

Strange STORIES



15¢

AUG.

13

COMPLETE
STORIES
IN THIS
ISSUE!

FEATURING

SNAKE GODDESS

A Novelet of a
Mystery Python

By E.
HOFFMANN PRICE

ALSO

ROBERT BLOCH

JOHN CLEMONS

HEYDORN SCHLEH

BERTRAM W. WILLIAMS

AUGUST W. DERLETH

TARLETON FISKE

CARL JACOBI

AND OTHERS

THE
CITADEL
OF
DARKNESS

By HENRY
KUTTNER

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PUBLICATION

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R. Loeffler

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Strange STORIES

VOL. II, NO. 1

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STRANGE STORIES, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as second class matter November 3rd, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3rd, 1879. Copyright, 1939, by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, \$9.00; single copies, \$1.50; foreign and Canadian postage extra. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

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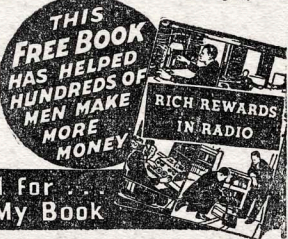
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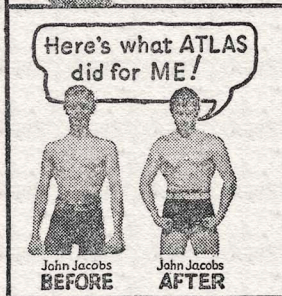
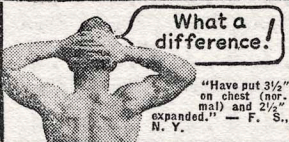
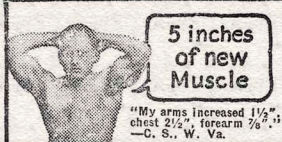
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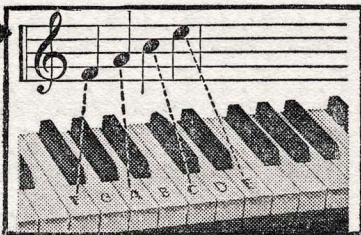
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PROPHECY, prediction, premonition... men gazing behind the portals of life and death, sacrificing human blood in ritualistic orgies and supernatural trances. Shrines, tombs, mystic altars to appease the diety of the damned, so that humans may see that which they should not see this side of the grave. . . .

These are not merely superstitious beliefs inherent in savage culture. Men of the highest intelligence of modern civilization have expressed their frank bewilderment at, if not outright belief in, the knowledge that lies behind the earthly curtain. Shrewd, practical explorers have seen and heard things that they cannot explain except by a shrug of the shoulders and a quotation from Shakespeare: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

On the other side of the fence there are skeptical realists who insist that no man can foresee the future; that prophesies and predictions are better termed coincidences, lucky guesses and hunches. There is nothing which the human brain cannot conjure up within its own imagination. What has not happened cannot be seen!

Those Lucky Guesses

Coincidence! What an easy alibi, when one cannot explain and will not believe. But the pages of history show too many "lucky guesses" which, fair-minded men must admit, are more than coincidence and far beyond the law of average chance.

It matters not to the skeptics if the exact day of the death of Lord Kitchener was predicted ten years in advance; if the fate of Kaiser William was seen years before he was exiled in Holland; if soothsayers foretold the fates of Queen Elizabeth, Julius Caesar and Napoleon; if the present Pope was chosen by prediction six years ago; if Franklin Roosevelt, afflicted with poliomyelitis, was told to have faith for he was ordained as leader of America; and even if Colonel Lindbergh as a boy was told that he was the reincarnation of the American Eagle.

No, the skeptics will still scoff.

Tibetans, Hindus, Mongolians, Malays—men of mystery hidden behind some lamasary wall or concealed within a secret cave in some forbidden gorge—do not have a

word for coincidence. For with them there is no such thing as guess. They see—therefore they can believe. . . .

Hadja Lacbo

SINGAPORE—1907. Arthur Barry, a young Englishman employed by a rubber plantation, homesick for his loved one back in London, cursing the heat and the maddening insects, looked forward to the day when his release would come through from Headquarters. He had applied for a transfer—they must take him out of this hell-hole of the tropics. They must, or he would go mad.

Let us hear this story vouched for by Barry's pal, Jerry Mack. . . .

In Singapore, the name, Hadja Lacbo, was seldom spoken. And when some one did mention this mystic monk of the forbidden hills, the name was uttered in a whisper. For Hadja Lacbo had strange powers. No white man was allowed by the authorities to visit this wizard of wisdom hidden somewhere in a secret gorge, his demoniac altar condemned by British law.

Some officials had tried to find him, but few had returned—and never entirely sane. Even in the dives of Singapore, the name, Hadja Lacbo, brought instant consternation. All mankind feared him—but respected his magic.

Hadja had his price, however. White men had approached him through proper channels and with sufficient money—and white men had learned the future.

Arthur Barry had heard of Hadja Lacbo. And Barry could no longer stand the strain of anxiety, wondering whether or not his release would come through. He must know now—or maybe it would be too late. So Barry confided in Jerry Mack.

"Jerry, I must see Hadja Lacbo. I will pay him all the money I have in the world, if he will tell me when I am to leave Singapore for home."

That night Arthur and Jerry visited the worst dive in the wicked city. The keeper trusted Jerry. Plans were made. The secret password was given. Arthur Barry and Jerry Mack would leave at midnight—follow the jungle trail and, when challenged by guards on the pathway, use the secret word which would get them through to Hadja.

Two hours later they entered the gorge. Hadja was expecting them and was ready. A fire burned before the altar, reflecting evil shadows on the walls of the cave. Giant henchmen stood behind Hadja who was seated before the fire that burned with a greenish glow.

The money was paid. The question was asked. Moments of silence—then suddenly a native girl was brought before Hadja. She did not scream, although she must have been aware of her fate. She gazed into the burning eyes of her master. He pressed his palm upon her forehead. She closed her eyes. Then guards placed her naked body upon the stone altar.

Hadja arose. With a knife as sharp as a scalpel, he slit the skin from her neck to her breast, first downward and then crosswise. With the craftsmanship of a surgeon, he peeled back the skin until the bloody nerves of her breast were exposed. The girl did not move.

Then with a demonic mumble, Hadja lay both of his hands upon the throbbing nerves. He closed his eyes and waited. Soon he began to speak—slowly and distinctly:

"The white man will depart from the city of the damned by two moons, in a..."

The last word was a native one—it could not be written in English on account of its strange sound—but Jerry understood it. He whispered to Barry that the word meant "vessel."

The two young Englishmen were glad to leave the atmosphere of ungodliness. They were escorted to the edge of the gorge with no word spoken—only a warning of silence. The stillness of the night was terrifying. Barry trembled. Although he was happy to learn of his freedom within two months, he feared that his forbidden quest had resulted in the sacrifice of a native girl. He could never forgive himself.

He wanted to find out if the girl had died, but Jerry cautioned him against such action. From all appearances she was dead.

Not until they reached Singapore at sunrise, did Barry and Jerry Mack relax. Two moons would mean July first, and freedom for Barry.

The Grim Prophecy

The days passed slowly. It was the night of June 28th—two days before the predicted order was to be received. Barry was ready to sail the same day that the release arrived.

But at midnight while Barry and Jerry were drinking together, assured of Hadja's prophecy, fate stepped in. Barry was stricken with a strange attack. He died an hour later in Jerry's arms.

"His heart," said the doctor.

Had the prophecy of Hadja come true? Judge for yourself—Arthur Barry's body was cremated. His ashes left for England

(Continued on page 126)

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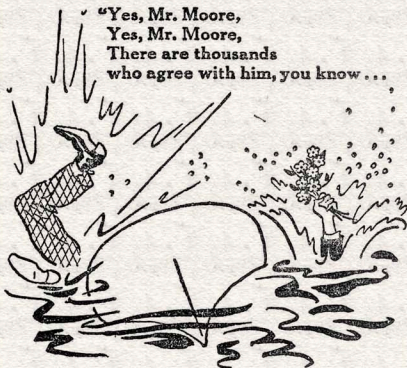
"Oh, Mr. Mattingly,
Oh, Mr. Mattingly,
I was stopped upon the highway
by a stranger



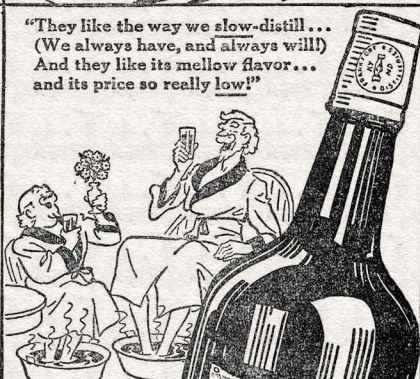
"Who said: 'Sir, my name is legion—
One of many in this region
Who will stick to M & M,
and never change, sir!'"



"Yes, Mr. Moore,
Yes, Mr. Moore,
There are thousands
who agree with him, you know..."



"They like the way we slow-distill...
(We always have, and always will!)
And they like its mellow flavor...
and its price so really low!"



THE fame and popularity of
Mattingly & Moore are due to
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You see, M & M is ALL whiskey
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Snake Goddess

*This is the Jungle's Riddle:
She Doth Curse, Yet Bless—
Crush, Yet Caress!*

By E. HOFFMANN
PRICE

*Author of "Dead Man's Gold," "Valley of
Tall Gods," etc.*

CHAPTER I *The Hunt*

THE hunt started bravely enough; with the beating of gongs, the popping of fire-crackers set off by the string; but as they went deeper into the jungle, the little yellow men ran out of courage. "Scared," Don Warren muttered.

"I've seen it coming," his partner said.

Murdoch halted to lift his cork helmet and wipe the sweat from his ruddy face and forehead.

"I've heard them muttering. They claim that python isn't really a snake at all. According to them, it's a female demon that lures men within striking range and then takes a serpent's form to crush them."

It was to counteract these superstitious mutterings of the plantation laborers that Warren and his partner had organized this hunt. Like twin St. Georges, they had set out to slay the "dragon," lest the coolies do what their murmurings portended—desert and leave the plantation without labor.



"I am the serpent in human form," she said—"we are one."

Yet for all of their white man's rationality, they had a submerged sense of the uncanny. A python swallows its prey, lies torpid for days, digesting it. The monster in question crushed its victims, and left them uneaten.

The craggy-faced American at his partner's words, repressed a shudder and tried not to think of the gory pulp which the python had made of some of the Siamese.

"Pure rot!" he snapped. "A snake's a snake, even if it is forty feet long!"

A smooth voice cut in from the rear,

A Novelet of a Mystery Python

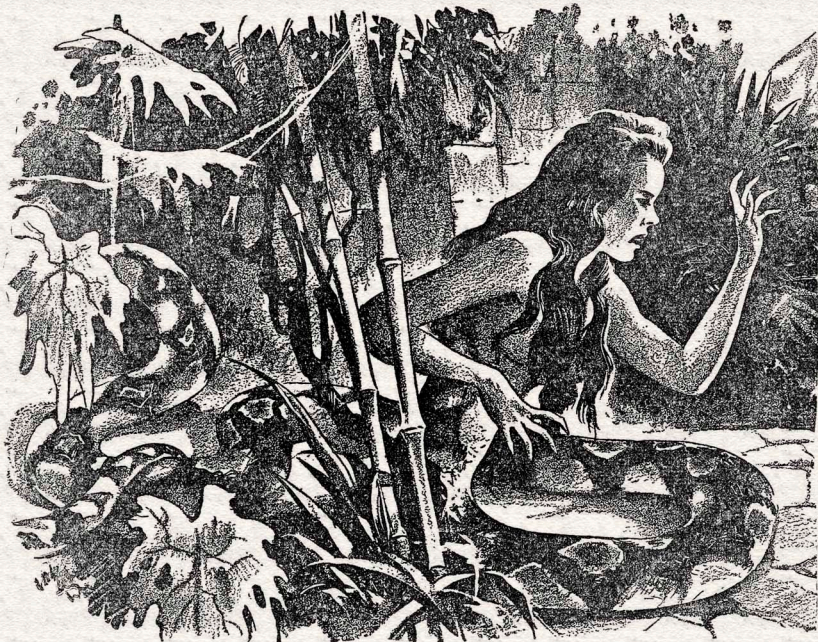
The Mysterious Serpent Goddess of Pong

saying in bookish English: "This one is the daughter of the gods."

Murdoch faced about, startled, as did Warren and the Malay servant who carried his express rifle. Amazed, the trio stared at a sallow-faced man, who stared back at them with unblinking black eyes.

The man, a Siamese, was barefooted.

There was no answer for a moment—only an unwavering, snake-like scrutiny of slanted eyes. The startled Warren fumbled for a coin, which he put in the wooden bowl; that was the custom of the country. The beaters, slowly trickling back, regarded the monk, and whispered among themselves. It was as though his mere



Rising from the mighty loops was

His head was shaved, and he wore a loose yellow robe which exposed one shoulder. This last, as well as his wooden bowl, indicated that he was a Buddhist monk.

The two white men were disconcerted by this unexpected apparition from a strip of jungle which had just been combed by forty beaters.

"Where in the world did you come from?" Murdoch demanded.

presence had recalled the hunt, even before he had spoken.

"I am Kambu, servant of the Holy Buddha who loves all living things," the monk at last said, addressing Murdoch. He tilted his bowl, letting Warren's coin spill to the ground.

"I cannot take a gift from hands that seek to take life."

The coolies, though they could not speak English, understood the monk's

The Eyes of Don Warren Behold the Great

Tuk Seeks the Soul of a Mortal Man!

gesture. Mongkut, the headman, addressed Warren.

"Builder of Pagodas, this holy man is right. Tomorrow, maybe, we will hunt. Not today."

A grim silence fell.

Warren faced his headman. "What foolish talk is this? She grabbed your own son from the ox cart as he drove

Mongkut joined the coolies who were already retreating to the jungle's fringe. Only Ali, Warren's Malay servant, remained. As on many another hunt, he carried his master's double barreled express rifle.

Warren turned to the monk. "Why did you make them afraid?"

"I did not frighten them," Kambu



something neither beast nor reptile

from Pong Tuk. She swallowed him. Now she is loggy and easy to kill."

MONGKUT fidgeted. His bare toes dug into the moist earth. Finally he looked up and said defiantly: "My men go no farther. You can hunt the *nagâ* if you wish. At least we have frightened the leopards away with our beating, so you will be in no danger from them."

placidly replied. "They are closer to the earth than you are, and they are wiser. They know, from old tradition, that it is evil to clear away this jungle to make more room for your plantation. Season after season you have been cutting closer to the home of the great *nagâ*. The Serpent Goddess of Pong Tuk, whose ruined temple is somewhat ahead of you, has warned you—"

Naga and the Pathway of Damnation!

"Thanks!" snapped Warren, striding past the monk. "I'm going to talk to her myself."

Glancing back, he saw that his partner was hesitating, frowning and fingering his straw-colored mustache. Too much gin and isolation were getting under Murdoch's skin; he was as bad as the natives.

"Ah—I say," Murdoch stammered, "maybe Mongkut's right. Tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow! Listen, you damn' sun-shiner—"

He checked himself. They would both lose face, arguing before a Malay servant. They had been wrangling thus for months, but always in private. The depredations of that uncanny python had served to heighten the tension between them.

Yes, too much gin, too much isolation, was the answer. And Murdoch would become even more of a problem when lovely Rosanne Malin left her father's plantation to marry Warren. Before that date Warren wanted to buy his partner's share in the estate—yet if the laborers did not remain on the job and harvest another tobacco crop, the estate would not be worth having.

Warren swallowed his resentment, and tried to speak reasonably. "Sorry, old man. But we've got to get our feet on the ground."

Even as he spoke, the breeze that furtively trickled through the tangle of lianas became pungent with a musty reptilian odor.

"The brute's just ahead," he murmured. "That's why they got cold feet!"

"By Allah, *tûan!*" Ali's voice trembled. "Verily, the great *nagâ!*"

Murdoch sniffed the reeking air, shook his head. "No! It's over there." "You're crazy. It's straight ahead. The wind—"

At this point Kambu, who was still there, retrieved the silver coin, and observed: "It is wrong to scorn any gift. And I will win merit by giving good counsel. Gentlemen, let each go his own way, and the event will prove the argument."

"Of course," Warren said, angered at himself for getting so irritable with

Murdoch. "We should have thought of that ourselves."

"Peace to all living things!" Kambu intoned. He turned, and almost before their eyes, vanished in the jungle.

Each took his own path, as the monk with the dark unwavering gaze had suggested. Each followed the pungent scent of the mighty *nagâ*. And Warren, remembering the monk's words, felt a shudder—that Buddhist blessing seemed almost a curse now. . . .

THE parakeets were silent, and no monkeys chattered. A sudden fear seemed to lay hold of life in the jungle. Warren advanced, warily watching overhead. Ali was at his heels, faithful but jumpy. Every rustle, every whisper, every stirring bamboo made him start and mutter.

Kambu's chilling presence had bitten deep.

Warren fought against the spell. Stubbornness drove him deeper into the jungle. He no longer heard Murdoch's advance. The sun was dipping. Eerie shadows already enveloped the cloistered banyans, made the twisted roots seem like nests of serpents. It was incredible that the python scent could have come from such a distance; it was just as incredible that they could have passed the reptile. . . .

Ten coolies killed in one month! There must be a nest of monstrous pythons.

Yet all the signs had indicated no more than one.

Suddenly, with surprising clearness, Warren heard Murdoch cry out—not in fear, but in astonishment. Their paths must have converged. Warren peered ahead. He saw, not far off, a cleared space out of which towered a great gray ruin of sculptured stone; one of the *wats* erected by the forgotten race that had once ruled Siam and Cambodia, then vanished like mist before the sun, remaining not even in memory but only in legend.

He could not yet see Murdoch, but he swung to the right, eager to know what had so amazed Murdoch. For Murdoch's outcry had been one of amazement.

Then Warren heard a woman's

voice, speaking in Urdu, a language as foreign in this jungle as English.

"*Sahib*," she said in a sibilant voice that was low yet strangely penetrating, "I am Yasmini and I live here. Welcome to the home of my ancestors."

"Lord"—Warren heard Murdoch's voice—"You . . . are . . . beautiful."

Murdoch's voice was husky with wonder. Warren's own pulse hammered; the woman was still unseen, but her voice alone, it seemed, had sent an unreasonable thrill through him. And her tinkling anklets brought a picture to him of tiny feet and cream-colored bare legs . . . a temple dancer . . . swaying hips. . . .

Then Murdoch yelled, in a hoarse burst of terror! Leaves rustled, branches crackled. Yet, creeping somehow through rustle and crackle and shout there came the sound of the woman laughing softly.

It was this, more than the yell, that had caught Warren with the paralysis of inaction.

The nerve of Ali, the gunbearer, broke.

"I betake me to the Lord of the Daybreak for refuge from Satan the Stoned!" he stuttered through chattering teeth. "The snake woman!"

Whrrrang! The blast of Murdoch's rifle shocked Warren out of his momentary daze. He plunged headlong through the brush. Thorns raked him, bamboo blades slashed at him like knives. The serpent scent billowed sickeningly about him.

He yelled encouragement to his unseen partner, and to Ali to be ready with his gun.

But Murdoch's cries abruptly ceased. There was a horrible crunching; a popping as of a blood-sodden leech crushed under a boot; then a dull crack-crack, deliberate, as of a prodigious power relentlessly breaking bones.

Warren and Ali broke out upon an open spot reddened by the slanting rays of the sun. But the sun was not the only bringer of red. Blood *drip-dripped* down upon the grass. Murdoch's!

Gigantic coils enveloped Murdoch. He was not struggling. Don War-

ren saw the endless golden brown length of it, twined for anchorage to an overhanging limb. It had cross-shaped bluish-black markings, edged with white. Its head was symmetrically divided by a thin black line that reached from snout to nape, and gleamed with iridescent scales. Its eyes blazed red, giving back the light from the sun.

"There is no might and no majesty save in Allah!" Ali cried out the prayer of a Moslem in the face of death. "*Túan*, this is no snake! *Where is the woman that was speaking to him?*"

"The gun! Fool, the gun!" Warren yelled.

RIPPLES raced along the spiraled length. The supple coils constricted, Murdoch seemed to grow thinner and longer.

Red pulp dripped, spattered; but no more bones were left to crackle. A coil unlooped, and the gaping jaws exposed pointed teeth, ivory white, long as lance heads.

Ali dropped the express rifle, and fled as another coil whipped loose, and the swaying head darted down.

Warren hurled himself at the double barreled weapon, but the mighty *nagá* lashed out, now swift as summer lightning.

There was a deadly hissing. The great head passed him; then a golden brown length blocked him, and a fold swooped under his arms.

From afar, he heard the brush crackling—Ali in flight!

Warren kicked, struggling as his feet left the ground. The chilly coils were cutting off his breath. A vise closed about his chest, and as he was whirled up, a second loop laced about him.

A dull roaring was in his ears. He no longer heard that awful hissing. A woman was chanting. Her voice was like silver bells, yet strangely sibilant.

But he could not see her. There was an agonized moment of watching the red glow above him. The *nagá* head blotted that out, and then swirling blackness swallowed the python's blazing eyes. . . .

CHAPTER II

Yasmini

A SPECTRAL moon silvered the placid faces and round breasts of the Apsaras sculptured on the gray masonry of a ruined temple; it made the clearing a lambent lake of illusion in the heart of the eerily murmuring jungle. The man who lay on the flags of the courtyard stirred, muttered.

"Murdoch—what happened—" Then Warren remembered. "Murdoch! Where are you—where are we?"

He could not feel the flags beneath him, nor his own body. He must be dead, else he could touch and feel what his eyes perceived.

Warren closed his eyes—to shut out the smiling Apsara. Vagrant thoughts flicked at his conscious self. The woman who had been speaking to Murdoch. Murdoch's hideously crushed body. That sodden plop when it dropped from the *nagâ* coils. And that woman's laugh. . . .

Bit by bit, he began to feel stone beneath him, and the thousand aches of his flesh. A caressing hand crept to his shoulder. Its coldness penetrated his shirt, and the sweetness of jasmine flooded his nostrils. But there was another odor; a musky undertone, as of the much diluted scent of a serpent. He cried out in terror, and in one move whipped upright.

A woman was beside him, and the sheer wonder of her froze the cry in his throat. The coolness of the moonlight could not subdue the golden witchery of her slim body. Warren marveled when she seated herself on the flagstones; it was incredible that any woman's legs could fold beneath her, as if they were flexible. The up-turned soles of her bare feet were henna stained, and she swayed from the hips like a long-stemmed lily caressed by a breeze. This must be a *devadassi*—a temple slave consecrated to the gods.

A thin scarf bound her breasts, and a broad girdle enclosed her slender

waist. From it trailed the frothy skirt through which he could see the smooth roundness of hip and thigh. He kept on staring at her as she stretched from the waist, and laced her fingers behind her high piled black hair.

She smiled, slow and languid. "I am Yasmini."

But Warren already knew that. "Where's Murdoch?"

"The great *nagâ* slew him for sacrilege."

Yasmini moved closer to him, yet without uncrossing her legs. Her skin rippled, and in some inexplicable manner, uncoun ted tiny muscles shifted her toward Warren. She added softly:

"But I commanded her to spare you."

"What?"

"The great *nagâ* obeyed me because I have spent all my life at her shrine. She is the Daughter of the Gods. She took human form, uncoun ted centuries ago, so that she could marry the prince of Arya Decca. But he was mortal, and when he died, she resumed the form of a serpent."

Warren frowned. Then he understood. This was the ancient legend of the snake people; Yasmini's way of explaining her strange power. He wet his lips, swallowed.

"If you charmed her away," he faltered, "why—good God—why didn't you save poor Murdoch?"

He shivered, then, looking at her. Her smile held cold malice; a malignant joy gleamed in her eyes. But only for a moment. Her lovely face softened, and her arms rippled about Warren. "He sought to slay for the sake of slaying," she whispered close to his ear. "You sought to save your men. And a man finds what he seeks. It was his slayer's heart that slew Murdoch."

THIS was an echo of Kambu's cryptic speech. Yasmini's voice was a silken rustle that sounded like a snake's hissing; and the dark hair that brushed his cheek exhaled a sweetness strangely blended with the scent of serpents.

He recoiled, but her arms were silken cords that would not release

him. She murmured: "Blind fool! I love you because the love of killing was not in your heart. For my sake, the *nagâ* will spare your people."

Her smile exposed white teeth, fine and sharp. She flung her head back, and her body arched closer to him in a silken ripple, so that she seemed more serpent than woman. He shuddered; he wanted to break away, but her unblinking eyes fascinated him, and an insidious thought crawled in his whirring brain.

"Kiss her . . . hold her closer . . . perhaps she has this power she claims . . . humor her crazy whim . . . Rosanne—Rosanne is miles away. . . .

And then Yasmini's red lips found and clung to his mouth. For a moment he forgot everything. But then reason returned. Her embrace reminded him of the all encircling coils of the great *nagâ*, and exerting all his will power, he broke away from her. She laughed, a rippling, silky sound that revealed her confidence in her powers of fascination.

She smiled up at him as he sat there uncertainly, and said. "You'll promise not to hunt the *nagâ*, won't you? For my sake?"

"Why—certainly," he faltered.

But she sensed the tone in his voice and demanded, "Then swear it. Let Siva, the Destroyer, witness your oath."

Siva! It was not the name that chilled him; it was the fanatic glow in her eyes, her gesture of invocation. He knew that she would seek him out and stealthily slay him if he made a false oath.

"Why—I can't—listen here! She's killing my people."

"But I promise you she won't again touch them! I swear it—"

"How can you?" He caught her arm, jerked her upright. "You can't!"

"Look!" She shifted from the treacherous half glow into the full moonlight; he sat there, gaping, as her hand swept down the sleek stretch of her waist. "Look closely, and you will believe."

He saw, but it took him a shuddering moment to understand. Yasmini was dappled with cross-shaped shadows. The outline of countless scales

marked her skin, and he caught their faint iridescence as she moved. These were serpent shadings; the very pattern of the great *nagâ* faintly mottled Yasmini's smooth skin!

"I am the *nagâ* in human form," she said. "We are one."

"You're crazy! You can't be!" he croaked.

"You heard me speaking to Murdoch. Then you heard him yell. But did I scream? As any woman would, if she saw a serpent seize a man?"

"You—you let it kill him!" he cried. "You're a snake charmer! You made the damn' thing crush him—made it release me—"

He leaped to his feet, sick and trembling. He clung to a sculptured *Apsara* for support. This lovely fiend had surely murdered Murdoch.

Then Yasmini faced him, arms outstretched. "A man can hardly believe that a serpent can love him. I understand, being immortal and having known many men. So forget all but this—that the *nagâ* will not kill your people—if you promise that you will be faithful to me, that you will come here every evening to meet me."

SHE was crazy, maddened by solitude. A *devadassi*, all alone in a shrine in this venomous jungle, held there by her fanatic devotion until her mind was upset. Those strange markings were nothing but an atavism.

Atavism! That logical explanation did the very thing it was designed not to do. It reminded him that all life, ages ago, was reptilian; that eons ago, the world was a steaming swamp, and all things crawled; that all living things evolved from reptiles.

"We're not! She isn't! It's crazy—"

He stumbled down the crumbling steps, and plunged into the brush beyond the clearing's edge. Thorns clawed him but he did not feel them. The overpowering serpent scent that tainted the breeze was becoming stronger, and it goaded him, reminding him of Murdoch's horrible death. Warren ran until he fell down, and lay gasping in the jungle gloom. There were cracklings and rustlings, evil whispers; invisible creatures stirred

in the poisonous night . . . they were closing in on him. . . .

Then he heard voices, saw the glare of torches. Someone was calling him, in English.

"Mr. Warren. Where are you?"

Another voice, shaking and hoarse, chimed in: "*Tûan*, it is I, your servant."

Ali, the deserter, came forward. Kambu was with him. The monk explained.

"Ali told me what had happened. He spoke of a strange woman, and your partner's death."

Ali knelt and cried, "*Tûan*, my blood turned to water. By Allah, I had to run. There was no help for it. Now my face is blackened."

"A girl saved me," Warren groped. "A snake charmer."

Kambu smiled. "Mr. Warren, let me help you to your bungalow. The sight of you will hearten your people, and they will get your partner's body."

Once back in his quarters, Warren poured himself a tumbler of whiskey. It burned the chill from him. Later, he heard Kambu and the coolie's returning. They carried something lashed to a pole. He knew what it was, but he could not force himself to approach his partner's horribly crushed body.

Ali explained. "*Tûan*, since the *nagâ* spared you, the men had courage to go after the one she slew. And they will stay and work. They know now that she will also spare them."

"How?"

"It is manifest that she loves you, *tûan*. Kambu told them so."

"Where's Kambu? I want to talk to him. Get him."

But the monk edged into the room before Ali reached the door. When the Malay stepped into the hall, Kambu carefully closed the door, squatted on the floor, and said:

"Mr. Warren, I can guess why you wanted to see me. I was expecting it."

"Well?"

"From what you said, I know what happened to you. The Queen of the Snake People spared you. You have found favor in her eyes."

"But she can't be—"

"This world is *maya*—illusion,"

Kambu cut in. "This world is but the materialization of a God's thought. There is nothing that remains, in the end, except the Thinker."

Don Warren felt bemused by these baffling thoughts which he could neither grasp nor deny.

"You think that you are in this room," the monk went on. "You think that that which you saw in the jungle could not be. Simply because you are accustomed to sitting here, while you are not used to meeting women who can become serpents. Yet both are equally facts. Though a wise man would say, both are equally illusion."

The silence that followed bit into Warren. At last he demanded, "Do you mean—that—that she—"

"Yasmini," the monk solemnly declared, "is the Serpent God's daughter. As long as she loves you, and you do not give her cause to feel otherwise, she will not hurt your people." He rose, made a gesture of invocation. "And peace to all living things!"

CHAPTER III

In the Toils

THE memory of that horror in the jungle kept Warren from helping Ali prepare Murdoch's body for burial the following day. It was not until the Malay had washed the corpse and wrapped it in a clean sheet that Warren could nerve himself to approach.

The coolies watched him drop the first shovel of steaming earth into the grave. They regarded him with awe. This was the man whom the great *nagâ* had spared. The daughter of the snake god must love him.

Warren risked baring his head to the blazing sun, and muttered a prayer. Kambu, who had spent the night sitting up with the dead, intoned a strange, sonorous ritual in Pali. And during the heavy silence that followed his benediction he vanished, suddenly as he had appeared, in the jungle.

The coolies went back to work, singing and chattering. Warren went into

the bungalow to think it out. He was now sole owner of twelve hundred acres planted in tobacco; or he would be, when he had dug into his bank account to buy Murdoch's share from whatever heirs might make a claim.

"Poor devil," he muttered to the steaming solitude. "Here I thought, all these weeks, he was whispering things to the coolies so they'd desert, run the plantation into the ground. So he could buy me out. . . ."

His first impulse was to write to Rosanne Malin. But the memory of Yasmini's incredible words checked him.

That night, and those that followed, he found himself drawn to the ruined temple. He was afraid not to see the strange creature. The thought of what might happen if he scorned her entirely drove some of the revulsion he felt toward Yasmini out of his mind, as he endured the passionate kiss with which she received him. He stayed only a few minutes each time, making awkward pretenses of business details he had to attend to—pretexts which he felt were easily seen through. But Yasmini, smiling mockingly, seemed to be satisfied for the moment with just his presence. He was caught in the web she had spun, the light in her eyes seemed to say, and eventually she would have him—of his own volition.

And Warren found himself more and more fascinated, felt his will slowly crumbling, until he resembled, in lack of conscious will, a subject under hypnosis.

He wrote an incoherent note to Rosanne, saying that Murdoch's death had left him no time to ride through thirty miles of wild country to see her. He could not face the truth behind his excuses, for he was no longer sure what it was, after the madness that whirled by day and by night through the tempest that had become his mind.

Was it because he was slowly being won over to Yasmini—or because he was afraid for the safety of his people, and for Rosanne—that he could not summon the will to break away.

For the depredations of the python had ceased, at once. Events were proving Yasmini's outrageous claim!

Warren strove each day to convince himself that it was coincidence. But as the moon waxed, at last becoming a great spectral disc over the jungle, its radiance revealed with increasing clearness during those nightly trysts the python markings of her skin. The coolness of her smooth flesh was now like a python's.

HE BEGAN to wish that the python would seize a coolie. Just one death, and he would know that Yasmini and the serpent were not the same creature. But she was keeping her promise. And Warren ignored Rosanne's letter; he brusquely told her messenger that he was busy.

He was certain that the runner learned a great deal from the contented coolies with whom he talked before returning to Rosanne.

Yasmini's sides had the mother of pearl lustre of the great *nagâ*; shimmering scales that he could almost feel, despite the softness of her skin. And her eyes had an unblinking, ophidian luster. He tried to tell himself that it was illusion, but he could no longer doubt his senses. Yasmini's hips were becoming more slender, and her lithe body seemed each time more supple.

"Soon, soon we will be together," she whispered, in a voice that each night had become more sibilant, more like a serpent's soft hissing than any woman's speech. "The waxing of the moon, unless I use my will, makes my *nagâ* form blossom out of this human body—"

He drew away. "You mean some night you'll change—"

"Don't be afraid," she said softly. "I have waited patiently. Once I loved a mortal, and I made the mistake of marrying him as a human being. Then he died."

Her unblinking eyes, in the glow of the moonlight, were lit up by an unholy, fanatic light.

"You will love me when I have changed. For you will soon yourself take a serpent's shape—and then you will be bound to me by the ties of the *nagâ*. You will really be mine then—forever. Look, already you have python markings."

Warren turned and fled down the narrow trail that his nightly visits had cleared through the jungle.

In his bungalow, he lighted a gasoline lantern. By the white glow of the incandescent mantel, he looked at his body. Where he was sun-tanned, there was no change in his skin; but where his singlet and shorts had protected him from Siam's blazing sun, he saw a scarcely perceptible mottling. Diamond-shaped patterns, bluish-black shadows, visible only when the light came from a certain angle.

"God in heaven!"

A surge of horror nauseated him. When he recovered, he staggered to the bath, seized a stiff brush and a bar of pumice soap. He scrubbed until his skin was red.

But the python markings remained. And the mirror gave him a more intense shock. A fine stripe ran along his spine.

Madness blazed in his brain. He bounded to the dresser, tore open the drawer, snatched the heavy Webley automatic. He cocked it. He stood there for a moment, then slowly laid the weapon down.

His voice trembled as he said aloud: "Lord—I damn near did do it—it's some ghastly trick—it's impossible—a man can't become a snake—a woman can't—"

Rage suddenly burned him. He dressed, thrust the weapon into his pocket, dashed into the compound. He was going to see Yasmini for the last time. One long ripping stream of lead to tear Yasmini's beauty to shreds. Simple! Kill her before she became a snake . . . before her insidious, uncanny powers turned him into a snake—and her mate. . . .

AT THE gate, he abruptly halted. Something was stirring in the shadows outside. A calm voice said: "You cannot slay what is immortal."

Warren licked his dry lips. "What do you mean—how do you—"

Kambu was now before him. He smiled serenely. "I was meditating, after the custom of our order. I could feel the vibrations of hate and fear that came from you. But you cannot kill what is immortal."

The calmness of Kambu's voice made Warren's turbulent emotions seem foolish. He could hardly believe that he had been on the verge of killing a lovely, crazed creature who mistakenly believed herself a python. For she had to be that—crazed—despite the monk's intimations of her immortality—and what he had seen.

Kambu turned away. "Peace to all living things," he intoned, making a gesture of benediction.

Warren staggered up the veranda stairs, sank into a chair. It must have been a touch of fever; or the insidious force of Yasmini's suggestion. She had hypnotized him. Suddenly he leaped to his feet. He was going to call Ali and ask him if he could see serpent markings.

But he checked himself. Suppose Ali did see that diamond shadowed pattern? The faithful fellow's fright would make him babble. The coolies would kill their master before he became a *nagâ*!

From afar, he heard a dolorous creaking. An ox cart with an ungreased axle was squeaking and rattling along. Then came a chanting; a native teamster was trying to scare away the devils that haunted the night.

Perplexed at this late visit, Warren went to the compound gate. A flashlight beam stabbed him full in the face. He blinked, leaped back. A woman exclaimed, "Oh, Don—" She choked a sob. "Don—oh—it was awful—"

He recognized her voice; there was only one white woman in Siam who would call him by name or know where to find him. He leaped forward, caught her as she climbed from the cart. It was Rosanne Malin, who had come from her father's plantation thirty miles on the other side of the jungle.

"Rosanne—what on earth—what's the matter?"

She clung to him as he ascended the stairs.

"Dad was killed. A python—a monstrous creature—like the one that was causing you so much trouble."

Once inside, she repeated the garbled account given by the native fore-

man from whose side Dave Malin had been plucked as they made their round of inspection.

"We—I'd not seen you for weeks," she concluded. "And those horrible stories—darling, I was afraid—"

"My dear, I'm terribly sorry." He drew her to him. She was shapely, with cream white skin and soft bronze colored hair. He shuddered. "It finished poor Murdoch. Nearly got me."

Her blue eyes were wide with apprehension; the fear that lurked behind them finally found words. "Don, tell me. I've heard my coolies and the servants muttering about a snake woman. A snake demon."

"You're all shaken up," he evaded. "You would be. Don't I know! Poor Murdoch crushed right before my eyes!"

"Couldn't you kill it?"

He gulped. "Ali had my express rifle. He dropped it and ran. Before I could pick it up, it was too late."

ROSANNE shuddered. Then she said: "Don, it's unbelievable that neither you nor Murdoch killed that python. He was such a hunter, too. And another thing; when these big snakes make a kill, they lie torpid for days. They don't feed again for weeks. But this thing killed one of your coolies every three or four days."

"There must be several of them," he lamely countered.

"Not that size, Don, and you know it. A python over fifteen feet is a rarity."

Rosanne was cornering him. Her intuition told her that he was holding something back.

"This whole place smells of reptiles."

"But we've not had a calamity since—since Murdoch died. That's been two weeks."

His assurance played into her hands. Rosanne retorted: "Why did the monster stop, like that?"

"My dear—how should I know—"

"You shouldn't!" she cried, snuggling in his arms. "No white person can understand this terrible country. It's a curse of some kind. It's lifted from you, and now it got Dad."

Horror slowly laid its cold hands

on Warren. The *nagâ*, keeping her promise, had begun now to go further afield to get victims. And had it been just a coincidence that it had struck at Rosanne's father?

"Darling," he groined, "I'll take you to the train in the morning. You can go to Bangkok—no, get out of Siam—go to Singapore!"

"Don! Don't you understand, I'm all alone now. I've nobody in the world but you."

He flared up. It did not sound like himself speaking. "You don't understand! There's something fiendish in this jungle. You've got to get out."

"No." Her pert little chin lifted, and her sweet mouth became resolute. "I'm staying here to face it with you. As you'd stay with me, if the tables were turned."

Warren told himself that he loved her. He did, he did!

But he could not, he dared not, tell her why a native woman had promised him the safety of his men. She would think him mad—

He rose, picked up a decanter. "You're hanging on with sheer nerve, after that awful experience. If you can't let go, you'll crack."

"I know. I wanted to see you, so I could relax and cry my head off. But the fear—the fear of something lurking, hovering over you, has frozen me."

"Take a drink. A big one." He thrust a half tumbler of brandy into her hands. It's old and smooth."

The suave stuff was oily and fragrant; its concealed strength brought a glow to Rosanne's pallid cheeks. Then she nodded drowsily, slumped into his arms.

Warren carried her into his own room, laid her on his bed.

There was only one thing to do; kill Yasmini. And to hell with Kam-bu's cryptic mutterings. And if she and the *nagâ* were not one and the same, then she would die for her ghastly mutterings, and he would know that he had no more than an unusually large python to hunt down.

Somehow, Rosanne's presence had strengthened him. She reminded him that he was white, and not a part of dark Asia's evil riddles.

CHAPTER IV

The Second Promise Kept

WRATH drove Warren into the jungle and down the path his repeated trips to the tower had cleared. But frosty apprehension chilled him.

He stumbled into the moon flooded temple court, and the sacred pool where he had left Yasmini an hour before. But only the sculptured Ap-saras were there to greet him.

"Yasmini!" he called, trying to steady his voice. "Yasmini?"

An echo answered him; a treacherous echo that transmuted her name into hissing sounds. He stood there, listening.

He then followed the echoes across the court, and toward a dim passageway that reached into the terraced tower whose pinnacles soared into the moonlight.

Then he saw it. He had time to run, but he could not. Vagrant rays reached into the shadows and picked out endless coils; their scales gleamed like satanic jewels. And rising from the mighty loops was something neither beast nor reptile.

Yasmini's lovely face and arms, her sinewy torso; but he could not tell where her hips blended with the *nagá's* prodigious length. Yasmini had kept her second promise! And her smile was as evil as the words she hissed.

"You have mocked me with that yellow-haired woman, and the gods will curse you."

This was jungle illusion; another ghastly trick, an Asiatic jugglery. Warren drew his automatic. It would not kill a python, but it could riddle the woman's torso that swayed from the serpent's coils.

The murmuring silence shook from the automatic's ripping blasts. But darkness blotted out that gleaming shape, and the roaring echoes were accented with the whine of bullets screaming upward, flattened and deflected. Something had screened Yas-

mini from his wrath. Weapons were of no avail.

For a moment Warren stood there, numb and dazed by more than fear. He had seen her transition from human to serpent. And even if that had been moon glamour and illusion, the fact remained that she had anticipated his attack, and had been prepared to screen herself from bullets. Whatever Yasmini might be, she was more than human!

A yell startled him as he whirled to run across the court. It was Ali. The Malay babbled, as he trailed after Warren:

"*Túan, túan*, my face was blackened! So I followed you—I knew that you could not kill her—I knew that you wanted to—I wanted to stop you—"

They emerged from the jungle. Both were trembling, stunned. Ali muttered, "I saw it. The snake woman—"

"Shut up!" Warren's chattering teeth bit off the words. "That was what Kambu calls *maya*—illusion."

"Allah blacken that pagan!"

As they approached the *kampung* where the laborers' huts were clustered, they heard a babble of frantic voices. Torches flared. Men yelled, women screamed, "The *nagá*! She seized Mongkut!"

"When?" Warren seized Rasda, the headman's brother.

"Only a moment ago! She reached into his house. We heard him scream. We saw her. The cross markings."

This was against all nature. Pythons lurk in trees, waiting to reach down and seize the unwary man or beast that passes by. But this creature hunted its prey. The coolies and their families were pouring out of the stockade that enclosed the *kampung*.

Don Warren seized a torch. By its smoky flame, he was able to survey the ground outside the fence of sharpened palm stakes. No python could have penetrated the palisade; nor were there any marks outside to indicate that one had approached or left.

