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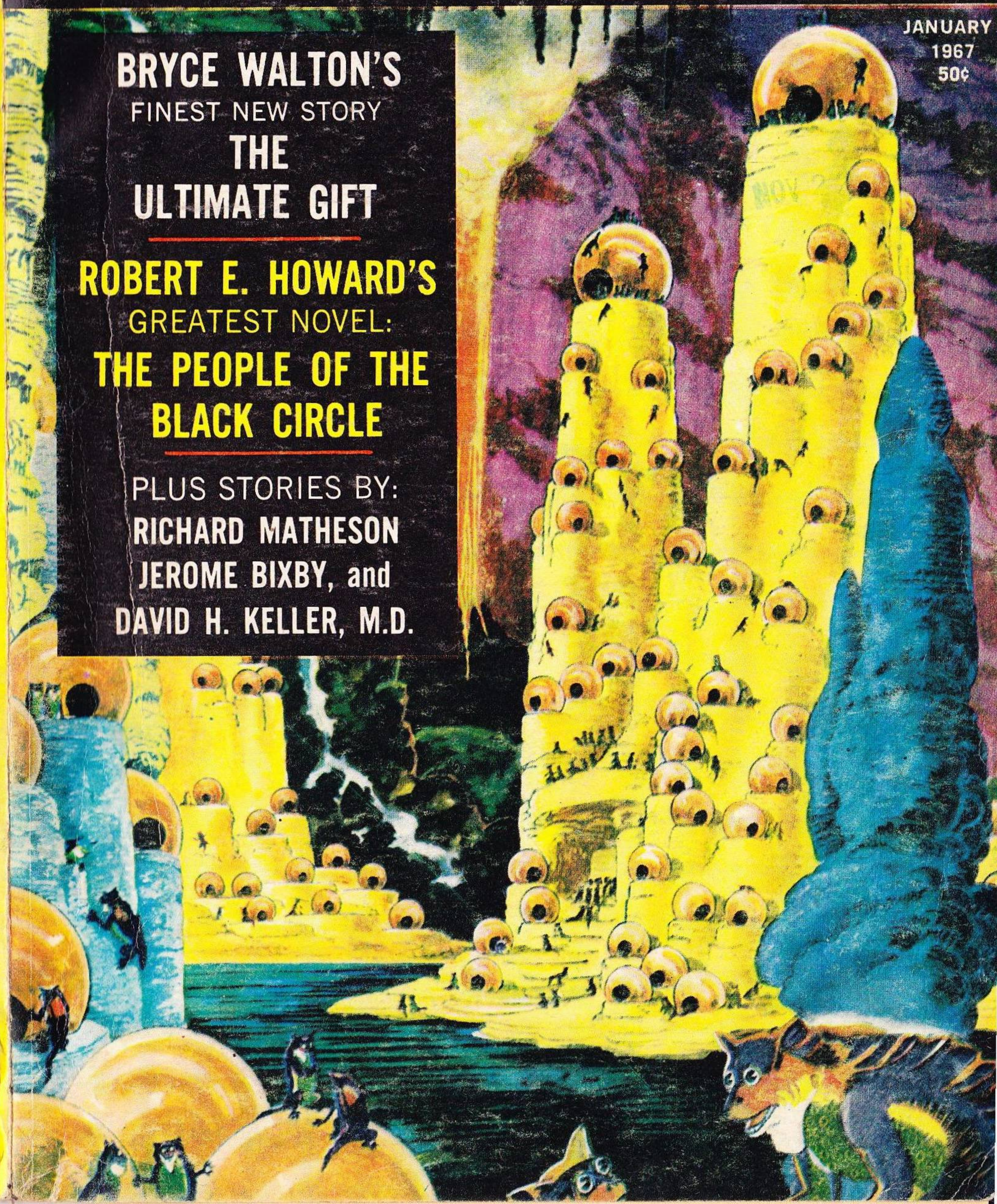
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"A CITY ON NEPTUNE"

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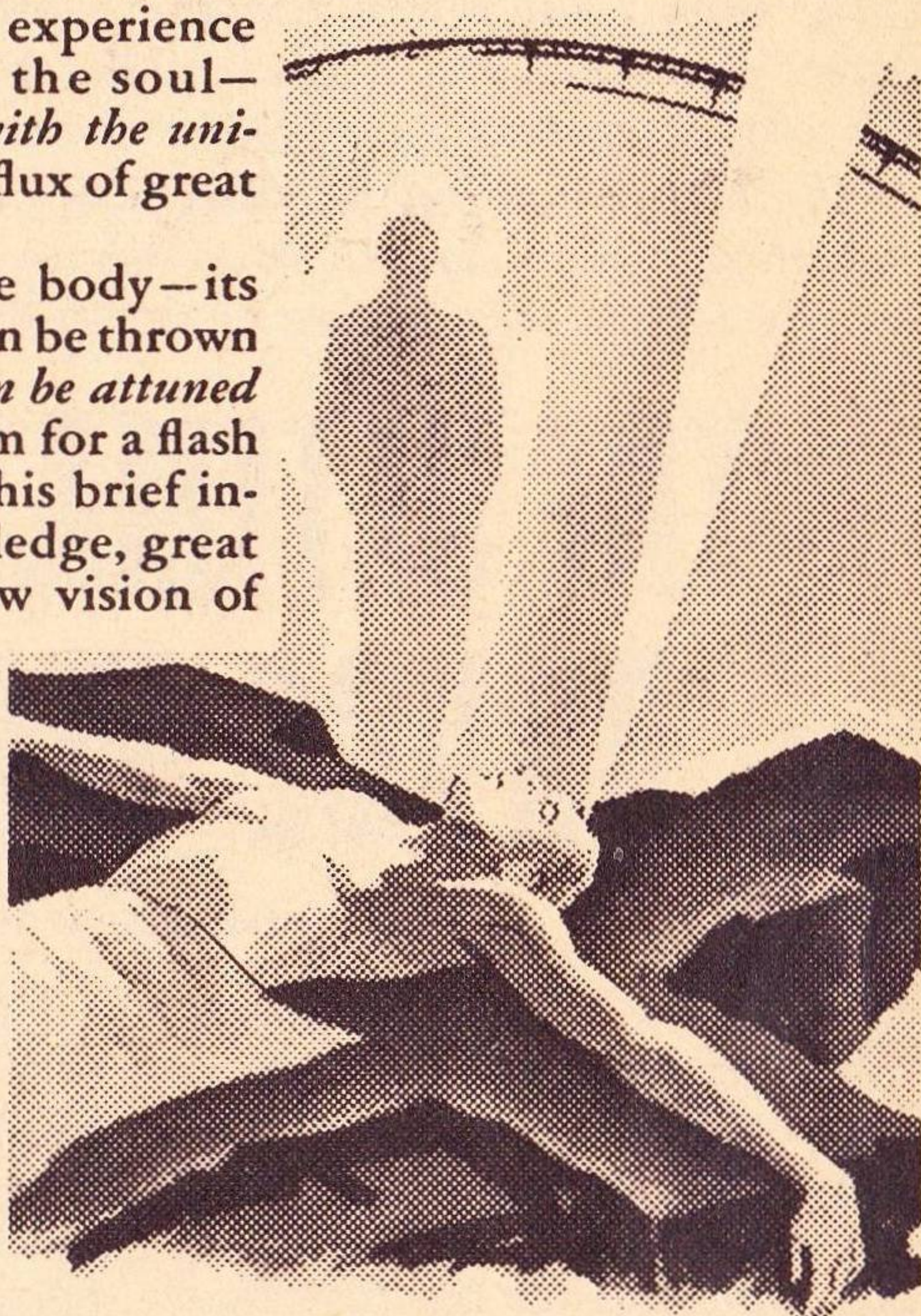
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Back in 1952 when we first read Limbo—Bernard Wolfe's terrifying preview, among other things, of prosthetics gone mad—we thought that the author had said just about the last word on the subject. Now we can see that we should have dropped the cliché long ago because in a field as far out as this one, no theme receives its "final" treatment for very long. Not when stories as fertile as Bryce Walton's latest can take one aspect of the Wolfe theme, fuse it with an old favorite—the extraterrestrial threat—and come out with a spellbinding predicament. Earth doomed—unless a sideshow freak agrees to a lesson in alien protocol—to be conducted on the far side of the moon!

THE ULTIMATE GIFT

BRYCE WALTON

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

SECURITY gave its unusual and most difficult personal relations jobs to a quiet, cool, medium man named Merrik. But the stakes could never again be this high and for the first time in a long career of assignments, Merrik was nervous.

The *Museum of Unnatural History* was in a converted factory building. Cheap medieval-pop decor, low lighting, a damp plaster smell. Merrik folded his raincoat neatly over his left arm. His plain face was pleasantly expressionless as he asked to see George Hillaby.

The usher, a hunchback in a black hood who carried a plastic headsman's axe, said, "Little ole Basket Man? Yeah. Exhibit Five, Gallery of Teratisms. Lives right in back of his showcase so he can just open a door and roll in home to his booby-trapped womb."

Merrik passed other exhibits labeled: *Centipede Woman* and *The Seal Boy*. He didn't look. A fleeting expression of disgust curled his mouth. But he had to glance in through a view glass at the Basket Man, just as a gong sounded the closing of the Gallery and a curtain covered the glass.

Merrik shook his head slowly. He felt a quiet nauseous anger and wondered if this whole business was anything more than a crazy delusion created by desperation. This vulgarity was supposed to be of some possible benefit to the world—this defect deliberately flaunting itself, leering at normalcy like a Medieval abuse—

Door number five in a dim rear hallway resembled old wood, but Merrik knocked on steel. A panel slid open and a one-way oval of frosted glass watched him.

"Who're you, whattaya want?" A full, flat meanly normal baritone crackled through a speaker in the door.

"I'm from United Nations Central Security," Merrik said, humbly. "I'd like a few words with you, Hillaby."

A thin sneering laugh of disbelief. "Get out of here!"

Merrik held his card up to the frosted eye. Then Hillaby's voice was thinner, a bit worried. "So I can have a dozen official looking cards printed up before dinner. Get lost, snoop."

"Phone number's on the card," I said. "Check your directory. Better verify me, Hillaby. This is no gag."

Merrik waited while Hillaby called. Then, "Hey now, what could UNCS want with *me*?"

"It'll take a little time to explain," Merrik said.

"Can you talk money?"

THE ULTIMATE GIFT



Merrik grinned thinly, and pushed a thick check against the frosted eye. "From World Bank, Hillaby. Made out to you. You fill in the amount later when you decide what your services are worth."

Hillaby produced scarcely a definable sound, something between a grunt and a belch. Then he said quickly, "Come in, come in Gordon. Come *in!*"

The door clicked open automatically. One small visitor's chair occupied the center of the room. The rest was a mess of electronic gadgets, conveyor belts, mechanical arms and rollers and dials and grids.

"Drop that case!" Hillaby yelled in alarm from his basket tilted on top of a wheeled table. "Drop that case!"

Merrik calmly put the leather case on the floor by the chair. "Slide projector," he said. "And small tape recorder. You hear, see what you buy."

"Okay," Hillaby warned insolently. "But just sit in the chair. No messing around. I might be about as dangerous as a caterpillar outside, but in here it's different." His eyes blinked code at the walls. Several gun barrels slid out and kept pointing at Merrik as he eased into the chair. Sweat had appeared along his upper lip.

Hillaby's pink little carp mouth

quivered with defensive irritability. "Don't waste time pretending I'm pleasant company. You just go on and talk business. I don't care what you think. What do you drink?"

Merrik told him. Hillaby blinked code at a drink-mixer. It buzzed. A conveyor brought Scotch and soda to Merrik's chair. "Be with you in two minutes, Gordon. Then we better talk fast turkey."

As he blinked amazing incandescent eyes around, highly sensitized cells reacted. An ingenious system of servomechanisms, relays and robotic gimmicks went to work. Hillaby's basket tilted and its wheeled table darted back. Hillaby was picked up, rolled, maneuvered and manipulated around the room like a fat dignified sausage being packaged in an automated factory. He ignored his automata the way royalty might the administrations of servants. He was taken from his basket, whisked through cleansing and depilatory sprays, wrapped in a disposable towel, gently deposited on a small circular platform that held him upright inside a delicate silver railing. His little ionocraft maneuvered by ionic emission. It moved at any desired speed, in any direction including straight up and down. It could also hover motionless at any height and was controlled by Hillaby shifting his weight balance. Hillaby

went through this exhibit with an air of martyred irony mixed with pride in his gadgeted independence.

But to Merrik it seemed more than ever an absurd outrage. This was too much. Thirty inches long, round pink hairless head connected with hardly a neck to a larger round pink hairless belly ball. Four faint nubs where arms and legs had never been. He resembled one of those dried gourds that bulge at top and bottom because of a restricting band kept around them as they grow. Or rather like a doll, Merrik thought, that someone never finished. Was he alive or merely wound up?

Then Merrik began to respect Hillaby's eyes and forget the rest of him. They were the most alive, the most curious and compassionate, the most terribly sensitive and frightening eyes Merrik had ever seen. And he controlled his precarious closed system of an environment with those eyes. They were everything, protection, arms, legs, will and way.

A plastic tube shot from the drink-mixer into Hillaby's carp mouth. His ionocraft hovered, quivered like a hummingbird at a flower.

Then Merrik, in his calm and terribly convincing way, gave the facts to Hillaby straight, while showing him slides of an alien

race's ship on the far side of the Moon.

The Rishch. From Alpha Centauri. The trouble wasn't in convincing Hillaby, but in his being too eager to believe the worst. "These aliens are enemies and superior to us?" he said, excitedly. "They'll pop this lousy earth like a bowl of jello?"

Merrik frowned and said that was an eminent possibility. The Rishch was an intelligent, technologically space-traveling race with an added talent of excelling the speed of light. They had taken over a number of intelligent and semi-intelligent races across the Galaxy from their homeworld. They had sophisticated nuclear weapons, were many times our number with a long history of experience in space travel and had warships waiting in space to strike faster than the speed of light. "If they decide to hit us," Merrik added, "we won't have a chance."

"What'll they do?" Hillaby asked eagerly.

"Decimate a few billion. The remainder will serve as slaves in another Galactic colony and maybe as a source of high protein powder."

Hillaby glared in arrogant silence a while, then said, "So what?"

Yes, Merrik thought wearily, so what. What could all this possibly have to do with the miser-

able Basket Man? Merrik wondered. All of Security wondered. Murdock had claimed to know the answer. But Murdock was dead. Murdered by the Rishch for fatal error in protocol . . .

When Security had learned from intercepting Rishch radio messages that they were on the Moon's far side, it sent up two manned probes. Before the men were killed they managed to plant tiny powerful relay transmitters small as magnetic dust particles that rose from the bodies of the murdered Earthmen and clung to the Rishch. Security learned about the Rishch from these transmitters and by monitoring their radio messages to and from their home world. Experts in alien contact and interpretation, men trained for years in theoretical anticipation of contact with non-human races, worked themselves into collapse analyzing symbols, brainwave patterns, images and references. The Rishch language was decoded. They were contacted. Attempts at face-to-face communications were made.

But Security was stumped by abstract social ritual. The sort of thing that frustrates even inter-human understanding proved even more alienating between humans and the Rishch whose historical basis of civilization was drastically different from earth's.

Ancient social customs can make emotional sense to one group, be incomprehensible nonsense to another. Any culture, including Earth's, has these systems of primitive taboos elaborated to fit complexities of technological civilization. They're not measurable by logical standards. They're subjective, and block what diplomacy calls "primary atmosphere of accommodation." Mutual cultural acceptance is required before the parties can have face-to-face talk across a conference table. Security had to have this face-to-face talk fast. Or it was Armageddon.

"So why haven't they knocked us off already?" Hillaby asked.

Merrik, still calmly intense, explained that Earth had the most sophisticated race the Rishch had ever run into. They knew Earth had harnessed nuclear energy, had atomic weapons, but had no idea what Earth's destructive or delivery potentialities were. Just as important—what was Earth's degree of aggressiveness? How willing were the creatures of Earth to fight and die for a cause? In other words, the Rishch were cautious, didn't want to pay too high a price for what was, after all, only one little world among countless easier patsy worlds clustering the Galaxy like ripe grapes. No use losing a lot of ships and sacred Rishch personnel just for one little world.

And Security couldn't arrange a demonstration of Earth's power, not before preliminary accommodation rituals. The sudden movement and appearance of space missiles might be assumed by the Rishch to be a threat or the opening of hostilities. Security wanted friendly, or at least mutually accommodating talk. So did the Rishch. Negotiations were set up with the Rishch. Two envoys were sent to the Moon. But they were stopped dead by Rishch rituals of protocol. Both were murdered.

An example, Merrik said, could be found in our own culture. The Arab desert kingdoms. A recent UN visitor to an Arab court was killed for ignorance of ritual, for offering deadly insult to the host. He died without even knowing the nature of his error. Many visitors have been murdered for unknowingly insulting their host. Among rigid honor codes is this one—an insult, even an unintentional insult—must be repaid by murder. It was the code of Homer's Greeks, and the Vikings.

Also the Rishch. Our two envoys, Merrik said, offered some unindurable insult to their Rishch host and were killed. "We don't even know what that error was."

Hillaby had hardly taken his mouth from the straw. His eyes had been getting mean and small. But not puzzled. Hillaby proved to be intelligent, well informed.

He understood Merrik. He had even read of the probabilities of other inhabited worlds, was familiar with the likelihood of alien contact reports. And he respected the reputation of UNCS and Merrik as its agent. He believed what Merrik said. But how did he fit into it? That was the incredible part to Hillaby, to everyone concerned.

"Why?" he gave a defensive growl. "Why *me*?"

Merrik hesitated, but then said it, "Security seems to think there's a chance that you can get through to the Rishch."

Hillaby's ionocraft wavered and sank to the floor like a crippled fly. "What?" he whispered.

Merrik repeated it uneasily. He'd been living with it and it made no sense to him either.

Hillaby's face reddened. He shouted angrily. "Me? You getting sick kicks or something? I never leave this pad. My showcase is built right into it. I go back and forth on a wheeled table through an automatic door and the glass is bullet-proof. I move my act anywhere, my pad goes too, like a portable fishtank. I don't want any part of out there, brother. Out there without my little electronic helpers, I'm as helpless, more helpless than a baby or the first amoeba that ever was gobbled on this cannibal Earth! Some guy in

your front office is bugged. Go away."

"I have convincing evidence," Merrik said.

The ionocraft teetered nervously. "Anyway, why in hell should I help this stinking world, even if I could?" Hillaby's face was pale with emotion, but he sneered craftily. "Why do you call them aliens?"

"They're not like us."

Hillaby laughed sarcastically. "Like you you mean. So I'm an alien, always been an alien. You asking me to turn traitor?"

"That's stupid," Merrik said softly.

"Don't get personal, you lousy stooge."

"It's a stupid argument," Merrik said. "For better or worse, Hillaby, you're an Earthling, born of Earth parents. No matter how much you claim to resent it, you're human too. You have to admit it no matter how much you pretend to look like something else. It's your own masochistic self-pitying vindictive choice, Hillaby, lying in that ridiculous crib being ogled by perverts for pay. You don't *have* to be a Basket Man. Artificial and graft limbs are available gratis at any Federal or World Hospital, have been for years."

Hillaby quivered with rage. "By the time I was told enough to realize my rights," he shrilled, "figured out how to get arms and

legs tacked on, I hated them. I'd had my belly full of so-called biped normalcy, brother." His face was wet and pale. "I lay helpless for years, couldn't protect myself, even from an itch or a crawling fly let alone the worse things people did. Used, handled, couldn't do anything. I died ten thousand times, like when that mean broad tried to tickle me to death, had me alone—" He couldn't go on. He started to sweat and Merrik really felt sorry for him.

"You can throw away the crying-towel," Merrik said coolly. "Forget humanity, the world, civilization, Hillaby. But drop the self-pity and think of yourself in more realistic terms. You may feel alien. But the Rishch won't treat you like a brother. You'll go like the rest of us. There may be ways of being handled you haven't known yet."

Hillaby's ionocraft floated unsteadily to the window. He looked out through gray wet glass at thin autumn rain. Then he floated down to the floor a few feet in front of Merrik.

"Okay," he whispered. "But why—why *me*?"

Merrik prepared Hillaby for the tape. Told him of remarkable recent developments in interpreting, transmitting, receiving and associating the electrical activities that accompany the working of the brain. Tiny transistors

were planted under the skulls of the two envoys, with hair-thin wires reaching into certain brain areas, linked electronically with receivers in Security HQ on Earth.

Right up to the moment the envoys were killed they were relaying to Earth everything that was happening—except why they were killed. The nature of the error bringing quick violent death came with such shocking and stunning emphasis that the brain-wave transmissions had turned into short-circuited gibberish. But just as the second envoy died, his brain waves did register some intelligible, if puzzling, thoughts. Those thoughts were recorded. Thought waves translated into electronic speech. It was indeed a ghost voice.

Merrik started the tape. Hillaby stared at the tape, listened to the eery atonal speech like a curious frightened lemur.

"... only one chance now ... one chance ... Hillaby ... Basket Man ... freakshow ... but must look normal ... must have electronic limbs ... important ... vital ... like us ... Basket Man ... Hillaby ..."

After Merrik switched off the tape, Hillaby kept staring in stunned silence. Finally he whispered anxiously. "Who was that? How'd he know about me? Why'd he say a thing like that?"

"He was our second envoy,"

Merrik said. "Our most respected legal advisor and diplomatic legman. He was your legal advisor once, Hillaby, and friend. His name was Murdock."

"Murdock." Hillaby said it so softly that Merrik was scared. And then he heard Hillaby sniffing. Tears came out of his eyes and made his insolent defensive sneer look like a soggy mask.

"Your defense counsel," Merrik said. "Fifteen years ago when an anachronism called the Citizen's Purifying Committee had you arrested on a public obscenity charge. James Allen Murdock. He was with our UN legal staff for twelve years."

Hillaby turned. A machine dabbed at his wet face with a disposable towel. "He won my case. But he came back to see me often. He drank with me. We talked and drank all night. He was—my—friend." After another long silence, he said, "Why did he think of me?"

"We don't know," Merrik said. "Will you help us try to find out?"

Hillaby's eyes were like wild things wanting to escape from a cage. But he nodded jerkily like a puppet trying to act on his own. God knows what courage it's taking, Merrik thought, for him to even consider leaving the security of his pad.

"Your room, gadgets, all of it goes with you of course," Mer-

rik said. "Just like when you move your act." Merrik felt that he was sounding a little soft for Hillaby's taste, so he changed his tone. "You're not signing anything, buddy. You can come back anytime and lie in your little crib."

"Don't be so damn cute," Hillaby shouted.

"It's up to you," Merrik said. "Trust us just as we have to trust Murdock's last words without the faintest idea why. Sometimes a determination to believe is all there is."

"Well, thus spake Gordon," sneered Hillaby. "Okay, but it better make more sense fast, or I cut out."

Merrik called Security HQ. While waiting for a truck and crew to dismantle and load Hillaby's portable pad, he blinked code at his mixer. By the time the pad was ready to be loaded, Hillaby already was. He screamed directions at the workmen, backed up by some kind of vicious looking rifle that projected from the base of his ionocraft. The craft darted and dipped at the uneasy workmen like an angry hornet. Then after fighting it, fear oozing from his big eyes, Hillaby passed out. Merrik had to carry his ionocraft out to the limousine. He woke up once as they rode crosstown through the park and night mist. His eyes were black with terror for a mo-

ment and he opened his mouth in what looked like a silent scream. Then he recognized Merrik and scowled with fierce resentful relief. Merrik scowled back. "Go back to sleep and shut up," he said to Hillaby. "Don't attract attention. You're outside now. Save it for Halloween."

"Real cute aren't you, Gordon," Hillaby snarled, but went back to sleep.

The Rishch agreed dubiously to receive one more envoy on the Moon. They waited, restlessly.

Hillaby's portable pad was reassembled in an observation room just off the Examination Center and laboratories. All the tests were run on him, but it shredded the staff's weary patience. Hillaby surely remained the most irascible, quick-tempered and suspicious subject in the annals of testing.

Then the Director, Dr. Otto Stein, called Merrik into his office. Security's own International Science Observatories had discovered the Rishch, and Security had voted to withhold all knowledge of the Rishch presence from the world until it did all it could to set up mutual accommodation talks. Sovereign state governments could do nothing but turn the problem over to the military. Security could do that if and when less destructive measures failed. So Dr. Stein's was a

lonely and dreadful responsible. It showed on his strong face now hanging flabby and gray with fatigue. Dedicated idealism had turned to a tragi-comic clown's mask. He looked up at Merrik, they looked at one another in shy silence a while, self-consciously. They might have been fellow conspirators in a shameful betrayal. For who could honestly believe that Hillaby was—well, anything but a wretched, self-perpetuating defect? All due respect to Murdock, but he had surely gone raving mad with pain and shock, spoken nonsense but in his usual logical manner. Security seemed to be reduced to a club dedicated to the mutual support of desperate delusion. Hillaby was a magic amulet being tossed into a lethal wishing-well.

"We can't find anything significantly different about Hillaby," Stein said sadly. "No arms or legs, with resultant personality twists. That's it. Suppose he has some kind of ESP?"

"I doubt it," Merrik said. "Murdock would have mentioned it before I guess. Hillaby says its hogwash."

"Probably is," Stein said. "Well, nothing for it but prepare him for the Moon. How is he?"

"Incensed as ever," Merrik said. "Can't stand people around, touching. Anxiety keeps him

continuously loaded with rye.

"Will he ever trust us at all?"

"I think he does now," Merrik said. "But unconsciously he's always in a terror of helpless dependency. It's stamped on his autonomic nervous system. His life must be an autistic nightmare. He wants you, in any case, to get this show on the road."

Stein grunted. "We shall. Don't think the Rishch will give us more than seven days, Gordon. Get limbs on him. He's got to use them well enough to get in, and perhaps out of the Rishch ship—with radio-controlled help. Yours, Gordon. You'll have to be with him. I wouldn't go so far as to say Hillaby likes you, but he finds you tolerable, the only one he can really accept. Anyway we must have someone else up there besides the shuttle pilot. Few of us have your agile Protean talents, Gordon."

Merrik grinned wryly. "Thanks. But my talents don't include outer space. I turn green even on an intercontinental jet."

Stein shrugged, waved Merrik out. He had to stick with Hillaby now and all the way, help alleviate anxiety, help get him ready for the Moon shuttle in seven days.

At first Hillaby had insisted that it all be done in his pad. He finally gave in to being trun-

dled off to surgery. He managed it by drinking until he passed out and having Merrik always with him. "Sure," Merrik said, "if I let you out of my sight I'd stop believing in you."

Then Hillaby went into sedation and stopped caring, at least on the outside where anyone could see. Merrik could only guess at the awfulness of those hidden inner traumatic hours when Hillaby often sobbed and screamed out of drugged sleep and abysses of nightmare.

As with the two preceding envoys, a tiny microdevice was planted under Hillaby's skull, with hair-thin wires reaching into certain areas of his brain where transistors could send, receive and would be linked electronically with receivers in Security HQ and with Merrik on the rocket shuttle. Tiny wires connected Hillaby's brain and electronic limbs. Each arm and leg attachment was a separately mechanized unit. All were powered by the body's own electrical output. Electronic limbs of Fleshine, nearly indistinguishable in appearance and feel from human flesh. Carefully fitted, fixed to body stump contours by cellular magnetism process called Vitacamp. Only other connections being those hair-thin wires leading into associative neural areas and to the brain. Each limb then a separate autonomous mechanism with its own hookup of

resistors, condensers, transistors, and minute mercury batteries. Coordinative control of these limbs was usually mastered by a patient in an amazingly short time. Continued practice with rhythmic electrical stimulation resulted in remarkably smooth bodily movement, with tiny dials planted in the skin for the adjusting of frequency and pacing emission.

Back in his pad from surgery, Hillaby insisted that Merrik be the only one to see him struggle up and learn to walk at the age of forty-three. It wasn't a pleasant sight for Merrik. But in any case he had to assist Hillaby's learning by remote control use of what a lab technician had dubbed the Devil Doll. A small electronic transistor model of Hillaby, tuned to precise scale. Whatever Merrik, behind a screen looking through a peephole, made the Devil Doll do, Hillaby's limbs had to do in proportionate scale movement. Hillaby objected furiously to this idea of remote control. Gradually he surrendered to the humiliation when he learned it speeded up his learning to walk and use his arms.

Merrik never told him the truth—that through the Devil Doll, his control over Hillaby's limbs was stronger than Hillaby's. It became a subtle, mutual deceptive thing. Hillaby didn't realize that movement he thought his own was really Merrik's. Mer-

rik soon realized that he was never quite sure how much of Hillaby's movements were autonomous, or due to Merrik's manipulating the Devil Doll. For he was always careful only to follow through on Hillaby's initiated actions. This was an inevitable mystification, for the efficient use of these, or genuine limbs, depends on their use becoming unconscious.

Hillaby's learning had to overcome special handicaps. Ordinarily, a Devil Doll isn't required after the patient has picked up some autonomic control. But Hillaby was no ordinary defect grateful and overjoyed at the prospect of having limbs. Hillaby had no such advantageous motive. Hillaby hated his limbs. He loathed them. He lurched, lunged, staggered, toppled, disentangled himself, got up, kept going. He sweated, snarled, screamed and cursed his arms and legs. He cussed them out, drove them unmercifully as if they were apathetic slaves. When an arm didn't carry through a desired movement, he glared at it, spat at it, heaped obscene abuse on it. Merrik, from behind the screen, would then subtly move the Devil Doll. Hillaby's arm would move. Hillaby would laugh in vicious triumph as if he had conquered. Somehow he did achieve a remarkable degree of control, considering his attitude. But it was

the hostile armed truce relationship of an animal trainer in a cage of resentful but obedient beasts.

But his coordination never developed past a point comparable to that of a man afflicted with paralysis agitans, a late life disease characterized by tremor of the muscles, delays of voluntary movement, and muscular contraction, causing peculiar position of limbs and head. It was decided that Hillaby would be worked over accordingly by makeup artists. Soon Hillaby resembled a man of eighty, considerably the worse for wear. Or as Dr. Stein put it wryly, "We're sending our most distinguished, venerable diplomat."

When not practicing with his hated limbs, memorizing Rishch speech and protocol ritual, or getting drunk, Hillaby remained taciturn, brooding, and secretively frightened. But despite how much he needed whiskey to dull his terror, he forced himself to slack off. He gained some relief by constantly cussing out his limbs. He hated his arms the most. They made possible, "those horrible hands and fingers, those damn fingers that handle and pick and paw and maul and—twist people around—"

"Console yourself with the fact you won't have to wear them long," Merrik said. "Soon as we get back to Earth, you can shuck those vile appendages, and go

back to burbling for pay in your little crib."

Hillaby glared silently out of his old man's twisted face.

"But if you don't get through that poison protocol," Merrik said, "you won't be coming back. You'll just have to die with your legs on."

Hillaby tried not to laugh. He choked and laughed anyway, fitfully until his arms and legs went out of control and he fell on the floor like an expiring toy. Merrik jumped behind the screen and manipulated the tanist Doll until Hillaby got up and flopped cursing on the couch, his face wet, pale and irate. "Let's move now," he said flatly, uncompromisingly. "I won't wait any longer. I'm as ready now as I'll ever be for—whatever it is."

Everone was ready. Hillaby had learned by hypnopaedic disks basic Rishch language. He had learned all the protocol up to the fatal moment.

It was arranged this time with the Rishch that an attendant would accompany the last envoy. They were most agreeable, seemed surprised that the two preceding envoys hadn't had personal attendants, or slaves. Every important Rishch had a personal slave.

The firing of the rocket shuttle from the United Nations Space Research Foundation was secretive, of course, and there was no fan-

fare at all, even on the part of the staff. Hillaby didn't want to say goodbye to anyone. The staff was too depressed about the whole thing to care. They assumed their stations to await communication from the rocket shuttle. A faint feeling lingered that Murdock's last words might have had some validity and hopeful meaning. Anyway, there was no alternative.

After the rocket shuttle was free of acceleration pressure, the silence was uncanny, contrasted with the rocket blasts. It only emphasized the faint creaking of the shuttle's metal walls, as Merrik opened his eyes and saw, first, the stolid practical face of the pilot, Gil, already straightened up in his bucket seat checking controls, the ignition circuit.

Merrik looked at Hillaby, still out flat in his reclined pneumatic bucket seat. His eyes looked directly at Merrik, but they seemed glazed, fixed on nothing in particular. Merrik knew he had stood the lab acceleration rig tests well enough. Then he knew. And he felt a deadly oyster-like twitch in his stomach.

Hillaby's left arm. The immense force of acceleration had torn loose the Vitaclamp cell locks and hair-thin neural connecting wires. The arm floated just above Gil's head. When Gil raised up, his head bumped the arm sending it up to bob against the bulkhead.

Gil recoiled in disgust. He didn't trust Hillaby anyway.

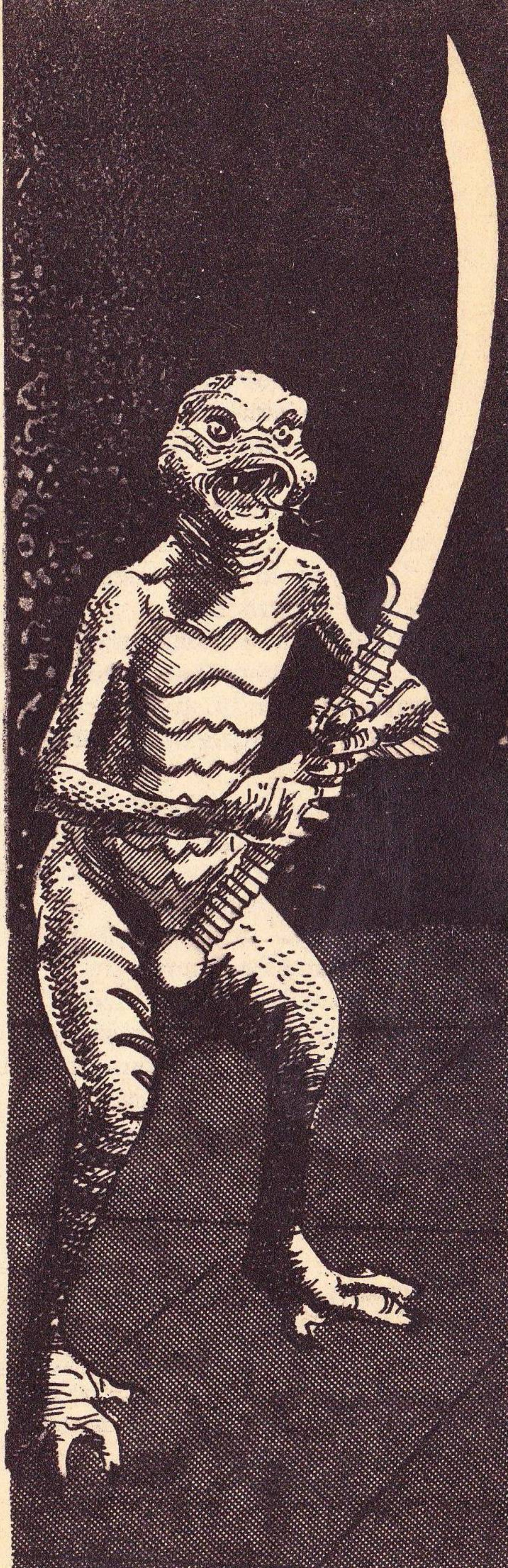
"Contact staff," Merrik said. Then he rummaged a first-aid kit from the locker. The nub on Hillaby's left shoulder was discolored, as if bruised. A thread of blood unwound from where the hair-thin wires had ripped out. Merrik wiped the blood off, sprayed on antiseptic and sealer spray, got another jacket on him. The empty sleeve floated, and the other arm and two legs seemed as limp as squids.

"That must have hurt like blazes," Merrik whispered.

Hillaby's only answer was a scoffing laugh and a demand for rye whiskey. Merrik rummaged a plastic tube of rye from the closet-sized galley, held it near Hillaby's right arm. "Here's your bottle, baby," he said, waiting to see if Hillaby could move that arm. Hillaby grunted and glared and cursed until the arm jumped up and grabbed the tube. Then he leaned back, sighed, and sipped rye while a pink flush shone through his old-man makeup. By then Gil was through to Security Staff via Security's own private little relay satellite. "Project Basket," he said shakily. Then Merrik took the speaker. "Emergency, Doctor Stein. Rigors of acceleration—detached the upper left artificial."

There was a too long pause, then a sour chuckle that was

THE ULTIMATE GIFT



unlike Stein. But alternations of hope and despair are hard on anyone's nervous system. Even Merrik felt a dizziness and might have fallen had there been any direction in which to fall. Then Stein said. "The others work?"

"The arm does. He's busy using it now—hoisting."

"Remind him that tube stuff's a hundred and twenty proof," Stein said. "What about legs?"

Hillaby grinned around his rye tube.

"How about a little leg-work, champ?" Merrik said.

Hillaby glared and cursed his legs. They alternately raised and flexed obediently at the knees.

"He's still firing on all three," I said.

"We can't possibly abandon or stall this meeting now," Stein said. Merrik looked at Hillaby and Gil. They shrugged.

"Of course not," Merrik said. "We'll limp along somehow."

"Good show. Cut in the TW transmitters soon as face-to-face contact is made. He sounded as inebriated as Hillaby looked.

"You'll hear from us," Merrik said. "Stand by."

They were then 4000 miles from Earth. 248,000 from the Moon.

They took tranquilizers. Later Merrik woke up and looked through the periscope at deep space. His first look at it. For every star he had been able to

see before, he now saw thousands. Earth was lovely with snow and cloud, but mostly sea as the Pacific turned up a glimpse of the Hawaiian Islands through silvery haze, then New Guinea broke out in darker clots. Then Merrik sensed the still abyss of space without end, and he felt that desperate need for warm Earth that you only find in space, and looked away from the scope.

"Want a look, junior," he asked Hillaby. "That green Earth is quite a picture."

Hillaby growled, "Looking at it from up here doesn't make it look any better."

"The Rishch will make it look a lot worse, jasper."

"Will it?" Hillaby said, and sucked at the tube again.

"What side you on, finko?" asked Gil.

Hillaby gurgled around his tube. Then silent brooding tension mounted as the rocket shuttle sped Moonward faster than a bullet. Hillaby finished the rye and conked off as Merrik watched him tolerantly and Gil with disgust. Then as they neared the Moon, Gil—making sure Hillaby was still out—advanced ingenious, slightly paranoid theories about him. Maybe Hillaby was really a Rishch in disguise, planted on Earth long ago to sell us all out. Merrik admitted even that theory was better than none, but what about proof?

"And he puts away more hootch than any human could take," Gil said. "The Rishch must have some special chemical tolerance to booze and can put it away like water and—"

So forth. Merrik listened to other theories until Hillaby woke up, his big sensitive lemur eyes not bitter or incensed now, but thoughtful.

"What do they look like, Gordon?" he asked, seriously. "Maybe Security figures the Rishch will buy me because I sort of look like them."

Merrik shook his head. "Sorry. No Basket Rishch. Nary a one, jocko. Matter of fact, they look something like us—I mean me. Little shorter. All of them are filthy bipeds with arms. Long pliable arms, too, like double jointed humans. With more fingers than we have—"

"Shut up!" Hillaby said. "You make me sick." He paused, thinking. "Maybe it's my ability to take pain."

Merrik looked at his watch and nodded as if he were really interested. It was good to have Hillaby filling up his time with thoughts and feelings rather than hootch. "Yeah, jocko. What about you being able to take pain?"

"When that arm was ripped out, I hardly felt it." His face was pale. "I have what they call a very high pain threshold. It was tested. An unconscious ability to

shut pain off, they said, pain messages don't reach my brain much."

He closed his eyes. His voice lowered almost to a whisper. "The woman who bore me was alone, abandoned in back country bush. She kept me, didn't turn me in, out of some possessive love even most Mothers wouldn't dig. Maybe she was crazy, but she bore me alone, no witnesses and kept me a secret . . ."

Merrik listened to what he already knew as the rocket whispered through blackness. For the first 16 years of his life he lay completely helpless, armless, legless, a lump, a victim of anyone's or anything's whim. And he had not had a voice either for those years. When he was picked up by professional freak-exhibitors he made money. He started developing gadgets so he could be independent of all human hands. The first thing he got was an electronic voice box. Merrik knew this, but he listened as though he didn't. Hillaby had never told anyone about it before. That was the important thing, not the thing told about. The point was—you lie absolutely helpless, defenseless, without arms or legs or voice, year after year, you either die, or go mad, or learn to ignore pain. The worst of all his horrors in the beginning had been pain silently endured, never communicable. Unable to move, to

cry out to express his needs, or his pain in any way. Crying out in pain is some relief. Hillaby had none, never could make known his suffering needs—if anyone had cared. He had tried to speak with his eyes.

"So maybe that's it, Gordon. My ability to take pain—if it is, then I wonder what they do to you?"

The Rishch contacted Gil. The orbit was set and the point of rendezvous with the Rishch ship.

The fearful beauty of the scene through the periscope stunned Merrik as they cut down across the Moon's night, or Farside. Day's crescent shrank. The Moonscape dwindled to a line of blazing fire as the Sun's disk dropped toward the horizon. Earthlight was brilliant, then lunar nightland darkness filled Merrik's vision. They were on Farside where suddenly no Sun or Earthlight shone and the pitted Moonscape below was so black it burned his eyes. He turned back into the cabin. He could smell the sweat and fear in it. He asked if Hillaby wanted to see the Moon or the Rishch ship down there.

"No," Hillaby said. "All I want is to see the Rishch mogul and have our little Farside chat."

"You're sure a card," Merrik said, and laughed.

Hillaby grinned back. Gil said, "We're coming in." The vernier

rockets exploded. Gil said hoarsely, "We've got their beam." No sound then, dropping into Farside blackness, but a faint creaking of strained metal. A sickening jolt, finally, a metallic grinding of locking airlocks that seemed to sand the inside of the skull. Absolutely silent then, and nothing moved but for a faint fluttering of Hillaby's false beard.

"Airlocks fusing," Gil said. "Okay, we're hooked up."

"Open it," Merrik said as he grabbed up the leather case of gifts and the tiny Devil Doll. The airlock's inner door opened. Hillaby walked awkwardly into the lock and Merrik followed. The two of them could barely squeeze into the small lock. Then the outer door slid open. They looked into the much larger airlock of the Rishch ship. This fusing was possible of course because of similar air mixtures, but Rishch air had a bad smell—damp and "musty like a den of snakes."

A small Rishch slave darted into the inner lock opening, bowed, then blinked slowly like a frog and a black tongue flicked out two feet before recoiling into its hard glistening lips.

