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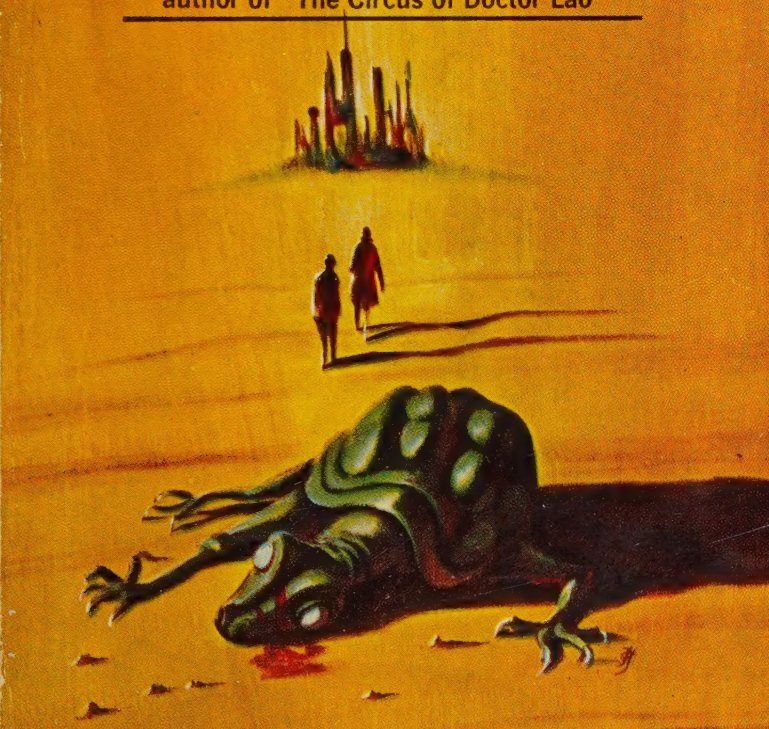

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THE UNHOLY CITY

CHARLES G. FINNEY

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THE UNHOLY CITY

A PYRAMID BOOK

Vanguard Press edition published June, 1937
Pyramid edition published June, 1968

Printed in United States of America

PYRAMID BOOKS are published by Pyramid Publications, Inc., 444 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.

CONTENTS

I FIRST MET Vicq Ruiz quite some distance from anywhere, along the edge of the wide peneplain which is the border of Floreat Go-Lee.

After scrimping and saving for nearly twenty-one years, after being wiped out twice during the Depression—once at its inception and again at the end of the thing—after paying taxes all the while for wars and deficits and luxuries, I nevertheless had managed to accumulate enough money to purchase a passage on a round-the-world airliner, such passage being at the time the zenith of my ambition.

The ship got halfway around; then a wing fell off, and down we came. Twenty-three people were aboard besides myself. They were all killed. I went through their pockets and through their luggage and through the ship's strongbox and salvaged all the money I could find. I ate a sandwich the stewardess had prepared just prior to the crash. I took the pilot's gun and secreted it about my waist under my greatcoat. Then I lit out. I didn't know where I was.

Vicq Ruiz was knee-deep in a patch of calla lilies when I found him. He beckoned me over and showed me a lily he had just finished painting.

"Sir," he exulted proudly, "they claimed it couldn't be done."

"But," I asked, "do you really think you have improved it?"

"Yes, sir," he said, "I do. Regard these purple spots and

regard this great smear of crimson. Is it not a pretty conceit? I have improved the lily immeasurably, sir."

I felt little enough like arguing, so I merely said: "Yes, I suppose you have, and I will not question the prettiness of the conceit." Then I asked him where we were.

He replied we were some baker's dozen of miles from the big city, and he asked me what I did there at that early hour of the morning.

I told him how I came from Abalone, Arizona, and how I was the sole survivor of an airship wreck; and I asked him would he lead me to the big city that I might make inquiry there as to facilities for the remainder of my journey the balance of the way around the world.

"No, sir," he said. "I cannot do it. I'm not allowed back in the city any more. They have banished me forever from its streets and shops and houses."

"Well, now, why?" I asked.

"Debts, sir," says Vicq Ruiz. "They have banished me for bad debts. The Merchants Association had me stoned and driven from the city. They pronounced me anathema and they scotched my name from the great Book of Credit."

"Well, now, that is bad," I said. "Is the banishment irrevocable?"

"Yes, sir, it is," replied Ruiz. "That is, until I pay up. But, by gad, I'll eat dirt and grasshoppers and ant eggs the rest of my years before I pay them one single drachma. For they offered me credit, sir; they begged me to take things without even a down payment; they recommended me to one another, displayed bargains cunningly before me, tempted me with glowing advertisements and testimonials signed by famous people, broke down my sales resistance, sneered at my ideas of thrift, laughed when I protested I could afford nothing more, and sold me their wares in spite of myself. Then, when I could not pay, they repossessed all the things I had contracted for, and they stoned and banished me.

"Well, I got down on my knees, sir and I prayed: 'Lieber Gott, strafe that evil gang of Shylocks!' And I made a vow that I would never pay them anything. And I have kept that vow, for my principles will not allow me to break it. Besides, I have no money."

I remembered my activity following the crash of the airliner, and I said proudly: "I have money."

"How much?" cried Vicq Ruiz.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I have not counted it yet."

Ruiz thereupon bade me to sit down at once and count my money without further ado; common sense demanded, he said, that one always know exactly how much money one carried upon one. So we sat down among the calla lilies and counted my money.

It came to exactly seven thousand six hundred fifty-four drachmas* and thirty-two pfennigs.

Vicq Ruiz looked at me suspiciously. "Sir, this is a fortune. Where did you come by it, sir?" And he waited for an answer.

I explained how some of it had come from the pockets and the luggage of the dead passengers and how the remainder had come from the ship's strongbox. "It seemed criminal to go off and leave all that money there," I said.

Vicq Ruiz studied for a moment before answering. Then he said: "Yes, sir, you are right. It would have been criminal. I hate money, sir. I hate it worse than I hate hunger or sleeping cold of nights. But you are right: it is criminal ever to leave money lying around. Now, come, sir. My mind is made up. We will take this money and go to the city and pay my debts with it. The debts are large, but they will require not even the moiety of this hoard. We will pay the debts; then we will celebrate your arrival in these parts. And, sir, when Vicq Ruiz celebrates—no matter the cause—the pagan gods dreaming on their Olympus become restless; they realize a new bacchanal has been designed by a new master. Come, sir! There's not a moment to lose."

"But, Mister Ruiz!" I protested. "I thought you had vowed never to pay those debts. Besides, the money—"

"Sir," interrupted Ruiz, "the vow I took regarding those debts ran much in this fashion: I said I would never pay a single debt till the money fell to me from heaven. Such a possibility seemed sufficiently remote to provoke my telling you, sir, that they would never be paid, for I never go back on a vow. Yet now, literally, the money has fallen

*Not the Greek drachma.

from heaven; it is a portent, a sign, a manifestation from the Lords of the Universe. I cannot disregard it, sir. Come, let us be off at once. We have a long way to go and much to do."

"But, Mister Ruiz, please!" I still protested. "I have other plans for this money. After all, I am a wretchedly poor man, and this money represents a freedom that never otherwise may I attain. I can buy an annuity with it and live happily ever afterward. Or perhaps I can buy a small, choice business or something. At any rate, Mister Ruiz, I cannot allow that this money should slip away in the preposterous manner you propose. No, I cannot!"

Vicq Ruiz sat amid the lilies again, and he waggled a finger in my face, and he admonished me:

"Sir, I perceive now that you are only another of those purblind creatures who worship but one god; and that god is gold. And I see in you, sir, one who is ripe for having his whole life ruined because of that vile god. But I detect a nobleness in you, also; I was taken by your address the moment I met you; and I intend, if possible, to shield you from such a catastrophe. My principles will not allow me to do otherwise.

"Listen to me, sir! I had a grandfather once who worshiped the same god you do, and my father following in my grandfather's faith worshiped the same god also. And so did my mother and my aunts and uncles and cousins, and all the rest of my kin to whatever degree you may please of consanguinity. Such worship, sir, well-nigh wrecked my whole life; I bear the scars of it today.

"For my grandfather had money—much money. Far, far too much money. He worshiped the stuff, and he made all of us worship it. How did he do it? Why, it was simple, sir! All he had to do was threaten not to leave it to us when he died, and we got down on our knees and worshiped. He would threaten us a while, and then, because he was a vicious old man and liked to plague people and make them crawl, he would command us in the name of his money to do thus and so and refrain from doing this and that. And we obeyed out of veneration and fear of his money. All through my childhood and young manhood, sir, I was flogged with the lashes of that money. I was a lusty, mischievous youth, but my parents knew how to control me, for whenever they caught me doing something

they would scream out at me: 'Stop that at once, for the love of God, or your grandfather will hear about it and cut us off in his will!' It took very little of that I can assure you, sir, to make me cower and flinch, for the thought of not inheriting a large mass of grandfather's money was the most ghastly thing in our whole family life.

"For we worshiped that money—do you see, sir?—and the whole ends of our lives were directed toward getting it when the old fellow passed away.

"Well, one day he did die. But a little before he did so, a plump young woman wormed her way into his affections in the guise of his secretary—it turned out that she lusted after money even more than we did, if such a thing could be possible—and she petted him and excited his aged glands and made him forget for a brief hour that he was an old, dying man. So he died. And he left all that awful mass of money to the plump young woman, and left us not a single, miserable pfennig.

"Sir, the blow killed five of my uncles and drove seven of my aunts mad. It caused six of my cousins to commit suicide and the wives of the rest of them to seek divorces. My father weathered it somehow; in his fashion he proved to be a philosopher. But when I saw the havoc the worship of money had wrought among my loved ones, I engendered a hate of it, sir, that has lasted from that day to this and promises to last forever.

"I intend to shield you, sir, from such a nightmare. I will not allow your life to be ruined by this horrible medium of exchange. We will take this money, sir, and we will treat it with the contempt it deserves. We will pay my debts with some of it; there is not a more contemptuous use of money than that. Then we will carouse with the rest of it. Save it? Hoard it? Invest it? A pox on that sir! We will cast it abandonedly from us and let the coins fall where they will!"

I still wasn't completely taken with the idea, and I said: "Yes, but why throw it all away around here and in this city which has banished you? After all, there are other cities. I should like to see them, too. I should like to fling money around in them, also."

"What?" screamed Vicq Ruiz. "Other cities after this one? Oh, you are mad, sir! You do not know what you say! You have a fever!"

"I do not have a fever!" I said. "What damned city is it? What is its name? I'm a stranger around here."

Vicq Ruiz looked at me as a Roman Catholic priest might look at a hitherto normal communicant who suddenly confesses never to have heard of God.

"It's Heilar-wey, sir," he says very gently. "Heilar-wey, The white queen of all the cities of all the world. It's Heilar-wey, sir. Now, will you come along?"

Well, I had heard of Heilar-wey. I argued no more. We took up the money and went across the wide peneplain, away from the lilies.

On the far horizon, straight away from us a good five miles, a tiny cluster of lumps was visible, and I asked Ruiz if that cluster were the skyline of Heilar-wey.

"No, sir," he said, "it's not. Those lumps will be the cantonment of the Chiam Mings. Heilar-wey will stay hidden by the earth's curve for quite a while yet."

Who were the Chiam Mings, I asked.

"A tribe of nomads, sir," Ruiz replied. "They come down every year from their winter home in the Munwale Mountains, and they camp ahead there where you see the lumps and pick the molewort herb which grows abundantly thereabout. They use the herb as a cathartic all winter long high up in the Munwale Mountains where no herbs grow and where constipation is one of the major evils of their days and nights.

"They are a very interesting people," he continued, "and they brew an extraordinary drink which they call szelack. We shall go through their cantonment, sir, and buy a bottle of szelack apiece. In Heilar-wey we can have more, if you like it, for all the more enterprising bars handle it. I have not drunk any szelack for a long while. Besides, the Chiam Mings are old friends of mine."

"Are you a drinking man?" I asked.

Vicq Ruiz looked at me sharply. "No, sir!" he said emphatically. "I am not. I can either take the stuff or leave it alone. I found that out a long time ago. So I take it, sir, for my brighter hours to brighten them still more, and I take it for my doleful hours to alleviate the dolefulness. Then, too, I find it helps my appetite at times, and I take it then. Also, it helps me to get to sleep when I am restless of nights, and I take it then. But I am not a drinking man, sir. I can take the stuff or leave it alone, just as I choose.

"However, this szelack the Chiam Mings brew is a very palatable and superior drink. I think you will like it. Perhaps, too, they will have some lamb chops cooked up, and we can eat. The Chiam Mings are old, old friends of mine, sir. I speak their language, and they respect me."

"I had a sandwich just before I left the airliner," I said, "so I am not very hungry. But I shall be glad to meet your friends, the Chiam Mings, and I always enjoy tasting a new drink. Are the Chiam Mings an hospitable people?"

"Yes, sir, they are," says Ruiz. "The Chiam Mings are the salt of the earth. Full of quaint customs. Saturated with curious lore. They have, for instance, a White Goddess which they worship. I have never seen the goddess, but I suppose she is a statue or something of the sort. Then they have an unusual animal called the Layya, to which they are alleged to sacrifice goats and roosters and such. They are a nomadic people, and they admit the jurisdiction of no ruler except their own jefe. Some scientists think they are one of the lost tribes of Israel, but no one has ever been able to prove it."

So we walked along over the vast peneplain, and Vicq Ruiz entertained me with strange tales about the Chiam Mings. And the cantonment grew more and more perceptible up ahead of us; finally, it broke up into its component parts: round-roofed felt hogans, or jurkas, as Ruiz explained the Chiam Mings called them.

We walked up to the cantonment of jurkas boldly, for Ruiz was an old and honored friend of the Chiam Mings, and, besides, we had money to pay our way. The little Chiam Mings were playing about on the turf between the jurkas; they were fat, ugly little brutes, amazingly sturdy, reddish in color, and with long red hair growing all over them. They played with small spears, jabbing them into a gaunt human figure they had constructed from grass and hides. One of them, observing us, sneaked up and jabbed his spear in Vicq Ruiz's thigh, then dashed away, laughing. The others laughed and ran, also.

"Chingratta sauza!" gasped Ruiz, rubbing his thigh. "Sownee sho-yo rendi maiza!" he continued, swearing in the Verskamite tongue, which is supposed to have more latitude that way than other languages. "That little devil! Chingratta sauza maiza! However, I must preserve a Spartan attitude. Otherwise the elders might think I were

a weakling. But, by gad, sir, you can imagine, I hope, how pleased I would be to operate on that youngster's backside with a cavalry quirt soaked in turpentine!"

I said hesitatingly I hoped there was no chance of the spear-point being poisoned.

"No! No!" said Ruiz, wrinkling his face with pain. "Not a chance, sir. Just some childish horseplay. These devilish young Chiam Mings are full to the brim with devilment. Always playing tricks on me when I visit them."

Then a group of elders came from a jurka and, in what I thought was a very malignant fashion, stared at us. The elders favored the children in appearance, being reddish and hairy, but much larger, of course.

Ruiz waved both hands to them, crying out joyfully: "Ska, ska, ska! Wawdi pungio! Ska!"

In an aside, he explained to me that meant "Hello, hello, hello, my friends, hello!"

But the biggest of the Chiam Mings came striding up, and he pointed to the path by which we had entered the cantonment and he said: "Loka!"

I suspected that was a direct order to leave, and I said as much to Ruiz.

"It is," Ruiz admitted. "In fact, literally translated, it mens 'Get to hell out.' And I'm frank to tell you, sir, that I do not like it. This is the first time I have ever been ordered away from a Chiam Ming cantonment, and I do not like it a little bit. But I think I know what to do."

And Ruiz took a handful of drachmas from his pocket and showed them to the big Chiam Ming.

"Guul," says Vicq Ruiz. "Taka, taka guul! Gelna zulla ze, wawdi pungio." And he slid a dozen or so drachmas into the Chiam Ming's big fist.

"I have just bribed him, sir," he whispered to me. "I told him we had money and I would give him some because he was our friend. Now watch how different he acts, sir!"

Sure enough, the big Chiam Ming's behavior did change. He looked at the drachmas in a pleased, open-mouthed, unbelieving sort of way; he mumbled: "Guul, guul, eh?" Then he said politely to Vicq Ruiz: "Ze vullas yeo shemma?"

"Wawdi pungio," Ruiz replied, "allum vitta szelack. Zu zellums szelack."

He explained to me: "He asked what we wanted, and I tell him we wish to buy two zellums of szelack. There are big zellums and little zellums. We will purchase the big zellums."

"Um," grinned the big Chiam Ming. "Szelack, eh? Stoola venna muhdi."

Vicq Ruiz turned to me triumphantly. "See how well I handled it, sir! With a small bribe I eradicate from his heart all thoughts of driving us away. Then I go a step farther and arouse his merchandising instinct. Now all he thinks of is selling us some szelack. Money, sir, is the master key to the savage heart. Accepting bribes and trafficking with merchandise are the fundamental instincts of these Chiam Mings, just as they are the fundamental instincts of all other peoples. Let us go with him, sir, We are perfectly safe, now."

So we went with the big Chiam Ming. He led us to a long, low jurka and bade us enter. Inside were benches and taborets; other Chiam Mings sat on the benches. On the taborets were zellums of szelack. Usually the zellums were small zellums, and when Ruiz and I were served with a big zellum apiece I could hear the Chiam Mings near us mutter: "Ummm. Ta vullas uo taka guul;" which, as Ruiz interpreted it, meant "Ummm, those fellows must have a lot of money."

At the first swallow I found that the Chiam Ming szelack was a very palatable and very superior drink. It was a heavy green in color, shot through with little zigzagging lights of brilliant gold. As it went down one's gullet, one could feel those little shafts of gold dig into the membranous lining of one's sustenance-conveying tubes. Furthermore, although the first swallow of szelack sometimes burned and caused a slight sense of stricture in the vicinity of one's tonsils, the next swallow assuaged the burn, and the following swallows relieved the strictured feeling.

We finished our two big zellums and ordered two more from the Chiam Ming drink-dispenser. After a couple of glasses I began to harbor an impression that Ruiz was warming up to tell me something of either a weighty or an involved nature, for he kept absolutely silent, and that was a strange thing for him to do, and, also, he constantly fiddled with his fingers as if endeavoring to pick out the

exact words in which to tell me of what was bothering him.

Finally, he took a long, hearty swig at his szelack; the jolt of the potation gave him courage, and he started in at once to expound his confidence.

"Sir," he says, "I feel that I must tell you now before we go along any farther together that since I awoke at dawn this morning I have been aware that this is to be my last day on earth. I have a profound premonition that amounts practically to a conviction that sometime today I will meet a violent death. So inevitable does it all appear to me that I am not sad and I am not gloomy. But—here is the point, sir—before the end comes I wish to make of this day a vital, glowing thing crammed with colors of curious ecstasy, burning with incidents of poignant joy. I spoke before of having a celebration, and, indeed, I think a celebration is well warranted. I spoke of a bacchanal, sir, but I meant a bacchanal of the spirit as well as a bacchanal of the flesh. For I desire to leave the world with an affirmation of life on my lips, crying: 'Yea, yea unto thee! Thou art good and thou art brave!' Like Faust, I wish to hail one flying moment and say: 'Ah, still delay, thou art so fair!' And the only way I can see myself justified in making such a final statement is to crowd into the last few remaining hours all the beauty and all the joy I have hitherto missed.

"Hence, today will be a quest for me, sir, a quest for the right to affirm life even while on the point of greeting death. And so, sir, if you wish to come along with me and bear me company, do a deathwatch over me, as it were, then in gad's name say so; and I could not ask for better companionship or find it anywhere. But if you feel you would do better striking out alone, why, then, say that instead, sir, and I'll bear no grudge. I'll understand and even commend your decision."

"Mister Ruiz," I asked, "are you serious?"

"Yes, sir," says Vicq Ruiz. "I am."

"Well, then, I'll come along with you," I said.

And we shook hands and poured another drink.

Then suddenly there was a commanding shout outside; all the Chiam Mings who were drinking in the big jurka hastily swigged down their szelack and hurried out.

Ruiz said: "Something evidently is afoot, sir, for it is not

the custom of the Chiam Mings thus unceremoniously to end their drinking. Let us, too, go outside and see what is going on. I should not like for you to miss anything here of importance."

So we went outside. A long procession of Chiam Mings was moving by. The marchers in the procession waved their spears; they sang a low, muttering song. The procession wound in and out among the jurkas, singing; then it filed into the largest jurka of them all, a prodigiously big jurka that stood at the far end of the cantonment.

"Come, sir," says Ruiz. "Let's go have a look."

I suggested that, inasmuch as they had not invited us, perhaps the Chiam Mings would prefer us not to look; I said the procession appeared to me to be of a religious nature; perhaps they did not want strangers curiously and heretically to eye their rites.

But Vicq Ruiz assured me he was an old and honored friend of the Chiam Mings, that they would be pleased for us to watch their services, if such, indeed, they were, and to come along.

So I went along. We went to the huge jurka which the procession had entered. A silken flap covered the doorway. Ruiz cautiously took hold of the flap and, equally cautiously, moved it aside a little so that we could peer in.

The Chiam Mings were worshiping their White Goddess. When Ruiz had mentioned her to me back on the peneplain, I had supposed her to be, as he said, some sort of statue. But it was no statue we saw in that tremendous jurka. It was a blindingly beautiful woman, so white that she illuminated the whole dark interior. She stood on a pedestal, splendid in her nudity, her hands but half hiding the proud glory of her loins. I gave her a rapid, searching, rapturous glance, and the only blemish on her nacreous beauty I could discover anywhere was a grayish naevus halfway down her hip. The Chiam Mings were groveling before her, moaning as all should moan before such terrible loveliness.

"Milliadiablo florenzent!" gasped Vicq Ruiz in profane astonishment.

And that Verskamite oath was our undoing, for it attracted the attention of the worshiping Chiam Mings, and they looked up and saw us staring at their White Goddess.

At least ten of them seized each of us, and they maltreated us exceedingly; and, dazed and daunted, we were led by spearmen to the jurka of the jefe of all the Chiam Mings. We were cast at the feet of the jefe, and there we were forced to lie while the spearmen howled out to their chief the tale of our crime.

Vicq Ruiz attempted to rise to his feet and deny categorically all their accusations, but they kept him flat on the ground with the nibs of their spears; and now and then they poked me, also.

The jefe of the Chiam Mings was a giant man not given to much talk.

He silenced the jabbering spearmen, and he asked: "Wah? Snuggi wah? Sund noi tui talen?"

A fat spearman answered him. "Messi so yaw!" he said angrily.

"Stilli?" then demanded the jefe. "Stilli og tif?"

"Stook!" cried all the spearmen emphatically.

"Um," said the jefe. And he stood up. He waved his hand. "Fizl. Burp. Valoova rowl cymfip. Cissi na noi tahn de Layya."

"Chingratta maiza sowya vinta!" I could hear Ruiz gasp. And I asked him what had been said.

"Sir," he whispered to me, "we have been tried and found guilty, and the jefe has directed that we be thrown to the Layya."

"What the hell is the Layya?" I asked.

"I don't know, sir," says Ruiz. "But it's something terrible."

"Yes, but damn it all!" I protested. "We have done no crime. And, even if we had, why are we not allowed to testify in our own defense?"

"Such is not custom, sir, among the Chiam Mings," said Ruiz. "Our crime was to look upon their White Goddess. We defiled her with our eyes because as we looked at her we harbored unclean thoughts about her. I know I did, sir, and I imagine you did, also. At least, that is the charge we have been found guilty of, and that is the unforgivable sin among the Chiam Mings. We shall be cast to the Layya without further ado. By gad, sir, when I awoke early this morning I had a premonition of a violent death today, but that premonition never hinted it was to come about in any such fashion as this. And I have led you into it, also, sir.

But you must say that you forgive me; otherwise, death will be too much to bear."

Well, I wasn't sure whether I forgave him or not. He had kept bragging so much about being an old and honored friend of the Chiam Mings, and how hospitable they were and all; and now there we were lying on the ground like two fowls with those damnable spears poking into us and faced with nothing better than the expectancy of being thrown to the Layya. No, I wasn't a bit sure I could forgive the man.

The jefe gave some orders, and the spearmen picked us up by the hands and feet and carried us out. All the other Chiam Mings from the entire cantonment crowded round then to learn what disposition the jefe had made of our case; when they heard we were to be thrown immediately to the Layya, their exultation practically knew no bounds.

"Fizl rowl de Layya!" they yelled. "Oh, fizl rowl de lumpig Layya!"

And they went into a sort of crazy, drunken dance, hopping and prancing and leaping about and making horrible gestures.

The spearmen carried Vicq Ruiz and me along, letting us scrape on the ground now and then, and finally they got us to a big arena with mud walls that stood a little way from the cantonment proper.

"I intended for you to see this before we left," Ruiz whispered to me. "This arena has been standing for centuries. The Chiam Mings built it ages ago, and they always repair it every year when they come here to camp and pick the molewort herb. Archaeologists from Heilarwey declare it to be the oldest mud structure in the entire world, sir."

"I think it's the ugliest damned thing I ever saw," I replied.

The arena was merely a round, continuous wall made of mud bricks cemented together with mud mortar. It had no door or other opening in it. Ladders leaning against its wall were the only means of access to the interior. The spearmen carried us up a wide ladder and dropped us down inside. Then all the other Chiam Mings climbed up and sat on the wall with their legs hanging over the edge. They howled and threw chunks of mud at us.

Within, near where Ruiz and I sat on the ground

rubbing our bruises, contusions, and lacerations, was any number of bones, most of which still had shreds of fetid meat clinging to them. I identified panda bones and dingo bones and capybara bones, but there were also some big thick bones which I could not identify, and I pointed them out to Ruiz.

"Those will be lion bones," he announced after inspecting them.

"The Layya killed the lion, did it?" I asked.

"Yes, sir, it probably did," he replied. "I have never seen one, but I have heard that Layyas are immoderately ferocious and terrific fighters. Undoubtedly, they are, too, sir, if they are able to kill lions."

"Yes, undoubtedly," I agreed. "And I assume that very shortly now we will be matched against the Layya."

"Yes, sir," said Ruiz, "I am afraid you are right. Gad, what a foul and wretched way for things to end!" And he sighed.

Then there was a commotion on the arena wall: we looked up and saw the jefe of the Chiam Mings taking the seat of honor—a raised place on the wall top made by piling up a few extra bricks.

Vicq Ruiz arose and walked slowly over till he stood under the jefe. He raised his right hand in the manner of the fascist greeting, and he cried: "Caesar, we who are about to die salute thee!"

The old jefe nodded and saluted back. "Burple roop," he said benignly.

Then there was a fresh commotion, and we could see the spearmen tugging and yanking at some ropes. They were pulling up something from the ground outside, and presently they got it up—the cage of the Layya.

The Chiam Mings screamed with delight. "Fizl rowl de lumpig Layya!" they howled. "Oh, fizl rowl de Layya!"

Over the side of the wall the spearmen let the cage down. When it settled on the ground one of them yanked a rope, and its door opened. Out came the Layya.

"Vennecchi chelna veeta!" swore Vicq Ruiz, using for the occasion the most formidable of all the Verskamite oaths.

The Layya had heavy lizard-legs and the shell of a turtle, and its head was the head of a serpent with the multitudinous teeth of the shark. Also, the head was as big as a beer keg. It darted out its tongue, yanked it back in

again, saw us, sniffed at us, roared. It hopped up and down nervously for a minute; then it raised on its hind legs and, glancing at us over its shoulder, whetted its claws on the mud bricks of the arena.

In a sort of daze, I was thinking of cordite rifles and demolition bombs. Then, all at once, I remembered something. And I felt under my greatcoat, and there, still there, was the big automatic pistol I had taken from the dead pilot of the airliner. It was buckled in its holster on its belt around my waist, and I took it out and raised it to my lips, and I kissed its beautiful blue steel receiver.

"Magician!" hissed Vicq Ruiz. "Where got you the power to work a miracle?"

But all I said was: "Stand aside! With this mighty wand of science, now let me joust with yon nightmare of superstition!"

And I rutched back the slide of that beautiful pistol, and in its lands and grooves I chambered an eight-hundred-foot-second, two-hundred-thirty-grain bullet.

The Layya was stalking about haughtily on poised, alert legs. The Chiam Mings screamed and danced on the wall top; they howled at the Layya as if to warn it of my weapon. But the Layya raised a hind leg and defiled a heap of bones contemptuously; it hissed at me, then scratched like mad.

"Come on, incubus!" I roared. "Come on!"

The Layya lowered its head and moved in. Vicq Ruiz stepped behind me.

I took the pistol in both hands. "Shoot, for the love of God!" says Ruiz.

I leveled the sights high between the Layya's eyes and squeezed the trigger. Like a clap of thunder, the pistol discharged and made a bull's-eye. The Layya stopped and trembled. I shot into its head twice more and made a mess of its skull. The Layya died.

The Chiam Mings were very silent. "Now shoot the jefe!" directed Ruiz. "In the abdomen—the intestines—where he can feel it! Shoot him off that damn wall, sir! Revenge, now, O my sweet Jesus! Revenge!"

I shot at the jefe and missed, and he leaped off the arena wall. I shot wildly at the remaining spearmen and I think I nit some of them, but they fled, too. Then the

glorious pistol was empty of bullets; I kissed it again and laid it reverently on the ground near the Layya.

Vicq Ruiz and I climbed out of the arena by means of the ropes the spearmen had used to lower the Layya's cage.

"By gad, sir," says Ruiz, "this has been a delivery directed by heaven. I feel, sir, that I must kneel now and offer thanks to the Author who saw fit not to write *finis* to my history just then in that arena."

And, sure enough, the man was about to kneel down there and pray; but I pulled him up, and I told him to withhold his praises to his Author till we got far away from that cantonment and could pray in peace. Reason prevailed; we hurried off. But on the lips of Vicq Ruiz there was a prayer of thanks, and he made thanksgiving as we hurried.

The Chiam Mings did not attempt to hinder us as we left their cantonment, nor did they shoot arrows at us as, farther and farther away from it, we walked. For we left those Chiam Mings a numbed and stupefied people. We had defiled their White Goddess with our sacrilegious eyes, and we had slain their Layya with our terrible little tool of science. We put a nameless and inscrutable fear into them, for, in our fashion, we had hexed them, and hexed they stayed.

Vicq Ruiz finally walked himself out of his attitude of thanksgiving; he began, instead, to make plans for the immediate future. A ravenous hunger, he alleged, was troubling him, and he said:

"Now, sir, we will stop at the first suburb we reach of Heilar-wey and refresh ourselves before entering the city proper. There are many excellent restaurants scattered through the suburbs; and, though my bowels were sorely disturbed by our travails of an hour ago, the disturbance has subsided now, and the bowels beg me to slide something well cooked down to them. So, sir, we will stop at the first available place and eat. The suburbs of Heilar-wey are noted for their fine fodder, and all the chefs in the restaurants are dear old friends of mine and make a point of extending themselves when they see me sitting at the table. I'll order up a meal, sir, that will delight and surprise you."

I asked if, besides getting rid of the disturbance in his

bowels, he had gotten rid also of his premonition of violent death.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I believe I have. But undoubtedly, sir, the premonition was well founded, for I need not tell you that we are probably unique in our escape from the Layya. In no manner of justice can my premonition be held accountable for failing to foresee that glorious pistol. But, as a result, my mind is as the mind of one from which forty rampant scorpions have been freed; and I promise you, sir, that we shall celebrate that freedom in no inconsequential manner. We shall have a bacchanal, sir, and it will glitter from a thousand different facets."

"Will it differ greatly in detail," I asked, "from the bacchanal we were to have when you were still convinced this was to be your last day on earth?"

Ruiz puckered his lips and pondered. "No, sir," he said at last; "frankly, I do not believe it will. For as it is with drink, so is it also with bacchanals. The drink which I take to soothe my doleful hours is exactly the same which I take to brighten my joyful minutes. And the bacchanal which I had planned to celebrate my last day on earth will do very nicely now to celebrate the fact that it is not my last day, after all. And yet somehow, sir, that seems illogical, doesn't it? But in any event, let us hurry along, for the sooner we reach the suburbs, the sooner we can eat."

And in no great length of time, for we were walking at the rate of almost four miles an hour, a suburb appeared ahead of us. We maintained our pace and directly we entered its main street, a dirt street which, out on the peneplain, had been the merest donkey-path, but now in the suburb was a very tolerable thoroughfare.

Well into the suburb, the sides of the street became gaudy with painted signs; and many of the signs hung over entrances of eating places. We went into one of the places which was neither the most glittering nor the most humble; Ruiz claimed its food was excellent, so in we went. We sat at a table by a screen; and the table was covered with a coarse brown cloth.

I had noticed the manager speak a word to a waiter as we entered. Presently the waiter came over and told us briefly that only very expensive meals were being served that day.

Vicq Ruiz became furious. He prefaced his remarks with the Verskamite oath, "Eista carruda veeta!" and then he howled in the waiter's face, with such a loud voice that even passers-by outside stopped to peer in: "You insolent server of half-cooked food! You grease-bedizened lackey! You pasty-faced soup-spiller! Where got you the notion that we give a damn whether your foul messes are expensive or not? You take us for tramps, I take it! You think we come here to order and eat and then beg off paying, I presume! You think we have no money, I suppose! Hah, money!" And here Ruiz took forty or fifty paper drachmas from his greatcoat pocket and shook them in the waiter's face.

"See these?" he screeched. "And there's millions more where they came from! Millions, sirrah! I tell you what I shall do: I shall go at once to the bank which holds the mortgage on this tawdry little place, and I shall buy up that mortgage and foreclose on it and come back here and kick you out. Then I shall set fire to this foul eyesore and burn it down and spit upon the ashes. Expensive meals! Ah, Gott!"

The manager came over and calmed Ruiz down. I noted, though, that the manager made no move till he saw the drachmas in Ruiz's hand. But the manager, when he did come, came all with unctuous smiles and servile humbleness; and Ruiz saw he had made his point, so he stopped screaming and demanded a menu. The waiter brought us one apiece.

Boilt Rett Batavias
Lemp Tschapps
Yong Grhin Honyerns
Guse Liffer Unt Zaleries
Kagcke Snaffles
Zeled Tschrimps
Pistacchio Poi En Pot
Dzrawberrez Unt Gode Krimn

"Gad, sir," says Ruiz to me, "did you ever see such a trashy meal?" And to the waiter he said: "Now, don't tell us this is all you have?"

"Sorry, sir, but it is," said the waiter.

Ruiz groaned. "Very well," he said finally. "Bring us each all of it and hurry."

The waiter started away, but Ruiz bellowed out: "Come back here!"

Cowed, the waiter jerked nervously, turned around, and came back.

"Yes, sir?"

"Bring us," says Ruiz, "two zellums of szelack. Bring them right away. We'll have them while we wait for that putrid meal. And be sure the zellums are unopened and sealed. 'Twouldn't surprise us a bit to find that you adulterate szelack in this stinkhole."

"Big zellums or small zellums, sir?"

"Big zellums, of course!"

Ruiz then turned to me and said: "This is the curse of the suburbs, sir: these bankrupt, filthy eating-houses and their stupid, inefficient personnels."

"You should have bribed these people when we first came in, as you did the Chiam Mings," I told him. "Then probably they would have been more polite."

"Yes, sir, I believe I should at that," agreed Ruiz. "For the way these suburbanites kowtow to money is almost pathetic—if the suburbanites themselves weren't so insufferable. But just wait till we get to Heilar-wey, sir. There the restaurant service is perfect, and the meals approach the divine."

"Are you well known in the big, fine restaurants of Heilar-wey?" I asked.

"Yes, sir, I am," says Ruiz. "I am an habitué of them. They fairly pester me with service when I dine, too, for they know I'm an astute judge of good eating, sir, and if I tell my friends that the fodder in such and such a place is good, why, my friends flock there by the twenties. Yes, sir, they will tell you in Heilar-wey that nothing means as much to a restaurant as a word-of-mouth testimonial by Vicq Ruiz. And, furthermore, sir—but, ah, here is the szelack!"

Ruiz snatched the zellums from the waiter's hands and examined the seals closely to make sure, he explained to me, that the manager or one of his hirelings had not previously opened the zellums and adulterated the contents. "They do that right along in these little low-grade restaurants, you know," he said to me. "One of my dear

old friends in Heilar-wey is fond of saying, 'Show me a restaurant-owner or a food-handler from the suburbs and I'll show you an adulterer and a thief and a poisoner.' And, by gad, sir, that dear old friend is right! He may be wrong about a lot of things, but he's unquestionably correct when it comes to summing up the failings of a suburb culinary worker."

Ruiz assured himself the seals were in good order, then he handed the zellums back to the waiter and instructed him to open them and pour for us. Ruiz said that the szelack was not chilled nearly enough, but then one shouldn't be too meticulous when dining in the suburbs; one should take the wretched food and wretched service with only a sigh, knowing it were futile to expect anything better.

We sat there drinking in silence for a while after that. Then, as we were pouring our third glasses, the restaurant door opened and a young, innocent-looking fellow came in. He had a roll of paper in his pocket, and he went to the counter and bought himself a few sweetmeats. Ruiz stared at him intently; then he rapped on the table and called him over. The young fellow came rather diffidently.

"Sir," says Ruiz to him tolerantly enough, "I do believe you are a journalist."

With a shamed little smile the young fellow admitted he was.

"And what do you do out here, then?" asked Ruiz.

The young fellow explained he was working—his paper was the *Tandstikkerzeitung*—and this was his beat.

"Well, now, that is interesting," says Ruiz. "It is very interesting, sir. I have no doubt that this suburb is full of many stories glittering with both news- and reader-interest."

But the young fellow replied that unfortunately just the opposite was true. The suburb, he claimed, was singularly lacking in news of any variety whatsoever; about all that constituted news out here was when a chicken laid an egg with two yolks or when the river rose up once a year and the people were afraid it might wash out the approaches to the bridge.

"But," pressed Ruiz, "surely there are prominent people here whom it would be profitable to interview; human

lives here that have had in them much of terror and much of pity."

But the young fellow said all the prominent people of the suburb had been interviewed so many times before that other folk were sick to death of reading about them and what they thought of this and that; and, one thing and another, the young fellow said, it was a tough beat to get any really live news on.

"Sir," then says Ruiz abruptly, "I like your looks and I like your address. I propose to let you in on a momentous scoop. It may very well merit your by-line, if you write it up well enough."

What was it, asked the young fellow without any undue enthusiasm that I could catch.

"You see this man?" asked Ruiz, indicating me with his thumb.

The young fellow nodded.

"Let me introduce him, sir," says Ruiz. "This is Captain Butch Malahide, the famous aviator from Abalone. He is on a round-the-world flight, sir. And when Captain Butch Malahide flies around the world, that, sir, is news."

The young fellow evidently thought so himself, for he took his paper and pencil, and I could see a stream of questions forming on his face. But he didn't get to ask any of them, for Ruiz did all the talking.

"Captain Malahide's principal reason for coming here, sir, was to visit that strange tribe of nomads we know as the Chiam Mings. Realizing that I was an old and honored friend of the Chiam Mings—I am Vicq Ruiz, of course, sir —the captain contacted me and asked that I arrange a meeting for him. I did so, and I met the captain personally out on the peneplain near to the Chiam Ming cantonment. Then we entered the cantonment and called upon the jefe of the Chiam Mings, and Captain Malahide conveyed to the jefe the interest and admiration the people of Abalone have for his tribe. Thereupon the jefe ordered a tremendous oanquet to be served up at once, and Captain Malahide and myself sat down with the jefe of the Chiam Mings between us and partook of his hospitality. I am an old and honored friend of the Chiam Mings, sir, and they went out of their way to be princely hosts to us. And, sir," ended Ruiz triumphantly, "so overwhelmed were the Chiam Mings by Captain Malahide's visit that they

showed us their White Goddess and they showed us their Layya!"

The young, innocent-looking journalist became very excited at the receipt of this information, and he pressed question after question upon Ruiz about the White Goddess and the Layya, too, for, he said, we must be the only Gentiles ever to have seen them.

"Of course, we are, sir," agreed Ruiz. "But, now, we cannot violate the hospitality of the Chiam Mings and disclose what we saw. The things they showed us are the hallowed, age-old, closely guarded secrets of the Chiam Mings, and we would no more think of telling you what we saw of them than a Roman Catholic priest would think of telling you what he had heard in a confessional."

But the young journalist kept right on begging, and he said pathetically that if he could get a description of the White Goddess and the Layya it would advance him greatly in his profession, for that was something no other journalist had ever been able to do; and his editor might even recommend him for a raise in salary on the strength of it. So, please, for the sake of his career, tell him just a little something.

Ruiz poured out more szelack and gave the matter some further thought. Finally, he said: "Well, sir, I'll tell you this much and no more, and I tell it to you in the hope the Chiam Mings will never take offense. You may quote me as saying for the record, sir, that the White Goddess is a very fine-looking woman, marred only slightly by a curious birthmark, which, as a matter of fact, does not mar her at all, but, instead, adds piquancy to her beauty. About the Layya . . . um, now, let me see, sir. Ah, yes. Phrase it this way, sir: 'Closely questioned, Vicq Ruiz replied, "The Layya, sir? Why, the Layya is an interesting animal, most highly interesting. But it is not invulnerable, sir, not invulnerable." '"

The young fellow jotted all that down. Then he said disappointedly he had hoped we would tell him more than that, for, after all, it would make such a good story.

But Ruiz was adamant. "Not another word, sir. I fear I have already told you far too much. And now be sure that makes the next edition before the rival reporters of the big Heilar-wey papers seek us out and scoop you."

The young fellow said he would take care of that, all

right; he still had thirty minutes before the sheet went to press. And then he asked us if we had heard anything of the huge tiger tracks which had been seen lately in the dust of the streets of the outlying sections of Heilar-wey.

"Tiger tracks, sir?" cried Ruiz. "Now, what absurdity is this?"

No absurdity at all, said the young fellow. The tracks had been seen by a lot of people, and had been photographed for the *Tandstikkerzeitung* by one of its staff photographers. Evidently this tiger had come from the jungles of Bureat Go-Lee—there were tigers there—but the tracks this beast made were so enormous that many people were worried. His editor had cautioned him to be on the alert for any further news of the tiger; it looked like a good story.

"Well, sir," says Ruiz rather pityingly, "we haven't seen any tiger, and we haven't seen any tiger tracks. But we have seen the Layya, sir, and I'm here to tell you that, after the Layya, tigers appear to Captain Malahide and myself as very small beer. And you may quote me to that effect, sir, in your paper!"

The young journalist said that, well, he didn't know much about it either way; he was just asking—that was all. And he said he had to leave to make the next edition, so we shook hands with him, and that was the last of him we ever saw. Our meals were served, and we ate them, and then we drank two more big zellums of szelack.

Ruiz made a big scene when he paid the bill, claiming that the food had been terrible, the service horrible, and the szelack unbearably warm. The proprietor soothed him as best he could, and hurried us out of his restaurant with little nervous, clucking noises and little pats on our backs. But somehow I went away with the impression that in the future he would rather we did not patronize his place.

I conveyed that impression to Vicq Ruiz.

"Gad, sir," says Ruiz, "and what of it? I certainly shall not be in any great hurry to return there. Wait till you see the fine big restaurants of the city, sir. Compared to them, these hole-in-corner places of the suburbs are mere rancid spots of grease. Come along, sir. It's time you saw something of the city."

So I went along, and presently we were out of the

suburb, and we turned a corner, and there ahead lay Heilar-wey.

There, dead ahead, lay Heilar-wey, for we stood at the foot of its main street—Calle Grande, it is called. It was the widest street in the world, being at least a verst from curb to curb. It was paved with a dulcet gray bitumen substance that did not glare nor yet absorb the light. We stepped out of the suburb and stopped and looked down that tremendous street of soft gray. On either side, the immense black buildings rose. From their pinnacles and towers white, plumelike pennons flew straight out in the wind. Above the street and buildings and pennons arched the pale blue sky. And at what seemed the far end of Calle Grande, where the buildings on its either side apparently met at the horizon, we could see a mirage, the strange reflection the city cast of itself in the sky; and the appearance was of two cities, one gross and real and earthbound, the other aerial and tenuous, a magic levitation superimposed on high.

"It is remarkable," said Vicq Ruiz. "Every time I approach Heilar-wey from this direction I feel I should kneel down and pray to whatever gods may be that Heilar-wey will always stay the same. She is the most beautiful city in the world, sir, and the thought of her dying or even changing is intolerable to me. Regard this panorama: it is built up stone by stone, and each stone contrives to submerge itself into the symmetry of the whole; and the city we now see is not a loose, haphazard mass of construction but a magically articulated entity, a complete harmony such as a great landscape painter might achieve in his masterpiece. Stare straight down Calle Grande, sir, and mark again the mirage. That is called Heilar-wey's Daydream, the conceit being that the city dreams endlessly of even more beauty and, Narcissus-like, casts a reflection of itself on the mirror of the sky and basks in that reflection —the mirage—which truly is more fair than Heilar-wey herself. Men built a lovely city on the ground, but, outdoing them, the city builds one even more lovely in the air: Heilar-wey's Daydream, sir, the mirage of immutable beauty."