This raid was the ultimate outrage. Thus far, the *nagá* had contented herself with seizing unwary laborers as they followed the trail that led to the

Pong Tuk highway, or ventured too far into the jungle in search of a stray goat.

Then he found what was left of Mongkut: a gory, shapeless hulk. Shattered bones gleamed white from the pulp that once was a man. Oddly, Mongkut's skull had been fractured.

"*Túan*," muttered Ali, kneeling beside him, "this is verily a demon serpent. No python ever broke the head of its prey. It crushes only to kill and make easy for swallowing it whole."

Warren swallowed, licked his lips. He remembered how he had been snatched from the ground. Had his head crashed against an overhanging limb, it would have been too late for Yasmini's intervention.

Intervention? No. Yasmini had been careful, gentle, as her *nagá* form reached for him to squeeze him to unconsciousness. He owed her no gratitude. He had to kill her, somehow.

"Call some coolies," he ordered, his voice cold and curt. "To take what's left of Mongkut."

Perhaps the glare of torches had frightened the *nagá*. But Warren could not shut out the thought that this was a wanton slaying: for vengeance, not for food.

Rosanne—

Horror had for a moment blotted out all thought of her. Recollection sent him dashing to the bungalow. He stumbled up the veranda steps, plunged headlong into the living room. There he sank into a chair, gasping.

Rosanne was there to meet him. Her shoes were scuffed, her legs were spattered with slime from jungle pools. A strange light gleamed in her eyes, and she swayed dizzily as she tried to speak.

"God, it was awful," Warren was thinking of Mongkut's crushed body.

"I saw," she said. "I didn't drink all that brandy. But what's that yelling outside?"

"I thought you saw poor Mongkut. The *nagá* got him."

"No. What I saw was that thing. I followed you to the temple. I knew there was something uncanny. I didn't swallow all that brandy. You were

trying to put me to sleep, so I wouldn't worry."

He recoiled, and his sun tan became a sickly yellow. He began to understand why Rosanne's lips were grotesquely red against the whiteness of her face.

"But I didn't see you there. I didn't hear you."

"I was too shocked to scream. I must have fainted for a moment. Then you were gone. I'd heard about that temple. The natives on Dad's plantation, they've heard. Things like that spread. So I knew about the snake woman. Only, I couldn't believe, until I followed you."

"You saw her? And got away?"

"She—it—it laughed. Cursed me in Urdu. I guess it was Urdu. Then began uncoiling. Very slowly. I ran!"

They eyed each other for silent moments. Outside, drums were muttering. Warren stepped to the window. A fire had been kindled in the *kampong*. The coolies had returned; fatally, they reasoned that they could not escape the demon by hiding.

A GONG clanged. Its brazen note shivered, lingered; the dying sound became an eerie hissing that made Warren shudder. Voices were chanting. The laborers were making magic to protect them, since their master could not.

"It's crazy, Don," Rosanne finally said. "When I came here, I did not have the nerve to blurt it right out. But now I will. She is in love with you. Now I'm here, and she is taking vengeance on your people. I've got to go, right now."

She rose. Warren caught her arm. "You can't!"

"But I will."

"Where?"

"Home. To the plantation. I'm not quitting."

"For God's sake, don't!" he pleaded. "Go to Huahin. Stay at one of the beach resorts. Where there are white people. Electric lights. I'll fight this thing. It's a devilish trick to run me out."

"I wish I could believe it. But I saw her. And why run you out? When there is so much land for the taking.

Good tobacco land, like ours is good for kapok. Don, I've lived in Siam longer than you have. I was raised here. Dad wanted me to go to the States when mother died, but I wouldn't.

"So I know. It sounds silly, but such things have happened. That old temple is the center of something hideous, accursed. You told me time and again how one labor crew after another refused to clear away the jungle that surrounds it and wastes half of your estate."

"I'll dynamite the damn' thing!" He leaped to his feet. "I'll do it myself. But for God's sake, Rosanne, do get out of here, for a while."

She considered a moment. "I'll do that. Get the car while I pack up my suitcase. I've only opened one."

Warren went to the garage. He seldom used the car, except to drive to Ban Pong on business. All heavy supplies had to come in on ox carts. He jabbed the starter. There was not a whimper. Not even a murky glow when he flicked on the headlight switch. He cursed bitterly; in the weeks that had passed since Murdoch's death, the intense heat of the sun beating down on a tin roof had evaporated the water in the battery.

At all events, he could put the car in gear and in the morning, have an ox cart tow it until the generator was spinning fast enough to furnish current to feed the spark coil. He struck a match, found a bottle of rain water he had collected for the battery. By filling it up, he could charge it on the drive to Bang Pong in the morning.

He lifted the floorboard trap. The ground cable had been freshly cut!

That was a shock. And the next came when he saw the prints of bare feet on the dusty floor. They had been made by a man whose toes spread out in a way to indicate that he never wore shoes. He had more than Yasmini to deal with. The *nagâ* had human allies who did not intend for him to leave the plantation, except on foot.

"Ali, damn your hide," he muttered.

It must have been Ali. No one else on the plantation knew enough about

automobiles to turn a trick like that. But a white man would have devised one not so readily exposed.

Wrath corroded Warren. He had trusted Ali. Now his suspicions darted back. The Malay, though superstitious as all his kind, had stayed with him when the coolies fled, only to fling aside the rifle at the last moment, leaving his master trapped. And Ali had followed him to the temple.

"He's been putting Yasmini wise! She must have hypnotized him, had him in her power. And he, poor fellow, was afraid to disobey her, anyhow."

THAT the *nagâ* used human allies heartened Warren, yet it also made it more urgent than ever for him to get Rosanne away from the plantation. He no longer knew who he could trust.

Warren took the tool kit and flashlight from the luggage compartment and knelt beside the running board. He set to work with pliers to stretch the slack in the woven copper ribbon so that he could renew the ground connection to the frame.

"*Tûan!*" Ali was calling from somewhere in the compound; the walls and the resonance of the tin roof distorted the sound. "There is trouble among the coolies."

Warren did not answer. He listened to the ominous mutter of drums. They blotted out whatever stealthy sounds there might be in the compound. That clipped cable made him wary; a trap might be waiting, with Ali's call as a decoy. Once the drums whipped the natives to fanatic fury, once they disposed of him, Rosanne was doomed. He crept toward the garage door, drew his automatic, gripped it firmly.

But it was unloaded. He had emptied it at the temple, firing in sheer frenzy. His rifle was in the bungalow. Warren retreated, silently opened a window in the back of the garage; it had once been a storehouse. That rear exit brought him closer to the house, and gave him the further advantage of an unexpected route.

The sullen drums covered what little sound he made in pulling himself

to the sill. He wondered why Ali's call had not been repeated.

A choked cry echoed in the compound; a horrible gurgling, a diabolical hissing. The humid air had become charged with the musty scent of a python. The *nagâ* had slipped into the palisade about the house! The monster had seized either Ali or Rosanne. The distortion of the sound kept Warren from identifying the cry.

He lurched recklessly through the window, bounded to the back steps of the bungalow. The crunching of bones had ceased, and so had the hissing. Warren's lips and mouth were dry, but his body was drenched with a sudden rush of sweat.

He burst into the house, knocked Rosanne sprawling as she ran to the rear to meet him.

"Thank God—it didn't get you," he choked.

WARREN snatched the express rifle. "It got Ali!"

"Where—now what?" She caught his arm, but he shook her loose.

"It's hiding somewhere. I'll get it! I must get it!"

The double-barreled .50 rifle would stop a tiger's charge, or bring an elephant to his knees.

From the house, he had a view of nearly the entire compound; lights blazing, shutters flung aside, there were few blind spots. Rosanne followed him from room to room.

There was no python in sight. But Ali's crushed body was horribly plain; a red pulp that still quivered in the front angle of the palisade. Rosanne cried out, turned her face, and clung to the door jamb for a moment. Warren muttered, "She used him—and then killed him. Poor Ali! God, he's got to be dead. I hope he's dead—"

He forced his horrified gaze away from the sickening tangle of sodden flesh and cracked ribs. It had ceased stirring.

Rosanne caught his arm. "Don, don't go out there. Wait till daylight."

He jerked loose. "I'll settle it now. If she—if it is in the shadows, I'll pick it with the flashlight."

As he descended the back steps, he listened, sniffed the air. The python scent was thinning in the breeze, and the odor of fresh blood overwhelmed it. Once in the compound, he flicked the flashlight beam into the dark space beneath the bungalow, which stood on stilts eight feet high.

But no serpent was to be found.

Then he saw that the compound gate was open. Only a few moments earlier, it had been locked and bolted. But most incredible of all were the marks on the ground. They were quite plain.

In the dust of the compound, and on the earth moistened by water sprinkled about, were marks of a snake's belly; clear imprints, and of incredible size.

But worst of all were small footprints. A temple dancer might have left those narrow, shapely tracks. Yasmini had such tiny, high-arched feet. *They began where the serpent trace thinned out and vanished!* They led toward the clearing.

The moon in its descent had almost reached the far off hills. Thus while the compound had been shadowed by the high palisade, the leveled fields beyond remained a weird glamor of mist and silver. A woman was half visible. Her bare body gleamed, and her trailing hair reached in a black veil to her swaying hips; other than that, she wore not a trace of covering, not a bracelet, not an anklet.

Yasmini. No mistaking that serpentine gait.

Warren bounded past the jamb. He was trembling violently. The muzzle of the heavy rifle would not center on that exquisite shape. He knelt, which steadied him. He aimed between the shoulders. He fired both slugs. A single one could tear the lungs out of a buffalo.

The rifle leaped from his hands as though alive. Choking folds, silken, stifling, settled about him. Serpent odor flooded his nostrils. His head reeled; his arms and legs were confined as by a monstrous web that shut off air and light. He could not breathe. Red spots flashed before his eyes, and he seemed to be floating in space.

And as he moved, he heard far off yelling. A woman screamed, closer at hand. Drums muttered, and brass clanged. Then he no longer heard Rosanne's cries, or the chanting of those who had seized her.

CHAPTER V

The Sacrifice

HE DID not know how much later it was when fresh air crept into the suffocation that had dizzied him to the edge of unconsciousness. He felt the bite of a knife. The pain aroused his resistance. He kicked, struggled; but he subsided when a native said in broken English, "Carefully, sir. I let you loose."

It was Yin, Rosanne's servant.

Warren kicked free of the cocoon of silken web that had entangled and almost suffocated him. Yin pointed toward the jungle, and said: "They take her to the temple."

Warren regained command of his legs. Yin fled. He had no intention of getting into the hands of fanatics! Warren ran toward the bungalow.

His own laborers had seized Rosanne to appease Yasmini. They had spared him, because the snake goddess loved him.

It was not too late. The drums, the terrifying crescendo of voices, told him that; but terror filtered into that grain of assurance. Some fearful jungle ritual was building up to a climax of horror. As he ran, breath wheezing in heart-breaking gasps, he remembered the old legends of this accursed land.

His automatic was gone. There was nothing in his pockets but a cigar lighter. And the express rifle was nowhere in sight. His coolies had disarmed him.

But a man—a man of the real world—must not give way to fatal circumstance overlaid with strangeness. Murdoch's shotgun. He dashed into the house. But he found only the pegs on the wall. And all the while, the tomtoms in the jungle were inciting

the Serpent Gods to crush a white woman's bare body.

But Warren's whirling brain could not shape that picture. He cursed, shouted at the walls, stared at his empty hands. Then, just before he dashed to the door, he saw a weapon desperation could use.

It was a large copper cylinder with a three foot length of pressure hose at whose end was a brass nozzle: one of the soda-acid fire extinguishers he had brought to guard against a blaze during the dry season. He took it from its bracket, and carefully unscrewed its massive top, to which the container of acid was attached.

This he set aside. He poured three-fourths of the soda solution on the floor. In the kitchen he found a package of baking soda which he put into the water that remained. Thus, in more concentrated form, he now had the equivalent of the original mixture.

He dashed to the garage. He returned with the can of gasoline, and poured the inflammable fluid into the copper cylinder. The two could not stay mixed for more than a moment. He screwed the top back into place, and swung the sling-strap across his shoulder.

The satanic drum notes maddened him, and as he ran, he heard a woman's voice shrill with terror. They must have her bound. They must be conjuring the *nagâ* to come forth to seize the sacrifice. But, since they continued their chant, Warren knew that Yasmini had not yet appeared.

A red glow picked out the pinnacles of the temple. He plunged into the jungle.

Then, as he tripped over vines and felt the slash of bamboo blades, the drumming ceased. There was a long, quavering cry from many throats. The silence that followed was broken only by a furtive crackling and rustling.

They were leaving. Rosanne was dead. Or waiting, paralyzed with horror, for the deliberate approach of the *nagâ*; deliberate, until that last hideous moment when its great head and mighty coils swooped forward like the dipping of a swallow in flight.

He dared not cry out. He swallowed a yell, bounded across the clearing. They had not heard him. They were slinking away. No man could prove that they had taken a hand in preparing Rosanne's doom.

Warren leaped into the courtyard. Moonlight came through the arches high up on the pinnacled towers of the temple. Its silver bars reached across the bed of embers at the far end of the sacred pool.

"Rosanne!"

Echoes began to mock him. Then, above their hollow laughter, he caught her trembling cry: "Oh, Don—quick—over here—"

She was in one of the arched niches of the towering masonry. Her moon-gilded hair was streaming. Her dress was gone, and scarcely more than a few shreds of her slip remained. She was struggling with her bonds; bare legs straining, torso writhing with desperate effort.

Warren skirted the pool, opening his penknife as he ran. Rosanne's sob of relief rose to a scream of unutterable terror. Warren whirled. She could not gesture, but he knew it must be behind him. The warning still stabbed his ears when he saw what had emerged from a crypt beyond the embers of the ritual fire.

It was Yasmini, her lovely torso swaying from the endless coils of a python. Her breasts peeped through her trailing hair. And by the ruddy glow of the embers he could see the serpent markings that dappled her stomach, the jewel-glisten of scales on her arms and throat.

Rosanne's horror-strained voice became a far-off gasping. Warren's entire being was compelled by this fascinating monstrosity spewed from the ancient jungle. Yasmini regarded him with slow smile, and gestured toward the arch at his side.

She was giving him his chance to escape and leave her to her prey. Then she spoke, and her voice was hardly human in its venomous hissing.

"If I thought you could forget her, I might spare that yellow-haired woman. Go. You cannot help her. Not one nor twenty empty-handed men can equal a *nagâ's* strength."

Time ceased. Yasmini swayed slowly, like a pendulum of doom. He wondered when the transformation would become complete; when the *nagâ* would entirely blot out the woman. He could not stop this vengeance. No man had ever reasoned with a jealous woman. And Yasmini, he now knew beyond all doubt, was more than a woman. Neither force nor entreaty would avail him. Madness would be his lot if Rosanne died.

Madness—not death nor yet life—madness, a kind of death in life. He did a desperate thing. He twisted the handwheel of the copper cylinder. And the hiss that followed was that of the gas generated by sulphuric acid meeting the solution of soda. The pressure forced the gasoline out in a fine spray.

He had come prepared with a cigar lighter, but he did not need it. The jet became a roaring flame as it passed over the embers. It sprayed the *nagâ*. She shrieked as the blazing fluid enveloped her in flames, drenched her coils.

There was a tremendous thrashing as the coils wound and unwound in writhing agony, and the surging powerful muscles lifted the monstrous serpent body in fiery arcs.

WARREN advanced, wasting not a drop of fuel. Then, just before the corner of the court became a roaring hell, he had a last glimpse of the strangely beautiful face and torso of Yasmini, grotesquely protruding from the python's coils. He could not be sure if it was the distorting flickers of the fire or actuality that brought to him a vision of an eerie, ghastly transformation. One minute it was Yasmini—and then it wasn't. The gleaming white teeth, the glittering eyes, the contours of the head were a compound of something inhuman and unearthly.

He shuddered and drew back. The smell of burned flesh sickened him. He flung his flame thrower aside, staggered drunkenly toward Rosanne. He found the knife he had dropped, and slashed her bonds. He help her to her feet and for a long moment they clung to each other, dizzy and trembling.

"Don, what did I see? What was it?"

The flames had died down, and they both turned to stare in fascination at the horrible remains. Something that had once been white and gleaming and lovely was now part of a hideously charred, motionless length.

"Kambu said that she was immortal, that she couldn't be killed," Warren muttered.

"She was immortal."

They turned around at the words, startled. The sallow-faced, black-eyed monk stood there, calmly, solemnly, staring at the blackened remnants of the flames.

"As woman or as serpent, she was the daughter of a god and immortal. You were fortunate, Mr. Warren. You found her in the one state in which her immortal life could be severed—when she was half-woman and half-serpent."

"But I still can't believe it," Warren said. "It just can't be—it's not reasonable—"

"There are many things that are not reasonable in this world," Kambu said softly. "Perhaps it is better that you believe it was all *maya*—illusion." He turned away. "Peace to you—and to all living things." And then he was gone.

Warren didn't know what it was that made him look down at his chest which his torn undershirt had exposed.

But the diamond-shaped patterns, the python markings which had been there, were gone! He stared out into the jungle.

"Yes, illusion," he said quietly. "It must have all been illusion."

He took Rosanne's hand, and together they crept through the jungle to the sane fresh morning awaiting them without.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

DEATH IS FORBIDDEN

A Novelet of Dual Personality

By DON ALVISO

PLUS TWELVE OTHER STORIES BY AUGUST W. DERLETH,
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The Bohemian



I muttered some sort of cry and leaped for the arm that held the knife

*Did the Dripping, Bleeding Heart of the Great John
Gilford Unite Two Lovers in Another World?*

By HEYDORN SCHLEH

Author of "Cats Have Nine Lives," "Little Old Lady," etc.

YOU want to know what really happened to John Gilford, and how it is that I am still alive? All right. I'll tell you the whole story, every detail of it—though I warn you, you won't believe it, at first, at least. You'll say I've been brooding too much over it, or that I'm subject to hallucinations. You think such things couldn't happen; or you'll seek some natural explanation.

But study the evidence of the tangible things that even your practical mind must accept—the key in the clock, the partly filled wine glasses, the three exploded bullets. I've studied them over and over again, as I have relived that night, and I can reach only one conclusion: there must be things, and there must be a state of being beyond the exactitude of space and time as we know them, just as there are sound waves

above and below our capacity to hear, and lights that we cannot see. And you must then believe that these so-called unnatural things and states of being may only rarely become manifest to us, perhaps through some distortion of perceptory tuning. Perhaps you will even conclude that these things are unnatural to us only because they are not normally perceptible to us; that actually they are always present, just as are the extra-auditory sound waves always in the air.

But that is for you to conclude. I will relate the facts, exactly as they happened.

ALTHOUGH to this day I don't know his name, or whence he came; although before these events, I cannot recall that either John Gilford or myself ever spoke a word to him, it would be incorrect to say that he was a stranger. Actually, he was very close to us—almost a part of our lives—drawn there almost as though by design of some impish fates intent upon luring us into a ghastly whirl of haunting tragedy and death.

We first came upon him in the town of Perpignan, in Southern France, in a little traveling street show under petrol flares on a side street.

John and I, you recall, sought for and secured places on the staff of the hospital there at the conclusion of our post-graduate work in Paris, in the belief that the surge of refugees across the border from Spain would include many war casualties. War wounds, as you know, make most excellent surgical practice, and we felt that we would learn more in a year there than we might in a life time at home, without risking our necks on either side of a most unsavory internal struggle.

We were not far wrong in that. We were kept well occupied. John, probably, more so than I; for no matter how much I study, however much I try, I shall never be the surgeon that he was. You remember, he was made for it, physically, mentally, and temperamentally, from the

magically powerful tips of his long, slender fingers to the drawn steel nerves that guided them. And his capacity for work was limitless. While I need some recreation—a bit of life, laughter and song—his work was all of life to him.

Think back—can you recall ever having heard him laugh heartily, or known him to enjoy a song, in all our association in America and in Paris? He was like that in Perpignan; though we have lived together, sharing quarters these years, I cannot say we were ever intimate friends. If ever he had a thought beyond the field of medicine, he never spoke to me of it. On our rare walks through the streets of the town, he was oblivious to all the sights and sounds and smells in which I found inspiration for thoughts and observations. He would talk only of his profession, whatever the surroundings.

That's why it is all so strange; why, as I say, it seems that fiendish fates from nether regions must have plotted it. Strange, that the sound of a voice lifted in gay song should cause him to stop short, touch my arm in appreciation, then the two of us go winding about corners and up side streets in search of the singer, like kids back home at the sound of a band. And that John, normally the most unmoved of mortals, should burst into applause and bravos.

But he was a handsome youth, this Bohemian—dark skin, flashing white teeth, brightly colored native costume, and the very soul and spirit of gayety, his song and his rich, full voice throbbing and vibrating with the joy of living. And his partner, a wisp of a girl with flashing black eyes—her dance was moonlight playing on rippling water, her laughter tingling music to accompany his song! Call it the spell they cast over us or whatever you will; I dare say opera in Paris never thrilled me quite as they did.

But that even they could arouse John was little short of magic.

"They should be in a better place," he said, when at last we walked away. "You should speak to your

innkeeper friend. What an attraction they would be there! Why, even I might then enjoy sipping wine in his smoky old place!"

I did speak to the innkeeper, and he found them and arranged for them to perform there. And each night, for nearly a week, John and I were there to applaud them.

So you see, that made a profound difference. Though we never spoke a word to them directly, and though they never gave sign that they even noticed us, I dare say that they entered into John's life more intimately than had any human beings before; they were more a part of him, closer to him, even than I.

THAT is why it made so much difference when one day—a Tuesday morning; I could give the exact date and hour, if that mattered—the tall youth burst into the hospital carrying her in his arms as though she were a baby, and she doubled up in pain. That is why, from that moment, the world that is bound by hospital walls stopped turning.

For you must understand how we worked there. It was not like Paris, where each operation is scheduled in advance, planned and prepared for. John and I used to compare it to an American factory, with cases brought to us as though on a conveyor belt, anesthetized, and often diagnosed on the operating table. A madhouse, you would have called it; but what a wonderful surgical training!

But the world stopped, the turning of the wheels was stilled, as John Gilford himself took the little dancer from his arms, tenderly, as though she were his own, his only human possession. Feverishly he examined her, pronouncing it acute appendicitis.

"We must operate at once," he ordered, snapping orders to nurses and orderlies.

"You can't cut her!" the youth said simply, quietly, yet so forcefully that the two men glared at each other—two strong men who, each in his way, loved her. John tried to brush him aside, but the

Bohemian's quiet manner changed to wild fury.

"You can't cut her," he screamed. "You can't harm her beautiful body! I'll kill you first!"

It took several orderlies to drag him away and control him; but there are provisions in hospitals for such things. Had it been anyone else, John would have said, "To hell with her, then; let her die." But this, as I have said, was different.

So the little door closed. The nurses were ready. Then. . . .

You know how those things are. Every operation, we say, is in the hands of God, and only He can tell. Here was the most masterful surgeon I have ever known, and the simplest of operations; yet scarcely had the incision been made when her pulse faltered and failed. And, though they worked furiously, with everything John had learned, it was futile. They could only wheel her away.

They told the youth as gently as possible.

I am accustomed to seeing human anguish. Usually I turn away from it. But there was something inhuman about the agony and terror in the Bohemian's face as he dropped to his knees beside her still form, touching her body. Somehow, I couldn't turn away from that. And well it was that I didn't.

For suddenly the youth lifted the sheet. There was the still open incision of the uncompleted operation, for there had been no need to close it. With a horrible scream, he whipped out a knife and leaped like a tiger at John.

John was wholly unprepared for the attack; he hadn't time to move. More by good luck and desperation than judgment, I caught the man's arm and stayed it until the others were around us, all of us struggling on the floor, he screaming for vengeance. He was soon overcome and dragged away.

For a moment, John was utterly shaken. But it was all over in a moment, like the passing of a cloud in a summer day, and he was himself again.

Himself? Perhaps more than that. The man's nerves, I have said, are drawn steel. An hour later, while I was still trembling and working with extreme difficulty, he was performing a modern miracle of surgery. A shattered, gangrenous leg, too long unattended—one that you or I would have unhesitatingly amputated immediately—was being reshaped, and delicate nerves wound through rebuilt flesh. For seventy minutes he bent over his task, every muscle tense. It was the finest bit of work I believe any living man ever witnessed. And at the conclusion of that, after only a brief rest and a bit of brandy, he was on with the afternoon routine.

But the evening—that was difficult. We had grown accustomed to going to the inn together after dinner. That night, it seemed limitless time loomed ahead of us. John tossed aside his books and paced the floor, restless and discontent. I tried desperately to interest him in some discussion, but my conversation only bored him the more. In the end, I took my pipe and went out for a stroll.

IT WAS while I was out, and he alone in our study, that the Bohemian burst in through the window. What passed between them no one will ever know; but it must have been very brief, for those responding to the sound of shattering glass were in time to witness only the end of it—the mad youth plunging through the air, knife in hand, and John, still seated in his chair, firing two quick shots from his pistol.

The youth slumped at his feet. John bent over him, ripping off his clothes and probing the wounds. There was nothing that could be done; he had shot too well. But bending over him, John heard the curse on his dying lips—a curse uttered in a strange tongue, yet which John, strangely, seemed to understand.

John, of course, was exonerated of all blame. The inquiry was brief, and immediate; the French authorities have a way of concluding such

matters without needless formality. When the last of them had bowed his way out, John said bluntly:

"Let's go to bed! We need rest—both of us."

Sleep was beyond me, but the sound of even breathing from the adjoining room told me that John had found rest; that once again he was master of himself. What a man! Tomorrow I visioned him performing other feats of science as though nothing had happened, the tragic interlude merely strengthening him.

But that tomorrow never came.

John had slept well. He was in his usual spirits in the morning, engaged in a discussion of the new shock therapy in mental cases over breakfast—a discussion which I encouraged, fearing to bring up the subject of yesterday's event.

We went through the usual morning routine of inspection and dressings without incident. It was mid-morning, when I received an urgent call to Operating "C." John stood over a patient already prepared, scalpel in hand. He forced a half smile, a casual air.

"Toby, you'll have to take over for me," he said. "I'm not quite up to it this morning."

It was a simple amputation of a shattered arm. John stood beside me through it. I worked clumsily, under strain, but he made no comment. When I had finished, he left, returning to our quarters to rest.

He never performed another operation. The following day, and the day after, he found excuses—excuses that became less plausible, that showed more acutely the strain he was under. Then he asked for a leave to rest.

He returned three days after his departure, more drawn and haggard than before. And it was then that he confessed to me the cause of it.

"You'll think me mad," he said. "I know myself it is only an illusion. But every time I touch a knife he stands there before me—that Bohemian youth, ready to kill me. I—I can't do anything. Oh, I know it's foolish—just because he uttered a curse. And it isn't that I'm afraid

to die; you know that, Toby. Even if it were real, and if he were to plunge his knife into my heart, that wouldn't matter. But how could I perform an operation? How could I take an innocent person with me? That's what I'm afraid of. That ghost, standing over me—"

I tried to laugh at the thought. John tried it, too. Both our attempts were hollow and flat. Then he became desperate, pleading.

"God, Toby! I don't know what to do! He is everywhere! I went to Paris—thought I could lose myself for a week or so—but he's there, too. Am I going mad? If I thought so, I'd finish it all right now. Do you ever see such things? Does anyone else outside of a madhouse? If I were to pick up a scalpel right now, he would appear—"

He suited the action to the words, taking an instrument from my case.

"Look! Look, Toby! Don't you see him! Am I mad? Is he there, coming toward me?"

Suddenly he hurled the instrument across the room, sank into a chair, and buried his face in his hands, sobbing convulsively. That was John Gilford, the nerveless, the masterful surgeon—a pitiful trembling, shaking, quivering wreck in only a few short days!

You know how difficult are those cases even for the trained and experienced psychiatrist. I would have done anything—if only to save his skill for the human race, for no one could ever replace him—but, though I wracked my brain, there seemed nothing I could do.

"So you went to Paris?" I parried. "And what did you do there? Went to our old haunts, I suppose—the hospitals and clinics and class rooms?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"Good God! And then you wonder why you can't shake this off!" I followed up that lead. "You go away from here for a rest, and then get into a madder whirl of it! Don't you see—this psychosis, this nervous reaction, is directly associated with your work; and probably, rather than the result of the immediate past, it

is simply the culmination of your many years of ceaseless study and work. What you need is a complete rest—a complete change.

"Go somewhere—go up in the mountains of Switzerland. Pick out some place where they have no hospital, where you'll never see a doctor. Live there, in the open air, for just a month or two, and you'll be all over it. That's all you need—and that you must have—a change."

It sounded reasonable to me as I talked to him. It seemed reasonable to him, too. That very afternoon he drove off, headed toward the mountains—anywhere in the mountains. I went with him to the car, and watched him down the driveway. The way he handled the wheel told me our talk had brought renewed hope to him. I went back to my work, feeling somewhat satisfied with my solution to it.

TWO weeks passed without word from him. That in itself seemed to me a hopeful sign. Were the apparition still haunting him, I felt he would have come back at once. But my hopes were blasted when, one mid-morning, I received a telegram. It was a long telegram, with no attempt to save money by cutting words. It read:

You must come here at once. Believe me, it is vitally important, or I would not take you from your work. I may not live through the night, and there are things I must tell you. The travel bureau will instruct you how to reach here, and anyone in the village will tell you how to get to my cottage. Please do not fail me. Arrive before nightfall, if at all possible.

I read it over again, searching for some clue to his sanity, but there was none. I called the travel bureau, and learned it would take at least five hours, with hard driving, to reach the place he mentioned in the foothills of the Maritime Alps—part of it over dirt roads of uncertain quality.

I finished my work as quickly as possible and set out, guided by the map the bureau had given me; but my best effort brought me to the

village just after dusk, with the haunting fear that I might be too late. A villager pointed the cottage to me—a small one, apart from the others, on the hill. There was a light burning when I drove up.

John had seen me coming. He greeted me warmly, and for a moment I felt immensely relieved; he seemed fit and in good spirits.

"You're hungry and tired, old man," he said. "Get cleaned up a bit, and I'll have a meal ready for you that will be a memory, after the institutional fare we've lived through these years. I'm just discovering myself; I can really cook. . . . Discovering myself a little too late!" he added, almost under his breath.

And that last word told me it was only his nerve that refused to break. The rest of him was gone. I felt suddenly utterly helpless; if only I had brought someone along—some psychiatrist!

I WONDER now if that would have made any difference?

I concealed my fears, however, and strained as hard as he to keep up the appearance of normalcy. Sizzling steaks on the grate helped with that; I could see John really enjoyed cooking. I think he had begun really to live, for the first time in his life. He seemed actually human.

And perhaps that makes it harder, when a man about to die just discovers what there is to life!

The meal was less difficult than I had expected. I had promised myself to avoid two subjects, at least for the duration of it—the Bohemian, and any reference to surgery. That left us almost nothing in common except the rent for our quarters and the telephone bill. But we got along well, first with discussions of cooking, then of the mountains and roads and farms. It was a new John Gilford—one you've never known. I think you'd have liked him better had you known him then.

But over the most excellently brewed coffee, we both knew it had to come. Putting down his cup and accepting one of my cigarettes, John attacked it boldly, as he does every-

thing. There was no fear now in his voice; it was coldly impersonal. I let him do the talking; I listened.

"You think I'm mad," he began. "After all, perhaps I am. It really doesn't matter what either of us thinks. What I know is that I am about to die.

"And I know *how* I am going to die! I'm going to have my heart cut out of my living body and carried away, a dripping, bleeding offering to the ghost of a dancing girl!"

I have said John spoke coldly. Even in that, there was no emotion in his voice, no challenge to his fate. He had accepted that.

"I have known this for a long time," he went on, evenly. "It sounds silly, I know. You're sure I'm mad. But I'm telling you, because I must tell someone; and after you leave here, you can forget this part of it.

"You see, they are in another world, those two; in separate worlds. And because of his oath—because he swore I should never cut another human body under penalty of death—he can't be with her. His work on earth can't be finished until I am dead. And love is strong; you and I who have never experienced it can't appreciate how strong. For the sake of being with her, he will put me out of the way."

I puffed on my cigarette. "But John," I protested, "be rational. How many stiffs have you and I seen carted away? Did any of them look as if they'd come back? How many bodies have we dissected, slicing all the flesh from the bones? Could any power reconstruct them into their material form, and set them on earth again?"

He regarded me thoughtfully. "Remember our chemistry? 'Matter is indestructible'—no matter what you do to it, it merely changes form. Burn a stick of wood, and there is nothing left but smoke and ash; but were we to collect all the gases and all the ash, we would have exactly the same materials, plus the carbon and oxygen from the air that we started with. Not in the form of a stick of wood; you and I can't reproduce that. But who are we to say

that the God who made it in the first place cannot restore it?

"But we are wasting time. I have seen things, Toby, that you haven't seen. I don't think I would have believed them, either. But what is important is that you help me arrange my affairs. The discussion can go for another time, in some other world. For the present, I want you to make notes, and follow my instructions."

FOR a half hour, he detailed his personal affairs, making sure I understood each of his wishes fully. After that, I witnessed the will he had already written—the will you have seen probated. Finished with that, John got up and stretched.

"I asked you to get here before dark," he said, "because I don't want anything to happen to you. I wanted time to discuss these things with you and send you on your way before anything does happen."

"Without seeming to be rude, Toby"—his face actually broke into a wholesome smile—"I'm going to suggest that you get started back. Believe me, old man, I do appreciate your coming—and everything. If I have one wish in the next world, it will be that no harm ever come to you—"

I didn't get up immediately. I was watching his eyes. In spite of his words, there was no madness there. He wasn't insane. I know that now.

"How about riding back with me?" I suggested abruptly. "You've had rest; now maybe what you need is work."

He shook his head sadly. "That would do no good. Lord, man! I've taken my car for a ride on moonlight nights, and there he is, riding beside me. I wouldn't risk a crack-up with you on strange roads."

"But how do you know he will come tonight?" I asked.

"I know he will come," he told me. "He always comes. But I know, too, that I can't resist him any longer. At first I could fend him off. Then I took to eluding him. Last night I was completely exhausted, and this place looked like a shambles. I

haven't the strength to do that again tonight. I'm not going to try."

I got up, walked to the window, and peered out. The lights of the village shone below us—warm and friendly lights. It all seemed so utterly unreal; yet I felt certain that, left alone, John Gilford would be dead in the morning, even if by his own hand.

I faced him again. "Okay," I said. "Then I'll stay here with you."

"You can't, Toby—"

"If we want to mete out the most terrible punishment we can to a man," I went on, "we make him die alone, his hand untouched by that of a friend. I'm not going to let you suffer that—"

"But the risk, Toby—"

I ignored him and went on. "That's why you sent for me, really. Not that this stuff is so damned important; it's the human being in you—the part that can't die alone! That's why you struggled and fought for life last night—not for this extra day, but for a moment of companionship."

"And, what is more important, you have told me how to dispose of your few earthly effects. Humanity could have struggled along somehow had that information died with you. But what I must know—what humanity needs—are the secrets of your art; all those theories you have dreamed of materializing. When you die, all that dies with you, unless you can pass it on to me. I'm staying, John. Stir up a fire on your hearth, and see if you can rustle up a bit of wine. Then talk—talk up to the moment of your death! I must hear everything you've learned in a lifetime, and there is only this night in which to do it!"

I impressed him, as I had hoped I would. He didn't object. It would have been brutal to leave him there alone. We sat before the fire, talking, sipping wine.

I fought hard to keep him awake, and keep myself from dozing. Time and again, conversation lagged; I didn't dare let him think. The hours dragged by, growing more torturous.

Once I glanced at my watch. A

few minutes after one. He fell silent. I prodded him with other questions.

In the next interlude, he brought another bottle of wine. I opened it, filling each of the glasses. He gulped his down. I sipped a little out of mine, and put it on the table. I remember that distinctly; I fumbled with it a little, noting the height of the liquid in the glass. The fire burned low. I wanted to get up and put another stick of wood on it, but didn't. Sheer laziness. We sat silent, gazing into the embers in idle contemplation.

Then his clock stopped.

Have you ever heard a clock stop in a silent room? Perhaps you may not have been aware there was a clock ticking, but those last dying ticks are like thunder in the silence that follows, arousing you to full wakefulness.

It was that which aroused me—the deafening silence. I sat up, glancing toward the clock, high above the mantel.

"Your clock stopped, John," I remarked.

"Does it matter?" he asked, sullenly.

Without answering, I got up, dragging a chair to the hearth, stood on it to reach the clock. As I expected, I found the old-fashioned winding key inside the case. I held it in my hand momentarily while I checked the time with my watch. It was approximately correct—a few minutes before half-past one. I put the key over the stem, and was about to turn it, when John screamed.

It was the most chilling, ghastly scream I have ever heard in my life. When a woman screams, that's bad enough. But a strong man screaming in terror—

I wheeled about, leaving the key in the clock.

Then I saw it!

It was the Bohemian youth; I recognized that, even though his back was turned, and even though, in the place of his gayly colored native costume there was just a drab, shapeless drape over his form. I saw the knife gleam—I saw John shrinking

back in terror, and the form crowding closer.

I leaped from the chair. It seemed my hands grasped that form by the neck. I was sure I had judged rightly—but I went sprawling on the floor—and the apparition, ignoring me, stood over me. I grasped where I thought the legs were under the shapeless drape, but there was nothing . . . or was it eluding me? I scrambled to my feet in desperation.

I thought of John's pistol in the table drawer. He had mentioned that among his effects. I got it, took careful aim, and fired twice. The Bohemian didn't notice. John was backing—backing toward the blank wall.

I fired once again, moving to the side to avoid shooting John. Then I tossed the gun on the floor.

Suddenly a lean, dark forearm whipped from the drab hulk, thrust against John's throat and pinioned him against the wall. Then the other dark arm, gripping a knife, swept toward his heart.

I uttered some sort of a frantic cry and leaped for the arm that held the knife. Once before I had done that. But this time, my grasping hands felt only space, and once again, off balance, I fell to the floor. I heard John's last cry—heard the crunching of bone. Looking up, I saw blood dripping. Before I could move, there it was, in the long, bony fingers—a human heart, dripping, still throbbing convulsively!

It were as though my limbs were benumbed by the horror of it. Though I struggled desperately, I couldn't move. Then I saw the gray mass bend toward me—fold over me.

I won't say it struck me. I was conscious only of a blinding flash of light, then oblivion.

JACQUES CARLON, one of the French doctors, was shaking me. It was with difficulty that I aroused; but once my eyes were opened, I leaped out of bed to my feet.

I was back in my own room—in bed—in my pajamas!

I sank back on the bed trying to understand. I must have been dream-

ing—a hideous, horrible dream. Jacques was chuckling.

"You were screaming," he said. "I thought something might really be wrong. You must have had a dream?"

"I—I don't know! It was real!"

I looked about, suddenly. On the table was John's telegram, where I had left it. Beside it was my watch. I grasped the watch and studied it, unbelieving.

It was half-past one!

I asked Jacques the time. He said about one-thirty.

"What time did I come in?" I asked him, suddenly.

"I don't know," he answered. "I didn't see you this evening."

"Ask the doorman! It's important!"

Jacques called on the house phone. The doorman didn't know either. I insisted; no one can get in or out at night unless he unlocks the doors. But he insisted I had not come in that evening. I might have been there all the time—

"Hurry, Jacques!" I ordered. "You've got to go with me! It's a long trip—it will take the rest of the night. John Gilford is dead!"

We dressed feverishly. Jacques, fortunately, was not too inquisitive; my manner discouraged that. Together, we raced to the hospital garage.

The attendant answered our ring.

"My car is in?" I demanded.

"Yes, sir. I was about to wash it. It's very dirty—covered with red dust and mud—"

"What time did it come in?" I demanded.

"I don't know, sir—"

"You must know! How could I get in without you knowing? For God's sake, think, man! I have to know—"

He just shook his head. "I don't know, sir."

"When did you see it?" I asked.

"I just noticed it now, taking back the car I finished washing. I just glanced there and saw how dirty it is, and was about to put it on the rack when you rang."

And no more than that could we get out of him!

The long ride up to the mountains was a feverish nightmare. Yet I

knew every inch of the road, it seemed, as though I had driven over it many times. In the gray dusk of early morning we swept into the village, through it, and up the hill to John's cottage. The light was still burning on the table.

I leaped from the car, running ahead of Jacques. But the door was locked and barred. We went around the house, trying every window and door, but all of them were securely locked and barred on the inside. Finally I found a club and, breaking a window, climbed inside.

We found John lying there on the floor, in a crumpled heap, just where he had been. Rolling him over, we found the ugly gash in his chest, where his heart had been.

It was completely cut out. Not skillfully, as a surgeon might have done it, but crudely breaking and slashing through the rib bones with brute strength.

Jacques, for all his experience, shrank back in horror. But I had seen it before. I was sure of that. I had been there; that couldn't have been a dream!

I got up and looked about the room. There was the chair, drawn up before the hearth, where I had put it to stand on. There was the clock, stopped at a few minutes before one-thirty, with the door still open, and the key on the stem. There was my partly finished glass of wine on the table, and John's empty glass, and the half-filled bottle. There was my pipe, just where I had put it down when I got up to wind the clock.

I got down on my knees to look for the pistol. I knew just where to look. It was still lying there. I broke it, and there were the exploded shells.

And in the opposite wall, imbedded in the woodwork, were the bullets I had fired!

Tangible, material things!

AM I MAD? Could it all have been a dream?

I wasn't sure, then. In the gray of early morning, I left Jacques to face the authorities, and then get back to Perpignan by rail. I got in my car

and drove off, not to Perpignan, but to Marseilles.

You recall the long dock they have there? I drove my car out to the end of it, and left it standing there. I caught a boat for America. So far as I know, my car is still on the dock, awaiting its owner.

Perhaps you have heard something of it? Perhaps they have traced me through it, or through the countless fingerprints I left in the cottage. Perhaps they think I killed John, in madness, or something?

No, I couldn't have killed him. You who measure time mathematically can prove that; I couldn't have killed him, and been in Perpignan to return with Jacques, and have competent physicians determine that he had been dead less than five hours when we found him.

No, I didn't kill him. Nor did any other mortal being.

Perhaps the dripping, bleeding heart of the great John Gilford united two Bohemian lovers in another world. Perhaps, in the eyes of the Fates, the love of a young couple is more important than the good a great surgeon could have done in the world. Who are we mortals to know?

But I do know one thing—I must know it to believe in my sanity: The only way I could have awakened in my own room at the hospital right after John's death had to be through John's intervention. He must have realized the consequences had I been found at the scene of his murder—and I still remember vividly those warm words of his in our last conversation after he had dictated his will and wanted to send me away.

