

Welcome to *Schlock!* the new webzine for science fiction, fantasy and horror.

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Schlock! is an exciting new weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels and novellas within the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of schlock fantasy, science fiction or horror, *Schlock!* is the webzine for you!

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Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, reviews and art. Feel free to submit fiction, articles, art or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk.

We will also review published and self-published novels, in both print and digital editions. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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Featured in this edition is a collection of stories, new and old.

This Is What's Happening by James Rhodes - a stuck lift + three mismatched individuals = a descent into horror.

The Jackal: Part Two by Gavin Roach - romance, betrayal, horror and a sinister obsidian statue spell trouble on the Spanish Main! Second in a five-part series.

Schlock! Classic Serial: Varney the Vampyre ascribed to Thomas Preskett Prest - Part Two - The girl has swooned, and the vampyre is at his hideous repast! Before Twilight... before Nosferatu... before Dracula... there was Varney...

A Second-hand Gryphon by Gavin Roach and Gavin Chappell- All Bernard wanted was for Daphne to pay him a second glance. But when his chance to impress her comes, can he be as ruthless as Crawford Forbes-Bentley?

Castle of the Blood Visage: Part Two by Gavin Chappell - the Red Daughter concludes her struggle against Celtic Vampires.

Schlock! Classic Serial: Edison's Conquest of Mars (Part 2) by Garrett P. Serviss - Vengeance the First Thing! Thomas Edison's expedition to the Red Planet leads him to the surface of the Moon!

Gordred and the Golden Goose by Ernest Self-Paradis - the secret to untold riches creates galloping inflation and social breakdown in the city-state of Cosht.

When the Life-Giver Dies by Rex Mundy - a pagan god, a virgin sacrifice; just another night's work for Walwain the Pict. Or is it?

Escape into Danger by Klaus McClusky - four space pirates are pursued by the galactic police.

Schlock! Classic: Red Nails by Robert E Howard - "One of the strangest stories ever written - the tale of a barbarian adventurer, a woman pirate, and a weird roofed city inhabited by the most peculiar race of men ever spawned." First published in *Weird Tales*, 1936.

This Is What's Happening by James Rhodes

December had frosted the windscreen of her car, which frankly, was typical. Tegan had woken up at six o'clock to make sure everything was ready for the interview and over an hour, two mugs of coffee and a shower later she felt muggy from the lack of decent sleep. The gas card had run out a few days before and even the gelid water that slapped her clean wasn't enough to wake her up. The anti-frost spray had run out and she was carefully pouring hot water from the kettle onto the roof of the car so that it trickled down over the windows without cracking them. The result of this was that sheet ice replaced the frost as the water froze on contact. She decided to risk leaving the car running outside, whilst she got dressed properly and collected her research portfolio.

She cursed England and especially the jobless North of England as she got into the car twenty minutes later. The black plastic steering wheel was still cold enough to aggravate her eczema. The man who had brought her there entered briefly into her mind but she was trying to be Zen about the situation so she thought: if I get the job then I won't cut his balls off; maybe just one of them.

For a Friday morning there was surprisingly little traffic, there wasn't even a queue for the automatic barriers at the Birkenhead tunnel. When she was a teenager Tegan had made a mix-tape of cheesy upbeat tunes that she never got tired of, and it was one of the few things she'd brought over from VA.

When she had packed it in her luggage she hadn't expected to own a car that could still play it, but then, she hadn't expected to get stuck paying the mortgage on a house that she didn't like, or having a fiancée who vanished without explanation either. Even played on speakers that rumbled on any note below a certain frequency, Walking on Sunshine still made her feel good; especially as she flew through an almost empty tunnel in a couple of minutes.

None of the spaces directly outside of the World Museum were available as there was a large truck directly blocking the entrance. Still, it had only just turned eight o'clock and she had an hour and a half to kill before the interview began. For a brief moment Tegan got excited at the prospect that it was still early enough for McDonald's breakfast; then she remembered that the last of her cash was going to be burnt up on parking. Never mind, she reasoned, I can always sightsee.

Even after driving in England for two years, the multi-storey car park's spaces seemed far too narrow than and it took her a couple of levels to find a space she could comfortably get the car in and out of. Tegan made a note of the floor she had parked on, 3a, and pressed the button to call the elevator.

Damien hated parking the BM in the multi-storey but the proximity to the Coppersfeld meeting had made it a necessity. He would have thought that at eight in the morning he would have been able to get there without running in to any undesirables but sure enough there was one waiting for the elevator. Damien hated elevators; he didn't like to think that he had claustrophobia because that seemed like a weakness to him. He merely reasoned that confined spaces were unpleasant to anyone rational. Especially confined spaces filled with other people. Ordinary people were enough of an ordeal to be cooped up with; being stuck in an elevator with some buzz-cut, hooded top wearing scally was the worst thing he could imagine. Damien's stomach was hurting. In an effort to avoid embarrassment in the elevator he discretely released some trapped wind. The elevator doors were opening to let the scally on board and as he passed through the doors the young man took a step back from him and said in a high-toned Scouse accent, "Eugh, mate, you stink."

It was endearing to Tegan that the man in the business suite had both time to blush and shoot the teenager a scowl that could silence a banshee in the same period that it took to take a single step. He was about six foot tall, dark skinned, impressively built and obviously affluent. He was also one of the best-looking men that Tegan had seen since Paul vanished. He fixed the boy's eyes as if to redirect the guilt and demanded authoritatively, "Ground please." It sounded impressive, but Tegan could see that the teenager was still giggling as he pressed the button.

The elevator began to judder downwards past the first floor so that the letter G became illuminated. When the elevator stopped its three occupants anticipated the final jolt that preceded the doors opening but, after a minute or two, they began to realise it was not coming.

Matty pressed the help button, just once at first, then again and again. After trying for a couple of minutes he held the button down, letting the monotonous drone of the alarm bell ring on for about three minutes. It was just his luck to be stuck in an elevator with some stuck up prick and a woman. Matty hated being in elevators with women because they always looked at him as if they thought he was going to rape them. Nothing was happening so he gave up and sat down on the floor, leaning his back against the wall and resting his arms on his raised knees.

“Looks like I’m not going to work today. First time in a week I’ve been on time, too.”

The woman smiled at him in a friendly but dismissive type of a way, whereas, the business man kept his stare fixed on the doors as if he was about to open negotiations with them. It was too quiet for Matty so he dug in to his pocket and pulled out his mobile phone. He clicked through a few menus until he got to the folder of MP3s that he had titled Toonz.

The Coppersfeld meeting was at 8.30 which meant that Damien was half an hour late. His phone wasn’t getting a signal; it wouldn’t look good, to say the least. The pain in his stomach had risen to the point where he was barely able to stand up straight, yet he was holding his composure; at least to the eyes of the two strangers. It was more than just his stomach now too; his head had begun to throb, blurring his vision with a purple hue that faded in and out on alternate heartbeats. The music was making it worse, he’d had enough now:

“Can you turn that bloody thing off?” There was a guttural element to Damien’s tone that persuaded Matty to take him seriously.

“This thing?” Matty asked, holding up his phone.

“Jesus Christ, of course that thing.”

Matty reluctantly turned off the music and stood up; he walked back and forward in the limited space as if the silence was the blinding headlights of an approaching vehicle. After only about a minute he mumbled, “I’ve had enough of this,” and started pressing the help button again. After he had jabbed at it for long enough to drive both Damien and Tegan close to the point of homicide, it had still failed to bring any help. Matty began needling his fingers into the cavity between the closed doors in the effort to pull them apart. The doors didn’t give much under the force that Matty could muster but they opened enough so that he could jam his foot in to the space he had made to keep them open. The face of exterior wall that he had exposed was solid concrete. Just above the bottom where he had lodged his foot there was a gap of about six inches that let in a small amount of sunlight. Damien began to feel worse and rested his arm against the wall. He looked pallid, sweaty

and ill. Tegan kept telling herself that it would all be fixed in time for her interview.

She looked at the gap in the doorway and decided to try her luck.

“Hello,” she called out. “Hello, is anyone there?”

“Just my luck,” muttered Damien, “to get stuck in a lift with an American and a chav.”

Tegan didn’t have time to respond; Matty had been waiting for the opportunity for some time.

“Oh yeah, just my luck to get stuck in a lift with Johnny Fartypants.”

Tegan and Matty kept shouting for about twenty minutes but there was no-one even passing by, which in Liverpool City Centre during the morning rush-hour was a little disconcerting.

At 9.35 Tegan gave up worrying about her interview. She had tried with the help of Matty to hold her phone through the gap at the bottom of the door but even when she had got it through there was still no signal. Damien had scoffed cynically when she tried, saying, “There’ll be no signal! We might as well be trapped in a rock of iron ore under a mountain of slate.” Normally, his smug hostility would have made Tegan furious but the man was not looking well at all and, worst still, his illness was polluting the air. As Matty pulled to retrieve his foot from the doorway, she considered how it would affect the ventilation and asked if he could leave his shoe in the gap.

Matty, after introducing himself at length, had briefly tried to get everyone dancing but they weren’t going for it. Feeling hard done by the fact that he had one cold foot and no one would even dance with him he had given up. Pulling the hood of his sweatshirt over his head and tightening the strings until it obscured his face Matty down to sulk. He gently rocked his head in time to the tinny dance music that his phone was churning out again. Tegan was not about let her best interview suit make contact with that floor. She pulled a book of Sudoku puzzles from the back of her briefcase and did her best to immerse herself in them.

The first glimmer of hope arrived at a little before ten o’clock: They could hear movement outside and the sound of two male voices. A door slammed closed and then burst noisily open again. One of the voices screamed, “Get off him.” The other voice just simply screamed. There was the sound of a brief struggle and the squeak of shoes as one person sprinted away. Matty was knelt down on the floor his head craned over to try to see what was happening.

"I can't see anything," said Matty. "Must just be nutters!"

Because of the noise of Matty's music this was the first time that it had really occurred to Tegan just how quiet it was outside. Now there was an ominous repetitive sound that sounded like a person fidgeting. Screw it, she thought. I've been here long enough. She shouted through the gap:

"Can anybody help us?"

"Stupid woman," barked Damien. "That could be anyone."

"Better than no-one," she snapped back at him.

Suddenly there was the sound of slow approaching footsteps. Whoever it was must have been tall because they could see fingertips over the top of Matty's shoe. The fingertips closed and yanked the soft trainer out of its holding place. The elevator doors instantly closed behind it.

Matty stood up to start yelling but the sight of Damien stopped him dead. The man was clutching his chest. The American woman had run over to grab him and was trying to help him sit down. Damien flailed his arm in spasm and the back of his hand caught Tegan directly on the nose. Tegan had been the only thing supporting him. He simply slid down the wall and stopped moving. Matty stood, wondering what exactly he could do.

"Loosen his shirt and tie. We'll have to put him in the recovery position." Tegan had pulled some tissues out of her bag and was clutching them to her nose.

"I don't wanna move him; he looks like he's shat himself. Smells like it too."

Tegan freed one hand from her face and used it to help herself up. She crouched down next to the man and checked his pulse.

"You won't have to," she said. "He's dead."

The slow dawn of panic crept across Matty's face he raised both hands to his head and clutched at the front of his hood, pulling it forward to cover his eyes.

"I can't believe this," he muttered.

"Stay calm."

"I can't believe this!" Matty was shouting now. He started to kick the wall and then to bang his head against it, repeating the same words: "I can't believe this."

Tegan left him to burn off his energy and when he seemed to be slowing down she sternly asked him, "Calm?"

Matty nodded his head like a child lost in a supermarket.

“Good,” said Tegan, “‘cause that’s not fucking helping!”

“Oh, so-rry!”

Matty sat back down and began to rock his head again, this time without the accompanying music.

It was an hour and twenty-seven minutes before Matty finally broke his silence.

“Did he just fart?”

“No, you did.”

“That’s not me.”

“I think people release gasses after they’re dead.”

“Check his pulse again.”

Tegan went over to Damien and lifted his arm; he was unnaturally cold to the touch. She held her fingers against the vein of his left wrist but could feel nothing. Certain that he was dead, she slowly began to lower his arm. As his arm neared the floor, Tegan felt a faint but clear pulse and snatched it back up. His heart was beating, but at a rate of about once every five seconds. This was one of those time when having a PhD in History was particularly unhelpful.

“I think he’s just about alive.”

“OK,” nodded Matty. “That’s alright then.” His eyes stared up at Tegan, gibbous and terrified.

“I’m going to sleep now, OK?”

Tegan just shrugged.

“Fine.”

Matty had actually lain down on the filthy floor but he didn’t seem to find any peace. His legs and body sporadically twitched in spasm and even though his hood was obscuring his face it was obvious that he was crying. Tegan was not faring much better. Her legs were burning but she was still loath to sit down on the grime-carpeted floor. She figured that this probably wasn’t going

to be the day when her life turned around after all. Damien had begun to make inarticulate grunts and snorts. After staring at the two prostrate men for a few minutes Tegan frantically began to press the help button again. In her periphery she could see Matty stand up; he walked to the door and forced it open a few inches holding it open with his one shod foot. He turned to Tegan.

“Can you look the other way?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Try not to make a mess.”

Matty seemed to calm down and he went back to listening to mp3s on his phone; reluctantly, and because she needed the toilet too, Tegan sat down. She tried to occupy herself by reviewing the articles that she had brought for her interview portfolio. The syntax of the articles was almost enough to drown out the twin irritations of Damien’s intermittent moaning and the endless rattle of bass and treble that was escaping from Matty’s headphones. For a little over half an hour the situation was just about bearable to Tegan. Then, without warning, Matty’s music stopped.

Matty pulled out his phone and began banging it against the back of his hand as if that was somehow magically going to stimulate its battery into another hour of play. When that failed him, he simply threw it at the wall. Then he stood up, picked the phone back up and began to smash it against the wall.

“Will you calm down?” barked Tegan as she stood up to try to pacify him.

Tegan took a step backwards as she realised that Damien had also stood up and was staring directly at Matty. Matty turned to meet his glare and as he did so, Damien lurched forward and bit into his collarbone. Matty frantically took small and ineffectual swings at the man in an effort to shake him off, but Damien had firm hold of Matty, set on clenching his teeth until they had ripped out a good chunk of his flesh. The pain and shock left Matty defenceless. Tegan tried hitting Damien with her bag but the man seemed oblivious to the blows. Remembering a self-defence lesson she had taken in college she slipped around the back of Damien and threaded her forearm over his throat, using her other arm to double the pressure of the hold. As Tegan struggled to cut off his flow of oxygen Matty found the instinct to fight back and plunged both of his thumbs into Damien’s eye sockets.

Damien fell backwards with Tegan underneath him, still desperately squeezing his throat. Matty fell backwards too, clutching the wound that Damien had inflicted on him. After what seemed like an hour, Damien succumbed to Tegan’s chokehold and lost consciousness.

Tegan patched Matty up as best as she could by tearing her suit jacket into bandages. Matty had lost quite a bit of blood and was shivering; Tegan thought it was probably quite important that he keep warm. She was cold herself, she had lost control of her bladder in the struggle and the moisture was catching the draft. Blood covered her hands and body and she dreaded to think what else. There was no way of cleaning them properly but she saved a rag from her formerly best jacket to wipe most of it off her hands. The adrenaline rush that had provoked her to defend Matty had soured and turned against her, making her jittery and bellicose when there was nothing to defend or attack.

She paced the elevator, watching Damien, ready to strike him at the first sign of movement, but he didn't even stir. Matty was sleeping like a hibernating bear, and the quiet was all the more noticeable for the recent spurt of mayhem. It was a hopeless and neglected quiet that seemed to say, this is it for you – nobody is ever coming to help you. Tegan couldn't sit down again; not for fear of the dirt, how ridiculous that seemed now, but for fear of Damien waking up again and for fear of the cold that might set in if she stopped moving. It had been about five hours since the doors closed on her and they had been far, far worse than she could have possibly anticipated them to be. She began to fantasise that somehow Paul had returned and would come looking for her. The hollow fantasy was enough to keep her going for a little while longer. Tegan she wondered just how long she could simply keep pacing without giving in to the situation. The adrenaline in her system began slowly to wear off with a level of exhaustion she had never previously experienced settling down in its place.

At first she leant against the wall, then she slowly gave way to sitting and finally to closing her eyes. She reasoned to herself that it was just for a moment and that any movement from the two sleeping oafs would be more than sufficiently loud enough to wake her. If either of the other two had been awake, they would have witnessed on her blood-dirtied face an expression as serene as virgin snowfall.

Her false reasoning couldn't have been more wrong. Eventually Matty woke her by shaking her with brisk urgency.

She stumbled out of sleep, lurching forwards as she tripped on the step of consciousness.

“What is it?”

“Have you got the time?”

“What?”

“Do you know what time it is?”

Tegan reached for her phone.

“Fuck, I thought it was something important.”

“It is: what time is it?”

It took a few seconds for the drowsy Tegan to translate the twenty-four hour clock in to normal people’s time but doing so was enough to fire her synapses out of their drowsy stupor.

“It’s 2.48.”

Matty’s voice raised in a whining crescendo, like an old-fashioned kettle on the boil:

“Ahhhhhhhhhh! I knew it. Who’d have thought we’d still be here.” He didn’t pause for breath. “She’ll never forgive this, never, I’m gone, I’m gone.”

“What is it this time?”

“Our Samantha, I was supposed to pick our Samantha up.”

“You have to remember that I don’t actually know anything about you.”

“Samantha, she’s me daughter.”

“Jesus, how old is she?”

“Five.”

“And you are...?”

“I’m nineteen.”

“She’s at school, right?”

Matty gave a simpleton’s nod.

“Right, so the school will look after her until someone can get her. They’ll have other phone numbers besides yours won’t they?”

“Yeah, her mum’s - and she’ll ditch me for good this time.”

“Sit down, Matty.”

Tegan patted the floor next to herself and the boy faithfully obeyed her.

“There’s nothing you can do. Just be glad that your daughter’s safe and if we ever get out of here I’m sure the lawsuit I’ll be filing will be enough proof that this wasn’t your fault.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Matty put his head on Tegan’s shoulder and the two of them sat together. She placed a maternal arm around his shoulder.

“Coppersfeld!”

It was a dry rattling whisper.

“Coppersfeld!”

Both Tegan and Matty sprang to their feet. Damien on the other side of the room was trying to stand: his arm pushed backwards against the wall to prop him up but he kept slipping down like an idiotic drunk. Finally, he fell forwards on to his hands and knees and began crawling towards Matty and Tegan. Matty, still bleeding from his last attack stepped forward and kicked the Damien’s head as if it were the last ball in a penalty shootout. Damien fell sideways and his palms found the friction of the steel door: in a moment, he was on his feet and staring directly at Matty. Matty stepped forward and punched Damien with a one, two and hook combination that sent the executive backwards and at the same time tore open the rags that were bandaging his earlier wound.

“Get behind him again.”

Tegan followed the cue and as Damien charged at Matty she slipped around the back of him again and slid her arm around his neck. Damien was stronger and faster than before: he bent his head forwards to shield his neck with his chin. At the same time, his teeth snapped at Tegan’s arm. Tegan instinctively pushed away from him.

Damien staggered forwards and grabbed Matty by the wrist. Matty pulled his hand backwards to break the man’s grip and in doing so knocked Damien off balance. In the confined space, Matty could not step backwards enough to escape contact and Damien’s face fell directly in to his stomach. Matty screeched in pain as Damien bit through his sweater and pulled away a chunk of soft belly flesh, swallowing it in one. He lifted his head back to strike again and Tegan caught him squarely around the neck. Damien eventually went limp.

Matty was lying on the floor screaming in pain. She pulled off his remaining shoe and used the lace to bind the man’s feet together. Then, removing her blouse, she used her bra to secure his hands behind his back. Then, resting her knee across Damien’s throat, she shoved one of her socks in to his mouth and used the blouse as a gag so that he couldn’t bite any more. She cursed herself for not thinking of it the first time he had attacked and, putting her coat back on, turned her attention to Matty.

Folded against the wall, Matty had stopped screaming. Most of the colour had left his face and his hand was shaking from the pressure he was putting against his wound. Doing so was forcing more blood to flow out of the original bite. Tegan retied the rags on his shoulder and held her remaining sock against the wound on Matty's stomach. It was not enough to stop the blood flow, but it was stemming it. She stroked his arm with the other hand. He smiled at her dreamily and closed his eyes.

At about four o'clock the lights went out. Tegan kept checking Matty's pulse to see if he was still alive. On the other side of the room, she could see the outline of Damien, twitching in his sleep and pulling against the bindings she had placed on him. By seven pm Matty's pulse no longer needed checking. It didn't take long after his pulse faded before Matty began to grunt and stir. She took the leather belt off his jeans and gagged him, then used his jeans to create a makeshift straitjacket. She didn't want to undo any of the bandaging, just in case, and she didn't dare to use Damien's clothes. Finally, she used her suit pants to bind his legs together. Tegan sat in the dark, shivering in her coat and underpants and wondering what would happen when the two men woke up.

The door struggled to open as it was bumping over a small amount of mail and local papers.

"I guess she's not here anymore."

"Yeah, she was always smart. It's going to make her harder to find now though."

There was an obvious sound of regret in Paul's voice, though he had no control over what had happened. The two men began to search the house for any evidence of Tegan's whereabouts. The door of the fridge had an envelope taped to it labelled, "Paul." He took it down and tore it open immediately. The message read simply, "You're an asshole!"

The contents of the fridge were sparse, a small number of eggs, some wholemeal bread and less than quarter of a pint of milk. The bottom drawer was full of vegetables that had begun to wither but the milk was still drinkable, even with no electricity in the house. They increased the level of their search: pulling through drawers and searching through the bins. After they were sure they had looked through absolutely everywhere, they had found only a list of airline prices for February and a note on the calendar that declared December the 17th, two days before, to be a big day.

The Jackal by Gavin Roach

Part II

The acrid odour of tobacco and harsh laughter greeted Manfred Thornville as he stepped into the *Risen Anchor* tavern. He clutched his leather satchel to his chest as he pushed his way through the sweating, unwashed masses. Ahead of Thornville, through the miasma of smoke and body odour, were his new business partners; the crew of the brigantine, the Jackal. As he approached, Thornville studied them as best as the shadowed alcove allowed.

Each of them was an ill-favoured, ragged brute. The captain was easily identifiable among the thronging pack of ruffians by his tattooed face, shaven head and long beard. He sat at the end of the table, deep into the alcove. In one hand he had an ale mug and the other, one of the tavern whores. Both captain and crew were roaring with laughter as wenches plied them with drink.

Thornville checked his pocket. The pistol he carried offered some small comfort as he approached the alcove.

"It appears we've company, lads. Best behaviour now," said Captain Cole eying Lord Thornville. The crew grew quiet; some stared at Thornville with outright hostility, while others sneered in contempt of the soft, expensively dressed aristocrat before them.

The other patrons caroused, quaffed and revelled in the warm gloom, unconcerned by anything save their immediate gratification. Thornville and Cole stared at one another.

"I believe we have business to conclude this evening, Captain Cole."

"Aye, we do. Sit down and have a drink, Thornville."

Lord Thornville bristled at the lack of respect for his standing but said nothing. He carefully pulled a vacant stool back from the table, checked that it was clean and sat. A grubby hand shoved a tankard in front of him, slopping the contents over the bare wood.

Cole leered at Thornville and nodded to the first floor balcony. "I'll wager that we're not the only folk you have business with in here this fine evening." There were several curtained alcoves where most of the whores plied their trade with the wealthier patrons who required privacy. "I 'ear you've been seeing a lot o' young Mary recently."

"Cole, it is none of your concern with whom I choose to associate." Thornville wiped the lip of the tankard with his handkerchief. He lifted it to his nose, sniffed and then returned the tankard to the scarred table. He certainly was not about to drink such vile smelling muck. He motioned to one of the wenches. "Wine," he ordered, and then returned his attention to the men

before him. "As much as I enjoy our little chats, Cole, time is of the essence. I believe you have something for me?"

Captain Cole grinned. "Mr Clench, give the man what he came for." A huge bear of a man tossed a small pouch onto the table in front of Thornville. It landed with a dull clink.

"What," said Thornville glancing at the pouch, "is that?"

"That, my friend, is your cut from our recent 'venture'." Cole leaned forward, his predatory grin widening.

"Listen Cole, I know when someone is trying to short-change me. You would also do well to remember that I know where you make berth. One word to the proper authorities..."

Cole stood suddenly. His stool clattered back into the alcove and the doxy on his lap fell to the floor, cursing. Cole had in his hand a large twin barrelled pistol, and was aiming it at Thornville's heart.

"Ere now darlin'," said an enormous serving wench, "if you're intent on shootin' this fine gentleman, take it outside! I ain't cleaning up no bloody mess this evenin'." With one meaty hand on her hip, the other holding a tray she glared at the crew of the Jackal. Her expression showing she would not be defied.

"Now you lot, enjoy your drinks and don't kill nobody!," growled the wench as she dumped Thornville's wine on the table. "Leastways, not in 'ere where I can see ya."

"My apologies, Sal," said Cole "Didn't mean nuthin' by it. Just a business dispute is all."

Thornville's attention had been drawn by Sal, a crimson haired mountain of feminine indomitability. When he looked back to Cole the pistol had disappeared and the captain was the very paragon of congeniality.

"Aye, see that's all it is. An' you!" she turned on Thornville, "ask politely next time, or this lot'll be the least o' your worries!" With that, Sal turned and ploughed through the thronging revellers back to the bar.

During the calm that followed Sal's departure Thornville poured himself a glass of wine. He decided a change of strategy was in order. "My apologies, Captain Cole. I intended no insult to you or your crew. All I meant was, there appears to be a lot less there than I expected." Thornville indicated the leather pouch.

"Aye, Thornville. The last couple o' ships you fed us were easy pickings no doubt. An' we've all made a killin' outa them, God bless rich cowards says I. But that last one, the Morning Star, there was sumthin' odd about it; when we

boarded her there wasn't anybody, or anythin' much on board. It was like some sort o' ghost ship."

"Impossible! My contact at the harbour could not have been mistaken. He supervised the loading of that very ship himself. And spare me your sailor's superstitions, Cole."

The passengers on board that vessel were a rich religious sect travelling to England. There should have been a great deal of valuable items within the hold. "I assume you searched everywhere on board?"

Cole glared at Thornville "Ain't we lucky bein' in the company o' such an expert in naval matters, boys!" This was met with sniggers from the crew. "Where do you think they could 'ave 'idden their belongings? Up in the crow's nest?"

"So after taking the trouble to pack and load all their earthly possessions," said Thornville, pouring himself another glass of wine, "I suppose the passengers and crew of the Morning Star simply decided, one and all, to jump overboard?"

"Who knows with them religious sorts?"

"Oh, come now, Cole. I find it hard to believe there was nothing of worth at all in the hold. As for there being no one on board..."

"Listen Thornville, we took all there was to be had from that ghost ship, just an old stone box with an odd statue an' a few scraps o' furniture an' the like." Cole paused. "I suppose a nice, cultured fellow like yourself would appreciate exotic foreign art. I'll let you take the box and statue off my hands cheap," he added with a nasty grin.

"Keep the trinkets, Cole," said Thornville. "I'm sure you can pass them off as Aztec or some such treasure to the next gullible fool you meet."

The Jackal had already taken three vessels. Each one had indeed proven lucrative for everyone involved. What was one failure compared with three successes? "Very well, Captain, say no more about it. I have here," he said, indicating the satchel "details of your next target." Thornville opened the satchel and slid a folded paper across the table towards Cole.

As Cole rose he pocketed the folded paper. "Well, Thornville. We'll be seein' you sometime next month I expect." The Jackal's crew prepared to leave the tavern.

"Oh, Captain Cole, a word if you please," said Thornville.

"What now?"

"I have another task that requires the singular talents of your crew."

Cole stopped. "Make it quick Thornville; I don't want to spend the rest o' the evenin' starin' at you." His crew was stepping out of the tavern into the warm evening air.

"I have a delicate matter that I need resolving this evening. There is a young man hereabouts whom is causing me a great deal of trouble. I would like him to disappear."

"It's a risky business makin' people disappear, y'know."

"Oh not this one. He is merely a poet and barely out of his swaddling clothes to boot. I would imagine that he would pose no threat to men of your calibre." Thornville produced a bulging purse from the satchel. "I think it would be worth your while."

Cole looked at the purse. "I think we might be able to do somethin' about your problem."

"This is the poet's address," said Thornville. He produced a scrap of paper from a waistcoat pocket. "The sooner he is gone, the better, Captain Cole."

"Consider 'im gone then." Cole pocketed the purse. Without another word he walked out of the tavern.

Lord Thornville picked up the small purse and dropped it in his satchel. His attention turned to the staircase leading to the first floor balcony. Standing on the first stair was a girl. Thornville finished his wine, called politely for another bottle and walked over to the girl. She appeared to be no older than his daughter. She was small, thin and quiet, just the way he liked them. He stared at the girl with a hungry smile.

"Good evening, sweet Mary," he said, cupping her chin. "It has been a long day. I hope you will ease my troubles, if only for a little while." Lord Thornville led the young girl up the stairs and into a curtained alcove. With one last look behind him he slowly closed the curtains.

~oOo~

"Tobias! Tobias, wake up and let me in! Tobias!" Louis shouted, heedless of the hour, alternately pounding on Tobias Day's front door then peering in through darkened windows. Charlotte held back from the scene, not knowing what to do. It can't be as serious as Louis thinks, she thought, he must be overreacting. After all, it was something he was known for. Surely Father would not have Toby harmed?

After leaving her father's house, the pair had raced to the insalubrious part of town where Tobias Day had his lodgings. Now Louis was in danger of waking the entire street. Charlotte glanced up as light began to show in a few upstairs windows. "Louis, please calm down. Waking everyone will not do at all!"

“God damn you, man! Open the door, Tobias!” Louis went back to pounding on the door.

A light came on across the street. “What is going on down there?” A gruff, heavily moustachioed man leaned out of an upstairs window. “You! Yes you two, what are you doing?”

Charlotte looked back to Louis, then the man in the window. Just as she opened her mouth to speak Tobias answered the door. “What’s all this commotion about, Louis? Charlotte, is that you?”

“Tobias! I have grave news concerning both you and Charlotte.” Louis grabbed Tobias’ arm. “We must speak with you.”

“Come inside, quickly now!” Tobias stood aside holding the door open.

“I apologise about the lateness of the hour,” murmured Charlotte. “But it is good to see you, Toby.”

“It is a fine thing to see you too Charlotte, whatever the hour,” said Tobias closing the door on his neighbours’ complaints.

Tobias Day led his friends into the sitting room. Lighting lamps as they went, he turned to Louis. “Have a care, my friend. My neighbours dislike me as it is, and I do not wish to give my father any reason to cease paying the rent on this place.”

“I apologise, Tobias, but you must listen.” Louis grasped Tobias’ shoulder. “Charlotte’s father has arranged for her to be married!”

Tobias stopped fussing with the lamp and gaped at his friend “...married...” He looked at Charlotte.

“I swear I did not know about this until Louis told me earlier this evening,” Charlotte whispered, hugging him.

“And it gets worse. Thornville has plans to have you removed.” Louis peered through a crack in the curtains. “I think you need to get away from here, Tobias. It is no longer safe for you.”

Tobias fell into a nearby chair, confusion evident upon his face. He brushed a strand of long dark hair away from his eyes and looked at Charlotte. “What is happening, my love? I...”

Charlotte gazed at the pale, confused face of her lover. “I don’t know, Toby. But I think we should listen to Louis. There are rumours about my father to which I did not care to pay attention. Rumours about his business practices, his rivals disappearing and deals with pirates.” Charlotte sat down next to

Tobias. "But, they are after all, only rumours. I do not want to believe them, but I keep hearing more of them."

Tobias paused. He appeared to be thinking. Louis and Charlotte glanced at one another. "Charlotte, would you come away with me?" said Tobias, looking into Charlotte's eyes.

"Where would we go, Toby?"

"It doesn't matter, not if we are together. I still have some money; we could book passage on the next ship to leave tomorrow morning!" Tobias stood and clasped Charlotte's hands in his own. "Come away with me and be my wife!"

It was all moving too fast and Charlotte didn't know what to do. She looked at the man standing before her; amongst all the confusion she knew one thing. She knew that she wanted to be with him. "Yes! Oh yes, Toby!" she cried, leaping up from the chair and kissing him.

"Did you hear that? I think there is someone out there, Tobias," muttered Louis. "I'll go and take a closer look."

"Wait, I'll go with you."

"No, Tobias. You take Charlotte upstairs and get your things together. You can both stay at my place tonight." With that Louis lowered the flame in the lamp and left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Come, my love. This won't take long. Then we can leave with Louis," whispered Tobias. The pair of them dashed up the stairs, thrilled with excitement and a little apprehensive for what the future might hold.

TO BE CONTINUED

VARNEY THE VAMPIRE ascribed to THOMAS PRESKETT PREST

**CHAPTER IV.
THE MORNING.—THE CONSULTATION.—THE FEARFUL SUGGESTION.**

What wonderfully different impressions and feelings, with regard to the same circumstances, come across the mind in the broad, clear, and beautiful light of day to what haunt the imagination, and often render the judgment almost incapable of action, when the heavy shadow of night is upon all things.

There must be a downright physical reason for this effect—it is so remarkable and so universal. It seems that the sun's rays so completely alter and modify

the constitution of the atmosphere, that it produces, as we inhale it, a wonderfully different effect upon the nerves of the human subject.

We can account for this phenomenon in no other way. Perhaps never in his life had he, Henry Bannerworth, felt so strongly this transition of feeling as he now felt it, when the beautiful daylight gradually dawned upon him, as he kept his lonely watch by the bedside of his slumbering sister.

That watch had been a perfectly undisturbed one. Not the least sight or sound of any intrusion had reached his senses. All had been as still as the very grave.

And yet while the night lasted, and he was more indebted to the rays of the candle, which he had placed upon a shelf, for the power to distinguish objects than to the light of the morning, a thousand uneasy and strange sensations had found a home in his agitated bosom.

He looked so many times at the portrait which was in the panel that at length he felt an undefined sensation of terror creep over him whenever he took his eyes off it.

He tried to keep himself from looking at it, but he found it vain, so he adopted what, perhaps, was certainly the wisest, best plan, namely, to look at it continually.

He shifted his chair so that he could gaze upon it without any effort, and he placed the candle so that a faint light was thrown upon it, and there he sat, a prey to many conflicting and uncomfortable feelings, until the daylight began to make the candle flame look dull and sickly.

Solution for the events of the night he could find none. He racked his imagination in vain to find some means, however vague, of endeavouring to account for what occurred, and still he was at fault. All was to him wrapped in the gloom of the most profound mystery.

And how strangely, too, the eyes of that portrait appeared to look upon him—as if instinct with life, and as if the head to which they belonged was busy in endeavouring to find out the secret communings of his soul. It was wonderfully well executed that portrait; so life-like, that the very features seemed to move as you gazed upon them.

“It shall be removed,” said Henry. “I would remove it now, but that it seems absolutely painted on the panel, and I should awake Flora in any attempt to do so.”

He arose and ascertained that such was the case, and that it would require a workman, with proper tools adapted to the job, to remove the portrait.

“True,” he said, “I might now destroy it, but it is a pity to obscure a work of such rare art as this is; I should blame myself if I were. It shall be removed to some other room of the house, however.”

Then, all of a sudden, it struck Henry how foolish it would be to remove the portrait from the wall of a room which, in all likelihood, after that night, would be uninhabited; for it was not probable that Flora would choose again to inhabit a chamber in which she had gone through so much terror.

“It can be left where it is,” he said, “and we can fasten up, if we please, even the very door of this room, so that no one need trouble themselves any further about it.”

The morning was now coming fast, and just as Henry thought he would partially draw a blind across the window, in order to shield from the direct rays of the sun the eyes of Flora, she awoke.

“Help—help!” she cried, and Henry was by her side in a moment.

“You are safe, Flora—you are safe,” he said.

“Where is it now?” she said.

“What—what, dear Flora?”

“The dreadful apparition. Oh, what have I done to be made thus perpetually miserable?”

“Think no more of it, Flora.”

“I must think. My brain is on fire! A million of strange eyes seem gazing on me.”

“Great Heaven! she raves,” said Henry.

“Hark—hark—hark! He comes on the wings of the storm. Oh, it is most horrible—horrible!”

Henry rang the bell, but not sufficiently loudly to create any alarm. The sound reached the waking ear of the mother, who in a few moments was in the room.

“She has awakened,” said Henry, “and has spoken, but she seems to me to wander in her discourse. For God’s sake, soothe her, and try to bring her mind round to its usual state.”

“I will, Henry—I will.”

“And I think, mother, if you were to get her out of this room, and into some other chamber as far removed from this one as possible, it would tend to withdraw her mind from what has occurred.”

“Yes; it shall be done. Oh, Henry, what was it—what do you think it was?”

“I am lost in a sea of wild conjecture. I can form no conclusion; where is Mr. Marchdale?”

“I believe in his chamber.”

“Then I will go and consult with him.”

Henry proceeded at once to the chamber, which was, as he knew, occupied by Mr. Marchdale; and as he crossed the corridor, he could not but pause a moment to glance from a window at the face of nature.

As is often the case, the terrific storm of the preceding evening had cleared the air, and rendered it deliciously invigorating and lifelike. The weather had been dull, and there had been for some days a certain heaviness in the atmosphere, which was now entirely removed.

The morning sun was shining with uncommon brilliancy, birds were singing in every tree and on every bush; so pleasant, so spirit-stirring, health giving a morning, seldom had he seen. And the effect upon his spirits was great, although not altogether what it might have been, had all gone on as it usually was in the habit of doing at that house. The ordinary little casualties of evil fortune had certainly from time to time, in the shape of illness, and one thing or another, attacked the family of the Bannerworths in common with every other family, but here suddenly had arisen a something at once terrible and inexplicable.

He found Mr. Marchdale up and dressed, and apparently in deep and anxious thought. The moment he saw Henry, he said,—

“Flora is awake, I presume.”

“Yes, but her mind appears to be much disturbed.”

“From bodily weakness, I dare say.”

“But why should she be bodily weak? she was strong and well, ay, as well as she could ever be in all her life. The glow of youth and health was on her cheeks. Is it possible that, in the course of one night, she should become bodily weak to such an extent?”

“Henry,” said Mr. Marchdale, sadly, “sit down. I am not, as you know, a superstitious man.”

“You certainly are not.”

“And yet, I never in all my life was so absolutely staggered as I have been by the occurrences of to-night.”

“Say on.”

“There is a frightful, a hideous solution of them; one which every consideration will tend to add strength to, one which I tremble to name now, although, yesterday, at this hour, I should have laughed it to scorn.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes, it is so. Tell no one that which I am about to say to you. Let the dreadful suggestion remain with ourselves alone, Henry Bannerworth.”

“I—I am lost in wonder.”

“You promise me?”

“What—what?”

“That you will not repeat my opinion to any one.”

“I do.”

“On your honour.”

“On my honour, I promise.”

Mr. Marchdale rose, and proceeding to the door, he looked out to see that there were no listeners near. Having ascertained then that they were quite alone, he returned, and drawing a chair close to that on which Henry sat, he said,—

“Henry, have you never heard of a strange and dreadful superstition which, in some countries, is extremely rife, by which it is supposed that there are beings who never die.”

“Never die!”

“Never. In a word, Henry, have you never heard of—of—I dread to pronounce the word.”

“Speak it. God of Heaven! let me hear it.”

“A vampyre!”

Henry sprung to his feet. His whole frame quivered with emotion; the drops of perspiration stood upon his brow, as, in, a strange, hoarse voice, he repeated the words,—

“A vampyre!”

“Even so; one who has to renew a dreadful existence by human blood—one who lives on for ever, and must keep up such a fearful existence upon human gore—one who eats not and drinks not as other men—a vampyre.”

Henry dropped into his scat, and uttered a deep groan of the most exquisite anguish.

“I could echo that groan,” said Marchdale, “but that I am so thoroughly bewildered I know not what to think.”

“Good God—good God!”

“Do not too readily yield belief in so dreadful a supposition, I pray you.”

“Yield belief!” exclaimed Henry, as he rose, and lifted up one of his hands above his head. “No; by Heaven, and the great God of all, who there rules, I will not easily believe aught so awful and so monstrous.”

“I applaud your sentiment, Henry; not willingly would I deliver up myself to so frightful a belief—it is too horrible. I merely have told you of that which you saw was on my mind. You have surely before heard of such things.”

“I have—I have.”

“I much marvel, then, that the supposition did not occur to you, Henry.”

“It did not—it did not, Marchdale. It—it was too dreadful, I suppose, to find a home in my heart. Oh! Flora, Flora, if this horrible idea should once occur to you, reason cannot, I am quite sure, uphold you against it.”

“Let no one presume to insinuate it to her, Henry. I would not have it mentioned to her for worlds.”

“Nor I—nor I. Good God! I shudder at the very thought—the mere possibility; but there is no possibility, there can be none. I will not believe it.”

“Nor I.”

“No; by Heaven’s justice, goodness, grace, and mercy, I will not believe it.”

“Tis well sworn, Henry; and now, discarding the supposition that Flora has been visited by a vampyre, let us seriously set about endeavouring, if we can, to account for what has happened in this house.”

“I—I cannot now.”

“Nay, let us examine the matter; if we can find any natural explanation, let us cling to it, Henry, as the sheet-anchor of our very souls.”

“Do you think. You are fertile in expedients. Do you think, Marchdale; and, for Heaven’s sake, and for the sake of our own peace, find out some other way of accounting for what has happened, than the hideous one you have suggested.”

“And yet my pistol bullets hurt him not; he has left the tokens of his presence on the neck of Flora.”

“Peace, oh! peace. Do not, I pray you, accumulate reasons why I should receive such a dismal, awful superstition. Oh, do not, Marchdale, as you love me!”

“You know that my attachment to you,” said Marchdale, “is sincere; and yet, Heaven help us!”

His voice was broken by grief as he spoke, and he turned aside his head to hide the bursting tears that would, despite all his efforts, show themselves in his eyes.

“Marchdale,” added Henry, after a pause of some moments’ duration, “I will sit up to-night with my sister.”

“Do—do!”

“Think you there is a chance it may come again?”

“I cannot—I dare not speculate upon the coming of so dreadful a visitor, Henry; but I will hold watch with you most willingly.”

“You will, Marchdale?”

“My hand upon it. Come what dangers may, I will share them with you, Henry.”

“A thousand thanks. Say nothing, then, to George of what we have been talking about. He is of a highly susceptible nature, and the very idea of such a thing would kill him.”

“I will; be mute. Remove your sister to some other chamber, let me beg of you, Henry; the one she now inhabits will always be suggestive of horrible thoughts.”

“I will; and that dreadful-looking portrait, with its perfect likeness to him who came last night.”

“Perfect indeed. Do you intend to remove it?”

"I do not. I thought of doing so; but it is actually on the panel in the wall, and I would not willingly destroy it, and it may as well remain where it is in that chamber, which I can readily now believe will become henceforward a deserted one in this house."

"It may well become such."

"Who comes here? I hear a step."

There was a tip at the door at this moment, and George made his appearance in answer to the summons to come in. He looked pale and ill; his face betrayed how much he had mentally suffered during that night, and almost directly he got into the bed-chamber he said,—

"I shall, I am sure, be censured by you both for what I am going to say; but I cannot help saying it, nevertheless, for to keep it to myself would destroy me."

"Good God, George! what is it?" said Mr. Marchdale.

"Speak it out!" said Henry.

"I have been thinking of what has occurred here, and the result of that thought has been one of the wildest suppositions that ever I thought I should have to entertain. Have you never heard of a vampyre?"

Henry sighed deeply, and Marchdale was silent.

"I say a vampyre," added George, with much excitement in his manner. "It is a fearful, a horrible supposition; but our poor, dear Flora has been visited by a vampyre, and I shall go completely mad!"

He sat down, and covering his face with his hands, he wept bitterly and abundantly.

"George," said Henry, when he saw that the frantic grief had in some measure abated—"be calm, George, and endeavour to listen to me."

"I hear, Henry."

"Well, then, do not suppose that you are the only one in this house to whom so dreadful a superstition has occurred."

"Not the only one?"

"No; it has occurred to Mr. Marchdale also."

"Gracious Heaven!"

"He mentioned it to me; but we have both agreed to repudiate it with horror."

“To—repudiate—it?”

“Yes, George.”

“And yet—and yet—”

“Hush, hush! I know what you would say. You would tell us that our repudiation of it cannot affect the fact. Of that we are aware; but yet will we disbelieve that which a belief in would be enough to drive us mad.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“To keep this supposition to ourselves, in the first place; to guard it most zealously from the ears of Flora.”

“Do you think she has ever heard of vampyres?”

“I never heard her mention that in all her reading she had gathered even a hint of such a fearful superstition. If she has, we must be guided by circumstances, and do the best we can.”

“Pray Heaven she may not!”

“Amen to that prayer, George,” said Henry. “Mr. Marchdale and I intend to keep watch over Flora to-night.”

“May not I join you?”

“Your health, dear George, will not permit you to engage in such matters. Do you seek your natural repose, and leave it to us to do the best we can in this most fearful and terrible emergency.”

“As you please, brother, and as you please, Mr. Marchdale. I know I am a frail reed, and my belief is that this affair will kill me quite. The truth is, I am horrified—utterly and frightfully horrified. Like my poor, dear sister, I do not believe I shall ever sleep again.”

“Do not fancy that, George,” said Marchdale. “You very much add to the uneasiness which must be your poor mother’s portion, by allowing this circumstance to so much affect you. You well know her affection for you all, and let me therefore, as a very old friend of hers, entreat you to wear as cheerful an aspect as you can in her presence.”

“For once in my life,” said George, sadly, “I will; to my dear mother, endeavour to play the hypocrite.”

“Do so,” said Henry. “The motive will sanction any such deceit as that, George, be assured.”

The day wore on, and Poor Flora remained in a very precarious situation. It was not until mid-day that Henry made up his mind he would call in a medical gentleman to her, and then he rode to the neighbouring market town, where he knew an extremely intelligent practitioner resided. This gentleman Henry resolved upon, under a promise of secrecy, making confidant of; but, long before he reached him, he found he might well dispense with the promise of secrecy.

He had never thought, so engaged had he been with other matters, that the servants were cognizant of the whole affair, and that from them he had no expectation of being able to keep the whole story in all its details. Of course such an opportunity for tale-bearing and gossiping was not likely to be lost; and while Henry was thinking over how he had better act in the matter, the news that Flora Bannerworth had been visited in the night by a vampyre—for the servants named the visitation such at once—was spreading all over the county.

As he rode along, Henry met a gentleman on horseback who belonged to the county, and who, reining in his steed, said to him,

“Good morning, Mr. Bannerworth.”

“Good morning,” responded Henry, and he would have ridden on, but the gentleman added,—

“Excuse me for interrupting you, sir; but what is the strange story that is in everybody’s mouth about a vampyre?”

Henry nearly fell off his horse, he was so much astonished, and, wheeling the animal around, he said,—

“In everybody’s mouth!”

“Yes; I have heard it from at least a dozen persons.”

“You surprise me.”

“It is untrue? Of course I am not so absurd as really to believe about the vampyre; but is there no foundation at all for it? We generally find that at the bottom of these common reports there is a something around which, as a nucleus, the whole has formed.”

“My sister is unwell.”

“Ah, and that’s all. It really is too bad, now.”

“We had a visitor last night.”

“A thief, I suppose?”

“Yes, yes—I believe a thief. I do believe it was a thief, and she was terrified.”

“Of course, and upon such a thing is grafted a story of a vampyre, and the marks of his teeth being in her neck, and all the circumstantial particulars.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Good morning, Mr. Bannerworth.”

Henry bade the gentleman good morning, and much vexed at the publicity which the affair had already obtained, he set spurs to his horse, determined that he would speak to no one else upon so uncomfortable a theme. Several attempts were made to stop him, but he only waved his hand and trotted on, nor did he pause in his speed till he reached the door of Mr. Chillingworth, the medical man whom he intended to consult.

Henry knew that at such a time he would be at home, which was the case, and he was soon closeted with the man of drugs. Henry begged his patient hearing, which being accorded, he related to him at full length what had happened, not omitting, to the best of his remembrance, any one particular. When he had concluded his narration, the doctor shifted his position several times, and then said,—

“That’s all?”

“Yes—and enough too.”

“More than enough, I should say, my young friend. You astonish me.”

“Can you form any supposition, sir, on the subject?”

“Not just now. What is your own idea?”

“I cannot be said to have one about it. It is too absurd to tell you that my brother George is impressed with a belief a vampyre has visited the house.”

“I never in all my life heard a more circumstantial narrative in favour of so hideous a superstition.”

“Well, but you cannot believe—”

“Believe what?”

“That the dead can come to life again, and by such a process keep up vitality.”

“Do you take me for a fool?”

“Certainly not.”

“Then why do you ask me such questions?”

“But the glaring facts of the case.”

“I don’t care if they were ten times more glaring, I won’t believe it. I would rather believe you were all mad, the whole family of you—that at the full of the moon you all were a little cracked.”

“And so would I.”

“You go home now, and I will call and see your sister in the course of two hours. Something may turn up yet, to throw some new light upon this strange subject.”

With this understanding Henry went home, and he took care to ride as fast as before, in order to avoid questions, so that he got back to his old ancestral home without going through the disagreeable ordeal of having to explain to any one what had disturbed the peace of it.

When Henry reached his home, he found that the evening was rapidly coming on, and before he could permit himself to think upon any other subject, he inquired how his terrified sister had passed the hours during his absence.

He found that but little improvement had taken place in her, and that she had occasionally slept, but to awaken and speak incoherently, as if the shock she had received had had some serious affect upon her nerves. He repaired at once to her room, and, finding that she was awake, he leaned over her, and spoke tenderly to her.

“Flora,” he said, “dear Flora, you are better now?”

“Harry, is that you?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Oh, tell me what has happened?”

“Have you not a recollection, Flora?”

“Yes, yes, Henry; but what was it? They none of them will tell me what it was, Henry.”

“Be calm, dear. No doubt some attempt to rob the house.”

“Think you so?”

“Yes; the bay window was peculiarly adapted for such a purpose; but now that you are removed here to this room, you will be able to rest in peace.”

"I shall die of terror, Henry. Even now those eyes are glaring on me so hideously. Oh, it is fearful—it is very fearful, Henry. Do you not pity me, and no one will promise to remain with me at night."

"Indeed, Flora, you are mistaken, for I intend to sit by your bedside armed, and so preserve you from all harm."

She clutched his hand eagerly, as she said,—

"You will, Henry. You will, and not think it too much trouble, dear Henry."

"It can be no trouble, Flora."