We stood there at the edge of the city, staring down into its heart. Then Ruiz bethought himself again of his

debts, and he vowed we would go at once and pay the vile things.

"Then they will return to me the keys of the city. They will remove the anathema they have placed on me, and they will restore my name in the great Book of Credit. Come along, sir. We will take a streetcar."

I came along, and we boarded a streamlined, underslung, multimotored, hypertensioned streetcar that carried us down Calle Grande at ninety statute miles an hour. The buildings along Calle Grande grew higher and wider, and, finally, some forty minutes later when we neared the beginning of the First Business District, the buildings lost all semblance of engineering and architectural works and appeared, instead, to be vast, immeasurable mountains.

We got off the streetcar at the First Business District Union Tram Station and crossed to the south side of Calle Grande by means of a pedestrian tunnel under the traffic lanes. It was a half-hour walk, and at all times we were moving in a tight jam of other southbound pedestrians. After a while, though, we got up in the open air again, and Ruiz led the way to a mountainous, towering building which was a quarter-mile long at the base and went seven hundred stories up in the air. In the mammoth building we rode elevator after elevator and escalator after escalator, Ruiz stopping at intervals to check his orientation and to get a sight on some outstanding object which he could guide on when it became necessary for us to traverse some tremendous corridor on foot. At length, though, we reached a massive hall dotted with writing tables and phone booths, and all the way around two sides of the hall were grilled pigeonholes behind which clerks stood, and from the roof of the hall a big, electrically lighted sign hung down and read:

HEILAR-WEY MERCHANTS DEBT AND
CREDIT CLEARING HOUSE
Pay All Bills Here

It was familiar ground at last for Ruiz; he went without a sign of hesitation to a grilled pigeonhole marked Pi to St, and he said to the girl clerk who stood behind the grille:

"Now, miss, fetch me Mister Vicq Ruiz's account, please."

The girl went off and after a bit came back with a great long tabulated sheet that showed all the counts against Ruiz; and pinned to the sheet were all the various chits he had signed in amassing the magnificent debt. Added to the whole sum there was also a considerable item for interest.

Ruiz noted the interest item first of all, and in a loud, firm, bitter voice he announced: "Oh, no, by gad! You can't do a thing like this to me, miss! This is outrageous. I came here to pay some petty bills, not the interest and principal of Heilar-wey's funded debt. Call the manager, miss. We'll have an understanding right now, by gad!"

So the girl shrugged and spoke into a little house phone and we waited a while, and then the manager came. He must have known Ruiz, for he took but one look at him and then said: "Now, mister, I have no time and I have no inclination to listen to you. If you want to pay, pay. If you don't, don't, and I'll call the merchant police and have you thrown out as I did on the last occasion. Either pay or don't pay, just as you choose. But don't talk. I'll not stand for it."

Ruiz was so indignant that he couldn't talk. He threw down enough drachmas—and a lot were necessary—to pay his bills; he snatched the bills up after the girl receipted them; and he clutched my arm and hurried me out of the Merchants Credit Clearing House and out of the big building. And all that time he said never a word, nor did he ever say anything till we found a street-front drinking place and sat down and had served to us two big zellums of szelack. Then he cried: "Drink up quickly, sir! There's not a moment to lose! Drink up!"

I asked what was the matter.

"Sir, we must go to the Court House at once! Before this hour is out I shall file an action against the Clearing House and its manager and that girl clerk."

I asked on what grounds.

"Usury, sir! They'll regret the day they ever thought to compute all that interest against Vicq Ruiz! Look at this!" And he waved his receipted statement in my face. "Ten per cent per day compounded! That's usury, sir. There's a law against it. I have been discriminated against. They did it purposely. They thought I was too ignorant to under-

stand what they had done. But I'll bring an action at once. I won't take this lying down. You shall be my witness. Come along, sir. Drink up!" And Ruiz raised his big zellum and drained it to the dregs. I did likewise. Then we went along.

He decided it was too far to walk to the Court House and that a streetcar would take too long. So we hailed an eighteen-cylinder, diesel-engined, streamlined taxicab instead, and down Calle Grande we went at one hundred seventy-five miles per hour. In about thirty-five minutes we reached the Municipal Court House, which was in the Second Business District, and, while Ruiz was arguing with the cab-driver about the fare, I looked the Court House over from the outside.

It was a splendid Greek temple of a place, and its main door was plastered with notices of mortgage foreclosings, sheriff's sales, bills of divorcement, delinquent property tax lists, notices of civil suits, orders to show cause, cards of politicians seeking office, and posters of rewards for various criminals, showing front and side views of them, detailing their physical measurements and peculiarities, and describing their fingerprints.

Ruiz came running up the sidewalk after finishing his argument with the cab-driver, and he cried: "Now, come along, sir! Come along! There's not a moment to lose!"

I said: "Oh, hell, Mister Ruiz, we've got lots of time. You can bring your action properly enough without our first doing a hundred-yard dash to the clerk of the court of jurisdiction."

"Gad, sir!" gasped Ruiz; "you don't understand! It's not my litigation with the Clearing House: that can wait several days if need be. But I have just learned, sir, that in Criminal Court they are trying a black man on a rape-and-murder charge. We mustn't miss it, sir; it's the trial of a century. The case is bound to set a precedent in the annals of Heilar-wey jurisprudence, for always in the past some mob has lynched the black man long before he ever could be brought to trial. It's something new, sir, in local courtroom history, and the great legal minds from all over Floreat Go-Lee are here to attend. Come along, sir!"

So I went along. Ruiz led the way at a gallop through the corridors to the great Criminal Court, but long before ever we got there a trio of bailiffs halted us and threatened

us with their truncheons. One of them had a picture of Ruiz in his hand, and on the back of the picture was the information that Ruiz was officially banished from Heilarwey, and if ever anyone caught him within the finite limits of the city he should notify the authorities at once.

The bailiffs identified Ruiz to their own satisfaction, and they were becoming very exuberant over the thought of the reward they would receive from the Merchants Clearing House for his apprehension, when Ruiz shook loose from them and snatched out his receipted bills and held them under the bailiffs' noses.

"Now, by gad," says Ruiz, "take your dirty, snotty hands off me and keep them off, you slimy swine, or I'll file a charge of false arrest against you so quick it will make your empty heads swim. And I'll thank you to tear up that vile picture, too."

The sight of the receipts subdued the bailiffs no little, and Ruiz's threat of filing charges against them frightened them thoroughly. They apologized and became unusually humble for courtroom officers. Ruiz gave them a violent but hasty tongue-lashing, for he was in a hurry, and then we went on to the Criminal Courtroom where a black man's right to further life was being weighed on Justice's scales.

Other bailiffs at the courtroom door looked us over very narrowly, and they searched Ruiz's pockets, but in the end they let us in. The courtroom was cluttered up with microphones and newspaper reporters and cameras and telephones; so many wires were strung around that they veiled completely the statue of the Goddess who stood blindfolded behind the judge's bench holding in impersonal hands her weights and measures. For it was the trial of the century; every word spoken during it was to be broadcast or telephoned or wired or written everywhere throughout the world from Pit to Pole, and, though only a few thousand people were actually in the courtroom, everyone in all creation knew what was happening.

As Ruiz and I sat down on the floor, there being no seats vacant, the jury was momentarily out, and the attorneys, in low, monotonous voices, were arguing before the bench about the admissibility of some scrap of evidence or other. The old judge was drowsing with his head

in his hand; finally, though, he gave an adverse decision, and the jury was called back in.

Then the attorney for the defense announced the defendant would take the stand in his own behalf. Everybody, except the judge, sat up.

The defendant was a big black brute with white eyes and kinky hair; he had a haunted face, and he acted as if the air around him were haunted. In all that vast courtroom he seemed to be searching for some reality, for some tangible thing he could seize on that would free him from his devils.

"Tell the jury in your own words," said counsel, "exactly what took place."

The black man squirmed slowly around in the witness chair, and he clawed at the edges of his mouth with his big black paws.

"Come, come! Speak up!" said his lawyer sharply.

So the big black man began to talk.

"When I shook and held it to the light, the whisky I had bought bubbled greasily in the flask, and little chain-like beads formed, broke up and rotated. It was pretty stuff, a wicked amber that seemed to embody in itself a life of its mysterious own."

The prosecuting attorney sprang roaring to his feet.

"Iyahbjeck, yeronner! Witness is being irrelevant, immaterial, off the subject entirely, and what he has said will unduly influence the jury. The State asks the testimony as so far given be stricken from the Record and the witness be reprimanded. May it please the Court!"

The defense attorney sprang roaring to his feet. "No such thing, yeronner! Witness's testimony is highly relevant, intensely pertinent, and is background for further testimony to come. Defense asks that witness be allowed to proceed without interruption. May it please the Court!"

The old judge awoke. "What?" he said querulously. "What's all this now, gentlemen?"

The prosecutor repeated his objections, and the defense attorney repeated his rebuttal. The judge asked that some law be quoted him before he overruled or sustained. So then the attorneys hastened back to their tables and came up with armloads of books and folios and quoted the old judge statute after statute and precedent after precedent and decision after decision. After listening to a Supreme

Court opinion of four hundred years past that seemed pertinent, the judge made some sort of ruling, and the attorneys agreed to stipulate something or other, and the black man was allowed to continue.

"Morgalaski bought another flask for himself; then he and I went down among the sand dunes to the beach where we sat on a little hill and drank to the beauty of the moon. We drank to the beauty of the moon, and she graciously acknowledged our homage, for over the soft waves to us she laid a glittering, flickering path that led straight from her shining bosom; and we laughed at the thought that she recognized us and invited us to come visit her. All that night she was very beautiful, but we shortly forgot her."

The State's attorney leaped roaring to his feet. "Iyah-gainabjec, yeronner! Stuff about moon silly and of no consequence or bearing whatever. State petitions this Court to instruct witness to tell only what happened during time crime was committed and leave all such nonsensical stuff out. May it please the Court!"

The defense attorney leaped roaring to his feet. "Pay no attention to him, yeronner! Witness is building up background for testimony to come. Moon very material, yeronner. Let him go on. May it please the Court!"

The old judge awoke and sent the jury out of the courtroom while he questioned the attorneys shrewdly and closely as to their bases for his sustaining or overruling the current objection. He made them quote more law to him, and he had a bailiff throw an onlooker from the courtroom for coughing loudly. Finally, however, he decided the objection should stand, and he leaned over his bench and reprimanded the black man very severely. Then the jury was called back; the judge admonished it not to let what the witness had said influence it in any way; and then the black man went on with his story.

"It was quite dark when we saw the lantern. Morgalaski saw it first. It was far down the curve of the beach, past the mouths of the two estuaries, past the rock where the boat bones lay. All it seemed was a little yellow glare, but it flickered so much that we knew figures were passing between it and us."

The prosecuting attorney leaped roaring to his feet; this time he objected to witness's statement that he knew

figures had passed before the lantern. The prosecutor pointed out to the Court that, inasmuch as it was dark on witness's own admission, witness's testimony was absolutely worthless as to what he saw or thought he saw; and the prosecutor quoted General Sessions, 1788: Floreat Go-Lee versus Ida R. Hausland or otherwise known as Mrs. H. H. Hausland doing business under the firm name of The Little Hat Shoppe, wherein the Appellate Court had reversed a lower court's decision and declared a mistrial because the presiding magistrate had allowed testimony to stand which had been delivered by a witness who admitted under cross-examination he had seen through a window the things he was telling about.

The old judge was profoundly impressed by the pertinence of that ruling to the case in hand, and he immediately instructed the jury to pay no attention to witness's statement about the lantern, and the Court further instructed the court reporter to delete from the Record all references thereto. The defense attorney saw he was losing a strong point, and he fought back tooth and nail and nearly got into contempt and quoted conflicting rulings from sessions past and even offered to stipulate. But the Court wouldn't listen to him, and presently the black man went on with his story.

"We forgot the moon and her beauty and went down to the lantern. We left our clothes on the bank of the first estuary; on the bank of the second we left our empty whisky flasks. Furtive footprints were all we left near the rock where the boat bones lay.

"The lantern was tied to a pole stuck in the sand. About it two girls danced, while a third squatted at the edge of the ring of light and played gently on some stringed instrument. The moon, I suppose, was still beautiful, but we had forgotten her."

The prosecuting attorney leaped roaring to his feet. "Iyahbjec, yerroner! I mos temphatically yahbjec! Witness says he *supposes*. Now, I yask this Court: Are we concerned with what witness *supposes*, or are we concerned with what witness *knows*? The State petitions this Court to have last remarks of witness stricken from Record; State petitions Court to admonish jury t'pay no 'tention; State p'titions Court once more t' 'struct witness how t' deliver testimony. May yit pleezah Court!"

The defense attorney leaped roaring to his feet; in either hand he held three law books; he screamed out precedents till the air was thick with legal phraseology.

The old judge awoke from his drowse. "Now, gentlemen, what is it this time?" he asked petulantly.

The prosecutor bellowed out his objections all over again. The defender screamed his defense all over again. But the Court said:

"Well, now, I think that's a reasonable objection, and I'll sustain it. Mister Clerk, scratch the last of witness's remarks from the Record, and let said Record show that I hereby admonish the jury not to let said remarks influence its deliberations in any way, shape, or form. The witness will continue; but, now, listen to me, witness: Hereafter you must confine your testimony only to what actually occurred and not what you might suppose to have occurred."

So the black man started talking again.

"Ecstasy haunted the air. Their little feet shuffled in the moist sand, their dainty arms yearned for some transcendental lover, and their warm, nude bodies writhed with a desire they did not understand. The music sang in long, melodious chords. We lay on a little dune and watched them, our nervous toes furrowing the sand; and I could hear Morgalaski's heart pumping in his chest, and I know he could hear mine."

Somehow or other there was no objection at that point; the black man goggled astonished eyes and continued.

"Madness dropped from the skies. Their little dance changed to a mimic orgasm. It was as if they knew we were watching and wished to taunt us. They clasped each other close and rolled in the sand. They kissed, they twisted, they interlocked their arms and legs and bit each other's ears and throats and bosoms.

"Frenzy enveloped the night. Their little gasps of breath, hissing softly, stirred and infuriated our longings. The girl at the edge of light laughed mockingly at the pirouettes and posturings of the two who danced to her music; from the strings she evoked new madnesses; their gestures and charade-like motions lost all sense of imitation, and before our burning eyes the dream of a new sin swarmed."

At this point the defense counsel leaped to his feet and

demanded a directed verdict of not guilty, using some abstruse definition from common law on which to base his demand. But the State successfully quashed in the Court's mind all the defense's allegations and the black man went on with his story.

"Morgalaski gave a great cry, and we leaped down among them. But our clumsy feet tripped us in the torn-up sand; the three girls screamed and fled. We lurched up, pounding after them. Once the lantern glare died out of our eyes we saw them ahead, running like birds. Their bodies were pale in the gentle moonlight.

"It was a fantastic chase down that eternal beach. Next day I saw where the little sea shells had lacerated my feet, but that night we ran and ran, and our feet felt nothing. I was ahead of Morgalaski, almost on the heels of the last girl. Her breath came in great tortuous sobs; her hair hung as a wind-blown shroud behind her. And it was into that long, damp, silky shroud of hair that at last I plunged my hands and dragged her to the ground."

The black man's devils seemed to light all over him again, for he stopped his testimony and buried his face in his arms, and we could see his big round shoulders shake as the things which haunted him did their devil's dance in his brain. But the Court sternly told him to pull himself together, so the black man went on with his story.

"She shrieked and squirmed and spit at me. But Morgalaski helped me hold her. She subsided when she saw his face, only moaning a little.

"Then Morgalaski buried his mouth in her side, and she screamed with a horror of tone that I had never heard. Morgalaski raised his head. He had bitten out a piece of her flesh. Blood oozed over the sand. Her cries could have reached the moon.

"Her cries went tearing skyward, but I stopped them. Like a wolf, I fastened on her throat. The ecstasy had left the air; only frenzied madness remained.

"And it was with frenzied madness that we killed her, that, as rabid dogs, we worried her flesh. Yet the moon was still beautiful, and, to us over the dancing water, she sent a flickering, glittering path that came straight from her shining bosom. But we had forgotten the moon.

"Later we found a priest and Morgalaski confessed. He confessed to the priest, and the horror-stricken prelate

prayed in terror and put on him a terrible penance; and Morgalaski was absolved. But around my evil-haunted soul the sin still lingers."

The defense counsel again arose and asked for a directed verdict of not guilty. This was immediately denied.

"Your witness, sir," said the defense counsel to the State's attorney.

And the State prosecutor stood up and pursed his lips and asked the black man all sorts of leading questions and got him all mixed up and made him repeat most of his story three or four different times, and he stood right in front of the black man and roared his questions in his face and banged his fist on the rail of the chair; during all which time the defense counsel continually was popping up and down, objecting to this and objecting to that; and sometimes the Court sustained him and other times the Court didn't.

And the defense counsel insisted that the Record show this and the Record show that; and so did the State prosecutor. The old judge drowsed on his woolsack and had to have everything explained to him nine or eleven times before he would sustain or overrule, and the jury got fidgety and so did Vicq Ruiz and myself; and finally Ruiz said:

"Oh, my gad, sir! Let's get out of here!"

So we got up and left, and the bailiffs on guard at the door of the courtroom searched Ruiz again, and at length we attained the outside of the Court House.

I said to Ruiz that in a way I should like to have stayed and heard the jury's verdict. But Ruiz sneered at that.

"Rot, sir! What earthly good would it be to know what the verdict is? If they find him guilty, the defense counsel immediately will appeal the case. If they find him not guilty, the State immediately will indict him on another charge. In either event, the black man will be returned to his cell, his actual guilt or innocence still years from being decided. Here in Heilar-wey there is nothing more ephemeral or less final than a jury's verdict or a judge's decision."

We stood outside a moment undecided what to do next, but a welcome sight caught all our eyes at once: the entrance to a street-front saloon just under the lee, as it were, of the Municipal Court House itself. We hastened to

it, entered, sat at a small table; and the man tending bar called to us and asked what we would drink.

"Sir," says Ruiz, "we will have two big zellums of szelack."

The barman made a jeering, snide remark to a friend at the bar rail about the Chiam Ming potation.

Vicq Ruiz took him up sharply. "Sir, I resent that remark! Come, tell us, now, sir, what is wrong with szelack. You have jeered at it, but we intend to drink it. So, come—out with your objections."

The barman had not meant to start an argument; he tried to pass off Ruiz's challenge, saying: "Oh, they ain't nothing the matter with it. Fergit it." And he brought up our two big zellums.

But Ruiz was not to be mollified. "I insist, sir, that you tell what you have against szelack."

The barman shrugged his shoulders and winked at his friend. "Well, I don't never drink none myself, see? But they was two dames in here the other night—both of 'em drunker'n hell, see? An' nothin'd do but what they should give the nigger pianner player a alcohol shampoo. They'd been settin' there lookin' at his kinky wool and had got the notion, see? So they bought a big zellum of szelack 'cause it was the nastiest-lookin' stuff they could find on the shelf, an' they went over an' shampooed the black sonofabitch's hair to beat all hell. An' damn if his wool didn't turn yaller as daisies. Gawd damn! The way that nigger took on! I hadda give him three drachmas to shet him up. Anyhow, that's all I know about szelack. If it'll turn a nigger's wool yaller, wot in hell will it do to yer guts, see?"

"Bah!" said Ruiz. "I don't believe it." He confided to me: "Drunken barman's idea of a funny story, sir. Barman wit probably lowest form of wit in the whole world. Come, drink up, sir. We'll have another zellum."

Then a filthy-dirty Heilar-wey urchin came in with a bundle of newspapers under his arm, calling: "Paper, mister? Paper?" He passed by us, waving his papers in our faces. After he had passed, Ruiz thumped the table as if he had just remembered something, and he cried to the urchin to return.

"What paper is that, lad?" he asked.

"*Tandstikkerzeitung*, mister. Latest edition. All about the Mercenaries. Paper, mister? Paper?"

Ruiz flung him some coppers and snatched a paper from him. He glanced all over the front page, then raced through the other pages, searching avidly for something.

"By gad, sir, it's not to be understood," he muttered at last. And he went all through the paper a second time. But still he found not what he wanted, and he flung the sheet down and began a long harangue against newspapers in general.

I asked him what it was he wanted to find.

"Why, sir," he says, "it's that interview we gave the young reporter down in the suburbs this noon. By gad, sir, it should have been on Page One. Instead, it's not in the paper anywhere. The editor of the *Tandstikkerzeitung* is evidently a man who knows nothing of his business. Well, it's high time he found out what the public demands from its news organs. I shall write him a letter, sir, and I propose to mince not a single word. Barman, pen and ink and paper, please!"

I took up the *Tandstikkerzeitung* and looked through it carefully. Finally, I found a column headed:

THE SCAVENGING SCRIBE

This column contained fragmentary bits the newsgatherers had picked up here and there, each bit in itself not being important enough to merit individual story treatment. The column was racy and gossipy and full of names. Toward the last was this intelligence:

> . . . your Scavenger in the Suburbs was accosted by two droll hoboes who gave their names as "Captain Malahide and "Veek" Reese, and who told a fantastic, maudlin tale of paying a visit to the Chiam Mings where they dined with the jefe and were shown the White Goddess and the Layya. Both hoboes were half-shot on the Chiam Ming brew szelack and the information they chose to impart about the closely guarded secrets of the nomads added nothing to the small amount of knowledge already extant. Apparently it was derived from imbibing the Chiam Ming brew rather than by listening to the Chiam Ming soothsayers. . . .

I showed it to Ruiz. He read it, dashed the paper on the floor, and stood up.

"That's libel, sir! That's defamation of character! Look how they spell my name! And in quotes, too! They must think I'm a dammed Irishman or something. By gad, sir, they have gone too far this time! We'll bring a libel action against them at once. We'll make that paper pay and pay and pay. We'll teach them to bandy words about us. Come, sir! There's not a moment to lose! Back to the Court House we go."

But I protested hotly and loudly and emphatically that it was getting too late in the afternoon to start a litigation; they were probably locking the Court House doors at that very minute, I said, and if we went back there we would find no one about but janitors, who, obviously, would be unable to help us. And to prove my point and back up my assertions I called to the barman and ordered two more big zellums of szelack.

Ruiz gave in reluctantly and indicated he was deeply hurt and grieved that I refused to stand behind him in the matter. Pen and paper and ink had been brought him, and after a little he stifled his lamentations and sat down again and began to compose an indictment against the *Tandstikkerzeitung*. He made the indictment in the form of a resolution, and I never saw so many whereins and whereases in all my life before. I left him to his composition and settled down with my zellum of szelack to read the rest of the paper.

Page One contained a big spread about some organization it referred to as the "Mercenaries." The headlines stated that the Mercenaries had issued an ultimatum to the Board of Selectmen of Heilar-wey; the boldface lead of the story stated the situation was fraught with tenseness. The main narrative, however, was quite garbled, or seemed so to me who knew nothing of the background of the matter, and I couldn't tell what the tenseness was all about. So I asked Ruiz.

"Oh, the Mercenaries?" he said. "Why, those are those damned ex-soldiers, sir. They want a big lump of money given them now in addition to what we paid them when they were fighting for us. Another example of worshiping money, sir. Those Mercenaries worship it so much that they have formed a tremendous society, the whole purpose of which is to get them more money. The Mercenaries think of nothing else in the whole world, sir, except

forcing us to give them more money. By gad, you may not believe it, but they have been holding meetings every night for twenty-nine years, and all they have ever talked about at any of those meetings is how best they might go about getting money out of us. I tell you, sir, the Mercenaries worship the stuff even more than did my old grandfather or my aunts and uncles, and that is saying a great deal. They worship it so much that they have managed to make a political issue of it, and before they will cast their votes for a candidate seeking office, that candidate must assure them a thousand and one times that he thinks they are entitled to an extra handout and that he will work diligently for such after he is elected."

"What was the fighting they did for you?" I asked.

"Why, sir, I forget now exactly," said Ruiz. "There was a war of some sort, but even today the great minds of the world still have not decided what caused it or who was to blame for it. It has always seemed to me that it started of its own volition; the time was ripe for it and up it popped. Anyhow, we hired the Mercenaries to fight in it for us; there was a shibboleth making the rounds in those days that they were to save us from something or save something for us—I forget which. It was a parcel of foolishness, whatever name it went by. Well, the war ended in a sort of a draw, and the Mercenaries came back, and the same night they arrived here they started bellowing for money. They have bellowed ever since, and that was twenty-nine years ago."

"You did not take part in the war?" I asked.

"No, sir, I did not. I was too young by several years to become a Mercenary. But I've paid dearly for that too-youngness ever since."

"Well, now, how is that?" I asked.

"Why, sir," says Ruiz, "can't you see? After the war the fetish of the Mercenary began, and those who weren't Mercenaries weren't anything. No job unless one were a Mercenary. No credit in the shops unless one were a Mercenary. No relief from taxation unless one were a Mercenary. They were the heroes, d'ye see, sir? And the rest of us had to play second fiddle to 'em. Particularly those of us who were just a bit younger than they and were forced to compete with them in civil life. But, by gad, sir, the more people did for them, the more discrimina-

tions people made in their favor, why, the sorrier the Mercenaries got to feeling for themselves and the louder they would bellow for more money. But now they have heaved their Russian pity at people's heads just a little too much. It looks like a showdown this time. What does the paper say about it?"

"It states that a crisis is expected any moment—probably tonight. It says something about the 'Ausgethrowal,' whatever that is."

"The Ausgethrowal?" said Ruiz. "Oh, that's the plan one of our new and brilliant young statesmen has devised for settling the Mercenary problem. It's a beautifully simple plan, and it has impressed so many people favorably that this young statesman is well on his way to become our next premier. Briefly, the Ausgethrowal contemplates arresting all the Mercenaries and kicking them out of the country. A wholesale deportation, as it were."

"It sounds somewhat rigorous," I said.

"Rigorous?" cried Ruiz. "Why, it's the maximum of leniency! Let me tell you, sir, I know nothing of conditions in Abalone which is your home, but if you had been living in Heilar-wey all these years and every night of those years had heard the Mercenaries bellowing for more money, you would think it lenient, too."

"But do the people as a whole favor it, Mister Ruiz?"

"Yes, sir, they do. Only last month one of the big weekly magazines conducted a poll on the plan by asking each of its readers to send in an answer to this question: 'Do you advocate the Ausgethrowal plan for deporting the Mercenaries, and are you willing to back the plan, if necessary, with physical force?' And, sir, a tabulation of the ballots showed that whereas only seven million people were against the Ausgethrowal, twenty-three million people were in favor of it; and the magazine pointed out that seven million opposing votes came from the Mercenaries themselves or else their close relatives—in either case, people who hoped to benefit from further handouts of money."

"Well," I said, "it still seems a rather rigorous measure." And I picked up the *Tandstikkerzeitung* again and returned to my reading.

On Page Two the paper stated that real alarm was being felt on account of the huge tiger tracks which, every

morning now, could be seen in the outlying districts of the city. There was a five-column cut layout on Page Three showing some of the tracks, the pictures having been taken by the *Tandstikkerzeitung* staff photographer. They looked like any other tiger tracks except that the things were undeniably monstrous; as a scale, the photographer had prevailed on a child to lie down beside the paw marks while he photographed them, and the tracks were as wide as the child was long. Furthermore, the paw prints had been made in a bitumen pavement, the weight of the beast being so great that his pads had sunk deeply in the hard surface of the thoroughfare.

I said to Ruiz: "The paper states that the mere sight of the paw prints of this terrible, big tiger has reduced a number of people to a state bordering on hysteria."

"Rot!" says Ruiz. "People reduce to hysteria entirely too easily these days. Tiger tracks in this city! Rot!"

"Yes," I replied, "but this is no ordinary tiger, Mister Ruiz. Did you notice the pictures of his footmarks?"

"No, sir, I did not."

So I showed him the newspaper photos. He studied them.

"By gad, sir," he finally conceded, "now, it really must be a magnificent brute that can make such tracks. But it's certainly not a Bureat Go-Lee tiger. I have seen them in the Zoo, and they never get near as big as this. This, apparently, is the tiger of all tigers. I wonder what the beast is up to."

I had no ideas whatever on the subject of a tiger's purpose in Heilar-wey, and I went on reading the paper while Ruiz pondered and ordered two more big zellums of szelack. They came, and he poured to replenish our tumblers. Silently he drank a while; then he brought his fist down bang on the table top.

"I have it, sir!" he announced.

"What?"

"The mission of this tiger. Its awful purpose, sir. The only logical reason why such a beast should be in such a place at such a time. By gad, sir, the thought is terriyfing and terrible!"

"Well, what is it? What is the mission? What is the thought?"

Ruiz raised one finger closely to hold my attention.

"There is an old, forgotten legend, sir, that was born with the birth of the city that some day the lamb would flee from Heilar-wey and the tiger would come in its stead. I believe that is what has happened now."

"Lamb?" I said. "Tiger? I don't understand, Mister Ruiz."

"The lamb, sir," says Vicq Ruiz slowly, "was God's mercy. But the tiger is God's wrath. We must go at once, sir. There's not a moment to lose."

And he drained his zellum to the dregs and had me do likewise. And he led me hurriedly from the drinking place. But it was not until we were seated in a twenty-four cylinder, diesel-engined, super-streamlined, rear-motored taxicab and freewheeling down Calle Grande at one hundred seventy-two miles an hour that he told me what the hurry was for.

"We must start upon our bacchanal without delay, sir. For once again my premonition of violent, sudden death is upon me. This morning, remember, we planned to celebrate so that I might make an affirmation of life upon leaving the world, crying, indeed, to the flying moment as did Faust, 'Ah, still delay! Thou art so fair!' Then, when necessity for that supposedly had passed we decided to celebrate my liberation from such need. But now this new and terrible thing has been revealed. We must have our bacchanal, sir, without further loss of time. I pray even now we are not too late."

"Oh, we ought to have plenty of time," I said encouragingly. "The night is barely started. Sometimes, too, these bacchanals prove so tiresome that one is frankly relieved when something cuts them short."

"True enough, sir, with certain reservations," agreed Ruiz. "But we must take no chances, and we must not cease to hurry, for once the tiger looses his fury it may well be too late for what we propose."

And Ruiz took up the cab's speaking-tube mouthpiece, and he howled into it to the operator: "Faster! Faster!"

"Whereabouts are we going?" I asked.

"Sir, we go to pick up some girls. We can't very adequately have a bacchanal without girls."

"No," I admitted. "That's true enough. But, Mister Ruiz, why can't we just celebrate for the fun of the thing without first attaching all this significance to it? I like

szelack and I like girls, and I like to mix both into merriment, madness, hilarity, and fun. But I see no particular reason for eternally predicating such a program upon the end of one crisis or the beginning of a new one."

"That's all very well for you, sir," says Ruiz. "But you are forgetting my premonition. It is my premonition which is spurring me on to all this, in the first place. Otherwise I would be content to spend a dull and commonplace evening. But now we really must hurry, sir, for I insist on a large measure of joy before I meet my violent death."

"Well, all right," I said. And I asked: "Can we consider all the szelack you have been drinking as being in the nature of a viaticum?"

"Yes, sir," says Ruiz, "I think we can with justice. And we shall need still more szelack, sir, before the right is done."

"No doubt we will," I agreed. And I also said: "But, now, Mister Ruiz, let's dig into this tiger business a little more. You, of all people surely do not make a practice of putting faith in old legends?"

"Sir," says Ruiz very quietly, "there's nothing legendary about the wrath of God."

"No, of course not," I conceded. "But this tiger . . . surely you don't think a mere tiger, howsoever large it may be, is going to destroy this monstrous, beautiful, unholy city?"

"Sir," says Ruiz, "I remember very well what happened to two other cities. They were known as the Cities of the Plain."

"Yes," I said, "I remember reading of them, too, but there was nothing about a tiger connected with the tale."

"God's wrath destroyed them, sir," says Ruiz. "And I am convinced this great tiger here in Heilar-wey is another manifestation of that same supernal indignation."

So then I asked him if he were a churcngoer, and did he sing hymns and pray to this destroyer of great cities.

"No, sir," says Vicq Ruiz, "I do not. I worship the virile gods of Greece and Africa. I do not worship this destroying god, but I heartily fear him. Furthermore, there is my premonition. We must hurry with our baccnanal."

"Yes," I said, "there's that, of course." And I asked him about the girls we were getting.

"They are very fine girls," he replied. "They have just

enough age on them to give them plenty of experience and keep them from being silly, yet not enough age to prevent their getting around spryly. Of course, as is the curse of all women, they worship money. But that is something one perpetually puts up with in Heilar-wey wherever one goes, whatever one does. I think you will admire these girls, sir, and enjoy their company. You will approve their address and delight in their easy chitter-chatter. They are informal girls, easy to meet, easy to entertain, easy to suggest things to. Very fine girls."

"You like the women, I take it."

"Sir," says Ruiz, "I do and I don't. For deep in me lies the soul of a monk, and that soul has a voice which is forever weeping for a veritable Thebaid where a woman has never been known to wander. Yet, apart from my soul, there is my flesh; I have found, sir, for I must be frank, that the call of my flesh is stronger by far than the call of my soul. Some day I hope things will be different. That is, I think I hope that. Nowadays, however, I never argue with my flesh. I find it does no good. I give it the things it asks for as often as I am able, my caprice being that at some odd moment I may satisfy its insatiable appetite."

So we drove along down Calle Grande in our taxi and entered the Third Business District, and directly there was a scream of the taxi's brakes, and we could smell the rubber burn. Then we stopped. We cranked down the draftless, visionless, nonfrangible window and peered out in an endeavor to ascertain the cause of our halt. Up ahead, crossing Calle Grande, jamming the street from curb to curb, at least a verst, was a huge procession, the members of which carried banners and chaunted songs and howled defiance. And, looking at the procession, a profound and nameless desolation came over me, for I perceived that the procession was composed of very old people, some of them barely able to hobble, and in all their eyes I could detect a burning, bitter spark of madness.

I asked Vicq Ruiz who in the world were all those countless thousands of demented ancients.

"Sir," says Ruiz, "what you behold and wonder at is the Union of Old Folks. Now, I will give you one guess as to why they formed their organization."

"Money," I hazarded wildly.

"Sir," says Ruiz, "you are entirely too acute this evening. Of course, it is money. Money the All-in-All. Money the First Principle. Money the great Prime Mover. Money the god of the Heilar-wey children. Yes, you guessed right. Those old people have banded together to get money. They want pensions, two hundred drachmas apiece a month. And, now, one other guess, sir, as to what grounds they offer for demanding the pensions."

"Well, I wouldn't know that," I said.

"Why, because of their age, of course, sir. What else could they ask them for? They were never heroes or heroines. They never accomplished anything except under the direction of others superior to them mentally. In a sense, they merely cluttered up Heilar-wey with their presence and were always something of a burden and considerable of a bore to their city. But now, in keeping with the times, they demand pensions; they have banded together to get them through gross weight of their numbers; they hold meetings constantly; they write to the newspapers; they threaten the politicians; they contribute their hoarded mites in hope of reaping mountains; they sign millions of petitions; they never rest any more. See them there, sir, tottering on the threshold of death as they wander the streets in a mob; hear them forlornly chaunting their last, pathetic cry: 'Give us money! Oh, give us money!' Gott! They have even evolved a philosophy."

"A philosophy, Mister Ruiz?"

"Yes, sir, a philosophy. They claim that by spending their pensions as fast as they get them, all we younger people will have to work our necks off to supply their demands. Such an orgy of work on our part will produce untold wealth for the city and keep us from the evils of unemployment. We give them money to buy the fruit of our labor; they spend recklessly and joyously to keep our noses to the wheel."

"That's bad," I said. "What's being done about these Old Folks?"

"Well, sir, this same young politician I told you about a while back has evolved a plan for taking care of them. He calls it the Rausmitemall Plan; it contemplates arresting every one of them and deporting them. A lot of people have spoken very favorably of the Rausmitemall Plan, sir. They will tell you it is the only solution for this problem of

the Old Folks and that the young politician who thought it up should be rewarded with the Premiership."

"The Rausmitemall Plan seems to have a great deal in common with the Ausgethrowal Plan," I said.

"Yes," says Ruiz, "they do have their points of similarity. They are both very fine plans. I'm quite in favor of them."

"Well, but do the people of Heilar-wey favor the Rausmitemall Plan?" I asked.

"Oh, they do, indeed," says Ruiz. "One of the big weekly magazines conducted a poll several months ago to seek an answer to that very question, and, when the ballots were counted, it was discovered that whereas only seven million people were against the Plan, there were twenty-three million for it. And the magazine, in breaking down the vote, showed conclusively that the seven million opposed was made up entirely of the Union of Old Folks plus their very near relatives."

We sat there in the taxi a long, long time, waiting for the Union to get across Calle Grande so that we might proceed. Waiting, I discovered that our conveyance was equipped with a radio, so, to while away the time, I began to fiddle with the knob.

Soon I succeeded in capturing a grunt from the airwaves, and then a wheeze and a groan and a snatch of melody. Encouraged by those noises, I gave the knob a slightly harder twist, and immediately from the sound box poured a rich, resonant, lovely, and powerful voice which pronounced every word with ringing clarity and undeniable sincerity. "Liar and betrayer!" cried that wonderful voice. "Miscreant and deceiver! Fornicator and malefactor! Bastard and sonofabitch!"

I looked at Vicq Ruiz inquiringly.

"That'll be one of Heilar-wey's lesser gospelers summing up the shortcomings of one of our current political heroes," he explained.

"He seems to be vehement," I said.

"Very vehement," agreed Ruiz. "Twist the dial a bit further, sir, and see if you can get some piano music. Sometimes Bach is played about this time in conjunction with toilet-paper advertising, though I forget exactly which day."

So I twisted on, and in a minute, sure enough, broke into the end of the "Fugue in G Minor." "Dut-dee-da,"

went the fugue. "Dut-da, dut-da, dut-da-dee-dah!" But it soon stopped, and the sales talk began.

"Oh, shut the damned thing off," begged Ruiz. And I did so.

Then the street cleared, for the union of Old Folks had reached the far side; and the taxi operator started us off again, and directly he got his gears shifted into the final upper ratio of the overdrive, and we were going one hundred seventy-two miles an hour again as the taxi sprinted along on its fat rubber feet.

And yet we certainly had not ridden more than twenty-four minutes when the operator cut his motor and jammed on his brakes again, and again we could smell the rubber burn, and again we stopped. Once more we cranked down the window to look out. Once more up ahead was a tremendous, vast procession crossing Calle Grande, filling the street from curb to curb at least a verst. The members of the procession were carrying torches and sandwich boards and signs and banners; they sang incessantly; they howled defiance.

I again looked at Vicq Ruiz inquiringly.

"Sir," says Ruiz, "you now behold the National Federation of the Unemployed."

"Do they want money?" I asked.

"Oh, my God, yes!" says Ruiz.

"Do they hold meetings, make speeches, threaten politicians, spread propaganda, write to newspapers, connive, plot, and march?"

"Yes, sir, they do."

"Is there a plan to take care of them?"

"Yes, sir, there is."

"Did the young politician devise the plan?"

"Yes, sir, he did."

"What is the plan called, Mister Ruiz?"

"Sir, it is called the Ultima Ratio Regum."

"Does it propose to arrest and deport them?"

"No, sir. It proposes to exterminate them."

"Do seven million people oppose the plan, and do twenty-three million favor it?"

"That is correct, sir."

"Mister Ruiz," I said, "my mathematics are not good, so I ask you to straighten this out for me: There are seven milllion people in favor of giving money to the Mercen-

aries; there are seven million people in favor of giving money to the Old Folks; there are seven million people in favor of giving money to the Unemployeds. In each instance there are twenty-three million opposed. Now, how many people does that make, Mister Ruiz?"

"I do not know, sir," says Ruiz. "All I know is that we must hasten with our bacchanal."

"Why?"

"Because the tiger prowls about Heilar-wey."

"Well," I said, lolling back in my seat and stretching, "that suits me nicely. For, after all, I am only a visitor in your city, and I am not interested in your problems of Old Folks, Unemployeds, and Mercenaries. Nor am I alarmed that there should be a big tiger prowling about. For his business is no concern of mine. All I am interested in is having a good time tonight; I am a guest, a stranger, a casual wayfarer; I seek only to be amused. So, by all means, let us hasten with the bacchanal."

And I took up the mouthpiece of the taxicab speaking tube and into it I howled to the operator: "Faster! Faster!"

Then I said reminiscently: "Having a bacchanal, or having a good time, which is one and the same thing, follows certain definite precepts all the world over. The two principal ingredients are wine and women. And I warn you now, Mister Ruiz, that wonderful are the wine-fed women of Abalone—my little home town—and gaudy were the times I used to have there. If this enormous, huge, unholy city can improve on some of those good times, it will be a magic city, indeed."

And I also said: "Who are the girls we are going after?"

"Well, sir," says Ruiz, "one of them is Misses Schmale, and the other one is Misses Schwackhammer. It will be better for you to escort Misses Schmale. She, of the two, is perhaps the easier to meet. She makes pleasant small talk, has an undryable well of laughter, and comports herself with prudence when in a crowd. On the other hand, safe in a sequestered spot, such as an hotel room with the door locked, she can be as warm and loving as the next. Warmer and more loving, perhaps, than the common run, because she has had such a world of experience at it. Really, sir, I am positive you will enjoy your bacchanal with Misses Schmale."

"Yes, yes," I said. "But what does she look like?"

"Sir," says Ruiz, "Misses Schmale is a very fine-looking girl. She has substance. Very much substance. In fact, sir, she has enough substance for three men, and tonight you shall have it all to yourself."

"And what about Misses Schwackhammer?" I asked.

"Misses Schwackhammer is a bit of a coquette," Ruiz admitted. "Misses Schwackhammer is a very restless girl, and it is hard for her to be true to one man more than one night. Yet I suppose, sir, that it is her coquettishness which attracts me so: to subjugate completely that wilful heart of hers! Ah, how many men have attacked that intriguing problem! But she is such good company. So intelligent. Her quips and puns will convulse you. Always a joke on her lips. Sometimes, of course, men have found her to be what they thought was a bit coarse and lewd and nasty. But there's always the saving grace of humor in what she says and does. I think she will delight you. She is a girl of many parts."

We rode along silently for a while then, the taxi tearing through the Seventh Residential District. And I must confess at this time that I was thinking of Mrs. Schmale and Mrs. Schwackhammer in a none too complimentary manner, even though I had not yet seen either of the girls. For, while their characters, as Ruiz had outlined them, seemed all well enough, I was secretly afraid their physical appearances might turn out to be disappointing. And for me the physique of a girl has always meant far more than intelligence or small talk or ability to pun.

Whilst I was brooding thus uncertainly concerning our partners for the projected bacchanal, the taxi stopped again with another shocking, horrid suddenness which threw both Ruiz and me to the floor and bounced us back up in our seats again. Ruiz cursed fearfully in Verskamite and also in an ancient Gothic dialect. Once more we cranked the window down to see what procession it was this time which interrupted our way.

But it was no procession: it was a horrible smashup of forty or fifty streamlined multicyclinder automobiles; and each of them must have been traveling well over two hundred miles an hour to achieve, even in combination, such a terrible mass of wreckage. Ambulances and policemen were all about; and so were doctors and nurses and internes. Scores of newspapermen were there interviewing

onlookers and victims and taking flashlight photos of the mess. By each wrecked automobile there must have been six or seven insurance adjusters and nine or ten lawyers. A tremendous crowd of curiosity-seekers had gathered; Calle Grande, from curb to curb, at least a verst, was blocked completely. Our taxi operator killed his motor and set his brakes and even turned off the meter; he said we would just have to wait till the jam cleared. There was no way, of course, of getting out behind, because even as we stopped, the traffic piled up in back of us for ten or fifteen miles.

Vicq Ruiz and I got out to stretch our legs. Close by, we found a mobile saloon mounted on a truck and two trailers; its personnel had rushed it to the scene, let down the sides of the trailers, and set up shop where they did a remarkable business. Ruiz and I went to it at once and secured two big zellums of szelack.

Then we moved around through the crowd, inspecting the corpses and standing by different wrecks whenever we saw they were about to be photographed. Ruiz gave expert testimony to the police officers on how the accident had occurred, and he agreed to act as eyewitness for several insurance-company adjusters and also for several lawyers who had agilely secured themselves clients from among the people who had been in the wreck but who had not been killed and who now desired to sue someone or other for fortunes in damages. Ruiz finally became involved in a loud and bitter argument with a newsreel man. The newsreel man was angry because just as he had set up his recording equipment Ruiz stepped to his microphone and howled into it a long extemporaneous description of the scene. So I left Ruiz there deep in his argument and wandered around to look at things by myself.