Hillaby's mouth moved soundlessly a while before quivering words tumbled out somehow. "An Earthling with his attendant slave dare enter into the presence of the Lord Iynomu."

"Lord Iynomu waits," the slave

said, then leapt about in midair, and one snake arm pressed a wall button. He shouted at the door before it slid open. "Open, Sons of Kish. Make way for the Kodar from Earth whom the Lord Iynomu in his wisdom has granted the supreme favor of hospitality!"

Hillaby followed the slithering Rishch. Merrik followed at a humble slave's distance—ready with the Devil Doll in case Hillaby's legs faltered. They did falter at the second door and Merrik gave them a boost. Then they were in a kind of feasting hall, lit by a hanging patch of hard white light that made an island in the blackness. There were other smaller islands—the golden cold flat eyes of a dozen Rishch seated in a rectangle.

As the Earthlings advanced, Lord Iynomu and the others wriggled up and stood naked except for small dull scales. Lord Iynomu's rubbery arms gestured. Two slave attendants scurried forward, guided Hillaby to a cushioned seat beside Iynomu. Merrik moved back to crouch along a far bulkhead with other Rishch slaves standing at attention. As Lord Iynomu gave orders for the others to sit down, Merrik carefully helped Hillaby down by fingering the tiny Devil Doll. No one paid him any attention. No slave merited any attention until he was summoned. As Iynomu ges-

tured again, other attendants came forward with bottles, glasses, gifts. Then Merrik noticed that Iynomu's right arm was about half the length of his left, and a lighter shade of green.

The twelve Rishch all looked silently at Hillaby a while with what Merrik realized were lizard's eyes. The silence was long and absolute, and Merrik began to sweat. The protocol ritual began, and in about five minutes the fatal moment would be here. All he could do was wait.

The exchanging of gifts proceeded. "Magnificent, Lord Iynomu," Hillaby said, haughtily. "Your hospitality is peerless."

"A gift measures true respect for another, Earthling. May mighty Kadah prosper you beyond the Universe."

"Mighty Kadah be with you," Hillaby said.

"And with you," Lord Iynomu said.

"Will you," Hillaby said, "accept this small token of Earth's measureless respect?"

"My eyes are blinded, Earthling, by this treasure. I accept it fearful of being able to repay such respect. Blessed be Kadah."

"Blessed be Kadah," Hillaby said.

Iynomu gestured. A slave twisted forward carrying a cage with a strange creature pulsing

inside. "Will you accept this Hish-Khrin, Earthling? It is considered the most valuable non-Rishch thing among the five worlds of Vormach."

Hillaby put the cage with the other gifts. "I accept, Oh far-dreaming Iynomu," Hillaby said. "In so doing, I hope you will accept in return, as a small measure of a measureless respect, this ancient statuette. The most ancient and valued of all Earth artifacts, considered to be beyond price."

Merrik, shivering in the darkness by the wall, still had to admire Hillaby. He seemed to have become unconscious of anything but his role, which he portrayed with the skill and conviction of a true artist. He was scornful, serious, deflating, filled with lurking derision, cool, lofty, always with that faintly superior smile.

But the time was near. Merrik's mouth was dry. Sweat ran into his eyes. He was trembling.

"I accept," said Lord Iynomu. "But how can I possibly return so much respect, Earthling? I fear I shall drown in the great tides of your boundless respect."

"May Kadah in his wisdom," Hillaby said, "grant you the gift of ultimate respect."

Iynomu stood up. All eyes went to him. A long tension wound tightly and long through the room. Hillaby's eyes rolled toward Merrik and he slowly licked his lips.

"I must," said Lord Iynomu, "pay the ultimate respect due you."

This Merrik remembered, was the line.

"The supreme gift, Earthling. The gift of self."

There was a blur of movement. Then Merrik realized that Iynomu had fallen on his belly and that two slaves had, at a hissed command, torn off his right leg. It writhed on the floor like a beheaded snake. For a moment, in a flash from the overhead patch of light, Merrik saw that the limb had broken off so cleanly it appeared to have been cut with a knife. Only a few drops of pinkish body fluid appeared at the raw broken ends. Iynomu was sitting up, and a slave was handing the detached leg to Hillaby.

Merrik's mouth was dry. He took several deep breaths but couldn't seem to get enough oxygen. A kind of horror knotted his whole stomach as he realized what Murdock had known just before he stopped knowing anything. And he knew what he and Hillaby were supposed to do but Merrik didn't think he could do it. He didn't think that he or Hillaby or anyone else could—no matter how much of a painless freak he was.

Maybe Hillaby didn't think so either. Hillaby seemed paralyzed. He stared, his mouth opening

and closing wordlessly, as two slaves advanced toward him with curved blades raised to chop him to pieces. This was the moment of shock and horror that had turned the brain waves of the two preceding envoys to crazed gibberish. They had known that the ultimate gift according to the Rishch was one they were physically incapable of repaying.

But then Hillaby found his voice. Still sounding cool and lofty, he called to Merrik. And somehow Merrik managed to stumble over there. He whispered hoarsely, "You want to go ahead?"

"Get the damn thing off me," Hillaby said. "Before these skinks slit our throats. Get it off me!"

Merrik got a grip on Hillaby's left leg, closed his eyes and pulled. He turned away, gagging, as the leg came free and he felt the tearing of those tiny wires twanging in his head like snapping cables. Dimly, he heard a hissing chorus of appreciation and respect rise from the entire rectangle of royal Rishch. Then Iynomu promptly lay down and had his other leg torn away, and presented it to Hillaby.

"Again, slave," Hillaby said with a scornful grin still on his mouth, but his voice trembled. "This lizard wants an arm and a leg."

"But my God—" Merrik half-sobbed.

"Better hurry," Hillaby said. "The long knives are coming."

Merrik scarcely remembered pulling off Hillaby's other leg, then his right arm, hearing the hissing chorus of rising respect, and the faint whining that came from Hillaby.

Merrik remembered seeing Iynomu and Hillaby sitting facing one another, both armless and legless. They respected one another. According to some ancient Rishch ritual, they had given ultimately of themselves, Merrik thought vaguely. Each had rendered himself helpless before a potential enemy. So it was over, done with, Merrik thought. Hillaby had done it. Now to get him out of here before future top-level negotiations, all set now, were fouled up.

He heard a hissing scream of agony. The bright patch of light seemed to swell and contract and bob like a balloon. The other golden lights of Rishch eyes receded and rushed forward wildly. A whirling darkness drowned the twisting lights. Merrik had never fainted before. He had no idea what was happening to him as he fell down and back into darkness. He only knew what he saw as the dark came down and shut it out so he didn't have to see anymore. A slave, at Iynomu's command, savagely slashed out with a clawed hand and dug out his left eye.

"No," Merrik tried to yell, but there was no sound anywhere. Then there was nothing to see but the dark with those pulsing lights blinking out one by one.

He probably was not unconscious more than a minute. When he opened his eyes, he felt an icy calm, and knew that, in any case, it was too late to do anything about it. Hillaby had ordered one of the Rishch slaves to do what his own attendant was unable to do. Now blood smeared the front of Hillaby's face and his torso was toppling helplessly over to the floor.

Merrik caught him and lifted him. He stood there and looked at the Rishch and at Lord Iynomu whose torso remained upright, supported by two slaves, and whose single eye stared back at Merrik without blinking like the beam of a flashlight.

"I speak on behalf of my master, the Kadah of Earth," Merrik said. "My Kodar requests that, having paid to you the full and ultimate gift of self, he be allowed to take his gifts of self back to Earth."

"A strange request," said Iynomu. "Explain, slave."

"We Earthlings do not re-grow limbs as fast as you Rishch. Our ancient belief is that these members in the hands of others, even those of our own race, may be used to harm by dark spell the main body from which they are

detached. An old superstition, but important to our race."

"That is understood," said Iynomu.

"My Master Kodar of Earth requests the return of his three limbs, now that the ultimate gesture of trust and faith has been made, that they may be taken to Earth to be locked safely away there in the Temple of Sacred Limbs, while our Kodar, my master, grows new and even mightier limbs."

"This request is happily granted," said Iynomu. "The ultimate gift of self has been fearlessly made by your Kodar master. May blessed Kadah of the Universe be with him always."

"And with you," whispered Hillaby as Merrik scooped up the three artificial limbs under his other arm and backed out of the room of the Rishch rectangle. He hurried back through the locks into the rocket shuttle and told Gil to blast the hell off home. He had taken a chance, but he had known those artificials couldn't be left behind and later examined by the Rishch and found to be mechanical. Then as the rocket headed Earthward, he gave Hillaby the best first-aid he knew how to give, and then gave him rye whiskey until he passed out grinning.

"Regeneration," he told Gil. "The removed leg of a crab, the ray of a starfish, the tentacle of a

snail or the tail of a lizard can re-establish itself through new growth. The Rishch can grow new limbs, even new eyes apparently. The ability must have originated as a survival reflex, parts of bodies snap off, are left in possession of the attacker while the main part of the body lives to grow new organs another day. Not always perfect, perhaps painful, always an inconvenience. Common in earthworms, spiders, centipedes, crayfishes, starfish and some flatworms even grow new heads . . ."

The way was paved for further negotiations during which Earth's diplomats convinced the Rishch, with films of nuclear explosions and space missiles in action, that they would be wise to

go off and conquer elsewhere. They had evidently been uneasy about Earth from the beginning. They seemed relieved to sign a face-saving sort of treaty and clear out.

Before their ship disappeared oddly and suddenly in space like an exploding cigar, the Rishch returned that ultimate gift. Apparently, the Rishch spokesman said, the slave attendant of the Earth Kodar had forgotten or misplaced it on the Rishch ship during initial protocol.

It was Hillaby's eye.

But Merrik had left that behind deliberately, of course. He was sure they had put it on their slides and found the cellular structure quite genuine.

The End

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The People Of The Black Circle

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Although "People of the Black Circle" isn't the first Howard story to appear in Fantastic—see "The Garden of Fear" (May, 1961) and "The Dead Remember" (December, 1961)—it is the first time we've been lucky enough to bring you one of the longest and best of his enormously popular Conan stories, this time accompanied by the original Hugh Rankin illustrations which—in those early issues of Weird Tales—so effectively caught the eerie atmosphere of the prehistoric Hyborian Age. —And an incredible time it must have been, for on one occasion—this one—even bold Conan hesitated before tangling with a wizard who could pluck out your heart simply by reaching for it!

Chapter 1 Death Strikes a King

THE king of Vendhya was dying. Through the hot, stifling night the temple gongs boomed and the conchs roared. Their clamor was a faint echo in the gold-domed chamber where Bhunda Chand struggled on the velvet-cushioned dais. Beads of sweat glistened on his dark skin; his fingers twisted the gold-worked fabric beneath him. He was young; no spear had touched him, no poison lurked in his wine. But his veins stood out like blue cords on his temples, and his eyes dilated with the nearness of death. Trembling slave-girls knelt at the foot of the dais, and leaning down to him, watching him with passionate intensity, was his sister, the Devi Yasmina. With her

was the *wazam*, a noble grown old in the royal court.

She threw up her head in a gusty gesture of wrath and despair as the thunder of the distant drums reached her ears.

"The priests and their clamor!" she exclaimed. "They are no wiser than the leeches who are helpless! Nay, he dies and none can say why. He is dying now—and I stand here helpless, who would burn the whole city and spill the blood of thousands to save him."

"Not a man of Ayodhya but would die in his place, if it might be, Devi," answered the *wazam*. "This poison—"

"I tell you it is not poison!" she cried. "Since his birth he has been guarded so closely that the cleverest poisoners of the East could not reach him. Five skulls bleaching on the Tower of Kites

can testify to attempts which were made—and which failed. As you well know, there are ten men and ten women whose sole duty it is to taste his food and wine, and fifty armed warriors guard his chamber as they guard it now. No, it is not poison; it is sorcery—black, ghastly magic—”

She ceased as the king spoke; his livid lips did not move, and there was no recognition in his glassy eyes. But his voice rose in an eery call, indistinct and far away, as if he called to her from beyond the vast, wind-blown gulfs.

“Yasmina! Yasmina! My sister, where are you? I can not find you. All is darkness, and the roaring of great winds!”

“Brother!” cried Yasmina, catching his limp hand in a convulsive grasp. “I am here! Do you not know me—”

Her voice died at the utter vacancy of his face. A low confused moaning waned from his mouth. The slave-girls at the foot of the dais whimpered with fear, and Yasmina beat her breast in her anguish.

In another part of the city a man stood in a latticed balcony overlooking a long street in which torches tossed luridly, smokily revealing upturned dark faces and the whites of gleaming eyes. A long-drawn wailing rose from the multitude.

The man shrugged his broad shoulders and turned back into

the arabesqued chamber. He was a tall man, compactly built, and richly clad.

“The king is not yet dead, but the dirge is sounded,” he said to another man who sat cross-legged on a mat in a corner. This man was clad in a brown camel-hair robe and sandals, and a green turban was on his head. His expression was tranquil, his gaze impersonal.

“The people know he will never see another dawn,” this man answered.

The first speaker favored him with a long, searching stare.

“What I can not understand,” he said, “is why I have had to wait so long for your masters to strike. If they have slain the king now, why could they not have slain him months ago?”

“Even the arts you call sorcery are governed by cosmic laws,” answered the man in the green turban. “The stars direct these actions, as in other affairs. Not even my masters can alter the stars. Not until the heavens were in the proper order could they perform this necromancy.” With a long, stained finger-nail he mapped the constellations on the marble-tiled floor. “The slant of the moon presaged evil for the king of Vendhya; the stars are in turmoil, the Serpent in the House of the Elephant. During such juxtaposition, the invisible guardians are removed from the spirit of Bhunda Chand. A path is

opened in the unseen realms, and once a point of contact was established, mighty powers were put in play along that path."

"Point of contact?" inquired the other. "Do you mean that lock of Bhunda Chad's hair?"

"Yes. All discarded portions of the human body still remain part of it, attached to it by intangible connections. The priests of Asura have a dim inkling of this truth, and so all nail-trimmings, hair and other waste products of the persons of the royal family are carefully reduced to ashes and the ashes hidden. But at the urgent entreaty of the princess of Khosala, who loved Bhunda Chad vainly, he gave her a lock of his long black hair as a token of remembrance. When my masters decided upon his doom, the lock, in its golden, jewel-crusted case, was stolen from under her pillow while she slept, and another substituted, so like the first that she never knew the difference. Then the genuine lock traveled by camel-caravan up the long, long road to Peshkhauri, thence up the Zhaibar Pass, until it reached the hands of those for whom it was intended."

"Only a lock of hair," murmured the nobleman.

"By which a soul is drawn from its body and across gulfs of echoing space," returned the man on the mat.

The nobleman studied him curiously.

"I do not know if you are a man or a demon, Khemsa," he said at last. "Few of us are what we seem. I, whom the Kshatriyas know as Kerim Shah, a prince from Iranistan, am no greater a masquerader than most men. They are all traitors in one way or another, and half of them know not whom they serve. There at least I have no doubts; for I serve King Yezdigerd of Turan."

"And I the Black Seers of Yimsha," said Khemsa; "and my masters are greater than yours, for they have accomplished by their arts what Yezdigerd could not with a hundred thousand swords."

Outside, the moan of the tortured thousands shuddered up to the stars which crusted the sweating Vendhyan night, and the conchs bellowed like oxen in pain.

In the gardens of the palace the torches glinted on the polished helmets and curved swords and gold-chased corselets. All the noble-born fighting-men of Ayodhya were gathered in the great palace or about it, and at each broad arched gate and door fifty archers stood on guard, with bows in their hands. But Death stalked through the royal palace and none could stay his ghostly tread.

On the dais under the golden dome the king cried out again, racked by awful paroxysms. Again his voice came faintly and far away, and again the Devi

bent to him, trembling with a fear that was darker than the terror of death.

"Yasmina!" Again that far, weirdly dreeing cry, from realms immeasurable. "Aid me! I am far from my mortal house! Wizards have drawn my soul through wind-blown darkness. They seek to sap the silver cord that binds me to my dying body. They cluster around me; their hands are taloned, their eyes are red like flame burning in darkness. *Aie*, save me, my sister! Their fingers sear me like fire! They would slay my body and damn my soul! What is this they bring before me?—*Aie!*"

At the terror in his hopeless cry Yasmina screamed uncontrollably and threw herself bodily upon him in the abandon of her anguish. He was torn by a terrible convulsion; foam flew from his contorted lips and writhing fingers left their marks on the girl's shoulders. But the glassy blankness passed from his eyes like smoke blown from a fire, and he looked at his sister with recognition.

"Brother!" she sobbed. "Brother—"

"Swift!" he gasped, and his weakening voice was rational. "I know now what brings me to the pyre. I have been on a far journey and I understand. I have been ensorcelled by the wizards of the Himelians. They drew my

soul out of my body and far away, into a stone room. There they strove to break the silver cord of life, and thrust my soul into the body of a foul night-weird their sorcery summoned up from hell. Ah! I feel their pull on me now! Your cry and the grip of your fingers brought me back, but I am going fast. My soul clings to my body, but its hold weakens. Quick—kill me, before they can trap my soul for ever!"

"I can not!" she wailed, smiling her naked breasts.

"Swiftly, I command you!" There was the old imperious note in his failing whisper. "You have never disobeyed me—obey my last command! Send my soul clean to Asura! Haste, lest you damn me to spend eternity as a filthy gaunt of darkness. Strike, I command you! *Strike!*"

Sobbing wildly, Yasmina plucked a jeweled dagger from her girdle and plunged it to the hilt in his breast. He stiffened and then went limp, a grim smile curving his dead lips. Yasmina hurled herself face-down on the rush-covered floor, beating the reeds with her clenched hands. Outside, the gongs and conchs brayed and thundered and the priests gashed themselves with copper knives.

Chapter II A Barbarian from the Hills

Chunder Shan, governor of Peshkhauri, laid down his golden pen and carefully scanned that which he had written on parchment that bore his official seal. He had ruled Peshkhauri so long only because he weighed his every word, spoken or written. Danger breeds caution, and only a wary man lives long in that wild country where the hot Vendhyan plains meet the crags of the Himelians. An hour's ride westward or northward and one crossed the border and was among the Hills where men lived by the law of the knife.

The governor was alone in his chamber, seated at his ornately-carven table of inlaid ebony. Through the wide window, open for the coolness, he could see a square of the blue Himelian night, dotted with great white stars. An adjacent parapet was a shadowy line, and further crenelles and embrasures were barely hinted at in the dim starlight. The governor's fortress was strong, and situated outside the walls of the city it guarded. The breeze that stirred the tapestries on the wall brought faint noises from the streets of Peshkhauri—occasional snatches of wailing song, or the thrum of a cithern.

The governor read what he had written, slowly, with his open hand shading his eyes from the bronze butter-lamp, his lips moving. Absently, as he read,

he heard the drum of horses' hoofs outside the barbican, the sharp staccato of the guards' challenge. He did not heed, intent upon his letter. It was addressed to the *wazam* of Vendhya, at the royal court of Ayodhya, and it stated, after the customary salutations:

"Let it be known to your excellency that I have faithfully carried out your excellency's instructions. The seven tribesmen are well guarded in their prison, and I have repeatedly sent word into the hills that their chief come in person to bargain for their release. But he has made no move, except to send word that unless they are freed he will burn Peshkhauri and cover his saddle with my hide, begging your excellency's indulgence. This he is quite capable of attempting, and I have tripled the numbers of the lance guards. The man is not a native of Ghulistan. I can not with certainty predict his next move. But since it is the wish of the Devi—"

He was out of his ivory chair and on his feet facing the arched door, all in one instant. He snatched at the curved sword lying in its ornate scabbard on the table, and then checked the movement.

It was a woman who had entered unannounced, a woman whose gossamer robes did not conceal the rich garments beneath any more than they concealed the suppleness and beauty of her tall, slender figure. A filmy veil fell below her breasts, supported by a flowing head-dress bound about with a triple gold braid and adorned with a golden crescent.

Her dark eyes regarded the astonished governor over the veil, and then with an imperious gesture of her white hand, she uncovered her face.

"Devil!" The governor dropped to his knee before her, his surprise and confusion somewhat spoiling the stateliness of his obeisance. With a gesture she motioned him to rise, and he hastened to lead her to the ivory chair, all the while bowing level with his girdle. But his first words were of reproof.

"Your Majesty! This was most unwise! The border is unsettled. Raids from the hills are incessant. You came with a large attendance?"

"An ample retinue followed me to Peshkhauri," she answered. "I lodged my people there and came on to the fort with my maid, Gitara."

Chunder Shan groaned in horror.

"Devil! You do not understand the peril. An hour's ride from this spot the hills swarm with bar-

barians who make a profession of murder and rapine. Women have been stolen and men stabbed between the fort and the city. Peshkhauri is not like your southern provinces—"

"But I am here, and unharmed," she interrupted with a trace of impatience. "I showed my signet ring to the guard at the gate, and to the one outside your door, and they admitted me unannounced, not knowing me, but supposing me to be a secret courier from Ayodhya. Let us not now waste time. You have received no word from the chief of the barbarians?"

"None save threats and curses, Devi. He is wary and suspicious. He deems it a trap, and perhaps he is not to be blamed. The Kshatriyas have not always kept their promises to the hill people."

"He must be brought to terms!" broke in Yasmina, the knuckles of her clenched hands showing white.

"I do not understand." The governor shook his head. "When I chanced to capture these seven hillmen, I reported their capture to the *wazam*, as is the custom, and then, before I could hang them, there came an order to hold them and communicate with their chief. This I did, but the man holds aloof, as I have said. These men are of the tribe of Afghulis, but he is a foreigner from the west, and he is called Conan. I have threatened to hang

them tomorrow at dawn, if he does not come."

"Good!" exclaimed the Devi. "You have done well. And I will tell you why I have given these orders. My brother—" she faltered, choking, and the governor bowed his head, with the customary gesture of respect for a departed sovereign.

"The king of Vendhya was destroyed by magic," she said at last. "I have devoted my life to the destruction of his murderers. As he died he gave me a clue, and I have followed it. I have read the Book of Skalos, and talked with nameless hermits in the caves below Jhelai. I learned how, and by whom, he was destroyed. His enemies were the Black Seers of Mount Yimsha."

"Asura!" whispered Chunder Shan, paling.

Her eyes knifed him through. "Do you fear them?"

"Who does not, your Majesty?" he replied. "They are black devils, haunting the uninhabited hills beyond the Zhaibar. But the sages say that they seldom interfere in the lives of mortal men."

"Why they slew my brother I do not know," she answered. "But I have sworn on the altar of Asura to destroy them! And I need the aid of a man beyond the border. A Kshatriya army, unaided, would never reach Yimsha."

"Aye," muttered Chunder Shan. "You speak the truth

there. It would be fight every step of the way, with hairy hill-men hurling down boulders from every height, and rushing us with their long knives in every valley. The Turanians fought their way through the Himelians once, but how many returned to Khurusun? Few of those who escaped the swords of the Kshatriyas, after the king, your brother, defeated their host on the Jhumda River, ever saw Secunderam again."

"And so I must control men across the border," she said, "men who know the way to Mount Yimsha—"

"But the tribes fear the Black Seers and shun the unholy mountain," broke in the governor.

"Does the chief, Conan, fear them?" she asked.

"Well, as to that," muttered the governor, "I doubt if there is anything that devil fears."

"So I have been told. Therefore he is the man I must deal with. He wishes the release of his seven men. Very well; their ransom shall be the heads of the Black Seers!" Her voice thrummed with hate as she uttered the last words, and her hands clenched at her sides. She looked an image of incarnate passion as she stood there with her head thrown high and her bosom heaving.

Again the governor knelt, for part of his wisdom was the knowledge that a woman in such an emotional tempest is as peri-

lous as a blind cobra to any about her.

"It shall be as you wish, your Majesty." Then as she presented a calmer aspect, he rose and ventured to drop a word of warning. "I can not predict what the chief Conan's action will be. The tribesmen are always turbulent, and I have reason to believe that emissaries from the Turanians are stirring them up to raid our borders. As your majesty knows, the Turanians have established themselves in Secunderam and other northern cities, though the hill tribes remain unconquered. King Yezdigerd has long looked southward with greedy lust and perhaps is seeking to gain by treachery what he could not win by force of arms. I have thought that Conan might well be one of his spies."

"We shall see," she answered. "If he loves his followers, he will be at the gates at dawn, to parley. I shall spend the night in the fortress. I came in disguise to Peshkhauri, and lodged my retinue at an inn instead of the palace. Besides my people, only yourself knows of my presence here."

"I shall escort you to your quarters, your Majesty," said the governor, and as they emerged from the doorway, he beckoned the warrior on guard there, and the man fell in behind them, spear held at salute.

The maid waited, veiled like

her mistress, outside the door, and the group traversed a wide, winding corridor, lighted by smoky torches, and reached the quarters reserved for visiting notables—generals and viceroys, mostly; none of the royal family had ever honored the fortress before. Chunder Shan had a perturbed feeling that the suite was not suitable to such an exalted personage as the Devi, and though she sought to make him feel at ease in her presence, he was glad when she dismissed him and he bowed himself out. All the menials of the fort had been summoned to serve his royal guest—though he did not divulge her identity—and he stationed a squad of spearmen before her doors, among them the warrior who had guarded his own chamber. In his preoccupation he forgot to replace the man.

The governor had not been gone long from her when Yasmina suddenly remembered something else which she had wished to discuss with him, but had forgotten until that moment. It concerned the past actions of one Kerim Shah, a nobleman from Iranistan, who had dwelt for a while in Peshkhauri before coming on to the court at Ayodhya. A vague suspicion concerning the man had been stirred by a glimpse of him in Peshkhauri that night. She wondered if he had followed her from Ayodhya. Being a truly remarkable Devi, she did not sum-

mon the governor to her again, but hurried out into the corridor alone, and hastened toward his chamber.

Chunder Shan, entering his chamber, closed the door and went to his table. There he took the letter he had been writing and tore it to bits. Scarcely had he finished when he heard something drop softly onto the parapet adjacent to the window. He looked up to see a figure loom briefly against the stars, and then a man dropped lightly into the room. The light glinted on a long sheen of steel in his hand.

"Shhhh!" he warned. "Don't make a noise, or I'll send the devil a henchman!"

The governor checked his motion toward the sword on the table. He was within reach of the yard-long Zhaibar knife that glittered in the intruder's fist, and he knew the desperate quickness of a hillman.

The invader was a tall man, at once strong and supple. He was dressed like a hillman, but his dark features and blazing blue eyes did not match his garb. Chunder Shan had never seen a man like him; he was not an Easterner, but some barbarian from the West. But his aspect was as untamed and formidable as any of the hairy tribesmen who haunt the hills of Ghulistan.

"You come like a thief in the night," commented the governor,

recovering some of his composure, although he remembered that there was no guard within call. Still, the hillman could not know that.

"I climbed a bastion," snarled the intruder. "A guard thrust his head over the battlement in time for me to rap it with my knife hilt."

"You are Conan?"

"Who else? You sent word into the hills that you wished for me to come and parley with you. Well, by Crom, I've come! Keep away from that table or I'll gut you."

"I merely wish to seat myself," answered the governor, carefully sinking into the ivory chair, which he wheeled away from the table. Conan moved restlessly before him, glancing suspiciously at the door, thumbing the razor edge of his three-foot knife. He did not walk like an Afghuli, and was bluntly direct where the East is subtle.

"You have seven of my men," he said abruptly. "You refused the ransom I offered. What the devil do you want?"

"Let us discuss terms," answered Chunder Shan cautiously.

"Terms?" There was a timbre of dangerous anger in his voice. "What do you mean? Haven't I offered you gold?"

Chunder Shan laughed.

"Gold? There is more gold in Peshkhauri than you ever saw."

"You're a liar," retorted Conan. "I've seen the *suk* of the goldsmiths in Khurusum."

"Well, more than any Afghuli ever saw," amended Chunder Shan. "And it is but a drop of all the treasure of Vendhya. Why should we desire gold? It would be more to our advantage to hang these seven thieves."

Conan ripped out a sulfurous oath and the long blade quivered in his grip as the muscles rose in ridges on his brown arm.

"I'll spilt your head like a ripe melon!"

A wild blue flame flickered in the hillman's eyes, but Chunder Shan shrugged his shoulders, though keeping an eye on the keen steel.

"You can kill me easily, and probably escape over the wall afterward. But that would not save the seven tribesmen. My men would surely hang them. And these men are headmen among the Afghulis."

"I know it," snarled Conan. "The tribe is baying like wolves at my heels because I have not procured their release. Tell me in plain words what you want, because, by Crom! if there's no other way, I'll raise a horde and lead it to the very gates of Peshkhauri!"

Looking at the man as he stood squarely, knife in fist and eyes glaring, Chunder Shan did not doubt that he was capable of it. The governor did not believe any

hill-horde could take Peshkhauri, but he did not wish a devastated countryside.

"There is a mission you must perform," he said, choosing his words with as much care as if they had been razors. "There—"

Conan had sprung back, wheeling to face the door at the same instant, lips snarl. His barbarian ears had caught the quick tread of soft slippers outside the door. The next instant the door was thrown open and a slim, silk-robed form entered hastily, pulling the door shut—then stopping short at sight of the hillman.

Chander Shan sprang up, his heart jumping into his mouth.

"Devi!" he cried involuntarily, losing his head momentarily in his fright.

"Devi!" It was like an explosive echo from the hillman's lips. Chander Shan saw recognition and intent flame up in the fierce blue eyes.

The governor shouted desperately and caught at his sword, but the hillman moved with the devastating speed of a hurricane. He sprang, knocked over the governor sprawling with a savage blow of his knife-hilt, swept up the astounded Devi in one brawny arm and leaped for the window. Chunder Shan, struggling frantically to his feet, saw the man poise an instant on the sill in a flutter of silken skirts and white limbs that was his royal captive, and heard his fierce, exultant

snarl: "Now dare to hang my men!" and then Conan leaped to the parapet and was gone. A wild scream floated back to the governor's ears.

"Guard! *Guard!*" screamed the governor, struggling up and running drunkenly to the door. He tore it open and reeled into the hall. His shouts re-echoed along the corridors, and warriors came running, gaping to see the governor holding his broken head, from which the blood streamed.

"Turn out the lancers!" he roared. "There has been an abduction!" Even in his frenzy he had enough sense left to withhold the full truth. He stopped short as he heard a sudden drum of hoofs outside, a frantic scream and a wild yell of barbaric exultation.

Followed by the bewildered guardsmen, the governor raced for the stair. In the courtyard of the fort a force of lancers always stood by saddled steeds, ready to ride at an instant's notice. Chunder Shan led his squadron flying after the fugitive, though his head swam so he had to hold with both hands to the saddle. He did not divulge the identity of the victim, but said merely that the noblewoman who had borne the royal signet ring had been carried away by the chief of the Afghulis. The abductor was out of sight and hearing, but they knew the path he would strike—the road that runs straight

to the mouth of the Zhaibar. There was no moon; peasant huts rose dimly in the starlight. Behind them fell away the grim bastion of the fort, and the towers of Peshkhauri. Ahead of them loomed the black walls of the Himelians.

Chapter III Khemsa Uses Magic

In the confusion that reigned in the fortress while the guard was being turned out, no one noticed that the girl who had accompanied the Devi slipped out the great arched gate and vanished in the darkness. She ran straight for the city, her garments tucked high. She did not follow the open road, but cut straight through fields and over slopes, avoiding fences and leaping irrigation ditches as surely as it it were broad daylight, and as easily as if she were a trained masculine runner. The hoof-drum of the guardsmen had faded away up the hill road before she reached the city wall. She did not go to the great gate, beneath whose arch men leaned on spears and craned their necks into the darkness, discussing the unwonted activity about the fortress. She skirted the wall until she reached a certain point where the spire of a tower was visible above the battlements. Then she placed her hands to her mouth and voiced a low weird call that

carried strangely in the dark.

Almost instantly a head appeared at an embrasure and a rope came wriggling down the wall. She seized it, placed a foot in the loop at the end, and waved her arm. Then quickly and smoothly she was drawn up the sheer stone curtain. An instant later she scrambled over the merlons and stood up on a flat roof which covered a house that was built against the wall. There was an open trap there, and a man in a camel-hair robe who silently coiled the rope, not showing in any way the strain of hauling a full-grown woman up a forty-foot wall.

"Where is Kerim Shah?" she gasped, panting after her long run.

"Asleep in the house below. You have news?"

"Conan has stolen the Devi out of the fortress and carried her away into the hills!" She blurted out her news in a rush, the words stumbling over one another.

Khemsa showed no emotion, but merely nodded his turbaned head. "Kerim Shah will be glad to hear that," he said.

"Wait!" The girl threw her supple arms about his neck. She was panting hard, but not only from exertion. Her eyes blazed like black jewels in the starlight. Her upturned face was close to Khemsa's, but though he submitted to her embrace, he did

not bother to return it.

"Do not tell the Hyrkanian!" she panted. "Let us use this knowledge ourselves! The governor has gone into the hills with his riders, but he might as well chase a ghost. He has not told anyone that it was the Devi who was kidnapped. None in Peshkhauri or the fort knows it except us."

"But what good does it do us?" the man expostulated. "My masters sent me with Kerim Shah to aid him in every way—"

"Aid yourself!" she cried fiercely. "Shake off your yoke!"

"You mean—disobey my masters?" he gasped, and she felt his whole body turn cold under her arms.

"Aye!" she shook him in the fury of her emotion. "You too are a magician! Why will you be a slave, using your powers only to elevate others? Use your arts for yourself!"

"That is forbidden!" He was shaking as if with an ague. "I am not one of the Black Circle. Only by the command of the masters do I dare to use the knowledge they have taught me."

"But you *can* use it!" she argued passionately. "Do as I beg you! Of course Conan has taken the Devi to hold as hostage against the seven tribesmen in the governor's prison. Destroy them, so Chunder Shan can not use them to buy back the Devi. Then let us go into the mountains

and take her from the Afghulis. They can not stand against your sorcery with their knives. The treasure of the Vendhyan kings will be ours as ransom—and then when we have it in our hands, we can trick them, and sell her to the king of Turan. We shall have wealth beyond our maddest dreams. With it we can buy warriors. We will take Khorbhul, oust the Turanians from the hills, and send our hosts southward; become king and queen of an empire!”

Khemsa too was panting, shaking like a leaf in her grasp; his face showed gray in the starlight, beaded with great drops of perspiration.

“I love you!” she cried fiercely, writhing her body against his, almost strangling him in her wild embrace, shaking him in her abandon. “I will make a king of you! For love of you I betrayed my mistress; for love of me betray your masters! Why fear the Black Seers? By your love for me you have broken one of their laws already! Break the rest! You are as strong as they!”

A man of ice could not have withstood the searing heat of her passion and fury. With an inarticulate cry he crushed her to him, bending her backward and showering gasping kisses on her eyes, face and lips.

“I’ll do it!” His voice was thick with laboring emotions. He staggered like a drunken man. “The

arts they have taught me shall work for me, not for my masters. We shall be rulers of the world—of the world—”

“Come then!” Twisting lithely out of his embrace, she seized his hand and led him toward the trap-door. “First we must make sure that the governor does not exchange those seven Afghulis for the Devi.”

He moved like a man in a daze, until they had descended a ladder and she paused in the chamber below. Kerim Shah lay on a couch motionless, an arm across his face as though to shield his sleeping eyes from the soft light of a brass lamp. She plucked Khemsa’s arm and made a quick gesture across her own throat. Khemsa lifted his hand; then his expression changed and he drew away.

“I have eaten his salt,” he muttered. “Besides, he can not interfere with us.”

He led the girl through a door that opened on a winding stair. After their soft tread had faded into silence, the man on the couch sat up. Kerim Shah wiped the sweat from his face. A knife-thrust he did not dread, but he feared Khemsa as a man fears a poisonous reptile.

“People who plot on roofs should remember to lower their voices,” he muttered. “but as Khemsa has turned against his masters, and as he was my only contact with them, I can count on their aid no longer. From now

on I play the game in my own way."

Rising to his feet he went quickly to a table, drew pen and parchment from his girdle and scibbled a few succinct lines:

"To Khosru Khan, governor of Secunderam: the Cimmerian Conan has carried the Devi Yasmina to the villages of the Afghulis. It is an opportunity to get the Devi into our hands, as the king has so long desired. Send three thousand horsemen at once. I will meet them in the valley of Gurashah with native guides."

And he signed it with a name that was not in the least like Kerim Shah.

Then from a golden cage he drew forth a carrier pigeon, to whose leg he made fast the parchment, rolled into a tiny cylinder and secured with gold wire. Then he went quickly to a casement and tossed the bird into the night. It wavered on fluttering wings, balanced, and was gone like a flitting shadow. Catching up helmet, sword and cloak, Kerim Shah hurried out of the chamber and down the winding stair.

The prison quarters of Peshkhauri were separated from the rest of the city by a massive wall, in which was set a single iron-bound door under an arch. Over the arch burned a lurid

red cresset, and beside the door squatted a warrior with spear and shield.

This warrior, leaning on his spear, and yawning from time to time, started suddenly to his feet. He had not thought he had dozed, but a man was standing before him, a man he had not heard approach. The man wore a camel-hair robe and a green turban. In the flickering light of the cresset his features were shadowy, but a pair of lambent eyes shown surprisingly in the lurid glow.

"Who comes?" demanded the warrior, presenting his spear. "Who are you?"

The stranger did not seem perturbed, though the spearpoint touched his bosom. His eyes held the warrior's with strange intensity.

"What are you obliged to do?" he asked, strangely.

"To guard the gate!" The warrior spoke thickly and mechanically; he stood rigid as a statue, his eyes slowly glazing.

"You lie! You are obliged to obey me! You have looked into my eyes, and your soul is no longer your own. Open that door!"

Stiffly, with the wooden features of an image, the guard wheeled about, drew a great key from his girdle, turned it in the massive lock and swung open the door. Then he stood at attention, his unseeing eyes staring

straight ahead of him.

A woman glided from the shadows and laid an eager hand on the mesmerist's arm.

"Bid him fetch us horses, Khemsa," she whispered.

"No need of that," answered the Rakhsha. Lifting his voice slightly he spoke to the guardsman. "I have no more use for you. Kill yourself!"

Like a man in a trance the warrior thrust the butt of his spear against the base of the wall, and placed the keen head against his body, just below the ribs. Then slowly, stolidly, he leaned against it with all his weight, so that it transfixed his body and came out between his shoulders. Sliding down the shaft he lay still, the spear jutting above him its full length, like a horrible stalk growing out of his back.

The girl stared down at him in morbid fascination, until Khemsa took her arm and led her through the gate. Torches lighted a narrow space between the outer wall and a lower inner one, in which were arched doors at regular intervals. A warrior paced this enclosure, and when the gate opened he came sauntering up, so secure in his knowledge of the prison's strength that he was not suspicious until Khemsa and the girl emerged from the archway. Then it was too late. The Rakhsha did not waste time in hypnotism, though his actions savored of mag-

ic to the girl. The guard lowered his spear threateningly, opening his mouth to shout an alarm that would bring spearmen swarming out of the guardrooms at either end of the alleyway. Khemsa flicked the spear aside with his left hand, as a man might flick a straw, and his right flashed out and back, seeming gently to caress the warrior's neck in passing. And the guard pitched on his face without a sound, his head lolling on a broken neck.

Khemsa did not glance at him, but went straight to one of the arched doors and placed his open hand against the heavy bronze lock. With a rending shudder the portal buckled inward. As the girl followed him through, she saw that the thick teakwood hung in splinters, the bronze bolts were bent and twisted from their sockets, and the great hinges broken and disjointed. A thousand-pound battering-ram with forty men to swing it could have shattered the barrier no more completely. Khemsa was drunk with freedom and the exercise of his power, glorying in his might and flinging his strength about as a young giant exercises his thews with unnecessary vigor in the exultant pride of his prowess.

The broken door let them into a small courtyard, lit by a cresset. Opposite the door was a wide grille of iron bars. A hairy hand was visible, gripping one of these bars, and in the darkness behind

them glimmered the white of eyes.

Khemsa stood silent for a space, gazing into the shadow from which those glimmering eyes gave back his stare with burning intensity. Then his hand went into his robe and came out again, and from his opening fingers a shimmering feather of sparkling dust sifted to the flags. Instantly a flare of green fire lighted the enclosure. In the brief glare the forms of seven men, standing motionless behind the bars, were limned in vivid detail; tall, hairy men in ragged hill-men's garments. They did not speak, but in their eyes blazed the fear of death, and their hairy fingers gripped the bars.

The fire died out but the glow remained, a quivering ball of lambent green that pulsed and shimmered on the flags before Khemsa's feet. The wide gaze of the tribesmen was fixed upon it. It wavered, elongated; it turned into a luminous green smoke spiraling upward. It twisted and writhed like a great shadowy serpent, then broadened and billowed out in shining folds and whirls. It grew to a cloud moving silently over the flags—straight toward the grille. The men watched its coming with dilated eyes; the bars quivered with the grip of their desperate fingers. Bearded lips parted but no sound came forth. The green cloud rolled on the bars and blotted them from sight.

Like a fog it oozed through the grille and hid the men within. From the enveloping folds came a strangled gasp, as of a man plunged suddenly under the surface of water. That was all.

Khemsa touched the girl's arm, as she stood with parted lips and dilated eyes. Mechanically she turned away with him, looking back over her shoulder. Already the mist was thinning; close to the bars she saw a pair of sandaled feet, the toes turned upward—she glimpsed the indistinct outlines of seven still, prostrate shapes.

"And now for a steed swifter than the fastest horse ever bred in a mortal stable," Khemsa was saying. "We will be in Afghulistan before dawn."

Chapter IV

An Encounter in the Pass

Yasmina Devi could never clearly remember the details of her abduction. The unexpectedness and violence stunned her; she had only a confused impression of a whirl of happenings—the terrifying grip of a mighty arm, the blazing eyes of her abductor, and his hot breath burning on her flesh. The leap through the window to the parapet, the mad race across the battlements and roofs when the fear of falling froze her, the reckless descent of a rope bound to a merlon—he went down almost at a run, his captive folded

limply over his brawny shoulder—all this was a befuddled tangle in the Devi's mind. She retained a more vivid memory of him running fleetly into the shadows of the trees, carrying her like a child, and vaulting into the saddle of a fierce Bhalkhana stallion which reared and snorted. Then there was a sensation of flying, and the racing hoofs were striking sparks of fire from the flinty road as the stallion swept up the slopes.