"Then I shall rest in peace, for I know that the dreadful vampyre cannot come to me when you are by—"

"The what, Flora!"

"The vampyre, Henry. It was a vampyre."

"Good God, who told you so?"

"No one. I have read of them in the book of travels in Norway, which Mr. Marchdale lent us all."

"Alas, alas!" groaned Henry. "Discard, I pray you, such a thought from your mind."

"Can we discard thoughts. What power have we but from that mind, which is ourselves?"

"True, true."

"Hark, what noise is that? I thought I heard a noise. Henry, when you go, ring for some one first. Was there not a noise?"

"The accidental shutting of some door, dear."

"Was it that?"

"It was."

"Then I am relieved. Henry, I sometimes fancy I am in the tomb, and that some one is feasting on my flesh. They do say, too, that those who in life have been bled by a vampyre, become themselves vampyres, and have the same horrible taste for blood as those before them. Is it not horrible?"

"You only vex yourself by such thoughts, Flora. Mr. Chillingworth is coming to see you."

“Can he minister to a mind diseased?”

“But yours is not, Flora. Your mind is healthful, and so, although his power extends not so far, we will thank Heaven, dear Flora, that you need it not.”

She sighed deeply, as she said,—

“Heaven help me! I know not, Henry. The dreadful being held on by my hair. I must have it all taken off. I tried to get away, but it dragged me back—a brutal thing it was. Oh, then at that moment, Henry, I felt as if something strange took place in my brain, and that I was going mad! I saw those glazed eyes close to, mine—I felt a hot, pestiferous breath upon my face—help—help!”

“Hush! my Flora, hush! Look at me.”

“I am calm again. It fixed its teeth in my throat. Did I faint away?”

“You did, dear; but let me pray you to refer all this to imagination; or at least the greater part of it.”

“But you saw it.”

“Yes—”

“All saw it.”

“We all saw some man—a housebreaker—It must have been some housebreaker. What more easy, you know, dear Flora, than to assume some such disguise?”

“Was anything stolen?”

“Not that I know of; but there was an alarm, you know.”

Flora shook her head, as she said, in a low voice,—

“That which came here was more than mortal. Oh, Henry, if it had but killed me, now I had been happy; but I cannot live—I hear it breathing now.”

“Talk of something else, dear Flora,” said the much distressed Henry; “you will make yourself much worse, if you indulge yourself in these strange fancies.”

“Oh, that they were but fancies!”

“They are, believe me.”

“There is a strange confusion in my brain, and sleep comes over me suddenly, when I least expect it. Henry, Henry, what I was, I shall never, never be again.”

“Say not so. All this will pass away like a dream, and leave so faint a trace upon your memory, that the time will come when you will wonder it ever made so deep an impression on your mind.”

“You utter these words, Henry,” she said, “but they do not come from your heart. Ah, no, no, no! Who comes?”

The door was opened by Mrs. Bannerworth, who said,—

“It is only me, my dear. Henry, here is Dr. Chillingworth in the dining-room.”

Henry turned to Flora, saying,—

“You will see him, dear Flora? You know Mr. Chillingworth well.”

“Yes, Henry, yes, I will see him, or whoever you please.”

“Shew Mr. Chillingworth up,” said Henry to the servant.

In a few moments the medical man was in the room, and he at once approached the bedside to speak to Flora, upon whose pale countenance he looked with evident interest, while at the same time it seemed mingled with a painful feeling—at least so his own face indicated.

“Well, Miss Bannerworth,” he said, “what is all this I hear about an ugly dream you have had?”

“A dream?” said Flora, as she fixed her beautiful eyes on his face.

“Yes, as I understand.”

She shuddered, and was silent.

“Was it not a dream, then?” added Mr. Chillingworth.

She wrung her hands, and in a voice of extreme anguish and pathos, said,—

“Would it were a dream—would it were a dream! Oh, if any one could but convince me it was a dream!”

“Well, will you tell me what it was?”

“Yes, sir, it was a vampyre.”

Mr. Chillingworth glanced at Henry, as he said, in reply to Flora’s words,—

“I suppose that is, after all, another name, Flora, for the nightmare?”

“No—no—no!”

“Do you really, then, persist in believing anything so absurd, Miss Bannerworth?”

“What can I say to the evidence of my own senses?” she replied. “I saw it, Henry saw it, George saw, Mr. Marchdale, my mother—all saw it. We could not all be at the same time the victims of the same delusion.”

“How faintly you speak.”

“I am very faint and ill.”

“Indeed. What wound is that on your neck?”

A wild expression came over the face of Flora; a spasmodic action of the muscles, accompanied with a shuddering, as if a sudden chill had come over the whole mass of blood took place, and she said,—

“It is the mark left by the teeth of the vampyre.”

The smile was a forced one upon the face of Mr. Chillingworth.

“Draw up the blind of the window, Mr. Henry,” he said, “and let me examine this puncture to which your sister attaches so extraordinary a meaning.”

The blind was drawn up, and a strong light was thrown into the room. For full two minutes Mr. Chillingworth attentively examined the two small wounds in the neck of Flora. He took a powerful magnifying glass from his pocket, and looked at them through it, and after his examination was concluded, he said,—

“They are very trifling wounds, indeed.”

“But how inflicted?” said Henry.

“By some insect, I should say, which probably—it being the season for many insects—has flown in at the window”

“I know the motive,” said Flora “which prompts all these suggestions it is a kind one, and I ought to be the last to quarrel with it; but what I have seen, nothing can make me believe I saw not, unless I am, as once or twice I have thought myself, really mad.”

“How do you now feel in general health?”

“Far from well; and a strange drowsiness at times creeps over me. Even now I feel it.”

She sunk back on the pillows as she spoke and closed her eyes with a deep sigh.

Mr. Chillingworth beckoned Henry to come with him from the room, but the latter had promised that he would remain with Flora; and as Mrs. Bannerworth had left the chamber because she was unable to control her feelings, he rang the bell, and requested that his mother would come.

She did so, and then Henry went down stairs along with the medical man, whose opinion he was certainly eager to be now made acquainted with.

As soon as they were alone in an old-fashioned room which was called the oak closet, Henry turned to Mr. Chillingworth, and said,—

“What, now, is your candid opinion, sir? You have seen my sister, and those strange indubitable evidences of something wrong.”

“I have; and to tell you candidly the truth, Mr. Henry, I am sorely perplexed.”

“I thought you would be.”

“It is not often that a medical man likes to say so much, nor is it, indeed, often prudent that he should do so, but in this case I own I am much puzzled. It is contrary to all my notions upon all such subjects.”

“Those wounds, what do you think of them?”

“I know not what to think. I am completely puzzled as regards them.”

“But, but do they not really bear the appearance of being bites?”

“They really do.”

“And so far, then, they are actually in favour of the dreadful supposition which poor Flora entertains.”

“So far they certainly are. I have no doubt in the world of their being bites; but we not must jump to a conclusion that the teeth which inflicted them were human. It is a strange case, and one which I feel assured must give you all much uneasiness, as, indeed, it gave me; but, as I said before, I will not let my judgment give in to the fearful and degrading superstition which all the circumstances connected with this strange story would seem to justify.”

“It is a degrading superstition.”

“To my mind your sister seems to be labouring under the effect of some narcotic.”

“Indeed!”

“Yes; unless she really has lost a quantity of blood, which loss has decreased the heart’s action sufficiently to produce the languor under which she now evidently labours.”

“Oh, that I could believe the former supposition, but I am confident she has taken no narcotic; she could not even do so by mistake, for there is no drug of the sort in the house. Besides, she is not heedless by any means. I am quite convinced she has not done so.”

“Then I am fairly puzzled, my young friend, and I can only say that I would freely have given half of what I am worth to see that figure you saw last night.”

“What would you have done?”

“I would not have lost sight of it for the world’s wealth.”

“You would have felt your blood freeze with horror. The face was terrible.”

“And yet let it lead me where it liked I would have followed it.”

“I wish you had been here.”

“I wish to Heaven I had. If I though there was the least chance of another visit I would come and wait with patience every night for a month.”

“I cannot say,” replied Henry. “I am going to sit up to-night with my sister, and I believe, our friend Mr. Marchdale will share my watch with me.”

Mr. Chillingworth appeared to be for a few moments lost in thought, and then suddenly rousing himself, as if he found it either impossible to come to any rational conclusion upon the subject, or had arrived at one which he chose to keep to himself, he said,—

“Well, well, we must leave the matter at present as it stands. Time may accomplish something towards its development, but at present so palpable a mystery I never came across, or a matter in which human calculation was so completely foiled.”

“Nor I—nor I.”

“I will send you some medicines, such as I think will be of service to Flora, and depend upon seeing me by ten o’clock to-morrow morning.”

“You have, of course, heard something,” said Henry to the doctor, as he was pulling on his gloves, “about vampyres.”

“I certainly have, and I understand that in some countries, particularly Norway and Sweden, the superstition is a very common one.”

“And in the Levant.”

“Yes. The ghouls of the Mahometans are of the same description of beings. All that I have heard of the European vampyre has made it a being which can

be killed, but is restored to life again by the rays of a full moon falling on the body.”

“Yes, yes, I have heard as much.”

“And that the hideous repast of blood has to be taken very frequently, and that if the vampyre gets it not he wastes away, presenting the appearance of one in the last stage of a consumption, and visibly, so to speak, dying.”

“That is what I have understood.”

“To-night, do you know, Mr. Bannerworth, is the full of the moon.”

Henry started.

“If now you had succeeded in killing—. Pshaw, what am I saying. I believe I am getting foolish, and that the horrible superstition is beginning to fasten itself upon me as well as upon all of you. How strangely the fancy will wage war with the judgment in such a way as this.”

“The full of the moon,” repeated Henry, as he glanced towards the window, “and the night is near at hand.”

“Banish these thoughts from your mind,” said the doctor, “or else, my young friend, you will make yourself decidedly ill. Good evening to you, for it is evening. I shall see you to-morrow morning.”

Mr. Chillingworth appeared now to be anxious to go, and Henry no longer opposed his departure; but when he was gone a sense of great loneliness came over him.

“To-night,” he repeated, “is the full of the moon. How strange that this dreadful adventure should have taken place just the night before. ‘Tis very strange. Let me see—let me see.”

He took from the shelves of a bookcase the work which Flora had mentioned, entitled, “Travels in Norway,” in which work he found some account of the popular belief in vampyres.

He opened the work at random, and then some of the leaves turned over of themselves to a particular place, as the leaves of a book will frequently do when it has been kept open a length of time at that part, and the binding stretched there more than anywhere else. There was a note at the bottom of one of the pages at this part of the book, and Henry read as follows:—

“With regard to these vampyres, it is believed by those who are inclined to give credence to so dreadful a superstition, that they always endeavour to make their feast of blood, for the revival of their bodily powers, on some evening immediately preceding a full moon, because if any accident befall

them, such as being shot, or otherwise killed or wounded, they can recover by lying down somewhere where the full moon's rays will fall upon them."

Henry let the book drop from his hands with a groan and a shudder.

CHAPTER V. THE NIGHT WATCH.—THE PROPOSAL.—THE MOONLIGHT.—THE FEARFUL ADVENTURE.

A kind of stupefaction came over Henry Bannerworth, and he sat for about a quarter of an hour scarcely conscious of where he was, and almost incapable of anything in the shape of rational thought. It was his brother, George, who roused him by saying, as he laid his hand upon his shoulder,—

"Henry, are you asleep?"

Henry had not been aware of his presence, and he started up as if he had been shot.

"Oh, George, is it you?" he said.

"Yes, Henry, are you unwell?"

"No, no; I was in a deep reverie."

"Alas! I need not ask upon what subject," said George, sadly. "I sought you to bring you this letter."

"A letter to me?"

"Yes, you see it is addressed to you, and the seal looks as if it came from someone of consequence."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, Henry. Read it, and see from whence it comes."

There was just sufficient light by going to the window to enable Henry to read the letter, which he did aloud.

It ran thus:—

"Sir Francis Varney presents his compliments to Mr. Beaumont, and is much concerned to hear that some domestic affliction has fallen upon him. Sir Francis hopes that the genuine and loving sympathy of a neighbour will not be regarded as an intrusion, and begs to proffer any assistance or counsel that may be within the compass of his means.

“Ratford Abbey.”

“Sir Francis Varney!” said Henry, “who is he?”

“Do you not remember, Henry,” said George, “we were told a few days ago, that a gentleman of that name had become the purchaser of the estate of Ratford Abbey.”

“Oh, yes, yes. Have you seen him?”

“I have not.”

“I do not wish to make any new acquaintance, George. We are very poor—much poorer indeed than the general appearance of this place, which, I fear, we shall soon have to part with, would warrant any one believing. I must, of course, return a civil answer to this gentleman, but it must be such as one as shall repress familiarity.”

“That will be difficult to do while we remain here, when we come to consider the very close proximity of the two properties, Henry.”

“Oh, no, not at all. He will easily perceive that we do not want to make acquaintance with him, and then, as a gentleman, which doubtless he is, he will give up the attempt.”

“Let it be so, Henry. Heaven knows I have no desire to form any new acquaintance with any one, and more particularly under our present circumstances of depression. And now, Henry, you must permit me, as I have had some repose, to share with you your night watch in Flora’s room.”

“I would advise you not, George; your health, you know, is very far from good.”

“Nay, allow me. If not, then the anxiety I shall suffer will do me more harm than the watchfulness I shall keep up in her chamber.”

This was an argument which Henry felt himself the force of too strongly not to admit it in the case of George, and he therefore made no further opposition to his wish to make one in the night watch.

“There will be an advantage,” said George, “you see, in three of us being engaged in this matter, because, should anything occur, two can act together, and yet Flora may not be left alone.”

“True, true, that is a great advantage.”

Now a soft gentle silvery light began to spread itself over the heavens. The moon was rising, and as the beneficial effects of the storm of the preceding

evening were still felt in the clearness of the air, the rays appeared to be more lustrous and full of beauty than they commonly were.

Each moment the night grew lighter, and by the time the brothers were ready to take their places in the chamber of Flora, the moon had risen considerably.

Although neither Henry nor George had any objection to the company of Mr. Marchdale, yet they gave him the option, and rather in fact urged him not to destroy his night's repose by sitting up with them; but he said,—

“Allow me to do so; I am older, and have calmer judgment than you can have. Should anything again appear, I am quite resolved that it shall not escape me.”

“What would you do?”

“With the name of God upon my lips,” said Mr. Marchdale, solemnly, “I would grapple with it.”

“You laid hands upon it last night.”

“I did, and have forgotten to show you what I tore from it. Look here,—what should you say this was?”

He produced a piece of cloth, on which was an old-fashioned piece of lace, and two buttons. Upon a close inspection, this appeared to be a portion of the lapel of a coat of ancient times, and suddenly, Henry, with a look of intense anxiety, said,—

“This reminds me of the fashion of garments very many years ago, Mr. Marchdale.”

“It came away in my grasp as if rotten and incapable of standing any rough usage.”

“What a strange unearthly smell it has!”

“Now you mention it yourself,” added Mr. Marchdale, “I must confess it smells to me as if it had really come from the very grave.”

“It does—it does. Say nothing of this relic of last night's work to any one.”

“Be assured I shall not. I am far from wishing to keep up in any one's mind proofs of that which I would fain, very fain refute.”

Mr. Marchdale replaced the portion of the coat which the figure had worn in his pocket, and then the whole three proceeded to the chamber of Flora.

It was within a very few minutes of midnight, the moon had climbed high in the heavens, and a night of such brightness and beauty had seldom shown itself for a long period of time.

Flora slept, and in her chamber sat the two brothers and Mr. Marchdale, silently, for she had shown symptoms of restlessness, and they much feared to break the light slumber into which she had fallen.

Occasionally they had conversed in whispers, which could not have the effect of rousing her, for the room, although smaller than the one she had before occupied, was still sufficiently spacious to enable them to get some distance from the bed.

Until the hour of midnight now actually struck, they were silent, and when the last echo of the sounds had died away, a feeling of uneasiness came over them, which prompted some conversation to get rid of it.

“How bright the moon is now,” said Henry, in a low tone.

“I never saw it brighter,” replied Marchdale. “I feel as if I were assured that we shall not to-night be interrupted.”

“It was later than this,” said Henry.

“It was—it was.”

“Do not then yet congratulate us upon no visit.”

“How still the house is!” remarked George; “it seems to me as if I had never found it so intensely quiet before.”

“It is very still.”

“Hush! she moves.”

Flora moaned in her sleep, and made a slight movement. The curtains were all drawn closely round the bed to shield her eyes from the bright moonlight which streamed into the room so brilliantly. They might have closed the shutters of the window, but this they did not like to do, as it would render their watch there of no avail at all, inasmuch as they would not be able to see if any attempt was made by any one to obtain admittance.

A quarter of an hour longer might have thus passed when Mr. Marchdale said in a whisper,—

“A thought has just struck me that the piece of coat I have, which I dragged from the figure last night, wonderfully resembles in colour and appearance the style of dress of the portrait in the room which Flora lately slept in.”

"I thought of that," said Henry, "when first I saw it; but, to tell the honest truth, I dreaded to suggest any new proof connected with last night's visitation."

"Then I ought not to have drawn your attention to it," said Mr. Marchdale, "and regret I have done so."

"Nay, do not blame yourself on such an account," said Henry. "You are quite right, and it is I who am too foolishly sensitive. Now, however, since you have mentioned it, I must own I have a great desire to test the accuracy of the observation by a comparison with the portrait."

"That may easily be done."

"I will remain here," said George, "in case Flora awakens, while you two go if you like. It is but across the corridor."

Henry immediately rose, saying—

"Come, Mr. Marchdale, come. Let us satisfy ourselves at all events upon this point at once. As George says it is only across the corridor, and we can return directly."

"I am willing," said Mr. Marchdale, with a tone of sadness.

There was no light needed, for the moon stood suspended in a cloudless sky, so that from the house being a detached one, and containing numerous windows, it was as light as day.

Although the distance from one chamber to the other was only across the corridor, it was a greater space than these words might occupy, for the corridor was wide, neither was it directly across, but considerably slanting. However, it was certainly sufficiently close at hand for any sound of alarm from one chamber to reach another without any difficulty.

A few moments sufficed to place Henry and Mr. Marchdale in that antique room, where, from the effect of the moonlight which was streaming over it, the portrait on the panel looked exceedingly life like.

And this effect was probably the greater because the rest of the room was not illuminated by the moon's rays, which came through a window in the corridor, and then at the open door of that chamber upon the portrait.

Mr. Marchdale held the piece of cloth he had close to the dress of the portrait, and one glance was sufficient to show the wonderful likeness between the two.

"Good God!" said Henry, "it is the same."

Mr. Marchdale dropped the piece of cloth and trembled.

“This fact shakes even your scepticism,” said Henry.

“I know not what to make of it.”

“I can tell you something which bears upon it. I do not know if you are sufficiently aware of my family history to know that this one of my ancestors, I wish I could say worthy ancestors, committed suicide, and was buried in his clothes.”

“You—you are sure of that?”

“Quite sure.”

“I am more and more bewildered as each moment some strange corroborative fact of that dreadful supposition we so much shrink from seems to come to light and to force itself upon our attention.”

There was a silence of a few moments duration, and Henry had turned towards Mr. Marchdale to say something, when the cautious tread of a footstep was heard in the garden, immediately beneath that balcony.

A sickening sensation came over Henry, and he was compelled to lean against the wall for support, as in scarcely articulate accents he said—

“The vampyre—the vampyre! God of heaven, it has come once again!”

“Now, Heaven inspire us with more than mortal courage,” cried Mr. Marchdale, and he dashed open the window at once, and sprang into the balcony.

Henry in a moment recovered himself sufficiently to follow him, and when he reached his side in the balcony, Marchdale said, as he pointed below,—

“There is some one concealed there.”

“Where—where?”

“Among the laurels. I will fire a random shot, and we may do some execution.”

“Hold!” said a voice from below; “don’t do any such thing, I beg of you.”

“Why, that is Mr. Chillingworth’s voice,” cried Henry.

“Yes, and it’s Mr. Chillingworth’s person, too,” said the doctor, as he emerged from among some laurel bushes.

“How is this?” said Marchdale.

“Simply that I made up my mind to keep watch and ward to-night outside here, in the hope of catching the vampyre. I got into here by climbing the gate.”

“But why did you not let me know?” said Henry.

“Because I did not know myself, my young friend, till an hour and a half ago.”

“Have you seen anything?”

“Nothing. But I fancied I heard something in the park outside the wall.”

“Indeed!”

“What say you, Henry,” said Mr. Marchdale, “to descending and taking a hasty examination of the garden and grounds?”

“I am willing; but first allow me to speak to George, who otherwise might be surprised at our long absence.”

Henry walked rapidly to the bed chamber of Flora, and he said to George,—

“Have you any objection to being left alone here for about half an hour, George, while we make an examination of the garden?”

“Let me have some weapon and I care not. Remain here while I fetch a sword from my own room.”

Henry did so, and when George returned with a sword, which he always kept in his bed-room, he said,—

“Now go, Henry. I prefer a weapon of this description to pistols much. Do not be longer gone than necessary.”

“I will not, George, be assured.”

George was then left alone, and Henry returned to the balcony, where Mr. Marchdale was waiting for him. It was a quicker mode of descending to the garden to do so by clambering over the balcony than any other, and the height was not considerable enough to make it very objectionable, so Henry and Mr. Marchdale chose that way of joining Mr. Chillingworth.

“You are, no doubt, much surprised at finding me here,” said the doctor; “but the fact is, I half made up my mind to come while I was here; but I had not thoroughly done so, therefore I said nothing to you about it.”

“We are much indebted to you,” said Henry, “for making the attempt.”

“I am prompted to it by a feeling of the strongest curiosity.”

“Are you armed, sir?” said Marchdale.

“In this stick,” said the doctor, “is a sword, the exquisite temper of which I know I can depend upon, and I fully intended to run through any one whom I saw that looked in the least of the vampyre order.”

“You would have done quite right,” replied Mr. Marchdale. “I have a brace of pistols here, loaded with ball; will you take one, Henry, if you please, and then we shall be all armed.”

Thus, then, prepared for any exigency, they made the whole round of the house; but found all the fastenings secure, and everything as quiet as possible.

“Suppose, now, we take a survey of the park outside the garden wall,” said Mr. Marchdale.

This was agreed to; but before they had proceeded far, Mr. Marchdale said,—

“There is a ladder lying on the wall; would it not be a good plan to place it against the very spot the supposed vampyre jumped over last night, and so, from a more elevated position, take a view of the open meadows. We could easily drop down on the outer side, if we saw anything suspicious.”

“Not a bad plan,” said the doctor. “Shall we do it?”

“Certainly,” said Henry; and they accordingly carried the ladder, which had been used for pruning the trees, towards the spot at the end of the long walk, at which the vampyre had made good, after so many fruitless efforts, his escape from the premises.

They made haste down the long vista of trees until they reached the exact spot, and then they placed the ladder as near as possible, exactly where Henry, in his bewilderment on the evening before, had seen the apparition from the grave spring to.

“We can ascend singly,” said Marchdale; “but there is ample space for us all there to sit on the top of the wall and make our observations.”

This was seen to be the case, and in about a couple of minutes they had taken up their positions on the wall, and, although the height was but trifling, they found that they had a much more extensive view than they could have obtained by any other means.

“To contemplate the beauty of such a night as this,” said Mr. Chillingworth, “is amply sufficient compensation for coming the distance I have.”

“And who knows,” remarked Marchdale, “we may yet see something which may throw a light upon our present perplexities God knows that I would give all I can call mine in the world to relieve you and your sister, Henry Bannerworth, from the fearful effect which last night’s proceedings cannot fail to have upon you.”

"Of that I am well assured, Mr. Marchdale," said Henry. "If the happiness of myself and family depended upon you, we should be happy indeed."

"You are silent, Mr. Chillingworth," remarked Marchdale, after a slight pause.

"Hush!" said Mr. Chillingworth—"hush—hush!"

"Good God, what do you hear?" cried Henry.

The doctor laid his hand upon Henry's arm as he said,—

"There is a young lime tree yonder to the right."

"Yes—yes."

"Carry your eye from it in a horizontal line, as near as you can, towards the wood."

Henry did so, and then he uttered a sudden exclamation of surprise, and pointed to a rising spot of ground, which was yet, in consequence of the number of tall trees in its vicinity, partially enveloped in shadow.

"What is that?" he said.

"I see something," said Marchdale. "By Heaven! it is a human form lying stretched there."

"It is—as if in death."

"What can it be?" said Chillingworth.

"I dread to say," replied Marchdale; "but to my eyes, even at this distance, it seems like the form of him we chased last night."

"The vampyre?"

"Yes—yes. Look, the moonbeams touch him. Now the shadows of the trees gradually recede. God of Heaven! the figure moves."

Henry's eyes were riveted to that fearful object, and now a scene presented itself which filled them all with wonder and astonishment, mingled with sensations of the greatest awe and alarm.

As the moonbeams, in consequence of the luminary rising higher and higher in the heavens, came to touch this figure that lay extended on the rising ground, a perceptible movement took place in it. The limbs appeared to tremble, and although it did not rise up, the whole body gave signs of vitality.

“The vampyre—the vampyre!” said Mr. Marchdale. “I cannot doubt it now. We must have hit him last night with the pistol bullets, and the moonbeams are now restoring him to a new life.”

Henry shuddered, and even Mr. Chillingworth turned pale. But he was the first to recover himself sufficiently to propose some course of action, and he said,—

“Let us descend and go up to this figure. It is a duty we owe to ourselves as much as to society.”

“Hold a moment,” said Mr. Marchdale, as he produced a pistol. “I am an unerring shot, as you well know, Henry. Before we move from this position we now occupy, allow me to try what virtue may be in a bullet to lay that figure low again.”

“He is rising!” exclaimed Henry.

Mr. Marchdale levelled the pistol—he took a sure and deliberate aim, and then, just as the figure seemed to be struggling to its feet, he fired, and, with a sudden bound, it fell again.

“You have hit it,” said Henry.

“You have indeed,” exclaimed the doctor. “I think we can go now.”

“Hush!” said Marchdale—“Hush! Does it not seem to you that, hit it as often as you will, the moonbeams will recover it?”

“Yes—yes,” said Henry, “they will—they will.”

“I can endure this no longer,” said Mr. Chillingworth, as he sprung from the wall. “Follow me or not, as you please, I will seek the spot where this being lies.”

“Oh, be not rash,” cried Marchdale. “See, it rises again, and its form looks gigantic.”

“I trust in Heaven and a righteous cause,” said the doctor, as he drew the sword he had spoken of from the scabbard, and threw away the scabbard. “Come with me if you like, or I go alone.”

Henry at once jumped down from the wall, and then Marchdale followed him, saying,—

“Come on; I will not shrink.”

They ran towards the piece of rising ground; but before they got to it, the form rose and made rapidly towards a little wood which was in the immediate neighbourhood of the hillock.

"It is conscious of being pursued," cried the doctor. "See how it glances back, and then increases its speed."

"Fire upon it, Henry," said Marchdale.

He did so; but either his shot did not take effect, or it was quite unheeded if it did, by the vampyre, which gained the wood before they could have a hope of getting sufficiently near it to effect, or endeavour to effect, a capture.

"I cannot follow it there," said Marchdale. "In open country I would have pursued it closely; but I cannot follow it into the intricacies of a wood."

"Pursuit is useless there," said Henry. "It is enveloped in the deepest gloom."

"I am not so unreasonable," remarked Mr. Chillingworth, "as to wish you to follow into such a place as that. I am confounded utterly by this affair."

"And I," said Marchdale. "What on earth is to be done?"

"Nothing—nothing!" exclaimed Henry, vehemently; "and yet I have, beneath the canopy of Heaven, declared that I will, so help me God! spare neither time nor trouble in the unravelling of this most fearful piece of business. Did either of you remark the clothing which this spectral appearance wore?"

"They were antique clothes," said Mr. Chillingworth, "such as might have been fashionable a hundred years ago, but not now."

"Such was my impression," added Marchdale.

"And such my own," said Henry, excitedly. "Is it at all within the compass of the wildest belief that what we have seen is a vampyre, and no other than my ancestor who, a hundred years ago, committed suicide?"

There was so much intense excitement, and evidence of mental suffering, that Mr. Chillingworth took him by the arm, saying,—

"Come home—come home; no more of this at present; you will but make yourself seriously unwell."

"No—no—no."

"Come home now, I pray you; you are by far too much excited about this matter to pursue it with the calmness which should be brought to bear upon it."

"Take advice, Henry," said Marchdale, "take advice, and come home at once."

“I will yield to you; I feel that I cannot control my own feelings—I will yield to you, who, as you say, are cooler on this subject than I can be. Oh, Flora, Flora, I have no comfort to bring to you now.”

Poor Henry Bannerworth appeared to be in a complete state of mental prostration, on account of the distressing circumstances that had occurred so rapidly and so suddenly in his family, which had had quite enough to contend with without having superadded to every other evil the horror of believing that some preternatural agency was at work to destroy every hope of future happiness in this world, under any circumstances.

He suffered himself to be led home by Mr. Chillingworth and Marchdale; he no longer attempted to dispute the dreadful fact concerning the supposed vampyre; he could not contend now against all the corroborating circumstances that seemed to collect together for the purpose of proving that which, even when proved, was contrary to all his notions of Heaven, and at variance with all that was recorded and established as part and parcel of the system of nature.

“I cannot deny,” he said, when they had reached home, “that such things are possible; but the probability will not bear a moment’s investigation.”

“There are more things,” said Marchdale, solemnly, “in Heaven, and on earth, than are dreamed of in our philosophy.”

“There are indeed, it appears,” said Mr. Chillingworth.

“And are you a convert?” said Henry, turning to him.

“A convert to what?”

“To a belief in—in—these vampyres?”

“I? No, indeed; if you were to shut me up in a room full of vampyres, I would tell them all to their teeth that I defied them.”

“But after what we have seen to-night?”

“What have we seen?”

“You are yourself a witness.”

“True; I saw a man lying down, and then I saw a man get up; he seemed then to be shot, but whether he was or not he only knows; and then I saw him walk off in a desperate hurry. Beyond that, I saw nothing.”

“Yes; but, taking such circumstances into combination with others, have you not a terrible fear of the truth of the dreadful appearance?”

“No—no; on my soul, no. I will die in my disbelief of such an outrage upon Heaven as one of these creatures would most assuredly be.”

“Oh! that I could think like you; but the circumstance strikes too nearly to my heart.”

“Be of better cheer, Henry—be of better cheer,” said Marchdale; “there is one circumstance which we ought to consider, it is that, from all we have seen, there seems to be some things which would favour an opinion, Henry, that your ancestor, whose portrait hangs in the chamber which was occupied by Flora, is the vampyre.”

“The dress was the same,” said Henry.

“I noted it was.”

“And I.”

“Do you not, then, think it possible that something might be done to set that part of the question at rest?”

“What—what?”

“Where is your ancestor buried?”

“Ah! I understand you now.”

“And I,” said Mr. Chillingworth; “you would propose a visit to his mansion?”

“I would,” added Marchdale; “anything that may in any way tend to assist in making this affair clearer, and divesting it of its mysterious circumstances, will be most desirable.”

Henry appeared to rouse for some moments and then he said,—

“He, in common with many other members of the family, no doubt occupies place in the vault under the old church in the village.”

“Would it be possible,” asked Marchdale, “to get into that vault without exciting general attention?”

“It would,” said Henry; “the entrance to the vault is in the flooring of the pew which belongs to the family in the old church.”

“Then it could be done?” asked Mr. Chillingworth.

“Most undoubtedly.”

“Will you undertake such an adventure?” said Mr. Chillingworth. “It may ease your mind.”

“He was buried in the vault, and in his clothes,” said Henry, musingly; “I will think of it. About such a proposition I would not decide hastily. Give me leave to think of it until to-morrow.”

“Most certainly.”

They now made their way to the chamber of Flora, and they heard from George that nothing of an alarming character had occurred to disturb him on his lonely watch. The morning was now again dawning, and Henry earnestly entreated Mr. Marchdale to go to bed, which he did, leaving the two brothers to continue as sentinels by Flora’s bed side, until the morning light should banish all uneasy thoughts.

Henry related to George what had taken place outside the house, and the two brothers held a long and interesting conversation for some hours upon that subject, as well as upon others of great importance to their welfare. It was not until the sun’s early rays came glaring in at the casement that they both rose, and thought of awakening Flora, who had now slept soundly for so many hours.

CHAPTER VI. A GLANCE AT THE BANNERWORTH FAMILY.—THE PROBABLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE MYSTERIOUS APPARITION’S APPEARANCE.

Having thus far, we hope, interested our readers in the fortunes of a family which had become subject to so dreadful a visitation, we trust that a few words concerning them, and the peculiar circumstances in which they are now placed, will not prove altogether out of place, or unacceptable. The Bannerworth family then were well known in the part of the country where they resided. Perhaps, if we were to say they were better known by name than they were liked, on account of that name, we should be near the truth, for it had unfortunately happened that for a very considerable time past the head of the family had been the very worst specimen of it that could be procured. While the junior branches were frequently amiable and most intelligent, and such in mind and manner as were calculated to inspire goodwill in all who knew them, he who held the family property, and who resided in the house now occupied by Flora and her brothers, was a very so—so sort of character.

This state of things, by some strange fatality, had gone on for nearly a hundred years, and the consequence was what might have been fairly expected, namely—that, what with their vices and what with their extravagances, the successive heads of the Bannerworth family had succeeded in so far diminishing the family property that, when it came into the hands of Henry Bannerworth, it was of little value, on account of the numerous encumbrances with which it was saddled.

The father of Henry had not been a very brilliant exception to the general rule, as regarded the head of the family. If he were not quite so bad as many of his ancestors, that gratifying circumstance was to be accounted for by the supposition that he was not quite so bold, and that the change in habits, manners, and laws, which had taken place in a hundred years, made it not so easy for even a landed proprietor to play the petty tyrant.

He had, to get rid of those animal spirits which had prompted many of his predecessors to downright crimes, had recourse to the gaming-table, and, after raising whatever sums he could upon the property which remained, he naturally, and as might have been fully expected, lost them all.

He was found lying dead in the garden of the house one day, and by his side was his pocket-book, on one leaf of which, it was the impression of the family, he had endeavoured to write something previous to his decease, for he held a pencil firmly in his grasp.

The probability was that he had felt himself getting ill, and, being desirous of making some communication to his family which pressed heavily upon his mind, he had attempted to do so, but was stopped by the too rapid approach of the hand of death.

For some days previous to his decease, his conduct had been extremely mysterious. He had announced an intention of leaving England forever—of selling the house and grounds for whatever they would fetch over and above the sums for which they were mortgaged, and so clearing himself of all encumbrances.

He had, but a few hours before he was found lying dead, made the following singular speech to Henry,—

“Do not regret, Henry, that the old house which has been in our family so long is about to be parted with. Be assured that, if it is but for the first time in my life, I have good and substantial reasons now for what I am about to do. We shall be able to go some other country, and there live like princes of the land.”

Where the means were to come from to live like a prince, unless Mr. Bannerworth had some of the German princes in his eye, no one knew but himself, and his sudden death buried with him that most important secret.

There were some words written on the leaf of his pocket book, but they were of by far too indistinct and ambiguous a nature to lead to anything. They were these:—

“The money is _____”

And then there was a long scrawl of the pencil, which seemed to have been occasioned by his sudden decease.

Of course nothing could be made of these words, except in the way of a contradiction as the family lawyer said, rather more facetiously than a man of law usually speaks, for if he had written "The money is not," he would have been somewhere remarkably near the truth.

However, with all his vices he was regretted by his children, who chose rather to remember him in his best aspect than to dwell upon his faults.

For the first time then, within the memory of man, the head of the family of the Bannerworths was a gentleman, in every sense of the word. Brave, generous, highly educated, and full of many excellent and noble qualities—for such was Henry, whom we have introduced to our readers under such distressing circumstances.

And now, people said, that the family property having been all dissipated and lost, there would take place a change, and that the Bannerworths would have to take to some course of honourable industry for a livelihood, and that then they would be as much respected as they had before been detested and disliked.

Indeed, the position which Henry held was now a most precarious one—for one of the amazingly clever acts of his father had been to encumber the property with overwhelming claims, so that when Henry administered to the estate, it was doubted almost by his attorney if it were at all desirable to do so.

An attachment, however, to the old house of his family, had induced the young man to hold possession of it as long as he could, despite any adverse circumstance which might eventually be connected with it.

Some weeks, however, only after the decease of his father, and when he fairly held possession, a sudden and a most unexpected offer came to him from a solicitor in London, of whom he knew nothing, to purchase the house and grounds, for a client of his, who had instructed him so to do, but whom he did not mention.

The offer made was a liberal one, and beyond the value of the place. The lawyer who had conducted Henry's affairs for him since his father's decease, advised him by all means to take it; but after a consultation with his mother and sister, and George, they all resolved to hold by their own house as long as they could, and, consequently, he refused the offer.

He was then asked to let the place, and to name his own price for the occupation of it; but that he would not do: so the negotiation went off altogether, leaving only, in the minds of the family, much surprise at the exceeding eagerness of some one, whom they knew not, to get possession of the place on any terms.

There was another circumstance perhaps which materially aided in producing a strong feeling on the minds of the Bannerworths, with regard to remaining where they were.

That circumstance occurred thus: a relation of the family, who was now dead, and with whom had died all his means, had been in the habit, for the last half dozen years of his life, of sending a hundred pounds to Henry, for the express purpose of enabling him and his brother George and his sister Flora to take a little continental or home tour, in the autumn of the year.

A more acceptable present, or for a more delightful purpose, to young people, could not be found; and, with the quiet, prudent habits of all three of them, they contrived to go far and to see much for the sum which was thus handsomely placed at their disposal.

In one of those excursions, when among the mountains of Italy, an adventure occurred which placed the life of Flora in imminent hazard.

They were riding along a narrow mountain path, and, her horse slipping, she fell over the ledge of a precipice.

In an instant, a young man, a stranger to the whole party, who was travelling in the vicinity, rushed to the spot, and by his knowledge and exertions, they felt convinced her preservation was effected.

He told her to lie quiet; he encouraged her to hope for immediate succour; and then, with much personal exertion, and at immense risk to himself, he reached the ledge of rock on which she lay, and then he supported her until the brothers had gone to a neighbouring house, which, bye-the-bye, was two good English miles off, and got assistance.

There came on, while they were gone, a terrific storm, and Flora felt that but for him who was with her she must have been hurled from the rock, and perished in an abyss below, which was almost too deep for observation.

Suffice it to say that she was rescued; and he who had, by his intrepidity, done so much towards saving her, was loaded with the most sincere and heartfelt acknowledgments by the brothers as well as by herself.

He frankly told them that his name was Holland; that he was travelling for amusement and instruction, and was by profession an artist.

He travelled with them for some time; and it was not at all to be wondered at, under the circumstances, that an attachment of the tenderest nature should spring up between him and the beautiful girl, who felt that she owed to him her life.

Mutual glances of affection were exchanged between them, and it was arranged that when he returned to England, he should come at once as an honoured guest to the house of the family of the Bannerworths.

All this was settled satisfactorily with the full knowledge and acquiescence of the two brothers, who had taken a strange attachment to the young Charles

Holland, who was indeed in every way likely to propitiate the good opinion of all who knew him.

Henry explained to him exactly how they were situated, and told him that when he came he would find a welcome from all, except possibly his father, whose wayward temper he could not answer for.

Young Holland stated that he was compelled to be away for a term of two years, from certain family arrangements he had entered into, and that then he would return and hope to meet Flora unchanged as he should be.

It happened that this was the last of the continental excursions of the Bannerworths, for, before another year rolled round, the generous relative who had supplied them with the means of making such delightful trips was no more; and, likewise, the death of the father had occurred in the manner we have related, so that there was no chance as had been anticipated and hoped for by Flora, of meeting Charles Holland on the continent again, before his two years of absence from England should be expired.

Such, however, being the state of things, Flora felt reluctant to give up the house, where he would be sure to come to look for her, and her happiness was too dear to Henry to induce him to make any sacrifice of it to expediency.

Therefore was it that Bannerworth Hall, as it was sometimes called, was retained, and fully intended to be retained at all events until after Charles Holland had made his appearance, and his advice (for he was, by the young people, considered as one of the family) taken, with regard to what was advisable to be done.

With one exception this was the state of affairs at the hall, and that exception relates to Mr. Marchdale.

He was a distant relation of Mrs. Bannerworth, and, in early life, had been sincerely and tenderly attached to her. She, however, with the want of steady reflection of a young girl, as she then was, had, as is generally the case among several admirers, chosen the very worst: that is, the man who treated her with the most indifference, and who paid her the least attention, was of course, thought the most of, and she gave her hand to him.

That man was Mr. Bannerworth. But future experience had made her thoroughly awake to her former error; and, but for the love she bore her children, who were certainly all that a mother's heart could wish, she would often have deeply regretted the infatuation which had induced her to bestow her hand in the quarter she had done so.

About a month after the decease of Mr. Bannerworth, there came one to the hall, who desired to see the widow. That one was Mr. Marchdale.

It might have been some slight tenderness towards him which had never left her, or it might be the pleasure merely of seeing one whom she had known

intimately in early life, but, be that as it may, she certainly gave him a kindly welcome; and he, after consenting to remain for some time as a visitor at the hall, won the esteem of the whole family by his frank demeanour and cultivated intellect.

He had travelled much and seen much, and he had turned to good account all he had seen, so that not only was Mr. Marchdale a man of sterling sound sense, but he was a most entertaining companion.

His intimate knowledge of many things concerning which they knew little or nothing; his accurate modes of thought, and a quiet, gentlemanly demeanour, such as is rarely to be met with, combined to make him esteemed by the Bannerworths. He had a small independence of his own, and being completely alone in the world, for he had neither wife nor child, Marchdale owned that he felt a pleasure in residing with the Bannerworths.

Of course he could not, in decent terms, so far offend them as to offer to pay for his subsistence, but he took good care that they should really be no losers by having him as an inmate, a matter which he could easily arrange by little presents of one kind and another, all of which he managed should be such as were not only ornamental, but actually spared his kind entertainers some positive expense which otherwise they must have gone to.

Whether or not this amiable piece of manoeuvring was seen through by the Bannerworths it is not our purpose to inquire. If it was seen through, it could not lower him in their esteem, for it was probably just what they themselves would have felt a pleasure in doing under similar circumstances, and if they did not observe it, Mr. Marchdale would, probably, be all the better pleased.

Such then may be considered by our readers as a brief outline of the state of affairs among the Bannerworths—a state which was pregnant with changes, and which changes were now likely to be rapid and conclusive.

How far the feelings of the family towards the ancient house of their race would be altered by the appearance at it of so fearful a visitor as a vampyre, we will not stop to inquire, inasmuch as such feelings will develop themselves as we proceed.

That the visitation had produced a serious effect upon all the household was sufficiently evident, as well among the educated as among the ignorant. On the second morning, Henry received notice to quit his service from the three servants he with difficulty had contrived to keep at the hall. The reason why he received such notice he knew well enough, and therefore he did not trouble himself to argue about a superstition to which he felt now himself almost, compelled to give way; for how could he say there was no such thing as a vampyre, when he had, with his own eyes, had the most abundant evidence of the terrible fact?

He calmly paid the servants, and allowed them to leave him at once without at all entering into the matter, and, for the time being, some men were procured,

who, however, came evidently with fear and trembling, and probably only took the place, on account of not being able, to procure any other. The comfort of the household was likely to be completely put an end to, and reasons now for leaving the hall appeared to be most rapidly accumulating.

A SECOND-HAND GRYPHON by Gavin Roach and Gavin Chappell

'...and of course that was when I realised I'd omitted to remove the camera's lens-cap,' Crawford Forbes-Bentley added, looking round at the rapt faces watching him. 'However, I assure you that my expedition was the first to see the Great Grey Man of Ben MacDhui with our own eyes, and we certainly beat the Thoroughgood expedition to it. A vast, hideous, apelike creature standing before me on that cold Grampian hillside... It was a moment I'll never forget.'

He looked around proudly, acknowledging the pitter-patter of applause that rippled through the members of the New Brighton Cryptozoological Society. The applause came most enthusiastically from Daphne Cardew, who gazed admiringly at Crawford as he leant his leather-patched elbows on the wide, stained table in the church hall's musty backroom.

Bernard watched quietly and bitterly as Daphne congratulated Crawford on his tale and the meeting began to break up. What she saw in the old fake with his preposterous goatee and his tall tales of Loch Ness Monsters and Alien Big Cats, he did not know. The pompous fool had even fallen for that E-bay jackelope fraud, and he never ceased to boast of his moth-eaten acquisition – a stuffed hare with a pair of fake antlers attached to its head.

'Goodbye, Bernard,' Daphne murmured as she put on her coat and headed past him towards the door. His heart fluttered like a caged bird and he tried to find something to say to her but his throat went dry as he saw Crawford deliberately running a proprietorial hand over Daphne's shapely shoulders. Bernard found some small solace in the way she drew slightly away from him and headed for her car.

The other society members had already got into their own vehicles. Crawford gave Bernard a condescending glance and got into his Aston Martin before screeching off across the carpark. The other cars pulled out, leaving Bernard standing alone in the cold and the petrol fumes. Dolefully, he took out his keys and approached his Morris Minor.

Bernard slumped in the driver's seat and stared dejectedly at nothing in particular. As he leaned forward to slot the key into the ignition, he heard the crackle of the carefully folded piece of paper in his inside pocket.

He dropped his driving gloves onto the passenger seat and removed the document. Unfolding the paper, he read the email once again.

With regard to your post on cryptozoology.org, I have recently acquired a specimen that you may find interesting. Since you seem like a promising young man and live locally, I thought you might care to attend a viewing. It is scheduled for Thursday 24th September at 8:30 pm. I do hope you will attend. My address is 13 Wellington Road, New Brighton.

Prof H Thoroughgood.

Bernard looked at his watch. It was 8:10 – just enough time to get to the viewing. He started the car and pulled out into the busy road.

Gosh, thought Bernard, this could be it. That is, if Professor Thoroughgood isn't completely bats, of course.

As Bernard's Morris Minor chugged down the road, the streetlamps blinked into life, their dull yellow glow adding to the otherworldly feel of the encroaching twilight. As he drove, Bernard considered his career with the society.

On his first expedition with the group, he had almost caught a glimpse of the Beast of West Kirby. Some weeks later he had very nearly collected a scale sample from the site of the famous Llandudno Phenomenon. He would certainly have photographed the infamous Endcliffe Manor Octopus if his camera hadn't gone mysteriously missing. And he was almost certain that it was the Giant Gastropod of the Peak District that had stolen his sandwiches.

Of course, Crawford had been there each time to compound Bernard's abject failure with that mocking expression and meaningless platitudes. And what was worse, each time Daphne had witnessed his failure. What must she think of him?

But this was it, this time the truth would not elude him. He would show them all at the New Brighton Cryptozoological Society. Especially Crawford. No sir, no grainy, out-of-focus pictures of logs that in the right light looked a bit like the Loch Ness Monster. Finally, he would have the proof that he so desperately desired, and then... then maybe Daphne Cardew would agree to go out for a drink with him.

Stepping out of the car, Bernard peered through the ever-deepening gloom at the imposing edifice looming before him. The house was a large, crumbling Victorian Gothic building that overlooked the promenade and the murky waters of the Irish Sea. It could have doubled as Frankenstein's castle.

'Well, it certainly seems to be the right address,' he remarked to no one in particular, glancing at the printout one more time. He crunched his way along the gravel path and up to the imposing front door. Taking a breath, he banged the knocker.

For a moment there was silence. Then a vague, distorted shape appeared in the frosted glass panes above the knocker. Seconds later, the door creaked open to reveal a tall, bearded man with wild, unruly hair that fringed an enormous bald spot. He wore a stained tweed jacket that had seen better days, and a pair of baggy plus-fours.

‘Ah, Mr Maxwell!’ he exclaimed, holding out a hand.

‘Dalrymple,’ Bernard corrected him. ‘Bernard Dalrymple. You emailed me.’

Thoroughgood blinked owlishly at him for a moment. ‘Ah! Well, Mr Maxwell – come with me. I think you’ll be very interested in the contents of my coal cellar.’

He turned abruptly and led Bernard along a peeling old passage that smelled faintly of boiled cabbage. Opening a door, the Professor revealed a flight of steps leading down into darkness. He clicked on a light.

Bernard heard something moving down below. He looked anxiously at the Professor.

‘Is it safe?’ he asked.

The Professor stared at him again. Then he turned and hurried down the rickety steps. ‘Make haste, Mr Maxwell!’ he boomed.

Nervously, Bernard followed.

A cage stood in the centre of the musty, brick-walled cellar, covered by a sheet that the Professor was removing even as Bernard stepped down onto the uneven floor. He halted, staring in amazement at the creature that blinked at him in the harsh light of a single naked bulb.

‘God’s teeth!’ Bernard exclaimed. ‘Is it...?’

‘Yes, Mr Maxwell. It is,’ said the Professor.

Before the two men, hunched in a cage far too small for it, was a gryphon.

‘It... it’s a gryphon,’ Bernard croaked.

‘Right again! I see my faith in you was not ill-founded,’ said Thoroughgood.

Bernard gazed in pity at the sorrowful creature, all thoughts of glory evaporating. Its once powerful leonine body was emaciated and missing patches of fur. The majestic eagle’s face was devoid of any animation, and vital feathers had been removed from its scabbed wings.

‘His name is Theophilus,’ the Professor said. ‘And to my best estimate he is between one and a half and two years old.’

'What happened to him?' Bernard asked. 'Where did he come from?'

'I found this fellow during one of my journeys to an odd place named Nevermoor. Ever heard of it? No? Well, I'm sure you'll find it one day. I rescued Theo from a coven of Stygian witches. They'd been harvesting his teeth, feathers, and – most diabolical of all – his tears. Getting him out of Nevermoor was tricky enough, but smuggling him past the parapsychological wing of Her Majesty's Customs and Excise service was a truly Herculean task.'

Theophilus sighed and laid his beak upon his large forepaws, his eyes studying Bernard. 'He seems to have taken a shine to you, dear boy,' said Thoroughgood, stepping closer to Bernard.

'He can't stay like this!' Bernard exclaimed. 'It, it's inhuman! He needs to be somewhere where he can be cared for.'

'Quite right,' said the Professor, staring at Bernard. Suddenly Bernard felt an irresistible urge. He must get this unfortunate creature away from here.

The gryphon was sitting up now. A new spark of life was evident in his eyes. The same eyes that were now staring intently into Bernard's own.

'Is he for sale?' Bernard choked.

'Only for the right person,' the Professor replied. 'And for the right price.'

'Who's that?' Bernard asked.