I saw her standing in a little eddy of the vast sea of people, and after I looked at her once I could see nothing else in the whole mad uproar.

She wore low shoes on her feet and low socks rolled down about her slim ankles. She wore shorts as if for tennis-playing. A little shirt she also wore, the sleeves rolled high on her slender arms, the collar open about her throat. Her hair was brushed back from her brow and from her ears, and, oh! how lovely she was. She seemed a little frightened and a little tired, and she seemed bewildered. But her bewilderment did not appear to stem from the

accident there in Calle Grande; it seemed to come from something within, from that curious soulspot where my own bewilderment was often born.

I moved over closer to her to regard her more closely, to examine her beauty, to drink in her loveliness, to marvel, and to adore; in my mind to bow down before her, say brave things to her, achieve her sympathy through my own sympathy, take her and touch her and kiss her and love her. I moved over closer to her, for I wanted to look closely at her arms and at her lovely slim legs, and I wanted to see how the hair curled about the back of her neck, and I was anxious also to examine her throat and her lips and her eyes. I moved over closer to her, because I thought that perhaps in the turmoil I could touch her unnoticed, just brush my fingers lightly on her arms. I moved over closer to her, because I wanted to be very near her and drench myself in her aura, drench myself so deeply that some of it would remain and she would return to me sometime in a dream. I moved over closer.

But Vicq Ruiz came along, and he said: "Come along. Come along, sir! The police have cleared a traffic lane. The operator has turned on his meter and is choking his motor. We are ready to move again. Come along. Drink up your szelack. We must return the zellums."

And I looked down, and there was the big half-empty zellum of szelack in my hand, and it had been there all the time, all the while I was moving closer to the glorious girl.

Back in the cab I asked Ruiz if he had noticed the girl in the little eddy of the sea of people.

"The thin, rawboned one?" asked Ruiz.

I said I supposed so.

"Yes, sir, I noticed her," says Ruiz. "An awkward, inept, adolescent-looking squab. Probably just at that silly age. She can't be more than twenty-nine. No substance to her. Probably no experience, either. You surely can't be taken by that sort of thing, sir. By gad, wait till you see Misses Schmale. Then you'll see a real girl, sir. No bag of bones. No virginal pseudo-athlete. No ethereal keep-your-hands-off, touch-me-not creature."

"Are you a connoisseur of women?" I asked.

"Yes, sir, I believe I am," says Ruiz. "But I arrived at that connoisseurship only after a multitude of experiments, let me tell you. No hasty, haphazard method of judgment

for Vicq Ruiz, sir. No try-just-one and know-them-all stuff. Not where the women are concerned. Understand me, though, sir: I do not pretend to understand them. But I certainly understand what I like and dislike in them, and I attempt to get what I like and avoid what I dislike. Sometimes I am successful, but not always."

"Where do these girls live we are going after now?" I asked.

"They live in an apartment on down Calle Grande about forty-two more miles in the Eleventh Residential District. We should be there in another ten or fifteen minutes unless the traffic thickens a great deal."

And, sure enough, we did get there in just a little while. We whizzed through residential district after residential district, the apartments becoming cheaper and nastier and shoddier as farther and farther we got from the main business districts. Ruiz howled into the speaking tube to the operator to slow down quite a bit as we were getting close to where we wanted to go and did not wish to overrun it. So the operator slowed down to about seventy, and Ruiz stuck his head out the window to watch for our destination, and finally he saw it up ahead and he screamed: "Stop! For God's sake, stop!" And the taxi stopped and rolled into the curb nicely in front of the marquee of an apartment house where Ruiz, verifying the number on the door with one he had on a slip of paper, said the girls lived.

He paid the operator the monumental sum computed on the face of the taxi's meter, and then he said: "Come along, sir." And we went into the apartment's reception room.

We went somewhat uncertainly to a little desk, where, beside a PBX 'neath a flowery floor lamp, the matron sat reading a story of true love, in a fat magazine. Ruiz cleared his throat and begged to be connected with Mrs. Schwackhammer's apartment. But the matron looked up at us and, instead of complying, gave a shriek and pressed a button. Almost immediately, the apartment detective hurriedly tramped in and collared us, and he looked at her for further orders.

"Throw 'em out, Henry," says the matron. "They're undoubtedly two tramps who've wandered in here in a drunken stupor. Throw 'em out."

"Velta vella vasta!" gurgled Ruiz in Verskamite. "We are neither tramps nor are we drunk! And what is more we know how to handle you people! We know, by gad, how to make you cringe before us and beg our pardons and attempt to mollify our wrath and please us. By gad, we do!"

And he thrust his hand into the pocket of his ragged greatcoat and took out thirty silver drachmas, and he made the detective take them, crying: "There, sir, there is your bribe! Now, turn us loose!" And he stepped to the matron, and he thrust forty silver drachmas in her bosom, and he cried: "There, madam! There is your bribe! Now, please, connect me with Misses Schwackhammer's apartment!"

And, by heaven, the detective went away, counting his drachmas, and the matron felt of hers, and she connected Vicq Ruiz with Mrs. Schwackhammer's apartment. Then she turned to me and apologized in a cringing sort of way, just as Ruiz had prophesied, and she bubbled out something to the effect that in these big, fine apartments one always has to be so careful, you know.

I went over and sat on the divan while Ruiz bellowed into the telephone and arranged things with the girls for our bacchanal. Presently, he was done, and he came and sat beside me, saying that all was well; the girls would be down as soon as they tidied themselves up somewhat; all to do now was wait for them.

So we waited, and directly a filthy little urchin came into the apartment reception room, calling: "Paper, mister? Paper?" I saw that he peddled the latest edition of the *Tandstikkerzeitung*, and I flung him some coppers and snatched one from his bundle.

Page Seven was all pictures of the automobile smashup we had witnessed previously on Calle Grande; banner lines above the cuts proclaimed the accident as being the greatest of the month: a record in all ways. And the cut lines related how three hundred and thirty-three people had been either killed or wounded. I looked at the pictures very closely and found that Ruiz and myself appeared in four of them. In each instance we looked to be accident victims ourselves somehow; and, contemplating the pictures, I felt perhaps the apartment matron had had some shade of reason for questioning our appearance and motive when we entered. In two of the photos in which we

figured, Ruiz's big zellum of szelack was strikingly apparent, and in one of the remaining I happened to be in the act of sipping unconsciously from mine. In all of the pictures we were of an uncommonly uncouth and wild seeming.

Other than advertisements, the rest of the paper was devoted a great deal to the immediate troubles of Heilarwey: strikes, murders, suicides, politics, relief, crime, taxes, and so on. I glanced at the editorial and found that it maintained that the sooner the Ausgethrowal, the Rausmitemall, and the Ultima Ratio Regum Plans were put into effect, the better off Heilar-wey would be. The editorial claimed that unless Heilar-wey extirpated her parasites and leeches, the leeches and parasites would devour Heilarwey; and the editorial asked why the citizens of the city did not act as men should act instead of shambling along at the mercy of the Unemployeds, the Old Folks, and the Mercenaries, perpetually temporizing before the one, procrastinating before the other, and compromising with the last.

There was also a story about the tiger. At the time of the great accident the tiger was alleged to have attacked a gaudy gayhouse on the edge of town known as the House of All Nations, torn down its walls, routed its inmates, and roared at the top of its lungs.

I read the story to Ruiz and said it seemed to me that the tiger was quibbling.

"Rather, sir," says Ruiz, "the tiger is sharpening his claws. Wait till he gets started." And he asked for the crossword puzzle.

I tore out the puzzle and gave it to him. He borrowed a pencil from the matron and worked at it, now and again asking me for a three-letter word that meant sea eagle or a seven-letter word that meant sorrow. I helped with the puzzle in between reading about the tiger and the Ausgethrowal.

Then I ran across a little squib which stated that the jury in the trial of the black man on the rape-and-murder charge had informed the Court that, after due deliberation, half of its members thought the black man guilty and the other half innocent, but the whole jury agreed he ought to be hung anyhow. And the foreman of the jury, during an interview later with the press, had given it as his

opinion that it was much better just to lynch these black men at once, whenever they were suspected of anything, than to trouble to bring them to trial. A trial, the foreman was quoted as saying, was a waste of time and money and never actually decided anything. But a good, old-fashioned lynching decided everything and was absolutely final and positive and gave everyone a party thereto a sense of definite accomplishment.

And there was another little squib near by which stated that the black man's attorney had secured from the Court a writ commanding the black man's people to turn over to him all the black man's real and chattel property in part payment of his attorney's fee.

Vicq Ruiz worked away at his puzzle, and the matron came over and got interested in it—so interested that she let the telephone ring and ring without bothering to answer it—and they both kept asking me first for one word and then another, and Ruiz would mark in the word I told them, only to erase it later on and try something entirely different. He had it all solved except for seven or eight blank places when the elevator came down from the ninety-ninth story, and the girls got out and stepped into the reception room with little shrieks.

They went flouncing up to the matron's desk with little shrieks, and the matron, who had stopped her crossword puzzling when she saw them leave the elevator, met them there. The smaller of the two of them promptly giggled to the matron: "Oh, gossip, now where is that gentleman who asked if he could see us? Oh, gossip, he had such an intristing voice over the tellyphone! Don't tell me, gossip, that he has run away! Tee hee hee!"

The matron giggled back, saying: "Chit, chit, cousin! You know gentlemen never run away from you! Here are both gentlemen waiting over here! And well you know it, cousin, you saucy minx! Tee hee hee!"

So then the matron brought the girls over to us, and one could see the faces of the girls fall even while the girls were still some eighty-eight paces across the reception room from us. Vicq Ruiz nudged me, and we got up.

They were large, fleshy girls with plenty of substance, as Ruiz had said. One was shorter than the other, but she made up in substance what she lacked in height. She had on a black dress, and the big one wore a pink dress. The

big one was a sort of brunette, but the smaller one was a natural blonde. The smaller one had black jewels pinned in her natural blonde hair, and the big one had blond jewels pinned in her dark hair. They both had huge, fat arms and wore a multitude of bracelets upon them. The smaller, who was the natural blonde, had great big freckles the size of the states of the union on the average map sprinkled all over her shoulders and the back of her neck and her back. The larger one, who was a head taller, had freckles, too, but they were little black ones, not huge red ones as were the natural blonde's; and the larger one's freckles grew all over her cheeks and brow and face and upon her forearms also, speckling her hands even unto the second and third joints of her finger bones. The smaller natural blonde had a flat, unintelligent-appearing peasant face, and the larger had a snippy sort of face which was not intelligent in appearance either. But the larger brunette had a bad cast in one eye, whereas the smaller natural blonde one giggled incessantly; and the blonde tried to hide her freckles with some kind of powder, whereas it seemed almost as if the brunette were proud of her freckles and wished to flaunt them in folks' faces.

"Here are the gentlemen, cousin," giggled the matron. And she giggled and scurried away, giggling.

Vicq Ruiz spoke first: "My dear Misses Schwackhammer, mam, and my dear Misses Schmale, mam," he said, "do allow me to introduce myself without further formality. Of course, you must already know of me, I feel sure, for I am sure our mutual friend, Harvey, has told you all about me, even as he told me all about you, mam, and gave me your address. Heh, heh, heh. Now, Misses Schmale, mam, and Misses Schwackhammer, mam, I am Mister Ruiz, and this is my old and honored friend, Captain Butch Malahide, the famous aviator from Abalone. Dropping in on me quite unexpectedly from the skies, by gad—for the captain's on a round-the-world flight—he suggested that we make a night of it here in Heilar-wey where the nights are so designed as to be made much of. So, of course, I thought immediately of you two girls, mam, remembering all that Harvey had told me, heh, heh, heh; and so here we are, ready and anxious to take you out and fling roses, by gad. My dear Misses Schmale, mam, and my dear Misses Schwackhammer!"

The natural blonde had been looking at the great, tearing holes in my shoddy old greatcoat and at the mud on my trouser legs which clotted the cloth all the way to my knees; and the brunette had made herself cognizant of Vicq Ruiz's shabby old hat with no hatband on it and of his tattered greatcoat which had one of the pockets ripped loose and no collar at all. And both of them had stared fixedly at Ruiz's scuffed and mired low-cut button shoes, which had big slits in them so that his corns might have more freedom and less oppression.

But Ruiz was quick and sharp as a cat—I'll always give the man credit for that—and before the girls could say a word in answer to his speech of introduction he slid a twenty-drachma piece into each of their bosoms.

So the big brunette said smilingly: "Oh, Harvey is such a dear, sweet soul! Of course, he told us erl about you, Mister Ruiz; and we have been in such a worry for fear we wouldn't be able to meet you before we left for Pahriss. And how do you do, Captain Malahide? This is a great honor, I am most sure. I am Misses Schwackhammer, and this is Misses Schmale. Tee hee!"

"Tee hee hee!" said Mrs. Schmale.

I bowed.

Then the matron called out from across the reception room: "Oh, cousin, dearie, could I speak with you just one weensy moment? Tee hee!"

And the natural blonde excused herself and went over and spoke for a moment with the matron, and then she came back, and she told us that the matron had said Mrs. Schwackhammer's apartment rent was due and that she, the matron, didn't hardly think it was fair for the girls to be going out good-timing with all that rent still to pay.

So Ruiz, looking as if he had just bitten down on a nail imbedded in a tomato worm, asked how much the rent was, and the girls whispered it bashfully to him, and Ruiz secretly handed Mrs. Schwackhammer the money and told her to go pay up and for gad's sake to get a receipt. But Mrs. Schmale said something plaintive to the effect that they never paid the apartment rent without also giving the matron a carton of cigarettes along with the money, for the matron, poor, dear soul, was only collecting for the heartless corporation which owned the apartment

house and got none of the money herself, receiving for her labor only a chintzy little room, rent-free, and no salary.

So Ruiz handed over more drachmas to take care of the carton of cigarettes, and the two girls went over to pay the matron, and Ruiz and I were left alone for the nonce.

"Cungratts mezza!" says Ruiz. "Are we pigeons to be plucked and parboiled, or what the hell, sir? Take care, Captain Malahide, that you do your part toward making the girls give value received for all this money we are forced to put out just for the damned preliminaries. Don't be satisfied with a kiss, sir, impress upon them that a kiss will not even begin to satisfy you. How to that line, sir. Also, you had better give me some more money. I'm afraid those girls will bleed what you have out of you completely. You'd best let me do all the paying this night, sir, for I know when to say no."

So I gave him another thousand drachmas, and then the girls came back, and we went out and punched a button for a taxi.

We stood under the marquee of the apartment house not saying very much, for we were still not yet well acquainted, and directly a taxi came along, an eighteen-cylinder, front-engined, old-style gasoline burner that would do only about a hundred miles an hour and wasn't very well streamlined. But it had two compartments, so we took it anyhow. Mrs. Schmale and I got into one compartment, and Vicq Ruiz and Mrs. Schwackhammer got into the other.

Ruiz popped down the little window between our compartments and asked did we want to go to a restaurant first and have dinner before we did anything else, or what? I wasn't particularly hungry, but Mrs. Schmale said of course we would have dinner first, and she named the restaurant for him to go to. So Ruiz popped up the window, and we could feel the vehicle begin to gather speed and hear it squawk its horn as it tooled out into the major high-speed traffic lanes.

Mrs. Schmale said she had just as well get comfy in so far as we had a very long way to go, and she took off her shoes and loosened her stays, put her feet on the rug rail, and let herself fall back into my arms. I snuggled my face against hers, and she turned her head a little and mashed her mouth against mine, and we swapped spits a while;

then she pulled away a little and commanded me to tell her all about myself and how I had been spending my time during my visit in Heilar-wey.

I said I had only landed this morning, but had paid a call on the Chiam Mings and found them to be a very interesting people full of quaint and curious lore; that I had dined in the suburbs, had been interviewed by a *Tandstikkerzeitung* reporter there, and, subsequently, had sat in on a rape-and-murder trial which had as its stake the life of a black man. I added, as an afterthought, that I had also made the acquaintance of szelack and had found it to be a very palatable drink.

Mrs. Schmale thereupon sat up on my lap and commenced to laugh as perhaps might a hyena. I inquired as to the cause of her merriment.

"Well, Captain Malahide, tee hee, the other night dear Misses Schwackhammer and I, tee hee hee, went to a very vulgar place, we wanted to see life, you know, and poor, dear Misses Schwackhammer drank just the teensy-weensiest bit too much, and there was a nigger piano player there, and Misses Schwackhammer saw his kinky hair, and she decided to give him a shampoo, and we bought a bottle of that awful szelack and shampooed his hair, such fun, Captain Malahide, you never saw, and, oh, he screamed and writhed around, and the barman kept threatening to call the police, and poor, dear Miss Schwackhammer broke the bottle of szelack over the nigger's head, and there was a big crowd all around, and, oh, it was the funniest, awfullest, damnedest thing!"

"Didn't the Negro's hair turn yellow?" I asked.

"Yes, I believe it did," said Mrs. Schmale. "That szelack is such horrid, nasty stuff, you know."

We stopped all serious conversation for a while then, cuddling up close together and contenting ourselves with whispering sweet nothings in each other's ears. Then, quite suddenly, we stopped, and Mrs. Schmale said: "Well, my God, darling, this is not the place I told him to go to." And she started to open the little window and find out about it.

"Maybe we are stopping for a procession," I hazarded.

"Well, my God, darling, we don't want to stop for a procession," said Mrs. Schmale. "We want to eat."

That was a half-truth, at least, and I let it pass without

comment. Then Ruiz jerked open our door and said that there we were.

"Why, we're no such thing!" contradicted Mrs. Schmale. "We're miles from there yet!"

But Mrs. Schwackhammer stuck her face in and said she had told Ruiz to stop here herself; she preferred it to the place Mrs. Schmale had previously picked out.

Mrs. Schmale, however, preferred it not the least, teensy bit and made no pretense of saying so. So I got out and, with Vicq Ruiz, stood by neutrally while the girls reasoned and debated with each other over their difference.

"How have you been doing, sir?" asked Ruiz.

"Quite well," I replied. "A number of kisses; a number of exploratory gestures. If she were only a little younger and considerably more beautiful, though, I think I could put more heart into it."

"Sir," says Ruiz, "I perceive you need more szelack. Szelack will buoy you up manfully. It will buoy me, also, I believe."

"Yes," I said, "that is probably true. I could not love her half so well, loved I not szelack more. As long as szelack keeps bubbling within me I can maintain my passion at lukewarm pitch against any woman."

"Sir," says Ruiz, "that assertion lacks chivalry."

"Alas," I agreed. "But what it lacks in chivalry it makes up in truth."

The girls ended their scene about that time, and the crowd of onlookers which had gathered to find out the cause of their screamings gradually departed. The girls, friends again, came over to us hand in hand and said they had decided on a third restaurant, one just a little farther on, and that we should hasten there at once. Ruiz and I commended them for their spirit of compromise, and all of us reëntered the cab and drove on. In thirteen minutes we reached the place.

The doorman at the restaurant did not want to let the girls in and Ruiz had to bribe him. Then the doorman did not want to let Ruiz and myself in after the girls, and Ruiz had to bribe him again. But finally, we were all safe inside, seated in a commodious booth; and Mrs. Schwackhammer took up the vinegar cruet and banged it loudly against the sugar bowl to attract the attention of a waitress and get some service.

At length a waitress came over. She was a thin, worried-looking waitress, and her shoulders were at least seven inches wider than her hips. Ruiz ordered four orders of lamb chops well done and young green onions and boiled new red potatoes.

The waitress said: "I don't think we got nothing like that, mister."

"By gad, miss, you'd better have," says Ruiz. "Trot yourself off at once and find out; and we want soup, too, woman. Beef soup with lots of barley and rice in it. And we also want a huge plate of crackers and a lot of butter to spread on them. Meanwhile, as our orders are being prepared, fetch four zellums of szelack. Four big zellums."

The steward came over then and told us not to make so much noise; the other diners were complaining, he said; and he looked at Ruiz and me pretty sourly and at the girls even more sourly. Ruiz, however, saw immediately what the steward was after, and he gave him a ten-drachma bribe, and we were left in peace.

The worried-looking waitress brought the szelack, and the first thing both the girls said was that they hated the stuff and wouldn't drink any. But Ruiz poured them each a glass anyhow and insisted they try it. Mrs. Schmale took a sip, then Mrs. Schwackhammer took a sip, too. Those first sips of the szelack made their throats burn and caused them to cough and belch, but subsequent drinks assuaged the burns, stopped their coughing, and eased their belching a little; in the end both the girls finished their zellums before either Ruiz or myself had finished ours.

A little filthy-dirty urchin came in, crying: "Paper, mister? Paper?" I flung him some coppers and snatched one from him; it was the latest edition of the *Tandstikkerzeitung*. Ruiz immediately asked for the crossword puzzle, which I tore out and gave him. It contained the answer to the previous puzzle, and he sat there engrossed, trying to remember which words he had gotten right and which he had missed.

The front page was covered with scareheads about the latest depredations of the tiger. The paper stated that the huge, maddened beast was raging around the suburbs, leaping over buildings, and ripping up bridges, and slaughtering people. The suburb constabulary, so the paper stated, had tried out its submachine-guns against it, but the guns proved no more effective than BB rifles against elephants, and the

tiger had stricken down the constabulary even as it had stricken down the citizens, the just among the unjust, indiscriminately and with ferocious abandon. Great waves of curiosity-seekers, so the paper further stated, had rushed to the scene in their automobiles and had experienced a number of bad smashups en route. The chief of the Heilar-wey Police Traffic Squad, so the paper finally stated, had issued a plea to the people for heaven's sake to drive more carefully, as the number of fatal accidents this year had already trebled the number for last year, and the chief's record was in a very bad state, despite the fact that Safety Week was just beginning.

I showed the news about the tiger to Vicq Ruiz. He nodded and said: "Well, sir, I told you so. Lucky we started when we did. Even so, the tiger should have worked his way this far before the night's over. But I trust not until the night has provided all that it should provide." And he pinched Mrs. Schwackhammer and made her cackle a little sensual cackle of feigned indignation.

The girls wanted to read about the tiger, too, so I twisted the paper about where they might see it. But the news meant nothing much to them, and when I began to explain the tiger's significance Ruiz touched me with his foot and shook his head as much as to say that some things were better left unexplained.

There was also considerable news about the Mercenaries. They had brought off a coup d'état and had seized the City Arsenal and armed themselves. A source which the paper stated was unusually well informed had given it as his opinion that the Mercenaries were about to march on the City Treasury and loot it. Another source, equally well informed, had hinted that there was a secret rapprochement between the Old Folks and the Unemployeds and that if the Mercenaries tried anything of the sort they would have a battle on their hands with the other two organizations.

I read all that aloud to Ruiz.

"It sounds bad, sir, very bad," he said. And he asked: "What is a . . . um . . . let's see, now . . . twelve-letter word for 'despair'?"

"Hopelessness," I said. And I went on to read a little squib which quoted some businessman as saying the taxpayers should do a little organizing themselves and take

up arms, if necessary, and put a stop to all the foolishness that was going on in Heilar-wey. I read that to Ruiz, also.

"By gad," he says, "the man's right. Right as right can be. What does the paper say his name is?"

"A Mister Addison," I replied.

"Hmmm," says Ruiz. "Never heard of him. However, he's right. Ah . . . what would be a seven-letter word for 'silly,' sir?"

"Fatuous," I said.

"No," said Ruiz, "it won't tie in with the others."

He pondered the problem, chewing the while upon the pencil he had borrowed from the matron at the girls' apartment house. I started to read some more about the tiger, but I heard a little whimper and looked up, and there both the girls were crying.

An anxious inquiry brought out the fact that their feelings were hurt because Ruiz was all wrapped up in the damned puzzle and I was all wrapped up in the damned tiger, and the girls weren't getting a bit of attention, and people were beginning to look at them and snicker, and what the hell was the use of them being along in the first place if we preferred a newspaper to their company?

So Ruiz crumpled up the puzzle, and I threw the paper on the floor, and we ordered some more szelack, and directly the orchestra began to play, and we all got up and danced.

It was while we were dancing in our male and female attitudes over the polished restaurant floor to the strains of some sweet old Viennese waltz tune among a myriad of other dancers that the thin, worried-looking waitress brought our soup. So we stopped dancing and sat down and began to dine.

Just as we spooned up the last of our broth, the waitress came with the rest of the meal; Ruiz was so pleased and surprised at the prompt service that he gave her a drachma and brought a wan, unbelieving smile to her worn cheeks. Neither Mrs. Schmale nor Mrs. Schwackhammer would eat her young green onions for fear the things would make her breath smell, so Ruiz ate Mrs. Schwackhammer's and I ate Mrs. Schmale's. And Mrs. Schmale could eat only one of her chops, but Ruiz ate the other one; he also ate two of Mrs. Schwackhammer's boiled new red potatoes and all that was left of her butter.

We were dallying over some more szelack and waiting for our pie when she came into the restaurant. Again, after one brief glance at her, she was the sole thing I could see in all that pandemonium. She wore a long, white gauzy dress that was almost transparent, and when she stood against a glare of light I could see her slim legs outlined to her hips. Her hair was brushed back from her ears and from her brows, and her slender arms and her slim hands had on them neither gaud nor bracelet nor jewel. And on her face was still that same bewilderment.

I looked at her and, quite unconsciously but very loudly, I said: "Out of the coarse and bitter satire that has been my life, I seek one gentle, simple hour."

"The man's mad!" says Mrs. Schmale.

"He's drunk, cousin!" says Mrs. Schwackhammer.

And Ruiz hastily poured me some more szelack.

But I smiled at them apologetically and assured them that everything was all right; my subconscious had bothered me again, I told them. It was an old chronic malady I had contracted in Abalone, I explained, but it was no worse than a common cold: a trifle, a bother, an irk, and an annoyance, but after all—nothing.

Then the worried-looking waitress brought us our pie, and we all fell to eating again.

But before we were half through our pie she walked close past our booth, and all of us stopped eating and looked at her.

Mrs. Schmale laid down her knife.

"Gossip!" she cried. "Can that be she?"

"Cousin, dear," says Mrs. Schwackhammer, "it can be no other."

"Who, mam?" asked Vicq Ruiz.

"Who!" shrieked Mrs. Schwackhammer. "Why, Mister Ruiz, that's Frances Shepherd! Now you certainly know who!"

"Ummm," says Ruiz. "Uh . . . yes. Yes, of course, mam."

"She should be ashamed to come into a public place!" says Mrs. Schmale.

"She knows no shame, gossip, dear!" says Mrs. Schwackhammer.

"What is her crime?" I asked timidly.

"What!" screamed Mrs. Schmale. "You haven't heard?"

"No, mam."

"What?" screamed Mrs. Schwackhammer.

"Captain Malahide only arrived today, mam," apologized Ruiz.

"Well, you tell him, Mister Ruiz," said Mrs. Schwackhammer. "I can't bring myself to speak of such things any more."

"Ummm," says Ruiz. "Well, but I believe, mam, that you can tell it better than I. You need have no fear, mam: the captain will not be shocked."

"Well, indeed," says Mrs. Schmale, "he should be shocked! But go ahead and tell him, gossip, dear."

"Captain Malahide," says Mrs. Schwackhammer, bending over close to me and speaking thickly and dramatically: "her father was Alejandro Shepherd, the bank president who committed suicide!"

"What the hell difference does that make?" I asked.

"Oh!" gasped Mrs. Schwackhammer. And she swooned.

Vicq Ruiz and Mrs. Schmale busied themselves resuscitating her; after she came to, Ruiz took her in his arms and comforted her, and Mrs. Schmale took me to task and discomfited me.

"You must learn right now, Captain Malahide, that poor, dear Misses Schwackhammer is a girl of very nervous and high-strung temperament and cannot stand severe shocks, and I must beg of you hereafter to watch your language in front of her!"

I protested I had done nothing intentionally to shock Mrs. Schwackhammer, and I further protested that I saw nothing in the fact that Frances Shepherd's father was a suicide to arouse their hatred of her.

"Oh, Captain Malahide!" said Mrs. Schmale in a low, tragic, throbbing voice. "Can't you see, poor, dear Misses Schwackhammer had all her life's saving in the Shepherd bank, and after Shepherd killed himself there was a run on the bank, and poor, dear Misses Schwackhammer didn't get there in time and lost every penny, everything she had saved in the entire world—can you wonder, then, that the sight of that shameless, horrid, disgusting woman is enough to send her into hysterics and bring her to bed under a doctor's care?"

Well, that, of course, was quite understandable. I stood up and begged Mrs. Schwackhammer's pardon for having offended her, and I implored her to forgive the unforgiva-

ble sin I had committed. I had had no idea, I proclaimed, how terribly she had been wronged, but, now that I knew, I readily recognized how bitter she must feel; and I took her hand and kissed it and begged her all over again to forgive and forget and let bygones be bygones.

She forgave me, and we ordered some more szelack.

We sat there then, talking amicably enough, and every now and then the orchestra would blare out with the newest dance hit, and we would push aside our szelack zellums and arise upon our feet and dance. I knew nothing whatever of dancing and was forced to improvise my own steps as we went along; Mrs. Schmale was loudly raucous in her criticism of my lack of proficiency. "Follow my lead, Captain Malahide!" she kept belching. "For God's sake, follow my lead!" And when the music expired and the dance was done and we all sat down again, she went into the matter very thoroughly, saying in part:

"For God's sake, I do think it is groteskue and abzurrrd, Captain Malahide, that you should preesist in dancing with such fantastical awkwardness, my ankles are swoll to the point of torture, also, Captain Malahide, it is not considered good manners to dance here with one's great-coat on and buttoned up like you have yours!"

I hesitated to reply, for I was ashamed to confess that I had nothing on under my greatcoat except my trousers and the soiled undershirt of my heavy, winter woolen underwear, but Vicq Ruiz saved the occasion for me by saying:

"Now, mam, you mustn't be critical of the captain for a little thing like his dancing. For the captain comes from Abalone, mam; and the only dance the Abalonians do is a fertility dance like unto the dance of animals when the rutting season is in full sway: a nervous, restless, timid, half-unconscious sort of dance, full of repressed fury and anticipated excitement; a dance essentially pagan, mystically mechanical; a dance that is a welling-out of an inward urge, a silent cry, a secret petition, a muffled wail, a gesture, and a promise. 'Tis a dance, mam, that weaves through in pantomime the whole past rapture of the animal in man; a dance wherein, trembling for a brief moment of uneasy ecstasy, may be seen the shadow of the future loves of man. So you should not carp and cavil, mam, that when the captain dances he keeps his greatcoat donned and buttoned. For myself, mam, I cry: 'Well

danced, Captain Malahide! Well danced, indeed, sir!' "

Mrs. Schmale was both appeased and mollified by Ruiz's exposition and was all for dancing a great deal more. But I begged off, pleading a slight headache. I disliked to tell her that, while dancing with her, I kept thinking of Frances Shepherd.

Ruiz happened to look down on the floor about that time and saw there the newspaper which I had tossed away when the girls started to weep over our inattention to them. In an odd corner of a torn page Ruiz read a notice of what some Heilar-wey theater was showing.

"By gad," says Ruiz, "this place here is beginning to pall on all of us. I suggest, therefore, we go to a theater and see a play. Later, we can do other things. I am fed up to the gills with talking motion pictures and radio entertainment and television drama and similar forms of canned, preserved diversion. So let us go to a theater and see a legitimate play. The paper there on the floor states that a theater is still open, and I think we ought to attend before the Radio and Television Trust gets out a writ and closes it."

The girls pouted and demurred and made moues, and Ruiz had to argue with them for a long time, but finally they agreed to go, after both Ruiz and I had stipulated that if they did not like the play we would leave and go some place where a floor show was in operation.

So we left our booth, and the girls went to the ladies' rest room, and Ruiz and I went to the cashier to settle the bill. It was a big bill, and, after he paid it, I had to replenish again Ruiz's supply of drachmas. The steward came up and insisted Ruiz pay for tumblers and things the girls had broken, and the steward also claimed Mrs. Schmale had stolen six forks and concealed them in her purse, and Ruiz had to pay for them, too. But while he was paying, Ruiz told the steward and the cashier what he thought of the restaurant and the service and the clientele and the quality of food served and the orchestra; and when the girls returned and we finally left, Ruiz and the management hated each other very thoroughly, and the management told Ruiz never to come there again, and Ruiz told the management he would not come even if he were paid to do so. And then we went out and got into a taxi and drove off for the theater.

We secured a brand-new teardrop-shaped taxi that was underslung and carried its twenty-four-cylinder diesel motor in the rear end; the thing could do ninety-nine an hour just on the self-starter alone, without the ignition ever been turned on. However, it was only a single-compartment taxi, and we all had to snuggle into the back seat. But we were very cozy there and had a pleasant ride. Mrs. Schmale opened her bag to take out her lipstick and mirror and make up her face, and we hit a bump, and out of her bag popped the half-dozen forks she had stolen in the restaurant and four spoons the steward hadn't noticed.

"Tee hee, cousin! See! Souvenirs! Tee hee!"

And Mrs. Schwackhammer said: "Oh, gossip, you naughty girl! You are always doing that! But some day you are going to get caught, gossip; you just mark my words! Tee hee! Won't she get caught, Mister Ruiz?"

"It is a very bad habit," said Ruiz ambiguously.

I fiddled with the radio dial and found the *Tandstikkerzeitung* Newsflash Quarter-Hour, Inc. The announcer was pretty much agog about the tiger, which was slaughtering everyone in its path. A number of people had hidden in a subway, but the tiger smelled them there and dug them out and struck them down with huge, merciless paws as they ran screaming from the ruin. The Homeguard, which the Heilar-wey Board of Selectmen had ordered out to combat the beast, was having trouble with its antiquated, motorized artillery unit but was expected to get to the scene and endeavor to shoot the beast just as soon as the necessary repairs were made.

"They'll never shoot that tiger," says Ruiz.

Mrs. Schwackhammer said: "Why, this is the silliest thing I ever heard over the raddio! A tiger in this city! How abzurrrd!"

"It isn't really a tiger," I said.

"What is it, then?" asked Mrs. Schmale.

"Ruiz says it is the wrath of God," I told her maliciously.

The girls took offense at that, for they thought we were being blasphemous. They made us take our hands away from their bodies and our mouths from their lips; and their anger endured until we reached the theater.

And it was during that long, sullen lull in our theretofore sprightly converse that I was able to examine closely

and at great length the inflammation of the sebaceous glands in Mrs. Schwackhammer's skin. It was a truly morbid condition, characterized by small papules or pustules, and it affected principally her nose and her face. And although I was a hardened observer of cutaneous disorder and a man easily fascinated by the slightest eruption, I could not deny to myself that over me there swept a suggestion of repulsion.

We were held up momentarily by a very brutal accident on Calle Grande, where four buses, loaded with sightseers bound for the scene of the tiger's depredations, had collided with four other buses returning therefrom. All the occupants were instantly killed, but the alert police quickly cleared the traffic lanes of corpses, and we were soon again on our way. After our taxi operator shifted into super-high gear, we did the last fifty miles to the theater in ten minutes flat.

Once at the theatre, the girls went immediately to the ladies' rest room, and Ruiz and I went to the box office to purchase seats. The box-office girl was a nice-looking girl with pretty black hair and a flaring red mouth almost big enough to put a billiard ball into. Her fingernails were painted as brilliant a red as was her mouth, but they had crescents of black under their edges. She was a pleasant girl, given to much offhand sarcasm in her small talk, and Ruiz and I stood there chatting with her till the girls came back from the rest room.

Then we reluctantly stopped our converse with the pretty box-office girl, for it had reached the point where we were making improper suggestions to her, and we piled on inside with Mrs. Schmale and Mrs. Schwackhammer. The girls decided at once they couldn't stand sitting in the seats Ruiz and I had chosen, and we moved arbitrarily to ones they liked better. The ushers wanted to make trouble about it, of course, but Ruiz fixed things with a bribe. It was the smallest bribe he had had to give all that evening, and it so elated him to get off cheap for once that he bought some chocolates for the girls from a lean, lackadaisical lad there selling them.

An old newspaper lay on the floor among the cigarette butts and orange peels; Ruiz salvaged it and tore out the crossword puzzle for himself and handed the remainder to me. I began to read a long front-page editorial plea to the

Mercenaries asking them not to do irreparable harm to the city now that they had seized the Armory and armed themselves, but was only half through it when the curtain rose and the play began.

(The Narrator stands on a low thick stump. Lying sprawled about is the Chorus, and off to one side is the Semichorus. The Narrator is dressed in yellow robes; his face is palely ascetic. He speaks in the high, thin, irritating voice of a British army officer. The People, to whom the Narrator speaks, move about quietly just within earshot. Sometimes only a handful is listening; at other times a multitude is there. They wander back and forth, seemingly distrait, little interested in what the Narrator is saying.)

NARRATOR: I tell of a pagan land. As is this land, it is harried by seven sins and graced by seven virtues. Unlike this land, however, the sins there are not always deadly, nor do the virtues invaribly lead to a beatitude. I proprose to examine for you the life of one of the inhabitants of that pagan land. Take what profit you can from the meager sketch now to be set forth of his existence. The name of the land is Iunne.

CHORUS: Let us burn candles now to the plaguy spirit of obviousness. For Iunne is so clearly an anagram of ennui that it bores us even to mention it. It is no pagan land. It is right here, now.

SEMICHORUS: Let him proceed.

NARRATOR: The man's name is Stingo.

SEMICHORUS: Oh, think of a better name than that.

CHORUS: That name's good enough. On with the tale.

NARRATOR: Stingo dedicated his life to the theory ana practice of happiness. Stingo pursued happiness as a hound pursues a hare. Stingo followed the spoor of happiness far out of his little home village around the world and well-nigh back again. But whether he found it or not I cannot say. For he was an old, old man when I knew him, and the old adulterate their memories. But he had had pleasures of sorts in his time; the remembrance of some of the sins he had committed still warmed the ancient cockles of his murmuring heart. And, inspired by such warmth, he would go off into some story about the fair-haired girl of Santa Ana Rosa,

or the black-haired girl of Monte Corpus Dulce to whom for six months he had accorded gifts and serenades in order to seduce her brother.

CHORUS: But why seduce a man?

SEMICHORUS: It wasn't a man; it was a curly, blond boy.

CHORUS: Oh.

NARRATOR: Now Stingo never wanted happiness the like of which a cabbage or horse-radish knows and perhaps relishes. Happiness for Stingo meant ecstasy and nothing else. And he thought a long while on the problem, and at length he decided that in three places only did ecstasy hide: in religion, in art, and in love.

CHORUS: Is that something profound, or is that something banal?

SEMICHORUS: He would prefer you to think it profound.

NARRATOR: Stingo first tried religion. He entered the theological seminary at Regah, a student of the religion of Haan. An apt scholar, he learned quickly; and he learned all the mysteries of Haan. How Haan is the entire universe. How this world is only a fragment of Haan's kingdom. How Haan rewards his believers and chastises his unbelievers. How the ways of Haan are seemingly unjust and inscrutable, but, nevertheless, eminently reasonable, could one but view matters in the same light that Haan views them. How all Haan's purpose is writ in the stars. How the conjunction of planets foreshadows Haan's intentions. How Haan allows races to live only stated lengths of time, then destroys them and experiments with new races. How, through a long novitiate and chelaship and a thousand heart-rending trials, one may at last attain favor in the eyes of Haan and become one of his initiates in the eternal brotherhood, achieve youth eternal, be granted a bi-monthly dole of maidens, live perpetually in a garden of delight, regard amusedly the travails of this vale of tears.

And when he had learned sufficient of these secretive confusing things to be allowed to explain them guardedly and mysteriously to the common people, the Patriarch of Haan called Stingo and chose him and laid gentle hands on Stingo's thighs and shoulders, kissed his eyes and bosom, branded him over the heart with the Sign of Haan, dubbed him deacon, put into his hand the dread

Ligis of Haan, and sent him out to preach the Word. Young Stingo left the seminary full of the Word and alert for ecstasy.

CHORUS: Oh, but now we understand not that kissing and branding and that laying gentle hands on thighs and shoulders. We understand it not, but we are suspicious, and we disapprove.

SEMICHORUS: Well, let it pass.

NARRATOR: Stingo went to Monte Corpus Dulce. The people there, being Haanites but theretofore priestless, builded him a temple. They builded him a snug and gracious temple of green rocks, and inside, at the far end, they hung Haan's eternal symbol. Beneath was a small platform on which Stingo was to stand and preach the Word.

Stingo was a glib preacher. Especially eloquent was he on the subject of Haan's paradise, though perhaps even a shade more so on the subject of Haan's hell. On the more abstract points of doctrine, however—questions as to actually what benefit Haan derived from the worship of the people of Monte Corpus Dulce, or schism-provoking queries such as why Haan had not answered the last seven prayers for rain—he was neither so eloquent nor convincing. But he managed to muddle through by saying dark, mysterious, ambiguous things about the inscrutability of Haan's ways.

Now a year of this passed, and Stingo audited keenly and closely the hours of that year, and he was troublesomely alarmed to discover in his audit that he had experienced not one single second or fraction thereof of ecstasy Doubtless, considered he, that, also, could be explained by reference to Haan's inscrutable ways; but time was surging along at a most dismaying rate, and one could not be expected forever to remain idle while an inscrutable god was making up his mind to become a little more objective. Stingo tore off his smock of deaconhood, burned the brand off his breast, threw away the dread Ligis, nailed fast the door of the temple, and went down into the purlieus of Monte Corpus Dulce to wrest what ecstasy he might from the pursuit of art.

SEMICHORUS: Oh, skip art and start right in with love.

CHORUS: No. We want to hear about art first.

NARRATOR: Now, Monte Corpus Dulce had one art: that

was the making of pots. The Monte Corpus Dulce artist, he sat in his shop before his wheel, a pile of clay on his left side, a jar of oil on his right. His apprentice would pedal merrily; the wheel spun as if mad. The artist would wet his hand with oil, then, on the madly spinning wheel, he'd pop a lump of clay. With imperative fingers he'd caress the clay nicely; it reared itself fantastically into a symmetrical, whirling pot. Sometimes long and lyrically slender. Sometimes squat as the belly of a fat man. There was a tale of a Monte Corpus Dulce master potter who had him a beautiful young wife. One afternoon he unclothed her and made her to stand nude in his shop before him and his apprentice; then he made pots the shape and style and rhythm of every contour of her lovely body.

But in making these pots the artist surpassed himself. Never before had he attained such mastery. Actually, he improved on his model; the pots he made were more beautiful than was his wife. So he felt an overwhelming love for them, and he would neither sell them nor give them away. Instead, he hid them in a locked room, and hours every day he would go there to gaze and touch in adoration. And the affection he had for his wife left her and went to dwell among the pots; and he forsook her completely. She waned and withered and died broken-hearted, while he adored his pots in the locked room, wrapped in the ecstasy of the creator.

SEMICHORUS: Bosh.

CHORUS: We cannot conceive it. True, we never created anything, but, still, we cannot conceive it.

NARRATOR: That was the sort of thing Stingo was looking for in his pursuit of happiness. With intense zest, then, he embraced the art of pot-making, and, securing shop, wheel, clay, oil, and 'prentice, he set about his second novitiate. At first, he found it fun and took pride in the crude, rude, blotched receptacles his awkward hands turned out. But then the task became stale. His back ached. His head became dizzy. His hands grew sore.

At last, he gave up. He threw away the clay, poured out the oil, broke the wheel, kicked out the 'prentice. "There is," he said, "no happiness in this business except for the master. And I have neither the skill nor the patience to become a master. Thus art is eliminated

along with religion. Meanwhile, love remains. Now, surely, one needs neither divine inspiration nor years of practice to attain ecstasy in the arms of a woman."

SEMICHORUS: Skip a few paragraphs now and plunge into the heart of hearts. We are becoming interested, so skip a few paragraphs.

NARRATOR: I skip. In the tavern Stingo asked the wineseller where one might find a woman. The wineseller told him there were many places but that Black Eli's was as good as the next. There Stingo went.

The courtyard screamed with furious sunlight. In the tepid fountain long black serpents cooled their dingy coils. Under a tree, where it was shady, two mad girls with wan and desolate faces tortured a sick dingo. A little black boy staggered past, staggering under the weight of a large amphora. It slipped from his shoulder and crashed into fragments. The black boy wept. There came a white-faced man, trailing a whip. He lashed the boy savagely, relentlessly, and silently. He was Black Eli the bodymaster.

BOTH CHORUSES: Come. Come.

NARRATOR: The white-faced man saw Stingo. 'What can I do for you?"

Stingo said: "I wish a woman."

The white-faced man said: "Let us go inside."

They sat on a white bench in a whitewashed hall, and the girls walked past, then walked back again. Black Eli had many girls. Some were like ivory, some were like ebony, some like copper, and some like gold. A few were of a blue-veined whiteness.

Stingo considered. "That one," he said at last.

She took him to her room. The air was scented, and the couch was warm and soft—repellently soft—and it was covered all over with soft, warm, repellent coverings.