"If I have one wish in the next world, it will be that no harm ever come to you. . . ."

*An Evil God Shuns the Light and
Seeks Victims in Darkness*

IN

SPAWN OF BLACKNESS

A Story of Weird Magic

By CARL JACOBI

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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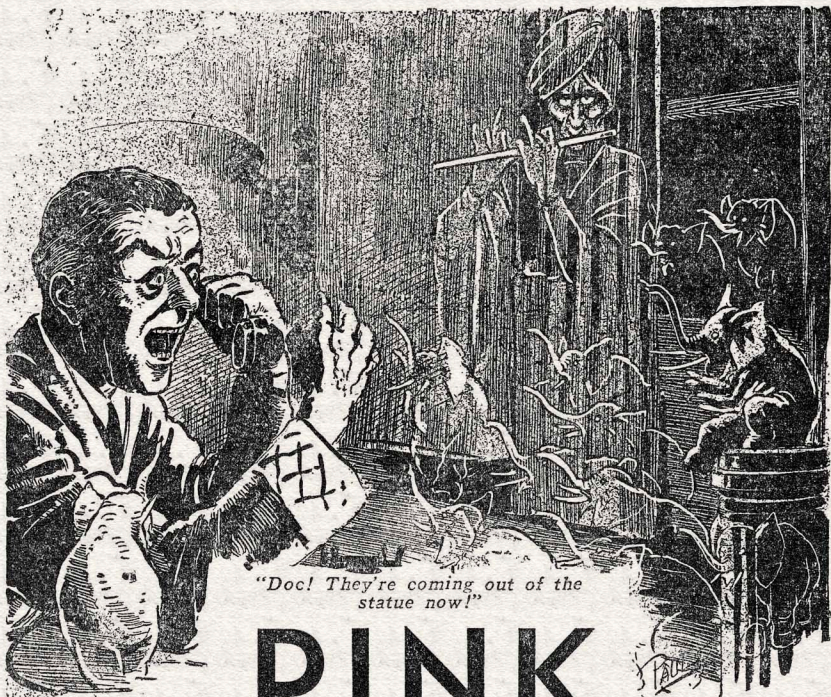


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At Night They Came, from Out of Dark Corners—
Marching Right into Gregory Mitre's Brain!



"Doc! They're coming out of the statue now!"

PINK ELEPHANTS

By ROBERT BLOCH

Author of "The Curse of the House," "Feast in the Abbey," etc.

SCREWBALLS don't bounce. Otherwise, Gregory Mitre might have sailed up to the ceiling every time he took a step. As it was, he was flopping around the room like a badly chloroformed baboon.

It really wasn't funny, though—it was just too pathetic to deal with seriously. Greg Mitre was a great guy once, before he started traveling; rather close friend of mine, as a

matter of fact. And now he was a professional grape-squeezer.

Of course, he'd invited us all to the home-coming party; there were at least a dozen of us in his apartment that evening, and we fully intended to do well by the liquid hospitality we expected. Nevertheless, everyone was a bit put out to walk in and find mine host loaded to the gills in advance. What made it worse, Greg Mitre appeared to be

more than ordinary bottle-dizzy. He was mawkishly, almost helplessly drunk.

Foster and I arrived first, at about the same time. We had to wait several minutes before Mitre answered the bell, and when he opened the door he almost fell on top of us. Once inside, when we got a good look at that red, sweating face with the unnaturally rolling eyes, we were both a little shocked, I think.

Of course, neither of us showed it, though Mitre's quife incoherently mumbled greetings further distressed us. He waved us to chairs and indicated the refreshments by walking up to the table and clawing out a bottle from the imposing array thereon. He gulped his drink from the neck and urged us to partake. We did so, silently. I know Foster's thoughts were my own.

WHAT the devil had happened to Mitre? He never had been a heavy drinker, before his trip. Two years is a good stretch, but granted he had picked up dipsomania in that time, the fact remains that in two years a man should also mature by that much. And Mitre apparently had lived a dozen since we last saw him. He was thinner, and his hair was graying. He'd tanned, but there were unpleasant lines about his eyes and mouth. And his smile was forced, maudlin. We took quick glances at him, and I caught Foster's eye.

Mitre never appeared to notice. He just lapped up the gravy, shot after shot. In ten minutes we saw him put down a swig of rye, two highballs, a straight Scotch and a brandy. During that time he said scarcely a word. I began to grope for an opening question.

The doorbell began to ring. From then on it kept ringing steadily throughout the evening. The apartment filled up. I watched my fellow guests. All of them seemed genuinely puzzled by Mitre's obvious intoxication; no one, apparently, knew any more than we did.

Mitre didn't explain. He kept on drinking. Somewhat embarrassed, the

others joined in, though naturally at a much slower pace, which rendered Mitre's own antics less conspicuous. But I kept my eye on him alone, wondering as the hours passed how any man could put away what he did without passing out.

It worried me; that and his silence. He laughed a lot, gabbled to the boys, but never once referred to his trip. Naturally they threw him a few friendly questions, but he ignored them. That wasn't like Greg Mitre. I felt a little put out because of his attitude. After all, we had been friends. Now he'd made a toy ship of his interests and put it in a bottle.

I kept my eye on Mitre, and I was watching him when the doorbell rang, at about eleven. Mitre stumbled through the laughing, chattering crowd to answer the door and I saw him open it.

A dapper, black-haired man with a Latin face stood in the hallway, and when he saw Mitre he bowed and smiled, showing his even white teeth, which stood out in startling contrast to the pallor of his face.

I was watching Mitre, and I almost fancied I saw a look of curious recognition in his drink-beared eyes. Through the buzz of conversation about me I caught a few words of the quick exchange.

"So sorry to disturb, but I thought that perhaps you might wish to part with the object now."

The stranger spoke with a peculiar accent, in a hissing voice that annoyed me.

But Mitre's sudden angry response disturbed me more.

"No, no, I tell you! I gave you my final answer on the ship, and that still stands. You can't frighten me out of it, you can't do that! No use of phoning any more, either."

The man smiled, unperturbed, though there was a flaring in his deep, dark eyes.

"But I thought perhaps my last message might have made you change your mind."

"You mean that call yesterday afternoon?"

"No." There was mockery in the

hissing voice. "I mean the message last night. Last night after you went to bed. Last night when you wanted to sleep, Mitre. Surely you remember the message you heard—the playing, and what followed?"

"No!" Mitre's shout rose to quiet the room. "No! There was nothing, nothing. You can't devil me that way!"

"My message will come every night, Mitre. It will come stronger and stronger. I do not wish to be harsh, but if my message fails I shall soon have to send a stronger one. A more persuasive one. I shall have it deliver that last message, Mitre."

Mitre got apoplectic. "Get out!" he screamed. "Get out!"

The smiling stranger made a single gesture. I seemed to catch a glint of silver flashing from his sleeve, as though he were pulling out a dagger—no, a steel rod of some kind. At the sight, Mitre lashed out with his hands, wildly, and the stranger ducked, then turned and hastened down the hall.

We all stood stock-still now, staring at the open door and the retreating figure of the man. Mitre was trembling, purple-faced, in the doorway; he seemed quite unconscious of our presence, and he was gasping for breath in a desperate sort of way.

And then, in the stillness, we heard a sound from down the hall. It was unmistakable; we all heard it.

A thin, wailing whistle rose on the air—a reedy piping from afar, as though played by eerie flutes. Mitre heard it, too.

"The Dance!" he muttered in a shocked voice.

The wailing rose, and abruptly a vision came to me wherein the stranger was pulling something long and silvery from his sleeve. Had it been a pipe, a flute of some kind? And was this the "message" those two had spoken of so mysteriously?

The music reached a horrid pitch, an inhuman shrillness that brought the puzzled guests to their feet. We stood staring at each other like fools, and then the music seemed to touch

a responsive chord in all of us—a chord of stark fear. It was as though cold air had blown through the room from some outer gulf of space. The music bit into my brain as it faded away down the hall, still rising, rising, rising.

Mitre's gasps brought us to our senses. He turned and stared wild-eyed at his guests. And then speech came to him.

"You'd better go," he mumbled. "Quickly. Can't explain. Just go—clear this all up later. Get out, all of you—for God's sake, get out!"

FOSTER started toward the distraught figure of our host.

"What's the matter, old man?" he began.

"Don't touch me! Go—go, for the love of mercy, go! I must get back, get back and look at it to see if the music has stirred it again. It mustn't be left alone when the music plays. It has to be watched, because if it ever—"

Mitre checked himself hastily, on the verge of hysteria. He pulled himself erect with a tremendous effort that did not deceive me, though the others may have been deluded.

"I'm sorry about this," he said, speaking very precisely. "I'm not well—touch of nerves, I guess. Nothing to worry about. And I've been drinking a bit too much. Won't you all accept my apologies? And forget what just happened here tonight? I'll explain all this—matter of fact, I'll drop in and see you, Bob, tomorrow." He nodded at me. "But if you'll be kind enough to leave now, I'd be obliged."

This was better. At least he was rational now. The crowd donned outer garments and departed. Conversation was subdued and there were wondering glances, but on the whole things were clearing up. I lingered behind. Mitre stood in the doorway, bidding farewells in a nervous manner.

"You'll be in my office, Greg?" I murmured to him.

"Yes, I meant what I said about explaining. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Would you like some company

tonight?" I ventured, trying to seem casual about it. After all, I was not only his friend but his doctor, and thus had a double responsibility, so to speak.

Fear flamed in his face. "No—no, not tonight!"

I abruptly changed my tack. "Could I prescribe a sedative, then?"

"No. It wouldn't help—God, I know! I'll see you tomorrow—explain it then—"

He pushed me out and closed the door. Going out, I looked around quickly but saw no sign of the stranger and his pipes. . . .

The next morning. "Got a drink, Doc?"

I had, and I gave it to him despite any scruples to the contrary. Mitre looked as though he needed a drink, and damned badly. He put it down and stopped shaking a bit. Then he looked at me and apparently thought about smiling, but gave it up.

"Listen, Doc. Got to help me! I've got 'em bad."

"Got what?" I considered looking surprised and gave that up, too.

"D.Ts. Hallucinations. Something, I don't quite know what. But I see things."

"What sort of things, Mitre?"

"What do you suppose? Pink elephants, mostly."

Now right then is where I should have suspected a gag. I've had *delirium tremens* cases before, but in all my experience the only time such patients see pink elephants is in the funny papers. The devil of it was, Mitre was obviously serious.

"Go on," I prompted; but that was entirely unnecessary, because Mitre had already started. His jaw was hanging loose, and his eyes were half closed as he mumbled in the flat, monotonous drone characteristic of hysteria.

"I see them at night. Every night they march into my room—out of Ganesha they come, and march around the bed. When the light is on they go away, but then it's worse because I hear them. Nobody else sees them and hears them, but I do. That's why I know they're not real, those little pink elephants.

"But even if I know it's a dream, why do I fear them so? I can't stand to see them walking around with their tiny red eyes staring at me and their gleaming yellow tusks raised, and then they trumpet at me and come closer and closer and I can't sleep, or they'd get on top of me!"

"They come out of Ganesha, I tell you—every night they come—and I have to drink and drink until I fall asleep. Then I don't hear them any more with their little shrill trumpetings in the dark, just as I did that first time in the temple. No, I know what you'll say, and it's not true. They *aren't* fantasies of alcoholic origin! I wasn't drinking when I went into the temple that day, and I heard them then. I heard them when I pinched the idol—the Ganesha idol."

Mitre shuddered. "I was all alone in the big dark room with the awful stone frescoes on the walls. The silly priest had gone out to ring the bells, and I was alone, and here was this little statue in the niche. I didn't take it for its value; it had none. It wasn't like stealing a jewel from an idol's eye and then having a curse set on you—none of that stage melodrama stuff. I wanted the dirty little statue for a souvenir, and that was that.

"Put it in my sun-helmet, I did, and carried it out in my hand. But when I copped it, I heard the trumpeting, and I've heard it ever since. I've seen them marching around in my room, at night. They come out of Ganesha and march and their red eyes stare, and—"

HE BEGAN to tremble again, and I gave him another drink.

"Let's go over and have a look at your statue," I suggested. I wanted to look over his room, look over the figurine. The Hindus are great ones for hypnosis and I've seen some damnable tricks; statues with polished surfaces that reflect light so that, when stared at, they induce self-hypnotic states. Mitre might have been the victim of some similar device; hence my suggestion.

On the way over I questioned him.

I got more details of the story. Mitre had stolen a statue of Ganesha, Hindu elephant-god, from a little temple in Seringapatam. The fantasies began then, and his drinking mounted apace. No priest had shouted hysterical curses, no little dark men with knives followed him about. It was just that the temple had given him the creeps, and the statue seemed so evil, so *malign* that he believed his theft had invoked a curse on him.

The little pink elephants running around—I tried to trace the image. The temple had housed several live, sacred white elephants. They are really pink in color rather than white. I could see that the hallucinations might have arisen there. That and the fact that Ganesha is the patron god of the elephant. Moreover, Mitre said that after his “haunting” began, he read up on Hindu mythology. Potent imaginative forces involved here, obviously. Oh, he had the D.Ts. very properly, poor Mitre did. I wanted to see his room now.

I did. Ordinary enough, surely. I looked at the statue, and it was black and dull. There was no reflecting surface, no jewel. The statue was scarcely eight inches in height, carved out of basalt, and the execution was crude but effective. I didn’t realize how effective until I had handled and stared at it for some minutes. Then it hit me full force.

THE figure was that of a seated man with much too many arms. The figure was of a man, but the head that of an elephant. Grotesque? Yes; and frightening, too. The thing had eyes that almost peered from the stone, and its trunk was not motionless—it was *poised*! Simple as it was, the effect was not that of an inanimate representation, but rather of a creature whose arms and legs might move at any second. Watching it, I began to wait for it to move.

Then I understood Mitre’s case. He’d watched it, too; watched it with many bottles before him, and waited for that movement so diabolically captured in stone. And fantasies had come to haunt him; guilt-complex had arisen. Now the ele-

phants indeed marched. Pink elephants, in all truth.

“But why didn’t you get rid of it?” I asked, at length. It was a logical enough question.

“I was afraid,” Mitre answered simply. It was a quite logical reply. The more I looked at the thing, the more sensible the reply became. I’d be afraid, too—I confess it quite frankly. I wouldn’t throw the staring statue into the sea, or break it, or lock it away; not unless I could destroy completely the evilness inherent in it. Mitre had borne his cross with him halfway around the world; and seeing it, I understood. But something had to be done, logic or no logic.

We stood there in his bedroom staring at that horrid little black idol with its man-body, its extra arms with the detestably exquisite fine work that made even the tiny fingers real; stood staring at the horrid elephant trunk and the sharp, pointed tusks; staring at the little hoofs on the ivory-inlaid feet. The little, dark eyes seemed to stare back in return, to flash as though with sardonic life. In the dusk the dully gleaming statue unnerved me, and I began to wait for it to move—

And then, from the window, came the sound. It trickled in, as though from the courtyard below, and I recognized it with a chill prickling of my spine.

It was the music—the eerie flute music that had played in the hallway last night after Mitre had repulsed the stranger. It was the high, shrill, hysterical music that seemed to flicker from undefinable, alien worlds, bringing a message of some unhuman madness. I recognized it with a fear I could not name, could not hide.

Mitre recognized it, too. He blanched, faced me wildly.

“The music,” he whispered, “Again! It’s the *Dance of Ganesha*!”

The words broke the spell. He had said something during that mysterious conversation last night—something about a “Dance.” This was it, then?

I seized his trembling shoulders and looked straight into his eyes.

"Tell me the truth, man," I said. "Out with it. Who was that stranger, and exactly what does he want of you?"

Mitre shook all over. "I'll tell you—but make him stop playing—make him stop before it—*before it's too late!*"

I flung open the window and peered down into the courtyard. As I did so the music abruptly ceased! My eyes swept the opening below. I fancied I saw a figure moving quickly away through the shadows close to the building, but I could not be sure. Did the dying sun glimmer on a silver reed?

No, there was nothing there! Nothing but the last haunting echo of that strangely ceased music. I turned to Mitre again. He sighed deeply with relief.

"It's gone. And it didn't do what he threatened. Thank God for that!"

MY PATIENCE snapped. "Who is that fellow—and what is this all about, anyway? The truth, Mitre—if you really want my help?"

Mitre looked away and spoke rapidly. "I didn't tell you everything, Doc. But you might as well know now. I was followed from that temple, have been—ever since. At first, I hadn't realized it; the man was dressed like a European, talked like one. He didn't wear a melodramatic beard-and-turban get-up, and he didn't come yipping to me with threats or curses.

"On the boat he sidled up to me one day and asked if I'd picked up any curios in the East. We fell to talking, and I took him down to the cabin and showed him some vases, other knickknacks I had purchased. When we finished he said nothing, but smiled. And then he asked me to show him the statue of Ganesha.

"I got excited; asked him how he knew of it. He didn't say anything—just told me that he'd heard. And he would like very much to buy it. Offered me a thousand, there, sight unseen, in spot cash. I refused, showed him curtly to the door. He just smiled again and said I'd hear from him."

Mitre mopped his face. "In Paris, on the way back, he came to my hotel. How he found me, I don't know. Offered me ten thousand this time. Again I refused. By now I was getting worried. How did he know of the theft? If he knew, who else knew? Who might send agents after me in vengeance?"

"On the boat here it began all over again. He showed up; I almost expected him to. I asked the steward and the purser about him—they could tell me nothing. They withheld his name but said he came from India. Then I realized—he was the agent sent by the temple!"

Mitre's eyes seemed haunted. "He didn't flash a knife or send cobras through my transom, or even threaten me, like such people are supposed to. He just smiled, showed up in unexpected places, and offered me money. Sometimes he just showed up—and that alone got on my nerves, I can tell you! Wherever I went he was standing off at the side, smiling, watching me. I began to drink then and there.

"And the second night out for New York, he came and whispered outside my stateroom; whispered because I wouldn't let him in. He made his only threat then. He said that if I didn't return the statue, he would make the statue come to him!"

I could see the sweat on his face now. "That was sheer madness. I asked him whether he was a priest; pointblank. And he said 'yes,' he had been in the temple when I stole the idol, and he was a priest who knew many mysteries and had powers over the elephant-god. Power enough to make the statue come when he called, if need be."

Mitre paused, stared at me with haggard eyes.

"Doc, it's crazy, and it's wild—but it's true! He said he could play the Dance of Ganesha on his pipes—play the sacred music used in secret temple rites, and make the idol come alive. He said they did that in the temple, that the stone held the spirit of the god incarnate—and that the spirit could be released by playing sacred music. Or am I mad?"

"No, Greg," I said softly. "Go on."

"Well, I scoffed. And so he played. Played softly, shrilly. The music sounded into my room. And that's when I first saw the things—those damned pink elephants, coming like—like little pale ghosts from the statue! They were pink, misty things, but they marched around the room at my feet and trumpeted shrilly in reply to that wailing music. I almost fancied I saw the idol moving, its malignant little eyes staring at me—and I began to scream and scream—"

I could see Mitre shudder. "So he went away quietly then, before anyone was aroused. And I took a drink and went to bed and had dreams. Dreams of Ganesha.

"The next morning some fool stubbornness kept me from going to him. I couldn't confess that I was afraid—I *couldn't* confess that he had these powers, don't you see? If it were true, then this world is a monstrous, unthinkable place, and we walk unheeding amidst unimagined terrors. I could not believe that and remain sane!"

Mitre shrugged helplessly. "So I guarded the statue, thinking he might steal it. But he would never stoop to such a petty trick. He played again, though, that same night. And I drank and drank, and the elephants marched around me, and the statue nearly moved. I think it did, I mean. . . .

"Then we landed. I hid out in a hotel for three days, and I thought I'd slipped him off my trail. So I came home to the apartment. I had to; it was getting so that I'd sit in front of this damnable idol all day and stare at it, and take another drink whenever my head cleared. I threw the party last night to get people here; to take my mind off this horrible elephant-creature."

The man's eyes were bitter. "You saw what happened, Doc. He showed up. And he made those threats. Said that he'd play again—this was the *last chance* I had to sell! He wants to take the thing back to the temple for rites soon to be performed. He said it was angry now, and if it came alive it would harm me before going

to him. And it will come alive if he plays again—I *know it*! It might have happened today if you hadn't been here."

I faced him then. "Greg, keep still."

"What—"

"I said, be quiet. Listen to me, now. At first I thought you were being hypnotized by the statue. Your drinking and continual staring might have given you hallucinations."

"That's not true!" Mitre flared. Anger—an encouraging sign!

"I know it. It's *not* the statue that has hypnotized you—it's that unearthly music."

Mitre gaped at me. "The music?"

"Yes, those pipes. I've heard them—they *are* insidious, Greg. They hold certain tones that appeal to primal instincts; paralyze certain nerve-centers and in some way deaden the brain, as an opiate does. And so you imagine pink elephants marching out of the statue, imagine the thing is about to move. There's absolutely nothing in the statue. Do you follow me, Greg? It isn't hollow—it's solid. I could smash it, of course. But I won't. You're going to fight this thing like a man, and I'll fight with you. Here's my plan, Greg. This man must be stopped. And stopped now."

MITRE began to shake. "No—don't harm him! He's a priest, he has powers—"

I shook my head. "No powers, Greg—he's simply a dangerous fanatic. Now, I'm going to post myself down the street. In the drugstore. I'll wait. When you hear the music, I'll come back. And Mr. Flute-player won't get away this time. Believe me, Greg—this is the only way to stop this morbidness of yours. Breaking the statue won't help your mental state any. We must have that man. He's the source behind all your troubles."

Mitre still wasn't entirely convinced. "Yes, but the danger—If he plays again, the statue moves."

"Nonsense! You must keep a grip on yourself, man. Do as I say now. Stay here; the Hindu will be back,

I know. Then call me at once. And don't worry. We'll lick this guy yet!"

I gripped his shoulder, turned and departed. Mitre was still shaking, but he managed to pull himself together a bit, grinning weakly in farewell. I went down the stairs and crossed into the drugstore; arranged with the clerk that when my call came, he was to turn around immediately and phone the police, sending them right up to Mitre's.

Then I sat down to dinner in the booth. It was dark in that corner of the store, and as I stared into the shadows an image rose, unbidden, to my brain.

The staring elephant face of Ganesha emerged blackly and grinned, and the trunk began to wave and wave; the tusks moved forward, the horrid hoofs pranced evilly.

Stifling fear, I ate. That cursed idol, that cunning music was getting me, too.

Night fell, and though the drugstore radio played reedy jazz my brain was listening to other music—strange, eerie music from afar, that crept through my senses and clawed away at my sanity. I heard the awful music rise as in a daze and then—

Then came the sharp tinkling of the phone!

The booth was black as I lifted the receiver in a trembling hand. And over the wires, Mitre's voice screamed in high hysteria.

"Doc! He's here—in the courtyard! I've shut the window, and still the music comes, louder and louder. It's dark here in the bedroom, and yet I can see the statue! It's glaring at me, and the eyes are moving—*stop the music, Doc!*"

"Greg, control yourself!" I snapped.

"Doc, hurry—it's beginning to wave its trunk—in time with the music! Listen, Doc, you can hear the music—They're coming out of the statue now! I see them glistening in the light— Doc, come on—the music is louder, closer—"

"Greg, for God's sake!"

"Doc—it's getting down off the pedestal—it's coming for me—I see the tusks—it's crawling—up—now—*Doc!*"

There was an indescribable scream, an echo of pure madness. And then over the buzzing phone I heard that damnable, that accursed, that soul-chilling flute music, rising and rising in bubbling waves of horror.

I dropped the phone and scrambled out. My feet thudded down the street, into the lobby, up the stairs. Greg's key was in my hand and I yanked the door open upon harsh blackness. Through the parlor I raced, as the music burst out on me from all sides—triumphant, cackling notes that seemed to mock and scream defiance.

Then I was in the bedroom. Mitre lay on the floor, and I snapped up a lamp. Still the music shrieked in the air about me, and I glanced wildly at the pedestal. It was—*empty!*

My eyes went to the door with a dread I dare not name, and the music screeched in horrid glee. I didn't see pink elephants marching. There were none. There were no beasts with tiny hoofs and gleaming tusks. But over at the window—

SOMETHING crawled blackly into the shadows. Something dark, stony, about eight inches high. Something gleamed in the lamplight and lumbered across the floor, climbing up the window ledge and resting there as though directed by the unearthly music.

From the street a police car squealed, but I scarcely heard it above the infernal music that dinned in my ears. I scarcely heard it, because I could only stare and see—

See that unbelievable, grotesque little monster clambering to the window ledge and with one stony arm raise the window to permit an exit. See, in the lamplight, the miniature elephant-head with the bobbing, moving trunk of stone, the little red eyes staring down, the tiny hands clawing, the hoofs of the feet lumbering as it prepared to leap from the window toward the waiting flute player below.

And then the roar of a revolver sounded from the courtyard and the music abruptly ceased. . . .

But another sound came then from

within the room. It was not from me, nor from Mitre. It came from I dare not say where—but it was a *tiny, shrill trumpeting!*

Abruptly the thing leaped. Just as the shot died away it leaped from the window. A second later it landed with a crash on the stone court below.

I rushed to the window, stared with uncomprehending eyes at the tiny statue that had fallen to the ground, shattered now into a hundred little pieces—fragments of simple stone.

Next to it lay the dark body of a strange man—a man whose dead hands still clutched a silver pipe. And policemen were bending over him; bending over the little broken statue that was, thank God, only stone after all.

I turned with a sob of relief. It had been the music, at that—horrible sounds that hypnotized Mitre and had

hypnotized me, too, at the last. The statue must have been on the windowsill all along; it had toppled out. Hallucinations induced by the music had made me see what could not have been.

But how had that statue got to the window?

Had Mitre placed it there and then fallen back on the floor?

Mitre—on the floor. What had this cruel hypnosis done to him, with his maddening obsession of living statues and pink elephants and Hindu vengeance?

I bent over the body of Gregory Mitre—for it was his body, and he lay quite dead.

And then I stood up and began to scream and scream, staring at the body of Gregory Mitre—that loathsome, mangled body, *covered all over with the bruises of stony hoofs, and the little red stabs from the goring tusks of a tiny elephant!*

THE PATH TO PERDITION

A Story of Supernatural Fears
By JOHN CLEMONS

HALF BULL

A Gripping Fantasy by MANLY WADE WELLMAN

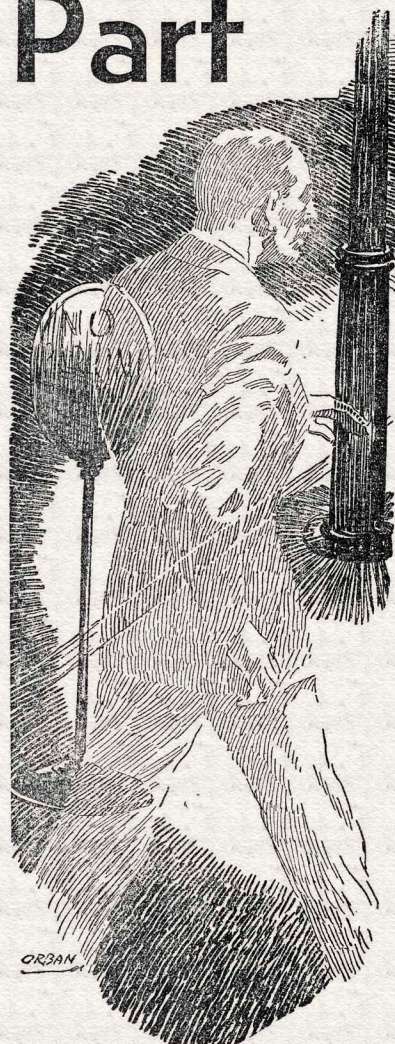


A Message For His Majesty

A Story of a Strange Visitation by AUGUST W. DERLETH

AND TEN OTHER TALES IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Mrs. Elting Does Her Part



Alder's dim figure was still behind him

*Shadow or Substance—Who
Can Tell What Things
Within the Darkness
Dwell!*

By
TALLY MASON

*Author of "Lord of Evil,"
"The Lost Wraith," etc.*

THE medium came around to it at last, and agreed to Richard Alder's plan: to put fear into Sanders Hawk, if possible, now that Prother had done his part and talked Sanders Hawk into coming to see her. No easy task, that. She was a little dubious, even though it involved no great violence to her principles.

"He's retired and living off what he

made on those poor suckers," urged Alder. "And it's all of five years since my brother Jack killed himself."

"I don't know, I'm sure, Mr. Alder," she hesitated. "The spirits may be angry."

"I doubt it," said Alder dryly. "I'll be in the neighborhood waiting for Hawk; he doesn't know me, and I look enough like Jack to put the fear of God into him. I'll come back and pay you afterward."

That much arranged, he felt considerably better. He left Mrs. Elting's place and went out into the twilight. There was time now for a little supper, and after that he could take up his vigil nearby, so as not to miss Hawk when he came out. He had an uncanny feeling that he had done the right thing, that he had taken at least a step in the direction of the vengeance coming to Hawk for Jack's sake—for Jack, who had taken his life after Hawk had mulcted him of his small savings.

As Richard Alder walked to his car, he smiled at the medium's simple belief in her after-world—"the spirits may be angry. . . ."

MR. SANDERS HAWK, his hair just beginning to gray, but as suave as ever, arrived with Prother. He left Prother at the door and went into the medium's rooms for the seance. He was the last to arrive, and was none too eager. A master of skepticism, he. Prother had prevailed upon him, and he had come, but for spiritualism and supernaturalism in general he had a profound contempt.

He sat down, watched the lights dim, joined hands, and smiled derisively to himself. Rigmarole. A kind of magic that depended for its success upon the gullibility of the people who came to see it worked. He told himself that he could foresee each step the medium might take.

In this he was wrong. The medium had hardly gone into her trance when something obviously not scheduled took place. This was Mrs. Elting doing her part, which, of course, Hawk could not have anticipated.

A convincing shudder of terror, a half-voiced cry, the urgent words

moaned into the pregnant air from the revoltingly lax body of the medium:

"There's someone haunted here, someone who is *haunted!* I can't go on—with him here. He is Hawe or Hawk—and there is a malignant spirit with him: a tall man with a mustache. His name is . . . his name is Alder, John Alder."

The incident startled Hawk; the long, terrified groan shook him.

"Please go—please go away!" the medium said.

Hawk was astounded and not a little upset. His skepticism was for the moment put from his mind. He got up hastily and drew away, and with unaccustomed speed, he left the house, admitting within himself a certain relief at being again in the city's refreshing night air. He regretted not having brought his car, and damned Prother briefly for convincing him that the walk would do him good. He considered phoning for a taxi, but dismissed the thought; the fact was, he was loath to reenter the house from which he had just taken his hasty departure.

He stepped briskly to the sidewalk and strode away into the night. After the first block, he began to go over the thing that had happened in the seance room. He began to wish Prother had stayed, so that he could relate his incredible experience. Thinking about it, he confessed himself just a bit shaken.

He remembered John Alder, a little dimly, yet well enough. The woman's description of him was vague, but it was Alder all right, and Hawk began to wonder how she might have got hold of such an idea. Of course, she must have learned something about his past before he came there—but on second thought, he reflected that he and Prother had taken adequate precaution. Still, there must have been some means of informing herself.

His confidence and skepticism coming back to him, he half thought of returning to denounce the medium for a fraud, certain that a hoax had been perpetrated upon him. But in a moment he reflected that there was nothing to be gained by such a hoax; the woman had done herself out of her

petty pay and had helped herself and her reputation not at all.

HAWKS felt a faint, uneasy sense of chill, and had the impulse to turn and look around. But he did not immediately yield to it, because within himself he had admitted to uneasiness, and was loath to signify it so outwardly as to turn and look behind him, like any child in the dark. But presently the impulse became overpowering, and he looked around, certain that he was alone in the shadowed street.

He saw Alder at once, because Alder was at that moment passing under a street light, but, as so often happens, Hawk did not assimilate what he saw immediately; he turned away and had taken four or five steps before the face under the brief glow of lamplight came back to him with the force of a blow, and he glanced over his shoulder again, only to see the figure plodding steadily after him.

Hawk paused grimly, closed his eyes, and looked again.

There was no one there.

Courage returned to him. Impulsively he turned and walked rapidly back down the half block separating him from the man he thought he had seen, confident of finding someone crouched in a doorway. But he found no one, and, turning again to continue on his way home, he went at an increased pace, firmly repressing a growing feeling of fear and a faint sense of helpless anger, this partly at himself for giving way to fear, partly at the nebulous person or persons responsible for this shabby deception.

He was certain that some form of deception was being practised upon him, and, knowing full well how often he had got away with other people's money, often considerable sums, by means of one clever scheme after another, he understood that there was motive enough, and many a man alive who might want to strike back in some way. But despite thinking so, he continued to hurry, as if by haste to leave his fear behind.

Half a block onward, he glanced again behind him. There was Alder

still, the same distance from him, a dim figure, but certainly Alder, for his face was quite clear despite the darkness all around. Hawk began to feel a coolness on his forehead and knew that perspiration stood there. Yet he steeled himself to wait. Whatever it was must pass him by. The muscles of his jaw tightened, and he waited.

But nothing whatever passed him.

The figure of Alder came on and was lost suddenly in deep shadows lying upon the walk there. Once more Hawk thought that he must have hidden. Once more he ran back, and again he saw no one, no living thing save a nocturnal bird darting and swooping with harsh cries among the moths and insects about the nearest street light.

This time Sanders Hawk went toward his home at a running walk. Fear and terror had him and held him, impelling him at last to rapid flight. It may have been that in this extremity Hawk remembered the misery and tragedy he had caused wherever he had gone with his plans and schemes, the trust and faith he had broken time and again, the source of his comfortable income. But now, uppermost in his mind, was the thought of reaching the haven of his house, the security of his room.

He did not once look behind him.

HE REACHED the house safely, though once or twice he fancied he heard running footsteps behind him. But he did not turn to see. He ran into the house and locked the door behind him, his breath coming in gasps, and without pausing to turn up the lights, he raced up the long stairs to the second floor.

That was his mistake. The light might have given him some additional security, might have lent his fear-distorted mind some stability. As it was, he saw Alder coming toward him down the hall, coming with incredible speed, it seemed, just as he reached the top of the stairs.

He cried out, stepped back, clawed for the rail, and missed it. His legs crumpled grotesquely beneath him,

(Concluded on page 59)

A Sentence of Death



He stabbed viciously, twisting the knife

*He Who Lives by the Knife,
Dies by the Knife—but
Mike Agosta Couldn't
Understand!*

By
JOHN L. BENTON

*Author of "Murder in Pictures,"
"The Wheel of Torture," etc.*

THE Duke of Brooklyn was no duke at all, and bore not the faintest resemblance to royalty. His real name was Mike Agosta. His profession was murder. He was a chiv man. He used the knife. His rates were high, but he was a clean workman and his services were usually in demand.

The Duke always viewed his work without emotion. He considered himself a professional, carving warm meat for which he was paid cold turkey.

Seldom did he go to a victim's funeral. Only sometimes, as now, in the case of Gib Johnson, it was necessary. Too many people knew that

Johnson and the Duke had been fairly good friends. So the Duke stood now with a lot of others under a sullen sky and chewed gum while they lowered the latest object of his financial interest into a dark, dank grave. He had lost all interest before the final ceremony was concluded and was surveying instead his bleak surroundings.

Ten paces away he noticed another grave, let his eyes glance casually over its headstone. The name inscribed on the stone seemed familiar.

That grave belonged to Peter James Greer. He was sure it was someone he once knew. He shrugged slightly as memory came back. Sure, he remembered now. Greer had been a two hundred dollar job. Now he was Gib Johnson's neighbor. And Johnson had been a three hundred dollar job. Only a hundred bucks extra to put them ten paces apart.

SOMEHOW the funeral, the cemetery, combined to make even the unemotional shiv man feel depressed. So he decided to make the usual rounds that night, to visit his regular haunts.

Presently the Duke was sitting at his favorite table, drinking beer from his favorite bar. It was a little after ten. The place was crowded, poorly ventilated, and under the low ceiling hung a thick pall of tobacco smoke. A lady barfly was playing, or thought she was playing, a popular tune on the piano, and a gentleman barfly was earnestly trying to sing.

It was gay enough and classy enough for Agosta's taste. He was interested. He was interested until his eyes roamed to the people at the bar.

Then he lost all interest in the alleged music. He ceased even to hear it. Being an unemotional man, a killer, he displayed no outward trace of unusual concern. It is doubtful whether he was more than merely surprised. For, standing with one elbow on the bar, one foot on the rail, and casually stirring his drink in characteristic fashion, was "Palooka" Pete, the prizefighter. That in itself was admittedly nothing to get excited about. But Palooka Pete had been dead for years! The Duke clearly remembered killing him.

"I must have got the wrong man," the shiv man told himself.

So the Duke stared and stared, and was thankful for the pall of smoke that made faces indistinct. His mind not being of the chain-lightning order, he had no idea what to do about it. This was the first time he had ever made a mistake. A little more thought and he suddenly remembered something: Palooka Pete's real name was Peter James Greer—the name on the headstone he had seen at the cemetery. Then who was buried there in place of Pete? That point didn't bother the Duke much. What did concern him was, what was he going to do about Pete being alive?

The Duke was a direct actionist. Gingerly, he felt for the shiv which he carried in a shoulder scabbard as some men carry a gun. Reassured by its touch, he got up to see Pete. But the girl at the piano grabbed the tail of his coat as he went by.

"Don't go," she said raucously. "Don't go. Wait'll you hear this one."

Agosta balled his fist. But he couldn't hit a lady. He smiled angrily and pulled away. But when he looked again at the crowded bar, Palooka Pete had gone.

Mike Agosta was puzzled. Had Pete left the place because he had recognized him? Not once, not for one brief second, not for even the tiniest tick of time, did it occur to the impassive, passionless killer that he may have been witness to that most incredible of phenomena—the return of the dead.

Mike remained at the bar, sipping his beer with the noisy others. The girl kept on playing, the man kept on singing, the hum and buzz of idle conversation continued; everything was as before. The Duke thought of asking the bartender about Pete, but then he changed his mind. If the bartender had not recognized Pete he would think the shiv man was crazy. So Mike held his tongue.

An hour later he had not exactly forgotten the incident, but he had swallowed a few more beers and Pete was summarily relegated to some obscure pigeonhole in his mind.

It was perhaps twenty minutes later

when Nicky Smith came up to him. He knew the guy.

"Have a beer, kid," he invited. He was feeling expansive.

The kid took the beer and then he said, "That's not what I came in here for, Duke. A guy sent me in. He said he wants to see you. He said he had a little work for you. He's outside now."

The Duke choked down a swallow. "The hell with him," he said. "I don't deal with strangers."

"No, but that's just it," Nicky said. "He says he knows you."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know."

"Did he say what he wants?"

"He said that it was important. He said there was something in it for you. He gave me a fin just to tell you."

The Duke thought at once of Pete. He thought a long time of Pete. He thought so long about it that Nicky had finished another beer before the Duke could come to any sort of decision. He got an idea, though; he got a good one. He was, as previously disclosed, a direct actionist; he thought along direct—and deadly—lines. That Pete was out front he had no doubt whatever. That Pete intended to destroy him he had even fewer doubts. The problem had to be solved at once, and decisively.

Mike pulled out a roll and gave the kid a five-spot.

"Thanks for telling me," he said. Mike the Duke always paid off for slight favors, real or fancied. He walked away from the bar without finishing his beer; he had more important business on his mind. He went out. Not out the front way, but out through the back, through the kitchen.

In the narrow alley at the rear of the place he drew out his shiv and slipped it up his sleeve; he could use it now in the wink of an eye. And he intended to use it. He intended to use it in just a moment, on the unsuspecting Pete waiting for him out front.

A bum slouched up to him in the dark and Mike, startled, had the shiv at the man's belly before the fellow could open his mouth. The fellow had

merely asked for a match. Ordinarily Mike would have given him the match and a few dimes besides. But Mike was busy now.

"Beat it," he said out of the side of his mouth. He knew the fellow had not seen the knife at his stomach. The Duke had not intended him to; none of his victims ever saw it. He slipped the knife back up his sleeve like a sleight-of-hand artist.

The bum turned away without saying anything, but he took only a step. A spot of light from a chink in the clouded sky illumined his face. Suddenly the bum began to laugh. Mike shivered. It was the laughter, not the laughter, that so startled the steady shiv man. For the laughter was Palooka Pete, Peter James Greer of the tombstone, the man he was supposed to have killed years ago. Well, Mike was going to rectify the mistake right now. He leaped in with the swiftness of a striking cobra. He spoke no word, made hardly a sound. It wounded his professional pride to have to expose his weapon, but most likely Pete was armed with a gun.

BUT Pete's weapons were his fists. He caught the murderous knife thrust on his forearm, the boxer's trick of warding off a blow. Unlike a gloved fist, the sharp knife bit deep into the fending flesh. Too deep. Before the killer could pull it out to stab again the boxer let go a terrific right that crashed into the shiv man's face with force enough to alter his appearance. The killer gasped with pain and anger as he fell back with the knife in his hand, smacking up against the side of the building from the terrific force of the blow. He kept his grip on the knife mostly through instinct.

The whole place began to swim. The blackness became punctuated with blinding lights of all sizes, shapes and colors. The Duke let out a hoarse bellow of baffled rage, then plunged in again. There seemed to be a whole mob of men in front of him, pushing him, hitting him.

Presently the effect of Pete's tremendous wallop dissipated. But still the mob of men remained.

"He hurt my eyes with that sock,"

the Duke said to himself. "I'll kill him!" He lowered his head and charged bull-like into what he thought was a mob of men created by optical illusion. It was only Pete there, alone, he thought.

He was wrong. It was a mob of men. Twenty-seven of them. Silent as the night, as grim as death. One caught him from behind with a crooked arm around his windpipe. Another, almost effortlessly, took the knife away. Another belted him on the jaw.

A great big black limousine rolled up into the alley. The door opened from behind and the Duke thought that was funny. Then they pushed him in and he saw why the door had opened from behind—the "limousine" was a hearse!

The hearse jogged along at terrific speed. Presently it slowed down to a stop. The Duke was jerked out roughly and, when he fell, he was as roughly jerked to his feet. A sickly moon broke through pale clouds and the shiv man saw where he was. Callous and stony-hearted though he was, he could not repress a shudder. It was not fear. It was more a painful presentiment, an unholy anticipation, an impalpable impression much too subtle for the cold and unfeeling killer to define.

HE WAS back in the cemetery where he had attended the funeral only hours before. A crowd of men were waiting for him there.

He knew then, he knew without looking, with that uncanny foreknowledge so often given to those who are about to die. These others, too—all these others—had all been his victims. . . .