'Why, you, of course, Mr Maxwell.'

Bernard tugged out his wallet and thumbed through it. 'I'm sorry, I don't have very much,' he said apologetically, frustrated.

'Oh no, Mr Maxwell,' the Professor replied, and in the shadows of the cellar his face took on a strangely goat-like appearance. 'I don't want money at all.'

Mesmerised, Bernard stared at him. 'What then?' he croaked.

'The price,' the Professor said solemnly, 'will be one thing and one thing only. In exchange for this gryphon I want you to give me your greatest fear...'

Bernard could never quite remember leaving the house. The next thing he was aware of, he was driving down the road with the gryphon in the seat beside him, leaning its head out of the window, its feathers ruffled by the slipstream.

This would show them, he thought fiercely. This would show Crawford! Maybe Daphne would take an interest in him, too. He snatched a look at his acquisition, and saw its look of joy at the wind rushing past it. It must be almost like this when it was flying free and alone in the skies of that other place... What had the Professor called it? Nevermoor. He felt a lump in his throat.

Bernard pulled into the side of the road. His heart felt heavy as he regarded the majestic creature beside him. Could he ever hope to own it? All that, simply to impress Daphne?

He got out and went round to the other side. The gryphon looked mournfully at him as he opened the passenger door. He ushered the creature out and it jumped down, limping across the tarmac before sinking its paws into the soft grass of the verge. Its mighty wings beat heavily, and suddenly it was flying into the sky. It took one last look back at Bernard before it flew across the moon.

Bernard got back into the car. Fired by a new resolve, he executed a hasty U-turn and drove in the direction of Daphne's house.

CASTLE OF THE BLOODY VISAGE PART TWO: by Gavin Chappell

Six

The path up the cliff was steep and narrow, and the wind was fierce. The silent figures led the way, with Ingunn and Oengus following. Their guides had shown no qualms about the boy accompanying them. Ingunn was less sanguine.

'Why did you run after me?' she asked.

'I reckon it's safer with you,' Oengus confessed. 'Besides, I want to see what's happened to Emer. What do you hope to do?'

Ingunn made no reply. The cowed figures led them inexorably up the cliffside path, the way Loeaghaire drove the sacrifices at the appointed times.

Oengus began to wonder if she had any real idea what they would do once they got up there.

The wind was buffeting around them, and the village below lay remote in the darkness by the time they reached the top of the cliff. They could see the mountains marching towards the encircling horizon, and the vast cloud-smearied bowl of stars that rose above them. The valley beneath trailed away into blackness.

But Ingunn tore her attention from the dizzying prospect beneath her feet, and looked up.

'That's the fort,' said Oengus quietly, beside her.

The megalithic blocks rose dark against the stormy sky. Ingunn received a sense of some ancient, primordial power, stretching back further in time than she could imagine. These walls had stood here long before her people's ancestors came out of the north. Surely, they were the work of giants, not men?

The cowled figures beckoned them to follow. Ingunn realised that she had been standing there for over a minute. For the first time in her life, she was afraid - truly afraid, almost rigid with fear. Slowly, she turned to look down at the boy.

Their eyes met, and Ingunn's cold heart melted. Here was someone who saw her as heroine, a great achieve, a fearless shieldmaiden. More than her honour was at stake here; more than simply her reputation.

'Come, then,' she croaked, and strode forward, stiff-legged. Oengus followed.

The archway loomed up before them, gaping like a hungry mouth. Ingunn dismissed the thought. The cowled figures led them into the fort.

In the courtyard beyond, their guides halted, and turned to them.

They stood in silence, silhouetted against the red glow emanating from the hall behind it.

'Who are you?' she demanded of their leader. 'Are you Lord Dreach-Fhoula?'

Emboldened by her courage, Oengus piped up; 'Where's Emer? What have you done with her?'

'She is within,' replied the figure. 'The hall is empty, except for the girl. Come. I am not Lord Dreach-Fhoula, but one of the *neamh-mhairbh*.'

Ingunn and Oengus looked at each other. The speaker walked towards the hall entrance followed by his two silent companions.

'Where are the vampires?' Ingunn asked. But the speaker had vanished into the red-lit confines of the hall.

Without pausing, Ingunn followed him.

'Maybe they've all gone to the village,' Oengus muttered, running to keep up.

'But you said...,' Ingunn snapped.

'I know, I know,' Oengus replied.

'I came here to speak with their leader,' Ingunn said.

They had entered the hall by now. All was red light and shadow. In the centre of the eerily lit hall lay a motionless form.

'Emer!' cried Oengus, and he ran forward.

He was halfway across the hall when Loeaghaire stepped from out of the shadows, dropping the cowl that had previously hidden his face. Oengus skidded to a halt. Ingunn stepped forward, puzzled.

'Loeaghaire!' she cried. 'I thought you were dead! How did you get up here?'

'I was dead,' said Loeaghaire, in the hissing voice they had already heard. The other *neamh-mhairbh* seized hold of the young boy, dragging him towards the spot where Emer lay. 'But like my father before me, and his father before him, I have won the blessing of eternal life.'

Ingunn whirled round. Loeaghaire's eyes were glowing, and his teeth gleamed sharply.

'Now the boy and the girl shall both give their blood to the lord,' Loeaghaire intoned sombrely. 'Behold! Lord Dreach-Fhoula!'

Ingunn turned again, as the red light flared up, burning brighter to illumine the hall, and to reveal the one who had stood silent in the shadows.

'Welcome to my abode,' said the tall man who stood alone in the centre of the now brightly-lit hall. He took a step forward, his eyes intent on the shieldmaiden. 'Such beauty,' he murmured.

Ingunn glared at the man.

His face was pale, but suffused with red around the lips and eyes; pale and strangely elongated. Tattoos scarred his cheeks, in the form of streaks of blood. His eyes seemed to glow with a blood-red light - but surely that was a reflection of the blazing fires. His hair was red, also; almost, but not quite, the colour of Ingunn's own. He smiled suddenly, revealing two delicate fangs.

'Who are you?' Ingunn demanded brashly, though her heart was pounding. 'I've not seen your like in Ireland.'

'My kind is rare in these latter days,' the man murmured. 'I have no name now, except a title; Lord Dreach-Fhoula is how my followers know me.'

From the shadows stepped two other figures like himself; a younger man to the left, a woman to the right.

'I am Sreng,' hissed the man, 'war-chief of my lord's armies.'

'And I am Badb,' said the woman. 'I am my lord's leman.'

Ingunn cast a glance at the still figure lying beside the blood-trench. 'Lord?' she questioned. 'What kind of ruler preys upon his own people?'

The Lord shrugged elegantly.

'What ruler does not?' he replied carelessly. 'Some let their charges fetter them with laws or taboos, but I have never seen the need for such constraints. And you yourself, who prey upon the good Christian folk of Ireland? What kind of monster are you?'

'Warfare is a noble occupation,' Ingunn replied. 'The chief occupation of nobles, that is. I fight for glory and for loot, to reward my followers. But I never prey upon the innocent - only upon the kings and bishops and chieftains who resist me. Such is the way of the Vikings.'

'But are there not times when you wish to throw away the shackles of law and custom?' Lord Dreach-Fhoula suggested. 'When you would slake your bloodlust on the weak and the strong alike?' He rounded the blood-trench, and stooped to lift Emer. Lord Dreach-Fhoula looked down at the young girl's unmoving face. 'She is not dead. As yet she is young, and serves as no more than a pawn in the great game.' He looked up. 'But you are strong and virile - a queen in spirit, and a conqueror in truth.' He indicated Loeaghair. 'This one would have joined his ancestors with me, sooner or later. Now he serves me, and continues the cycle, harvesting the folk of the village, bringing them to swell the ranks of my undead army. But I no longer need numbers - now that I have a strong war-chief to lead the host.'

Sreng and Badb hissed coldly at this, and their eyes glowed red.

'You have a choice, Red Daughter,' said the Lord languorously, ignoring the reactions of his confederates. 'Join me willingly and become my queen; ride beside me when my undead legions march out to lay the land beneath our rule. Or join me in living death to slave as the lowest of my concubines.'

'It's a hard choice you give me,' said Ingunn in a level voice, facing Lord Dreach-Fhoula again. 'To be your slave - or to be your slave. Hardly a choice at all. But I do see another alternative.'

Lord Dreach-Fhoula shook his head. 'There is no alternative,' he replied. 'You may join me willingly, or join me as my slave.'

'Or I may kill you, and save the boy and his friend!' shouted Ingunn defiantly. Her sword left its sheath with a rasp.

Lord Dreach-Fhoula stood still as the blade, glittering in the torchlight, slashed down through his bony body. He made no attempt to escape the blow, to resist. And yet when the gaping wound had opened up his torso he showed little sign that it had incapacitated him.

He looked disappointedly at his attacker. Ingunn returned his gaze with disbelief.

'Lord Dreach-Fhoula does not die so easily!' Sreng exclaimed. Badb moved to the lord's side, and ran her fingers along the gaping lips of the gash. Looking up, she raked Ingunn with a jealous feline gaze.

'He offers you so much - and you give him this?' she hissed. 'No matter! The wound will heal within the hour.'

'Let her return to her people and reconsider,' Lord Dreach-Fhoula gasped as the two younger vampires led him away. 'If the boy means so much to you' - his gaze shot to Oengus, still in the grasp of the *neamh-mhairbh* - 'then I will release him to you when you swear to join us. The girl as well.'

Ingunn stared at Oengus. The boy looked back in mute appeal. Helplessly, Ingunn turned, and walked from the hall.

Seven

The two younger vampires laid their lord on a slab of stone in a small chamber off the main hall. Badb looked down at Lord Dreach-Fhoula. His eyes had closed, and he lay as one dead. The wound was beginning to close. Without opening his eyes, he gestured to them to leave him.

'Come,' Badb said to Sreng. They strode from the chamber.

'The fool!' she hissed as soon as they were out of earshot. 'To allow that wench to damage him at a time such as this!'

Sreng glowered. 'Why is he changing our plans now?' he demanded. 'Why does he want this mortal to lead us? I was to be his war-chief!'

Badb's eyes glimmered bitterly. 'He is fascinated by this warrior-woman's legend,' she hissed. 'He wants her, and now we mean nothing to him. But perhaps we can remove her...'

'Or him!' Sreng hissed. 'We can use this Red Daughter to overthrow him! With Lord Dreach-Fhoula out of the way, we could conquer the lands together! We do not need the dried up old fool.'

Badb shook her head. 'I will not see him harmed,' she replied flatly. 'Besides, when I went down to the village to abduct the young girl, I also encountered one of the Red Daughter's men. A little nip in the neck was all it took. Now he is under my power. We can use him to remove this threat to our ambitions.'

Sreng shook his head. 'No. It is time Lord Dreach-Fhoula himself was removed,' he replied obstinately. He turned on his heel, and abruptly left the chamber.

Badb watched his departure, a cynical smile twisting her pallid features.

'How can you consider this?' demanded Thorkell. 'It's impossible that you should join this foul vampire's army!' He looked wildly around, as if searching for reasons. 'You swore an oath to aid Sigtrygg!'

Ingunn looked around the hut. She had returned a while ago, to tell her men of her encounter with the vampire. The night was drawing on, and the Vikings looked tired and dispirited.

'I did,' she said quietly in reply to Thorkell's statement. 'But I also swore to aid the boy.' She looked pensive. 'Perhaps I can yet leave this place with my honour intact.'

'I see no way in which that can be done,' said Suibhne tentatively, 'but I advise you to forget this vaunted honour of yours. It will not serve you in the next world. If even you cannot slay Lord Dreach-Fhoula, if he is invincible, then it would be best if you were to leave us to our fate.' He shook his head. His voice was dismal. 'Better that than if you were to join him. All Ireland will be imperilled should it be you who rides at the head of his host. Besides, your soul too would suffer.'

'My soul?' Ingunn replied. 'My soul is Odin's own. To his high halls shall I go when I die on the field of battle. But first I intend to join Lord Dreach-Fhoula's army.' There was a gasp from the others. She shrugged. 'What is one lord beside another? All prey upon the simple folk - that is the way of the great.'

'You can't join him!' said Thorkell. 'What of King Sigtrygg? What of your oath?'

Ingunn smiled coldly. 'I've considered that,' she told him. 'When I have this invincible undead army at my back, my first move - after ensuring my oath to the boy is fulfilled - will be to lead them to the Boggeragh Mountains. There we will join Sigtrygg's host and march against the men of Cork. I will fulfil my obligation, then go on to conquer the land for Lord Dreach-Fhoula.' She stared round at her men, challengingly. 'You may come with me or not, as you choose.'

Thorkell Treebone stared at the ground. Bjorn looked bewildered. Ingunn looked from face to face. Each man seemed dismayed by her words, except for one. Oli watched the proceedings, his eyes red in the firelight.

Suibhne broke the silence.

'Ambition is a terrible thing,' he murmured. 'Do you truly intend to imperil your soul simply to maintain your worldly honour?'

'Enough talk of souls, priest,' said Ingunn. 'How can this endanger mine any more than all my evil deeds in life so far?'

Suibhne looked at her sadly. 'Surely you have realised?' he asked. 'Lord Dreach-Fhoula will not want a living woman to lead his army and share his bed. Before you join him, he will make you one of his own.'

Ingunn's face fell with the suddenness of an avalanche. 'He intends to make me a vampire?' she asked wildly.

'Of course! Had you not realised?' came a voice from behind them.

Ingunn whirled round to see a figure in the doorway, a pale-faced youth with strange designs tattooed upon his cheeks. Ingunn recognised him as Lord Dreach-Fhoula's companion, Sreng.

'If you are to usurp my position,' Sreng added venomously, 'you must become one of us.'

Badb stood in the shadows of the hall silent, her eyes closed. In the chamber nearby, Lord Dreach-Fhoula was slowly recovering. She had little time.

Her mind's eye gazed through the eyes of Oli, the Viking she had bitten in the stables. Now she saw the roundhouse, and the crowd of Vikings and villagers. The priest was nearby cowering in fear from the figure in the doorway. She recognised their visitor instantly.

'Sreng...' she whispered. 'What do you plot?'

'I'll not join you!' Ingunn exclaimed. 'I'll fight for you, but I'll not become one of your filthy kind!'

'I do not want you to lead our armies,' Sreng said. 'Now you have come, I have lost my lord's favour. It was I who would lead the undead armies to conquer. Now I am nothing in his eyes.'

'Our lord is old. His plans have grown over the centuries while he has dwelt within his fortress, growing bloated on the blood of the peasants. Once his plots were those of a genius, a visionary - one who would restore this country

to how it was entirely the territory of the inhuman. But in the long ages that passed as he slowly amassed his armies he has grown into his dotage. His plans remain sound, but he has fits of foolishness. This idea, to replace me with you, is only the latest.

'Our plans reach fruition. Only his senile notions hold us back. He must be removed, before he endangers us any more.'

'Why tell us this?' Ingunn replied. 'Why not dispose of him yourself, if you know the way?'

'Like you, I am bound by oaths,' Sreng said, with regret. 'A *geas* was laid upon me long ago, a binding obligation. I cannot harm my lord.'

'Nor can I!' said Ingunn ruefully. 'He is invincible. How do I deal with one who is immune to mortal weapons?'

'Why, with knowledge,' Sreng replied simply. 'With knowledge.'

Suibhne drew himself up. 'You are creatures of the Devil,' he said. 'Fallen angels, demons. However strong, all demons fear the name of God. Could we not exorcise Lord Dreach-Fhoula?'

Sreng smiled thinly, revealing his incisors. 'Nonsense,' he replied dismissively. 'Your Church has taught you nothing but play-acting and children's games. None of your superstitious rites could harm him.' His eyes travelled round the ring of bearded faces, then settled on Ingunn. The warrior woman met his gaze in silence. 'I risk much by revealing such information,' he said, 'but it is the only way. The *dearg-diúlaí* cannot be killed, but we can be incapacitated. To do this, it will be necessary to run Lord Dreach-Fhoula through with a sword hewn from yew-wood, then bury him upside down, surrounded by thorns and ash-twigs, and have his grave surmounted with heavy rocks. Only then will he be unable to return. Do this, and we will allow you to leave.'

'And the children you hold prisoner?' Ingunn asked.

'They will be released,' Sreng promised. 'I suggest you go now and find what you require, then come to the fortress. Say that you wish to discuss the deal.' He turned, and vanished into the night.

In the fortress, Badb's eyes snapped open. She gazed around wildly. 'So that is his plan!' she hissed to herself.

She heard a noise from the chamber beyond. Feet padded towards her. Lord Dreach-Fhoula appeared in the arch, his wound healed. Badb returned his gaze in silence.

'Will the Red Daughter accept my offer?' Lord Dreach-Fhoula asked.

Badb turned her attention to the children, still guarded by the undead. Should she tell him what she had learnt? But her lord might want to know why she had one of the Vikings under her control. She did not want Lord Dreach-Fhoula dead; Ingunn's death was enough for her. But if the lord knew what his subordinates plotted behind his back, he would be angry with them both.

'I think the warrior-woman will return to speak with you,' she said guardedly. 'Do you think she has an alternative?'

There was a pad from the archway that led outside, and she turned to see Sreng enter quietly.

'What else could she do but accept?' Lord Dreach-Fhoula muttered obsessively.

Badb moved into the shadows once more.

Five figures slipped through the gloom of a field below the cliff. At their head shuffled the priest, Suibhne. Behind him strode Ingunn, glancing cautiously up towards the fortress that bulked darkly against the stars above. Following her were Thorkell, Bjorn, and Oli.

'Here is the grove,' Suibhne murmured. Ahead, in the shadows of the cliff, a few stunted trees and bushes were growing. The priest gestured towards them. 'Thorn,' he said. 'Ash. And this tree is yew. All we need, if the vampire's words are true.'

'But can we be certain that this is not a trap?' Thorkell Treebone said anxiously. 'Why would he give us information that could seal his own fate?'

'Because he thinks we have no reason to use this against any but Lord Dreach-Fhoula,' Ingunn replied, gathering thorns and ash-twigs to place in a sack. 'Help me with this, can't you?'

Bjorn had produced a wood-axe, and was cutting off a long branch. Suibhne had joined the others picking up twigs.

'And you, Oli,' Ingunn snapped, scowling at one of her men. 'Or are you too fine and noble to dirty your hands?'

Bjorn thought the man had been behaving strangely, and had brought him with them to keep an eye on him. When Ingunn looked at Oli coldly, the Viking started, paling, and moved to aid them. Absently, he put a hand to his head.

Ever since he encountered that girl in the stables he had been feeling unwell. A couple of times he had experienced blackouts. He had no recollection of her departure. Was he suffering from concussion? It was a few days since any of them had been in a fight, and he had not recently received any blows to the head. But there were gaps in his memory. He busied himself gathering more twigs.

Bjorn was shaping the yew branch into the form of a sword. His axe travelled busily up and down the branch, and he hummed happily to himself. He'd always enjoyed whittling, even as a boy, on the cold slopes of the Hardanger Fjord, long before he joined the Viking fleet of Ingunn's father. But as he began carving a crosspiece, he heard a sound that made him look up from his work.

Oli was standing still, gazing down at Ingunn, bent nearby. He had drawn his sword. The scrape as it left its sheath had alerted Bjorn. Shocked, he looked at Oli's eyes. They were red.

Badb stood in the shadows, her own eyes closed. She had made contact with her slave again. There was the Red Daughter, bent over, picking up twigs like a peasant woman gathering firewood. This was the moment!

'Kill her...' she urged silently. 'Kill her!'

'Ingunn!' Bjorn shouted, as the blade descended.

Ingunn dived to the rocky ground and rolled, panting. Oli ran at her.

Bjorn flung the wood-axe at him. It bounced off his skull, making no apparent impression on him. Thorkell Treebone surged upwards, producing his own weapon. Oli hacked mechanically at Ingunn, who rolled back again. Thorkell's sword hissed through the air, slicing through the man's neck.

Oli's head fell, but horrifically his headless body continued to hack and slash at Ingunn. The shield-maiden was cornered now, backed against a large rock. There was nowhere left for her to roll.

'The sword!' Suibhne shouted. 'The man's one of the undead! Run him through with the sword of yew!'

Bjorn looked back in confusion. Suibhne grabbed the wooden sword from where it had fallen, and flung it at him. Bjorn seized it, then turned towards the headless thing.

Just as the undead Viking was about to plunge his own blade into Ingunn's heart, Bjorn rammed into him with the sword of yew. It burst through Oli's chest, showering Ingunn with blood.

Thorkell Treebone pulled her away, staggering as his wooden leg almost gave way. They watched as Bjorn bore the still thrashing body to the ground. It twitched on the end of the yew sword like a speared fish.

'The rock!' Ingunn panted, indicating the slab of stone that had almost sealed her doom. Together, she and Thorkell Treebone ripped it up from the soil and poised it above Oli, while Suibhne scattered the ground around him with thorns and twigs. They slammed the slab down on top of the undead Viking.

They gathered around the slab, gazing down in awe. Scrabbling sounds from beneath gradually died away.

'Not quite as Sreng directed,' said Ingunn. 'But effective, nonetheless.'

'Now we'll have to gather more twigs, and cut another sword,' muttered Bjorn.

Ingunn studied the yew tree. She tested a branch. 'This will do,' she said. She looked thoughtfully at a couple of other branches.

Badb's eyes opened again. Bitterness was in her red gaze. Now it seemed Sreng's plan would go ahead. She looked towards Lord Dreach-Fhoula, where he stood in meditation before the blood-trench. She would miss the old fool. But maybe the war would go better if Sreng was in command. Or perhaps herself...

Eight

Oengus looked down at Emer's tranquil face. He sat in the middle of the cold, echoing hall, watched over by Loeaghaire and the other undead. Emer was breathing shallowly, but had shown no signs of recovery.

He had been sitting here for what seemed like hours, since Ingunn stalked away. The *neamh-mhairbh* had watched over him with awful patience, while vampires strode back and forth on their sinister business, and muttered darkly

in corners. But little else had happened. Oengus was too worried by Emer to grow bored, but it had been a long night. He yawned. His head was nodding...

'The Red Daughter returns.'

The statement, in the slow, emotionless tones of the *neamh-mhairbh*, jerked Oengus back into full wakefulness again. Around him the hall was instantly bustling with life - or rather, with undeath. A messenger had shambled in from the archway, and now Lord Dreach-Fhoula and his two companions strode into the torchlight.

'Alone?' asked Lord Dreach-Fhoula.

'She brings her men with her,' the undead messenger stated.

'Beware, my lord,' the female vampire warned. 'She intends treachery.' Her eyes glowed as she gazed at her lord.

'Nonsense, Badb!' the other vampire exclaimed, giving her a fierce look. 'She knows that she has no way to defeat you, Lord,' he added, turning to Lord Dreach-Fhoula with a bark of laughter. 'What treachery could she entertain?'

Badb seemed torn by conflicting emotions. 'Nevertheless, my lord,' she said finally, 'I urge you to beware.'

'No, Badb,' said Lord Dreach-Fhoula. 'Sreng is right. The Red Daughter has seen that even cold steel does not affect me. How could she consider any other way to foil me? She comes here - with her men, it seems - to join us.'

Badb's eyes flickered over at Oengus, who quailed back.

'Will you give her these children, as you promised?' she asked. Oengus' heart pounded wildly, painfully. Lord Dreach-Fhoula turned to gaze at them, and Oengus looked away. He stared at the great pillar that stood nearby.

'If she asks for them,' the lord replied. 'But once she is with us, it is more likely that she will wish to drink their blood than free them.'

Oengus gulped. Was it true? Did Ingunn intend to join the vampires? Was there any chance she would let Emer and he go free? Despairingly, he gazed at the pillar. It seemed precarious. Could there be some way he might shift it, and bring the whole place down around their ears? But what would that achieve? He would die in the destruction, and so would Emer. The situation was impossible.

The sound of booted feet rang out from the main archway. Lord Dreach-Fhoula turned, his eyes red with pleasure.

At the head of her men, Ingunn marched proudly into the great hall of Dún Dreach-Fhoula. Thorkell Treebone and Bjorn marched on either flank; at their

backs came the rest of the Vikings. In the torch lit darkness ahead she could see the silent figures of the three vampires. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Oengus and Emer at their feet.

She glanced briefly at Sreng, who met her gaze, then turned away. Lord Dreach-Fhoula took a step forward.

'What is your decision?' he asked. 'I trust that you have realised the futility of resistance to my will?'

Ingunn faced him squarely. 'I know that my longsword is no use against you,' she replied.

Lord Dreach-Fhoula made a dismissive gesture.

'Of course,' he replied. 'You cannot even consider harming me. But will you join me?' He indicated Oengus and Emer. 'I shall give you these children, if that is what you wish.' He clicked a finger. Ingunn heard Oengus gasp as Emer began to stir.

'Send them over to my men,' Ingunn commanded, striding forward. 'I come to join you.' Lord Dreach-Fhoula beckoned to his undead servants, who lifted the two children.

He turned to meet Ingunn, and his pale face fell as she drew a sword from her belt.

'What treachery is this?' he croaked, with a brief glance towards Badb. He laughed hoarsely. 'Have you learnt nothing? Cold steel will not harm me!'

'This is not steel!' replied Ingunn, as she ran him through with the sword of yew.

Lord Dreach-Fhoula staggered back under the force of the blow, and fell into the trench of blood. The foul-smelling liquid splattered Ingunn as she forced the wooden sword deep into Lord Dreach-Fhoula's struggling body.

'Help me!' the vampire lord gargled, glaring frantically up at Sreng and Badb. But the younger vampires stared down at him; Sreng impassive, Badb betraying regret. Now Suibhne rushed forward, strewing the trench with thorns and twigs. Thorkell Treebone and Bjorn followed him, and seized the nearby stone slab.

'My undead legions!' the threshing form howled. 'Destroy these intruders!' As the undead began to shamble forward from the shadows, Bjorn and Thorkell Treebone brought the stone slab crashing down on top of the blood trench, and Lord Dreach-Fhoula's cries were silenced.

Ingunn's men came forward as the undead came slowly towards the killers of their lord. The two surviving vampires stood unmoving. Oengus crouched beneath them, bending over Emer as she stirred. Her eyes flickered open.

'What's happening?' the girl asked, raising herself on one arm. 'All I remember is being outside the roundhouse, and something seized me... Oengus? Have you come to rescue me?'

The boy looked grimly up at the scene that surrounded them. The vampires had made no move to halt the advance of the undead. Tension hung heavy in the stale air of the hall.

Ingunn swung round to Sreng.

'What is this?' she demanded. 'I have done as you said! Call off your warriors!'

After a moment's seeming indecision, Sreng turned to face her. 'Very well,' he said slowly. He gazed at the advancing undead. 'Return to your places, *neamh-mhairbh!*' he cried. 'I, Sreng, command you!'

'No!' Badb shrieked. 'Sreng has brought about the death of your lord! Kill the Vikings! And kill Sreng!'

The undead surged forward.

Ingunn drew her sword - her metal sword, not the wooden weapon now buried beneath the slab with Lord Dreach-Fhoula. As the undead rushed across the floor, she came to meet them.

'What foolishness is this?' Sreng demanded, facing Badb across the slab that buried their lord. 'Now we have the old fool out of the way, I can put his plans into effect without his dotard's notions imperilling them!'

Badb sneered. 'Do you think you are the only one here without ambition, Sreng?' she spat. 'Now Lord Dreach-Fhoula is gone, I will not leave his plans for you to mangle! I will be the only one of us to lead the armies! And I will not allow you the pleasure of accepting the Red Daughter into your ranks.'

Ingunn's Vikings stood before the archway, eyes wide in amazement. At the centre of a horde of glassy-eyed *neamh-mhairbh*, Ingunn stood amidst a shimmer of glittering steel, a spray of spattering gore; her small body was alive with fighting spirit, while her beautiful face was a twisted mask. Though the undead villagers towered over her, she was sending them to the Hell they had cheated in ones and twos, or leaving them hamstrung and legless to thresh around on the stone floor. Savagely wounded forms twitched and struggled at her feet.

But not all the blood was that of her enemies. Ingunn's tempestuous auburn hair ran dark with blood from an axe-wound to the temple, and her left arm

streamed red from a shoulder wound. Her movements were growing weaker. Suddenly, she stumbled, her foot sliding in a pool of blood. One of the undead raised his sword.

'Attack!' bellowed Gunnholm the Berserker. They rushed into the battle..

Badb watched the fight with a sneer on her cold, arrogant face. Oengus watched that face as he crouched beside Emer. Two of the undead had seized Sreng, and the vampire was struggling with them. Events had fled past too fast for Oengus to follow them well, but it seemed the vampires were fighting among themselves. Meanwhile, Ingunn was fighting the undead single-handed.

Bjorn, Thorkell Treebone and Suibhne stood nearby, watching the two vampires, seeming unwilling to join Ingunn in her fight. And they were paying little attention to Oengus and Emer. He looked up.

Badb tore her attention away from the battle as the Vikings charged in to support their leader. She stared down at Oengus with a cunning expression on her face.

'Boy,' the vampire murmured. 'Come here, boy.'

Ingunn felt the line of her attackers reel as Gunnholm and the Vikings rushed them. She grinned viciously, and rose from her crouch.

'Not so strong now, eh?' she said with a wild laugh. The *neamh-mhairbh* turned away from her to meet the Viking attack.

Only one of the undead remained to fight her - Loeaghaire, who had stalked through the undead ranks to attack. His once ruddy face was white, his fiery eyes glazed. But his strength was greater than it had ever been in life, as Ingunn realised when he set upon her with a mighty two-handed axe. Wearily, she raised her sword to parry.

'Time to reconsider!'

Badb's words cut through the roar of battle. Loeaghaire halted, and Ingunn wearily pushed her hair out of her eyes, then turned her attention on the vampire.

Badb stood by the slab with Oengus and Emer struggling in her arms. Beside her, two of the undead held Sreng. Ingunn scowled. Then Loeaghaire seized her.

'Let me go!' she hissed, but he was inhumanly strong. Loeaghaire twisted the sword from her hand, and it clattered across the stone floor.

She stood before Badb, held fast by Loeaghaire. With a wry smile, she nodded at Sreng.

'What will you do with him?' she asked.

'He is a fool,' Badb hissed. 'Like Lord Dreach-Fhoula himself, he was ensnared by your beauty. But I am immune to your charms. I shall lead the armies to conquer, and I shall not rely on a whore like yourself.' She turned to the undead. 'Some of you, go and find all that is necessary to send Sreng to join the lord he betrayed!' Now she stepped closer to Ingunn. 'But you fight well,' she added reaching forward to caress Ingunn's neck. 'You have destroyed many of my followers, you and your men. Let me make you a new offer. You and your men will join me - as slaves - and these children go free. What do you say?'

Oengus looked up at Ingunn's blood-spattered face, feeling hope and guilt in equal measures. She laughed.

'You must think my maternal feelings get the better of me!' the Red Daughter said harshly. 'Can you imagine no better way to manipulate me than this stale offer? Do you think I care so much about this boy and his friend that I will offer up my soul for him?'

Oengus gulped. Badb looked uncertain. Ingunn laughed again. 'It worked well enough before, vampire. When you had the edge. But in your rise to power you have neglected a few small matters. You might as well call back your undead warriors. We have the means to deal with Sreng here. And with you!'

Thorkell Treebone and Bjorn drew the wooden swords they had been concealing throughout the battle, and ran the two vampires through.

'Kill them!' Badb wailed as she writhed on the end of Bjorn's wooden sword. Though they had pierced both vampires to the heart, Bjorn and Thorkell Treebone had not succeeded in slaying them. The undead were approaching.

'We must bury them beneath rocks!' Suibhne exclaimed, staring around, searching for another slab. 'They will not be stopped until we have done so!'

'Where will we find rocks?' Ingunn shouted, as the undead shambled towards them. 'Do we have the time?'

'We must do it quickly,' Suibhne yelled. 'Otherwise the undead will kill us!'

Oengus was still smarting, as much from Ingunn's hurtful words as from being flung bodily to the ground, but he knew that this was his moment. He leapt up and jabbed his finger at the central pillar.

'Bring that down!' he cried. 'Bring that down and you will destroy this place!'

Ingunn spun round. 'Bjorn!' she said urgently. 'Can you manage it?'

The big man strode to the pillar. Bearlike, he hugged it. His face turned purple as he heaved at the great stone. The undead drew closer and closer, ringing the Vikings.

With a great roar, Bjorn tore the ancient stone free. Immediately, a crack ran straight across the stone roof. The undead halted, gazing dully above them.

'Run!' shouted Ingunn. As the fortress began to fall apart, the surviving Vikings forced their way through the motionless undead legion, and fled into the night.

Nine

Oengus stood in the village square. Emer was beside him, pale and wary, but smiling weakly in the morning sun. Behind them stood Suibhne and the villagers. The fortress that had dominated the heights above their settlement for so many years was a tumbled ruin. Now the Vikings were preparing for the ride through the mountains. They had been greatly diminished by the events of the night.

Thorkell Treebone limped up to Ingunn.

'We're ready to ride,' he said. 'If you think there's any point continuing. There's hardly enough of us to crew a trading vessel.'

Ingunn smiled carelessly.

'We go where we are bidden. Besides, consider our young fighter here.' She indicated Oengus, who flushed with embarrassment. Ever since he had helped them defeat the undead, the Vikings had been treating him like some kind of hero. And Ingunn had apologised, unprompted, for her callous words in the hall, explaining that she had said them merely to trick Badb, to put the vampire off her guard before the Vikings slew her. 'He has a village to steer towards new ways of life,' she added. Her gaze took in the villagers who huddled behind the lad.

Thorkell Treebone gave Oengus an uncharacteristic smile.

'But now he is free from the curse of his forefathers,' the wily Viking said. 'Freed by his own action. We, for all our strength and prowess, were nearly defeated. This boy saved us all.'

'But won't you stay?' asked Emer suddenly.

'Yes,' Oengus added. 'I could have done nothing without the Red Daughter - she is my inspiration. You would be welcome to join us.'

Ingunn crouched down and rested her arms on his shoulders. She looked him in the eye.

'Last night, you proved that you need no heroes,' she murmured. 'You are as strong and as capable as anyone. And now Lord Dreach-Fhoula and his cohorts are gone, you need feel fear no more than any of us.'

She straightened up. Around her, the Vikings were mounting their steeds, ready for the ride through the wild mountains, off to add their strength - such as it was - to that of their earl.

'Besides, your life is not for my kind,' she added. 'To each their own. To the farmer the plough, to the clerk his books - and to the Viking, the sword!'

She leapt astride her horse and turned to look down at Oengus and Emer.

'This is a shifting, uncertain world,' she told them. 'But you will weather all storms that face you. Perhaps one day our paths will cross again, but till then - farewell! May the gods go with you!'

With a thunder of hoofs, the Vikings turned, and rode out of the village and down the track that wound through the heather. Oengus and Emer watched for a long time as the riders cantered into the haze. Then Ingunn and her men rode behind a jutting outcrop of rock, and were gone.

Oengus turned uncertainly to Emer. 'What will we do?'

She scowled.

'Weren't you listening?' she asked. 'Rebuild.'

EDISON'S CONQUEST OF MARS (PART 2) by Garrett P Serviss

Chapter IV.

It is not necessary for me to describe the manner in which Mr. Edison performed his tremendous task. He was as good as his word, and within six months from the first stroke of the hammer, a hundred electrical ships, each provided with a full battery of disintegrators, were floating in the air above the harbour and the partially rebuilt city of New York.

It was a wonderful scene. The polished sides of the huge floating cars sparkled in the sunlight, and, as they slowly rose and fell, and swung this way and that, upon the tides of the air, as if held by invisible cables, the brilliant pennons streaming from their peaks waved up and down like the wings of an assemblage of gigantic humming birds.

Not knowing whether the atmosphere of Mars would prove suitable to be breathed by inhabitants of the earth, Mr. Edison had made provision, by means of an abundance of glass-protected openings, to permit the inmates of

the electrical ships to survey their surroundings without quitting the interior. It was possible by properly selecting the rate of undulation, to pass the vibratory impulse from the disintegrators through the glass windows of a car, without damage to the glass itself. The windows were so arranged that the disintegrators could sweep around the car on all sides, and could also be directed above or below, as necessity might dictate.

To overcome the destructive forces employed by the Martians no satisfactory plan had yet been devised, because there was no means to experiment with them. The production of those forces was still the secret of our enemies. But Mr. Edison had no doubt that if we could not resist their effects we might at least be able to avoid them by the rapidity of our motions. As he pointed out, the war machines which the Martians had employed in their invasion of the earth, were really very awkward and unmanageable affairs. Mr. Edison's electrical ships, on the other hand, were marvels of speed and of manageability. They could dart about, turn, reverse their course, rise, fall, with the quickness and ease of a fish in the water. Mr. Edison calculated that even if mysterious bolts should fall upon our ships we could diminish their power to cause injury by our rapid evolutions.

We might be deceived in our expectations, and might have overestimated our powers, but at any rate we must take our chances and try.

Watching the Martians.

A multitude, exceeding even that which had assembled during the great congress at Washington, now thronged New York and its neighbourhood to witness the mustering and the departure of the ships bound for Mars. Nothing further had been heard of the mysterious phenomenon reported from the observatories six months before, and which at the time was believed to indicate the departure of another expedition from Mars for the invasion of the earth. If the Martians had set out to attack us they had evidently gone astray; or, perhaps, it was some other world that they were aiming at this time.

The expedition had, of course, profoundly stirred the interest of the scientific world, and representatives of every branch of science, from all the civilized nations, urged their claims to places in the ships. Mr. Edison was compelled, from lack of room, to refuse transportation to more than one in a thousand of those who now, on the plea that they might be able to bring back something of advantage to science, wished to embark for Mars.

As the Great Napoleon Did.

On the model of the celebrated corps of literary and scientific men which Napoleon carried with him in his invasion of Egypt, Mr. Edison selected a company of the foremost astronomers, archaeologists, anthropologists, botanists, bacteriologists, chemists, physicists, mathematicians, mechanics, meteorologists and experts in mining, metallurgy and every other branch of practical science, as well as artists and photographers. It was but reasonable to believe that in another world, and a world so much older

than the earth as Mars was, these men would be able to gather materials in comparison with which the discoveries made among the ruins of ancient empires in Egypt and Babylonia would be insignificant indeed.

To Conquer Another World.

It was a wonderful undertaking and a strange spectacle. There was a feeling of uncertainty which awed the vast multitude whose eyes were upturned to the ships. The expedition was not large, considering the gigantic character of the undertaking. Each of the electrical ships carried about twenty men, together with an abundant supply of compressed provisions, compressed air, scientific apparatus and so on. In all, there were about 2,000 men, who were going to conquer, if they could, another world!

But though few in numbers, they represented the flower of the earth, the culmination of the genius of the planet. The greatest leaders in science, both theoretical and practical, were there. It was the evolution of the earth against the evolution of Mars. It was a planet in the heyday of its strength matched against an aged and decrepit world which, nevertheless, in consequence of its long ages of existence, had acquired an experience which made it a most dangerous foe. On both sides there was desperation. The earth was desperate because it foresaw destruction unless it could first destroy its enemy. Mars was desperate because nature was gradually depriving it of the means of supporting life, and its teeming population was compelled to swarm like the inmates of an overcrowded hive of bees, and find new homes elsewhere. In this respect the situation on Mars, as we were well aware, resembled what had already been known upon the earth, where the older nations overflowing with population had sought new lands in which to settle, and for that purpose had driven out the native inhabitants, whenever those natives had proven unable to resist the invasion.

No man could foresee the issue of what we were about to undertake, but the tremendous powers which the disintegrators had exhibited and the marvellous efficiency of the electrical ships bred almost universal confidence that we should be successful.

Master Minds of the World.

The car in which Mr. Edison travelled was, of course, the flagship of the squadron, and I had the good fortune to be included among its inmates. Here, besides several leading men of science from our own country, were Lord Kelvin, Lord Rayleigh, Professor Roentgen, Dr. Moissan—the man who first made artificial diamonds—and several others whose fame had encircled the world. Each of these men cherished hopes of wonderful discoveries, along his line of investigation, to be made in Mars.

An elaborate system of signals had, of course, to be devised for the control of the squadron. These signals consisted of brilliant electric lights displayed at night and so controlled that by their means long sentences and directions could be easily and quickly transmitted.

A Novel Signal System.

The day signals consisted partly of brightly collared pennons and flags, which were to serve only when, shadowed by clouds or other obstructions, the full sunlight should not fall upon the ships. This could naturally only occur near the surface of the earth or of another planet.

Once out of the shadow of the earth we should have no more clouds and no more night until we arrived at Mars. In open space the sun would be continually shining. It would be perpetual day for us, except as, by artificial means, we furnished ourselves with darkness for the purpose of promoting sleep. In this region of perpetual day, then, the signals were also to be transmitted by flashes of light from mirrors reflecting the rays of the sun.

Perpetual Night!

Yet this perpetual day would be also, in one sense, a perpetual night. There would be no more blue sky for us, because without an atmosphere the sunlight could not be diffused. Objects would be illuminated only on the side toward the sun. Anything that screened off the direct rays of sunlight would produce absolute darkness behind it. There would be no graduation of shadow. The sky would be as black as ink on all sides.

While it was the intention to remain as much as possible within the cars, yet since it was probable that necessity would arise for occasionally quitting the interior of the electrical ships, Mr. Edison had provided for this emergency by inventing an air-tight dress constructed somewhat after the manner of a diver's suit, but of much lighter material. Each ship was provided with several of these suits, by wearing which one could venture outside the car even when it was beyond the atmosphere of the earth.

Terrific Cold Anticipated.

Provision had been made to meet the terrific cold which we knew would be encountered the moment we had passed beyond the atmosphere—that awful absolute zero which men had measured by anticipation, but never yet experienced—by a simple system of producing within the air-tight suits a temperature sufficiently elevated to counteract the effects of the frigidity without. By means of long, flexible tubes, air could be continually supplied to the wearers of the suits, and by an ingenious contrivance a store of compressed air sufficient to last for several hours was provided for each suit, so that in case of necessity the wearer could throw off the tubes connecting him with the air tanks in the car. Another object which had been kept in view in the preparation of these suits was the possible exploration of an airless planet, such as the moon.

The necessity of some contrivance by means of which we should be enabled to converse with one another when on the outside of the cars in open space, or when in an airless world, like the moon, where there would be no medium

by which the waves of sound could be conveyed as they are in the atmosphere of the earth, had been foreseen by our great inventor, and he had not found it difficult to contrive suitable devices for meeting the emergency.

Inside the headpiece of each of the electrical suits was the mouthpiece of a telephone. This was connected with a wire which, when not in use, could be conveniently coiled upon the arm of the wearer. Near the ears, similarly connected with wires, were telephonic receivers.

An Aerial Telegraph.

When two persons wearing the air-tight dresses wished to converse with one another it was only necessary for them to connect themselves by the wires, and conversation could then be easily carried on.

Careful calculations of the precise distance of Mars from the earth at the time when the expedition was to start had been made by a large number of experts in mathematical astronomy. But it was not Mr. Edison's intention to go direct to Mars. With the exception of the first electrical ship, which he had completed, none had yet been tried in a long voyage. It was desirable that the qualities of each of the ships should first be carefully tested, and for this reason the leader of the expedition determined that the moon should be the first port of space at which the squadron would call.

It chanced that the moon was so situated at this time as to be nearly in a line between the earth and Mars, which latter was in opposition to the sun, and consequently as favourably situated as possible for the purposes of the voyage. What would be, then, for 99 out of the 100 ships of the squadron, a trial trip would at the same time be a step of a quarter of a million of miles gained in the direction of our journey, and so no time would be wasted.

The departure from the earth was arranged to occur precisely at midnight. The moon near the full was hanging high over head, and a marvellous spectacle was presented to the eyes of those below as the great squadron of floating ships, with their signal lights ablaze, cast loose and began slowly to move away on their adventurous and unprecedented expedition into the great unknown. A tremendous cheer, billowing up from the throats of millions of excited men and women, seemed to rend the curtain of the night, and made the airships tremble with the atmospheric vibrations that were set in motion.

Magnificent Fireworks.

Instantly magnificent fireworks were displayed in honour of our departure. Rockets by hundreds of thousands shot heaven-ward, and then burst in constellations of fiery drops. The sudden illumination thus produced, overspreading hundreds of square miles of the surface of the earth with a light almost like that of day, must certainly have been visible to the inhabitants of Mars, if they were watching us at the time. They might, or might not, correctly interpret its significance; but, at any rate, we did not care. We were off, and

were confident that we could meet our enemy on his own ground before he could attack us again.

And the Earth Was Like a Globe.

And now, as we slowly rose higher, a marvellous scene was disclosed. At first the earth beneath us, buried as it was in night, resembled the hollow of a vast cup of ebony blackness, in the centre of which, like the molten lava run together at the bottom of a volcanic crater, shone the light of the illuminations around New York. But when we got beyond the atmosphere, and the earth still continued to recede below us, its aspect changed. The cup-shaped appearance was gone, and it began to round out beneath our eyes in the form of a vast globe—an enormous ball mysteriously suspended under us, glimmering over most of its surface, with the faint illumination of the moon, and showing toward its eastern edge the oncoming light of the rising sun.

When we were still further away, having slightly varied our course so that the sun was once more entirely hidden behind the centre of the earth, we saw its atmosphere completely illuminated, all around it, with prismatic lights, like a gigantic rainbow in the form of a ring.

Another shift in our course rapidly carried us out of the shadow of the earth and into the all pervading sunshine. Then the great planet beneath us hung unspeakable in its beauty. The outlines of several of the continents were clearly discernible on its surface, streaked and spotted with delicate shades of varying colour, and the sunlight flashed and glowed in long lanes across the convex surface of the oceans. Parallel with the Equator and along the regions of the ever blowing trade winds, were vast belts of clouds, gorgeous with crimson and purple as the sunlight fell upon them. Immense expanses of snow and ice lay like a glittering garment upon both land and sea around the North Pole.

Farewell To This Terrestrial Sphere.

As we gazed upon this magnificent spectacle, our hearts bounded within us. This was our earth—this was the planet we were going to defend—our home in the trackless wilderness of space. And it seemed to us indeed a home for which we might gladly expend our last breath. A new determination to conquer or die sprung up in our hearts, and I saw Lord Kelvin, after gazing at the beautiful scene which the earth presented through his eyeglass, turn about and peer in the direction in which we knew that Mars lay, with a sudden frown that caused the glass to lose its grip and fall dangling from its string upon his breast. Even Mr. Edison seemed moved.

“I am glad I thought of the disintegrator,” he said. “I shouldn’t like to see that world down there laid waste again.”

“And it won’t be,” said Professor Sylvanus P. Thompson, gripping the handle of an electric machine, “not if we can help it.”

Chapter V.

To prevent accidents, it had been arranged that the ships should keep a considerable distance apart. Some of them gradually drifted away, until, on account of the neutral tint of their sides, they were swallowed up in the abyss of space. Still it was possible to know where every member of the squadron was through the constant interchange of signals. These, as I have explained, were effected by means of mirrors flashing back the light of the sun.

But, although it was now unceasing day for us, yet, there being no atmosphere to diffuse the sun's light, the stars were visible to us just as at night upon the earth, and they shone with extraordinary splendour against the intense black background of the firmament. The lights of some of the more distant ships of our squadron were not brighter than the stars in whose neighbourhood they seemed to be. In some cases it was only possible to distinguish between the light of a ship and that of a star by the fact that the former was continually flashing while the star was steady in its radiance.

An Uncanny Effect.

The most uncanny effect was produced by the absence of atmosphere around us. Inside the car, where there was air, the sunlight, streaming through one or more of the windows, was diffused and produced ordinary daylight.

But when we ventured outside we could only see things by halves. The side of the car that the sun's rays touched was visible, the other side was invisible, the light from the stars not making it bright enough to affect the eye in contrast with the sun-illuminated half.

As I held up my arm before my eyes, half of it seemed to be shaved off lengthwise; a companion on the deck of the ship looked like half a man. So the other electrical ships near us appeared as half ships, only the illuminated sides being visible.

We had now got so far away that the earth had taken on the appearance of a heavenly body like the moon. Its colours had become all blended into a golden-reddish hue, which overspread nearly its entire surface, except at the poles, where there were broad patches of white. It was marvellous to look at this huge orb behind us, while far beyond it shone the blazing sun like an enormous star in the blackest of nights. In the opposite direction appeared the silver orb of the moon, and scattered all around were millions of brilliant stars, amid which, like fireflies, flashed and sparkled the signal lights of the squadron.

Danger Manifests Itself.

A danger that might easily have been anticipated, that perhaps had been anticipated, but against which it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to provide, presently manifested itself.

Looking out of a window toward the right, I suddenly noticed the lights of a distant ship darting about in a curious curve. Instantly afterward another member of the squadron, nearer by, behaved in the same inexplicable manner. Then two or three of the floating cars seemed to be violently drawn from their courses and hurried rapidly in the direction of the flagship. Immediately I perceived a small object, luridly flaming, which seemed to move with immense speed in our direction.

The truth instantly flashed upon my mind, and I shouted to the other occupants of the car:

Struck By A Meteor!

“A meteor!”

And such indeed it was. We had met this mysterious wanderer in space at a moment when we were moving in a direction at right angles to the path it was pursuing around the sun. Small as it was, and its diameter probably did not exceed a single foot, it was yet an independent little world, and as such a member of the solar system. Its distance from the sun being so near that of the earth, I knew that its velocity, assuming it to be travelling in a nearly circular orbit, must be about eighteen miles in a second. With this velocity, then, it plunged like a projectile shot by some mysterious enemy in space directly through our squadron. It had come and was gone before one could utter a sentence of three words. Its appearance, and the effect it had produced upon the ships in whose neighbourhood it passed, indicated that it bore an intense and tremendous charge of electricity. How it had become thus charged I cannot pretend to say. I simply record the fact. And this charge, it was evident, was opposite in polarity to that which the ships of the squadron bore. It therefore exerted an attractive influence upon them and thus drew them after it.

I had just time to think how lucky it was that the meteor did not strike any of us, when, glancing at a ship just ahead, I perceived that an accident had occurred. The ship swayed violently from its course, dazzling flashes played around it, and two or three of the men forming its crew appeared for an instant on its exterior, wildly gesticulating, but almost instantly falling prone.

It was evident at a glance that the car had been struck by the meteor. How serious the damage might be we could not instantly determine. The course of our ship was immediately altered, the electric polarity was changed, and we rapidly approached the disabled car.