SEMICHORUS: But these were the lips a thousand men had kissed. This was the flesh desired and possessed by men of all nations. Fruits had been plucked, animals had been slain to feed this lovely body. Silk had been spun to drape it. Oil had been pressed to anoint it. Songs had been sung to praise it. And gold had been mined to purchase it.

NARRATOR: Yes. These were the lips a thousand men had kissed. This was the madness, the furious drunkenness

that no religion and no art could ever give. Here was all the ecstasy that was anywhere in all the world.

SEMICHORUS: Song of love. Song of lust and love. Song of life.

Rain falling on green grasses.
Pollen flying in the wind.
Fishes leaping waterfalls.
Honeysuckle diffusing perfume in the moonlight of midnight.
Spider devouring spider.
Toads croaking in pond water.
Song, oh, song of life.

(*The People come clustering about the Narrator. They trample through the protesting Choruses. They are nervous and worried.*)

PEOPLE: What does he mean? What does he mean?

SEMICHORUS: Fret yourselves not. He is only being symbolical.

PEOPLE: But did Stingo really find happiness?

CHORUS: He rented a woman.

NARRATOR: He lived in the land of Iunne. He was an old, old man when I knew him; he had been around the world and well-nigh back again. If he found happiness, I cannot say. The old adulterate their memories. The land of Iunne is a curious land.

CHORUS: Yes, yes; we know: seven sins and seven virtues, meaning little and leading nowhere.

PEOPLE: But you were to instruct us. You were to teach us.

NARRATOR: I told you an idle tale.

PEOPLE: No! No! You have jeered at faith and industry, saying happiness lies only in lust. You intend to mislead and confuse us. Such thoughts are dangerous to us and to our homes.

SEMICHORUS: Well, forget the thoughts, then, and return to your homes. Light candles and pray. Tomorrow, work harder than ever.

PEOPLE: No! We have heard evil, lying counsel, and we will refute it!

The People pick up stones and begin to fling the missiles at the Narrator and his Choruses.)

NARRATOR: Quick! Follow me! Away!

(*The stones streak through the air like comets.*)

BOTH CHORUSES: Where?

NARRATOR: Back to the land of lunne.

(*Curtain amidst wonderful confusion.*)

Mrs. Schmale thereupon stood straight up from her seat and announced to Mrs. Schwackhammer and Ruiz and myself that that was the damnedest-fool play she had ever seen in all her living days and how she had managed to sit through that much of it would always be a marvel to her and if we didn't escort her out at once she would find the way by herself.

Ruiz begged her to sit down again, telling her we had only witnessed the first act. But she absolutely refused, and finally, at the request of people around us and a number of ushers, we all got up and left. Mrs. Schwackhammer went to the ladies' rest room again, and Ruiz and myself went to the box office and talked some more to the pretty girl there, and Mrs. Schmale stood off to one side and sulked.

But pretty soon Mrs. Schwackhammer came flouncing back and saw Mrs. Schmale sulking by herself in a corner while Ruiz and I were making merry with the box-office girl. She went at once to Mrs. Schmale and comforted her and let her have a good cry on her shoulder; then both of them came over and berated Vicq Ruiz and myself at the top of their lungs and at very great length. And when they were done with that, they turned on the box-office girl and called her every name in the category of bad names and actually invented some brand-new ones. But the box-office girl was never the lass to take such treatment mildly; she flashed back at Mrs. Schmale and Mrs. Schwackhammer with some of the vilest vocables I had ever heard issue from the lips of a remarkably pretty girl. A quite thick crowd had gathered around us by that time, but Mrs. Schmale dared the girl to come out of her protecting cubbyhole and call her those names all over again. The girl did so with an alacrity which startled all of us, for Mrs. Schmale was much the more formidable-appearing of the two. Then Mrs. Schmale threw down on the sidewalk her hat and her bag and her gloves and the other things she was carrying, and she flew into the box-office girl and made to snatch out her hair by the roots. But the box-office girl had thin, hairy young arms and largish hands, and she knotted her fists as would a man and struck Mrs. Schmale

heavy blows over the ears and the eyes and upon the mouth. All the while, she kept uttering the most fearful and profane sort of war cries, and the crowd of onlookers became denser and denser. Finally, the box-office girl's youth and clean living triumphed over the rage and fury of Mrs. Schmale, and Mrs. Schmale was pounded to the ground, from where she made, for a while, very little effort to rise.

Mrs. Schwackhammer went up to the box-office girl, and she howled in her face: "You brazen bitch, you! You never could have done that if poor, dear Misses Schmale had been sober! She would have killed you, miss! She would have torn you to pieces and ripped the filthy clothes from your back!"

But some man in the mob of onlookers snickered loudly and replied: "Like hell she would. I seen that girl fight before and, drunk or sober, there don't none of them lick her."

Then the law came and arrested Mrs. Schmale, and Ruiz had to bribe the law heavily before Mrs. Schmale was released from its toils. And Ruiz also had to put up bond, there, on the spot, to satisfy the law that Mrs. Schmale would appear in court the next day and answer the charges. Then, upon advice from the law, we hailed a taxicab and got into it—all four of us—and drove away.

Both girls were in distressful states of hysteria and anger. Ruiz and I tried every way in the world to quiet them, but the only method we discovered which had any effect whatsoever was to give them drachmas every few minutes. I had to give Mrs. Schmale sixty-two drachmas before she finally ceased screaming and trying to throw herself from the cab window, and Ruiz had to give Mrs. Schwackhammer at least seventy before she stopped doing the same things.

After they quieted down somewhat, Ruiz suggested that we go up on a roof garden somewhere and have a light meal and some more szelack and dance a little and look at the stars and listen to the music; perhaps, he pointed out, the relaxation would do us all good after the horrible time we had had outside the theater.

The girls said they didn't care where we went or what we did; Ruiz and I had ruined their reputations forever, and we were liars and drunkards and beasts, and the only

reason we had picked up the girls at all was to take advantage of their innocence and wreak our lust upon them.

So we went to a building six hundred stories high which had a roof garden on top up among the cumulus clouds and we got into the high-speed elevator and went zooming to the zenith.

There we bribed doormen and waiters and maîtres d'hôtel to let us in and we found a table over by the edge of the roof; and when the food-server came to take our orders Ruiz specified lamb chops and young green onions and boiled new red potatoes and zellums of szelack for the four of us.

It was while Ruiz was pouring out the first tumblers of szelack that a filthy-dirty little urchin came by our table, crying: "Paper, mister? Paper?"

I snatched one from him and flung him back some coppers. It was the latest edition of the *Tandstikkerzeitung;* the news on the front page was very grave, indeed.

The paper stated that the Mercenaries, armed to the teeth with arms they had seized at the Armory, had stormed the City Treasury, killed the guards there, battered down the doors, and looted the coffers. Getting wind of the Mercenaries' enterprise, the Union of Old Folks and the National Federation of the Unemployed had thrown their resources together in desperation and attacked. The Old Folks attacked from the south, while the jobless attacked from the northeast. Thus, the Mercenaries were now fighting with their backs against two walls to retain possession of the moneys they had seized.

And I no sooner read all that in the paper than the radio near our table commenced to relate much the same thing: the Mercenaries, so the radio announcer stated, were weakening rapidly under the terrific onslaught of the Old Folks. The Unemployeds were badly disrupted, however, because of dissension in their own ranks as to how the money was to be shared after they had gotten it away from the Mercenaries, and even as they fought with the Old Folks against the Mercenaries, so also did the Unemployeds fight among themselves. The announcer claimed to be an eyewitness at the scene of battle; he maintained the old people were the class of the engagement so far. He rattled out a blow-by-blow account of how ten Unem-

ployeds jumped on two Mercenaries and wrested seven drachmas from them, only to have twenty Old Folks leap upon them and fight still more furiously for possession of the money.

That whole section of Heilar-wey, the announcer stated, was in an uproar; the few self-supporting citizens living there were in terror of their lives, and fugitive scores of them could be seen from time to time fleeing to more peaceable areas and carrying with them a few, scant, pitiful remnants of their belongings. Stand by, the announcer roared, for further news from the front line; and then he told how what we had just heard was brought to us through the courtesy of the Scramunvelder Sanitary Pad Company over Station Caph Teth Caph He. "The young matron is assured a drachma's worth of value for every drachma spent on Scramunvelder products!" the announcer admonished.

"Such goings-on!" commented Mrs. Schwackhammer complacently. "Dear me, the things you hear over the radio these days become worser and worser."

Mrs. Schmale was acting fidgety, and when Mrs. Schwackhammer finished her comment she whispered something in Mrs. Schwackhammer's ear. "Why, of course, gossip!" says Mrs. Schwackhammer, and they both arose. As they left the booth, Mrs. Schwackhammer bent over and whispered to Ruiz and myself: "The poor darling's kidneys are so wretchedly weak, you know, tee hee. But we'll be right back."

"That's quite all right, mam," says Ruiz. And he poured some more szelack.

When the girls were out of hearing range, I said: "Mister Ruiz, we don't seem to be making much progress."

"How do you mean, sir? How do you mean?"

"Well," I said, "we appear to be going around in circles; we approach no closer to our ultimate goal. After all, Mister Ruiz, you specified yourself that this night was to be devoted to a bacchanal."

"That's right, sir," says Ruiz.

"Well, now," I persisted, "perhaps we have conflicting notions about the word 'bacchanal.' According to my own definition, however, we still have a long way to go before we can very well claim to have indulged in a bacchanal;

but what I am getting at is that we are not getting anywhere on this blasted roof garden."

"Oh!" says Ruiz. "So that's what's bothering you. Well, sir, certainly you realize that a thing of this sort needs a build-up. One just doesn't rush headlong into it; one paves the way gradually."

"That is all well and good," I replied, "but, according to the standards of Abalone, which are the standards I know best, we have paved the way for a dozen bacchanals. And as far as a build-up is concerned, let me tell you this, Mister Ruiz: I know a fraternal organization in a house of learning near Abalone which boasts of the fact that its members will not even expend so much as a kiss on the build-up."

"That's fantastic, sir," says Ruiz. "I can't believe it."

"Nevertheless," I said, "I am sure it is a fact, for I have questioned those fellows closely any number of times, and they always tell the same story. They pick up their passion-flower in an automobile, whisk her speedily and silently to some secluded spot in the desert, then turn to her in the most abrupt manner possible and say: 'Well?' "

"Why, sir, that's barbaric!" protested Ruiz. "It's a felony, that's what it is."

"Well, I used to think so myself," I agreed. "But after all the temporizing and procrastinating we are doing tonight, I am beginning to think such technique has its advantages. Frankly, Mister Ruiz, I do not believe we are getting anywhere."

Ruiz pondered. "Well, sir," he said at last, "perhaps it is time we were bringing things to a head. When the girls come back we will see what can be done."

And then we both happened to look up, and there the girls were, just returned.

"Tee hee, cousin," says Mrs. Schmale; "did you ever see such awful, serious faces? Tee hee, I am sure something very important has been discussed. Perhaps we should better go away."

"No, no!" says Ruiz hastily. "No, no, indeed! You just sit yourselves down here again at once and listen. The captain and I have just decided that we will all be much more comfortable in the captain's fine big hotel room where there isn't such an atrocious crowd. It will be quiet there, and we can have a tub of szelack sent up."

"I'm very comfortable here, Mister Ruiz," said Mrs. Schwackhammer. "Aren't you comfortable, too, gossip?"

"Very comfortable," says Mrs. Schmale sharply.

Then our food was brought, and the girls fell grimly and silently to eating.

After a moment or two of obvious mental struggle, Ruiz sighed and gave up, and started eating, also. But my appetite had fled far away; I fell to brooding, and, to conceal it, I poked at my potatoes with my fork and stabbed at my lamb chops with my knife. And a premonition began to form in my mind—not one of violent death like Ruiz's, but one of endless futility and final frustration.

It was whilst I sat there deeply brooding, eating nothing, poking and cutting, that Mrs. Schmale hissed out sharply, ferociously, and abruptly: "Cousin, can that be she again?"

Mrs. Schwackhammer looked, as did Ruiz and myself, and, after looking, said defeatedly: "Yes, gossip, dear. That is she."

Frances Shepherd wore white slacks, and she wore a blouse of shimmering soft gray. The collar of the blouse was black, and so were the cuffs of the sleeves. She walked among the mad mob of that sky-high roof garden, and on her face there was a trace of desolation and a shadow of bewilderment.

My subconscious thereupon began to bother me again most terribly. I attempted to abate its attack by chatting merrily with the girls, punning with Vicq Ruiz, and drinking heavily of szelack. But, mauger those nostrums, my chronic malady would not depart from me, and I was aghast at the thought that there, on that sky-high roof garden, which was alive with melody and joy and hilarity, and bright with shining evening faces, besides being gay with seasonal decorations and happy with no thought of morrow, my soul-sickness should strive once again to lay hold of, and invalidate, me.

I sat there, trembling, for I knew from a multitude of past experiences in Abalone how terrible those seizures could be. And at length I could not touch my szelack, nor could I eat my young green onions when the waiter brought them. I could only sit there in dire dread checking as best I could my symptoms, one moment optimistically

reassuring myself the attack had passed, the next nauseated with the realization it was only momentarily dormant.

And just at the instant when Vicq Ruiz reached over to get my young green onions, saying that if I intended not to eat them he would, my subconscious burst out with a fury so malignant that it well-nigh prostrated me. In a voice that none but myself could hear (but, verily, I could hear naught else) it cried:

"This is your soul speaking, man. Yonder walks Frances Shepherd. Turn your head a little and regard Frances: how lithe she is, how the front of her gray blouse is agitated as her bosoms tremble to the motion of her slow walk. Think of her knee-deep in calm waters, thigh-deep among lilies, drenched in the sunlight, pale under the moon, laughing in the boughs of a tree, touching with her slim fingers the fur of some bright-eyed, gentle animal, nude before her mirror, looking with strange hunger at a forbidden fruit, yielding her lips to other lips to be kissed. Then regard yourself and your companions."

And all of a sudden I stood up, and Ruiz and Mrs. Schmale and Mrs. Schwackhammer were astonished and alarmed to hear me announce:

"The monotonous, contemptuous events which so far have characterized my life experience are not enough. Out of the coarse and bitter satire which is my life I seek one gentle, simple hour."

And the gods who work dubious guardianship over the lives of weary men alone know what I might have said or done next had not an interruption come about which jarred my subconscious back into dumb insensibility.

This interruption was in the form of two big, brutal looking men who came over to our table, ignored Ruiz and myself completely, and asked the girls to dance with them. The girls accepted and, in doing so, aped the men by also ignoring Ruiz and me.

Off they went, dancing. I asked Ruiz if such were custom in Heilar-wey.

"Sir," he says, "it's neither custom nor good manners. But it happens at every dance every night. We will overlook it for the nonce, sir, and, provided those brutes bring back the girls directly the dance is done, we will overlook it for good. But, sir, if they take the girls to their own table or to the bar to buy them drinks, or give any

other indication that they intend to make fools of us, then, sir, we shall be compelled to go to them and fight."

What would be our grounds for fighting, I asked.

"Why, our honor, sir!" says Ruiz. "That's self evident."

I said I felt not at all like fighting for my honor that night; I said if the two brutes took the girls off our hands I would consider we owed them a debt of gratitude.

"By gad, sir!" says Ruiz; "now, that's a strange attitude to take! And what would we do the balance of the night?"

Maybe we could get some more girls, I suggested.

But Ruiz wouldn't hear of such a thing. We would have to fight, he insisted; and, after ordering more szelack, he spent the next few minutes instructing me in the art of landing telling blows with one's fists.

He became engrossed in the subject, going into it with a great wealth of detail. After he finally finished, we looked around and saw that the dance had stopped, and we also saw the girls and the two brutes at the bar. The larger brute was fondling Mrs. Schmale; the smaller brute was kissing Mrs. Schwackhammer.

"Sir," says Ruiz, "we shall have to fight."

I said: "Oh, hell, I'm not going to fight over those two old bladders." And I kept my seat while he stood up.

"Well, by gad, sir, I shall certainly fight!" declared Ruiz. "My honor is at stake. Did you see him kiss her? Did you see her smirk? Yes, sir, I shall fight, and very promptly, too! By gad, but I'm angry. Now, come along, sir! Your honor has been besmirched as much as mine."

"To hell with it," I said.

Ruiz studied for a moment. "Very well, sir," he replied. "I'll argue with no man about his honor, which is his own personal affair. Do not fight if you do not choose. However, come along as my second; you can do that much, can you not?"

So I went along as his second; and first we went to the men's rest room to get him into shape for the battle. He took out his false teeth and had me put them in my pocket, for he was afraid an unparried blow might crack the plates. Then he let down his pants, and we tightened his truss so there would be no danger of his hernia slipping loose during a moment of agitated footwork. For protection to his hands when he would be striking heavy blows, he borrowed my old kid gloves which had the fingers out

and most of the palms worn away. Finally, he handed me his glasses so that they would not be damaged. Then, squinting his eyes and blinking, for he could not see very well without the lenses, he led the way to the bar and started the fight.

He walked up to the lesser brute—the one who had kissed Mrs. Schwackhammer—and he said: "See here, Mister Sonofabitch, what do you mean, trying to steal my girl?"

The lesser brute said: "When you call me that, smile!"

But Ruiz didn't smile, and the fight began.

It didn't last long. Ruiz was viciously beaten. As he lay there on the dance floor, his opponent standing over him, stirring him with his foot, and daring him to get up and fight it out, I remembered Mrs. Schwackhammer's comment when the box-office girl defeated Mrs. Schmale, and I said: "You never could have done it, brother, if Mister Ruiz had been sober."

But the larger brute sneered: "Oh, the hell he couldn't!" And then the two of them took the two girls, and they went away, laughing.

I helped Ruiz up.

"By gad, sir," he says, "I am afraid I have had the hell beaten out of me."

"It's not quite that bad," I comforted.

"Yes, sir, it is," insisted Ruiz. "But tell me now: did I not land at least one telling blow on that man?"

I lied whitely and told him he had landed four telling blows to my exact count. That cheered him immensely; he allowed me to help him back to the men's rest room, where we might repair what was repairable of the damage.

On the way, I asked him if he felt his honor had been satisfied.

"Yes, sir," he said. "I do. My honor is well satisfied, sir. I am confident that for the remainder of the night it will demand no more such heroic gestures and sacrifices from my flesh."

In the peace and quiet of the toilet, we put his plates back into his mouth, and he only complained a little of the pain they caused his mashed front gums. Then I daubed his face with a damp paper towel and blotted up most of the blood and dirt. We let his pants down again and

reëxamined his hernia. It seemed to be in good shape, so we loosened his truss a little that he might be more comfortable when sitting down. He gave me back my gloves, and I returned his glasses; then, except for his black eyes and split lips, one would never have known he had been fighting at all.

We returned to our table and ordered more szelack, for not to do so, Ruiz said, would be to lose face in the eyes of the crowd. I told Ruiz I thought we were well rid of the girls, all things considered.

"Sir," he replied, "I do not wish to discuss them. This is the first time in my life such a thing ever happened to me, and, although I attacked Misses Schwackhammer's new escort, my rage was really directed at herself. However, that rage has subsided entirely, and all I feel now is profound contempt. I presume, sir, that this has been a unique experience for you, also."

I told him that it was far from being unique to me. I said it was a thrice-told tale as far as I was concerned; and I complained that the Author who wrote the plot for my days seemed quite content to repeat Himself every so often when the plot demanded that I take a girl to a place where other predatory men were roaming about. And I related to Ruiz a typical instance which happened back in Abalone, where, with my last dollar,* I had taken a girl to a lowly joint to feed her—she having previously complained of being hungry—and no sooner had she gotten through with her pie than she excused herself and went up to the counter and started talking with another man, and a minute later slipped off with him; and the last I saw was her getting into his little old automobile, and he had his hands under her armpits helping her in and feeling her at the same time, and the smile on her lips was not a smile of shame at all but rather one of gleeful acquiescence.

I ended by saying to Ruiz that such experiences invariably had the effect of driving me to drink.

"Yes, sir," says Ruiz, "you are right: such experiences will do it every time. There is consolation in the Bottle, sir; I will never deny it." And he emphasized his point by ordering two more big zellums of szelack.

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*The standard coin in the devaluated currency of Abalone.

We consoled ourselves in silence for a while; then Ruiz banged his fists on the table and cried: "Now, drink up, sir! There's not a moment to be lost!"

I demanded, however, a clear exposition of his plans before I drank up.

"Sir," he says, "we shall go to a House! We should have done it before, instead of wasting our time with Schmale and Schwackhammer. For in a House one gets what one pays for; it is a cut-and-dried business proposition, as simple as buying fresh meat in a butcher shop. And it is eminently satisfactory, too. So drink up, sir, and come along."

I did so. I drained my zellum to the dregs. And we left the sky-high roof garden high among the cumulus clouds and descended to earth in the elevator and went out of the great, gross building; and once again we were on the streets of Heilar-wey.

Lights flashed in the sky, and airplanes sped through the beams of light. Calle Grande was a hideous inferno of light, and each light in that inferno advertised something which was for sale and which carried a price. From every open window a radio could be heard screaming. The roar of the traffic in the high-speed lanes was terrific. Whistles and grinding noises blatted against the eardrums. Riflefire could be heard from far off. That, Ruiz said, would probably be the Mercenaries defending themselves in the City Treasury against the mass attack of the Old Folks and the Unemployeds.

"Sir," suggested Ruiz, "let us walk to the House. One feels like stretching one's legs after so much taxi-riding and sitting around. I am sure there must be a House close around here, anyhow. This particular district is well supplied with them on account of the big university over yonder on the far side of the street."

So we set out walking along Calle Grande through a maelstrom of light and a chaos of noise. After a bit, we passed a tremendous building which was set back quite some way from the street and had a steel wall all around it. I asked Ruiz what it was.

"That, sir," he says, "is the Leopold Austriol Foundation. Leopold Austriol is a man one hundred seventy-seven years old; he is the richest man in Floreat Go-Lee; that

building there, the Leopold Austriol Foundation, is a monument to his fear."

What was he afraid of, I asked.

"Sir," says Ruiz, "he is afraid of death."

I asked if he could escape death even in such a tremendous building.

"By gad, sir, he's doing it!" says Ruiz. "When the fear first came on him, he had that building erected and he had it outfitted with every subtle tool and device and compound and tincture known to the surgical and medical professions, and he had it manned with every outstanding member of those professions, and he went into it and ordered those he had hired to keep him alive. And, by gad, they have done so!"

"How long has he been there?" I asked.

"Seventy-nine years," says Ruiz. "The doctors have constructed a sort of glass case with tubes leading into it and out of it, and they have old Leopold enclosed in that case, and nothing can get into it without their scrutiny and sanction, nor can anything leave it, not even old Leopold's life-spark, without their permission. He has been in that case more than seven decades now, and he is confident of his own particular immortality, and so are the doctors who tend him. Those doctors are cunning devils—positive magicians with their metabolic machines. They feed old Leopold through one tube, drain him through a second, aerate him through a third. They keep a perpetual X-ray turned on him, and one of them is perpetually on watch for the first sign of worn tissue. When they note any, they operate on him in his glass case and substitute new tissue for what he has worn out. One day a week, the public is allowed in there to inspect the old man, and a while back I availed myself of the privilege. He hardly resembles a human being any more, appearing, instead, to be a sort of huge rolled-up beef steak with all manner of gauges and thermostats and pipes stuck into it. But he's undoubtedly alive. There's no question about it."

"Why should the doctors take so much trouble with him?" I asked.

"Gad, sir," says Ruiz. "Why, it's on account of his money, of course. You don't think a Heilar-wey doctor would fool with him for a minute if he had no money, do you? But he has matters arranged so that as long as they

keep him alive they are paid unbelievably huge salaries and get bonuses, also. The moment he dies, though, all the salaries and bonuses automatically stop, and every cent of his fortune is to be used for constructing a magnificent tomb to perpetuate his name forever."

"Well," I said, "even so. But with all the facilities the Foundation must have, I should think the doctors there might do something on the side for suffering humanity."

"Oh, they have, sir!" says Ruiz. "There can be no question about it. Only last year, for instance, they performed the outstanding medical feat of the age and resurrected a man from the dead."

"How long had he been dead?" I asked skeptically.

"He had been dead ten years," replied Ruiz, "and the resurrection was genuine in every respect. He had been caught in a glacier and frozen to death, and everybody knew about it, for you could see the man lying in the clear ice near the thing's end a few years after he had fallen into a crevasse where no one could rescue him. It was the great Lorenchian Glacier in the Munwale Mountains near the high meadows where the Chiam Mings have their winter home.

"After he moved far enough down with the ice so that you could see him, people wanted to dig him out and give a decent burial. But the doctors at the Austriol Foundation said to let him stay there a while till they got their technique perfected and then they would have a try at bringing him back to life. So a law was passed making it a felony for anyone to disturb him, and the doctors busied themselves perfecting their technique. Finally, they did perfect it; then came the great day. They dug him free and had at him. They thawed him out, shot him full of a powerful stimulant, massaged his heart with an apparatus designed for that one purpose, gave him artificial respiration, did a number of other things to him; and presently he was alive again—as much so as you or I."

"Is he still alive?" I asked.

"No, sir, he isn't," said Ruiz. "He was killed in an automobile accident a few weeks after his resurrection, and the accident cut him into so many pieces that the doctors deemed it impractical to attempt to resurrect him a second time. But he said some mighty terrible things while he was alive."

"What?" I asked.

"Well, sir," says Ruiz, "he had been dead ten years, you know, so he was, beyond any question, an authority on the subject of death. And one of the first things he started saying was that there was no Heaven and there was no Hell: there was only a dreamless sleep. You can imagine, sir, how the clergy of Heilar-wey acted when he started saying that. It had a bad effect on people, too. Suicide assumed the proportions of an epidemic; for some folks of the introvert type who had staked their all on the hope of Paradise as a reward for their sufferings in this world, melancholia became the order of the day. No one could help but feel depressed. And so the clergymen banded together and formed a powerful lobby and had a law passed making it a felony for the man to say anything further on the subject, particularly over the radio, and also making it a felony for any publication to make any mention of his testimony. That helped some, but, of course, there was no stopping people talking about it in private. Anyhow, everyone was considerably relieved when he was killed the second time. And since then there has been a lot of agitation for a law that would forbid the medical profession ever to practice resurrection again."

"Well," I said, "now, about this tiger, Mister Ruiz, which is tearing Heilar-wey to pieces: I find a sort of conflict there—the tiger being the wrath of God and all."

"A superficial conflict only, sir," says Ruiz. And then, to change the subject, he said: "A House should be somewhere in this neighborhood. Let us just ask this policeman. He will know if anyone does."

I suggested that one would hardly ask a policeman for such directions.

But Ruiz insisted it was quite all right. The police of Heilar-wey were noted for their courtesy, he claimed.

So we went over to the policeman and asked him.

"Well, boys," says the officer, "Madam Lily's place is just around the corner on the twenty-fourth floor. She has the whole floor. Just tell the old bat you got the address from Mike. Lily's place is one of the finest in town."

That was practically the first courteous treatment I had received from a stranger during my visit in Heilar-wey, and I spoke up and told the officer so. He was visibly gratified and smiled with a charming modesty. I gave him

a ten-drachma bill, and I asked him what the girls at Madam Lily's were like.

"Lad," says the officer, "some are like ivory, some are like ebony, some like copper, and some like gold. And some, too, are of a blue-veined whiteness."

"Really?" said Ruiz. "Then come along, Captain Malahide. There's not a moment to be lost."

We went just around the corner and found an elevator and went to the twenty-fourth floor. In a cozy little reception room there, we found Madam Lily and told her we had been directed there by Mike.

"Ah, yes," said Lily. And she asked us to be seated on the divan, and she called: "Come in, girls!"

We sat on the divan as on a reviewing stand, and the girls paraded for us. Their parade was very contemptuous, too, after they noticed Ruiz's black eyes and my shabby old greatcoat.

Ruiz chose a small fat one, and I chose a slender one. They started to take us to different rooms. But Ruiz said:

"No, no, girls. Captain Malahide and myself think we first should have some sort of party—the better to get acquainted, you know. Let us all go to one room first and have some food and some szelack sent up. We can sit there quietly with the radio turned off and relax and have a pleasant hour of chatting and what not before we do anything else."

The girls said they didn't care, but we would have to pay first. So we paid, and then we went to a nice cozy room. Ruiz and the small, fat one sat together in a big overstuffed chair, and the thin one and I lolled on the bed. A colored man brought up some szelack and said he would fetch the lamb chops and young green onions in just a little bit. We drank in silence. That is, Ruiz and I drank; the girls refused to touch the stuff. They seemed bored.

The silence got on Ruiz's nerves; he began to fidget. He saw a magazine on the dresser and picked it up and glanced through it.

I asked the thin girl if she did much reading. She said: "No, not a hell of a lot."

Ruiz gave a grunt and waved the magazine at me. "By gad, sir!" he cried: "here's a short story by a friend of mine. Man named Stilliborne. I knew he was in the writing game, but the last I saw of him, he was having his

usual trouble getting his stuff accepted. This, for all I know, may be his maiden appearance in print."

"I know a guy that writes for the newspapers," said the fat girl.

"Gad, miss," said Ruiz, "any jackass can write for newspapers. But it takes an artist of words to write as this fellow does. Suppose I read this story of his aloud, Captain Malahide? I am sure the girls will enjoy it. The man is trenchant and he is racy, too. You cannot help but enjoy it."

The girls said for him to go ahead and read; they didn't care. I told him to go ahead, also.

So Ruiz adjusted his glasses, shuffled the magazine back and forth till he found the right focus, followed the lines with one finger so as not to lose his place, and read away in an uncertain and unimpassioned voice.

"There was a nigger in the woodpile. A little nigger in a big woodpile. The woodpile was made of sticks of stovewood cut from fallen elm trees. It was cold in the woodpile. Cold and uncomfortable. Nothing was there to eat in the woodpile. Roaches slept under slabs of bark. Frosty lizards hibernated there. Rain seeped through the woodpile. Snow piled on top of it. As the winter waxed, the woodpile waned. Biscuits it cooked in the oven of the goodwife. Biscuits and pies and jelly doughnuts and pig's knuckles and kraut and baked potatoes. Who would not love the soup cooked with the wood of that woodpile? Who would not love to toast and heat his flesh before the fire fed with the sticks of that woodpile? Who would not love to heat his flesh before the hearth and fondle his honey there, her dreaming eyes bright from the flare of the blaze of the sticks from the woodpile? And yet the nigger in the woodpile. Shivering there. Fretful there. Hungry there. Uncomfortable and wanting revenge. List, list, oh, list to a tale of the lonesome, latter years, of a tale of the catch to everything. . . ."

Ruiz stopped and reverently looked up from his reading as might a skilled pianist look up in the midst of rendering the "Butterfly Etude."

"Gad, sir," he says; "and what a princely way to commence a story!"

Then he noticed that his girl—the fat one—was asleep, and my girl—the thin one—had turned on the radio very

low and was listening to it with one ear close to the screen grid while with a finger she shut out from her other ear the sound of his reading. Ruiz hurled the magazine across the room and broke an empty fish globe.

"Karra skulta meetah rakkah!" he cursed in Verskamite at the top of his lungs. "Sweet Gott in hell! Now, why didn't you tell me I was boring you and putting you to sleep? By gad, I'm going out and sell myself as an opiate! At last, I have found a purpose for my being on this world!"

The girls sat up, yawning and stretching.

"Whassa matter?" they asked.

"Matter?" yelled Ruiz. "Matter enough, thank you! Now I know what it is to cast pearls before swine!"

The girls took offense at that remark very quickly. Both of them at the same time commenced to curse Ruiz, choosing for the occasion all the poignantly bitter nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs in the profane lexicon of Heilar-wey harlotry. It was a brilliant and impressive performance; I lay on the bed, fascinated.

The thin girl—mine—was the more formidable virtuoso of the two, and as her rhetoric attained Elizabethan proportions, I felt a singularly unclean desire for her come over me, and I flung my arms about her, my lips avid of her spouting mouth. But she kept her mouth free and kept on with her tirade, and I contented myself with caressing the back of her neck with my lips, nearly swooning the while in a brand-new sort of ecstasy.

Ruiz attempted to match words with the girls, but he was nowhere near their equal either in volume or trenchancy: in their own way they defeated him as badly as had the lesser brute on the roof garden.

Ruiz gave up. He arose and hunched his shoulders about in his greatcoat.

"My evening has been spoiled," he said quietly. "This is the second time tonight it has been spoiled. I do not like it, but I shall not protest further. Captain Malahide, I shall go now. You may remain or come with me—just as you please."

Well, in my heart I wanted to stay. Suddenly, that thin girl had become very dear to me—I cannot deny it. But he looked so forlorn and beaten as he stood there giving me my choice that I could not bear to. His raggedy greatcoat hung sloppily about him; his toes jutted uncomfortably

from his old button shoes; his eyes and mouth were pitifully swollen: no, I couldn't let him down just then in his miserable moment of defeat.

I said: "I'll come along."

And I pushed the thin girl away and got up from the bed, and we went down the elevator and out again into the roaring night.

I suggested another Bottle—the great consoler.

"Yes, sir," says Ruiz. "You are right."

We found a small and modest groggery, and we took a table there spread with a dirty cloth and ordered two big zellums of szelack. On the wall was a sign which said:

NO ONE UNDER TWENTY-ONE
ARE ALLOWED HERE

We sat there without speaking, sipping, merely sipping at our zellums of szelack. Black thoughts of despair and hopelessness burgeoned and waxed in our desolated minds. We emptied our tumblers and listlessly refilled them. I raised mine bubbling to the brim and announced: "Thus I hail the moment flying: 'Ah, still delay, thou art so fair!' "

"Skoal," says Vicq Ruiz.

We were again silent for a while after that, and then I asked: "Do you still have your premonition?"

"Yes, sir," says Ruiz. "I do."

"I have a feeling," I said, "that, despite the various forms of joy we have encountered on our bacchanal, you, nevertheless, will not, when the moment comes, deem it warranted to leave the world with a glad affirmation of life issuing from your lips."

"No, sir," says Ruiz, "I see very clearly now that I cannot die singing paeans in praise of living. What I no doubt shall do is leave the world with an oath and an imprecation. I must cull over my bitterest sayings shortly and choose the most biting for my final words. You are a good sneerer, Captain Malahide. Think up something particularly nasty for me to say."

I saw he was very serious, so I tried to cheer him. I said:

"But you do not know for sure that your premonition is authentic; all the evidence so far points to the contrary. At

any rate, you surely have a number of hours left. You may find your glorious moment among them. You should not judge the future by the immediate miserable past; you should not crush down upon your brow a crown of frustration."

"Sir," says Ruiz, "I will confess to you now that I do not even know what to look for in my search for a glorious moment. I conceive that I am lost, sir, even as you yourself are lost. For we are members of a lost generation, and we are more miserably lost than were the Israelite children; there are no ravens to feed us. I suggest that Nature in a mysterious, weird way has decreed us to be lost. Desolately, we strike back at her—best as we are able—with petty sins and petty transgressions. We are as stepped-upon worms which writhe and try feebly to bite something, and end only by biting themselves."

As he was speaking, my subconscious raised before me a tenuous vision of Frances Shepherd. Somehow that vision warmed and cheered me mightily, for I raised my glass and said:

"I am an optimist. I think there is beauty in life and in the world. I think that some of it—a bountiful lot of it—has been designed, numbered, reserved, and set aside for me. I think that sometime I shall find it."

"Sir," says Ruiz, "you can well afford to be an optimist. You have no premonition to plague you. Your life expectancy is still unmarred."

I took another long pull at my szelack, and again I saw the wondrous vision of Frances.

"Sun, moon, and stars," I announced to Ruiz, "shine about me with their blessed light. And about one other, too, they also shine. And I shall find her, and I shall know how to sing to her, and the flatulence of the past years will drift away and be forgotten as I sink my weary, triumphant head upon her fair young breasts and attain there the comfort and the rest and the sweetness that has for overlong eluded me."

Ruiz started to make some comment or other on that announcement, but the radio, which the barkeep kept fiddling with, burst in with a roar and drowned him out. It was a roving radio reporter speaking, bringing us the latest news of the day.

The reporter said he and his microphone were down in

the Thirty-fifth Residential and Small Business District, covering the tiger excitement on a program sponsored by the Plotzgluder Pressed Cheese Company, and, although he had not actually seen the tiger, plenty of other people around there had, and he and his microphone were right smack in the heart of a section where the tiger had torn down most of the buildings and slain a great quantity of people, and now we would hear Jonas Randolf, a carpenter, who had been an eyewitness to the catastrophe but who had escaped the tiger by hiding in a sewer till the brute was gone.

"Biggest animal ever I see in my life," mumbled Jonas Randolf. "I seen it, and then I run. Its eyes was jest like headlights on a ortermobile. It roared like hell . . . er . . . I beg yer pardon, mister. That jest kinda slipped out. It ritch up and grob a housetop and rip it off. Ever' body run. But it didn't do 'em no good, fer the animal kilt 'em all. I'm a-gettin' out a' here myself."

"Thank you, Mister Randolf, thank you!" cried the radio reporter. "Thank you for your vivid description! And Mister Randolf is right, too, good people of the radio audience! From here where we have the sound truck parked we can easily see the houses which the tiger attacked, and, I tell you, it looks like a hurricane struck them! People are gathering up their belongings and fleeing from this section of the town! The Homeguard is supposed to arrive here any minute to stop the looting and guard property until the tiger is repulsed! . . . Here comes a big truck now, folks! . . . I can see its headlights coming down Calle Grande! . . . I can hear its motor rumble! . . . Probably it's the Homeguard already! . . . Then the folks here can feel safe for a while! . . . Um, wait, by God! . . . That's not a truck, either! . . . The lights are too damn big! . . . I wonder what the hell it is! . . . Mister Randolf! Wait, Mister Randolf! . . . Oh, my God! It's the tiger! . . . Oh, Jesus! . . ."

And over the radio we heard an awful roar, and then we heard nothing else.

Vicq Ruiz ordered two more big zellums of szelack.

"Sir," he said, "I propose to sit here and drink till the tiger comes. Flight strikes me as being futile and unreasonable."

"Maybe he won't come this far," I said. "We must be a long way from the Thirty-fifth Residential and Small Business District."

"We are," said Ruiz. "But what is distance to the wrath of God?"

I could think of no suitable reply.

The door of the groggery opened abruptly then, and in came a stern-looking, poorly dressed man. He took Ruiz and me in at a glance and demanded: "Both of you are of the Unemployed, aren't you?"

"Sir," says Ruiz, "we do not have jobs, if that is what you mean."

"Of course, that's what I mean!" cried the man. "Now, by God, both you fellows get down to Charity Hall at once and report to Commandant Bleeck there. The Mercenaries turned loose a machine gun on us a while back and damned near wiped out a whole phalanx, and we need reinforcements bad. You ought to be horsewhipped, both of you, sitting here swilling szelack when your comrades are down in the trenches by the City Treasury dying! Get up and go at once!"

"Comrades!" says Ruiz. "Do you mean to insinuate, sir, that the National Federation of the Unemployed has members whom we call comrades? Now, by gad, sir, that's an insult! Get it out of your head immediately that we are allied in any way, shape, or form with your insufferable cause!"

The stern-faced man was obviously astounded. He looked again at our clothing, and he asked: "Do you mean you do not carry our Card?"

"No, sir, by gad, we do not carry your card!" says Ruiz.

"You're against us, then!" cried the man threateningly.

"Sir," says Ruiz, "we are neither against you nor against your enemies. We are the two most neutral men in Heilarwey, and we care positively nothing about absolutely anything. I suppose you and your friends are still squabbling with the Old Folks and the Mercenaries over the money in the City Treasury."

"You're damned right we are!" said the stern-faced man. "And it's no squabble, either, four-eyes! It's war to the death! We are fighting for what is due us; we are fighting for a square deal; we are fighting for the right to live! And

let me tell you something, you lousy, drunken rat! Those that aren't with us are against us, and we won't forget them. You just think you're neutral. But this time there's no such thing as neutrality. We've lost a little ground tonight, but, by God, we'll get it all back, and then we'll reward those who stood with us and we'll take care of those who opposed us. Neutrals! I never heard such damned nonsense!"

And the stern-faced, poorly dressed Unemployed went storming out into the night.

But it seemed as if the door had barely banged closed when it snapped open again, and another man came striding in. He was dressed in a sort of military uniform, and he wasted no time at all, for as soon as he saw us he commenced to shout.

"What the hell do you two men mean, sitting here drinking on a night like this! Get to your barrack at once and report for duty! My God, don't you know the Old Folks and the Unemployeds have us with our backs to the wall! Get to the barrack at once and tell the Quartermaster to issue you guns, or I'll have you court-martialed and shot!"

"Sir," says Ruiz, "go home and petition your Maker never again to allow you to appear in the guise of such a fool. We do not have the honor to belong to your splendid organization of Mercenaries."

"What?" screamed the military man. "You mean you're not ex-service men?"

"No, sir," says Ruiz, "we are not."

The military man reached for his pistol and bayonet. "Ah! A couple of Unemployeds, heh? Spies, probably. Sneaking around making trouble."

"By gad," says Ruiz, "we're not Unemployeds, either, Mister Sergeant-Colonel-Field Marshal!" And he showed the military man a handful of drachmas.

"Ever see an Unemployed carry such stuff as that?" Ruiz shouted.

The military man was nonplussed by the sight of the money; it more or less convinced him that we were not Unemployeds, but he was still suspicious, and he threatened us with his pistol, demanding to know whose side we were on.

"Sir," says Ruiz, "it may interest you to know that we are on nobody's side. We are neither for you nor for your enemies. We are neutrals, and our only prayer is that you may find your own pet hell just as we have found ours."

The military man put away his pistol reluctantly. But he gave us a lecture before he left. "There's something damned queer about you two bastards," he submitted. "I'm advising you to be very careful about what you do from now on. There's no such thing as a neutral in Heilar-wey any longer. You've got to take sides. D'you hear me? You've goddam well got to take sides! You fellows better watch out what you do and where you go. I'm going to detail some men on guard against you." And he went storming out.

But again it seemed that the groggery door barely banged shut when it flew open again: this time an angry appearing old woman came in. She marched up to us, and she shook her finger in our faces, and she screeched:

"What the devil do you men mean, sitting here guzzling szelack when you know the Mercenaries and the Unemployeds are about to slaughter us? Why don't you go at once to our trenches near the Treasury and ask our great leader to assign you posts at the barricades? Oh, you men! You filthy, beastly men! Every woman in our society is down there fighting her heart out, but you sit here drinking! Oh, God, I tell you, if our Cause is won tonight it will be because the noble women were not afraid to sacrifice themselves, even though the miserable men were!"

"Well spoken, madam," says Ruiz. "And I do not doubt that your words are pregnant with truth. But we do not belong to the Society of Old Folks, and we regret we cannot go to the Treasury and help you fight for the money your hearts so much desire."

That quieted the old girl only for a fraction of a moment. "Ah hah!" she said passionately. "You're spies for the Mercenaries, then! I might have known it!"

"Madam," says Ruiz, "we are not Mercenaries. Do we look like soldiers?"

The old lady stared at us; obviously, we didn't. "I have it!" she hissed. "You're Unemployeds! Vile devils! Oh, God, why didn't I bring my gun!"

Ruiz pulled out some drachmas and showed them to her and cured her of the idea we belonged with the jobless. But she still wasn't satisfied. She walked all around us, staring at us cunningly. Suddenly, she backed away from us as if we were snow-white lepers, and she said in an awful, boding whisper: "Now I know who you are! I can tell it just as plain! But we hate you, too! The curse of God be upon you!" And she went clucking and hackling and spitting out into the night.

"What do you think she thinks we are?" I asked Ruiz.

"Sir," he says, "I do not have a single idea on the subject."

Then we sat there sipping and quietly brooding deep within ourselves. I remember that I pondered gloomily upon the march of the years and the beat of the hours, and I pondered also on the strange paths a man's feet perpetually were treading. But a sound disturbed our cogitations; we looked up. Approaching us from the bar was the groggery's fat barkeep. As against the distrust and suspicion his eyes had entertained when first we entered his booze den, a warm and friendly look now radiated therefrom. He came to us, and he took one of each of our hands in one of his own, and he pressed them to his bosom, and he cried: "Comrades! Oh, comrades!"

Vicq Ruiz snatched away his hand, and so did I, and Ruiz demanded: "Sir, what does this mean?"

"Oh, comrade," cried the joyous groggery barkeep, "it means that at last I have recognized you! When you entered my establishment, I knew you were not of the ordinary run of men, but I could not place you. I kept looking at you and wondering about you, but it took the last words of that despicable old woman from the Society of Old Folks to make me realize who you truly were."

"Sir," says Ruiz, "whatever are you talking about?"

"Oh, you slyest of dear devils!" beamed the barkeep. "I do not blame you for being fearful of giving away your identity; but, rest assured, both of you, your secret is safe with me."