They took him to a place as cold as a grave, a place almost suffocating with the odors of death. It was the inside of a huge, imposing, marble mausoleum. The resting place of the late Judge Holtz. The Duke, hired by someone who objected to the judge's decision regarding a certain case, had handed the judge six inches of cold steel.

The Duke stared in unbelief at the stern old judge who now sat in judicial robe at a marble table meant for

flowers, a grisly bone in his hand for a gavel.

There was a jury, too, ranged around in a half circle about the judge, some sitting, some standing. The Duke recognized most of them as former victims. He had no doubt he had killed the rest also. There was an audience, too, grouped on either side of the judicial bench. Here again he recognized many of the recipients of his sharp shiv special.

"Clean and quick," he told himself. "I never hurt them." He hoped he would receive the same courtesy.

The Duke kept calm. He kept calm in the face of this ghostly assemblage, patently hostile, plainly vengeful, because he was certain it was all a dream. If he were not asleep in his own bed at home, then he had been kayoed by Pete. He had heard of some dreadful dreams inspired by a seductive sock on the jaw. He knew kayoed fighters who, in the ten brief seconds they were on the canvas, had gone to Egypt and talked to King Tut. So the Duke, unemotional, unimaginative, regarded the entire affair from a detached point of view.

So he mustered a little of his questionable store of courage and said to the judge, "What's this, a trial?"

The judge made a gesture so characteristic, so peculiarly his own, that the Duke drew back in spite of himself. It was certainly a most vivid dream, he was thinking. The judge eyed the prisoner over the top of his glasses.

"The trial was over long ago," he said, and the Duke almost collapsed as he heard again that gruff, familiar, not unkindly tone. This dream was too real. The Duke swallowed hard.

"Wake up," he commanded himself. "Wake up! Wake up before these things get you!"

"The trial was over long ago," the judge repeated. "And tonight we are enforcing your sentence. Your grave is ready, through the courtesy of one Peter James Greer, who has kindly offered to accommodate you until such time as more permanent quarters are available. No one else would have you.

"You see about you and before you only those dispatched by your hand

alone and none other. How you plead is immaterial, since you have already been found guilty. The sentence of the court is this: That you die . . . by your own knife . . . not once—but once for each death you yourself have caused. And that this punishment is to be repeated . . . each night . . . *for one thousand nights!*"

In the stunning silence that followed the judge's grim pronouncement, the Duke could hear himself breathe, he could hear his heart beating, his pulses pounding. Stolid though his heart and mind, now he was genuinely frightened.

In the wan light of a single flickering candle the entire sere scene looked frightful enough, real enough now, to the doomed prisoner at the bar. The booming, dreadful, tones of the judge jarred him.

"Execution of sentence to be carried out here! At once!"

The stillness of the tomb was shattered by loud and vengeful cries. Eager hands reached for the prisoner, now a thoroughly frightened man. He thrust aside the reaching hands and cried out desperately. He'd fight them—it was the only chance. Fight! And if it was a dream, his struggles would wake him up. Dream? The most impossible nightmare could not compare with it! He lashed out with both fists and someone butted him against the wall. He crashed with his back up against the hard cold marble and caught himself only by expended effort. The dead were all around him now, like hounds with a cornered fox.

He fought out ferociously, as any cornered fox might have done. He cleared a little way in front of him, but not for long. Someone clipped him on the chin. He reeled, dropped his guard, and was promptly clipped again. He fell.

Then the judge's grisly gavel rapped out. The Duke could hear him pounding it on the great marble table and began to think it was his head, his ears, that were pounding.

"Order! Order!" the judge shouted. "I shall have order in this court. Bailiff, another such unruly outburst and you shall clear the courtroom—"

The judge was interrupted by a knock on the great oak door.

"Bailiff!" he bawled, not even bothering to lower his tone. "See who that is!"

The door was opened and two men trooped in. The Duke gave a violent start. They were some of his earlier, his clumsier efforts. Experimental cases, you might say. Practice. A fellow had to have practice. They were badly butchered up, and their faces showed it.

The judge rapped sternly for order. "We do not countenance lateness in this court!" he snapped.

"Same old hard rock," the Duke said inaudibly. Not even death had changed him.

The judge went on. "It is the pleasure of this Court to remind one and all that the sentence, like the verdict, was arrived at by unanimous acclaim. I shall have to ask one and all to take their turn as originally agreed upon, and stab the prisoner with his own weapon. Ah . . . first on the bailiff's list is—Eric Brandenwine! Step forward, Eric. Ah . . . the fatal wound was in the solar plexus. Bailiff, see that the incision is performed there. This is indeed a crude bit of work. Must have been one of his early ones—"

Brandenwine, a big man with a fine set of shoulders, wearing the truckster's canvas apron he had worn at the time of the fatal thrust—the front of it was badly torn and thick with ominous stains—rolled up his sleeves revealing very powerful arms. He took the Duke's knife from the hands of the bailiff. He advanced at the cringing prisoner whose face was white as snow. He smiled as he advanced. He came very slowly, doubtless relishing the situation too much to hurry its inevitable end.

The judge pounded with his bone gavel.

"There are others waiting!" he reminded. "Come, man; stab him and give the others a chance!"

SO BRANDENWINE stabbed, as two powerful bailiffs held the prisoner still. He stabbed viciously, twisting the knife as it entered the

flesh. The Duke's lifeblood spurted out in a crimson torrent. He slumped back into the arms that held him, and was laid on the stone floor, the blood still pouring from him. A terrible lassitude crept over and through him, pervading the limbs and the mind and the muscles with sleep. He felt less weak than tired, and the pain in his abdomen was so unendurable that it made him feel faint, aside from the steady loss of blood.

"I suppose I am dying," he said to himself. And then he laughed a little, not much because of the pain. He thought, "When I'm dead—I'll wake up in the alley back of that joint, with Palooka Pete standing over me. This can't be real."

But it hurt as if it were real. He saw strange spots before the eyes and felt cold gooseflesh crawling all over him. He felt his life ebbing away in immense lassitude. He saw things dimming, gradually, but with a relentless certainty that made it appalling. He tried to hang on to life. He struggled with death and darkness. Then the darkness swept over him and engulfed him in billowing clouds of—nothing. The Duke of Brooklyn was dead. . . .

HHE FELT different after awhile. He felt. There had been no feeling a moment ago, it appeared to him; and now he felt again. He tried to move and he found that he could. Inwardly he chuckled. "It's an even bet," he said to himself. "I'm either in bed or out in the alley." He opened his eyes. He was not in the alley. He was not in his bed. He was back in the funereal chamber of justice, and Judge Holtz was still presiding. The Duke was alive again. Or was he alive? He did not know.

"Next!" the stern judge bellowed. A tall, cadaverous man advanced, knife in hand.

"My God!" the shiv man shrieked. "Do I have to go through that again!" "Again!" the judge pronounced. "Again, and again, and again. Twenty and nine times in all. Each night. For one thousand nights in succession!"

So the Duke had to take it again.

This time in the heart. A fairly clean job that simply severed one lung enroute, but only because of the inexpertness, purposeful or otherwise, of the knife wielder, who had been, oddly enough, a prominent surgeon in his lifetime. But he was likely rusty for want of practice.

Again and again and again he took it, and again and again and again he had to come back. He was a mass of bloody wounds. And then came Peter's turn, Peter James Greer, the prize-fighter.

The Duke noted a curious fact. The boxer had a bandage around his left forearm. Evidently the surgeon had fixed up the wound he had made in the arm, earlier in the evening. Palooka Pete contributed his bit in the multiple murder of Mike Agosta via the knife route. And then everyone on the list had had his turn. Every one of the twenty and nine. It was over. The Duke could rest. He would need to rest, for on the following night—for a thousand nights yet to come—he must die each night. Once for each death he himself had caused. A thousand nights. Twenty-nine times each night!

The Duke tried to scream, but he couldn't. And then he remembered. He mustn't even try. He was dead.

To prove it, he took a look around slyly. And this time he got such a shock as could compare only with each death he had died tonight. He was in the alley after all! It had all been, then, some fantastic conception of his subconscious mind after all! Some weird incubus of the devil's own invention. For he was back again, and there could be no doubt of it.

He saw people around him, milling and standing and jabbering excitedly or whispering. There were lights in the alley from a car that had pulled up. No; he made out two cars through veiled lids: there was a police prowler, and the other, the other was bigger. There was a red cross on its side. An ambulance.

"That rat, Pete!" he swore. "He must have beat me up badly." An ambulance. Disgraceful! His reputation would be shot! But it put the kayo on the ghost business anyway.

He tried to get up, but it hurt so badly, it made him change his mind.

He saw a bluecoated cop making notes in his book. He was talking to the ambulance interne. He hadn't noticed that before. He listened. Nothing like getting a real line on yourself, he thought. That Pete! He'd get him for this. There'd be no mistake this time! What a dream that had been! What a nightmare. What an awful thing it was to be murdered like that, night after night—for a thousand nights! What a dream!

"Badly bruised about the head and body," the interne was saying.

"You mean he was beat up?" asked the cop.

"Obviously."

The cop let that pass and put in his little book that the shiv man had been ambushed by person or persons unknown.

The Duke kept thinking.

"That dirty Palooka. When I see him—"

WHAT a dream! It made his head reel to think of any part of it. But it made him feel easier, too; easier in the mind. No ghosts. He allowed himself to drowse.

The cop was speaking again. "Twenty-nine?"

"Yes, twenty-nine," the interne affirmed.

Twenty-nine! The Duke grew wide awake. Twenty-nine what? What the devil were they talking about?

"Dead?" asked the cop.

"What do you think?" the interne countered.

"Well, I got to ask," the cop said mildly. "Dead when found," he wrote in his little book.

"Any of those stab wounds was of sufficient seriousness to have been instantly fatal," the interne exclaimed. He whistled softly. "Some one stabbed him twenty-nine times. Whoever did it certainly must have had it in for him."

"He was a shiv man," the cop said. "And he got it the way he dished it out."

The Duke was panic-stricken. Dead! Him dead! Twenty-nine wounds! Fathomless terror gripped him. He saw stars. His head reeled with sickening speed. His eyes swam in a white lake of mist.

He felt every one of those twenty-nine wounds.

Who had inflicted them? The thought kept pounding in his brain. One of his enemies? Or—or the Court of Death? He'd find out in the nights to come. Nauseating horror filled his mind then. Yes, he'd find out. That was the whole trouble—what he might find out—in the next thousand nights. . . .

MRS. ELTING DOES HER PART

(Concluded from page 52)


his fingers closed on air, and Sanders Hawk rolled down the stairs. Hawk was no longer young enough to withstand such an acrobatic feat without danger to himself; he broke his neck.

TEN minutes later, Richard Alder came to the medium's house and went in.

Mrs. Elting glowed at him. "Mr. Alder, I know everything's all right. How you got in behind his chair and stood there is more than I can understand!"

Paying her, he looked at her a little curiously, but smiled glumly. "You've got an imagination," he said wryly. "I wasn't able to carry out my plan. I've just now come back from two hours at the police station explaining an accident I got into."

Ironically, for one in her profession, it did not occur to Mrs. Elting for some time after he had left, that the man she had seen behind Hawk at the seance had a mustache considerably larger and grayer than Richard Alder's.



Silent is the Clock

By FENTON W.
EARNSHAW

Author of "Murder on the Courts,"
"Murder in the Air," etc.

THIS was to be Madame La Ferté's last day on earth. Before the feeble winter sun should have faded, Madame La Ferté, now sound asleep in her own bed, would lie cold and stiffening beneath a coarser sheet upon a marble slab.

The night before, as she retired,

Madame La Ferte Over-Sleeps, a Cat Jumps and a Hearse Passes . . .

The man was standing motionless in the shadows

death had been furthest from her thoughts. There had been no whisper in her ear of the morrow's dreadful secret.

Now she slumbered on, long past her usual hour, not knowing that the Day had come. And yet perhaps deep within her soul some volatile and sensitive essence did know, and was trying to impart a warning. For Madame was moaning in her sleep. Her troubled spirit was wandering through a broken land of nightmares.

And then suddenly her affrighted spirit seemed to float far out toward the stars. But even as she watched, they vanished, every one, and she alone of all created things remained.

It was daybreak everywhere. The light seemed without source.

Eternal silence was everywhere. She had become a dot, a microscopic speck, a solitary soul lost in timelessness, a pinpoint in the universe, poised in limitless space. Above her, below, on every side, a vaguely luminous nothingness.

Presently it seemed as if long cold fingers were sliding round her sagging throat, slowly closing round her throat. A weight upon her chest grew heavier, and her heart struggled wildly against it. Deep in her dreadful dream, she still knew that something had furtively touched her face—twice, thrice—something soft and furry and alive! Then the Thing presumed to touch her half-open lips.

In a shudder of revulsion the woman awoke so suddenly that the echo of her own choked scream still seemed the echo in the room.

A gaunt black cat lay curled with impudent self-assurance on the shabby counterpane, its slitted green eyes gazing unblinkingly at Madame La Ferté. With a curse the woman knocked the cat to the floor, reached down for a slipper. The creature nimbly dodged the missile, darted into the adjoining room.

Madame La Ferté lay back on the pillow trembling, and waited for that flutter in her heart to cease. She had grown accustomed to it now. Sleep had gone, and dully the woman's mind groped for reality among the lingering fragments of her

dreams. With incurious eyes she surveyed the drab familiar surroundings. The ceiling was blotched and cobwebs draped the corners. In the far corner was a grimy window, and what reluctant light could filter through was obstructed by a strip of wallpaper which had become detached and was hanging dejectedly across the upper pane. A few cheap unframed pictures hid portions of the dirty walls. Near the bed a small, old-fashioned mahogany table with a marble top held a futile miscellany which included a half-empty whiskey bottle and two glass tumblers, flanked by a water-pitcher with a broken handle.

At the foot of the bed a decrepit dresser was covered with a dreary litter, in the midst of which stood a battered alarm clock minus one leg and propped drunkenly against a book. The eyes of the musing Madame La Ferté fell upon its scorbutic face.

ELEVEN o'clock! She thrust back the covers, sat up in bed. It couldn't be that late! Leaning forward, she squinted skeptically at the timepiece. Then she hastily swung her feet to the floor, found one slipper, hobbled across the floor to retrieve the one she had thrown at the cat. Then she flung about her shoulders the sleazy dressing-gown snatched up from the chair beside the bed, went to the dresser and picked up the clock. She looked at the time again, incredulously, held the clock to her ear. It had stopped—stopped at eleven, nor would a furious shaking set it going again.

Madame La Ferté drew back the frowsy drapes that separated bedroom from living room. Going to the front window she raised the shade. From its fraying tassel a small sign dangled:

*Mme. La Ferté
Psychic Readings*

The morning looked cold and sombre. The woman looked out upon a narrow street that was lined with its usual rows of ash- and garbage-cans, with piles of boxes and

rubbish. They seemed to be waiting hopelessly for collectors who never came. In the office buildings, whose gray hulks two blocks distant marked the noisy course of East Forty-second Street, lights were burning. Between and above those grim impregnable structures, brief glimpses of the sky showed massed clouds moving slow and sullenly.

Directly across the street from Madame's window some men were peeling old show posters from a billboard. A blustery wind caught up bits of the paper, whirled it away with other vagrant detritus from the pavement. A heavy truck lumbered by laden with huge rolls of newsprint. Then there passed, silently, an empty hearse.

The fortune teller shivered, turned from the window, and began dressing. Her toilette was hasty and imperfect. She returned to the front room and stepped to the door that opened into the hall. The cat now crept furtively from its hiding-place under the sofa.

"All right, Shamus," said Madame La Ferté. "I'll get your milk."

The cat *miaowed* hungrily, and licked its whiskers. The woman slid the bolt on the door. The cat bounded to the door, paused, drew back. Its spine was arched, the fur on its tail expanded. The woman regarded the cat in astonishment for a second, then opened the door. The animal hissed, spat fiercely, gave one bound and disappeared.

"Whatever in hell is the matter with you, Shamus!" the woman muttered, and bent over to pick up a milk bottle. As she straightened, she saw the man, standing motionless in the shadows.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You gave me a start! I didn't see you. I thought Shamus was actin' crazy . . . I—I was just gettin' the milk."

The man was slight, undersized, and in the dim half-light she could see that he was dressed in black and that he wore a starched white collar and an anomalous white linen bow tie. . . . Where had she once seen a man dressed like that, and so still? . . .

She felt a chill at the back of her neck.

THE visitor in the hallway regarded her steadily from eyes deeply set in a white face. His voice was mild and even:

"I was lookin' for Madame La Ferté," he said.

She felt an unreasonable panic. She wanted to retreat within her apartment and shut the door against this figure etched in chiaroscuro against the vague background of the hallway. But she forced herself to speak.

"I'm Madame La Ferté," she answered. "You—you wasn't wantin' a reading, was you?"

"Why, yes," came the slow, even voice. "I did want a readin'. You give 'em, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, of course." She laughed nervously. "Only the reason I asked was that it ain't hardly ever that anybody comes so early in the morning, you see? I—I just got up. I ain't even had my breakfast yet."

"Oh, that's all right," the voice returned placidly. "I got lots o' time. That is, if you don't mind. Yeah. I can wait."

"I suppose it's all right," said Madame La Ferté, hesitant. "Come in." She stepped back. The visitor entered. She closed the door. Without looking at him, she motioned the man to a chair, and went into the bedroom. She set the milk bottle on the table and stood before the dresser. In the mirror her face seemed unnaturally white. That strange sharp pain had once more bitten deep into her heart. She pressed her hand hard against the place. Then she leaned forward and dabbed rouge and powder on her face. She pushed and patted the graying unlovely hair into a makeshift tidiness. Her hands shook as she applied the lipstick.

During the latter part of this ritual, she talked to the man in the front room, partly to cover the slight delay, and partly to mask her own agitation.

"You'll have to excuse everything bein' kind of topsy-turvy in there,"

she said. He murmured some reply. "You see, everything is mixed up with me this morning. Some friends was in last night, or I should say, a friend, and they stayed kind of late, and so I guess I must have overslept. I never woke up till eleven. Leastwise that's what my clock says. But it stopped. It's been crazy lately. You ain't got the right time on you, have you? Maybe I could set it." Then she remembered that the clock had seemed broken.

The mild voice answered her from the front room. "No, I'm sorry. I haven't got a watch. I've sort of lost track of time myself. It must be only a little bit after eleven though."

Madame La Ferté stepped back from the mirror, looked out of the corner of her eye through the opening in the draperies. He was sitting with his back to the front window, his face a vague white oval, his hands resting patiently on his knees.

MADAME LA FERTE was stalling for time, and knew it. She didn't want to go into the other room. She felt oppressed and irritated. The day was starting badly. She had planned to see Dude this morning, and get the money from him to pay for her new glasses. Her eyes were growing worse.

And then there was that other thing to be decided today. The most important thing of all. They had talked about it so long last night that it had probably been the cause of her restless slumbers. Then she had wakened, to find the day far gone. This unexpected customer would take more time. . . . She would get the reading over with, collect her fee and send him quickly on his way. She stepped to the curtained doorway.

"Oh, I forgot to ask whether you thought you'd want the one-dollar or the two-dollar reading," she said. "They're both the same, you might say, only the two-dollar is more thorough. Either way, it's cash in advance you know." She laughed professionally. "I always say cash, because cash does keep people

friends, I don't care what you say. And besides, sometimes people don't like what comes out in the reading. And, of course, I ain't to blame. I only tell 'em what actually comes to me."

The white face of the man in the chair turned slightly as the woman advanced into the room.

"Sadie!"

She had not seen his lips move, and yet the name had been uttered distinctly but without emphasis. Her legs turned to lead.

"How—how did you know my name?" Automatically her hand darted to her left side and pressed hard against her heart.

"Come over here to me, Sadie Laferty!"

Even now she tried not to accept the truth which an icy breath had whispered to her in the very beginning. She faced him resolutely. When she spoke the professional sugariness had left her voice, and her tones were hard.

"What's the gag? I don't know you!"

"I think you do."

"What are you, a dick?" The words curled from her lips with the brittle mocking challenge implicit in the speech of the underworld. "Listen, mister, you got nothin' on me—nothin' at all!"

But all along she knew—she knew—that he was no plainclothes man.

"Don't be afraid of me, Sadie," he continued, smoothly and reassuringly. "Come over here by this chair."

"I'm not afraid of any living man," she said stoutly. And yet she was afraid . . . she was afraid.

"Look at me!" the voice commanded. And the sad ashen light revealed his face. She put her hand to her throat.

"Red!"

How changed he was! She remembered him as big, broad-shouldered, ruddy. He seemed shrunken, and the red hair was shot with gray. The face was smaller, heavily lined.

"Yes, Sadie," he said calmly. "It's me—Red Lafferty."

She sank upon the sofa, at the end

furthest from him. She brushed her forehead.

"How did you get out? You had five years more to go."

She waited breathless—then, when no answer came, cried:

"Red—don't lie to me! You—you haven't escaped, have you?"

He shook his head. "No. I was—released."

"You're out! Out of prison!" she said mechanically, as if speaking to herself. "How could I know? Nobody told me? I never dreamed—"

"Don't take it so hard, Sadie." Again so mildly. "I suppose I did startle you."

"I—I don't know what to say, Red!" She averted her face.

"Well, you might say you're glad. Are you?"

She looked at him blankly.

"Glad? Why—why, yes, of course, I'm glad, Red. Why shouldn't I be? Wouldn't any woman be glad to see a man come back that she's been thinkin' all these ten long years was just the same as—"

She stopped.

"Don't be afraid to say it, Sadie. The same as dead, that's what you mean. Yeah, I know. It's kind of a shock to you. At first I guess I didn't realize what a shock it would be."

She remained silent.

"Well, Sadie, I got everything all figured out. Up there I had plenty of time to think—specially after you stopped writin' to me."

She would not look at him.

"At first I kind of went nuts out there at Columbus. But after awhile I got so's I could understand. I seen a lot o' things I couldn't see when I first went in. I guess what used to burn me up more'n anything was thinkin' about Dude O'Connor."

She gave him one quick glance, then turned her head away again.

"I always hoped you'd get outa this fortune-tellin' racket," he went on, colorlessly as ever. "You always accused me o' bein' jealous of Dude. Well, maybe I was. I never liked him. In fact I've thought many a time out there that it was him that

ratted on me when we got in the jam. Otherwise, how come he got off and I drew a jolt of fifteen years? It could only have been him or you that done it, Sadie, and o' course I knew you wouldn't cross me, so it must have been him. . . .

"Well, Sadie, he had a kind of horrible fascination for you. Like a snake. . . . But more than that, what I didn't like was you doin' this here trance-medium stuff and gettin' all the dope on a lot of foolish old women and then workin' with Dude so's he could blackmail 'em."

The blood was surging back into her cheeks, under the rouge, and she turned toward him with something like belligerence.

"You should talk about Dude's racket, Red. You was mixed up in plenty yourself!"

"Yeah, Sadie," he returned, gently. "But it was big stuff—jobs that took guts. . . . But forget it, Sadie. The thing that burned me up more'n anything was this same business you're in now. I hoped you'd dropped out of it. I mean, foolin' around with trances and spirit stuff, and all that. It used to give me the willies when you went into one o' them trances. They was more like fits to me."

HHE EYED her mildly.

"Well, if you're worryin' about that, Red," she replied, listlessly—for her mind was already far away, seeking like a cornered rat for some escape, "I been fakin' now for years. The customers like it just as well, and it ain't so wearin' on me. I never have a materialization any more. Sometimes they used to come so fast I thought I was goin' crazy. Now I just fake everything. . . . In fact, I even wonder if I ever was really a medium. Maybe I just imagined things. Maybe everything's a fake. . . . What's the difference?"

"Well, it's all over, Sadie. We won't talk no more about it. I ain't jealous no more. I ain't even sore at Dude no more. I'm different. And I've got everything figured out, Sadie . . . planned. I ain't thought of nothin' else day or night for years!"

She lifted her head, looked at him curiously—and with renewed trepidation.

"You got everything planned out, Red? What do you mean?"

"Listen, Sadie. You remember, the mob took me because I was handy with tools. Well, after I'd been in stir for a while, the warden, he let me work on my invention, in the machine shop. In my spare time, you know. I figured out an idea for airplane engines. He got a lawyer—outside, see—to handle the patents. Well, one day I gets a letter through the warden that one of the big airplane companies has bought the patent. And I been gettin' royalties on it for a couple of years. Can you feature that, Sadie? Right in prison. And say, listen. . . . I got more than twenty grand saved up already!"

He had leaned forward a little, and there was a note of almost young enthusiasm in his voice. She must think fast. If that sharp bitter pain that had come again to cut her heart in two—if it would only let her think. She needed time—time—time!

"What are you going to do, Red?" she said finally.

"I'm going straight, Sadie."

"But the mob, they won't let you! You ought to know that, Red. You won't be here in New York a week before they'll have you in another jam. Or they'll put the finger on you. They won't forget you got enough on some of 'em who are still alive and out, to send 'em to the hot seat!"

He smiled. "But I'm gettin' out of New York, Sadie."

"They'd catch up with you. You wouldn't be safe anywhere in the country, Red."

"Yes, that's right," he continued, with calm persistence. "But I thought that all out, too. We ain't stayin' in New York. We ain't even stayin' in this country, Sadie. We're goin' to some foreign place—far off! So far away that nobody on earth can find us!"

"We?" she repeated mechanically. So that was it. Of course. He'd come back to claim her. And on

this day, of all days! If he'd only waited another week—even another twenty-four hours!

Then full-fledged the Idea came into her mind! She'd have to do it. There wasn't a chance any other way. No other way to stop that inexorable march of Red's plans. His slow, one-track mind would never change, and whatever plan he'd pondered in the still watches of the night as he lay upon his pallet in a prison cell, Red would pursue to the very end, and she knew it. She'd have to do it. He'd practically asked for it, coming back this way, five years before his time, and expecting to pick up just where he'd left off ten long years before.

SHE had to steel herself to face those deep-set solemn eyes, from which a dull light seemed to thrust toward her like accusing fingers. Madame La Ferté had never heard of Jezebel or of Delilah, but she smiled now as she rose from the sofa, as they must have smiled in their day. "Okay, Red," she said. "That's swell. It's a bet. We'll get out of the country. I've been wanting to go away."

The face of the man seemed suddenly lighted, seemed whiter than ever.

"I knew you'd go, if I came back and asked you, Sadie! I just knew you'd go!"

Madame La Ferté disappeared for a moment in the bedroom. She returned wearing her coat. A shabby black purse was tucked under her arm.

"Listen, Red," she said, "you just set right where you are, and I'll be right back. I ain't had no breakfast yet, see? I'll run over to the store and get some things, and then we'll both eat. And we can talk about it some more. I won't be gone more'n a minute," she added glibly.

And then she went out, closing the door and shutting him in with the dim gray shadows.

She sped past the delicatessen, and went into the drugstore on the corner. In the telephone booth she

groped nervously in her purse for a nickel, then with trembling fingers dialed a number.

"Hello! Dude! Is that you, Dude?" She pressed her lips into the transmitter, speaking low, and struggling to keep the panic from her voice.

"Get this quick, Dude! *Red's out!*—I say Red Lafferty is out of prison! How do I know? Because he's settin' in the house now, waitin' for me to get back!—Now listen, Dude! He says he's been released, but I know he's lyin'! He's got five more years to do! He's escaped, Dude, that's what he's done! And they must be lookin' for him high and low right now! And look, Dude, he wants me to take a powder with him—yeah, lam outa the country, to some foreign place! Yeah! Now listen, there's only one thing to do. Go to a pay station, so they can't trace the call, see? Get Sergeant Calhoun on the wire. And for God's sake, Dude, if you love me, hurry!"

MADAME LA FERTE'S manner was so agitated that the drug clerk stared at her as she hurried out of the door. She stopped at the delicatessen and made a few small purchases for appearance's sake. Then fearfully she turned her steps toward the apartment.

"Well, Red, I'll get some breakfast now," she said, as she came in. She gave a quick look toward him, but the chair in which he had been sitting, pale thin hands on his knees, was vacant now. She looked around the room, passed into the bedroom. He was not there. Nor in the kitchen or the bathroom.

She threw her coat on the bed, tossed her packages on the table. Then puzzled and irresolute she stood for a moment, trying to find an explanation. Trying, too, to still that familiar cutting pain that again assailed her heart.

Could he have become suspicious? Could the police have come already, and taken him away? Oh, but that was impossible! There hadn't been time. Then a sharp knock came at the door, and she started violently, as

if a cold thin hand had touched the back of her neck. The cops were there now, outside!

Madame La Ferté opened the door. A telegraph messenger stood in the hall.

"Mrs. Sadie Lafferty?"

Her hands shook as she signed the receipt. The messenger left. She closed the door and ripped open the envelope.

* * * * *

THE police surgeon dropped the twist, turned back the eyelids. Then he stood up. "She's gone, Sergeant," he said to the officer. "Better put that cat out of here. Where did it come from anyway?"

Sergeant Calhoun opened the hall door. The cat snarled and spat, and bounded away.

"Slipped in when you got here. Dead, eh?" The sergeant took out a small black memorandum book.

"What caused it, Doc?"

"Looks like heart. The autopsy will show. Was anybody with her when you got here?"

"No," said Sergeant Calhoun. "There's something kind of funny about it, Doc. We got a tip that a heister named Red Lafferty was hiding out here. Supposed to have made a crush-out from Columbus State Penitentiary. But there wasn't anybody here—except this woman. And she was lying there just as you see her. Dead. No marks on her. Of course, naturally, first thing I think of is this escaped prisoner came here, killed her, and then took a powder. But hell, that's all wrong, and I'll show you why. Here's a telegram I found in her hand. Read it!"

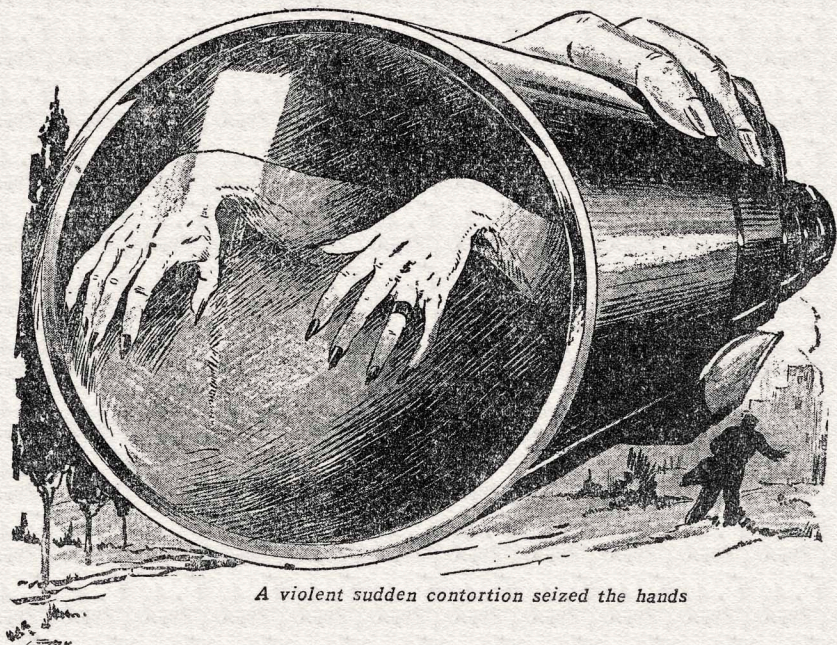
The police surgeon read it:

COLUMBUS, O.

WHILE ATTEMPTING TO ESCAPE FROM THIS PRISON YOUR HUSBAND WILLIAM LAFFERTY WAS SHOT BY A GUARD AND DIED IN THE HOSPITAL HERE AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK THIS MORNING. PLEASE WIRE WHETHER YOU WILL CLAIM THE BODY.

A. B. McLAUGHLIN, WARDEN.

An Augmented Eye Pierces the Mist-Wall that Rises
Skyward from the Grave!



A violent sudden contortion seized the hands

Sagasta's Last

By CARL JACOBI

Author of "The War of the Weeds," "Flight of the Flame Fiend," etc.

THE package arrived on the fifteenth of August. I had given Martin Crade's West-Starling house as a forwarding address on my departure from London, but I had instructed my servant to trouble me with only imperative communications.

In this case the servant had acted with full appreciation for my avocational whims. The package was from the Bristol Optical Company, Southampton, and it contained a three foot, thirty-power telescope, for which I had paid the sum of twelve pounds.

There was an accompanying letter which somewhat detracted from my expectations.

It read:

Dear Mr. Brockton:

In response to your order for one of our French LeGare scopes, we are sorry to inform you that our supply of this glass has been exhausted. We are substituting on approval a sample telescope of similar measurements which is not a part of our general line.

This scope was manufactured by Jose Sagasta, the well known optician of Lisbon, and represents the last of his work

before his death. We sincerely hope the product will meet with your approval.

Bristol Optical Co., Ltd.

Martin Crade took the letter as I handed it to him, read it casually and tossed it to the table.

"Still at it, eh, Brocton? You must have three dozen of the things by now. What do you do with them?"

I smiled. "Collect them. The science of optics is really a fascinating one. And all of my glasses aren't telescopes," I went on. "I have a pair of stereo-prism binoculars which are just about as perfect as modern science can make them. I have a Seventeenth Century Lippershey, a—"

Martin Crade wasn't listening. He crossed to a chair and slumped into it with an air of boredom. Crade was like that, unemotional, self-centered. Tall and thin, with a hawk face and a shock of black hair, there was a sinister something about his eyes that affected me deeply. Gimlet eyes that seemed to penetrate to the depths of one's soul. I knew I could expect but the briefest hospitality from him.

Crade had married my sister Louise a year before. Always delicate, Louise had steadily languished in the gloom of this West-Starling moor country. I had feared for her health and stood out against the marriage from the beginning. But her infatuation had known no barriers.

Even the appeals of her childhood sweetheart, young Clay Stewart, had fallen on unheeding ears. After a hurried wedding and a trip through France, she had taken up her residence in this house. And then on January last, suddenly and without warning, Crade had written me of her illness and death.

It was primarily, therefore, to cherish my sister's memory that I had accepted his invitation to visit him during the last part of August.

YET all the way from London I had looked toward my destination with a sense of foreboding. Twice before I had been here, and then as now I had been utterly depressed by the bleak moor on all sides.

Dinner over, Crade showed me to my room on the second floor.

"I'm afraid you'll have to amuse yourself, Brockton," he said. "I'm a solitary sort of person and a devil of a poor host. But if you want anything, let me know."

Like the rest of the house, my chamber was painfully severe, with dark and heavy furnishings. Overlooking the south sweep of the moor were two French windows, opening onto a small balcony.

At the sight of that balcony I nodded in satisfaction. I took up the telescope and stepped outside. I placed the tube to my eye and then focused it.

Dusk had not yet fallen, and the heath below extended from horizon to horizon, the dark moor-grass undulating like water in the chill wind. For several minutes I looked through that scope, moving it from left to right. Then I lowered it with a frown of disappointment.

The 31mm. achromatic objective lens was strong and clear, but something was wrong with the instrument. I got the impression that a whitish blur was fogging the vision somewhere near the limit of the range.

Dusting the glass, I tried again. When at length I returned to the inner room I was puzzled.

Turned to the west, to the south, the telescope revealed only the monotonous stretches of the moor. But to the east something focused itself in the lens that defied explanation. It was as if a compact wall of white fog hung there, a tall surface like the front of a ruined building.

Yet it was past that spot I had walked on my way from the village. I was positive no structure of any kind was there.

A quarter of an hour later I heard Crade leave his room and descend to the floor below. But when I came upon him in the library and told him what I had seen, he could offer no explanation.

"To the east?" he repeated. "No, Brockton, you must be mistaken. My house is quite alone here. The nearest building of any kind is at Glover, and since the village lies in the de-

pression of the river, you couldn't possibly see it."

"And there are no chalk cliffs, no Roman ruins in that direction?" I persisted.

Crade's black eyes surveyed me curiously as he shook his head.

Next morning I looked again, and although a drizzling rain and a leaden sky considerably lessened the scope's vision range, I saw as before that same wall.

But after a moment of scrutiny, it seemed the color had altered. The wall had changed from a white to a light pink. Also it had moved. It was nearer now. Studying it, I thought I could discern its slow division into two separate sections.

Rain and wind drove me from the balcony at length. I dressed and went down to the dining room.

IT WAS there that Crade revealed his true reason for inviting me here. Prior to her marriage, Louise had obtained considerable property near Harwich. The property had increased multifold in value, but in several cases the abstracts had been written in joint name with me. Crade asked if I was prepared to relinquish my claims.

The unmasked avarice and lack of tact in the question staggered me. I stared at Crade, studied his hawk-face, his deep-set eyes as he awaited my answer. It was through my influence that Louise had purchased that property, and I was tempted to give him a cold negative. Yet in all fairness, inasmuch as my sister had paid for the land with her own money, and had been the wife of this man, I should, I realized, waive my rights.

A smile of complete satisfaction turned Crade's lips as I agreed reluctantly.

"I felt sure you'd see it that way," he nodded. "We can walk to the village tomorrow and sign the necessary papers."

Without further word he got up, drew on a heavy rain coat and went out. Through the window I watched him. He moved slowly through the rain, heading east in a general direction toward Glover.

Alone now in the house, I climbed the staircase toward my room. Hand on the latch, I hesitated.

As yet I had not told Crade of my intention to take back with me any of those possessions which my sister, Louise, had treasured, and which Crade would permit me to remove. There was in particular a valuable signet ring with the letter "L" upraised in jade which she had worn constantly and which I had given her. I saw no reason why I should not find it now.

I continued down the corridor to the door of Louise's room and stopped abruptly.

The door was double locked. A chain was stretched across from a staple on the frame, and attached to it was a heavy padlock.

For a full minute I stood there, staring. Back in my own room I slumped in a chair and attempted to see through the growing puzzle.

It would have been a logical, a pardonable move on the part of Crade to close forever the room of his dead wife, assuming his grief had been deep and sincere. But paradoxically, from the last letters of Louise, I was inclined to believe otherwise. From time to time she had written that Crade treated her cruelly, that her life was no longer a happy one.

A growing feeling of unease began to rise up within me. I took up the telescope, hoping to divert my mind into other channels, went out on the little balcony and looked to the east.

The wall was still there. But it was ten times closer, ten times magnified in size.

As I looked, I saw that it was no longer a vague thing of one part. It was divided completely into two sections, one above the other, extending horizontally. There was something oddly familiar about the shape of those two objects. Absurd though it seemed, I thought they resembled arms and hands.

I TURNED the scope in a quick circle. Then I saw something else.

The figure of Martin Crade could be seen, walking slowly across the

moor. Shoulders hunched into the wind, he was advancing directly upon that double wall.

But an instant later I jerked rigid in every nerve and muscle of my body. Crade stopped a few yards away from the walls and looked back. Then he went on, apparently unaware of the objects in his path.

The walls offered no resistance to his passage. Like a man moving across a shadow, Crade passed through them and continued on the other side.

I adjusted the focus a fraction. The twin walls were steadily growing larger. Stereoscopically clear they became, as if I had trained the scope upon an object close at hand.

And then a mounting sense of horror began to creep upon me. Viselike I held the telescope balanced on the balcony rail.

They were hands! The thin, delicately-formed hands, wrists and forearms of a woman. They hung there in mid-air, swaying gently back and forth like some flesh-colored marine serpents. The fingers opened and closed gently. The nails caught the gray light of the moor and glittered perceptibly.

For a quarter of an hour I knelt there, watching them. During that time the hands continued their slow oscillation, but did not move from the spot. And then once more Crade came into sight, toiling across the moor. With his appearance the hands abruptly disappeared.

I spent the rest of the morning trying to collect my chaotic thoughts. Fear for my very sanity oppressed me. What was the meaning, the cause of it all? Into what world was my new telescope seeing? Not this world—not this place of earth and flesh! But how could it see into any other, enabling me to see too? Had the science of optics, by some miraculous accident, created a lens no mortal mechanic had wittingly ground?

Shortly before noon, as I sat there, turning the telescope over and over in my hands, a thought came suddenly to me. The wrappings in which the glass had arrived—had I destroyed them—

The pasteboard box still lay undis-

turbed in the wastebasket. I crossed the room and with trembling fingers examined it.

But when I had found what I was looking for and when I had read the cryptic words, the mystery only became deeper. Glued to the inside of the box-cover was a small card, bearing words in a spidery hand-printing. The first part was a technical description of the telescope, the type of glass, the quality of grinding, notes such as usually accompany a manufacturer's product. The last part was puzzling:

... glass formed from sand found in eastern Kurdistan, near the lost Yezidee city of Chaldabad. Although undoubtedly of a finer quality, rich in silicates, it is to be regretted that this sand was utilized in the making of the scope.

The Yezidees are the devil-worshippers of Asia, and the sand was taken from a site close to one of their temples. I do not know, but I sometimes suspect this fact played a part in the manufacture of this glass.

Jose Sagasta.

Lisbon, May 24th.

THE tinkling of a bell below advised me I was wanted for luncheon. Putting aside the box, I descended the stairs. But not until the meal was over did I tell Crade what I had seen. Then I described the vision of the hands.

It was remarkable the effect those details had upon the man. His face went white, his black eyes swiveled, bored into mine with piercing intensity.

"Hands, Brockton?" he repeated hoarsely. "Are you sure they were hands?"

I nodded. I had not been mistaken. I had seen them clearly.

Crade rose to his feet, paced unsteadily across the room. Suddenly he whirled.

"I'd like to look through that glass of yours."

"Of course," I assented. "It's in my room. But the vision disappeared an hour ago."

Unleashed fear seemed to dominate the man. He clawed his fingers through his hair, gaped at me wildly. Turning, he almost ran from the room.

I stared after him, perplexed and a little frightened. At last I got up and strolled into the library. I was troubled more than I cared to admit, and the silence and gloom of that vast chamber did not lighten my feelings. Slowly I moved past the book-shelves, glancing absently at the titles.

In my present mood none of the titles offered any interest. A spell of depression seeming to emanate from the shadow-filled ceiling pressing down upon me. Tables and chairs were gaunt silhouettes in the gray light.

And then abruptly I came upon a book almost hidden on a lower shelf and different from the others. Leather-bound, it was filled with Crade's writing in pencil. I moved quickly to put it back, when the cover fell open, revealing the following passage.

Monday, Dec. 6th. She does not suspect I know, and I have given her no reason to believe otherwise. Yet since the day young Clay Stewart visited us, I am positive she has been in love with him. Stewart is younger than I, but he is a callow fool. I must watch this and see if there are any developments.

I read this twice. Curiosity, a rising suspicion, prompted me to continue:

12th Dec. Stewart called on us again today. He came supposedly for the loan of my rifle, but I know this was but an excuse. The moment I left the room I am positive Louise was in his arms. The situation is developing faster than I had expected. But as yet I see no reason for concern. She is quite within my reach.