The men who had fallen lay upon its surface. One of the heavy circular glasses covering a window had been smashed to atoms. Through this the meteor had passed, killing two or three men who stood in its course. Then it

had crashed through the opposite side of the car, and, passing on, disappeared into space. The store of air contained in the car had immediately rushed out through the openings, and when two or three of us, having donned our air-tight suits as quickly as possible, entered the wrecked car we found all its inmates stretched upon the floor in a condition of asphyxiation. They, as well as those who lay upon the exterior, were immediately removed to the flagship, restoratives were applied, and, fortunately, our aid had come so promptly that the lives of all of them were saved. But life had fled from the mangled bodies of those who had stood directly in the path of the fearful projectile.

This strange accident had been witnessed by several of the members of the fleet, and they quickly drew together, in order to inquire for the particulars. As the flagship was now overcrowded by the addition of so many men to its crew, Mr. Edison had them distributed among the other cars. Fortunately it happened that the disintegrators contained in the wrecked car were not injured. Mr. Edison thought that it would be possible to repair the car itself, and for that purpose he had it attached to the flagship in order that it might be carried on as far as the moon. The bodies of the dead were transported with it, as it was determined, instead of committing them to the fearful deep of space, where they would have wandered forever, or else have fallen like meteors upon the earth, to give them interment in the lunar soil.

Nearing the Moon.

As we now rapidly approached the moon the change which the appearance of its surface underwent was no less wonderful than that which the surface of the earth had presented in the reverse order while we were receding from it. From a pale silver orb, shining with comparative faintness among the stars, it slowly assumed the appearance of a vast mountainous desert. As we drew nearer its colours became more pronounced; the great flat regions appeared darker; the mountain peaks shone more brilliantly. The huge chasms seemed bottomless and blacker than midnight. Gradually separate mountains appeared. What seemed like expanses of snow and immense glaciers streaming down their sides sparkled with great brilliancy in the perpendicular rays of the sun. Our motion had now assumed the aspect of falling. We seemed to be dropping from an immeasurable height and with an inconceivable velocity, straight down upon those giant peaks.

The Mountains of Luna.

Here and there curious lights glowed upon the mysterious surface of the moon. Where the edge of the moon cut the sky behind it, it was broken and jagged with mountain masses. Vast crater rings overspread its surface, and in some of these I imagined I could perceive a lurid illumination coming out of their deepest cavities, and the curling of mephitic vapours around their terrible jaws.

We were approaching that part of the moon which is known to astronomers as the Bay of Rainbows. Here a huge semi-circular region, as smooth almost as

the surface of a prairie, lay beneath our eyes, stretching southward into a vast ocean-like expanse, while on the north it was enclosed by an enormous range of mountain cliffs, rising perpendicularly to a height of many thousands of feet, and rent and gashed in every direction by forces which seemed at some remote period to have laboured at tearing this little world in pieces.

A Dead And Mangled World.

The Moon's Strange and Ghastly Surface in Full View of Man.

It was a fearful spectacle; a dead and mangled world, too dreadful to look upon. The idea of the death of the moon was, of course, not a new one to many of us. We had long been aware that the earth's satellite was a body which had passed beyond the stage of life, if indeed it had ever been a life supporting globe; but none of us were prepared for the terrible spectacle which now smote our eyes.

At each end of the semi-circular ridge that encloses the Bay of Rainbows there is a lofty promontory. That at the north-western extremity had long been known to astronomers under the name of Cape Laplace. The other promontory, at the southeastern termination, is called Cape Heraclides. It was toward the latter that we were approaching, and by interchange of signals all the members of the squadron had been informed that Cape Heraclides was to be our rendezvous upon the moon.

I may say that I had been somewhat familiar with the scenery of this part of the lunar world, for I had often studied it from the earth with a telescope, and I had thought that if there was any part of the moon where one might, with fair expectation of success, look for inhabitants, or if not for inhabitants, at least for relics of life no longer existent there, this would surely be the place. It was, therefore, with no small degree of curiosity, notwithstanding the unexpectedly frightful and repulsive appearance that the surface of the moon presented, that I now saw myself rapidly approaching the region concerning whose secrets my imagination had so often busied itself. When Mr. Edison and I had paid our previous visit to the moon on the first experimental trip of the electrical ship, we had landed at a point on its surface remote from this, and, as I have before explained, we then made no effort to investigate its secrets. But now it was to be different, and we were at length to see something of the wonders of the moon.

Like a Human Face.

I had often on the earth drawn a smile from my friends by showing them Cape Heraclides with a telescope, and calling their attention to the fact that the outline of the peak terminating the cape was such as to present a remarkable resemblance to a human face, unmistakably a feminine countenance, seen in profile, and possessing no small degree of beauty. To my astonishment, this curious human semblance still remained when we had approached so close to the moon that the mountains forming the cape filled nearly the whole field

of view of the window from which I was watching it. The resemblance, indeed, was most startling.

The Resemblance Disappears.

“Can this indeed be Diana herself?” I said half aloud, but instantly afterward I was laughing at my fancy, for Mr. Edison had overheard me and exclaimed, “Where is she?”

“Who?”

“Diana.”

“Why, there,” I said, pointing to the moon. But lo! the appearance was gone even while I spoke. A swift change had taken place in the line of sight by which we were viewing it, and the likeness had disappeared in consequence.

A few moments later my astonishment was revived, but the cause this time was a very different one. We had been dropping rapidly toward the mountains, and the electrician in charge of the car was swiftly and constantly changing his potential, and, like a pilot who feels his way into an unknown harbour, endeavouring to approach the moon in such a manner that no hidden peril should surprise us. As we thus approached I suddenly perceived, crowning the very apex of the lofty peak near the termination of the cape, the ruins of what appeared to be an ancient watch tower. It was evidently composed of Cyclopean blocks larger than any that I had ever seen even among the ruins of Greece, Egypt and Asia Minor.

The Moon Was Inhabited.

Here, then, was visible proof that the moon had been inhabited, although probably it was not inhabited now. I cannot describe the exultant feeling which took possession of me at this discovery. It settled so much that learned men had been disputing about for centuries.

“What will they say,” I exclaimed, “when I show them a photograph of that?”

Below the peak, stretching far to right and left, lay a barren beach which had evidently once been washed by sea waves, because it was marked by long curved ridges such as the advancing and retiring tide leaves upon the shore of the ocean.

This beach sloped rapidly outward and downward toward a profound abyss, which had once, evidently, been the bed of a sea, but which now appeared to us simply as the empty, yawning shell of an ocean that had long vanished.

It was with no small difficulty, and only after the expenditure of considerable time, that all the floating ships of the squadron were gradually brought to rest on this lone mountain top of the moon. In accordance with my request, Mr.

Edison had the flagship moored in the interior of the great ruined watch tower that I have described. The other ships rested upon the slope of the mountain around us.

Although time pressed, for we knew that the safety of the earth depended upon our promptness in attacking Mars, yet it was determined to remain here at least two or three days in order that the wrecked car might be repaired. It was found also that the passage of the highly electrified meteor had disarranged the electrical machinery in some of the other cars, so that there were many repairs to be made besides those needed to restore the wreck.

Burying the Dead.

Moreover, we must bury our unfortunate companions who had been killed by the meteor. This, in fact, was the first work that we performed. Strange was the sight, and stranger our feelings, as here on the surface of a world distant from the earth, and on soil which had never before been pressed by the foot of man, we performed that last ceremony of respect which mortals pay to mortality. In the ancient beach at the foot of the peak we made a deep opening, and there covered forever the faces of our friends, leaving them to sleep among the ruins of empires, and among the graves of races which had vanished probably ages before Adam and Eve appeared in Paradise.

While the repairs were being made several scientific expeditions were sent out in various directions across the moon. One went westward to investigate the great ring plain of Plato, and the lunar Alps. Another crossed the ancient Sea of Showers toward the lunar Apennines.

One started to explore the immense crater of Copernicus, which, yawning fifty miles across, presents a wonderful appearance even from the distance of the earth. The ship in which I, myself, had the good fortune to embark, was bound for the mysterious lunar mountain Aristarchus.

Before these expeditions started, a careful exploration had been made in the neighbourhood of Cape Heraclides. But, except that the broken walls of the watch tower on the peak, composed of blocks of enormous size, had evidently been the work of creatures endowed with human intelligence, no remains were found indicating the former presence of inhabitants upon this part of the moon.

A Gigantic Human Footprint.

But along the shore of the old sea, just where the so-called Bay of Rainbows separates itself from the abyss of the Sea of Showers, there were found some stratified rocks in which the fascinated eyes of the explorer beheld the clear imprint of a gigantic human foot, measuring five feet in length from toe to heel.

Detailing the Marvellous Adventures of the Earth's Warriors in Unknown Worlds.

The most minute search failed to reveal another trace of the presence of the ancient giant, who had left the impress of his foot in the wet sands of the beach here so many millions of years ago that even the imagination of the geologists shrank from the task of attempting to fix the precise period.

The Great Footprint.

Around this gigantic footprint gathered most of the scientific members of the expedition, wearing their oddly shaped air-tight suits, connected with telephonic wires, and the spectacle, but for the impressiveness of the discovery, would have been laughable in the extreme. Bending over the mark in the rock, nodding their heads together, pointing with their awkwardly accoutred arms, they looked like an assemblage of antediluvian monsters collected around their prey. Their disappointment over the fact that no other marks of anything resembling human habitation could be discovered was very great.

Still this footprint in itself was quite sufficient, as they all declared, to settle the question of the former inhabitation of the moon, and it would serve for the production of many a learned volume after their return to the earth, even if no further discoveries should be made in other parts of the lunar world.

Expeditions Over the Moon.

It was the hope of making such other discoveries that led to the dispatch of the other various expeditions which I have already named. I had chosen to accompany the car that was going to Aristarchus, because, as every one who had viewed the moon from the earth was aware, there was something very mysterious about that mountain. I knew that it was a crater nearly thirty miles in diameter and very deep, although its floor was plainly visible.

The Glowing Mountains.

What rendered it remarkable was the fact that the floor and the walls of the crater, particularly on the inner side, glowed with a marvellous brightness which rendered them almost blinding when viewed with a powerful telescope.

So bright were they, indeed, that the eye was unable to see many of the details which the telescope would have made visible but for the flood of light which poured from the mountains. Sir William Herschel had been so completely misled by this appearance that he supposed he was watching a lunar volcano in eruption.

It had always been a difficult question what caused the extraordinary luminosity of Aristarchus. No end of hypotheses had been invented to account for it. Now I was to assist in settling these questions forever.

From Cape Heraclides to Aristarchus the distance in an air line was something over 300 miles. Our course lay across the north-eastern part of the Sea of Showers, with enormous cliffs, mountain masses and peaks shining on

the right, while in the other direction the view was bounded by the distant range of the lunar Apennines, some of whose towering peaks, when viewed from our immense elevation, appeared as sharp as the Swiss Matterhorn.

When we had arrived within about a hundred miles of our destination we found ourselves floating directly over the so-called Harbinger Mountains. The serrated peaks of Aristarchus then appeared ahead of us, fairly blazing in the sunshine.

A Gigantic String Of Diamonds.

It seemed as if a gigantic string of diamonds, every one as great as a mountain peak, had been cast down upon the barren surface of the moon and left to waste their brilliance upon the desert air of this abandoned world.

As we rapidly approached, the dazzling splendour of the mountain became almost unbearable to our eyes, and we were compelled to resort to the device, practiced by all climbers of lofty mountains, where the glare of sunlight upon snow surfaces is liable to cause temporary blindness, of protecting our eyes with neutral-tinted glasses.

Professor Moissan, the great French chemist and maker of artificial diamonds, fairly danced with delight.

“Voila! Voila! Voila!” was all that he could say.

A Mountain of Crystals.

When we were comparatively near, the mountain no longer seemed to glow with a uniform radiance, evenly distributed over its entire surface, but now innumerable points of light, all as bright as so many little suns, blazed away at us. It was evident that we had before us a mountain composed of, or at least covered with, crystals.

Without stopping to alight on the outer slopes of the great ring-shaped range of peaks which composed Aristarchus, we sailed over their rim and looked down into the interior. Here the splendour of the crystals was greater than on the outer slopes, and the broad floor of the crater, thousands of feet beneath us, shone and sparkled with overwhelming radiance, as if it were an immense bin of diamonds, while a peak in the centre flamed like a stupendous tiara incrustated with selected gems.

Eager to see what these crystals were, the car was now allowed rapidly to drop into the interior of the crater. With great caution we brought it to rest upon the blazing ground, for the sharp edges of the crystals would certainly have torn the metallic sides of the car if it had come into violent contact with them.

Donning our air-tight suits and stepping carefully out upon this wonderful footing we attempted to detach some of the crystals. Many of them were firmly fastened, but a few—some of astonishing size—were readily loosened.

A Wealth of Gems.

A moment's inspection showed that we had stumbled upon the most marvellous work of the forces of crystallization that human eyes had ever rested upon. Some time in the past history of the moon there had been an enormous outflow of molten material from the crater. This had overspread the walls and partially filled up the interior, and later its surface had flowered into gems, as thick as blossoms in a bed of pansies.

The whole mass flashed prismatic rays of indescribable beauty and intensity. We gazed at first speechless with amazement.

"It cannot be, surely it cannot be," said Professor Moissan at length.

"But it is," said another member of the party.

"Are these diamonds?" asked a third.

"I cannot yet tell," replied the Professor. "They have the brilliancy of diamonds, but they may be something else."

"Moon jewels," suggested a third.

"And worth untold millions, whatever they are," remarked another.

Jewels from the Moon.

These magnificent crystals, some of which appeared to be almost flawless, varied in size from the dimensions of a hazelnut to geometrical solids several inches in diameter. We carefully selected as many as it was convenient to carry and placed them in the car for future examination. We had solved another long standing lunar problem and had, perhaps, opened up an inexhaustible mine of wealth which might eventually go far toward reimbursing the earth for the damage which it had suffered from the invasion of the Martians.

On returning to Cape Heraclides we found that the other expeditions had arrived at the rendezvous ahead of us. Their members had wonderful stories to tell of what they had seen, but nothing caused quite so much astonishment as that which we had to tell and to show.

The party which had gone to visit Plato and the lunar Alps brought back, however, information which, in a scientific sense, was no less interesting than what we had been able to gather.

They had found within this curious ring of Plato, which is a circle of mountains sixty miles in diameter, enclosing a level plain remarkably smooth over most of its surface, unmistakable evidences of former inhabitation. A gigantic city had evidently at one time existed near the centre of this great plain. The outlines of its walls and the foundation marks of some of its immense buildings were plainly made out, and elaborate plans of this vanished capital of the moon were prepared by several members of the party.

More Evidences of Habitation.

One of them was fortunate enough to discover an even more precious relic of the ancient lunarians. It was a piece of petrified skullbone, representing but a small portion of the head to which it had belonged, but yet sufficient to enable the anthropologists, who immediately fell to examining it, to draw ideal representations of the head as it must have been in life—the head of a giant of enormous size, which, if it had possessed a highly organized brain, of proportionate magnitude, must have given to its possessor intellectual powers immensely greater than any of the descendants of Adam have ever been endowed with.

Giants in Size.

Indeed, one of the professors was certain that some little concretions found on the interior of the piece of skull were petrified portions of the brain matter itself, and he set to work with the microscope to examine its organic quality.

In the mean time, the repairs to the electrical ships had been completed, and, although these discoveries upon the moon had created a most profound sensation among the members of the expedition, and aroused an almost irresistible desire to continue the explorations thus happily begun, yet everybody knew that these things were aside from the main purpose in view, and that we should be false to our duty in wasting a moment more upon the moon than was absolutely necessary to put the ships in proper condition to proceed on their warlike voyage.

Departing from the Moon.

Everything being prepared then, we left the moon with great regret, just forty-eight hours after we had landed upon its surface, carrying with us a determination to revisit it and to learn more of its wonderful secrets in case we should survive the dangers which we were now going to face.

Chapter VI.

A day or two after leaving the moon we had another adventure with a wandering inhabitant of space which brought us into far greater peril than had our encounter with the meteor.

The airships had been partitioned off so that a portion of the interior could be darkened in order to serve as a sleeping chamber, wherein, according to the regulations prescribed by the commander of the squadron each member of the expedition in his turn passed eight out of every twenty-four hours—sleeping if he could, if not, meditating, in a more or less dazed way, upon the wonderful things that he was seeing and doing—things far more incredible than the creations of a dream.

One morning, if I may call by the name morning the time of my periodical emergence from the darkened chamber, glancing from one of the windows, I was startled to see in the black sky a brilliant comet.

The Adventure With The Comet.

A Thrilling Story of an Encounter that Nearly Ended the Great Expedition.

No periodical comet, as I knew, was at this time approaching the neighbourhood of the sun, and no stranger of that kind had been detected from the observatories making its way sunward before we left the earth. Here, however, was unmistakably a comet rushing toward the sun, flinging out a great gleaming tail behind it and so close to us that I wondered to see it remaining almost motionless in the sky. This phenomenon was soon explained to me, and the explanation was of a most disquieting character.

The stranger had already been perceived, not only from the flagship, but from the other members of the squadron, and, as I now learned, efforts had been made to get out of the neighbourhood, but for some reason the electrical apparatus did not work perfectly—some mysterious disturbing force acting upon it—and so it had been found impossible to avoid an encounter with the comet, not an actual coming into contact with it, but a falling into the sphere of its influence.

In the Wake of the Comet.

In fact, I was informed that for several hours the squadron had been dragging along in the wake of a comet, very much as boats are sometimes towed off by a wounded whale. Every effort had been made to so adjust the electric charge upon the ships that they would be repelled from the cometic mass, but, owing apparently to eccentric changes continually going on in the electric charge affecting the clashing mass of meteoric bodies which constituted the head of the comet, we found it impossible to escape from its influence.

At one instant the ships would be repelled; immediately afterward they would be attracted again, and thus they were dragged hither and thither, but never able to break from the invisible leash which the comet had cast upon them. The latter was moving with enormous velocity toward the sun, and, consequently, we were being carried back again, away from the object of our expedition, with a fair prospect of being dissipated in blazing vapours when

the comet had dragged us, unwilling prisoners, into the immediate neighbourhood of the solar furnace.

Even the most cool-headed lost his self-control in this terrible emergency. Every kind of device that experience or the imagination could suggest was tried, but nothing would do. Still on we rushed with the electrified atoms composing the tail of the comet sweeping to and fro over the members of the squadron, as they shifted their position, like the plume of smoke from a gigantic steamer, drifting over the sea birds that follow in its course.

Is This the End?

Was this to end it all, then? Was this the fate that Providence had in store for us? Were the hopes of the earth thus to perish? Was the expedition to be wrecked and its fate to remain forever unknown to the planet from which it had set forth? And was our beloved globe, which had seemed so fair to us when we last looked upon it near by, and in whose defence we had resolved to spend our last breath, to be left helpless and at the mercy of its implacable foe in the sky?

At length we gave ourselves up for lost. There seemed to be no possible way to free ourselves from the baleful grip of this terrible and unlooked-for enemy.

Giving Up All Hope.

As the comet approached the sun its electric energy rapidly increased, and watching it with telescopes, for we could not withdraw our fascinated eyes from it, we could clearly behold the fearful things that went on in its nucleus.

This consisted of an immense number of separate meteors of no very great size individually, but which were in constant motion among one another, darting to and fro, clashing and smashing together, while fountains of blazing metallic particles and hot mineral vapours poured out in every direction.

A Flying Hell.

As I watched it, unable to withdraw my eyes, I saw imaginary forms revealing themselves amid the flaming meteors. They seemed like creatures in agony, tossing their arms, bewailing in their attitudes the awful fate that had overtaken them, and fairly chilling my blood with the pantomime of torture which they exhibited. I thought of an old superstition which I had often heard about the earth, and exclaimed: "Yes, surely, this is a flying hell!"

As the electric activity of the comet increased, its continued changes of potential and polarity became more frequent, and the electrical ships darted about with even greater confusion than before. Occasionally one of them, seized with a sudden impulse, would spring forward toward the nucleus of the comet with a sudden access of velocity that would fling every one of its crew from his feet, and all would lie sprawling on the floor of the car while it rushed, as it seemed, to inevitable and instant destruction.

Saved on Ruin's Brink.

Then, either through the frantic efforts of the electrician struggling with the controller or through another change in the polarity of the comet, the ship would be saved on the very brink of ruin and stagger away out of immediate danger.

Thus the captured squadron was swept, swaying and darting hither and thither, but never able to get sufficiently far from the comet to break the bond of its fatal attraction.

The Earth Again!

So great was our excitement and so complete our absorption in the fearful peril that we had not noticed the precise direction in which the comet was carrying us. It was enough to know that the goal of the journey was the furnace of the sun. But presently someone in the flagship recalled us to a more accurate sense of our situation in space by exclaiming:

“Why, there is the earth!”

Thrilling Adventures Crowd Each Other In the Great War Upon Mars.

And there, indeed, it was, its great globe rolling under our eyes, with the contrasted colours of the continents and clouds and the watery gleam of the ocean spread beneath us.

“We are going to strike it!” exclaimed somebody. “The comet is going to dash into the earth.”

Such a collision at first seemed inevitable, but presently it was noticed that the direction of the comet's motion was such that while it might graze the earth it would not actually strike it.

And so, like a swarm of giant insects circling about an electric light from whose magic influence they cannot escape, our ships went on, to be whipped against the earth in passing and then to continue their swift journey to destruction.

Unexpected Aid.

“Thank God, this saves us,” suddenly cried Mr. Edison.

“What—what?”

“Why, the earth, of course. Do you not see that as the comet sweeps close to the great planet the superior attraction of the latter will snatch us from its grasp, and that thus we shall be able to escape?”

And it was indeed as Mr. Edison had predicted. In a blaze of falling meteors the comet swept the outer limits of the earth's atmosphere and passed on, while the swaying ships, having been instructed by signals what to do, desperately applied their electrical machinery to reverse the attraction and threw themselves into the arms of their mother earth.

Over the Atlantic.

In another instant we were all free, settling down through the quiet atmosphere with the Atlantic Ocean sparkling in the morning sun far below.

We looked at one another in amazement. So this was the end of our voyage! This was the completion of our warlike enterprise. We had started out to conquer a world, and we had come back ignominiously dragged in the train of a comet.

The earth which we were going to defend and protect had herself turned protector, and reaching out her strong arm had snatched her foolish children from the destruction which they had invited.

It would be impossible to describe the chagrin of every member of the expedition.

A Feeling of Shame.

The electric ships rapidly assembled and hovered high in the air, while their commanders consulted about what should be done. A universal feeling of shame almost drove them to a decision not to land upon the surface of the planet, and if possible not to let its inhabitants know what had occurred.

But it was too late for that. Looking carefully beneath us, we saw that fate had brought us back to our very starting point, and signals displayed in the neighbourhood of New York indicated that we had already been recognized. There was nothing for us then but to drop down and explain the situation.

I shall not delay my narrative by undertaking to describe the astonishment and the disappointment of the inhabitants of the earth when, within a fortnight from our departure, they saw us back again, with no laurels of victory crowning our brows.

At first they had hoped that we were returning in triumph, and we were overwhelmed with questions the moment we had dropped within speaking distance.

“Have you whipped them?”

“How many are lost?”

“Is there any more danger?”

“Faix, have ye got one of thim men from Mars?”

But their rejoicings and their facetiousness were turned into wailing when the truth was imparted.

A Short Stay on the Earth.

We made a short story of it, for we had not the heart to go into details. We told of our unfortunate comrades whom we had buried on the moon, and there was one gleam of satisfaction when we exhibited the wonderful crystals we had collected in the crater of Aristarchus.

Mr. Edison determined to stop only long enough to test the electrical machinery of the cars, which had been more or less seriously deranged during our wild chase after the comet, and then to start straight back for Mars—this time on a through trip.

Mysterious Lights on Mars.

The astronomers, who had been watching Mars, since our departure, with their telescopes, reported that mysterious lights continued to be visible, but that nothing indicating the starting of another expedition for the earth had been seen.

Within twenty-four hours we were ready for our second start.

The moon was now no longer in a position to help us on our way. It had moved out of the line between Mars and the earth.

High above us, in the centre of the heavens, glowed the red planet which was the goal of our journey.

The needed computations of velocity and direction of flight having been repeated, and the ships being all in readiness, we started direct for Mars.

Greater Preparations Made.

An enormous charge of electricity was imparted to each member of the squadron, in order that as soon as we had reached the upper limits of the atmosphere, where the ships could move swiftly, without danger of being consumed by the heat developed by the friction of their passage through the air, a very great initial velocity could be imparted.

Once started off by this tremendous electrical kick, and with no atmosphere to resist our motion, we should be able to retain the same velocity, barring incidental encounters, until we arrived near the surface of Mars.

When we were free of the atmosphere, and the ships were moving away from the earth, with the highest velocity which we were able to impart to them,

observations on the stars were made in order to determine the rate of our speed.

Ten Miles A Second!

This was found to be ten miles in a second, or 864,000 miles in a day, a very much greater speed than that with which we had travelled on starting to touch at the moon. Supposing this velocity to remain uniform, and, with no known resistance, it might reasonably be expected to do so, we should arrive at Mars in a little less than forty-two days, the distance of the planet from the earth being, at this time, about thirty-six million miles.

Nothing occurred for many days to interrupt our journey. We became accustomed to our strange surroundings, and many entertainments were provided to while away the time. The astronomers in the expedition found plenty of occupation in studying the aspects of the stars and the other heavenly bodies from their new point of view.

Drawing Near to Mars.

At the expiration of about thirty-five days we had drawn so near to Mars that with our telescopes, which, though small, were of immense power, we could discern upon its surface features and details which no one had been able to glimpse from the earth.

As the surface of this world, that we were approaching as a tiger hunter draws near the jungle, gradually unfolded itself to our inspection, there was hardly one of us willing to devote to sleep or idleness the prescribed eight hours that had been fixed as the time during which each member of the expedition must remain in the darkened chamber. We were too eager to watch for every new revelation upon Mars.

But something was in store that we had not expected. We were to meet the Martians before arriving at the world they dwelt in.

Among the stars which shone in that quarter of the heavens where Mars appeared as the master orb, there was one, lying directly in our path, which, to our astonishment, as we continued on, altered from the aspect of a star, underwent a gradual magnification, and soon presented itself in the form of a little planet.

The Asteroid.

"It is an asteroid," said somebody.

"Yes, evidently; but how does it come inside the orbit of Mars?"

"Oh, there are several asteroids," said one of the astronomers, "which travel inside the orbit of Mars, along a part of their course, and, for aught we can tell,

there may be many which have not yet been caught sight of from the earth, that are nearer to the sun than Mars is.”

“This must be one of them.”

“Manifestly so.”

As we drew nearer the mysterious little planet revealed itself to us as a perfectly formed globe not more than five miles in diameter.

“What is that upon it?” asked Lord Kelvin, squinting intently at the little world through his glass. “As I live, it moves.”

A Martian Appears!

The First Glimpse of the Horrible Inhabitants of the Red Planet.

“Yes, yes!” exclaimed several others, “there are inhabitants upon it, but what giants!”

“What monsters!”

“Don’t you see?” exclaimed an excited savant. “They are the Martians!”

The startling truth burst upon the minds of all. Here upon this little planetoid were several of the gigantic inhabitants of the world that we were going to attack. There was more than one man in the flagship who recognized them well, and who shuddered at the recognition, instinctively recalling the recent terrible experience of the earth.

Was this an outpost of the warlike Mars?

Around these monstrous enemies we saw several of their engines of war. Some of these appeared to have been wrecked, but at least one, as far as we could see, was still in a proper condition for use.

How had these creatures got there?

“Why, that is easy enough to account for,” I said, as a sudden recollection flashed into my mind. “Don’t you remember the report of the astronomers more than six months ago, at the end of the conference in Washington, that something would seem to indicate the departure of a new expedition from Mars had been noticed by them? We have heard nothing of that expedition since. We know that it did not reach the earth. It must have fallen foul of this asteroid, run upon this rock in the ocean of space and been wrecked here.”

“We’ve got ‘em, then,” shouted our electric steersman, who had been a workman in Mr. Edison’s laboratory and had unlimited confidence in his chief.

Preparing to Land.

The electrical ships were immediately instructed by signal to slow down, an operation that was easily affected through the electrical repulsion of the asteroid.

The nearer we got the more terrifying was the appearance of the gigantic creatures who were riding upon the little world before us like castaway sailors upon a block of ice. Like men, and yet not like men, combining the human and the beast in their appearance, it required a steady nerve to look at them. If we had not known their malignity and their power to work evil, it would have been different, but in our eyes their moral character shone through their physical aspect and thus rendered them more terrible than they would otherwise have been.

The Martians Recognize Us.

When we first saw them their appearance was most forlorn, and their attitudes indicated only despair and desperation, but as they caught sight of us their malign power of intellect instantly penetrated the mystery, and they recognized us for what we were.

Their despair immediately gave place to reawakened malevolence. On the instant they were astir, with such heart-chilling movements as those that characterize a venomous serpent preparing to strike.

Not imagining that they would be in a position to make serious resistance, we had been somewhat incautious in approaching.

The Awful Heat Ray.

Suddenly there was a quicker movement than usual among the Martians, a swift adjustment of that one of their engines of war which, as already noticed, seemed to be practically uninjured, and then there darted from it and alighted upon one of the foremost ships a dazzling lightning stroke a mile in length, at whose touch the metallic sides of the car curled and withered and, licked for a moment by what seemed lambent flames, collapsed into a mere cinder.

Another Ship Destroyed.

The Death-Dealing Martians Strike a Fearful Blow at the Earth's Warriors.

For an instant not a word was spoken, so sudden and unexpected was the blow.

We knew that every soul in the stricken car had perished.

“Back! Back!” was the signal instantaneously flashed from the flagship, and reversing their polarities the members of the squadron sprang away from the little planet as rapidly as the electrical impulse could drive them.

But before we were out of reach a second flaming tongue of death shot from the fearful engine, and another of our ships, with all its crew, was destroyed.

A Discouraging Beginning.

It was an inauspicious beginning for us. Two of our electrical ships, with their entire crews, had been wiped out of existence, and this appalling blow had been dealt by a few stranded and disabled enemies floating on an asteroid.

What hope would there be for us when we came to encounter the millions of Mars itself on their own ground and prepared for war?

However, it would not do to despond. We had been incautious, and we should take good care not to commit the same fault again.

Vengeance the First Thing!

The first thing to do was to avenge the death of our comrades. The question whether we were able to meet these Martians and overcome them might as well be settled right here and now. They had proved what they could do, even when disabled and at a disadvantage. Now it was our turn.

GORDRED AND THE GOLDEN GOOSE by Ernest Self-Paradis

Gordred trudged across Doctor Fortunatus' backyard, carrying a leather bucket filled with water and over his shoulder a sackful of specially treated feed.

The yard was cluttered and muddy. Gordred didn't relish this job; he hadn't joined the company to be a labourer. But if what the doctor had told him was true then a bit of hard, tedious work would reap dividends.

He opened the gate to the goose pen. The goose looked up from nibbling at a tuft of grass and hissed at him. Gordred scowled back.

'Hiss all you like,' he replied. 'But you're almost ready to lay. And if Fortunatus is right, we'll all be rich. Not that I'll see any of the benefits...'

Gordred had recently acquired a young wife. He'd first met Rhyn when he was an apprentice; she had been his master's daughter. Now they were man and wife, but her love of fine living ate away at the money he earned working for the Kestrel Free Company. To him this goose represented... a nest-egg.

He put the leather bucket down where the goose could reach it, and began to sprinkle the muddy grass with feed. It glittered in the evening sun in a way that broke his heart. The wheat was laced with gold dust.

'Do you really think this is going to work?' Gordred asked Doctor Fortunatus, as he returned to the shed.

The doctor looked up from the scroll he had been studying. He blinked at Gordred over half moon spectacles.

'Why certainly,' he replied. 'If the book we found in the Tower of Nestura the Merciless contains any truth...'

'If,' Gordred interrupted. 'If.'

Fortunatus stroked his long white beard. Gordred looked around the cramped shed. Racks piled with alchemical oddities lined two walls. Another wall was scorched black as far as the low ceiling. A pile of sorcerous tomes propped up the old trestle table at which Doctor Fortunatus sat. It had been the scene of more wizardly disasters than Castle Thaumaturgus itself.

'By the way, Lothar has arranged a meeting. The rest of the company is coming here first thing,' Gordred said. 'Lothar said he wants to investigate what you've been doing with the company gold reserve. He says you've squandered half a hundredweight.'

Doctor Fortunatus paled momentarily, but regained his composure.

'I'm absolutely certain that by tomorrow morning, I will be able to provide proof positive that my experiments are worth their weight in gold,' the doctor told Gordred. 'In fact, rather more so.'

'If it's enough to keep Rhyn quiet, that'll do me,' Gordred replied. 'But I don't know if Lothar will see it like that.'

Ten bells rolled out across the gabled roofs of Cosht. Gordred looked up, surprised. He hadn't realised it was so late.

'Well, I'd better be getting back to the little woman,' he hinted. Doctor Fortunatus glanced up from an alembic in which a noxious gunge slowly bubbled.

'Certainly, my boy, certainly.'

Gordred hurried out into the street. Rhyn hated him getting back from work late.

The next day dawned bright and early. A summer breeze stirred the dusty backstreets of the city, carrying tiny grains of sand blown all the way from the cannibal islands south of Septizodia. Gordred trudged into Fortunatus' backyard and rapped on the shed door.

He heard conversation from within. Then Fortunatus threw the door open with a scowl.

'Come in,' he said grumpily.

Nervous, Gordred entered. He saw that most of the interior was taken up by the brawny figure of Lothar, the head of the company.

'You're late,' Lothar grunted disapprovingly, not looking at Gordred. His shaven pate was glistening as if freshly oiled, and his moustaches bristled. Lothar was of Carillian Hillman stock, and in his leather jerkin he cut a barbaric figure.

Gordred looked around the small space. Other than Fortunatus and a whole host of alchemical and astrological clutter, it was empty.

'I'm late?' he said. 'What about everyone else?'

'As for Manfred,' Lothar added, 'his whereabouts are a mystery as ever. I didn't invite any other company members to the meeting; this is purely a disciplinary hearing. Your own presence is required simply because you've been hand-in-glove with Fortunatus while he's been squandering our hard-earned loot.'

Fortunatus threw down his hat and fixed Lothar with a piercing stare.

'As I was explaining before Gordred joined us,' he said angrily, 'my experiments should increase the company's wealth tenfold.'

Lothar looked cynical. 'You seem to have been spending our gold, half a hundredweight, with a free hand,' he said. 'But you've got nothing to show for it, by Aku!'

Unmoved, Fortunatus took out an astrolabe, went to the dusty shed window and measured the sun's position in the sky. While Lothar looked on in increasing annoyance, the doctor muttered a series of calculations. Finally, he snapped his fingers.

'It's time you learnt the truth, Lothar.' Fortunatus turned to Gordred. 'Lead us to the pen.'

The goose sat in the middle of a heap of straw. She looked up as Gordred and the others approached; her usual air of malevolence had been replaced by a placid expression. Gordred stood at the gate, ready to unlatch it. Doctor Fortunatus pointed the creature out to Lothar.

'There she is,' he said. 'That's where the gold has been going.'

'You've squandered our entire gold reserves on a goose?' Lothar demanded. 'Who did you buy it from? You've been had, Fortunatus. Seriously ripped off.'

Assuming you're not both up to your necks in fraud...' He looked suspiciously at Gordred who quailed under the big man's burning gaze

Doctor Fortunatus shook his head. 'The goose was cheap enough,' he said. 'Gordred got it for me from the Lowmarket last week...'

Gordred inspected his still tender fingers from where the goose had introduced herself with her beak. 'The Doctor's right. I've got the bill of sale in the accounts back at the counting house,' he said. 'I entered the transaction into all the relevant ledgers.'

Gordred's main role in the Company was as scrivener; he was in charge of the Company's records, particularly the financial ones. He used up a lot of red ink writing in the latter...

'So what have you been doing with the gold?' Lothar asked. 'Have you been feeding the thing gold dust?'

Fortunatus looked at him, open-mouthed.

'However did you guess?' he asked.

Lothar's look turned thundery. 'Are you seriously telling me ...?'

The goose rose unsteadily, wagging her back end. Something plopped onto the straw. Doctor Fortunatus cackled.

'Success!' he exclaimed. 'Gordred, drive the goose away from her egg.'

Gordred gave Fortunatus a pained look. Why was it always him who got these jobs? He was a fully qualified scrivener! Grumbling, he flapped his hands at the goose, who rose, wings flapping, and hissed at him. As she did so, the goose revealed what she had been sitting upon. It glinted dully in the sunlight.

Lothar gasped.

'Is that egg made from gold?' he demanded. 'Gordred, bring it here!'

Risking life and limb for the company was something Gordred did not usually deem acceptable, but he snatched the egg before the goose bit him and gingerly presented it to Lothar.

The egg was indeed golden. Gordred hadn't believed Fortunatus when he had explained his plan. He had gone along with it in hopes, since he knew no other way of raising the cash he needed. Actually to see the egg laid, though, with the shell glittering like this, was something of an epiphany.

'Of course,' Fortunatus said in answer to Lothar's question. 'And if the egg is fertilised, there is a calculated nine in twenty chance of the chick growing up to lay golden eggs. Assuming it's female.'

Lothar grinned. 'This is wonderful. We could sell this scheme for a high price.'

'Wouldn't it be better to keep it a secret?' Gordred interjected. 'If we have an endless supply of gold, we would soon become the richest company in Cosht, maybe even among all the Riparian cities.'

Lothar looked doubtfully at Fortunatus. 'Won't it be expensive to keep feeding the goose on gold?'

The doctor shook his head. 'No. Now the initial spell is cast, we need only to mix a small amount into her feed every few weeks. And we'll have plenty of gold, gold to spare! We'd better put the egg back, though. It needs to be incubated...'

'So, we're agreed that this will remain a secret?' Lothar asked, about to return the egg to its proud parent. 'We will monopolise the situation. No one must know about it. This will be a trade secret.' He looked meaningfully at the other two.

'So sorry I'm late,' said the foppish aristo who hurried into the yard. 'Why on earth are we meeting in Fortunatus' backyard? I've had the most hellish morning. Mother Shipgate's thugs are after me. I owe them money, of course...'

Lothar turned, clutching the golden egg triumphantly.

'Don't worry about that, Manfred. All our financial problems are over,' he announced.

Manfred of the House of Kestrel eyed the egg distrustfully. 'Tell me all about it,' he suggested, with his most polished smile. He listened with barely concealed amazement.

'You're right,' the aristo said when Lothar fell silent. 'This could mean the end of all my money problems. You won't believe how many creditors I have bothering me right now, not to mention angry husbands demanding hefty out-of-court settlements. Good work, Fortunatus. Splendid work, Gordred. Might I take a peek at the egg?'

Lothar handed it over and Manfred examined it. 'And it will hatch a golden gosling?' he asked.

Gordred nodded. 'There's a good chance; isn't there, Doctor Fortunatus?'

The good doctor nodded, eyeing the egg worriedly. Manfred smiled.

'I'm sure that when I explain the details, Mother Shipgate will consider all my debts to her syndicate redeemed. Thank you, my good men. Thank you.' He moved to slip the egg into his belt pouch.

Lothar seized his lace-hung wrist in an iron grip. Manfred let go of the egg with a gasp. Gordred sprang forward and grabbed it before it hit the ground. He didn't know if the golden egg would shatter, but he didn't want to test it.

'No, Manfred,' Lothar said. Gordred handed the egg to Fortunatus, who snatched it and returned it quickly to the goose. 'We've got to be cleverer than that. We can't just squander this opportunity. We have to keep it to ourselves, not sell it to others. It will be like having our own private gold mine. Pretty soon, we'll be the richest company around. Your noble family will welcome you back with open arms.'

Manfred had been disowned by his father after a small matter of arms dealing with the enemy during the recent wars. Since then he had had to survive by selling his sword to anyone who would have him. Only this cash-strapped company had been desperate enough to take him on.

'Right,' Lothar added. 'Gordred, you're coming back with me to the counting house. Fortunatus, keep up the good work. Manfred – be patient. And get your eyes off that egg! Gordred, bring your penknife and your best quill. We need to draw up a cash-flow forecast...'

'Gone?' Lothar demanded the next day, as Doctor Fortunatus stood before his desk in their dingy rented counting house. 'What do you mean, gone?'

Gordred looked up from the parchment scroll on which he was writing. The doctor's face was one of woe.

'I got up this morning, went out to the pen, and found that some ruffians had broken in during the night and snatched the egg from the goose. She was most upset!'

'Did they take anything else?' Gordred asked.

The doctor shook his head. 'Just the egg.'

'How did they know where to find it?' Lothar demanded, his face purpling.

Gordred sighed bleakly. 'I notice there's no sign of Manfred at the counting house this morning,' he said.

'He's often late,' Lothar said dismissively. 'I've spoken to him time after time about his lack of punctuality, but he just gives me those foppish aristo airs...'

Doctor Fortunatus looked at Gordred, then turned to Lothar.

'I think Gordred is suggesting that Manfred is behind the theft,' he said.

'Watch your tongue, lad,' Lothar warned. 'In a slander trial, even a disgraced nobleman has more clout than a journeyman scrivener.'

'Perhaps we should pay a visit to our colleague,' said Fortunatus tactfully.

They hurried through the busy city. The smell of cooking fires and animal dung hung like a miasma over the winding streets. Banging on a door in a seedy back alley summoned a big-paunched lodgings-house keeper.

'Milord Manfred? Rented a small garret on the top floor? Yes, left this morning. Paid six months' back rent, paid up and left me a tip. Most unlike him. Would you gentlemen be wanting words with his lordship?'

'The stuck-up aristo swine!' Lothar raged as they trudged back up the street. 'He's sold us out!'

'We still have the goose,' said Doctor Fortunatus.

'I suggest we put an armed guard on her night and day,' Gordred said glumly.

'By Aku, I'll watch over her myself,' Lothar swore. 'Back to your place, Fortunatus. Fortunatus?'

Doctor Fortunatus was staring in horror at a hand-bill pasted on the wall of a half-timbered house. Gordred followed his gaze.

INVESTMENT SOUGHT.
CITIZENS WISHING TO
BUY SHARES IN THE PROFITS
OF A VENTURE ARE INVITED TO
ATTEND A PUBLIC MEETING
AT THE OLD ROPEMARKET.
GOLDEN GOOSE EGG
TAKEN FROM THE MANSE OF AN EVIL WIZARD
FUNDS REQUIRED FOR THE UPKEEP
OF THE GOLDEN GOSLING
UNTIL IT REACHES EGG-LAYING AGE.

'Too late,' Fortunatus groaned. 'It's out in public now. We've lost our edge.'

'We've had it stolen,' Lothar corrected him. 'Damn that foppish aristo!'

Gordred sat at his desk in the cramped counting house, looking nervously out of the window. The city had been gripped by golden goose mania for months. Now matters were getting out of hand.

The first egg had hatched in record time. Soon the golden gosling was laying her own. The price of golden geese had sky-rocketed while the value of gold itself plummeted. Overnight, guttersnipes and cutpurses became wealthier than the richest landed aristo. Sporadic fighting broke out in the streets. It was no longer safe to go out even before curfew. Finally, the Council of Nobles had been deposed by the so-called Merchants' Council, a front for Mother Shipgate's gang of crooks.

Gordred had come to the counting house this morning after a nightmare journey through the lawless streets, only to find the place deserted. No Lothar. No sign of any of the other company members.

He heard a drum beating in the street, the tramp of marching feet, fifes and whistles blowing. He hurried to the window and gazed out at the street below. Citizens were marching past, beneath a banner marked with the words; 'Death to Trinovant.'

Gordred went back to the desk and sat there, head in hands.

His wife was constantly nagging at him. She couldn't understand why the money he brought home wasn't enough for even the barest essentials. And Rhyn liked her luxuries. But prices were going up all the time. Now it looked like war with Trinovant, the northern city that had been Cosht's trading rival for generations

The door burst open and Gordred leapt under the desk, clutching the hilt of his rapier. He peeked round to see a wild-looking figure that he recognised as Lothar, supporting Doctor Fortunatus. Both looked as if they had been in a fight.

Gordred rose. Lothar laid Fortunatus to the floor in a swift motion and drew his own sword. He stared at Gordred for a moment before lowering it.

Fortunatus rose and staggered to the desk where he sat down, panting heavily.

'We were set upon by warmongers,' Lothar said abruptly. 'They saw my looks and knew me for a Carillian. The Carillian high chief swore fealty to Trinovant. Fortunatus was unfortunate enough to be accompanying me.'

Gordred shook his head. 'This is terrible,' he replied.

Lothar produced a wicker-covered bottle of metheglyn from a desk drawer. He uncorked it and took a swig. His eyes were alight with battle ardour.

'Nonsense!' he boomed. 'By Aku – this is an opportunity! War is what we're best at. Time for the Company to use its meagre wealth to raise troops. We'll fight for Cosht or whoever gives us the biggest share of plunder. Now, at last, we have a chance to make serious money!'

Gordred opened his moneybag. He poured out gold coins, more than he had ever seen in the old days, when a silver groat was “serious money.” Each coin was pure gold. Each one couldn’t buy him a pint of ale.

Fortunatus came to join them. He was slow and doddery, like a man much older than his sixty winters.

‘Cosht and all the Riparian cities are facing ruin,’ he said. ‘Do you really think war will make things better?’

Lothar looked at him in silence. Through the open mullioned windows drifted a chant of ‘War! War! War! War!’

‘Someone sold the Trinovantians a golden goose,’ he said. ‘Now they’re as rich as we are. Gold-rich, that is. All the old rivalries, all the old feuds, have broken out afresh. War is inevitable.’

Gordred put his head back in his hands.

The skyline was aflame. Ahead of the small contingent – all that remained of the Coshtian expeditionary force – lay a barren land of burnt-out farms and churned up fields. Only scavengers moved amongst the fallen corpses that littered the ground.

‘Forward,’ Lothar ordered. Gordred kicked his horse into action and joined the others as they picked their way across the broken land. A battered kite shield hung from his left arm; in his right he carried a lance. He wore an oversize helm, looted weeks ago from a Trinovantian cougar knight. Since then it had been nothing but war for the Kestrel Free Company. Gordred yearned for the safe, boring days when he had worn a rapier for show, and the pen had been mightier.

Riders broke out from the cover of trees. Mist or smoke swirled about them as they charged. They bore the livery of Trinovantian troops. A cougar knight rode at their head.

‘Form up! Form up!’ Lothar bellowed. The tired mercenaries formed a wedge, and counter-charged their attackers.

Gordred sweated with fear beneath his motley plate armour as they rode towards the enemy. Pennons fluttered angrily aloft, pale sunlight glimmered from lance heads and burnished armour. The two forces were almost upon each other when the knight at the head of the Trinovantian force reined in his steed, and held up his hand. In an instant, his well-trained riders had halted. The knight flung off his helmet.

‘Lothar? Is that you?’ he bellowed. ‘I recognised the standard!’

Lothar yelled for his men to halt. Gordred struggled to rein in his rearing charger. The creature terrified him as much as the enemy. He stared in confusion at the Trinovantian knight, his dark, curling hair, his mustachios, his cold sneering face. It looked almost like ... Manfred.

The knight leapt down from his steed and stepped unafraid into the open between the two enemy groups.

'Lothar!' he called. 'Come and talk to me, for old time's sake. Is there anyone else I know with you?'

Gordred looked at Doctor Fortunatus, who had ridden with them despite his age and debility, and his disapproval of what he called 'this foolish war.' Lothar climbed down from his own horse and walked out into the open.

'Manfred of the House of Kestrel,' he said. 'I've sworn to kill you.'

Manfred laughed, and gripped his erstwhile colleague's arm. 'That's all in the past, big man,' he said. 'It's turned out a bit of a mess, hasn't it? Who else is with you?'

Lothar gave him an unforgiving glower. He turned to Gordred and Fortunatus.

'Join us,' he invited.

Gordred followed Fortunatus out into the space between the opposing ranks of armed riders. War had laid waste to this land for many months. Gold was worth no more than dirt. The only people to prosper had been the nobility, who owned the one thing with any value now; land. The merchants were all ruined, or turned mercenary. Even being a mercenary had proved futile; Gordred and his comrades fought for plunder, sometimes simply for food. The Coshtians' campaign had lost all sense of strategy. Now their leaders were rival warlords fighting for survival in a world insane with gold lust and bloodlust.

Some time later, the two forces, under an uneasy truce, camped beneath the trees. The sun had set hours ago. Campfires constellated the surrounding darkness. Manfred still stood talking to Lothar and the others.

'I offered the egg to Mother Shipgate's thugs,' he had told them. 'At first they weren't interested, but I pointed out that it was gold. Then they wanted to smash it and share it amongst themselves, so I explained that it would be better to exploit the situation fully.'

'We floated a company for the rearing of golden goslings. It went well. We hatched the first one successfully, and it grew to maturity in record time. Soon we had it laying. Then there was a quarrel among the shareholders. Daggers were drawn. Eggs were snatched. Things got too hot for me in Cosht. I took an egg and rode for Trinovant.'

Gordred was shocked by the casual way Manfred described his treachery. Trinovant was the enemy, always had been.

'That's how you came to be on the wrong side?' he said.

Manfred laughed politely. 'Trinovant represents the future, inky,' he said. 'The Trinovantians will forge an empire that stretches from the Mountains of Morning to the Gargonese Ocean; unite all the Riparian cities. That's the opportunity this war gives us.'

Lothar shook his head angrily. 'You, out of all of us, should be loyal to Cosht,' he rumbled. 'Your family has served the city for generations. I'm from immigrant stock, Fortunatus is a non-citizen too. Gordred has citizenship, for what it's worth... But you're from the nobility!'

Manfred sneered. 'My own family abandoned me to the gutter, forced me to work for a living like a common citizen. I'm a hero to the Trinovantians.'

Doctor Fortunatus pursed his lips. 'You know they'll betray you the moment you become a liability,' he said. 'No one likes a traitor.'

Manfred stared scornfully at each of them in turn. But gradually his face lost its arrogant cast and he looked lost.

'It's all a bit of a mess, really,' he said dolefully. 'Yet what can we do but fight to survive? Join me, Lothar, and the rest of you. Your company bears my crest, even though I had no right to let you use it. The future is with Trinovant, not in that collection of salt marsh hovels they call Cosht.'

Doctor Fortunatus rose. He had been pensive while Manfred spoke.

'The future is in Cosht,' he said, shaking his head. 'The solution to all our troubles lies in my own backyard.'

Gordred looked at him in disbelief. 'You mean the golden goose?' he asked. 'Don't you realise that's what caused everything?'

'That's where it started,' Doctor Fortunatus said. 'And that's where it will all end.'

'Return to Cosht?' Lothar shook his head. 'That's more perilous than being out here in the hinterland. The city is locked in civil war. Street gangs roam, looking for citizens to plunder. It would be suicide to return to Cosht.'