As the girl's mind cleared, her first sensations were furious rage and shame. She was appalled. The rulers of the golden kingdoms south of the Himelians were considered little short of divine; and she was the Devi of Vendhya! Fright was submerged in regal wrath. She cried out furiously and began struggling. She, Yasmina, to be carried on the saddle-bow of a hill chief, like a common wench of the market place! He merely hardened his massive thews slightly against her writhings, and for the first time in her life she experienced the coercion of superior physical strength. His arms felt like iron about her slender limbs. He glanced down her and grinned hugely. His teeth glimmered whitely in the starlight. The reins lay loose on the stallions's flowing mane, and every thew and fiber of the great beast strained as he hurtled along the bolder-strewn trail. But Conan sat easily, almost carelessly, in

the saddle, riding like a centaur.

"You hill-bred dog!" she panted, quivering with the impact of shame, anger, and the realization of helplessness. "You dare—you *dare*! Your life shall pay for this! Where are you taking me?"

"To the villages of Afghulistan," he answered, casting a glance over his shoulder.

Behind them, beyond the slopes they had traversed, torches were tossing on the walls of the fortress, and he glimpsed a flare of light that meant the great gate had been opened. And he laughed. "By Crom, we will lead him a merry chase! What do you think, Devi—will they pay seven lives for a Kshatriya princess?"

"They will send an army to hang you and your spawn of devils," she promised him with conviction.

He laughed gustily and shifted her to a more comfortable position in his arms. But she took this as a fresh outrage, and renewed her vain struggles, until she saw that her efforts were only amusing him. Besides, her light silken garments, floating on the wind, were being outrageously disarranged by her struggles. She concluded that a scornful submission was the better part of dignity, and lapsed into a smoldering quiescence.

She felt even her anger being submerged by awe as they entered the mouth of the Pass, lowering like a black well mouth

in the blacker walls that rose like colossal ramparts to bar their way. It was as if a gigantic knife had cut the Zhaibar out of walls of solid rock. On either hand sheer slopes pitched up for thousands of feet, and the mouth of the Pass was dark as hate. Even Conan could not see with any accuracy, but he knew the road, even by night. And knowing that armed men were racing through the starlight after him, he did not check the stallion's speed. The great brute was not yet showing fatigue. He thundered along the road that followed the valley bed, labored up a slope, swept along a low ridge where treacherous shale on either hand lurked for the unwary, and came upon a trail that followed the lap of the left-hand wall.

Not even Conan could spy, in that darkness, an ambush set by Zhaibar tribesmen. As they swept past the black mouth of a gorge that opened into the Pass, a javelin swished through the air and thudded home behind the stallion's straining shoulder. The great beast let out his life in a shuddering sob and stumbled, going headlong in mid-stride. But Conan had recognized the flight and stroke of the javelin, and he acted with spring-steel quickness.

As the horse fell he leaped clear, holding the girl aloft to guard her from striking boulders. He lit on his feet like a cat,

thrust her into a cleft of rock, and wheeled toward the outer darkness, drawing his knife.

Yasmina, confused by the rapidity of events, not quite sure just what had happened, saw a vague shape rush out of the darkness, bare feet slapping softly on the rock, ragged garments whipping on the wind of his haste. She glimpsed the flicker of steel, heard the lightning crack of stroke, parry and counter-stroke, and the crunch of bone as Conan's long knife split the other's skull.

Conan sprang back, crouching in the shelter of the rocks. Out in the night men were moving and a stentorian voice roared: "What, you dogs! Do you flinch? In, curse you, and take them!"

Conan started, peered into the darkness and lifted his voice.

"Yar Afzal! Is it you?"

There sounded a startled imprecation, and the voice called warily.

"Conan? Is that you, Conan?"

"Aye!" The Cimmerian laughed. "Come forth, you old war-dog. I've slain one of your men."

There was movement among the rocks, a light flared dimly, and then a flame appeared and came bobbing toward him, and as it approached, a fierce bearded countenance grew out of the darkness. The man who carried it high, thrust forward, and craned his neck to peer among the boulders it lighted; the other hand gripped a great curved tulwar. Conan

stepped forward, sheathing his knife, and the other roared a greeting.

"Aye, it is Conan! Come out of your rocks, dogs! It is Conan!"

Others pressed into the wavering circle of light—wild, ragged, bearded men, with eyes like wolves, and long blades in their fists. They did not see Yasmina, for she was hidden by Conan's massive body. But peeping from her covert, she knew icy fear for the first time that night. These men were more like wolves than human beings.

"What are you hunting in the Zhaibar by night, Yar Afzal?" Conan demanded of the burly chief, who grinned like a bearded ghoul.

"Who knows what might come up the Pass after dark? We Wazulis are nighthawks. But what of you, Conan?"

"I have a prisoner," answered the Cimmerian. And moving aside he disclosed the cowering girl. Reaching a long arm into the crevice he drew her trembling forth.

Her imperious bearing was gone. She stared timidly at the ring of bearded faces that hemmed her in, and was grateful for the strong arm that clasped her possessively. The torch was thrust close to her, and there was a sucking intake of breath about the ring.

"She is my captive," Conan warned, glancing pointedly at the

feet of the man he had slain, just visible within the ring of light. "I was taking her to Afghulistan, but now you have slain my horse, and the Kshatriyas are close behind me."

"Come with us to my village," suggested Yar Afzal. "We have horses hidden in the gorge. They can never follow us in the darkness. They are close behind you, you say?"

"So close that I hear now the clink of their hoofs on the flint," answered Conan grimly.

Instantly there was movement; the torch was dashed out and the ragged shapes melted like phantoms into the darkness. Conan swept up the Devi in his arms, and she did not resist. The rocky ground hurt her slim feet in their soft slippers and she felt very small and helpless in that brutish, primordial blackness among those colossal, nighted crags.

Feeling her shiver in the wind that moaned down the defiles, Conan jerked a ragged cloak from its owner's shoulders and wrapped it about her. He also hissed a warning in her ear, ordering her to make no sound. She did not hear the distant clink of shod hoofs on rock that warned the keen-eared hillmen; but she was far too frightened to disobey, in any event.

She could see nothing but a few faint stars far above, but she knew by the deepening darkness when they entered the gorge mouth.

There was a stir about them, the uneasy movement of horses. A few muttered words, and Conan mounted the horse of the man he had killed, lifting the girl up in front of him. Like phantoms except for the click of their hoofs, the band swept away up the shadowy gorge. Behind them on the trail they left the dead horse and the dead man, which were found less than half an hour later by the riders from the fortress, who recognized the man as a Wazuli and drew their own conclusions accordingly.

Yasmina, snuggled warmly in her captor's arms, grew drowsy in spite of herself. The motion of the horse, though it was uneven, uphill and down, yet possessed a certain rhythm which combined with weariness and emotional exhaustion to force sleep upon her. She had lost all sense of time or direction. They moved in soft thick darkness, in which she sometimes glimpsed vaguely gigantic walls sweeping up like black ramparts, or great crags shouldering the stars; at times she sensed echoing depths beneath them, or felt the wind of dizzy heights blowing cold about her. Gradually these things faded into a dreamy unwakefulness in which the clink of hoofs and the creak of saddles were like the irrelevant sounds in a dream.

She was vaguely aware when the motion ceased and she was

lifted down and carried a few steps. Then she was laid down on something soft and rustling, and something—a folded coat perhaps—was thrust under her head, and the cloak in which she was wrapped was carefully tucked about her. She heard Yar Afzal laugh.

"A rare prize, Conan; fit mate for a chief of the Afghulis."

"Not for me," came Conan's answering rumble. "This wench will buy the lives of my seven headmen, blast their souls."

That was the last she heard as she sank into dreamless slumber.

She slept while armed men rode through the dark hills, and the fate of kingdoms hung in the balance. Through the shadowy gorges and defiles that night there rang the hoofs of galloping horses and the starlight glimmered on helmets and curved blades, until the ghoulis shapes that haunt the crags stared into the darkness from ravine and boulder and wondered what things were afoot.

A band of these sat gaunt horses in the black pit-mouth of a gorge as the hurrying hoofs swept past. Their leader, a well-built man in a helmet and gilt-braided cloak, held up his hand warningly, until the riders had sped on. Then he laughed softly.

"They must have lost the trail! Or else they have found that Conan has already reached the

Afghuli villages. It will take many riders to smoke out that hive. There will be squadrons riding up the Zhaibar by dawn."

"If there is fighting in the hills there will be looting," muttered a voice behind him, in the dialect of the Irakzai.

"There will be looting," answered the man with the helmet. "But first it is our business to reach the valley of Gurashah and await the riders that will be galloping southward from Secunderam before daylight."

He lifted his reins and rode out of the defile, his men falling in behind him—thirty ragged phantoms in the starlight.

Chapter V The Black Stallion

The sun was well up when Yasmina awoke. She did not start and stare blankly, wondering where she was. She awoke with full knowledge of all that had occurred. Her supple limbs were stiff from her long ride, and her firm flesh still seemed to feel the contact of the muscular arm that had borne her so far.

She was lying on a sheepskin covering a pallet of leaves on a hard-beaten dirt floor. A folded sheepskin coat was under her head, and she was wrapped in a ragged cloak. She was in a large room, the walls of which were crudely but strongly built of uncut rocks, plastered with sun-

baked mud. Heavy beams supported a roof of the same kind, in which showed a trap-door up to which led a ladder. There were no windows in the thick walls, only loop-holes. There was one door, a sturdy bronze affair that must have been looted from some Vendhyan border tower. Opposite it was a wide opening in the wall, with no door, but several strong wooden bars in place. Behind them Yasmina saw a magnificent black stallion munching a pile of dried grass. The building was fort, dwelling-place and stable in one.

At the other end of the room a girl in the vest and baggy trousers of a hill-woman squatted beside a small fire, cooking strips of meat on an iron grid laid over blocks of stone. There was a sooty cleft in the wall a few feet from the floor, and some of the smoke found its way out there. The rest floated in blue wisps about the room.

The hill-girl glanced at Yasmina over her shoulder, displaying a bold, handsome face, and then continued her cooking. Voices boomed outside, then the door kicked open, and Conan strode in. He looked more enormous than ever with the morning sunlight behind him, and Yasmina noted some details that had escaped her the night before. His garments were clean and not ragged. The broad Bakhariot girdle that supported his knife in its ornamented scabbard would have

matched the robes of a prince, and there was a glint of fine Turanian mail under his shirt.

"Your captive is awake, Conan," said the Wazuli girl, and he grunted, strode up to the fire and swept the strips of mutton off into a stone dish.

The squatting girl laughed up at him, with some spicy jest, and he grinned wolfishly, and, hooking a toe under her haunches, tumbled her sprawling onto the floor. She seemed to derive considerable amusement from this bit of rough horse-play, but Conan paid no more heed to her. Producing a great hunk of bread from somewhere, with a copper jug of wine, he carried the lot to Yasmina, who had risen from her pallet and was regarding him doubtfully.

"Rough fare for a Devi girl, but our best," he grunted. "It will fill your belly, at least."

He set the platter on the floor, and she was suddenly aware of a ravenous hunger. Making no comment, she seated herself cross-legged on the floor, and taking the dish in her lap, she began to eat, using her fingers, which were all she had in the way of table utensils. After all, adaptability is one of the tests of true aristocracy. Conan stood looking down at her, his thumbs hooked in his girdle. He never sat cross-legged, after the Eastern fashion.

"Where am I?" she asked

looking up at him abruptly.

"In the hut of Yar Afzal, the chief of the Khurum Wazulis," he answered. "Afghulistan lies a good many miles farther on to the west. We'll hide here awhile. The Kshatriyas are beating up the hills for you—several of their squads have been cut up by the tribes already."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Keep you until Chundar Shan is willing to trade back my seven cow-thieves," he grunted. "Women of the Wazulis are crushing ink of *shoki* leaves, and after a while you can write a letter to the governor."

A touch of her old imperious wrath shook her, as she thought how maddeningly her plans had gone awry, leaving her captive of the very man she had plotted to get into her power. She flung down the dish, with the remnants of her meal, and sprang to her feet, tense with anger.

"I will not write a letter! If you do not take me back, they will hang your seven men, and a thousand more besides!"

The Wazuli girl laughed mockingly, Conan scowled, and then the door opened and Yar Afzal came swaggering in. The Wazuli chief was as tall as Conan, and of greater girth, but he looked fat and slow beside the hard compactness of the Cimmerian. He plucked his red-stained beard and stared meaningly at

the Wazuli girl, and that wench rose and scurried out without delay. Then Yar Afzal turned to his guest.

"The damnable people murmur, Conan," quoth he. "They wish me to murder you and take the girl to hold for ransom. They say that anyone can tell by her garments that she is a noble lady. They say why should the Afghuli dogs profit by her, when it is the people who take the risk of guarding her?"

"Lend me your horse," said Conan. "I'll take her and go."

"Pish!" boomed Yar Afzal. "Do you think I can't handle my own people? I'll have them dancing in their shirts if they cross me! They don't love you—or any other outlander—but you saved my life once, and I will not forget. Come out, though, Conan; a scout has returned."

Conan hitched at his girdle and followed the chief outside. They closed the door after them, and Yasmina peeped through a loop-hole. She looked out on a level space before the hut. At the farther end of that space there was a cluster of mud and stone huts, and she saw naked children playing among the boulders, and the slim erect women of the hills going about their tasks.

Directly before the chief's hut a circle of hairy, ragged men squatted, facing the door. Conan and Yar Afzal stood a few paces before the door, and between

them and the ring of warriors another man sat cross-legged. This one was addressing his chief in the harsh accents of the Wazuli which Yasmina could scarcely understand, though as part of her royal education she had been taught the languages of Iranistan and the kindred tongues of Ghulistan.

"I talked with a Dagozai who saw the riders last night," said the scout. "He was lurking near when they came to the spot where we ambushed the lord Conan. He overheard their speech. Chunder Shan was with them. They found the dead horse, and one of the men recognized it as Conan's. Then they found the man Conan slew, and knew him for a Wazuli. It seemed to them that Conan had been slain and the girl taken by the Wazuli; so they turned aside from their purpose of following to Afghulistan. But they did not know from which willage the dead man was come, and we had left no trail a Kshatriya could follow.

"So they rode to the nearest Wazuli village, which was the village of Jugra, and burnt it and slew many of the people. But the men of Khojur came upon them in darkness and slew some of them, and wounded the governor. So the survivors retired down the Zhaibar in the darkness before dawn, but they returned with reinforcements before sunrise, and there had been skirmishing

and fighting in the hills all morning. It is said that a great army is being raised to sweep the hills about the Zhaibar. The tribes are whetting their knives and laying ambushes in every pass from here to Gurashah valley. Moreover, Kerim Shah has returned to the hills."

A grunt went around the circle, and Yasmina leaned closer to the loop-hole at the name she had begun to mistrust.

"Where went he?" demanded Yar Afzal.

"The Dagozai did not know; with him there were thirty Irakzai of the lower villages. They rode into the hills and disappeared."

"These Irakzai are jackals that follow a lion for crumbs," growled Yar Afzal. "They have been lapping up the coins Kerim Shah scatters among the border tribes to buy men like horses. I like him not, for all he is our kinsman from Iranistan."

"He's not even that," said Conan. "I know him of old. He's an Hyrkanian, a spy of Yezdigerd's. If I catch him I'll hang his hide to a tamarisk."

"But the Kshatriyas!" clamored the men in the semicircle. "Are we to squat on our haunches until they smoke us out? They will learn at last in which Wazuli village the wench is held. We are not loved by the Zhaibari; they will help the Kshatriyas hunt us out."

"Let them come," grunted Yar afzal. "We can hold the defiles against a host."

One of the men leaped up and shook his fist at Conan.

"Are we to take all the risks while he reaps the rewards?" he howled. "Are we to fight his battles for him?"

With a stride Conan reached him and bent slightly to stare full into his hairy face. The Cimmerian had not drawn his long knife, but his left hand grasped the scabbard, jutting the hilt suggestively forward.

"I ask no man to fight my battles," he said softly. "Draw your blade if you dare, you yapping dog!"

The Wazuli started back, snarling like a cat.

"Dare to touch me and here are fifty men to rend you apart!" he screeched.

"What!" roared Yar Afzal, his face purpling with wrath. His whiskers bristled, his belly swelled with rage. "Are you chief of Khurum? Do the Wazulis take orders from Yar Afzal, or from a low-bred cur?"

The man cringed before his invincible chief, and Yar Afzal, striding up to him, seized him by the throat and choked him until his face was turning black. Then he hurled the man savagely against the ground and stood over him with his tulwar in his hand.

"Is there any who questions

my authority?" he roared, and his warriors looked down sullenly as his bellicose glare swept their semicircle. Yar Afzal grunted scornfully and sheathed his weapon with a gesture that was the apex of insult. Then he kicked the fallen agitator with a concentrated vindictiveness that brought howls from his victim.

"Get down the valley to the watchers on the heights and bring word if they have seen anything," commanded Yar Afzal, and the man went, shaking with fear and grinding his teeth with fury.

Yar Afzal then seated himself ponderously on a stone, growling in his beard. Conan stood near him, legs braced apart, thumbs hooked in his girdle, narrowly watching the assembled warriors. They stared at him sullenly, not daring to brave Yar Afzal's fury, but hating the foreigner as only a hillman can hate.

"Now listen to me, you sons of nameless dogs, while I tell you what the lord Conan and I have planned to fool the Kshatriyas"—the boom of Yar Afzal's bull-like voice followed the discomfited warrior as he slunk away from the assembly.

The man passed by the cluster of huts, where women who had seen his defeat laughed at him and called stinging comments, and hastened on along the trail that wound among spurs and rocks toward the valley head.

Just as he rounded the first

turn that took him out of sight of the village, he stopped short, gaping stupidly. He had not believed it possible for a stranger to enter the valley of Khurum without being detected by the hawk-eyed watchers along the heights; yet a man sat cross-legged on a low ledge beside the path—a man in a camel-hair robe and a green turban.

The Wazuli's mouth gaped for a yell, and his hand leaped to his knife-hilt. But at that instant his eyes met those of the stranger and the cry died in his throat, his fingers went limp. He stood like a statue, his own eyes glazed and vacant.

For minutes the scene held motionless; then the man on the ledge drew a cryptic symbol in the dust on the rock with his forefinger. The Wazuli did not see him place anything within the compass of that emblem, but presently something gleamed there—a round, shiny black ball that looked like polished jade. The man in the green turban took this up and tossed it the Wazuli, who mechanically caught it.

"Carry this to Yar Afzal," he said, and the Wazuli turned like an automation and went back along the path, holding the black jade ball in his outstretched hand. He did not even turn his head to the renewed jeers of the women as he passed the huts. He did not seem to hear.

The man on the ledge gazed after him with a cryptic smile. A girl's head rose above the rim of the ledge and she looked at him with admiration and a touch of fear that had not been present the night before.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

He ran his fingers through her dark locks caressingly.

"Are you still dizzy from your flight on the horse-of-air, that you doubt my wisdom?" he laughed. "As long as Yar Afzal lives, Conan will bide safe among the Wazuli fightingmen. Their knives are sharp, and there are many of them. What I plot will be safer, even for me, than to seek to slay him and take her from among them. It takes no wizard to predict what the Wazulis will do, and what Conan will do, when my victim hands the globe of Yezud to the chief of Khurum."

Back before the hut, Yar Afzal halted in the midst of some tirade, surprised and displeased to see the the man he had sent up the valley, pushing his way through the throng.

"I bade you go to the watchers!" the chief bellowed. "You have not had time to come from them."

The other did not reply; he stood woodenly, staring vacantly into the chief's face, his palm outstretched holding the jade ball. Conan, looking over Yar Afzal's shoulder, murmured something and reached to touch the chief's

arm, but as he did so, Yar Afzal, in a paroxysm of anger, struck the man with his clenched fist and felled him like an ox. As he fell, the jade sphere rolled to Yar Afzal's foot, and the chief seeming to see it for the first time, bent and picked it up. The men, staring perplexedly at their senseless comrade, saw their chief bend, but they did not see what he picked up from the ground.

Yar Afzal straightened, glanced at the jade, and made a motion to thrust it into his girdle.

"Carry that fool to his hut," he growled. "He has the look of a lotus-eater. He returned me a blank stare. I—*aie!*"

In his right hand, moving toward his girdle, he had suddenly felt movement where movement should not be. His voice died away as he stood and glared at nothing; and inside his clenched right hand he felt the quivering of *change*, of *motion of life*. He no longer held a smooth shining sphere in his fingers. And he dared not look; his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he could not open his hand. His astonished warriors saw Yar Afzal's eyes distend, the color ebb from his face. Then suddenly a bellow of agony burst from his bearded lips; he swayed and fell as if struck by lightning, his right arm tossed out in front of him. Face down he lay, and from between his opening fingers crawled a spider—a hideous, black

hairy-legged monster whose body shone like black jade. The men yelled and gave back suddenly, and the creature scuttled into a crevice of the rocks and disappeared.

The warriors started up, glaring wildly, and a voice rose above their clamor, a far-carrying voice of command which came from none knew where. Afterward each man there—who still lived—denied that he had shouted, but all there heard it.

“Yar Afzal is dead! Kill the outlander!”

The shout focused their whirling minds as one. Doubt, bewilderment and fear vanished in the uproaring surge of the blood-lust. A furious yell rent the skies as the tribesmen responded instantly to the suggestion. They came headlong across the open space, cloaks flapping, eyes blazing, knives lifted.

Conan’s action was as quick as theirs. As the voice shouted he sprang for the hut door. But they were closer to him than he was to the door, and with one foot on the sill he had to wheel and parry the swipe of a yard-long blade. He split the man’s skull—ducked another swinging knife and gutted the wielder—felled a man with his left fist and stabbed another in the belly—and heaved back mightily against the closed door with his shoulders. Hacking blades were nicking chips out of the jambs about his ears, but the

door flew open under the impact of his shoulders, and he went stumbling backward into the room. A bearded tribesman, thrusting with all his fury as Conan sprang back, over-reached and pitched head-first through the doorway. Conan stooped, grasped the slack of his garments and hauled him clear, and slammed the door in the faces of the men who came surging into it. Bones snapped under the impact, the next instant Conan slammed the bolts into place and whirled with desperate haste to meet the man who sprang from the floor and tore into action like a madman.

Yasmina cowered in a corner, staring in horror as the two men fought back and forth across the room, almost trampling her at times; the flash and clangor of their blades filled the room, and outside the mob clamored like a wolf-pack, hacking deafeningly at the bronze door with their long knives, and dashing huge rocks against it. Somebody fetched a tree trunk, and the door began to stagger under the thunderous assault. Yasmina clasped her ears, staring wildly. Violence and fury within, cataclysmic madness without. The stallion in his stall neighed and reared, thundering with his heels against the walls. He wheeled and launched his hoofs through the bars just as the tribesman, backing away from Conan’s murderous swipes, stum-

bled against them. His spine cracked in three places like a rotten branch and he was hurled headlong against the Cimmerian, bearing him backward so that they both crashed to the beaten floor.

Yasmina cried out and ran forward; to her dazed sight it seemed that both were slain. She reached them just as Conan threw aside the corpse and rose. She caught his arm, trembling from head to foot.

"Oh, you live! I thought—I thought you were dead!"

He glanced down at her quickly, into the pale, upturned face and the wide staring dark eyes.

"Why are you trembling?" he demanded. "Why should you care if I live or die?"

A vestige of her poise returned to her, and she drew away, making a rather pitiful attempt at playing the Devi.

"You are preferable to those wolves howling without," she answered, gesturing toward the door, the stone sill of which was beginning to splinter away.

"That won't hold long," he muttered, then turned and went swiftly to the stall of the stallion.

Yasmina clenched her hands and caught her breath as she saw him tear aside the splintered bars and go into the stall with the maddened beast. The stallion reared above him, neighing terribly, hoofs lifted, eyes and teeth flashing and ears laid back, but Conan leaped and caught his

mane with a display of sheer strength that seemed impossible, and dragged the beast down on his forelegs. The steed snorted and quivered, but stood still while the man bridled him and clapped on the gold-worked saddle, with the wide silver stirrups.

Wheeling the beast around in the stall, Conan called quickly to Yasmina, and the girl came, sidling nervously past the stallions's heels. Conan was working at the stone wall, talking swiftly as he worked.

"A secret door in the wall here, that not even the Wazuli know about. Yar Afzal showed it to me once when he was drunk. It opens out into the mouth of the ravine behind the hut. Ha!"

As he tugged at a projection that seemed casual, a whole section of the wall slid back on oiled iron runners. Looking through, the girl saw a narrow defile opening in a sheer stone cliff within a few feet of the hut's back wall. Then Conan sprang into the saddle and hauled her up before him. Behind them the great door groaned like a living thing and crashed in, and a yell rang to the roof as the entrance was instantly flooded with hairy faces and knives in hairy fists. And then the great stallion went through the wall like a javelin from a catapult, and thundered into the defile, running low, foam flying from the bit-rings.

That move came as an absolute surprise to the Wazulis. It was a surprise too, to those stealing down the ravine. It happened so quickly—the hurricane like charge of the great horse—that man in a green turban was unable to get out of the way. He went down under the frantic hoofs, and a girl screamed. Conan got one glimpse of her as they thundered by—a slim, dark girl in silk trousers and a jeweled breast-band, flattening herself against the ravine wall. Then the black horse and his riders were gone up the gorge like the spume blown before a storm, and the men who came tumbling through the wall into the defile after them met that which changed their yells of blood-lust to shrill screams of fear and death.

Chapter VI

The Mountain of the Black Seers

"Where now?" Yasmina was trying to sit erect on the rocking saddlebow, clutching her captor. She was conscious of a recognition of shame that she should not find unpleasant the feel of his muscular flesh under her fingers.

"To Afghulistan," he answered. "It's a perilous road, but the stallion will carry us easily, unless we fall in with some of your friends, or my tribal enemies. Now that Yar Afzal is dead, those damned Wazulis will be on our heels. I'm sur-

prized we haven't sighted them behind us already."

"Who was that man you rode down?" she asked.

"I don't know. I never saw him before. He's no Ghuli, that's certain. What the devil he was doing there is more than I can say. There was a girl with him, too."

"Yes." Her gaze was shadowed. "I cannot understand that. That girl was my maid, Gitara. Do you suppose she was coming to aid me? That the man was a friend? If so, the Wazulis have captured them both."

"Well," he answered, "there's nothing we can do. If we go back, they'll skin us both. I can't understand how a girl like that could get this far into the mountains with only one man—and he a robed scholar, for that's what he looked like. There's something infernally queer in all this. That fellow Yar Afzal beat and sent away—he moved like a man walking in his sleep. I've seen the priests and Zamora perform their abominable rituals in their forbidden temples, and their victims had a stare like that man. The priests looked into their eyes and muttered incantations, and then the people became like walking dead men, with glassy eyes, doing as they ordered.

"And then I saw what the fellow had in his hand, which Yar Afzal picked up. It was like a big black jade bead, such as the temple girls of Yezud wear when



they dance before the black stone spider which is their god. Yar Afzal held it in his hand, and he didn't pick up anything else. Yet when he fell dead, a spider, like the god at Yezud, only smaller, ran out of his fingers. And then, when the Wazulis stood uncertain there, a voice

cried out for them to kill me, and I know that voice didn't come from any of the warriors, nor from the women who watched by the huts. It seemed to come from *above*."

Yasmina did not reply. She glanced at the stark outlines of the mountains all about them and

shuddered. Her soul shrank from their gaunt brutality. This was a grim, naked land where anything might happen. Age-old traditions invested it with shuddery horror for anyone born in the hot, luxuriant southern plains.

The sun was high, beating down with fierce heat, yet the wind that blew in fitful gusts seemed to sweep off slopes of ice. Once she heard a strange rushing above them that was not the sweep of the wind, and from the way Conan looked up, she knew it was not a common sound to him, either. She thought that a strip of the cold blue sky was momentarily blurred, as if some all but invisible object had swept between it and herself, but she could not be sure. Neither made any comment, but Conan loosened his knife in his scabbard.

They were following a faintly marked path dipping down into ravines so deep the sun never struck bottom, laboring up steep slopes where loose shale threatened to slide from beneath their feet, and following knife-edge ridges with blue-hazed echoing depths on either hand.

The sun had passed its zenith when they crossed a narrow trail winding among the crags. Conan reined the horse aside and followed it southward, going almost at right angles to their former course.

"A Galzai village is at one end of this trail," he explained.

"Their women follow it to a well for water. You need new garments."

Glancing down at her filmy attire, Yasmina agreed with him. Her cloth-of-gold slippers were in tatters, her robes and silken under-garments torn to shreds that scarcely held together decently. Garments meant for the streets of Peshkauri were scarcely appropriate for the crags of the Himelians.

Coming to a crook in the trail, Conan dismounted, helped Yasmina down and waited. Presently he nodded, though she heard nothing.

"A woman coming along the trail," he remarked. In sudden panic she clutched his arm.

"You will not—kill her?"

"I don't kill women ordinarily," he grunted; "though some of these hillwomen are she-wolves. No," he grinned as at a huge jest. "By Crom, I'll *pay* for her clothes! How is that?" He displayed a handful of gold coins, and replaced all but the largest. She nodded, much relieved. It was perhaps natural for men to slay and die; her flesh crawled at the thought of watching the butchery of a woman.

Presently a woman appeared around the crook of the trail—a tall, slim Galzai girl, straight as a young sapling, bearing a great empty gourd. She stopped short and the gourd fell from her hands when she saw them; she wavered

as though to run, then realized that Conan was too close to her to allow her to escape, and so stood still, staring at them with a mixed expression of fear and curiosity.

Conan displayed the gold coin.

"If you will give this woman your garments," he said, "I will give you this money."

The response was instant. The girl smiled broadly with surprise and delight, and, with the disdain of a hillwoman for prudish conventions, promptly yanked off her sleeveless embroidered vest, slipped down her wide trousers and setpped out of them, twitched off her wide-sleeved shirt, and kicked off her sandals. Bundling them all in a bunch, she proffered them to Conan, who handed them to the astonished Devi.

"Get behind that rock and put these on," he directed, further proving himself no native hillman. "Fold your robes up into a bundle and bring them to me when you come out."

"The money!" clamored the hill girl, stretching out her hands eagerly. "The gold you promised me!"

Conan flipped the coin to her, she caught it, bit, then thrust it into her hair, bent and caught up the gourd and went on down the path, as devoid of self-consciousness as garments. Conan waited with some impatience while the Devi, for the first time in her pampered life, dressed her-

self. When she stepped from behind the rock he swore in surprise, and she felt a curious rush of emotions at the unrestrained admiration burning in his fierce blue eyes. She felt shame, embarrassment, yet a stimulation of vanity she had never before experienced, and a tingling when meeting the impact of his eyes. He laid a heavy hand on her shoulder and turned her about, staring avidly at her from all angles.

"By Crom!" said he. "In those smoky, mystic robes you were aloof and cold and far off as a star! Now you are a woman of warm flesh and blood! You went behind that rock as the Devi of Vendhya; you come out as a hill girl—though a thousand times more beautiful than any wench of the Zhaibar! You were a goddess—now you are real!"

He spanked her resoundingly, and she, recognizing this as merely another expression of admiration, did not feel outraged. It was indeed as if the changing of her garments had brought a change in her personality. The feelings and sensations she had suppressed rose to domination in her now, as if the queenly robes she had cast off had been material shackles and inhibitions.

But Conan, in his renewed admiration, did not forget that peril lurked all about them. The farther they drew away from the region of Zhaibar, the less likely

he was to encounter any Kshatriya troops. On the other hand he had been listening all throughout their flight for sounds that would tell him the vengeful Wazulis of Khurum were on their heels.

Swinging the Devi up, he followed her into the saddle and again reined the stallion westward. The bundle of garments she had given him, he hurled over a cliff, to fall into the depths of a thousand-foot gorge.

"Why did you do that?" she asked. "Why did you not give them to the girl?"

"The riders from Peshkhauri are combing these hills," he said. "They'll be ambushed and harried at every turn, and by way of reprisal they'll destroy every village they can take. They may turn westward any time. If they found a girl wearing your garments, they'd torture her into talking, and she might put them on my trail."

"What will she do?" asked Yasmina.

"Go back to her village and tell her people that a stranger attacked her," he answered. "She'll have them on our track, all right. But she had to go on and get the water first; if she dared go back without it, they'd whip the skin off her. That gives us a long start. They'll never catch us. By nightfall we'll cross the Afghuli border.

"There are no paths or signs

of human habitation in these parts," she commented. "Even for Himelians this region seems singularly deserted. We have not seen a trail since we left the one where we met the Galzai woman.

For answer he pointed to the northwest, where she glimpsed a peak in a notch of the crags.

"Yimsha," grunted Conan. "The tribes build their villages as far from that mountain as they can."

She was instantly rigid with attention.

"Yimsha!" she whispered. "The mountain of the Black Seers!"

"So they say," he answered. "This is as near as I ever approached it. I have swung north to avoid any Kshatriya troops that might be prowling through the hills. The regular trail from Khurum to Afghulistan lies farther south. This is an ancient one, and seldom used."

She was staring intently at the distant peak. Her nails bit into her pink palms.

"How long would it take to reach Yimsha from this point?"

"All the rest of the day, and all night," he answered, and grinned. "Do you want to go there? By Crom, it's no place for an ordinary human, from what the hill people say."

"Why do they not gather and destroy the devils that inhabit it?" she demanded.

"Wipe out wizards with swords?"

Anyway, they never interfere with people, unless the people interfere with them. I never saw one of them, though I've talked with men who swore they had. They say they've glimpsed people from the tower among the crags at sunset or sunrise—tall, silent men in black robes."

"Would you be afraid to attack them?"

"I?" The idea seemed a new one to him. "Why, if they imposed upon me, it would be my life or theirs. But I have nothing to do with them. I came to these mountains to raise a following of human beings, not to war with wizards."

Yasmina did not at once reply. She stared at the peak as at a human enemy, feeling all her anger and hatred stir in her bosom anew. And another feeling began to take dim shape. She had plotted to hurl against the masters of Yimsah the man in whose arms she was now carried. Perhaps there was another way, besides the method she had planned, to accomplish her purpose. She could not mistake the look that was beginning to dawn in this wild man's eyes as they rested on her. Kingdoms have fallen when a woman's slim white hands pulled the strings of destiny. Suddenly she stiffened, pointing. "Look!"

Just visible on the distant peak there hung a cloud of peculiar aspect. It was a frosty crimson in color, veined with sparkling gold.

This cloud was in motion; it rotated, and as it whirled it contracted. It dwindled to a spinning taper that flashed in the sun. And suddenly it detached itself from the snow-tipped peak, floated out over the void like a gay-hued feather, and became invisible against the cerulean sky.

"What could that have been?" asked the girl uneasily, as a shoulder of rock shut the distant mountain from view; the phenomenon had been disturbing, even its beauty.

"The hillmen call it Yimsha's Carpet, whatever that means," answered Conan. "I've seen five hundred of them running as if the devil were at their heels, to hid themselves in caves and crags, because they saw that crimson cloud float up from the peak. What in—"

They had advanced through a narrow, knife-cut gash between turreted walls and emerged upon a broad ledge flanked by a series of rugged slopes on one hand, and a gigantic precipice on the other. The dim trail followed this ledge, bent around a shoulder and reappeared at intervals far below, working a tedious way downward. And emerging from the gut that opened upon the ledge, the black stallion halted short, snorting. Conan urged him on impatiently, and the horse snorted and threw his head up and down, quivering and straining as if against an invisible barrier.

Conan swore and swung off, lifting Yasmina down with him. He went forward, with a hand throw out before him as if expecting to encounter unseen resistance, but there was nothing to hinder him, though when he tried to lead the horse, it neighed shrilly and jerked back. Then Yasmina cried out, and Conan wheeled, hand starting to knife-hilt.

Neither of them had seen him come, but he stood there, with his arms folded, a man in a camel-hair robe and a green turban. Conan grunted with surprise to recognize the man the stallion had spurned in the ravine outside the Wazuli village.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded.

The man did not answer. Conan noticed that his eyes were wide, fixed, and of a peculiar luminous quality. And those eyes held his like a magnet.

Khemsa's sorcery was based on hypnotism, as is the case with most Eastern magic. The way has been prepared for the hypnotist for untold centuries of generations who have lived and died in the firm conviction of the reality and power of hypnotism, building up, by mass thought and practice, a colossal though intangible atmosphere against which the individual, steeped in the traditions of the land, finds himself helpless.

But Conan was not a son of

the East. Its traditions were meaningless to him; he was the product of an utterly alien atmosphere. Hypnotism was not even a myth in Cimmeria. The heritage that prepared a native of the East for submission to the mesmerist was not his.

He was aware of what Khemsa was trying to do to him; but he felt the impact of the man's uncanny power only as a vague impulsion, a tugging and pulling that he could shake off as a man shakes spider-webs from his garments.

Aware of hostility and black magic, he ripped out his long knife and lunged, as quick on his feet as a mountain lion.

But hypnotism was not all of Khemsa's magic. Yasmina, watching, did not see by what roguery of movement or illusion the man in the green turban avoided the terrible disemboweling thrust. But the keen blade whickered between side and lifted arm, and to Yasmina it seemed that Khemsa merely brushed his open palm lightly against Conan's bull-neck. But the Cimmerian went down like a slain ox.

Yet Conan was not dead; breaking his fall with his left hand, he slashed at Khemsa's legs even as he went down, and the Rakhsha avoided the scythe-like swipe only by a most unwizardly bound backward. Then Yasmina cried out sharply as she saw a woman she recognized as Gitara glide out

from among the rocks and come up to the man. The greeting died in the Devi's throat as she saw the malevolence in the girl's beautiful face.

Conan was rising slowly, shaken and dazed by the cruel craft of that blow which, delivered with an art forgotten of men before Atlantis sank, would have broken like a rotten twig the neck of a lesser man. Khemsa gazed at him cautiously and a trifle uncertainly. The Rakhsha had learned the full flood of his own power when he faced at bay the knives of the maddened Wazulis in the ravine behind Khurum village; but the Cimmerian's resistance had perhaps shaken his new-found confidence a trifle. Sorcery thrives on success, not on failure.

He stepped forward, lifting his hand—then halted as if frozen, head tilted back, eyes wide open, hand raised. In spite of himself Conan followed his gaze, and so did the women—the girl cowering by the trembling stallion, and the girl beside Khemsa.

Down the mountain-slopes, like a whirl of shining dust blown before the wind, a crimson, conoid cloud came dancing. Khemsa's dark face turned ashen; his hand began to tremble, then sank to his side. The girl beside him, sensing the change in him, stared at him inquiringly.

The crimson shape left the mountain-slope and came down in a long arching swoop. It struck

the ledge between Conan and Khemsa, and the Rakhsha gave back with a stifled cry. He backed away, pushing the girl Gitara back with groping, fending hands.

The crimson cloud balanced like a spinning top for an instant, whirling in a dazzling sheen on its point. Then without warning it was gone, vanished as a bubble vanishes when burst. There on the ledge stood four men. It was miraculous, incredible impossible, yet it was true. They were not ghosts or phantoms. They were four tall men, with shaven, vulture-like heads, and black robes that hid their feet. Their hands were concealed by their wide sleeves. They stood in silence, their naked heads nodding slightly in unison. They were facing Khemsa, but behind them Conan felt his own blood turning to ice in his veins. Rising, he backed stealthily away, until he felt the stallion's shoulder trembling against his back, and the Devi crept into the shelter of his arm. There was no word spoken. Silence hung like a stifling pall.

All four of the men in black robes stared at Khemsa. Their vulture-like faces were immobile, their eyes introspective and contemplative. But Khemsa shook like a man in an ague. His feet were braced on the rock, his calves straining as if in physical combat. Sweat ran in streams down his dark face. His right hand locked on something un-

der his brown robe so desperately that the blood ebbed from that hand and left it white. His left hand fell on the shoulder of Gitara and clutched in agony like the grasp of a drowning man. She did not flinch or whimper, though his fingers dug like talons into her firm flesh.

Conan had witnessed hundreds of battles in his wild life, but never one like this, wherein four diabolical wills sought to beat down one lesser but equally devilish will that opposed them. But he only faintly sensed the monstrous quality of that hideous struggle. With his back to the wall, driven to bay by his former masters, Khemsa was fighting for his life with all the dark power, all the frightful knowledge they had taught him through long, grim years of neophytism and vassalage.

He was stronger than even he had guessed, and the free exercise of his powers in his own behalf had tapped unsuspected reservoirs of force. And he was nerved to super-energy by frantic fear and desperation. He reeled before the merciless impact of those hypnotic eyes, but he held his ground. His features were distorted into a bestial grin of agony, and his limbs were twisted as in a rack. It was a war of souls, of frightful brains steeped in lore forbidden to men for a million years, of mentalities which had plumbed the abysses

and explored the dark stars where spawn the shadows.

Yasmina understood this better than did Conan. And she dimly understood why Khemsa could withstand the concentrated impact of those four hellish wills which might have blasted into atoms the very rock on which he stood. The reason was the girl that he clutched with the strength of his despair. She was like an anchor to his staggering soul, battered by the waves of those psychic emanations. His weakness was now his strength. His love for the girl, violent and evil though it might be, was yet a tie that bound him to the rest of humanity, providing an earthly leverage for his will, a chain that his inhuman enemies could not break; at least not break through Khemsa.

They realized that before he did. And one of them turned his gaze from the Rakhsha full upon Gitara. There was no battle there. The girl shrank and wilted like a leaf in the drouth. Irresistibly impelled, she tore herself from her lover's arms before he realized what was happening. Then a hideous thing came to pass. She began to back toward the precipice, facing her tormentors, her eyes wide and blank as dark gleaming glass from behind which a lamp has been blown out. Khemsa reeled drunkenly after her, hands vainly outstretched, groaning, slobbering in his pain,

his feet moving heavily like dead things.

On the very brink she paused, standing stiffly, her heels on the edge, and he fell on his knees and crawled whimpering toward her, groping for her, to drag her back from destruction. And just before his clumsy fingers touched her, one of the wizards laughed, like the sudden, bronze note of a bell in hell. The girl reeled suddenly and, consummate climax of exquisite cruelty, reason and understanding flooded back into her eyes, which flared with awful fear. She screamed, clutched wildly at her lover's straining hands, and then, unable to save herself, fell headlong with a moaning cry.

Khemsa hauled himself to the edge and stared over, haggardly, his lips working as he mumbled to himself. Then he turned and stared for a long minute at his torturers with wide eyes that held no human light. And then with a cry that almost burst the rocks, he reeled up and came rushing toward them, a knife lifted in his hand.

One of the Rakhshas stepped forward and stamped his foot, and as he stamped, there came a rumbling that grew swiftly to a grinding roar. Where his foot struck, a crevice opened in the solid rock that widened instantly. Then, with a deafening crash, a whole section of the ledge gave way. There was a last glimpse of Khemsa, with arms wildly upflung,

and then he vanished amidst the roar of the avalanche that thundered down the abyss.

