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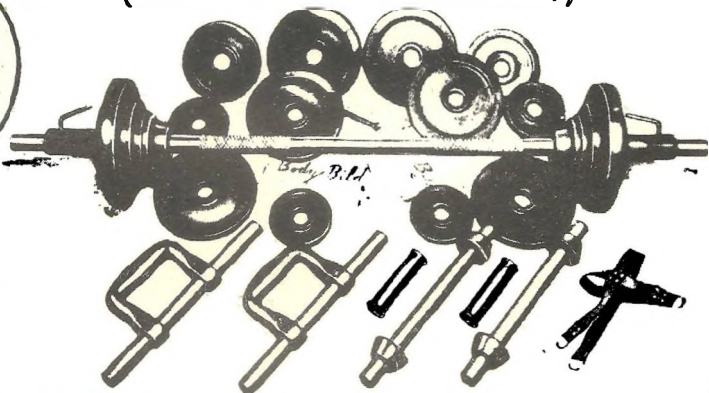
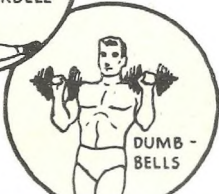


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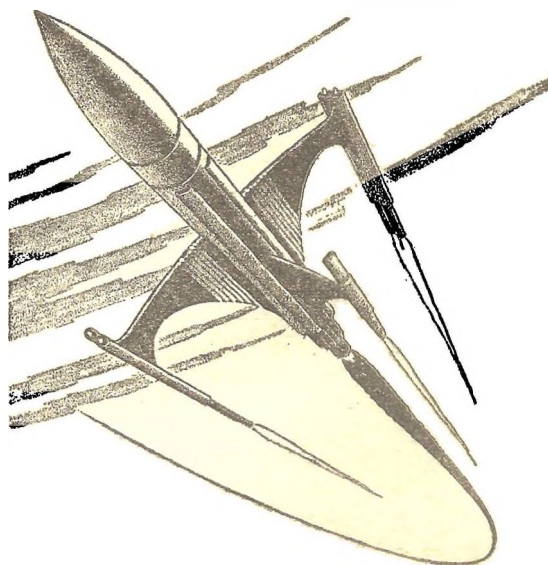
THE TIME MACHINE

by H. G. Wells 2

It was paradise—this luxuriant world of the 8028th Century—but it's beautiful people were haunted by death that crept through the black shroud of night.

H. G. Wells' advanced and startling story reprinted in full.

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THE TRITONIAN RING

by L. Sprague de Camp 46

The Gods frowned as Prince Vakar set out in search of the elusive Tritonian Ring. But they could smile when he stopped at the snake-throned court of bewitching Porfia—the queen who made men forget their quests.

ROCKET MAIL—Letters from Readers 45, 128

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The TIME MACHINE

by H. G. WELLS

It was paradise—this luxuriant world of the 8028th Century—but it's beautiful, childlike people were haunted by death that crept through the black shroud of night.

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I

THE TIME TRAVELLER, for so it will be convenient to speak of him, was expounding a recondite matter to us. His gray eyes shone and twinkled, and his usually pale face was flushed and animated. The fire burned brightly, and the soft radiance of the incandescent lights in the lilies of silver caught the bubbles that flashed and passed in our glasses.

Our chairs, being his patents, embraced and caressed us rather than submitted to be sat upon, and there was that luxurious after-dinner atmosphere when thought runs gracefully free of the trammels of precision. And he put it to us in this way—marking the points with a lean forefinger—as we sat and lazily admired his earnestness over this new paradox (as we thought it) and his fecundity.

"You must follow me carefully. I shall have to controvert one or two ideas that are almost universally accepted. The geometry, for instance, they taught you at school is founded on a misconception."

"Is not that rather a large thing to expect us to begin upon?" said Filby, an argumentative person with red hair.

"I do not mean to ask you to accept anything without reasonable ground for it. You will soon admit as much as I need from you. You know of course that a mathematical line, a line of thickness *nil*, has no real existence. They taught you that? Neither has a mathematical plane. These things are mere abstractions."

"That is all right," said the Psychologist.

"Nor, having only length, breadth, and

thickness, can a cube have a real existence."

"There I object," said Filby. "Of course a solid body may exist. All real things—"

"So most people think. But wait a moment. Can an *instantaneous* cube exist?"

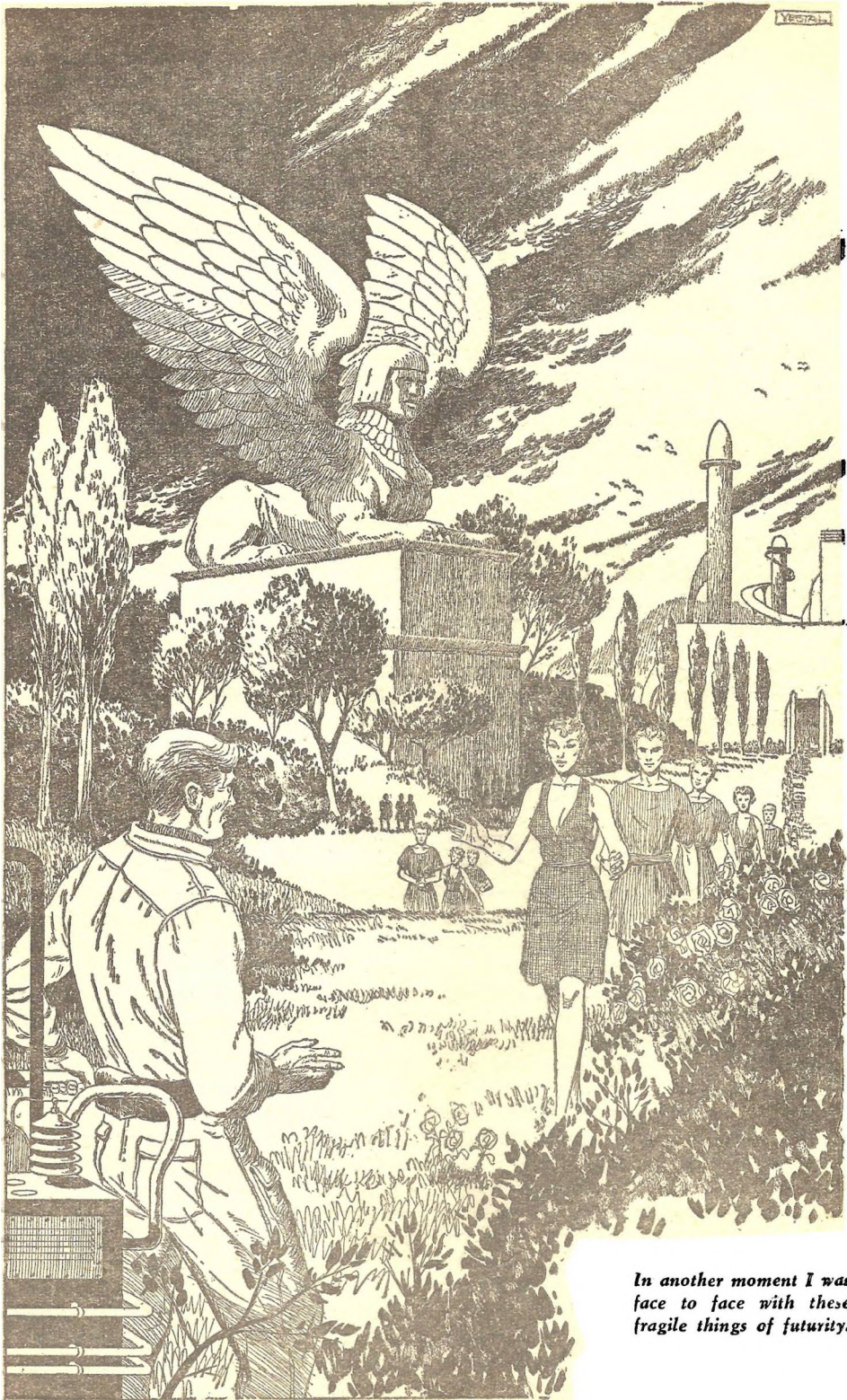
"Don't follow you," said Filby.