'It must be done,' said Fortunatus sombrely. He looked at the campfires that surrounded them in the night. 'Besides, we're not lacking strength ourselves.'

'Storm Cosht?' Manfred laughed. 'Is that what you're suggesting? You're demented.'

'I expect we'll have to fight our way in,' Fortunatus replied. 'But that's the only way we'll get back to normal.'

Gordred tried to stop worrying about his wife, his parents. A rumour said that they had escaped the city and were hiding in a fortified manor in the hinterland. If it was true, he didn't know. If it was safer where they were, he didn't know. But if Fortunatus knew a way to end the madness of war and gold-lust that his own experiments had unleashed, Gordred was right behind him.

Several weeks later, at daybreak, their remaining forces scaled the walls of Cosht.

Paradoxically, no guards patrolled the parapet, as they would in times of peace. As Gordred reached the top of the crazily-swaying rope ladder he climbed, he glimpsed the city stretched out before him, and felt a chill of horror. Lothar, who had reached the top seconds before, hauled him over onto the parapet. The mercenaries assembled on either side. Manfred and Doctor Fortunatus joined them.

They had lost numerous men on their ride back to the city. Now their numbers were small. But as Gordred looked across the place he had known as his home for two decades, he felt that they would face few difficulties entering it.

Cosht was almost deserted. More ruins were standing than whole buildings. Smoke hung in the dawn air. Grass grew in the streets. Nothing seemed to move amid the devastation. A noise from the distance broke the stillness, and Gordred turned with a start to see a building near the river come tumbling down.

The Coshtians surveyed the city in grim silence. Eventually, Doctor Fortunatus said

'We must go to my home. Let's hope the goose is still there.'

As they filed down the parapet steps and moved through the ruins, Gordred realised that the city was not as deserted as it seemed. Several times, small gangs of street thieves were visible moving among the ruins, although none came close. However, Gordred got the impression that the small groups were beginning to mass, and follow them. Often he glimpsed them at junctions down the way from the street they were on. The thieves were following them at a distance.

Gold littered the overgrown streets. Gold coins, gold ornaments, gold jewellery crunched and clanked underfoot. When the men had first seen them, they had been on their knees immediately, snatching up the plunder despite Lothar's barked commands. Gordred had watched with distaste as even

Manfred rooted in the treasure like a pig in a trough. But the aristo's gold lust was sated finally, and the men were able to walk through the gold-paved streets unmoved.

Gordred and his companions crossed the main bridge and trailed through the desolation beyond the river. Eventually, they came to the street where Doctor Fortunatus had lived. This area was less ruinous than the rest. They walked through the eerie quiet, until they reached the archway that led into Fortunatus' backyard.

'Stay here,' Lothar told the mercenaries. 'Keep watch. If those thieves appear, hold them off.' He nodded to Fortunatus, Gordred and Manfred. 'We'll deal with this. Fortunatus? What do we do?'

The doctor led them under the arch and into the yard. It had barely been touched. No doubt the looters had passed it by, not realising that the shabby exterior hid the key to riches untold.

The goose was rooting in her pen, tugging at scrawny grass. She was scrawny herself, and clearly had not been cared for since the doctor had left her in the care of his wife and joined the company at war.

The house was deserted otherwise. Fortunatus' wife was gone.

'A mercy, if the truth be told,' the doctor said. 'No doubt she went to her sister in Borasiz, as she was always threatening.' He rubbed his hands. 'Lothar, Manfred – take the goose to the shed.'

Gordred watched as the two men entered the pen and seized the angry bird in their hands. Despite her struggles they soon managed to pinion the creature. Gordred looked at Doctor Fortunatus.

'You don't mean to kill the golden goose?' he asked.

Doctor Fortunatus looked at him, startled.

'Of course not,' he said. 'That would be inhumane! Take the poor creature to my shed.'

With difficulty, Manfred and Lothar lugged the struggling bird into the shed, followed by Gordred and the doctor.

The doctor stunned the goose by making her inhale poppy fumes, which made Gordred's own head feel dizzy. Then he laid the somnolent creature out in the middle of a hastily inscribed pentagram. He lit a differently coloured candle at each of the five points.

'Give me some gold,' Doctor Fortunatus said to Manfred, holding his hand out but not looking at him.

'Why me?' Manfred protested. He quietened down at a glower from Lothar and handed Fortunatus a gold coin. The doctor placed it in the goose's mouth.

He uttered an incantation and flung a strange-looking powder into the air above the goose. It dusted down onto the goose's breast and lay there dimly glowing. Finally, Fortunatus made a pass with his hand and the candles were extinguished.

Gordred blinked in the sudden gloom, and was startled by a sudden feeling of lightness. He attributed it to the poppy fumes that still hung in the air but then Manfred cried out in indignation. Gordred looked at the aristo. He was patting his pockets, a grimace on his face. Puzzled, he thrust his hand into his left hand pocket and brought out... broken egg shells.

Doctor Fortunatus put back his head and laughed. Gordred tipped his moneybag out on the table. More egg fragments piled up.

Feeling disillusioned, Gordred went to the door. In the street outside, the mercenaries were staring at the broken shells they held. Beyond them, an approaching street gang was looking sheepish. He looked at Doctor Fortunatus in puzzlement.

'The spell is broken,' said the doctor. 'Poverty is a great leveller. Now we start again. All we need is to gather half a hundredweight of gold.'

They both turned and looked at Lothar.

WHEN THE LIFE-GIVER DIES by Rex Mundy

1 The Mysterious Valley

The tattooed man fled through the mist.

Behind him, appearing occasionally through the swirling curtain of fog, were the dim shapes of his pursuers. Their shouts and calls echoed through the low-lying clouds, muffled but ever-present indications of pursuit.

After a brief halt to determine the proximity of his pursuers, the fugitive ran on, stumbling over rocks and scrambling down stony scarps, clambering over precipices and sprinting across unstable slopes of scree.

He had been running for a long time. It was clear that despite his muscular physique he had reached the limits of endurance. His flame-red hair and beard were dark with sweat, and his simple woollen tunic clung wetly to his body. His blue eyes, their natural intensity increased by the elaborate patterns tattooed on the skin of his face, stared desperately about him.

It seemed there was no escape. His pursuers were gaining on him. Although they had been following him ever since he fled their settlement, they'd crossed the lowlands and foothills on horseback. As a result they were much fresher than he.

If they caught him, they would kill him.

He burst from the mist to find himself at the top of a towering precipice. A green valley lay at the foot of the mountain far below; other peaks marched in serried ranks towards the craggy skyline. There was a lake in the valley, so far below him it seemed more like a puddle. He shivered as the winds whipped around his precarious perch, and turned to go back.

As he did so, his ears caught a clatter of stones from the mist. He had thought to evade his pursuers by scrambling up the cliff that had led him here. But as two warriors burst out of the wall of fog, he realised that he had been over-optimistic.

The smaller man saw him first; his older companion was looking over his shoulder, puzzled. The fugitive considered his chances against them. although he was a fine swordsman in better conditions, during the last few days he had known defeat in battle, a solo sea-voyage in a storm, and pursuit across the mountains.

It had not left him in any condition to defend himself.

'Where are Ceredig and the others...' the older warrior began.

'Enniaun!' The second warrior, who was not much more than a boy, interrupted him. The older man turned, and spotted the fugitive.

'Brother, we've got him!' the boy exulted.

Enniaun bore a family resemblance to his companion, with the same high forehead and curly brown hair. 'Aye, Meriaun! Walwain the Pict, without his painted hordes. Prepare to defend yourself, barbarian!'

Walwain spat. 'You call me a barbarian, son of Cunedag,' the Pict replied, 'but it's only a few years since your people were living beyond the Empire. Still, no matter - come and fight me!'

He drew his short sword, and awaited the warrior's advance. This was Enniaun the Impetuous, whose father Cunedag had come to Guenodota from one of the northern kingdoms, in which Walwain's own folk were well-known - and feared. But one exhausted Pict seemed a small threat to the eldest of the sons of Cunedag.

Enniaun advanced with the dim sunlight glinting dully from the blade of his sword. Walwain readied himself for the assault. Meriaun had been looking around uneasily.

'No, Enniaun, wait!' he hissed suddenly. His brother looked at him.

'What is it, Meriaun?' he asked.

Walwain glanced at the younger man, whose face was white with fear.

'Don't you realise where we are?' Meriaun demanded. 'Look down at the valley below.'

Giving Walwain a baleful glower, Enniaun stared down through the mist. He went still, his face set.

'You see?' Meriaun called. 'We must be within the borders already! Come, leave the Pict - he's doomed anyway. Let's leave before anything untoward happens.'

Enniaun nodded. Glancing regretfully at the silent Pict, he turned, and followed his brother into the mist.

Walwain stood still for a moment, puzzled. What had frightened them off? They certainly weren't afraid of him, not without an army at his back. They seemed more concerned by the valley below, but why?

He shook his head. Despite the Briton's taunts, Walwain's folk were not entirely barbarian, having accepted the new Roman religion of Christianity two generations earlier. But Cunedag's sons remained pagan, and they had not forsaken the superstitions of their fathers. Perhaps they regarded the valley with some kind of heathen reverence.

Whatever the reason, it had saved Walwain. He could seek shelter in the valley, recover, then quit this hostile country and continue his quest.

He began searching for a way down the cliff.

2 The Warrior and the Shepherdess

Aoife sat atop a pile of rocks with her sheep-dog curled at her feet, and surveyed the valley. Her flock cropped the lush grass busily beside the river that watered the open, fertile valley that was her home. Westward it fed the wide lake of Lin Guinnant, and after that - so Aoife had heard - it flowed into the sea, beyond which lay Erin, her clan's homeland. But she had never left the valley. The lands that surrounded it were rocky and barren, the haunt of wild men, and living in this green paradise at the heart of the mountains, neither she nor her clan felt much inclination to leave.

There was a price to be paid for such plenty, but that was only the way of the world.

On the south side of the valley lay her village, six or seven huts on the higher ground near the centre of the flood-plain. They remained in the shadows of the great mountain until late into the morning. Distantly, Aoife could hear her father, the chieftain, arguing with her mother. As their raised voices floated down the valley, she grimaced. Too well did she know what they argued about; so did the rest of the village. If only her mother wouldn't take on so! To Aoife, her destiny was an honour; out of all her people, she was to leave the valley for a far better place. Her father understood this, the whole clan approved - she did too. But her mother couldn't accept that Aoife would leave this place forever.

The girl sighed, watching the sheep. Indeed, the surrounding lands were bleak and her valley was a verdant paradise, but life was so dull! Nothing ever seemed to happen. If not for the fact that she'd soon be leaving the place, she would end up like all the other women; married to some crude man, doubtless a cousin of hers, spending the rest of her days - and nights - in one back-breaking labour or another. As daughter of the chieftain, she had the privilege of herding the sheep rather than toiling like the others in unending domestic chores, and they envied her for it. But she found it wearisome.

The bleating of a lamb near the river caught her attention, a sound of distress. She rose, and her sheep-dog Sgeolan, leapt up beside her, wagging his tail. Now they would have to find out what was troubling the creature. Nothing much, she was sure, but it wouldn't do to leave the lamb, if it had fallen in the river, or got into some other bother. She scanned the valley.

It wasn't only one lamb bleating now; the whole flock seemed to have joined in the chorus of woe. They were streaming across the field towards her, and behind them...

A man was loping tiredly along the bank of the stream, darting hungry glances at the flock. He'd disturbed them somehow. Aoife didn't recognise him. Who could it be? As far as she knew, the rest of the clan were back in the village, or fishing down by the lake. And the man didn't look like a fisher - his red hair marked him out. Few of her clan had red hair, except herself and her immediate family.

Then the man slung a rock at the nearest sheep. It missed by inches, and the sheep bolted.

Aoife's heart jumped. This was no one from her clan - this was a raider! She scanned the valley for signs of other attackers. The natives avoided the valley and she'd met few people from outside her clan. No sign of any others. No need to call for help - she'd deal with the problem herself.

Picking up her sling and a couple of round pebbles she called Sgeolan to follow, and sped down the field, through the milling sheep towards the man. He was about to try again at another lamb, when he glanced up to see her approach. Aoife stopped dead, staring at his tattooed face.

Walwain felt that he must have found the Otherworld the bards always harped on. Nestling in the midst of the forbidding mountains was a fair green valley stocked with fat flocks of sheep. He had been trying to catch one, weary as he was, when the shepherdess came running over with her dog.

He looked at her guiltily. He'd had no idea that the valley was inhabited.

'I'm so sorry,' he told the shepherdess quickly. She had a sling, and it was loaded with shot. He spread out his hands to show his peaceful intention; in his current condition he didn't feel like a struggle. 'I had no notion anybody owned these beasts.'

'Who are you?' the shepherdess demanded as her barking dog ran in circles around her. She had an Irish accent, which was odd. Walwain thought that Cunedag and his sons had driven most of the Irish settlers who'd lived in this land. But the Gaelic folk were old allies of his folk and had often raided the Southlands at their sides in the old days. He felt safer than if he had met a Briton. Besides, this was only a girl.

'I am Walwain ipe Leudon, lately king of the Walweithan Picts,' he declared blandly. Smiling a little, he added; 'Fallen on hard times, as you can see. But I mean your people no harm, and besides, we are traditionally allies.'

The shepherdess looked uncertain. 'You're the king?' she said dazedly.

Walwain shook his head. 'I was a king, up in the North. But I was worsted in battle by King Vortigern's Saxon mercenaries and now I'm an exile.'

'Oh,' said the shepherdess, relaxing slightly. She put her sling away and called her dog to heel. 'You're a friend of our people, then, if you fight the Britons.' She smiled shyly. 'I'm Aoife ni Eogan.'

Now the crisis had passed, Walwain took a good long look at his interrogator. She was a pretty lass, and Walwain had never been one to resist the charms of the opposite sex. He eyed her laughing face, her dancing, humorous eyes and warm, red lips; the soft curves of her body, her budding breasts and the red hair that hung in ringlets to her shoulders. She returned his frank gaze coyly. 'Is it a place to stay you're looking for?' she asked. 'My clan will give you hospitality. We don't get many guests, but we pride ourselves in entertaining the few who do come.'

'I'd appreciate somewhere to lie low,' Walwain admitted frankly. 'I came ashore near Cair Segont, and someone recognised me from when I used to raid the Britons. The sons of Cunedag and their war bands are after me.' He paused. 'That is, if your people can afford to keep me...'

'Oh, we have plenty of food,' Aoife told him, taking his arm and leading him up the riverbank. 'We seldom go hungry.' Amicably, they wandered towards the village.

3 The Village

Aoife's village was small, but cleaner than the places Walwain had seen during his visit to Ulaid, the Gaelic kingdom across the sea from Walweitha. The clan greeted their unexpected guest warmly. Eogan, Aoife's father, a laughing bear of a man, led him into their turf-roofed main hut with half the villagers following, until the chieftain chased them away.

'It's not often that we get visitors,' he boomed as Walwain squatted down in the seat of honour with a tired sigh of relief, directly across the hearth from Eogan's own chair. 'But you come a few days before Beltainné, the greatest ceremony of our year...'

Walwain looked at him. 'You still follow the old gods?' he asked disapprovingly. Beltainné was a heathen festival.

'Of course,' said Aoife from the door. 'Why shouldn't we? What does this new Roman god do for you?' She grinned impishly, clearly determined to tease him.

'He'll save your soul when you die,' Walwain replied in a stern voice.

'But our god saves us while we're still alive,' Aoife countered, with a saucy glance.

Eogan looked sternly at his child. 'Run along now,' he ordered. 'It's time you got back to the sheep.' Aoife gave him a look, but minced off when he raised his hand.

Eogan looked rueful after she went out of the door. 'A lovely girl, my daughter, but something of a handful,' he said in an apologetic tone.

'She is that,' Walwain replied, watching as she disappeared into the distance. He turned back to his host.

'I didn't know the Picts had taken up the new Roman religion,' Eogan said inquisitively. 'Then again, we don't get much news here - we're a little remote.'

Walwain was shaking his head. 'Most of the Picts remain pagan,' he replied. 'Those of the far North have always been, and even King Drust's folk still hanker after the gods of their ancestors. But my people come from near the Wall. We became allies of the Romans in my grandfather's day, and a man called Ninianus came and told us of the Gospel. Since then we've had Christus on our side. Not that it helped much when we rode against the Britons.'

'You were defeated?' asked Eogan sympathetically.

Walwain looked bitter. 'My father was one of the Pictish warriors employed by Vortigern. Vortigern incited them to kill the Count of Britannia in order to seize power himself, then had them executed to make himself seem innocent. My uncle went South to get revenge but the Britons were too strong, and only after the plague did we have a chance to ravage the British lands. By then my uncle was dead, and the feud was for me to take up. We attacked the southlands and laid waste to many towns and villages, but Vortigern called in Saxon auxiliaries who pursued us back to our own lands, entered my kingdom and defeated my subjects.'

'Subjects?' Eogan queried. 'You are their king?' Hurriedly, he bowed.

Walwain shook his head impatiently. 'No longer,' he said with venom. 'They set a governor over my people, a man named Beorhtilac. He banished me from my own kingdom, telling me that I could only return if I could tell him what it was that women most desire...' Walwain saw Eogan's puzzled expression, and scowled again. 'Some Saxon joke, no doubt. I fled my homeland in a small coracle, heading towards Rheged, where some of my mother's family live, but a storm blew me off course and wrecked me on the coast of a mountainous land. With no notion as to where I was, I went looking for aid but the first town I reached was Cair Segont, where King Cunedag's men recognised me. They knew me of old and the king had me imprisoned immediately, intending to execute me as a notorious raider; but I escaped, and fled south towards the mountains. His sons pursued me across the plain on horseback, then on foot when we reached the peaks. It was impossible to shake them off before I reached your valley.'

Eogan laughed. 'The Britons never trouble us here,' he explained. 'They fear this valley.'

'Why is that?' Walwain inquired. 'Some superstition?'

Eogan gave him a crooked grin. 'You could say so. We've been left alone here ever since my father's day, when we settled in the valley. And when Cunedag and his folk drove out the rest of the Irish they never troubled us. We keep ourselves to ourselves here now, and no one raids us.'

'I would have thought someone would have overcome their superstitions,' Walwain murmured. 'Yours is a very rich valley - unusually so, considering its position.'

Eogan shook his head. 'We have no troubles,' he repeated, getting to his feet. 'Right now, I'm afraid I have some tasks to attend to. But there'll be a feast here tonight, to formally welcome you. Until then you're free to go where you wish.'

Walwain rose and followed him as he left the hut, feeling refreshed from his rest.

Eogan glanced over his shoulder as he stood in the lane, glancing around. 'You may want to see my daughter again,' he said knowingly. 'She'll be back with the flock now.' He strode off towards the fields, leaving Walwain puzzled.

When he'd been heir to the throne, he had seduced plenty of men's daughters right under their noses but here was a man who almost seemed to be encouraging him. Folk in remote places were strange.

He headed for the river.

4 Confrontation

Aoife sighed. Back with the sheep, back to work after the excitement of meeting a mysterious stranger. Handsome, too, and rich, if he truly was a king. She remembered his eyes strong and bright as he had gazed at her, and she wriggled a little. It seemed he liked the look of her, and in her heart of hearts, she had to admit that she liked him too.... A shout broke into her thoughts.

'Aoife!' Aoife looked up to see a figure coming up from the lake with a wicker-basket full of fish. She sighed. It was Goll, come once again to peddle his crude brand of charm.

Goll was her mother's sister's son. Aoife and he had known each other since childhood. He was only a couple of months older than her and they had been friends when they were younger. But in the last few years, Goll had wanted to do things that Aoife knew were wrong. She'd told her father, and he'd had words with the lad. Aoife was to stay chaste; she'd had that impressed upon her since before she really understood the word. She was to keep her virtue for another; her father said she could dally with any man who took her fancy, as long as her virginity remained intact. It was this that Goll found hard to accept.

'Aoife!' He grinned so widely that all the gaps in his teeth were visible. By her side, Aoife's dog growled, low in his throat. 'Look what I saved specially for you.' He took a wet fish out of his basket and thrust it at her. She jumped back with an indignant squawk. 'Come on, you know you want it,' he leered, strutting up close. Aoife turned her face away from his foul breath.

'I don't know what you mean,' she muttered sullenly.

He grabbed her roughly by the arm, then forced his lips against hers. She hit out at him, but he laughed.

'Come on,' he growled. 'You're not busy. Let's go into the bushes.'

'You know what my father will say,' Aoife replied. 'You know why I can't. Even if I wanted to.'

He looked hurt. 'I don't want to have you. I know I can't. But we can still have a bit of fun.'

'But I don't want fun,' Aoife snapped. 'Not with you!'

'Oh! Am I interrupting?'

It was Walwain's voice. He stood on the bank below them, looking at the couple with a slightly disappointed expression on his face. Goll stared warily at the Pict and the sword in his belt.

'Wh - what's it to you?' he stammered bravely. 'Aye! Aye, you are interrupting! Get away with you!'

'Don't listen to him, Walwain,' Aoife said desperately. 'He's pestering me. Goll, this is my friend Walwain. He's a Pict, from up North. Now if you don't leave me be, he'll cut your head off!'

Goll swallowed audibly. Walwain let his hand drop to his sword-hilt. The Irish boy started, then grabbed his basket and sped off down the hill, dropping fish as he ran. From the safety of the bushes near the river he shouted that he would tell Aoife's father he'd seen her with a foreigner, and fled.

Walwain sheathed his sword, and turned to Aoife. He smiled. 'A famous victory.' She laughed, feeling unaccountably nervous. They sat down together. The dog looked jealously up at Walwain, but moved aside.

'Goll won't be any trouble,' she said, looking in admiration up at her saviour. 'But I suppose you must have been in worse fights, being a king?' She was only half teasing.

Walwain found himself telling her a little about his past, his raids on the Britons and all the desperate adventures that had ensued. Aoife in turn told him something about herself but she quickly fell silent, finding Walwain's story made her life seem duller than ever. For his part, the Pict had no qualms about impressing the girl with what must have seemed like a heroic past, though he kept quiet about recent defeats.

They sat very close and as she gazed admiringly into Walwain's eyes, Aoife slipped slowly nearer until her body was right against him. He was warm and soft through their clothes. Walwain put his arm around her. The sun was beginning to set - they'd been talking for hours.

He looked down into her adoring eyes. 'But fighting is not my only skill,' he murmured. He leant forward, and she rose up to meet his lips.

They kissed long and passionately. Walwain ran his fingers through Aoife's soft auburn hair as Aoife caressed his back. He moved his hands slowly round her body, and cupped her small breasts through her woollen kirtle. Aoife's eyes snapped open.

'It's getting late,' she murmured, breaking off the kiss, her eyes sparkling. She looked languorously around, and yawned. 'If we want to go to this feast my father was talking about, we'd better go now.'

She struggled free of his grasp, and ran away, down the hill and into the shadows of dusk. Her sheep-dog followed, barking excitedly.

'Catch me if you can!' Her call floated up out of the darkness. Sure that she was his to do with as he pleased, Walwain got up and hurried after her.

5 The Feast

A few minutes later, they entered the warmth and light of Eogan's hut. It hadn't taken Walwain long to catch up with Aoife, and though she had squealed when he did, it had been with delight. She kissed him quickly, then broke off again, insisting they return immediately to the village.

Their entrance was heralded by a raucous but well-meaning chorus from the villagers, who were drinking round the fire.

'Silence!' Eogan called merrily, as his daughter flamed as bright as her hair with blushes, and Walwain himself felt uncomfortable. 'I expect a warmer welcome for our distinguished guest. Hail Walwain, who is of the blood of kings!'

Grudgingly, the villagers raised jugs and beakers of heather ale, mumbling greetings to their visitor. He accepted their words gracefully and followed Aoife round the fire to sit near Eogan. The chieftain passed him a flagon of heather ale and soon the night was passing merrily.

Some time later the embers were dying down, and for the most part, the feasters were slipping off into ale-soaked slumber. The revel had been a rough-and-ready affair for one accustomed to the high halls of the Picts, but Walwain had enjoyed himself. The stark surroundings reminded him of his younger days, before his uncle died and the onus of kingship had fallen upon him, when he and his brothers had gone hunting up in the hills, spending their nights in peasant bothies not unlike this one. It had been in such a hut that he'd tumbled a wench for the first time, late at night, when the peat fire was dying down and it was hard to see the darker corners. Ah, he was in a nostalgic mood, full of ale and content.

Aoife had spent the night cuddled up to him, sipping from the same flagon, laughing loudly at all his jokes; by now she was more receptive to his advances than before. Walwain took a look round the hut, seeing Eogan

slumped asleep in his wife's arms, and most of the villagers snoring in huddles around the fire. One man still sat directly across the fire from him, staring into the embers. But Walwain felt safe enough.

He turned to Aoife, dozing now, and gently shook her awake. She blinked, and looked up fuzzily. He gave her a kiss, and she returned it with growing warmth. Tenderly they embraced, and Walwain grinned to himself with secret triumph as Aoife slid her hands beneath his tunic and began to caress his bare flesh. Slowly he slid her kirtle down over her plump little breasts. They fell into his hands like soft, pendulous apples and she moaned happily as he fondled them, teasing her nipples erect.

He lowered her quietly to the earthen floor. Panting, she tugged at his tunic, and he slid it over his shoulders, leaving his sinewy body bare except for a breech-clout. He kissed her neck, moving slowly down to her shoulders. She seized him tightly as he gently brushed her warm skin with his lips.

He slipped her kirtle down further, tugging it slowly over her hips and down her soft white legs. Soon they were naked except their undergarments. Walwain lay between her legs. He slipped off his breech-clout.

But when she felt him hard against her, she pulled away.

'No...' she moaned.

He held her gently but firmly. 'Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you.' He slipped his hand between her thighs, luxuriating in the feel of her. But she pulled him away before he could go any further.

'Don't,' she murmured.

'Don't?' muttered Walwain angrily. She'd been leading him on all night, and now she was spurning him! 'Don't you want to?'

She looked blindly up at him. 'I... No. No, I can't.'

Irritated, Walwain slumped down beside her. She reached out and touched him tentatively.

'Sorry,' she murmured.

After a while, he turned to her. 'So you don't want me,' he murmured. 'But what do you want? What do all women desire?' He may as well get her opinion on Beorhtilac's question. She was silent for a while, then she turned to him.

'Life,' she said resolutely.

'Life?' he asked. He moved closer to her, embracing her. She turned to him, and kissed him. He was shocked to see her eyes, in the red glow of the embers, glinting with tears. But she said no more.

From the far side of the hearth, Goll watched the lovers in silent jealousy.

6 Revelations

Walwain awoke with a splitting headache. That heather ale had left his skull in pieces. He opened his eyes, winced at the bright sunlight as it shone harshly through the smokehole and glanced around. The hut was empty. Someone had slung his cloak over him but he was still semi-naked. He dressed hurriedly.

He'd just finished when he heard a scuffed footstep from the entrance. Looking up, he saw Eogan's wife standing in the doorway. She grinned when he greeted her politely.

'Have a good night?' she said, giving him a wink. Walwain felt uncomfortable again, but he nodded. She came closer. 'I saw you with Aoife, last night,' she murmured, eyeing him. He flushed. 'Oh, don't get embarrassed,' she crowed, her weather-beaten face creasing with amusement.

'What's the hour?' he asked brusquely, to change the subject.

'It's nearly eventide,' she said.

'Oh!' said Walwain. 'I have overslept.'

'I'm not surprised, after what you were up to last night,' she said in a roguish voice. Again Walwain felt less than comfortable.

'I didn't compromise your daughter's virtue,' he said stiffly. 'She's still intact.'

'Oh, I know that!' Aoife's mother replied. 'She told me.' She laughed. 'Not that I expected anything else. Oh, but it's so nice for her to have fun before she leaves.'

'She's leaving?' Walwain questioned. 'I thought no-one ever left this valley. When's she going?'

'On Beltainné, of course,' she said in surprise. Then she looked worried. 'Oh, perhaps I shouldn't have said.'

'But why's she leaving?' Walwain demanded.

'Well, to join her husband! I wish she didn't have to,' she went on, wanly, 'but perhaps I've said too much. I must be going now.' She hurried from the hut before Walwain could question her any further.

He stood there for a while, with a troubled expression on his face. Aoife was soon to be married, then? So that was why she'd been so keen to stay a virgin! But who was going to marry her? She'd said they had nothing to do with people outside the valley. He frowned, feeling more than a little put out. She'd led him on yesterday, got his blood boiling, and now there was this! A sick fury washed over him. He strode out of the hut, determined to find her and demand an explanation.

Outside, the sun was nearing the western peaks, and the lake glittered in the distance. Walwain headed out of the village, nodding tightly to the villagers he passed and then hurried down to the river. The foothills of the great mountain loomed on his right, dark and bleak, seeming to reflect his mood. He crossed a tributary of the river on a series of slippery stepping stones, and headed across the boggy field beyond. He wasn't going to stand for this, he told himself. He'd go straight there and...

He turned his head at a sudden whizzing sound from the air behind him but before he could identify it, something hard and painful whacked straight into his skull. Redness exploded in his brain, and he blacked out.

Coming to, he found himself flat out in the middle of the field. Heaving himself to his feet, he woozily glanced around, angry. He wanted to be sick.

Hearing a clatter from the hawthorn bushes at the top of the field, he caught a glimpse of a dark-haired figure scrambling away through them. Goll, he realised. What had got into the lad this time? Had he been throwing stones at him? Well, he'd chosen the wrong time to do it.

Grimly, Walwain splashed up the field towards the hawthorn bushes, determined to bring home to Goll the consequences of attacking a King of the Picts. He plunged into the twisted thicket, forcing his way through meshes of thorns that seemed to reach out and hold him back. Quickly, he caught up with his quarry.

Goll shouted with alarm as Walwain burst out of the bushes beside him. Though the Pict was no more than nine years older than him, he was strong and well-built, and despite the lushness of the valley, Goll was underdeveloped.

Walwain flung him to the ground, pinning him down with a hand around his throat. The boy's empty sling landed next to him.

'What was that about?' Walwain demanded. His head was throbbing, and he had no desire to be gentle. The boy struggled a little, but then went limp. He glared up at his captor.

'I saw you with my girl!' he gargled, 'last night!'

Walwain removed his hand. 'What? You mean Aoife?' he asked. 'She's not your girl.'

Goll was silent. Clearly he found this fact hard to face.

'She's not, is she?' Walwain persisted. He was growing angry. 'She's to be married this Beltainné - isn't she?' His head was swimming. Above the roaring in his ears, he heard Goll laugh bitterly.

'Who told you that?' he was asking. But Walwain could hardly hear him. He put his hand to his head and...

...soft hands were stroking his temples, and a wet tongue licked at his cheek. He opened his eyes, and looked up into Aoife's worried face. Behind her, the evening sky was darkening. The dog was licking him. His nausea and his headache had gone.

'Stay still,' Aoife urged tenderly. 'Stop that, Sgeolan,' she snapped, and the dog sat, thumping its tail on the grass. 'Walwain, stay still. Last time you moved you were sick, don't you remember?'

He shook his head. He had no recollection. But he was feeling much better for it. Gently, he pushed her away and sat up.

'That heather ale... Oh, I'm alright now,' he said, looking up. 'What happened?'

'I found you here,' she said. 'I was herding the sheep back to their pen, and I found you. You look like someone hit you.'

Walwain cursed, as the memory flooded back. 'Someone did,' he said. 'It was your friend Goll.'

'Oh no!' Aoife replied, shocked. 'I don't know what's got into him.' She looked at him for a while, seemingly torn between conflicting emotions. Then, 'Come here,' she said softly. Walwain was about to say something else when he felt her lips warm against his, and then there was no time for talk.

'No,' she said, a little later.

Walwain sat up in exasperation, and glared at her.

'What's the matter with you?' he muttered. 'You keep leading me on. A man expects something in return, you know.'

Aoife looked miserably up at him. 'I can't,' she said. 'I can't, Walwain. I'd love to... but...'

'Is this because you're getting married tomorrow?' Walwain demanded unpleasantly. 'You want to have a bit of fun with me before marrying some

chieftain from the hills? Is that it? Well, I'm a king,' he went on, with all the unthinking arrogance that suggested. 'I'm worth more than some chieftain. I may have no lands, but I'm still of royal blood.'

Aoife didn't seem very impressed. 'My husband will not be just a chieftain,' she said sadly.

'Even if he's Vortigern himself, that doesn't mean you can't let me...' He broke off. 'Plenty of women marry after losing their maidenhead. It's not a big problem.'

'It will be if I do,' said Aoife in tones of dread.

'Well, who is your husband-to-be, anyway?'

Aoife took a deep breath.

'Gwyn map Nodens,' she said finally. 'The God of the Underworld.'

Walwain stared at her uncomprehendingly.

'You're marrying a god?' he whispered. 'A heathen god?'

'Aye,' Aoife replied listlessly.

'I suppose that means human sacrifice,' Walwain said angrily. 'But why?'

'This is the Valley of Gwyn,' Aoife said. 'He lets us live here in peace and prosperity, in return for the choicest of our maidens every nine years. If I don't go to him as a virgin, then he will wreak a terrible revenge.'

Walwain shook his head. 'Stop this nonsense,' he snapped. 'You mean your father is going to sacrifice you to some pagan idol? I can't allow that!'

'But can't you see...?' Aoife began desperately.

'Is this what you meant when you said you desire life?' Walwain asked. He laughed harshly, without humour. 'You see - that proves you don't want to go to this god! It's all nonsense; devil-worship and superstition. Even if there is a demon who wants to marry you, a Christian like me will easily defeat him. I have faith in Christus.'

Aoife shook her head softly. 'Is your Christus as strong as Gwyn the Hunter?' she asked softly.

'Aye,' Walwain replied, emphatic. 'Get dressed. We'll go to your father, and I'll tell him that you're not going to be given to this idol. He may not like it but I've got my sword, and that should be a convincing enough argument.'

She did as he ordered, and stood up. He turned in the direction of the village.

For the second time that night, something collided with his head. He fell, twisting round as he did so to see Aoife standing over him with a rock in her hand. He gaped at her stupidly, and for the second time that day blacked out.

7 Beltainné Night

Another splitting headache woke him from uneasy dreams, and he found that he was bound upright to a post in the centre of the village. His vision was blurred and uncertain. He fell to wondering how many more blows to the head he could take.

Eogan's face swam up out of the surrounding darkness.

'I'm sorry to have to do this, really I am,' he said. 'It goes against all the rules of hospitality. But the prosperity of our land is paramount. I can't allow you to stop my daughter facing her destiny. Once she has gone, we will set you free. But until then we will have to hold you prisoner.' He hurried away.

'You pagan fool!' Walwain shouted into the darkness as it swallowed up the chieftain. 'You don't need to sacrifice her! Providence gave you your wealth, not Satan! Turn to the true God...'

But Eogan had gone.

Walwain hung there, shivering. They'd taken his sword away, of course. At the mercy of the heathen, he felt like a martyr. The martyrdom of Saint Walwain. It had a nice ring to it. But who would ever hear of his death? Eogan had said he would let him free, but you could never trust pagans. They were evil, vile devil-worshippers...

Saint Walwain. It did sound rather fine, he thought. But if he was to join Ninianus and the heavenly host, he'd do it more heroically than this. He'd save Aoife from the demon. The villagers couldn't stop him, they were only peasants, and he was a King of the Picts...

With this uppermost in his mind, he fell uncomfortably asleep.

It was late afternoon, and the villagers were making ready for the night's ceremony. Walwain still hung from the post. They had treated him fairly well, as it turned out. Aoife's mother gave him something to eat in the morning, and he'd experienced none of the tortures he had been expecting - though he still had a sore head, and at one point, Goll had sloped up and spat in his direction. Walwain had seen Aoife once, when she was heading out with the sheep, but she'd only given him an enigmatic glance when he had called to her.

He'd tried to break free from his bonds, of course, whenever the villagers left him alone. But the ropes were tight and beyond even his strength to break. He

tried again now, heaving surreptitiously at them, but stopped quickly when he saw Aoife's mother come out of her hut and head for him. In her hands she had some bread and a jug.

'Here's your supper,' she said cheerily. Walwain nodded, and allowed her to feed him.

'You're not going to free me even so I can feed myself?' he mumbled.

'Well, now, my husband doesn't want you getting away,' she said. 'He doesn't want you stopping Aoife going to our god.'

Walwain seized on this. 'He doesn't,' he said quietly. 'But what are your views?' She gave him a startled glance, then looked away quickly, guiltily even. 'You don't want her to leave at all, do you?' Walwain probed.

She was about to say something, but the words seemed to stick in her mouth. She shook her head.

'Well, set me free,' Walwain said urgently. 'If you do, I'll make sure she doesn't go.'

She stared wildly at him for a second, then looked away in consternation.

Walwain was about to say something else when a shout from the main hut alerted them. It was Eogan, calling to his wife. She turned and hurried to him, and Walwain slumped back despondently.

As night fell, the villagers began filing towards the main hut where another feast was in preparation. Walwain hung from the post in the gathering darkness, listening to the sounds of merry-making that began to emanate from the hut.

A few cold, lonely hours later, he watched as the villagers staggered out into the lane, forming a ragged procession in two lines on either side of the hut's door. They seemed to be waiting for something. Walwain struggled futilely at his bonds.

A gasp of awe came from the villagers and Walwain paused in his attempts, peering towards the hut. In the entrance stood a vision in white: Aoife, in a long white sacrificial robe, wearing a chaplet of flowers upon her brows. Behind her came her father and mother. They strode through the crowd and came to the head of the procession, ready to lead their daughter to the sacrifice.

But at the last moment, Aoife's mother broke away, and hurried towards Walwain.

'Where are you going?' Eogan shouted.

'Checking the prisoner,' she replied. She hurried up to him, and made a show of testing his bonds. Walwain felt the cold hilt of a knife being pressed into his hand.

'We'll be leaving Aoife atop of the big cliff that overlooks the lake,' she murmured. 'Your sword is in the main hut. This is all I can do. Wait till we've got clear of the village. Then be quick.'

She scurried away. Soon, the procession was snaking off into the surrounding darkness.

As soon as the villagers had gone, Walwain began sawing at his bonds. Aoife's mother had seen sense at the last minute - now it was time for him to put a stop to all this evil, pagan stupidity. He broke free, and stood still for a moment, painful with cramp. But he forced himself into action, and made for the hut.

The room inside was dark and shadow-hung; it took him a while to find his sword. He searched desperately, imagining Aoife coming closer and closer to the place of slaughter. He found his weapon hanging from a pillar. He tore it down, then hurried outside.

In the lane, he stopped dead. Before him stood a small figure - Goll. In his hand the boy held an axe.

'I thought you might get free, Pict,' he said quietly. 'But you won't get past me.'

Walwain shook his head. 'Why are you doing this?' he demanded. 'You don't want Aoife dead.'

'No,' Goll admitted. 'But if I can't have her, neither can you.' He sprang forward, swinging his axe. Walwain put up his sword to parry the blow, and Goll stumbled backwards.

'I don't want to hurt you,' Walwain told the lad. 'But I'm in a hurry. I've no time for this.'

Goll attacked a second time, and again Walwain easily parried his assault. It was obvious the boy had never had any training.

Goll came at Walwain in a flurry of blows. The Pict deflected the attack, then stepped back. The boy was leaving himself open every time he used his weapon. Walwain had no real quarrel with him, but he couldn't afford to waste time. Goll attacked again, whirling the axe around his head, and Walwain thrust forward, catching him in the shoulder. The lad cried out loudly.

'The prisoner's escaping!' he shouted into the darkness.

Walwain shook his head regretfully. There was only one thing for it. He leapt forward, his sword flashed briefly in the moonlight, and with a fountain of gore, Goll's body collapsed.

Walwain turned, and sped out of the village.

8 The Horned God

As he ran, he caught the sound of shouts and cries from behind him. The villagers must have been anticipating a breakout and it seemed they had sent some of them to stop him. He dashed towards the river, skittered over a wet stone footbridge that crossed the rushing torrent, and staggered up the rocky slope on the other side. Behind him, the sound of pursuit grew less audible as the wind howled around the peaks. As it increased he became unable to hear anything of his hunters.

He found himself running through a dark wood. This told him that he must be getting closer to his destination; he recalled a thick stand of trees across the river from where he'd met Aoife, and the lake lay beyond that. From close behind him, he caught the sound of pursuit again; men crashing through the trees, close enough to be heard over the keening of the wind. But he wasted no time in looking back.

Bursting from the tangled trees, he found himself on a path leading alongside the river. A great rock loomed darkly out of the night ahead, and he followed the path towards it. He fled across a slanting hillside through another stand of trees; they petered out after a while, and he found himself near the edge of the lake. It spread before him, vast and dark and silver in the light of the pendant moon. To his right, the cliff loomed above the waters - it was an extension of the foothills of the great mountain. He ran towards it.

'Wait!' came a shout from behind him. He glanced back to see Eogan and four other men standing at the edge of the trees. They were not pursuing him, only watching him as he sprinted for the cliff. Around them, the storm-wind began to increase in ferocity, battering at the treetops.

Eogan's words were very faint. 'If you value your own life, Walwain,' the tiny voice persisted, 'don't go up that hill!'

'You can't stop me now,' Walwain roared in reply. 'I'm going to save her!'

'But he is coming,' Eogan wailed. 'See - in the sky! He has flown out from his halls in the Summer Country - and now he comes! The Horned God comes!'

Walwain glanced up into the storm-wracked skies to glimpse something like a flock of dark, sinister birds that were soaring up the valley towards them. The roar of the storm grew as they approached.

He scowled. Pagan superstition wouldn't hinder him. He ran up the hill.

Near the top he found another wood and as the storm thundered on he blundered through it, searching frenziedly for Aoife. Had they killed her already? The thought surged and pounded in his mind as he ran through the dark. He found himself at the edge of the cliff. To his right lay a small lawn between two low ridges of rock, with trees at one end and the cliff-edge at the other. Standing patiently in the shadow of the trees was a white-clad figure. His heart beating with joy and relief, Walwain ran towards her.

'Aoife!' he cried as he reached her, shouting to be heard over the howling storm. She turned to him, her features serene until she recognised him. Then an expression of panic flitted across her face.

'No!' she shouted desperately, her words almost whipped away by the wind. 'Go back!'

'You're coming with me!' Walwain asserted.

'But he's here!' she cried, pointing towards the edge of the cliff.

Walwain turned. The flock sailed through the troubled sky towards them. The storm was at its height, and the trees around them began to shake while Walwain stared in amazement. As they came closer he realised that they weren't birds, they were far too large his tired brain had seen them as such because it was impossible to accept the dark truth... Towards him flew a sable pack of red-eyed hunting dogs; and at their head a horned rider sat astride a coal-black steed.

Then they were there, on the cliff before him, and the roar of the storm suddenly cut out.

In the empty silence that fell softly like a feather coverlet upon the valley, the rider leapt down - a naked man with the head of a stag. He paced towards Aoife and Walwain.

The Pict gazed at the bestial figure. A stag's head with two sweeping antlers topped a massive, hirsute, muscular body. Two baleful eyes, neither animal nor human, regarded the mortals coldly. The figure stood silently before them; wild, pagan, evil, demonic.

Divine.

Walwain stepped forward. His voice hardly quavered as he spoke. 'If you want her,' he said, 'you'll have to fight for her.'

The Horned God gave no sign of comprehension. It seemed to Walwain that he might as well have expected a wild beast to understand his words. But then the God raised his bestial face to the moon, let forth a great coughing roar, and rushed him.

Walwain raised his sword, but immediately the Horned God was upon him, beating the cold steel from his hands, wrestling him down. Walwain hit back, feeling the God's hands tearing at his windpipe. This was no fight with honour; this was the battling of beasts. The Horned God pinned him savagely to the turf and the Pict feebly battered at the great, muscular body as his foe struggled to throttle him. Foul breath reeked down into his face. Two eyes, cold and pitiless as a winter storm, glared down at him.

He remembered the knife that Aoife's mother had given him, which he'd tucked into his belt. As the Horned God tried to force the last breath of life from his weakening body, Walwain fumbled for the weapon. It was trapped under him. He heaved himself up, pulled out the knife, then plunged it into the Horned God's flesh.

The God squealed like a wounded animal, and stumbled away, spouting ichor across the grass. Walwain leapt up, flinging himself at his foe, knocking him backwards into a tree. The Horned God fell, and lay stunned beneath its trunk. Walwain looked around for his sword, spotted it nearby, and grabbed it. He turned to find the God staggering up again.

Walwain raised the sword and savagely brought it hacking down.

A scream broke out from the foaming mouth, echoing and re-echoing around the high peaks for an impossibly long time as the dying god twitched and snarled on the end of Walwain's blade. Stinking of urine and ordure, the creature collapsed to the blood-spattered sward.

Walwain stood over it, breathing hoarsely as adrenalin still coursed through his body. He dropped the bloody blade, and turned.

Aoife watched him fearfully. Otherwise, the lawn was deserted. He strode over to her, and caught her in his gory arms, crushing her lips to his own. Tearing away her flimsy robe, he pulled her to the ground, ripping off his own clothes as he did so.

Hungrily, he sated his lust in her quivering flesh.

9 The Maimed Land

Dawn broke like a scab, filling the valley with crimson. They lay naked on the grass together in a tangle of limbs.

Walwain awoke, feeling tired and drained. He stood up, leaving Aoife asleep, and dressed himself wearily. He looked around.

There was no sign of the God's body. It had vanished silently in the night like a ghost and with it the phantom pack and the otherworldly steed, while he and

Aoife made wild, savage love nearby. Going over to the edge of the cliff, he looked out.

He rubbed his eyes, and looked again. This wasn't the valley he'd grown accustomed to! It resembled it in many ways, having the same general shape... But it was barren and rocky, with mean, marshy fields hardly suitable for sheep-farming, never mind crop-raising. The valley had transformed hideously overnight. He stared over it in horrified wonder.

'You killed the God - you killed the land,' came a dull voice from behind him.

He turned to see Aoife crouching at the edge of the lawn. Her flesh was blue and goose-pimpled with cold, and for the first time Walwain noticed how scrawny she was. He gazed into her drab eyes as they stared at him accusingly. He tried to speak, but his mouth was dry. He wanted to say something; to demand an explanation, to beg forgiveness. But his mouth was as dry and parched as a desert waste.

When he said nothing, she looked away. After a while, she replaced her tattered clothes and vanished into the trees.

Walwain turned, and walked wearily out into the waste land.

He never saw her again.

ESCAPE INTO DANGER by Klaus McClusky

Bursting out of hyperspace with Interplanetary Police Vessel RP-80 still on their tail, the space pirates swerved through the star-strewn void as their pursuer scored a succession of direct hits.

They crouched over the main console, wrestling with the controls.

'Shield levels low!' the computer commented in a calm, friendly voice.

'Still after us!' Gerald gibbered. 'You said the hyperspace jump would shake them off!'

'Looks like they followed us,' Percy replied. 'Now what?'

'I don't know!' Gerald cried.

'Fuel levels low!' the computer added encouragingly.

'Why don't we try reasoning with them?' Norman demanded.

Gerald exploded. 'We're wanted throughout the Alpha Centauri system, dead or alive! They don't care how they bring us back!'

'Energy levels low,' the computer contributed.

They rocketed through the void, the police vessel still close behind. Distant stars whirled as the space pirates tried to shake off their pursuers.

'Computer!' Percy shouted. 'What do you suggest?'

'You are now approaching the solar system. Directly ahead is Pluto, and its moon Charon, location of Outer Planets Service Station Zeta.' A map appeared, showing a small planet with a smaller moon. A close-up revealed a complex of domes on the planet-side of the moon. 'Suggestion: land on Charon for refuelling. Fuel levels now very low!' The pursuing vessel hit dead on, and the space pirates were flung across the bridge.

'Warning. Interplanetary Police Vessel still in pursuit. Further suggestion: submit to arrest and face trial for interstellar piracy.'

'Bollocks to that.' Gerald staggered back to the pilot's seat. 'How do we get away?'

Percy peered at the map. An idea came to him. 'Brian, stop looking like a twat and get on the tail-gun. Norman - keep that gun loaded. I've got an idea that might just get us outa here.'

The ship tore through the void. Still the police vessel pursued them, surrounding their vessel with a lightning storm of energy beams. Then the space pirates' stern laser cannon opened up, sending violet energy bolts lancing out into the night. One hit the police vessel dead on, knocking out its forward gun.

Percy and Gerald urged their ship onwards despite rapidly descending fuel and energy levels. The Pluto-Charon system swung up in the forward monitor; a small, moon-like planet, dimly lit by the distant sun, orbited by a minuscule speck of rock.

'Where's this service station?' Gerald demanded.

'Far side of the moon,' Percy replied.

They locked on to Charon and hurtled straight towards it. The tiny rock grew rapidly to fill the monitor screen, and Gerald saw that it was about five hundred kilometres across; smaller than the British Isles. The distant light of Sol glimmered in a crescent on the far edge of the moon.

Relentlessly, the police vessel pursued them.

'Dive!' Percy shouted. 'Go into a low orbit round the moon.'

The ship swooped down towards Charon, skimming round the curvature of the planetoid. The cratered surface spun above their heads in horrifyingly close proximity.

Abruptly, the barrage from the police vessel ceased. Glancing at the rear screens, Gerald saw they had put the tiny moon between them and their pursuers.

Pluto appeared from behind the horizon, its nightside blacker than the void. Like Charon it was lit only along one edge, beyond which glimmered the distant sun. The orange lights of cities were visible in the endless night of the planet beneath. A steady stream of space traffic flowed between Pluto and its moon. The space pirates continued to orbit the moon.

'There's the service station!' Percy exclaimed. The complex had just whirled into view over the lunar horizon. He saw that it was the destination of the space traffic.

Brian and Norman burst into the control room. 'I still think we ought to stop and explain everything,' Norman insisted. 'We didn't intend to become space pirates...'

'Shut up, Norman,' said Gerald automatically. 'Now what, Percy?'

'Dock onto the service station.'

Gerald guided them towards a connecting corridor between two domes, lined with airlocks. Spacecraft bristled from the wall and tractor beams arced from unoccupied airlocks. They passed a spacebus heading for one airlock, and then slipped into the tractor beam from an adjacent lock.

The station autopilot automatically took control of the ship, and they coasted gently into dock. Beside them was the spacebus. Someone had spray-painted it with a psychedelic miasma of colours, like something from a bad acid trip. Gerald saw the words

THE RODENTS - ON TOUR

written on the side.

With a resounding clang, they connected with the airlock. A message flashed up on the screen.

'Outer Planets Service Station Zeta requests permission to begin refuelling. Cost 20,000 galacticcredits.'

'Come on!' said Percy, striding towards the airlock. 'We're going into the service station.'