17th Dec. Stewart left this morning for London. There remains now to see what effect this will have on Louise. I will watch carefully. . . .

BEADS of cold perspiration gathered on my forehead. I turned the page and hurried on.

24th Dec. She has not forgotten. She sits in her room, night after night, writing letters. Letters to him!

27th Dec. She scarcely speaks to me. She stays in her room. Tonight I saw part of one of the letters she was writing. She

is going to run off with him. *My plans are complete. I must and will kill her!*

The writing ended here. Mechanically I closed the book, replaced it on the shelf. Rigid, I stood there while the huge pendulum clock on the farther wall ticked off the passing seconds. Then I swung about and headed slowly for my own room.

The events that followed after that are a bit confused in my memory. I remember sitting stiffly in a chair, staring at the table and the telescope upon it. Presently, hardly knowing why, I got up, took the glass and strode out onto the balcony.

The hands were there again, graceful and feminine, swaying lightly in the air. Long and intently I stared, the scope carefully focused. With almost microscopic clarity I could see the tapering fingers, the pink skin.

There was something infinitely horrible about those bodyless members suspended there before me. Slowly, inexorably they were drawing closer; the intervening space lessened until they occupied the entire width of the glass. About me, all was deathly stillness. I could hear the wild hammering of my heart.

Larger they grew. The moor background faded away, and my eyes, held by a hypnotic attraction, watched feverishly.

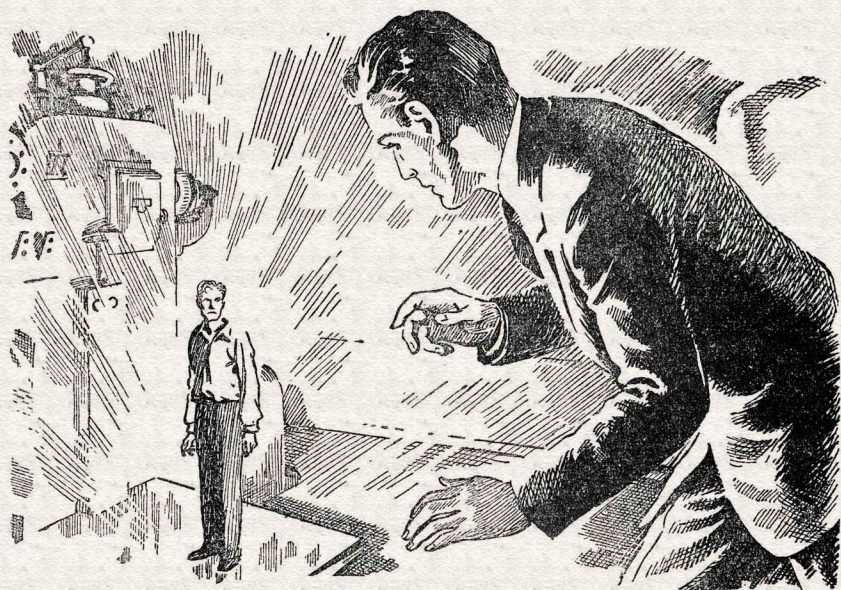
Suddenly the hair rose on my head. A violent contortion had seized the hands. As if startled, as if taken unawares by some unseen thing which had come within their reach, they recoiled, leaped backward. A perceptible tremor of expectancy passed through them. The cords of the arms stood out.

And then with a jerk and a twist of the wrists, they lunged forward, fingers outstretched . . . clawing. . . .

Simultaneously, filtering through the walls of that house, a piercing scream split the air. It was the scream of Martin Crade. Again it came, ricocheting down the corridor, filling every corner in a voice of agony.

I dropped the scope, leaped to the door and raced down the hall. Silence greeted me as I flung open the
(Concluded on page 76)

Who and What Was this Queer Little Man that Drifted
Across the Path of John Allory?



When he was scarcely a foot high I lunged forward and threw the switch

Memoir for Lucas Payne

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

Author of "Man in the Dark," "Logoda's Heads," etc.

Deposition of John Allory

I MET Lucas Payne on the street, the casual meeting of two men who do not know each other. I was standing on a corner, looking idly across at what appeared to be a deserted house—for there was no light in its windows, and its grounds were ill-kept—when he came out of it. He

was a thin little man, wearing a worn opera cloak beneath which the blowing wind revealed dark trousers and a shirt open at the neck. He wore no hat, and his hair was tousled, what there was of it.

He saw me at once and came to a stop on the sidewalk. Then he looked speculatively down the street to where the lights of a chemist's shop glowed

in the night some blocks away, and presently, as if deciding between the chemist's and me, he crossed the street to my side.

"Could you let me have a match?" he asked in a mild voice.

"Certainly," I said, and gave a few. "One would have been enough," he murmured, but pocketed all of them. Then with a mumbled, "Thank you!" he turned, recrossed the street, and reentered the house.

A moment later a light went on in the attic window. I saw his shadow cross the light once or twice, and then I myself left for home.

The encounter was so casual that it still remains a wonder to me how that man could have grown on me. Yet he did, opera cloak and all. I continued to see him in my mind's eye, his thin hair blowing from his head, his opera cloak whipped in the wind, the impression of frailness growing with him.

Three nights later I stopped at the same corner and looked up. There was no light in the attic window. I had been standing there but a minute or two, and was about to move on, when I heard footsteps come up behind me and stop, and in a moment I heard his voice.

"Good evening."

Turning and seeing him there, I said, "Good evening."

He dragged a hand from the folds of his cloak and opened it, revealing a penny card of matches in his palm.

"This evening, you see, I am provided." And then immediately he asked, "Are you looking for work, perhaps? Out of it?"

I told him I was not.

He nodded, dismissing the subject, looked toward his room, and then rather hesitantly asked, "Would you like to come up for a bit?"

I ASSENTED at once, and fell into step at his side as he crossed the street.

He began to talk before we reached the house, telling me his name, a few salient facts about himself, and some vague details concerning his surroundings, which apparently did not entirely please him. When we en-

tered the house, I saw that it was indeed empty, save for Payne's attic room, and I wondered what impulse caused this man to continue living in surroundings so lonely and forlorn.

His room was extraordinary in contrast to its squalid setting. Payne was evidently no mean hand at artistic arrangement. The room, which was in reality little more than a chemical laboratory with a bed, was so transformed that at first glance it seemed a cozy combination study and bedroom. Whatever slight household magic Payne had managed to cast about his possessions, however, was dissipated upon a closer examination of the room, as retorts, tubes, and various chemical paraphernalia emerged.

There was, moreover, a curious atmosphere of age about all these things, and the room itself reeked of antiquity, but so indefinitely that there was no single object upon which I could fix as the cause of it. Unless that object be Lucas Payne himself. For now in the light of the room he began to grow on me as one of those little old men who seem always young despite the certain age of their features and the evidence of lesser details.

My host, however, gave me little time for speculation, for he launched almost immediately into a discussion the nature of which caught and held my attention from his first question.

"Would you believe in everlasting life?" he asked.

For a moment I was too astonished to reply. It struck me that Payne was a religious fanatic. But this thought he brushed aside in an explanatory sentence.

"I don't mean a life hereafter—I mean everlasting life here on this earth."

"I'm afraid that our biological science has shown that impossible," I said then.

"Yes, biologically. But the lower sciences are at best very poor and exacting servants." He paused, looked toward the lone window of his room. Then he added, "My father was a higher scientist; they called him a magician."

I was startled.

"But for all that, an honest man—which is more than I could always say for myself these past centuries," he went on.

"Decades," I interrupted instinctively, thinking he had mistaken the word.

HHE LOOKED at me then, and for the first time I noticed what strange green-blue eyes he had, as if fire burned behind them.

"No, centuries," he repeated quietly. "I was two hundred years old yesterday." He smiled then, adding, "You are thinking me mad. Perhaps I am. But I am still two hundred years—and now an extra day—old."

I felt that I was in a situation that called for finesse in extricating myself, but I spoke as though I still considered him logical and reasonable.

"Something I can't understand. How does it happen?"

"I have been born several times," he said. "That is, my original birth, and then my rebirths. My father discovered the secret of the atom, which is the secret of the universes. You have heard it theoretically stated, doubtless, that our world is but an atom to some larger cosmos, just as an atom is to some smaller cosmos a world."

I admitted that guardedly, not quite sure of how to proceed on such a subject.

"Accepting that, then," he continued, "It is not difficult to conceive of someone's finding the way from one of these universes into another. My father found it, and, though he never made use of it himself, I have passed repeatedly from this world into smaller and larger universes. There are dimensional changes, too, which are difficult to explain. I have come back each time, and soon I am going again. Long after you are dead, I shall be alive."

If Lucas Payne were mad, then surely he was harmless, for my increasing doubt clearly distressed him, and it was only after my insistence that he went on.

"I went into a larger cosmos only once. That was when one of my enemies fed me arsenic. I was all but

dead. In that other world I was better able to withstand the poison."

"And that enemy?" I asked, striving to lead him away from his strange subject.

"Dead! But that is a living symbol of him." He pointed then to a small cage on the floor near the window.

Even as he spoke, he took up a yardstick from the table and jabbed viciously at the rat imprisoned there. The creature snapped at the stick and backed away, teeth bared. Payne struck at it again, and smiled thinly.

"There is no love lost between us," he said.

I said I could understand that, concealing my amazement as best I could. He did not return to his first subject, and shortly after, I left him. As well as I can remember it, this conversation took place on the night of July 7th, 1933.

It was not until the eleventh that I saw him again. I met him just outside the empty house and once more allowed myself to be drawn to his attic room.

"You have not directed the law against me as a madman," he said at once, "though that would not have caused me much inconvenience." He laughed at the thought. "If you think you can stand the shock of it, I'll show you tonight how small I can become, little though I already am."

WHEN we reached the attic and the light was put on, I saw that the aspect of his room had changed considerably. He now had two very curious machines on the floor, set about four feet apart. Between them, with a host of fine glowing wires connecting it to both machines, was what looked like a copper plate, though I was given to understand later that it was not of copper but of some hitherto unknown metal. However, to me it was copper, and for the purpose of this statement, I shall call it copper.

Payne paused only to fling off his opera cloak before stepping toward the machine and turning on the current. Then he indicated two small switches to me.

"See those? I'm going to press the

top switch, and when you have seen enough, please throw the lower, which will reverse the power of the machines."

Then he stepped on the plate and threw the top switch. Immediately strange green rays emanated from the machines and began to play over my host, covering him from head to heel with a halo of color.

"A colorful display," I said, but even as I spoke I felt the words dying on my lips.

For Lucas Payne was growing steadily smaller before my eyes. I cannot put into words the incredible amazement I felt. From five feet to four, to three, he went before I could feel myself free to move from my astonishment. Only when he was scarcely a foot in height did I lunge forward and throw the lower switch. I think that if I had waited a few moments longer I would have been too weak to do even that, for the thing I thus witnessed was so beyond the bounds of what is right and natural that I was deeply shaken.

The throwing of the lower switch caused my host to grow again, as rapidly as he had before been diminished in size. When he had regained his normal size, he stepped from the plate and turned off the current.

Both of us sat in silence for some time afterward. I was too overcome to say anything, to trust myself to speak, and he doubtless waited for the impression of what I had seen to sink in. Naturally, my brain was muddled by what I had witnessed, but presently I began to consider the phenomenon.

"But how do you come back?" I asked. "You can't take your machines along!"

"Certainly not," he replied easily. "But they are of such essentially simple construction that I am able to build them again at will. They may be of any size, of course, and there are certain materials in them which I usually take with me when I change my abode."

"But isn't there danger?" I asked then.

"Very slight. Only that of being imprisoned in some medium from

which I cannot escape." He nodded toward the window. "Glass, for instance. That is why I make a point of occupying a room with the least number of windows."

He dismissed the subject then, apparently delighting in my baffled wonder, and for the rest of my visit that evening spoke of more prosaic matters.

THE last visit I made to Lucas Payne's room took place two nights later. It was made on my own initiative, and because of a curious incident. I had come to the corner from which I had first seen the house in which he occupied the attic room, and was aware of a square of light flung across part of the street from his window.

I looked up, watching to see whether I might catch sight of him moving across the light. But I did not, and was about to continue my aimless stroll, when I caught sight of a movement in the reflected light on the pavement. I looked quickly back up to the window, but there was nothing in sight. Then I gazed once more at the square of light on the pavement and saw the shadow again, like that of a small animal scuttering across the street. But it differed from this in that the shadow did not escape from the confines of the square of light, a singular incident which did not at first impress me.

But that some premonition assailed me and sent me up to Lucas Payne's attic room I have no doubt. I failed to find my acquaintance of the past days, but saw at once with serious misgivings that the odd machines were at work, their green rays playing against each other above the plate. Impulsively, I stepped forward and shut it off.

Then a small sound attracted my attention. I went toward the window, thinking at first that the rat, which was still caged there, had made the sound I had heard. But this was not so. Yet it was the rat which, by the singularity of its attention to the glass, directed my attention to the window.

Thus it was that I bent closer and

saw a frightening inch-high caricature scuttling about within the confines of the windowpane. It was the caricature of a man, and I saw at once that it had seen me, and was trying to communicate with me. Without understanding his strange signs, the conviction was borne in upon me that the uncanny figure in the glass was all that was left of Lucas Payne.

I remembered then, on the instant, what Payne had told me about the danger of being imprisoned in the glass. At once I resolved to free him, reasoning that it was doubtless this which he wished me to do, to enable him to return to the machines and accomplish his escape into another dimension and another cosmos.

Accordingly, I raised the window and lowered the top half. This accomplished, I brought the shade down outside the window from above, and into the room again below, so that the shattered glass might not drop beyond the room into the street below. Then I struck the pane a quick blow, breaking it immediately into many small pieces.

Then, to my utter horror, a frightful thing took place. Lucas Payne, for it was he, immediately scuttled free of the fragments of glass and darted toward the machines. But, in his anxiety, he was heedless of the rat's cage. He passed too close, and with a lightning-quick stroke of a

paw, the rat reached forth and crushed Payne as he was attempting to pass. Within the second, all that was left of Lucas Payne had disappeared between the rodent's jaws!

Overwhelmed by the horror of it, I fled from the room and from the house. Coming upon a policeman, I told him what had taken place.

This is the true statement of the facts in the case of Lucas Payne, and I swear to it herewith.

JOHN ALLORY.

SUMMARY OF THE OFFICIAL INQUIRY

PAYNE, LUCAS—Age unknown. Birth certificate found in effects, and verified by inquiry, indicate that person of this name was born in Tatham Village, New Hampshire. The given birth-date is July 6, 1739, the son of one Giles Payne, a travel-magician by profession, and Mary Payne, his wife. (Note odd comparison with the reference in the statement made by Allory to the conversation with Payne on July 7, in which Payne stated that he was two hundred years old the previous day.)

There is also a singular coincidence in the medical report made on the rat, which was found dead in its cage (though the room was otherwise as stated by Allory). In the Allory deposition, Payne refers to his having been at one time poisoned by arsenic. It is a well known fact that traces of arsenic remain in the body for many years. The rat, upon examination, was found to contain very small bones, many broken, which seemed disturbingly like miniature human bones. It was found that these bones contained sufficient arsenic to have caused the rat's death.

SAGASTA'S LAST

(Concluded from page 71)

door to Crade's room. The man was not there. I ran on down the corridor to Louise's chamber.

The door here stood open. I pushed inside, stood stock still, frozen by what I saw.

IN THE center of the room, slumped back in a chair was the motionless figure of Martin Crade. His head was tilted far back, his eyes were staring upward. His hands hung at his sides. I saw at a glance that he was dead.

There was no sign of wound on his body. No weapon or person was visible in the room. Fighting back the

horror that was overwhelming me, I stepped closer.

No wound, no. Only Crade's throat bore marks of violence. There were prints there on the skin just above the unbuttoned collar of his shirt—deeply indented fingerprints that had undoubtedly caused strangulation. They were the marks of a woman's hands. But the prints of the fourth finger bore an additional mark in the deeply discolored flesh. Staring at it, I felt a slow scream rise to my lips!

It was the mark of Louise's signet ring, round and symmetric, with an upraised letter "L."

*Stranger Than the Fact of the Spatial Voyage Itself
is the Horrible Doom of Lycanthropy!*



The hands were claws, and the body was furry and shaggy

Flowers from the Moon

By TARLETON FISKE

Author of "The Seal of the Satyr," "The Unheavenly Twin," etc.

ONE minute there was nothing in the clear blue depths of the sky. The next, streaking across the far horizon like a silver comet, the great ship appeared, roaring down to earth.

With anxious eyes I watched it fall as the roaring intensified. With a sense of relief I heard the sound diminish, even as the speed of the dropping space-ship diminished. They had shut off the propulsion successfully. The last danger had passed!

Now the vessel seemed to drift to-

ward earth. I ran back to my car, raced the motor, then shot down the road toward the west. The ship would land in the plain about three miles distant, I calculated. As I sped toward the spot my eyes scanned the silver hull, and I sighed with relief as I noted that it seemed undented, unblemished.

Cars behind me hooted horns, for the reporters were here, too. I pressed my foot down hard and shot up to eighty, then ninety. Ahead of me the ship was purring to rest, easing gently

down upon the smooth turf of a meadow. It landed.

I put on the brakes and the car screeched to a halt; then with my heart thumping and thundering in my chest, I ran across the grass toward the ship—toward the silver door.

"Edna," I murmured. "Edna!"

Of course my voice could not be heard through the insulated duraluminum walls of the space-ship—but it was almost magic to see the door slowly open in response to my cry, and it was magic when she stepped into the doorway, lovelier than the images of my dreams during the past two months. She hesitated, blinking in the sun that flamed through her auburn hair; gazed at the ground six feet beneath the base of the doorway.

Then I held out my arms, and she leaped, and we were locked together in an embrace that freed me of all the anxious longing and heart-sick worry of the past eight weeks.

"Edna, you're safe—alive," I whispered tenderly.

"Oh, Terry, I knew you'd find us."

"Your father—Charles—the captain—are they all right?"

Her blue eyes clouded in momentary confusion. "Yes," she whispered. "But—"

The sentence was never finished. The reporters were on us; literally *on* us from all sides. The cars straggled in. Cameras clicked.

"Story, Miss Jackson? . . . Picture. . . . Hold it, please. . . . Your father safe? . . . Get to the moon, Miss Jackson? . . . Gonna marry this young man?"

Edna's white hands tugged at my shoulder.

"Terry, do something. Let Father and the others get away from these men. They're—they're too tired to talk now. And, besides, Charles isn't well."

FOR answer I fought my way through the struggling swarm of reporters and climbed into my car. Deliberately I wheeled around and drove straight at the babbling horde. The reporters scattered as I skidded to a stop directly under the ship's doorway. By this time a rope ladder

had been let down from this ship, and now Professor Jackson appeared.

His tired eyes blinked nervously, and one hand went to his white head as he took in the scene. He descended the ladder and seated himself in the car. Then the captain appeared; not the fat Captain Zurrit I remembered, but a thinner, haggard looking man. He carried a great satchel in one hand. He paused in the doorway to shout into the depths of the ship. He scowled, then slowly descended. Halfway down he paused again and reached up to shut the door. But the door opened.

A figure appeared then.

It was Charles DeVeaux, my rival; Charles the suave, Charles the laughing, the debonair, the black-haired, sleek, handsome scientist. So I remembered Charles.

But this man was different—horribly different.

His face was dead white, and his black hair bristled down almost to his eyebrows. His features seemed oddly altered—the shadows of the sun seemed to have lengthened his nose and chin. His hands went to his face, and they seemed thin as claws, and when the hands came away I saw his red eyes. They glared. And his mouth grinned.

That mouth! It hung open, working, a crimson maw of drooling imbecility. Charles DeVeaux was mad!

The captain looked up.

"Go back!" he shouted. "Charles—go back!"

Charles opened his mouth and snarled. I have never heard such a sound from a human throat. The yelling reporters quieted about the car, and then Charles came down.

He didn't climb down. He leaped. "What's wrong with him?" shouted an excited little man, who climbed on the running-board as the captain took his seat. "Hey, buddy, what's the matter?"

Charles leaped and landed—not on the running-board, but on the shoulders of the little man.

With a sound I can only describe as a growl, Charles bore the small reporter screaming to the ground. His hands clawed at the little man's throat,

and his mouth gaped open, and then he snarled and put his mouth to the reporter's throat and *bit*.

Edna was shuddering at my side, and the professor was screaming something in a high, hysterical voice.

The reporters were tugging at Charles, pulling him away. I tried to free myself, but Edna clung to me, sobbing. The captain acted. With a single gesture he pulled out a revolver and fired. There was a moan, and Charles fell backward, hands clawing the air; fell backward from the bleeding horror of the little man's torn neck.

And then the captain heaved the crumpled figure of Charles into the car and snapped, "Drive, Terry—drive like hell!"

I did.

WE WERE safe at last in the laboratory. Safe from the screaming headlines:

JACKSON RETURNS FROM MOON

JACKSON'S DAUGHTER RETURNS
FROM MOON VOYAGE TO WED

MADMAN IN JACKSON'S LUNAR
PARTY ATTACKS REPORTER

We were safe in the laboratory, and Captain Zurrit had gone back to remove the party's effects from the space-ship. The professor and Edna sat beside me in the room, while upstairs Charles DeVeaux tossed and moaned with a bullet through his shoulder.

"Tell me," Professor Jackson began, "have you kept the charts?"

I nodded, a bit ruefully, I must confess. It was something of a sore point with me—those charts and records of the voyage I had astronomically recorded while they were away. It dated back five years ago to my college days, when I worked with the professor in his laboratory; became his intimate and then his assistant.

During those years I met and learned to love his daughter Edna, and during those years my life, like his own, was centered about his plans for a voyage to the moon. We had

gone over the construction of the vessel together.

Then Dr. Charles DeVeaux had come as assistant. He designed the actual space-ship while I plotted the course by astronomy. Edna had helped me, and we had all worked with but a single goal for years—that voyage to the moon and return.

When the trial ships we sent up exploded, or disappeared forever, we had suffered the keen pangs of disappointed dreams. Then Captain Zurrit had come from Moscow to perfect our plans and finance the venture. The voyage was about to begin.

But when it came to selecting the passengers, the professor omitted me. The captain, Charles DeVeaux, Edna, and himself had gone. I was forced to stay behind and keep the records—a bookkeeper of astronomy, I reflected bitterly. Up there in the solar blue my future bride rode with my nearest rival, while I could not share her perils.

It had been a bitter pill for me to swallow! To wait, to gaze each night in agony at the cold moon; wondering, wondering where she was, whether I'd ever hold her in my arms again. It was hell on earth those eight anxious weeks.

The papers had scoffed, called us all mad for our scheme, despite the validity of our plans we gave them. That had added to my worries. Was it, after all, an impossible scheme? I wondered, wondered through sleepless nights.

But now they had returned. There were a thousand questions I must ask. What had they found? Was there life on the moon, as the professor had always staunchly maintained? What was the temperature, the nature of the soil, the effect of gravity?

And what had made a drooling madman of Charles DeVeaux?

I asked those questions now. And the professor answered, while Edna sat at my side, her eyes alight with a strange, unspoken fear.

THE voyage had been calm enough as planned. Captain Zurrit handled the ship nicely, the propulsion devices had worked smoothly, the in-

sulation had been perfect and the air-conditioning sound. Food capsule supplies had held out. The speed had been calculated properly, the automatic direction steering had proved practical.

The actual voyage took a little over three weeks each way. They had spent four days actually on the surface of the moon. The figures, exact detailed reports, were all here. The instruments were to be unlocked and their findings checked and recorded. The voyage had proved a brilliant success.

But why was Professor Jackson so haggard? Why did his hands tremble so when he spoke of the voyage home? Why didn't he begin, with his old-time enthusiasm, to recount the story of his days on the moon? Why did Edna draw closer to me as though in fear?

These questions flashed through my brain.

"But your actual experiences on the moon, Professor?" I asked. "What did you bring back with you?"

"Terry, I'd rather not go into that just yet. I'm tired, my boy." The professor's words came too hastily.

"Don't ask about that, dear. It's—it's something you'd better not know," Edna whispered.

"But I've a right to know," I snapped angrily. "You made me sit here and eat my heart out, my heart that belonged to you and to the plan for years. Now I've a right to know what happened on that voyage—to know what made a lunatic out of Charles DeVeaux!"

"Lunatic!" The professor breathed the words. "Lunacy—madness caused by the moon. The old definition was right. Yes—and that *other* definition."

"Father—please—" Edna begged.

The professor looked at me.

"No, Edna. He has a right to know, as he said. He must know about what we found—and about Charles. Because we'll have to do something right away."

He rose to his feet as I watched him, and went over to a table on which rested the big satchel the captain had brought with him.

Without a word he opened it and motioned me over. I went to his side

and looked down at what he drew forth.

His hands were filled with flowers—white, orchidlike flowers, waxen as the face of Death, and lovely as pearls. The ivory petals hung open on scarlet depths unblossomed, and as the professor stroked the thick, white cups they seemed to tremble, rising and falling like the flesh of a woman's throat as she breathes. And they were lovely, lovely past all imagining.

"We brought these back to earth," the professor said. "We found them on the second day when we descended into the crater. We had seen no life in the barren soil, but we descended into this deep crater and found them growing at the bottom, near the mouths of the caves."

I listened, but scarcely heard, so intently was I studying the white and scarlet blossoms.

"We plucked them. Charles carried them back with him, and he put them away." His voice sounded from a great distance. "We didn't know, then. But that night, as they lay on a shelf in the ship, we had the dreams. And we heard the howling. Waking, I realized for the first time that these flowers had a scent."

A SCENT! Abruptly I jerked myself into awareness. That was it—that was why I couldn't hear, couldn't see. These flowers had a scent!

It was a scent so subtle, so delicate, I had not known that I was inhaling it. And it was a scent so powerful that I could scarcely stand. It was a scent so strong that my olfactory nerves blotted out consciousness of other faculties; I could only smell, could no longer hear or see or feel.

It was an indescribable scent—but terribly sweet; so sweet it hurt my eyes and throat and burned in my brain with lovely white fire.

I fought to awaken as I stood there, reeling before the strange white flowers from the moon, and then I saw once more—*saw that my breath was coming in rhythm to the pulsing of the flowers.*

"Terry!" Edna's voice called from far away. "Wake up, Terry!"

But I didn't want to awaken. I wanted to drown in that sweetness, let that scent flood my veins and surge up in white fire. My closed eyes saw waving blossoms; and I was suddenly in a deep, black pit on the surface of the moon where flowers nodded in the darkness and bent toward me blossoming, their hungry red mouths like the avid ruby lips of vampires. I was bending toward them—

"Terry!"

Edna's arms, her voice, brought me to my senses.

"What are these accursed things?" I gasped.

The professor shook his head gravely. "I do not know. The odor affects one strongly at first. I'm used to it now, I think. But that first night we all had queer dreams, and I remember waking from my slumber to stare at the glass door of the ship—the glass temporary door we affixed after landing. I could see eyes in the doorway—great red eyes, like the eyes of a wolf.

"And then we all awoke and heard the howling, the dreadful, wolfish howling. God, I'll never forget the way—"

"What's that?" I shouted the interruption.

The ghastly sound rose on wings of nightmare dread, sweeping down from the rooms upstairs. It was a sound that made the short hairs rise on my neck, that caused my throat to go dry with sudden, unnamable fear. It was the sound all men instinctively dread—the horrible, deep-throated baying of a wolf.

And it came from within the house! "Charles!" shouted the professor. "Come on!"

He raced from the room and plunged up the stairs, while I pounded at his heels. Edna tried to hold me back, but I brushed her arm away.

The professor, his face frantic with alarm, ran down the hall and jerked open the door of a bedroom where Charles had been placed. I followed swiftly, entered behind him. Too late.

For as the door opened, the horror sprang.

The professor went down, and then the thing was at his throat, tearing

and tearing, with that monstrous growl rising from a fanged maw as it bit and snapped.

I staggered back, my eyes blurring at the enormity of the dread I saw before me. It was not Charles DeVeaux attacking Professor Jackson. DeVeaux had disappeared; he was not in the room.

There was no Charles DeVeaux any more. There was a wolf. . . .

THE face I thought lengthened in the sunlight's shadows was now completely gone. It was a snout, a furry-rimmed, gleaming muzzle with wicked red jaws from which the long yellow fangs protruded. The clawlike hands were claws, and the naked body was furry and shaggy as a gigantic wolf's body is shaggy.

That nightmare metamorphosis had occurred—and now this *thing* tore at the professor's helpless throat, and then it looked up at me and snarled, and sprang. I flung up my arms to shield myself from the ripping talons. One hand struck against the coarse hair of the beast's shoulder, and the lupine creature yelped with pain.

My hand had touched the wolf's shoulder where it bled from a bullet wound which Charles DeVeaux had sustained. Whining with pain, the animal swerved aside and sprang past me, out the door. It scuffed down the stairs and I raced after it. Edna was in the laboratory.

I sighed with relief as the thing continued on out the open door. In my daze I didn't realize that the horror was escaping, loosing itself on the world. My only thought was for Edna's safety.

I turned back up the stairs, but it was too late. One glimpse of the fallen professor and I knew that it was all over. Mercifully I covered the torn features and hurried down the stairs. Edna, sobbing, fell into my arms. I tried to speak.

"Oh, Terry—I know, I know," she murmured. "Father's—gone. And it was Charles. Did he get away?"

I nodded. And then Edna showed the stuff that she was made of. Her eyes cleared, her voice became firm.

"We must act at once," she said.

"Terry, you're the only one who can save us from it."

I held her close.

"It was my fault. I should have made Father tell you everything at the first. I will tell you now."

She spoke swiftly, urgently.

"Those flowers—I have a theory about them, Terry. Have you ever read those old books in Father's library? Those ones on witchcraft and demonology he collected?"

I looked up, comprehending. "Yes."

"He was a serious student of occultism, remember? You used to argue with him as to whether there weren't actually distorted scientific truths in old superstitions and legends that strangely persisted in every age and every country. He said that perhaps these legends had a basis in truth, and a scientific meaning men just hadn't learned to interpret yet. And I think he was right. Because of this."

She paused for breath, then hurried on.

"Those books speak of werewolves. Remember? The legend that men sometimes alter their shape to that of beasts? Under the influence of some drugs, the books say, the minds of men change. That's true—it's regularly accepted science. Opium, various narcotics do that to your mind. They are made from flowers, remember."

"And the old books say that there are *other* drugs, rarer ones, that alter not the mind but the body. They say that in certain valleys of the Orient, where the moon shines always, there grows a curious white flower which blossoms under the full moon. The books say that those who breathe the scent of this flower change their bodies and become wolves. *Werewolves*."

"Only a silver bullet slays them, once they breathe the scent of these strange, rare flowers that legends say grow from seeds that drift in space—seeds that come from the moon."

WHEN she paused for breath, I spoke hesitantly.

"You mean that—"

"Yes, Terry. Don't you see? And those other medical theories of olden

days about lunatics, people who go mad when the moon is full. The moon influenced their minds, those ancient savants believed. The moon is a strange thing, Terry. It's a weird world, that controls much on earth. It affects our tides, influences our seasons—why not our minds? The old faiths that worshiped the moon were aware of long-forgotten truths. These white flowers that grow on the moon; you smelled them and you know what happened to your own mind. It's true."

"But Charles DeVeaux? What did he do?"

"We were asleep that first night after plucking the flowers. Their scent filled the ship, although we didn't know it then. And the howling awoke Father. He saw the wolf outside. It howled. And Charles began to howl in return!"

"It was horrible. Father and Captain Zurrit knew at once that he had gone mad, somehow. We strapped him to the bed, but he was raving about flowers, about how he had sat there poring over them all evening. We didn't listen to him, then, thinking that he babbled in delirium brought on by some strangeness in the lunar air, or by the rigors of the trip. But the wolf howled outside, and Charles raved about the white flowers and a change within his blood, and how he felt his body going wrong. That was the worst, Terry—Charles guessed what the truth was. And we didn't heed."

"The wolf vanished. Father went back to the craters again, though I begged him to leave at once. But he was so excited by the possibility of life on this dead planet—particularly such a high form as canine life. He theorized as to how this particular form managed to maintain its existence."

"He searched for hours. When he came back he was pale; stricken and aged. Charles was worse, straining at his bonds, and howling continuously. We put the flowers away, still not believing in their potency. And we started back."

"The return voyage was terrible. Charles began to change visibly. And

Father and the captain argued, until they hit on the truth. The wolves on the moon must have once been men, but the flowers of lycanthropism had changed them into wolves who howled in pits, just as poor Charles howled for blood.

"We landed, hoping to keep Charles confined until we could move him secretly. Father wanted to study his lycanthropy as a disease—cure him, if possible. But Charles knew. Even though he could no longer speak, he knew. And he gnawed through his bonds and tried to escape. When he bit the reporter, Captain Zurrit shot him. But ordinary bullets won't kill a werewolf. And now he has killed Father—"

Edna laid her head on my shoulder and shuddered.

"We must find him, Terry! He's loose on the world now, and he'll seek blood wherever he goes. Those things live on and on, and the flowers will change others, too. We must destroy those flowers first of all. All the blossoms must be burned until that evil scent is gone forever."

"No, you don't!" a deep voice barked through the room.

BOTH of us turned to see the set face of Captain Zurrit. I looked at that face, then into the staring muzzle of a revolver.

"Lucky I arrived in time," the captain said. "Just listen to what I say, and keep your hands at your side. I don't want trouble."

Edna looked curiously at the captain.

"But the professor is dead," she faltered. "Charles escaped."

"That's no concern of mine," snapped the captain. "I'm interested in the flowers—not saving a few worthless lives. This flower cluster came from the moon. Don't be fools. It has incalculable scientific value. It is a form of lunar life and must be studied. Science can learn much from it that should be known. You must not destroy it in childish, superstitious dread."

"But DeVeaux is out, and he'll kill," I argued.

The gun waved to silence me.

"Stop talking like a schoolboy. What if he is? He'll be captured in due time, and captured alive, too. He must be studied now, as well."

"You're mad," I shouted. "Crazy, a fanatic! Science or no science, there's a horror in these blossoms that must be destroyed to save humanity. His bite will kill many, but it will merely infect others—like rabies from a dog, it will work in their blood until they too become living-dead animals that raven to kill. The world will be filled with snarling horrors, werewolves. They'll destroy all men. You saw what happened on the moon; it can happen here. Whole cities of baying wolves, howling at the moon. You can't want that!"

"I don't care. I'm taking these flowers, now."

I glanced at the windows. It was dark outside, and the moon was already rising. Night was falling, and somewhere in the blackness that loping thing waited to kill, red tongue lolling, gleaming jaws agape.

"The papers from the ship, the instruments?" I asked, stalling for time to think.

"I brought them here," said Captain Zurrit. "They are safe in the house, all your precious secrets. The vessel has been checked over, too—you will find it in readiness for a return voyage, if you like. That doesn't interest me. I stalled off the reporters and the police about the shooting this afternoon. They won't be around till morning. I didn't want anything to hinder my plans. These plants leave with me tonight for Moscow. I shall study them at my leisure, with my own staff."

Edna moved away, but the captain saw her.

"Don't try anything foolish, girl. I'll shoot without hesitating, I assure you. Now—I'll take the flowers and go."

He scooped them up from the table and for a moment one great hand clutched the mass of white, evil blossoms. His nostrils flared as he inhaled the cloying scent. His eyes narrowed.

"Exquisite," he murmured, half to himself. "They bring me dreams. I

dreamed on the voyage back, dreamed of them. Now they shall be mine, their perfume mine to breathe. I shall inhale all beauty and all strangeness—"

"He's mad!" Edna whispered to me. "He's mad! His story is insane; he doesn't want the flowers for scientific reasons, but because they've begun to bewitch him. The scent is starting to change him, as it did poor Charles. He'll become a—"

"He is!" I hissed.

AND he was. In the wan twilight I could see it. The evil fingers of moonlight clawed at the windows, then entered in long, bony webs of luminance. They seemed to strike at the blossoms in the captain's hand, and a white fire blazed forth. The odor, that unhallowed effluvium, seemed to strengthen in the lunar rays. I could not shut my nostrils to the increasing scent, the sorcerous scent that rose from my breath to my brain.

The captain held the flowers and I could see him change, now. His nose was a snout, and his eyes were red. Faint hair bristled on his face, coarsened in his beard and on the shadowed neck. His arms were long.

He inhaled deeply, holding the gun steadily enough. Yes, it was true! He must have succumbed later than Charles, his stronger will had resisted longer, but now the flowers were winning; the wolf-taint was in his blood, his lungs, his flesh.

His shoulders slumped as he turned away. "I'm going now," he mumbled—and it was dreadful to hear his deepened voice, his growling, slurring tones. "You can go out and catch your werewolf whenever you please. I shan't care. My plane leaves at once."

He left the room, stooping in a monstrous way. I wondered how long it would take for the change to be completed; how soon he would howl like a thing of darkness in the night. And how soon the world would howl with him, a nightmare world of shaggy wolves that tore away at the throats of all humanity and plunged earth into a barren horror akin to the shining moon above.

"Edna, we have to stop him!"

She nodded. Together we ran out into the hall, toward the open door. And there in the garden twilight we saw him running across the lawn. The night was still, but a faint breeze stirred, and on it was the strong, almost overpowering scent of the lycanthropic moon-flowers. The vine trailed from the hands of the mad captain as he sped away. It filled the garden as the moonlight filled it; under a full moon the full scent rose in a world of white light, white perfume, white horror.

Even as he crossed the lawn the captain's body seemed to change. His coat sloughed off, his form bent closer to the ground. His hands, holding the blossoms, were dark and hairy. Moonlight performed a dreadful acceleration of his condition. The scent was so strong that Edna reeled in faintness beside me. I smelled that damnable odor everywhere.

Another smelled it.

A long howl sounded from the bordering bushes near the walk.

It was Charles. He had waited there, drawn back to the house by the scent of those maddening evil-scented moon-blossoms.

The captain turned halfway. Charles saw him, crept from the bushes, shaggy body crouching close to the ground. The captain held up one hand as though to shield himself, and the blossoms glistened slickly in the pale moonlight.

Then Charles leaped forward. The wolf-head dipped, raking talons hurled the captain to the ground. With a triumphant baying, the wolf was at his throat.

And—the captain bayed back!

"Terry," Edna moaned, clinging to me.

THERE before our eyes two wolves fought and snarled in the moonlight, fighting with fang and claw, leaping and slashing with bloody muzzles. Back across the lawn they raced, the captain still clutching the ragged flowers in one paw—one paw that should not, could not be real; yet was.

The yelping rose in our ears. Champing jaws grated on bone. Two

wolves fought to the death, and through the growling came an abominable, throaty voice.

"I must—have the blossoms—Charles."

And then it happened. The flowers slipped from wolf-paws as the two rolled in a rending embrace. I raced silently across the lawn, caught up the scented moon-flowers, and sped back to Edna: "Come on," I whispered. "Let's get out of here."

She turned and ran at my heels as I made for the car, clutching the handful of demonic blossoms. Behind us the baying rose to the cold moon.

"What—where?" gasped the girl.

"To the ship," I panted. "Put these things aboard. Zurrit said it was ready. Going to send them up in the ship, let them plunge back into space, back to the moon, perhaps—anything. Must get them off the earth."

I suppose I was a little delirious. But the notion fastened to me. It was the only way to cleanse the world of the terror, the scented terror. I raced the car.

"Terry—look!"

Down the silvery white road that gleamed in the moonlight behind us, two figures loped. Two fully formed wolves! Charles and the captain had discovered the theft of the blossoms, and now they pursued.

It was a mad race through midnight with two creatures of myth howling at our heels, the scent of doom welling in our nostrils as I shot the speed up, up. We turned. The running forms vanished from behind us. Yet they were coming, coming.

And I was in a garden, a cool, sweet garden, and the air was a white wine that I breathed richly, intoxicating myself with the deep fire of strange new life. I was in a garden, and Edna was beside me, eyes closed, lips opened to inhale the magic perfume of rapture. . . .

No. I wasn't in a garden. I was in a car, doing seventy miles an hour down a moon-blazed road, while between my face and Edna's rested the damnable cluster of vampiric blossoms, their scent sucking our souls out with every breath. The cursed things were getting at us!

I dared not throw them away. Those things behind would catch up, find them. I dared not. I had to fight, fight to keep awake, to keep speeding down the road toward the ship.

Yet I didn't want to fight. I wanted to sleep, to rest, to forget everything except the beauty of perfumed dreams. Now I understood the enslavement of opium eaters, of hasheesh addicts, who sought strange worlds of the mind at the expense of their bodies.

Edna must not be exposed to this scent any longer! I shot up to a hundred, screaming down the road toward the plain where the ship rested. Edna lay white and still, her bosom rising and falling, rising and falling in rhythm with the weaving blossoms that coiled out as though to touch her milky, moon-white skin. Edna!

We jarred to a halt before the great gleaming bulk of the ship. I wanted to rest. I could smell the scent, and I wanted to rest. The moonlight hurt my eyes. So easy to close them, to forget. . . .

BLINKING painfully, I threw the door open and jumped to my feet. I shook Edna into wakefulness. She moaned.

"Come on—come on," I panted. "Hurry!"

The ladder still hung, although the door was closed. I forced Edna to mount before me, placing the blossoms in her hands. It was awful to see her fingers close lovingly about the stems of the leprous growths, awful to see the cataleptic stare in her eyes, the way those eyes slanted in the moonlight. But I had to have my hands free to support her, to urge her upwards. We scrambled up the ladder, and I prayed that the door was unlocked. It was. The captain had left in haste. We pulled ourselves into the darkened cabin of the ship. I fumbled for lights.

Edna crouched on the floor, clasping the flowers to her face. I had to tear them away from her. In the little cabin the scent rose strongly, compellingly. We had to get out of here. I fumbled with the panel controls. Impossible, of course, to chart a course; to plan. Just throw the switch

with a half-minute's delay, catch hold of Edna, and hurry out in time to be clear of the ship as it left—taking with it in its plunge those damnable blossoms. That was the only way. Get those things off earth before it was too late!

I studied the panel for a moment. There must be no hesitation. We were in danger from the scent ourselves; or was it a danger? It was so pleasant, that odor, so peaceful. Why not surrender?

And then, from without the door, from the ground below, a long dreadful howling from two throats. They had found us and they were waiting!

That was the end. We couldn't escape. I knew it then, knew that the things that waited would rend and tear if we ventured outside. And here, within the cabin, the flowers still rustled as though filled with alien, moon-given life. The scent rose stronger on the air. Edna lay still, beside the blossoms, breathing, breathing. . . .

HOWLS rose from the outside. I found pen and paper then. Had to, to keep from going mad. Had to concentrate on something, anything. Anything but the howling outside and the quiet horror of scent within.