"Sir," says Ruiz, "I demand a direct answer. Whom do you take us to be? Speak up, sir, speak up!"

"Hah, hah, hah!" giggled the rapturous barkeep. "Oh, you rogues, you! Whom do I take you to be, indeed! Why,

comrades, despite your subtle disguises, despite your cunning subterfuges of idiom and elan, I still recognize you. You are members of that great but sadly disorganized fraternity of Self-respecting, Self-supporting, Taxpaying Citizens!"

"What!" screamed Ruiz.

"Yes!" cried the ecstatic barkeep. "You are not Unemployeds, you are not Mercenaries, you are not Old Folks: therefore, you must be Self-respecting, Self-supporting, Taxpaying Citizens! The conclusion is indisputable! Comrades, oh, my comrades! Come! There's not a moment to be lost!"

And he ran to a rear door of his groggery and beckoned to us imperiously.

"Mister Ruiz," I asked, "are we what that man claims we are?"

"By gad, sir," replied Ruiz, "it's a ghastly thing to admit, but I do believe so. We are self-respecting after a fashion. We are self-supporting in a manner of speaking. And every time we spend a drachma, two-thirds of it goes for taxes. Now, let me warn you, sir, to tread gently hereafter and to speak very circumspectly. This situation is fraught with tenseness and is apt to get us into a horrid mess of serious trouble. Meanwhile, I think it best that we follow the barkeep and find out what the man is up to. We cannot fight back until we know what our adversary is to be. Come along, sir."

And thus admonishing me, he signaled to me to arise, and we went to the rear door after the groggery barkeep.

I cannot speak for Vicq Ruiz, but I know that as for myself I went through that door expecting anything, for I had a queer feeling that I was about to come face to face with perhaps the major crisis of my life. And as I followed Ruiz and the groggery barkeep I kept fingering nervously the third button of my greatcoat and, nervously, also, I pulled at my lower lip.

The door opened into a small room. Tables and chairs and drinks were there, and men sat at the tables in the chairs and drank the drinks, talking all the while in low, earnest tones of voice. Not many men were there, and all of them were well-dressed. I took but one look at their reliant, chaste, proud faces and then I knew that, one and

all, they were self-supporting citizens. But they regarded Ruiz and me with something akin to genuine alarm.

But the barkeep quickly allayed their fears. "Comrades," he said joyfully, "here are two more of us. They are in disguise, for already tonight their lives have been endangered several times. But they seek only to serve with us, ready to lay down their lives for our glorious Cause."

"Sir," protested Ruiz, "you proceed entirely too fast. We are ready to do nothing of the sort."

This protestation caused a visible stir among the citizens; several of them half arose threateningly from their seats. And from the back of the room came bitter murmurs:

"Why, they're just a couple of bums!"

"Certainly! Hoboes, if I ever saw one!"

"Probably thieves, to boot!"

"Throw 'em out!"

The barkeep was momentarily at a loss. But Vicq Ruiz wasn't.

"By gad, gentlemen," says Ruiz, "I'll have all of you know right now, at once, that whatever Captain Malahide and myself may be, we certainly are not bums!"

And Ruiz reached into a pocket and took out the receipted bills he had received that morning from the Heilar-wey Merchants Credit Clearing House, and he held them aloft where all could see.

"Now, gentlemen," yells Ruiz, "each of you shall tell me at your leisure whether any bums of your acquaintance carry such credentials as these! By gad, yes!"

The sight of all those paid, receipted bills wrought an immediate and unparalleled change in the citizens. One of the men close to us begged Ruiz for the privilege of examining them. He looked them over hastily but thoroughly, and he cried in a startled voice: "My God, gentlemen, every damned one of them is marked 'Paid in Full,' and the date is today!"

After that announcement the citizens could not do enough to make amends for doubting us and for the aspersions they had cast at us. They moved up chairs for us to sit in; they poured us brimming drinks; they introduced us to their chairman, Mr. Addison. And the groggery barkeep walked around with a gay and happy smile

and kept saying smugly to citizens here and there: "I told you they were genuine."

Presently, after a conference in a corner with several of the more important-looking citizens, Mr. Addison, the chairman, rapped for order, and everyone stopped talking. Mr. Addison said:

"Mister Ruiz, I need not tell you how serious this night has proved to us. I need not tell you how, unless we act quickly and effectively, everything we have built up will be torn down and everything we stand for will lose its value and its meaning. What I shall tell you, though, is that we have met here tonight to reorganize ourselves in the hope that we may be strong enough to repulse these forces which now threaten us. We had just completed our reorganization when you entered. In fact, Mister Ruiz, you are now sitting with the Board of Governors of the Association of Heilar-wey Self-respecting, Self-supporting, Taxpaying Citizens. And, now, in behalf of this association, I have the honor to extend to you and to your companion, Captain Butch Malahide, a formal and sincere invitation to join with us and lend your energies and efforts to our Cause."

(*Loud applause.*)

Ruiz appeared stunned, but got upon his feet anyhow; it was the first time I had ever seen him actually at a loss for words.

"Gad, sir," he finally says, "you will never know how difficult it is for me to make suitable reply to you. For all you gentlemen must realize that heretofore when I have been addressed by one of you it was invariably in a situation where I shone, if at all, in a most unfavorable and critical light. My reply then was dictated by motives of ire and distress. And I have been infinitely more accustomed to such motives as those than to the ones which grip me now. Gad, sir, how shall I say it? . . . You ask me to become one of you. . . . You proffer me the unique hand of friendship and comradeship . . . and . . . oh! I accept, sir! By gad, yes! I am inexpressibly delighted to do so. Oh, I cannot any longer dissemble the emotion I feel at the proud honor you have conferred upon me."

And Vicq Ruiz sat down, sobbing as might a small child.

Mr. Addison, the chairman, quietly said: "And you, Captain Malahide?"

I arose. "Gentlemen," I said, "like Mister Ruiz, I am overwhelmed by your invitation. Yet I cannot accept. I am just a visitor here in Heilar-wey, and I think it is a very fine city and all that, but I would not wish to become mixed up in its troubles. I have been an onlooker since I came here, and an onlooker I intend to remain. I will not take sides. But I wish you to know, gentlemen, that no one could be more sensible than myself of the honor you have done me in inviting me to join with you."

Ruiz had gotten a grip on his emotions by then, and he cried: "By gad, Captain Malahide, are you letting me down now, sir? After all we have been through together?"

"Put it that way, if you choose," I said. "But I'll not go along with you any further now. I am a visitor here and a neutral man, and I'll not take sides. I am neither for the Taxpaying Citizens, nor for their enemies. I am an onlooker and a bystander, and, if I do not take sides, neither do I criticize nor attempt to judge. But you have taken sides, Mister Ruiz; you have waived your individuality and entered into an entangling alliance. I think it is you that has let me down. At any rate, this is the parting of our ways. I cannot go along with you."

And I walked wrathfully out of the room where sat Vicq Ruiz and the Board of Governors. And no one attempted to detain me or offer me violence. I went straight back to our old table, and I poured a drink of szelack from what remained in our two big zellums.

I sat at the table with the tumbler of the great Consoler, and black and bitter thoughts formed and hardened in my brain. I strived to conjure up a vision of Frances Shepherd and, with her strange dream beauty, dispel the irks of reality. But no vision came, and the black and bitter thoughts continued to form and harden and form again.

Then, after a bit, Ruiz came out of the council room with a rare and radiant look on his face. He seemed to have forgotten that we had parted in anger, for he cried out immediately: "By gad, sir, never in my life have I felt so tremendously proud and happy! In just five minutes I have achieved more civic recognition than in my whole life before. The reorganization of the Taxpaying Citizens is

complete; I have been assigned a battalion, and in ten minutes I go out to fight for thrift and diligence and business acumen. Now, sir, I know I can get them to let you go along with me. They need manpower terribly for their storm troops and will overlook the technicality of your only being a visitor here. Besides, they think very highly of me and will be delighted to extend the hand of comradeship to anyone I recommend. Just come back in with me, sir."

"I'll be damned if I do," I said.

"By gad," says Ruiz, "you evidently do not appreciate what joining with them means! Look! They have pronounced me respectable and have given me a badge to prove it. Look!"

And he showed me a little badge they had given him, a little blue-and-white badge, edged in gold, which stated that the wearer was thoroughly respectable.

"Mister Ruiz," I said irritably, "damn your badge of respectability. I shall still go my own way, and to hell with whether it ever leads to badges or not."

Ruiz was hurt at that; I could see the hurt in his face.

"Together we started out," he says. "Together we encountered many things. You stood close by me in my moments of defeat and despair. But now, at my first triumph, you leave me in arbitrary fashion on a bitter, sneering note of anger."

"I cannot go along with you on your new path," I said stubbornly. "I cannot do it."

"And I cannot turn back," says Ruiz. "For, sir, I have at last discovered the way to that glorious moment of beauty and strange joy. And I know the meaning of my morning's premonition, too. But I do not fear it. I have conquered my destiny."

"Rot," I said. And I also said: "Well, at least we have no need of each other any longer if that is true. I wish you utmost joy of your glorious moment, Mister Ruiz."

"Sir," says Ruiz, "I in turn wish you all the luck in the world."

"Thanks," I replied. "No doubt I shall need it."

Then we shook hands and grinned uneasily at each other; and Vicq Ruiz went back to the council room and his newly created respectability; and I went out into the night.

I thought idly at first I would go back to Madam Lily's and spend the remainder of the night there. But the remembrance of the girls' snickers as Ruiz and I had left deterred me; I decided to find another groggery and have some more szelack.

So I went down Calle Grande, strolling slowly, and all I could think of was that sad song of Richard Middleton's:

> Too tired to laugh or weep
> At the world that I have missed,
> Love, in your heaven, let me sleep
> An hour or two before I keep
> My unperturbed tryst.

On down Calle Grande I went, strolling slowly, repeating the verse monotonously. Finally, it dawned on me that there was a terrific traffic jam out in Calle Grande. At the street corner at least a hundred policemen were engaged in routing oncoming traffic onto a detour. I asked a bystander what had caused the tie-up.

"It's the tiger," he said. "The goddam thing's down the road about four mile jest raisin' hell, an' they's so many people tryin' to git down thar an' watch 'im that the road's blocked fer at least six business districts."

I asked him why people should want to watch the tiger.

"Why, hell, fellah, he's a-tearin' up buildings an' killin' people all over the place. It's exciting as hell. Ever'body wants tuh watch. I wisht I was down thar myself."

I said maybe the tiger would eventually work up this far and then the man could see him.

"How the hell's he gonna git through all that goddam mess of traffic?"

I didn't know the answer to that.

I turned and retraced my way down Calle Grande. I saw the lights of a groggery I had not been in before, so I made my way there. No sooner did I step inside than a filthy-dirty little urchin sprang up and cried: "Paper, mister? Paper?"

I flung him some coppers and snatched one from him. There, smack bang on the front page—and it was the latest edition of the *Tandstikkerzeitung*—was a picture of Ruiz, and beside the picture a story which was headlined:

COLONEL VICQ RUIZ SELECTED TO LEAD CITIZEN REGIMENT AGAINST CITY FOES

Ultima Ratio Regum To Be Put Into Effect At Once

The story was mostly quotations from Ruiz: a reporter had interviewed him, and Ruiz had seized the opportunity to allow at last full rein to his lust for giving statements to the press. The Self-supporting, Self-respecting, Taxpaying Citizens, so Ruiz declared, had stood all they intended to stand from the Old Folks, the Mercenaries, and the Unemployeds and now were going to take matters in their own hands. The Ausgethrowal and the Rausmitemall Plans had been deemed too idealistic and visionary for the present situation; it had been decided to use the Ultima Ratio Regum indiscriminately against all three battling groups. The paper stated that Ruiz intended first of all to recapture the City Treasury for the Taxpaying Citizens, then to go on with the Ultima Ratio Regum. Ruiz prophesied speedy conquest and victory.

I threw the paper on the floor, marveling mildly at the celerity with which Ruiz achieved not only respectability but also military fame, and I went up to the bar and ordered a big zellum of szelack.

"Drink it here or carry it with you?" inquired the barman.

I started to tell him it was my pleasure to drink it there in peace and quiet, but, instead, I told him to cancel the order. For I had just thrust my hand in my pocket and discovered that I had no more money: I had spent my last coppers for the latest edition of the *Tandstikkerzeitung*.

I said to the barman: "Whereabouts can a man sleep in this town when he has no money."

"Well, there's the Park. They run you off the benches, but they'll let you hide out in the brush."

I asked where the Park was located.

"Well, you go down Calle Grande six squares, then take

the street to the right for three miles. Hell of a long walk, if you was to ask me."

So I started for the Park.

Five squares down Calle Grande, it occurred to me that I would want a drink when I got up in the morning. So I kept on watch thereafter; presently I saw a man and a girl standing in the entrance of a hotel. I went up to them.

"Pardon me, mister," I said, "and pardon me also, madam. Coming up to you like this is very embarrassing to me, and I would never in the world do it if the circumstances were not so extreme. But the fact is that I am penniless, and I am also hungry; I wondered if you could spare me a little something for a sandwich and a cup of coffee."

"Hell, no," said the man.

So I went on another square, turned to the right, and started for the Park.

From afar off the sound of rifle fire could be heard fortissimo. I judged the racket signalized Ruiz taking the field against the old people, the out-of-work, and the ex-soldiers. It sounded more like a major engagement than a sporadic foray; I was minded of the exciting days of several years back when the revolutionist Escobar had laid siege to a border town near Abalone. I had been an onlooker then, too, a sort of spectator with neither wrath nor pity for the city's defending forces nor her attackers.

I walked perhaps two miles, the sound of rifle fire continuing unabated, when a filthy-dirty little urchin came dashing by, crying: "Paper, mister? Paper?"

I had no coppers any more to fling him; I merely snatched a paper from him and snarled him into a cowed retreat when he shrieked for payment. It was the latest edition of the *Tandstikkerzeitung*, and it contained all the up-to-the-minute news of the front. The bull-line said:

VICQ RUIZ CLAIMS
SITUATION IS WELL IN HAND

The paper stated that as soon as the Old Folks and the Unemployed had felt the onslaught of Ruiz's solidery they composed their own differences and made hasty overtures to the Mercenaries; and the result was that the three organizations formed a coalition in a desperate attempt to

hold the City Treasury. The leaders of this coalition were claiming "important damage" to Ruiz's troops; bombs and machine guns had been used with deadly effect on the Taxpayers, they maintained, and would continue so to be used until Ruiz capitulated.

Ruiz, nevertheless, was superbly confident. "Unless," the paper quoted him as saying, "conditions become extremely desperate, we feel that our objective will shortly be attained. Any lessening in our attack has been due to our desire for systematizing our gains and not through any weakness in our forces. Our troops are storming the left wing of the Treasury and should enter any minute. A roving column composed partly of Old Folks and partly of Unemployed has been routed with heavy casualties. The enemy's position progressively becomes more precarious, whereas ours progressively becomes more secure. The situation is well in hand. Victory all along our line is to be expected any moment."

The paper then went on to state that heavily guarded sandbag barricades had been thrown up all around the theater of war to prevent the onlookers from being injured. Janitors had been arrested in surrounding buildings for firing shots from the roofs thereof. Martial law was proclaimed in that section of Heilar-wey; and Ruiz had taken special emergency measures to conserve the food supply and avert price boosting and hoarding. The coalitionists had been forced to abandon several important outposts and suffered heavy losses of ammunition and supplies. The Taxpayers flag was flying from all the important buildings in that section, attesting further to the strength of the Citizen organization.

"The Ultima Ratio Regum," said Ruiz elsewhere in another interview, "is an assured success."

I wondered how he could do so much talking in addition to so much fighting; and I threw the paper in the gutter and continued toward the Park.

After a while I came to it. It looked a tremendous, fairy forest there in the heart of the city; the gates were locked, but I scrambled clumsily over the wall and wandered through the bushes and the dew-damp grasses.

Presently, I came to the Zoo. The animals were restless; they padded about their cages, and their eyes gleamed at me. Some of them moaned and some of them grunted;

others called and whistled softly. In the snake pit I watched two fat river jacks mating. They looked almost like pigs instead of snakes, they were so bloated. Now and then the female would hiss; then I would jump, for it bothers me to hear a snake call out as does an owl or turtle. The keeper had fed them, and the food—some frightened ducklings—huddled uneasily in a corner while the two gross river jacks made serpentine love.

I wandered on and I saw the panda with its peevish face and the bongo and the dingo and the solenodon. And I saw the boomslang and the sladang and the capybara and the earth hog and the wild swine. I also saw the giant rhesus and the white-tailed deer. Then I came to the great cats, and I saw the lion and the panther and the leopard and the ocelot and the cougar and the lucivee.

Then, at last, I found him, and I stopped before his cage and looked at him. He arose and came up to me, but he came quietly and he did not growl.

Tiger tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

. . .

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

. . .

Tiger! tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

He came quietly, and he did not growl; he stood there in his graceful, terrible strength and looked at me. But in his burning eyes I could find no rancor, wrath, or malice. And I went away from the tiger, and I was not afraid.

I went far away, far beyond the sound of the restless

animals and their low calling. I found a sort of leaf cave under a cluster of salt cedars, and I said: "Here I will make my bed. This park is my garden, and I shall find here the things necessary to make my comfort. I shall sleep on roses as though I were Pharaoh. I shall sleep amid roses on a green couch beneath a green canopy."

So I removed from the leaf cave all the sticks and stones and brambles. And then I searched for blossoms to make a coverlet and pillow. I found lilies, and I took them. And I found posy, rose, and daisy, and I took them, too. I culled over all the flowers, retaining this one, discarding that. I made a green couch, and I covered it with blossoms.

Then I was thirsty, so I went to a little Arcadian fountain and drank of its pure waters. I was very weary: sleep, I prayed, would come to me gently and bring dreams of sweetness and light. And as I went back to my green couch I composed a little prayer which pleased me:

Sleep and dreams and rest and peace are good.
To wine, to dine, to sleep and dream are good.
To wine, to dine, to love, and then to sleep is good.
These are adorable things: Love me, O Lord; give unto me much of them.
Amen.

And I returned to my green couch. But I halted before it, for someone was in it lying curled on my leaves and blossoms. And my anger mounted to the skies.

"Get out!" I roared. "Get to hell out! Have you sunken so low you would rob a pauper of his bed?" And I cursed the shadowy figure lying there on my green couch of leaves and blossoms, cursed it in the name of Baldad the Suhite, and Eliphaz the Themanite, and Sophar the Naamathite. Such was my fury that I called to the earth gods to open for me a volcano that I might fling this usurper of couches into the menstrual mud of the womb of the world.

Then the shadowy figure amid the leaves and blossoms turned and half arose; and I wanted to cut my throat.

"I did not mean a word I said," I whispered.

"I had no place to sleep," said Frances Shepherd. "I did not know this couch was yours. I am sorry. I will go away."

And she came from the leaf cave and started to go. But I took her hands.

I cried: "No! You cannot go. The plot demands that I keep you. You are the plot's symbol of all that is sweet and gentle and good, the symbol of all that the plot has lacked. What is a plot without simplicity and beauty? You must stay, Frances. Here in the leaf cave, warm on Nature's bosom, you must give me rest and hope and joy; you must assuage my hunger, and cool my thirst."

"Here? With you? I'd rather be in a cage with a tiger. Oh, let me go!"

But I would not let her go. I sought to wrest from her fear and bewilderment and loathing my gentle, simple hour. And she did not even struggle; she only cried.

And I looked at her tears, the tears of a slim, tired girl, tears that made her hideous, a maid of sorrow. And I took my hands from her, for I had touched her beauty and at my touch it became hurt and desolate and ugly. I took my hands from her, and I went away.

They told me of Ruiz's death when they deported me from Heilar-wey for vagrancy.

He achieved great honor in the field; at dawn he was the conqueror of the coalitionists. From every tongue flew praise of his name. He was the high hero of all Heilar-wey.

So they had a prodigious victory march down Calle Grande. From every building waved a multitude of flags. Uproarious cheers and thunderous huzzahs filled the air.

"Heil Vicq Ruiz! Viva Ruiz! Banzai Ruiz!" Again, and yet again.

There was a terrible roar, and the victory march stopped in its tracks, and women fainted. For up ahead stood the tiger; he was so big he seemed to fill Calle Grande from curb to curb; and he appeared there as if by magic; from where the tiger came, or how, no one could say.

Vicq Ruiz quieted the people and asked them to dissolve their crowds and go away. And Ruiz ordered his troopers to load a military truck to the brim with high explosives and instantaneous impact fuses. Then he got into the truck all alone.

The tiger stood watching Ruiz, lashing his tail, rumbling.

They told me Ruiz looked up to the skies as if he were addressing some Presence there, and he said: "Well, sir, even though you slay me, still will I praise you. Hear me now make affirmation that the life I have had was good."

And Ruiz looked back at the teeming, tense throng of people who called him their hero and their deliverer; he looked at the people he had served for a glorious hour of curious beauty and strange joy. And they told me he clutched out with his hands as if to grasp that fleeting moment and hold it tight to him again, and he whispered: "Ah, still delay; thou art so fair!"

Then he drove head on full tilt into the tiger; there was a magnificent explosion; it was the end of both. It was as if Ruiz had offered himself in sacrifice, had immolated his body in a monstrous blast.

And now they were wondering who Ruiz was, where he had come from, what he had done. You, they said to me, were his friend. You suffered with him. Tell us about him, they said.

But there was nothing I could tell them except that he was a good man.

THE MAGICIAN OUT OF MANCHURIA

For Marie

Chapter One

THERE WAS a war in the north—a civil, soul-distracting war—and all the towns were full of soldiers. So the magician came south, seeking towns where men warred less and played more. Wartorn towns were inimical to make-believe, boiling, as they were, with slogans and ideologies. He sought simple, backland towns where the citizens might pay to be diverted from their sorrows by dramatic glamourie and adroit chicanery. With him, of course, came his chela, or apprentice, leading the black ass, Ng Gk, which carried on its back twin panniers containing the magician's tools of wizardry.

The party trudged south upon the sand of the Great Sea Road, following that section of it which lay between the seemingly topless mountains and the immeasurable ocean. And, after several days of such trudging, they reached a sand-bordered bay where a cluster of fishermen was drawing in a net. These fishermen were singing a roaring sea song.

The magician looked at them critically and calculatingly. Then he halted his chela and Ng Gk. "Let us stop a moment and watch them," he said. "Sometimes strange things are scooped from the sea."

The fishermen sang and pulled at the net ropes, the head fisherman standing aside with hands on hips, urging them to their task with curtailed praise and copious oaths. The floats of the net became visible, and then the water-bulged cords of the meshes, and finally the whole long sein itself, bellying and heaving in the shallow, sandy water of the inshore. At a signal from the head fisherman, the

rope-pullers grasped the edges of the net and dragged it from the ocean with a rush. They dumped it bottom-over-top on the beach to empty it quickly and see what it had caught for them.

Not a single fish fell from it; all that lay on the beach was a woman, a nude, drowned woman, with seaweed tangled pitilessly about her.

The magician strode among them. "Great boggling fools of ineptitude!" he snorted. "A better fish one could catch with bare hands in a camel trough. Stand away, all of you! You are defiling her poor, sodden flesh with your lascivious stares. Stand away! I will take this woman and I will do a magic with her. But I must not be bothered with a pack of fish-eating fools while I am at it."

He pushed them with his hands and kicked them with his feet to get them moving; they were sullen and did not like it, but the dead woman frightened them, for she was bad omen; and they did not know who the magician was.

He straightened the woman on her back in the sand and kneeled astride her. He forced open her clenched mouth and put his own over it. He blew air into her lungs from the mighty pressure of his own lungs. He inflated and deflated her as one might do with a toy ballon. She stirred and began to choke and sob.

"Thus," said the magician, "do I banish death. I spit at death. Be careful, then, that you do not seek to hinder him against whom even death itself cannot prevail." He picked the woman up and laid her between the panniers on the back of the black ass Ng Gk. Chela following, he led Ng Gk and his new burden down the Great Sea Road and out of sight around the bend of the bay.

The fishermen stared at the head fisherman for an answer.

"That was a devil's magic," he said; and he spat and shuddered. And, before he gave the order again to cast the net into the sea, he drew lines awiddershin between where they seined and where the magician had disappeared down the Great Sea Road.

This magician was as fat as two men and would weigh more than both. The weather had to be three coats cold before the magician would put on a single coat, for his blubber, like the whale's, served to keep him warm.

He had curious spurs on his heels, and he allotted this malformation to the fact that once a giant python of India had been a branch in his family tree. Giant pythons commonly are equipped with such spurs, vestigial echoes of the feet they formerly walked upon, but now no longer needed. He expatiated upon this once while he was talking to the Fiend. "I know there is a woman snake in my ancestry," he said, "because periodically I also change my skin."

"Your male ancestors must have been model beings," said the Fiend.

"They were men of wide and diverse interests," conceded the magician. The Fiend avoided him after that.

This was the man, then, who waddled down the Great Sea Road, leading a black Manchurian ass upon whose back between two rattan panniers lay an artificially resuscitated woman. His chela walked alongside the ass, helping to keep the woman in place. And, after one particularly heavy lurch in the sand on the part of the ass, which caused the woman to groan in low-keyed agony, the chela suggested respectfully that the journey was not doing the woman very much good.

"Better," said the magician who had been deep in other thoughts, "for her to ride between panniers in the open air than to slumber amidst seaweed under the waves. However, we are now at a lonely stretch of the road. Let us therefore go off beyond that clump of little trees and examine her. Let us appraise this gift the sea gods have bestowed upon us."

And, in the shade of thorn trees, out of sight of the Great Sea Road, they unloaded the woman from the sturdy Ng Gk and laid her in the soft sand.

"What a pity," said the magician, staring down at her and stirring her with his foot, "that she should be so ugly. Out of all the women who have ever drowned in the sea, it is obviously our fate to have rescued the least comely of them all. Now, when the imperial barge of the Emperor Li-chung was rammed by four whales and overturned, some of the concubines that drowned in that disaster were so beautiful that poems are still being written about them. But the most cursory of glances is all that is needed to

show that here we do not have one of those lyric-embalmed lotuses."

"She has a bangle around her ankle, though," pointed out the chela.

"So she has," agreed the magician. "Hand it to me. It may serve to identify her."

The chela knelt beside the undraped woman and, from her left ankle, detached the gaud. "Note that her feet have never been bound, master," he said. "I note," said the magician. He took the bauble from his apprentice's hand.

He took one look, and then looped his spectacles over his nose for a better one. "Very unusual characters," he observed. Then he reached himself a wine jug from one of the panniers on Ng Gk's back, and took a sustaining swig.

"What does the inscription mean, master?" whispered the chela, for he could sense that what the magician had deciphered carried in it some disturbing significance.

The magician looked all about to make sure no one was eavesdropping. He took another taste of the wine. "She is a queen!" he said. "She is a queen of La." He rolled her over with his foot. "She is the Lustful Queen of La!" And he drank more wine.

"How can you tell, master?"

"By her anklet which bears the regal Seal of La. By this tattooing, the design of which is reserved for her alone." And he pointed to a tattooed red mouse scampering down her back toward the cleft between her buttocks.

"There are three Queens of La," he explained: "The Beautiful Queen, the Righteous Queen, and the Lustful Queen. The last named is the one we have here, for neither of her sisters, judging from their titles, would have countenanced such a thing as this tattoo."

"How came she, then, to be drowned in the sea?" gasped the chela.

"Politics!" snapped the magician. "The new politics do not allow of queens. The new politics do not allow of magic. I am disturbed, chela; for if the new politicians can do this to a queen, think what they can do to me. We are all doomed, and I do not like it." And the mage gulped angrily at his wine jug.

"Is our future now fraught with uncertainties and hazardous with dark dangers?" demanded the chela.

"But definitely," said the magician. "Have you not

listened to what I have just been telling you? I propose to awaken our queen from her coma and learn the worst from her own lips. Do we have any fresh meat on hand?"

"None, master. Nor any cured, either."

"Well, then, take our sharpest knife and seek out some kid goat in yonder hills and bring it back, and I will make her a broth. No need to disturb her until the broth is done. While you are securing the kid, I shall construct for her a garment to veil her nudity. Make sure no one sees you capture the kid."

The chela left with a worried air, for he had been sent on similar missions in the past, and invariably they had engendered near disaster. As for the magician, he dug around in the commodious panniers on the back of Ng Gk and found a bag made of jute. He also found another wine jug. He sat down beside the queen, jug in hand, ran his fingers over her lightly, and tried to envision what sort of garment would suit her best.

"The trouble is," he said to himself, "she is such an ugly thing that I doubt if any clothes would become her, or she them. Swathed in scarlet silk piped with gold and black, she would still be hideous. Enwrapped in white fluffy woolen with green sash and green turban, she would be equally hideous. Naked as she is now, however, she is veritably repulsive, and so for my own piece of mind, if for no other reason, I had better do something about it."

He had further recourse to Ng Gk's panniers, and drew forth a black flask of some mysterious lotion. "May the Queen of Sheba and Queen Cleopatra and Queen Nephertiti all forgive me," he said. And he applied the lotion to the Lustful Queen of La from the bottoms of her feet to the top of her head. The only part of her he did not massage with the lotion was the red mouse tattooed on her back. It was a good lotion, and it worked wonders. What now lay on the sand was no ugly little skinny woman with wens and moles. What lay there was something the Kmers of Cambodia would have been proud to have sculpted.

Even the magician himself was somewhat awed. "I had no idea the lotion was so . . . whatever it is," he said. "I wish I could remember where I got it. I might use it with advantage to myself among the wives of the politicians. Alas, it is all gone now. However, she is so beautiful that

there is no need to make her a fine gown. She will transform into loveliness anything she deems to wear."

And he took the jute bag he had found in the pannier and sliced an aperture in its bottom. "For her head," he said. Then he cut two more holes in the sides of the bag. "For her arms," he said. Returning to the pannier, he fished out a piece of tarred rope. "For her girdle," he concluded.

He had another drink of wine and began to admire his handiwork. "A couturier, no less! A designer of costumes feminine and practical. Costumes to fit the spirit of the wearer. Every dress to fit the skin of the spirit. Though they be queens. Though they be queens." And he took yet another drink of wine; then supporting the Queen of La in one hand, he dressed her in the jute bag with his other. Still unconscious, she only moaned a little.

The chela returned then, bearing in his arms a tiny kid. "Its mother liked not at all to lose it," he told the magician, "and I was forced to turn my knife upon her. We had a battle up there on a hidden hill. I am not happy, master."

"But you were the victor in the battle, you stupid boy! You should rejoice. It is not every day that one as aimless and inept as you triumphs over an angry nanny goat."

"I know all that," said the chela, "but there was a young goatherd near by. When I also threatened him with the knife, he ran off . . . probably to tell somebody."

"Well," said the magician, "when that somebody comes around to make trouble will be soon enough to consider how to meet it. Start a fire now, chela; we shall make some goat broth for our highborn guest. Notice the fine gown I have fashioned for her."

"It looks like our old jute bag," said the chela.

"It is our old jute bag. But notice how she glorifies it with the glamour of her queenhood."

"Did you wash her off or something?" asked the chela. "She looks prettier and cleaner."

"I washed away her ugliness," said the magician. "Whether I washed away her sins remains to be discovered."

After the kid had boiled awhile, the magician poured off the stock into a separate pan and added cabbage leaves

and garlic. He boiled that some more and added some wine to it and boiled it still more. When the broth was done, he cooled it and took it to the queen's side.

"Another drink of wine," he said, "to fortify myself. Then I'll spoon this fine broth between her jaws." He picked up a wine jug and poured half its contents down his throat. Then he took the queen's head upon his lap and began to feed her.

The warm fluid at length restored her to consciousness. "Stop!" she cried, and endeavored to sit up.

"Gently, gently," said the magician. He assisted her to a half-crouching position and poked the dripping spoon again at her mouth.

"Throw that vile swill away!" she ordered, for she had now so far recovered that she could raise her voice to a fishwife's scream. "Why am I in this horrible sack under this repulsive thorn tree? How dare that stupid boy stare so at me? And who are you, you bloated, hideous eunuch? Know you not that your head is forfeit for touching me?"

"Gently," said the magician. "Such rancor is ill timed. I am not a eunuch. This youth and I are your saviors. Has madame no remembrance of falling into the sea?"

"You fat monster! I never fell! I was flung bodily!"

"A capital crime! Who flung madame?"

"Who? Who but Khan Ali Bok? Who else would dare, you idiot?"

"Who else, indeed," said the magician.

Then the chela, who had been listening attentively to the conversation between queen and mage, said quietly, "Master, men are coming, and with them comes the little goatherd boy. I foresee trouble, master."

"A nuisance!" said the magician. "A petty nuisance. Why must we be interrupted now? Madam, veil your face, seal your lips, and forget your identity. Chela, give her your waistband to wrap around her head. Above all, madame, do not speak."

There were three men with the young goatherd, and they all carried clubs.

"That is he! That is he!" screeched the goatherd as soon as he got a good look at the chela. "As I related to you before, he brandished his knife at the nanny goat and snatched away her kid. The bleating which then went on between mother and offspring was pitiful. I became

alarmed myself and ran, my life as a goatherd up to then having been a quiet pastoral existence never before disturbed by such deeds of desperateness. But that is he, for, despite my perturbation I fixed his visage in my mind with great exactness. As for the fat man and the hooded, cowering woman, I do not know who they are, but I reason they are in some manner connected with this despicable goat-stealer."

"Oh, shut up, you longwinded, tiresome little fool!" said the leader of the three men with the clubs; and the magician inclined his head and asked what the difficulty was, if any.

"Difficulty?" sneered the leader. "Why only that one of our prize kid goats has been stolen, slain, and cooked." And he picked up the cast-aside goatskin and waved it in the air. He turned to his companions: "Would that all crimes were as easily solved."

The magician threw up his hands and covered his face in shame. "You have done a terrible thing," he said to the chela. And he said to the men, "You behold in me a loving, trusting father brought face to face with the heinous crime of his only son. All I can do now is tell the truth. This morning, the lad's mother here being ill, I gave him money and sent him off to buy goat's meat, thinking to make her some healing broth. He returned much belatedly with the kid, saying the village was farther off than we had anticipated. I took him at his word. Now you citizens confront me with the miserable thing he actually did. Tell me!" he roared at the chela, "what did you do with that money I gave you!"

"I . . . uh," said the chela.

"You gambled the money away?"

"Yes, master."

"Then you stole the kid to conceal the loss?"

"Yes, master."

"I am overwhelmed," said the magician tragically. He looked at the club-bearers with pathetic eyes. "What is the penalty hereabout for such a crime?"

"In our village," said the leader, "the hand which performs the deed is severed from the wrist."

"Except in aggravated circumstances," said another club-bearer, "when the head which devised the deed is severed from the neck."

"And," added a third club-bearer, "this appears to be an aggravated instance."

"Very well!" said the magician briskly. "I have never temporized with the law, and I shall not do so now. Kneel down, my son. Kneel down, you bringer of shame to your old father." And the magician drew from a pannier on the back of Ng Gk a *da boa*, or beheading knife.

"Not that!" yelled the chela when he saw what the magician was doing. "Not that again! It hurts too much!"

"The pain is only momentary," replied the mage. And from the pannier he also drew a large black sheet.

The chela whimpered. "Is there no other way, master?"

"None," said the magician. "Take a deep breath and hold it, and incline your head."

Resignedly, the apprentice did so. The magician cloaked the *da boa* in the black sheet, gave a mighty swing, and for a brief instant the chela's head rolled in the sand. Then the black sheet fell and covered all.

The magician burst into tears. "I have not temporized with the law," he sobbed. "You three citizens are witnesses. Take up what remains of the purloined goat and go back to your village and tell all your people that you have met a father who honored the law more than the head of his own son."

"The goat's remains are worthless as far as we are concerned," said the leading citizen. "And the arbitrary way in which you have dealt with this situation puts my companions and myself in a definitely anomalous position. I concede, however, that a certain rough justice has been done, but I believe, nevertheless, that you and your woman had better leave these parts and forever remain away. In our commune. we distrust your kind intensely."

"Abandon me to my sorrow," said the magician. "We shall depart as soon as funeral arrangements are completed."

The club-bearers walked dourly away, the little goatherd boy sending back startled glances at the magician, the queen, and the black-shrouded heap on the ground. Once they were out of sight, the Lustful Queen of La threw aside her head wrapping and gasped, "What a horrible, horrible thing to do!"

"Nonsense," said the magician. He took the black sheet by one corner and jerked it into the air. Head intact and in

place again, the chela sat up and rubbed his neck. "I knew it would hurt," he said angrily.

"Not as much, however," pointed out the magician, "as if it had been done by those righteous villagers."

"I think I am going mad," said the queen.

"Madame's wits should not impair so easily," said the magician, opening a new wine jug.

The chela turned his head from side to side, testing his neck. "I do not like that trick, and I have never liked it," he said complainingly. "But you are so fond of it that I believe you deliberately go out of your way to develop a situation wherein you can practice it for your own perverse pleasure."

"Think not so ill of me, my son," said the magician, wiping the neck of the wine jug. "When you grow older you will come to understand the necessity and significance of such things."

"There must be a curse upon me," said the queen. "Such evil company as I fall in with can only be accounted for by a curse. You vile, obese charlatan! If we were back in my home country, I would have your own head detached, and I would have it stuck on a pole by my palace gates as an example to evildoers."

The magician said, "Here in this thorn grove, madame, I am the headsman. Who holds that office in your Province of La, I cannot say, but his blade does not reach here."

The queen looked at him in wild surmise, silent in her pique, marking his great, bulging belly, his bald head, his spurred heels. Finally, she whispered fearfully, "Who are you? How come you to know of La?"

"Tell her who I am, chela."

The chela spoke rapidly, as if he were reciting a set piece: "He is a simple magician out of Manchuria, coming south to find peaceful lands and prosperous villages where he may amuse the people with his arts. Along with his mastery of magic, he is able to read minds, tell time without consulting clocks, and find lost money. He asks no great payment for his entertainment, but he has always held that avariciousness is a sin. The mysterious Koot Hoomi Lal Singh has commented favorably upon the subtlety of his mind. The only thing he hates is politics, and it is because of the new politics in Manchuria that he has left there forever."

"I never heard of him," said the queen. "And yet he has heard of my Province of La."

"I have also heard," said the magician, "of your oppressor, Khan Ali Bok."

The queen nodded. "Had I my way," she said, "I would beat Khan Ali Bok to death with his own hammer and then carve him into bits with his own sickle."

Chapter Two

"I PROPOSE," said the magician, "that madame tell us more about Khan Ali Bok. I know of him by repute only—very ill repute. Yet, suddenly, I am obsessed by the feeling that it may be our fate to encounter—or be encountered—by him again. This, I assure you, is a most unhappy feeling. Therefore, I propose that madame tell us more about him. One should always know as much as possible about one's enemy."

A far-off look came into the now lovely eyes of the Lustful Queen of La. She twined a tress of her long black hair between her slender fingers.

My mother, she said, was the most beautiful of all women, and I was her eldest and ugliest daughter. My father never spoke to her after she bore him a third daughter. He did, however, take heavily to drink.

As a young prince, when in his glory and sobriety he first ascended to the throne of La, he had befriended a tiny orphaned baby found by the guards in a basket at the palace gate. The little beast grew, and my father had him tended and tutored. He became a devotee of the abacus at an early age, and in no time at all mastered the intricacies of budgeting, posting accounts, and bookkeeping. Poor father hated mathematics and distrusted those who dealt in that field. He did impose thorough trust in this young protégé of his, however, so much so that in the end he appointed him Treasurer of La.

All went seemingly well until some ten years later when my father had a dream. He awoke from it to demand an independent audit of the books of La. The premonition

conveyed to him in his dream was verified: He, Prince of La, owned not a thing any more; the entire wealth of the province was in the hands of the Treasurer, Khan Ali Bok. Plus all this, his wife had just born her third daughter. He, the Prince of La, thereupon took to drink. He was Prince of La in name only. Khan Ali Bok was the ruler.

I must admit I was not too unhappy during my early girlhood. A princess—the oldest princess—does have special privileges. It was when, in our later girlhood, my sisters and I took up politics that our troubles really began.

To simplify what follows, I will tell you that my sisters and I, after many furtive consultations, decided to assassinate Khan Ali Bok and thus restore to our father the wealth of La and the disposal thereof. This was considered high politics in those days, elections being looked upon as opiates for the people.

We thought we would poison the Treasurer. We had read in a book where some other Treasurer had been poisoned for the good of some other realm; and we talked it over and decided we should poison ours.

Of course, in our young innocence, we knew nothing of the essential nature of poisons; we operated on the adolescent assumption that anything which was horrible enough and nasty enough was bound to be poison. So for more than a week we collected all the things of that nature which we could find: dead toads, cruror from slain lions, and similar matter. It all made a very foul mess when we boiled it down.

One night we managed to pour some of the stuff into Kahn Ali Bok's lamb stew. He took it to be some new and exotic sauce and complimented the bewildered cook upon it. In not the slightest degree did he become ill, and of course he never died, either.

It was a great disappointment. But then I came up with the idea of shooting the Khan with a cannon. This seemed like a sure thing. The cannon, a relic of the later Tatar conquest days, was set on the edge of the Peacock Balcony overlooking the Lotus Gardens of the palace. Khan Ali Bok walked in those gardens in the evening.

The cannon was none too efficient an instrument, being by nature incredibly unwieldy, but I had read an ordnance book on how to operate such materiel, and I easily enlisted my sisters' aid in the cause.

We secured fireworks and opened the squibs and poured the powder that was in them down the cannon's throat. When we judged that several cupfuls had been poured down, we took a cannonball from a pyramid of such projectiles near by and forced that down on top of the powder.

When twilight came, I lit a piece on incense and stood by the cannon's breech, chanting ballads till the Khan could stroll by. My sisters trembled and hid behind pots of ferns.

Presently, he did come by. I held my breath and thrust the stick of incense into the fire-hole. The cannon roared with mighty voice, spat out the cannonball with a blast of flame, and recoiled four feet. But the cannonball went nowhere near its intended target; instead, it smashed into a stupa at the edge of the garden—the oldest and loveliest stupa in all the Province of La.

Khan Ali Bok came bounding up to the balcony, expecting to find an insurrection; but he found only us three frightened girls. I explained to him that I had thrust the incense stick into the touchhole only with the intention of dousing the spark, never dreaming that the cannon had a charge in it which would detonate.

The Khan was wonderstruck. "What a grand old piece of artillery!" he cried. "Sleeping all these years, only awaiting a tiny spark to bring it to life once more!" He ordered the court poet to write an ode commemorating the occasion. As for me, I was heartbroken; I had forgotten that paragraph in the ordnance book which said that the target should always appear in the cannon's sights.

When our father, the Prince of La, died, Khan Ali Bok called us three sisters together and told us solemnly that each of us was now a queen; we were the three Queens of La, he had so ordained it. But, naturally, the executive and economic direction of the province would remain in his hands.

So we were queens, and, oh! what queens we were! After a while our subjects bestowed nicknames upon us: the youngest sister became known as the Beautiful Queen, the next the Righteous Queen, me the Lustful Queen. Never were names less apt or fitting.

For the Beautiful Queen was not beautiful; she was merely vain. The scoundrelly Khan knew it and pampered

her vanity with fine raiment and beauty treatments, and thus kept her from meddling in affairs of state. Nor was the Righteous Queen righteous. She had merely read of a king called Suliman, and she announced that she wished to model her reign on his. So the Khan allowed her to preside over a small court and act as judge in minor civil matters, and thus kept her from meddling in affairs of state.

But the most inappropriately named of all was myself. I made no claim to beauty of righteousness, but I did make loud claim to the throne. So, to distract *my* attention and keep *me* from meddling in the affairs of state, he decreed that I must have a lover. In the long run, I had seven—two of the Khan's choosing and five of my own. This helped confirm the adjective in my nickname. But I was never lustful—the term infuriates me. I was only academically interested in amorousness; I viewed its ramifications with complete detachment. If some of my lovers went out and told tales, the blame rests upon them, for they were part and party to everything; and, in the beginnings, at least, their enthusiasm invariably surpassed my own.

Tra la la! I remember once when I was experimenting with a handsome peasant turned solider. He had no imagination whatever. But I was a daring innovator in those days; and I claim, without boasting, to be the inventor of a technique which I call, for want of a better name, the application of the fillips. These are half-psychic little shocks, and enough of them will arouse the most lassitudinous lout from his distasteful boredom to a peak of intoxicated passion.

So, having several idle hours to dispose of somehow that day, I began to practice these fillips upon this soldier. The result set a precedent. For I found myself overwhelmed in an athletic embrace from which I could not extricate myself until he had his complete will of me; and his was the most enduring will I had ever encountered. Even when he did cast me aside, as one casts aside a pomegranate from which all the essence has been squeezed, he was no more satiated than a starving man at the first course of a banquet.