The other three followed him doubtfully, grabbing their weapons as they went. They came out into a corridor. The crew of the spacebus were disembarking nearby; five longhaired men wearing leather, denim and spandex; some kind of intergalactic rock band, Gerald assumed. One of them locked the spacebus doors with a remote control, before pocketing it. Then they stepped onto a moving floor, and it swept them away.

‘Shouldn’t we lock our doors?’ asked Norman.

‘Shut up, Norman,’ said Percy automatically. ‘We’re gonna follow those freaks.’

He spoke loudly enough for one of the Rodents to look back and glower at them. Gerald glanced self-consciously at himself and his companions, clad in a motley collection of furs and space armour, loaded down with weapons. He supposed they didn’t look much better than a bunch of grown men in spandex.

‘Come on, Vermin,’ said another band member. ‘Let’s get some food while we refuel. Gonna be a long tour. It’s months before we play the Olympus Mons festival.’

‘We play Dis first,’ said another man. ‘The Manager awaits us there.’

Nonchalantly, Percy and his companions followed them down the moving floor, passing businessmen and space police, star tramps and colonists, gap-year students and intergalactic warlords, all headed towards their respective ships.

The moving floor deposited them in a large, crowded hall dotted with gurgling fountains, indoor plants and plastic-topped tables. Fast food chains lined the far wall, the wall on their left offered newsagents, sweetshops and amusement arcades. To the right a huge plastiglass window looked out across the cratered surface of Charon. Pluto’s vast black orb took up half the sky.

The rock band swaggered towards a burger joint. Percy and the others followed them.

‘I wish you’d tell us what you’re doing,’ Gerald muttered.

‘Patience,’ Percy replied. They joined the queue. The man named Vermin was ordering a MurderBurger with frothshake and fries.

The meal sprang out of a hatch in the replicant waitress’s stomach, and she handed it over. ‘Twenty galacticcredits please, sir or madam.’

Vermin rooted in his pocket, producing first the remote control for the spacebus, then his wallet. Just as he was opening the latter, Percy leapt forward and grabbed the remote.

He raced off with it. Startled, Gerald, Brian and Norman ran after him.

'Oi!' shouted Vermin in outrage. 'Stop, thief!'

Gerald saw one of the band members running towards one of the tall Martian space police. The policeman barked something into his hand mike, and two more space police sprinted from an amusement arcade, dropping doughnuts as they ran. Levelling blasters, they fired at the sprinting space-pirates, hitting pot-plants, fast food joints, and a small Neptunian family outing.

The band produced blasters and pursued the space-pirates. Percy and his companions pelted down the moving corridor.

'Back to the ship?' Gerald panted.

'Nah!' Percy crowed, waving the stolen remote. 'Back to their ship.'

Blaster bolts roared down the corridor. Brian turned and gave the band and the space police both barrels of his radium pistols. Gerald also opened fire. Plasma rays and energy beams flashed up and down the corridor.

The other two reached the spacebus and Percy unlocked the doors with the remote. The airlock hissed open, and they were about to enter the spacebus when Percy realised Gerald and Brian were no longer with them. Turning, he saw them exchanging fire with their pursuers.

'Hurry up!' he bellowed. The remaining policeman fired at him, and Percy and Norman ducked back into the airlock. They began a withering fire at their foes, and Brian and Gerald sprinted towards the airlock. They leapt in to join their comrades.

'Hey,' Gerald panted, 'this isn't our ship!'

Percy fired a round at the advancing foe. 'Go inside and get the engines fired up.'

Gerald and Brian scrambled into the bus, followed by Norman. Percy fired again at their pursuers. The last space policeman fell sprawling across the two moving floors.

Percy ducked back, hit the control panel and the airlock hissed shut. Through the plastiglass port in the hatch, he saw the band rush towards the adjacent airlock.

The engines began to rumble. Percy turned and raced away.

He burst onto the bridge to see Gerald and Brian at the controls. Norman was flicking through a band promotional catalogue.

'Get moving!' Percy cried.

The spacebus tore free of its moorings. Gerald executed a quick three-point turn, and they chugged out into space, towards the nightside of Pluto. 'Now what? You do know we don't have any weapons now, don't you? And those pigs will easily outrun this cow of a ship.'

'No they won't.' Percy laughed. 'Only that rock band survived the gun battle. And they got on board our ship...'

'Hey!' Norman shouted, pointing towards the rear screen. 'We're being followed! By our own ship!'

Their old ship had detached itself from Service Station Zeta and was lurching towards them through the sublunar night. The forward guns burst into life and an energy bolt winged the spacebus.

'Percy!' Gerald roared. 'This is your fault!'

Then a dark shape darted up from the lunar horizon. Like a shark bursting from a submarine crevasse, Interplanetary Police Vessel RP-80 soared towards their old ship, wing-guns blazing. Already severely damaged, the ship glowed a cherry red, then went white-hot, and exploded like a supernova.

The space pirates sat back, and exchanged awed glances. The holoscreen crackled, and a porcine alien head appeared.

'Interplanetary Police Vessel to spacebus. Have annihilated your pursuers. Thanks, guys - we've been following those pirates ever since they escaped the Alpha Cent star system! Peace in the Galaxy! Message ends. PS, we love your music!'

'Er, peace in the Galaxy,' Gerald replied. He switched the holoscreen off, and looked at the others.

They chugged towards Pluto.

Half an hour later, the planet filled their monitor screens. Gerald joined the others in the luxurious passenger lounge.

'So we robbed the tour-bus of an interstellar rock band.'

Percy nodded, and swigged at a bottle of expensive whisky.

'The Rodents,' he replied. He flicked on a holoscreen to show the band in concert. Wearing leather suits and isolation masks, the recently deceased rock stars played to a huge crowd.

'The Rodents remain in the charts with their latest hit "Earth under the Martians",' an announcer burred. 'But will they win the battle of the bands on

Mars this summer? The Rodents have kept their place in the sun for long enough. Is it time for another group of stars to enter the ascendant? We'll see, this summer - at Olympus Mons!

'Where are we going now?' asked Norman.

'The autopilot kicked in after we got beyond Charon's orbit,' Gerald told them. 'I couldn't override it. We're going wherever they were going.'

'The city of Dis, Pluto,' said Percy. 'For their forthcoming gig, the start of a tour of the solar system that ends at the Monsters of Rock festival on Olympus Mons, Mars.'

'Everyone will be expecting the band! What if we step off the ship instead?'

'We can fight them!' Brian snarled.

'An entire planet? All Pluto is queuing up to see the Rodents. When they realise what's happened to their favourite band... they'll lynch us!'

Norman pointed at the main screen. 'We're close to landing.'

Beneath them was a vast, dark city lit only by dim orange light. The ship was descending towards a spaceport.

'What now?' Gerald gulped.

Percy opened a cupboard. He produced a black leather suit and isolation mask, and flung it across a couch.

'There were four in the band, weren't there?' he said speculatively. 'Why don't we...?'

'Oh no we don't!' said Gerald quickly, guessing his friend's intention. 'We can't even play!'

'Neither could they, if the video's anything to go by,' said Percy.

The spaceport filled the screen. The roar of rockets resounded through the ship.

'Look, Gerald,' Percy shouted. 'We've got no choice. Chuck these things on; we'll work the rest out later.'

Brian was pulling on the leather suit. Norman copied unenthusiastically. Percy climbed into another.

'Oh fuck,' said Gerald, donning the remaining suit as a clang reverberated through the ship. The rockets cut out.

They had landed.

Percy led them towards the airlock. Through the plastiglass porthole, they could see a welcoming committee on the scorched tarmac. A lean figure in a business suit stood at its head.

With a hiss, the airlock door opened. Tensely, the four space pirates stepped out onto the surface of the planet.

RED NAILS by Robert E Howard

1. The Skull on the Crag

The woman on the horse reined in her weary steed. It stood with its legs wide-braced, its head drooping, as if it found even the weight of the gold-tasseled, red-leather bridle too heavy. The woman drew a booted foot out of the silver stirrup and swung down from the gilt-worked saddle. She made the reins fast to the fork of a sapling, and turned about, hands on her hips, to survey her surroundings.

They were not inviting. Giant trees hemmed in the small pool where her horse had just drunk. Clumps of undergrowth limited the vision that quested under the somber twilight of the lofty arches formed by intertwining branches. The woman shivered with a twitch of her magnificent shoulders, and then cursed.

She was tall, full-bosomed and large-limbed, with compact shoulders. Her whole figure reflected an unusual strength, without detracting from the femininity of her appearance. She was all woman, in spite of her bearing and her garments. The latter were incongruous, in view of her present environs. Instead of a skirt she wore short, wide-legged silk breeches, which ceased a hand's breadth short of her knees, and were upheld by a wide silken sash worn as a girdle. Flaring-topped boots of soft leather came almost to her knees, and a low-necked, wide-collared, wide-sleeved silk shirt completed her costume. On one shapely hip she wore a straight double-edged sword, and on the other a long dirk. Her unruly golden hair, cut square at her shoulders, was confined by a band of crimson satin.

Against the background of somber, primitive forest she posed with an unconscious picturesqueness, bizarre and out of place. She should have been posed against a background of sea-clouds, painted masts and wheeling gulls. There was the colour of the sea in her wide eyes. And that was as it should have been, because this was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, whose deeds are celebrated in song and ballad wherever seafarers gather.

She strove to pierce the sullen green roof of the arched branches and see the sky which presumably lay about it, but presently gave it up with a muttered oath.

Leaving her horse tied she strode off toward the east, glancing back toward the pool from time to time in order to fix her route in her mind. The silence of the forest depressed her. No birds sang in the lofty boughs, nor did any rustling in the bushes indicate the presence of any small animals. For leagues she had traveled in a realm of brooding stillness, broken only by the sounds of her own flight.

She had slaked her thirst at the pool, but she felt the gnawings of hunger and began looking about for some of the fruit on which she had sustained herself since exhausting the food she had brought in her saddle-bags.

Ahead of her, presently, she saw an outcropping of dark, flint-like rock that sloped upward into what looked like a rugged crag rising among the trees. Its summit was lost to view amidst a cloud of encircling leaves. Perhaps its peak rose above the tree-tops, and from it she could see what lay beyond—if, indeed, anything lay beyond but more of this apparently illimitable forest through which she had ridden for so many days.

A narrow ridge formed a natural ramp that led up the steep face of the crag. After she had ascended some fifty feet she came to the belt of leaves that surrounded the rock. The trunks of the trees did not crowd close to the crag, but the ends of their lower branches extended about it, veiling it with their foliage. She groped on in leafy obscurity, not able to see either above or below her; but presently she glimpsed blue sky, and a moment later came out in the clear, hot sunlight and saw the forest roof stretching away under her feet.

She was standing on a broad shelf which was about even with the tree-tops, and from it rose a spire-like jut that was the ultimate peak of the crag she had climbed. But something else caught her attention at the moment. Her foot had struck something in the litter of blown dead leaves which carpeted the shelf. She kicked them aside and looked down on the skeleton of a man. She ran an experienced eye over the bleached frame, but saw no broken bones nor any sign of violence. The man must have died a natural death; though why he should have climbed a tall crag to die she could not imagine.

She scrambled up to the summit of the spire and looked toward the horizons. The forest roof—which looked like a floor from her vantage-point—was just as impenetrable as from below. She could not even see the pool by which she had left her horse. She glanced northward, in the direction from which she had come. She saw only the rolling green ocean stretching away and away, with only a vague blue line in the distance to hint of the hill-range she had crossed days before, to plunge into this leafy waste.

West and east the view was the same; though the blue hill-line was lacking in those directions. But when she turned her eyes southward she stiffened and caught her breath. A mile away in that direction the forest thinned out and ceased abruptly, giving way to a cactus-dotted plain. And in the midst of that

plain rose the walls and towers of a city. Valeria swore in amazement. This passed belief. She would not have been surprised to sight human habitations of another sort—the beehive-shaped huts of the black people, or the cliff-dwellings of the mysterious brown race which legends declared inhabited some country of this unexplored region. But it was a startling experience to come upon a walled city here so many long weeks' march from the nearest outposts of any sort of civilization.

Her hands tiring from clinging to the spire-like pinnacle, she let herself down on the shelf, frowning in indecision. She had come far—from the camp of the mercenaries by the border town of Sukhmet amidst the level grasslands, where desperate adventurers of many races guard the Stygian frontier against the raids that come up like a red wave from Darfar. Her flight had been blind, into a country of which she was wholly ignorant. And now she wavered between an urge to ride directly to that city in the plain, and the instinct of caution which prompted her to skirt it widely and continue her solitary flight.

Her thoughts were scattered by the rustling of the leaves below her. She wheeled cat-like, snatched at her sword; and then she froze motionless, staring wide-eyed at the man before her.

He was almost a giant in stature, muscles rippling smoothly under his skin which the sun had burned brown. His garb was similar to hers, except that he wore a broad leather belt instead of a girdle. Broadsword and poniard hung from this belt.

“Conan, the Cimmerian!” ejaculated the woman. “What are you doing on my trail?”

He grinned hardily, and his fierce blue eyes burned with a light any woman could understand as they ran over her magnificent figure, lingering on the swell of her splendid breasts beneath the light shirt, and the clear white flesh displayed between breeches and boot-tops.

“Don't you know?” he laughed. “Haven't I made my admiration for you plain ever since I first saw you?”

“A stallion could have made it no plainer,” she answered disdainfully. “But I never expected to encounter you so far from the ale-barrels and meat-pots of Sukhmet. Did you really follow me from Zarallo's camp, or were you whipped forth for a rogue?”

He laughed at her insolence and flexed his mighty biceps.

“You know Zarallo didn't have enough knaves to whip me out of camp,” he grinned. “Of course I followed you. Lucky thing for you, too, wench! When you knifed that Stygian officer, you forfeited Zarallo's favor and protection, and you outlawed yourself with the Stygians.”

"I know it," she replied sullenly. "But what else could I do? You know what my provocation was."

"Sure," he agreed. "If I'd been there, I'd have knifed him myself. But if a woman must live in the war-camps of men, she can expect such things."

Valeria stamped her booted foot and swore.

"Why won't men let me live a man's life?"

"That's obvious!" Again his eager eyes devoured her. "But you were wise to run away. The Stygians would have had you skinned. That officer's brother followed you; faster than you thought, I don't doubt. He wasn't far behind you when I caught up with him. His horse was better than yours. He'd have caught you and cut your throat within a few more miles."

"Well?" she demanded.

"Well what?" He seemed puzzled.

"What of the Stygian?"

"Why, what do you suppose?" he returned impatiently. "I killed him, of course, and left his carcass for the vultures. That delayed me, though, and I almost lost your trail when you crossed the rocky spurs of the hills. Otherwise I'd have caught up with you long ago."

"And now you think you'll drag me back to Zarallo's camp?" she sneered.

"Don't talk like a fool," he grunted. "Come, girl, don't be such a spitfire. I'm not like that Stygian you knifed, and you know it."

"A penniless vagabond," she taunted.

He laughed at her.

"What do you call yourself? You haven't enough money to buy a new seat for your breeches. Your disdain doesn't deceive me. You know I've commanded bigger ships and more men than you ever did in your life. As for being penniless—what rover isn't, most of the time? I've squandered enough gold in the sea-ports of the world to fill a galleon. You know that, too."

"Where are the fine ships and the bold lads you commanded, now?" she sneered.

"At the bottom of the sea, mostly," he replied cheerfully. "The Zingarans sank my last ship off the Shemite shore—that's why I joined Zarallo's Free Companions. But I saw I'd been stung when we marched to the Darfar border. The pay was poor and the wine was sour, and I don't like black women. And that's the only kind that came to our camp at Sukhmet—rings in their noses

and their teeth filed—bah! Why did you join Zarallo? Sukhmet's a long way from salt water."

"Red Ortho wanted to make me his mistress," she answered sullenly. "I jumped overboard one night and swam ashore when we were anchored off the Kushite coast. Off Zabhela, it was. There a Shemite trader told me that Zarallo had brought his Free Companies south to guard the Darfar border. No better employment offered. I joined an east-bound caravan and eventually came to Sukhmet."

"It was madness to plunge southward as you did," commented Conan, "but it was wise, too, for Zarallo's patrols never thought to look for you in this direction. Only the brother of the man you killed happened to strike your trail."

"And now what do you intend doing?" she demanded.

"Turn west," he answered. "I've been this far south, but not this far east. Many days' traveling to the west will bring us to the open savannas, where the black tribes graze their cattle. I have friends among them. We'll get to the coast and find a ship. I'm sick of the jungle."

"Then be on your way," she advised. "I have other plans."

"Don't be a fool!" He showed irritation for the first time. "You can't keep on wandering through this forest."

"I can if I choose."

"But what do you intend doing?"

"That's none of your affair," she snapped.

"Yes, it is," he answered calmly. "Do you think I've followed you this far, to turn around and ride off empty-handed? Be sensible, wench. I'm not going to harm you."

He stepped toward her, and she sprang back, whipping out her sword.

"Keep back, you barbarian dog! I'll spit you like a roast pig!"

He halted, reluctantly, and demanded: "Do you want me to take that toy away from you and spank you with it?"

"Words! Nothing but words!" she mocked, lights like the gleam of the sun on blue water dancing in her reckless eyes.

He knew it was the truth. No living man could disarm Valeria of the Brotherhood with his bare hands. He scowled, his sensations a tangle of

conflicting emotions. He was angry, yet he was amused and filled with admiration for her spirit. He burned with eagerness to seize that splendid figure and crush it in his iron arms, yet he greatly desired not to hurt the girl. He was torn between a desire to shake her soundly, and a desire to caress her. He knew if he came any nearer her sword would be sheathed in his heart. He had seen Valeria kill too many men in border forays and tavern brawls to have any illusions about her. He knew she was as quick and ferocious as a tigress. He could draw his broadsword and disarm her, beat the blade out of her hand, but the thought of drawing a sword on a woman, even without intent of injury, was extremely repugnant to him.

“Blast your soul, you hussy!” he exclaimed in exasperation. “I’m going to take off your——”

He started toward her, his angry passion making him reckless, and she poised herself for a deadly thrust. Then came a startling interruption to a scene at once ludicrous and perilous.

“What’s that?”

It was Valeria who exclaimed, but they both started violently, and Conan wheeled like a cat, his great sword flashing into his hand. Back in the forest had burst forth an appalling medley of screams—the screams of horses in terror and agony. Mingled with their screams there came the snap of splintering bones.

“Lions are slaying the horses!” cried Valeria.

“Lions, nothing!” snorted Conan, his eyes blazing. “Did you hear a lion roar? Neither did I! Listen at those bones snap—not even a lion could make that much noise killing a horse.”

He hurried down the natural ramp and she followed, their personal feud forgotten in the adventurers’ instinct to unite against common peril. The screams had ceased when they worked their way downward through the green veil of leaves that brushed the rock.

“I found your horse tied by the pool back there,” he muttered, treading so noiselessly that she no longer wondered how he had surprised her on the crag. “I tied mine beside it and followed the tracks of your boots. Watch, now!”

They had emerged from the belt of leaves, and stared down into the lower reaches of the forest. Above them the green roof spread its dusky canopy. Below them the sunlight filtered in just enough to make a jade-tinted twilight. The giant trunks of trees less than a hundred yards away looked dim and ghostly.

“The horses should be beyond that thicket, over there,” whispered Conan, and his voice might have been a breeze moving through the branches. “Listen!”

Valeria had already heard, and a chill crept through her veins; so she unconsciously laid her white hand on her companion’s muscular brown arm. From beyond the thicket came the noisy crunching of bones and the loud rending of flesh, together with the grinding, slobbering sounds of a horrible feast.

“Lions wouldn’t make that noise,” whispered Conan. “Something’s eating our horses, but it’s not a lion—Crom!”

The noise stopped suddenly, and Conan swore softly. A suddenly risen breeze was blowing from them directly toward the spot where the unseen slayer was hidden.

“Here it comes!” muttered Conan, half lifting his sword.

The thicket was violently agitated, and Valeria clutched Conan’s arm hard. Ignorant of jungle-lore, she yet knew that no animal she had ever seen could have shaken the tall brush like that.

“It must be as big as an elephant,” muttered Conan, echoing her thought. “What the devil——” His voice trailed away in stunned silence.

Through the thicket was thrust a head of nightmare and lunacy. Grinning jaws bared rows of dripping yellow tusks; above the yawning mouth wrinkled a saurian-like snout. Huge eyes, like those of a python a thousand times magnified, stared unwinkingly at the petrified humans clinging to the rock above it. Blood smeared the scaly, flabby lips and dripped from the huge mouth.

The head, bigger than that of a crocodile, was further extended on a long scaled neck on which stood up rows of serrated spikes, and after it, crushing down the briars and saplings, waddled the body of a titan, a gigantic, barrel-bellied torso on absurdly short legs. The whitish belly almost raked the ground, while the serrated back-bone rose higher than Conan could have reached on tiptoe. A long spiked tail, like that of a gargantuan scorpion, trailed out behind.

“Back up the crag, quick!” snapped Conan, thrusting the girl behind him. “I don’t think he can climb, but he can stand on his hind-legs and reach us——”

With a snapping and rending of bushes and saplings the monster came hurtling through the thickets, and they fled up the rock before him like leaves blown before a wind. As Valeria plunged into the leafy screen a backward glance showed her the titan rearing up fearsomely on his massive hind-legs, even as Conan had predicted. The sight sent panic racing through her. As he reared, the beast seemed more gigantic than ever; his snouted head towered among the trees. Then Conan’s iron hand closed on her wrist and she was

jerked headlong into the blinding welter of the leaves, and out again into the hot sunshine above, just as the monster fell forward with his front feet on the crag with an impact that made the rock vibrate.

Behind the fugitives the huge head crashed through the twigs, and they looked down for a horrifying instant at the nightmare visage framed among the green leaves, eyes flaming, jaws gaping. Then the giant tusks clashed together futilely, and after that the head was withdrawn, vanishing from their sight as if it had sunk in a pool.

Peering down through broken branches that scraped the rock, they saw it squatting on its haunches at the foot of the crag, staring unblinkingly up at them.

Valeria shuddered.

“How long do you suppose he’ll crouch there?”

Conan kicked the skull on the leaf-strewn shelf.

“That fellow must have climbed up here to escape him, or one like him. He must have died of starvation. There are no bones broken. That thing must be a dragon, such as the black people speak of in their legends. If so, it won’t leave here until we’re both dead.”

Valeria looked at him blankly, her resentment forgotten. She fought down a surging of panic. She had proved her reckless courage a thousand times in wild battles on sea and land, on the blood-slippery decks of burning warships, in the storming of walled cities, and on the trampled sandy beaches where the desperate men of the Red Brotherhood bathed their knives in one another’s blood in their fights for leadership. But the prospect now confronting her congealed her blood. A cutlass-stroke in the heat of battle was nothing; but to sit idle and helpless on a bare rock until she perished of starvation, besieged by a monstrous survival of an elder age—the thought sent panic throbbing through her brain.

“He must leave to eat and drink,” she said helplessly.

“He won’t have to go far to do either,” Conan pointed out. “He’s just gorged on horse-meat, and like a real snake, he can go for a long time without eating or drinking again. But he doesn’t sleep after eating, like a real snake, it seems. Anyway, he can’t climb this crag.”

Conan spoke imperturbably. He was a barbarian, and the terrible patience of the wilderness and its children was as much a part of him as his lusts and rages. He could endure a situation like this with a coolness impossible to a civilized person.

“Can’t we get into the trees and get away, traveling like apes through the branches?” she asked desperately.

He shook his head. “I thought of that. The branches that touch the crag down there are too light. They’d break with our weight. Besides, I have an idea that devil could tear up any tree around here by its roots.”

“Well, are we going to sit here on our rumps until we starve, like that?” she cried furiously, kicking the skull clattering across the ledge. “I won’t do it! I’ll go down there and cut his damned head off——”

Conan had seated himself on a rocky projection at the foot of the spire. He looked up with a glint of admiration at her blazing eyes and tense, quivering figure, but, realizing that she was in just the mood for any madness, he let none of his admiration sound in his voice.

“Sit down,” he grunted, catching her by her wrist and pulling her down on his knee. She was too surprised to resist as he took her sword from her hand and shoved it back in its sheath. “Sit still and calm down. You’d only break your steel on his scales. He’d gobble you up at one gulp, or smash you like an egg with that spiked tail of his. We’ll get out of this jam some way, but we shan’t do it by getting chewed up and swallowed.”

She made no reply, nor did she seek to repulse his arm from about her waist. She was frightened, and the sensation was new to Valeria of the Red Brotherhood. So she sat on her companion’s—or captor’s—knee with a docility that would have amazed Zarallo, who had anathematized her as a she-devil out of hell’s seraglio.

Conan played idly with her curly yellow locks, seemingly intent only upon his conquest. Neither the skeleton at his feet nor the monster crouching below disturbed his mind or dulled the edge of his interest.

The girl’s restless eyes, roving the leaves below them, discovered splashes of colour among the green. It was fruit, large, darkly crimson globes suspended from the boughs of a tree whose broad leaves were a peculiarly rich and vivid green. She became aware of both thirst and hunger, though thirst had not assailed her until she knew she could not descend from the crag to find food and water.

“We need not starve,” she said. “There is fruit we can reach.”

Conan glanced where she pointed.

“If we ate that we wouldn’t need the bite of a dragon,” he grunted. “That’s what the black people of Kush call the Apples of Derketa. Derketa is the Queen of the Dead. Drink a little of the juice, or spill it on your flesh, and you’d be dead before you could tumble to the foot of this crag.”

“Oh!”

She lapsed into dismayed silence. There seemed no way out of their predicament, she reflected gloomily. She saw no way of escape, and Conan seemed to be concerned only with her supple waist and curly tresses. If he was trying to formulate a plan of escape, he did not show it.

“If you’ll take your hands off me long enough to climb up on that peak,” she said presently, “you’ll see something that will surprise you.”

He cast her a questioning glance, then obeyed with a shrug of his massive shoulders. Clinging to the spire-like pinnacle, he stared out over the forest roof.

He stood a long moment in silence, posed like a bronze statue on the rock.

“It’s a walled city, right enough,” he muttered presently. “Was that where you were going, when you tried to send me off alone to the coast?”

“I saw it before you came. I knew nothing of it when I left Sukhmet.”

“Who’d have thought to find a city here? I don’t believe the Stygians ever penetrated this far. Could black people build a city like that? I see no herds on the plain, no signs of cultivation, or people moving about.”

“How could you hope to see all that, at this distance?” she demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders and dropped down on the shelf.

“Well, the folk of the city can’t help us just now. And they might not, if they could. The people of the Black Countries are generally hostile to strangers. Probably stick us full of spears——”

He stopped short and stood silent, as if he had forgotten what he was saying, frowning down at the crimson spheres gleaming among the leaves.

“Spears!” he muttered. “What a blasted fool I am not to have thought of that before! That shows what a pretty woman does to a man’s mind.”

“What are you talking about?” she inquired.

Without answering her question, he descended to the belt of leaves and looked down through them. The great brute squatted below, watching the crag with the frightful patience of the reptile folk. So might one of his breed have glared up at their troglodyte ancestors, treed on a high-flung rock, in the dim dawn ages. Conan cursed him without heat, and began cutting branches, reaching out and severing them as far from the end as he could reach. The agitation of the leaves made the monster restless. He rose from his haunches and lashed his hideous tail, snapping off saplings as if they had been

toothpicks. Conan watched him warily from the corner of his eye, and just as Valeria believed the dragon was about to hurl himself up the crag again, the Cimmerian drew back and climbed up to the ledge with the branches he had cut. There were three of these, slender shafts about seven feet long, but not larger than his thumb. He had also cut several strands of tough, thin vine.

“Branches too light for spear-hafts, and creepers no thicker than cords,” he remarked, indicating the foliage about the crag. “It won’t hold our weight—but there’s strength in union. That’s what the Aquilonian renegades used to tell us Cimmerians when they came into the hills to raise an army to invade their own country. But we always fight by clans and tribes.”

“What the devil has that got to do with those sticks?” she demanded.

“You wait and see.”

Gathering the sticks in a compact bundle, he wedged his poniard hilt between them at one end. Then with the vines he bound them together, and when he had completed his task, he had a spear of no small strength, with a sturdy shaft seven feet in length.

“What good will that do?” she demanded. “You told me that a blade couldn’t pierce his scales——”

“He hasn’t got scales all over him,” answered Conan. “There’s more than one way of skinning a panther.”

Moving down to the edge of the leaves, he reached the spear up and carefully thrust the blade through one of the Apples of Derketa, drawing aside to avoid the darkly purple drops that dripped from the pierced fruit. Presently he withdrew the blade and showed her the blue steel stained a dull purplish crimson.

“I don’t know whether it will do the job or not,” quoth he. “There’s enough poison there to kill an elephant, but—well, we’ll see.”

Valeria was close behind him as he let himself down among the leaves. Cautiously holding the poisoned pike away from him, he thrust his head through the branches and addressed the monster.

“What are you waiting down there for, you misbegotten offspring of questionable parents?” was one of his more printable queries. “Stick your ugly head up here again, you long-necked brute—or do you want me to come down there and kick you loose from your illegitimate spine?”

There was more of it—some of it couched in eloquence that made Valeria stare, in spite of her profane education among the seafarers. And it had its effect on the monster. Just as the incessant yapping of a dog worries and

enrages more constitutionally silent animals, so the clamorous voice of a man rouses fear in some bestial bosoms and insane rage in others. Suddenly and with appalling quickness, the mastodonic brute reared up on its mighty hind legs and elongated its neck and body in a furious effort to reach this vociferous pigmy whose clamor was disturbing the primeval silence of its ancient realm.

But Conan had judged his distance with precision. Some five feet below him the mighty head crashed terribly but futilely through the leaves. And as the monstrous mouth gaped like that of a great snake, Conan drove his spear into the red angle of the jaw-bone hinge. He struck downward with all the strength of both arms, driving the long poniard blade to the hilt in flesh, sinew and bone.

Instantly the jaws clashed convulsively together, severing the triple-pieced shaft and almost precipitating Conan from his perch. He would have fallen but for the girl behind him, who caught his sword-belt in a desperate grasp. He clutched at a rocky projection, and grinned his thanks back at her.

Down on the ground the monster was wallowing like a dog with pepper in its eyes. He shook his head from side to side, pawed at it, and opened his mouth repeatedly to its widest extent. Presently he got a huge front foot on the stump of the shaft and managed to tear the blade out. Then he threw up his head, jaws wide and spouting blood, and glared up at the crag with such concentrated and intelligent fury that Valeria trembled and drew her sword. The scales along his back and flanks turned from rusty brown to a dull lurid red. Most horribly the monster's silence was broken. The sounds that issued from his blood-streaming jaws did not sound like anything that could have been produced by an earthly creation.

With harsh, grating roars, the dragon hurled himself at the crag that was the citadel of his enemies. Again and again his mighty head crashed upward through the branches, snapping vainly on empty air. He hurled his full ponderous weight against the rock until it vibrated from base to crest. And rearing upright he gripped it with his front legs like a man and tried to tear it up by the roots, as if it had been a tree.

This exhibition of primordial fury chilled the blood in Valeria's veins, but Conan was too close to the primitive himself to feel anything but a comprehending interest. To the barbarian, no such gulf existed between himself and other men, and the animals, as existed in the conception of Valeria. The monster below them, to Conan, was merely a form of life differing from himself mainly in physical shape. He attributed to it characteristics similar to his own, and saw in its wrath a counterpart of his rages, in its roars and bellowings merely reptilian equivalents to the curses he had bestowed upon it. Feeling a kinship with all wild things, even dragons, it was impossible for him to experience the sick horror which assailed Valeria at the sight of the brute's ferocity.

He sat watching it tranquilly, and pointed out the various changes that were taking place in its voice and actions.

“The poison’s taking hold,” he said with conviction.

“I don’t believe it.” To Valeria it seemed preposterous to suppose that anything, however lethal, could have any effect on that mountain of muscle and fury.

“There’s pain in his voice,” declared Conan. “First he was merely angry because of the stinging in his jaw. Now he feels the bite of the poison. Look! He’s staggering. He’ll be blind in a few more minutes. What did I tell you?”

For suddenly the dragon had lurched about and went crashing off through the bushes.

“Is he running away?” inquired Valeria uneasily.

“He’s making for the pool!” Conan sprang up, galvanized into swift activity. “The poison makes him thirsty. Come on! He’ll be blind in a few moments, but he can smell his way back to the foot of the crag, and if our scent’s here still, he’ll sit there until he dies. And others of his kind may come at his cries. Let’s go!”

“Down there?” Valeria was aghast.

“Sure! We’ll make for the city! They may cut our heads off there, but it’s our only chance. We may run into a thousand more dragons on the way, but it’s sure death to stay here. If we wait until he dies, we may have a dozen more to deal with. After me, in a hurry!”

He went down the ramp as swiftly as an ape, pausing only to aid his less agile companion, who, until she saw the Cimmerian climb, had fancied herself the equal of any man in the rigging of a ship or on the sheer face of a cliff.

They descended into the gloom below the branches and slid to the ground silently, though Valeria felt as if the pounding of her heart must surely be heard from far away. A noisy gurgling and lapping beyond the dense thicket indicated that the dragon was drinking at the pool.

“As soon as his belly is full he’ll be back,” muttered Conan. “It may take hours for the poison to kill him—if it does at all.”

Somewhere beyond the forest the sun was sinking to the horizon. The forest was a misty twilight place of black shadows and dim vistas. Conan gripped Valeria’s wrist and glided away from the foot of the crag. He made less noise than a breeze blowing among the tree-trunks, but Valeria felt as if her soft boots were betraying their flight to all the forest.

"I don't think he can follow a trail," muttered Conan. "But if a wind blew our body-scent to him, he could smell us out."

"Mitra grant that the wind blow not!" Valeria breathed.

Her face was a pallid oval in the gloom. She gripped her sword in her free hand, but the feel of the shagreen-bound hilt inspired only a feeling of helplessness in her.

They were still some distance from the edge of the forest when they heard a snapping and crashing behind them. Valeria bit her lip to check a cry.

"He's on our trail!" she whispered fiercely.

Conan shook his head.

"He didn't smell us at the rock, and he's blundering about through the forest trying to pick up our scent. Come on! It's the city or nothing now! He could tear down any tree we'd climb. If only the wind stays down——"

They stole on until the trees began to thin out ahead of them. Behind them the forest was a black impenetrable ocean of shadows. The ominous crackling still sounded behind them, as the dragon blundered in his erratic course.

"There's the plain ahead," breathed Valeria. "A little more and we'll——"

"Crom!" swore Conan.

"Mitra!" whispered Valeria.

Out of the south a wind had sprung up.

It blew over them directly into the black forest behind them. Instantly a horrible roar shook the woods. The aimless snapping and crackling of the bushes changed to a sustained crashing as the dragon came like a hurricane straight toward the spot from which the scent of his enemies was wafted.

"Run!" snarled Conan, his eyes blazing like those of a trapped wolf. "It's all we can do!"

Sailor's boots are not made for sprinting, and the life of a pirate does not train one for a runner. Within a hundred yards Valeria was panting and reeling in her gait, and behind them the crashing gave way to a rolling thunder as the monster broke out of the thickets and into the more open ground.

Conan's iron arm about the woman's waist half lifted her; her feet scarcely touched the earth as she was borne along at a speed she could never have attained herself. If he could keep out of the beast's way for a bit, perhaps that betraying wind would shift—but the wind held, and a quick glance over his shoulder showed Conan that the monster was almost upon them, coming like

a war-galley in front of a hurricane. He thrust Valeria from him with a force that sent her reeling a dozen feet to fall in a crumpled heap at the foot of the nearest tree, and the Cimmerian wheeled in the path of the thundering titan.

Convinced that his death was upon him, the Cimmerian acted according to his instinct, and hurled himself full at the awful face that was bearing down on him. He leaped, slashing like a wildcat, felt his sword cut deep into the scales that sheathed the mighty snout—and then a terrific impact knocked him rolling and tumbling for fifty feet with all the wind and half the life battered out of him.

How the stunned Cimmerian regained his feet, not even he could have ever told. But the only thought that filled his brain was of the woman lying dazed and helpless almost in the path of the hurtling fiend, and before the breath came whistling back into his gullet he was standing over her with his sword in his hand.

She lay where he had thrown her, but she was struggling to a sitting posture. Neither tearing tusks nor trampling feet had touched her. It had been a shoulder or front leg that struck Conan, and the blind monster rushed on, forgetting the victims whose scent it had been following, in the sudden agony of its death throes. Headlong on its course it thundered until its low-hung head crashed into a gigantic tree in its path. The impact tore the tree up by the roots and must have dashed the brains from the misshapen skull. Tree and monster fell together, and the dazed humans saw the branches and leaves shaken by the convulsions of the creature they covered—and then grow quiet.

Conan lifted Valeria to her feet and together they started away at a reeling run. A few moments later they emerged into the still twilight of the treeless plain.

Conan paused an instant and glanced back at the ebon fastness behind them. Not a leaf stirred, nor a bird chirped. It stood as silent as it must have stood before Man was created.

“Come on,” muttered Conan, taking his companion’s hand. “It’s touch and go now. If more dragons come out of the woods after us——”

He did not have to finish the sentence.

The city looked very far away across the plain, farther than it had looked from the crag. Valeria’s heart hammered until she felt as if it would strangle her. At every step she expected to hear the crashing of the bushes and see another colossal nightmare bearing down upon them. But nothing disturbed the silence of the thickets.

With the first mile between them and the woods, Valeria breathed more easily. Her buoyant self-confidence began to thaw out again. The sun had set and

darkness was gathering over the plain, lightened a little by the stars that made stunted ghosts out of the cactus growths.

“No cattle, no plowed fields,” muttered Conan. “How do these people live?”

“Perhaps the cattle are in pens for the night,” suggested Valeria, “and the fields and grazing-pastures are on the other side of the city.”

“Maybe,” he grunted. “I didn’t see any from the crag, though.”

The moon came up behind the city, etching walls and towers blackly in the yellow glow. Valeria shivered. Black against the moon the strange city had a somber, sinister look.

Perhaps something of the same feeling occurred to Conan, for he stopped, glanced about him, and grunted: “We stop here. No use coming to their gates in the night. They probably wouldn’t let us in. Besides, we need rest, and we don’t know how they’ll receive us. A few hours’ sleep will put us in better shape to fight or run.”

He led the way to a bed of cactus which grew in a circle—a phenomenon common to the southern desert. With his sword he chopped an opening, and motioned Valeria to enter.

“We’ll be safe from snakes here, anyhow.”

She glanced fearfully back toward the black line that indicated the forest some six miles away.

“Suppose a dragon comes out of the woods?”

“We’ll keep watch,” he answered, though he made no suggestion as to what they would do in such an event. He was staring at the city, a few miles away. Not a light shone from spire or tower. A great black mass of mystery, it reared cryptically against the moonlit sky.

“Lie down and sleep. I’ll keep the first watch.”

She hesitated, glancing at him uncertainly, but he sat down cross-legged in the opening, facing toward the plain, his sword across his knees, his back to her. Without further comment she lay down on the sand inside the spiky circle.

“Wake me when the moon is at its zenith,” she directed.

He did not reply nor look toward her. Her last impression, as she sank into slumber, was of his muscular figure, immobile as a statue hewn out of bronze, outlined against the low-hanging stars.

2. By the Blaze of the Fire-Jewels

Valeria awoke with a start, to the realization that a gray dawn was stealing over the plain.

She sat up, rubbing her eyes. Conan squatted beside the cactus, cutting off the thick pears and dexterously twitching out the spikes.

“You didn’t awake me,” she accused. “You let me sleep all night!”

“You were tired,” he answered. “Your posterior must have been sore, too, after that long ride. You pirates aren’t used to horseback.”

“What about yourself?” she retorted.

“I was a kozak before I was a pirate,” he answered. “They live in the saddle. I snatch naps like a panther watching beside the trail for a deer to come by. My ears keep watch while my eyes sleep.”

And indeed the giant barbarian seemed as much refreshed as if he had slept the whole night on a golden bed. Having removed the thorns, and peeled off the tough skin, he handed the girl a thick, juicy cactus leaf.

“Skin your teeth in that pear. It’s food and drink to a desert man. I was a chief of the Zuagirs once—desert men who live by plundering the caravans.”

“Is there anything you haven’t been?” inquired the girl, half in derision and half in fascination.

“I’ve never been king of an Hyborian kingdom,” he grinned, taking an enormous mouthful of cactus. “But I’ve dreamed of being even that. I may be too, some day. Why shouldn’t I?”

She shook her head in wonder at his calm audacity, and fell to devouring her pear. She found it not unpleasing to the palate, and full of cool and thirst-satisfying juice. Finishing his meal, Conan wiped his hands in the sand, rose, ran his fingers through his thick black mane, hitched at his sword-belt and said:

“Well, let’s go. If the people in that city are going to cut our throats they may as well do it now, before the heat of the day begins.”

His grim humor was unconscious, but Valeria reflected that it might be prophetic. She too hitched her sword-belt as she rose. Her terrors of the night were past. The roaring dragons of the distant forest were like a dim dream. There was a swagger in her stride as she moved off beside the Cimmerian. Whatever perils lay ahead of them, their foes would be men. And Valeria of the Red Brotherhood had never seen the face of the man she feared.

Conan glanced down at her as she strode along beside him with her swinging stride that matched his own.

“You walk more like a hillman than a sailor,” he said. “You must be an Aquilonian. The suns of Darfar never burnt your white skin brown. Many a princess would envy you.”

“I am from Aquilonia,” she replied. His compliments no longer irritated her. His evident admiration pleased her. For another man to have kept her watch while she slept would have angered her; she had always fiercely resented any man’s attempting to shield or protect her because of her sex. But she found a secret pleasure in the fact that this man had done so. And he had not taken advantage of her fright and the weakness resulting from it. After all, she reflected, her companion was no common man.

The sun rose behind the city, turning the towers to a sinister crimson.

“Black last night against the moon,” grunted Conan, his eyes clouding with the abysmal superstition of the barbarian. “Blood-red as a threat of blood against the sun this dawn. I do not like this city.”

But they went on, and as they went Conan pointed out the fact that no road ran to the city from the north.

“No cattle have trampled the plain on this side of the city,” said he. “No plowshare has touched the earth for years, maybe centuries. But look: once this plain was cultivated.”

Valeria saw the ancient irrigation ditches he indicated, half filled in places, and overgrown with cactus. She frowned with perplexity as her eyes swept over the plain that stretched on all sides of the city to the forest edge, which marched in a vast, dim ring. Vision did not extend beyond that ring.

She looked uneasily at the city. No helmets or spear-heads gleamed on battlements, no trumpets sounded, no challenge rang from the towers. A silence as absolute as that of the forest brooded over the walls and minarets.

The sun was high above the eastern horizon when they stood before the great gate in the northern wall, in the shadow of the lofty rampart. Rust flecked the iron bracings of the mighty bronze portal. Spiderwebs glistened thickly on hinge and sill and bolted panel.

“It hasn’t been opened for years!” exclaimed Valeria.

“A dead city,” grunted Conan. “That’s why the ditches were broken and the plain untouched.”

“But who built it? Who dwelt here? Where did they go? Why did they abandon it?”

“Who can say? Maybe an exiled clan of Stygians built it. Maybe not. It doesn’t look like Stygian architecture. Maybe the people were wiped out by enemies, or a plague exterminated them.”

“In that case their treasures may still be gathering dust and cobwebs in there,” suggested Valeria, the acquisitive instincts of her profession waking in her; prodded, too, by feminine curiosity. “Can we open the gate? Let’s go in and explore a bit.”

Conan eyed the heavy portal dubiously, but placed his massive shoulder against it and thrust with all the power of his muscular calves and thighs. With a rasping screech of rusty hinges the gate moved ponderously inward, and Conan straightened and drew his sword. Valeria stared over his shoulder, and made a sound indicative of surprise.

They were not looking into an open street or court as one would have expected. The opened gate, or door, gave directly into a long, broad hall which ran away and away until its vista grew indistinct in the distance. It was of heroic proportions, and the floor of a curious red stone, cut in square tiles, that seemed to smolder as if with the reflection of flames. The walls were of a shiny green material.

“Jade, or I’m a Shemite!” swore Conan.

“Not in such quantity!” protested Valeria.

“I’ve looted enough from the Khitan caravans to know what I’m talking about,” he asserted. “That’s jade!”

The vaulted ceiling was of lapis lazuli, adorned with clusters of great green stones that gleamed with a poisonous radiance.

“Green fire-stones,” growled Conan. “That’s what the people of Punt call them. They’re supposed to be the petrified eyes of those prehistoric snakes the ancients called Golden Serpents. They glow like a cat’s eyes in the dark. At night this hall would be lighted by them, but it would be a hellishly weird illumination. Let’s look around. We might find a cache of jewels.”

“Shut the door,” advised Valeria. “I’d hate to have to outrun a dragon down this hall.”

Conan grinned, and replied: “I don’t believe the dragons ever leave the forest.”

But he complied, and pointed out the broken bolt on the inner side.

“I thought I heard something snap when I shoved against it. That bolt’s freshly broken. Rust has eaten nearly through it. If the people ran away, why should it have been bolted on the inside?”

“They undoubtedly left by another door,” suggested Valeria.

She wondered how many centuries had passed since the light of outer day had filtered into that great hall through the open door. Sunlight was finding its way somehow into the hall, and they quickly saw the source. High up in the vaulted ceiling skylights were set in slot-like openings—translucent sheets of some crystalline substance. In the splotches of shadow between them, the green jewels winked like the eyes of angry cats. Beneath their feet the dully lurid floor smoldered with changing hues and colours of flame. It was like treading the floors of hell with evil stars blinking overhead.

Three balustraded galleries ran along on each side of the hall, one above the other.

“A four-storied house,” grunted Conan, “and this hall extends to the roof. It’s long as a street. I seem to see a door at the other end.”

Valeria shrugged her white shoulders.

“Your eyes are better than mine, then, though I’m accounted sharp-eyed among the sea-rovers.”

They turned into an open door at random, and traversed a series of empty chambers, floored like the hall, and with walls of the same green jade, or of marble or ivory or chalcedony, adorned with friezes of bronze, gold or silver. In the ceilings the green fire-gems were set, and their light was as ghostly and illusive as Conan had predicted. Under the witch-fire glow the intruders moved like specters.

Some of the chambers lacked this illumination, and their doorways showed black as the mouth of the Pit. These Conan and Valeria avoided, keeping always to the lighted chambers.

Cobwebs hung in the corners, but there was no perceptible accumulation of dust on the floor, or on the tables and seats of marble, jade or carnelian which occupied the chambers. Here and there were rugs of that silk known as Khitan which is practically indestructible. Nowhere did they find any windows, or doors opening into streets or courts. Each door merely opened into another chamber or hall.

“Why don’t we come to a street?” grumbled Valeria. “This place or whatever we’re in must be as big as the king of Turan’s seraglio.”

“They must not have perished of plague,” said Conan, meditating upon the mystery of the empty city. “Otherwise we’d find skeletons. Maybe it became haunted, and everybody got up and left. Maybe——”

“Maybe, hell!” broke in Valeria rudely. “We’ll never know. Look at these friezes. They portray men. What race do they belong to?”

Conan scanned them and shook his head.

“I never saw people exactly like them. But there’s the smack of the East about them—Vendhya, maybe, or Kosala.”

“Were you a king in Kosala?” she asked, masking her keen curiosity with derision.

“No. But I was a war-chief of the Afghulis who live in the Himelian mountains above the borders of Vendhya. These people favor the Kosalans. But why should Kosalans be building a city this far to west?”

The figures portrayed were those of slender, olive-skinned men and women, with finely chiseled, exotic features. They wore filmy robes and many delicate jeweled ornaments, and were depicted mostly in attitudes of feasting, dancing or love-making.

“Easterners, all right,” grunted Conan, “but from where I don’t know. They must have lived a disgustingly peaceful life, though, or they’d have scenes of wars and fights. Let’s go up that stair.”

It was an ivory spiral that wound up from the chamber in which they were standing. They mounted three flights and came into a broad chamber on the fourth floor, which seemed to be the highest tier in the building. Skylights in the ceiling illuminated the room, in which light the fire-gems winked pallidly. Glancing through the doors they saw, except on one side, a series of similarly lighted chambers. This other door opened upon a balustraded gallery that overhung a hall much smaller than the one they had recently explored on the lower floor.

“Hell!” Valeria sat down disgustedly on a jade bench. “The people who deserted this city must have taken all their treasures with them. I’m tired of wandering through these bare rooms at random.”

“All these upper chambers seem to be lighted,” said Conan. “I wish we could find a window that overlooked the city. Let’s have a look through that door over there.”

“You have a look,” advised Valeria. “I’m going to sit here and rest my feet.”

Conan disappeared through the door opposite that one opening upon the gallery, and Valeria leaned back with her hands clasped behind her head, and thrust her booted legs out in front of her. These silent rooms and halls with their gleaming green clusters of ornaments and burning crimson floors were beginning to depress her. She wished they could find their way out of the

maze into which they had wandered and emerge into a street. She wondered idly what furtive, dark feet had glided over those flaming floors in past centuries, how many deeds of cruelty and mystery those winking ceiling-gems had blazed down upon.

It was a faint noise that brought her out of her reflections. She was on her feet with her sword in her hand before she realized what had disturbed her. Conan had not returned, and she knew it was not he that she had heard.

The sound had come from somewhere beyond the door that opened on to the gallery. Soundlessly in her soft leather boots she glided through it, crept across the balcony and peered down between the heavy balustrades.

A man was stealing along the hall.

The sight of a human being in this supposedly deserted city was a startling shock. Crouching down behind the stone balusters, with every nerve tingling, Valeria glared down at the stealthy figure.

The man in no way resembled the figures depicted on the friezes. He was slightly above middle height, very dark, though not negroid. He was naked but for a scanty silk clout that only partly covered his muscular hips, and a leather girdle, a hand's breadth broad, about his lean waist. His long black hair hung in lank strands about his shoulders, giving him a wild appearance. He was gaunt, but knots and cords of muscles stood out on his arms and legs, without that fleshy padding that presents a pleasing symmetry of contour. He was built with an economy that was almost repellent.

Yet it was not so much his physical appearance as his attitude that impressed the woman who watched him. He slunk along, stooped in a semi-crouch, his head turning from side to side. He grasped a wide-tipped blade in his right hand, and she saw it shake with the intensity of the emotion that gripped him. He was afraid, trembling in the grip of some dire terror. When he turned his head she caught the blaze of wild eyes among the lank strands of black hair.

He did not see her. On tiptoe he glided across the hall and vanished through an open door. A moment later she heard a choking cry, and then silence fell again.