"Can a cube that does not last for any time at all have a real existence?"

Filby became pensive. "Clearly," the Time Traveller proceeded, "any real body must have extension in *four* directions: it must have Length, Breadth, Thickness, and—Duration. But through a natural infirmity of the flesh, which I will explain to you in a moment, we incline to overlook this fact. There are really four dimensions, three which we call the three planes of Space, and a fourth, Time. There is, however, a tendency to draw an unreal distinction between the former three dimensions and the latter, because it happens that our consciousness moves intermittently in one direction along the latter from the beginning to the end of our lives."

"That," said a very young man, making spasmodic efforts to relight his cigar over the lamp; "that . . . very clear indeed."

"Now, it is very remarkable that this is so extensively overlooked," continued the Time Traveller, with a slight accession of cheerfulness. "Really this is what is meant by the Fourth Dimension, though some people who talk about the Fourth Dimension do not know they mean it. It is only another way of looking at Time. *There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it.* But some foolish people have got hold of the wrong side of that idea. You have all heard what



*In another moment I was
face to face with these
fragile things of futurity.*

they have to say about this Fourth Dimension?"

"I have not," said the Provincial Mayor.

"IT IS simply this. That Space, as our mathematicians have it, is spoken of as having three dimensions, which one may call Length, Breadth, and Thickness, and is always definable by reference to three planes, each at right angles to the others. But some philosophical people have been asking why *three* dimensions particularly—why not another direction at right angles to the other three?—and have even tried to construct a Four-Dimensional geometry. Professor Simon Newcomb was expounding this to the New York Mathematical Society only a month or so ago. You know how on a flat surface, which has only two dimensions, we can represent a figure of a three-dimensional solid, and similarly they think that by models of three dimensions they could represent one of four—if they could master the perspective of the thing. See?"

"I think so," murmured the Provincial Mayor; and, knitting his brows, he lapsed into an introspective state, his lips moving as one who repeats mystic words. "Yes, I think I see it now," he said after some time, brightening in a quite transitory manner.

"Well, I do not mind telling you I have been at work upon this geometry of Four Dimensions for some time. Some of my results are curious. For instance, here is a portrait of a man at eight years old, another at fifteen, another at seventeen, another at twenty-three, and so on. All these are evidently sections, as it were, Three-Dimensional representations of his Four-Dimensioned being, which is a fixed and unalterable thing.

"Scientific people," proceeded the Time Traveller, after the pause required for the proper assimilation of this, "know very well that Time is only a kind of Space. Here is a popular scientific diagram, a weather record. This line I trace with my finger shows the movement of the barometer. Yesterday it was so high, yesterday night it fell, then this morning it rose again, and so gently upward to here. Surely the mercury did not trace this line in any of

the dimensions of Space generally recognised? But certainly it traced such a line, and that line, therefore, we must conclude was along the Time-Dimension."

"But," said the Medical Man, staring hard at a coal in the fire, "if Time is really only a fourth dimension of Space, why is it, and why has it always been, regarded as something different? And why cannot we move in Time as we move about in the other dimensions of Space?"

The Time Traveller smiled. "Are you so sure we can move freely in Space? Right and left we can go, backward and forward freely enough, and men always have done so. I admit we move freely in two dimensions. But how about up and down? Gravitation limits us there."

"Not exactly," said the Medical Man. "There are balloons."

"But before the balloons, save for spasmodic jumping and the inequalities of the surface, man had no freedom of vertical movement."

"Still they could move a little up and down," said the Medical Man.

"Easier, far easier down than up."

"And you cannot move at all in Time, you cannot get away from the present moment."

"My dear sir, that is just where you are wrong. That is just where the whole world has gone wrong. We are always getting away from the present moment. Our mental existences, which are immaterial and have no dimensions, are passing along the Time-Dimension with a uniform velocity from the cradle to the grave. Just as we should travel *down* if we began our existence fifty miles above the earth's surface."

"But the great difficulty is this," interrupted the Psychologist. "You can move about in all directions of Space, but you cannot move about in Time."

"THAT is the germ of my great discovery. But you are wrong to say that we cannot move about in Time. For instance, if I am recalling an incident very vividly I go back to the instant of its occurrence: I become absent-minded, as you say. I jump back for a moment. Of course we have no means of staying back for any length of Time, any more than a savage or

an animal has of staying six feet above the ground. But a civilised man is better off than the savage in this respect. He can go up against gravitation in a balloon, and why should he not hope that ultimately he may be able to stop or accelerate his drift along the Time-Dimension, or even turn about and travel the other way?"

"Oh, *this*," began Filby, "is all——"

"Why not?" said the Time Traveller.

"It's against reason," said Filby.

"What reason?" said the Time Traveller.

"You can show black is white by argument," said Filby, "but you will never convince me."

"Possibly not," said the Time Traveller. "But now you begin to see the object of my investigations into the geometry of Four Dimensions. Long ago I had a vague inkling of a machine——"

"To travel through Time!" exclaimed the Very Young Man.

"That shall travel indifferently in any direction of Space and Time, as the driver determines."

Filby contented himself with laughter.

"But I have experimental verification," said the Time Traveller.

"It would be remarkably convenient for the historian," the Psychologist suggested. "One might travel back and verify the accepted account of the Battle of Hastings, for instance!"

"Don't you think you would attract attention?" said the Medical Man. "Our ancestors had no great tolerance for anachronisms."

"One might get one's Greek from the very lips of Homer and Plato," the Very Young Man thought.

"In which case they would certainly plough you for the Little-go. The German scholars have improved Greek so much."

"Then there is the future," said the Very Young Man. "Just think! One might invest all one's money, leave it to accumulate at interest, and hurry on ahead!"

"To discover a society," said I, "erected on a strictly communistic basis."

"Of all the wild extravagant theories!" began the Psychologist.

"Yes, so it seemed to me, and so I never talked of it until——"

"Experimental verification!" cried I.

"You are going to verify *that*?"

"The experiment!" cried Filby, who was getting brain-weary.

"Let's see your experiment anyhow," said the Psychologist, "though it's all humbug, you know."

The Time Traveller smiled round at us. Then, still smiling faintly, and with his hands deep in his trousers pockets, he walked slowly out of the room, and we heard his slippers shuffling down the long passage to his laboratory.

The Psychologist looked at us. "I wonder what he's got?"

"Some sleight-of-hand trick or other," said the Medical Man, and Filby tried to tell us about a conjurer he had seen at Burslem; but before he had finished his preface the Time Traveller came back, and Filby's anecdote collapsed.

THE thing the Time Traveller held in his hand was a glittering metallic framework, scarcely larger than a small clock, and very delicately made. There was ivory in it, and some transparent crystalline substance. And now I must be explicit, for this that follows—unless his explanation is to be accepted—is an absolutely unaccountable thing.

He took one of the small octagonal tables that were scattered about the room, and set it in front of the fire, with two legs on the hearth rug. On this table he placed the mechanism. Then he drew up a chair, and sat down. The only other object on the table was a small shaded lamp, the bright light of which fell full upon the strange model.