The four looked contemplatively at the ragged edge of rock that formed the new rim of the precipice, and then turned suddenly. Conan, thrown off his feet by the shudder of the mountain, was rising, lifting Yasmina. He seemed to move as slowly as his brain was working. He was befogged and stupid. He realized that there was desperate need for him to lift the Devi on the black stallion, and ride like the wind, but an unaccountable sluggishness weighted his every thought and action.

And now the wizards had turned toward him; they raised their arms, and to his horrified sight, he saw their outlines fading, dimming, becoming hazy and nebulous, as a crimson smoke billowed around their feet and rose about them.

They were blotted out by a sudden whirling cloud—and then he realized that he too was enveloped in a blinding crimson mist—he heard Yasmina scream, and the stallion cried out like a woman in pain. The Devi was torn from his arm, and as he lashed out with his knife blindly, a terrific blow like a gust of storm wind knocked him sprawling against a rock. Dazedly he saw a crimson conoid cloud spinning up and over the mountain slopes. Yasmina was gone, and so were the four men in black. Only the

terrified stallion shared the ledge with him.

Chapter VII On to Yimsha

As mists vanish before a strong wind, the cobwebs vanished from Conan's brain. With a searing curse he leaped into the saddle and the stallion reared neighing beneath him. He glared up the slopes, hesitated, and then turned down the trail in the direction he had been going when halted by Khemsa's trickery. But now he did not ride at a measured gait. He shook loose the reins and the stallion went like a thunderbolt, as if frantic to lose hysteria in violent physical exertion. Across the ledge and around the crag and down the narrow trail threading the great steep they plunged at breakneck speed. The path followed a fold of rock, winding interminably down from tier to tier of striated escarpment, and once, far below, Conan got a glimpse of the ruin that had fallen—a mighty pile of broken stone and boulders at the foot of a gigantic cliff.

The valley floor was still far below him when he reached a long and lofty ridge that led out from the slope like a natural causeway. Out upon this he rode, with an almost sheer drop on either hand. He could trace ahead of him the trail he had to follow; far ahead it dropped down from the ridge and made a great horseshoe back

into the river bed at his left hand. He cursed the necessity of traversing those miles, but it was the only way. To try to descend to the lower lap of the trail here would be to attempt the impossible. Only a bird could get to the riverbed with a whole neck.

So he urged on the wearying stallion, until a clink of hoofs reached his ears, welling up from below. Pulling up short and reining to the lip of the cliff, he stared down into the dry riverbed that wound along the foot of the ridge. Along that gorge rode a motley throng—bearded men on half-wild horses, five hundred strong, bristling with weapons. And Conan shouted suddenly, leaning over the edge of the cliff, three hundred feet above them.

At his shout they reined back, and five hundred bearded faces were tilted up toward him; a deep, clamorous roar filled the canyon. Conan did not waste words.

"I was riding for Ghor!" he roared. "I had not hoped to meet you dogs on the trail. Follow me as fast as your nags can push! I'm going to Yimsha, and—"

"Traitor!" The howl was like a dash of ice-water in his face.

"What?" He glared down at them, jolted speechless. He saw wild eyes blazing up at him, faces contorted with fury, fists brandishing blades.

"Traitor!" they roared back, wholeheartedly. "Where are the seven chiefs held captive in Pesh-

khauri?" Where, we ask you?"

"Why, in the governor's prison, I suppose," he answered.

A bloodthirsty yell from a hundred throats answered him, with such a waving of weapons and a clamor that he could not understand what they were saying. He beat down the din with a bull-like roar, and bellowed: "What devil's play is this? Let one of you speak, so I can understand what you mean!"

A gaunt old chief elected himself to this position, shook his tulwar at Conan as a preamble, and shouted accusingly. "You would not let us go raiding Peshkhauri to rescue our brothers!"

"No, you fools!" roared the exasperated Cimmerian. "Even if you'd breached the wall, which is unlikely, they'd have hanged the prisoners before you could reach them."

"And you went alone to traffic with the governor!" yelled the Afghuli, working himself into a frothing frenzy.

"Well?"

"Where are the seven chiefs?" howled the old chief, making his tulwar into a glimmering wheel of steel about his head. "Where are they? Dead!"

"What!" Conan nearly fell off his horse in his surprise.

"Aye, dead!" five hundred bloodthirsty voices assured him.

The old chief brandished his arms and got the floor again. "They were not hanged!" he

screeched. "A Wazuli in another cell saw them die! The governor sent a wizard to slay them by craft!"

"That must be a lie," said Conan. "The governor would not dare. Last night I talked with him—"

The admission was unfortunate. A yell of hate and accusation split the skies.

"Aye! You went to him alone! To betray us! It is no lie. The Wazuli escaped through the doors the wizard burst in his entry, and told the tale to our scouts whom he met in the Zhaibar. They had been sent forth to search for you, when you did not return. When they heard the Wazuli's tale, they returned with all haste to Ghor, and we saddled our steeds and girt our swords!"

"And what do you fools mean to do?" demanded the Cimmerian.

"To avenge our brothers!" they howled. "Death to the Kshatriyas! Slay him, brothers, he is a traitor!"

Arrows began to rattle around him. Conan rose in his stirrups, striving to make himself heard above the tumult, and then, with a roar of mingled rage, defiance and disgust, he wheeled and galloped back up the trail. Behind him and below him the Afghulis came pelting, mouthing their rage, too furious even to remember that the only way they could reach the height whereon he rode was to traverse the riverbed in the

other direction, make the broad bend and follow the twisting trail up over the ridge. When they did remember this, and turned back, their repudiated chief had almost reached the point where the ridge joined the escarpment.

At the cliff he did not take the trail by which he had descended, but turned off on another, a mere trace along a rock-fault, where the stallion scrambled for footing. He had not ridden far when the stallion snorted and shied back from something lying in the trail. Conan stared down on the travesty of a man, a broken, shredded, bloody heap that gibbered and gnashed splintered teeth.

Only the dark gods that rule over the grim destinies of wizards know how Khemsa dragged his shattered body from beneath that awful cairn of fallen rocks and up the steep slope to the trail.

Impelled by some obscure reason, Conan dismounted and stood looking down at the ghastly shape, knowing that he was witness of a thing miraculous and opposed to nature. The Rakhsha lifted his gory head, and his strange eyes, glazed with agony and approaching death, rested on Conan with recognition.

"Where are they?" It was a racking croak not even remotely resembling a human voice.

"Gone back to their damnable castle on Yimsha," grunted Conan. "They took the Devi with them."

"I will go!" muttered the man. "I will follow them! They killed Gitara; I will kill them—the acolytes, the Four of the Black Circle, the Master himself! Kill—kill them all!" He strove to drag his mutilated frame along the rock, but not even his indomitable will could animate that gory mass longer, where the splintered bones hung together only by torn tissue and ruptured fiber.

"Follow them!" raved Khemsa, drooling a bloody slaver. "Follow!"

"I'm going to," growled Conan. "I went to fetch my Afghulis, but they've turned on me. I'm going on to Yimsha alone. I'll have the Devi back if I have to tear down that damned mountain with my bare hands. I didn't think the governor would dare kill my headmen, when I had the Devi, but it seems he did. I'll have his head for that. She's no use to me now as a hostage, but—"

"The curse of Yizil on them!" gasped Khemsa. "Go! I am dying. Wait—take my girdle."

He tried to fumble with a mangled hand at his tatters, and Conan, understanding what he sought to convey, bent and drew from about his gory waist a girdle of curious aspect.

"Follow the golden vein through the abyss," muttered Khemsa. "Wear the girdle. I had it from a Stygian priest. It will aid you, though it failed me at last. Break the crystal globe with

the four golden pomegranates. Beware of the Master's transmutations—I am going to Gitara—she is waiting for me in hell—*aie, ya Skelos yar!*” And so he died.

Conan stared down at the girdle. The hair of which it was woven was not horsehair. He was convinced that it was woven of the thick black tresses of a woman. Set in the thick mesh were tiny jewels such as he had never seen before. The buckle was strangely made, in the form of a golden serpent head, flat, wedge-shaped and scaled with curious art. A strong shudder shook Conan as he handled it, and he turned as though to cast it over the precipice; then he hesitated, and finally buckled it about his waist, under the Bakhariot girdle. Then he mounted and pushed on.

The sun had sunk behind the crags. He climbed the trail in the vast shadow of the cliffs that was thrown out like a dark blue mantle over valleys and ridges far below. He was not far from the crest when, edging around the shoulder of a jutting crag, he heard the clink of shod hoofs ahead of him. He did not turn back. Indeed, so narrow was the path that the stallion could not have wheeled his great body upon it. He rounded the jut of the rock and came upon a portion of the path that broadened somewhat. A chorus of threatening yells broke on his ear, but his stallion pinned

a terrified horse hard against the rock, and Conan caught the arm of the rider in an iron grip, checking the lifted sword in mid-air.

“Kerim Shah!” muttered Conan, red glints smoldering luridly in his eyes. The Turanian did not struggle; they sat their horses almost breast to breast, Conan's fingers locking the other's sword-arm. Behind Kerim Shah filed a group of lean Irakzai on gaunt horses. They glared like wolves, fingering bows and knives, but rendered uncertain because of the narrowness of the path and the perilous proximity of the abyss that yawned beneath them.

“Where is the Devi?” demanded Kerim Shah.

“What's it to you, you Hyrkanian spy?” snarled Conan.

“I know you have her,” answered Kerim Shah. “I was on my way northward with some tribesmen when we were ambushed by enemies in Shalizah Pass. Many of my men were slain, and the rest of us harried through the hills like jackals. When we had beaten off our pursuers, we turned westward, toward Amir Jehun Pass, and this morning we came upon a Wazuli wandering through the hills. He was quite mad, but I learned much from his incoherent gibberings before he died. I learned that he was the sole survivor of a band which followed a chief of the Afghulis and a captive

Kshatriya woman into a gorge behind Khurum village. He babbled much of a man in a green turban whom the Afghuli rode down, but who, when attacked by the Wazulis who pursued, smote them with a nameless doom that wiped them out as a gust of wind-driven fire wipes out a cluster of locusts.

"How that one man escaped, I do not know, nor did he; but I knew from his maunderings that Conan of Ghor had been in Khurum with his royal captive. And as we made our way through the hills, we overtook a naked Galzai girl bearing a gourd of water, who told us a tale of having been stripped and ravished by a giant foreigner in the garb of an Afghuli chief, who, she said, gave her garments to a Vendhyan woman who accompanied him. She said you rode westward."

Kerim Shah did not consider it necessary to explain that he had been on his way to keep his rendezvous with the expected troops from Secunderam when he found his way barred by hostile tribesmen. The road to Gurashah valley through Shalizah Pass was longer than the road that wound through Amir Jehun Pass, but the latter traversed part of the Afghuli country, which Kerim Shah had been anxious to avoid until he came with an army. Barred from the Shalizah road, however, he had turned to the forbidden route, until news that

Conan had not yet reached Afghulistan with his captive had caused him to turn southward and push on recklessly in the hope of overtaking the Cimmerian in the hills.

"So you had better tell me where the Devi is," suggested Kerim Shah. "We outnumber you—"

"Let one of your dogsnock a shaft and I'll throw you over the cliff," Conan promised. "It wouldn't do you any good to kill me, anyhow. Five hundred Afghulis are on my trail, and if they find you've cheated them, they'll flay you alive. Anyway, I haven't got the Devi. She's in the hands of the Black Seers of Yimsha."

"*Tarim!*" swore Kerim Shah softly, shaken out of his poise for the first time. "Khemsa—"

"Khemsa's dead," grunted Conan. "His masters sent him to hell on a landslide. And now get out of my way. I'd be glad to kill you if I had the time, but I'm on my way to Yimsha."

"I'll go with you," said the Turanian abruptly.

Conan laughed at him. "Do you think I'd trust you, you Hyrkanian dog?"

"I don't ask you to," returned Kerim Shah. "We both want the Devi. You know my reason; King Yezdigerd desires to add her kingdom to his empire, and herself in his seraglio. And I knew you, in the days when you were a hetman

of the *kozak* steppes; so I know your ambition is wholesale plunder. You want to loot Vendhya, and to twist out a huge ransom for Yasmina. Well, let us for the time being, without any illusion about each other, unite our forces, and try to rescue the Devi from the Seers. If we succeed, and live, we can fight it out to see who keeps her."

Conan narrowly scrutinized the other for a moment, and then nodded, releasing the Turanian's arm. "Agreed; what about your men?"

Kerim Shah turned to the silent Irakzai and spoke briefly: "This chief and I are going to Yimsha to fight the wizards. Will you go with us, or stay here to be flayed by the Afghulis who are following this man?"

They looked at him with eyes grimly fatalistic. They were doomed and they knew it—had known it ever since the singing arrows of the ambushed Dagozai had driven them back from the pass of Shalizah. The men of the lower Zhaibar had too many reeking blood-feuds among the crag-dwellers. They were too small a band to fight their way back through the hills to the villages of the border, without the guidance of the crafty Turanian. They counted themselves as dead already, so they made the reply that only dead men would make: "We will go with thee and die on Yimsha."

"Then in Crom's name let us be gone," grunted Conan, fidgeting with impatience as he stared into the blue gulfs of the deepening twilight. "My wolves were hours behind me, but we've lost a devilish lot of time."

Kerim Shah backed his steed from between the black stallion and the cliff, sheathed his sword and cautiously turned the horse. Presently the band was filing up the path as swiftly as they dared. They came out upon the crest nearly a mile east of the spot where Khemsa had halted the Cimmerian and the Devi. The path they had traversed was a perilous one, even for hillmen, and for that reason Conan had avoided it that day when carrying Yasmina, though Kerim Shah, following him, had taken it supposing the Cimmerian had done likewise. Even Conan sighed with relief when the horses scrambled up over the last rim. They moved like phantom riders through an enchanted realm of shadows. The soft creak of leather, the clink of steel marked their passing, then again the dark mountain slopes lay naked and silent in the starlight.

Chapter VIII

Yasmina Knows Stark Terror

Yasmina had time but for one scream when she felt herself enveloped in that crimson whirl and torn from her protector with ap-

palling force. She screamed once, and then she had no breath to scream. She was blinded, deafened, rendered mute and eventually senseless by the terrific rushing of the air about her. There was a dazed consciousness of dizzy height and numbing speed, a confused impression of natural sensations gone mad, and then vertigo and oblivion.

A vestige of these sensations clung to her as she recovered consciousness; so she cried out and clutched wildly as though to stay a headlong and involuntary flight. Her fingers closed on soft fabric, and a relieving sense of stability pervaded her. She took cognizance of her surroundings.

She was lying on a dais covered with black velvet. This dais stood in a great, dim room whose walls were hung with dusky tapestries across which crawled dragons reproduced with repellent realism. Floating shadows merely hinted at the lofty ceiling, and gloom that lent itself to illusion lurked in the corners. There seemed to be neither windows nor doors in the walls, or else they were concealed by the nighted tapestries. Where the dim light came from, Yasmina could not determine. The great room was a realm of mysteries, of shadows, and shadowy shapes in which she could not have sworn to observe movement, yet which invaded her mind with a dim and formless

terror. She gasped to scream, but her gaze fixed itself on a tangible object. On another, smaller dais of jet, a few feet away, a man sat crosslegged, gazing contemplatively at her. His long black velvet robe, embroidered with gold thread, fell loosely about him, masking his figure. His hands were folded in his sleeves. There was a velvet cap upon his head. His face was calm, placid, not unhandsome, his eyes lambent and slightly oblique. He did not move a muscle as he sat regarding her, nor did his expression alter when he saw she was conscious.

Yasmina felt fear crawl like a trickle of ice-water down her supple spine. She lifted herself on her elbows and stared apprehensively at the stranger.

"Who are you?" she demanded. Her voice sounded brittle and inadequate.

"I am the Master of Yimsha." The tone was rich and resonant, like the mellow notes of a temple bell.

"Why did you bring me here?" she demanded.

"Were you not seeking me?"

"If you are one of the Black Seers—yes!" she answered recklessly, believing that he could read her thoughts anyway.

He laughed softly, and chills crawled up and down her spine again.

"You would turn the wild children of the hills against the Seers

of Yimsha!" he smiled. "I have read it in your mind, princess. Your weak, human mind, filled with petty dreams of hate and revenge."

"You slew my brother!" A rising tide of anger was vying with her fear; her hands were clenched, her lithe body rigid. "Why did you persecute him? He never harmed you. The priests say the Seers are above meddling in human affairs. Why did you destroy the kind of Vendhya?"

"How can an ordinary human understand the motives of a Seer?" returned the Master calmly. "My acolytes in the temples of Turan, who are the priests behind the priests of Tarim, urged me to bestir myself in behalf of Yezdigerd. For reasons of my own, I complied. How can I explain my mystic reasons to your puny intellect? You could not understand."

"I understand this: my brother died!" Tears of grief and rage shook in her voice. She rose upon her knees and stared at him with wide blazing eyes, as supple and dangerous in that moment as a she-panther.

"As Yezdigerd desired," agreed the Master calmly. "For a while it was my whim to further his ambitions."

"Is Yezdigerd your vassal?" Yasmina tried to keep the timbre of her voice unaltered. She had felt her knee pressing something hard and symmetrical under a

fold of velvet. Subtly she shifted her position, moving her hand under the fold.

"Is the dog that licks up the offal in the temple yard the vassal of the god?" returned the Master.

He did not seem to notice the actions she sought to dissemble. Concealed by the velvet, her fingers closed on what she knew was the golden hilt of a dagger. She bent her head to hide the light of triumph in her eyes.

"I am weary of Yezdigerd," said the Master. "I have turned to other amusements—ha!"

With a fierce cry Yasmina sprang like a jungle cat, stabbing murderously. Then she stumbled and slid to the floor where she cowered, staring up at the man on the dais. He had not moved; his cryptic smile was unchanged. Termblingly she lifted her hand and stared at it with dilated eyes. There was no dagger in her fingers; they grasped a stalk of golden lotus, the crushed blossoms drooping on the bruised stem.

She dropped it as if it had been a viper, and scrambled away from the proximity of her tormenter. She returned to her own dais, because that was at least more dignified for a queen than groveling on the floor at the feet of a sorcerer, and eyed him apprehensively, expecting reprisals.

But the Master made no move.

"All substance is one to him

who holds the key of the cosmos," he said cryptically. "To an adept nothing is immutable. At will, steel blossoms bloom in unnamed gardens, or flower-swords flash in the moonlight."

"You are a devil," she sobbed.

"Not I!" he laughed. "I was born on this planet, long ago. Once I was a common man, nor have I lost all human attributes in the numberless eons of my adeptship. A human steeped in the dark arts is greater than a devil. I am of human origin, but I rule demons. You have seen the Lords of the Black Circle—it would blast your soul to hear from what far realm I summoned them and from what doom I guard them with ensorcelled crystal and golden serpents.

"But only I can rule them. My foolish Khemsa thought to make himself great—poor fool, bursting material doors and hurtling himself and his mistress through the air from hill to hill! Yet if he had not been destroyed his power might have grown to rival mine."

He laughed again. "And you, poor, silly thing! Plotting to send a hairy hill chief to storm Yim-sha! It was such a jest that I myself could have designed, had it occurred to me, that you should fall into his hands. And I read in your childish mind an intention to seduce by your feminine wiles to attempt your purpose, anyway.

"But for all your stupidity, you

are a woman fair to look upon. It is my whim to keep you for my slave."

The daughter of a thousand proud emperors gasped with shame and fury at the word.

"You dare not!"

His mocking laughter cut her like a whip across her naked shoulders.

"The king dares not trample a worm in the road? Little fool, do you not realize that your royal pride is no more to me than a straw blown on the wind? I, who have known the kisses of the queens of Hell! You have seen how I deal with a rebel!"

Cowed and awed, the girl crouched on the velvet-covered dais. The light grew dimmer and more phantom-like. The features of the Master became shadowy. His voice took on a newer tone of command.

"I will never yield to you?" Her voice trembled with fear but it carried a ring of resolution.

"You will yield," he answered with horrible conviction. "Fear and pain shall teach you. I will lash you with horror and agony to the last quivering ounce of your endurance, until you become as melted wax to be bent and molded in my hands as I desire. You shall know such discipline as no mortal woman ever knew, until my slightest command is to you as the unalterable will of the gods. And first, to humble your pride, you shall tra-

vel back through the lost ages, and view all the shapes that have been you. *Aie, yil la khosa!*''

At these words the shadowy room swam before Yasmina's af-frighted gaze. The roots of her hair prickled her scalp, and her tongue clove to her palate. Some-where a gong sounded a deep, ominous note. The dragons on the tapestries glowed like blue fire, and then faded out. The Master on his dais was but a shapeless shadow. The dim light gave way to soft, thick darkness, almost tangible, that pulsed with strange radiations. She could no longer see the Master. She could see nothing. She had a strange sensation that the walls and ceil-ing had withdrawn immensely from her.

Then somewhere in the dark-ness a glow began, like a fire-fly that rhythmically dimmed and quickened. It grew to a golden ball, and as it expanded its light grew more intense, flaming white-ly. It burst suddenly, showering the darkness with white sparks that did not illumine the sha-dows. But like an impression left in the gloom, a faint luminance remained, and revealed a slender dusky shaft shooting up from the shadowy floor. Under the girl's dilated gaze it spread, took shape; stems and broad leaves appeared, and great black poisonous blos-soms that towered above her as she cringed against the velvet. A subtle perfume pervaded the

atmosphere. It was the dread fig-ure of the black lotus that had grown up as she watched, as it grows in the haunted, forbid-den jungles of Khitai.

The broad leaves were mur-murous with evil life. The blos-soms bent toward her like sen-tient things, nodding serpent-like on pliant stems. Etched against soft, impenetrable darkness, it loomed over her, gigantic, black-ly visible in some mad way. Her brain reeled with the drugging scent and she sought to crawl from the dais. Then she clung to it as it seemed to be pitching at an impossible slant. She cried out with terror and clung to the vel-vet, but she felt her fingers ruth-lessly torn away. There was a sensation as of all sanity and sta-bility crumbling and vanishing. She was a quivering atom of sentiency driven through a black, roaring, icy void by a thundering wind that threatened to extin-guish her feeble flicker of animate life like a candle blown out in a storm.

Then there came a period of blind impulse and movement, when the atom that was she min-gled and merged with myriad other atoms of spawning life in the yeasty morass of existence, molded by formative forces until she emerged again a conscious individual, whirling down an end-less spiral of lives.

In a mist of terror she relived all her former existences, recog-

nized and *was* again all the bodies that had carried her ego throughout the changing ages. She bruised her feet again over the long, weary road of life that stretched out behind her into the immemorial Past. Back beyond the dimmest dawns of Time she crouched shuddering in primordial jungles, hunted by slaving bests of prey. Skin-clad, she waded thigh-deep in rice-swamps, battling with squawking waterfowl for the precious grains. She labored with the oxen to drag the pointed stick through the stubborn soil, and she crouched endlessly over looms in peasant huts.

She saw walled cities burst into flame, and fled screaming before the slayers. She reeled naked and bleeding over burning sands, dragged at the slaver's stirrup, and she knew the grip of hot, fierce hands on her writhing flesh, the shame and agony of brutal lust. She screamed under the bite of the lash, and moaned on the rack; mad with terror she fought against the hands that forced her head inexorably down on the bloody block.

She knew the agonies of childbirth, and the bitterness of love betrayed. She suffered all the woes and wrongs and brutalities that man has inflicted on woman throughout the eons; and she endured all the spite and malice of woman for woman. And like the flick of a fiery whip through-

out was the consciousness she retained of her Devi-ship. She was all the women she had ever been, yet in her knowing she was Yasmina. This consciousness was not lost in the throes of reincarnation. At one and the same time she was a naked slave-wench groveling under the whip, and the proud Devi of Vendhya. And she suffered not only as the slave-girl suffered, but as Yasmina, to whose pride the whip was like a white-hot brand.

Life merged into life in flying chaos, each with its burden of woe and shame and agony, until she dimly heard her own voice screaming unbearably, like one long-drawn cry of suffering echoing down the ages.

Then she awakened on the velvet-covered dais in the mystic room.

In a ghostly gray light she saw again the dais and the cryptic robed figure seated upon it. The hooded head was bent, the high shoulders faintly etched against the uncertain dimness. She could make out no details clearly, but the hood, where the velvet cap had been, stirred a formless uneasiness in her. As she stared, there stole over her a nameless fear that froze her tongue to her palate—a feeling that it was not the Master who sat so silently on that black dais.

Then the figure moved and rose upright, towering above her. It stooped over her and the long

(Continued on page 139)

THE YOUNG ONE

BY JEROME BIXBY

A careful study of the screen credits for the smash-hit science-fiction movie "Fantastic Voyage" reveals a very interesting detail—that the screenplay was based on an original story by two gentlemen named Otto Klement and J.L. Bixby, the second of whom turns out to be none other than Jerome Bixby, author of such choice fantasies as "It's a Good Life" and the following short, in which some immigrants from Hungary decide to give up the old ways—even if it means eating raw beefsteak at least twice each week.

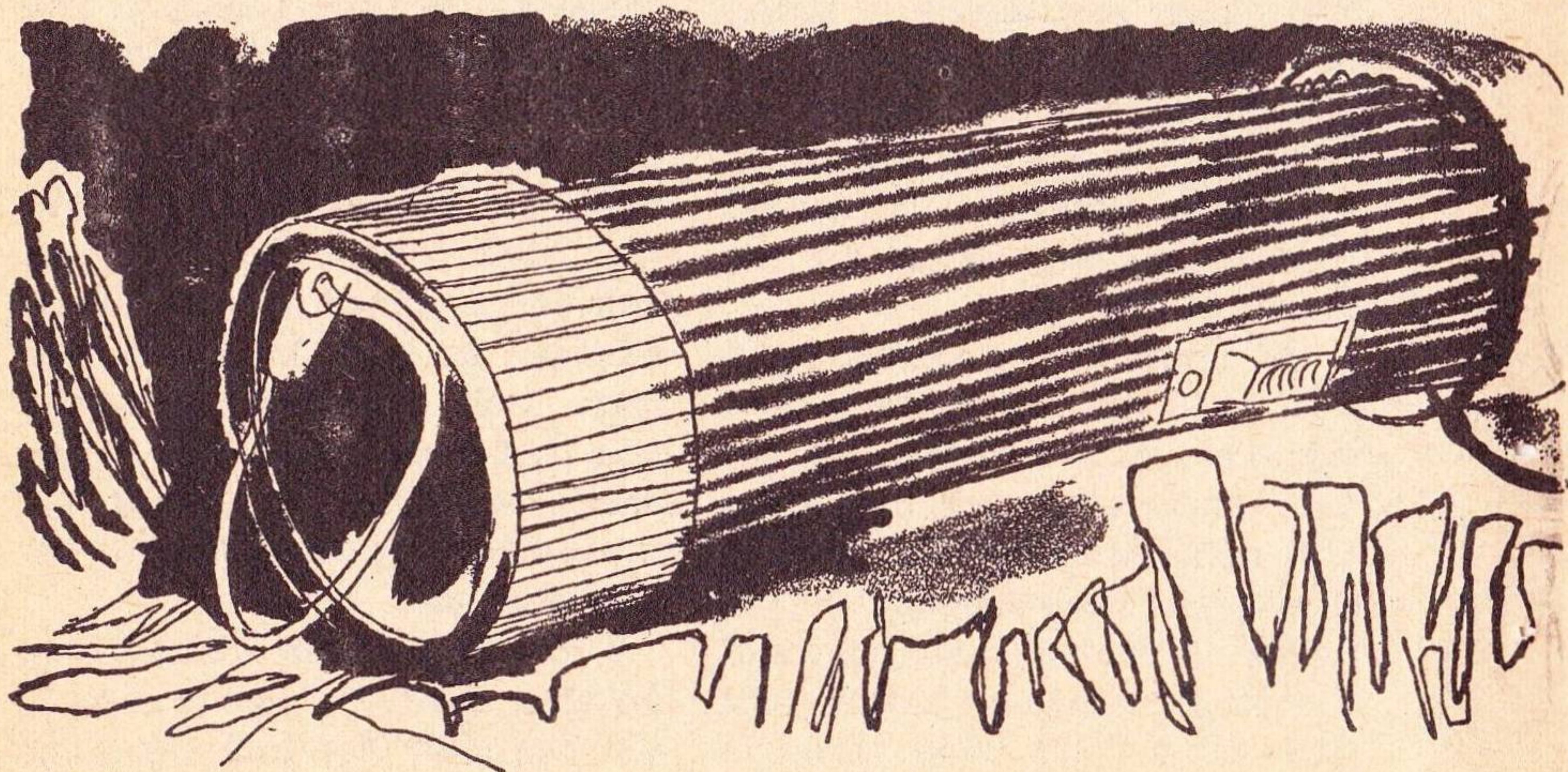
OLD BUSTER was suddenly crouched on stiff legs, right up out of a sound sleep, and his ears were laid back flat against his head, and he was letting out the deep, wet-sounding growl he always used on rattlers.

Young Johnny Stevens looked up in surprise.

The new kid was standing out in the middle of the road, about

ten feet away. He'd come up so silently Johnny hadn't even known he was there—until old Buster let out that growl.

Johnny stopped whittling. He sat there on the damp, tree-shaded grass in front of the Stevens farmhouse, his big silver-mounted hunting knife in one hand, the shaved stick in the other, and stared at old Buster.





The dog's head was down, his eyes were up and slitted on the new kid. His lips were curled back tight against his teeth.

Johnny started to reach for Buster's scruff, afraid he was getting set to attack. But Buster gave him a mean, panicky, sideways glance, and Johnny pulled back his hand, because he knew his dog. Then Buster whined. His tail went between his legs and he started to walk backward, one slow step after another. He emerged from the shade of the big elm, where he'd been sleeping at Johnny's feet ever since lunch, and kept going backward until he was about twenty feet up the lawn toward the house. Then he stopped and threw back his head as if to howl — but he didn't. He held the pose for a second, his eyes glaring on the new kid down along the sides of his muzzle, and then he turned and ran around the corner of the house.

Buster had never even run from bear. Johnny had once had to drag him off the scent of one.

Johnny turned to look at the new kid, mad clear through and curious as heck at the same time.

The kid looked friendly, curious — and kind of lost. He was dark and thin, with big eyes. His short, stiff, black hair fit his long skull like a cap. His voice had a funny accent, and it was kind of hesitant, almost like he was afraid to talk.

"Hello," he said.

Johnny Stevens stood up. Woodshavings spilled off his lap onto the grass.

"What'd you do to Buster?" he demanded.

"I — I don't know. Dogs just don't like me. I'm sorry I frightened him."

Johnny scowled. "You didn't frighten him," he denied formally. "He musta seen something across the road."

"It was me," said the new kid softly.

Johnny turned to look at the corner of the house. Buster was poking his head around, low down, ears still back. The new kid looked over that way too, and Buster ducked out of sight like he was yanked. A second later Johnny heard the dog's claws gallop across the cellar door along the side of the house, and knew Buster must be heading for the field out back, where he went and hid whenever he was punished.

Johnny scowled harder. "Who're you?"

"Kovacs. Hello."

Johnny didn't answer — just stared suspiciously.

"What are you making?" Kovacs asked, after a minute.

"I dunno," Johnny said. Then, because that didn't sound smart, he added, "A cane, maybe. Or a fishing rod. Kovacs what?"

"Bela."

"That's a funny name."

"What is yours?"

"Johnny Stevens."

"Hello, Johnny," Kovacs Bela said again, hopefully.

"Hello," Johnny said sourly.

Kovacs Bela came to the edge of the road, where it gave onto a slope of rock and root-studded dirt that rose a few feet to the Stevens lawn. There he stopped, his thin shadow lying up the slope in front of him, as if he were waiting to be invited.

Johnny sat down again, still scowling. He didn't say anything.

Kovacs half-turned, looking down the road over his shoulder, as if sorry he'd stopped.

They watched a couple of robins chase each other through the sun-bleached rails of the fence across the road. Summer heat danced along the waving tips of wheat in the field beyond, and shimmered up the green-brown sides of the low hillocks that lined the old creek-bed.

Johnny started whittling again.

"You from that new family who bought the old Soames place?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Moved in last week, din'cha? I heard about it."

"Yes."

The robins tired of darting through the fence-rails and set off across the wheatfield, wings blurring, bodies almost brushing the carpet of tips.

"We played around there a lot," Johnny grunted. "The Soames place. Guess we can't now . . . cause you moved in."

Kovacs Bela was silent.

"We used the silo for a robber hideout," Johnny said accusingly.

"Silo . . .?"

"Don't you know what that is?"

Kovacs shook his dark head.

"It's the big round building, like a tin can. You're kinda dumb."

Kovacs bit his lip and stood silently, his big, dark eyes unhappy. "Do you want me to go away?" he asked.

"Sure," said Johnny, still feeling mean.

Kovacs started to turn away, with that aimless look to his movements that means one is going no place in particular — just leaving.

Johnny relented a little. "I was just kiddin' . . . c'mon and sit down."

Kovacs Bela stood for a moment, then smiled hesitantly and came up the dirt slope into the shade of the trees. He sank to the grass and curled his legs under him with an oddly graceful motion. "Thank you," he said.

Johnny peeled a long sliver of bark off the stick with his big, razor-sharp knife. "I wanna know what you did to Buster. How'd you make him act that way?"

"Animals just don't like me."

"Why?"

"My father once said it is the

way we sme . . ." Kovacs' voice trailed off. "I don't know. They don't like us."

"Us? You mean your whole family?"

"I — yes."

"You're a funny guy. Where you from, they don't have silos? You talk funny too."

"I am from Hungary."

Johnny looked closely at Kovacs Bela, taking in the dark features, the big eyes, the soft mouth. There was something about the face that disturbed him, but he couldn't pin it down.

"Where's Hungary?" he asked.

"In Europe."

"Oh . . . a foreigner. I guess Buster never saw a foreigner before."

The two robins, or another pair, came hedgehopping back over the wheatfield, arced up over the fence, over the road and into the uppermost branches of the tree directly overhead. They set up a loud chirping, and commenced flitting from branch to branch.

"Where are you from?" Kovacs Bela asked.

"Right here. Michigan." Johnny thought for a second, balancing his big knife on one finger, the heavy blade on one side, the silver-mounted handle on the other. "There's Bela Lugosi in the movies. He's always a monster or something. But Bela's his *first* name."

"It is my first name too. In Hungary, the first name comes last. I should have said my name is Bela Kovacs . . . that is the way you would say it here."

Johnny shook his head, as if wondering at the crazy things foreigners did — and the crazy way they must smell, to wake old Buster up and send him kiting the way he had.

Without being obvious about it, he tried to get a whiff of Bela Kovacs — but he couldn't smell a thing. Well, dogs could smell lots more than people. Old Buster sure must have.

Bela Kovacs had noticed the headshake. He said a little defensively, "I talk English well, don't I?"

Johnny started to deprecate; but he said instead, honestly, "Yeah. I gotta admit, you talk pretty good."

"We have been in America for almost a year. In New York. And my father taught English to me and my mother before we came."

Johnny was working up considerable interest in his first foreigner. "You mean your father's English?"

"He is Hungarian. He had to teach himself first. It took him a long time. But he said we had to move, and America was the best place for us to go. We brought over some paintings, and my father sold them to buy the farm."

"Your father paints pitchers?"

"My grandfather painted them. He was a famous artist in Hungary."

"What d'you mean, you *had* to move?"

"We . . . we just had to. We had to move to a new country. That's what Father said." Bela Kovacs looked around at the blue summer sky, the heat-shimmering hillocks, the groves of trees that lay along the landscape like clean green cushions, the dusty road that wound through low hills to Harrisville thirty miles to the east. "I am glad we finally moved out here. I did not like New York. In Hungary, we lived in the country."

The two robins had been hopping lower and lower in the tree overhead, and now they dropped side by side from the bottom branches to the lawn, where they began searching the thick grass for insects.

One hopped to within a few feet of Bela Kovacs, who still sat with his legs curled under him in that relaxed yet curiously steel-spring position.

Suddenly the robin froze — cocked its head — regarded the boy with a startled beady eye.

Then it chirped a thin note, and both birds streaked away across the lawn as fast as they could go.

Johnny stared after them.

"I like birds," Bela Kovacs said wistfully. "I would not hurt them. I wish they liked me. I wish ani-

mals did not hate us."

Johnny began to work up even more interest in his first foreigner — because maybe it wasn't the way he smelled after all.

Because birds could hardly smell anything.

Then he noticed something funny. Bela Kovacs was still looking at the place where the robins had vanished, and Johnny saw what it was that had disturbed him about Bela's face ever since He'd first seen it.

"You have funny eyebrows," he said. "They're awful thick, and they meet in the middle. They grow all the way across."

Bela didn't look at him. The remark seemed to have brought back his shyness. He lowered his head and raised one slender hand to the side of his face, as if wanting to conceal the eyebrows.

After a second, Johnny was sorry he'd said anything.

"Heck, that's okay," he said. "Look — I haven't got any end on this finger." He held up the pinkie he'd caught in the wheel on the well two years ago.

Bela Kovacs stared at the smooth pink end and his straight bar of brows rose at the outsides.

"We're all different," Johnny said — and realized that, curiously, where he had before been teasing this new kid, he was now trying almost to console him. And he wondered more than ever what

could be wrong with Bela Kovacs, to make him act so funny. Guilty, almost — like he was ashamed of something — something he was maybe afraid people would find out.

Bela was sitting in the same position, but somehow he seemed smaller than before, like he was huddled into himself. His hand was still up to his face.

"We're all different," Johnny said again. "My dad always tells me that . . . and he says it doesn't matter. He says for me never to care where anybody comes from, or how funny they look, or anything like that. That's why I don't mind you being a foreigner. I'm sorry Buster acted the way he did."

Bela Kovacs said muffledly, "I'm so different."

"Naw."

"I am." Bela looked at Johnny's finger. "I was *born* different."

"Naw," Johnny said again, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. Heck, he knew Bela Kovacs *was* different — anybody could see that. And he was itching to know what the mystery was all about.

He said uncomfortably, "Want to hike or something?"

"Hike?"

"Go walking." Johnny stood up and shoved the hunting knife in his belt. "C'mon, Bela. There's lots of swell places to play — I'll show 'em to you. There's the

hollow tree, and the injun fort, and —"

"A real Indian fort?" Bela said, looking up finally, dark eyes wide.

"Naw. We built it outa rocks. And there's the caves, back in the hills . . . miles of 'em. You go in through a little chink that don't look like nothin' at all, and then you flash your light around and there's walls that look like waving cloth, all pink and green and blue, and secret passages and stalatites and stagmites and holes where you can't even see the bottom they're so deep."

"That sounds wonderful," Bela Kovacs said. "Will you take me there, Johnny?"

"Sure. C'mon, I'll pick up my flashlight." Johnny started up the lawn toward the house.

Bela rose gracefully to his feet, as if the steel-spring had suddenly uncoiled, and walked a few steps after Johnny. Then he stopped and looked up at the high summer sun.

"What is the time?" he asked.

"Oh . . . 'bout three o'clock, I guess."

"Is it far — to the caves?"

"Two, three miles."

Bela looked at the grass at his feet. "I have to be home by seven o'clock."

"We can make it easy. C'mon." Johnny started off again.

Bela fell into step. "Johnny —"
"Yeah?"

"I *have* to be home by seven."

"Why?"

"I — I just have to. My parents will be terribly angry if I'm not. We will not get lost, or go too far away, will we?"

"Heck, no. I know the caves better'n anybody." Johnny glanced sideways at Bela. "Won't your parents let you play at night? *Mine* do."

"It's — only on certain days that I can't go out at night. Certain times of the month."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you. But I have to be home by seven."

Johnny was intrigued by this new addition to the mystery. "Don't worry," he said. "Nothing'll happen."

They reached the front porch.

"Wait here," said Johnny.

He went into the house and into the kitchen, where Mom was already working on supper, because the Youngs were coming over for bridge tonight and supper was always something special for guests.

Johnny got his flashlight from under the sink.

Mom looked up from the chicken she was stuffing. "What are you doing, dear?"

"Goin' to the caves."

Mom frowned. "I wish you'd stay away from that place, Johnny. I wish your father would do something to make you. It's so dangerous . . . they go on for miles. Suppose you got lost sometime?"

"I won't get lost," Johnny said contemptuously. "I know every inch."

"Suppose the flashlight failed?"

"Aw, Mom, don't worry . . . I'm just going to show the new kid around."

"The new kid?"

"Bela Kovacs . . . his family bought the old Soames place."

Mom looked surprised, and a little pleased. "So they have a little boy! Now you'll have a new playmate. Is he a nice boy?"

Johnny juggled the flashlight. "Well, he's kinda funny. He's a foreigner from Hungry. That's in Europe. I guess he's all right."

"I'd like to meet him."

"He's right outside waitin' . . . c'mon, I'll interduce you."

Johnny started through the house toward the porch where he'd left Bela. Mom smiled and wiped her hands on a towel and followed.

They were just passing through the front room when they heard old Buster barking and snarling like he'd gone crazy.

Buster had Bela Kovacs backed against the porch steps, and was snaking back and forth in front of the boy as if he wanted to attack worse than anything else in the world, but was afraid to.

Bela's dark face had gone bone-colored, and he was half-crouched in an almost animal position, looking ready to move instantly in any direction, including straight up.

Johnny Stevens dropped over the porch-rail and lit beside Bela and shouted, "Buster! Cut it out! Stop it!"

Old Buster looked at him with the red-lamp eyes of a mad dog. Watery froth dripped from his stretched lips. His tail was curled so hard between his legs that it pressed up along his belly. He trembled so hard he could hardly stand — but Johnny knew that scared or not, Buster was set to attack any second.

Johnny hissed and clapped his hands in front of him, hard and fast. That meant Buster had better git, or end up with a sore rump.

Buster took a prowling, back-high, head-low step forward. His lips were so curled that his head seemed half teeth.

Mom screamed from the porch, "Johnny, come away!" and Johnny turned his head frantically to look at her, and Buster chose that moment to charge Bela Kovacs.

Then everything happened almost too fast to see.

Johnny felt a tug at his belt, where he'd stuck the hunting knife, and saw Bela Kovacs swing the heavy blade at Buster's head.

Old Buster lost heart, and turned and ran again, howling his heart out.

Bela Kovacs screamed, "*Silver . . . the knife is silver!*" and he dropped the knife and ran off across the lawn, crying and flap-

ping the hand he'd grabbed the knife-handle with. He turned and ran down the road, faster than Johnny had ever seen a kid run.

Johnny's mother was off the porch and on her knees, frantically examining Johnny to see if he'd been bitten; and Johnny's father drove up just then in the station-wagon, craned his neck after Bela Kovacs, and asked what in hell was going on.