Consumed with curiosity, Valeria glided along the gallery until she came to a door above the one through which the man had passed. It opened into another, smaller gallery that encircled a large chamber.

This chamber was on the third floor, and its ceiling was not so high as that of the hall. It was lighted only by the fire-stones, and their weird green glow left the spaces under the balcony in shadows.

Valeria's eyes widened. The man she had seen was still in the chamber.

He lay face down on a dark crimson carpet in the middle of the room. His body was limp, his arms spread wide. His curved sword lay near him.

She wondered why he should lie there so motionless. Then her eyes narrowed as she stared down at the rug on which he lay. Beneath and about him the fabric showed a slightly different colour, a deeper, brighter crimson.

Shivering slightly, she crouched down closer behind the balustrade, intently scanning the shadows under the overhanging gallery. They gave up no secret.

Suddenly another figure entered the grim drama. He was a man similar to the first, and he came in by a door opposite that which gave upon the hall.

His eyes glared at the sight of the man on the floor, and he spoke something in a staccato voice that sounded like "Chicmec!" The other did not move.

The man stepped quickly across the floor, bent, gripped the fallen man's shoulder and turned him over. A choking cry escaped him as the head fell back limply, disclosing a throat that had been severed from ear to ear.

The man let the corpse fall back upon the blood-stained carpet, and sprang to his feet, shaking like a wind-blown leaf. His face was an ashy mask of fear. But with one knee flexed for flight, he froze suddenly, became as immobile as an image, staring across the chamber with dilated eyes.

In the shadows beneath the balcony a ghostly light began to glow and grow, a light that was not part of the fire-stone gleam. Valeria felt her hair stir as she watched it; for, dimly visible in the throbbing radiance, there floated a human skull, and it was from this skull—human yet appallingly misshapen—that the spectral light seemed to emanate. It hung there like a disembodied head, conjured out of night and the shadows, growing more and more distinct; human, and yet not human as she knew humanity.

The man stood motionless, an embodiment of paralyzed horror, staring fixedly at the apparition. The thing moved out from the wall and a grotesque shadow moved with it. Slowly the shadow became visible as a man-like figure whose naked torso and limbs shone whitely, with the hue of bleached bones. The bare skull on its shoulders grinned eyelessly, in the midst of its unholy nimbus, and the man confronting it seemed unable to take his eyes from it. He stood still, his sword dangling from nerveless fingers, on his face the expression of a man bound by the spells of a mesmerist.

Valeria realized that it was not fear alone that paralyzed him. Some hellish quality of that throbbing glow had robbed him of his power to think and act. She herself, safely above the scene, felt the subtle impact of a nameless emanation that was a threat to sanity.

The horror swept toward its victim and he moved at last, but only to drop his sword and sink to his knees, covering his eyes with his hands. Dumbly he awaited the stroke of the blade that now gleamed in the apparition's hand as it reared above him like Death triumphant over mankind.

Valeria acted according to the first impulse of her wayward nature. With one tigerish movement she was over the balustrade and dropping to the floor behind the awful shape. It wheeled at the thud of her soft boots on the floor, but even as it turned, her keen blade lashed down, and a fierce exultation swept her as she felt the edge cleave solid flesh and mortal bone.

The apparition cried out gurglingly and went down, severed through shoulder, breast-bone and spine, and as it fell the burning skull rolled clear, revealing a lank mop of black hair and a dark face twisted in the convulsions of death. Beneath the horrific masquerade there was a human being, a man similar to the one kneeling supinely on the floor.

The latter looked up at the sound of the blow and the cry, and now he glared in wild-eyed amazement at the white-skinned woman who stood over the corpse with a dripping sword in her hand.

He staggered up, yammering as if the sight had almost unseated his reason. She was amazed to realize that she understood him. He was gibbering in the Stygian tongue, though in a dialect unfamiliar to her.

"Who are you? Whence come you? What do you in Xuchotl?" Then rushing on, without waiting for her to reply: "But you are a friend—goddess or devil, it makes no difference! You have slain the Burning Skull! It was but a man beneath it, after all! We deemed it a demon they conjured up out of the catacombs! Listen!"

He stopped short in his ravings and stiffened, straining his ears with painful intensity. The girl heard nothing.

"We must hasten!" he whispered. "They are west of the Great Hall! They may be all around us here! They may be creeping upon us even now!"

He seized her wrist in a convulsive grasp she found hard to break.

"Whom do you mean by 'they'?" she demanded.

He stared at her uncomprehendingly for an instant, as if he found her ignorance hard to understand.

"They?" he stammered vaguely. "Why—why, the people of Xotalanc! The clan of the man you slew. They who dwell by the eastern gate."

"You mean to say this city is inhabited?" she exclaimed.

“Aye! Aye!” He was writhing in the impatience of apprehension. “Come away! Come quick! We must return to Tecuhtli!”

“Where is that?” she demanded.

“The quarter by the western gate!” He had her wrist again and was pulling her toward the door through which he had first come. Great beads of perspiration dripped from his dark forehead, and his eyes blazed with terror.

“Wait a minute!” she growled, flinging off his hand. “Keep your hands off me, or I’ll split your skull. What’s all this about? Who are you? Where would you take me?”

He took a firm grip on himself, casting glances to all sides, and began speaking so fast his words tripped over each other.

“My name is Techotl. I am of Tecuhtli. I and this man who lies with his throat cut came into the Halls of Science to try and ambush some of the Xotalancas. But we became separated and I returned here to find him with his gullet slit. The Burning Skull did it, I know, just as he would have slain me had you not killed him. But perhaps he was not alone. Others may be stealing from Xotalanc! The gods themselves blench at the fate of those they take alive!”

At the thought he shook as with an ague and his dark skin grew ashy. Valeria frowned puzzledly at him. She sensed intelligence behind this rigmarole, but it was meaningless to her.

She turned toward the skull, which still glowed and pulsed on the floor, and was reaching a booted toe tentatively toward it, when the man who called himself Techotl sprang forward with a cry.

“Do not touch it! Do not even look at it! Madness and death lurk in it. The wizards of Xotalanc understand its secret—they found it in the catacombs, where lie the bones of terrible kings who ruled in Xuchotl in the black centuries of the past. To gaze upon it freezes the blood and withers the brain of a man who understands not its mystery. To touch it causes madness and destruction.”

She scowled at him uncertainly. He was not a reassuring figure, with his lean, muscle-knotted frame, and snaky locks. In his eyes, behind the glow of terror, lurked a weird light she had never seen in the eyes of a man wholly sane. Yet he seemed sincere in his protestations.

“Come!” he begged, reaching for her hand, and then recoiling as he remembered her warning, “You are a stranger. How you came here I do not know, but if you were a goddess or a demon, come to aid Tecuhtli, you would know all the things you have asked me. You must be from beyond the great forest, whence our ancestors came. But you are our friend, or you would not have slain my enemy. Come quickly, before the Xotalancas find us and slay us!”

From his repellent, impassioned face she glanced to the sinister skull, smoldering and glowing on the floor near the dead man. It was like a skull seen in a dream, undeniably human, yet with disturbing distortions and malformations of contour and outline. In life the wearer of that skull must have presented an alien and monstrous aspect. Life? It seemed to possess some sort of life of its own. Its jaws yawned at her and snapped together. Its radiance grew brighter, more vivid, yet the impression of nightmare grew too; it was a dream; all life was a dream—it was Techotl's urgent voice which snapped Valeria back from the dim gulfs whither she was drifting.

“Do not look at the skull! Do not look at the skull!” It was a far cry from across unreckoned voids.

Valeria shook herself like a lion shaking his mane. Her vision cleared. Techotl was chattering: “In life it housed the awful brain of a king of magicians! It holds still the life and fire of magic drawn from outer spaces!”

With a curse Valeria leaped, lithe as a panther, and the skull crashed to flaming bits under her swinging sword. Somewhere in the room, or in the void, or in the dim reaches of her consciousness, an inhuman voice cried out in pain and rage.

Techotl's hand was plucking at her arm and he was gibbering: “You have broken it! You have destroyed it! Not all the black arts of Xotalanc can rebuild it! Come away! Come away quickly, now!”

“But I can't go,” she protested. “I have a friend somewhere near by——”

The flare of his eyes cut her short as he stared past her with an expression grown ghastly. She wheeled just as four men rushed through as many doors, converging on the pair in the center of the chamber.

They were like the others she had seen, the same knotted muscles bulging on otherwise gaunt limbs, the same lank blue-black hair, the same mad glare in their wide eyes. They were armed and clad like Techotl, but on the breast of each was painted a white skull.

There were no challenges or war-cries. Like blood-mad tigers the men of Xotalanc sprang at the throats of their enemies. Techotl met them with the fury of desperation, ducked the swipe of a wide-headed blade, and grappled with the wielder, and bore him to the floor where they rolled and wrestled in murderous silence.

The other three swarmed on Valeria, their weird eyes red as the eyes of mad dogs.

She killed the first who came within reach before he could strike a blow, her long straight blade splitting his skull even as his own sword lifted for a stroke. She side-stepped a thrust, even as she parried a slash. Her eyes danced and her lips smiled without mercy. Again she was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, and the hum of her steel was like a bridal song in her ears.

Her sword darted past a blade that sought to parry, and sheathed six inches of its point in a leather-guarded midriff. The man gasped agonizedly and went to his knees, but his tall mate lunged in, in ferocious silence, raining blow on blow so furiously that Valeria had no opportunity to counter. She stepped back coolly, parrying the strokes and watching for her chance to thrust home. He could not long keep up that flailing whirlwind. His arm would tire, his wind would fail; he would weaken, falter, and then her blade would slide smoothly into his heart. A sidelong glance showed her Techotl kneeling on the breast of his antagonist and striving to break the other's hold on his wrist and to drive home a dagger.

Sweat beaded the forehead of the man facing her, and his eyes were like burning coals. Smite as he would, he could not break past nor beat down her guard. His breath came in gusty gulps, his blows began to fall erratically. She stepped back to draw him out—and felt her thighs locked in an iron grip. She had forgotten the wounded man on the floor.

Crouching on his knees, he held her with both arms locked about her legs, and his mate croaked in triumph and began working his way around to come at her from the left side. Valeria wrenched and tore savagely, but in vain. She could free herself of this clinging menace with a downward flick of her sword, but in that instant the curved blade of the tall warrior would crash through her skull. The wounded man began to worry at her bare thigh with his teeth like a wild beast.

She reached down with her left hand and gripped his long hair, forcing his head back so that his white teeth and rolling eyes gleamed up at her. The tall Xotalanc cried out fiercely and leaped in, smiting with all the fury of his arm. Awkwardly she parried the stroke, and it beat the flat of her blade down on her head so that she saw sparks flash before her eyes, and staggered. Up went the sword again, with a low, beast-like cry of triumph—and then a giant form loomed behind the Xotalanc and steel flashed like a jet of blue lightning. The cry of the warrior broke short and he went down like an ox beneath the pole-ax, his brains gushing from his skull that had been split to the throat.

“Conan!” gasped Valeria. In a gust of passion she turned on the Xotalanc whose long hair she still gripped in her left hand. “Dog of hell!” Her blade swished as it cut the air in an upswinging arc with a blur in the middle, and the headless body slumped down, spurting blood. She hurled the severed head across the room.

“What the devil's going on here?” Conan bestrode the corpse of the man he had killed, broadsword in hand, glaring about him in amazement.

Techotl was rising from the twitching figure of the last Xotalanc, shaking red drops from his dagger. He was bleeding from the stab deep in the thigh. He stared at Conan with dilated eyes.

“What is all this?” Conan demanded again, not yet recovered from the stunning surprise of finding Valeria engaged in a savage battle with these fantastic figures in a city he had thought empty and uninhabited. Returning from an aimless exploration of the upper chambers to find Valeria missing from the room where he had left her, he had followed the sounds of strife that burst on his dumbfounded ears.

“Five dead dogs!” exclaimed Techotl, his flaming eyes reflecting a ghastly exultation. “Five slain! Five crimson nails for the black pillar! The gods of blood be thanked!”

He lifted quivering hands on high, and then, with the face of a fiend, he spat on the corpses and stamped on their faces, dancing in his ghoulish glee. His recent allies eyed him in amazement, and Conan asked, in the Aquilonian tongue: “Who is this madman?”

Valeria shrugged her shoulders.

“He says his name’s Techotl. From his babblings I gather that his people live at one end of this crazy city, and these others at the other end. Maybe we’d better go with him. He seems friendly, and it’s easy to see that the other clan isn’t.”

Techotl had ceased his dancing and was listening again, his head tilted sidewise, dog-like, triumph struggling with fear in his repellent countenance.

“Come away, now!” he whispered. “We have done enough! Five dead dogs! My people will welcome you! They will honour you! But come! It is far to Tecuhtli. At any moment the Xotalancas may come on us in numbers too great even for your swords.”

“Lead the way,” grunted Conan.

Techotl instantly mounted a stair leading up to the gallery, beckoning them to follow him, which they did, moving rapidly to keep on his heels. Having reached the gallery, he plunged into a door that opened toward the west, and hurried through chamber after chamber, each lighted by skylights or green fire-jewels.

“What sort of a place can this be?” muttered Valeria under her breath.

“Crom knows!” answered Conan. “I’ve seen his kind before, though. They live on the shores of Lake Zuad, near the border of Kush. They’re a sort of

mongrel Stygians, mixed with another race that wandered into Stygia from the east some centuries ago and were absorbed by them. They're called Tlazitlans. I'm willing to bet it wasn't they who built this city, though."

Techotl's fear did not seem to diminish as they drew away from the chamber where the dead men lay. He kept twisting his head on his shoulder to listen for sounds of pursuit, and stared with burning intensity into every doorway they passed.

Valeria shivered in spite of herself. She feared no man. But the weird floor beneath her feet, the uncanny jewels over her head, dividing the lurking shadows among them, the stealth and terror of their guide, impressed her with a nameless apprehension, a sensation of lurking, inhuman peril.

"They may be between us and Tecuhtli!" he whispered once. "We must beware lest they be lying in wait!"

"Why don't we get out of this infernal palace, and take to the streets?" demanded Valeria.

"There are no streets in Xuchotl," he answered. "No squares nor open courts. The whole city is built like one giant palace under one great roof. The nearest approach to a street is the Great Hall which traverses the city from the north gate to the south gate. The only doors opening into the outer world are the city gates, through which no living man has passed for fifty years."

"How long have you dwelt here?" asked Conan.

"I was born in the castle of Tecuhtli thirty-five years ago. I have never set foot outside the city. For the love of the gods, let us go silently! These halls may be full of lurking devils. Olmec shall tell you all when we reach Tecuhtli."

So in silence they glided on with the green fire-stones blinking overhead and the flaming floors smoldering under their feet, and it seemed to Valeria as if they fled through hell, guided by a dark-faced, lank-haired goblin.

Yet it was Conan who halted them as they were crossing an unusually wide chamber. His wilderness-bred ears were keener even than the ears of Techotl, whetted though these were by a lifetime of warfare in those silent corridors.

"You think some of your enemies may be ahead of us, lying in ambush?"

"They prowl through these rooms at all hours," answered Techotl, "as do we. The halls and chambers between Tecuhtli and Xotalanc are a disputed region, owned by no man. We call it the Halls of Silence. Why do you ask?"

"Because men are in the chambers ahead of us," answered Conan. "I heard steel clink against stone."

Again a shaking seized Techotl, and he clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering.

"Perhaps they are your friends," suggested Valeria.

"We dare not chance it," he panted, and moved with frenzied activity. He turned aside and glided through a doorway on the left which led into a chamber from which an ivory staircase wound down into darkness.

"This leads to an unlighted corridor below us!" he hissed, great beads of perspiration standing out on his brow. "They may be lurking there, too. It may all be a trick to draw us into it. But we must take the chance that they have laid their ambush in the rooms above. Come swiftly, now!"

Softly as phantoms they descended the stair and came to the mouth of a corridor black as night. They crouched there for a moment, listening, and then melted into it. As they moved along, Valeria's flesh crawled between her shoulders in momentary expectation of a sword-thrust in the dark. But for Conan's iron fingers gripping her arm she had no physical cognizance of her companions. Neither made as much noise as a cat would have made. The darkness was absolute. One hand, outstretched, touched a wall, and occasionally she felt a door under her fingers. The hallway seemed interminable.

Suddenly they were galvanized by a sound behind them. Valeria's flesh crawled anew, for she recognized it as the soft opening of a door. Men had come into the corridor behind them. Even with the thought she stumbled over something that felt like a human skull. It rolled across the floor with an appalling clatter.

"Run!" yelled Techotl, a note of hysteria in his voice, and was away down the corridor like a flying ghost.

Again Valeria felt Conan's hand bearing her up and sweeping her along as they raced after their guide. Conan could see in the dark no better than she, but he possessed a sort of instinct that made his course unerring. Without his support and guidance she would have fallen or stumbled against the wall. Down the corridor they sped, while the swift patter of flying feet drew closer and closer, and then suddenly Techotl panted: "Here is the stair! After me, quick! Oh, quick!"

His hand came out of the dark and caught Valeria's wrist as she stumbled blindly on the steps. She felt herself half dragged, half lifted up the winding stair, while Conan released her and turned on the steps, his ears and instincts telling him their foes were hard at their backs. And the sounds were not all those of human feet.

Something came writhing up the steps, something that slithered and rustled and brought a chill in the air with it. Conan lashed down with his great sword and felt the blade shear through something that might have been flesh and bone, and cut deep into the stair beneath. Something touched his foot that chilled like the touch of frost, and then the darkness beneath him was disturbed by a frightful thrashing and lashing, and a man cried out in agony.

The next moment Conan was racing up the winding staircase, and through a door that stood open at the head.

Valeria and Techotl were already through, and Techotl slammed the door and shot a bolt across it—the first Conan had seen since they left the outer gate.

Then he turned and ran across the well-lighted chamber into which they had come, and as they passed through the farther door, Conan glanced back and saw the door groaning and straining under heavy pressure violently applied from the other side.

Though Techotl did not abate either his speed or his caution, he seemed more confident now. He had the air of a man who has come into familiar territory, within call of friends.

But Conan renewed his terror by asking: “What was that thing that I fought on the stair?”

“The men of Xotalanc,” answered Techotl, without looking back. “I told you the halls were full of them.”

“This wasn’t a man,” grunted Conan. “It was something that crawled, and it was as cold as ice to the touch. I think I cut it asunder. It fell back on the men who were following us, and must have killed one of them in its death throes.”

Techotl’s head jerked back, his face ashy again. Convulsively he quickened his pace.

“It was the Crawler! A monster they have brought out of the catacombs to aid them! What it is, we do not know, but we have found our people hideously slain by it. In Set’s name, hasten! If they put it on our trail, it will follow us to the very doors of Tecuhltli!”

“I doubt it,” grunted Conan. “That was a shrewd cut I dealt it on the stair.”

“Hasten! Hasten!” groaned Techotl.

They ran through a series of green-lit chambers, traversed a broad hall, and halted before a giant bronze door.

Techotl said: “This is Tecuhltli!”

3. The People of the Feud

Techotl smote on the bronze door with his clenched hand, and then turned sidewise, so that he could watch back along the hall.

“Men have been smitten down before this door, when they thought they were safe,” he said.

“Why don’t they open the door?” asked Conan.

“They are looking at us through the Eye,” answered Techotl. “They are puzzled at the sight of you.” He lifted his voice and called: “Open the door, Xecelan! It is I, Techotl, with friends from the great world beyond the forest!— They will open,” he assured his allies.

“They’d better do it in a hurry, then,” said Conan grimly. “I hear something crawling along the floor beyond the hall.”

Techotl went ashy again and attacked the door with his fists, screaming: “Open, you fools, open! The Crawler is at our heels!”

Even as he beat and shouted, the great bronze door swung noiselessly back, revealing a heavy chain across the entrance, over which spear-heads bristled and fierce countenances regarded them intently for an instant. Then the chain was dropped and Techotl grasped the arms of his friends in a nervous frenzy and fairly dragged them over the threshold. A glance over his shoulder just as the door was closing showed Conan the long dim vista of the hall, and dimly framed at the other end an ophidian shape that writhed slowly and painfully into view, flowing in a dull-hued length from a chamber door, its hideous blood-stained head wagging drunkenly. Then the closing door shut off the view.

Inside the square chamber into which they had come heavy bolts were drawn across the door, and the chain locked into place. The door was made to stand the battering of a siege. Four men stood on guard, of the same lank-haired, dark-skinned breed as Techotl, with spears in their hands and swords at their hips. In the wall near the door there was a complicated contrivance of mirrors which Conan guessed was the Eye Techotl had mentioned, so arranged that a narrow, crystal-paned slot in the wall could be looked through from within without being discernible from without. The four guardsmen stared at the strangers with wonder, but asked no question, nor did Techotl vouchsafe any information. He moved with easy confidence now, as if he had shed his cloak of indecision and fear the instant he crossed the threshold.

“Come!” he urged his new-found friends, but Conan glanced toward the door.

“What about those fellows who were following us? Won’t they try to storm that door?”

Techotl shook his head.

“They know they cannot break down the Door of the Eagle. They will flee back to Xotalanc, with their crawling fiend. Come! I will take you to the rulers of Tecuhltli.”

One of the four guards opened the door opposite the one by which they had entered, and they passed through into a hallway which, like most of the rooms on that level, was lighted by both the slot-like skylights and the clusters of winking fire-gems. But unlike the other rooms they had traversed, this hall showed evidences of occupation. Velvet tapestries adorned the glossy jade walls, rich rugs were on the crimson floors, and the ivory seats, benches and divans were littered with satin cushions.

The hall ended in an ornate door, before which stood no guard. Without ceremony Techotl thrust the door open and ushered his friends into a broad chamber, where some thirty dark-skinned men and women lounging on satin-covered couches sprang up with exclamations of amazement.

The men, all except one, were of the same type as Techotl, and the women were equally dark and strange-eyed, though not unbeautiful in a weird dark way. They wore sandals, golden breast-plates, and scanty silk skirts supported by gem-crusted girdles, and their black manes, cut square at their naked shoulders, were bound with silver circlets.

On a wide ivory seat on a jade dais sat a man and a woman who differed subtly from the others. He was a giant, with an enormous sweep of breast and the shoulders of a bull. Unlike the others, he was bearded, with a thick, blue-black beard which fell almost to his broad girdle. He wore a robe of purple silk which reflected changing sheens of colour with his every movement, and one wide sleeve, drawn back to his elbow, revealed a forearm massive with corded muscles. The band which confined his blue-black locks was set with glittering jewels.

The woman beside him sprang to her feet with a startled exclamation as the strangers entered, and her eyes, passing over Conan, fixed themselves with burning intensity on Valeria. She was tall and lithe, by far the most beautiful woman in the room. She was clad more scantily even than the others; for instead of a skirt she wore merely a broad strip of gilt-worked purple cloth fastened to the middle of her girdle which fell below her knees. Another strip at the back of her girdle completed that part of her costume, which she wore with a cynical indifference. Her breast-plates and the circlet about her temples were adorned with gems. In her eyes alone of all the dark-skinned people there lurked no brooding gleam of madness. She spoke no word after her first exclamation; she stood tensely, her hands clenched, staring at Valeria.

The man on the ivory seat had not risen.

“Prince Olmec,” spoke Techotl, bowing low, with arms outspread and the palms of his hands turned upward, “I bring allies from the world beyond the

forest. In the Chamber of Tezcoti the Burning Skull slew Chicmec, my companion——”

“The Burning Skull!” It was a shuddering whisper of fear from the people of Tecuhtli.

“Aye! Then came I, and found Chicmec lying with his throat cut. Before I could flee, the Burning Skull came upon me, and when I looked upon it my blood became as ice and the marrow of my bones melted. I could neither fight nor run. I could only await the stroke. Then came this white-skinned woman and struck him down with her sword; and lo, it was only a dog of Xotalanc with white paint upon his skin and the living skull of an ancient wizard upon his head! Now that skull lies in many pieces, and the dog who wore it is a dead man!”

An indescribably fierce exultation edged the last sentence, and was echoed in the low, savage exclamations from the crowding listeners.

“But wait!” exclaimed Techotl. “There is more! While I talked with the woman, four Xotalancas came upon us! One I slew—there is the stab in my thigh to prove how desperate was the fight. Two the woman killed. But we were hard pressed when this man came into the fray and split the skull of the fourth! Aye! Five crimson nails there are to be driven into the pillar of vengeance!”

He pointed at a black column of ebony which stood behind the dais. Hundreds of red dots scarred its polished surface—the bright scarlet heads of heavy copper nails driven into the black wood.

“Five red nails for five Xotalanca lives!” exulted Techotl, and the horrible exultation in the faces of the listeners made them inhuman.

“Who are these people?” asked Olmec, and his voice was like the low, deep rumble of a distant bull. None of the people of Xuchotl spoke loudly. It was as if they had absorbed into their souls the silence of the empty halls and deserted chambers.

“I am Conan, a Cimmerian,” answered the barbarian briefly. “This woman is Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, an Aquilonian pirate. We are deserters from an army on the Darfar border, far to the north, and are trying to reach the coast.”

The woman on the dais spoke loudly, her words tripping in her haste.

“You can never reach the coast! There is no escape from Xuchotl! You will spend the rest of your lives in this city!”

“What do you mean?” growled Conan, clapping his hand to his hilt and stepping about so as to face both the dais and the rest of the room. “Are you telling us we’re prisoners?”

“She did not mean that,” interposed Olmec. “We are your friends. We would not restrain you against your will. But I fear other circumstances will make it impossible for you to leave Xuchotl.”

His eyes flickered to Valeria, and he lowered them quickly.

“This woman is Tascela,” he said. “She is a princess of Tecuhltli. But let food and drink be brought our guests. Doubtless they are hungry, and weary from their long travels.”

He indicated an ivory table, and after an exchange of glances, the adventurers seated themselves. The Cimmerian was suspicious. His fierce blue eyes roved about the chamber, and he kept his sword close to his hand. But an invitation to eat and drink never found him backward. His eyes kept wandering to Tascela, but the princess had eyes only for his white-skinned companion.

Techotl, who had bound a strip of silk about his wounded thigh, placed himself at the table to attend to the wants of his friends, seeming to consider it a privilege and honour to see after their needs. He inspected the food and drink the others brought in gold vessels and dishes, and tasted each before he placed it before his guests. While they ate, Olmec sat in silence on his ivory seat, watching them from under his broad black brows. Tascela sat beside him, chin cupped in her hands and her elbows resting on her knees. Her dark, enigmatic eyes, burning with a mysterious light, never left Valeria’s supple figure. Behind her seat a sullen handsome girl waved an ostrich-plume fan with a slow rhythm.

The food was fruit of an exotic kind unfamiliar to the wanderers, but very palatable, and the drink was a light crimson wine that carried a heady tang.

“You have come from afar,” said Olmec at last. “I have read the books of our fathers. Aquilonia lies beyond the lands of the Stygians and the Shemites, beyond Argos and Zingara; and Cimmeria lies beyond Aquilonia.”

“We have each a roving foot,” answered Conan carelessly.

“How you won through the forest is a wonder to me,” quoth Olmec. “In bygone days a thousand fighting-men scarcely were able to carve a road through its perils.”

“We encountered a bench-legged monstrosity about the size of a mastodon,” said Conan casually, holding out his wine goblet which Techotl filled with evident pleasure. “But when we’d killed it we had no further trouble.”

The wine vessel slipped from Techotl’s hand to crash on the floor. His dusky skin went ashy. Olmec started to his feet, an image of stunned amazement, and a low gasp of awe or terror breathed up from the others. Some slipped to

their knees as if their legs would not support them. Only Tascela seemed not to have heard. Conan glared about him bewilderedly.

“What’s the matter? What are you gaping about?”

“You—you slew the dragon-god?”

“God? I killed a dragon. Why not? It was trying to gobble us up.”

“But dragons are immortal!” exclaimed Olmec. “They slay each other, but no man ever killed a dragon! The thousand fighting-men of our ancestors who fought their way to Xuchotl could not prevail against them! Their swords broke like twigs against their scales!”

“If your ancestors had thought to dip their spears in the poisonous juice of Derketa’s Apples,” quoth Conan, with his mouth full, “and jab them in the eyes or mouth or somewhere like that, they’d have seen that dragons are not more immortal than any other chunk of beef. The carcass lies at the edge of the trees, just within the forest. If you don’t believe me, go and look for yourself.”

Olmec shook his head, not in disbelief but in wonder.

“It was because of the dragons that our ancestors took refuge in Xuchotl,” said he. “They dared not pass through the plain and plunge into the forest beyond. Scores of them were seized and devoured by the monsters before they could reach the city.”

“Then your ancestors didn’t build Xuchotl?” asked Valeria.

“It was ancient when they first came into the land. How long it had stood here, not even its degenerate inhabitants knew.”

“Your people came from Lake Zuad?” questioned Conan.

“Aye. More than half a century ago a tribe of the Tlazitlans rebelled against the Stygian king, and, being defeated in battle, fled southward. For many weeks they wandered over grasslands, desert and hills, and at last they came into the great forest, a thousand fighting-men with their women and children.

“It was in the forest that the dragons fell upon them, and tore many to pieces; so the people fled in a frenzy of fear before them, and at last came into the plain and saw the city of Xuchotl in the midst of it.

“They camped before the city, not daring to leave the plain, for the night was made hideous with the noise of the battling monsters throughout the forest. They made war incessantly upon one another. Yet they came not into the plain.

“The people of the city shut their gates and shot arrows at our people from the walls. The Tlazitlans were imprisoned on the plain, as if the ring of the forest

had been a great wall; for to venture into the woods would have been madness.

“That night there came secretly to their camp a slave from the city, one of their own blood, who with a band of exploring soldiers had wandered into the forest long before, when he was a young man. The dragons had devoured all his companions, but he had been taken into the city to dwell in servitude. His name was Tolkemec.” A flame lighted the dark eyes at mention of the name, and some of the people muttered obscenely and spat. “He promised to open the gates to the warriors. He asked only that all captives taken be delivered into his hands.

“At dawn he opened the gates. The warriors swarmed in and the halls of Xuchotl ran red. Only a few hundred folk dwelt there, decaying remnants of a once great race. Tolkemec said they came from the east, long ago, from Old Kosala, when the ancestors of those who now dwell in Kosala came up from the south and drove forth the original inhabitants of the land. They wandered far westward and finally found this forest-girdled plain, inhabited then by a tribe of black people.

“These they enslaved and set to building a city. From the hills to the east they brought jade and marble and lapis lazuli, and gold, silver and copper. Herds of elephants provided them with ivory. When their city was completed, they slew all the black slaves. And their magicians made a terrible magic to guard the city; for by their necromantic arts they re-created the dragons which had once dwelt in this lost land, and whose monstrous bones they found in the forest. Those bones they clothed in flesh and life, and the living beasts walked the earth as they walked it when Time was young. But the wizards wove a spell that kept them in the forest and they came not into the plain.

“So for many centuries the people of Xuchotl dwelt in their city, cultivating the fertile plain, until their wise men learned how to grow fruit within the city—fruit which is not planted in soil, but obtains its nourishment out of the air—and then they let the irrigation ditches run dry, and dwelt more and more in luxurious sloth, until decay seized them. They were a dying race when our ancestors broke through the forest and came into the plain. Their wizards had died, and the people had forgot their ancient necromancy. They could fight neither by sorcery nor the sword.

“Well, our fathers slew the people of Xuchotl, all except a hundred which were given living into the hands of Tolkemec, who had been their slave; and for many days and nights the halls re-echoed to their screams under the agony of his tortures.

“So the Tlazitlans dwelt here, for a while in peace, ruled by the brothers Tecuhtli and Xotalanc, and by Tolkemec. Tolkemec took a girl of the tribe to wife, and because he had opened the gates, and because he knew many of

the arts of the Xuchotlans, he shared the rule of the tribe with the brothers who had led the rebellion and the flight.

“For a few years, then, they dwelt at peace within the city, doing little but eating, drinking and making love, and raising children. There was no necessity to till the plain, for Tolkemec taught them how to cultivate the air-devouring fruits. Besides, the slaying of the Xuchotlans broke the spell that held the dragons in the forest, and they came nightly and bellowed about the gates of the city. The plain ran red with the blood of their eternal warfare, and it was then that——” He bit his tongue in the midst of the sentence, then presently continued, but Valeria and Conan felt that he had checked an admission he had considered unwise.

“Five years they dwelt in peace. Then”—Olmec’s eyes rested briefly on the silent woman at his side—“Xotalanc took a woman to wife, a woman whom both Tecuhtli and old Tolkemec desired. In his madness, Tecuhtli stole her from her husband. Aye, she went willingly enough. Tolkemec, to spite Xotalanc, aided Tecuhtli. Xotalanc demanded that she be given back to him, and the council of the tribe decided that the matter should be left to the woman. She chose to remain with Tecuhtli. In wrath Xotalanc sought to take her back by force, and the retainers of the brothers came to blows in the Great Hall.

“There was much bitterness. Blood was shed on both sides. The quarrel became a feud, the feud an open war. From the welter three factions emerged—Tecuhtli, Xotalanc, and Tolkemec. Already, in the days of peace, they had divided the city between them. Tecuhtli dwelt in the western quarter of the city, Xotalanc in the eastern, and Tolkemec with his family by the southern gate.

“Anger and resentment and jealousy blossomed into bloodshed and rape and murder. Once the sword was drawn there was no turning back; for blood called for blood, and vengeance followed swift on the heels of atrocity. Tecuhtli fought with Xotalanc, and Tolkemec aided first one and then the other, betraying each faction as it fitted his purposes. Tecuhtli and his people withdrew into the quarter of the western gate, where we now sit. Xuchotl is built in the shape of an oval. Tecuhtli, which took its name from its prince, occupies the western end of the oval. The people blocked up all doors connecting the quarter with the rest of the city, except one on each floor, which could be defended easily. They went into the pits below the city and built a wall cutting off the western end of the catacombs, where lie the bodies of the ancient Xuchotlans, and of those Tlazitlans slain in the feud. They dwelt as in a besieged castle, making sorties and forays on their enemies.

“The people of Xotalanc likewise fortified the eastern quarter of the city, and Tolkemec did likewise with the quarter by the southern gate. The central part of the city was left bare and uninhabited. Those empty halls and chambers became a battleground, and a region of brooding terror.

“Tolkemec warred on both clans. He was a fiend in the form of a human, worse than Xotalanc. He knew many secrets of the city he never told the others. From the crypts of the catacombs he plundered the dead of their grisly secrets—secrets of ancient kings and wizards, long forgotten by the degenerate Xuchotlans our ancestors slew. But all his magic did not aid him the night we of Tecuhtli stormed his castle and butchered all his people. Tolkemec we tortured for many days.”

His voice sank to a caressing slur, and a far-away look grew in his eyes, as if he looked back over the years to a scene which caused him intense pleasure.

“Aye, we kept the life in him until he screamed for death as for a bride. At last we took him living from the torture chamber and cast him into a dungeon for the rats to gnaw as he died. From that dungeon, somehow, he managed to escape, and dragged himself into the catacombs. There without doubt he died, for the only way out of the catacombs beneath Tecuhtli is through Tecuhtli, and he never emerged by that way. His bones were never found, and the superstitious among our people swear that his ghost haunts the crypts to this day, wailing among the bones of the dead. Twelve years ago we butchered the people of Tolkemec, but the feud raged on between Tecuhtli and Xotalanc, as it will rage until the last man, the last woman is dead.

“It was fifty years ago that Tecuhtli stole the wife of Xotalanc. Half a century the feud has endured. I was born in it. All in this chamber, except Tascela, were born in it. We expect to die in it.

“We are a dying race, even as those Xuchotlans our ancestors slew. When the feud began there were hundreds in each faction. Now we of Tecuhtli number only these you see before you, and the men who guard the four doors: forty in all. How many Xotalancas there are we do not know, but I doubt if they are much more numerous than we. For fifteen years no children have been born to us, and we have seen none among the Xotalancas.

“We are dying, but before we die we will slay as many of the men of Xotalanc as the gods permit.”

And with his weird eyes blazing, Olmec spoke long of that grisly feud, fought out in silent chambers and dim halls under the blaze of the green fire-jewels, on floors smoldering with the flames of hell and splashed with deeper crimson from severed veins. In that long butchery a whole generation had perished. Xotalanc was dead, long ago, slain in a grim battle on an ivory stair. Tecuhtli was dead, flayed alive by the maddened Xotalancas who had captured him.

Without emotion Olmec told of hideous battles fought in black corridors, of ambushes on twisting stairs, and red butcheries. With a redder, more abysmal gleam in his deep dark eyes he told of men and women flayed alive, mutilated and dismembered, of captives howling under tortures so ghastly that even the barbarous Cimmerian grunted. No wonder Techotl had trembled with the terror of capture. Yet he had gone forth to slay if he could, driven by hate that was stronger than his fear. Olmec spoke further, of dark and mysterious

matters, of black magic and wizardry conjured out of the black night of the catacombs, of weird creatures invoked out of darkness for horrible allies. In these things the Xotalancas had the advantage, for it was in the eastern catacombs where lay the bones of the greatest wizards of the ancient Xuchotlans, with their immemorial secrets.

Valeria listened with morbid fascination. The feud had become a terrible elemental power driving the people of Xuchotl inexorably on to doom and extinction. It filled their whole lives. They were born in it, and they expected to die in it. They never left their barricaded castle except to steal forth into the Halls of Silence that lay between the opposing fortresses, to slay and be slain. Sometimes the raiders returned with frantic captives, or with grim tokens of victory in fight. Sometimes they did not return at all, or returned only as severed limbs cast down before the bolted bronze doors. It was a ghastly, unreal nightmare existence these people lived, shut off from the rest of the world, caught together like rabid rats in the same trap, butchering one another through the years, crouching and creeping through the sunless corridors to maim and torture and murder.

While Olmec talked, Valeria felt the blazing eyes of Tascela fixed upon her. The princess seemed not to hear what Olmec was saying. Her expression, as he narrated victories or defeats, did not mirror the wild rage or fiendish exultation that alternated on the faces of the other Tecuhtli. The feud that was an obsession to her clansmen seemed meaningless to her. Valeria found her indifferent callousness more repugnant than Olmec's naked ferocity.

"And we can never leave the city," said Olmec. "For fifty years no one has left it except those——" Again he checked himself.

"Even without the peril of the dragons," he continued, "we who were born and raised in the city would not dare leave it. We have never set foot outside the walls. We are not accustomed to the open sky and the naked sun. No; we were born in Xuchotl, and in Xuchotl we shall die."

"Well," said Conan, "with your leave we'll take our chances with the dragons. This feud is none of our business. If you'll show us to the west gate, we'll be on our way."

Tascela's hands clenched, and she started to speak, but Olmec interrupted her: "It is nearly nightfall. If you wander forth into the plain by night, you will certainly fall prey to the dragons."

"We crossed it last night, and slept in the open without seeing any," returned Conan.

Tascela smiled mirthlessly. "You dare not leave Xuchotl!"

Conan glared at her with instinctive antagonism; she was not looking at him, but at the woman opposite him.

“I think they dare,” retorted Olmec. “But look you, Conan and Valeria, the gods must have sent you to us, to cast victory into the laps of the Tecuhltli! You are professional fighters—why not fight for us? We have wealth in abundance—precious jewels are as common in Xuchotl as cobblestones are in the cities of the world. Some the Xuchotlans brought with them from Kosala. Some, like the fire-stones, they found in the hills to the east. Aid us to wipe out the Xotalancas, and we will give you all the jewels you can carry.”

“And will you help us destroy the dragons?” asked Valeria. “With bows and poisoned arrows thirty men could slay all the dragons in the forest.”

“Aye!” replied Olmec promptly. “We have forgotten the use of the bow, in years of hand-to-hand fighting, but we can learn again.”

“What do you say?” Valeria inquired of Conan.

“We’re both penniless vagabonds,” he grinned hardily. “I’d as soon kill Xotalancas as anybody.”

“Then you agree?” exclaimed Olmec, while Techotl fairly hugged himself with delight.

“Aye. And now suppose you show us chambers where we can sleep, so we can be fresh tomorrow for the beginning of the slaying.”

Olmec nodded, and waved a hand, and Techotl and a woman led the adventurers into a corridor which led through a door off to the left of the jade dais. A glance back showed Valeria Olmec sitting on his throne, chin on knotted fist, staring after them. His eyes burned with a weird flame. Tascela leaned back in her seat, whispering to the sullen-faced maid, Yasala, who leaned over her shoulder, her ear to the princess’ moving lips.

The hallway was not so broad as most they had traversed, but it was long. Presently the woman halted, opened a door, and drew aside for Valeria to enter.

“Wait a minute,” growled Conan. “Where do I sleep?”

Techotl pointed to a chamber across the hallway, but one door farther down. Conan hesitated, and seemed inclined to raise an objection, but Valeria smiled spitefully at him and shut the door in his face. He muttered something uncomplimentary about women in general, and strode off down the corridor after Techotl.

In the ornate chamber where he was to sleep, he glanced up at the slot-like skylights. Some were wide enough to admit the body of a slender man, supposing the glass were broken.

“Why don’t the Xotalancas come over the roofs and shatter those skylights?” he asked.

“They cannot be broken,” answered Techotl. “Besides, the roofs would be hard to clamber over. They are mostly spires and domes and steep ridges.”

He volunteered more information about the “castle” of Tecuhtli. Like the rest of the city it contained four stories, or tiers of chambers, with towers jutting up from the roof. Each tier was named; indeed, the people of Xuchotl had a name for each chamber, hall and stair in the city, as people of more normal cities designate streets and quarters. In Tecuhtli the floors were named The Eagle’s Tier, The Ape’s Tier, The Tiger’s Tier and The Serpent’s Tier, in the order as enumerated, The Eagle’s Tier being the highest, or fourth, floor.

“Who is Tascela?” asked Conan. “Olmec’s wife?”

Techotl shuddered and glanced furtively about him before answering.

“No. She is—Tascela! She was the wife of Xotalanc—the woman Tecuhtli stole, to start the feud.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded Conan. “That woman is beautiful and young. Are you trying to tell me that she was a wife fifty years ago?”

“Aye! I swear it! She was a full-grown woman when the Tlazitlans journeyed from Lake Zuad. It was because the king of Stygia desired her for a concubine that Xotalanc and his brother rebelled and fled into the wilderness. She is a witch, who possesses the secret of perpetual youth.”

“What’s that?” asked Conan.

Techotl shuddered again.

“Ask me not! I dare not speak. It is too grisly, even for Xuchotl!”

And touching his finger to his lips, he glided from the chamber.

4. Scent of Black Lotus

Valeria unbuckled her sword-belt and laid it with the sheathed weapon on the couch where she meant to sleep. She noted that the doors were supplied with bolts, and asked where they led.

“Those lead into adjoining chambers,” answered the woman, indicating the doors on right and left. “That one”—pointing to a copper-bound door opposite

that which opened into the corridor—”leads to a corridor which runs to a stair that descends into the catacombs. Do not fear; naught can harm you here.”

“Who spoke of fear?” snapped Valeria. “I just like to know what sort of harbour I’m dropping anchor in. No, I don’t want you to sleep at the foot of my couch. I’m not accustomed to being waited on—not by women, anyway. You have my leave to go.”

Alone in the room, the pirate shot the bolts on all the doors, kicked off her boots and stretched luxuriously out on the couch. She imagined Conan similarly situated across the corridor, but her feminine vanity prompted her to visualize him as scowling and muttering with chagrin as he cast himself on his solitary couch, and she grinned with gleeful malice as she prepared herself for slumber.

Outside, night had fallen. In the halls of Xuchotl the green fire-jewels blazed like the eyes of prehistoric cats. Somewhere among the dark towers a night wind moaned like a restless spirit. Through the dim passages stealthy figures began stealing, like disembodied shadows.

Valeria awoke suddenly on her couch. In the dusky emerald glow of the fire-gems she saw a shadowy figure bending over her. For a bemused instant the apparition seemed part of the dream she had been dreaming. She had seemed to lie on the couch in the chamber as she was actually lying, while over her pulsed and throbbed a gigantic black blossom so enormous that it hid the ceiling. Its exotic perfume pervaded her being, inducing a delicious, sensuous languor that was something more and less than sleep. She was sinking into scented billows of insensible bliss, when something touched her face. So supersensitive were her drugged senses, that the light touch was like a dislocating impact, jolting her rudely into full wakefulness. Then it was that she saw, not a gargantuan blossom, but a dark-skinned woman standing above her.

With the realization came anger and instant action. The woman turned lithely, but before she could run Valeria was on her feet and had caught her arm. She fought like a wildcat for an instant, and then subsided as she felt herself crushed by the superior strength of her captor. The pirate wrenched the woman around to face her, caught her chin with her free hand and forced her captive to meet her gaze. It was the sullen Yasala, Tascela’s maid.

“What the devil were you doing bending over me? What’s that in your hand?”

The woman made no reply, but sought to cast away the object. Valeria twisted her arm around in front of her, and the thing fell to the floor—a great black exotic blossom on a jade-green stem, large as a woman’s head, to be sure, but tiny beside the exaggerated vision she had seen.

“The black lotus!” said Valeria between her teeth. “The blossom whose scent brings deep sleep. You were trying to drug me! If you hadn’t accidentally

touched my face with the petals, you'd have—why did you do it? What's your game?"

Yasala maintained a sulky silence, and with an oath Valeria whirled her around, forced her to her knees and twisted her arm up behind her back.

"Tell me, or I'll tear your arm out of its socket!"

Yasala squirmed in anguish as her arm was forced excruciatingly up between her shoulder-blades, but a violent shaking of her head was the only answer she made.

"Slut!" Valeria cast her from her to sprawl on the floor. The pirate glared at the prostrate figure with blazing eyes. Fear and the memory of Tascela's burning eyes stirred in her, rousing all her tigerish instincts of self-preservation. These people were decadent; any sort of perversity might be expected to be encountered among them. But Valeria sensed here something that moved behind the scenes, some secret terror fouler than common degeneracy. Fear and revulsion of this weird city swept her. These people were neither sane nor normal; she began to doubt if they were even human. Madness smoldered in the eyes of them all—all except the cruel, cryptic eyes of Tascela, which held secrets and mysteries more abysmal than madness.

She lifted her head and listened intently. The halls of Xuchotl were as silent as if it were in reality a dead city. The green jewels bathed the chamber in a nightmare glow, in which the eyes of the woman on the floor glittered eerily up at her. A thrill of panic throbbed through Valeria, driving the last vestige of mercy from her fierce soul.

"Why did you try to drug me?" she muttered, grasping the woman's black hair, and forcing her head back to glare into her sullen, long-lashed eyes. "Did Tascela send you?"

No answer. Valeria cursed venomously and slapped the woman first on one cheek and then the other. The blows resounded through the room, but Yasala made no outcry.

"Why don't you scream?" demanded Valeria savagely. "Do you fear someone will hear you? Whom do you fear? Tascela? Olmec? Conan?"

Yasala made no reply. She crouched, watching her captor with eyes baleful as those of a basilisk. Stubborn silence always fans anger. Valeria turned and tore a handful of cords from a near-by hanging.

"You sulky slut!" she said between her teeth. "I'm going to strip you stark naked and tie you across that couch and whip you until you tell me what you were doing here, and who sent you!"

Yasala made no verbal protest, nor did she offer any resistance, as Valeria carried out the first part of her threat with a fury that her captive's obstinacy only sharpened. Then for a space there was no sound in the chamber except the whistle and crackle of hard-woven silken cords on naked flesh. Yasala could not move her fast-bound hands or feet. Her body writhed and quivered under the chastisement, her head swayed from side to side in rhythm with the blows. Her teeth were sunk into her lower lip and a trickle of blood began as the punishment continued. But she did not cry out.

The pliant cords made no great sound as they encountered the quivering body of the captive; only a sharp crackling snap, but each cord left a red streak across Yasala's dark flesh. Valeria inflicted the punishment with all the strength of her war-hardened arm, with all the mercilessness acquired during a life where pain and torment were daily happenings, and with all the cynical ingenuity which only a woman displays toward a woman. Yasala suffered more, physically and mentally, than she would have suffered under a lash wielded by a man, however strong.

It was the application of this feminine cynicism which at last tamed Yasala.

A low whimper escaped from her lips, and Valeria paused, arm lifted, and raked back a damp yellow lock. "Well, are you going to talk?" she demanded. "I can keep this up all night, if necessary!"

"Mercy!" whispered the woman. "I will tell."

Valeria cut the cords from her wrists and ankles, and pulled her to her feet. Yasala sank down on the couch, half reclining on one bare hip, supporting herself on her arm, and writhing at the contact of her smarting flesh with the couch. She was trembling in every limb.

"Wine!" she begged, dry-lipped, indicating with a quivering hand a gold vessel on an ivory table. "Let me drink. I am weak with pain. Then I will tell you all."

Valeria picked up the vessel, and Yasala rose unsteadily to receive it. She took it, raised it toward her lips—then dashed the contents full into the Aquilonian's face. Valeria reeled backward, shaking and clawing the stinging liquid out of her eyes. Through a smarting mist she saw Yasala dart across the room, fling back a bolt, throw open the copper-bound door and run down the hall. The pirate was after her instantly, sword out and murder in her heart.

But Yasala had the start, and she ran with the nervous agility of a woman who has just been whipped to the point of hysterical frenzy. She rounded a corner in the corridor, yards ahead of Valeria, and when the pirate turned it, she saw only an empty hall, and at the other end a door that gaped blackly. A damp moldy scent reeked up from it, and Valeria shivered. That must be the door that led to the catacombs. Yasala had taken refuge among the dead.

Valeria advanced to the door and looked down a flight of stone steps that vanished quickly into utter blackness. Evidently it was a shaft that led straight

to the pits below the city, without opening upon any of the lower floors. She shivered slightly at the thought of the thousands of corpses lying in their stone crypts down there, wrapped in their moldering cloths. She had no intention of groping her way down those stone steps. Yasala doubtless knew every turn and twist of the subterranean tunnels.

She was turning back, baffled and furious, when a sobbing cry welled up from the blackness. It seemed to come from a great depth, but human words were faintly distinguishable, and the voice was that of a woman. "Oh, help! Help, in Set's name! Ahhh!" It trailed away, and Valeria thought she caught the echo of a ghostly tittering.

Valeria felt her skin crawl. What had happened to Yasala down there in the thick blackness? There was no doubt that it had been she who had cried out. But what peril could have befallen her? Was a Xotalanca lurking down there? Olmec had assured them that the catacombs below Tecuhltli were walled off from the rest, too securely for their enemies to break through. Besides, that tittering had not sounded like a human being at all.

Valeria hurried back down the corridor, not stopping to close the door that opened on the stair. Regaining her chamber, she closed the door and shot the bolt behind her. She pulled on her boots and buckled her sword-belt about her. She was determined to make her way to Conan's room and urge him, if he still lived, to join her in an attempt to fight their way out of that city of devils.