So I scribbled this. I don't know how long I've been sitting here. There is no howling any longer, but low whining sounds proclaim that the waiters are patient. My task is finished, but I cannot step outside to face those ravening fangs, those fangs set in what were once human throats.

Nor can I stay inside. The air is close. No, there is no air any longer. There is merely the scent. For a while it weakened me while writing, but now it seems to be easier to breathe. I can hear myself breathing, quite hoarsely, but easily enough. I feel a little better, a little stronger. Perhaps I'm immune. Edna is still asleep, but she's stirring. Maybe she, too, is immune. I pray that this is so. She is waking, now. The flowers still move, her breathing is attuned—and so is mine. Perhaps there's nothing to worry about. But what shall we do?

It is difficult to write these last

words, for some reason. The labor makes me glance down at my hands. And I read the answer there.

My hands are growing darker. There are hairs sprouting on them. The fingers are curling. The dark hairs are sprouting.

I know what I must do, now.

I thought we'd throw the switch and leap out, and send the flowers back to the moon, or back into space. But we cannot leave. That was the problem, but it has been solved, dreadfully solved. We shall have to go with the flowers, now, out into space. *My hands are hairy.*

Sitting here in the close confines of the cabin has done it. I have breathed too many fumes. No wonder I don't mind it any longer, don't try to resist that cursed scent. I'm—changing.

How soon, I wonder? Better start the ship, now.

Edna mustn't know. I pray to God she doesn't know. The knowledge would kill her. Just start the ship and pray she doesn't suspect at first. Good idea. If she doesn't know, then she'll trust me. She is smiling at me now, bravely. Her blue eyes, so frank, so trusting! And still she breathes in rhythm with the white blossoms.

I won't tell her. Because then, when I get hungry enough—why do I get hungry when I look at her now?—I can approach her. She trusts me. She doesn't know what the flowers have done to me. And the pulse-beat in her white neck moves up and down, and I'm hungry. When we're plunging out there in the spatial darkness all alone it will be too late to think of my hairy hands when I do tell her. When I tell her, and take her.

I will throw the switch now, and throw this manuscript out of the ship. I'm hungry. That perfume from the white flowers is making me hungry. Well, there will soon be a feast.

Yes, very soon. And yet, I wonder. Edna is standing at my side now, trying to read what I write. She still isn't afraid, and has just laid one hand on mine. And I see something else.

There will be a feast soon out in space, but perhaps I will not be the feaster.

Edna's hand is growing hairy, too.

DEATH Bridge

*The Pale Moon Shines On
Murder—and Dead Men's
Coins Have No Tails!*

By

JOHN CLEMONS

*Author of "Chameleon Eyes," "City of
Dreadful Nights," etc.*



He was heading for the covered bridge

OLD Ambrose Hinckle firmly believed that the time-worn covered bridge was haunted. The folks of Miller Junction whispered amongst themselves that it was Ambrose Hinckle who was haunted. But Ambrose Hinckle was superstitious only about that one thing.

They thought motion pictures, for example, were a projection of thought picture inspired by the devil. The radio was likewise consigned by them to the nether regions. Miller Junction was not large enough to support a picture house, and though there was a good one over in Clarkston, only ten miles away, no one from Miller Junction ever went there for that. In a breath, the use of such modern devices as motion pictures, automobiles, the radio, were all of them placed in a single category: association and communion with his dark and forbidding majesty, the devil himself.

Old Ambrose Hinckle had a radio; he had an automobile; he went to the picture show in Clarkston as often as

they changed the program. He had tractors on his fields and subscribed to farming journals. Even so, the people of Miller Junction were positive that the reason his crops were better, the reason his cows were fatter and his silos fuller, was because of his constant communion with the devil.

Everyone in Miller Junction owed Ambrose Hinckle for something. Everyone in Miller Junction had to look to him for renewal of notes, since he held mortgages on everything. Yet this was accepted by his debtors as inevitable and proper, since the devil was his friend and no doubt his adviser.

Did not old Ambrose go to the covered bridge of a black midnight, and hold prolonged and serious conversation with—no one that the eye could see?

Oh, they had spied on him, the various ones; Old Max, Barney Jordan, Ken Lewis. But later Old Max had drowned when the creek rose in flood season—Old Max who knew every one of its devious turns and had bested it for sixty years. A disinterested observer might reasonably point out that Old Max had grown feeble, that his waning strength might have been insufficient to cope with the rising flood waters; a man can't go on winning the same fight year in and year out for ever.

But Jordan had been young. Lewis had been young. Both had died under suspicious and mysterious circumstances. Jordan from the kick of a cow—a mild bossy he had been milking for five years. And Lewis—Lewis had jumped from a hayloft into a wagon loaded with hay. It had turned out there was a forgotten pitchfork buried in the load. Lewis had impaled himself.

That's what worried the superstitious farmers of Miller Junction. Everything was made to appear so natural.

Old Ambrose could hardly be openly accused. He could only be talked about in whispers, behind closed doors.

They were afraid of his friend, the devil.

But they were not all of them of one single mind; there was a quiet dissenter who never raised his voice. Rance Holcomb his name was. He had been abroad, had Holcomb; he had been in Clarkston, and even farther; he had put in a whole winter in Denham, a large manufacturing center more than a hundred miles away.

He had learned to be skeptical of superstitious nonsense. He had seen life. And because he had seen life and grown up and away from the small narrow ways and delusory thoughts prevalent in Miller Junction—because he had seen life, he was now waiting on the old covered bridge for death. He was going to kill Old Ambrose Hinckle.

OLD AMBROSE had renewed the note he held on Holcomb's farm; he had renewed it once, he had renewed it twice, he had refused to renew it a third time without at least proper payment of interest.

"You're plain lazy," Old Ambrose had said to him. "If you'd have tried and couldn't make it, I'd have renewed your note, same as I did for Jensen. I don't want your land, Rance Holcomb, but if *you* don't want it—"

Hinckle's words had cut especially deep, for they were true words. Rance Holcomb was lazy—knew it. He had been lazy ever since his—for him—wild fling in the outside world. Miller Junction was a small and narrow world. Over it, even in this day and age, hung a dark cloud of obstinate beliefs in sorcery, magic, devils, and many similar forms of heretic persuasion.

Rance Holcomb pined for the pleasures of Pan. He had only to kill Old Ambrose to achieve this end. With the old man dead, he could creep in the dead of night to Hinckle's farm and ransack the strong-box before the hired help woke for the morning chores. He was sure to find his note, and heaven only knew how much money in cash. Ambrose Hinckle was modern only by comparison to his backward neighbors. He did not believe in banks.

For nearly a week Rance Holcomb

had lain in wait for his prey each night, hidden in the black shadows that abounded inside and outside the bridge. He failed to heed the whispered warnings of the mysteriously muttering wind in the brush, a warning echoed in the profound depths of him, too deep within him to be heard.

Tonight his vigil ended. He could see his victim coming, plainly limned by pale moonbeams, his stooped form made more grotesque than usual by reason of his studied, stealthy approach.

It was midnight now; the village was asleep.

"Now," thought Rance, "I'll see for myself what this gibberish is about."

Those others had said that too.

He crept out of the shadows and wormed his way inside the covered bridge, crawling on his belly, making no sound. He saw Old Ambrose pause at the opposite end, then the old man blended with the blackness inside. He heard the soft clomp of Hinckle's boots.

The tread stopped. There was a most unearthly yet not loud wail as Holcomb held his breath. It was only by exercise of extreme will power that Holcomb kept from bolting on the spot.

Then he reminded himself that there was no one here but an old man who believed in mysterious powers that did not exist.

The old man began to jabber swiftly in a tongue that was foreign to the listener.

"More nonsense," Holcomb thought. The jabbering stopped after a bit and Holcomb heard the unmistakable clink of silver. Money. His eyes were used to the darkness by now. He could make out the dim figure he meant to kill. He crawled stealthily forward. He had an iron bar wrapped in a thick towel. He came abreast of the old man and rose like a wraith out of the engulfing blackness.

A thin sliver of light from a broken side board marked his passage sufficiently for the old man to suddenly see his stalker. He started to cry out, but Holcomb cracked him on the back of the neck with the covered iron bar. The old man crumpled without an-

other sound, other than the sound of his falling body.

AMBROSE HINCKLE was not dead. Holcomb had not intended that this blow should make murder. He had with him a stout rope. He slung the rope to an overhead stanchion and made it fast. He tied the other end around the thick red neck of Old Ambrose. He saw the body swing in air. He intended it should be found that way. It would have to be listed as suicide. Who was there in Miller Junction with nerve enough to kill Old Ambrose, the man who was friends with the devil? It would be naturally supposed that the devil had claimed his own.

Holcomb forgot to consider that with the commission of murder, he had himself sold out to the devil.

He had a flashlight with him. He carefully diffused the glare with his handkerchief and flashed the light around. He had heard the clink of silver, and it had aroused his greed and curiosity. He directed his light on worn wooden planks of the floor. He saw nothing to account for the sound he had heard. He played the diffused light around. It struck the swinging figure of his murder victim and he shrank back as from a sudden impact, shuddering and raising his hands to hide the sight: he was only an amateur murderer.

But in a moment he stepped out of the amateur ranks. As he swung around, the light beam swung with him. And it struck a most remarkable spot. It hit a veritable gold mine. It reflected the light from a thousand glittering coins in a box that was itself hidden in a massive upright supporting the old bridge.

Such was the bank of Old Ambrose Hinckle. Legitimate banks he would not trust. He had evidently considered the possibility of robbery and would not trust his money around the house; yet, deluding himself with mumbo-jumbo into an alleged association with the devil, he had willingly consigned his wealth to the safety of a deposit box of his own invention—a hollowed log, an upright beam that supported an old covered bridge.

Hinckle had had faith in the devil. Rance Holcomb stared in unbelief. But not for long. He soon convinced himself. He reached up and took out a handful of coins. They were real, no doubt about that. He took down the strong box and closed the lid. Next he sought to close the door of the improvised safe in a log. It was a clever affair, he found. It had to be maneuvered by means of a rivet that was deep in a crack, up high; it could not have been found by accident.

A most remarkable safe, Rance decided, all the more safe because with people passing back and forth all day, not one would ever have thought of it. Besides, Old Ambrose had practically made a witch of the bridge, with his ridiculous worship of it. It had served him illy in the end.

Holcomb spat. He turned his back on the low swinging figure and stole away in the night, the box firmly in his arms.

It was only natural that, as the Cain-branded man walked along the deserted road, he should think there was someone following him. It was his first crime, and a desperate one.

The moon made shadows. It had always made shadows and would continue thus to blend landscape with pale light until the end of time. But the Rance Holcomb of the clear conscience had never noticed the queer shadows before.

Now he was angry with himself; he was no coward. He squared his capable farmer shoulders and clenched his big farmer fists. Ghosts were for fools like Ambrose Hinckle to believe in. Ghosts were for Miller Junction. Ghosts were not for Rance Holcomb who was a man of the world. "And a murderer," something screamed within him.

HE took a deep breath. It was all he could do to keep from turning around and shouting, "Come out and fight like a man, damn you!" He began to sweat. He thought, "I must hang on to my nerves." He plodded along.

He crept by a dark house, a sleeping farm, a near neighbor's place. He moved slowly for fear of waking

someone. He kept in the shadow of trees and shrubs. He concentrated on this and forgot about anyone or anything trailing him. It was not far to his own farm now. Victory was only a step away. He had already planned what he must do. He had to hide the money, bury the box. He had to lay low for awhile.

But he would be patient. When the excitement of Old Hinckle's death had died a sure death, he would get away. Go out in the world. The civilized world, where you could visit cabarets and get roaring drunk if it pleased you; where you could see shows and ride in autos without bringing down the censorship of a lot of backward old fogies who believed that abstinence was the only avenue to heaven. Rance wanted his heaven on earth.

He whirled on his heel. What was that stealing up behind him? It was something that *slunk*. A paroxysm of terror rooted his feet to the spot. The slinker came close and nuzzled his trembling hand. A dog. His neighbor's dog. The animal knew him well. Holcomb trembled a moment out of sheer relief. He felt like shouting. He patted the animal and stumbled on. He said to himself. "So this is what they call a guilty conscience." He was beginning to be sorry for his crime.

But he got home all right. He spread his prize on his bed. He made sure that not a chink or crack was open to peering eyes. He made a light in an oil lamp and dumped the contents on the blankets. He immediately forgot about being sorry for his deed. The box was filthy with money.

It must represent the savings of a lifetime, Rance decided. Cash, all cash, thousand of dollars. He searched in vain for papers; notes and things like that. Hinckle must have had another hiding place for those things. They were not in the cash box. And then Holcomb saw what a good thing that was. Everyone knew that the old man held the mortgage on his place. It would cause suspicion if in the end Holcomb's note was not found. Now it would be found, eventually, with the rest of his papers. And they could

have the farm, Rance thought. He would quietly fade away with the cash. Ah. All of it. There was paper, silver, gold even. . . .

Twenty minutes later Holcomb was still lovingly running his hand through the clinking coins, the rustling bills of varied denomination. He bathed in it. He picked up a big silver dollar. His lips were twisted, his eyes shone in purest adulation. This was something. More money than he had thought existed. Worth killing for. A thousand times worth killing for.

He gloated over the big rich coin. And still with that passionate look of gloating adulation on his face, he suddenly stared harder at the coin. Harder still he stared, and his eyes grew big, bigger; round, rounder. They almost popped. What sort of fool stuff was this? The head on the coin was the head of Old Ambrose. He tried to laugh but only gurgled.

It was old Old Ambrose Hinckle.

He put the coin down, head up. He took a few steps, whirled quickly and looked again. It was the regulation head now. He laughed. What if it was a hysterical laugh? He laughed. He looked again, merely to reassure himself. It was all right. It was the regular head. But now a terrible thought entered his mind, and once there, refused to be displaced: What if the money were haunted?

HE thought of this with grave seriousness. Then all at once he really did laugh. It was a normal, happy laugh.

"So that's what they call conscience," he thought. "Well, it's not going to get the best of me!"

He knew he had merely imagined this nonsense. To prove it he picked up a coin at random, and laughed, for it was an ordinary—he stopped laughing. It was an ordinary head when he picked it up. Now it was the head of Old Ambrose. He trembled. He shook. He put the coin on the table by the side of the other coin. It was all right suddenly. Suddenly it was all right. It was the other coin that was wrong. The other coin had the head of Old Ambrose on it. He screamed.

For the first time in his life Rance Holcomb screamed. It was first time he had ever been frightened. That is to say, profoundly frightened. Frightened to death. But the sound of his own voice did more than medicine could have. He said to himself:

"You're a fool, Rance Holcomb. Laugh at this nonsense. It's your damned conscience. You're just not used to murder. . . . When we get to the big city, Rance Holcomb . . . ah, the fun we'll have. . . ."

In this frame of mind he looked again. Both coins were all right.

He automatically looked in the mirror as he undressed for bed. He wasn't worried about hiding his loot, he had a place all planned. He was only worried about looking red-eyed and sleepy in the morning. It might just excite suspicion among these suspicious Miller Junction folk. Too well he knew their harsh natures. They still believed in witchcraft. So he prepared to get an hour or two of sleep. He could hide his prize when he got up for the milking. If he was seen out there now by some unhappy mischance, it could prove very awkward. He paused and stared harder into the mirror. There was the face of Old Ambrose in the glass.

Such a cry as left Holcomb's throat had no business coming from a human being. It represented the depths of despair, the ultimate of helpless abandon, the apogee of fear. He cringed as he turned around. He cringed with his eyes and his mouth wide open, with his face the color of paper. He stopped cringing when he saw what it was that had frightened him. There was a coin on the mantelpiece. It was tilted against a candlestick in such a manner as to reflect its face in another glass, a shaving glass that magnified. The magnified version in turn threw its reflection into his dresser mirror.

He blew a relieved sigh.

All at once he thought to himself: "How did that coin get up on the mantelpiece? I can't remember putting it there." A moment later he shrugged the thought away. If it was there he must have put it there. But it did look like Ambrose. He approached it cautiously. He took a

furtive peek at it when he thought it was not looking.

He laughed when he realized that he was treating the coin as if it were human, a thinking, sentient human being. It was all right. It was an ordinary head. He turned away, angry with himself. He heard a clink and turned back like a streak of lightning. The tilted coin had fallen, face up. He went to pick it up. It was the head of Old Ambrose.

HOLCOMB couldn't even scream. He let out a stifled, strangled, piping sort of creak that tore the lining of his throat, even if it accomplished very little in the way of sound. There was a rain of water from his face that he vaguely recognized as sweat. It showered from his hair when he jerked a palsied hand for the coin. He threw it from him with a cry that was really a sob; a horrified sob. The coin was flung with maniacal strength and without any aim whatever. It cracked against an iron stove, now dead, and ricocheted off to come back and hit him squarely in the face. He dropped to his knees, as much out of sheer surprise as from the blinding pain.

He rubbed his face with his hands and shook his head. He kept his face covered and stole a glance at the coin on the floor beside him. It was all right, an ordinary coin with an ordinary head. Then he thought, "Why do they always fall heads up?" He did not realize he was being quite timid as he reached for the coin. He turned it over. There was no tails to the thing. It was another head. It was Holcomb's head.

He put it down quickly and turned away. This was awful. This was stupid. He took a good grip on himself. He had to look again. But first he made sure he was soberly attentive, not half hysterical with fallacious expectation. It was just not possible to be anything but an ordinary coin. If it wasn't, then Old Ambrose had tampered with it. Rance decided to find out—definitely. He picked up the coin. It was perfectly sound, perfectly proper, with a regulation head, a regulation tail.

"Now, see!" he thought to himself. "You silly fool, you're getting as bad as the rest!"

So he got up, in full possession now of all his strength, the strength of mind and body. He had not realized how taut he had been holding himself until he now relaxed. He almost caved in. He had been tight as a drawn string.

"No wonder I was seeing things," he thought. He prepared for bed again. As he did so he looked once more in the mirror. It was only a passing glance. But in that passing glance he saw. He saw Old Ambrose peering *out of his own eyes*.

He gasped and looked closer to the mirror. It was not a true affair, not an expensive thing; it could "make faces." But no. It was his face. He knew it. He recognized it. He had been living with it over thirty years. It was his face. But the eyes were Ambrose Hinckle's eyes. They were the eyes of the man he had murdered.

A quiet panic seized the murderer, more desperately deadly than all his hysteria. He thought to himself, "I'm either crazy, or else I'm possessed." He continued to survey himself in the mirror—through the eyes of the man he had killed. So it seemed to him. And through these eyes he naturally looked at himself in hostile fashion. What more reasonable, then, that he should suddenly hate himself with a most deadly and violent hatred!

He pulled himself away from the mirror with convulsive effort. "Quiet, quiet," he said aloud. "Easy, boy. Steady."

He was trying to think. But all he could think of was: "Such things are not possible—except if you believe in them. And I don't believe!"

SO HE looked again in the mirror, though it took a good brave man to do it now. He looked again, and again he saw himself through another's eyes, a hateful murderer. He tore his eyes away. That way lay madness. The heat of his body was becoming unendurable. He noted then that he was soaked in sweat. Soaked. As if he had been bathing. He felt trapped.

He thought to himself: "I won't look. I don't have to look. I can spend the money without looking at it."

Then all at once he grew very angry with himself. He shouted out loud: "You fool! You imbecile! Cut it out! You let that damn ignorant upbringing of yours get the best of you! You're no better than the other damn ignorant fools in this hateful sleepy hollow!"

He stopped, strained his ear to listen. He caught himself in that attitude of strained expectation. He laughed brutally. "What the hell!" he thought. "There's nobody here to answer me!" But he kept on listening. Nothing happened and he laughed again. He slumped in a chair. Sleep was all at once something not possible to attain. He was terribly wide awake. He couldn't look in the mirror, he was afraid to look at the coins. It made him angry. He slammed his fist on the table with terrific force. The odds and ends on it jumped up and bounced around. The two coins he had forgotten about. They did a jig. They came to rest finally, face up. Holcomb stared. "Heads," he said soberly. "Heads. . . Tails!" he suddenly shouted at the coins. "Tails! Come tails!"

But they were heads. Old Ambrose Hinckle heads.

Rance roared and leaped to his feet. He looked in the mirror. He sobered. The strange eyes stared at him. Strangely. Hostile eyes in a head that was favorable. A greater paradox man could not imagine. The mad eyes hated the face. The face belonged to the mad eyes. Holcomb shook his head and slapped himself soundly. He looked away from the mirror, resolutely away.

He said to himself: "I'm Rance Holcomb. I've just killed an old miser who believed himself to be a friend of the devil. I stole his money. I am worried because I am not a criminal at heart. My conscience is getting me down. It is nothing else but conscience. In the morning I'll laugh at it. . . Now look in the mirror. . ."

He looked. He was perfectly all right.

"Now look at the coins."

He looked. They were perfectly all right.

He sat down. "Now," he said triumphantly, "you see what a damn fool you were?" He sat a moment. "Go to sleep," he told himself sternly. "You'll need all the rest you can get — you damn' amateur killer you. . ."

He got up. The money was still spread on the bed. He look at it hard, as if daring it to do tricks. It was just money inanimate and incapable of trickery. He took the empty box and began shoveling the money in with his hands. As they rolled and spilled into the box he caught sight of more than one head. He saw many heads. But they were all Ambrose Hinckle's heads. All of them. Dozens of them. He got them all in the box, quietly, not letting on, as if everything was regular.

JUST as quietly he got up and looked in the mirror. The eyes that looked with so vast a scorn, so intense a hatred, appeared to him once more as the eyes of the dead man. And more. He felt as if now his mind, too, was dominated from somewhere without him, some central depot that controlled his thoughts.

He said to himself: "Rance Holcomb, you're a rotten murderer. You killed a defenseless old man." He caught his mouth with his hands. "what am I saying?" he thought. But when he looked again he screamed: "I hate you!" and crashed his fist into his own reflection. The glass splintered.

He dashed to the box with its wealth of money and hurled it in the air. The box hit the ceiling, smashed wide open, and spilled a great shower of bills and coins. The bills fluttered around like oversize confetti. The coins ran around the room like a line on an endless fall, their grotesque little heads squinting at the killer. They sprayed around like loose shot, kicking up a noisy row as they cracked into chairs and wall, into stove and ash stands, and the various other impedimenta of the room.

They showered down on Holcomb too, and seemed to take bitter satisfaction in cutting him as they fell.

It was when they appeared to be chasing him around the room that he took greater fright than ever before. He kicked at them as at a living foe. "They're after me!" he cried. He was kicking them and they were moving, so he thought they were after him.

"They're after me," he shouted, and opened the door to flee into the star-spangled night. Into the haunted murder night.

His house was on a slight rise that sloped to the river—and the covered bridge. When he opened the door and kicked, what was more natural than that some of the coins should roll down hill—after him. So he cried to the dead quiet night: "They're after me!" And when he realized that it was the old covered bridge he was heading for in his frenzy of fear, he made to turn and run another way. But some of the coins had bounced off trees, and rocks, and the deflection had altered their course.

Turn which way he would, there seemed to be coins following him. Only the road to the bridge was open. It appeared to his terror-stricken disorganized mind that the coins were chasing him that way. So it was that he was practically forced—considering his abnormal fear of the glinting heads rolling, or seeming to roll so weirdly down the moon-drenched knoll—to race for safety to the old covered bridge.

He pulled up short as he reached the pitch black approach. There were fearsome things within. He knew. He had left a dead man swinging. Swinging low. A dead man who was said to be friends with the devil. He believed in no devil, he believed in none of the dead but unforgotten things the folks of Miller Junction still believed in. Yet he fancied now there were things within, unspeakably vile things that waited for him, that would pounce on him and kill him most horribly if he ventured within. It was bewitched territory, the old bridge was. Everyone in Miller Junction said so. Despite the better judg-

ment of the little sense still left to him, he was seized by a terror so vast, a fear so absolute, a dread so profound, as to put upon his face a pallor greater than the moon's.

SCREAMING "No! No! No!" as loud as he could, he began to back away, raising his hands to protect himself. From what? From nothing. Nothing that the eye could see. He was overwrought from this incredibly monstrous complexity of nervous emotions, of overmastering terror. Perhaps by an awesome prescience of evil, as well. He turned to run away, away from the incubus of evil that appeared to his disordered mind to be housed in the old covered bridge. As in the stillness of a dream, he saw the galloping coins converging on him. They seemed to his distorted eyes as big as boulders now! The glinting evil eyes in the evil head of Old Ambrose Hinckle increased a thousand-fold with the speed of their whirling, like bands of fire.

He hesitated now no longer. He turned and with his head down and his arms covering his eyes, he rushed like a mad bull into the yawning darkness inside the old covered bridge. The black, mysterious, haunting darkness where a dead man swayed low, with the rhythmic motion of a twisting pendulum.

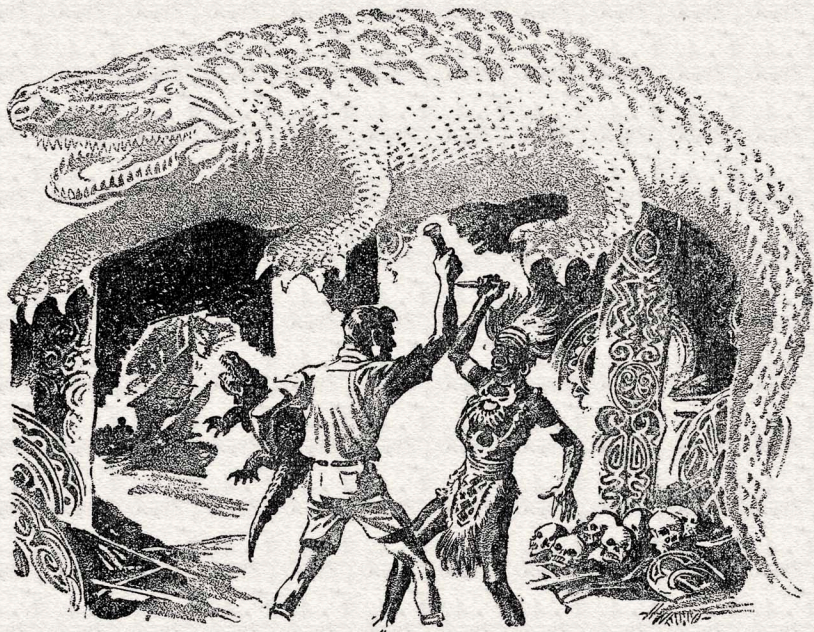
He did not come out at the other end.

When they found him the next morning he was dead. He had died in a most singular manner. He must have tripped over a loose board. He must have. It must have thrown him off balance—and slightly upward. It must have. For he was found with his throat in the grip of Old Ambrose, whose fingers were set in *rigor mortis*. Yet even so, how was it that Rance Holcomb, who was strong as a horse, had been unable to escape from the grip?

They had so much trouble getting them apart, they thought of burying the two men together.

THIRTEEN TALES OF THE UNCANNY
IN EVERY ISSUE!

The Curse of the Crocodile



The native rushed at Koreing with some kind of dagger in his hand

The Man Who Violates the Banga Ju-Ju Returns to the Saurian Ooze from Whence He Sprang!

By **BERTRAM W. WILLIAMS**

Author of "Strange Waters," "The Treasure of Ah Loo," etc.

"**B**LASTED lot of black swine!" Koreing growled. "If I had my way I'd start the day by lambasting every native in the safari with a chicotte just to show him what to expect if he didn't keep his end up."

"They might not like it," Cummins

remarked dryly, a quizzical expression on his lean, tanned face. "They might even mutiny."

More and more Cummins was becoming convinced that it had been a mistake for the superintendent at Akassi Mines to hire Koreing, sight unseen, on the strength of a few

recommendations. But it was not easy to secure mining engineers who were willing to go into the deep bush to Akassi, and the super had obviously been pleased when he had ordered Cummins—the guide, hunter, and handyman at the mines—to bring Koreing back with him on his return from a few weeks' vacation on the Coast. Now the stocky, craggy-faced engineer kicked viciously at a stone in the jungle trail.

"Mutiny?" he grunted. "Not them. They might desert—some of 'em have already. But that's why I'm letting you run things. I'll never learn to kow-tow to a native."

"Don't make the mistake of thinking the African will stand for too much," Cummins retorted.

"Yeah. I've heard all those yarns about putting ground glass in the *bwana's* chop, and that sort of thing. But I'm not scared of any damn native."

"Well, we don't want anything to happen on this trip," Cummins snapped, exasperated by the other's self-confidence. "We're not making nearly such good time as I'd figured. You brought too many—luxuries with you, and we haven't enough porters now."

"I'm a white man," Koreing returned stiffly.

The inference was obvious. Cummins flushed, remembering that the "luxuries" consisted mainly of whiskey, of which Koreing consumed the greater share.

THERE is considerable truth in the statement if you have seen one mile of the African bush, you know what the rest of the continent looks like. The two hundred mile strip bordering the coast is monotonous past belief. Narrow trails wind through a dense forest which is as impenetrable as a brick wall in most places. Occasionally the traveler passes small clearings, generally the site of a village. And always, a short distance away, and in the densest part of the jungle, is the fetish house.

This may be a pretentious building with some old man officiating as

high priest, or just a tiny space cleared of brush with nothing to denote its sanctity but a few pathetic offerings—a bowl of cassava, a broken gin bottle, or a dead fowl.

Fetishism is a subject about which practically nothing is known. The whole business of pagan practices, superstitions and secret religious rites is usually lumped together under the term ju-ju.

"What the devil are the boys side-stepping that place for?" Koreing demanded as the safari passed a small hut before which squatted an old native. "Don't tell me they're scared of his nibs there!"

Cummins merely nodded. He was tired; the hour was late, and he was in no mood for casual conversation. Ju-ju houses were common enough, and there was nothing to distinguish this one from a hundred others he had seen.

That night they camped at the adjacent village, one which lay on the shore of a river, and after supper Koreing muttered something about strolling around to see if he could pick up any curios.

"Might have a peek in that ju-ju hut. I've heard that's where they keep their best stuff."

"You'd better keep out of there," Cummins exclaimed in sudden alarm.

"Why? Afraid these bushmen will start something?"

"It isn't them," Cummins said, frowning. "It's our own boys. You noticed how they looked when they filed by that hut—cowed, frightened. We don't want any more of them vamoosing in the night."

"To hell with them! They won't know, anyhow." Koreing grinned at Cummins, helped himself liberally to a whiskey and sparkley, and after a time sauntered off.

It was one of those dank, sultry nights common in Africa when a white man sleeps only in broken snatches. The noises in the bush after dark are continual and nerve-racking. Frogs croak from adjoining swamps, and the chorus of insects is unbelievable in its volume. Flying foxes squawk discordantly through the mango trees, and every living

creature, silent during the day, seems to come to life determined to advertise its presence.

Cummins awoke from a doze and saw by the luminous hands of his watch that it was nearly ten. Koreing's cot on the opposite side of the tent was still empty. Didn't the fool realize that it was absolutely necessary in that climate to make an early start? Didn't he realize also that the natives in this region, peaceable in all other respects, would not stand for any interference with their religious customs?

AT THAT moment, Koreing staggered in the tent, threw a bundle on his cot, and lit the kerosene lamp. He poured himself half a tumblerful of whiskey. Cummins noticed his hands were shaking.

"Better go easy on that, old man," he advised. "It's none of my business, but—"

"Oh, shut up!" Koreing snarled. "You'd need a bracer, too, if you'd been through what I have tonight." "Been robbing the local bank?" Cummins asked.

Koreing put down the glass and began to unlace his boots. "Worse than that. Sacrilege, I guess you'd call it, and—oh, well, accidents will happen." He muttered the last.

Cummins sat up in instant alarm. "What do you mean, Koreing? What's that thing on your bed?"

Instead of replying, Koreing refilled his glass, lit his pipe, and after a moment's hesitation handed over the object in question.

At first Cummins thought it was merely an ordinary West African curio, one of those grotesque representations of animals or reptiles that the savage loves to carve. But when he took it nearer to the light he saw that here was no toy or article of commerce.

It was an almost perfect model of a crocodile, made from some species of hardwood and colored the exact shade of greenish gray the saurian attains at maturity. The image was about three feet long, extremely heavy, and so lifelike Cummins could not repress a shudder of distaste.

Whoever had made it knew crocodiles. There was not a detail missing; scales, the many rows of teeth—the mouth was open—and squat, handlike paws; all were there.

"Just feel the thing," Koreing urged. "If that isn't the genuine goods, I'll—I'll eat it."

It might have been imagination, but it seemed to Cummins that there was actually a clammy feeling to the light-shaded belly. Certainly there was a distinct odor of musk coming from the open throat.

"That's what I've been wanting ever since I hit the Coast," Koreing went on. "Something that was a bit more than a mere curio. This little chap mayn't have much actual cash value—"

"How did you get it?" Cummins interrupted. "The natives up here don't savvy money, and I know you haven't any trade goods with you."

"I'll tell you all about it in the morning," Koreing muttered.

"You'll tell me now," Cummins snapped. If the other had stolen it there might be a chance to restore the idol before the loss was discovered.

Koreing mixed himself a third drink, and this time Cummins did not remonstrate. Koreing's tongue thickened.

"I had a hunch," he said, "that that ju-ju house we passed had something out of the ordinary; at any rate, there was no harm in giving it the once-over. It was dark when I got there, but I had my flashlight, and crawled through the entrance hole. First time I was ever inside one of those fetish places. There was a lot of junk—skulls of animals, bones, and mummies. The old geezer was sitting in the middle of the floor, stark naked and mumbling to himself like—well, you know how they do when they've passed the whittling stage. The funny thing was that he didn't look up or seem to notice me at all. Deaf and blind, I thought. But if he didn't see me, something else did. I tell you I jumped when I saw what it was, and only a yard away from where I was squatted. Notice it?"

Cummins nodded. He was strangely conscious of the dull reptilian eyes of the image. The deadly, passionless glare of the hideous original had certainly been reproduced faithfully.

"That's what I call art," Koreing observed, grinning as he saw Cummins' involuntary gesture of distaste.

"What did you have to pay for it?"

Koreing evaded the question. "Heaven knows my intentions were honorable enough when I entered that hut."

"Just what do you mean?" Cummins was more and more alarmed by Koreing's tone, from which the usual bluster was noticeably absent.

"I picked up this—this thing, and as soon as I did, the old boy showed signs of life. He gibbered at me, and I tell you those red-rimmed eyes of his made me nervous. 'How much, Grandpa?' I asked him, but he staggered to his feet and cussed me out. No mistake about that. He was peeved because I'd made him a bona-fide business proposition. I held out the flashlight, switching it on and off. If magic like that wouldn't tempt him, nothing would."

"It didn't. He rushed at me, with some kind of dagger in his hand. Naturally I struck out. With the torch. Not hard, but—well, the thing's heavy, and—and that's all rot about a native's skull being so much thicker than a white man's."

THERE was a pause, pregnant with meaning. Cummins whispered, "You—fool, Koreing!"

"It was self-defense. And he was due to die these last twenty years, anyway."

Cummins was silent, thinking hard. "We'd better beat it first thing in the morning. I'll try to fix it up, but you've raised plenty hell."

Koreing rolled into his cot, and in five minutes was snoring.

After breakfast, Twalo, the headman of the carriers, presented himself.

"Massa," he began without preamble. "All dem boy walk for bush."

Cummins' mouth hardened. This was serious. Translated, it meant that every one of their porters had

deserted in the night. And an African does not sacrifice his hard-earned wages without cause.

"What name run away?" Cummins asked tersely.

Twalo hesitated and peered into the tent where Koreing lay still asleep.

"Ju-ju man live for die," he muttered. "Dat bad too much. White man stealum ju-ju, dat—"

Words failed him; he was divided between his allegiance to his white masters and his horror of last night's heinous crime. Cummins knew it would be fruitless to try to ascertain how Twalo and his men had got wind of the affair. This is one of the mysteries of Africa; natives can smell out news almost before the events take place.

"How about hiring a fresh gang from the village here?" Cummins suggested.

Twalo shook his head. "Dese feller no savvy safari; be canoemen. 'Sides"—he looked fearfully around—"dey not like it when dey go look ju-ju house."

Cummins knew what he meant. Harmless and the least pugnacious of men naturally, the West African is capable of being extremely nasty when his superstitious fears have been aroused. And the farther away from civilization a tribe is, the greater indifference it has for the white man's power.

Koreing came outside rubbing his eyes. Cummins explained the trouble and suggested he slip back to the fetish temple and replace the image.

"Like hell I will!" Koreing growled. "Huh, I'll get you some recruits." He snatched up a hippo-hide whip and turned toward the village.

Cummins seized his arm. "You fool—you've made trouble enough! We'll be lucky if we come out of this business with our lives."

He pushed the other back into the tent, and for once Koreing put up no argument. Possibly he was beginning to realize that the situation might be really serious after all. Cummins was puzzled as to the best course to take. He would have liked to ask Twalo, but a white man does

not seek advice of a native. Their destination, Akassi, was over a week's march overland. By using the river they could travel by canoe a more roundabout and longer route. Cummins decided to take the water trail, although he knew that there would be difficulty in obtaining paddlers.

There was. Not a single native was visible in the village; the huts were deserted.

"Oh, the devil with 'em!" Koreing exclaimed after a fruitless search. "We're foolish to waste time. We'll paddle our own canoe." He stepped into a small dugout drawn up on the river bank and started loading their possessions into it.

Twalo grunted assent. There was no alternative. It was impossible to carry much luggage; three men nearly filled the narrow craft, which was none too stable at the best of times. Cummins insisted that the tent and most of the provisions be left behind; they would be some payment for the canoe, he pointed out, and it was vitally necessary to travel light. But it took a long time to convince Koreing that the whiskey should be jettisoned with the rest of the equipment. Cummins was adamant, however.

"If you're going to take that thing along"—he indicated the crocodile idol which his partner had rolled up in a blanket—"you'd better not let Twalo see it."

"Why not? Do I have to consult a servant about my luggage?"

"Listen, Koreing," Cummins said, "Twalo's a fairly intelligent chap, less superstitious than most Africans, but he's no agnostic. Get what I mean? We're dependent on him just now."

Cummins was never likely to forget that trip up the Ogowan River. By day they paddled, sweating even in the chill of early morning from the unaccustomed work. Their hands were blistered, and every limb ached intolerably from the cramped positions they were forced to take. The heat during the day was almost unbearable. It seemed to press down on them like an unseen weight. Yet they had to carry on till sunset.

Koreing, although a heavy drinker and a man of gross body, appeared to suffer least. Gradually he shed his clothing, garment by garment, till he was practically naked. He had given up shaving and even washing. At their camps in the evening he had little to say; indeed, as the days dragged on he became morosely silent, only grunting when spoken to directly.

While Cummins had more serious things to consider than the appearance of his companion, it annoyed him to see Twalo eyeing Koreing curiously on several occasions. An almost nude white man with long matted hair and bloodshot eyes is not calculated to improve a native's morale.

IN the evening he ordered Twalo to examine the fish-lines he had set, and when the headman was gone, took Koreing to task.

"We'll be hitting some of the up-river villages tomorrow. How about brushing up a bit?" Receiving no reply, he went on. "You'd better come closer to the fire, old man; some croc is likely to swipe you out there. Lots of 'em round here, you know."

"Let 'em," Koreing grunted without moving. "I'm not scared of those things."

"Well, how about a shaving and a wash?" Cummins ventured.

"What for?"

"Listen, Koreing. This kind of thing doesn't go—not here in Africa. We whites have to keep up a certain appearance for our own sakes."

Koreing's only reply was to edge nearer the river.

Presently Twalo returned with a few fish. He began to clean them preparatory to broiling some over the fire. Koreing seemed annoyed by this. He lumbered clumsily to his feet, snatched a fish from the native's hand, and while the other two stared in amazement, he devoured it raw, tearing at the flesh and crunching the bones. Cummins caught Twalo's eye and looked hastily away.

Cummins awoke in the middle of

the night and glanced at the spot where Koreing had been lying. There was no one visible in the camp but Twalo, some distance away, also awake.

"Where?" Cummins asked softly.

Twalo grunted. "Massa Koreing live for water. Go swim."

"Swim?"

"Yah. P'raps he catchum fish."

Odd, Cummins reflected. A little tingle of apprehension crawled down his spine. White men do not as a rule get up in the middle of the night to bathe in crocodile-infested African rivers. He examined the bundle of possessions his companion had been using for a pillow. The wooden fetish was gone.

"If he walk river, he live for die," Cummins told Twalo. "Plenty *jambuka* stop longa there."

"He no die; he takum de *jambuka* ju-ju longa him."

CUMMINS pondered in silence. He had no idea of indulging in a religious argument with Twalo in the middle of the night. Instead, he crawled back under the cheese-cloth net, more annoyed by the swarm of mosquitoes he found there than by Koreing's sudden penchant for moonlight swimming.

An hour later Koreing returned, but so silent that Cummins did not realize his presence till he heard a peculiar noise close by. Peering from under the net he saw Koreing squatting on the sand eating a large fish—alive. His eyes gleamed in the starlight, passing over the other two men as though they did not exist.

The same thing happened during the next two nights. By day Koreing would paddle, hunched up in the bow of the canoe, morose and silent; at night he went "fishing." And always with him went the fetish. Cummins tried to believe that it was nothing more than a craving for flesh diet, and that in some way the carven image lured fish so that they might be caught by hand.

All very well, but that did not account for the overpowering stench of musk which had begun to emanate from Koreing. Cummins spoke to

Koreing about this on one occasion, receiving a wordless snarl for answer.

Twalo kept as far away from Koreing as possible, and but for the fact that his interests lay with his white masters, there was no doubt that he would have deserted.

The affair came to a head on the third night when Cummins was awakened to find Twalo shivering in the dim moonlight.

"Massa, you come look."

Without a question Cummins followed the native to the river bank. Crouching in the reeds, they saw through a break in the mangroves the coffee-colored stream gliding sluggishly through the jungle. Scattered about a mud flat were several objects resembling stranded logs.

"*Jambuka*," Twalo whispered. "Crocodiles!"

Cummins did not answer; he was staring at Koreing, who, stark naked, had something silvery in his hands, a freshly caught fish. He was on the mud flat, and watching him, barely ten feet away, was a crocodile.

It was not a large one—perhaps six feet long—but quite large enough to be dangerous. Cummins was about to shout a warning when Koreing tossed the remnants of the fish to the saurian and slid into the water.

Twalo clutched his master's arm. "Look, massa, he takem 'long."

Cummins supposed he meant the idol which he knew Koreing carried with him on these excursions, but at the moment he was more interested in the living reptile. It finished the morsel and floundered into the water also.

The situation was beyond Cummins. He had no gun with him, and to run back to where they had moored the canoe and paddle down in the darkness would have been useless. Too, he doubted whether Twalo would accompany him on such an errand. After peering uncertainly into the darkness for several minutes the watchers got to their feet without comment and returned to camp.