After supper, the grownups sat around and talked about the new family before starting to play bridge.

Everybody who had met either Mr. or Mrs. Kovacs seemed to like them all right — that was the consensus. Mrs. Young said that McIntyre, the grocer, who was generally looked up to as a pretty good judge of character, had let it be known yesterday that Mr. Kovacs had impressed him favorably. Mr. Kovacs had come in to stock up on food and some implements, and McIntyre had tried to pump him, and Mr. Kovacs had answered the right questions and resisted the rest pleasantly, and McIntyre had liked that.

And Mrs. Kovacs had waited outside the store in the Kovacs' '42 Dodge, and three townsladies said she looked like a nice woman, if a little foreign-looking.

And Junior Murdoch, at the gas-station, said that the Kovacs Dodge was in very good shape for

its age, and showed signs of recent careful overhauling — and Murdoch liked people who cared for their cars, particularly old cars that someone else might lose pride in. He thought it told a lot about them.

Nobody thought them too strange, it seemed — just foreign.

Mrs. Young and Johnny's Mom decided, on the basis of the evidence, to suggest at the next meeting of the Ladies' Club that Mrs. Kovacs be invited to join.

Then the talk got around to what had happened this afternoon.

Old Buster had come back around five o'clock, sneaking out of his hideaway in the field and looking around each time before he put his paw down for a step.

While Mom and Johnny had stayed inside and watched through the front window, and Johnny had blinked back tears of worry, Dad had gone out with his pistol in one hand and coaxed Buster over to him and, with the gun to the animal's head, examined him carefully. Dad knew a lot about animals.

Old Buster wagged his tail and took a couple of laps out of the pan of water Dad carried in his other hand.

Dad came back and said, "He's okay. I don't know what got into him. There are some people animals just hate, and I guess the Kovacs boy is one of them. It's

nothing against him — from what Johnny says, he likes animals himself. They just don't like him."

"He tried to kill Buster," Johnny said. He'd been mad about that all afternoon. "He took my knife and tried to kill Buster."

Dad said, "You shouldn't be angry about that, Johnny. It was an instinctive thing to do . . . the kid was probably scared silly. Buster was out for blood, God knows why, and Bela grabbed the knife and took a swipe in self-defense. He's probably sorry he did it."

"I don't care," Johnny said sullenly. "He tried to kill him."

Dad sighed. "It's just lucky that Buster saw the knife and lit out — and that Bela missed with the knife. Bela didn't get bitten, and Buster's all right."

"It wasn't the knife," Johnny said. "Buster ain't scared of my knife. He was scared of *Bela* . . . he ran before he even saw the knife."

"Well," Dad said, "maybe. Anyway, everything's all right now. Nothing really bad happened." He paused. "You know, I feel a little sorry for the kid . . . animals hating him like that. No wonder he acts a little strange. A kid ought to be able to have a pet. Maybe he feels a little inferior to kids who can."

But Johnny was still mad. After Dad finished talking to him, he

was less mad than before — but he still resented anyone taking a knife to his dog. No matter what the provocation. And *his* knife to boot.

“I wonder why he dropped the knife and ran,” Mom mused. “He yelled that it was silver, and acted like it burned his hand.”

“Oh,” Dad said, “he probably said ‘sliver.’ Maybe he got a sliver from the knife handle.”

Johnny started to object, but let it go. His knife handle was of smooth, worn, hard wood and silver strips — he knew darned well there weren’t any slivers on it. But still, he let it go. He’d settle the whole thing in his own way.

When Dad suggested that he go over the next day and apologize to Bela Kovacs for Buster’s behavior, and show the new boy that nobody held his actions against him, Johnny said all right.

Because, though he knew Dad was absolutely right and it hadn’t been Bela’s fault, he still wanted to get back at Bela for trying to kill Buster — and he had a good idea of how to do it.

He’d take Bela into the caves, and pretend to get lost.

Until seven o’clock.

He’d scare the living daylights out of the kid — and maybe find out what the mysterious reason was why Bela had to be home every night by that time at certain times of the month.

The grownups finally started

their bridge game, and Johnny went outside and sat on the porch with Buster and looked up at the big, yellow full moon that rode the night sky like a spotlight.

Buster had spent the last two hours prowling around the lawn, smelling everyplace where Bela Kovacs had walked, growling deep in his throat and every so often letting out a scared-sounding howl.

Now Johnny scratched Buster’s ears, and thought about tomorrow.

It was a good idea. He’d scared Bela spitless — and then tell him why he’d done it and make friends with him again. Because Bela really wasn’t a bad guy . . . he was just a little queer.

The next day Johnny took his flashlight and went over to the old Soames place around three o’clock. He went cross-country instead of down the road, and as he came out of the weed-grown cornfield that old Soames had once tended so lovingly, he saw Bela Kovacs playing in the yard by the windmill.

When Bela saw him, he stood stock-still, dark eyes wide, again with that animal look to him, as if he were ready to run.

Johnny said, “I came over to say I’m sorry Buster tried to bite you.”

“Oh.” Bela blinked. He had his hands cupped in front of him, about belt-level.

Johnny waited for Bela to say

something else, but he didn't. Johnny looked curiously at Bela's cupped hands. "What you got?" he asked.

Bela's mouth twisted. He lifted the top hand, and Johnny saw that he held a mouse. It was curled into a ball, and its mouth hung wide open — but Johnny noticed it wasn't trying to bite its way loose. Tiny black eyes glittered up in terror.

"I caught it," Bela said. "In the barn."

"What d'you want to catch a *mouse* for?" Johnny said disgustingly. "Why not get a cat?"

Bela blinked again, and Johnny suddenly wondered if Bela hadn't been just about to cry or something, before Johnny showed up, and if he wasn't holding it back now.

"I wanted to make friends with it," Bela said softly. "But it is no different in America. All the animals hate me — fear me."

"Heck, any mouse'd be scared, caught and held that way."

"Not this frightened." Bela knelt and gently placed the mouse on the ground. For a second it stayed there, a huddled gray ball — then legs erupted and it bounded off, so fast that halfway to the barn it tripped and rolled over twice, and when it reached a gap between two boards in the side of the barn, it bounced off hard because of bad aim. Then it vanished, hind legs scrabbling.

"See?" said Bela. "It runs in terror. So would a cat. I have never had a pet." He straightened and gave Johnny his shy, lonely smile. "I am sorry about yesterday too, Johnny. I am sorry I tried to hurt your dog. I did not mean —"

"Aw," Johnny said uncomfortably, remembering how Dad had felt sorry for Bela last night — and remembering what he planned to do today in the caves. "Aw . . . forget it."

Bela took Johnny into the farmhouse to meet his parents.

Mr. Kovacs was a big, handsome, middle-aged man who moved the same smooth way Bela did. And Mrs. Kovacs moved that way too — Johnny noticed it the instant he came through the front door into the living room, for Bela's parents had just been finishing their lunch, and when they saw Johnny come in, they rose from the table with Old World courtesy. And with that strange animal grace.

"Father and Mother," said Bela, "this is Johnny Stevens, the boy I met yesterday."

Mr. Kovacs took Johnny's hand and shook it firmly and gently — and Johnny could tell, from the size of Mr. Kovacs' hand and the hard feel of its palm against his own, that Mr. Kovacs was very, very strong.

And a funny thing — when Johnny took his hand away, the

ends of his fingers rubbed against something sort of bristly in Mr. Kovacs' hard palm. It felt almost like Dad's cheek, just after he shaved — like short whisker stubble.

But that was silly. Nobody had hair on their palms. He'd probably just felt dried skin peeling away from work callouses . . .

Mrs. Kovacs, a slim, pretty woman, nodded pleasantly and said, with an accent much more pronounced than Bela's, "How do you do, Mr. Stevens."

Johnny swelled a little. It was the first time anyone had ever called him Mr. Stevens.

"I'm pleased to meet you," he said.

"Bela has told us what happened yesterday," Mr. Kovacs said. "Please, may we add our apologies to his? It is unfortunate — but animals just do not like us. It is a peculiarity of our family."

"Heck," Johnny said. "I came over to apologize. And to play with Bela."

Mrs. Kovacs smiled and said almost exactly what Johnny's mother had said the day before: "How nice . . . for Bela to have such a nice boy his own age to play with."

It was Johnny's turn to smile shyly. He looked away, and for the first time got a look at the inside of the Kovacs home.

The last time he'd been in this

house, about three weeks ago, it had been bare walls and refuse-cluttered floors. Now there was furniture — mostly ordinary stuff. But there were some things — the round table in the middle of the room, for instance, and that big bookcase-desk against the wall — that were pretty foreign-looking. And the pictures — most of them were in fancier, heavier frames than any he'd ever seen, and a lot of them were of funny foreign buildings. And the tablecloth, and the candlesticks and lamps and the rug — oh, lots of the smaller things around the room had a foreign look. A sort of solid, warm, old look.

Mr. Kovacs, noting Johnny's interest, said in a deep bass voice, "We brought many of our things from Hungary."

"It looks nice," Johnny said.

"Thank you," said Mr. Kovacs gravely.

Mrs. Kovacs commenced to clear the table, and Johnny glanced casually at the plates . . . and when he saw what the lunch had consisted of, his jaw sagged and he looked again.

Raw meat. A roast of beef, it looked like — except it wasn't roasted. And nothing else. A big platter of red, blood-juicy beef in the middle of the table, three red-stained plates at the chair-places, glasses and a pitcher of water.

Again Mr. Kovacs noted Johnny's interest. Or his amazement.

"Raw meat," he said, a little heavily, "is good for the blood. We eat raw beefsteak once or twice a week, young man."

"Oh," said Johnny, trying not to stare so hard. "I guess I read about that someplace myself — 'bout raw meat being good for you. But I don't think . . ." His voice trailed off.

"You do not think you would like it," Mrs. Kovacs smiled, picking up the plates. "But you are too polite to say so."

Johnny nodded uncomfortably.

"Now," said Mr. Kovacs, "come here, young man."

Johnny moved to stand before the man's chair. He didn't know exactly why — except that he felt somehow that Mr. Kovacs was a friendly man.

Mr. Kovacs looked appreciatively — almost critically — at Johnny's well-muscled arms and firm neck and clear eyes. "You are in good health," he said.

"I — I guess so."

"You will make a good playmate for our Bela," Mr. Kovacs said. "He is very active. Do you know the country here?"

"I've lived here all my life."

"Good. You will tell Bela of any dangers that exist, yes?"

"Sure."

"Good. Now, Bela, why don't you show your new friend around the house?"

Mrs. Kovacs began to remove

the platter of raw beef. Mr. Kovacs reached out and took one of the remaining chunks and bit into it with teeth that, when he opened his mouth wide, were startlingly long and white and, from the way the meat tore, sharp.

He chewed and looked at Johnny again, a little reflectively. Johnny and Bela were over by the bookcase by the stairs — Bela was showing Johnny what Hungarian writing looked like.

Mrs. Kovacs looked too, and her large eyes — now they were almost luminous — traveled up and down Johnny's body, along the muscular arms and legs, dwelt on the tanned throat. She licked her lips.

"In the old country . . ." she sighed in Hungarian.

"Eva," said Mr. Kovacs, softly but warningly, also in Hungarian.

"Ah, *imadot* Ferenc, I am only thinking. But *look* at him . . ."

Mr. Kovacs smiled at the expression on her face. "Sh-h, now, Eva. We have left all that behind . . . it is best not even to think."

"*Sajnos* . . ." Mrs. Kovacs picked up a small piece of beef and bit into it with teeth as long and sharp as her husband's. She sighed again. "A new country, a new life . . . I know, my dear."

"You are unhappy, Eva?"

"Unhappy?" Eva Kovacs smiled down at him, and since her lower lip concealed the points of her teeth, it was quite a pleasant

smile. "Only my belly suffers. I am happy that we are safe, Ferenc."

He took her hand and pressed it against his shoulder. "The old country, the old life . . . it is impossible to live that way any longer, Eva. We are known. Not you, perhaps, nor I, nor little Bela, but *we* . . . all of us . . . known by signs familiar to the smallest child. While here — here they do not know us, or even believe in us — and we must let it remain so. We must forsake the old ways."

"You are not disappointed in America, then."

He shook his massive head. "America is best, in every way. There is no tradition to expose us. The political situation is good. And living conditions, and opportunity. No, mamma, I am well content here — except —" he put his big hands palms-up on the table before him and flexed them and then slowly made fists around the clean-shaven stubble on the palms — "except at this time of the month, when the moon turns her full face to us . . ."

"Yes," said Eva Kovacs softly. "Yes."

"But beef does not taste so bad, my dear. Not so bad, at least, as a silver bullet."

Mrs. Kovacs popped the last of the beef into her mouth, chewed powerfully, and swallowed. She seemed to be tasting it in her throat, feeling it, almost analyzing it as it went toward her stom-

ach. "No," she said slowly. "Once you are used to it, it is not bad. But —"

"Do not think about it, Eva."

"We cannot even chase the cow," she said softly. "We must go and buy —"

"I know."

Mrs. Kovacs looked across the room again at Johnny Stevens, and her large eyes grew larger.

"Eva," Mr. Kovacs said, a little sharply. "You would not think of —"

"No, no," she said, and licked blood from fingers which seemed to have grown just a little hairier, and the nails a little longer. "Of course not, *imadot* Ferenc. It is just when I remember . . ."

"We must forget."

"And they are so *healthy* here . . ."

"We must never change again, Eva. Never."

"And Bela?"

Ferenc Kovacs sighed. "He is too young yet — too young to know. We must be sure that he is always with us when he changes. Soon he will be old enough to control the change, as we do — then we must worry no longer in our new home."

Bela had been showing Johnny his room, which held an old poster-bed, a very old maple bureau, and a carved chest full of fascinating toys such as Johnny had never seen before.

Now the boys came back to the living room, and Bela said, "Mother, we are going out to play."

"All right, Bela. But remember — come home before seven o'clock."

"Yes, mamma."

"You know what time of the month this is, don't you?"

"Yes, mamma." Bela looked uncomfortably at Johnny. "I will be back."

"You *must*," said Mr. Kovacs. "Just as you did in New York. You know why, Bela . . ." He turned to Johnny. "You will not keep our Bela out late, will you? You see — he is not well . . . that is why it is very important that he return home before night-fall."

"Oh," said Johnny. "I'll be careful. I mean, I'll — I won't —" And he looked away in confusion, thinking of what he planned to do in the cave.

Mr. Kovacs' big eyes were still on his face when he looked up, and Johnny felt they were looking right through his own eyes at the inside of his skull.

"I think," said Mr. Kovacs, "that you had better be."

Bela's parents came to the door and stood in the sunshine, and as Johnny and Bela turned to wave at them from the edge of the corn-field, Johnny noticed for the first time that their eyebrows were just like Bela's — straight, thick

bars of hair that ran right across their foreheads.

The entrance to the caves was just a black chink in the rocks on the hillside. They climbed up toward it, leaping from one big boulder to the next under the afternoon sun.

They reached the black hole, and felt the coolness of it on their faces, even in the sunshine.

Bela hung back when Johnny started to go right in.

"Johnny . . ." he said.

"Yeah?"

"Don't forget . . . I *have* to be back before seven."

Johnny put his hands on his hips. "Well, f'gosh sakes, yes! I heard it enough. What's so awful that'll happen to you if you don't? D'you have to take medicine or something?"

Bela shook his head. "I can't tell you. But it's awful, all right. You won't get lost or anything, will you?"

"No," said Johnny emphatically, crossing his fingers behind his back.

"You heard what my parents said . . . I have to be home before the moon rises."

"The *moon*! What's the moon got to do with it?"

Bela just looked nervously at the black hole in the hillside.

And Johnny didn't ask about it again. He just sniffed, "The moon, f'gosh sakes!" as if he were dismissing it as something else crazy

that foreigners — especially Hungarians — worried about. Because he knew he had a better way of finding out.

"Johnny . . . perhaps I had better not go in. Not now."

Johnny put a jeer in his voice. "Scared?"

"Not for the reasons you think," Bela said, dark eyes flashing. "You do not understand."

"Well, come on, then . . . I promise —" the crossed fingers again — "I won't get lost."

Johnny started again into the black chink. Bela hesitated for a second, and then followed.

Actually, Johnny thought as they made their way through the narrow fissure into increasing darkness, the crossed fingers weren't necessary — because he wasn't planning to really get lost; only to *pretend* to get lost.

And he wasn't sure he was going to do even that, now — not if Bela was *sick*. That was different. Maybe it explained a lot — even old Buster's behavior. Dogs sometimes got funny around sick people.

But he wasn't sure that that *was* the explanation. It sounded a little fishy to him. Why all the mystery, if Bela was just sick? Or was it some awful-to-gosh disease? If so, why was Bela let out to play and maybe give the disease to someone else? And Mr. Kovacs had said that Bela was very ac-

tive. That didn't sound like he was sick. And Bela sure didn't look sick.

Johnny decided he'd wait and decide what to do later.

The floor of the chink dipped down, and turned at a right angle, and they were inside the caves.

Johnny turned on his flashlight. And heard Bela gasp.

All around them were curtains and draperies and carpets and fountains of stone — gray, pink, blue, green, lavender, stretching from where they stood to a sharp sixty-foot downslope ahead of them, which led to the cave floor below and off into inky shadows that looked almost like solids.

Johnny played the beam of light around, giving Bela a good look at everything worth seeing here near the entrance. Then he said, "Let's start down."

They made their way across ripples of pastel-shaded stone to where the downslope began. The sounds they made started to echo, and the air was very dry and cool.

The beam of the flashlight was hard and bright, and the blackness pressed in on it as if trying to squash down it to pencil-thinness — but the beam moved like lightning, cutting like a knife, and wherever it opened the blackness it revealed wonders of color and shape.

"The waves in the slope make steps," Johnny said, pointing the light downward. "See? We can go

down that way. How do you like it?"

"It is beautiful," Bela whispered.

They started down, Johnny keeping the light always on their footing and guiding their progress down the face of rock by familiar rippling formations and splashes of color.

At last they reached the bottom, and Johnny said, "This way."

As they started across the uneven floor of the cave, Bela asked, "Do you know the time, Johnny?"

"'Bout four . . . you got lotsa time."

And soon the caves became so beautiful that Bela forgot entirely to worry about the time.

They passed fountains and sprays and mists and museums of stone, gleaming with colors purer and more delicate than any ever seen on Earth's surface. They passed rows of marching stalagmites of green and blue and bright orange, here and there united with drooping stalactites to form arching passageways and gardens of pillars. They moved slowly beneath walls of rippled stone, as if blue or pink or purple lava had been frozen in midflow.

They passed lakes of blue-black water, so still and smooth that one had almost to touch them to be convinced that they weren't glass.

They moved up vast slopes of colored stone like insects up a

giant Christmas tree ornament, and when they reached the top, Johnny would select this dark passage or that and lead them on into royal chambers of purple and white, and then up a curving crimson staircase to a balcony of coral pink and green where more passages offered further mysteries to be explored.

They moved along the edges of crevices so deep that a penny dropped made no sound — not even the whisper of an echo.

Once Johnny turned off his light and told Bela to stand still, and they listened to the silence which can not be qualified, the silence which is absolute — the silence that exists only underground.

They heard their own hearts beating.

At last Johnny was sure the time must be about six o'clock.

"We'd better get started back," he told Bela. "If you're going to get home by seven. This way."

And he led the way back to the place where they had entered the caves. And there he pretended to get lost.

It was easy. Bela was new to the caves. He probably wouldn't recognize the entrance even if Johnny flashed his light up the long slope right to the chink where they'd come in.

Johnny wasn't sure yet whether he wanted to keep up the pretense for more than a few minutes

— maybe just throw a short scare into Bela, and then take him on out of the caves so he could go home by seven. After all, if Bela was sick . . .

But he wasn't sure about that. It still sounded fishy. And he was more curious than ever to know what the mystery was all about — even if it *was* some kind of disease.

He said worriedly, "Bela . . . I — I'm not sure which way we go from here. I think maybe I'm lost . . ."

And he looked to see what effect it would have on the Hungarian boy.

Bela's eyes grew huge. "Oh, *no* . . . Johnny, you do not mean it. You *promised!*"

John pretended to be confused — even afraid. "I — I'm sorry," he stammered. "I just lost the way. I was so interested showing you around. Gosh, Bela —"

"But, Johnny, I *have* to get out. I have to get home before . . ."

"Come on," Johnny said, making his voice worried. "Maybe — maybe it's this way."

And he led Bela in a huge circle through the pillars and passages and hanging stone curtains that surrounded the entrance. It took about half an hour, and then they were right back where they'd started from — within a hundred feet of the entrance.

Johnny said, "I just don't know where we *are!*"

"What time do you think it is?" Bela asked, his voice terrified.

"Six thirty, about."

Bela shuddered and looked at Johnny, his eyes shining enormously in the light. "Johnny, do something! I have to get *out* . . ."

Johnny put panic in his voice. "Well, what can *I* do? I'm sorry! I'm scared too! Maybe we'll *never* get out!"

"Try," Bela begged. "Try, Johnny . . . can't you remember the way?"

Looking at Bela in the light, at the big dark eyes and smooth brown skin and white straight teeth and lithe body, Johnny decided abruptly that the story about Bela's being sick must be phony. It was something else . . . There was some other reason why Bela was so frantic about being home by seven, and why his parents were so emphatic on the same point. Some real strange, funny reason — and Johnny wanted to know what.

He decided to do as he'd originally planned — keep Bela down here and watch to see what happened.

He turned around as if in indecision. "I think — I think maybe it's off this way. Come on!"

And he led Bela in a circle the other way around, by a slightly different route, and they ended up by the entrance again.

Johnny knew it must be nearly

seven by now. He kept a sharp eye on Bela while pretending to search for the entrance chink that was really right up the slope over their heads.

Would Bela know, somehow, when seven o'clock had arrived? And was it something that would happen to him right at seven that he was afraid of? But how could he know? . . . and what could happen down here in the caves? Or was it something his parents would do to him later, as punishment for not getting home by that time?

"Johnny!" Bela said suddenly, close by Johnny in the blackness, a quaver in his voice.

Johnny stopped his pretense of searching, and put the beam of light on Bela. "Yeah?"

Bela was trembling all over, and he was looking up at the roof of the cave. As Johnny watched, he hunched his shoulders a little — sort of cringed — and his face got even tighter, as if he saw something horrible coming at him right down through the blackness and the solid rock.

"It is almost seven . . . Johnny . . . *do something* . . . it is going to *happen!*"

"What's going to happen? *What* can I do?"

"I do not know," Bela cried, and echoes came back, *I do not know, do not know* . . .

"You don't know what I can do?"

"I do not know . . ." . . . *do not know, not know, know, know* . . .

"You don't know what's going to happen?"

"I do not know! I am frightened . . . it never happened to me away from home before . . . Johnny, you *promised* . . . ah, mamma, mamma, mamma —" and Bela began to cry. He sank to a heap on the colored stone floor, and tears rolled down his cheeks and splashed on the stone and made the colors deeper, and he wailed things in Hungarian until he could hardly talk any more but just cried.

"You don't know what's going to happen?" Johnny asked, amazed.

Bela choked trying to talk, and coughed hard, and the echoes came back like footsteps across his frantic voice. "I know, but I do not know what it is, or why, it just *happens* . . . ah, mamma, *mamma* . . ."

Suddenly his back stiffened, and his hands clawed out in front of him. His streaming eyes rolled up to Johnny's face. He whined like an animal.

"Johnny . . . it is seven . . . the moon is rising . . . I can feel it . . ."

"*Feel* the moon? Down *here?* How can —"

"It does not matter where . . . I can *feel* it . . . I can feel . . . mamma, mamma — ah, ah, *ah!*"

And Bela's face twisted into an expression of such terror and agony that Johnny was suddenly chilled — and he decided that his joke had gone far enough. In fact, all of a sudden he was pretty darned scared — he hadn't expected anything like this. Golly, if Bela really *was* sick . . .

He bent over the huddled figure on the cave floor and pointed his flashlight upward.

"Bela, look!" he said loudly. "Look up there . . . *there's* where we came in! Come on — let's go out!"

Bela didn't answer.

"Bela . . . C'mon."

Bela moved, and his fingernails scratched the rock so hard it sounded like they'd tear off.

Johnny began to tremble. He looked down, the flashlight still pointing up.

Bela's eyes gleamed up at him from the floor — enormous, yellowish in the reflected light, glassy, fixed — somehow baleful.

As Johnny watched, they seemed to move closer together, and get yellower.

Johnny was so startled he dropped the flashlight. It thumped on the stone at his feet, and glass broke and the light went out.

In the blackness — the utter thick blackness — Johnny heard a scuffling sound near his feet, and a low, soft, animal snarl.

He yelled and leaped back. His

foot struck the flashlight, and even as he went down, he got one hand on it, and with the other hand he dragged his big hunting knife out of his belt. He hit hard on his side. He pressed the flashlight button and prayed that it would work.

It did.

Bela was gone.

Wide-eyed, Johnny rolled over. Kneeling there, he darted the light this way and that. Finally he found his voice.

"B-Bela . . ." he quavered.

Nothing happened.

He got to his feet and stood shaking. "Bela?"

There was a claws-on-stone sound from the blackness behind him.

He whirled, his neck stiff and cold, and lashed the beam of light across the shadows. He held his hunting knife hard, the point straight out, ready to stab or slice from almost any angle.

At first he saw nothing. Rocks. Curtains and pillars of colored stone. Black shadows that seemed to lean toward him.

Then a low shadow moved at the corner of his vision.

He swung the light that way.

Two yellow eyes, low against the stone floor, blazed back at him.

"B-Bela?" Johnny whispered, and lifted the light so that it shone directly on the possessor of the eyes.

The creature slit the eyes

and snarled to reveal sharp white fangs and charged.

Mr. and Mrs. Kovacs were looking both furious and terrified at the same time. They stood by the big table in the living room, where they'd been sitting playing some kind of game with big colored cards when Johnny came bursting in to tell them what had happened in the caves.

"I'm sorry," Johnny said, for the dozenth time — and wiped a hand across his tear-stained cheeks. "I didn't mean to do it . . . it was just a joke. Please, call Sheriff Morris and ask him to get a posse out . . . they'll find Bela, honest they will!"

Mr. Kovacs' large eyes were brilliant with anger — and his deep voice was almost a snarl. "*I* will go look for Bela, young man — and you had better go home. I do not think we want to see you any more!"

Johnny turned miserably toward the door.

There was a growl from the darkness right outside.

Mrs. Kovacs gasped, "*Bela* . . ."

The creature came panting through the open door and made a beeline for Johnny's leg.

Johnny said, "It isn't Bela . . . it's that darned wolf cub!"

He dodged and dropped to one knee and cuffed the cub playfully on the side of the head.

It snarled like a lapdog and

backed off and put its belly against the floor. Its tiny ears were flat against its head, just as old Buster's had been when he'd first seen Bela, and its yellow eyes gleamed hungrily on Johnny's throat.

It charged again, stubby legs pumping.

Johnny caught it neatly by the scruff of the neck and shook it gently. It snapped and snarled and waved its legs.

"I'll be darned," he said, forgetting for the moment that Mr. Kovacs had practically ordered him out of the house. "The little feller must've followed me here . . ."

"You saw the little wolf to-night?" Mr. Kovacs said sharply, eyes widening and glowing a little brighter.

"Sure. In the cave. Just after Bela ran off. It tried to bite me then too, and now it followed me all the way to your place." Johnny grinned feebly, looking from Mr. Kovacs' rather grim face to Mrs. Kovacs' somehow relieved one. "I guess it wants to eat me or something."

"I suppose," said Mr. Kovacs heavily, "it does."

"I'll take it outside and turn it loose again," Johnny said.

"Again?"

The cub swung from Johnny's grasp, rolling its yellow eyes hungrily at the nearest finger. Johnny

nodded. "I carried it up out of the caves, after I gave up hollering for Bela. Figured it wasn't right to let it die down there. Maybe when it gets older, I'll shoot it if I see it . . . but now I figured to give it a chance, it's so young."

"Yes . . . a young one."

"Oh, give him to me, young man," said Mrs. Kovacs. "He's so cute!" And she took the wolf cub from Johnny's arms before Johnny could protest it was dangerous, and cuddled it in her own. It whined and looked up at her with its big yellow eyes, and didn't struggle at all to free itself.

Johnny was too unhappy to wonder at that, though, or even notice it.

"Now go home, young man," said Mr. Kovacs.

Johnny turned to the door again. "Will you turn it loose afterwards, Mr. Kovacs? You won't kill it, will you?"

"I will not kill it."

"And you better call the sheriff to help you look for Bela. I'll help too, if — if you want. I know the caves like —"

"Bela will be all right," Mr. Kovacs said.

"When you find him, will you please tell him I'm sorry for what I did?"

"Yes."

Johnny had reached the front door when Mrs. Kovacs said something soft in Hungarian, and Mr. Kovacs grunted and said,

"Young man."

Johnny turned. "Yes, sir?"

The wolf cub was on the table, and Mr. Kovacs was thoughtfully scratching the scruff of its neck.

"Young man," Mr. Kovacs said slowly. "I do not want to be harsh. I have thought it over. What you did was not very nice — but I think it is understandable. I think it may be forgiven. And you came to us immediately and told us about it — and now you have offered to help undo what you have done."

"Yes, sir?"

"You may come here as often as you wish, and play with our Bela."

Johnny brightened. "Yes, sir! Thank you!"

"Provided you never do anything like that again."

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir!"

"Now," said Mr. Kovacs a little intently. "I would like to make absolutely certain of what happened in the cave. It happened like this, yes? Our Bela became sick; you dropped your flashlight; when you turned the light on again, Bela was gone."

"That's right, sir."

"You did *not* see where Bela went."

"No, sir."

"And then you saw the little wolf."

"Uh, huh." Johnny grinned. "It was a dope to wander in there. Lucky I came along."

"M'm," said Mr. Kovacs. "Yes." His eyes, which had become a little larger as he questioned Johnny, lost some of their wary glow; and his fingers, which had become just a tiny bit hairier, relaxed. "Now, you had better go. I will — find Bela. Good night, young man."

"Good night, Mr. Kovacs. Good night, Mrs. Kovacs."

As Johnny turned to leave again, Mr. Kovacs said, "Another thing, young man."

Johnny paused.

"I was not entirely truthful with you. Our Bela is not really sick. It is just that at certain times of the month, he is expected to be home before nightfall because . . . well, I believe you might call it a custom. A Hungarian custom. An old family custom. It must be observed. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"We will not tell Bela what you did . . . if you will promise never to tell anyone what happened tonight."

"Yes, sir."

"We would not want to be thought queer by our neighbors. After all, young man, customs differ. We are all of us different."

"Yes, sir. My father taught me that."

"Did he teach you to keep promises?"

Johnny grinned. "He licks me when I don't."

"Do you promise, then?"

"Yes."

"You will make a good playmate for our Bela, as I said. Good night, young man."

Smiling, Johnny Stevens left. When he reached the edge of the cornfield, he began to whistle at the full moon overhead. He wondered if the moon always rose at seven in Hungary . . .

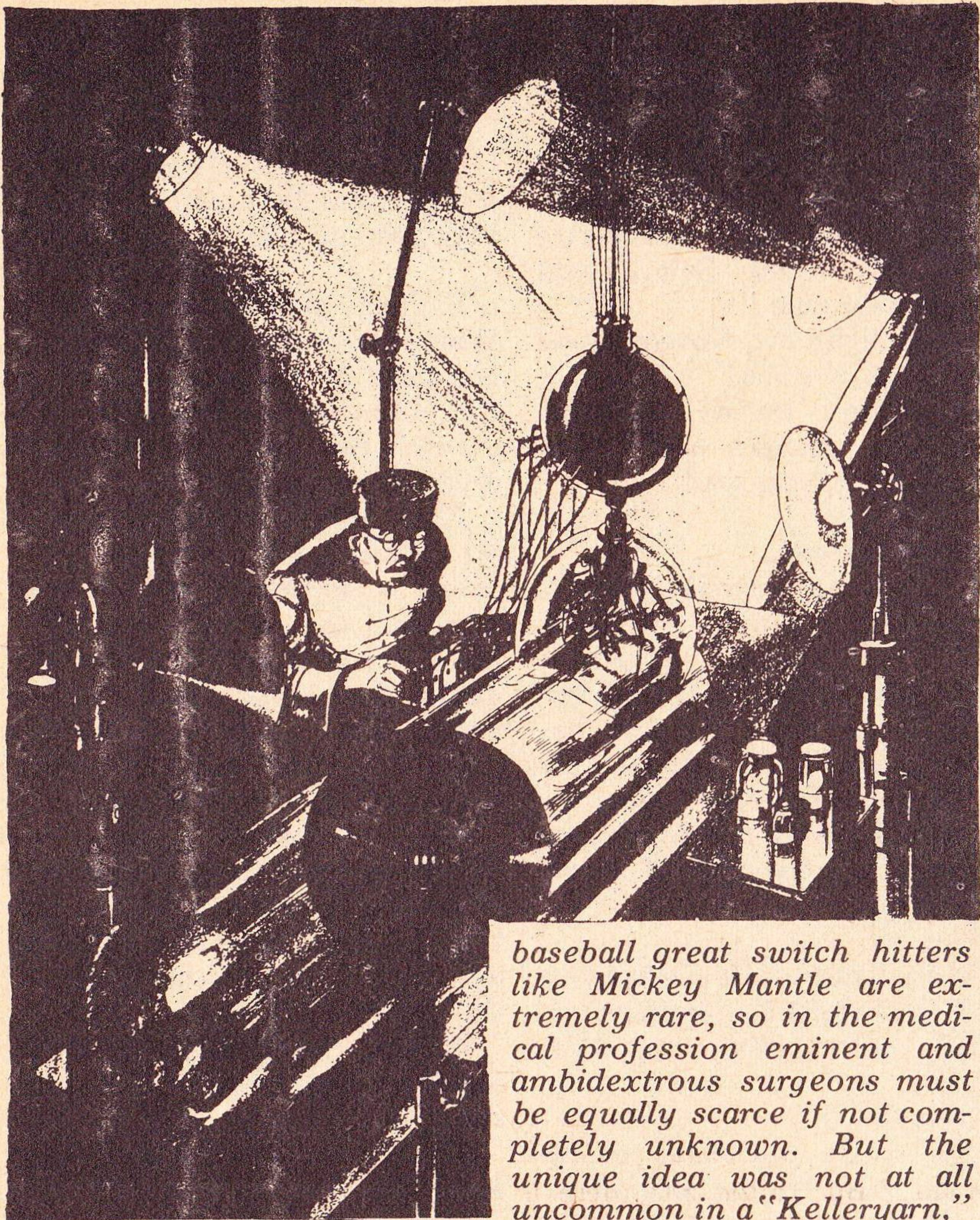
Naw. Maybe it was just a time set so Bela would always be home before it happened, and observe whatever the custom was. But, heck, lots of times the moon rose earlier than seven. Even the full moon, like tonight — it always rose when the sun set. Four o'clock sometimes, in winter.

Maybe — Johnny nodded, remembering something from school — maybe the Kovacs figured the time for Bela to be home by the seasons, by the months. Even by the — the — latitudes.

What a funny custom. Maybe someday Bela would tell him about it . . .

Mr. Kovacs looked thoughtfully at his son.

"We could have lost all," he told his wife, "but for a boy dropping a flashlight. Our new country is good to us. Now — the time has come when we must tell Bela what he is."



Until we'd read the following macabre short by the late David H. Keller, we'd never really thought about a rather simple statistic—perfectly obvious, now that Keller has brought it to mind. That just as in

baseball great switch hitters like Mickey Mantle are extremely rare, so in the medical profession eminent and ambidextrous surgeons must be equally scarce if not completely unknown. But the unique idea was not at all uncommon in a "Kelleryarn," nor the occasional flash of unexpected horror that sometimes knocked his many fans for a loop. A very long one, we suspect, in the case of "Ambidexter," no tale for the squeamish—we warn you.

THE AMBIDEXTER

DAVID H. KELLER, M.D.

Illustrated by MOREY

THE greatest surgeon in America looked at the greatest surgeon in Asia. The Oriental in return looked at the white man with genuine admiration.

"From my student days I have held the greatest reverence for you, Dr. Hopkins. Reverence for you has been a part of my daily life, also envy for your skill and despair of ever reaching the heights of perfection you have attained."

"That was nicely said, Wing Loo," replied the man from Chicago. "But, after all, there is only one thing, and that an accident, which prevents you from being my equal, or superior, at the operating table and that is that you work with one hand while I am ambidextrous."

"I have heard of that. You

were born that way; and when your most wise parents discovered, it, they were wise enough to let you cultivate the use of both hands. Thus, in operating where there is but little room, it is as though two surgeons were operating, but there is only one body."

"Just my good fortune," admitted the American. "But what do you think of the future of surgery? Does it not appear to you that our specialty lags behind the other sciences? In every other field the greatest advances are being made, but in our field all we have done is to obtain a slightly greater technical skill."

"I have done a few things," whispered the yellow man, almost as though he were making the modest statement to himself.

"Rumors of those things have crossed the ocean."

"But only rumors. No one knows what I have in mind. I have talked to no one, published nothing."

"But you did not kill your successes. I saw the bridge builder, the Chief of the Trans-Pacific Steel Company. No! He did not betray any secrets, but I saw that arm. He had a dislocation of the elbow, and that was the way I saw it."

Wing Loo smiled, the inscrutable, mysterious smile of the Orient.

"And when I saw that arm," Hopkins continued, "I knew that you had done something that would revolutionize surgery."

"It was nothing," sighed the Chinaman. "The man had his arm torn so badly that amputation was necessary. I simply transplanted the arm of a coolie."

"I know that much. There was a difference in the colors of the two arms."

"Of course I took all precautions. The man who furnished that arm was in perfect health."

"Naturally. You would not want your patient to become diseased through his new arm. I know your pride well enough to realize that you would not overlook the slightest factor in an operation like that. I must admit that I do not know how you do it—but the fact that you do it is

what brought me to China."

"You honor me," said the Oriental.

"Not at all. Your work honors you more than any individual could. But my visit is almost a selfish one. Briefly speaking, I want you to operate on me."

"Now, indeed, you are honoring me. You mean that you pass by Bloodgard of New York, Smathers of London, Verdin of Paris and the great experimenter Largo of Rome and come to me for an operation?"

"That is what I did. But I did not pass them by. I saw them all on my way East, and they all said the same thing."

"And that was?"

"Wing Loo of Canton is the only man who has even thought of performing that kind of operation."

In spite of his imperturbability, the yellow hand handling the ivory cigarette holder trembled.

"And so I came. To ask of you a favor."

"Yes?"

"I want you to operate on my brain."

"On your brain?"

"Absolutely. The best neurologists in America have diagnosed a brain tumor on the right frontal lobe. There is evidence to show that it is slowly growing. Unchecked, it will some day destroy my mentality; even now the public knowledge that such a tumor existed in my brain would abso-

lutely check my surgical career. No one would want me to operate on him; he would be afraid."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Remove that portion of my brain, replace it with a similar portion of brain from a normal person and send me back to America for twenty more years of usefulness to my nation."

"How do you know that I can do all this?"

"I do not know. I can only hope."

"But the brain is different from the arm. Decay is rapid. The slightest injury leads to almost instant degeneration of the cells. You know that this fact is the reason back of our lack of progress in neurology."

"I realize all that. At the same time, I believe that you can do it."

"I can do it," the Oriental admitted. "I can do it. In fact, I have done it. In my home I have a little toy dog, a Pekingese. It is running around in the best of health and spirits, but, controlling the body, there is the brain of another dog. But with a human being it may be different."

"It might be different," admitted Dr. Hopkins, "if I asked you to transplant the entire brain or even one half of it. But all I want is to have the frontal lobe on one side replaced. Men have lived without the frontal lobe and have done some work, but not surgery. I talked with some men

in Vienna, and they still feel that the use of this part of the brain is unknown, something only to be guessed at, but perhaps in some way connected with memory. At least, there is no motor function.

"This lobe has to be removed from my brain, or the tumor will kill me. If the frontal lobe on the right side is removed, it will have to be replaced with something, or pressure changes will cause deterioration of the previously healthy brain. Why not replace the diseased lobe with a healthy one?" said Dr. Hopkins.

"You think it will have no effect on your surgery?"

"I am confident of it."

"And for twenty years you will be still considered the world's greatest operator?"

"The second greatest, Doctor. After you I come."

"I will do as you request," the Asiatic at last said. "It will take time. I must make careful preparations, take accurate measurements. It will not be easy to find a man with the same cranial contours—who is willing to take part in such an operation."

"Of course, I will pay him well."

"If I find the man, he will be glad to do it — without pay." There was a slight smile on the yellow face as Wing Loo said this. "In the meantime, I want you to become my guest. My humble home will be honored by

your worthy presence. In a month, perhaps in less time, all will be ready. Before the operation I will explain my technique."

Three weeks passed. During those three weeks Dr. Hopkins was indeed an honored guest in the palace of the greatest surgeon of the East.

Then he was called to the surgeon's office.

"You have been at leisure, Dr. Hopkins?" purred the Chinaman.

"Very much so."

"You have thought of other things besides surgery?"

"I am afraid so."

"But after the play comes work. We must begin. Here is what I do. I take your entire body and rapidly freeze it. While it is frozen, I operate. Then I thaw the body and inject adrenalin into the heart. Active life is renewed. In the years to come freezing will replace chloroform and ether as a general anaesthetic for all operations."

"It cannot be done, Dr. Wing Loo," declared Hopkins, shaking his head emphatically. "Take a piece of meat and freeze it. At once there is a destruction of cells. The water in the meat turns to crystal ice and in expanding destroys the cell wall. Place the meat in a warm room and at once decay, putrefaction sets in. Am I right or wrong?"

"Both. If the process of freezing is slow, gradual, you are

right. But I do not use that method. I take the person to be operated on and place him in a steel cylinder where the temperature is fifty degrees below zero. The freezing takes place so rapidly that there is no time for the water to form crystals. The entire body simply becomes a piece of frozen, suspended animation. I can then raise the temperature to ten degrees below zero and keep the animal in that state for days.

"Let me show you. I open this box. Here are two eels, both frozen by my method. With a forceps I pick one up and throw it on the floor. It shatters to bits as though it were made of glass. I place the other in this vase of hot water. See? It will soon come to life and move. Already it begins to quiver. And that eel has been frozen for over a year."

"All this is new to me," admitted Hopkins. "But you have to be near the body to operate. How can you retain any delicacy of touch at ten degrees below zero?"

"The person I operate on," answered the Chinese surgeon, "is in a glass case. Above the site of operation my instruments are suspended. I sit at a table by the cylinder. The field of operation is made visible to me by a series of mirrors. I press little buttons and the instruments above the patient do my bidding. The operation is always perfect, because it is entirely mechanical. There

is no chance for the slip of a nervous hand."