Three ladies-in-waiting, the Righteous Queen, and two chambermaids fell prey to him before he left the palace. Indeed, the only feasible way we could think of to control

him was to call in the *shimboos* and have them chop off his head.

It was a great lesson to me, and never since then have I applied that particular fillip. I still retain the knowledge of it, but it will be a desperate day indeed when I am forced to practice it again.

Which brings me up to that short while ago when the hyena, Khan Ali Bok, came simpering to me with the announcement that he had arranged my marriage with the Emperor Nip Toon Ah. He said that so much progress had been made that the royal junk was already being prepared for my voyage down the Gai Ho to the sea where the Emperor and I would meet. I told the hound that marriage was the very farthest thing from my thoughts, for I had long ago promised myself to live and die a virgin queen.

But he is shrewd as he is vile, and he told me a great change was coming over the land and soon it would come to the Province of La itself. The change, for one thing, was political, he said; and it meant the end of queens, kings, princesses and princes; it meant, indeed, that I would lose everything including my head if I remained in La. But, safely wed to the Emperor Nip Toon Ah, I would be beyond the reach of politics, for even politics could not extend to the realm of that great dignitary. I did not understand then, I barely understand now; but what he intended was a deal with the new politicians: he would put me away forever in return for being allowed to retain some of his perquisites as Regent of La.

For Nip Toon Ah is no emperor. He is only the sea itself, and the Khan intended to drown me; I was chief claimant to La's throne, and had to be put away to mollify the politicians.

This, I did not understand until later.

So I gave in to him, and not particularly reluctantly, either. For I had begun to scheme how, as the potential chief wife of the Emperor Nip Toon Ah, I would soon be in position to return to La, overthrow the Khan, and chop off his head. And I cried out to the Khan, "Let me now board my imperial junk and begin the voyage down the Gai Ho! Let me delay not all in meeting this peerless emperor who will be my spouse. I ache for his embraces, and I shall make him ache for mine. Not for nothing have I studied the arts and practices of love, burning endless

candles and smoking endless lamps in pursuit of such knowledge. After a night in my arms, he shall forget another woman ever kissed him."

"Softly," he replied. "First, La must have an opportunity to celebrate its queen's good fortune."

And all of La was proclaimed in carnival, and food and wine and sweetmeats were made free. At the head of a procession which stretched for several miles, I was borne through the streets in the royal palanquin. Riots broke out incessantly, inspired by the new politicians, and the *shimboos* were kept busy beheading the ringleaders. After the procession ended, I prayed to my ancestors for three days; then we rode on milk-white camels to the banks of the Gai Ho, and there, amid a shower of lilies and poppies, I was borne aboard the imperial junk.

The Gai Ho's current sucked us away from shore. I lay under a canopy on the rear deck and watched La fade away. Soon, I could not see the people nor their pennons any more. Then the houses and the buildings merged. Then the great *pailu* itself was lost, and all was lost; but I did not know it then.

Oh, it is a long way down the Gai Ho to the sea! I had never seen the sea before, and I was afraid. It semed to me to be full of monsters, and the air full of strange and terrible birds. Khan Ali Bok ordered the sailors to hoist the sail, and the wind blew us away from the mouth of the Gai Ho and finally out of sight of the shore. The Khan told me that out beyond the line where the sky touched the water, the Emperor Nip Toon Ah was waiting. We sailed all that night.

At dawn Khan Ali Bok told me to put aside my clothing, that the moment of my marrige was at hand.

I told him that I did not comprehend. But he only pointed a finger over the side of junk. Down there, he said, far down, the great Emperor Nip Toon Ah awaited me. Down there, far down, he waited in his palace surrounded by his empire.

So I understood him then, and I began to curse him. I cursed with all the vehemence I could muster on such a dismaying occasion.

I ended by telling him that he had dishonored the beards of his ancestors and had taken pay for so doing. I told him to drown me as he pleased but never to doubt

that some day I would return to La and, as the crowning glory of that moment, witness the severance of his evil head.

He only smiled. He gently pulled away my robe and led me to the junk's rail. There, he lifted me, kissed me between the breasts, and dropped me into the waves.

Those waves were as cold and impersonal as ice. Now I find myself here, dressed in a jute bag, the taste of garbage in my mouth, completely unhappy. For the Khan sooner or later will find that I am still alive, and will set forth to kill me all over again.

Chapter Three

"A TRAGIC, tragic story," said the magician sympathetically. "Inevitably, it reminds one of that onetime queen of Hopei, who, also deprived of her throne, in a political coup d'état, was forced thereafter to live a life of misery and shame as a prostitute among the Mongols. Her dissatisfaction with such a life she set down in a long series of poems. Her classical couplets remain to this day models of how to describe such a sordid existence."

"Well, if anyone thinks for a single moment," said the queen, stamping her foot, "that I am going to sit around and write poetry . . ."

"No, no!" said the magician hastily. "I was merely remarking on the perpetual coincidences of history, the curious patterns which seem to delight in repeating themselves. Now, in this great turmoil which has descended upon the Province of La, I perceive a storm wherein we, as do petrels, may find some advantage to ourselves. I propose that we set out for La, and when we get there see what can be done about the matter. Fortunately, madame is so well disguised that none will recognize her."

"Disguised?" said the queen. "I am not disguised, unless you consider this jute bag to be a disguise. Well! I shall discard it as soon as possible."

"But I did not mean the jute bag," said the magician. "I meant something else, something quite else. Here, madame, regard yourself in the mirror and learn the meaning of my words." He handed her a mirror taken from a pannier on the back of the black ass, Ng Gk.

The queen snatched it petulantly from him and re-

garded her countenance in its silvered surface. "In the name of Kwan Yin," she gasped, "whatever has happened to me?"

"Beauty has descended upon madame," said the magician, "and has enwrapped her in its bewitching folds."

"But how? But when? But why?" demanded the bewildered queen.

"By my magic. Immediately after your resuscitation. Because all noble women should be beautiful."

The queen touched her face. She ran her fingers over her arms. She held out her mane of black hair. She looked down at her feet. She raised the jute bag above her knees. She raised it above her waist. She discarded it altogether. She pirouetted about like a dancer, examining herself as she did so. "But it is true!" she gasped. "I am beautiful. I must be the most beautiful woman in all the world! And you did it? How did you do it? Thou art indeed a magician. Thou art indeed a worker of miracles."

"Out of the Great Cosmetician's secret files, I have culled a recipe or two," said the mage. "But madame will please to protect her fair skin once again with this humble jute bag. Such great beauty should be displayed only a dollop at a time, otherwise its effect upon the beholder might be unfortunate. I am thinking of the chela, madame."

"I must have a more suitable wardrobe," said the queen. "I must have it immediately. My whole life is beginning to change. I can feel it. I can feel a new power within me."

"Alas," said the magician.

"My mind is beginning to fill with plans of grandeur," said the queen. "Plans of grandeur and revenge. If I were back in La at this moment, magician, I would show *you* a thing or two."

"Alas," said the magician.

"Then why are we standing here like dolts?" demanded the queen. "Take me back at once to La, magician! I have things to do."

"Gently. Gently," said the magician. "La is many leagues away, for madame's trip down the Gai Ho and on the ocean extended for many nautical miles. One should never set out on a trip to La without adequate provisions and money. Having neither, I propose we find some village down the Great Sea Road and entertain the denizens

thereof with a performance of my magic. A place I have in mind is one called the Little Dragon Village, a name which distinguishes it from its wealthier neighbor called the Big Dragon Village. Neither place is noteworthy in any way, which is why I propose to go there. Therefore, chela, my sturdy son, load up the good black ass, Ng Gk, and let us be gone from the shadows of these thorn trees."

"I am not used to riding on asses," said the queen.

"Excellent," said the magician. "There is no point in overloading Ng Gk."

"I am accustomed to riding in a palanquin," said the queen, "with guards up ahead and guards in the rear and guards on either side to spurn away the common people."

"A palanquin would be a most inappropriate method of transportation for madame to employ in entering the Little Dragon Village," said the magician, "for then the villagers would seek to prey upon us, instead of us preying upon them, as is my aim. Meanwhile, destiny lies ahead. Lead on, chela. Come now, madame. An empire is at stake."

The blue-gowned, pigtailed yellow boy led stout Ng Gk out from the clump of thorn trees; the magician strode along on his strange feet. Muttering futilely, but bitterly, the queen fell in with dainty limp.

They trod the sandy ruts of the Great Sea Road; in no long time that historic thoroughfare left the narrow level of the ocean beaches and climbed by zigzag ways to a high bluff which bordered the ocean and against which great waves roared and battered. At the highest reach of the bluff, a little shrine had been erected in honor of some sea god; here the magician halted his party while he burned incense at the god's feet.

"It was at this spot," related the mage when he had finished with his homage, "that the Emperor Him Lin Tan discovered his daughter in the amorous embrace of a fish. The fish was a shark, a large grey one, and, such was the ease and familiarity with which daughter and shark disported themselves in the brine, that the emperor judged the scene he then witnessed to be a reptition of something which had occurred many times before. The shrine here, of course, has no connection with that particular incident."

"My back aches," complained the queen. "Nowhere do I feel well."

"It is this high altitude," said the magician. "Once we descend again to sea level, all madame's pains will vanish. That emperor I was speaking of—Him Lin Tan—was riding just here long the Great Sea Road with quite a large retinue. He and his followers were mounted on camels of the racing variety; and I have no doubt they made a splendid sight to see. For the banners and the pennons would be waving, the bugles blowing, the camels grunting and snorting as they paced up over this magnificent bluff.

"On recognizing his daughter down there in the ocean in amorous embrace with a fish, however, the Emperor Him Lin Tan halted his cavalcade—probably at this exact spot. I presume the shark and the maiden must have been in that shoal there between the five large rocks where the water is so still that you can count the polyps.

"The emperor leaned forward, his elbows on the pommel of his saddle, and he pointed out what he saw to his chief counsellor who had reined in beside him.

" 'That,' said the emperor in great sorrow, 'seems to account for my daughter's long absences from the palace these latter weeks.'

"The chief counsellor agreed cautiously that such might well be the explanation.

" 'I should never,' said the emperor, 'have allowed that girl to be taught to swim.' And he gave the forward signal, and the gorgeously bedecked troop swept down from this scenic high point here to the beaches far below; even now, I can visualize the brilliance of their scarves and trappings, the clamor of their bugles as they urged their racing camels to greater and greater speed, and the shaggy beasts pounded surefootedly down the sweeping hill."

"Bah," said the queen.

Magician, chela, ass, and queen descended from the bluff much more slowly than had the troop of the Emperor Him Lin Tan. The ocean breeze on the beaches was invigorating, cool, and salty; and the ducks, cormorants, and pelicans made the air bright with their flashing, canny wings.

After a while, the road curled inland, and the ocean became hidden by beach-growing osiers. Here the little party came upon another shrine; yams were growing in a field nearby, and the yam-planters had erected this shrine

in the hope that the God of Yams would be pleased and grant them good yam crops.

The magician paused at this shrine also—to burn incense in honor of the Yam God. "A boiled yam," said mage reflectively, "is a nutritious and palate-satisfying vegetable. I have eaten many of them, and I count on eating many more. I prefer them hot and marinated in butter."

"I believe the soles of my feet are sloughing off," said the queen. "Also, my hips ache as if they had been beaten."

"In the Little Dragon Village, we shall acquire slippers for those feet," said the magician. "Perhaps, too, we can find an ointment to rub on those hips."

He looked about him, and squinted as if seeking for some distinguishing landmark. "It was at this point, or immediately hereabouts," he continued, "the legendary javelin thrower, Hai Li, won special commendation for his prowess from the noted general, Subatai. Far ahead, there to the left, you can see a coarse growth of pine trees—six pine trees—making a dark smudge among the osiers. Seemingly, it is beyond the power of any man to stand here at this spot and hurl a javelin all the way to that clump of trees. Yet that is exactly what Hai Li did. Many witnesses saw him do it and have testified to his feat."

"Those ancient exploits of minor athletes are profoundly boring," said the queen.

"Ah, but this one has a special significance," said the magician. "It seems that Hai Li was in love with one of General Subatai's campfollowers, a girl called Dirtyneck in the vernacular of the army. But she, to the contrary and much to Hai Li's disgust, was in love with one of General Subatai's lieutenants. This lieutenant reciprocated her love every time he had an opportunity.

"Such an opportunity occurred when Subatai was leading his battle hordes on a practice march through this country and halted them for a rest here at this very spot. The lieutenant and Dirtyneck, taking advantage of the pause, hastened off to that clump of pines amid the osiers. An enemy of the lieutenant's saw them and carried the news to the javelin thrower, Hai Li. Thereupon, according to reliable witnesses, Hai Li uttered a bombastically virulent oath, seized his javelin, fixed his feet here on this little mound, and hurled his weapon at the clump.

"The javelin made an arrowlike flight of surprisingly flat trajectory, whistled into the pine clump, and buried its nib into Dirtyneck's rump. She screamed in such penetrating decibels that on-the-spot witnesses, without walking to the pines, were able to verify by sound alone that the javelin had reached its mark.

"That throw established a new and as yet unbroken record for Mongol spearmen. General Subatai himself was so impressed that he advanced Hai Li to the rank of captain and put him in exclusive charge of training javelin throwers. Later, in the Polish campaigns, Captain Hai Li was to make an even greater name for himself through his ruthlessness and battle acumen.

"Indeed," concluded the magician, "all this countryside is spotted with similar high points in the panorama of history."

"If there is one thing I hate more than another thing," said the queen, "it is tiresome travelogue. Can we please get on with our journey, or do we have to hear more trifling tidbits about the olden times?"

And the chela said, "Ng Gk is becoming thirsty, master. He has had no water to drink all this day."

"Lead on, by all means," said the magician. "There should be a well not far from here. All of which reminds me that there should be another wine jug in the left pannier. Hand it to me, chela, and I will take a sip of it in sympathy with the thirsty beast. I know he would do as much for me."

The queen started to say something, but only sighed and maintained silence as they resumed their journey. The magician now strode along like a monstrous wingless bird. Every tenth step, he raised his wine jug to his lips.

"This Great Sea Road is probably the oldest highway in all the world," he said proudly. "And consider the variety of people it has served throughout the ages: bandit and pandit, mandarin and murderer, farmer and fugitive, soldier, saint, and shopkeeper. Now, we travel it. Some noble apostrophe should be composed to signal this occasion, but I cannot think of any at the moment."

"I can see kites flying up ahead," said the chela.

"Exactly!" said the magician. "That means we are nearing our immediate destination. In the Little Dragon Village, the youngsters fly the kites, and the elders sit around

on the village stoops to watch them. There is nothing else to do. Hence, I think the diversion we are prepared to offer them this evening will be welcomed. They will be roused for a little while from their stupendous lethargy. It will be the Number Three Performance. Remember that well, chela: the Number Three Performance."

"The Number Three Performance?" asked the chela dully.

"Yes."

"The Number Three Performance," said the chela sadly.

As his party neared the village, the magician strode more rapidly and placed himself well at the head. Thus they entered the Little Dragon Village: The obese mage in white cotton breeches, the chela in blue cotton gown, the black ass Ng Gk swaying under big rattan panniers, the Lustful Queen of La, her new, incredible beauty glittering through the jute bag she wore as a dress.

Such was their appearance that many a villager awoke from his doze on his stoop, and many a child tied his kite to a stake and trotted up to view the newcomers at close range.

Conscientiously, but without ostentation, the village *shimboo* on daylight duty buckled on his sword, laid aside his pipe, stationed himself in the middle of road, halted the magician, and, sharply and firmly, demanded to know what business the little band of travelers might have.

The magician stood mute, arms folded, eyes cast heavenward. It was the chela who stepped forward, bowed humbly to the *shimboo*, and began to speak.

"The master may not break his silence until the sun sets. No word may he utter. The master may not break his fast until the moon rises. No bite may he swallow. Such is the intensity of the master's concentration on his forthcoming task that conversation and food would intolerably distract him."

"Bah!" said the *shimboo*. "Who said anything about feeding the porcine monstrosity? What is he doing here? That is what must be told."

"He is a magician out of Manchuria," said the chela, "traveling south to enlighten the people of the villages with his arts and sorcery. He has been Court Conjurer to the Ahmirs of Kindoorani; he has read the Canticles of Ras Koum Al Hejji and translated them into the vulgate of

High Mandarin; the Prince of Jekkel decorated him with Grand Cross of the Golden Swan; and the Queen of Starpathia made room for him on her couch. After dusk falls, he will practice his arts for the people of this Little Dragon Village. He counts on you, good *shimboo*, properly to announce his arrival."

And the chela took a silver coin from the pocket of his gown and pressed it into the *shimboo's* hand.

"There are statutes and ordinances governing such claptrap," said the *shimboo*. "For one thing, they forbid all magic and amusement. The Little Dragon Village is not a *village* anymore. It is a *commune*, and, as such, is a vital part of the Great Leap Forward. We have no time left here for frivolity. Even in the olden days, such performances as your gross clown of a master proposes were by law banned from the village proper and, perforce, were staged beyond the village limits. In those days, too, it was unlawful to charge admission, and ninety per cent of all donations had to be turned over to the *shimboo*."

"Those are agreeable and generous terms!" cried the chela. "The master accepts them and vows to follow them to the letter. At dusk, the master will stand at the break of the kaoliang fields; there, the people of this Little Dragon Village may come and marvel at one whom the Goorkwar of Yamparang called the 'Sublime.' "

"The Little Dragon *Commune*," replied the *shimboo*, "has seen many itinerant impostors before, and it has always been noted for the aridity, rather than the impetuosity, of its generosity. Do not say that I have not warned you."

"Further warning would be superfluous," agreed the chela. And the *shimboo* stood aside and allowed the party to proceed through the commune and on toward the sanctuary of the kaoliang field.

Out of hearing of the *shimboo*, the queen cried in great ill temper, "Many things of late I do not understand, but the thing which irritates me most is this chela's flambuoyant fluency in describing you and your great attainments and honors, whereas at all other times he is laconic to the point of being stupidly tonguetied."

"Ah," said the magician, "but the explanation is so very simple. Just now, for instance, it was not the chela speaking at all. It was I, myself. The chela merely made motions

with his lips, while I supplied the words. This is one of my minor arts.

"For," he continued, scratching himself as he strode along, "I suffer from profound bashfulness, especially when forced to speak of myself. So I have contrived this harmless little illusion of the chela seeming to speak for me. It is an apt expedient; it frees my tongue from the coy reticence which otherwise might hamper it."

"I consider it downright dishonest," said the queen. "And there is yet another thing: only a short while ago you announced you were without money. Yet, with my own eyes, I saw the chela bribe that *shimboo* with a large silver coin which I identified as dollar Mex."

"It was dollar Mex in appearance only. Actually, it was worthless."

"You dared bribe a *shimboo* with counterfeit money?"

"There was no danger, madame. In accepting it, he broke one of the strictest laws of the Great Leap Forward: *There shall be no squeeze.* That is why he slipped it into his belt so quickly without examining it. When he does discover the truth about it, his ire will act as an incentive to urge all the people of the commune to attend my performance, for he thinks to collect ninety per cent of the donations, and thus reap far more than a single dollar Mex."

"So, once again," mourned the queen, "I am in association with an unprincipled schemer. First it was Khan Ali Bok; now it is you."

The chela spoke up: "But there is a startling difference, madame. Khan Ali Bok schemed only to usurp madame's throne; the master schemes only to restore it to madame."

The queen opened her mouth as if to make reply, but then suddenly her face became knotted with uncertainty and suspicion: she was not sure at all whether the chela had made that last remark or whether the magician had made it for him.

Preparations for the evening's performance were simple. The magician halted his party at a break in the kaoliang fields, and took two small bags from the panniers on Ng Gk and threw them to the ground. He also took out another wine jug for himself and began to nurse at it. The queen watched him in disgust for a while, then slumped

wearily to the ground and dozed in boredom. Without any orders and as if everything had been prearranged, the chela led away the ass and disappeared in the kaoliang.

As the sun sank lower, furtive village children came to stare at the magician and queen. A few of the elders passed by in silence. At length the air became thick with duskiness. The magician yawned and laid aside his wine jug. He kindled a bright little fire of kaoliang stalks and burls. From one of his bags he took a small, fat, two-stringed fiddle. As the flames from the fire rose higher, he began to play.

More people came and stood around, murmuring to each other and scolding the children. Dogs skulked in and out of the kaoliang rows, sometimes sniffling at the huddled queen who, in return, snarled at them till they backed away.

The magician laid aside his fiddle. From a canister, he sprinkled powder upon his little fire. A single flame, thin as a kaoliang stalk, shot up as if issued from a blowtorch. It illuminated the entire clearing.

The magician took up three bright balls and began to juggle with them. The village *shimboo* arrived. He stood by himself, and he eyed the magician with belligerence.

In a moment of clumsiness, the mage dropped one of the balls. It rolled across the clearing where a child seized it. The village elders guffawed. The magician bowed. From somewhere about his person, he took a little bell. This, he held up and rang at the villagers. It tinkled, and they guffawed the more.

Then he separated one of the juggling balls into two pieces, put the bell between them and screwed them back together again. He shook the ball at the villagers, and they could hear the bell tinkling within it.

The magician swallowed the ball. He danced about so vigorously that his great belly shook. He struck himself sharply on his chest; the tinkling of the bell could be heard within him.

He gave a mighty cough, and the bell came up. He unscrewed it and held out the halves. There was no bell to be seen. He danced again and thumped himself again upon the chest. The tinkling of the bell could be plainly heard. He swallowed the two halves of the ball, and for

the third time he danced and thumped himself on the chest. The bell tinkled loudly and merrily.

Then once more the magician coughed up the ball. The two halves were screwed firmly together; within it the bell tinkled.

Some of the villagers giggled.

But the giggling stopped almost as soon as it arose, for there came a choking cry: the child who had seized the ball which had rolled away from the magician had attempted in mimicry to swallow it, and now it was fast in his mouth. The father of the child broke out four of the youngster's front teeth and released the ball in that manner. The other elders looked at the magician angrily. The *shimboo* shouldered himself around and took up a new position.

From another bag, the magician took out a long, thin snake, grey-green in color. He placed it on the ground, and it reared and faced him like a tall, thin S. He took up his fiddle and played, singing a song of the singsong houses of Shanhaikuan, a song of simple words but evil connotation. The snake weaved and swayed in time with his music.

The villagers snickered embarrassedly.

One of the lurking dogs, however, became excited by the fat fiddler and the dancing snake. It growled and sprang at the reptile. The snake struck fiercely and sank its fangs in the dog's black, pulpy nose. The beast backed away howling. In a few moments it was paralyzed and in another few moments dead. It was a green mamba that had bitten it.

The villagers began talking angrily; the dog had been a favorite in the Little Dragon Village. The *shimboo* joined them and conferred with them. He loosened his sword in its scabbard.

The magician laid aside his fiddle and held out his arm. The mamba curled in loose loops about his hand and wrist.

Sword now in hand, the *shimboo* approached and confronted the magician. The mamba reared from the mage's wrist, its head drawn back as a lancer draws back his arm before launching his javelin. Its mouth was half-open, its fangs partly bared beneath its upper lip.

Shimboo and snake confronted each other.

With his free hand, the magician snatched up a canister

and cast its contents on the fire. The flames blazed up as if they were huge, spark-dripping fireworks. Vast burning hoops formed and began to swim.

The fire was so brilliant that villagers and *shimboo* could see nothing else. The hoops swam so fearfully that they could look at nothing else.

And the Lustful Queen of La felt the magician snatch her up and heave her across his shoulders; she could tell by the way the kaoliang stalks scratched and tore at her that he was running with great speed.

After the light of the hellfire had left her eyes and the magic hoops had stopped whirling in her hypnotized brain, she saw that they were on a back road and the chela was tugging at the black ass, Ng Gk, urging the beast to match the speed of the mage.

At long last they halted in a grove of osiers. The magician tossed her to the ground and plunged his hands into the panniers on Ng Gk's back. He threw out bags of money, parcels of foodstuffs, bottles of wine, quantities of clothing. He inventoried it rapidly, then hugged and caressed the chela in deep appreciation.

The befuddled queen thought it was another trick. Not until the magician had opened his third bottle of wine, not until the chela had gorged himself on sweetmeats, did the realization come to her that the loot was from the Little Dragon Village . . . that while the master had held the villagers spellbound with his magic, the chela had ransacked the town.

Chapter Four

HAVING TRAVELED furtively and rapidly all the next day, by nightfall they found themselves in the hollow fold of a high hill where the thorn trees grew with fernlike thickness. The magician was having a delightful time. The chela had found a saddle of fresh pork whilst he had plundered the Little Dragon Village, and had brought it along. Now the magician sat crosslegged on the ground, humming as he trimmed the saddle before marinating it in wine.

The queen was also having a delightful time, for she was examining the feminine garments the chela had gathered up in the village. Now and again, she would hold up some frilly piece of frippery for the magician to look at, and she would ask him if he thought it would be becoming on her. "Some of those women in the Little Dragon Village must be well-to-do to afford such materials and such workmanship. Look, magician, at this green octopus embroidered on this gold cloth. Not even the palace seamstresses of La could improve upon it."

"I found it in the headman's house," said the chela. "Likewise, the pig meat the master is carving at now." And the complacent apprentice forced another sweetmeat into his mouth from the great store he had loaded on Ng Gk.

"This is not pig meat, you ignorant lout!" cried the magician, holding up and admiring the hunk of pale flesh. "This is the saddle of a boar—one of those huge wild fellows that roam the canyons to the west. They grow in size till they weigh more than Ng Gk. They gorge on earthnuts and fungi. They are more ferocious than tigers;

their tusks are as long as knifeblades. Furthermore, there is a vast difference between the taste of pig meat and the taste of wild boar saddle. Pig meat one merely tosses in a pan and scorches. The saddle of a wild boar calls for the ministering hand of an artist." And the magician, conscious that he was that artist, placed the saddle carefully in a wide wooden bowl and began to ladle white wine over it.

"If you make a fire," said the queen, "it will attract the attention of the vile people who pursue us."

"No," said the magician, "for the chela had the forethought to bring along a sack of charcoal which burns with great heat but sends off no smoke or flame. Besides, those who pursue are searching down the Great Sea Road, never foreseeing that we have hidden in these hills. We are perfectly safe: I know it because my conscience is not troubled." And he said to the chela, "What is that thing you have in that wicker cage, boy?"

"A small and pretty hawk, master. I found it in the *shimboo's* office."

"Let me see it."

The hawk stirred restlessly as the chela took it from its cage. Its eyes eagerly scanned the darkening heavens.

"I believe it is a falcon," said the mage. "That is to say, a hawk which has been trained to kill and retrieve other birds. You see how even now it peers about for something to attack."

A pigeon came winging over in the gloaming, and the little hawk struggled to free itself from the chela's hand. "Loose it!" said the magician. "It is only following its natural bent."

The hawk zoomed high above the speeding pigeon, then swooped on it in a magnificent dive that carried both to the ground. With heavy wing flaps, it brought the shuddering pigeon back to the chela and magician.

"Well done!" cried the mage. "Well done, indeed! Thou art well schooled. Let me see your pigeon." And he pulled the gentle dovelike bird from the falcon's talons.

"Hummm," he said. "So we have a message tied to our leg, do we? Well, as we have intercepted the messenger, so we will read its message." He untied and unrolled the little scroll that was fastened to the pigeon's leg.

To the Chief Shimboo of the Village of the Second Gate.

From the High Shimboo of the Little Dragon Village.

Greeting.

Our citadel—a model among the new communes established to abet the Great Leap Forward—having been pillaged by a murderous band of noncomformers, despite valiant precaution on our part: Warning.

This nonconforming deviationist band is headed by one who poses as a magician. He is accompanied by a boy, a woman, and an ass. They fear not even to stoop to bribery and counterfeiting, both of which are now capital crimes under the Great Leap Forward.

Fortunately, our commune is so well guarded that they were unable to commit any murders.

But, to our deep sorrow, they did manage to pilfer a few useless articles, and our anger thereat is not to be estimated or weighed on the customary scales of fury and outrage.

We shall hunt them down and bring them to the justice of the sword.

At this very moment, indeed, we are furiously on their trail, and have many clues as to their whereabouts.

Should they enter your honorable commune, hold them and send word.

Their leader is huge and fat and monstrously depraved in the face.

The boy is a typical young degenerate of the kind most likely to be an apprentice to such a villain.

The woman is hideously beautiful and is the spawn of evil itself.

These people are dangerous to the very state itself.

End immediate message.

The following is for your guidance only and should not be repeated or commented upon: Comrade Khan Ali Bok has been named commissar of all this territory. Could you and I, dear Chief Shimboo of the Commune of the Second Gate, present him with these deviationists, it could not harm our subsequent careers. A word to the wise, ha ha.

End message by carrier pigeon.

The queen blazed up instantly. "We shall return immediately to that foul Little Dragon Village. With hot irons and boiling water, we shall impress upon the miserable *shimboo* the awful penalty for writing slanderous words about the Lustful Queen of La. His head shall be placed on a pole as an object lesson. We shall return immediately."

"We shall do no such thing," said the magician. "Existence for a magician was bad enough in the old days when he had only to contend with the stupid and the avaricious. Now, it seems, we have the whole state upon our heads. The Great Leap Forward is pursuing us all across this once fair land. But, as Fate gave us the falcon, and as the falcon gave us the pigeon's message, so we may trust that, after their fashion, the gods still smile upon us. And are politicians to be feared when the high gods are on one's side? I say no. At the same time, I say that while one need not fear them, one should, nevertheless, do his best to avoid them. Alas for the dear, dead, and now gone days of the warlords, the princes, the emperors."

"But," sobbed the queen, "that *shimboo* said I was the hideous spawn of evil. You read those very words in his message."

"True," said the magician, "but in the context there was also the word 'beautiful.' And he only saw madame dressed in her jute bag. Now, if madame had been enswathed in suitable finery," and here the mage waved a hand at the feminine garb the chela had found in the village, "perhaps his adjectives would have taken on a different tone."

"We shall see about that right now!" cried the queen. "I hate this jute bag! I hate it!" And before magician or chela could turn his back modestly, she ripped it off and began reaching critically for the bright ensembles which once graced the No. 1 wife of the headman of the Little Dragon Village.

She bound her breasts with a transparent band. She drew peach-colored trousers up her slim legs and about her hips. She drew on a peach-colored jacket. She drew her hair into a high, tight knot. On her feet, she drew pearly slippers. Then she reached for the mirror.

"Hey!" cried the magician. "There is a sorceress in our

midst as well as a sorcerer! See, chela? It is not a queen we have, but a goddess."

"The jacket is a little snug," said the queen, blushing. "My bust measurement seems unaccountably larger. There are some other things about me, too, which seem to have changed. But any change would have been for the better."

The chela was so amazed at her glowing loveliness that a sweetmeat fell from his mouth. Ng Gk flung up his head and brayed.

Cold with anger, the queen seized a stick to belabor the tactless brute, but the magician hissed, "Stay your hand! That was not a criticism of madame's ensemble; that was a note of warning. Someone is coming!" And he lurched to his feet, and so did the chela, great alarm in their eyes.

Behind them a calm, clear voice said threateningly, "That's a fine boar's saddle you have marinating there in that white wine." And all three—magician, queen, chela—spun about to see a humped-over little man, apparently several centuries old, dressed in rags and supporting himself on a stick.

"It is the grandfather of time himself," said the magician, thinking out loud.

"Alas, no," replied the stranger. "I am only a poor hermit whose meditations have been disturbed by the coarse gabbling of your voices, and the queasy fetor of that saddle of boar's meat. I can tell at a glance that it is the saddle of the so-called Magic Boar of the Chang-li Mountains, slain by a lightning bolt only last week, and brought by a goatherd as a gift to the headman of the Little Dragon Village, now, alas, the headquarters of one of these new communes."

"Not so!" cried the magician. "It is only a piece of poor pig meat, bought across the counter on the open market at the Village of the Second Gate."

"Hmmm," said the elderly stranger. "Now, I could have sworn your chela had stolen it in the Little Dragon Village, along with the finery the Lustful Queen of La is wearing, and along with the wine you are now drinking. Where is your hospitality, fat miracle worker? Why do you not offer me a cup of your wine?"

"It is too poor a wine for such a great intellect. It could only curdle such precisely tuned old brains."

"Worry not about these brains! Worry instead about the future of this miserable land of ours! I tell you it is in such a state that soon there will be no place at all anymore for meditating hermits and wonder-working thaumaturgists. Give me some wine."

"Pour him a cup, chela," said the magician. "Old man, your words make me very sad, for they are but echoes of my own dolorous thoughts. A way of life is passing, and all that once was mysterious, poetic, and beautiful is being transformed—at the point of the bayonet—into crass materialism. Aye, if our new oppressors have their way, we will live out our lives according to the restrictive precepts of a foreign polemicist-agitator, a man we never knew."

"More wine," said the hermit. "Perhaps wine is all that is left to us. There is, of course, another way."

"What way?" demanded the magician.

"The way of revolt," said the hermit. "All we need is a leader." And he looked steadfastly at the magician.

"No!" said the magician. "Listen to me, and I will tell you a story.

"There is a mountain ten or twenty li back, and one side of this mountain is a cliff overhanging a chasm. It is a horrendous place and is known as Madman's Leap. I myself gave it that name. A long time ago, two madmen climbed up to the edge of the cliff and looked over. The first one said, 'Only a madman would leap down there.' And the second one said, 'That is right.' And he leaped. Then I came along, and I said to the first madman, 'Where is your companion?' 'He leaped into the chasm,' was the reply. 'But,' I said, 'only a madman would leap into such a place.' 'That is right,' the first madman replied, and he leaped also. So I gave the place the name of Madman's Leap, and it has retained the name to this very day.

"And I put it to you now: Who would be the maddest: Those two who leaped into the chasm, or I if I was to do as you suggest and leap into this political thing?"

"Perhaps you have already leaped," said the hermit. "Perhaps you are already involved."

"I am not aware of it," said the magician.

"You have the queen," said the hermit. "That involves you. Queens and communes do not mix. You should have left her safe in the arms of Nip Toon Ah. You should have

left her ugly. Now that they think she is gone from them, they remember only the beauty she seemed to have symbolized for them. They have forgotten her petty meannesses, and remember well her glory. But, truly now, she is a lovely thing."

And he reached over and stroked the queen in various places.

"Stop pawing me, you dirty old man!" she screamed.

"Aye! Strike these feeble hands away," said the hermit sadly. "There was a time, though, when young maids were not so fastidious. Give me some more wine, magician. I fain would indulge in some senile reminiscences.

"For, when I drink wine, I always remember my boynood and my boyhood home in a land of sand and sulphur and spume. A riverain land."

"Where is that land?" asked the magician, boredly pouring more wine.

"Over yonder," said the ancient. "A girl was there in my youth, a lean and hungry-eyed girl. Sometimes I dream of her now when I am asleep in my cave. I dream that I am playing with her in the sands after the sun has set. Ah, yes! It was sex games that we played, modeling our behavior on that of some goats which frolicked there. Daring improvisationists, we often outdid the goats in our impetuosity. Indeed, sometimes the goats stood by and watched in awe.

"Alas, they are building a dam now in that boyhood land of mine; they are building a dam all the way across that land of sand and sulphur and spume. It will be the biggest dam in all the world, they say. And that lean and hungry-eyed girl, now a bent old woman, each day carries on her thin shoulders the basket of rocks she is condemned to deliver to the damsite. Now I have escaped carrying rocks, but I am condemned to be a dirty old man."

Here, he paused to drink wine, and then began to sing a dirge:

"The seagulls lay their eggs near Shan Hai Kwan
And junks put out to sea near Wei Hai Wei;
Bold tigers nurse their young near Toon Li Han
As drugmen pulp the poppies red and gay.

"It is not of the mandarins I sing;
It is not of the moonlight that I chant.
But poppies in the dawntime will I bring
When o'er thy grave I rend my breast and pant."

"A fitting dirge," said the magician. "One only wishes one knew what it meant. But there are so many things in that same category that it is tiresome to think about it. Let us have some more wine. As moments go, this one seems particularly flitting. Let us have some more wine. Then, after we become sufficiently illuminated so that we can see everything in its utmost clarity, I propose that we make love to the queen."

"Agreed," said the hermit enthusiastically.

"You try it," said the queen, "and I will cut your drunken hearts out." And she held up the big knife the magician had used in trimming the wild boar's saddle.

Chapter Five

They were bidding farewell to the hermit at the mouth of his bat-haunted cavern, and it was the magician out of Manchuria who said:

"Well, now, my ancient wrinkled small and smelly one, we have enjoyed the bounty of your hospitality, but all good things must come to an end, alas. I had rather drowse in the musty sunlight at the entrance of your fetid cave than do what I am about to do, but duty drives me on, alas. Duty, always my inexorable mistress, drives me on to restore the Lustful Queen of La to her rightful throne, alas. There is no help for it. On we go now, and so, goodbye, alas."

"This moment of history," said the hermit, "bodes very ill for those who would restore queens to their thrones. A more inappropriate moment of history I cannot conceive of. I suggest that you reduce your grandiose aims to the simple one of bare survival. Even that, alas, will prove difficult enough."

"I want my throne back," said the queen snappishly. "And that's the end of the matter."

"See?" said the magician helplessly to the hermit. "That is indeed the end of the matter."

"No, it isn't," said the hermit. "But there is no use in engaging in further argument. However, you had just as well have some excitement on your way. Take this path here," and he indicated one leading off into the gloom behind his cavern, "and it will lead you through the sky-high, cloud-shattering Moonbath Mountains. Only brigands, bandits, evildoers, and desperadoes live there. But

there are none of the new politicians, and therein may lie your safety."

"Excellent!" exulted the mage. "They sound like my kind of people, wild and free. The tame sheep that form human chains and pass along buckets full of rocks to make dams for the glory of the new state are not my kind at all.

"Forward, then! Trot in your slippers, my queen! Shuffle in your sandals, my chela! Danger lies ahead, yes, but it is honest, understandable danger."

Lizards haunt the Moonbath Mountains. They are of a moldy green in color, and they persist in living together as do the corals. When not off feeding, they pile themselves up together so that they form a thing which looks like a dead bush or shrub. If one kicks at one of these lizard bushes, or trees, the reptiles break apart and scamper away, outwitting their enemy by the rapidity of their dispersion.

The magician explained this minor mystery of the Moonbath Mountains to the chela and the queen, and promised them a demonstration as soon as they might come upon one of the trees.

To illustrate more fully what he meant, he halted them and pointed out a small dead shrub on which there were no leaves, but only stunted, spiky branches.

"This," he said, "is exactly what the lizard trees look like. Now, if this little dead shrub was indeed a lizard tree, and I should kick it—thus—it would immediately disintegrate into the numerous lizards which make it up, and they would all go scampering away." And he kicked at the little shurb.

It disintegrated immediately into numerous moldy green lizards, and they all went scampering away.

The magician looked at the queen and the chela. Their faces were sober and expressionless, and neither of them said anything.

"Forward," said the magician in a frosty voice.

Obediently, the party moved forward. But ever and again for quite some while the magician was certain he could hear giggles, the gurgling giggles of the boy, the limpid giggles of the queen. Ng Gk seemed only to cough, but once he coughed so hard he had to pause to allow the seizure to pass.

For the journey, the queen wore loose white trousers which were so wide at the cuffs that they billowed about her ankles as if she wore a skirt instead. There was a blue scarf tight about her waist, the ends of it neatly tucked in. She wore a transparent net blouse the color of gold with tiny black dragons running helter-skelter all over it; it was buttoned in a high, tight collar about her throat. It was so short of sleeve that most of her pale arms were bare. Her long black hair hung in a loose plait down her back, rippling like corded moss under a waterfall. Her feet were shod in black cotton slippers with thick felt soles of grey. The quiet air of the mountain morning buoyed itself about her, sustaining on its waves fugitive wisps of her delicate perfume. In the dust of the path, her felt-soled slippers left neat little prints, evenly spaced, meticulously placed. A bird flying up the pathway noted the queen's long black hair and coveted a dozen strands or so with which to bind its nest. The queen petulantly brushed it away as it attempted to secure them. For the queen herself was remembering her sixth lover, a thin brown man given to spells of silence and melancholy, but occasionally besieged by an ardor of incredible persistence.

She remembered the perfume of the sumptuous couches on which she oft had lain, the thick and cloying perfume that spoke insidiously of the love which had been distilled there . . . the pillows piled in disarray at head or foot or even in the middle . . . the robes and rugs thrown about in abandoned untidiness . . . the towels . . .

"Hey, magician!" cried the queen. "What sort of men live in the Moonbath Mountains?"

"Bad men," said the mage in his somberest tone. "One and all, they are robbers and bandits and outlaws, and not a single one but would cut the throat of an honest traveler or otherwise work harm to him. We take this route only because it is short, and for no other reason."

And grim silence reigned among the travelers, broken only by the queen's angry curses as she was forced again and again to shoo away the bird which was trying to snatch strands of her long black hair.

They came to a wayside inn, carved in situ from the rocky wall of the path they traveled and guarded by cloisonne gargoyles and stern-visaged marble lions.

Even as they approached the inn, they saw a troop of

horse soldiers rush from its interior, fling themselves on their ponies, and dash off into the fastnesses of the hills. Each soldier wore an ugly false face to frighten the enemy.

"Those mounted, militant figures undoubtedly are soldiers!" cried the magician. "They ride up into the mountains on a foray against bandits. For the Moonbath Mountains are like a patch of flowers in which noxious growths persist in springing up: they must be weeded every so often, else the whole range would be overrun with miscreants." And he directed the chela to tether Ng Gk to the statue of a lion which had an iron ring in its nose.

Then he took the queen and the chela into the inn and sat them down at a table, and he called to the innkeeper to bring them tea and rice and boiled fish with soy sauce.

However, the innkeeper stopped first to talk awhile.

"Did you see the soldiers?" he asked.

"Yes," said the magician, "and I have already explained their significance to my little flock."

"Ah," said the innkeeper, "then it is unnecessary on my part to point out how anachronistic is their whole futile enterprise."

"Eh?" said the magician.

"Ah!" said the innkeeper. "Even so."

"Even so, what?" asked the magician. "And where is our tea?"

"Presently," said the innkeeper. "Yes, you already know about the soldiers, how they have formed themselves into what they call 'The Company of the Compassionate,' how they have vowed to fight with the last drop of their blood against the encroachment of the Great Leap Forward, how they have vowed to fight in the garb of the soldiers of the great Emperor Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, who built the Great Wall to stem a greater menace than the Great Leap. Yes, you know all that, and you know how futile is their entire enterprise."

"Futility," said the magician, "is the most relative of all terms. Tell me, if you are able, something of the leader of this Company of the Compassionate."

"Able?" cried the innkeeper. "I have known the man since he was no bigger than a bobbin. He is Captain Bao Bu-bo, once the greatest bandit-killer ever to patrol the Moonbath Mountains. In his heyday, bandits would tremble when they heard his name; when they saw his face,

they swooned; many, at his command, have been known to disembowel themselves. At first, he worked on a bounty basis. This province would pay him so much a head for every bandit he slew. Quite soon he found there was a lucrative squeeze attached to his position: often the bandit would pay more to retain his head than the province would pay to deprive him of it. This led to a rapprochement between the bandits and Captain Bao Bu-bo. And it was a simple step for them to join ranks when the Great Leap Forward came this way, for neither the gallant captain nor the canny bandits could see their way to following its precepts. Thus, the Company of the Compassionate was formed. But I pronounce the whole thing as being anachronistic, and I shall denounce the company to the proper authorities as soon as some necessary preliminary steps have been taken."

"I suppose," said the magician sourly, "that there will be some handsome squeeze coming your way for the denunciation."

"Squeeze has long been forbidden," said the innkeeper. "But suitable recompense from a grateful state has never been frowned upon. Just a few preliminaries are necessary. This Captain Bao Bu-bo is particulalry detested by the great commissar, Khan Ali Bok, who has vowed to wipe out him and his Company of the Compassionate."

"The more I hear of this captain and his company," said the magician, "the more I am convinced that they are my kind of people."

"But they are anachronisms, I tell you!" stormed the innkeeper.

"No more so than I am," said the magician. "Be pleased to bring us our tea now, please, and our fish and rice and soy sauce."

"We are out of fish," said the innkeeper, "and our store of rice was commandeered by the Company of the Compassionate. A water shortage prevents us from serving tea."

"So?" said the magician. "Well, then the feast is finished. Come, my children; we shall be able to walk the faster because our bellies are lighter. It was a gratifying meal in that it cost us nothing."

"There was no offense meant," said the innkeeper.

"There was none received, either," said the mage.

"You are taking a happy attitude about this which pleases me," said the innkeeper. "The last time a similar thing occurred, the travelers were fearfully upset, and one of them took his staff and struck me a glancing blow on the head."

"What a cruel thing to do!" cried the magician. "Tell me, did he strike at you like this?" And the magician made a mighty, backhand sweep with his staff and crashed it against the innkeeper's skull.