There were also perhaps a dozen candles about, two in brass candlesticks upon the mantel and several in sconces, so that the room was brilliantly illuminated. I sat in a low armchair nearest the fire, and I drew this forward so as to be almost between the Time Traveller and the fireplace. Filby sat behind him, looking over his shoulder. The Medical Man and the Provincial Mayor watched him in profile from the right, the Psychologist from the left. The Very Young Man stood behind the Psychologist. We were all on the alert. It appears incredible to me that any kind of trick, however subtly conceived and however adroitly done, could

have been played upon us under these conditions.

The Time Traveller looked at us, and then at the mechanism. "Well?" said the Psychologist.

"This little affair," said the Time Traveller, resting his elbows upon the table and pressing his hands together above the apparatus, "is only a model. It is my plan for a machine to travel through time. You will notice that it looks singularly askew, and that there is an odd twinkling appearance about this bar, as though it was in some way unreal." He pointed to the part with his finger. "Also, here is one little white lever, and here is another."

The Medical Man got up out of his chair and peered into the thing. "It's beautifully made," he said.

"It took two years to make," retorted the Time Traveller. Then, when we had all imitated the action of the Medical Man, he said: "Now I want you clearly to understand that this lever, being pressed over, sends the machine gliding into the future, and this other reverses the motion. This saddle represents the seat of a time traveller.

"Presently I am going to press the lever, and off the machine will go. It will vanish, pass into future Time, and disappear. Have a good look at the thing. Look at the table too, and satisfy yourselves there is no trickery. I don't want to waste this model, and then be told I'm a quack."

There was a minute's pause perhaps. The Psychologist seemed about to speak to me, but changed his mind. Then the Time Traveller put forth his finger towards the lever. "No," he said suddenly. "Lend me your hand." And turning to the Psychologist, he took that individual's hand in his own and told him to put out his forefinger. So that it was the Psychologist himself who sent forth the model Time Machine on its interminable voyage. We all saw the lever turn. I am absolutely certain there was no trickery. There was a breath of wind, and the lamp flame jumped. One of the candles on the mantel was blown out, and the little machine suddenly swung round, became indistinct, was seen as a ghost for a second perhaps, as an eddy of faintly glittering brass and ivory; and it was gone—

vanished! Save for the lamp the table was bare.

EVERY one was silent for a minute. Then Filby said he was damned.

The Psychologist recovered from his stupor, and suddenly looked under the table. At that the Time Traveller laughed cheerfully. "Well?" he said, with a reminiscence of the Psychologist. Then, getting up, he went to the tobacco jar on the mantel, and with his back to us began to fill his pipe.

"We stared at each other. "Look here," said the Medical Man, "are you in earnest about this? Do you seriously believe that that machine has travelled into time?"

"Certainly," said the Time Traveller, stooping to light a spill at the fire. Then he turned, lighting his pipe, to look at the Psychologist's face. The Psychologist, to show that he was not unhinged, helped himself to a cigar and tried to light it uncut. "What is more, I have a big machine nearly finished in there"—he indicated the laboratory—"and when that is put together I mean to have a journey on my own account."

"You mean to say that that machine has travelled into the future?" said Filby.

"Into the future or the past—I don't, for certain, know which."

After an interval the Psychologist had an inspiration. "It must have gone into the past if it has gone anywhere," he said.

"Why?" said the Time Traveller.

"Because I presume that it has not moved in space, and if it travelled into the future it would still be here all this time, since it must have travelled through this time."

"But," said I, "if it travelled into the past it would have been visible when we came first into this room; and last Thursday when we were here; and the Thursday before that; and so forth!"

"Serious objections," remarked the Provincial Mayor, with an air of impartiality, turning towards the Time Traveller.

"Not a bit," said the Time Traveller, and, to the Psychologist: "You think. You can explain that. It's presentation below the threshold, you know, diluted presentation."

"Of course," said the Psychologist, and

reassured us. "That's a simple point of psychology, I should have thought of it. It's plain enough, and helps the paradox delightfully.

"We cannot see it, nor can we appreciate this machine, any more than we can the spoke of a wheel spinning, or a bullet flying through the air. If it is travelling through time fifty times or a hundred times faster than we are, if it gets through a minute while we get through a second, the impression it creates will of course be only one-fiftieth or one-hundredth of what it would make if it were not travelling in time. That's plain enough." He passed his hand through the space in which the machine had been. "You see?" he said, laughing.

We sat and stared at the vacant table for a minute or so. Then the Time Traveller asked us what we thought of it all.

"It sounds plausible enough to-night," said the Medical Man; "but wait until to-morrow. Wait for the common sense of the morning."

"Would you like to see the Time Machine itself?" asked the Time Traveller. And therewith, taking the lamp in his hand, he led the way down the long, draughty corridor to his laboratory. I remember vividly the flickering light, his queer, broad head in silhouette, the dance of the shadows, how we all followed him, puzzled but incredulous, and how there in the laboratory we beheld a larger edition of the little mechanism which we had seen vanish from before our eyes. Parts were of nickel, parts of ivory, parts had certainly been filed or sawn out of rock crystal. The thing was generally complete, but the twisted crystalline bars lay unfinished upon the bench beside some sheets of drawings, and I took one up for a better look at it. Quartz it seemed to be.

"Look here," said the Medical Man, "are you perfectly serious? Or is this a trick—like that ghost you showed us last Christmas?"

"Upon that machine," said the Time Traveller, holding the lamp aloft, "I intend to explore time. Is that plain? I was never more serious in my life."

None of us quite knew how to take it. I caught Filby's eye over the shoulder of

the Medical Man, and he winked at me solemnly.

II

I THINK that at that time none of us quite believed in the Time Machine. The fact is, the Time Traveller was one of those men who are too clever to be believed; you never felt that you saw all round him; you always suspected some subtle reserve, some ingenuity in ambush, behind his lucid frankness. Had Filby shown the model and explained the matter in the Time Traveller's words, we should have shown *him* far less scepticism. For we should have perceived his motives: a pork butcher could understand Filby. But the Time Traveller had more than a touch of whim among his elements, and we distrusted him. Things that would have made the fame of a less clever man seemed tricks in his hands. It is a mistake to do things too easily. The serious people who took him seriously never felt quite sure of his deportment: they were somehow aware that trusting their reputations for judgment with him was like furnishing a nursery with egg-shell china. So I don't think any of us said very much about time travelling in the interval between that Thursday and the next, though its odd potentialities ran, no doubt, in most of our minds: its plausibility, that is, its practical incredibleness, the curious possibilities of anachronism and of utter confusion it suggested. For my own part, I was particularly preoccupied with the trick of the model. That I remember discussing with the Medical Man, whom I met on Friday at the Linneæan. He said he had seen a similar thing at Tübingen, and laid considerable stress on the blowing out of the candle. But how the trick was done he could not explain.

The next Thursday I went again to Richmond—I suppose I was one of the Time Traveller's most constant guests—and arriving late, found four or five men already assembled in his drawing-room. The Medical Man was standing before the fire with a sheet of paper in one hand and his watch in the other. I looked round for the Time Traveller, and—"It's half-past seven now," said the Medical Man. "I suppose we'd better have dinner?"

"Where's——?" said I, naming our host.

"You've just come? It's rather odd. He's unavoidably detained. He asks me in this note to lead off with dinner at seven if he's not back. Says he'll explain when he comes."

"It seems a pity to let the dinner spoil," said the Editor of a well-known daily paper; and thereupon the Doctor rang the bell.