"But how about your arteries? I can understand that there is no bleeding while the operation is going on. But afterwards?"

"I have a special method of approximating the ends of nerves and arteries," replied the Oriental, smiling. "This is my own discovery, and you must pardon me if I keep it to myself, at least for a few years, but rest assured that there is no bleeding and that the operative wound heals rapidly."

"I can only say that I am astonished," admitted Dr. Hopkins.

"If you were an Oriental, Doctor, you would be astonished at nothing that happens."

"Perhaps you are right."

"And now that you have my idea, my method of operating, do you still want to take the risk?"

"I think so. The headaches are growing worse. Some days I am not sure of my own personality. I think that I have done things—in China—that I would not have done under ordinary circumstances."

"So many people act that way in China, even when they are well. However, human conduct is a very singular thing. I will operate tomorrow."

"You have the other man selected?"

"Indeed, yes."

"And he is willing?"

"So far, he has not questioned the desirability of the procedure."

"Will you let me pay him?"

"No, indeed. This entire operation is a present from a beginner in surgery to the world's greatest operator, the only ambidextrous surgeon on this earth."

"I shall be glad to get it over with," sighed Hopkins. "The way I have been feeling, the peculiar ideas I have had lately, the way I have been acting — anything, even death will be a change for the better."

"Death is a great adventure, Dr. Hopkins."

"I agree with you, Dr. Wing Loo."

The next day the American was rolled into the steel cylinder where the temperature was always under fifty degrees below zero. All struggling was prevented by a light, preliminary nitrous oxide anaesthesia. In a short time life was suspended, all animation at an end. Later on, the body lay on the operating table, the battery of glistening instruments was suspended above it and all enclosed in a glass case. On one side sat the surgeon and in front of him was a table of push buttons. Every consecutive step of the operation had been arranged for. The necessary instrument for each detail was in place and the mechanism neces-

sary to enable that instrument to make the proper movements was in perfect order. As Dr. Wing Loo sat there, looking at his invention, he could not help smiling in a pleased way.

"It is perfect," he admitted to himself. "It is so mechanically perfect that I could make a robot to sit here and press the buttons. That will come in time. And now for the operation. My mirrors are working perfectly. I will soon be able to see if the diagnosis of tumor of the right frontal lobe is correct." He pressed a button.

A small circular saw descended on the forehead of the American and started to cut its way through the frozen flesh and frontal bone.

A month later the two surgeons again sat in Dr. Wing Loo's office.

"I am feeling fine," said Dr. Hopkins. "I have spent a part of each day with my right hand in my pocket and my left hand performing imaginary operations, with my nail file and manicure scissors as instruments, and, as far as I can judge, that hand has lost none of its dexterity by having a part of its controlling cerebrum replaced. If you have some simple operation to do, I should like to operate before I leave China, and in that operation use first one hand and then the other. It will be interesting for you to watch me and make notes, so your case history will be com-

plete. Any procedure will do."

"I think that can be arranged for, Dr. Hopkins. But it will be years before your case history will be complete."

"No doubt. But you never told me about the tumor. Was it harmless or a glioma? And how is the poor fellow doing who contributed his brain to my welfare?"

"Oh! The tumor was a harmless variety, though it was causing pressure symptoms. As far as the man was concerned, I beg of you do not worry about him. I am sure that he feels honored to think that a piece of his insignificant brain is reposing in the cranial cavity of the greatest surgeon in the world."

"I wish you would stop saying that, Doctor. I am sure that if the world ever knew what you were doing in the way of experimental surgery, they would worship at your shrine."

"The time has not come for that. Someday perhaps — after you have died of old age, if I am then alive. But now I do not want to take your honor from you; and you look so much younger since the operation."

Hopkins looked at himself in the long mirror on one side of the room. He smiled as he pushed the hair away from his forehead.

"It was a clever piece of surgery, Doctor. The scar is hardly perceptible, and when the hair grows longer, no one will know I have been operated on. I really

did not want it known. So few people have confidence in a man who has had brain surgery. We had a general with a brain tumor, and I know the man was capable, but the War Department thought they could not trust his judgment. Of course, you will keep this operation a professional secret?"

"Certainly, Dr. Hopkins."

The two men looked at each other. It was as though two fencers had paused for a moment to decide on the next attack.

"But you will know, and I will know, Doctor," the Asiatic said finally, "that there was an operation."

"I will never forget that."

"No. You will never forget that."

A week later Dr. Hopkins performed a very delicate operation. First he used the right hand and then he used the left. Wing Loo watched him, and at the end, complimented him highly.

"Your left hand was mechanically perfect, Doctor."

"I felt so. Of course, I will continue to plan my operations with the left side of my brain. That is where the speech centers are, you know. The orders will be conveyed to the right brain and through those centers relayed to the muscles of the arm. The neurology of the central nervous system is all very interesting, Doctor."

"It certainly is," agreed the

Oriental physician quietly.

The following month Dr. Hopkins returned to Chicago. On the long ocean voyage he had an unusual opportunity to think. His final conclusions were that he was gloriously alive, very fortunate and extremely capable of years of more work; he also felt that in some ways he had been a trifle foolish in China and that some of the statements made by Wing Loo had been a little childish.

"The average Oriental is a queer mixture of savant and youth," he said to himself. "At the same time, he was very kind to me, and when I arrive at Chicago I must send him a worthwhile present. Perhaps a complete set of my writings bound in half morocco would be appropriate."

He had been away from his office for months, and he found a lot of work accumulated. There were a number of wealthy individuals who needed operations, but who wanted to wait till the great Master could give them individual care. As usual, he selected his cases, giving individual preference only to those who could give him either the greatest financial reward or the largest modicum of glory. When not operating, he lectured to his classes or read scientific papers before medical societies.

Immediately on arriving in Chicago he had turned all the re-

sources of his surgical laboratory towards the duplication of the surgical innovations that he had seen used in China. Some of his technicians laughed at him, while others, long haired and wild-eyed, enthused over being allowed to participate in such revolutionizing studies. The greatest secrecy was preserved. When the time came for an announcement to the world Dr. Hopkins wanted all the glory.

Another month passed and then a year and then two years. The great Chicago surgeon was asked to operate on the daughter of the richest man in America. It was not a difficult operation, simply the removal of a harmless tumor from the girl's neck. Hopkins decided to do it in his private operating room, alone, under local anaesthesia. Hours later the door of the operating room was forced open and the poor girl found, dead, on the operating table, the head completely severed from the body. Dr. Emanuel Hopkins had disappeared. Prolonged and persistent search failed to obtain the slightest clue.

His friends, remembering the brain tumor, placed the kindest construction on it and told the world that he had gone suddenly insane and in this condition had committed murder and suicide. A week later the murder was forgotten in the interest aroused by

the gangster murder of twelve bootleggers from Detroit.

It was spring time in China. Dr. Wing Loo sat in deep meditation as he slowly scratched the head of his favorite Pekingese, the dog he had operated on years before.

"Some day he will come back," he said to himself. "My Tong brother in Chicago writes of a strange murder and an equally peculiar disappearance. Someday he will come back to me, my beautiful experiment, my Occidental brother, my dear, damned fool."

As though an unseen hand were pulling the wire to make the human puppets dance, the thing that the Chinaman felt sure was going to happen, took place that very day. Dr. Hopkins came to the office and asked for an interview. Only the card, handed in by the servant, told that the man was the one-time great American surgeon. The writer who walked into the office was haggard and bent and there was a look of furtive fear on his face.

"So you have come back, my dear Doctor?" whispered the Oriental.

"I have come back," answered the man from Chicago. "Across the continent and the Pacific I have come back to you. I have come back—"

"You have said that three times!" interrupted the China-

man. "Once would have been once too many. I can see that you have come back to me without being told so often." The voice was sharp and cut like a knife. But the American looked at him and repeated the objectionable phrase.

"I say that I have come back to you. What did you do to me and why did you do it?"

"You mean the operation?"

"Certainly."

"Why, I did just what you asked me to do."

"No doubt. But there was something that you hid from me. There was something you did to me that I was not prepared for."

The Chinaman shook his head, and rejoined.

"You have to tell me more about it. I certainly have not the least idea of what you are talking about. I thought that when you left China you were more than pleased with the results of my surgery. You told me that you had remained perfectly ambidextrous, that your left hand was as good as the right. You operated for me and showed me your cleverness. I thought you approved of my work. As I remember, you sent me a present, a set of your medical writings, bound in half morocco. And now you seem to find fault. What happened?"

"Have you any whiskey?"

"Very good liquor, of all kinds."

"Get me some. My nerves are

at the breaking point—Ah! That has a kick to it—liquid fire in that decanter."

"That is very old peach brandy. Years ago it was made for my honorable grand-father."

"Lucky for me he did not drink it all. Now, for the story. Explain it if you can. I left you in perfect health and returned to Chicago. I at once started to operate and I was more clever than ever before. It seemed that the rest and the operation did me a world of good. My reputation became greater than ever. My clinics were filled by students from all parts of the world. There were even some Chinamen there."

"I sent them there—to observe you."

"Spy on me; was that it? Perhaps they told you of my ability? But there was one thing they did not tell you, because they did not know about it. After a while I noticed a difference in my thinking — while I was operating. I would keep on planning and arranging for the next step, my mind as usual a few minutes or seconds ahead of the knife. That part of me was working perfectly, but whenever I used my left hand there seemed to be a desire to operate poorly. I did not understand it at first, but finally, I realized that it was not a desire to do poor work, but an obsession to mutilate, destroy, tear and cut and ravish. As soon as I realized

it, I became frightened. In my abdominal work I forced myself to use only the right hand, but now and then I would forget and the left hand would take the knife and slash—and then there would be busy, silent moments and rapid work with the haemostats.

"Can you understand what I am saying? Do you see what I mean? The right hand operating perfectly for the cure of suffering humanity and the left hand waiting silently for a chance to kill!"

"But you told me that both hands were under the control of the left brain; that it was there you did all the programme work and that the right brain simply carried the messages, the orders from the other side," said the Chinese surgeon.

"I know that I told you that and my left brain is still in control. At least, I think so. But in Chicago the struggle continued—and at last I knew that it was a struggle between the two sides of the brain—not the two hands or arms, but between the two frontal lobes. *And only one of them was mine! The other you placed within my skull. They fought for the mastery.* But I won. At least for a long time I won. I claimed a neuritis of my left arm, and for months operated with it in a sling. And then my chance came to win the battle. I have told you all this, because I want you to understand.

"Do you?"

"I am sure I do."

"I was asked to perform a simple operation on the daughter of the richest man in my country. I had my left arm tied to my side, with ropes, and then I went into my private operating room with the girl and shut the door. I used local anaesthesia. I was going to prove to myself that my left brain was the dominant one. And then the temptation came. I started to operate and all the time the left hand and arm were straining to be free, and more and more I wanted it to be free; so, at last, I took a knife and cut the ropes that held it fast—and that hand of mine—that left hand almost jumped forward and took a knife and decapitated that poor child, and my body, my right hand, couldn't do anything to stop it. That is what happened. Of course, I fled from the country. No jury in America would believe my story. Think of the papers! The headlines. *Peculiar defense offered. Noted surgeon claims this to be a left handed murder. States that the rest of his body was not in sympathy with the hand that used the knife.* So, I made my getaway and I came to see you, because I am sure you know what is the matter with me. Do you?"

"I think so."

"Then tell me before I go insane."

"It is very simple. You came to

my house as my guest. I was very kind to you. But during the weeks before the operation you played around my house. There was a little Chinese girl—”

“Only a servant—and only as a joke.”

“She was my daughter. What was I to do? You were my guest, and I had promised to operate on you. But I had to have a healthy frontal lobe to replace your diseased one. A criminal was to be decapitated at that time. I obtained his head, and his right frontal lobe is now in your skull.”

“A criminal?”

“Yes. He was a really bad man. He was not content with just killing; he wanted to mutilate, destroy, terrify by the appearance of his victims. So, Ong Tong came to a bad end after killing many, many people; but a part of his brain now is your property, and, evidently, it remembered the conduct of its past owner and the frontal lobe of a degenerate Chinaman—need I say more?”

The American looked at the Chinaman. The Oriental continued to scratch the head of the Pekingese dog on his lap.

“And you did all this on purpose?”

“Certainly. You will admit that I had to do something—to save my face?”

“I suppose so. Now, let me tell you something. My life is ruined. I cannot open my skull and take out that yellow brain on my right

side, but I can keep this poor left arm from doing any more ruin. It has committed murder once, but that is no reason why it should do it again. I am not going to kill you. I ought to, but, in a way, you are right. I suppose I was a cur. But I didn’t know it was your daughter’ honest, I didn’t, Wing Loo. So, this is my final gesture.”

He took a long knife, an amputating knife, from his pocket, and with the skill of a Master, he cut off his left hand, and placed it on the table between them, then he fainted.

The Oriental rang a gong. His private secretary answered.

“Our friend has taken the honorable way of escape,” Dr. Wing Loo announced. “Take him from here and let his blood flow, as he desired. But place him at once in the cold chamber. The left side of his brain is in perfect condition and so are his right arm and hand. It may be that when old age changes and withers my brain, I shall want to use his brain, for a little while—just for a little while.”

The room cleaned, the body removed, Wing Loo sat day-dreaming in his chair. He picked up the little dog and playfully bit his ears.

“And now,” he said to the dog, “I can honestly say that I am the greatest surgeon in the world.”

The End

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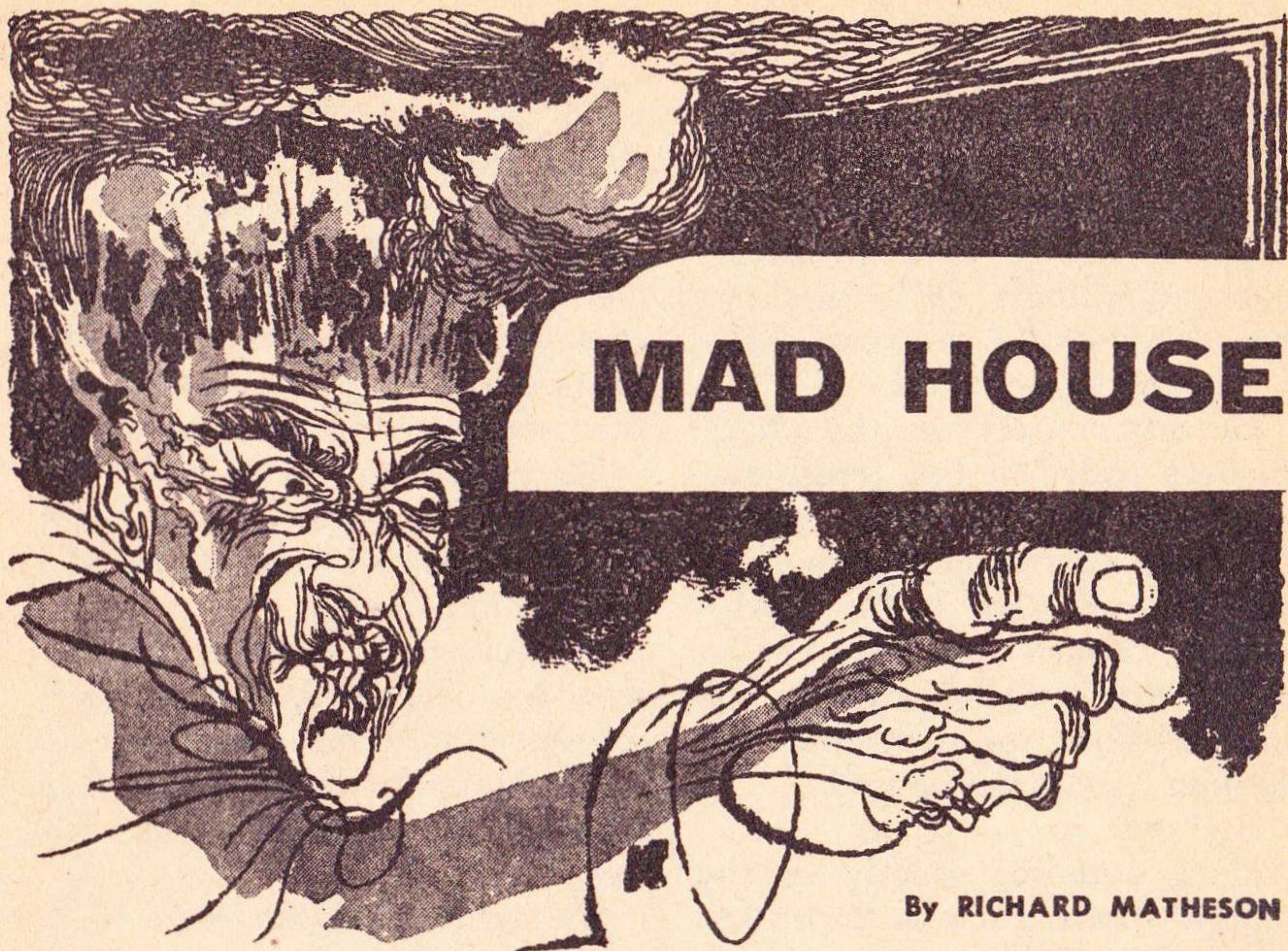
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MAD HOUSE

By RICHARD MATHESON

Although it may be a bit hard to believe—especially for some of us near-oldtimers—it's now more than fifteen years since Richard Matheson jolted the field with "Born of Man and Woman"—a first story only a few pages long but each of them fraught with enough horror to keep us from rereading it all these years. But that's not at all how we feel about later Matheson, some of which we've reread many times, particularly "Mad House"—just so we could get back to that terrifying moment when Professor Neal's straight razor decides to open up all by itself!

HE sits down at his desk. He picks up a long yellow pencil and starts to write. The lead point breaks.

The ends of his lips turn down. The eye pupils grow small in the hard mask of his face. Quietly,

mouth pressed into an ugly lipless gash, he picks up the pencil sharpener.

He grinds off the shavings and tosses the sharpener back in the drawer.

Once more he starts to write.

The point snaps again and the lead rolls across the paper.

Suddenly his face becomes livid. Wild rage clamps the muscles of his body. He yells at the pencil, curses it with a long stream of outraged epithets. He breaks it in two with a brutal snap and flings it into the wastebasket.

He sits tensely on the chair, his eyes wide, his lips trembling. He shakes with a frenzied wrath. It sprays his insides with acid.

The pencil lies in the wastebasket, broken and still. It is wood, lead, metal, rubber; all dead, without appreciation of the burning fury it has caused.

And yet . . .

He is standing quietly by the window, peering out at the street. He is letting the tightness sough away.

He does not hear the rustle in the wastebasket which ceases almost immediately it has begun.

He sits down before his typewriter.

He inserts a sheet of paper and begins tapping on the keys.

His fingers are large. He hits two keys at once. The two type surfaces are jammed together. They stand in the air, hovering impotently over the black ribbon. He reaches over in disgust and slaps them back and starts typing again. He hits the keys brutally, fingers falling like the stiff claws of a derrick. He types faster. Four

of the keys stick together.

He screams.

He slams his fist on the machine. He clutches at the paper and rips it from the machine in ragged pieces. He welds the fragments in his fist and hurls the crumpled ball across the room. He beats the carriage over and slams the cover down on the machine.

He jumps up. "You fool!" he shouts at the machine, in a bitter revolted voice. "You stupid, idiotic, asinine fool!"

He quivers as he yells. And he wonders, deep in the self-isolated recesses of his mind, whether he is killing himself with anger, whether he is destroying his system with fury.

He turns and stalks away. He is too outraged to hear the slight whirring of metal, somewhat as if the keys were trembling in their slots.

He is shaving. The razor will not cut. Or the razor is too sharp and cuts too much. Both times a muffled curse billows up through his lips. He hurls the razor on the floor and kicks it against the wall.

He is cleaning his teeth. He draws the fine silk floss between his teeth. It shreds off. A fuzzy bit remains in the gap. He tries to press another piece down to get that bit out. He cannot force the white thread down. It snaps in his fingers.

He screams. He screams at the

man in the mirror and draws back his hand, throws the floss away violently.

He has torn another piece of floss from the container. He is giving the dental floss another chance. He is holding back his fury. If the floss knows what is good for it, it will plunge down between the teeth and draw out the shredded bit immediately.

It does.

The man is mollified. But the anger is still there, a thing apart.

He is eating. His wife places a steak before him. He picks up the knife and fork. He slices. The meat is tough, or the blade is dull.

A spot of red puffs up in his cheeks. His eyes narrow. He draws the knife through the meat. The blade will not sever the browned flesh. The meat will not surrender.

White teeth jam together. The knife is hurled across the room in a paroxysm of violent temper.

So through the days and nights.

His anger falling like frenzied axe blows on every article in his house, everything he owns.

Sprays of teeth-grinding hysteria clouding his windows and falling to his floors. Oceans of wild uncontrolled hate flooding through every room of his house; filling each iota of space with a shifting, throbbing life.

He lay on his back and stared

hard at the sun-mottled ceiling.

The last day. The phrase had been creeping in and out of his brain since he had awakened.

In the bathroom he could hear the water running. He could hear the medicine cabinet being opened and then closed again. He could hear the sound of her slippers shuffling on the tile floor.

Sally, he thought, don't leave me. Please. "I'll take it easy if you stay," he promised the air in a whisper.

But he knew he couldn't take it easy. That was too hard. It was easier to fly off the handle. Easier to scream and rant and attack.

He turned on his side and stared out into the hall at the bathroom door. He could see the line of light under the door. Sally is in there, he thought. Sally, my wife, whom I married many years ago when I was young and full of hope.

He closed his eyes suddenly and clenched his fists. It came upon him again. The sickness that prevailed with more violence every time he contracted it. The sickness of despair, of lost ambition. It ruined everything. It cast a vapor of bitterness over all his comings and goings. It jaded appetite, ruined sleep, destroyed affection.

He gritted his teeth and tried to make his mind a blank. Like a dull-eyed idiot, his mind repeated the words that he muttered often in his sleep through restless tossing nights: I'm 35 years old. I

teach English at Fort College. Once I had hoped to be a writer. I thought this would be a fine place to write. I would teach class part of the day and write with the rest of my time. I met Sally at school and married her. I thought everything would be just fine. I thought success was inevitable.

Fifteen years ago.

Fifteen years.

How, he thought, could you mark the passing of a decade and a half? The time seemed a shapeless lump of failing efforts, of anguished nights; of the secret, the answer, the revelation always being withheld from him. Dangled overhead like cheese swinging in a maddening arc over the narrow head of a beserk rat.

And resentment building higher and higher. Mostly now it was directed at Sally. Every penny she spent on the house was like a blow at his aspirations, took him that much farther from the time he could devote himself solely to writing.

He forced himself to think that way. He forced himself to believe that it was only time he needed to do great writing. But once a furious student had yelled at him: "You're just a third-rate talent hiding behind a desk!"

He remembered that.

Oh God, how he remembered that moment. Remembered the cold sickness that had convulsed

him when those words hit his brain. Recalled the trembling and the shaky unreason of his voice.

He had failed the student for the semester, despite good marks. There had been a great to-do about it. The student's father had come to the school. They had all gone before Dr. Ramsay, the head of the English department.

He remembered that too. The scene could crowd out all other memories: him, sitting on one side of the conference table facing the irate father and son. Dr. Ramsay stroking his beard until he thought he'd hurl something at him. Dr. Ramsay had said, "Well, let's see if we can't straighten this little matter out."

They had consulted the record book and found that the student was right. Dr. Ramsay had looked up at him in great surprise. "Well, I can't see what . . ." he had said, and then let his syrupy voice trail off, just waiting for an explanation.

And the explanation had been hopeless. A jumbled and pointless affair. Irresponsible attitude, he had said. Flaunting of unpardonable behavior. Morally a failure.

And Dr. Ramsay, his thick neck getting red, telling him in no uncertain terms that morals were not subject to the grading system at Fort College.

There was more, but he'd forgotten it. He'd made an effort to forget it.

But he couldn't forget that it would be years before he made a professorship. Ramsay would hold it back. And his salary would go on being insufficient and bills would mount and he would never get his writing done.

He regained the present to find himself clutching the sheets with taut fingers. He found himself glaring in hate at the bathroom door. His mind snapped vindictively. Go on! Go home to your precious mother. See if I care. Why just a trial separation? Make it permanent. Give me some peace. Maybe I can do some writing then.

Maybe I can do some writing then.

The phrase made him sick. It had no meaning any more. Like a word that is repeated until it becomes gibberish, that sentence, for him, had been used to extinction.

For a moment, though, he wondered if it were true. Now that she was leaving, could he forget about her and really get some work done? Quit his job? Go somewhere and hole up in a cheap furnished room and write?

And far back in his mind he wondered if he could write anywhere. Often the question threw itself at him when he was least expecting it. You have four hours every morning, the statement would rise like a menacing wraith.

You have time to write many thousands of words. Why don't you?

The bathroom door opened and she came out dressed in her good red suit. For no reason at all, it seemed, he suddenly realized that she'd been wearing that same outfit for more than three years.

The realization angered him even more. He closed his eyes and hoped she wasn't looking at him. I hate her, he thought. I hate her because she has destroyed my life.

He heard the rustle of her skirt as she sat at the dressing table and pulled out a drawer.

He kept his eyes shut. He listened to the Venetian blinds tap lightly against the window frame as morning breezes touched them. He could smell her perfume floating lightly on the air.

And he tried to think of the house empty all the time.

He tried to think of coming home from class and not finding Sally there waiting for him. The idea seemed, somehow, impossible.

And that angered him.

Yes, he thought, she's gotten to me. She's worked on me until I am so dependent on her for really unessential things that I suffer under the delusion that I cannot do without her.

He turned suddenly and looked at her. "So you're really going," he said in a cold voice.

There was no anger on her face. She looked tired. "Yes," she said, "I'm going."

Good riddance. The words tried to pass his lips. He cut them off. "I suppose you have your reasons," he said bitterly.

Her shoulders twitched a moment in what he took for a shrug of weary amusement.

"I have no intentions of arguing with you," he said. "Your life is your own."

She was quiet, saying nothing, just looking tired.

She's waiting for apologies, he thought. Waiting to be told that he didn't hate her as he'd said. That he'd not struck her, but all his twisted and shattered hopes; the mocking spectacle of his own lost faith.

"And just how long is this *trial* separation going to last?" he said, his voice acidulous.

She shook her head. "I don't know, Chris," she said quietly, "It's up to you."

"Up to me?" he said. "It's always up to me, isn't it?"

"Oh *please*, Chris. I don't want to argue any more. I'm too tired to argue."

"It's easier to just pack and run away."

She turned and looked at him. Her eyes were very dark and unhappy. "Run away?" she said, "After fifteen years you accuse me of that? Fifteen years of watching

you destroy yourself. And me along with you. Oh, don't look surprised. I'm sure you know that you've driven me half insane too."

She turned away and he saw her shoulders twitch. She brushed some tears away from her eyes.

"It's n-not just because you hit me," she said. "You kept saying that last night when I said I was leaving."

"Do you think it would matter if . . ." She took a deep breath. "If it meant you were angry with *me*? If it was that I could be hit every day. But you didn't hit *me*. I'm nothing to you. I'm not wanted."

"Oh, stop being so —"

"No," she broke in. "That's why I'm going. Because I can't bear to watch you hate me more every day for something that — that isn't my fault."

"I suppose you —"

"Oh, don't say any more," she cried, getting up. She hurried out of the room.

Don't say any more? his mind asked as though she were still there. Well, there's more to say. Lots more.

You don't seem to realize what I've lost, he told her. You don't seem to understand. I had hopes. Oh, God, what hopes I had. I was going to write prose to make the people sit up and gasp. I was going to tell them things they need badly to know. I was going to tell them in so entertaining a way that

they would never realize that the truth was getting to them. I was going to create immortal works.

Now when I die I shall only be dead. I am trapped in this depressing village. Entombed in a college of science where men gape at dust and do not even know that there are stars above their heads. I don't know what to do. . . .

He looked miserably at her perfume bottles. At the powder box that tinkled *Always* when the cover was lifted off.

*I'll remember you. Always.
With a heart's that true. Always.*

The words are childish and comical, he thought. But his throat contracted and he felt himself shudder. "Sally," he said. So quietly that he could hardly hear it himself.

After a while he got up and dressed. While he was putting on his trousers a rug slid from under him and he had to grab the dresser for support. He glared down, heart pounding in the total fury he had learned to summon within the space of seconds.

"Damn you," he muttered.

He forgot Sally. He forgot everything. He just wanted to get even with the rug. He kicked it violently under the bed. The anger plunged down and disappeared. He shook his head. I'm sick, he thought. He thought of going in to her and telling her that

he was sick, that he needed help.

His mouth tightened as he went into the bathroom.

No, I'm not sick, he contradicted. Not in body, anyway. It's my mind that's ill. And she only makes it worse.

The bathroom was still damply warm from her use of it. He opened the window a trifle and got a splinter in his finger.

"Damn you!" he snarled loudly at the finger. He picked at the flesh until he had pulled out the sliver of wood.

He jerked at the cabinet door. It stuck. His face reddened. He pulled harder and the door flew open and cracked him on the wrist. He spun about and grabbed his wrist. He threw back his head with a whining gasp.

He stood there, eyes clouded with pain, staring at the ceiling. He looked at the crack that ran in a crazy meandering line across the ceiling width and into the wall to disappear where the line of tile began.

Then he closed his eyes. And began to sense something. Intangible. A sense of menace. He wondered about it. Why, it's myself, of course, he reasoned. It is the moral decrepitude of my own subconscious. It is bawling out to me, saying: You are to be punished for driving your poor wife away to her mother's arms. You are not a man. You are a —

"Oh shut up," he said out loud.

He washed his hands and face. He ran an inspecting finger over his chin. He needed a shave. He opened the cabinet door gingerly and took out his straight razor. He held it up and looked at it.

The handle was expanded.

He told himself that quickly as the blade appeared to fall out of the handle willfully. It made him shiver to see it flop out like that and glitter in the light from the cabinet light fixture.

He stared in repelled fascination at the bright steel. He touched the blade edge. So sharp, he thought. The slightest push will sever flesh. What a hideous thing it is.

"It's my hand."

He said it involuntarily and shut the razor suddenly.

It *was* his hand. It had to be. It couldn't have been that the razor moved by itself. That was sick imagination. But he didn't shave. He put the razor back in the cabinet with a vague sense of forestalling doom.

Don't care if we are expected to shave every day, he said. I'm not taking a chance on my hand's slipping. I'd better get a safety razor, anyway. This kind isn't for me. I'm too nervous.

Suddenly a picture of himself fifteen years before flew into his brain. He remembered a date he'd had with Sally. He remembered telling her he was so calm it was akin to being dead. Nothing both-

ers me, he'd said. And it was true. At the time.

He remembered, too, telling her he didn't like coffee. That one cup kept him awake all night. That he didn't smoke. Didn't like the taste or the smell. I like to stay healthy. That's what he'd said. He remembered the exact words.

"And now," he muttered at his lean and worn reflection. Now he drank gallons of coffee a day. Until it sloshed like a black pool in his stomach and he couldn't sleep any more than he could fly. Now he smoked endless strings of finger-yellowing cigarettes until his throat felt raw and clogged.

As he brushed his teeth, he tried to recall when this irrational temper had first begun to control him. But there was no way of tracing its course. Somewhere in mists that could not be pierced, it had started. With a word of petulance. An angry contraction of muscles. With a glare of unrecallable animosity.

And from there, like a swelling amoeba, it had gone its own perverted and downward course of evolution, reaching its present nadir in him; a taut, embittered man who found his only solace in hating.

He spit out white froth and rinsed his mouth.

As he put down the glass, it cracked. A barb of glass drove into his hand.

"Damn!" he yelled.

He spun on his heel and clenched his fist. It sprang open as the sliver sank into his palm.

He stood with tears on his cheeks, breathing heavily. He thought of Sally listening to him, hearing once more the audible evidence of his snapping nerves.

Stop it! he told himself. You can never do anything until you rid yourself of this de-enervating temper. He drew the glass sliver from his palm. He put on his dark tie.

Then he went into the dining room, consulting his watch. It was ten-thirty already. More than half the morning was gone. It happened that way more often now than he would admit even to himself. Sleeping late. Making up errands. Doing anything to forestall the terrible moment when he must sit down before his typewriter and try to wrench some harvest from the growing desert of his mind.

It was harder every time. And he grew more angry every time. And hated more. And had never noticed until now, when it was too late, that Sally had grown desperate and could no longer stand his temper or his hate.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down across the table from where she was drinking coffee. She started to get up.

"What's the matter? Can't you stand the sight of me?"

She sat back and took a deep pull on the cigarette in her hand. Then she tamped it out on the saucer.

He felt sick. He wanted to get out of the house suddenly. It felt alien to him. He had the feeling that she had renounced all claim to it. That she had retreated from it. The touch of her fingers and the loving indulgences she had bestowed on every room — all these things were taken back. They had lost tangibility because she was leaving. She was deserting it and it was not their home any more. This he felt strongly.

Sinking back against the chair, he pushed away his cup and stared at the yellow oilcloth on the table. He felt as if he and Sally were frozen in time. That seconds were drawn out like some fantastic taffy, until each one seemed an eternity. The clock ticked slower. And the house became a different house.

"What train are you getting?" he asked, knowing before he spoke that there was only one morning train.

"12:47," she said.

When she said it, he felt as if his stomach were pulled back hard against his backbone. He gasped, so actual was the physical pain. She glanced at him.

"Burned myself," he said hastily, and she got up and put her cup and saucer in the sink.

Why did I say that? he thought.

Why couldn't I say that I gasped because I was filled with terror at the thought of her leaving me? Why do I always say the things I don't mean? I'm not bad. But every time I speak, I build the walls of hate and bitterness around me higher and higher, until I cannot escape them.

Sally walked out of the kitchen. He sat tensely at the table, rage making his body tremble.

Consciously, he tried to relax, and pressed his left hand over his eyes. He sat there trying to lose his misery in silence and blackness.

It wouldn't work.

And then his cigarette really burned him and he sat erect. The cigarette hit the floor, scattering ashes. He bent over and picked it up. He threw it at the waste can and missed. To hell with it, he thought.

He got up and dumped the cup and saucer in the sink. The saucer broke in half and nicked his right thumb. He let it bleed.

She was in the extra room finishing her packing.

The extra room. The words tortured him now. When had they stopped calling it "the nursery"? When had they learned they would never be able to have the children they wanted so badly? When had he begun to replace this loss with nothing better than volcanic temper and days and nights of sheath-scraped nerves?

He stood in the doorway and watched her. He wanted to get out his typewriter and sit down. He wanted to write reams of words. He wanted to glory in his coming freedom. Think of all the money he could save. Think of how soon he could go away and write all the things he'd always meant to write.

He stood in the doorway. Sick.

Is this possible? his mind asked, incredulous. Possible that she is leaving? But she and he were man and wife. They had lived and loved in this house for fifteen years.

Now she was leaving. Putting articles of clothing in her old black suitcase and leaving. He couldn't reconcile himself to that. He couldn't understand it or ally it with the functions of the day. Where did it fit into the pattern? The pattern that was Sally right there cleaning and cooking and trying to make their home happy and warm.

He shivered and, turning abruptly, went back into the bedroom. He slumped down on the bed and stared at the delicately whirring electric clock on their bedside table.

Past eleven. In less than an hour I have to hold class for a group of idiot freshmen. And on the desk in the living room is a mountain of mid-term examinations with essays that I must suffer through, feeling my stomach turn at their paucity of intelli-

gence, their adolescent phraseology.

And all that tripe, all those miles of hideous prose, have been wound into an eternal skein in my head. And there it sits unraveling into my own writing until I wonder if I can stand the thought of living any more. I have digested the worst. Is it any wonder then that I exude it piecemeal?

Temper began again, a low banking fire in him, gradually fanned by further thinking.

I've done no writing this morning. Like every morning after every other morning as time passes. I do less and less. I write nothing. Or I write worthless things. I could write better when I was twenty than I can now.

I will *never* write anything good!

He jolted to his feet and his head snapped around as he looked for something to strike at, something to break, something to hate with such force that it would wither under the blast.

It seemed as though the room clouded. He felt a throbbing.

His left leg banged against a corner of the bed.

He gasped in fury. He wept. Tears of hate and repentance and self-commiseration. I am lost, he thought. Lost. There is nothing.

He became very calm. Icy calm. Drained of pity. Of emotion. He put on his suit coat. He put on his hat and got his briefcase off the

dresser. He stopped before the door to the room where she still fussed with her bag. He felt his heart thudding like a heavy drum beat.

"Have a nice time at your mother's," he said dispassionately.

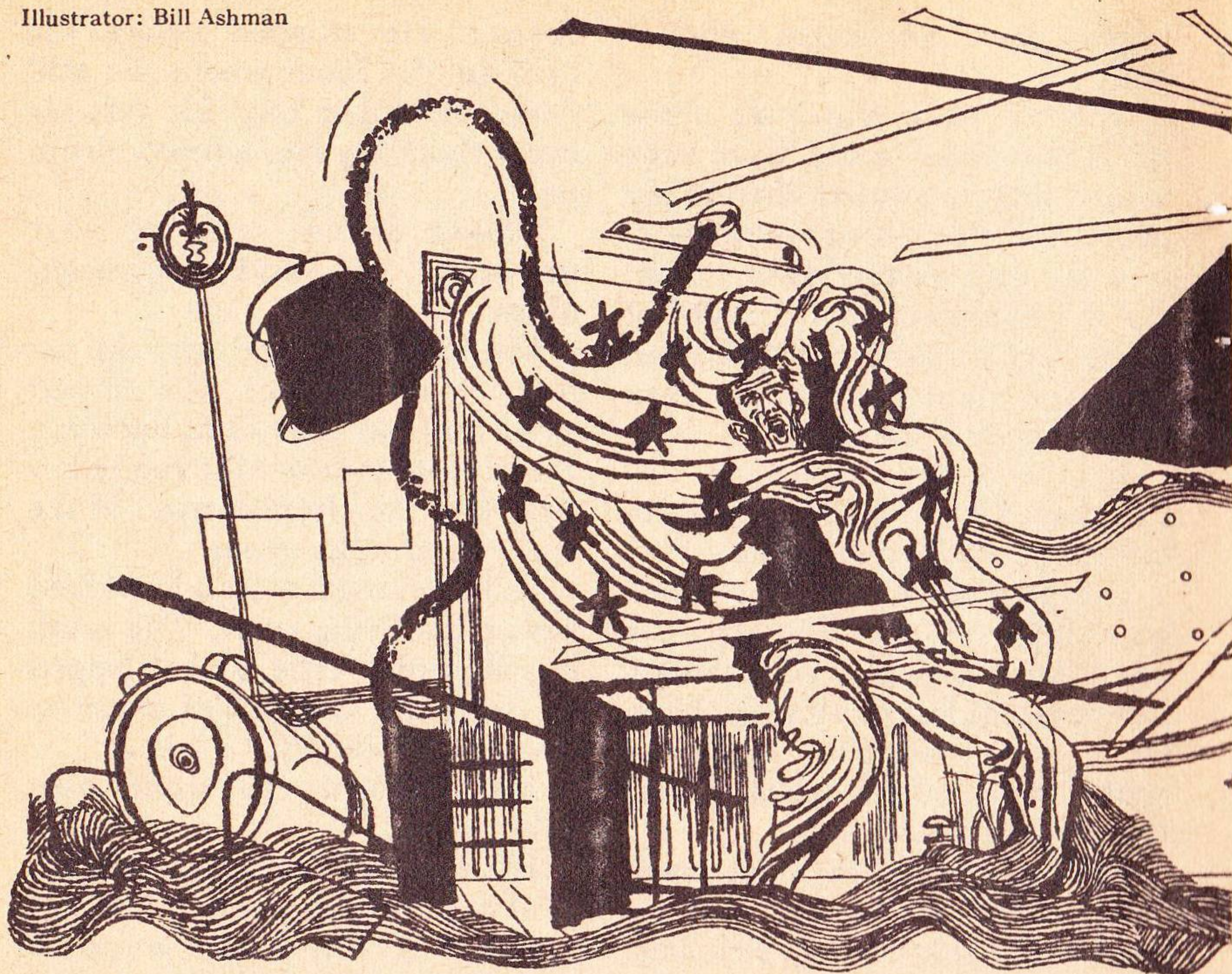
She looked up and saw the expression on his face. She turned away and put a hand to her eyes. He felt a sudden need to run to her and beg for forgiveness. Make everything right again.

But he turned away and walked across the living room. The small rug slipped a little, and it helped to focus the strength of anger he needed. He kicked it aside.

He slammed the front door behind him.

His eyes saw that it was a beautiful day, but his mind would not attest to it. The trees were thick with green, and the air warm and fresh. Spring breezes flooded down the streets. He felt them brush over him. He walked down the block, crossed Main Street to the bus stop.

He stood on the corner looking back at the house. She is in there, his mind persisted in analysis. In there, the house in which we have lived for so many years. She is packing or crying or doing something. And soon she will call the Campus Cab Company. A cab will come. The driver will honk the horn. Sally will put on her light spring coat and take her suit-



case out on the porch. She will lock the door behind her — maybe for the last time.

"No."

He could not keep the word from strangling in his throat. He kept staring at the house. His head ached. He saw everything weaving. I'm sick, he thought.

"I'm sick!"