"Now, let us be gone," he said to his chela and the queen. "It is high time we left, anyhow, dinner or no dinner. I feel the clouds of doom closing in upon us. Besides, I am hungry."

"Master, I am very hungry," said the chela.

"I am violently hungry!" said the queen. "And I think the clouds of doom have already closed in. Wherever we go, I hear the hated name of Khan Ali Bok. Someday, he will catch up with me. He will have known by now that I was never drowned at all, but instead was resuscitated by a shilly-shallying charlatan who only seems to go around in stupid circles and has done absolutely nothing so far toward restoring me to my rightful throne. He will know..."

"Peace!" said the magician. "He may have learned, indeed, that you still live, but in what guise, he will not know. For what he drowned was an abominable homely female, and what I resurrected has now become an almost intolerably beautiful young lady. Therefore, let us cease this constant recrimination and go forward, knowing that truth and justice are on our side, and that against truth and justice the infernal fires themselves shall not prevail."

"Bosh," said the queen. "I may be beautiful, but I hope not intolerably so. May I ask what your plans are at this moment?"

"Why, to remain existent, to remain a threat always against the Khan and what he stands for. Always to retreat, if it be necessary for our existence to retreat, but always to be ready to strike, even if it means the end of existence. I recall the dialogue between the Mandarin and the Cockatrice. The Mandarin was in the process of building a vast pleasure park, and the site he chose for it was the home of the Cockatrice.

" 'You will have to go,' said the Mandarin. 'You do not

fit in here anymore. Modernity has caught up with you. You are a thing of the past. The wave of the future is about to roll over you.'

" 'And if I choose not to go?' said the Cockatrice.

" 'Then you shall be destroyed.'

" 'And if I contend against destruction?'

" 'Then you shall be hounded and harried unto the ends of the earth.'

" 'Call up your harrying hounds,' said the Cockatrice, 'for I elect to contend.'

"And the Mandarin did so, and the Cockatrice skittered off to a bosk and hid there and malingered. And so things went along, for years even, with the Mandarin becoming more and more bored with the whole thing, and the Cockatrice just biding its time.

"And so it still goes. The harrying has been relaxed somewhat, but the original hatreds remain."

"Nonsense!" cried the queen. "Do you mean that we, too, shall hide out in a bosk and malinger?"

"Not exactly," said the magician. "For we have a weapon which was denied to the Cockatrice."

"Weapon? What weapon?"

"Madame's intolerable beauty. Thrones have fallen for less, towers have been toppled, and even politicians and theoreticians have been known to be vulnerable."

"Well, I don't know," said the queen, touching herself on the breasts, "but, of course, I will help if I can. Where do we go now?"

"It is my thought," said the magician, "to join up, if possible, with the Company of the Compassionate and attempt to concert our plans."

"Plans? Plans for what?"

"Survival. That was the advice, remember, from the old hermit in the cave. If we survive long enough, we might be able to strike back. Come, let us go."

Chapter Six

THE MAGICIAN mothered his little flock away from the environs of the evil inn carved in situ in the living rock and took them up the same path the Company of the Compassionate had taken when its members had riden off in their brave false faces into the foothills of the Moonbath Mountains. Soon towering pines and mountain alders began to arch over the path, and at length it seemed as if they were making their way through a tunnel of green.

"Master, I am very hungry," whimpered the chela.

"Yes," said the queen. "And I am beginning to fear this queer path we are following, for I know not where it leads, but I suspect it to be haunted with horrors."

"Rubbish," said the magician. "Has not the Company of the Compassionate ridden on ahead of us? Is not its mission to make the mountains safe for simple travelers? There is nothing to fear. All mountain paths look a great deal alike; forebodingness is one of their chief characteristics. Fix your thoughts on cheerful things, and march on fearing naught."

They marched on; the trail they trod was hewn from the virgin igneous rock itself. Repulsive barb-tailed vultures came flapping through the tunnel of green just above their heads. Their only note was a creaking wail.

"By the bowels of Buddha!" cried the vexed queen, "the gods must have conceived a hatred of the world when they designed such atrocious terrain as this! Anyone who travels through here is a fool and merits whatever vile fate awaits him."

"I am afraid, too, master," whimpered the chela.

"Fear," said the magician, "is the prerogative of children and women. As for myself, I fear nothing, least of all these mountains and their sylvan paths."

And by his brave example he kept them striding on, and at length they emerged from the tunnel of greenery and entered an area of piled-up boulders and gorges and crags; and the path they followed took on nightmare proportions of rock and shadow and cleft and chasm.

The magician muttered unbelievingly to himself: "Surely the architects of Hell itself could borrow striking backgrounds from this ghastly scene."

Neither chela nor queen saw fit to reply to that somber admission.

But then the magician, who was leading them, cried out, "Ha, ha!" in a nervous voice full of relief, for ahead there opened a pretty glade encompassing a lovely mountain meadow, and camped in it was the Company of the Compassionate.

"See?" said the magician. "What have I been telling you? The sun shines again. All ahead is clear and safe."

Even the queen was reassured. They hastened their feet and speeded their journey.

The shaggy ponies of the Company of the Compassionate munched in the mountain meadow, and the members of the company lolled about on the sod, their false faces hanging from tree branches along with the ponies' saddles. Without the hideous faces of war, the members of the company looked for the most like gentle young boys.

A tent of white felt had been erected at the edge of the meadow under the trees; this was the command tent of the leader of the Company of the Compassionate. "I propose that we go straight to it," said the magician, "and make ourselves known. Which, I wonder, among all these false faces of wrath, is the one the leader wears?"

It turned out that the leader of the Company of the Compassionate was the last man in the world to need a false face in order to frighten the enemy. At the approach of the magician, the queen, the chela, and Ng Gk, he manifested himself from the door flaps of the white felt tent and stood there staring at them, his hands insolently on his hips.

A large, muscular felon, he was dressed in sheepskins, and his leggings were laced with cords of gold. He wore a

ring in his nose and in the lobe of each ear; jewelry, in fact, could be discerned about most of his person. There were rings on his fingers, a gold chain about his throat, and bracelets on his arms. His mustaches, which sprouted from the edges of his mouth and fell far down on his chest, had tiny gold pistols plaited in their ends.

Heavily armed, he wore a curved sword, two straight daggers, and a large-caliber pistol which, for a grip, had a wolf's head carved in ivory. The sheepskins which he wore in lieu of formal clothing were of the finest fleece, and the tailoring which had gone into them was meticulous. Where his leggings did not entirely cover his shanks, big varicose veins stuck out like cables. Many of his teeth had been lost either in battle or through lack of care. Some fingers on one hand and the thumb on another were gone, too.

The Lustful Queen of La looked at him and drew a sharp breath through her nostrils deep down into the cells of her lungs. He looked at her and did likewise.

"Greetings!" he cried. "I am, of course, Captain Bao Bu-bo, once chief bandit-hunter of the Moonbath Mountains, but now, alas, the last of the petty bourgeoisie. A remorseless, merciless man, I am a shrewd and implacable fighter. I have risen to my present leadership through sheer ability and virtuosity. If I am met with a situation not specifically taken care of in the great Rules Book on Survival, I never hesitate to improvise new rules and stratagems. Some of my battles have become classics of mountain guerrillaship. Judging by my present stature, there is little doubt that when I die I shall become a myth and my doings will be incorporated in the folklore of my peoples. Lately, because of the political situation, I have had to revise some of my immediate aims, and this Company of the Compassionate is an obvious corollary thereto. But, even so, I still adhere to most of my hardest and fastest rules, one of them being, for instance, that all uninvited male travelers chancing upon my enclave shall be killed, and all females in the same condition shall be ravished, their spawn to become full-fledged members, if they prove worthy, of my Company of the Compassionate. It is upon the young men, indeed, that I base my hopes for the future."

"Ravish all you please!" shrilled the queen. "But revise your rules about killing males."

"Bah!" sneered the guerrilla chieftain. "Is it not rather obvious that I, Captain Bao Bu-bo, never listen to the pleas of my victims? Here in these mountains, I, and I alone, command. Who is this fat monstrosity?"

"He is a magician out of Manchuria," said the chela, "and even the last of the petty bourgeoisie should think twice about destroying a necromancer of such diverse and extraordinary talent. For what worth is a world, even a one-party world, with the magic gone out it?"

As Bao Bu-bo sought to come up with an appropriate answer to this intellectual challenge, the queen and the chela looked at each other in amused wonderment. For neither of them actually had spoken at all; it had been the magician who had spoken through them.

"Hah!" finally said Bao Bu-bo. "Hah! I shall have to think this over. Meanwhile, I shall have the fat beast fettered and then, later, slain at leisure. But the woman's fate is definitely sealed. She shall be ravished."

"Women differ," warned the queen, and even the chela could not tell now whether she spoke her own or the magician's words. "They differ just as do the deciduous trees, some of which must have their fruits torn from them whereas others overwhelm the would-be picker with the avalanche from their branches." The chela decided that this was definitely magician-talk, and even the queen seemed satisfied with the sentiments it expressed.

But the guerrilla chieftain only sneered a third time, and blew a blast on his fingers to summon his men. When a sufficient number of them arrived, he directed them to bind the magician and the chela and to cast them into the black yurt which served as detention quarters. As for the queen herself, he led her into his white felt tent.

Within the yurt, the pleasant-faced, gentle-looking boys of the Company of the Compassionate bound the magician and the chela with both hempen and leather thongs, gagged them, and tossed them to the floor. Outside, the black ass, Ng Gk, was allowed to wander as he chose among the tethered ponies.

The chela loosened his gag and moaned, "A sorry pass, master. Truly a sorry pass."

"It is not these fetters that fret me," said the mage, loosening his own gag. "It is the stagnation of my mind. I

can think of positively nothing to do. Therefore, lie still, chela, and keep still. Allow me to collect my thoughts."

"But the queen!" cried the chela. "Think of the awful fate in store for her!"

"Pfffft!" said the magician. "She came not by her name and fame through skill at Mah Jongg."

The chela cast that illuminating phrase around in his mind for a while, and then asked, "What is being ravished?"

"It will be easier to explain that to you when you are somewhat older," said the magician. "Meanwhile, were I that redoubtable Captain Bao Bu-bo, I should be most wary. Our queen wears no warlike mask on her face when she goes into battle, but the weapons she possesses are nonetheless quite formidable."

Then chela and sorcerer lay still for a while, snugly pinioned within the cool, quiet confines of the detention yurt, the one submitting to his bonds, the other collecting and sorting out his thoughts. Outside, the members of the Company of the Compassionate were beginning to make merry for the evening, the sun now beginning to set in classic style in the west.

They were cooking the haunch of a sadhjuk, that agile mountain antelope which can whistle through its horns, they being hollow after a certain age and piped to the creature's lungs by a special passageway. The young Compassionates were as happy at this as a group of schoolboys on a picnic or similarly innocent lark. The ensign who supervised the barbecue wielded a long spit. While the attention of his mates was directed elsewhere, he heated the spit's end in the coals. Then, the attention of his mates still being directed elsewhere, he touched the heated end of the spit to the lower backside of the newest recruit who was the constant butt of his fellows' pranks and teasings. The new recruit bellowed in pain and wrath, and struck down the ensign. Whereat, the others fell upon him and bucked and gagged him, for it was unlawful in the Company of the Compassionate to strike an officer. Then all, except the gagged recruit with the branded backside, roared with laughter, for the little incident appealed to their senses of humor.

Within the yurt, magician and chela listened to the sounds of mirth with mixed emotions. The chela squirmed

the harder against his bonds, but the magician lay very still, for he felt a creepy, crawly feeling along the base of his spine, and his fingernails began to pain him. At length, the skin around his ankles drew tight as a drumhead and gave off a popping sound.

"Ten thousand vile words!" said the mage.

"What is it, master?" asked the alarmed apprentice.

"Do you remember what happened to me almost exactly one year ago on the road between Mukden and Harbin?"

"Not that again! Oh, surely, not that!"

"Alas."

"But what an embarrassing time, master! Is there any pain?"

"No pain, chela. Merely utter exasperation."

Intermittently thereafter, the magician groaned in varing tones of loudness or softness—groans of exasperation and not of pain. In sympathy, the chela groaned with him. Tiring of that at length, the chela said, "Master, I have never seen our fortunes at a lower ebb."

By then, all the magician could do was grunt.

Chapter Seven

Surrounded by those luxuries without which his existence would have been—to him—crude and meaningless, the captain of the Company of the Compassionate lay in his silk-lined white felt tent upon a low couch of immaculate spraddelfusz. Small, intricate lattices were drawn over the windows of the tent, and the floor was carpeted with a thick and beautiful blue Koordistan rug. Against this almost feminine atmosphere of the interior had been thrown a clashing leit motif of brutality carried out in massy brasses, horrid, stylized weapons, tortured, prehistoric objets d'art.

"My case history is a most curious one," said the captain to the queen, who sat crosslegged on an ottoman, dreamily preparing herself for the moment of her ravishing. "As I relate it to you, you will discover that I am a man of strange, sudden impulses and bashful, conflicting desires. A remorse has haunted me since childhood when once, in a moment of boyish anger, I flung a stone at my aunt who was endeavoring to decapitate a crocodile. Indeed, only a quirk of fate kept me from being a seller of squashes in the marketplace or a recluse in a Buddhist monastery, writing learned footnotes upon the Fire Sermon."

The queen wetted a slim finger and ran it over the down of her forearm. "Is your case history a long one?" she asked.

"Unabridged, it would make three chapters in a book of this length," replied the captain.

The queen sighed and recrossed her legs. "What is your earliest childhood remembrance?" she asked.

"The remark of the midwife as she eased me from the womb and slapped me: 'No good will ever come of this young fellow.' Heyday, how true her dour words have proved!" And the guerrilla took from a bowl on the dais beside him a sweet made of lichee nuts and almonds mashed into a paste.

"Life is sometimes difficult for an only child," said the queen, plaiting her hair into a single, heavy rope.

"Only child?" cried her host. "I had something like eight or nine sisters. Not all of them lived, of course."

The queen smiled and partially removed her blouse. "The lives of girl babies have never been too highly valued in this country," she said.

"I was apprenticed to a shoemaker," said the guerrilla. "He despised me, and I hated him. Every weekend at shop closing time, he would beat me. But I grew rapidly, and one day it occurred to me that not only was I large enough then to prevent him from beating me but that I could beat him instead. Came the weekend, and I put this theory to immediate test. It worked so well that I severed all connection with the shoe business. But by then I had learned the trade, and learned it well; and if worse ever comes to worst, I can always go back to making shoes. Indeed, I have always held that whatever his station in life, a young man should learn a trade. As my master often remarked, 'He'll never know when he'll need it the most.'"

"That is sound and meaty advice," said the queen, laying aside her blouse and pulling daintily at her nipples.

The captain took a long draught from a pitcher of wine.

"That shoemaking experience taught me to watch the pennies, too," he said. "'Watch the pennies,' my master used to say, 'and the dollars will watch themselves.' Of course, in my boisterous youth, that arid axiom sounded to me as so much nonsense, but since then I have had more than one occasion on which to remark upon its aptness. My master also had another favorite saying: 'Never put off till tomorrow what you should do today.'"

"Now there," cried the queen, "is an admonition in which I wholeheartedly concur. It is succinct and entirely to the point." And she pulled the earrings from her earlobes and massaged them into her breasts.

"But," said Captain Bao Bu-bo, "my master also was

fond of pointing out that haste makes waste." And he took a pipe of opium, lighted it, and puffed meditatively.

The queen threw the earrings across the tent. "I suppose," she remarked sourly, "that you therefore order all your actions on whatever silly cliché happens to pop into your head."

"One could go farther and fare worse," said the guerrilla. "I am critically reminded at this point of several significant things which happened to me on my wedding night."

"Oh?" said the queen. "So then you are married?"

"Very much so; I have five wives. The first three, I married the same afternoon, the other two at appropriate intervals much later. The experience of my original wedding night with three brides, however, did more than anything else in my whole life to impress upon me the truth of the saying that a man should never bite off more than he can chew, and another saying which has something to do with the straw that breaks a camel's back."

The queeen loosened her waistband and settled the top of her trousers down over her hips. "Yet you should certainly guard against the possibility of people sharpening their fingers at you and saying, 'That which he should have done, he did not do,' " and she slipped the trousers down her slim legs and off her slim feet. "That a thing is sometimes abused is no reason for giving up its legitimate use," she pointed out to him. And, slapping herself sharply on her mound of Venus, she hissed, "A word to the wise is sufficient: Shoemaker mind thy last!"

"Rome," growled back the guerrilla, "took more than a day in the building, and the race is not always to the swift."

The queen sprang to her feet and advanced upon him. "Birds," she screamed, "that can sing and won't sing must be made to sing! A horse that is led to water and won't drink must be made to drnk!"

"A volcano which erupts too harshly empties itself by its own violence," pleaded the now desperate man. "One which is content to smolder lives a long life. You cannot have your cake and eat it, too. Temperance in all things! Temperance!"

'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,"

replied the grim queen; and she wrought upon him that fillip by which she had come to name and fame.

Back in the black felt yurt, the magician groaned profoundly, while the anxious chela lay in terror listening to his master's agonies and spasms. "How goes it now?" he kept asking, but for a long while received no intelligible answer. Suddenly, however, the magician gave a fearful cough and then said in a surprisingly clear voice, "Ah! Now at last my head is free."

"It was truly then, the same trouble?" asked the chela.

"Yes. Yes," said the magician in a firm, businesslike tone. "I am shedding my skin again . . . one of the penalties for having snakes on one's maternal side. Hah! I can feel the hide splitting down my back, and it is slipping off my shoulders. Chela! Listen to me! I am also shedding my fetters along with my old skin. Not for nothing am I a magician!"

"O Paradise!" exulted the chela. "Even in my deepest gloom, I never doubted but that thou wouldst find a way to free us. Since that glorious day I became thy pupil, I have never seen difficulty or danger which thou couldst not overcome. Being bound, fettered in guerrilla yurt wast as naught to him whom the Chawlmoogra of Panremus decorated with the Ebony Star of the Lower Riffle. Not for nothing did. . . . But what is all that tremendous racket going on outside?"

And, indeed, a most wild tumult had arisen. It sounded like the combined baying of dogs, roaring of lions, trumpeting of elephants, frantling of peacocks, crouting of cormorants, wailing of banshees, blowing of whales, screaming of leopards, bawking of bats, snickering of snipes, and bugling of stags.

The entire guerrilla camp was in an uproar. Well might the queen have felt proud of herself at that moment. She had caused it all with one subtle fillip. The potency of her action had transmitted itself throughout the whole camp, and now each member of the Company of the Compassionate gave tongue in such voice as best suited his implacable disturbance.

As for Captain Bao-Bu-bo, he was electrified with fear of what the queen might do, or require him to do, next; and he burst through the side of the tent without bother-

ing to use the door. He leaped to the back of his pony while still some twenty paces from the beast, and spurred away for the valley.

Ignorant exactly of what had happened, and full of bewilderment and uncertainty, the Company of the Compassionate stood in a mass, its members' voices now muted and querulous, and somewhat shamed after their previous unaccountable outbursts.

Then came a commanding shout in the voice of Captain Bao Bu-bo: "To your beasts at once! Saddle! Mount! Ride off in all directions! Never return! Never think of returning! This company is disbanded. Mount! Ride off! Be gone!"

And such was their sense of obedience that they did so, like a swarm of bees without a queen. They disappeared, and no one has seen them since.

The chela looked in awe at the magician. "Master," he said, "never have I seen such a performance. Indeed, even I at first thought I was hearing the guerrilla chieftain."

"Well," said the magician, rubbing his hands briskly, "never mind what you thought. Come, we have work to do now that the way is cleared."

Back in the white felt tent, a thoroughly disgusted Lustful Queen of La picked up her scattered clothing, looked at it disdainfully, tossed it aside, and exited through the door. "There is one satisfaction," she said to herself. "That imitation hero will never speak again of ravishing women." She looked about the deserted camp and discerned two shadowy figures at the door of a large tent some distance away. She tiptoed across the meadow and found that the figures were those of the magician and the chela.

They were loading the black ass, Ng Gk, with loot from the Company of the Compassionates' great hoard of pilferings. The chela was doing the actual work, and the magician was issuing the orders. "Throw back some of that gold to make room for more wine. The poor beast can only carry so much."

"But, master," protested the chela, "gold is far more valuable than wine."

"Nonsense," said the mage. "Gold is a heavy, unpleasant metal over which men murder each other. Wine, on the

other hand, is the elixir of distilled dreams. Do as I tell you and throw away the gold."

With blazing eyes, the queen stood watching them. Ng Gk saw her and noted her wrath. He nudged the magician warningly with his nose.

"Well, my dusky butterball, and what is it now?" asked his master, scratching him behind one ear. The ass whined fearfully, as does a dog whose master is caught in a burning building, and nodded his head toward the simmering queen. The magician looked.

"Well!" he said. "Well . . . hello . . . how are you?"

"How am I?" snarled the queen. "I am just splendid, thank you! I am like to a kettle of water brought just to the boiling point and then snatched away. I am like a bud about to blossom, but cut from the limb. I am like a bomb about to explode, but whose fuse has been torn out."

"This is incredible," said the magician in amazement. "According to my remembrance of this evening's program, madame should instead be like a temple whose holy of holies has just been violated or, indeed, like a dishrag from which the last drop of moisture has been wrung."

"Well, I'm not," snarled the queen. "And it is through no virtue of yours that I am not. Just when I needed you the most, I was most deserted by you. Just when you could have been of utmost assistance, you were nowhere to be found."

"You needed me?" asked the bewildered magician. "How could I have been of any assistance?"

"You could have helped hold the chieftain!" screamed the queen. "And when I finally find you—and it is already far too late—what are you doing? Why, you are engaged in your favorite pursuit of petty larceny, stealing wine to pour into your fat belly. Truly an action of heroic stature! Truly most worthy of him whom the Batschira of Musrumba called the Infallible!"

"But Madame the Queen is being grossly unfair to the master," put in the chela. "He has undergone and triumphed over terrible trials all through this awful night. He was bound tight as a bundle of osiers by the wicked Company of the Compassionate and thrown prone into an evil-smelling detention yurt made of the mangy hair of crippled camels. He was given nothing to eat, nor any wine to drink. In addition to all that, the queer, chronic

ailment which has been the chief bane of his existence chose then to visit him; and there, in those most unpleasant surroundings, his peculiar curse lit upon him, and he found he was shedding his skin. A painful procedure always, this time it was almost unbearably so. A lesser man might have lost his reason from the mere agony of it.

"But the ineffable master so contrived things that his curse worked also to his blessing, and, as his old skin rolled down off him in painful pulsations, so also did his fetters roll off with that skin. Speechless before, his voice now returned to him in full throat, and, with one imperious command, he disbanded the Company of the Compassionate, the members of which are nothing if not credulous and obedient to what they consider to be the voice of ultimate authority. When madame discovered us, we were provisioning the black ass Ng Gk with the dominant thought in mind of rescuing madame and continuing our journey."

"I fail to be impressed anymore," said the queen, "by the grandiloquent excuses the magician artificially makes to me though the mouth of an apprentice. And what, pray, is all this nonsense about changing skins?"

"It is no nonsense," said the magician in an injured voice. "It is a periodic visitation about which I am highly sensitive and choose not to discuss when I can avoid it. Now, however, since madame has seen fit to impugn my honor and hint that I am useless as well as cowardly, I shall discuss the phenomenon at some length. On the maternal side of my family there was at one time a snake, and it is from her that I have inherited that peculiarity of all squamata, large and small: moulting. It happens at off intervals; there is nothing regular about it except its irregularity. I become aware only a few moments before it starts that it is about to happen. Invariably, it selects inopportune times, although I concede that just now it was most opportune."

"How perfectly ridiculous," said the queen. "I don't believe a word of it. Yet you do seem different somehow. Come closer and let me look at you. Yes! Your skin is ten or fifteen shades lighter. You have lost considerable weight. Your eyes are brighter; and, by the bunion on the left toe of Gautama Buddha, your fingernails are actually clean! You must have changed your skin! Nothing else,

except a thorough boiling in oil could have wrought so great a transformation. Stand still!" And she reached out and stroked his shoulder, her long fingernails leaving red marks.

"How soft this new skin is," she purred. "It is resilient and rubbery and warm. It is like a baby's skin, but at the same time mature and masculine."

"Leave my skin alone," said the magician touchily, beginning to back away. "There is a gleam in madame's eyes which I definitely distrust."

"Don't look at my eyes," said the queen, still purring. "Look at me." And she put her hands on her hips and twisted her lithe body before him. "Is there not something about me which is not to be found in other women? Can you not see in me the haunting dream of some old hidden desire?"

"No," said the magician. And, nervously, he backed farther away.

The chela spoke up uncertainly. "I remember a story my father used to tell me of how the girl of Bonda Porjas takes her lover into the jungle and applies fire to his back. If he emits a scream, she rejects him. This old bit of folk lore may or may not be apropos to the moment, but it seems that a negative answer might well do for a more formal scream."

"Shut up, you stupid little brat!" shouted the queen. "Who asked you to say anything?" And then she looked narrowly at the magician. "Who spoke then, you or the boy? I warn you, my patience is becoming exhausted at your silly trick of talking to me through his adolescent, vacuous mouth. If you have anything to say, speak up like a man and say it. If you don't have anything to say, keep still!" And she advanced upon him, and with fierce fingers made more red marks in his new skin.

The necromancer could stand no more. "What the great leader of the Company of the Compassionate started but failed to finish, I cannot complete!" And he gave a birdlike leap and landed on the back of Ng Gk, heading the ass, at the same time, down the trail. "Old servant, old faithful carrier of my burdens, stand me once again and ever after in good stead." Employing the natural spurs on his heels as one employs manufactured rowels, he goaded Ng Gk into a gallop and soon disappeared into the shades.

"They do not frustrate the Lustful Queen of La twice the same way the same night!" shrieked the queen. "Out of my way, you stupid chela: we shall soon see who has the speediest legs, that fat black ass or myself!"

And she, too, sped down the path, a wraith of white, swift, passion-filled fury, and soon, too, disappeared into the shades.

"How ill things go," said the chela. "I know I am but a beardless boy; nevertheless she . . ."

He rummaged around some more in the guerrillas' abandoned storage tent and filled the pockets of his jacket with coins, the pockets of his trousers with sweetmeats, and his little knapsack with sweetmeats also.

It was now bright dawn in the Moonbath Mountains, and the corncrakes had begun their matins, marking the first canonical hour of that wilderness. The chela sighed and started off after the queen, the black ass, and the magician.

He came upon a dwarfed, stumpy bush by the side of the trail. "Ah," he said. "That is one of those clusters of lizards the master told us about which live harmoniously in groups in imitation of dead vegetation in order to conserve their strength and escape detection. I shall kick it and watch them all scamper away."

He poised himself on one foot and gave it a mighty kick with the other. It shuddered and fell over. It was only a dead bush after all.

Chapter Eight

"Shhh!" said the queen to the chela when he eventually caught up with her and his master. "Our mighty mage is sleeping and must not be disturbed. He needs his rest now as he has never needed it before."

Ng Gk was lying in the shade of a tree, his legs tucked under him, dog fashion. The magician lay in the shade also, flat on his back, a handful of grass over his face to shield his eyes from the random glances of the morning sun. His snores droned through the fly-infested dell where the queen had made camp. Ng Gk twitched at them with his ears.

"It seems as if every insect pest in all Cathay is marshalled in this one foul spot," said the queen unhappily as she slapped at a huge bluebottle which had just bitten her on the thigh. "Fortunately, the master is so drowned in sleep that he does not notice them. Are flies poisonous, chela? One got in his mouth a moment ago, and I think he swallowed it."

"The bamboo flies of Menchuen Province are very poisonous," said the chela. "They are medium-size yellow flies with green glints on their wings."

"It was a large blue beast of a thing that the master swallowed," said the queen; "much the same as the one I slapped at on my thigh just now."

"I do not know about that kind," said the chela.

"When the master changed his skin," said the queen dreamily, "he also in some mysterious way changed his whole personality. A more protean character I have never encountered. At first, of course, there was a certain

amount of shyness and even bashfulness, but all boys are shy and bashful at times; then it is the girl's duty to be just a tiny bit forward, to allow herself certain naughty little liberties which she otherwise would shrink from even considering. Wooing is such a tetchy business at best! One small thing done wrong and the whole delicate psychological structure is shattered and must be rebuilt painstakingly, little cell upon little cell. That calls for a nice, discerning touch, and the exact knowledge of when to stop and when to advance. Now, when I finally caught up with the master and succeeded in detaching him from the back of Ng Gk, to which he clung with a sort of hysterical dismay, I had to know exactly when to ease my grip upon him and also exactly where to apply the first caress. Often these little things are more important than the seemingly bigger things, chela; it is in the tiny details that the hand of the artist manifests itself."

"He sleeps as one who is dead," said the chela, looking intently at her pertly pouting breasts.

"The long ride down the mountain naturally tired him," said the queen, noticing his stare and gently massaging her paps for his benefit.

"I found a beautiful little jade amulet in the guerrillas' store of loot," said chela. "The intracacies of its intaglio fascinated me, and I took it. I should like to offer it in homage to madame."

"Here is a nice place for it to nest," said the queen, pushing her breasts together. "You may hang its chain around my throat and place it there. You are a very thoughtful boy."

"I had previously realized," said the chela, adjusting the amulet's gold chain about the queen's slender neck, "that these beautiful twin objects had a utilitarian use in that they served as suppliers of food for very young people. But it never occurred to me until this moment that, entirely in themselves and apart from any utilitarianism, they might be so delightful . . . and so responsive to an appreciative touch. I note that they are made up of two highly functional parts: the firm but elastic storage chambers, and the erectile spouts. I note that this spout, as I tug at it, becomes at least a size larger than its twin sister, but now I note that when I tug at the sister, it, too, increases in size and achieves a similar firmness."

"Young men always have much to learn," said the queen.

"Some things are much more pleasant to learn than other things," said the chela. "May I presume to ask if this is the portal from which one emerges from the warm land of no return into the troubles and agonies of sentient, individual life? Oh, how delicately, and yet how avidly, its petals unfold! This is the door of life, mystical and legend-haunted. When once this exquisite refuge is abandoned, one's footsteps lead inexorably to the door of death, but the dreams accompanying those footsteps return ever and again to this subtle portal. Meanwhile, one can worship, pay homage to, adore, and caress it in various fashions."

"I never thought about it that way," said the queen. "But there is much in what you say. And you say it beautifully, and with appropriate gestures." Then she uttered a startled "Hah!" for she perceived that the magician had one eye partially open and that his lips were partially moving. "Again?" she screamed. "Have you done that voice trick to me again . . . and at such a time?" And she struck away the chela's hands, seized a stick and crashed it against the magician's skull.

At that moment, miles away, a caravan of refugees was moving down a road southward, fleeing from a gilded city which had been overrun by the new politicians. It was a caravan of three donkey carts, those two-wheeled vehicles which have high cotton tops and high wooden wheels, and which bounce abominably. One donkey pulls one cart, and the pace is leisurely. There is never any surcease from the dust; there is never any relief from the abominable bouncing; there is never any hurrying of the donkeys. But it is better thus to be a refugee than it is to be a captive.

Unquestionably, the most important person of the caravan was the young patrician, Gin Seng, a youth of great slenderness, great lassitude, and, at a former time, of great wealth. He seemed to have no stamina, no interests, and certainly no fire. Such was his slimness and idleness and lack of personality that his household referred to him among themselves as the Candlewick. It was not a term of reproach, for they were all fond of him; rather, it was that the limp and characterless twist of twine with its protective

coating of alien fat seemed best to personify him. He was the candlewick, and they were the tallow that made sense of his being; yet, without him in their center, they would have been as nothing.

There was his amah who had cared for him night and day since the hour of his birth. There was his eunuch who had hovered about him constantly since that same startling hour. There was his sister who often had to use her brain in place of his. There was his wife who, unable to do anything else, had become the servant of the others. There was the donkeymaster, an old donkeylike person himself, who tended the animals and kept the caravan moving.

And thus they came southward, refugees from the new order which had displaced them and all their kind; and in bronze caskets distributed among the carts, was all the wealth that was left to the ancient House of Gin, still by no means an inconsiderable sum, for the Candlewick's forefathers had been forceful men who had striven after and achieved great riches.

The axles of the cartwheels sang louder than crickets as the iron-rimmed discs ground through the dust of the ruts. Of a sudden, the off-wheel of the cart in which the Candlewick rode groaned like a pangolin, then croaked like a prairie ousel, and fell apart in three pieces. The cart sank over in a ninety-degree list. The donkey pulling it looked over his shoulder and estimated the damage. He folded his legs under him, sank down in the dust, and rested.

The old donkeymaster came up and surveyed the situation.

"That miscreant of a wheel was never too strong, even when I put it on that cart fourteen years ago," he announced bitterly. "I have been haunted all those years with the dubious premonition that some day it would fall apart, just as it has now done." And he kicked at it.

The Candlewick parted the silk hangings of his cart and leaned out from among the tangle of cushions and pillows and scarves. "Now that you have diagnosed the trouble so cannily," he said, "what do you propose to do about it?"

"I propose to repair it," said the donkeyman. "Only a brief glance, however, will suffice to show that this will be a tedious and long drawn-out task."

"We deign not to glance at the miserable thing," said the Candlewick. "Meanwhile, this conveyance is definitely uncomfortable in its grotesque slant at this deplorable angle."

"Yes, yes, yes!" agreed the women and the eunuch, who by then were buzzing about nervously. "We can see that it is obviously so. Your serenity must remove to one of the remaining carts, the bed of which is still on a level, and rest among the cushions there." And they helped him from his askew cart and supported him to the nearest level one and helped him in it and shoved in pillows and cushions and scarves after him.

His amah wrung out a towel in hot water and washed his face. His sister poured him a bowl of hot tea. His wife offered him a tray of sweetmeats. The eunuch fretted about uncertainly, handing things to the women to hand to the Candlewick.

Back up in the hills in the insect-infested dell, the magician rubbed his pate where the queen had banged him with a stick, and said critically to her, "Put on some clothes. What if somebody should come along? Chela, stop staring at her. She only looks like what all women look like in their natural state."

"Alas, I have no clothes," replied the queen, from whom all passion had now ebbed, and whose face was full of contrition as she marked the great welt her stick had raised on the mage's skull. She attempted to conceal her paps with one arm and her mound with her hand. "I discarded all my garments back up there in the mountains and have had no chance to secure replacements since."

"Then get the jute bag from Ng Gk's pannier and wear that some more," he grunted. "My mouth tastes as if I had been eating flies. I feel at cross purposes with everything."

"It is this unpleasant spot where we are camped," said the queen slipping the jute bag over her shoulders. "I think we should go on. Exercise will help us all."

Irritably, the magician gave the command to break camp and set forth, which was done. But it soon became obvious that the spirits of the little group definitely were at a low ebb, for none of them said anything, each seeming to prefer his own silence to any dubious conversation.

Some miles down the road they chose, the old donkeytender of the caravan of Gin Seng, the Candlewick, was patching up the cartwheel which had broken asunder and interrupted the caravan's journey. He went about his task very slowly and with much deliberation, and finally the Candlewick said, "Once I read of a streamlet which was eating away at the foot of a mountain. It took the streamlet centuries and centuries to do so, but it eventually devoured it."

His amah said, "The philosopher Yu Ti once watched a snail which had set out to scale the highest peak in the Moonbath Mountains. By timing its progress with an hour glass, Yu Ti estimated that in four hundred years the snail would be one-half the way up."

His sister said, "There is the tale of the man who would count the grains of sand in a dune. His son took up the task at the man's death; his grandson at his son's death. According to the tale, the counting of the sand grains took seven centuries."

The eunuch said, "Even so. But this old man seems even slower than any of that."

Whereupon the donkeytender laid down his tools, straightened his back, and spoke. "There is a song about the elephant, the noblest and most patient of all the beasts. In this song, the elephant is pictured as wading a wild stream, and he is sorely hampered by the swirling waters and the mud that sucks at his thighs. Nevertheless, so noble is the elephant that he is carrying on his back four helpless creatures—a mangy dog, a sick cat, a pregnant monkey, and a gelded pig—all of whom otherwise would have been drowned. And, as the elephant seems about to bog down in midstream, instead of encouraging him and praising him and spiritually buoying him, all these vile little creatures on his back set up a loud chorus of castigation, calumniation, and criticism of his efforts. The elephant is a noble and patient beast; in the song he ignores them for quite some time, never relenting his efforts against the stream. Finally, however, he sickens of it all. He reaches up with his remorseless trunk and sweeps them one and all off his back into the raging current. Then he swells his great muscles and tramps out of the stream onto dry land."

And the old donkeytender kicked aside his hammer and

chisel, jerked the recumbent donkey to its feet, uncoupled it from the leaning cart, swung himself upon its back, and galloped off down the road in the direction from which they had come.

The eunuch said, "The old man confuses himself with the elephant."

The Candlewick's sister said, 'Hush, you fat idiot! Things are in a mess."

The Candlewick's amah said, "We are in trouble."

And the Candlewick said, "We are vexed."

A mile or more away, the magician was also vexed. "This whole enterprise has resolved itself into a pile of purposelessness," he said. "We don't even know where we are going or what we will do when we get there. Enemies oppress us from all sides. We are fugitives, and whatever we do is futile. Besides that, the queen's fine clothes are gone, and she is dressed again in an old jute sack."

"Now, now," said the gentle queen, "nothing is ever as bad as it seems. We all have our health, and that is a great thing in itself. What if I don't have my fine clothes anymore? This jute sack will do very well until I can find some more. Fortunately, I am very easy to fit, and I can wear almost any color. Nothing is ever as bad as it seems."

"This journey," replied the mage, "is not only as bad as it seems; it is actually worse. We are political refugees with no place to find refuge."

"Master, I see some carts far down the road!" cried the chela who had eyes as sharp as those of young and hungry eagles.

"Roads commonly have carts upon them," snorted the magician.

But the queen asked softly, "How many carts do you see, chela?"

"Three. One of them seems to be disabled."

"How many persons?"

"Three women and one prince, and another person of uncertain gender."

"Do they appear rich?"

"Yes. On the carts are fixed the blue-and-silver pennons of the great House of Gin."

"Oh, rapture now! See, magician, how our fortunes have picked up!"

"No, I do not."

"Stupid, thick-headed darling man! Where are your wits? We will rob them."

"Benighted but beautiful woman! How can we rob them without weapons or superior numbers? More likely they will rob us."

"Not for nothing are you a magician," replied the gay queen. "And not for nothing did the Bey of Ballong dub thee the Undenigratable. There are five of them and three of us. Therefore, I command you to construct two warrior dolls and to place them on the back of Ng Gk, thus giving us the similitude of great mounted strength. Gather up grass and clay and rags and sticks, magician; make me two great robber dolls to ride the back of the good black ass, Ng Gk, and throw fear into the hearts of the House of Gin."

"It is a dishonest and doubtful thing to propose," said the magician, for he had not thought of it himself. "If there were anything else to do, I would not do it. But our situation is now so desperate that I am forced to accede." And he began to gather up grass and clay, and a gleam appeared in his eye, for there was nothing he loved more than apt expedient.

Down the road a mile or more, the Candlewick's amah was bathing his face again with a wrung-out hot towel, and his sister and his wife were bemoaning their predicament.

"If we only had a good spare wheel and another donkey and another donkeytender, our predicament would not be so serious," said his wife.

"Thou hast always been noted for thy perceptivity," said the amah, and the wife smiled in gratitude at the compliment.

Then the sister cried "Hssst!" and all looked at her. "I see travelers up the road, perhaps a mile or more. There are three of them, and they have an ass. Wait! There are not three. There are five! And two of those five have suddenly mounted themselves on the ass and are heavily armed."

"Are they robbers?" asked the Candlewick.

"I fear so; I fear so, indeed," said the sister somberly. "Their garb, what there is of it, is wild and wilful. Their

facial expressions are harsh and fixed. Four of them are male; the other is female."

"The female one is probably their campfollower," said the amah cynically.

"Alas," groaned the sister, "she does not follow; she leads."

"Well?" demanded the Candlewick peevishly.

The sister peered again at the oncomers, shading her eyes with her hand to make for better vision. "It is almost too awful to say, but I fear she is the great Robber-Whore of the Moonbath Mountains. Her legend is, that roving about with her hideous band of cut-throats, she robs all the women and rapes all the men."

The Candlewick's wife gasped. The eunuch muttered something unintelligible.

Up the road the queen said proudly, "See! They quail at our approach. They gather in a frightened, timid, discursive huddle, wondering how best to defend themselves against us. The battle is half over because they fear us so."

"Will I be allowed to kill anyone?" cried the chela bloodthirstily. He carried the great knife the magician used in his beheading act, and with it he made tentative sweeps at the heads of flowering weeds which grew along the road.

"No!" said the queen sternly. "There must be no bloodshed. Your role with that horrible knife is psychological only."

The big robber-dolls the mage had constructed of grass and clay and rags and sticks reeled drunkenly on the back of Ng Gk, and the necromancer had to steady them with his hands to keep them from falling off. Their eyes stared with concentrated balefulness at the frightened retinue of the House of Gin, and their upraised hands contained daggers made of wood.

The queen, her jute bag gown corded high and tight about her hips with a tarry rope, strode menacingly forth, her bare feet limping now and then as she stepped on something sharp or rough.

"I hope they have slippers that fit me in their luggage," she said as she fetched almost to her knees after planting the ball of her foot on a small, jagged rock.

"Perhaps they will have some wine, too," said the magician, whose gloom, by this time, had more or less

evaporated. And, once again employing his great gift of ventriloquy, he began to chant through the mouths of the robber-dolls an extemporaneous ballade:

Oh, the winegod he is good,
And the winegod he is great;
Though some for clothes do pray,
And some of footwear prate.

So forth we go to war
As the sluggard goes to bed,
And our slaughter will not cease
Till our every foe be dead.

"Oh, oh, oh!" moaned the now thoroughly terrified amah. "Hear them sing their awful warsong as they advance upon us! See how the great Robber-Whore weaves and dances and almost crawls in perverse ecstasy as she leads her killers toward us. See how her horrid horsemen lurch and lean in their tandem saddle. Was ever any sight more ghastly? Was ever any plight more wretched? Yet, what have we done to deserve all this? Oh, oh, oh! Is there no pity in the world any more? No tiny drop of pity?"

And the sister and the wife and the eunuch all took up her sorrowful, frightened moaning.

But Gin Seng, the pampered, lissome youth—he whom they called the Candlewick—stepped down from among the curtains and silks of the cart where he had been bedded down and cried in a brave, clear voice:

"Silence, you whimperers! You stand in no danger whatever. For your own information, learn now that I intend to sacrifice myself for the good of you all. It is common knowledge that heretofore I have never amounted to anything. What is not so commonly known is that heretofore I have never encountered a situation worthy enough in itself to bring out the inherent heroism which I have always recognized to be within me. But now my hour of epiphany has come. Every man should have at least one epiphany. This will be my clarion defiance of the fates which up to now have seen to it that I remained a characterless piece of pulp. Oh ho! I know how in your secret councils, you refer to me as the Taper or the Limp String, or some such

other helpless object. I am not deaf, you know. But, as I have just announced, my hour of epiphany is upon me: I intend to give myself, without qualification to the great Robber-Whore on the understanding that she spare the lives of the remainder of you."

His old amah promptly banged her head down into the dust and sobbed exaltedly, "A more glorious moment never existed before in the centuries-long history of the House of Gin."

His sister burst into a freshet of tears. "This is the high-water mark of our whole family history."

His eunuch said, "Never before in the history of the great House of Gin has such an incident ever occurred."

His wife clasped and unclasped her hands nervously and said, "Such a decision makes me, of course, very happy also."

Thus, when the queen, the magician, the chela, and the two great robber-dolls on the back of Ng Gk reached the group of refugees, they found no craven clutch of cowards but, instead, five firm, serene adults who knew they were still the masters of their fate.

And it was the Candlewick, Gin Seng himself, who spoke first when the queen halted her band and confronted them:

"We know you, foul robberess, and we are fully aware of your bestial intentions. To know one's enemy is half the battle in itself. 'Know the truth,' the soothsayer has said, 'and the truth shall set you free.' That adage is not entirely applicable in the present circumstances, but offers, at the least, a faint ray of hope. Hence, to forestall a pitched battle with its attending suffusion of blood, I tender myself to you in sacrifice. Do as you will with me, but harm not these harmless ones who accompany me."

Stifling her surprise with a startled gesture, the queen looked him up and down very carefully, as one might examine a prize stud at a horseshow. She marked his slimness, his sensuous mouth, his languorous, lissome youth,

"Very well," she said, and she took him by the hand. To the magician: "Rob these others, and rob them well. But do not harm them. Do not touch a hair of their heads." And she led the Candlewick away.