The Psychologist was the only person besides the Doctor and myself who had attended the previous dinner. The other men were Blank, the Editor afore-mentioned, a certain journalist, and another—a quiet, shy man with a beard—whom I didn't know, and who, as far as my observation went, never opened his mouth all the evening. There was some speculation at the dinner table about the Time Traveller's absence, and I suggested time travelling, in a half-jocular spirit. The Editor wanted that explained to him, and the Psychologist volunteered a wooden account of the "ingenious paradox and trick" we had witnessed that day week. He was in the midst of his exposition when the door from the corridor opened slowly and without noise. I was facing the door, and saw it first. "Hallo!" I said. "At last!" And the door opened wider, and the Time Traveller stood before us. I gave a cry of surprise. "Good heavens! man, what's the matter?" cried the Medical Man, who saw him next. And the whole tableful turned towards the door.

HE WAS in an amazing plight. His coat was dusty and dirty and smeared with green down the sleeves; his hair disordered, and as it seemed to me greyer—either with dust and dirt or because its colour had actually faded. His face was ghastly pale; his chin had a brown cut on it—a cut half healed; his expression was haggard and drawn, as by intense suffering. For a moment he hesitated in the doorway, as if he had been dazzled by the light. Then he came into the room. He walked with just such a limp as I have seen in footsore tramps. We stared at him in silence, expecting him to speak.

He said not a word, but came painfully to the table, and made a motion towards the wine. The Editor filled a glass of champagne, and pushed it towards him. He drained it, and it seemed to do him good: for

he looked round the table, and the ghost of his old smile flickered across his face. "What on earth have you been up to, man?" said the Doctor. The Time Traveller did not seem to hear. "Don't let me disturb you," he said, with a certain faltering articulation. "I'm all right." He stopped, held out his glass for more, and took it off at a draught. "That's good," he said. His eyes grew brighter, and a faint colour came into his cheeks. His glance flickered over our faces with a certain dull approval, and then went round the warm and comfortable room. Then he spoke again, still as it were feeling his way among his words. "I'm going to wash and dress, and then I'll come down and explain things. . . . Save me some of that mutton. I'm starving for a bit of meat."

He looked across at the Editor, who was a rare visitor, and hoped he was all right. The Editor began a question. "Tell you presently," said the Time Traveller. "I'm—funny! Be all right in a minute."

He put down his glass, and walked towards the staircase door. Again I remarked his lameness and the soft padding sound of his footfall, and standing up in my place, I saw his feet as he went out. He had nothing on them but a pair of tattered, bloodstained socks. Then the door closed upon him. I had half a mind to follow, till I remembered how he detested any fuss about himself. For a minute, perhaps, my mind was wool gathering. Then, "Remarkable Behaviour of an Eminent Scientist," I heard the Editor say, thinking, after his wont, in head-lines. And this brought my attention back to the bright dinner table.

"What's the game?" said the Journalist. "Has he been doing the Amateur Cadger? I don't follow." I met the eye of the Psychologist, and read my own interpretation in his face. I thought of the Time Traveller limping painfully upstairs. I don't think any one else had noticed his lameness.

THE first to recover completely from this surprise was the Medical Man, who rang the bell—the Time Traveller hated to have servants waiting at dinner—for a hot plate. At that the Editor turned to his knife and fork with a grunt, and the Silent Man followed suit. The dinner was resumed. Conversation was exclamatory for a little while,

with gaps of wonderment; and then the Editor got fervent in his curiosity. "Does our friend eke out his modest income with a crossing or has he his Nebuchadnezzar phases?" he inquired. "I feel assured it's this business of the Time Machine," I said, and took up the Psychologist's account of our previous meeting. The new guests were frankly incredulous. The Editor raised objections. "What *was* this time travelling? A man couldn't cover himself with dust by rolling in a paradox, could he?" And then, as the idea came home to him, he resorted to caricature. Hadn't they any clothes-brushes in the Future? The Journalist, too, would not believe at any price, and joined the Editor in the easy work of heaping ridicule on the whole thing. They were both the new kind of journalist—very joyous, irreverent young men. "Our Special Correspondent in the Day after To-morrow reports," the Journalist was saying—or rather shouting—when the Time Traveller came back. He was dressed in ordinary evening clothes, and nothing save his haggard look remained of the change that had startled me.

"I say," said the Editor hilariously, "these chaps here say you have been travelling into the middle of next week! Tell us all about little Rosebery, will you? What will you take for the lot?"

The Time Traveller came to the place reserved for him without a word. He smiled quietly, in his old way. "Where's my mutton?" he said. "What a treat it is to stick a fork into meat again!"

"Story!" cried the Editor.

"Story be damned!" said the Time Traveller. "I want something to eat. I won't say a word until I get some peptone into my arteries. Thanks. And the salt."

"One word," said I. "Have you been time travelling?"

"Yes," said the Time Traveller, with his mouth full, nodding his head.

"I'd give a shilling a line for a verbatim note," said the Editor. The Time Traveller pushed his glass towards the Silent Man and rang it with his finger nail; at which the Silent Man, who had been staring at his face, started convulsively, and poured him wine. The rest of the dinner was uncomfortable. For my own part, sudden questions kept on rising to my lips, and I dare

say it was the same with the others. The Journalist tried to relieve the tension by telling anecdotes of Hettie Potter. The Time Traveller devoted his attention to his dinner, and displayed the appetite of a tramp. The Medical Man smoked a cigarette, and watched the Time Traveller through his eyelashes. The Silent Man seemed even more clumsy than usual, and drank champagne with regularity and determination out of sheer nervousness. At last the Time Traveller pushed his plate away, and looked round at us. "I suppose I must apologise," he said. "I was simply starving. I've had a most amazing time." He reached out his hand for a cigar, and cut the end. "But come into the smoking-room. It's too long a story to tell over greasy plates." And ringing the bell in passing, he led the way into the adjoining room.

"YOU have told Blank, and Dash, and Chose about the machine?" he said to me, leaning back in his easy chair and naming the three new guests.

"But the thing's a mere paradox," said the Editor.

"I can't argue to-night. I don't mind telling you the story, but I can't argue. I will," he went on, "tell you the story of what has happened to me, if you like, but you must refrain from interruptions. I want to tell it. Badly. Most of it will sound like lying. So be it! It's true—every word of it, all the same. I was in my laboratory at four o'clock, and since then . . . I've lived eight days . . . such days as no human being ever lived before! I'm nearly worn out, but I shan't sleep till I've told this thing over to you. Then I shall go to bed. But no interruptions! Is it agreed?"

"Agreed," said the Editor, and the rest of us echoed "Agreed." And with that the Time Traveller began his story as I have set it forth. He sat back in his chair at first, and spoke like a weary man. Afterwards he got more animated. In writing it down I feel with only too much keenness the inadequacy of pen and ink—and, above all, my own inadequacy—to express its quality. You read, I will suppose, attentively enough; but you cannot see the speaker's white, sincere face in the bright circle of the little lamp, nor hear the intonation of his voice. You

cannot know how his expression followed the turns of his story! Most of us hearers were in shadow, for the candles in the smoking-room had not been lighted, and only the face of the Journalist and the legs of the Silent Man from the knees downward were illuminated. At first we glanced now and again at each other. After a time we ceased to do that, and looked only at the Time Traveller's face.