Twalo replenished the fire, glancing furtively at his master.

"You savvy this palaver?" Cummins asked.

It appeared that Twalo did savvy, or thought he did. The ancient at Banga, the village where the carriers had deserted, was a medicine man of some renown throughout that part of the country. He had specialized in the worship of reptiles—snakes, crocodiles, and lizards.

"S'posin' he no like man, he makem ju-ju for dem man—*jambuka* ju-ju."

"Well," Cummins prompted as the other hesitated. "What happen—the man live for die?"

Twalo shook his head. "Be worse, too much worse."

Cummins did not pursue the subject. There were worse things than death; even the superstitious black was able to perceive that.

Koreing was asleep when Cummins opened his eyes next morning. There was nothing about the man to denote he had not been there all night save the musk smell, which was stronger than usual. At breakfast Cummins remarked:

"We'll be leaving the river this afternoon, Koreing. Have to go overland by boot then. Three days' march across country."

Koreing grinned mirthlessly. "I stop here. Like this river."

The words came thickly as if speech hurt him; yet they were not like those of a drunken man. Cummins stared for a moment, then shrugged resignedly. At Agwasse, through which they would pass, was a government medical officer to whom he could report Koreing's conduct. Plainly this was a case for a doctor.

Before leaving, it might not be a bad idea to steal the fetish. Cummins was beginning to believe that the thing was somehow connected with the man's immunity from the river carnivores, however, and he took the first opportunity of mentioning the plan to Twalo.

"Massa, I beg you not," the headman pleaded. "You lookum—" He gestured toward where Koreing was crouched, gazing dully across the river.

"Oh, rot! You fear too much,

Twalo. Dem ju-ju man put smell on dem bit wood, that's why *jambuka* don't bite Massa Ko."

Yet Cummins was relieved when he learned that there was a village two miles from their present camp on the river. He would ask some of the natives there to supply the *ibo*—the white man—with food, and incidentally to keep an eye on him, as he was "sick too much."

THE doctor was away when Cummins and Twalo reached Agwasse, and the young district commissioner in charge did not seem to take the story very seriously.

"Maybe your friend's gone *fantee* temporarily," he surmised. "I've read about whites in India turning native, but this goes one better—palling up with the crocs. Wonder if he could induce one of his chums to come close enough for me to pot it?"

But he ceased to joke when they returned to the river. A crowd of natives met them with the news that a small child had been killed while filling a water-pot the evening before. At least, they supposed the youngster had been eaten by the crocodiles, but there was no trace of the body. The village oldsters threw out dark hints about an evil spirit in human form that had been seen in the neighborhood. As for the sick *ibo*—nothing had been seen of him.

Actual witness of the child's disappearance was a small black boy name Yomba. Yes, he knew where his playmate had gone, and if the white men would give him a wire bracelet he could take them to the spot and explain how the tragedy had occurred.

The D.C. shrugged. "I'll have to stay and calm down this mob. The kid's probably been chopped by a croc, but you can't get these blighters to believe it's not black magic of some sort."

Followed by Cummins, Yomba led the way to the river beach and pointed to several tracks in the mud, one of which had the appearance of having been made by a white man.

Seeing that this service was not enough to justify the reward, he pointed to a narrow opening in the mangroves. There he halted and refused to go any further. With none of his own people around him his boyish bravado had evaporated. It appeared the trail led to a ju-ju place and—

Cummins swore under his breath. Everywhere one ran up against this blank wall of native superstition. He pushed on alone.

A HUNDRED yards up, the path opened into a clearing, in the center of which was a large mango tree. Close by was a pool, fed from the river through a shallow channel, and on its inky surface floated the *jambuka* image. On the bank several fish had been placed in a row.

Cummins examined the place for footprints—fruitlessly. At last he kicked the fish back into the water, gathered up what dry wood he could find, and burned the crocodile image, waiting until the “curio” was a mass of glowing embers.

“Palaver finish,” he muttered. “If this business had gone on much longer I’d have been bowing down to graven images myself.”

They would have to turn out all the villagers, he reflected, and scour the bush until they found Koreing. After that, the engineer would be sent back to civilization and sanity. As for the missing child, . . . Cummins hastily dismissed the horrible thought that had come to him. After all, there were a hundred ways one could meet death in the African jungle.

But none of the villagers was willing to have anything to do with the sick *ibo*. Cummins’ offers of bribes were met with dull stares. He wished he had kept the D.C. with him, but the young man had seemed to think that a missing white civilian was none of his business.

“Sorry, old chap,” he had said. “I can’t spare any more time. Got to write up my blasted reports. According to that head-man of yours, all your friend has done lately is swim in the river and catch fish.

No law against that, you know. You’ve probably got a touch of fever yourself, Mr. Cummins. Better take some quinine.”

Cummins had been so disgusted by the D.C.’s attitude that he had entirely forgotten to demand cooperation from the villagers.

“We go catchum white massa—you, me,” he told Twalo.

Twalo growled a decided negative, much to his master’s surprise.

“More better we go ’way one time, Massa Cummy. Me fright too much for look.”

Argument was useless. Cummins saw he would have to do the job himself. After all, there was no telling what further degradations Koreing might commit to imperil the white man’s prestige, and the fewer witnesses the better. What a fool he had been not to have borrowed the D.C.’s rifle! It would be no fun sitting in a swamp with those murderous reptiles all around.

Taking only his mosquito net and a bottle of whiskey he went back to the clearing. Surely Koreing would visit the place again to recover his wooden plaything! What his reaction would be on finding it destroyed, Cummins could not guess—perhaps, he hoped, a return to sanity. Anyhow, the man was almost certain to drink some of the liquor which Cummins meant to leave under the tree—whiskey heavily doped with sleeping-powders.

On a long vigil one eventually becomes almost oblivious to one’s surroundings. Cummins was in that state when a slight splash in the pool made him sit up alertly. A crocodile was crawling up the bank. Another followed, and another, till there must have been nearly a dozen. The last to appear was an enormous brute, fully twelve feet in length. It advanced a little further from the water than the others.

A fetid, musky odor filled the air, but Cummins scarcely noticed it. For instead of the usual somnolent attitude of saurians on land, these brutes seemed to be waiting for something with tense expectancy. They kept their heads raised, and

occasionally one would give a slight flick of his tail.

Presently there was a slight rustle in the bushes. An indistinct form came into view, halting at the base of the mango. The waiting reptiles shuffled closer. The patriarch in the lead opened its huge jaws; then shut them with a loud snap that startled Cummins. The vague blur in the shadow dissolved into two parts. The foremost straightened up and advanced a few paces.

It was Koreing—Koreing covered with the black ooze of the river and bearing no likeness at all to a white man anymore, or, indeed, to a human being. The light was too vague to make out details, but it seemed to the watcher that Koreing was searching for something. He padded around the opened space with hunched shoulders, ignoring the bottle of whiskey, plainly visible in a patch of moonlight. When he reached the spot where Cummins had burned the fetish he dropped to his knees and began groping in the ashes.

Now was the critical moment. Would this beast-man recover from his strange malady, freed from the evil influence of the crocodile image? Or would he—Cummins held his breath.

But Koreing showed no more emotion than the reptiles around him. He squatted motionless for several minutes. The big crocodile made a sweep with its tail, and as though at a signal the others crawled closer, their short legs moving together in a kind of awkward rhythm.

Koreing put his head down till it was almost on a level with that of the beast. Then, apparently remembering something, he clambered over the back of the giant saurian and on all fours returned to the mango tree.

Cummins strained his eyes to see what would come next. Unfortunately it was not possible to follow Koreing's movements without shifting his own position, and he had no intention of frightening Koreing away now. He waited.

Again Koreing came into the moonlight. This time he was erect

and carrying something in his arms, something that seemed to struggle feebly. Cummins, shocked into forgetfulness of his own danger, stood up, moved forward out of the mangrove thicket.

But none of the crocodiles took the least notice of him. Their dull opaque eyes were fixed on Koreing's burden—a feebly struggling native child.

Too dazed to scream, the boy—obviously the one who had disappeared from the village—could only express his fear in choking sobs. Koreing raised him high and commenced a chant in a throaty animal-like gibberish, swaying his body from side to side, increasing the tempo with every dip.

THE action roused Cummins; he leaped, forgetting the monsters underfoot. In his haste he tripped and fell over the giant tail of the nearest saurian. For a moment he lay, blinded with the sticky ooze and half asphyxiated by the nauseous odor that clung close to the ground. Around him jaws snapped and heavy bodies squelched through the slime. When he cleared his eyes and struggled to his feet he found Koreing gone.

The crocodiles were milling around at the foot of the bank, which was about four feet high. On the verge of the incline the native child lay, wide-eyed and frozen with terror. Behind the boy something crouched, something that Cummins did not at first recognize. Then a cold sweat broke through his pores; he stood rooted in mud, staring up blankly.

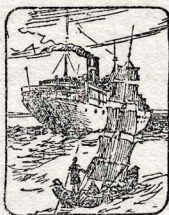
The thing was neither brute nor human. Its dull eyes passed unseeing over the watching white man and the hideous crocodiles waiting below. Whether it was imagination or the fantastic effect of moonlight and shadow through the overhanging jungle Cummins never knew, but it seemed to him as though the creature lying belly down opposite him underwent a metamorphosis. The streaks of dirt on the once white body seemed to assume the reticu-

(Continued on page 124)

Sea Vision

By WILL GARTH

Author of "Fulfillment," "Double Ring," etc.



THE sea, ancient Mother of life, which had heard in ages past the slap of galley slaves' oars, which had later heard the song of sails alluring the winds of the world, on that night had heard the *chunk-chunk* of a great ship's engines. To the sea, it was all one—the sounds came from man—so too the blood.

The blood? Aye. The slaves, back-lashed, had given of their blood—in ruddy drops it had twinkled down into the receiving sea, which had room for it, lots of room. And room for the blood of plank-walking men, given over by pirates to the awaiting sharks.

Would the sea ever have enough of blood, Edward Granville thought, sitting alone in his wireless room. He closed his eyes for an instant, opened them. For a moment he had thought that the room had grown darker. But the electric lights were burning, as brightly as before.

Oars and sail, and finally steam. And still the sea demanded the ruddy drops, and still men gave them. The liner steamed in darkness, her engines beating, her lights out.

In Edward Granville's wireless room the lights burned brightly. Or did they? Were they not a little dimmer now? Again Granville closed his eyes, opened them. The lights were on, they were burning, the wireless room was ablaze . . . with lights.

"What's wrong with me," he muttered.

He ran long sensitive fingers through his iron gray hair. Suddenly it seemed to him that he smelled salt, the air of the open sea, and at the same time a bit of verse, read long ago, made music in his mind.

The great liner, with plowing fore-foot, was snoring through the planet-powdered floors—but her wake was a slash of darkness, she showed no lights, not even the burning end of a cigarette. No whale fluked in flame, as in that bit of verse, to be sighted from the masthead and heralded by the lookout's fiercely joyous cry: "Thar she blows!"

Beneath the dark sea lurked things whale-shaped but not of whales' flesh—things of steel—one-eyed things, yet with power to look in all directions—things with a turning eye and a baleful purpose, which, upon being beheld by a lookout, would call forth a cry not fiercely joyous but savagely fearful: "Submarine!"

The lights in the wireless room were growing dimmer for Edward Granville. The liner plowed on, full steam ahead, as if hungry for her berth alongside the warmer, safer earth.

Beneath the sea things lurked.

Subs, men called them for short, as though to make friendly with monsters. And together they made a monster, a single monster, like a tentacled octopus whose arms stretched out into the seven seas, leaving one arm over to reach skyward perhaps, and cover the eyes of the condemning moon.

The lights were completely out for Edward Granville now, although they burned brightly in the wireless room. But he did not move. It did not seem strange to him that the wireless room was dark. He was waiting, expecting. . . .

The clarion cry of the lookout did not come down to him. "Submarine! Submarine off the starboard bow!" All he knew was that the wireless suddenly began to sputter. He bent forward, with a peculiarly rigid gesture.

One hand, holding a pencil, jerked to the pad.

The sea, hearer of slap of oar and song of sail, now heard and felt the feral hiss of the speeding torpedo, and heard the shattering thunder of its brutal blow against the ship.

The ship no longer plowed in darkness. Her wake was a welt of light. The sea was all at once enkindled and encarnadined. The ship was on fire!

In the wireless room the wireless sputtered and the hand of Edward Granville wrote:

SOS. Torpedoed by sub Lat. 42° 16' 33".
Long. 32° 9' 48". On fire. *Cyprus.*

Granville's hand flashed out to the phone. His lips moved with a peculiar stiffness. He did not hear his own voice as he relayed the message to the bridge. He waited for a reply. The seconds ticked away.

THEN the reply came back sharply from the bridge: "What's the matter with you? Are you drunk? You've just given our own exact position. We haven't been torpedoed, we're not on fire, and so far as I know there isn't a war on—at least we're not in it. Stand by and I'll be down to sample your liquor."

But Edward Granville did not stand by. Instead he got up quickly. Like a corporeal ghost he ascended to the deck, ran quickly to the stern, arms outstretched. He seized the lever for the depth bomb discharge. The sea now heard another sound—a bomb inscribed a graceful arc and plunged into the sea, a second bomb, then a third.

Then men had him by the arms and around the neck, restraining him. He did not struggle. He was strangely calm. The captain appeared.

"What the devil's going on here?" he snapped. "I thought I told you to stand by. What's happened to you? Have you gone crazy? I was down in the wireless room and saw the SOS. The steamship *Cyprus* was torpedoed over twenty years ago, in 1918. You

were on her, I know, but you're on the destroyer *Cyprus* now. What are you doing, living the whole war over again?"

The searchlight of the *Cyprus* flashed over them in its periodic arc. It stopped short abruptly, dipped down to mark a spot upon the sea. A cry floated deckward, mournful and clear:

"Wreckage two points off the starboard bow. Oil spot spreading. . . ."

The destroyer veered and headed for the spot. Her engines stopped and she drifted down upon it. The now quiet men looked over the side. "If there wasn't a submarine sunk around here in the last five minutes," the stolid Lieutenant Stevens said in low tones, "then I didn't live through the last war."

"Please God we will all live through this one," Edward Granville murmured.

They turned. He was standing there, lonely, his face set, his eyes staring off into distances beyond their ken.

"*This one!*" the captain exclaimed. "Why, we're not at war! I think I'd better put you to bed, Granville."

Edward Granville's body gave a sudden twitch.

"There's a message coming in," he said. "I'd better go back on duty."

"How do you know?" the captain asked, looking at him queerly. "You certainly can't hear it from here."

But the captain followed him. They found the wireless sputtering. Again Granville sat and his pencil wrote, decoding as he went:

He tore the paper off the pad and handed it to the captain. The captain read:

Report to Teignmouth for troop convoy duty.

The captain went up on deck and stared with the others at the pool of oil.

Then he gave orders for the destroyer *Cyprus* to speed to Teignmouth.

The Citadel

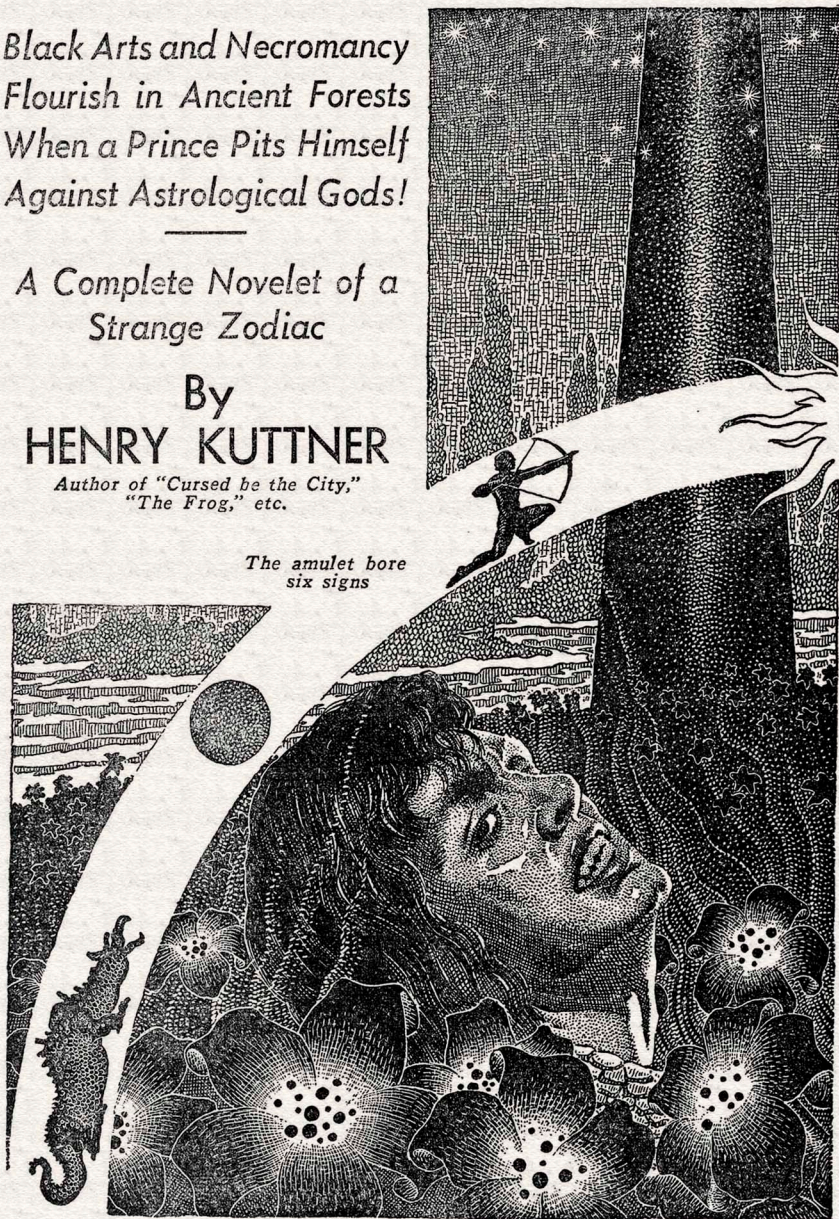
*Black Arts and Necromancy
Flourish in Ancient Forests
When a Prince Pits Himself
Against Astrological Gods!*

*A Complete Novelet of a
Strange Zodiac*

By
HENRY KUTTNER

*Author of "Cursed be the City,"
"The Frog," etc.*

*The amulet bore
six signs*



of Darkness

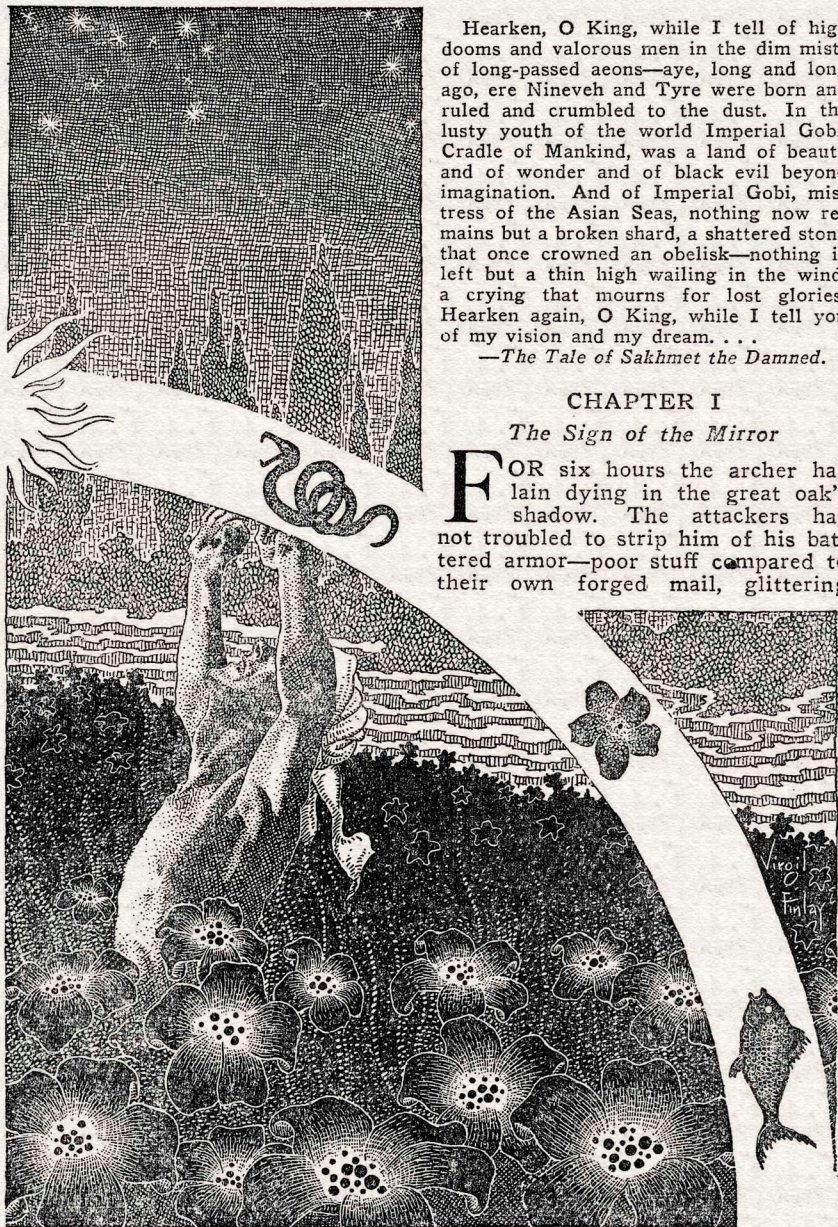
Hearken, O King, while I tell of high dooms and valorous men in the dim mists of long-passed aeons—aye, long and long ago, ere Nineveh and Tyre were born and ruled and crumbled to the dust. In the lusty youth of the world Imperial Gobi, Cradle of Mankind, was a land of beauty and of wonder and of black evil beyond imagination. And of Imperial Gobi, mistress of the Asian Seas, nothing now remains but a broken shard, a shattered stone that once crowned an obelisk—nothing is left but a thin high wailing in the wind, a crying that mourns for lost glories. Hearken again, O King, while I tell you of my vision and my dream. . . .

—*The Tale of Sakhmet the Damned.*

CHAPTER I

The Sign of the Mirror

FOR six hours the archer had lain dying in the great oak's shadow. The attackers had not troubled to strip him of his battered armor—poor stuff compared to their own forged mail, glittering



with brilliant gems. They had ridden off with their loot, leaving the wounded archer among the corpses of his companions. He had lost much blood, and now, staring into the afternoon dimness of the forest, he knew death was coming swiftly.

Parched lips gaped as the man gasped for breath. Once more he tried to crawl to where a goatskin canteen lay upon the glossy, motionless flank of a fallen war-horse. And again he failed. Sighing, he relaxed, his fevered cheek against the cool earth.

Faintly a sound came to the archer's ears—the drumming of hoofs. Were the raiders returning? One hand gripped the bow that lay beside him; weakly he strove to fit an arrow to the string.

TWO horses cantered into view—a great gray charger and a dun mare. On the latter rode a tall, huge-muscled black man, his gargoyle face worried and anxious.

The gray's rider seemed small beside the Nubian, but his strong frame was unwearied by hours in the saddle. Under yellow, tousled hair was a hard young face, bronzed and eagle eyed. He saw the shambles beneath the oak, reined in his steed.

"By Shaitan!" he snapped. "What devil's work is this?"

The dying man's fingers let the bow fall.

"Prince Raynor—water!" he gasped.

Raynor leaped to the ground, snatched a goatskin, and held it to the archer's lips.

"What's happened?" he asked presently. "Where's Delphia?"

"They—took her."

"Who?"

"A band of warriors took us by surprise. We were ambushed. We fought, but—they were many. I saw them ride south with Delphia."

The archer of a sudden looked oddly astonished. His hand reached out and gripped the bow that lay beside him.

"Death comes," he whispered, and a shudder racked him. His jaw fell; he lay dead.

Raynor stood up, a hard, cold

anger in his eyes. He glanced up at the Nubian, who had not dismounted.

"We also ride south," he said shortly. "It was a pity we fell behind, Eblik."

"I don't think so," Eblik observed. "It was an act of providence that your horse should go lame yesterday. Had we been trapped with the others, we'd have died also."

Raynor fingered his sword-hilt. "Perhaps not. At any rate, we'll have our chance to cross blades with these marauding dogs."

"So? I think—"

"Obey!" Raynor snapped, and vaulted to the saddle. He set spurs to the horse's flanks, galloped past the heap of bodies beneath the oak. "Here's a trail. And it leads south."

Grunting his disapproval, the Nubian followed.

"You may have been Prince of Sardopolis," he muttered, "but Sardopolis has fallen."

That was true. They were many days' journey from the kingdom where Raynor had been born, and which was no longer a home for him. Three people had fled from doomed Sardopolis—Raynor, his servant Eblik, and the girl Delphia—and in their flight they had been joined by a few other refugees.

And now the last of the latter had been slain, here in unknown country near the Sea of Shadows that lay like a shining sapphire in Imperial Gobi. When Raynor's horse had gone lame the day before, he and Eblik had fallen behind for an hour that stretched into a far longer period—and now the archers were slain and Delphia herself a captive.

The two rode swiftly; yet when night fell they were still within the great forest that had loomed above them for days. Raynor paused in a little clearing.

"We'll wait here till moonrise," he said. "It's black as the pit now."

Dismounting, the prince stretched weary muscles. Eblik followed his example. There was a brook near by, and he found water for the horses. That done, he squatted on his haunches, a grim black figure in the darkness.

"The stars are out," he said at last, in a muffled tone.

Raynor, his back against a tree-trunk, glanced up. "So they are. But it's not moonrise yet."

The Nubian went on as though he had not heard. "These are strange stars. I've never seen them look thus before."

"Eh?" The young prince stared. Against the jet curtain of night the stars glittered frostily, infinitely far away. "They look the same as always, Eblik."

But—did they? A little chill crept down Raynor's spine. Something cold and indefinitely horrible seemed to reach down from the vast abyss of the sky—a breath of the unknown that brooded over this primeval wilderness.

The same stars—yes! But why, in this strange land, were the stars dreadful?

"You're a fool, Eblik," Raynor said shortly. "See to the horses."

The Nubian shivered and stood up.

"I wish we had never come into this black land," he murmured, in an oddly subdued voice. "It is cold here—too cold for midsummer."

A low whisper came out of the dark.

"Aye, it is cold. The gaze of the Basilisk chills you."

"Who's that?" Raynor snarled. He whirled, his sword bare in his hand. Eblik crouched, great hands flexing.

Quiet laughter sounded. A shadow stepped from behind an oak trunk. A giant figure moved forward, indistinct in the gloom.

"A friend. Or at least, no enemy. Put up your blade, man. I have no quarrel with you."

"No?" Raynor growled. "Then why slink like a wolf in the dark?"

"I heard the noise of battle. I heard strange footsteps in the forest of Mirak. These called me forth."

A glimmer of wan, silvery light crept through the trees. The moon was rising. Its glow touched a great billow of white hair; shaggy, tufted eyebrows, a beard that rippled down upon the newcomer's breast. Little of the man's face could be seen. An

aquiline beak of a nose jutted out, and sombre dark eyes dwelt on Raynor. A coarse gray robe and sandals covered the frame of a giant.

"Who are you?"

"Ghiar, they call me."

"What talk is this of a—Basilisk?" Eblik asked softly.

"Few can read the stars," Ghiar said. "Yet those who can know the Dwellers in the Zodiac. Last night the sign of the Archer was eclipsed by the Fish of Ea. And this night the Basilisk is in the ascendancy." The deep voice grew deeper still; organ-powerful it rolled through the dark aisles of the forest. "Seven signs hath the Zodiac! The Sign of the Archer and the Sign of the Fish of Ea! The Sign of the Serpent and that of the Mirror! The Basilisk, and the Black Flower—and the Sign of Tammuz which may not be drawn. Seven signs—and the Basilisk rules tonight."

MEETING the brooding stare of those dark eyes, Raynor felt a nameless sense of unease.

"My business is not with the stars," half-angrily he said. "I seek men, not mirrors and serpents."

The tufted eyebrows lifted.

"Yet the stars may aid you, stranger, as they have aided me," Ghiar rumbled. "As they have told me, for example, of a captive maid in Malric's castle."

Raynor tensed. "Eh?"

"Baron Malric rules these marshes. His men captured your wench, and she is his prisoner now."

"How do you know this?" Raynor snapped.

"Does that matter? I have certain powers—powers which may aid you, if you wish."

"This is sorcery, Prince," Eblik muttered. "Best run your blade through his hairy gullet."

Raynor hesitated, as though almost minded to obey. Ghiar shrugged.

"Malric's castle is a strong one; his followers are many. You alone cannot save the girl. Let me aid you."

Raynor's laugh was hotly scornful. "You aid me, old man? How?"

"Old? Aye, I am older than you think. Yet these oaks, too, are ancient, and they are strong with age. Let me tell you a secret. Malric fears the stars. He was born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea, which serves the Sign of the Black Flower. I, too, was born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea, but to me has been given power to rule, not to serve. The baron knows my power, and in my name you may free the girl."

Eblik broke in. "What would you gain by this?"

For a moment Ghiar was silent. The cold wind ruffled his white beard and tugged at his gray robe.

"What would I gain? Perhaps vengeance. Perhaps Baron Malric is my enemy. What does that matter to you? If I give you my aid, that should be enough."

"True," Raynor said. "Though this smacks of sorcery to me. However"—he shrugged—"Shaitan knows we need help, if Malric be as strong as you say."

"Good!" Ghiar's somber eyes gleamed with satisfaction. He fumbled in his robe, brought out a small glittering object. "This amulet will be your weapon."

Raynor took the thing and scrutinized it with interest. The amulet was perhaps as large as his palm, a disc of silvery metal on which figures were graven clockwise.

Six signs the amulet bore.

An arrow and a fish; a serpent and a circle; a flower and a tiny dragon-like creature with a long tail and a row of spines on its back.

In the amulet's center was a jewel—cloudy black, with a gleaming star-point in its tenebrous heart.

"The Sign of Tammuz," whispered Ghiar. "Which may not be drawn! Yet by the star in the black opal ye may know him, Tammuz, Lord of the Zodiac!"

Raynor turned the object in his hand. On the amulet's back was a mirror-disc.

Ghiar said warningly, "Do not look too long in the steel. Through the Sign of the Mirror the power of the Basilisk is made manifest, and you may need that power. Show Malric

the talisman. Order him, in my name, to free the girl. If he obeys, well. If he refuses"—the deep voice sank to an ominous whisper—"if he refuses, turn the amulet. Let him gaze into the Sign of the Mirror!"

Ghiar's hand lifted; he pointed south. "There is your road. The moon is up. Ride south!"

Raynor grunted, turned to his horse. Silently he vaulted to the saddle and turned the steed's head into the trail. Eblik was not far behind.

Once Raynor turned to look over his shoulder. Ghiar was still standing in the clearing, his shaggy head lifted, motionless as an image.

The warlock stared up at the stars.

CHAPTER II

The Sign of the Basilisk

SO EBLIK and Prince Raynor came to the outlaw's castle, a great gray pile of stone towering above the gloomy forest. They came out of the woods and stood silent for a time, looking across a broad grassy meadow, beyond which the castle brooded like a crouching beast. Red flame of lamps and flambeaux glittered from the mullioned windows. In the gateway light glistened on armor.

"Follow!" Raynor snapped, and spurred forward.

Across the sward they fled, and before the nodding guardsman had sprung to alertness, two muscular figures were almost upon him. Bearded lips opened in a shout that died unuttered. Gleaming steel thrust through a bare throat, slipped free, stained crimson. Choking on his own blood, the guard clawed at the gate and fell slowly, face down, to lie motionless in the moonlight.

"One guard," Raynor murmured. "Baron Malric fears few enemies, it seems. Well, that will make our task the easier. Come."

They went through the flagged courtyard and entered the castle itself. A bare sentry-room of stone,

with a great oak door in the far wall—a room stacked with weapons, sword and mace and iron war-hook. Raynor hesitated, and then slipped quietly to the door. It was not barred. He pushed it gently open and peered through the crack. Eblik saw his master's figure go tense.

Raynor looked upon the castle's great hall. High-ceilinged it stretched up to oak rafters, blackened with smoke, that crisscrossed like a spider's web far above. The room itself was vast. Rich furs and rugs covered the floor; a long T-shaped table stretched almost from wall to wall. Around it, laughing and shouting in vinous mirth as they fed, were the men of Malric, his outlaw band.

Bearded men, wolf-fierce, gnawing on mutton-bones and swilling from great mugs of heady spiced liquor. At the head of the board, on an ornate throne, sat the baron himself—and he was truly a strange man to lord it over these lawless savages.

For Malric was slim and dark and smiling, with a gayly youthful face, and long hair that fell loosely about his slim shoulders. He wore a simple brown tunic, with loose, baggy sleeves, and his hands were busy twirling a gilded, filigreed chalice. He looked up as two burly outlaws entered, half dragging the slim form of a girl.

IT WAS Delphia. She still wore her dented armor, and her ebony hair, unbound, fell in ringlets about her pale face. There was beauty in that face, wild and lawless beauty, and fire and strength in the jet eyes. She straightened and glared at Malric.

"Well?" she snapped. "What new insult is this?"

"Insult?" the baron questioned, his voice calm and soft. "I intend none. Will you eat with us?" He motioned to a chair that stood vacant beside him.

"I'd sooner eat with wild dogs," Delphia declared.

And at her words a low, ominous growl rose from the outlaws. One man, a burly fellow with a cast in one eye and a white scar disfiguring his cheek, leaped up and hurried to

the girl's side. There he turned to face Malric.

"Have I given you leave to rise, Gunther?" the baron asked gently.

For answer the other growled an oath. "By Shaitan!" he snarled. "You've kept me waiting long enough, Malric. This wench is my own. I captured her, and I'll have her. If she eats with us, she sits beside me!"

"So?" Malric's voice did not change. Ironic laughter gleamed in the dark eyes. "Perhaps you grow tired of my rule, Gunther. Perhaps you wish to sit in my throne, eh?"

The outlaws watched, waiting. A hush hung over the long table. Involuntarily Raynor's hand crept to his swordhilt. He sensed death in the air.

Perhaps Gunther sensed it too. The white scar on his cheek grew livid. He roared an inarticulate oath and whipped out a great blade. Believing, he sprang at Malric. The sword screamed through the air.

The baron scarcely seemed to move, so swift was his rising. Yet suddenly he stood facing Gunther, and his slim hand dipped into his loose sleeve and came out with the light glittering on bright metal.

Swift as a snake's striking was Malric's cast. And a lean knife shot through the air and found its mark unerringly. Through eye and thin shell of bone and into soft, living brain it sped. Gunther screamed hoarsely once and his sword missed its target, digging instead into the wood of the table.

The outlaw's body bent back like a drawn bow. Gunther clawed at his face, his nails ripping away skin and flesh in a death agony.

And he fell, his mail ringing and clashing, to lie silent at Malric's feet.

The baron seated himself, sighing. Once more his fingers toyed with the gilded chalice. Seemingly he ignored the shout of approbation that thundered up from the outlaws.

But after a moment he glanced up at Delphia. He gestured, and the two guards dragged her forward.

Watching at the door, Raynor de-

cided that it was time to act. Madness, perhaps, walking into a den of armed enemies. But the prince had changed his opinion. He had developed a queer, inexplicable confidence in Ghiar's talisman. He found the disc in his belt, cupped it in his palm, and with a word to Eblik kicked open the door and stepped into the hall.

Ten steps he took before he was discovered. Ten steps, with the Arabian at his heels, great battle-ax ready.

Then the wolves saw him and sprang up, shouting.

Simultaneously Malric called an order. His voice penetrated knife-keen through the tumult, and silence fell. The baron sat motionless, a little frown between his eyes, watching the two interlopers.

"Well?" he demanded. "Who are you?" And he cast a swift glance at Delphia, whose slight start had been betraying.

"My name matters little," Raynor said. "I bring you a message from a certain Ghiar."

"Ghiar!"

A repressed whisper shuddered through the outlaws. There was fear in it, and bitter hatred.

"What is this message?" Malric demanded.

"That you free this girl."

THE baron's youthful face was bland.

"Is that all?" he asked.

Raynor was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. He had expected some other reaction—what, he did not know. But Malric's calm passivity baffled him.

The baron waited. When no answer came, he made a quick gesture. And up from the board leaped armed men, shouting, blades bared. They poured down upon Raynor and on Eblik crouching behind him, gar-goye face twisted in battle lust.

So this was what came of warlocks' promises! Raynor grinned bitterly, whipped out his sword—and remembered the talisman. What had Ghiar said?

"If he refuses, turn the amulet.

Let him gaze into the Sign of the Mirror!"

The foremost man was almost upon him as Raynor flung up his hand, the talisman cupped within it. From the mirror darted a ray of light—needle-thin, blindingly brilliant.

It struck full in the outlaw's face. It probed deep—deep!

Instantly a mask of stark, frightful horror replaced the look of savagery. The man halted, stood frozen and motionless as a statue, his eyes like those of a tortured animal.

Like a soundless whisper in Raynor's brain came the memory of Ghiar's words:

"The gaze of the Basilisk chills you. . . ."

And now from the mirror in the talisman pale bright rays were streaming, cold as white fires, unearthly as the arrows of the fabled Moon-goddess. And like arrows, too, they flamed swiftly through the air, seeking and finding their marks; and one by one Malric's men stiffened and stood frozen.

The last was the baron himself. And then the fires of the talisman died and were gone.

"Delphia!" Raynor cried. The girl was already running toward him, down the length of the hall.

"This is sorcery, Prince," Eblik said. "And it is evil!"

"It aids us, at least," Raynor flung at him, and then turned to meet the girl.

And halted—staring.

A sudden, icy chill had dropped down upon the great hall. The lamps dimmed swiftly and faded into utter darkness.

Through the midnight black Raynor heard Delphia scream. He sprang forward, cursing.

His foot struck a prostrate body. He bent, and searching fingers found a man's bearded chin.

"Delphia!" he shouted.

"Raynor!" she called and her voice seemed to fade and dwindle as though from infinite distances. "Raynor! Help me!"

The prince's sword screamed through the dark. He stumbled for-

ward blindly, seeking to penetrate the jet blackness, and quite suddenly one hand gripped hard, leathery flesh.

He heard an angry voice.

"Thou meddling fool! You dare to lift steel against the Lord of the Zodiac?"

The voice of—Ghiar! Ghiar, the warlock, come now to Malric's castle by some evil sorcery.

"Lift steel?" Raynor questioned furiously. "I'll give you a taste of it, skulking wizard!"

He thrust strongly just as Ghiar pulled free. A pain-filled screech rang out.

But Raynor had lost the wizard in the darkness, and he pushed forward hurriedly, before the oldster could escape.

"Thou fool!" Ghiar's voice whispered, cold with bitter menace. "Blind, rash fool!"

Raynor, groping in the dark, paused suddenly. A strange, greenish glow was beginning to pervade the hall. But its eerie light gave no illumination. Rather, it served only to reveal the source from which it sprang.

A gross and hideous bulk, scaled and shining, loomed above the man. It was shaped like a dragon, and Raynor suddenly remembered the symbol that he had seen on the talisman.

The Sign of the Basilisk!

Only instinct saved the prince then.

He knew, with a dreadful certainty, that to meet the dreadful gaze of the horror would mean death. And before he had time to catch but a flashing glimpse of the Basilisk, Raynor whirled, both hands lifted to his eyes. Through them, darting into the secret fortress of his mind, an icy chill had leaped suddenly—a cold beyond cold, a horror beyond life.

Four strides he took, blinded, his head throbbing with agony. Something soft and heavy caught his foot, and Raynor stumbled and crashed down upon the stones. The world went out in a blanket of merciful oblivion.

CHAPTER III

The Sign of the Black Flower

RAYNOR awoke suddenly. Sunlight was slanting down through the high oaks, and a gruff voice was cursing steadily in several outlandish dialects of Gobi. The prince realized that he was being carried on someone's back, and recognized the deep voice as Eblik's.

He wriggled free, dropped to the ground, and the Nubian turned swiftly, his ugly face twisted with delight.

"Shaitan!" he growled. "The gods be praised! So you're alive, eh?"

"Just about," Raynor said wryly. "What's happened?"

"How should I know? When the lights went out back in Malric's castle, I blundered out of the hall in the dark, and when I got back Delphia was gone and you were lying on your face with a bump as large as World-Mountain on your head. So I picked you up and headed east."

"Why east?" Raynor asked. "You have my thanks, but it might have been better to have remained in the castle. Delphia—"

"She's to the east," Eblik grunted. "At least, our best chance is to go in that direction. I picked up one of Malric's men and brought him with us. He woke up an hour ago, and I choked some information from the dog. Ghiar has a citadel in Mirak Forest, in that direction." He nodded toward the rising sun. "You were cursing the warlock in your sleep, so I guessed a little of what had happened. What now?"

"We go to Ghiar's citadel," Raynor decided. "You did well, Eblik." Swiftly he explained what had happened. "Where are our horses?"

"Shaitan knows. They took fright and ran off. It isn't far, however."

"So? Well, I'm beginning to understand now, Eblik. Ghiar used me as a cat's-paw. Though just how I still cannot understand."

Raynor pondered. No doubt Ghiar

had abducted the girl, but why had not the warlock stolen her by means of his magic, without seeking Raynor's aid? Could it be that the wizard had been unable to enter Malric's castle until someone had opened a gateway for him?

The prince had heard of such beings—creatures that could not enter a house unless they were lifted across the threshold, alien things that could never cross running water. Perhaps the amulet itself had given Ghiar power to materialize in the castle.

Reminded of the talisman, Raynor fumbled in his belt and found the disc there. He examined it with renewed curiosity. In the black jewel the star-point glowed with pale brilliance.

"Well, we go east, then," Raynor decided. "Come."

Without further words he set off at a steady, effortless lope that ate up the miles. The giant Nubian paced him easily, swinging his great ax as though in anticipation.

The oak forest stretched far and far, beyond their horizon. Overhead the sun grew hotter, pouring down its rays that would still be blasting upon Gobi when the empire would be not even a memory in the minds of men. But at last, hours later, the trees thinned and the two men found themselves at the top of a long slope that stretched down to the dark waters of a lake.

In the lake's center was an islet. And on the islet—Ghiar's citadel.

A citadel of darkness! Blacker than the nighted gulf of Abaddon was the great block of shining stone that towered up to the sky, a single, gigantic, polished oblong of jet, with neither tower nor window to break its grim monotony. No bridge spanned the lake.

The waters were steel-gray; frigid as polar seas they seemed.

On the islet, about the citadel, the ground was carpeted with darkness. The nature of this shadowy stain was a riddle; it was not stone, for now and again a long ripple would shudder across it as the wind sighed past.