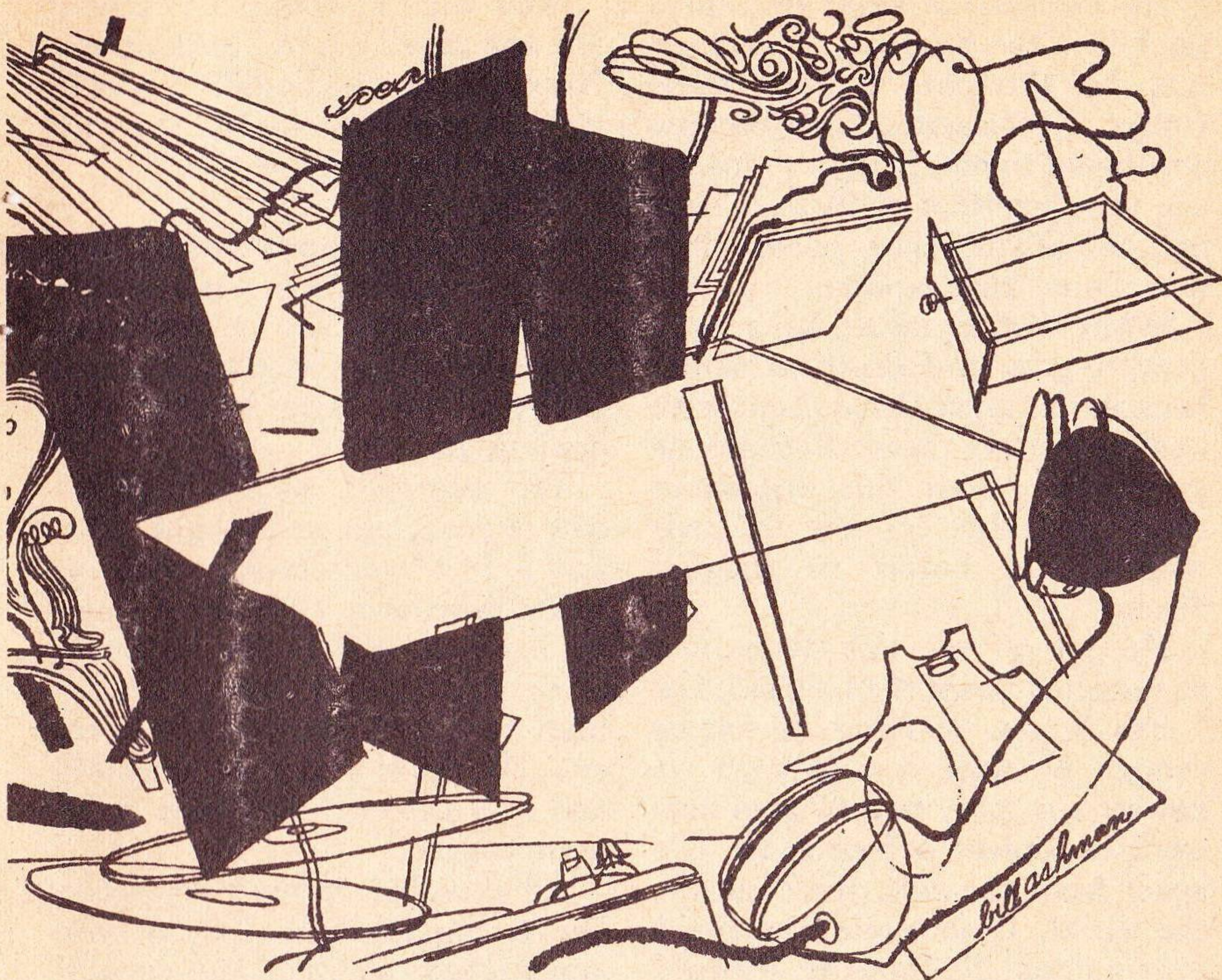
He shouted it. There was no one around to hear. He stood gazing at the house. She is going away forever, said his mind.

Very well then! He would write. I will write, write, write. He let

the word soak into his mind and displace all else.

A man had a choice, after all. He devoted his life to his work or to his wife and home and children. It could not be combined. Not in this day and age. In this insane world where God is second to income and goodness to wealth.

He glanced aside as the green-striped bus topped the distant hill and approached. He put the briefcase under his arm and reached into his coat pocket for a token. There was a hole in the pocket.



Sally had been meaning to sew it. Well, she would never sew it now. What did it matter anyway? I would rather have my soul intact than the clothes I wear.

Words, words, he thought, as the bus stopped before him. They flood through me now that she is leaving. Is that an evidence that it is her presence that clogs the channels of thought?

He dropped the token in the coin box and weaved down the length of the bus. He passed a professor he knew and nodded to him abstractedly. He slumped down

on the back seat and stared at the grimy rubberized floor boards.

This is a great life, his mind ranted. I am so pleased with this, my life, and these, my great and noble accomplishments.

He opened the briefcase. He looked in at the thick prospectus he had outlined with the aid of Dr. Ramsay.

First Week: (1) *Everyman*. Discussion of. Reading of selections from *Classic Readings For College Freshmen*. (2) *Beowulf*. Reading of. Class discussion. Twenty-minute quotation quiz.

He shoved the sheaf of papers back into the briefcase. It sickens me, he thought. I hate these things. The classics have become anathema to me. I begin to loathe the very mention of them. Chaucer, the Elizabethan poets, Dryden, Pope, Shakespeare.

What higher insult to a man than to grow to hate these names because he must share them with unappreciative clods. Because he must strain them thin and make them palatable for the dullards who should better be digging ditches.

He got off the bus downtown and started down the long slope of Ninth Street. Walking, he felt as though he were a ship with its hawser cut, prey to a twisted network of violent currents. He felt apart from the city, the country, the world. If someone told me I were a ghost, he thought, I would be inclined to believe. He plodded under the arch and into the wide green campus of the college. He looked across at the huge Physical Sciences Center, its granite face beaming in the late morning sun.

Now she must be calling the cab, he thought. He consulted his watch. No. She is in the cab already. Riding through the silent streets. Past the houses and down into the shopping district. Past the red brick buildings spewing out yokels and students. Through the town that was a potpourri of the sophisticated and the rustic.

Now the cab should be turning left and moving into Tenth Street. Now pulling up the hill. Topping it. Gliding down toward the railroad station. Now —

“Chris!”

His head snapped around and his body twitched in surprise. He looked toward the wide-doored entrance to the Mental Sciences Building. Dr. John Morton was coming out.

We attended school together fifteen years ago, he thought, John and I. But I only took a small interest in science. I preferred wasting my time on the literary culture of the centuries. I didn't care for mud and steel and bunsen burners. That's why I'm an associate and he's a doctor and head of his department.

All this fled through his brain like racing winds as Dr. Morton approached, smiling. He clapped Chris on the shoulder.

“Hello there. How are things?”

“How are they ever?”

Dr. Morton's smile faded. “What is it, Chris?” he asked.

I won't tell you about Sally, Chris thought. Not if I die first. You'll never know it from me. “The usual,” he said.

“Still on the outs with Ramsay?”

Chris shrugged. Morton looked over at the large clock on the façade of the Mental Sciences Building.

“Say, look,” he said, “why are

we standing here? Your class isn't for a half hour yet, is it?"

Chris didn't answer. He's going to invite me for coffee, he thought. He's going to regale me with more of his inane theories. He's going to use me as whipping boy for his mental merry-go-round.

"Let's get some coffee," Morton said, taking Chris's arm. They walked along in silence for a few steps.

"How's Sally?" Morton asked.

"She's fine," he answered in an even voice.

"Good. Oh, incidentally, before I forget, I'll probably drop by tomorrow or the next day for that book I left there last Thursday night."

"All right."

"What were you saying about Ramsay now?"

"I wasn't."

Morton skipped it. "Been giving any thought to what I told you?" he asked.

"If you're referring to your fairy tales about my house, no. I haven't been giving them any more thought than they deserve. Which is none."

They turned the corner of the building and walked toward Ninth Street.

"Chris, that's an indefensible attitude," Morton said. "You have no right to doubt when you don't know. You have no right to an opinion on a subject you

know absolutely nothing about."

Chris felt like pulling his arm away, turning and leaving Morton standing there. He was sick of words and words and words. He wanted to be alone. He almost felt as if he could put a pistol to his head now. Get it over with. Yes, I could, he thought. If someone handed it to me now, this moment, it would be done right here.

They went up the stone steps to the sidewalk and crossed over to the Campus Cafe. Morton opened the door and ushered Chris in. Chris went in back and slid into a wooden booth.

Morton brought two coffees and sat across from him. "Now, listen," he said, stirring in sugar, "I'm your best friend. At least I regard myself as such. And I'm damned if I'll sit by like a mute and watch you kill yourself. What'll it take to convince you, damnit? Do you have to lose your life first?"

"Look," Chris said pettishly, "I don't believe it. That's all. Forget it now. Let it go."

"Listen, Chris, I can show you —"

"You can show me nothing!" Chris cut in. He shook his head in disgust. "What dreams you white-frosted kiddies have in the sanctified cloister of your laboratory. You can make yourself believe anything after a while. As long as you can make up a measurement for it."

"Will you listen to me, Chris? How many times have you complained to me about splinters, about closet doors flying open, about rugs slipping? How many times?"

"Oh, don't start that again, for God's sake. I'll get up and walk out of here. I'm in no mood for your lectures. Save them for those poor idiots who pay tuition to hear them."

Morton looked at him with a shake of his head. "I wish I could get to you," he said.

"Forget it."

"Forget it?" Morton squirmed. "Can't you see that it's impossible to forget? Can't you see that you're in danger because of your temper?"

"I'm telling you, John —"

"Where do you think that temper of yours goes? Do you think it disappears? No. It doesn't. It goes into your rooms and into your furniture and into the air. It goes into Sally. It makes everything sick. Including you. It crowds you out. It welds a link between animate and inanimate. Psychobolie. Oh, don't look so petulant. Like a child who can't stand to hear the word 'spinach'. Sit down, for God's sake. You're an adult. Listen like one."

Chris lit a cigarette. He let Morton's voice drift into a non-intelligent hum. He glanced up at the wall clock. Quarter to twelve.

In two minutes, if schedule was adhered to, she would be going. The train would move and the town of Fort would pass away from her.

"I've told you any number of times," Morton was saying, "no one knows what matter is really made of. Atoms, electrons, pure energy. All words. Who knows where it ends? We guess. We make up means of measurement. We theorize. But we don't know."

"And that's for matter. Think of the human brain. Think of its still unknown capacities. It's an uncharted continent, Chris. It may stay that way for a long time. But all that time the suspected powers will still be affecting us, and maybe affecting matter. Even if we can't show it on a gauge."

"And I say you're poisoning your house. I say your temper has become ingrained in the structure. In every article you touch. All of them influenced by you and your ungovernable rages. And I think too that if it weren't for Sally's presence acting as an abortive factor, well . . . you might actually be attacked by . . ."

"Oh, stop this gibberish, for God's sake," Chris snapped angrily. "You're talking like a juvenile after he's finished reading his first Tom Swift novel."

Morton sighed. He ran his fingers over the cup edge and shook his head sadly. "Well," he said,

"all I can do is hope that nothing breaks down. It's obvious that you're not going to listen to me."

"Congratulations on one statement I can agree with," said Chris. He looked at his watch. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go and listen to saddle-shoed cretins stumble over passages they haven't the slightest ability to assimilate."

The students were reading a selection from *King Lear*. Their heads were bent over the books.

He stared at them without seeing them. I've got to resign myself to it, he told himself. I've got to forget her, that's all. She's gone. I'm not going to bewail the fact. I'm not going to hope against hope that she'll return. I don't *want* her back. I'm better off without her. Free and unfettered now.

His thoughts drained off. He felt empty and helpless. He felt as though he could never write another word the rest of his life. Maybe, he thought, sullenly displeased with the idea, maybe it was only the upset of her leaving that enabled my brain to find words. After all, the words I thought of, the ideas that flourished, though briefly, were all to do with her. Her going and my wretchedness because of it.

He caught himself short. No! he cried in silent battle. I will not let it be that way. I'm strong. This feeling is only temporary. I'll very

soon have learned to do without her. And then I'll do work. Brilliant work.

He quivered with excitement. Someone was waving a hand in his face. He focused his eyes and looked coldly at the girl.

"Well?" he said.

"Could you tell us when you're going to give back our mid-term papers, Professor Neal?"

He stared at her. His right cheek twitched. He felt as if he were about to hurl every invective at his command into her face. His fists closed.

"You'll get them back when they're marked," he said tensely.

"Yes, but —"

"You heard me," he said. His voice rose at the end of the sentence. The girl sat down. As he lowered his head, he noticed that she looked at the boy next to her and shrugged her shoulders, a look of disgust on her face.

"Miss . . ." He fumbled with his record book and found her name. "Miss Forbes!"

She looked up, her features drained of color. Her red lips stood out sharply against her white skin. Painted alabaster idiot. The words clawed at him.

"You may get out of this room," he ordered sharply.

Confusion filled her face. "Why?" she asked in a thin plaintive voice.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me," he said, the fury rising. "I said

for you to get out of this room!"

"But —"

"Do you hear me!" he shouted.

Hurriedly she collected her books, her hands shaking. Her face burned with embarrassment. She kept her eyes on the floor and her throat moved convulsively as she edged along the aisle and went out the doorway.

The door closed behind her. He sank back. He felt a terrible sickness in himself. Now, he thought, they will all turn against me in defense of an addle-witted little girl. Dr. Ramsay will have more fuel for his simple little fire.

And they are right.

He could not keep his mind from saying it.

They *are* right. He knew it. In that far recess of his mind which he could not cow with thoughtless passion. I am a stupid fool. I have no right to teach others. I cannot even teach myself to be a human being. He wanted to cry out the words and weep confessions and throw himself from one of the open windows.

"The whispering will stop!" he demanded fiercely.

The room was quiet. He sat tensely, waiting for any signs of militance. I am your teacher, he thought. I am to be obeyed. I am. . . .

The concept died. He lost them. He drifted away again. What were students or a girl asking about mid-term papers? What was any-

thing? Nothing at all mattered.

He glanced at his watch.

In a few minutes the train will pull into Centralia. She will change to the main line express into Indianapolis. Then up to Detroit and her mother. Gone.

Gone. He tried to visualize the word, put it into living terms. But the thought of the house without her was almost beyond his means. Because it wasn't the house without her. It was something else.

And he began to think of what John had said.

Was it possible? He was in a mood to accept the incredible. It was incredible that she had left him. Why not extend the impossibilities that were happening to him?

All right then, he thought angrily. The house is alive. I've given it this life with deadly outpourings of wrath. But —

The door opened. He glanced up. Dr. Ramsay stood there, face drawn into a mask of indignation. Behind him in the hall Chris could see the girl, her face streaked with tears.

"A moment, Neal," Ramsay said sharply. He stepped out into the hall again.

Chris sat at the desk staring at the door. He felt suddenly very tired, exhausted. He felt as if getting up and moving into the hall were more than he could possibly manage.

He glanced at the class. A few of them were trying to repress smiles.

"For tomorrow you will finish the reading of *King Lear*," he said. Some of them groaned.

Ramsay appeared in the doorway again, his cheeks pink.

"Are you coming, Neal?" he asked loudly.

Chris felt himself tighten with anger as he walked across the room and out into the hall.

The girl lowered her eyes. She stood behind Dr. Ramsay's portly frame.

"What is this I hear, Neal?" Ramsay asked.

That's right, Chris thought. Don't ever call me Professor. I'll never be one, will I? You'll see to that, you bastard.

"I don't understand," he said, as coolly as possible.

"Miss Forbes here claims you ejected her from class for no reason at all."

"Then Miss Forbes is lying quite stupidly," he said. Let me hold this anger, he thought. Don't let it flood loose. He shook with holding it back.

The girl gasped at the accusation. She took out her handkerchief again. Ramsay turned and patted her shoulder.

"Go in my office, child. Wait for me." She turned away slowly. Politician! cried Neal's mind. How easy it is for you to be popular with them. You don't have to

deal with their bungling minds.

Miss Forbes turned the corner and Ramsay looked back at Neal. "Your explanation had better be good," he said.

Chris didn't speak. Why am I standing here? he suddenly wondered. Why am I standing in this neon-lit hall and listening to this pompous boor berate me?

"I'm waiting, Neal."

Chris tightened. "I told you she was lying," he said quietly.

"I choose to believe otherwise," said Dr. Ramsay, his voice trembling.

A shudder ran through Chris. His head moved forward. He spoke slowly, with teeth clenched. "You can believe anything you damn well please."

Ramsay's mouth twitched. "I think it's time you appeared before the board," he said.

"Fine!" said Chris loudly. Ramsay made a move to close the classroom door. Chris gave it a kick and it banged against the wall. A girl gasped inside.

"What's the matter?" Chris yelled. "Don't you want your students to hear me tell you off? Don't you want them to suspect that you're a dolt, a windbag, an ass!"

Ramsay raised shaking fists before his chest. His lips trembled violently.

"This will do, Neal!" he cried.

Chris reached out and shoved the heavy man aside. He snarled,

"Oh, damn, get out of my way."

He started down the hallway. He heard the bell ring. It sounded as though it were in another existence. The building throbbed with life. Students poured from classrooms.

"Neal!" called Dr. Ramsay.

He kept walking. Oh, God, let me out of here, I'm suffocating, he thought. My hat. My briefcase. Leave them. Get out of here.

Dizzily he descended the stairs, surrounded by milling students. They swirled about him like an unidentifiable tide. His brain was far from them. His steps were robot-like.

Staring ahead dully, he walked along the first-floor hall. He turned and went out the door and down the porch steps to the campus sidewalk. He paid no attention to students who stared at his ruffled blond hair, his mussed clothes. He kept walking. I've done it, he thought belligerently, I've made the break. I'm free!

All the way down to Main Street and out on the bus he kept renewing his stores of anger. He went over those few moments in the hallway again and again. He summoned up the vision of Ramsay's stolid face, repeated the words. He kept himself taut and furious.

I'm glad, he told himself forcibly. Everything is solved. Sally has left me. Good. She spoiled everything I had. She drained me

of my talent. Now I'll be free of her — and able to write as I dreamed years ago. My job is gone. Good. Now I'm free to do as I like. I have all the time I'll need to put my words on the typewriter.

A strained and angry joy pounded through him. He felt alone, a stranger to the world and glad of it.

At his stop he got off the bus and walked determinedly toward the house, pretending to ignore the pain he felt at approaching it. It's just an empty house, he thought. Nothing more. Despite all puerile theories, *it is nothing but a house.*

He went in slowly. Everything seemed so quiet — so strange. The emptiness tore at him. Dizzy suddenly, he sank down on the couch and closed his eyes. He dug his nails into his palms. Oh, God, *I am sick.*

He twitched and looked around stupidly. What was it? This feeling that he was sinking into the couch, into the floor boards, dissolving in the air, joining the molecules of the house.

He whimpered softly, looking around. His head ached. He pressed a palm against his forehead. "What?" he muttered. "What?"

He stood up. As though there were fumes, he tried to smell them. As though it were a sound,

he tried to hear it. He turned around to see the fear. As though it were something with depth and length and width. Something menacing.

He wavered. He fell back on the couch. He stared around. There was nothing. All intangible. The furniture lay as it had before. The sunlight filtered through the windows, piercing the gauzelike curtains, making gold patterns on the inlaid wood floor. The walls were still creamy. The ceiling was as it had been.

He pushed up and walked dizzily about the room. He forgot about Sally. He walked into the dining room. He touched the table. He stared at the dark oak wood.

He went into the kitchen. He stood by the sink and looked out the window. Then he stared down at the sink. He felt drunk. Everything was fuzzy on the edges.

She'd washed the cups before she left. The broken saucer was thrown away. He looked at the nick on his thumb. It was dried. He'd forgotten about it.

He looked around suddenly as if someone had sneaked behind him. He stared at the wall. Something was rising. He felt it. But that was silly. It had to be imagination.

Imagination!

Suddenly he slammed a fist on the sink. I'll write. Write. Write. Sit down and drain it all away in words. This feeling of anguish and

terror and loneliness. Write it out of my system.

He ran from the kitchen. He refused to accept the fear of instinct in himself. He ignored the menace that seemed to thicken the very air.

A rug slipped. He kicked it aside.

He sat down. The air hummed. He tore the cover off the typewriter. He sat nervously, staring at the keyboard. The moment before attack. It was in the air. But it's my attack, he thought triumphantly. My attack on stupidity and fear!

He rolled a sheet into the typewriter. He tried to collect his throbbing thoughts. Write, the word called in his mind. Write. *Now.*

He felt the desk lurch against his shins. The flaring pain knifed through him. He kicked the desk in automatic frenzy. More pain. He kicked again. The desk flung back against him. He screamed.

He'd seen it move.

He tried to back off, the anger torn from him.

The typewriter keys moved under his hands. His eyes swept down. He couldn't tell whether he was moving the keys. Or whether they moved by themselves. He pulled hysterically, trying to dislodge his fingers.

He couldn't. The keys were moving faster than his eye could see. They were a blur of motion.

He felt them shredding his skin. His fingers were peeled. They were raw. Blood started to ooze out. He cried and pulled. He managed to jerk away his fingers. He jumped back in the chair.

His belt buckle caught. The desk drawer came flying out. It slammed into his stomach. He yelled again. The pain was a black cloud pouring over his head.

He threw down a hand to shove in the drawer. He saw the yellow pencils lying there. They glared. His hand slipped. It banged into the drawer. One of the pencils jabbed him. He always kept the points sharp. It was like the bite of a snake. He snapped back his hand with a gasp of pain. The point was jammed under a nail. It was imbedded in raw tender flesh.

He cried out in fury and pain.

He pulled at the pencil with his other hand. The point flew out and jabbed into his palm. He couldn't get rid of the pencil. It kept dragging over his hand. He pulled at it. It tore black jagged lines on his skin. It tore the skin open.

He heaved the pencil across the room. It bounced from the wall. It seemed to jump as it fell on the eraser. It rolled over and was still.

He lost his balance. The chair fell back with a rush. His head banged sharply against the floorboards. His outclutched hand

grabbed at the window sill. Tiny splinters flashed into his skin like invisible needles.

He howled in deathly fear. He kicked his legs. The mid-term papers showered down over him like the beating wings of insane bird flocks.

The chair snapped up again on its springs. The heavy wheels rolled over his raw bloody hands. He drew them back with a shriek. He reared a leg and kicked the chair over violently. It crashed on its side against the mantelpiece. The wheels spun and chattered like a swarm of furious insects.

He jumped up. He lost his balance and fell again. He crashed against the window sill. The curtains fell on him like a python. The rods snapped. They flew down and struck him across the scalp. He felt warm blood trickle across his forehead.

He thrashed about on the floor. The curtains seemed to writhe around him like serpents. He screamed again. He tore at them wildly. His eyes were terror-stricken.

He threw them off. He lurched up suddenly. He staggered around for balance. The pain in his hands assailed him. He looked at them. They were like raw butcher meat, skin hanging down in shreds.

He had to bandage them. He turned toward the bathroom. At his first step the rug slid from under him. The rug he had kicked

aside. It was back in place. He felt himself rush through the air. He reached down his hands instinctively, trying to block the fall.

The white pain made his body leap. One finger snapped. Splinters shot into his raw fingers. He felt a burning pain in one ankle.

He tried to scramble up. The floor was like ice under him. He slid toward the bathroom. His screams choked off. He was deadly silent. His heart thudded in his chest. He tried to rise again. He fell. He hissed in pain.

The bookshelf loomed over him.

He cried out and flung up an arm. The case came crashing down on him. The top shelf drove into his skull. Black waves dashed over him. A sharp pain blade drove into his brain.

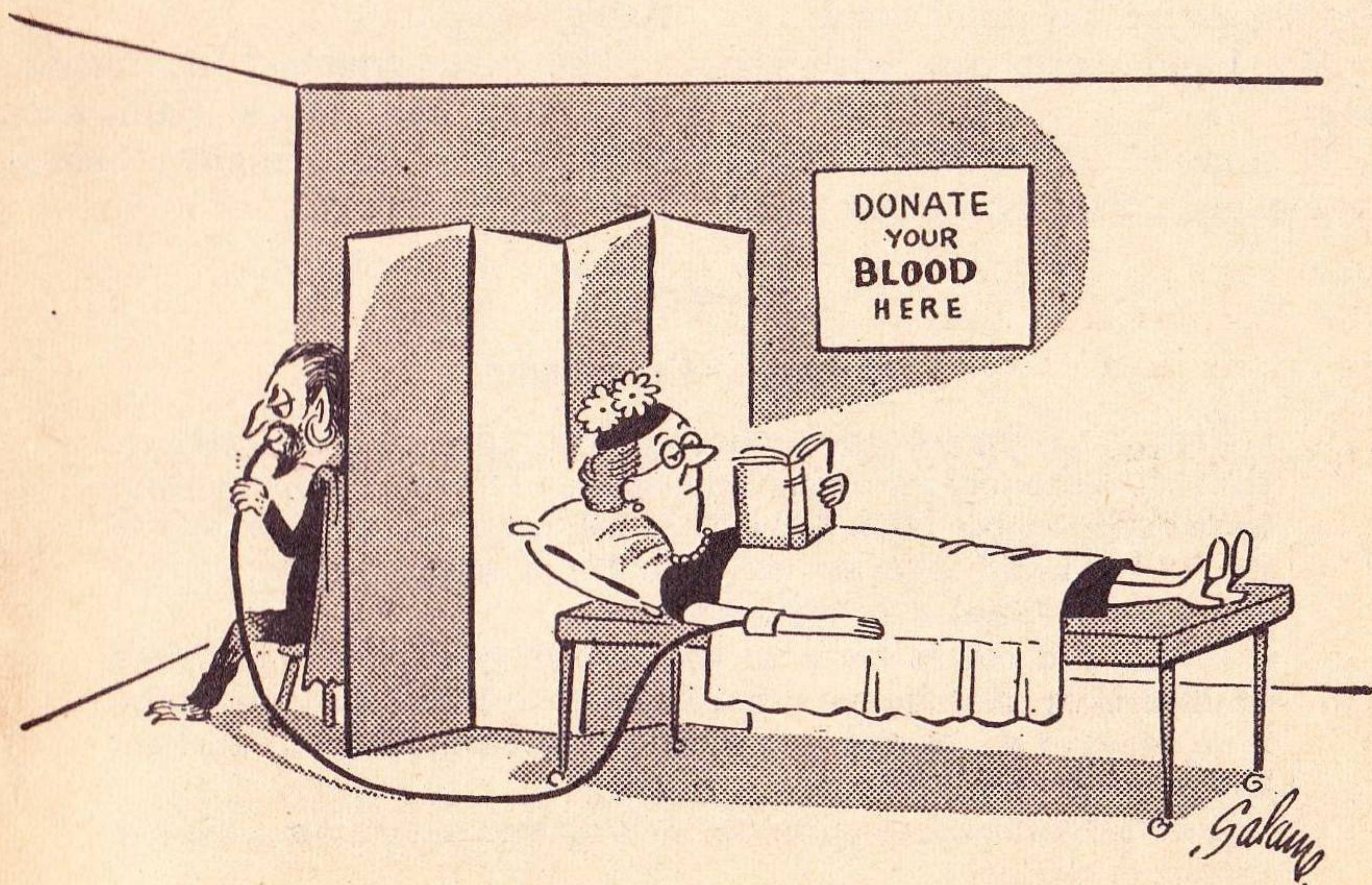
Books showered over him. He rolled on his side with a groan. He tried to crawl out from underneath. He shoved books aside weakly. They fell open. He felt the page edges slicing into his fingers like razor blades.

The pain cleared his head. He sat up. He hurled the books aside. He kicked the bookcase back against the wall. The back fell off it and it crashed down.

He rose up. The room spun before his eyes. He staggered into the wall. He tried to hold on. The wall shifted under his hands. He could not hold on. He slipped to his knees, pushed up again.

"Bandage myself," he muttered hoarsely.

The words filled his brain. He



staggered up, through the dining room. Into the bathroom.

He stopped. No! Get out of the house! Better to get out!

He tried to turn. But he slipped on the tiles and cracked his elbow against the edge of the bathtub. A shooting pain barbed into his upper arm. The arm went numb. He sprawled on the floor, writhing.

He sat up, breath tearing at his throat. He pushed himself up. His arm shot out. He pulled at the cabinet door. It flew open into his cheek. It tore a jagged rip in the soft flesh.

His head snapped back. The crack in the ceiling looked like a wide idiot smile on a blank white face. He whimpered in fright.

He tried to back away.

His hand reached out. For iodine, gauze, his mind cried.

His hand came out with the razor.

It flopped in his hand like a new-caught fish. His other hand

reached in. For iodine, gauze!

His hand came out with dental floss. It flooded out of the tube like an endless white worm. It coiled around his throat and shoulders. It choked him.

The long shiny blade slipped from its sheath.

He could not stop his hand. It drew the razor across his chest.

It slit open the shirt. It sliced a valley through his flesh.

Blood spurted out.

He tried to hurl away the razor. It stuck to his hand. It slashed at him. At his arms and hands and legs and body.

A scream of utter horror flooded from his lips. He ran from the bathroom. His feet carried him into the living room.

"Sally!" he screamed, "Sally, Sally, Sally . . ."

The razor touched his throat. The room went black. Pain. Life ebbing away into night. Silence over all the world.

Hideaway For a Head

*M*EDICAL science boasts a number of instances of self-surgery — but none as major as the case reported by a Denver, Colorado paper back in September 1866. A lodger in a Denver boarding house was not seen or heard of for several days. The landlady became worried and had his locked door battered down.

Inside, laid out in state on the bed, they found the boarder's headless body. Nearby was a farewell note which read: "I can stand it no longer. I am committing suicide by cutting off my head. I am hiding it where no one will ever find it."

With this evidence to go on, the alert coroner turned in a justifiable verdict of suicide.

(Continued from page 77)

arms in their wide black sleeves bent about her. She fought against them in speechless fright, surprised by their lean hardness. The hooded head bent down toward her averted face. And she screamed, and screamed again in poignant fear and loathing. Bony arms gripped her lithe body, and from that hood looked forth a countenance of death and decay—features like rotting parchment on a moldering skull.

She screamed again, and then, as those champing, grinning jaws bent toward her lips, she lost consciousness . . .

Chapter IX

The Castle of the Wizards

The sun had risen over the white Himelian peaks. At the foot of a long slope a group of horsemen halted and stared upward. High above them a stone tower poised on the pitch of the mountainside. Beyond and above that gleamed the walls of a greater keep, near the line where the snow began that capped Yimsha's pinnacle. There was a touch of unreality about the whole—purple slopes pitching up to that fantastic castle, toy-like with distance, and above it the white glistening peak shouldering the cold blue.

"We'll leave the horses here," grunted Conan. "That treacherous slope is safer for a man on foot. Besides, they're done."

He swung down from the black stallion which stood with wide-braced legs and drooping head. They had pushed hard throughout the night, gnawing at scraps from saddle-bags, and pausing only to give the horses the rests they had to have.

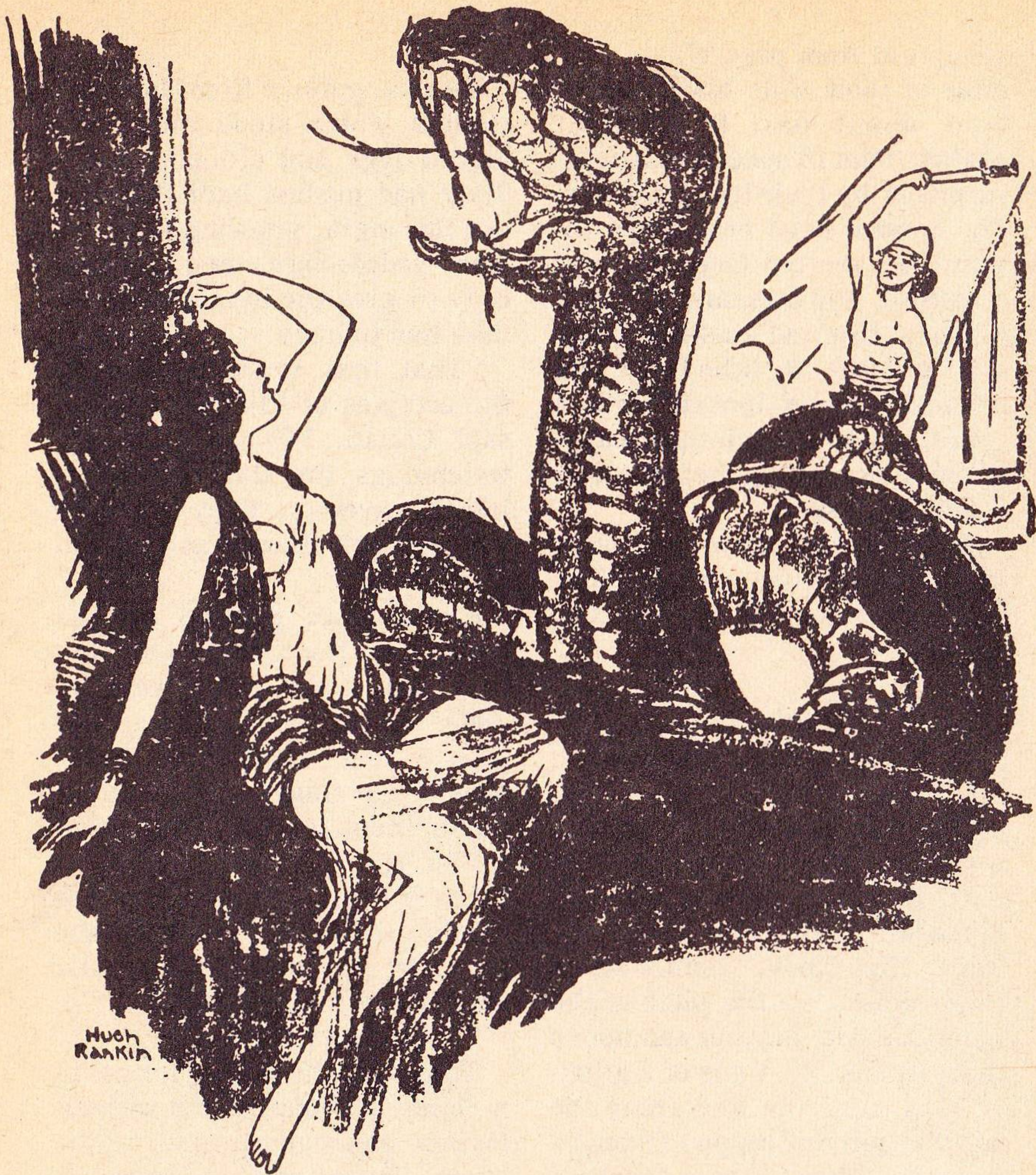
"That first tower is held by the acolytes of the Black Seer," said Conan. "Or so men say; watch-dogs for their masters—lesser sorcerers. They won't sit sucking their thumbs as we climb this slope."

Kerim Shah glanced up the mountain, then back the way they had come; they were already far up on Yimsha's side, and a vast expanse of lesser peaks and crags spread out beneath them. Among those labyrinths the Turanian sought in vain for a moment of color that would betray men. Evidently the pursuing Afghulis had lost their chief's trail in the night.

"Let us go, then."

They tied the weary horses in a clump of tamarisk and without further comment turned up the slope. There was no cover. It was a naked incline, strewn with boulders not big enough to conceal a man. But they did conceal something else.

The party had not gone fifty steps when a snarling shape burst from behind a rock. It was one of the gaunt savage dogs that infested the hill villages, and its eyes glared redly, its jaws dripped



foam. Conan was leading, but it did not attack him. It dashed past him and leaped at Kerim Shah. The Turanian leaped aside, and the great dog flung itself upon the Irakzai behind him. The man yelled and threw up his arm, which was torn by the brute's fangs as it bore him backward, and the next instant half a dozen

tulwars were hacking at the beast. Yet not until it was literally dismembered did the hideous creature cease its efforts to seize and rend its attackers.

Kerim Shah bound up the wounded warrior's gashed arm, looked at him narrowly, and then turned away without a word. He rejoined Conan, and they re-

newed the climb in silence.

Presently Kerim Shah said: "Strange to find a village dog in this place."

"There's no offal here," grunted Conan.

Both turned their heads to glance at the wounded warrior toiling after them among his companions. Sweat glistened on his dark face and his lips were drawn back from his teeth in a grimace of pain. Then both looked again at the stone tower squatting above them.

A slumberous quiet lay over the uplands. The tower showed no sign of life, nor did the strange pyramidal structure beyond it. But the men who toiled upward went with the tenseness of men walking on the edge of a crater. Kerim Shah had unslung the powerful Turanian bow that killed at five hundred paces, and the Irakzai looked to their own lighter and less lethal bows.

But they were not within bow-shot of the tower when something shot down out of the sky without warning. It passed so close to Conan that he felt the wind of the rushing wings, but it was an Irakzai who staggered and fell, blood jetting from a severed jugular. A hawk with wings like burnished steel shot up again, blood dripping from the scimitar-beak, to reel against the sky as Kerim Shah's bow-string twanged. It dropped like a plummet, but no man saw where it struck

the earth or heard its dying cry.

Conan bent over the victim of the attack, but the man was already dead. No one spoke; useless to comment on the fact that never before had a hawk been known to swoop on a man. Red rage began to vie with fatalistic lethargy in the wild sould of the Irakzai. Hairy fingers knocked arrows and men glared vengefully at the tower whose very silence mocked them.

But the next attack came swiftly. They all saw it—a white puffball of smoke that tumbled over the tower-rim and came drifting and rolling down the slope toward them. Others followed it. They seemed harmless, mere woolly globes of cloudy foam, but Conan stepped aside to avoid contact with the first. Behind him one of the Irakzai reached out and thrust his sword into the unstable mass. Instantly a sharp report shook the mountainside. There was a burst of blinding flame, and then the puffball had vanished, and of the too-curious warrior remained only a heap of charred and blackened bones. The crisped hand still gripped the ivory sword-hilt, but the blade was gone—melted and destroyed by that awful heat. Yet men standing almost within reach of the victim had not suffered except to be dazzled and half blinded by the sudden flare.

"Steel touches it off," grunted Conan. "Look out—they come!"

The slope above them was almost covered by the billowing spheres. Kerim Shah bent his bow and sent a shaft into the mass, and those touched by the arrow burst like bubbles in spurning flame.

His men followed his example and for the next few minutes it was as if a thunderstorm raged on the mountain slope, with bolts of lightning striking and bursting in showers of flame. When the barrage ceased, only a few arrows were left in the quivers of the archers.

They pushed on grimly, over soil charred and blackened, where the naked rock had in places been turned to lava by the explosion of those diabolical bombs.

Now they were almost within arrowflight of the silent tower, and they spread their line, nerves taut, ready for any horror that might descend upon them.

On the tower appeared a single figure, lifting a ten-foot bronze horn. Its strident bellow roared out across the echoing slopes, like the blare of trumpets on Judgment Day. And it began to be fearfully answered. The ground trembled under the feet of the invaders, and rumblings and grindings welled up from the subterranean depths.

The Irakzai screamed, reeling like drunken men on the shuddering slope, and Conan, eyes glaring, charged recklessly up the incline, knife in hand, straight at

the door that showed in the tower-wall. Above him the great horn roared and bellowed in brutish mockery. And then Kerim Shah drew a shaft to his ear and loosed.

Only a Turanian could have made that shot. The bellowing of the horn ceased suddenly, and a high, thin scream shrilled in its place. The green-robed figure on the tower staggered, clutching at the long shaft which quivered in its bosom, and then pitched across the parapet. The great horn tumbled upon the battlement and hung precariously, and another robed figure rushed to seize it, shrieking in horror. Again the Turanian bow twanged, and again it was answered by a death-howl. The second acolyte, in falling, struck the horn with his elbow and knocked it clattering over the parapet to shatter on the rocks far below.

At such headlong speed had Conan covered the ground that before the clattering echoes of that fall had died away, he was hacking at the door. Warned by his savage instinct, he gave back suddenly as a tide of molten lead splashed down from above. But the next instant he was back again, attacking the panels with redoubled fury. He was galvanized by the fact that his enemies had resorted to earthly weapons. The sorcery of the acolytes was limited. Their necromantic resources might well be exhausted.

Kerim Shah was hurrying up

the slope, his hillmen behind him in a straggling crescent. They loosed as they ran, their arrows splintering against the walls or arching over the parapet.

The heavy teak portal gave way beneath the Cimmerian's assault, and he peered inside warily, expecting anything. He was looking into a circular chamber from which a stair wound upward. On the opposite side of the chamber a door gaped open, revealing the outer slope—and the backs of half a dozen green-robed figures in full retreat.

Conan yelled, took a step into the tower, and then native caution jerked him back, just as a great block of stone fell crashing to the floor where his foot had been an instant before. Shouting to his followers, he raced around the tower.

The acolytes had evacuated their first line of defense. As Conan rounded the tower he saw their green robes twinkling up the mountain ahead of him. He gave chase, panting with earnest blood-lust, and behind him Kerim Shah and the Irakzai came pelting, the latter yelling like wolves at the flight of their enemies, their fatalism momentarily submerged by temporary triumph.

The tower stood on the lower edge of a narrow plateau whose upward slant was barely perceptible. A few hundred yards away this plateau ended abruptly in a

chasm which had been invisible farther down the mountain. Into this chasm the acolytes apparently leaped without checking their speed. Their pursuers saw the green robes flutter and disappear over the edge.

A few moments later they themselves were standing on the brink of the mighty moat that cut them off from the castle of the Black Seers. It was a sheer-walled ravine that extended in either direction as far as they could see, apparently girdling the mountain, some four hundred yards in width and five hundred feet deep. And in it, from rim to rim, a strange, translucent mist sparkled and shimmered.

Looking down, Conan grunted. Far below him, moving across the glimmering floor, which shone like burnished silver, he saw the forms of the green-robed acolytes. Their outline was wavering and indistinct, like figures seen under deep water. They walked in single file, moving toward the opposite wall.

Kerim Shah nocked an arrow and sent it singing downward. But when it struck the mist that filled the chasm it seemed to lose momentum and direction, wandering widely from its course.

"If they went down, so can we!" grunted Conan, while Kerim Shah stared after his shaft in amazement. "I saw them last at this spot—"

Squinting down he saw some-

thing shining like a golden thread across the canyon floor far below. The acolytes seemed to be following this thread, and there suddenly came to him Khemsa's cryptic words—"Follow the golden vein!" On the brink, under his very hand as he crouched, he found it, a thin vein of sparkling gold running from an outcropping of ore to the edge and down across the silvery floor. And he found something else, which had before been invisible to him because of the peculiar refraction of the light. The gold vein followed a narrow ramp which slanted down into the ravine, fitted with niches for hand and foot hold.

"Hers's where they went down," he grunted to Kerim Shah. "They're no adepts, to waft themselves through the air! We'll follow them—"

It was at that instant that the man who had been bitten by the mad dog cried out horribly and leaped at Kerim Shah, foaming and gnashing his teeth. The Turanian, quick as a cat on his feet, sprang aside and the madman pitched head-first over the brink. The others rushed to the edge and glared after him in amazement. The maniac did not fall plummet-like. He floated slowly down through the rosy haze like a man sinking in deep water. His limbs moved like a man trying to swim, and his features were purple and convulsed beyond the

contortions of his madness. Far down at last on the shining floor his body settled and lay still.

"There's death in that chasm," muttered Kerim Shah, drawing back from the rosy mist that shimmered almost at his feet. "What now, Conan?"

"On!" answered the Cimmerian grimly. "Those acolytes are human; if the mist doesn't kill them, it won't kill me."

He hitched his belt, and his hands touched the girdle Khemsa had given him; he scowled, then smiled bleakly. He had forgotten that girdle; yet thrice had death passed him by to strike another victim.