III

I TOLD some of you last Thursday of the principles of the Time Machine, and showed you the actual thing itself, incomplete in the workshop. There it is now, a little travel-worn, truly; and one of the ivory bars is cracked, and a brass rail bent; but the rest of it's sound enough. I expected to finish it on Friday; but on Friday, when the putting together was nearly done, I found that one of the nickel bars was exactly one inch too short, and this I had to get remade; so that the thing was not complete until this morning. It was ten o'clock to-day that the first of all Time Machines began its career. I gave it a last tap, tried all the screws again, put one more drop of oil on the quartz rod, and sat myself in the saddle. I suppose a suicide who holds a pistol to his skull feels much the same wonder at what will come next as I felt then. I took the starting lever in one hand and the stopping one in the other, pressed the first, and almost immediately the second. I seemed to reel; I felt a nightmare sensation of falling; and looking round, I saw the laboratory exactly as before. Had anything happened? For a moment I suspected that my intellect had tricked me. Then I noted the clock. A moment before, as it seemed, it had stood at a minute or so past ten; now it was nearly half-past three!

I drew a breath, set my teeth, gripped the starting lever with both hands, and went off with a thud. The laboratory got hazy and went dark. Mrs. Watchett came in and walked, apparently without seeing me, towards the garden door. I suppose it took her a minute or so to traverse the place, but to me she seemed to shoot across the room like a rocket. I pressed the lever over to its extreme position. The night came like the

turning out of a lamp, and in another moment came to-morrow. The laboratory grew faint and hazy, then fainter and even fainter. To-morrow night came black, then day again, night again, day again, faster and faster still. An eddying murmur filled my ears, and a strange, dumb confusedness descended on my mind.

I am afraid I cannot convey the peculiar sensations of time travelling. They are excessively unpleasant. There is a feeling exactly like that one has upon a switchback—of a helpless headlong motion! I felt the same horrible anticipation, too, of an imminent smash. As I put on pace, night followed day like the flapping of a black wing. The dim suggestion of a laboratory seemed presently to fall away from me, and I saw the sun hopping swiftly across the sky, leaping it every minute, and every minute marking a day. I supposed the laboratory had been destroyed and I had come into the open air. I had a dim impression of scaffolding, but I was already going too fast to be conscious of any moving things. The slowest snail that ever crawled dashed by too fast for me. The twinkling succession of darkness and light was excessively painful to the eye. Then, in the intermittent darknesses, I saw the moon spinning swiftly through her quarters from new to full, and had a faint glimpse of the circling stars. Presently, as I went on, still gaining velocity, the palpitation of night and day merged into one continuous greyness; the sky took on a wonderful deepness of blue, a splendid luminous colour like that of early twilight; the jerking sun became a streak of fire, a brilliant arch, in space; the moon a fainter fluctuating band; and I could see nothing of the stars, save now and then a brighter circle flickering in the blue.

THE landscape was misty and vague. I was still on the hillside upon which this house now stands, and the shoulder rose above me grey and dim. I saw trees growing and changing like puffs of vapour, now brown, now green; they grew, spread, shivered, and passed away. I saw huge buildings rise up faint and fair, and pass like dreams. The whole surface of the earth seemed changed—melting and flowing under my eyes. The little hands upon the dials that

registered my speed raced round faster and faster. Presently I noted that the sun belt swayed up and down, from solstice to solstice, in a minute or less, and that consequently my pace was over a year a minute; and minute by minute the white snow flashed across the world, and vanished, and was followed by the bright, brief green of spring.

The unpleasant sensations of the start were less poignant now. They merged at last into a kind of hysterical exhilaration. I remarked indeed a clumsy swaying of the machine for which I was unable to account. But my mind was too confused to attend to it, so with a kind of madness growing upon me, I flung myself into futurity. At first I scarce thought of stopping, scarce thought of anything but these new sensations. But presently a fresh series of impressions grew up in my mind—a certain curiosity and therewith a certain dread—until at last they took complete possession of me. What strange developments of humanity, what wonderful advances upon our rudimentary civilisation, I thought, might not appear when I came to look nearly into the dim elusive world that raced and fluctuated before my eyes! I saw great and splendid architecture rising about me, more massive than any buildings of our own time, and yet, as it seemed, built of glimmer and mist. I saw a richer green flow up the hillside, and remain there without any wintry intermission. Even through the veil of my confusion the earth seemed very fair. And so my mind came round to the business of stopping.

The peculiar risk lay in the possibility of my finding some substance in the space which I, or the machine, occupied. So long as I travelled at a high velocity through time, this scarcely mattered; I was, so to speak, attenuated—was slipping like a vapour through the interstices of intervening substances! But to come to a stop involved the jamming of myself, molecule by molecule, into whatever lay in my way; meant bringing my atoms into such intimate contact with those of the obstacle that a profound chemical reaction—possibly a far-reaching explosion—would result, and blow myself and my apparatus out of all possible dimensions—into the Unknown. This pos-

sibility had occurred to me again and again while I was making the machine; but then I had cheerfully accepted it as an unavoidable risk—one of the risks a man has got to take! Now the risk was inevitable, I no longer saw it in the same cheerful light. The fact is that, insensibly, the absolute strangeness of everything, the sickly jarring and swaying of the machine above all, the feeling of prolonged falling, had absolutely upset my nerve. I told myself that I could never stop, and with a gust of petulance I resolved to stop forthwith. Like an impatient fool, I lugged over the lever, and incontinently the thing went reeling over, and I was flung headlong through the air.

THERE was the sound of a clap of thunder in my ears. I may have been stunned for a moment. A pitiless hail was hissing round me, and I was sitting on soft turf in front of the overset machine. Everything still seemed grey, but presently I remarked that the confusion in my ears was gone. I looked round me. I was on what seemed to be a little lawn in a garden, surrounded by rhododendron bushes, and I noticed that their mauve and purple blossoms were dropping in a shower under the beating of the hailstones. The rebounding, dancing hail hung in a cloud over the machine, and drove along the ground like smoke. In a moment I was wet to the skin. "Fine hospitality," said I, "to a man who has travelled innumerable years to see you."

Presently I thought what a fool I was to get wet. I stood up and looked round me. A colossal figure, carved apparently in some white stone, loomed indistinctly beyond the rhododendrons through the hazy downpour. But all else of the world was invisible.

My sensations would be hard to describe. As the columns of hail grew thinner, I saw the white figure more distinctly. It was very large, for a silver birch-tree touched its shoulder. It was of white marble, in shape something like a winged sphinx, but the wings, instead of being carried vertically at the sides, were spread so that it seemed to hover. The pedestal, it appeared to me, was of bronze, and was thick with verdigris. It chanced that the face was towards me; the sightless eyes seemed to watch me; there was the faint shadow of a smile on the lips. It

was greatly weather-worn, and that imparted an unpleasant suggestion of disease. I stood looking at it for a little space—half a minute, perhaps, or half an hour. It seemed to advance and to recede as the hail drove before it denser or thinner. At last I tore my eyes from it for a moment, and saw that the hail curtain had worn threadbare, and that the sky was lightening with the promise of the sun.

I looked up again at the crouching white shape, and the full temerity of my voyage came suddenly upon me. What might appear when that hazy curtain was altogether withdrawn? What might not have happened to men? What if cruelty had grown into a common passion? What if in this interval the race had lost its manliness, and had developed into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful? I might seem some old-world savage animal, only the more dreadful and disgusting for our common likeness—a foul creature to be incontinently slain.