The citadel lay in the shelter of a valley, and over all seemed to hang a slumbrous, eerie quiet. No sound stirred, save for the wind's occasional murmuring. And even that was oddly hushed.

Thus might sleep the fabled Elysian Fields, where the dead who have tasted Lethe wander to and fro, with a half-incurious yearning for lost delights, amid the eternal hush of the shadowland.

With a little shiver Raynor shook off the spell. He strode forward, the Nubian at his side. Eblik said nothing, but his keen barbaric senses guessed that sorcery dwelt in this valley. The black's eyes were distended; his nostrils twitched as though seeking to scent something that dwelt beyond the threshold of his realization.

As the two went down the slope a dim, unreal perfume seemed to rise and drift about them, an odor sensed rather than actually scented. And a drowsy langour made Raynor's eyes heavy.

TRULY dark magic guarded Ghiar's citadel!

They reached the lake's shore. They circled swiftly, and discovered there was no means of crossing to the islet.

"Short of building a raft," Raynor observed, "which would take too long, I see nothing to it but a swim."

"Aye," Eblik assented, readily enough, but his somber eyes dwelt on the motionless gray waters. "Yet it would be well to have our blades ready, Prince."

A dagger hung at Raynor's side; he unsheathed this and gripped it between his teeth.

Without a word he dived into the lake, came up yards away, swimming strongly.

And the water was cold—cold! Frigid beyond anything Raynor had ever known.

The dreadful chill of it lanced deep into his bones, making them grind together with the sheer pain of the unearthly cold.

Looking down, he found that the water was opaque. A uniform dull

grayness made it seem as though he was floating on clouds. What mystery might lurk in these hidden depths he could not guess; but at least nothing rose to halt his progress.

The lake was not wide; yet Raynor was curiously exhausted when at last he waded through shallows and on to dry land. Eblik was not far behind. Now, not far away, Ghiar's citadel rose blackly cryptic before them.

And at their feet were—the Black Flowers!

The ground could not be seen, so thickly they grew. A living carpet of velvety darkness they covered the islet, weirdly beautiful, with stems and leaves and soft petals all of the same glossy black.

Ever and anon a soft wind whispered past, and waves rippled across the jet sea.

SAVE for the wind, it was utterly silent.

The two men moved forward. The flowers brushed against their ankles, and a soft cloud of disturbed pollen hung like smoke in their wake. And ever the insidious perfume crept into their nostrils—stronger now, vaguely repellent, and redolent of unknown and forbidden things.

His gaze riveted on the citadel, Raynor did not at first realize that he was making little progress. Then he glanced down quickly, or tried to. But his muscles seemed to respond with unwillingness, and it was with a genuine effort that he succeeded in looking down. The black flowers seemed to be swaying toward him; around his feet the smoky darkness hung.

The dim haze fingered up, questioning!

Raynor tried to spring forward. His feet kicked up a great cloud of pollen, and it shrouded him like a pall.

He was unconscious of the fact that he had halted and was swaying to and fro, slowly.

Over his vision a dim curtain dropped.

He seemed to fall very slowly.

The black flowers leaned toward him hungrily. A velvet blossom brushed his cheek; another seemed to cup his mouth as though in dreadful simulacrum of a kiss. Raynor breathed the dark perfume of the flower's heart. . . .

Of a sudden veils were lifted, and he saw unimaginable things. A blaze of sound and light and color swirled into being. Trumpets shrilled in his ears, and he heard the thunder of high walls crumbling to ruin. Confused visions of the past came to Raynor, and he lived again, dimly as in a dream, things he remembered and things he had forgotten.

And always the strange, deadly perfume was strong in his nostrils; but he felt no urge to move. The soporific spell of the Lethean flowers held him bound in fetters of dark magic.

It was pleasant to lie here, to rest, and to remember.

Then a rough hand gripped Raynor's arm; he was lifted, and immediately fell again heavily. From an immense distance came a harsh, despairing cry.

The voice of Eblik!

The sound pierced through the mists that shrouded Prince Raynor's brain. The Nubian was in danger, had cried to his master for help. Realization of this gave the prince strength as he battled down the terrible urge to remain motionless, to sleep, and at last Raynor won. The effort left him sweating and exhausted, but abruptly the visions faded and were gone.

He looked upon Ghiar's citadel, and the haunted islet in the lake.

With a sobbing curse he staggered upright. At his feet lay the unconscious Nubian, and Raynor lifted the black to his shoulders. Then, holding his breath, he plunged forward across the dark sea, even at that moment of mad turmoil feeling an odd sense of sadness at the thought of the jet, velvety beauty he crushed underfoot.

A wind rippled the blooms; they seemed to sigh as in farewell.

The Sign of the Black Flower was conquered!

CHAPTER IV

The Sign of the Serpent

NOW GHIAR'S citadel loomed above them. Grimly enigmatic it towered there featureless, with no gate or window breaking the dull monotony of its gloomy structure. Sick and dizzy, Raynor plunged on. And, quite suddenly, he realized that he had been wrong. A portal gaped in the high wall just before him.

Had it previously escaped his searching gaze? Perhaps; it was more probable that a hidden door had slid silently aside to admit the interlopers. It was not a comforting thought, for it meant that eyes were invisibly watching Raynor—eyes of the warlock Ghiar.

Nevertheless, the prince sprang over the threshold. Instantly the portal shut behind him. With little hope Raynor turned and attempted to reopen the door, but he failed.

Even if he had succeeded, what then? His path lay into the heart of the citadel. And a dimly lighted passageway stretched slanting down before him. Smiling grimly, Raynor moved on, carrying the unconscious Eblik, who now, however, began to stir and twitch feebly.

In a moment the giant Nubian had regained his senses. With one cat-like movement he leaped free, the huge war-ax gripped in his hand. Then, seeing no enemy, he relaxed, grinning somewhat feebly at Raynor.

"We're in the citadel?" he asked. "Shaitan, there's magic in those damned flowers. Sorcery of the pit!"

"Keep your voice down," Raynor said. "Ghiar may have ways of hearing us, and watching us too. But we can't turn back now, and anyway I want to try my sword on Ghiar's ugly neck."

"I'm curious to see if necromancy will armor him against this," said Eblik, with a flash of white teeth, and the ax cleft the air in a deadly blow. The Nubian handled

the heavy weapon as though it were light as a javelin.

Warily the two continued along the corridor. The dim light came from no discernible source; it seemed to gleam faintly from the air all about them. The walls and roof and floor were of the same dark stone.

The passage dipped, widened. The two men came out on a little ledge overhanging an abyss. At their feet was a gulf, dropping straight down to a milky, luminous shining far beneath. Nor was it water that lay at the pit's bottom, though it was certainly liquid. It glowed with a wan, eerie light that reflected palely upon the black room arching above.

Here the corridor broadened into a circular cavern. A bridge spanned the abyss. It arched from the ledge's lip, straight and unbroken as Bifrost Bridge that Norsemen say reaches to Valhalla's gate. It stretched to a black wall of rock and ended beneath an arched opening in the stone.

"Our path lies there," Raynor said grimly. "Pray to your Nubian gods, Eblik!"

The prince stepped forward upon the perilous bridge.

It was narrow, terribly so. Giddy vertigo clutched at the man's brain, impelling him to look down. He fought against the dangerous impulse, kept his eyes steadily upon his goal. He felt Eblik's hand grip his shoulder, heard the Nubian gasp:

"It draws me! Guide me, Prince—I dare not keep my eyes open."

"Hold fast," Raynor said between clenched teeth. Yet he looked down. He could not help it.

Nausea clutched him. Far below, in the milky slime, dark bodies moved slowly, writhing and squirming in the dimness. What they were Raynor could not tell, but the creatures had a sickeningly human aspect, despite their ambiguous outlines. A blind deformed face stared up; a shocking muzzle gaped; but no sound came.

The things squirmed and flopped their way through the pale liquid, and Raynor knew that his hasty glance down had been an error. He felt stronger than ever the weird

compulsion that seemed to tug at him, drawing him, overbalancing him so that he swayed perilously on the giddy bridge.

With a grinding effort he looked again at the bridge's end. Through some secret reservoir of mind he drew strength and will. He stepped forward, slowly, carefully. But he could not banish the thought of the horrors that dwelt below.

Yet at last the two men reached their goal. Sweating and gasping, they stepped to solid footing. And before them the portal in the rock opened enigmatically.

"God!" Eblik groaned. "Must we cross that hell-bridge on our return? If we do return."

But Raynor had crossed the threshold, and was standing silent before the Snake.

He was in a small cave, high-roofed, dimly lit, and containing nothing but a crude throne of rock directly facing him. On the throne sat a thing that bore a vague resemblance to a man. Staring at it, Raynor was reminded of the creatures he had just seen in the abyss.

Black and hideous and deformed it towered there, a pulpy shapeless thing of darkness, less human than a crudely chiseled idol. The head was worst of all. It was flattened, snake-like, with bulging dull eyes that stared blindly. The lower part of the face was elongated into a muzzle, and the creature was entirely covered with scales.

It sat there motionless, and bound about its brow like a dreadful crown was a snake. Its flattened head was lifted as in the uraeus crown of the Pharaohs, and its wise, ancient gaze dwelt coldly upon Raynor.

He had never seen anything as lovely and as horrible as this serpent.

The scintillant colors in its body flickered, changed, fading as smoke fades from red to violet, emerald green, shining topaz, sun-yellow, all in an intricate design that also shifted and moved strangely. The blinding beauty of the snake struck through Raynor like a sword.

Its eyes held him.

Very horrible were those eyes, alien beyond all imagining. Their gaze was at first tender, almost caressing, like that of a well loved maiden. Strange magic reached out to grip the man.

The eyes of the snake probed into his soul. He felt nothing, heard nothing, saw nothing but the flood of alien sorcery pouring into his mind from the incredibly ancient eyes of the serpent.

He was unconscious of the fact that Eblik had halted behind him, motionless, paralyzed.

And those passionless bright eyes were not evil—no! They were older than evil; beyond it, above it, as a god is above human motives and ideals.

They spoke of a wisdom beyond earthly understanding.

THEY erased all else from Raynor's consciousness.

The cords that bound him to this earth, the human ties, slipped away slowly. He had not lost his memories of warm hearths, of laughing, fire-lit faces, of sword-play and of the mad high excitement of war. He remembered these things, with a distant, diamond-sharp clarity; but they had lost their significance.

They were unimportant.

They would pass, and be enveloped in the shadow of the ultimate night, and, in the end, they would not matter.

He remembered Eblik the Nubian, the pale proud face of Delphia rose up before him; but he felt no warmth of human kinship or understanding.

All these things were slipping away from him, in a clear, cold wisdom that came from beyond the stars. He envisioned man as a bit of animate clay moving for a little while upon a ball of mud and stone and water that drifted through the void, through the darkness that would finally engulf it.

So the Snake, that ancient one, gave to Raynor its vision. And the serpent uncoiled from the brow of the seated thing, and it slid down and glided across the stones to the

prince, and it coiled about his body with a chill and merciless grip. The wise, flattened head lifted, till it was on a level with the man's face. The eyes of the serpent reached into Raynor's brain, into the secret fortress of his soul, and the prince stepped back one pace.

Then another. Slowly, like an automaton, he moved back toward the abyss that gaped behind him. He passed Eblik without seeing the black. For nothing existed but the dark, alien gaze of the serpent, brooding and old—old beyond earth-life!

The pit yawned behind him. Some stirring of human consciousness gave Raynor pause. He stopped, his sluggish thoughts feebly trying to rise free from the frigid ocean that held them motionless. Dimly he heard a cry from Eblik—muffled, faint, scarcely more than a despairing groan.

And that cry again saved him. Raynor could not have saved himself, but he knew that the Nubian called to his master for aid. And the thought of that was a faint, hot flame that rose and waxed brighter and slowly burned away the chill darkness that darkened his mind.

Slowly, slowly indeed, did the prince battle his way back to life. He swayed there upon the edge of the great gulf, while the serpent watched, and Eblik, after that one moan, was silent. And at last Raynor won.

Tide of life surged through his blood. He uttered a hoarse shout, gripped the cold, muscular body of the serpent, dragged it from his body. He flung the snake from him into the abyss.

A far sighing drifted up, unearthly, distant.

With that the spell lifted. Raynor came back to consciousness, no longer bound by the dark fetters of primeval magic; he swayed and drifted away from the edge of the pit.

He gave an inarticulate cry, somehow triumphant—exulting.

For the Sign of the Serpent was vanquished!

CHAPTER V

The Sign of the Fish of Ea

A MOVEMENT caught Raynor's attention. The hideous image on the throne was moving slightly. Its misshapen black hand lifted; the muzzle gaped and shuddered. From the deformed mouth came a voice, deep as though it burst from the tongue of a corpse. Harsh, half-inarticulate, and muffled, it croaked:

"Mercy! In your mercy, slay me!"

The dull eyes looked upon Raynor. Shrinking a little in revulsion, the prince almost by instinct whipped out his sword. The monster slowly lifted its frightful head.

"Slay me! Slay me!"

"By all the gods," Raynor whispered through white lips, "what manner of being are you?"

"Once human, like you," the harsh voice groaned. "Once I ruled this citadel. Once I was a greater sorcerer than Ghiair."

A black paw beat the throne's side in agony. "Ghiair served me. I taught him the dark lore. And he turned to evil, and overthrew me, and prisoned me here. He set the Serpent to guard me. From my lips even now he learns wisdom. I serve him in ways I may not tell you. My soul roves between the stars to bring him knowledge."

Raynor forced himself to speak. "Know you aught of a girl, a captive of Ghiair's?"

"Aye! Aye! The warlock has need of a maiden once in a decade. Thus he renews his youth. Ghiair is old—death should have taken him centuries ago. But by the young blood of a maiden, and by her young soul, he drinks fresh vigor. He gains strength to work new evil. Follow this road, and you will find the girl."

Raynor made an impulsive gesture. But the horrible voice froze him in mid-stride.

"Hold! You have conquered the Snake. Yet I am still captive, still in agony you cannot imagine. Give me release, I pray you! Slay me!"

Raynor dared not look upon the hideous figure. "You seek death?"

"I should have died centuries ago. Free me now, and I shall aid you when you need aid most. Slay me!"

Raynor's lips tightened in resolution. He stepped forward, lifted his sword. As the blade swept down the monster croaked:

"Remember! The Sign of Tammuz is Lord of the Zodiac. It is the Master Sign."

Steel put a period to the words. The horror's head leaped from its shoulders; a foul-smelling ichor spurted a foot into the air. The creature toppled to lie motionless on the stones.

"Blood a' Shaitan!" Raynor muttered shakily. "I think we've walked into hell itself."

"Those be true words," said a low voice. "Once again you have saved us, master. But for what? Some worse doom, I think."

Eblik was rubbing his head, shivering. The prince gave a bark of laughter that held no mirth.

"Well, our road is open before us. And a brave man goes to meet his doom, instead of waiting for it to creep up on him. Hold fast to your ax, Eblik."

Raynor skirted the throne and entered a passage that gaped in the wall behind it. Once more the way led downward. It was a monotonous journey between dull walls of black stone.

What had the monster on the throne meant? "The Sign of Tammuz is Lord of the Zodiac." The Master Sign that could not be drawn—the sign of which the jet jewel in Ghiar's amulet was the symbol.

The passage turned and twisted, but always descended. They were far beneath ground level now, Raynor thought. His leg muscles were beginning to ache when at last the way was barred by a door of iron.

It was, however, unfastened, and moved aside at Raynor's cautious push.

He looked into a great circular room. Wan green light illuminated it dimly. The floor was of mosaic, figured in a bizarre design that cen-

tered in the Signs of the Zodiac. A golden Archer and a blue Fish; a scarlet Serpent and a black Flower; the Basilisk, all in shining green; and the disc of the Mirror in dull steel-gray.

In the exact center of the room was an immense jewel of jet set into the mosaic. A blindingly bright star-point glittered deep in the gem's heart.

It was frigidly cold. Looking up, Raynor realized why. The room was roofless. Its shaft probed up through the heart of the huge stone structure, a hollow tube that ended, far above, in a purple-black sky, shot with innumerable stars. The day had ended, and moonless night brooded over the warlock's citadel.

THE stars looked down upon the Signs of the Zodiac.

The walls were hung with curtains of white samite. They parted now, and a slim figure entered. It was Delphia. She moved slowly, her gaze staring blindly before her, the coils of midnight hair clustering about the pale, keen face. Three paces she took, and halted.

"Delphia!" Raynor called, and stepped forward. The girl did not move.

She lifted her head, gazed up at the stars. There was a queer avidity in her face, a tenseness as though she waited eagerly for something. It was utterly silent—and cold, cold.

Raynor gripped Delphia's arm, shook her roughly.

"Wake up!" he said urgently. "Are you under a spell?"

"She has enchantment on her," Eblik grunted, peering into the girl's eyes. "Let me carry her, Prince. Once we're out of this evil place she may awaken."

Raynor hesitated. Before he could speak a new voice came, softly mocking.

"Nay, let me carry the wench! I shall be gentle."

With an oath Raynor whipped around, his sword bared. Eblik's war-ax was suddenly in his hand, quivering like a falcon straining to be released. There, filling the pas-

sage by which they had entered, were a dozen men, fierce-eyed, grinning with hate and triumph—the outlaws of Mirak Forest.

At their head stood Baron Malric. His youthful face wore a gay, reckless smile, despite the fact that he was in the heart of the wizard's stronghold.

"Hold!" he whispered. "Do not move! For if you do, I shall slay you." And one slim hand slipped toward the loose velvet sleeve and the sharp knife Malric wore strapped to his forearm.

"How the devil did you get here?" Raynor snarled.

"I followed the path you opened for me. I swam the lake and crossed the field of the Black Flowers. I tracked you here through the citadel. It was not an easily won victory—no! Of all my men, these few are all that remain. Some sleep amid the Black Flowers. Others died elsewhere. But it does not matter. Ghiar was too reckless when he hired you to steal the girl from my castle. Warlock he may be, but I rule Mirak!"

"Hired me?" Raynor said slowly. "You mistake. Ghiar is my enemy, as he is yours."

MALRIC laughed softly. "Well, it does not matter whether you lie or tell truth. For you and this black shall both die here, and after I have found and slain Ghiar, I shall go back to my castle with the wench."

"After you have slain Ghiar!"

The words whispered out; the samite curtains parted, and a man stepped through. It was the warlock. The dim green light touched the great billow of white beard, the shaggy eyebrows, of the giant. The dark, somber eyes held no emotion.

"You seek me, Malric? I am here. Slay me if you can."

The baron, after a single start, stood motionless. His gaze locked in a silent, deadly duel with the cold stare of the wizard.

Abruptly, without warning, Malric moved. Too fast for eye to follow his hand dipped, came up flashing brought death. Steel flickered through the air. The keen knife

drove at Ghiar's throat—and fell blunted, ringing on the stones.

"Mortal fool," the warlock whispered. "You seek to battle the stars in their courses. Malric, I am Lord of the Zodiac. I have power over the Signs that rule men's lives."

The baron moistened his lips. His smile was crooked.

"Is this so? I know something of the Zodiac, Ghiar, and I know you do not rule all the Signs. You yourself, once spoke to me of being born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea. As was I. How can you rule your ruler—or any other Sign? Nor are you Lord of the Stars. There is a certain Sign"—Malric glanced at the great black jewel in the mosaic's center—"Aye, there is Tammuz. He is Lord of the Master Sign."

"Who can call on Tammuz?" Ghiar said coldly. "Once in a thousand years is a man born under his Sign. And only such a man may work the ultimate magic. Aye, I said to you I was born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea, but who are you that I should tell you full truth—as I do now?" The warlock frowned at Raynor. "As for you and your servant, you shall die with the others. Had you been wise, you would not have sought me here. This girl is mine; I need her life to give me renewed youth."

"D'you think I fear a wizard?" Raynor snapped, and sprang. His sword sheared down, screaming through cleft air.

And rebounded, clashing. The weapon dropped from Raynor's nerveless hand, which was paralyzed as though by a strong electric shock. Snarling an oath, the prince tensed to leap, ready to close with the warlock with bare hands.

Ghiar's peremptory gesture halted him.

"Rash fools!" the wizard whispered, a chill and dreadful menace in the sibilant words. "You shall die as no man has died for a thousand years."

His arms lifted in a strange, archaic gesture. A gesture that reached up toward the stars far above, a gesture that summoned!

Bleak and ominous came the warlock's voice.

"Your doom comes. For now I call on the Sign of the Fish of Ea!"

CHAPTER VI

The Sign of Tammuz

THE green light thickened and grew fainter. An eerie, cloudy emerald glow dropped down upon the roofless room. The figure of Ghiar was a dark shadow towering in the dimness. And the deep voice thundered out:

"Ea! Lord of Eridu and E-apsu! Dweller in the house of the watery deep! *Shar-apsi!* By the power of thy Sign I call on the Lord of that which is below, watcher of Aralu, home of the restless dead. Ea, troubler of the great waters, consort of Damkina, Damgal-nunna, rise now from the eternal abyss!"

The green darkness thickened. Raynor, straining his eyes, could see nothing. He made an effort to move, but found he could not. A weird paralysis held him helpless.

He heard a sound, faint and far away. The sound of waters. The tinkling of brooks, the rushing of mighty cataracts, the thunder of tides crashing on basalt cliffs. The noises of the great deep heralded the coming of Ea, Lord of the waters under the earth.

Nothing existed but the glowing emerald fogs. A deeper light began to grow above. The mists poured up toward it.

Thicker they grew, and thicker. They swirled into an inverted whirlpool, rushing up toward the bright green shining in the air, flooding into it, vanishing. Vanishing as though plunging into an abyss that had no bottom!

A figure swam slowly into view, stiff and rigid. One of Baron Malric's wolves. Raynor had a glimpse of a strained, agonized face, and then the man was caught up into the torrent and vanished into the emerald glow. A thin, high scream drifted faintly from afar.

There were others after that. One by one the outlaws were caught up by the tide of alien magic, drawn into the weird whirlpool, swirled into nothingness. All were gone at last save for Malric.

Now the baron came into view. His youthful face was expressionless, but in the wide eyes was a horror beyond life. The bright hair tossed as though the man floated through water.

No sound came from Malric. He drifted up—and vanished!

The tide gripped Raynor. He felt himself lifted weightless, felt himself circling, rising. The shining abyss loomed above him. Desperately he fought to escape from the necromantic spell.

Quite suddenly the green mists were blotted out. Raynor seemed to hang in a black, starless immensity. He was alone in the void of eternal night.

In the distance a white, chill light began to grow. It approached, meteor-like, and Raynor saw a round, oddly familiar object speeding toward him. Soon it hung in the void not far away, and the prince remembered the deformed monster that had sat on the throne above the abyss—the captive of the snake that he had slain. Here was the same misshapen, hideous head, with its glazed eyes and elongated muzzle, all covered with glittering scales.

The Thing spoke.

"My promise, Prince Raynor. You gave me release. And I promised aid when you should need it most. I bring that aid now."

"The amulet," said the monstrous disembodied head.

Abruptly Raynor remembered the talisman Ghiar had given him in Mirak forest, the disc that bore the Signs of the Zodiac on its surface. He did not seem to move, yet the amulet was in his hand, and lifted high. It had changed. The Signs were erased, all but the black jewel in its center. Within the gem the star-point pulsed and waned with supernal brilliance.

"Tammuz is Lord of the Zodiac," the hideous muzzle croaked. "His

magic is above magic. He is master of truth. Through him you may cast away the fetters of glamour and sorcery. Once in a thousand years is a man born under this Sign, and only such a man may call on Tammuz. I am that man! I was born under the Master Sign! Ghiar lies—he boasts of that which he is not! And now, to keep my promise and to aid you, I summon the Lord of the Zodiac. I summon—*Tammuz!*”

Forthwith the black jewel blazed with an icy, incredible light, starkly pitiless and blindingly bright; and the fantastic vision snapped out and vanished. The talisman was snatched from Raynor's hand. He felt firm stone beneath his feet; a cold wind blew on his sweating face.

Once more he was in Ghiar's citadel. He stood in the roofless room of the Zodiac. But no longer was it filled with the green mists.

DELPHIA and Eblik stood motionless; near them towered the warlock. Of Malric and his wolves there was no trace.

Ghiar's beard fluttered in the frigid blast. His deep eyes were hate-filled. And, with a queer, strange certainty, Raynor knew that by the Sign and the power of the real Tammuz, all magic had been stripped from the wizard.

No longer master of dark sorcery, Ghiar was human, vulnerable!

Raynor's shout was madly exultant as he sprang. The armor of invulnerability had been torn from Ghiar. But inhuman strength still surged in the giant frame. Huge muscles rolled under the coarse robe.

Ghiar swept out his arm in a bone-crushing blow. The shock of it made Raynor reel. Shaking his head blindly, he reeled in and closed with the warlock.

The two men crashed down on the stones. Ghiar fell uppermost; his fingers stabbed down at Raynor's eyes. The prince rolled his head aside, and the warlock bellowed with pain as his hand smashed against rock. Abruptly Ghiar thrust himself away, and his mighty body dropped upon Raynor with an impact that drove

the breath from the smaller man's lungs.

Weakly the prince drove a blow at the wizard's face. Blood spurted, staining the white beard. Roaring, Ghiar's hands fastened on Raynor's throat. They tightened remorselessly.

The prince rolled aside; he caught Ghiar's body between his legs, locking his feet together. Breath spewed from the warlock's lips in a foul gust. Ghiar bared his teeth in a murderous grin. And his fingers tightened—tightened.

A hot, throbbing agony was in Raynor's skull. He could not breathe. Knifelike pain thrust into his spine. A little more pressure, and his backbone would crack.

Sheer blind madness swept down on the prince then. Like a flood of red waters it poured through him, sweeping away all else but an insane lust to kill—and swiftly.

Raynor's thigh muscles bulged, holding Ghiar's body in a vise between them. The grinding strain of that frightful effort made sweat burst out on the prince's face; yet he knew that this was the crucial time. It was kill or be slain.

Bones cracked and gave sickeningly. There was a sudden softness in the wizard's body. Ghiar gave a frightful, howling shriek that seemed to burst up from the depths of his lungs. Blood spewed from the gaping mouth, frothed over the white beard, fell on Raynor.

The mighty hands released their grip on the prince's throat. Ghiar sprang up in one last convulsive effort. Dying, he thrust up his arms to the cold stars and screamed like a beast.

And he fell, as a tree falls, smashing down on the stones. He lay inert. From him blood crept darkly across the mosaic, touching and then covering the Sign of the Fish of Ea, the Sign under which Ghiar had been born and had ruled.

The warlock was dead.

Consciousness left Raynor then. Merciful darkness blanketed him. Nor did he recover until he felt water poured between his lips, felt a cool,

Gripping his war-ax, he hurried after Delphia and Raynor. And, presently, the three of them were swallowed by the cool, dim aisles of the vast forest.

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THE CURSE OF THE CROCODILE

(Continued from page 103)

lated appearance of scales, and the bowed head, hidden in shadow, seemed oddly malformed and inhuman. The arms were grotesquely bowed, pointing outward at the elbow like the limbs of the monsters beside the pool.

"K-Koreing!" Cummins called hoarsely, forcing the word through parched lips.

There was no answer, no sound save for the shuffling of the crocodiles as they moved to and fro in restless impatience.

CUMMINS plunged through the mud and gained the bank. He snatched the child and ran for the tree. But he had reckoned without the beast-man.

Koreing—if Koreing it was—snarled savagely and struck at Cummins. His teeth clicked together audibly. The loose dirt on the bank gave way.

Perhaps it was this that saved Cummins. Koreing was momentarily distracted. The fallen earth formed a slope up which the crocodiles could climb, and the monsters moved forward swiftly. Hampered by the child, Cummins almost lost his balance; he flung himself forward desperately. From the corner of his eye he saw the deadly circle closing in. Something stirred in the outspread branches above his head, and a naked arm shot down.

"Massa, me catchum!"

Twalo! Cummins did not hesitate. He thrust the little black body upward, grunting with relief as Twalo clutched the child.

"Massa, you go 'way one time."

Good advice, but not easy of accomplishment. All around Cummins horny bodies were twisting and squirming; huge snouts nuzzled at his legs as the horrible creatures slithered back and forth uneasily. The thing that had once been Koreing had retreated to the edge of the mangroves. Cummins shuddered as he noted the lusterless eyes, now

glazed and bestial and inhuman. Whatever slight veneer of civilization had clung to the man up to this moment had vanished completely. Koreing was back in the dim past—a past that reached into a period long before the first ape-man left the trees to battle the lesser beasts for supremacy.

Dripping with sweat, his breath rasping hoarsely in his throat, Cummins stepped back involuntarily. His leg rasped against an armored hide; something swished through the air, and he was flung headlong into the bushes. Darkness took him.

"Massa, you fit walk?"

Twalo was bending over him. The moon had disappeared; a gray mist was creeping up from the river, sure precursor of dawn. Cummins raised his stiff body from the ground, groaned as a blinding ache shot through his head.

"The picanin and—and Koreing?" he gasped.

Twalo gestured toward a nearby bush. "Picanin sleep," he said, and hesitated. "Massa Koreing, he live for die Banga, long time."

"Banga? The village where he got the fetish—what fool talk this, Twalo? You no see dem palaver under tree?"

The native shook his head stubbornly.

"No see palaver, on'y *jambuka*. Me no lie. You go lookum self."

Cummins complied. The clearing was deserted. Beast and man had gone. Nothing remained save a broken bottle and the tracks of many crocodiles. Nothing—save for two narrow furrows close together that ran across the bank and disappeared into the pool. Cummins glanced up quickly, his face white beneath the tan, and Twalo met his eyes.

"*Jambuka* pullem dem—dem meat under water," he mumbled. "Croc eat croc."

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THE BLACK ARTS

(Continued from page 11)



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on July first, in an urn—which was another meaning of the native word spoken by Hadja Lachbo, the word Jerry Mack had interpreted as "vessel!" Hadja had "seen" the urn.

Coincidence? Ask those in Singapore who know and believe. They will tell you that Hadja Lachbo has many such coincidences to his credit. Why did he bare the nerves of that native maiden? Perhaps for the same reason that "Alias" Jimmy Valentine used to sandpaper his fingertips so his nerves could sense the combination of the safe he was trying to open by a super-sensitive touch. Had Hadja Lachbo sensed the combination of the supernatural by touching the raw nerves of the native girl in a moment of death? Who knows?

Beyond Western Philosophy

TIBET—1938. An American explorer was seated in a circle of Lamas. They were conjuring up devils who would tell them of the future. Did the American scoff? No—there was something going on before his eyes far beyond the philosophy of western man.

A screech that reached the soul of the American echoed weirdly. A nude woman suddenly appeared within the circle. Where had she come from?

She wasn't really nude. A flimsy substance surrounded her body. She seemed to be encased in a sort of thin mist, and she quivered like a smoke cloud. Her face revealed an expression of agony like one in the torments of hell. The mist slowly thickened until all within the circle were enveloped in this haze of unearthly origin.

The American could no longer see, but he could hear the voice of the chief Lama. For a moment the American had the impression that his eyes were closed—but he knew they were open. But where was he? Before him he saw the harbor of Shanghai. The city was on fire. Bombs were bursting in the air. Women and children were dying in the street.

Then suddenly the vision cleared. He was sitting in the circle of the Lamas. The air was clear—the Lamas' heads were bowed. Silence—except for the whistle of a bird overhead. The seance was over.

The American was cautioned not to return to America by way of Shanghai. He didn't. Two days out on the sea for home, he learned of the bombing of Shanghai. He was glad he was far away. Death had waited in that city for him, he was sure. The Lamas had saved him because he had always loved and respected Tibet and the magic of that strange land.

Mystic Serpents

BOMBAY, INDIA—1938. An American tourist had heard about an Indian fakir who looked into the future. The American,

a business man, was anxious to find out about a certain investment. Should he sell his stock in Corporation X? As a lark he attended a seance.

At first he shuddered. There were several cobras loose on the floor near the Hindu. But they did not leave the corner of the room. The American sat at the far side of the room. He wanted to be away from the snakes, near the door in case something happened. But the Hindu was confident.

"Nothing can hurt you but your own fear," said the mystic. "Snakes look beyond the body—they see the mind."

With that, one of the snakes rose, its beady eyes gazing at the American. Then it relaxed and crawled into a black box behind the Hindu. The mystic took the box, closed the trap door and set the box, about the size of a camera, on the table before him. He placed his hands on the box and began a chant that sounded to the American like a lullaby.

Minutes passed. The Hindu looked up. "Sell all," he said, "or within six weeks you will have naught. A wolf in sheep's clothing will soon be exposed."

But John was stubborn. No Hindu mystic would tell him what to do about his business investments.

In Suez a few days later, he left the boat to see the sights. As though some one was leading him, he entered a side street. Suddenly he stopped. There in a window to his right was a cobra, sleeping. As he looked at the snake, the cobra rose up and looked into the American's eyes. The man in the store tried to coax the American inside to witness an entertainment of the "performing cobra."

"The snake likes you," said the man. "He is sorry for you."

A Warning Heeded

That was enough for the American tourist. He went back to the boat, told his wife what had happened—and then radioed his stock broker to sell all his stock in Corporation X.

Three weeks later, in London, he learned that the head of Corporation X had committed suicide—and the corporation was in bad straits. The stock which the American tourist had sold on the advice of a snake was of that Corporation!

"Nothing but a hunch," our skeptics say. But John W. L.—who resides in New York City, smiles. For through a friend in Bombay he has since learned that this same Hindu fakir, eight years ago, told the then Prince of Wales that he would never be crowned King of England. Very lucky guessing?

A Strange Healer

PORT SAID—1932. The famous cameraman, Charles C. Miller, explorer of Dutch New Guiana, was on his way to America. He visited Port Said for several

(Continued on page 128)

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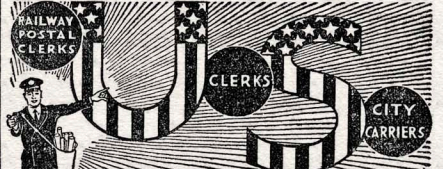
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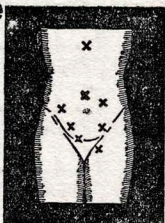
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(Continued from page 127)

days. In his hotel he was taken ill. The doctor could find nothing wrong. A native employee of the hotel advised Miller to see a certain mystic in the city whose herbs could cure everything. Miller visited this man. Before Miller could speak, the mystic handed him a piece of root, with instructions to chew it. Miller chewed. His nausea left him at once. He was completely cured.

Miller insisted that the mystic tell his fortune. The old man consented. Miller always carried his camera, so he had it ready at the time. The mystic sat at a table in front of a crystal ball. When the mystic's head was bowed, his eyes gazing at the crystal, Miller snapped a picture. The mystic trembled, then collapsed. In a moment he revived and in anger ordered Miller from the place. Miller left, glad to get away safely from the angry native.

The Strange Aura

Later Charles Miller discovered that the negative of that photograph was able to catch a faint trace of a strange aura around the old man. And in the mistlike background was the face of a woman—a woman he did not know at that time—who became his wife in Java, three years later when she sailed from New York on the same boat with him!

Many people have seen that negative, but recently when Miller tried to locate it in his trunk the negative had disappeared. But Mr. Miller will tell many more strange experiences of prophecy and premonition in his forthcoming book, *Cannibal Caravan*. Let the skeptics try to pick that book apart.

—LUCIFER.

LETTERS FROM READERS

THE letters keep rolling in, and we keep devouring them. Our appetite for both praise and criticism is as keen as ever. Here are some excerpts from a few of the hundreds of missives recently received:

I like the stories for this issue. They impress me as being better than the tales for the preceding issues. Dr. Keller's tale, *THE TOAD GOD*, made me feel at home, since all the districts of Philadelphia mentioned in the story are more or less familiar to me. Derleth gives us a nice short weird tale with a pleasant angle to it. I should say the best story for this issue would be Norman A. Daniels' story, *THE MAN WHO WAS DEATH*. That was really a humdinger. That's the type of story I like a lot; I could go for more from Daniels. Wellman, too, gives us an interesting yarn in *FOR FEAR OF LITTLE MEN*. And there are two of the short stories that impressed me more favorably than some of the others—*CHAMELEON EYES*, and *THE SEAL OF THE SATYR*.

The cover for this issue is less horrible than the preceding two covers. I am afraid it would be too much to ask for a Finlay or a Morey cover. The results would be artistic covers, and that seems to be what you don't want. If you wish to feel

BEST FUN, FICTION AND FOTOS IN

proud of your "non-horror air," why not go a bit further and eliminate those lurid covers?—John V. Balladonis, Philadelphia.

High praise indeed from so severe a critic as Mr. Baltadonis. We hope some day to receive an undeserved bravo from this constant reader.

Here's a comment from a fan of one of our companion magazines, **THRILLING MYSTERY**.

I have been reading your companion magazine, **THRILLING MYSTERY**, since its inception almost four years ago. I enjoy the stories in this magazine, although there have been some pretty foul ones from time to time. I was gratified to see your **STRANGE STORIES** appear on the market, and have read with appreciation the swell first three issues. Now I have a suggestion to make.

Some of the stories in **THRILLING MYSTERY** by authors like Carl Jacobi, Richard Tooker, John Russell Fearn, etc., have been supernatural or eerie—whatever you call it—and to my mind they not only could fit into **STRANGE STORIES**, but would be particularly welcome additions. No doubt there are thousands of readers who haven't read these yarns, and it seems to me that you would be doing them a favor if you republished one of these tested first-rate shorts in each issue of **STRANGE STORIES**. How about it?—Daniel Forrest, Jr., Union City, New Jersey.

Well, how about it, readers? If there is a sufficient demand for any of these yarns, we'll take it up with ourselves and see what we can do about it. And now a little weird experience from a disciple of the Black Arts:

I read your Black Arts with interest. I never did believe in ghosts and still don't, but I'm puzzled over the following happening:

About ten years ago I had the auto-racing craze. I did not have the money to purchase a racing car, but since I am a machinist and a good mechanic, built my own racing car. This car was about 300-horse power and would make a good 125 miles per hour. Now in the center of the floor I placed a long emergency brake.

One night I was driving from Bridgeport to Danbury to enter a race in the Danbury Fair. The night was stormy and you could not see very far out the windshield. I had a spotlight which I shone on the edge of the road. By keeping an eye on the edge of the road I could make fifty miles an hour.

All of a sudden the car, with a terrible tire screeching, came to a stop. The car came to such a sudden stop it smashed me against the steering wheel and for a minute knocked me cold. I thought I'd hit something. I got out and went to look in front of the car. Not three feet in front of that car was a drop of about fifteen feet. The rainy weather had washed away the bridge.

Now, who pulled the emergency brake? I didn't. Can you tell me who did? I never told this to my family or any one. I hate to have them think I'm silly.—J. A. Baucher, Bridgeport, Conn.

We couldn't tell you who pulled that emergency brake. It may have been some fortunate coincidence that loosened it so that it was driven back. Or it may have been due to some Guardian Angel who didn't believe your time was up!

Now for an interesting "first" letter:

This is the first letter I've ever written to any magazine. Sorry it has to have some criticism.

Taking **STRANGE STORIES** as a whole I think it's a very interesting magazine, just hitting the spot. I have a few criticisms to make about **DEATH HAS FIVE GUESSES**, by Robert Bloch, in your second issue. The story would have been all right if I hadn't read one almost identical in a science fiction mag **MASTER OF TELEPATHY**, by Eando Binder. It seems as though either one

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had taken the ideas from the other's works. I'm familiar with Binder, like his work a lot. Haven't noticed much of Bloch. How about skipping those telepathy stories—they're getting stale.—Edna Leithman.

We asked Mr. Binder to read Mr. Bloch's story, and he suggested that no doubt any coincidence was due to the fact that **both** had tapped the same source—a very obvious possibility—Prof. Rhine's famed experiments at Duke University.

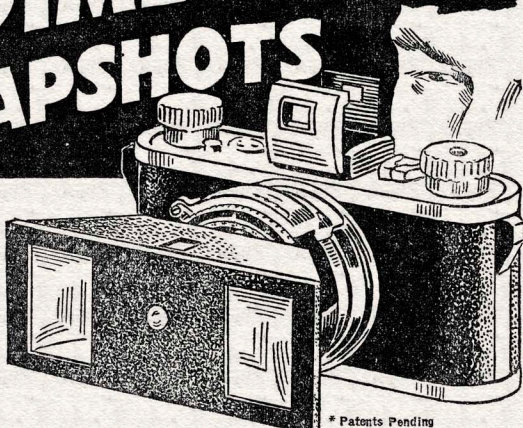
And so we close. Remember to send us your comments on this issue.

—THE EDITOR.

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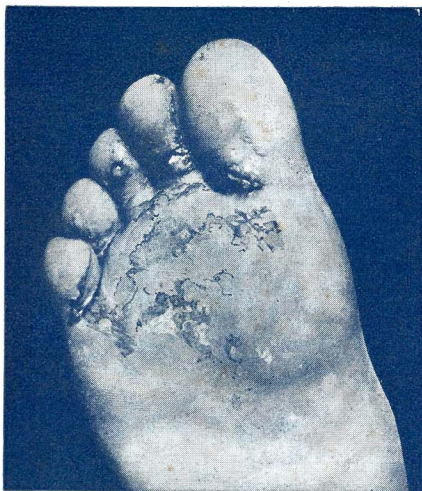
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BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

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Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

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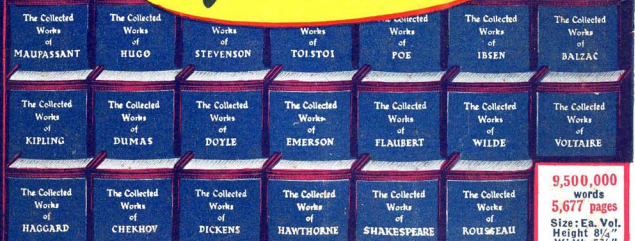
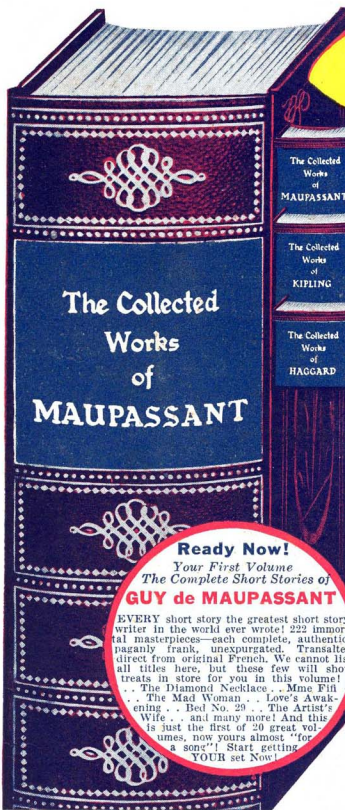
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