In vagrant fashion, the dusty wind caught up a loose hem of her jute bag gown and curled it over her hip. But

she did not bother to readjust her garb; she only firmed her grip on the Candlewick's hand. And the wind caught up her long black hair and tossed it in a whirl.

And the amah thought: "Of course, she *is* pretty."

And the sister thought: "She has a certain flair."

And the wife thought: "I wonder if he will like her better. . ."

And the eunuch thought: "Pity, pity me."

Meanwhile, the magician and the chela were briskly emptying the contents of the carts onto the ground that the goods might be inventoried.

"Nice silk you have here," commented the mage. "Is it of the weave of Yan?"

"No," said the amah, "I think it comes from Shan. We have much Yan back home, of course, but these carts can only carry so much."

"I see. I see," said the magician. "My, but this bronze casket is heavy. It must contain coins or many jewels."

"It contains both," said the amah. "We merely put the odds and ends and leftovers in that casket. The richest accumulation is in the three caskets in the second cart."

"The young master is of a very wealthy house, I take it," said the magician.

"Yes, indeed," replied the amah. "His ancestors hoarded gold and silver and jewels for untold generations. But now, of course, with the political situation what it is, life has suddenly become difficult for him, jewels, coins, or no."

"I can sympathize with his lot," said the magician. "The same thing has happened to me. This land of ours will never be the same again, alas."

"Alas," agreed the amah. "I do not understand politics, particularly the new politics, but I hate them."

The chela held up a shimmering white robe. "Look, master," he said. "Just the thing for the queen."

"White is very hard to wear," cautioned the amah. "She should have some greens and blacks and reds, too."

"But if we take too much of anything else," protested the magician, "our good black ass, Ng Gk, will be unable to carry it all."

"Why not convert one of our donkeys into a pack animal?" suggested the amah.

"That will be an excellent solution," agreed the mage. "Bundle the stuff up, Chela, and strap it on that little

brown fellow's back. Be quick about it, for the queen should be back shortly, and she hates to be kept waiting."

And, when the queen did at long last return, there were the ass and the little donkey, piled as high as camels with loot, and everything in readiness for their speedy departure.

"Very neatly done," commented the queen. She looked at the magician, and the magician nodded; and they set off down the road.

After a while, the queen said, "That Gin Seng was an impudent young fellow."

"How so?"

"He said that when he regained his great house he would purchase me for his Number Two wife."

"And what did madame say?"

"I said that when I regained my throne I would purchase him for my Number Three husband."

Chapter Nine

HERE, ALL the land was yellow and the vegetation sere. "Perfectly horrible," said the queen. "The annual distribution of rainfall is shockingly sparse in this area. Couldn't someone have done something about the clouds—such as forcing them to yield more moisture?" None vouchsafed to answer her.

The tongue of Ng Gk hung out a foot. The tongue of his donkey companion hung out even farther. The chela was so parched he could not speak.

"I crave cool wine, green fields, wet winds, lullaby waves," said the magician after some reflection. "Doubtless, that craving is abetted by the aridity of the terrain over which we are now passing; but, at any rate, it seems genuine enough to approach being an obsession. Therefore, I propose that when we reach the canal country lying ahead we buy a boat, using for the purchase thereof some of the large store of money we acquired from the House and Gin, hire a boatman to man the craft, and sail the remainder of the way to La."

"Yes, let's!" cried the now inspired queen. "By all means and by every means! Let us sail the remainder of the way to La. On cool canals in moonlight and sunlight, at dawning and again at eventide, at high noon and midnight, let us lie at ease on cushions and feel the sleek, oily bottom of the boat slip over the untroubled surface of the gentle waterways."

"I can dangle my feet in those waters," said the now revived chela. "Likewise, I can dribble my fingers therein."

And, once again in high spirits, they coursed on over the

parched yellow land, sustained by bright hope and buoyed by reckless reverie, making their way as best they could; and, sure enough, after endless days, each filled with tormented hours, they saw ahead a thin, wavy line of greenery, and they knew then that their days of travail were over, for they saw osiers growing on the bank of a canal.

At a town which was beside the canal, they bought a boat, taking three days to complete the transaction, for the magician was determined to drive a hard bargain, and, if any cheating were done, to be the cheater and not the cheated. It was a small town and a tedious one, the inhabitants all being canal workers and knowing nothing except the canal and its local gossip. They spoke mostly of how the new politicians had taken over the management of the canal, and how everything was being ruined by the new bureaucracy; profit was a thing of the past. Travelers from the outside world aroused their distrust, for they were looked upon as spies for the new masters, and the lot of the magician and his band was not altogether a happy one there.

The Lustful Queen of La went to all the town's shops to buy herself a gay boating outfit of new materials and new designs, but she was haughty while she was at it and insulted many of the tradespeople. They did not like a woman to be putting on such airs, and they talked angrily of beating her with bamboo rods, and would have done so, except that the magician bribed them out of it.

So the stay in the canal town was neither pleasant nor edifying; even the magician was certain that he had finally been cheated in the price he paid for the boat, and the chela was sick from drinking the strange water and eating too many sweets.

On the third day, they boarded their boat and put off down the canal, vowing never to return to that town again; but they surely did.

They had hired for a boatman a foreign man called Sergei Rao who had been long in the town's gaol for drunkenness; he poled them away rapidly, for he hated the town even more than they did.

She was a magnificent boat, and her name was *Flower of the Lotus*. She had footways along either gunwale, so that Sergei Rao could trot along one of them to her prow,

thrust his pole down to the canal's bottom, put his shoulder against the pole's end, and trot the whole length back to the stern, thus propelling her along under his slapping feet.

She had a silken-canopied cabin where the queen stayed. It was equipped with mirrors and jars of ointments and cushions and little bells for her to ring.

The magician had more masculine quarters. They were forward of the queen's so that he might look out ahead and mark the *Flower of the Lotus's* progress. Spartan-like in their furnishings, there was barely room in his quarters for the couch between the kegs of wine stored there.

Ng Gk and the donkey were stabled in the stern of the boat, just under the handle of the tiller; the chela's bedding was there, also, so that he could tend the good beasts. Sergei Rao, of course, needed no formal quarters, because he was constantly busy, either poling or towing or steering or sailing or sculling or otherwise acting in the navigational interests of the *Flower of the Lotus*.

She was wide of beam and shallow of draft and steady as a rolling stone upon a smooth pavement. Sergei Rao poled and paddled her and oared her and sculled her, but, best of all, he loved to sail her, for that required the least effort of all and likewise accounted for her greatest speed.

She had big square sails of yellow cotton that looked as if it had been padded. She had slim masts of bamboo rising from her middle. She had a rudder as long comparatively as the tail of a turtle. Her single, great, grave eye, painted on her prow, was both mild and canny; and her bottom was as tight as a drumhead.

The magician had not stinted in loading her down with kegs of wine, and the queen had piled her high with wardrobe boxes and chests of clothes. The chela had crammed her with bales of hay and sacks of grain for Ng Gk and the donkey; Sergei Rao had brought aboard much rice and fruit and many fowls and pigs. The banks of the canal were so close to the sides of the *Flower of the Lotus* that at any time it was possible to lay a plank over her gunwale and walk ashore; and the pace of the *Flower*, even when her sail was hoisted and a savage trade wind howling, was so leisurely that the same object on shore remained in sight all of the morning and part of the afternoon.

Between banks of now incredible greenery, the *Flower of the Lotus* made stately way; and the banks were alive with singing birds and plunging frogs and sunning turtles. At dawn the sun came up directly behind her, and at sunset the sun went down directly ahead of her, for the canal was the shortest distance between where it started and where it ended. Every daybreak, the birds on the green banks sang loud as a symphony; every afternoon, quick misty showers fell, and the rainbow gleamed; the queen would take her bath amid the showers and under the rainbow, and even the chela could tell that daily she was becoming more beautiful.

At night, the green banks murmured, and the stars glittered down as heaven-high, sparkling lamps.

"Perfect, perfect, perfect!" drooled the magician, drawing himself another and vaster cup of wine. "Paradise has been caught on a thin thread of brown water. Here, all is peace, all is beauty, all is joy. Who cares now about politics, communes, lost thrones, and all such troublesome things?"

The queen dyed her nails with green lacquer and placed a high golden comb in her hair. She depilated herself and donned a robe that was white and seemed the texture of snow. She dyed her toenails with a lacquer that was purple.

With a long stick, the chela scratched the backs of Ng Gk and the donkey as they stood lazily in their stall, munching hay and now and again varying the dried grass with a mouthful of corn.

The sail was hoisted high and fast, and the wind breathed into it gently. Sergei Rao sprawled in a brown, scarred lump beside the tiller, a pipe of yen-shee in his mouth, dreams of a long-lost girl in his head. He remembered how he had pursued that girl up a steep and thorny hillside, trailing her by the bits of clothing which the thorn hooks had snatched from her as she fled; and how she was completely nude and covered with scratches when he caught her. But her laughter was high and hard and her mouth was wide and warm; she dove into a pond on the crest of the hill, and he dove after her.

The magician lumbered about, patting things affectionately. "Give Ng Gk more grain," he ordered the chela.

"He already has more grain, master."

"Give him more hay, then."

The magician poured the last seven drops from his wine cup onto the water of the canal; they made a scarlet thread upon the calm brown surface. On his way to refill the cup, he stopped at the door of the queen's boudoir. "How goes it, madame?"

"See how pretty my toes are," she said, thrusting out a foot with its purple-lacquered nails. "See how sleek I am all over." And she pulled aside her robe and gave a switch of her hips.

"Indeed, it is as if madame had changed *her* skin," said the magician in deep appreciation. "Queen or no queen, thou art surely the most beautiful object in this whole vain world."

The queen made a moue and closed her robe.

The magician went to the stern of the *Flower of the Lotus* where Sergei Rao lay curled about the tiller, his pipe of yen-shee in his mouth, his dreams of the long-lost girl in his head.

"How fares the *Flower of the Lotus?*" asked the mage.

"She moves somewhat imperceptibly," replied Sergei Rao, "but she still moves."

"You know, of course, our secret?" said the magician after a pause.

"Nay, master, I do not."

"The lady is a queen."

"Ah."

"And I am a magician."

"Ah."

There was silence for a while.

Then Sergei Rao murmured, "Who is the lad?"

"He is my apprentice."

"Ah."

"Why did you ask?"

"I thought he was yours and the woman s spawn.

"No," said the magician. "We are both childless, alas.

"Then I have been misinformed," said Sergei Rao.

"Indeed? How so?" asked the mage.

"I am in the pay of Khan Ali Bok," said the helmsman. "I am taking you to him. He furnished me with a dossier about you people. The dossier says distinctly that the chela is yours and the queen's son, born out of wedlock some-

time after midnight in the old throne room of the Province of La."

"It simply is not so!" protested the magician. "Let me see that dossier."

Sergei Rao showed it to him. "Why, it is written in Persian," said the magician, holding it upside down. "I cannot read it."

"Neither can I," said Sergei Rao.

"How much is Khan Ali Bok paying you for this nefarious task?" demanded the magician.

"An advance royalty of ten dollar Mex, the balance to be settled by negotiation after I have delivered you into his hands."

"I offer you an advance royalty of eleven dollar Mex to take us in the opposite direction," said the magician.

"You are asking me to compound a felony," said Sergei Rao.

"I am asking you to be merciful at a handsome profit," said the magician.

"You must put your offer in writing," said Sergei Rao. "Then I will give it careful thought. But do not write in Persian."

"I must consult first with my constituents," said the mage.

"There is plenty of time," said Sergei Rao.

The necromancer made his way to the queen's boudoir. She was lying full length stomach down upon a rug of finest spraddlefuzh. The afternoon being quite warm, she had laid aside her garments. The red mouse tattooed on her back glowed almost malevolently in the soft light of her boudoir. The magician caressed the mouse.

The queen turned halfway over. "Leave my mouse alone!" she snapped. Then she saw his face, and she said, "You look as if you had just heard some bad news, some awful news, some terrible news. Have you?"

"Yes," he said. "I have." And he ran his fingers through her long black hair.

"Bad news affects different people different ways," said the queen, turning fully over. "Why don't you let me hold you and mother you while you unfold to me the reasons for your dismay?"

The magician laid his head down upon her and groaned.

"Are things as bad as I suspect?" asked the queen, waving away a fly with one hand and taking the high golden comb out of her hair with the other.

"They are worse," said the magician, pressing his ear into her warm skin.

The queen clasped her hands and clenched her fingers. "Why is it," she asked, "that whenever conditions seem to improve for us—the lovely trip on this lovely *Flower of the Lotus,* for instance—they almost immediately thereafter take a turn for the worse?"

"One wishes one knew," sighed the magician. "But it is very restful here and now."

"Well, you can't spend the rest of your life here," said the queen moving his head around. "Tell me what the new trouble is, and perhaps I can help."

"Sergei Rao," said the magician, "is in the pay of Khan Ali Bok. Khan Ali Bok has bribed Sergei Rao to bring us to him. I have offered Sergei Rao a larger bribe to take us in the opposite direction. There the matter now rests."

"Well," said the queen, settling his head more comfortably, "why not leave it to rest there? When I was on my throne back in La, we used to bribe our enemies frequently. As a matter of fact, it was Kahn Ali Bok, the mangy turtle, who introduced the practice into La."

"I do not trust this Sergei Rao," said the magician. "Once a thief, always a thief."

"Let me think about the matter a little further," said the queen, pushing his head farther down and settling herself more comfortably.

"Thou art like a ministering angel unto me," said the magician. "Mother me a little more. I have never been mothered. But I have always wanted to be."

"I am none too sure about the technique, never having been a mother," said the queen. "But I suppose I can improvise. How is this, now?"

"Divine," mumbled the magician, and the worried, harried, uncertain man cast aside his troubles and went to sleep.

He dreamed that the *Flower of the Lotus* had multipaired legs, as does the arachnid, and also had a voice, somewhat bell-like. She could walk upon the dry ground as well as sludge herself torpidly through the canal, and she could speak as she walked. In his dream, he clambered

off her onto the land, and she followed after, her great eye mild as a hound's, her splay feet sinking thickly into the mud. Her rudder left a trail behind, as does the tail of a crocodile when that saurian essays land travel, and her sail drooped as dismally as the wings of a vulture if that scavenger were to allow them to drag as it walked along. Her wooden sides creaked drearily.

"O Lotus Flower," protested the dreaming mage. "I should think all those multipaired feet of yours would impede your progress when sailing on the canal water."

"Nay, magician," responded the vessel. "I tuck them neatly into my sides where they offer no resistance whatsoever. It is a modern improvement known as retractable landing gear."

"Well, never before have I seen a boat with such outstanding and highly specialized amphibious equipment," cried the magician. "I am, indeed, unstinting in my approval. For, if we reach a dam or shallow spot in the canal, you have only to untuck your feet and walk along as you do now until deeper water is reached. Never was there such a wonderful boat!"

The *Flower of the Lotus* cast down her eye bashfully. "I like you, too, magician."

"Many men have loved boats," said the mage, "but I think I love this boat more than any other man ever loved his."

"But I had always thought," countered the *Lotus*, "that you loved the queen."

"I do love the queen," said the magician. "Everyone loves the queen."

"Pah!" pouted the canal boat. "That is like saying everyone loves the state—the new state, the new political thing. A very impersonal emotion. But you have given her fine raiment and fine jewelry. The jewelry she wears constantly, the raiment as rarely as possible."

"Her beauty is such," said the magician, "that raiment only disfigures it."

The *Flower of the Lotus* said, "To me you have given nothing."

"I have been awkward and bashful in my courtship," conceded the sorcerer, "but only because I knew not how, nor with what, to woo thee. Tell me, Flower of the Lotus

and flower of my desire, what wouldst thou like most for a love gift?"

"A new set of sails made all of silk," she said demurely. And then, in a whisper, "And I should like also to have my bilge scraped."

"By me?"

"By thee."

"In the name of the Buddha!" screamed the Lustful Queen of La, "stop that! And wake up! I don't know what you have been dreaming about, but I think it has warped your mind."

The magician sat up and looked wildly around. "Oh!" he said, "it is unforgivable sin to awaken a man when he is dreaming true. It is sin, unforgivable sin."

"I did it in self-protection," said the queen. "And I will certainly do it again, if need arises. Surely, even you must realize . . ."

"Wait!" said the magician. "I think my dream has told me something. I think my dream was true! If so, then we are saved!"

He hurried out of the queen's boudoir. "Another true dream like that," said the queen to herself, "and it will be the death of all of us."

The necromancer made his way down, down to the very orlop itself of the *Flower of the Lotus*, and what he found there surprised and pleased him, and made him slightly nervous. He was on his way to the queen's boudoir to apprise her of what he had discovered when Sergei Rao, breathless and overly excited, accosted him.

"Master, master!" said the overwrought helmsman, "a great storm is coming! Help, quick, to batten down the hatches before all is lost!"

"Nonsense," said the mage. "I never saw a finer day in all my life."

"Then look behind you, complacent fool!" snorted Sergei Rao. And he took the magician by the shoulder and pointed back over the stern of the *Flower of the Lotus*.

The queen and the chela had by then gathered at the magician's side to find out what all the uproar was about, and the trio of them turned and looked as Sergei Rao had beseeched them.

They saw a storm, and it was almost upon them. It occupied a major portion of the sky to the rear, being of

pyramidal shape, its apex spouting lightning flashes and bolts, its matrix grumbling with thunder and boiling with wrath. It appeared to be composed entirely of air and water and electricity, and it was, demonstrably, in a ferocious mood.

"Why does it have to come straight down this canal?" demanded the angry queen. "Why can't it go somewhere else?"

"Storms always follow this canal," explained Sergei Rao. "There is a precise meteorological reason for it, which is both lucid and, in this case, irrefutable, but which, because of its detailed nature, I do not now have time to go into. I think we should cover up Ng Gk and his donkey companion immediately."

"There is no time for that, either," said the magician, "commendable as is the humane impulse which prompted the suggestion. The storm is practically upon us. Its speed is such that we cannot hope to escape by rowing or poling or towing. It reminds me, indeed, of a storm which once ravaged the Province of Peng. That one tore down all the houses and ripped the clothes from all the clotheslines. Little boys, flying their kites, found themselves swept up into the vortex of the storm, for a far higher flight than their kites had ever enjoyed. Old women had to think back to the legends of their grandmothers to find a parallel to any such natural outburst. No! No, we do not have time to cover up Ng Gk and his donkey companion. All we do have time for is to throw ourselves flat on the deck and seize hold either of stanchion or gunwale, whichever proves the nearer or the more secure, and pray to the gods who watch over this canal to spare our lives and the timbers of this vessel."

"But, master," protested the chela, "can we, in all honor, ignore at this time the humble beasts of burden who, so uncomplainingly, have shared with us the rigors of our journey which so far have included rain, hail and frost, scorching sun and biting thirst, hunger, blows, and much sleeplessness? Had it not been for them, we would never have been here. They have been patient and loyal and forbearing of all criticism, content with their mute, slavish lot, seeking only to serve and still serve and then serve some more. Ill would it become us now to abandon them now to their dreary fate whilst we throw ourselves flat on

the deck, clutching stanchion or gunwale, whichever is handier or seemingly the more secure."

And from the bowels of the boat, Ng Gk and the donkey brayed mournful assent to the chela's passionate espousal of their cause.

The storm itself chose then to speak also. It let out a long, loud blast of thunder borne on a terrific gust of wind and underwritten by a flare of lightning. One of the storm's tentacles reached out ahead and snatched a droopy willow tree from the bank of the canal and swished it like a dirty broom over the *Flower of the Lotus,* shaking twigs and leaves and soil on the top of the heads of the magician, the queen, the chela, and Sergei Lao. Thereupon, Ng Gk and the donkey called out with high, fearful voices, and they plunged and stomped and reared and pitched in their stable in the bowels of the *Flower of the Lotus.*

"What is it about storms that frightens dumb animals so?" asked the queen, lashing herself to the mainmast.

"They do not understand the causes of a storm, but they fear the consequences of those unknown causes," explained the magician, lashing himself to a spar.

"I understand neither the cause nor the consequences, but I am equally afraid," said the chela, wedging himself between a hatch cover and a water butt.

"Storms always blow themselves out," observed Sergei Lao, abandoning the recalcitrant tiller and clutching the queen for safety.

Now, fully in the grip of the blast, the *Flower of the Lotus* pitched and tossed vigorously, crashing her sides first against one bank of the canal and then against the opposite one. She rose and plunged, also, her timbers shuddering as her keel would strike bottom after a particularly heavy lunge. The terrific gale blew her along at the fastest rate she had ever attained, a speed nearly equal to that achieved by a healthy man dogtrotting along the bank of the canal.

After a long, tempestuous time, the wind seemed to abate a bit, and the *Flower of the Lotus* eased somewhat in her agonized pitching. "We shall weather this storm yet!" cried the magician exultantly. "Be of stout heart, everyone! Clear skies and calm waters are not far distant."

"Misguided optimist!" contradicted Sergei Rao, "look behind us. Just look behind us!"

The magician looked, and the queen looked, and the chela looked; and what they saw was too awful for human utterance.

For the tempest had transformed itself into a gigantic waterspout of incredible proportion; a whirling mass of wind and water, dark as an angry bruise, it raged and roared down the canal straight at them, shooting out long, crooked spears of lightning and accompanying its march with a deafening diapason of thunder.

"We are lost," said the magician decisively. "We must abandon ship. All hands leap ashore."

"It is too late," again contradicted Sergei Rao. "We cannot leave."

"Must we stay here and die like rats?" demanded the queen.

"Yes," said Sergei Rao.

"No," said the magician.

Meanwhile, the waterspout came on apace, moving with the sublime and impersonal ferocity which usually accompanies such physical outbursts on the part of Mother Nature. It whirled along, its dervish foot spinning in the canal, its trunk roaring and revolving above, its black, bellowing head lost somewhere in the cannonading skies.

The bedeviled and bewildered travelers shrunk close together as the waterspout came upon them, seeking to shrink into the very planking of the *Flower of the Lotus* herself. There was a blackness and an air blast and a rush of waters and a scream and a moan, and then a blessed moment of unconsciousness as the spout careened over them.

And then there was a savage bump, and all motion ceased, and everything was as still as the interior of a tomb. One by one, magician, queen, chela, and Sergi Rao raised his head, opened his eyes, and looked. The waterspout had passed on; the air was calm. But, in its passing, the spout had sucked all the water from the canal; the *Flower of the Lotus* sat in the mud on the empty canal's bottom.

All the foliage had been stripped from the trees; all the sails from the boat. The *Flower of the Lotus* lay in a shallow ditch in which there was no water. On either bank

stood trees on which there were no leaves. The naked mast of the boat matched the naked branches of the trees. In the distance, the bellowing storm was fading fast from view; the clouds parted, and the sun shone down again. On the bare limb of a tree, a small bird alighted and began to sing a piping song.

"Well," said the queen, first to find her tongue, "look at us now, will you? In a shattered wooden crate in a ditch full of mud. What do we do now, magician?"

"We rely upon what we have always relied upon," said the unperturbed necromancer: "My power of working magic."

Chapter Ten

Said the queen, "If ever any time were more appropriate for a working of magic, I would not know when it would be."

And the chela said, "This is very true, master."

"Remain on deck quietly," said the magician, "whilst I attend then to certain matters thaumaturgical." And so saying, he opened a hatchway and disappeared down it. The chela looked at the queen, and the queen looked at the chela, and Sergei Rao looked at both of them; but none of the three said anything. From the bowels of the *Flower of the Lotus* a muffled thumping and bumping arose, but it only lasted a short while. The timbers of the *Flower of the Lotus* shortly thereafter began to creak mildly, and there followed a sort of shaking, as if the vessel were settling itself together. The queen looked over the gunwale at the bank of the canal, and gave a gasp. The *Flower of the Lotus* was rising gently, but a swift glance up and down the canal assured the queen that there was still no water in it. Her surprise conveyed itself without words to the chela and Sergei Rao, and they remained without words, also.

The magician reappeared, clambering like a fat snail out of the hatchway. He smiled at them beatifically. "Time to be on our way again," he said. "We cannot spend the rest of our lives in just this one spot."

"But . . . but, how?" asked the queen. "In what manner?"

"In this manner," said the magician. And he grasped the tiller of the *Flower of the Lotus* and threw it hard to port. "Full speed ahead," he commanded.

And the vessel, now possessed of some mysterious power within itself, began to move. With the magician's incisive hand on the tiller, it turned its prow against the left bank of the canal, reared its prow up over the bank, and, in some fashion, left the canal entirely and attained dry land. Here, it headed up the canal from the direction in which it had been sailing, moved along a short way, then thrust its prow down into the canal again, and ascended lumberingly into the muddy ditch, its purpose of turning itself around having been completed.

"Whatever is going on here?" demanded the frightened queen.

"Look over the side," suggested the magician. And he patted the tiller and said to the *Flower of the Lotus,* "Good girl! Good girl! We knew all the time you could do it, didn't we?"

And the queen looked over the side, and she saw that multiple legs and feet—resembling those of turtles—had evaginated from the bilgy bottom of the boat, and that the *Flower of the Lotus* was walking, walking of its own volition, walking without any great speed, admittedly, but walking with inflexible determination.

"What sleight-of-hand trick is this now, charlatan?" snarled the queen, confronting the magician, her face a-boil with doubt, fear, stupefaction, and misgiving.

"Hush," said the mage softly. "There is still much more to be done." And he went to the vessel's mast, stripped of its sails by the great windstorm, and he caressed the tall upright shaft of timber, and voiced what sounded to be an incantation.

The mast shook itself, shivering, as it were, its timbers. Little bulges, like those made by new twigs struggling to come forth from the bole of a well-pruned tree, appeared on its surface; and, as the startled queen watched in disbelief, these bulges swelled out and grew propitiously. At length, the bulges merged in a long thin blister the length of the entire mast and, before the queen could grasp this new significance, burst open and a brand new set of sails and lanyards and ratlines literally flung themselves into the air. And the new sails were of finest silk.

Then, to complete his magic, the hard-working necromancer stood on the prow of the *Flower of the Lotus* and whistled shrilly. A trickle of water, and then a great swell

of it, came down the canal; and in a trice the *Flower of the Lotus* was afloat again, her gleaming sails full of spanking breezes, her gentle eye proud and happy. She drew in her multiple feet and legs and tucked them securely away. She sailed along like a proper canal boat, her sides going swish! as they cleaved the brown waters.

"Thou art truly a magician," said Sergei Rao, "and I am truly undone. I cannot face my master, Khan Ali Bok, after this. I have no wish to face his crass materialism anymore. My only wish is to serve him whom the Pasha-Bey of Pindidelhi dubbed the Incredible."

"Serve, then," said the magician amiably. "And to make sure that you lose nothing by this commendable switch in allegiance, know that when our journeyings are done, we will give thee eleven dollar Mex. Take the tiller again and hold the *Flower of the Lotus* to her true course. Come with me, chela. It is that time again." And he led his apprentice down the hatch.

The queen retired to her boudoir where she depilated herself and anointed her skin with a vanishing cream. She was combing her black torrent of hair when the chela timidly knocked and then boldly thrust his head through the doorway.

"The master will soon be all right," he reported to the queen, staring at her hungrily. "It will be but a short time now."

"What's the matter with him?" asked the queen, noting the chela's hungry stare and abetting it by cupping and milking her breasts.

"He is changing his skin."

"Is that all? Tell him to come and see me when he is finished."

Chapter Eleven

FOLLOWED HALCYON days upon the canal. Clear sunny skies. Keen winds. Exhilaration for the asking. All this served to promote an optimistic briskness in the little band of travelers. No more gloomy interior thoughts. No more scathing denunciations when any little thing displeased them. No more harsh ejaculations over each others' failings. Cheerfulness, thoughtfulness, and forbearance were the rules of the day. In his last moulting, the magician had shed great rolls of fat and now, though still an outstandingly big man, he was not an obese one. The queen had become more ravishingly beautiful than ever. The chela was quiet and well mannered. A great weight seemed to have been lifted from Sergi Rao's soul. Ng Gk and the donkey spent long hours with one's head drooped over the other's neck.

Then the *Flower of the Lotus* neared the canal bank village where the magician first had purchased her. The village was only a day's sailing away when the chela went ashore to buy vegetables from canal bank husbandmen and was told the ominous news.

Khan Ali Bok was hot upon their trail. The leaders of the Great Leap Forward had made it plain to him that unless he apprehended the magician, the beautiful queen, the chela, and the turncoat Sergei Rao, things would go very bad for him and there was an excellent chance that along with losing his political perquisites he would also lose his head.

The Khan had acted swiftly and cunningly. He had amassed a small but well-disciplined army of peasants and

with them had seized control of the canal bank town where the magician had purchased the *Flower of the Lotus*. Impressing the villagers into labor gangs, the Kahn had constructed a weir of osiers across the canal to bar the *Flower of the Lotus's* progress. When the boat approached within a half-day's sailing of the weir he would throw part of his peasant army across the canal behind the vessel, and there with one simple maneuver would have the magician and his companions trapped, and trapped for good, upon a thread of water less than a *li* in length.

"We are undone!" cried the queen when she heard the news. "We are completely and abominably undone. Just as it seemed that we were on our way to something, we are undone. Fate, cruel fate has enmeshed us at last." And she flung herself around despairingly.

The chela stood mute and then began to sob, for he had been the bearer of the bad news.

Sergei Rao thought things over in silence, and then said, "The Khan has no record of ever being gentle with those who have deserted him."

Ng Gk and the donkey wailed like woeful wolfhounds.

The magician caught up the distraught queen in his arms and sought to comfort her. "Stop it, you beast!" she screamed. "Of all the inappropriate times to be pawed! Have you no sense of the fitness of things? Stop it, I say!"

"As madame wishes," said the mage, releasing her. "I was merely trying to convey to madame that all is far from being lost. Hounded, vilified, disgraced, screamed at, I am nevertheless still a magician, you know."

"Well, now is the time of all times to prove it," said the queen, drawing her rumpled gown together. "Even now, you can see the Khan's flags down there disgracing the canal banks, and you can hear the bugling of the trumpets as other flag-wavers crowd in upon our rear."

The magician did not answer her. Instead, he descended again into the bowels of the *Flower of the Lotus*, down to the orlop even; and there, one supposes, performed the greatest piece of magic of his career.

For the *Flower of the Lotus* lost weigh, stopped in its tracks, and flapped its sails resignedly. Then, with a great swishing and rattling and rope coiling, the sails wrapped themselves tightly around the mast until the whole thing looked like a folded umbrella.

"Now, what in the world good does this do?" cried the queen. "With the sails spread, we could at least lurch along; but now the wind cannot even blow us. What has got into the idiotic sails? What is the magician doing down there in the Lotus's orlop?"

"He is doing wondrous magic," said Sergei Rao. "Regard now, if you please, the mast."

For the mast had begun to bulge under its wrapping of sails, as, indeed, does the nymph cicada fresh from the ground as it climbs the bole of a tree intent on splitting itself out of its pupa husk. And this was exactly what the mast was doing. The sails, so tightly wound around it, split with a rivening sound, and beautiful, diaphanous colors showed forth; and before the amazed eyes of queen, chela, and Sergei Rao, great wings began to emerge, damp wings that glittered in the sunlight, but which, even as they watched, unfolded, spread and dried rapidly. And, in only a trice, there was the *Flower of the Lotus* resting calmly on the brown canal water, with great, beautiful wings arching up like a butterfly's, fanning the air softly.

And the magician came back up on deck, and saw that all was well; and he took the tiller and issued brisk commands:

"Prepare to take off. Bind yourselves with cords in lieu of seat belts. We will fly at an altitude of one thousand feet."

The wings of the *Flower of the Lotus* began to flap in mighty unison. They stirred up dust from the surrounding banks of the canal.

"Let us go," said the magician. And the *Flower of the Lotus* paddled furiously with its multiple feet and flapped even more furiously with its beautiful wings, and directly, like a monstrous grebe, it did take off, and began to describe an ever-ascending circle.

Khan Ali Bok stood on his silly, futile weir, so laboriously constructed by impressed peasant labor, and stared upward as the triphibious *Flower of the Lotus* flew over him majestically, its gentle eye staring down at him, and magician, queen, chela, and Sergei Rao staring down at him also from the prow of the airborne canal boat.

"Truly," said Khan Ali Bok, "that man is a magician." And the *Flower of the Lotus*, catching an upward draught

of air, ceased the powerful, rhythmic beating of its wings and began to soar like a condor.

The magician, taking undisguised and honest delight in his foe's discomfiture, gave a pull at the tiller, and the *Flower of the Lotus* banked into a wide turn and circled over the Khan thrice and then thrice again.

"Devil-worshipper!" snarled the Khan, shaking a powerless fist at the magician, and drawing lines awiddershin on the weir top, "I shall have you yet!" And then he got a good look at the queen who was leaning over the very prow itself like a strikingly carved figurehead with an even more striking torso. She was shouting imprecations at him, with an occasional innuendo thrown in for good measure.

"By the great toe of Gautama," said the Khan, "what in the world has happened to her? When I drowned her she was the ugliest woman alive, bar none. Now, I suppose it is safe to say, she is the most beautiful. To make a boat walk is something. To make a boat fly is even more so. But to beautify that sallow-skinned, surly slut of a female turtle is indeed magic. Not for nothing, I suppose, did the Past Grand Ras of the Ethiopians dub him the Immutable. A few more examples of his work, and I'll dub him something myself. I still can't get over that queen."

"What do we do now, master?" asked Captain Bao Bu-bo, who had given up his revolt against the Great Leap Forward and had joined forces with the Khan.

"Yes, master, what do we do now?" asked the Candlewick, who had also joined forces, there being no other option open to him.

"We change our hypothesis," said the Khan. "But what we change it to, I am not yet prepared to state."

"Try coaxing them to land," suggested Captain Bao Bu-bo. "Entice them down with honied words and placative gestures."

"Yes," echoed the Candlewick. "Entice them down. I fain would tryst with that queen again."

The Khan was doubtful, but in his desperation he was prepared to try anything. So the next time the *Flower of the Lotus* circled directly overhead, he spread wide his arms and shouted up to the magician:

"Come down, master necromancer! Alight and take tea with us. All you need fear from our side any more is a run-of-the-mill indictment on the general charge of hooli-

ganism. All the punishment it carries with it is a perfunctory sentence of light, corrective labor. And even that can be commuted. Then you and your companions can join with us in the Great Leap Forward. We would welcome you, for we have great need of your talents. What is a world without magic in it? We can arrange for you to give benefit performances in the larger cities. Think of the advantages. Think of the perquisites. Think!"

"I am thinking," said the magician, "and I see no advantages whatever. I spurn your offer of perfunctory indictments and light, corrective labor."

"Then only alight momentarily and take us off with you!" cried the now truly desperate Kahn. "Your *Flower of the Lotus* is plenty commodious to accommodate us. We will require no more personal services than your turncoat Sergei Rao can easily provide. Speaking of turncoats, I see no compelling reason why we can't defect also. We have, or at least we can conjure up, valuable secrets to disclose to the enemy. Think of the perquisites and the face this will earn for you. You must take us on, magician. Our position here has become untenable. Indeed, our very existence is in jeopardy."

"A perfunctory sentence of light, corrective labor will serve to erase that jeopardy," said the magician. "Things must have come to a sorry pass with the Great Leap Forward when commissars are forced to cry mercy from a hooligan. Stew in your own juice." And he gave the tiller an imperious jerk, and the *Flower of the Lotus* ceased its circling and began to climb like a condor on a shaft of air. The boat rose to an altitude of several thousand feet, and disappeared in the gathering haze.

"That term hooligan was ill chosen," said the Candlewick critically. "Many things have been imputed to him before, but never hooliganism. That is why he reacted so decisively. You touched him to the quick."

"Alas, yes," said Captain Bao Bu-bo. "And now what chance we had of escaping this chain-bound land has evaporated forever. Secret operatives are at this moment reporting our malfeasance to our unseen masters, who may be depended upon to act with their customary harshness."

"I was always overhasty with words," sighed Khan Ali Bok.

"My former master—he of the good old faroff days—a

shoemaker," said Captain Bao Bu-bo, "always counseled me to think twice before saying anything, and then, as a general rule, not to say anything at all."

"Would that I had had such sound advice as a growing boy," said Khan Ali Bok. "Would that so many things had been different. But, now, having failed utterly in our mission and facing nothing but imprecations, disgrace, and dishonor—and loss of all privileges—let us disband our peasant army and go cower among the bullrushes."

Chapter Twelve

The *Flower of the Lotus* soared amid a field of white clouds on her widespread butterfly wings of many colors. The clouds, curiously flat on the bottom, reared themselves into vast mountains of mist, and the *Lotus* floated among them. On the canal boat's foredeck, the magician and the queen were resting and enjoying each other's company along with the scenery. The magician summoned to his mind a passage from the writings of Mohammed, which he had chanced upon when he was studying religions. He recited it:

"The sincere servants of God!
A stated banquet shall they have of fruits,
And honored shall they be in the Garden of Delight
Upon green couches face to face."

"Very apt, and very pretty," said the queen. "But what do we do now, magician? Just float along and be happy? Is that all that is left to us, magician?"

"There is madame's throne in La," said the mage.

"I have renounced it," said the queen. "It is my present understanding that my sister, the Righteous Queen, is occupying it, she having gone over to the Great Leap Forward and having been suitably recompensed by her new masters. Do that again; it feels good."

The magician did it again, and said, "It must be the altitude which invigorates me. Were I down on the ground, I would probably feel like taking a nap."

"Move your head here and thus," said the queen. "See? I pillow it so. Now you may nap if you please."

"My altitude-inspired vigor is such that napping is out of the question," said the magician. "But would that all my pillows were as satisfying as this one."

"I will mother you a little," said the queen. "And then perhaps your great, round eyes will close in sleep. You are my tiny one, my dear one; and thus I cuddle you."

"Nay and yes and yes and nay," said the magician. "Not for nothing did you come by your name and fame. Nay and yes and yes and nay." And then he said sharply, "What are you doing here, Sergei Rao?" For the dour-visaged helmsman was standing there, staring at them with much disfavor. The queen sat up and pulled a shawl over her shoulders.

"I came to report that we are losing altitude," said Sergei Rao. "Something is happening to the *Flower of the Lotus* that is bringing her down to earth."

"It was always thus," sighed the magician. "Yes. I feel the pulling now myself. Happiness . . . and then unhappiness. Come, madame, let us leave the Garden of Delight and ascertain what transpires next."

The wings of the *Flower of the Lotus* would not flap anymore. The eye on her prow had a saddened glaze to it. She swept around, whirlpool fashion, in ever-descending circles, leaving the land of the cloud mountains. "Alas," said the queen.

The *Flower of the Lotus* would not respond to her tiller anymore. She came down like a kite suddenly deserted by the wind. She landed very gently in a little lake bordered with cedar trees. A man stood on the bank and waved in welcome.

"Alas, and again alas," said the magician, as he recognized the welcomer's features.

The queen swore softly. "Is it a new enemy?" she asked.

"Far worse," said the magician. "It is an old friend."

The *Flower of the Lotus*, by some outside force, was drawn gently to the lake bank, where it came to a stop with a gentle bump. The welcomer on the bank, an ancient, bent-over man, made mystic passes in the air with his delicate hands. He was the Hunchback of the Indus, one of the great necromancers of all time.

"So," he said sadly to the magician, "you sought to abandon us."

"On the contrary," said the magician, "I assumed you had abandoned me. I thought I was the last of the Revel, that you, my old comrade, had gone over to the enemy. So I carried on alone, in stealth and by subterfuge, shrugging off insults, warding off blows, absorbing indignities . . . and alone, always alone."

"Hardly alone," sniffed the Hunchback, looking at the queen. "If it be the penalty of solitude to be ever and again in the aura of such beauty, then who would not choose to be an eremite? If it be aloneness to have such breasts nearby from which to draw comfort and sustenance, then who would not be a solitary? Such hips, such thighs, such arms, hah! Besides all that, or perhaps because of it, you have become progressively younger, shucking away the wear and tear of the years each time you shed your skin. You are not the last of the Revel, but you are certainly the envy of it. For we have grown old, and forlorn, and embittered. But then we have no queen. The whole of the Revel is gathered here now. It was the combined power of the Revel which brought you down to earth."

And he beckoned with delicate hands, and out from behind rocks which suddenly blazed with foxfire and fireflies and phosphorescent flame came the companion wonderworkers—the last of their kind.

Old Chang of Jehol came first, then the Admiral Prince of Chin, then the Wizard of the Yenesei, then the Shaman of Ng Yuang; and that was all of them—the last muster of the thaumaturges of the land which had given birth to magic. They were, they recognized now, just odd-looking, tired old men, useless, and with nowhere to go.

The magician looked at them, and felt sorrow and pity, for some of them had once been his masters, and all of them had once been his friends. At his invitation, they boarded the *Flower of the Lotus*, and the queen, somewhat awed, served them wine with her own pale hands.

Old Chang of Jehol looked at her slender arms and spoke first, addressing himself to the magician:

"We have followed your progress, step by step, out of Manchuria to this point of no return. We have marked with admiration your adroit expedients. We were particu-

larly impressed by the manner in which you salvaged beauty, beauty which had never before existed, in the form of this queen who, when you found her, was drowned, hideous, hopeless, and forlornly decayed in the seaweed of a fisherman's net. Only a very great magician would have had the perception to do this.

"We have remarked favorably on the stratagems you employed in spiriting her away from her enemies, on how carefully you tended her and guarded her and revived her drooping spirits, always careful to do some little thing which would augment her slowly gathering beauty. We were impressed and a little awed, I think, by your manly lack of jealousy when, in order to assure the full flowering of her passions, you stood modestly aside whilst others could, as it were, cross-fertilize the tilling of your garden.

"Aye! You labored, you strove, you accomplished—while the rest of us cowered in the gathering storm and stood idle. Out of the darkness which was closing in upon us, you alone salvaged beauty. For all this we salute you."

And he signaled for the magician to withdraw that he might confer with his colleagues.

"What is all this leading up to?" demanded the queen suspiciously when she and the magician were alone.

"I think they are about to ask me to do them a favor," said the magician. "All that fine rhetoric was not for nothing."

"He said some rather nice things about me," said the queen. "But was I really so horrible looking when the fishermen brought me up in their net?"

"Perfectly ghastly," said the magician. "But the real, inner beauty managed still to shine through."

A bell tinkled, summoning them to appear again before the Revel.

The Admiral Prince of Chin spoke this time:

"The practice of magic is its own sublime reward, and needs no political organization to underwrite it, nor any profit motive to sustain it. I consider myself a transcendental artist, and the work I do great art. I want no rules, no dues, no legalisms to fetter me. I speak for all my colleagues here when I say this. Magic is our life work; it is to us what food and drink and wealth is to others. But now we find ourselves fettered . . . outcasts without honor. We dare appear no longer in public places to demonstrate our

arts, lest we be indicted and subjected to corrective labor. What is to be proposed, then? Everything is intolerable. How do we solve our dilemma?"

Said the Shaman of Ng Yuang, "There is one answer, and only one: Curse this land and leave it. It wants no magic; therefore, let us take the last drop of magic out of it, and leave."

"Let us leave, assuredly," said the Wizard of the Yenesei, "but let us not curse. There is curse aplenty upon this land already."

"I apprehend," said the magician, "that this will mean a certain amount of exertion on my part, inasmuch as I command the only means of transportation available. I suspect that the burden of the Revel's departure will rest largely upon my shoulders."

"You will be adequately recompensed," said Old Chang of Jehol. "You will be known as he who guarded and shepherded into safe refuge the last of the thaumaturges of this once magical land. Once secure in our exile, we will think up a suitable title with which to dub thee."

The queen frowned and signaled to the magician, and they withdrew from the Revel.

"Let us abandon them while there is still time," she said earnestly. "Otherwise, they will be like millstones around our necks. You can easily think up some plausible excuse for getting them off the boat. They have exhausted all their magic. They cannot bring us down again."

"I cannot abandon them," said the magician. "I cannot be a traitor to my own kind."

"But they are such shriveled old beasts!" said the queen.

"They are incredibly old men," said the magician. "And now they are fearful old men. They have no chelas to carry on their work for them, no apprentices to whom they can bequeath their skills. If we abandon them, they will shortly wither away into dust on the banks of this little lake. I cannot do it."

"But there is another matter," said the queen, folding her arms across her breasts.

"What?"

"I am going to have a baby."

"Oh, dear!" said the magician, popping his hands together in dismay. But suddenly he brightened up. "Really, this is most excellent!" he said. "It solves all our problems. It

will be a boy, and we will have these patriarchs make him into the greatest magician who ever lived. Thus, the old magic of this land will be reborn into a new and greater magic in a new land. Indeed, you have proved a great magician yourself. We shall have to dub *you* something or other. Come, let us carry the good news to our guests."

And, with careful, all-protective hands, he assisted her to where the forlorn old men sat in silence on the deck of the *Flower of the Lotus*, wondering gloomily what the outcome of their final, pathetic gesture would be.

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