ALREADY I saw other vast shapes—huge buildings with intricate parapets and tall columns, with a wooded hillside dimly creeping in upon me through the lessening storm. I was seized with a panic fear. I turned frantically to the Time Machine, and strove hard to readjust it. As I did so the shafts of the sun smote through the thunderstorm. The grey downpour was swept aside and vanished like the trailing garments of a ghost. Above me, in the intense blue of the summer sky, some faint brown shreds of cloud whirled into nothingness. The great buildings about me stood out clear and distinct, shining with the wet of the thunderstorm, and picked out in white by the unmelted hailstones piled along their courses. I felt naked in a strange world. I felt as perhaps a bird may feel in the clear air, knowing the hawk wings above and will swoop. My fear grew to frenzy. I took a breathing space, set my teeth, and again grappled fiercely, wrist and knee, with the machine. It gave under my desperate onset and turned over. It struck my chin violently. One hand on the saddle, the other on the lever, I stood panting heavily in an attitude to mount again.

But with this recovery of a prompt retreat

my courage recovered. I looked more curiously and less fearfully at this world of the remote future. In a circular opening, high up in the wall of the nearer house, I saw a group of figures clad in rich soft robes. They had seen me, and their faces were directed towards me.

Then I heard voices approaching me. Coming through the bushes by the White Sphinx were the heads and shoulders of men running. One of these emerged in a pathway leading straight to the little lawn upon which I stood with my machine. He was a slight creature—perhaps four feet high—clad in a purple tunic, girdled at the waist with a leather belt. Sandals or buskins—I could not clearly distinguish which—were on his feet; his legs were bare to the knees, and his head was bare. Noticing that, I noticed for the first time how warm the air was.

He struck me as being a very beautiful and graceful creature, but indescribably frail. His flushed face reminded me of the more beautiful kind of consumptive—that hectic beauty of which we used to hear so much. At the sight of him I suddenly regained confidence. I took my hands from the machine.

IV

IN ANOTHER moment we were standing face to face, I and this fragile thing out of futurity. He came straight up to me and laughed into my eyes. The absence from his bearing of any sign of fear struck me at once. Then he turned to the two others who were following him and spoke to them in a strange and very sweet and liquid tongue.

There were others coming, and presently a little group of perhaps eight or ten of these exquisite creatures were about me. One of them addressed me. It came into my head, oddly enough, that my voice was too harsh and deep for them. So I shook my head, and, pointing to my ears, shook it again. He came a step forward, hesitated, and then touched my hand. Then I felt other soft little tentacles upon my back and shoulders. They wanted to make sure I was real. There was nothing in this at all alarming. Indeed, there was something in these pretty little people that inspired confidence—a

graceful gentleness, a certain childlike ease. And besides, they looked so frail that I could fancy myself flinging the whole dozen of them about like ninepins. But I made a sudden motion to warn them when I saw their little pink hands feeling at the Time Machine. Happily then, when it was not too late, I thought of a danger I had hitherto forgotten, and reaching over the bars of the machine I unscrewed the little levers that would set it in motion, and put these in my pocket. Then I turned again to see what I could do in the way of communication.

And then, looking more nearly into their features, I saw some further peculiarities in their Dresden-china type of prettiness. Their hair, which was uniformly curly, came to a sharp end at the neck and cheek; there was not the faintest suggestion of it on the face, and their ears were singularly minute. The mouths were small, with bright red, rather thin lips, and the little chins ran to a point. The eyes were large and mild; and—this may seem egotism on my part—I fancied even then that there was a certain lack of the interest I might have expected in them.

As they made no effort to communicate with me, but simply stood round me smiling and speaking in soft cooing notes to each other, I began the conversation. I pointed to the Time Machine and to myself. Then hesitating for a moment how to express time, I pointed to the sun. At once a quaintly pretty little figure in chequered purple and white followed my gesture, and then astonished me by imitating the sound of thunder.

For a moment I was staggered, though the import of his gesture was plain enough. The question had come into my mind abruptly: were these creatures fools? You may hardly understand how it took me. You see I had always anticipated that the people of the year Eight Hundred and Two Thousand odd would be incredibly in front of us in knowledge, art, everything. Then one of them suddenly asked me a question that showed him to be on the intellectual level of one of our five-year-old children—asked me, in fact, if I had come from the sun in a thunderstorm! It let loose the judgment I had suspended upon their clothes, their frail light limbs, and fragile features. A flow

of disappointment rushed across my mind. For a moment I felt that I had built the Time Machine in vain.

I NODDED, pointed to the sun, and gave them such a vivid rendering of a thunderclap as startled them. They all withdrew a pace or so and bowed. Then came one laughing towards me, carrying a chain of beautiful flowers altogether new to me, and put it about my neck. The idea was received with melodious applause; and presently they were all running to and fro for flowers, and laughingly flinging them upon me until I was almost smothered with blossoms. You who have never seen the like can scarcely imagine what delicate and wonderful flowers countless years of culture had created. Then someone suggested that their plaything should be exhibited in the nearest building, and so I was led past the sphinx of white marble, which had seemed to watch me all the while with a smile at my astonishment, towards a vast grey edifice of fretted stone. As I went with them the memory of my confident anticipations of a profoundly grave and intellectual posterity came, with irresistible merriment, to my mind.

The building had a huge entry, and was altogether of colossal dimensions. I was naturally most occupied with the growing crowd of little people, and with the big open portals that yawned before me shadowy and mysterious. My general impression of the world I saw over their heads was of a tangled waste of beautiful bushes and flowers, a long-neglected and yet weedless garden. I saw a number of tall spikes of strange white flowers, measuring a foot perhaps across the spread of the waxen petals. They grew scattered, as if wild, among the variegated shrubs, but, as I say, I did not examine them closely at this time. The Time Machine was left deserted on the turf among the rhododendrons.

The arch of the doorway was richly carved, but naturally I did not observe the carving very narrowly, though I fancied I saw suggestions of old Phœnician decorations as I passed through, and it struck me that they were very badly broken and weather-worn. Several more brightly clad people met me in the doorway, and so we

entered, I, dressed in dingy nineteenth-century garments, looking grotesque enough, garlanded with flowers, and surrounded by an eddying mass of bright, soft-coloured robes and shining white limbs in a medodious whirl of laughter and laughing speech.

The big doorway opened into a proportionately great hall hung with brown. The roof was in shadow, and the windows, partially glazed with coloured glass and partially unglazed, admitted a tempered light. The floor was made up of huge blocks of some very hard white metal, not plates nor slabs,—blocks, and it was so much worn, as I judged by the going to and fro of past generations, as to be deeply channelled along the more frequented ways. Transverse to the length were innumerable tables made of slabs of polished stone, raised perhaps a foot from the floor, and upon these were heaps of fruits. Some I recognized as a kind of hypertrophied raspberry and orange, but for the most part they were strange.

Between the tables was scattered a great number of cushions. Upon these my conductors seated themselves, signing for me to do likewise. With a pretty absence of ceremony they began to eat the fruit with their hands, flinging peel and stalks and so forth into the round openings in the sides of the tables. I was not loth to follow their example, for I felt thirsty and hungry. As I did so I surveyed the hall at my leisure.

AND perhaps the thing that struck me most was its dilapidated look. The stained-glass windows, which displayed only a geometrical pattern, were broken in many places, and the curtains that hung across the lower end were thick with dust. And it caught my eye that the corner of the marble table near me was fractured. Nevertheless, the general effect was extremely rich and picturesque. There were, perhaps, a couple of hundred people dining in the hall, and most of them, seated as near to me as they could come, were watching me with interest, their little eyes shining over the fruit they were eating. All were clad in the same soft, and yet strong, silky material.

Fruit, by the bye, was all their diet. These people of the remote future were strict vegetarians, and while I was with them, in

spite of some carnal cravings, I had to be frugivorous also. Indeed, I found afterwards that horses, cattle, sheep, dogs, had followed the Ichthyosaurus into extinction. But the fruits were very delightful; one, in particular, that seemed to be in season all the time I was there—a floury thing in a three-sided husk—was especially good, and I made it my staple. At first I was puzzled by all these strange fruits, and by the strange flowers I saw, but later I began to perceive their import.