But even as she reached the door that opened into the corridor, a long-drawn scream of agony rang through the halls, followed by the stamp of running feet and the loud clangor of swords.

5. Twenty Red Nails

Two warriors lounged in the guardroom on the floor known as the Tier of the Eagle. Their attitude was casual, though habitually alert. An attack on the great bronze door from without was always a possibility, but for many years no such assault had been attempted on either side.

"The strangers are strong allies," said one. "Olmec will move against the enemy tomorrow, I believe."

He spoke as a soldier in a war might have spoken. In the miniature world of Xuchotl each handful of feudists was an army, and the empty halls between the castles was the country over which they campaigned.

The other meditated for a space.

"Suppose with their aid we destroy Xotalanc," he said. "What then, Xatmec?"

"Why," returned Xatmec, "we will drive red nails for them all. The captives we will burn and flay and quarter."

“But afterward?” pursued the other. “After we have slain them all? Will it not seem strange, to have no foes to fight? All my life I have fought and hated the Xotalancas. With the feud ended, what is left?”

Xatmec shrugged his shoulders. His thoughts had never gone beyond the destruction of their foes. They could not go beyond that.

Suddenly both men stiffened at a noise outside the door.

“To the door, Xatmec!” hissed the last speaker. “I shall look through the Eye—
—”

Xatmec, sword in hand, leaned against the bronze door, straining his ear to hear through the metal. His mate looked into the mirror. He started convulsively. Men were clustered thickly outside the door; grim, dark-faced men with swords gripped in their teeth—and their fingers thrust into their ears. One who wore a feathered head-dress had a set of pipes which he set to his lips, and even as the Tecuhtli started to shout a warning, the pipes began to skirl.

The cry died in the guard’s throat as the thin, weird piping penetrated the metal door and smote on his ears. Xatmec leaned frozen against the door, as if paralyzed in that position. His face was that of a wooden image, his expression one of horrified listening. The other guard, farther removed from the source of the sound, yet sensed the horror of what was taking place, the grisly threat that lay in that demoniac fifeing. He felt the weird strains plucking like unseen fingers at the tissues of his brain, filling him with alien emotions and impulses of madness. But with a soul-tearing effort he broke the spell, and shrieked a warning in a voice he did not recognize as his own.

But even as he cried out, the music changed to an unbearable shrilling that was like a knife in the ear-drums. Xatmec screamed in sudden agony, and all the sanity went out of his face like a flame blown out in a wind. Like a madman he ripped loose the chain, tore open the door and rushed out into the hall, sword lifted before his mate could stop him. A dozen blades struck him down, and over his mangled body the Xotalancas surged into the guardroom, with a long-drawn, blood-mad yell that sent the unwonted echoes reverberating.

His brain reeling from the shock of it all, the remaining guard leaped to meet them with goring spear. The horror of the sorcery he had just witnessed was submerged in the stunning realization that the enemy were in Tecuhtli. And as his spearhead ripped through a dark-skinned belly he knew no more, for a swinging sword crushed his skull, even as wild-eyed warriors came pouring in from the chambers behind the guardroom.

It was the yelling of men and the clanging of steel that brought Conan bounding from his couch, wide awake and broadsword in hand. In an instant

he had reached the door and flung it open, and was glaring out into the corridor just as Techotl rushed up it, eyes blazing madly.

“The Xotalancas!” he screamed, in a voice hardly human, “They are within the door!”

Conan ran down the corridor, even as Valeria emerged from her chamber.

“What the devil is it?” she called.

“Techotl says the Xotalancas are in,” he answered hurriedly. “That racket sounds like it.”

With the Tecuhtli on their heels they burst into the throne room and were confronted by a scene beyond the most frantic dream of blood and fury. Twenty men and women, their black hair streaming, and the white skulls gleaming on their breasts, were locked in combat with the people of Tecuhtli. The women on both sides fought as madly as the men, and already the room and the hall beyond were strewn with corpses.

Olmec, naked but for a breech-clout, was fighting before his throne, and as the adventurers entered, Tascela ran from an inner chamber with a sword in her hand.

Xatmec and his mate were dead, so there was none to tell the Tecuhtli how their foes had found their way into their citadel. Nor was there any to say what had prompted that mad attempt. But the losses of the Xotalancas had been greater, their position more desperate, than the Tecuhtli had known. The maiming of their scaly ally, the destruction of the Burning Skull, and the news, gasped by a dying man, that mysterious white-skin allies had joined their enemies, had driven them to the frenzy of desperation and the wild determination to die dealing death to their ancient foes.

The Tecuhtli, recovering from the first stunning shock of the surprise that had swept them back into the throne room and littered the floor with their corpses, fought back with an equally desperate fury, while the door-guards from the lower floors came racing to hurl themselves into the fray. It was the death-fight of rabid wolves, blind, panting, merciless. Back and forth it surged, from door to dais, blades whickering and striking into flesh, blood spurting, feet stamping the crimson floor where redder pools were forming. Ivory tables crashed over, seats were splintered, velvet hangings torn down were stained red. It was the bloody climax of a bloody half-century, and every man there sensed it.

But the conclusion was inevitable. The Tecuhtli outnumbered the invaders almost two to one, and they were heartened by that fact and by the entrance into the mêlée of their light-skinned allies.

These crashed into the fray with the devastating effect of a hurricane plowing through a grove of saplings. In sheer strength no three Tlazitlans were a match for Conan, and in spite of his weight he was quicker on his feet than any of them. He moved through the whirling, eddying mass with the surety and destructiveness of a gray wolf amidst a pack of alley curs, and he strode over a wake of crumpled figures.

Valeria fought beside him, her lips smiling and her eyes blazing. She was stronger than the average man, and far quicker and more ferocious. Her sword was like a living thing in her hand. Where Conan beat down opposition by the sheer weight and power of his blows, breaking spears, splitting skulls and cleaving bosoms to the breast-bone, Valeria brought into action a finesse of sword-play that dazzled and bewildered her antagonists before it slew them. Again and again a warrior, heaving high his heavy blade, found her point in his jugular before he could strike. Conan, towering above the field, strode through the welter smiting right and left, but Valeria moved like an illusive phantom, constantly shifting, and thrusting and slashing as she shifted. Swords missed her again and again as the wielders flailed the empty air and died with her point in their hearts or throats, and her mocking laughter in their ears.

Neither sex nor condition was considered by the maddened combatants. The five women of the Xotalancas were down with their throats cut before Conan and Valeria entered the fray, and when a man or woman went down under the stamping feet, there was always a knife ready for the helpless throat, or a sandaled foot eager to crush the prostrate skull.

From wall to wall, from door to door rolled the waves of combat, spilling over into adjoining chambers. And presently only Tecuhltli and their white-skinned allies stood upright in the great throne room. The survivors stared bleakly and blankly at each other, like survivors after Judgment Day or the destruction of the world. On legs wide-braced, hands gripping notched and dripping swords, blood trickling down their arms, they stared at one another across the mangled corpses of friends and foes. They had no breath left to shout, but a bestial mad howling rose from their lips. It was not a human cry of triumph. It was the howling of a rabid wolf-pack stalking among the bodies of its victims.

Conan caught Valeria's arm and turned her about.

"You've got a stab in the calf of your leg," he growled.

She glanced down, for the first time aware of a stinging in the muscles of her leg. Some dying man on the floor had fleshed his dagger with his last effort.

"You look like a butcher yourself," she laughed.

He shook a red shower from his hands.

"Not mine. Oh, a scratch here and there. Nothing to bother about. But that calf ought to be bandaged."

Olmec came through the litter, looking like a ghoul with his naked massive shoulders splashed with blood, and his black beard dabbled in crimson. His eyes were red, like the reflection of flame on black water.

“We have won!” he croaked dazedly. “The feud is ended! The dogs of Xotalanc lie dead! Oh, for a captive to flay alive! Yet it is good to look upon their dead faces. Twenty dead dogs! Twenty red nails for the black column!”

“You’d best see to your wounded,” grunted Conan, turning away from him. “Here, girl, let me see that leg.”

“Wait a minute!” she shook him off impatiently. The fire of fighting still burned brightly in her soul. “How do we know these are all of them? These might have come on a raid of their own.”

“They would not split the clan on a foray like this,” said Olmec, shaking his head, and regaining some of his ordinary intelligence. Without his purple robe the man seemed less like a prince than some repellent beast of prey. “I will stake my head upon it that we have slain them all. There were less of them than I dreamed, and they must have been desperate. But how came they in Tecuhtli?”

Tascela came forward, wiping her sword on her naked thigh, and holding in her other hand an object she had taken from the body of the feathered leader of the Xotalancas.

“The pipes of madness,” she said. “A warrior tells me that Xatmec opened the door to the Xotalancas and was cut down as they stormed into the guardroom. This warrior came to the guardroom from the inner hall just in time to see it happen and to hear the last of a weird strain of music which froze his very soul. Tolkemec used to talk of these pipes, which the Xuchotlans swore were hidden somewhere in the catacombs with the bones of the ancient wizard who used them in his lifetime. Somehow the dogs of Xotalanc found them and learned their secret.”

“Somebody ought to go to Xotalanc and see if any remain alive,” said Conan. “I’ll go if somebody will guide me.”

Olmec glanced at the remnants of his people. There were only twenty left alive, and of these several lay groaning on the floor. Tascela was the only one of the Tecuhtli who had escaped without a wound. The princess was untouched, though she had fought as savagely as any.

“Who will go with Conan to Xotalanc?” asked Olmec.

Techotl limped forward. The wound in his thigh had started bleeding afresh, and he had another gash across his ribs.

“I will go!”

“No, you won’t,” vetoed Conan. “And you’re not going either, Valeria. In a little while that leg will be getting stiff.”

“I will go,” volunteered a warrior, who was knotting a bandage about a slashed forearm.

“Very well, Yanath. Go with the Cimmerian. And you, too, Topal.” Olmec indicated another man whose injuries were slight. “But first aid us to lift the badly wounded on these couches where we may bandage their hurts.”

This was done quickly. As they stooped to pick up a woman who had been stunned by a war-club, Olmec’s beard brushed Topal’s ear. Conan thought the prince muttered something to the warrior, but he could not be sure. A few moments later he was leading his companions down the hall.

Conan glanced back as he went out the door, at that shambles where the dead lay on the smoldering floor, blood-stained dark limbs knotted in attitudes of fierce muscular effort, dark faces frozen in masks of hate, glassy eyes glaring up at the green fire-jewels which bathed the ghastly scene in a dusky emerald witch-light. Among the dead the living moved aimlessly, like people moving in a trance. Conan heard Olmec call a woman and direct her to bandage Valeria’s leg. The pirate followed the woman into an adjoining chamber, already beginning to limp slightly.

Warily the two Tecuhtli led Conan along the hall beyond the bronze door, and through chamber after chamber shimmering in the green fire. They saw no one, heard no sound. After they crossed the Great Hall which bisected the city from north to south, their caution was increased by the realization of their nearness to enemy territory. But chambers and halls lay empty to their wary gaze, and they came at last along a broad dim hallway and halted before a bronze door similar to the Eagle Door of Tecuhtli. Gingerly they tried it, and it opened silently under their fingers. Awed, they stared into the green-lit chambers beyond. For fifty years no Tecuhtli had entered those halls save as a prisoner going to a hideous doom. To go to Xotalanc had been the ultimate horror that could befall a man of the western castle. The terror of it had stalked through their dreams since earliest childhood. To Yanath and Topal that bronze door was like the portal of hell.

They cringed back, unreasoning horror in their eyes, and Conan pushed past them and strode into Xotalanc.

Timidly they followed him. As each man set foot over the threshold he stared and glared wildly about him. But only their quick, hurried breathing disturbed the silence.

They had come into a square guardroom, like that behind the Eagle Door of Tecuhtli, and, similarly, a hall ran away from it to a broad chamber that was a counterpart of Olmec's throne room.

Conan glanced down the hall with its rugs and divans and hangings, and stood listening intently. He heard no noise, and the rooms had an empty feel. He did not believe there were any Xotalancas left alive in Xuchotl.

"Come on," he muttered, and started down the hall.

He had not gone far when he was aware that only Yanath was following him. He wheeled back to see Topal standing in an attitude of horror, one arm out as if to fend off some threatening peril, his distended eyes fixed with hypnotic intensity on something protruding from behind a divan.

"What the devil?" Then Conan saw what Topal was staring at, and he felt a faint twitching of the skin between his giant shoulders. A monstrous head protruded from behind the divan, a reptilian head, broad as the head of a crocodile, with down-curving fangs that projected over the lower jaw. But there was an unnatural limpness about the thing, and the hideous eyes were glazed.

Conan peered behind the couch. It was a great serpent which lay there limp in death, but such a serpent as he had never seen in his wanderings. The reek and chill of the deep black earth were about it, and its colour was an indeterminable hue which changed with each new angle from which he surveyed it. A great wound in the neck showed what had caused its death.

"It is the Crawler!" whispered Yanath.

"It's the thing I slashed on the stair," grunted Conan. "After it trailed us to the Eagle Door, it dragged itself here to die. How could the Xotalancas control such a brute?"

The Tecuhtli shivered and shook their heads.

"They brought it up from the black tunnels below the catacombs. They discovered secrets unknown to Tecuhtli."

"Well, it's dead, and if they'd had any more of them, they'd have brought them along when they came to Tecuhtli. Come on."

They crowded close at his heels as he strode down the hall and thrust on the silver-worked door at the other end.

"If we don't find anybody on this floor," he said, "we'll descend into the lower floors. We'll explore Xotalanc from the roof to the catacombs. If Xotalanc is like Tecuhtli, all the rooms and halls in this tier will be lighted—what the devil!"

They had come into the broad throne chamber, so similar to that one in Tecuhtli. There were the same jade dais and ivory seat, the same divans, rugs and hangings on the walls. No black, red-scarred column stood behind the throne-dais, but evidences of the grim feud were not lacking.

Ranged along the wall behind the dais were rows of glass-covered shelves. And on those shelves hundreds of human heads, perfectly preserved, stared at the startled watchers with emotionless eyes, as they had stared for only the gods knew how many months and years.

Topal muttered a curse, but Yanath stood silent, the mad light growing in his wide eyes. Conan frowned, knowing that Tlazitlan sanity was hung on a hair-trigger.

Suddenly Yanath pointed to the ghastly relics with a twitching finger.

“There is my brother’s head!” he murmured. “And there is my father’s younger brother! And there beyond them is my sister’s eldest son!”

Suddenly he began to weep, dry-eyed, with harsh, loud sobs that shook his frame. He did not take his eyes from the heads. His sobs grew shriller, changed to frightful, high-pitched laughter, and that in turn became an unbearable screaming. Yanath was stark mad.

Conan laid a hand on his shoulder, and as if the touch had released all the frenzy in his soul, Yanath screamed and whirled, striking at the Cimmerian with his sword. Conan parried the blow, and Topal tried to catch Yanath’s arm. But the madman avoided him and with froth flying from his lips, he drove his sword deep into Topal’s body. Topal sank down with a groan, and Yanath whirled for an instant like a crazy dervish; then he ran at the shelves and began hacking at the glass with his sword, screeching blasphemously.

Conan sprang at him from behind, trying to catch him unaware and disarm him, but the madman wheeled and lunged at him, screaming like a lost soul. Realizing that the warrior was hopelessly insane, the Cimmerian side-stepped, and as the maniac went past, he swung a cut that severed the shoulder-bone and breast, and dropped the man dead beside his dying victim.

Conan bent over Topal, seeing that the man was at his last gasp. It was useless to seek to stanch the blood gushing from the horrible wound.

“You’re done for, Topal,” grunted Conan. “Any word you want to send to your people?”

“Bend closer,” gasped Topal, and Conan complied—and an instant later caught the man’s wrist as Topal struck at his breast with a dagger.

“Crom!” swore Conan. “Are you mad, too?”

“Olmec ordered it!” gasped the dying man. “I know not why. As we lifted the wounded upon the couches he whispered to me, bidding me to slay you as we returned to Tecuhltli——” And with the name of his clan on his lips, Topal died.

Conan scowled down at him in puzzlement. This whole affair had an aspect of lunacy. Was Olmec mad, too? Were all the Tecuhltli madder than he had realized? With a shrug of his shoulders he strode down the hall and out of the bronze door, leaving the dead Tecuhltli lying before the staring dead eyes of their kinsmen’s heads.

Conan needed no guide back through the labyrinth they had traversed. His primitive instinct of direction led him unerringly along the route they had come. He traversed it as warily as he had before, his sword in his hand, and his eyes fiercely searching each shadowed nook and corner; for it was his former allies he feared now, not the ghosts of the slain Xotalancas.

He had crossed the Great Hall and entered the chambers beyond when he heard something moving ahead of him—something which gasped and panted, and moved with a strange, floundering, scrambling noise. A moment later Conan saw a man crawling over the flaming floor toward him—a man whose progress left a broad bloody smear on the smoldering surface. It was Techotl and his eyes were already glazing; from a deep gash in his breast blood gushed steadily between the fingers of his clutching hand. With the other he clawed and hitched himself along.

“Conan,” he cried chokingly, “Conan! Olmec has taken the yellow-haired woman!”

“So that’s why he told Topal to kill me!” murmured Conan, dropping to his knee beside the man, who his experienced eye told him was dying. “Olmec isn’t so mad as I thought.”

Techotl’s groping fingers plucked at Conan’s arm. In the cold, loveless and altogether hideous life of the Tecuhltli his admiration and affection for the invaders from the outer world formed a warm, human oasis, constituted a tie that connected him with a more natural humanity that was totally lacking in his fellows, whose only emotions were hate, lust and the urge of sadistic cruelty.

“I sought to oppose him,” gurgled Techotl, blood bubbling frothily to his lips. “But he struck me down. He thought he had slain me, but I crawled away. Ah, Set, how far I have crawled in my own blood! Beware, Conan! Olmec may have set an ambush for your return! Slay Olmec! He is a beast. Take Valeria and flee! Fear not to traverse the forest. Olmec and Tascela lied about the dragons. They slew each other years ago, all save the strongest. For a dozen years there has been only one dragon. If you have slain him, there is naught in the forest to harm you. He was the god Olmec worshipped; and Olmec fed human sacrifices to him, the very old and the very young, bound and hurled from the wall. Hasten! Olmec has taken Valeria to the Chamber of the——”

His head slumped down and he was dead before it came to rest on the floor.

Conan sprang up, his eyes like live coals. So that was Olmec's game, having first used the strangers to destroy his foes! He should have known that something of the sort would be going on in that black-bearded degenerate's mind.

The Cimmerian started toward Tecuhtli with reckless speed. Rapidly he reckoned the numbers of his former allies. Only twenty-one, counting Olmec, had survived that fiendish battle in the throne room. Three had died since, which left seventeen enemies with which to reckon. In his rage Conan felt capable of accounting for the whole clan single-handed.

But the innate craft of the wilderness rose to guide his berserk rage. He remembered Techotl's warning of an ambush. It was quite probable that the prince would make such provisions, on the chance that Topal might have failed to carry out his order. Olmec would be expecting him to return by the same route he had followed in going to Xotalanc.

Conan glanced up at a skylight under which he was passing and caught the blurred glimmer of stars. They had not yet begun to pale for dawn. The events of the night had been crowded into a comparatively short space of time.

He turned aside from his direct course and descended a winding staircase to the floor below. He did not know where the door was to be found that let into the castle on that level, but he knew he could find it. How he was to force the locks he did not know; he believed that the doors of Tecuhtli would all be locked and bolted, if for no other reason than the habits of half a century. But there was nothing else but to attempt it.

Sword in hand, he hurried noiselessly on through a maze of green-lit or shadowy rooms and halls. He knew he must be near Tecuhtli, when a sound brought him up short. He recognized it for what it was—a human being trying to cry out through a stifling gag. It came from somewhere ahead of him, and to the left. In those deathly-still chambers a small sound carried a long way.

Conan turned aside and went seeking after the sound, which continued to be repeated. Presently he was glaring through a doorway upon a weird scene. In the room into which he was looking a low rack-like frame of iron lay on the floor, and a giant figure was bound prostrate upon it. His head rested on a bed of iron spikes, which were already crimson-pointed with blood where they had pierced his scalp. A peculiar harness-like contrivance was fastened about his head, though in such a manner that the leather band did not protect his scalp from the spikes. This harness was connected by a slender chain to the mechanism that upheld a huge iron ball which was suspended above the captive's hairy breast. As long as the man could force himself to remain motionless the iron ball hung in its place. But when the pain of the iron points

caused him to lift his head, the ball lurched downward a few inches. Presently his aching neck muscles would no longer support his head in its unnatural position and it would fall back on the spikes again. It was obvious that eventually the ball would crush him to a pulp, slowly and inexorably. The victim was gagged, and above the gag his great black ox-eyes rolled wildly toward the man in the doorway, who stood in silent amazement. The man on the rack was Olmec, prince of Tecuhtli.

6. The Eyes of Tascela

“Why did you bring me into this chamber to bandage my legs?” demanded Valeria. “Couldn’t you have done it just as well in the throne room?”

She sat on a couch with her wounded leg extended upon it, and the Tecuhtli woman had just bound it with silk bandages. Valeria’s red-stained sword lay on the couch beside her.

She frowned as she spoke. The woman had done her task silently and efficiently, but Valeria liked neither the lingering, caressing touch of her slim fingers nor the expression in her eyes.

“They have taken the rest of the wounded into the other chambers,” answered the woman in the soft speech of the Tecuhtli women, which somehow did not suggest either softness or gentleness in the speakers. A little while before, Valeria had seen this same woman stab a Xotalanca woman through the breast and stamp the eyeballs out of a wounded Xotalanca man.

“They will be carrying the corpses of the dead down into the catacombs,” she added, “lest the ghosts escape into the chambers and dwell there.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?” asked Valeria.

“I know the ghost of Tolkemec dwells in the catacombs,” she answered with a shiver. “Once I saw it, as I crouched in a crypt among the bones of a dead queen. It passed by in the form of an ancient man with flowing white beard and locks, and luminous eyes that blazed in the darkness. It was Tolkemec; I saw him living when I was a child and he was being tortured.”

Her voice sank to a fearful whisper: “Olmec laughs, but I know Tolkemec’s ghost dwells in the catacombs! They say it is rats which gnaw the flesh from the bones of the newly dead—but ghosts eat flesh. Who knows but that——”

She glanced up quickly as a shadow fell across the couch. Valeria looked up to see Olmec gazing down at her. The prince had cleansed his hands, torso and beard of the blood that had splashed them; but he had not donned his robe, and his great dark-skinned hairless body and limbs renewed the impression of strength bestial in its nature. His deep black eyes burned with a more elemental light, and there was the suggestion of a twitching in the fingers that tugged at his thick blue-black beard.

He stared fixedly at the woman, and she rose and glided from the chamber. As she passed through the door she cast a look over her shoulder at Valeria, a glance full of cynical derision and obscene mockery.

“She has done a clumsy job,” criticized the prince, coming to the divan and bending over the bandage. “Let me see——”

With a quickness amazing in one of his bulk he snatched her sword and threw it across the chamber. His next move was to catch her in his giant arms.

Quick and unexpected as the move was, she almost matched it; for even as he grabbed her, her dirk was in her hand and she stabbed murderously at his throat. More by luck than skill he caught her wrist, and then began a savage wrestling-match. She fought him with fists, feet, knees, teeth and nails, with all the strength of her magnificent body and all the knowledge of hand-to-hand fighting she had acquired in her years of roving and fighting on sea and land. It availed her nothing against his brute strength. She lost her dirk in the first moment of contact, and thereafter found herself powerless to inflict any appreciable pain on her giant attacker.

The blaze in his weird black eyes did not alter, and their expression filled her with fury, fanned by the sardonic smile that seemed carved upon his bearded lips. Those eyes and that smile contained all the cruel cynicism that seethes below the surface of a sophisticated and degenerate race, and for the first time in her life Valeria experienced fear of a man. It was like struggling against some huge elemental force; his iron arms thwarted her efforts with an ease that sent panic racing through her limbs. He seemed impervious to any pain she could indict. Only once, when she sank her white teeth savagely into his wrist so that the blood started, did he react. And that was to buffet her brutally upon the side of the head with his open hand, so that stars flashed before her eyes and her head rolled on her shoulders.

Her shirt had been torn open in the struggle, and with cynical cruelty he rasped his thick beard across her bare breasts, bringing the blood to suffuse the fair skin, and fetching a cry of pain and outraged fury from her. Her convulsive resistance was useless; she was crushed down on a couch, disarmed and panting, her eyes blazing up at him like the eyes of a trapped tigress.

A moment later he was hurrying from the chamber, carrying her in his arms. She made no resistance, but the smoldering of her eyes showed that she was unconquered in spirit, at least. She had not cried out. She knew that Conan was not within call, and it did not occur to her that any in Tecuhtli would oppose their prince. But she noticed that Olmec went stealthily, with his head on one side as if listening for sounds of pursuit, and he did not return to the throne chamber. He carried her through a door that stood opposite that through which he had entered, crossed another room and began stealing down a hall. As she became convinced that he feared some opposition to the

abduction, she threw back her head and screamed at the top of her lusty voice.

She was rewarded by a slap that half stunned her, and Olmec quickened his pace to a shambling run.

But her cry had been echoed, and twisting her head about, Valeria, through the tears and stars that partly blinded her, saw Techotl limping after them.

Olmec turned with a snarl, shifting the woman to an uncomfortable and certainly undignified position under one huge arm, where he held her writhing and kicking vainly, like a child.

“Olmec!” protested Techotl. “You cannot be such a dog as to do this thing! She is Conan’s woman! She helped us slay the Xotalancas, and——”

Without a word Olmec balled his free hand into a huge fist and stretched the wounded warrior senseless at his feet. Stooping, and hindered not at all by the struggles and imprecations of his captive, he drew Techotl’s sword from its sheath and stabbed the warrior in the breast. Then casting aside the weapon he fled on along the corridor. He did not see a woman’s dark face peer cautiously after him from behind a hanging. It vanished, and presently Techotl groaned and stirred, rose dazedly and staggered drunkenly away, calling Conan’s name.

Olmec hurried on down the corridor, and descended a winding ivory staircase. He crossed several corridors and halted at last in a broad chamber whose doors were veiled with heavy tapestries, with one exception—a heavy bronze door similar to the Door of the Eagle on the upper floor.

He was moved to rumble, pointing to it: “That is one of the outer doors of Tecuhtli. For the first time in fifty years it is unguarded. We need not guard it now, for Xotalanc is no more.”

“Thanks to Conan and me, you bloody rogue!” sneered Valeria, trembling with fury and the shame of physical coercion. “You treacherous dog! Conan will cut your throat for this!”

Olmec did not bother to voice his belief that Conan’s own gullet had already been severed according to his whispered command. He was too utterly cynical to be at all interested in her thoughts or opinions. His flame-lit eyes devoured her, dwelling burningly on the generous expanses of clear white flesh exposed where her shirt and breeches had been torn in the struggle.

“Forget Conan,” he said thickly. “Olmec is lord of Xuchotl. Xotalanc is no more. There will be no more fighting. We shall spend our lives in drinking and love-making. First let us drink!”

He seated himself on an ivory table and pulled her down on his knees, like a dark-skinned satyr with a white nymph in his arms. Ignoring her un-nymphlike profanity, he held her helpless with one great arm about her waist while the other reached across the table and secured a vessel of wine.

“Drink!” he commanded, forcing it to her lips, as she writhed her head away.

The liquor slopped over, stinging her lips, splashing down on her naked breasts.

“Your guest does not like your wine, Olmec,” spoke a cool, sardonic voice.

Olmec stiffened; fear grew in his flaming eyes. Slowly he swung his great head about and stared at Tascela who posed negligently in the curtained doorway, one hand on her smooth hip. Valeria twisted herself about in his iron grip, and when she met the burning eyes of Tascela, a chill tingled along her supple spine. New experiences were flooding Valeria’s proud soul that night. Recently she had learned to fear a man; now she knew what it was to fear a woman.

Olmec sat motionless, a gray pallor growing under his swarthy skin. Tascela brought her other hand from behind her and displayed a small gold vessel.

“I feared she would not like your wine, Olmec,” purred the princess, “so I brought some of mine, some I brought with me long ago from the shores of Lake Zuad—do you understand, Olmec?”

Beads of sweat stood out suddenly on Olmec’s brow. His muscles relaxed, and Valeria broke away and put the table between them. But though reason told her to dart from the room, some fascination she could not understand held her rigid, watching the scene.

Tascela came toward the seated prince with a swaying, undulating walk that was mockery in itself. Her voice was soft, slurringly caressing, but her eyes gleamed. Her slim fingers stroked his beard lightly.

“You are selfish, Olmec,” she crooned, smiling. “You would keep our handsome guest to yourself, though you knew I wished to entertain her. You are much at fault, Olmec!”

The mask dropped for an instant; her eyes flashed, her face was contorted and with an appalling show of strength her hand locked convulsively in his beard and tore out a great handful. This evidence of unnatural strength was no more terrifying than the momentary baring of the hellish fury that raged under her bland exterior.

Olmec lurched up with a roar, and stood swaying like a bear, his mighty hands clenching and unclenching.

“Slut!” His booming voice filled the room. “Witch! She-devil! Tecuhltli should have slain you fifty years ago! Begone! I have endured too much from you! This white-skinned wench is mine! Get hence before I slay you!”

The princess laughed and dashed the blood-stained strands into his face. Her laughter was less merciful than the ring of flint on steel.

“Once you spoke otherwise, Olmec,” she taunted. “Once, in your youth, you spoke words of love. Aye, you were my lover once, years ago, and because you loved me, you slept in my arms beneath the enchanted lotus—and thereby put into my hands the chains that enslaved you. You know you cannot withstand me. You know I have but to gaze into your eyes, with the mystic power a priest of Stygia taught me, long ago, and you are powerless. You remember the night beneath the black lotus that waved above us, stirred by no worldly breeze; you scent again the unearthly perfumes that stole and rose like a cloud about you to enslave you. You cannot fight against me. You are my slave as you were that night—as you shall be so long as you shall live, Olmec of Xuchotl!”

Her voice had sunk to a murmur like the rippling of a stream running through starlit darkness. She leaned close to the prince and spread her long tapering fingers upon his giant breast. His eyes glazed, his great hands fell limply to his sides.

With a smile of cruel malice, Tascela lifted the vessel and placed it to his lips.

“Drink!”

Mechanically the prince obeyed. And instantly the glaze passed from his eyes and they were flooded with fury, comprehension and an awful fear. His mouth gaped, but no sound issued. For an instant he reeled on buckling knees, and then fell in a sodden heap on the floor.

His fall jolted Valeria out of her paralysis. She turned and sprang toward the door, but with a movement that would have shamed a leaping panther, Tascela was before her. Valeria struck at her with her clenched fist, and all the power of her supple body behind the blow. It would have stretched a man senseless on the floor. But with a lithe twist of her torso, Tascela avoided the blow and caught the pirate’s wrist. The next instant Valeria’s left hand was imprisoned, and holding her wrists together with one hand, Tascela calmly bound them with a cord she drew from her girdle. Valeria thought she had tasted the ultimate in humiliation already that night, but her shame at being manhandled by Olmec was nothing to the sensations that now shook her supple frame. Valeria had always been inclined to despise the other members of her sex; and it was overwhelming to encounter another woman who could handle her like a child. She scarcely resisted at all when Tascela forced her into a chair and drawing her bound wrists down between her knees, fastened them to the chair.

Casually stepping over Olmec, Tascela walked to the bronze door and shot the bolt and threw it open, revealing a hallway without.

“Opening upon this hall,” she remarked, speaking to her feminine captive for the first time, “there is a chamber which in old times was used as a torture room. When we retired into Tecuhtli, we brought most of the apparatus with us, but there was one piece too heavy to move. It is still in working order. I think it will be quite convenient now.”

An understanding flame of terror rose in Olmec’s eyes. Tascela strode back to him, bent and gripped him by the hair.

“He is only paralyzed temporarily,” she remarked conversationally. “He can hear, think, and feel—aye, he can feel very well indeed!”

With which sinister observation she started toward the door, dragging the giant bulk with an ease that made the pirate’s eyes dilate. She passed into the hall and moved down it without hesitation, presently disappearing with her captive into a chamber that opened into it, and whence shortly thereafter issued the clank of iron.

Valeria swore softly and tugged vainly, with her legs braced against the chair. The cords that confined her were apparently unbreakable.

Tascela presently returned alone; behind her a muffled groaning issued from the chamber. She closed the door but did not bolt it. Tascela was beyond the grip of habit, as she was beyond the touch of other human instincts and emotions.

Valeria sat dumbly, watching the woman in whose slim hands, the pirate realized, her destiny now rested.

Tascela grasped her yellow locks and forced back her head, looking impersonally down into her face. But the glitter in her dark eyes was not impersonal.

“I have chosen you for a great honour,” she said. “You shall restore the youth of Tascela. Oh, you stare at that! My appearance is that of youth, but through my veins creeps the sluggish chill of approaching age, as I have felt it a thousand times before. I am old, so old I do not remember my childhood. But I was a girl once, and a priest of Stygia loved me, and gave me the secret of immortality and youth everlasting. He died, then—some said by poison. But I dwelt in my palace by the shores of Lake Zuad and the passing years touched me not. So at last a king of Stygia desired me, and my people rebelled and brought me to this land. Olmec called me a princess. I am not of royal blood. I am greater than a princess. I am Tascela, whose youth your own glorious youth shall restore.”

Valeria's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. She sensed here a mystery darker than the degeneracy she had anticipated.

The taller woman unbound the Aquilonian's wrists and pulled her to her feet. It was not fear of the dominant strength that lurked in the princess' limbs that made Valeria a helpless, quivering captive in her hands. It was the burning, hypnotic, terrible eyes of Tascela.

7. He Comes from the Dark

"Well, I'm a Kushite!"

Conan glared down at the man on the iron rack.

"What the devil are you doing on that thing?"

Incoherent sounds issued from behind the gag and Conan bent and tore it away, evoking a bellow of fear from the captive; for his action caused the iron ball to lurch down until it nearly touched the broad breast.

"Be careful, for Set's sake!" begged Olmec.

"What for?" demanded Conan. "Do you think I care what happens to you? I only wish I had time to stay here and watch that chunk of iron grind your guts out. But I'm in a hurry. Where's Valeria?"

"Loose me!" urged Olmec, "I will tell you all!"

"Tell me first."

"Never!" The prince's heavy jaws set stubbornly.

"All right." Conan seated himself on a near-by bench. "I'll find her myself, after you've been reduced to a jelly. I believe I can speed up that process by twisting my sword-point around in your ear," he added, extending the weapon experimentally.

"Wait!" Words came in a rush from the captive's ashy lips. "Tascela took her from me. I've never been anything but a puppet in Tascela's hands."

"Tascela?" snorted Conan, and spat. "Why, the filthy——"

"No, no!" panted Olmec. "It's worse than you think. Tascela is old—centuries old. She renews her life and her youth by the sacrifice of beautiful young women. That's one thing that has reduced the clan to its present state. She will draw the essence of Valeria's life into her own body, and bloom with fresh vigor and beauty."

"Are the doors locked?" asked Conan, thumbing his sword edge.

“Aye! But I know a way to get into Tecuhtli. Only Tascela and I know, and she thinks me helpless and you slain. Free me and I swear I will help you rescue Valeria. Without my help you cannot win into Tecuhtli; for even if you tortured me into revealing the secret, you couldn’t work it. Let me go, and we will steal on Tascela and kill her before she can work magic—before she can fix her eyes on us. A knife thrown from behind will do the work. I should have killed her thus long ago, but I feared that without her to aid us the Xotalancas would overcome us. She needed my help, too; that’s the only reason she let me live this long. Now neither needs the other, and one must die. I swear that when we have slain the witch, you and Valeria shall go free without harm. My people will obey me when Tascela is dead.”

Conan stooped and cut the ropes that held the prince, and Olmec slid cautiously from under the great ball and rose, shaking his head like a bull and muttering imprecations as he fingered his lacerated scalp. Standing shoulder to shoulder the two men presented a formidable picture of primitive power. Olmec was as tall as Conan, and heavier; but there was something repellent about the Tlazitlan, something abysmal and monstrous that contrasted unfavorably with the clean-cut, compact hardness of the Cimmerian. Conan had discarded the remnants of his tattered, blood-soaked shirt, and stood with his remarkable muscular development impressively revealed. His great shoulders were as broad as those of Olmec, and more cleanly outlined, and his huge breast arched with a more impressive sweep to a hard waist that lacked the paunchy thickness of Olmec’s midsection. He might have been an image of primal strength cut out of bronze. Olmec was darker, but not from the burning of the sun. If Conan was a figure out of the dawn of Time, Olmec was a shambling, somber shape from the darkness of Time’s pre-dawn.

“Lead on,” demanded Conan. “And keep ahead of me. I don’t trust you any farther than I can throw a bull by the tail.”

Olmec turned and stalked on ahead of him, one hand twitching slightly as it plucked at his matted beard.

Olmec did not lead Conan back to the bronze door, which the prince naturally supposed Tascela had locked, but to a certain chamber on the border of Tecuhtli.

“This secret has been guarded for half a century,” he said. “Not even our own clan knew of it, and the Xotalancas never learned. Tecuhtli himself built this secret entrance, afterward slaying the slaves who did the work; for he feared that he might find himself locked out of his own kingdom some day because of the spite of Tascela, whose passion for him soon changed to hate. But she discovered the secret, and barred the hidden door against him one day as he fled back from an unsuccessful raid, and the Xotalancas took him and flayed him. But once, spying upon her, I saw her enter Tecuhtli by this route, and so learned the secret.”

He pressed upon a gold ornament in the wall, and a panel swung inward, disclosing an ivory stair leading upward.

"This stair is built within the wall," said Olmec. "It leads up to a tower upon the roof, and thence other stairs wind down to the various chambers. Hasten!"

"After you, comrade!" retorted Conan satirically, swaying his broadsword as he spoke, and Olmec shrugged his shoulders and stepped onto the staircase. Conan instantly followed him, and the door shut behind them. Far above a cluster of fire-jewels made the staircase a well of dusky dragon-light.

They mounted until Conan estimated that they were above the level of the fourth floor, and then came out into a cylindrical tower, in the domed roof of which was set the bunch of fire-jewels that lighted the stair. Through gold-barred windows, set with unbreakable crystal panes, the first windows he had seen in Xuchotl, Conan got a glimpse of high ridges, domes and more towers, looming darkly against the stars. He was looking across the roofs of Xuchotl.

Olmec did not look through the windows. He hurried down one of the several stairs that wound down from the tower, and when they had descended a few feet, this stair changed into a narrow corridor that wound tortuously on for some distance. It ceased at a steep flight of steps leading downward. There Olmec paused.

Up from below, muffled, but unmistakable, welled a woman's scream, edged with fright, fury and shame. And Conan recognized Valeria's voice.

In the swift rage roused by that cry, and the amazement of wondering what peril could wring such a shriek from Valeria's reckless lips, Conan forgot Olmec. He pushed past the prince and started down the stair. Awakening instinct brought him about again, just as Olmec struck with his great mallet-like fist. The blow, fierce and silent, was aimed at the base of Conan's brain. But the Cimmerian wheeled in time to receive the buffet on the side of his neck instead. The impact would have snapped the vertebræ of a lesser man. As it was, Conan swayed backward, but even as he reeled he dropped his sword, useless at such close quarters, and grasped Olmec's extended arm, dragging the prince with him as he fell. Headlong they went down the steps together, in a revolving whirl of limbs and heads and bodies. And as they went Conan's iron fingers found and locked in Olmec's bull-throat.

The barbarian's neck and shoulder felt numb from the sledge-like impact of Olmec's huge fist, which had carried all the strength of the massive forearm, thick triceps and great shoulder. But this did not affect his ferocity to any appreciable extent. Like a bulldog he hung on grimly, shaken and battered and beaten against the steps as they rolled, until at last they struck an ivory panel-door at the bottom with such an impact that they splintered it down its full length and crashed through its ruins. But Olmec was already dead, for those iron fingers had crushed out his life and broken his neck as they fell.

Conan rose, shaking the splinters from his great shoulder, blinking blood and dust out of his eyes.

He was in the great throne room. There were fifteen people in that room besides himself. The first person he saw was Valeria. A curious black altar stood before the throne-dais. Ranged about it, seven black candles in golden candlesticks sent up oozing spirals of thick green smoke, disturbingly scented. These spirals united in a cloud near the ceiling, forming a smoky arch above the altar. On that altar lay Valeria, stark naked, her white flesh gleaming in shocking contrast to the glistening ebon stone. She was not bound. She lay at full length, her arms stretched out above her head to their fullest extent. At the head of the altar knelt a young man, holding her wrists firmly. A young woman knelt at the other end of the altar, grasping her ankles. Between them she could neither rise nor move.

Eleven men and women of Tecuhtli knelt dumbly in a semicircle, watching the scene with hot, lustful eyes.

On the ivory throne-seat Tascela lolled. Bronze bowls of incense rolled their spirals about her; the wisps of smoke curled about her naked limbs like caressing fingers. She could not sit still; she squirmed and shifted about with sensuous abandon, as if finding pleasure in the contact of the smooth ivory with her sleek flesh.

The crash of the door as it broke beneath the impact of the hurtling bodies caused no change in the scene. The kneeling men and women merely glanced incuriously at the corpse of their prince and at the man who rose from the ruins of the door, then swung their eyes greedily back to the writhing white shape on the black altar. Tascela looked insolently at him, and sprawled back on her seat, laughing mockingly.

“Slut!” Conan saw red. His hands clenched into iron hammers as he started for her. With his first step something clanged loudly and steel bit savagely into his leg. He stumbled and almost fell, checked in his headlong stride. The jaws of an iron trap had closed on his leg, with teeth that sank deep and held. Only the ridged muscles of his calf saved the bone from being splintered. The accursed thing had sprung out of the smoldering floor without warning. He saw the slots now, in the floor where the jaws had lain, perfectly camouflaged.

“Fool!” laughed Tascela. “Did you think I would not guard against your possible return? Every door in this chamber is guarded by such traps. Stand there and watch now, while I fulfill the destiny of your handsome friend! Then I will decide your own.”

Conan’s hand instinctively sought his belt, only to encounter an empty scabbard. His sword was on the stair behind him. His poniard was lying back in the forest, where the dragon had torn it from his jaw. The steel teeth in his leg were like burning coals, but the pain was not as savage as the fury that

seethed in his soul. He was trapped, like a wolf. If he had had his sword he would have hewn off his leg and crawled across the floor to slay Tascela. Valeria's eyes rolled toward him with mute appeal, and his own helplessness sent red waves of madness surging through his brain.

Dropping on the knee of his free leg, he strove to get his fingers between the jaws of the trap, to tear them apart by sheer strength. Blood started from beneath his finger nails, but the jaws fitted close about his leg in a circle whose segments jointed perfectly, contracted until there was no space between his mangled flesh and the fanged iron. The sight of Valeria's naked body added flame to the fire of his rage.

Tascela ignored him. Rising languidly from her seat she swept the ranks of her subjects with a searching glance, and asked: "Where are Xamec, Zlanath and Tachic?"

"They did not return from the catacombs, princess," answered a man. "Like the rest of us, they bore the bodies of the slain into the crypts, but they have not returned. Perhaps the ghost of Tolkemec took them."

"Be silent, fool!" she ordered harshly. "The ghost is a myth."

She came down from her dais, playing with a thin gold-hilted dagger. Her eyes burned like nothing on the hither side of hell. She paused beside the altar and spoke in the tense stillness.

"Your life shall make me young, white woman!" she said. "I shall lean upon your bosom and place my lips over yours, and slowly—ah, slowly!—sink this blade through your heart, so that your life, fleeing your stiffening body, shall enter mine, making me bloom again with youth and with life everlasting!"

Slowly, like a serpent arching toward its victim, she bent down through the writhing smoke, closer and closer over the now motionless woman who stared up into her glowing dark eyes—eyes that grew larger and deeper, blazing like black moons in the swirling smoke.

The kneeling people gripped their hands and held their breath, tense for the bloody climax, and the only sound was Conan's fierce panting as he strove to tear his leg from the trap.

All eyes were glued on the altar and the white figure there; the crash of a thunderbolt could hardly have broken the spell, yet it was only a low cry that shattered the fixity of the scene and brought all whirling about—a low cry, yet one to make the hair stand up stiffly on the scalp. They looked, and they saw.

Framed in the door to the left of the dais stood a nightmare figure. It was a man, with a tangle of white hair and a matted white beard that fell over his breast. Rags only partly covered his gaunt frame, revealing half-naked limbs strangely unnatural in appearance. The skin was not like that of a normal human. There was a suggestion of scaliness about it, as if the owner had

dwelt long under conditions almost antithetical to those conditions under which human life ordinarily thrives. And there was nothing at all human about the eyes that blazed from the tangle of white hair. They were great gleaming disks that stared unwinkingly, luminous, whitish, and without a hint of normal emotion or sanity. The mouth gaped, but no coherent words issued—only a high-pitched tittering.

“Tolkemec!” whispered Tascela, livid, while the others crouched in speechless horror. “No myth, then, no ghost! Set! You have dwelt for twelve years in darkness! Twelve years among the bones of the dead! What grisly food did you find? What mad travesty of life did you live, in the stark blackness of that eternal night? I see now why Xamec and Zlanath and Tachic did not return from the catacombs—and never will return. But why have you waited so long to strike? Were you seeking something, in the pits? Some secret weapon you knew was hidden there? And have you found it at last?”

That hideous tittering was Tolkemec’s only reply, as he bounded into the room with a long leap that carried him over the secret trap before the door—by chance, or by some faint recollection of the ways of Xuchotl. He was not mad, as a man is mad. He had dwelt apart from humanity so long that he was no longer human. Only an unbroken thread of memory embodied in hate and the urge for vengeance had connected him with the humanity from which he had been cut off, and held him lurking near the people he hated. Only that thin string had kept him from racing and prancing off for ever into the black corridors and realms of the subterranean world he had discovered, long ago.

“You sought something hidden!” whispered Tascela, cringing back. “And you have found it! You remember the feud! After all these years of blackness, you remember!”

For in the lean hand of Tolkemec now waved a curious jade-hued wand, on the end of which glowed a knob of crimson shaped like a pomegranate. She sprang aside as he thrust it out like a spear, and a beam of crimson fire lanced from the pomegranate. It missed Tascela, but the woman holding Valeria’s ankles was in the way. It smote between her shoulders. There was a sharp crackling sound and the ray of fire flashed from her bosom and struck the black altar, with a snapping of blue sparks. The woman toppled sidewise, shriveling and withering like a mummy even as she fell.

Valeria rolled from the altar on the other side, and started for the opposite wall on all fours. For hell had burst loose in the throne room of dead Olmec.

The man who had held Valeria’s hands was the next to die. He turned to run, but before he had taken half a dozen steps, Tolkemec, with an agility appalling in such a frame, bounded around to a position that placed the man between him and the altar. Again the red fire-beam flashed and the Tecuhtli rolled lifeless to the floor, as the beam completed its course with a burst of blue sparks against the altar.

Then began slaughter. Screaming insanely the people rushed about the chamber, caroming from one another, stumbling and falling. And among them Tolkemec capered and pranced, dealing death. They could not escape by the doors; for apparently the metal of the portals served like the metal-veined stone altar to complete the circuit for whatever hellish power flashed like thunderbolts from the witch-wand the ancient waved in his hand. When he caught a man or a woman between him and a door or the altar, that one died instantly. He chose no special victim. He took them as they came, with his rags flapping about his wildly gyrating limbs, and the gusty echoes of his tittering sweeping the room above the screams. And bodies fell like falling leaves about the altar and at the doors. One warrior in desperation rushed at him, lifting a dagger, only to fall before he could strike. But the rest were like crazed cattle, with no thought for resistance, and no chance of escape.

The last Tecuhtli except Tascela had fallen when the princess reached the Cimmerian and the girl who had taken refuge beside him. Tascela bent and touched the floor, pressing a design upon it. Instantly the iron jaws released the bleeding limb and sank back into the floor.

“Slay him if you can!” she panted, and pressed a heavy knife into his hand. “I have no magic to withstand him!”

With a grunt he sprang before the women, not heeding his lacerated leg in the heat of the fighting-lust. Tolkemec was coming toward him, his weird eyes ablaze, but he hesitated at the gleam of the knife in Conan’s hand. Then began a grim game, as Tolkemec sought to circle about Conan and get the barbarian between him and the altar or a metal door, while Conan sought to avoid this and drive home his knife. The women watched tensely, holding their breath.

There was no sound except the rustle and scrape of quick-shifting feet. Tolkemec pranced and capered no more. He realized that grimmer game confronted him than the people who had died screaming and fleeing. In the elemental blaze of the barbarian’s eyes he read an intent deadly as his own. Back and forth they weaved, and when one moved the other moved as if invisible threads bound them together. But all the time Conan was getting closer and closer to his enemy. Already the coiled muscles of his thighs were beginning to flex for a spring, when Valeria cried out. For a fleeting instant a bronze door was in line with Conan’s moving body. The red line leaped, searing Conan’s flank as he twisted aside, and even as he shifted he hurled the knife. Old Tolkemec went down, truly slain at last, the hilt vibrating on his breast.

Tascela sprang—not toward Conan, but toward the wand where it shimmered like a live thing on the floor. But as she leaped, so did Valeria, with a dagger snatched from a dead man, and the blade, driven with all the power of the pirate’s muscles, impaled the princess of Tecuhtli so that the point stood out

between her breasts. Tascela screamed once and fell dead, and Valeria spurned the body with her heel as it fell.

"I had to do that much, for my own self-respect!" panted Valeria, facing Conan across the limp corpse.

"Well, this cleans up the feud," he grunted. "It's been a hell of a night! Where did these people keep their food? I'm hungry."

"You need a bandage on that leg." Valeria ripped a length of silk from a hanging and knotted it about her waist, then tore off some smaller strips which she bound efficiently about the barbarian's lacerated limb.

"I can walk on it," he assured her. "Let's begone. It's dawn, outside this infernal city. I've had enough of Xuchotl. It's well the breed exterminated itself. I don't want any of their accursed jewels. They might be haunted."

"There is enough clean loot in the world for you and me," she said, straightening to stand tall and splendid before him.

The old blaze came back in his eyes, and this time she did not resist as he caught her fiercely in his arms.

"It's a long way to the coast," she said presently, withdrawing her lips from his.

"What matter?" he laughed. "There's nothing we can't conquer. We'll have our feet on a ship's deck before the Stygians open their ports for the trading season. And then we'll show the world what plundering means!"

THE END