The acolytes had reached the farther wall and were moving up it like great green flies. Letting himself upon the ramp, he descended warily. The rosy cloud lapped about his ankles, ascending as he lowered himself. It reached his knees, his thighs, his waist, his arm-pits. He felt it as one feels a thick heavy fog on a damp night. With it lapping about his chin he hesitated, and then ducked under. Instantly his breath ceased; all air was shut off from him and he felt his ribs caving in on his vitals. With a frantic effort he heaved himself up, fighting for life. His head rose above the surface and he drank air in great gulps.

Kerim Shah leaned down toward him, spoke to him, but Conan neither heard nor heeded.

Stubbornly, his mind fixed on what the dying Khemsa had told him, the Cimmerian groped for the gold vein, and found that he had moved off it in his descent. Several series of hand-holds were niched in the ramp. Placing himself directly over the thread, he began climbing down once more. The rosy mist rose about him, engulfed him. Now his head was under, but he was still drinking pure air. Above him he saw his companions staring down at him, their features blurred by the haze that shimmered over his head. He gestured for them to follow, and went down swiftly, without waiting to see whether they complied or not.

Kerim Shah sheathed his sword without comment and followed, and the Irakzai, more fearful of being left alone than of the terrors that might lurk below, scrambled after him. Each man clung to the golden thread as they saw the Cimmerian do.

Down the slanting ramp they went to the ravine floor and moved out across the shining level, treading the gold vein like rope-walkers. It was as if they walked along an invisible tunnel through which air circulated freely. They felt death pressing in on them above and on either hand, but it did not touch them.

The vein crawled up a similar ramp on the other wall up which the acolytes had disappeared, and up it they went with taut nerves,

not knowing what might be waiting for them among the jutting spurs of rock that fanged the lip of the precipice.

It was the green-robed acolytes who awaited them, with knives in their hands. Perhaps they had reached the limits to which they could retreat. Perhaps the Stygian girdle about Conan's waist could have told why their necromantic spells had proven so weak and so quickly exhausted. Perhaps it was a knowledge of death decreed for failure that sent them leaping from among the rocks, eyes glaring and knives glittering, resorting in their desperation to material weapons.

There among the rocky fangs on the precipice lip was no war of wizard craft. It was a whirl of blades, where real steel bit and real blood spurted, where sinewy arms dealt forthright blows that severed quivering flesh, and men went down to be trodden under foot as the fight raged over them.

One of the Irakzai bled to death among the rocks, but the acolytes were down — slashed and hacked asunder or hurled over the edge to float sluggishly down to the silver floor that shone so far below.

Then the conquerors shook blood and sweat from their eyes, and looked at one another. Conan and Kerim Shah still stood upright, and four of the Irakzai.

They stood among the rocky

teeth that serrated the precipice brink, and from that spot a path wound up a gentle slope to a broad stair, consisting of half a dozen steps, a hundred feet across, cut out of a green jade-like substance. They led up to a broad stage or roofless gallery of the same polished stone, and above it rose, tier upon tier, the castle of the Black Seers. It seemed to have been carved out of the sheer stone of the mountain. The architecture was faultless, but unadorned. The many casements were barred and masked with curtains within. There was no sign of life, friendly or hostile.

They went up the path in silence, and warily as men treading the lair of a serpent. The Irakzai were dumb, like men marching to a certain doom. Even Kerim Shah was silent. Only Conan seemed unaware what a monstrous dislocating and uprooting of accepted thought and action their invasion constituted, what an unprecedented violation of tradition. He was not of the East; and he came of a breed who fought devils and wizards as promptly and matter-of-factly as they battled human foes.

He strode up the shining stairs and across the wide green gallery straight toward the great golden-bound teak door that opened upon it. He cast but a single glance upward at the higher tiers of the great pyramidal structure tower-

ing above him. He reached a hand for the bronze prong that jutted like a handle from the door—then checked himself, grinning hardly. The handle was made in the shape of a serpent, head lifted on arched neck; and Conan had a suspicion that that metal head would come to grisly life under his hand.

He struck it from the door with one blow, and its bronze clink on the glassy floor did not lessen his caution. He flipped it aside with his knife-point, and again turned to the door. Utter silence reigned over the towers. Far below them the mountain slopes fell away into a purple haze of distance. The sun glittered on snow-clad peaks on either hand. High above, a vulture hung like a black dot in the cold blue of the sky. But for it, the men before the gold-bound door were the only evidence of life, tiny figures on a green jade gallery poised on the dizzy height, with that fantastic pile of stone towering above them.

A sharp wind off the snow slashed them, whipping their tatters about. Conan's long knife splintering through the teak panels roused the startled echoes. Again and again he struck, hewing through polished wood and metal bands alike. Through the sundered ruins he glared into the interior, alert and suspicious as a wolf. He saw a broad chamber, the polished stone walls untapes-

tried, the mosaic floor uncarpeted. Square, polished ebon stools and a stone dais formed the only furnishings. The room was empty of human life. Another door showed in the opposite wall.

"Leave a man on guard outside," grunted Conan. "I'm going in."

Kerim Shah designated a warrior for that duty, and the man fell back toward the middle of the gallery, bow in hand. Conan strode into the castle, followed by the Turanian and the three remaining Irakzai. The one outside spat, grumbled in his beard, and started suddenly as a low mocking laugh reached his ears.

He lifted his head and saw, on the tier above him, a tall, black-robed figure, naked head nodding slightly as he stared down. His whole attitude suggested mockery and malignity. Quick as a flash the Irakzai bent his bow and loosed, and the arrow streaked upward to strike full in the black-robed breast. The mocking smile did not alter. The Seer plucked out the missile and threw it back at the bowman, not as a weapon is hurled, but with a contemptuous gesture. The Irakzai dodged, instinctively throwing up his arm. His fingers closed on the revolving shaft.

Then he shrieked. In his hand the wooden shaft suddenly *writhed*. Its rigid outline became pliant, melting in his grasp. He tried to throw it from him, but

it was too late. He held a living serpent in his naked hand, and already it had coiled about his wrist and its wicked wedge-shaped head darted at his muscular arm. He screamed again and his eyes became distended, his features purple. He went to his knees shaken by an awful convulsion, and then lay still.

The men inside had wheeled at his first cry. Conan took a swift stride toward the open doorway, and then halted short, baffled. To the men behind him it seemed that he strained against empty air. But, though he could see nothing, there was a slick, smooth, hard surface under his hands, and he knew that a sheet of crystal had been let down in the doorway. Through it he saw the Irakzai lying motionless on the glassy gallery, an ordinary arrow sticking in his arm.

Conan lifted his knife and smote, and the watchers were dumbfounded to see his blow checked apparently in midair, with the loud clang of steel that meets an unyielding substance. He wasted no more effort. He knew that not even the legendary tulwar of Amir Khurum could shatter that invisible curtain.

In a few words he explained the matter to Kerim Shah, and the Turanian shrugged his shoulders. "Well, if our exit is barred, we must find another. In the meanwhile our way lies forward, does it not?"

With a grunt the Cimmerian turned and strode across the chamber to the opposite door, with a feeling of treading on the threshold of doom. As he lifted his knife to shatter the door, it swung silently open as if of its own accord. He strode into a great hall, flanked with tall glassy columns. A hundred feet from the door began the broad jade-green steps of a stair that tapered toward the top like the side of a pyramid. What lay beyond that stair he could not tell. But between him and its shimmering foot stood a curious altar of gleaming black jade. Four great golden serpents twined their tails about this altar and reared their wedge-shaped heads in the air, facing the four quarters of the compass like the enchanted guardians of a fabled treasure. But on the altar between the arching necks, stood only a crystal globe filled with a cloudy smoke-like substance, in which floated four golden pomegranates.

The sight stirred some dim recollection in his mind; then Conan heeded the altar no longer, for on the lower steps of the stair stood four black-robed figures. He had not seen them come. They were simply there, tall, gaunt, their vulture-heads nodding in unison, their feet and hands hidden by their flowing garments.

One lifted his arm and the sleeve fell away revealing his hand—and it was not a hand at all. Conan

halted in midstride, compelled against his will. He had encountered a force differing subtly from Khemsa's mesmerism, and he could not advance, though he felt it in his power to retreat if he wished. His companions had likewise halted, and they seemed even more helpless than he, unable to move in either direction.

The Seer whose arm was lifted beckoned to one of the Irakzai, and the man moved toward him like one in a trance, eyes staring and fixed, blade hanging in limp fingers. As he pushed past Conan, the Cimmerian threw an arm across his breast to arrest him. Conan was so much stronger than the Irakzai that in ordinary circumstances he could have broken his spine between his hands. But now the muscular arm was brushed aside like a straw and the Irakzai moved toward the stair, treading jerkily and mechanically. He reached the steps and knelt stiffly, proffering his blade and bending his head. The Seer took the sword. It flashed as he swung it up and down. The Irakzai's head tumbled from his shoulders and thudded heavily on the black marble floor. An arch of blood jetted from the severed arteries and the body slumped over and lay with arms spread wide.

Again a malformed hand lifted and beckoned, and another Irakzai stumbled stiffly to his doom. The ghastly drama was re-enacted

and another headless form lay beside the first.

As the third tribesman clumped his way past Conan to his death, the Cimmerian, his veins bulging in his temples with his efforts to break past the unseen barrier that held him, was suddenly aware of allied forces, unseen, but waking into life about him. This realization came without warning, but so powerfully that he could not doubt his instinct. His left hand slid involuntarily under his Bakharriot belt and closed on the Stygian girdle. And as he gripped it he felt new strength flood his numbed limbs; the will to live was a pulsing white-hot fire, matched by the intensity of his burning rage.

The third Irakzai was a decapitated corpse, and the hideous finger was lifting again when Conan felt the bursting of the invisible barrier. A fierce, involuntary cry burst from his lips as he leaped with the explosive suddenness of pent-up ferocity. His left hand gripped the sorcerer's girdle as a drowning man grips a floating log, and the long knife was a sheen of light in his right. The men on the steps did not move. They watched calmly, cynically; if they felt surprise they did not show it. Conan did not allow himself to think what might chance when he came within knife reach of them. His blood was pounding in his temples, a mist of crimson swam before his sight.

He was afire with the urge to kill—to drive his knife deep into flesh and bone, and twist the blade in blood and entrails.

Another dozen strides would carry him to the steps where the sneering demons stood. He drew his breath deep, his fury rising redly as his charge gathered momentum. He was hurtling past the altar with its golden serpents when like a levin-flash there shot across his mind again as vividly as if spoken in his external ear, the cryptic words of Khemsa: "*Break the crystal ball!*"

His reaction was almost without his own volition. Execution followed impulse so spontaneously that the greatest sorcerer of the age would not have had time to read his mind and prevent his action. Wheeling like a cat from his headlong charge, he brought his knife crashing down upon the crystal. Instantly the air vibrated with a peal of terror, whether from the stairs, the altar, or the crystal itself he could not tell. Hisses filled his ears as the golden serpents, suddenly vibrant with hideous life, writhed and smote at him. But he was fired to the speed of a maddened tiger. A whirl of steel sheered through the hideous trunks that waved toward him, and he smote the crystal sphere again and yet again. And the globe burst with a noise like a thunder-clap, raining fiery shards on the black marble, and the gold pomegranates, as if released from

captivity, shot upward toward the lofty roof and were gone.

A mad screaming, bestial and ghastly, was echoing through the great hall. On the steps writhed four black-robed figures, twisting in convulsions, froth dripping from their livid mouths. Then with one frenzied crescendo of inhuman ululation they stiffened and lay still, and Conanknew that they were dead. He stared down at the altar and the crystal shards. Four headless golden serpents still coiled about the altar, but no alien life now animated the dully gleaming metal.

Kerim Shah was rising slowly from his knees, whither he had been dashed by some unseen force. He shook his head to clear the ringing from his ears.

"Did you hear that crash when you struck? It was as if a thousand crystal panels shattered all over the castle as that globe burst. Were the souls of the wizards imprisoned in those golden balls?—Ha!"

Conan wheeled as Kerim Shah drew his sword and pointed.

Another figure stood at the head of the stair. His robe, too, was black, but of richly embroidered velvet, and there was a velvet cap on his head. His face was calm, and not unhandsome.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Conan, staring up at him, knife in hand.

"I am the Master of Yimsha!" His voice was like the chime of

a temple bell, but a note of cruel mirth ran through it.

"Where is Yasmina?" demanded Kerim Shah.

The Master laughed down at him.

"What is that to you, dead man? Have you so quickly forgotten my strength, once let to you, that you come armed against me, you poor fool? I think I will take your hear, Kerim Shah!"

He held out his hand as if to receive something, and the Turanian cried out sharply like a man in mortal agony. He reeled drunkenly, and then, with a splintering of bones, a rending of flesh and muscle and a snapping of mail-links, his breast burst outward with a shower of blood, and through the ghastly aperture something red and dripping shot through the air into the Master's outstretched hand, as a bit of steel leaps to the magnet. The Turanian slumped to the floor and lay motionless, and the Master laughed and hurled the object to fall before Conan's feet—a still-quivering human heart.

With a roar and a curse Conan charged the stair. From Khemsa's girdle he felt strength and deathless hate flow into him to combat the terrible emanation of power that met him on the steps. The air filled with a shimmering steely haze through which he plunged like a swimmer, head lowered, left arm bent about his face, knife gripped low in his right hand. His

half-blinded eyes, glaring over the crook of his elbow, made out the hated shape of the Seer before and above him, the outline wavering as a reflection wavers in disturbed water.

He was racked and torn by forces beyond his comprehension, but he felt a driving power outside and beyond his own lifting him inexorably upward and onward, despite the wizards strength and his own agony.

Now he had reached the head of the stairs, and the Master's face floated in the steely haze before him, and a strange fear shadowed the inscrutable eyes. Conan waded through the mist as through a surf, and his knife lunged upward like a live thing. The keen point ripped the Master's robe as he sprang back with a low cry. Then before Conan's gaze, the wizard vanished—simply disappeared like a burst bubble, and something long and undulating darted up one of the smaller stairs that led up to left and right from the landing.

Conan charged after it, up the left-hand stair, uncertain as to just what he had seen whip up those steps, but in a berserk mood that drowned the nausea and horror whispering at the back of his consciousness.

He plunged out into a broad corridor whose uncarpeted floor and untapestried walls were of polished jade, and something long and swift whisked down the

corridor ahead of him, and into a curtained door. From within the chamber rose a scream of urgent terror. The sound lent wings to Conan's flying feet and he hurtled through the curtains and headlong into the chamber within.

A frightful scene met his glare. Yasmina cowered on the farther edge of a velvet-covered dais, screaming her loathing and horror, an arm lifted as if to ward off attack, while before her swayed the hideous head of a giant serpent, shining neck arching up from dark-gleaming coils. With a choked cry Conan threw his knife.

Instantly the monster whirled and was upon him like the rush of wind through tall grass. The long knife quivered in its neck, point and a foot of blade showing on one side, and the hilt and a hand's-breadth of steel on the other, but it only seemed to madden the giant reptile. The great head towered above the man who faced it, and then darted down, the venom-dripping jaws gaping wide. But Conan had plucked a dagger from his girdle and he stabbed upward as the head dipped down. The point tore through the lower jaw and transfixed the upper, pinning them together. The next instant the great trunk had looped itself about the Cimmerian as the snake, unable to use its fangs, employed its remaining form of attack.

Conan's left arm was pinioned among the bone-crushing folds, but his right was free. Bracing his feet to keep upright he stretched forth his hand, gripped the hilt of the long knife jutting from the serpent's neck, and tore it free in a shower of blood. As if divining his purpose with more than bestial intelligence, the snake writhed and knotted, seeking to cast its loops about his right arm. But with the speed of light the long knife rose and fell, shearing half-way through the reptile's trunk.

Before he could strike again, the great pliant loops fell from him and the monster dragged itself across the floor, gushing blood from its ghastly wounds. Conan sprang after it, knife lifted, but his vicious swipe cut empty air as the serpent writhed away from him and struck its blunt nose against a paneled screen of sandalwood. One of the panels gave inward and the long, bleeding barrel whipped through it and was gone.

Conan instantly attacked the screen. A few blows rent it apart and he glared into the dim alcove beyond. No horrific shape coiled there; there was blood on the marble floor, and bloody tracks led to a cryptic arched door. Those tracks were of a man's bare feet . . .

"*Conan!*" He wheeled back into the chamber just in time to catch the Devi of Vendhya in his arms

as she rushed across the room and threw herself upon him, catching him about the neck with a frantic clasp, half hysterical with terror and gratitude and relief.

His wild blood had been stirred to its uttermost by all that had passed. He caught her to him in a grasp that would have made her wince at another time, and crushed her lips with his. She made no resistance; the Devi was drowned in the elemental woman. She closed her eyes and drank in his fierce, hot, lawless kisses with all the abandon of passionate thirst. She was panting with his violence when he ceased for breath, and glared down at her lying limp in his mighty arms.

"I knew you'd come for me," she murmured. "You would not leave me in this den of devils."

At her words recollection of their environment came to him suddenly. He lifted his head and listened intently. Silence reigned over the castle of Yimsha, but it was a silence impregnated with menace. Peril crouched in every corner, leered invisibly from every hanging.

"We'd better go while we can," he muttered. "Those cuts were enough to kill any common beast—or *man*—but a wizard has a dozen lives. Wound one, and he writhes away like a crippled snake to soak up fresh venom from some source of sorcery."

He picked up the girl and car-

rying her in his arms like a child, he strode out into the gleaming jade corridor and down the stairs, nerves tautly alert for any sign or sound.

"I met the Master," she whispered, clinging to him and shuddering. "He worked his spells on me to break my will. The most awful was a moldering corpse which seized me in its arms—I fainted then and lay as one dead, I do not know how long. Shortly after I regained consciousness I heard sounds of strife below, and cries, and then that snake came slithering through the curtains—ah!" She shook at the memory of that horror. "I knew somehow that it was not an illusion, but a real serpent that sought my life."

"It was not a shadow, at least," answered Conan cryptically. "He knew he was beaten, and chose to slay you rather than let you be rescued."

"What do you mean, *he?*?" she asked uneasily, and then shrank against him, crying out, and forgetting her question. She had seen the corpses at the foot of the stairs. Those of the Seers were not good to look at; as they lay twisted and contorted, their hands and feet were exposed to view, and at the sight Yasmina went livid and hid her face against Conan's powerful shoulder.

Chapter X Yasmina and Conan

Conan passed through the hall quickly enough, traversed the outer chamber and approached the door that let upon the gallery. Then he saw the floor sprinkled with tiny, glittering shards. The crystal sheet that had covered the doorway had been shattered to bits, and he remembered the crash that had accompanied the shattering of the crystal globe. He believed that every piece of crystal in the castle had broken at that instant, and some dim instinct or memory of esoteric lore vaguely suggested the truth of the monstrous connection between the Lords of the Black Circle and the golden pomegranates. He felt the short hair bristle chilly at the back of his neck and put the matter hastily out of his mind.

He breathed a deep sigh of relief as he stepped out upon the green jade gallery. There was still the gorge to cross, but at least he could see the white peaks glistening in the sun, and the long slopes falling away into the distant blue hazes.

The Irakzai lay where he had fallen, an ugly blotch on the glassy smoothness. As Conan strode down the winding path, he was surprised to note the position of the sun. It had not yet passed its zenith; and yet it seemed to him that hours had passed since he plunged into the castle of the Black Seers.

He felt an urge to hasten, not a mere blind panic, but an instinct of peril growing behind his back. He said nothing to Yasmina, and she seemed content to nestle her dark head against his arching breast and find security in the clasp of his iron arms. He paused an instant on the brink of the chasm, frowning down. The haze which danced in the gorge was no longer rose-hued and sparkling. It was smoky, dim, ghostly, like the life-tide that flickered thinly in a wounded man. The thought came vaguely to Conan that the spells of magicians were more closely bound to their personal beings than were the actions of common men to the actors.

But far below, the floor shone like tarnished silver, and the gold thread sparkled undimmed. Conan shifted Yasmina across his shoulder, where she lay docilely, and began the descent. Hurriedly he descended the ramp, and hurriedly he fled across the echoing floor. He had a conviction that they were racing with time, that their chances of survival depended upon crossing that gorge of horrors before the wounded Master of the castle should regain enough power to loose some other doom upon them.

When he toiled up the farther ramp and came out upon the crest, he breathed a gusty sigh of relief and stood Yasmina upon her feet.

"You walk from here," he told her. "It's downhill all the way."

She stole a glance at the gleaming pyramid across the chasm; it reared up against the snowy slope like a citadel of silence and immemorial evil.

"Are you a magician, that you have conquered the Black Seers of Yimsha, Conan of Ghor?" she asked, as they went down the path, with his heavy arm about her supple waist.

"It was a girdle Khemsa gave me before he died," Conan answered. "Yes, I found him on the trail. It is a curious one, which I'll show you when I have time. Against some spells it was weak, but against others it was strong, and a good knife is always a hearty incantation."

"But if the girdle aided you in conquering the Master," she argued, "why did it not aid Khemsa?"

He shook his head. "Who knows?" But Khemsa had been the Master's slave; perhaps that weakened its magic. He had no hold on me as he had on Khemsa. Yet I can't say that I conquered him. He retreated, but I have a feeling that we haven't seen the last of him. I want to put as many miles between us and his lair as we can."

He was further relieved to find horses tethered among the tamarisks as he had left them. He loosed them swiftly and mounted the black stallion, swinging the girl

up before him. The others followed, freshened by their rest.

"And what now?" she asked. "To Afghulistan?"

"Not just now!" He grinned hardly. "Somebody—maybe the governor—killed my seven headmen. My idiotic followers think I had something to do with it, and unless I am able to convince them otherwise, they'll hunt me like a wounded jackal."

"Then what of me? If the headmen are dead, I am useless to you as a hostage. Will you slay me to avenge them?"

He looked down at her, with eyes fiercely aglow, and laughed at the suggestion.

"Then let us ride to the border," she said. "You'll be safe from the Afghulis there—"

"Yes, on a Vendhyan gibbet."

"I am queen of Vendhya," she reminded him with a touch of her old imperiousness. "You have saved my life. You shall be rewarded."

She did not intend it as it sounded, but he growled in his throat, ill pleased.

"Keep your bounty for your city-bred dogs, princess! If you're a queen of the plains, I'm chief of the hills, and not one foot toward the border will I take you!"

"But you would be safe—" she began bewilderedly.

"And you'd be the Devi again," he broke in. "No, girl; I prefer you as you are now—a woman

of flesh and blood, riding on my saddle-bow."

"But you can't *keep* me!" she cried. "You can't—"

"Watch and see!" he advised grimly.

"But I will pay you a vast ransom—"

"Devil take your ransom!" he answered roughly, his arms hardening about her supple figure. "The kingdom of Vendhya could give me nothing I desire half so much as I desire you. I took you at the risk of my neck; if your courtiers want you back, let them come up the Zhaibar and fight for you."

"But you have no followers now!" she protested. "You are hunted! How can you preserve your own life, much less mine?"

"I still have friends in the hills," he answered. "There is a chief of the Khurakzai who will keep you safely while I bicker with the Afghulis. If they will have none of me, by Crom! I will ride northward with you to the steppes of the *kozaki*. I was a hetman among the Free Companions before I rode southward. I'll make you a queen on the Zaporoska River!"

"But I can not!" she objected. "You must not hold me—"

"If the idea's so repulsive," he demanded, "why did you yield your lips to me so willingly?"

"Even a queen is human," she answered, coloring. "But because I am a queen, I must consider my

kingdom. Do not carry me away into some foreign country. Come back to Vendhya with me!"

"Would you make me your king?" he asked sardonically.

"Well, there are customs—" she stammered, and he interrupted her with a hard laugh.

"Yes, civilized customs that won't let you do as you wish. You'll marry some withered old man of the plains, and I can go my way with only the memory of a few kisses snatched from your lips. Ha!"

"But I must return to my kingdom!" she repeated helplessly.

"Why?" he demanded angrily. "To chafe your rump on gold thrones, and listen to the plaudits of smirking, velvet-skirted fools? Where is the gain? Listen: I was born in the Cimmerian hills where the people are all barbarians. I have been a mercenary soldier, a corsair, a *kozak*, and a hundred other things. What king has roamed the countries, fought the battles, loved the women, and won the plunder that I have?"

"I came into Ghulistan to raise a horde and plunder the kingdoms to the south—your own among them. Being chief of the Afghulis was only a start. If I can conciliate them, I'll have a dozen tribes following me within a year. But if I can't I'll ride back to the steppes and loot the Turanian borders with the *kozaki*. And you'll go with me. To the devil with your kingdom; they

fended for themselves before you were born."

She lay in his arms looking up at him, and she felt a tug at her spirit, a lawless, reckless urge that matched his own and was by it called into being. But a thousand generations of sovereignty rode heavy upon her.

"I can't! I can't" she repeated helplessly.

"You haven't any choice," he assured her. "You—what the devil!"

They had left Yimsha some miles behind them, and were riding along a high ridge that separated the two deep valleys. They had just topped a steep crest where they could gaze down into the valley on their right hand. And there a running fight was in progress. A strong wind was blowing away from them, carrying the sound from their ears, but even so the clashing of steel and thunder of hoofs welled up from far below.

They saw the glint of the sun on lancetip and spired helmet. Three thousand mailed horsemen were driving before them a ragged band of turbaned riders, who fled snarling and striking like fleeing wolves.

"Turanians!" muttered Conan. "Squadrons from Secunderam. What the devil are they doing here?"

"Who are the men they pursue?" asked Yasmina. "And why do they fall back so stubbornly?"

They cannot stand against such odds."

"Five hundred of my mad Afghulis," he growled, scowling down into the vale. "They're in a trap, and they know it."

The valley was indeed a cul-de-sac at that end. It narrowed to a high-walled gorge, opening out further into a round bowl, completely rimmed with lofty, unscalable walls.

The turbaned riders were being forced into this gorge, because there was nowhere else for them to go, and they went reluctantly, in a shower of arrows and a whirl of swords. The helmeted riders harried them, but did not press in too rashly. They knew the desperate fury of the hill tribes, and they knew too that they had their prey in a trap from which there was no escape. They had recognized the hillmen as Afghulis, and they wished to hem them in and force a surrender. They needed hostages for the purpose they had in mind.

Their emir was a man of decision and initiative. When he reached Gurashah valley, and found neither guides nor emissary waiting for him, he pushed on, trusting to his own knowledge of the country. All the way from Secunderam there had been fighting, and tribesmen were licking their wounds in many a crag-perched village. He knew there was a good chance that neither

he nor any of his helmeted spearmen would ever ride through the gates of Secunderam again, for the tribes would all be up behind him now, but he was determined to carry out his orders—which were to take Yasmina Devi from the Afghulis at all costs, and to bring her captive to Secunderam, or, if confronted by impossibility, to strike off her head before he himself died.

Of all this, of course, the watchers on the ridge were not aware. But Conan fidgeted with nervousness.

"Why the devil did they get themselves trapped?" he demanded of the universe at large. "I know what they're doing in these parts—they were hunting me, the dogs! Poking into every valley—and found themselves penned in before they knew it. The poor fools! They're making a stand in the gorge, but they can't hold out for long. When the Turanians have pushed them back into the bowl, they'll slaughter them at their leisure."

The din welling up from below increased in volume and intensity. In the strait of the narrow gut, the Afghulis, fighting desperately, were for the time holding their own against the mailed riders, who could not throw their whole weight against them.

Conan scowled darkly, moved restlessly, fingering his hilt, and finally spoke bluntly: "Devi, I must go down to them. I'll find

a place for you to hide until I come back to you. You spoke of your kingdom—well, I don't pretend to look on those hairy devils as my children but after all, such as they are, they're my henchmen. A chief should never desert his followers, even if they desert him first. They think they were right in kicking me out—hell, I won't be cast off! I'm still chief of the Afghulis, and I'll prove it! I can climb down on foot into the gorge."

"But what of me?" she queried. "You carried me away forcibly from *my* people; now will you leave me to die in the hills alone while you go down and sacrifice yourself uselessly?"

His veins swelled with the conflict of his emotions.

"That's right," he muttered helplessly. "Crom knows what I *can* do."

She turned her head lightly, a curious expression dawning on her beautiful face. Then:

"Listen!" she cried. "Listen!"

A distant fanfare of trumpets was borne faintly to their ears. They stared into the deep valley on the left, and caught a glint of steel on the farther side. A long line of lances and polished helmets moved along the vale, gleaming in the sunlight.

"The riders of Vendhya!" she cried exultingly.

"There are thousands of them!" muttered Conan. "It has been long since a Kshatriya host has

ridden this far into the hills."

"They are searching for me!" she exclaimed. "Give me your horse! I will ride to my warriors! The ridge is not so precipitous on the left, and I can reach the valley floor. Go to your men and make them hold out a little longer. I will lead my horsemen into the valley at the upper end and fall upon the Turanians! We will crush them in the vise! Quick, Conan! Will you sacrifice your men to your own desire?"

The burning hunger of the steppes and the wintry forests glared out of his eyes, but he shook his head and swung off the stallion, placing the reins in her hands.

"You win!" he grunted. "Ride like the devil!"

She wheeled away down the left-hand slope and he ran swiftly along the ridge until he reached the long ragged cleft that was the defile in which the fight raged. Down the rugged wall he scrambled like an ape, clinging to projections and crevices, to fall at last, feet first, into the melee that raged in the mouth of the gorge. Blades were whickering and clanging about him, horses rearing and stamping, helmet plumes nodding among turbans that were stained crimson.

As he hit, he yelled like a wolf, caught a gold-worked rein, and dodging the sweep of a scimitar, drove his long knife upward through the rider's vitals. In an-

other instant he was in the saddle, yelling ferocious orders to the Afghulis. They stared at him stupidly for an instant; then as they saw the havoc his steel was wreaking among their enemies, they fell to their work again, accepting him without comment. In that inferno of licking blades and spurting blood there was no time to ask or answer questions.

The riders in their spired helmets and gold-worked hauberks swarmed about the gorge mouth, thrusting and slashing, and the narrow defile was packed and jammed with horses and men, the warriors crushed breast to breast, stabbing with shortened blades, slashing murderously when there was an instant's room to swing a sword. When a man went down he did not get up from beneath the stamping, swirling hoofs. Weight and sheer strength counted heavily there, and the chief of the Afghulis did the work of ten. At such times accustomed habits sway men strongly, and the warriors, who were used to seeing Conan in their vanguard, were heartened mightily, despite their distrust of him.

But superior numbers counted too. The pressure of the men behind forced the horsemen of Turan deeper and deeper into the gorge, in the teeth of the flickering tulwars. Foot by foot the Afghulis were shoved back, leaving the defile-floor carpeted with dead, on which the riders tram-

pled. As he hacked and smote like a man possessed, Conan had time for some chilling doubts—would Yasmina keep her word? She had but to join her warriors, turn southward and leave him and his band to perish.

But at last, after what seemed centuries of desperate battling, in the valley outside there rose another sound above the clash of steel and yells of slaughter. And then with a burst of trumpets that shook the walls, and rushing thunder of hoofs, five thousand riders of Vendhya smote the hosts of Secunderam.

That stroke split the Turanian squadrons asunder, shattered, tore and rent them and scattered their fragments all over the valley. In an instant the surge had ebbed back out of the gorge; there was a chaotic, confused swirl of fighting, horsemen wheeling and smiting singly and in clusters, and then the emir went down with a Kshatriya lance through his breast, and the riders in their spired helmets turned their horses down the valley, spurring like mad and seeking to slash a way through the swarms which had come upon them from the rear. As they scattered in flight, the conquerors scattered in pursuit, and all across the valley floor, and up on the slopes near the mouth and over the crests streamed the fugitives and the pursuers. The Afghulis, those left to ride, rushed out of the gorge

and joined in the harrying of their foes, accepting the unexpected alliance as unquestionably as they had accepted the return of their repudiated chief.

The sun was sinking toward the distant crags when Conan, his garments hacked to tatters and the mail under them reeking and clotted with blood, his knife dripping and crusted to the hilt, strode over the corpses to where Yasmina Devi sat her horse among her nobles on the crest of the ridge, near a lofty precipice.

"You kept your word, Devi!" he roared. "By Crom, though, I had some bad seconds down in that gorge—*look out!*"

Down from the sky swooped a vulture of tremendous size with a thunder of wings that knocked men sprawling from their horses.

The simitar-like beak was slashing for the Devi's soft neck, but Conan was quicker—a short run, a tigerish leap, the savage thrust of a dripping knife, and the vulture voiced a horribly human cry, pitched sideways and went tumbling down the cliffs to the rocks and river a thousand feet below. As it dropt, its black wings thrashing the air, it took on the semblance, not of a bird, but of a black-robed human body that fell, arms in wide black sleeves thrown abroad.

Conan turned to Yasmina, his red knife still in his hand, his blue eyes smoldering, blood oozing from wounds on his thickly-

muscled arms and thighs.

"You are the Devi again," he said, grinning fiercely at the gold-clasped gossamer robe she had donned over her hill-girl attire, and awed not at all by the imposing array of chivalry about him. "I have you to thank for the lives of some three hundred and fifty rogues, who are at least convinced that I didn't betray them. You have put my hands on the reins of conquest again."

"I still owe you my ransom," she said, her dark eyes glowing as they swept over him. "Ten thousand pieces of gold I will pay you—"

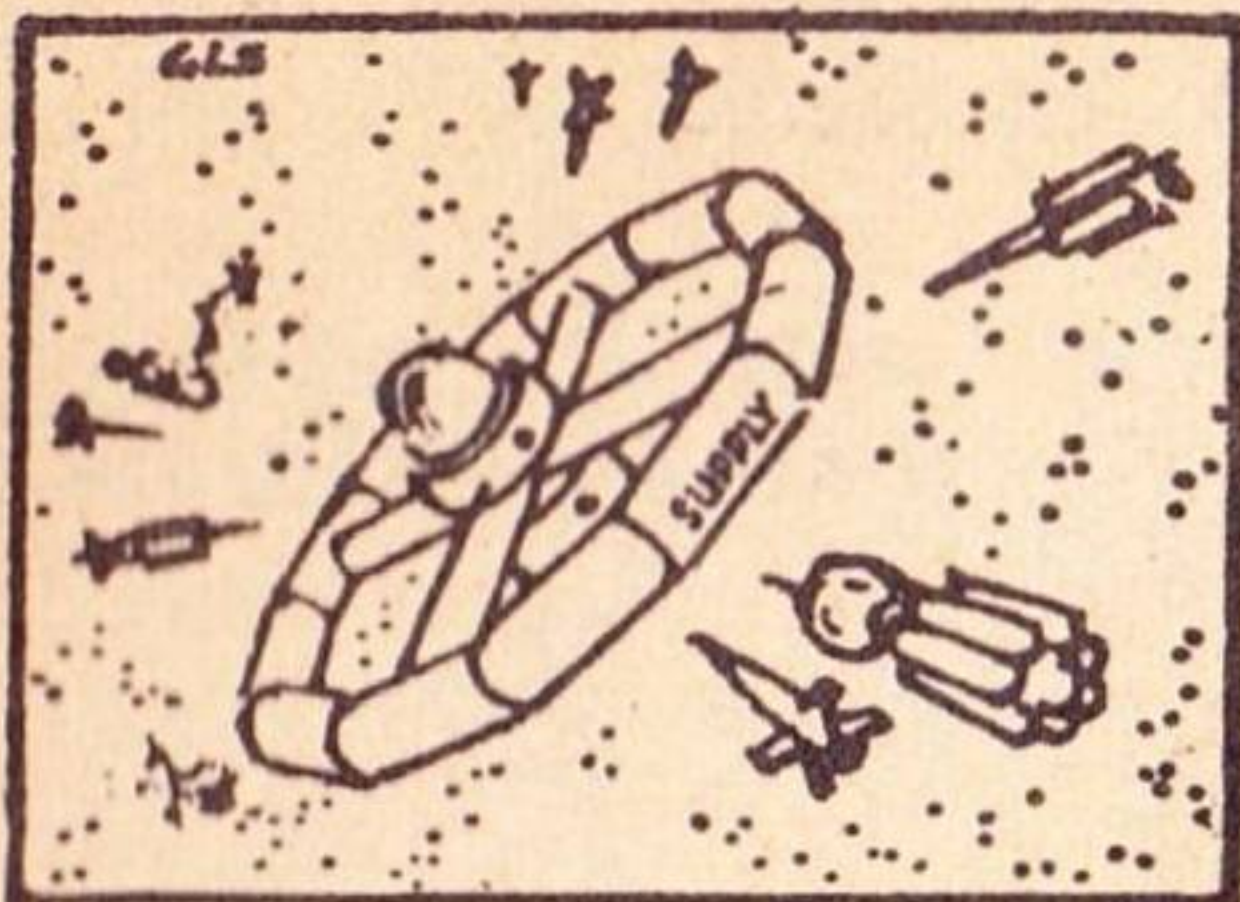
He made a savage, impatient gesture, shook the blood from his knife and thrust it back in its scabbard, wiping his hands on his mail.

"I will collect your ransom in my own way, at my own time," he said. "I will collect it in your palace at Ayodhya, and I will come with fifty thousand men to see that the scales are fair."

She laughed, gathering her reins into her hands. "And I will meet you on the shores of the Jhumda with a hundred thousand!"

His eyes shone with fierce appreciation and admiration as, stepping back, he lifted his hand with a gesture that was like the assumption of kingship, indicating that her road was clear before her.

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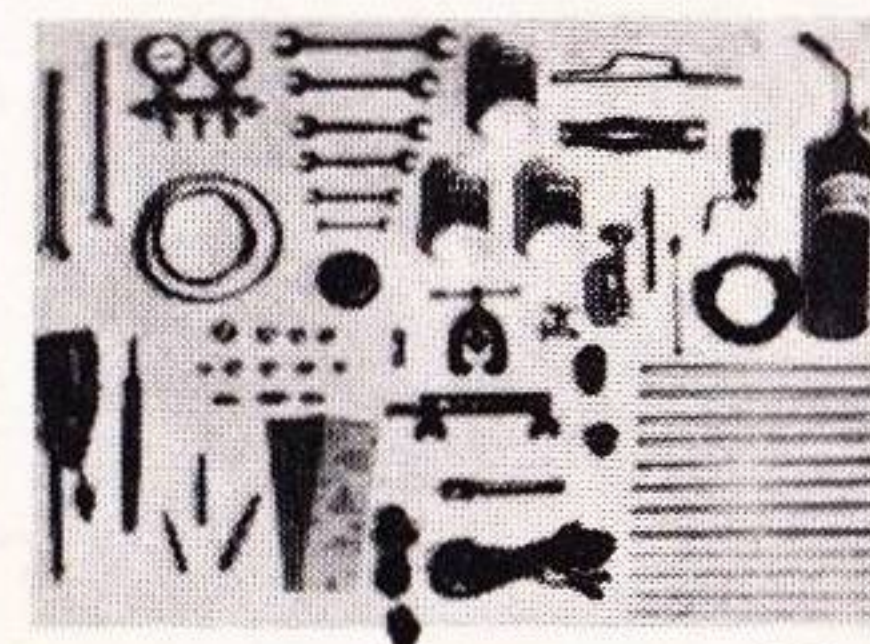
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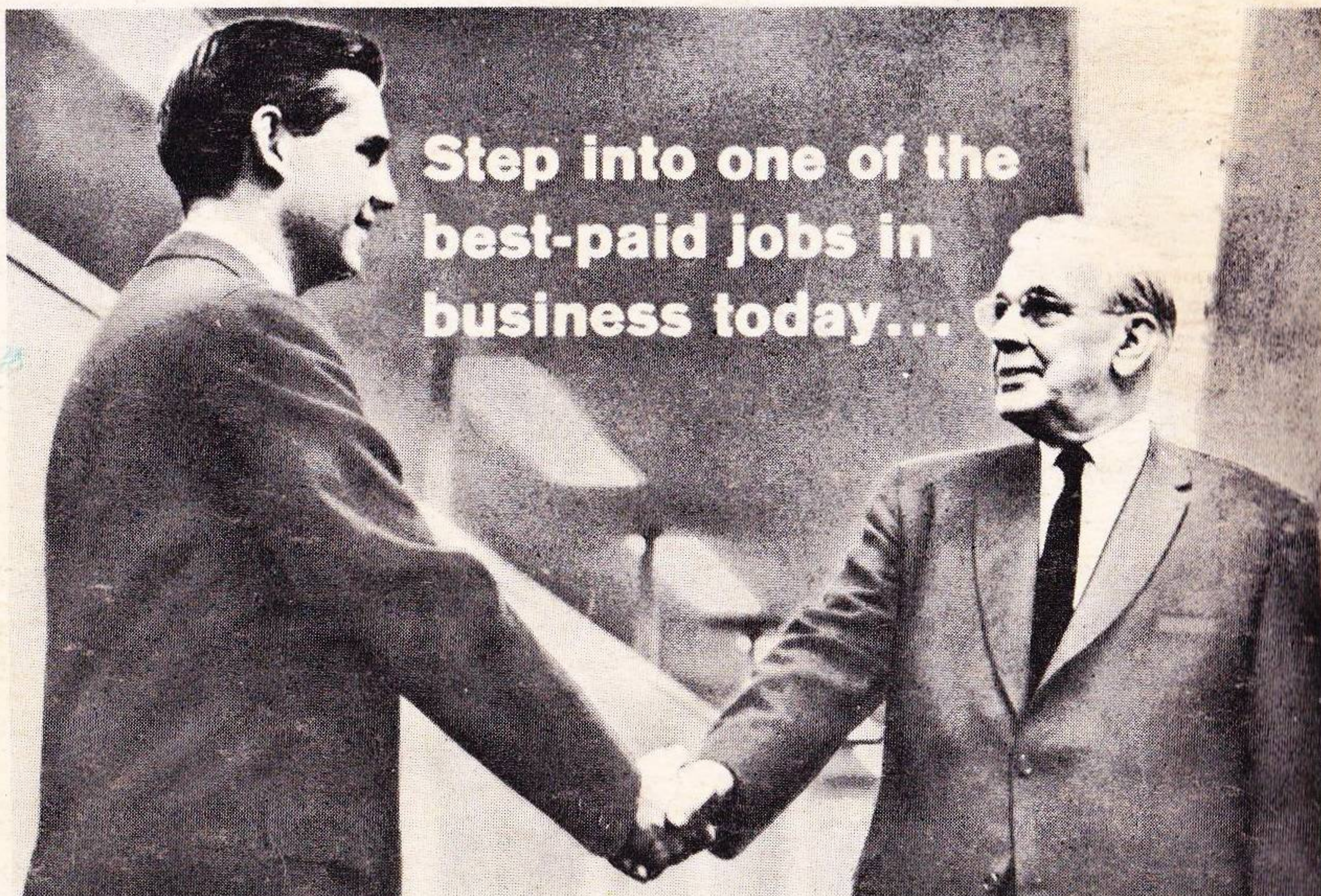


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