However, I am telling you of my fruit dinner in the distant future now. So soon as my appetite was a little checked, I determined to make a resolute attempt to learn the speech of these new men of mine. Clearly that was the next thing to do. The fruits seemed a convenient thing to begin upon, and holding one of these up I began a series of interrogative sounds and gestures. I had some considerable difficulty in conveying my meaning. At first my efforts met with a stare of surprise, or inextinguishable laughter, but presently a fair-haired little creature seemed to grasp my intention and repeated a name. They had to chatter and explain the business at great length to each other, and my first attempts to make the exquisite little sounds of their language caused an immense amount of amusement. However, I felt like a schoolmaster amidst children, and persisted, and presently I had a score of noun substantives at least at my command; and then I got to demonstrative pronouns, and even the verb "to eat." But it was slow work, and the little people soon tired and wanted to get away from my interrogations, so I determined, rather of necessity, to let them give their lessons in little doses when they felt inclined. And very little doses I found they were before long, for I never met people more indolent or more easily fatigued.

A queer thing I soon discovered about my little hosts, and that was their lack of interest. They would come to me with eager cries of astonishment, like children, but like children they would soon stop examining me and wander away after some other toy. The dinner and my conversational beginnings ended, I noted for the first time that almost all those who had surrounded me at first were gone. It is odd, too, how speedily

I came to disregard these little people. I went out through the portal into the sunlit world again so soon as my hunger was satisfied. I was continually meeting more of these men of the future, who would follow me a little distance, chatter and laugh about me, and, having smiled and gesticulated in a friendly way, leave me again to my own devices.

THE calm of evening was upon the world as I emerged from the great hall, and the scene was lit by the warm glow of the setting sun. At first things were very confusing. Everything was so entirely different from the world I had known—even the flowers. The big building I had left was situated on the slope of a broad river valley, but the Thames had shifted perhaps a mile from its present position. I resolved to mount to the summit of a crest, perhaps a mile and a half away, from which I could get a wider view of this our planet in the year Eight Hundred and Two Thousand Seven Hundred and One A.D. For that, I should explain, was the date the little dials of my machine recorded.

As I walked I was watchful for every impression that could possibly help to explain the condition of ruinous splendour in which I found the world—for ruinous it was. A little way up the hill, for instance, was a great heap of granite, bound together by masses of aluminum, a vast labyrinth of precipitous walls and crumbled heaps, amidst which were thick heaps of very beautiful pagoda-like plants—nettles possibly—but wonderfully tinted with brown about the leaves, and incapable of stinging. It was evidently the derelict remains of some vast structure, to what end built I could not determine. It was here that I was destined, at a later date, to have a very strange experience—the first intimation of a still stranger discovery—but of that I will speak in its proper place.

Looking round with a sudden thought, from a terrace on which I rested for a while, I realised that there were no small houses to be seen. Apparently the single house, and possibly even the household, had vanished. Here and there among the greenery were palace-like buildings, but the house and the cottage, which form such character-

istic features of our own English landscape, had disappeared.

"Communism," said I to myself.

And on the heels of that came another thought. I looked at the half-dozen little figures that were following me. Then, in a flash, I perceived that all had the same form of costume, the same soft hairless visage, and the same girlish rotundity of limb. It may seem strange, perhaps, that I had not noticed this before. But everything was so strange.

Now, I saw the fact plainly enough. In costume, and in all the differences of texture and bearing that now mark off the sexes from each other, these people of the future were alike. And the children seemed to my eyes to be but the miniatures of their parents. I judged, then, that the children of that time were extremely precocious, physically at least, and I found afterwards abundant verification of my opinion.

Seeing the ease and security in which these people were living, I felt that this close resemblance of the sexes was after all what one would expect; for the strength of a man and the softness of a woman, the institution of the family, and the differentiation of occupations are mere militant necessities of an age of physical force. Where population is balanced and abundant, much child-bearing becomes an evil rather than a blessing to the State; where violence comes but rarely and offspring are secure, there is less necessity—indeed there is no necessity—for an efficient family, and the specialisation of the sexes with reference to their children's needs disappears. We see some beginnings of this even in our own time, and in this future age it was complete. This, I must remind you, was my speculation at the time. Later, I was to appreciate how far it fell short of the reality.

WHILE I was musing upon these things, my attention was attracted by a pretty little structure, like a well under a cupola. I thought in a transitory way of the oddness of wells still existing, and then resumed the thread of my speculations. There were no large buildings towards the top of the hill, and as my walking powers were evidently miraculous, I was presently left alone for the first time. With a strange sense of free-

dom and adventure I pushed on up to the crest.

There I found a seat of some yellow metal that I did not recognise, corroded in places with a kind of pinkish rust and half smothered in soft moss, the arm rests cast and filed into the resemblance of griffins' heads. I sat down on it, and I surveyed the broad view of our old world under the sunset of that long day. It was as sweet and fair a view as I have ever seen. The sun had already gone below the horizon and the west was flaming gold, touched with some horizontal bars of purple and crimson. Below was the valley of the Thames, in which the river lay like a band of burnished steel. I have already spoken of the great palaces dotted about among the variegated greenery, some in ruins and some still occupied. Here and there rose a white or silvery figure in the waste garden of the earth, here and there came the sharp vertical line of some cupola or obelisk. There were no hedges, no signs of proprietary rights, no evidences of agriculture; the whole earth had become a garden.

So watching, I began to put my interpretation upon the things I had seen, and as it shaped itself to me that evening, my interpretation was something in this way. Afterwards I found I had got only a half-truth—or only a glimpse of one facet of the truth.

It seemed to me that I had happened upon humanity upon the wane. The ruddy sunset set me thinking of the sunset of mankind. For the first time I began to realise an odd consequence of the social effort in which we are at present engaged. And yet, come to think, it is a logical consequence enough. Strength is the outcome of need; security sets a premium on feebleness. The work of ameliorating the conditions of life—the true civilising process that makes life more and more secure—had gone steadily on to a climax. One triumph of a united humanity over Nature had followed another. Things that are now mere dreams had become projects deliberately put in hand and carried forward. And the harvest was what I saw!

AFTER all, the sanitation and the agriculture of to-day are still in the rudi-

mentary stage. The science of our time has attacked but a little department of the field of human disease, but, even so, it spreads its operations very steadily and persistently. Our agriculture and horticulture destroy a weed just here and there and cultivate perhaps a score or so of wholesome plants, leaving the greater number to fight out a balance as they can. We improve our favourite plants and animals—and how few they are—gradually by selective breeding; now a new and better peach, now a seedless grape, now a sweeter and larger flower, now a more convenient breed of cattle. We improve them gradually, because our ideals are vague and tentative, and our knowledge is very limited; because Nature, too, is shy and slow in our clumsy hands. Some day all this will be better organised, and still better. That is the drift of the current in spite of the eddies. The whole world will be intelligent, educated, and coöperating; things will move faster and faster towards the subjugation of Nature. In the end, wisely and carefully we shall readjust the balance of animal and vegetable life to suit our human needs.

This adjustment, I say, must have been done, and done well; done indeed for all Time, in the space of Time across which my machine had leaped. The air was free from gnats, the earth from weeds or fungi; everywhere were fruits and sweet and delightful flowers; brilliant butterflies flew hither and thither. The ideal of preventive medicine was attained. Diseases had been stamped out. I saw no evidence of any contagious diseases during all my stay. And I shall have to tell you later that even the processes of putrefaction and decay had been profoundly affected by these changes.

Social triumphs, too, had been effected. I saw mankind housed in splendid shelters, gloriously clothed, and as yet I had found them engaged in no toil. There were no signs of struggle, neither social nor economic struggle. The shop, the advertisement, traffic, all that commerce which constitutes the body of our world, was gone. It was natural on that golden evening that I should jump at the idea of a social paradise. The difficulty of increasing population had been met, I guessed, and population had ceased to increase.

But with this change in condition come inevitably adaptations to the change. What, unless biological science is a mass of errors, is the cause of human intelligence and vigour? Hardship and freedom: conditions under which the active, strong, and subtle survive and the weaker go to the wall; conditions that put a premium upon the loyal alliance of capable men, upon self-restraint, patience, and decision. And the institution of the family, and the emotions that arise therein, the fierce jealousy, the tenderness for offspring, parental self-devotion, all found their justification and support in the imminent dangers of the young. *Now*, where are these imminent dangers? There is a sentiment arising, and it will grow, against connubial jealousy, against fierce maternity, against passion of all sorts; unnecessary things now, and things that make us uncomfortable, savage survivals, discords in a refined and pleasant life.

I THOUGHT of the physical slightness of the people, their lack of intelligence, and those big abundant ruins, and it strengthened my belief in a perfect conquest of Nature. For after the battle comes Quiet. Humanity had been strong, energetic, and intelligent, and had used all its abundant vitality to alter the conditions under which it lived. And now came the reaction of the altered conditions.

Under the new conditions of perfect comfort and security that restless energy, that with us is strength, would become weakness. Even in our own time certain tendencies and desires, once necessary to survival, are a constant source of failure. Physical courage and the love of battle, for instance, are no great help—may even be hindrances—to a civilised man. And in a state of physical balance and security, power, intellectual as well as physical, would be out of place. For countless years I judged there had been no danger of war or solitary violence, no danger from wild beasts, no wasting disease to require strength of constitution, no need of toil. For such a life, what we should call the weak are as well equipped as the strong, are indeed no longer weak. Better equipped indeed they are, for the strong would be fretted by an energy

for which there was no outlet. No doubt the exquisite beauty of the buildings I saw was the outcome of the last surgings of the now purposeless energy of mankind before it settled down into perfect harmony with the conditions under which it lived—the flourish of that triumph which began the last great peace. This has ever been the fate of energy in security; it takes to art and to eroticism, and then come languor, decay.

Even this artistic impetus would at last die away—had almost died in the Time I saw. To adorn themselves with flowers, to dance, to sing in the sunlight; so much was left of the artistic spirit, and no more. Even that would fade in the end into a contented inactivity. We are kept keen on the grindstone of pain and necessity, and, it seemed to me, that here was that hateful grindstone broken at last!

As I stood there in the gathering dark I thought that in this simple explanation I had mastered the problem of the world—mastered the whole secret of these delicious people. Possibly the checks they had devised for the increase of population had succeeded too well, and their numbers had rather diminished than kept stationary. That would account for the abandoned ruins. Very simple was my explanation, and plausible enough—as most wrong theories are!

V

AS I stood there musing over this too perfect triumph of man, the full moon, yellow and gibbous, came up out of an overflow of silver light in the northeast. The bright little figures ceased to move about below, a noiseless owl flitted by, and I shivered with the chill of the night. I determined to descend and find where I could sleep.

I looked for the building I knew. Then my eye travelled along to the figure of the White Sphinx upon the pedestal of bronze, growing distinct as the light of the rising moon grew brighter. I could see the silver birch against it. There was the tangle of rhododendron bushes, black in the pale light, and there was the little lawn. I looked at the lawn again. A queer doubt chilled my complacency. "No," said I stoutly to myself, "that was not the lawn."

But it was the lawn. For the white leprous face of the sphinx was towards it. Can you imagine what I felt as this conviction came home to me? But you cannot. The Time Machine was gone!

At once, like a lash across the face, came the possibility of losing my own age, of being left helpless in this strange new world. The bare thought of it was an actual physical sensation. I could feel it grip me at the throat and stop my breathing. In another moment I was in a passion of fear and running with great leaping strides down the slope. Once I fell headlong and cut my face; I lost no time in stanching the blood, but jumped up and ran on, with a warm trickle down my cheek and chin. All the time I ran I was saying to myself, "They have moved it a little, pushed it under the bushes out of the way." Nevertheless, I ran with all my might. All the time, with the certainty that sometimes comes with excessive dread, I knew that such assurance was folly, knew instinctively that the machine was removed out of my reach. My breath came with pain. I suppose I covered the whole distance from the hill crest to the little lawn, two miles, perhaps, in ten minutes. And I am not a young man. I cursed aloud, as I ran, at my confident folly in leaving the machine, wasting good breath thereby. I cried aloud, and none answered. Not a creature seemed to be stirring in that moonlit world.

When I reached the lawn my worst fears were realised. Not a trace of the thing was to be seen. I felt faint and cold when I faced the empty space among the black tangle of bushes. I ran round it furiously, as if the thing might be hidden in a corner, and then stopped abruptly, with my hands clutching my hair. Above me towered the sphinx, upon the bronze pedestal, white, shining, leprous, in the light of the rising moon. It seemed to smile in mockery of my dismay.

I might have consoled myself by imagining the little people had put the mechanism in some shelter for me, had I not felt assured of their physical and intellectual inadequacy. That is what dismayed me: the sense of some hitherto unsuspected power, through whose intervention my invention had vanished. Yet, of one thing I felt as-

sured: unless some other age had produced its exact duplicate, the machine could not have moved in time. The attachment of the levers—I will show you the method later—prevented any one from tampering with it in that way when they were removed. It had moved, and was hid, only in space. But then, where could it be?

I THINK I must have had a kind of frenzy. I remember running violently in and out among the moonlit bushes all round the sphinx, and startling some white animal that, in the dim light, I took for a small deer. I remember, too, late that night, beating the bushes with my clenched fists until my knuckles were gashed and bleeding from the broken twigs. Then, sobbing and raving in my anguish of mind, I went down to the great building of stone. The big hall was dark, silent, and deserted. I slipped on the uneven floor, and fell over one of the malachite tables, almost breaking my shin. I lit a match and went on past the dusty curtains, of which I have told you.

There I found a second great hall covered with cushions, upon which, perhaps, a score or so of the little people were sleeping. I have no doubt they found my second appearance strange enough, coming suddenly out of the quiet darkness with inarticulate noises and the splutter and flare of a match. For they had forgotten about matches. "Where is my Time Machine?" I began, bawling like an angry child, laying hands upon them and shaking them up together. It must have been very queer to them. Some laughed, most of them looked sorely frightened. When I saw them standing round me, it came into my head that I was doing as foolish a thing as it was possible for me to do under the circumstances, in trying to revive the sensation of fear. For, reasoning from their daylight behaviour, I thought that fear must be forgotten.

Abruptly, I dashed down the match, and, knocking one of the people over in my course, went blundering across the big dining-hall again, out under the moonlight. I heard cries of terror and their little feet running and stumbling this way and that. I do not remember all I did as the moon crept up the sky. I suppose it was the unexpected nature of my loss that maddened

me. I felt hopelessly cut off from my own kind—a strange animal in an unknown world. I must have raved to and fro, screaming and crying upon God and Fate. I have a memory of horrible fatigue, as the long night of despair wore away; of looking in this impossible place and that; of groping among moonlit ruins and touching strange creatures in the black shadows; at last, of lying on the ground near the sphinx and weeping with absolute wretchedness. I had nothing left but misery. Then I slept, and when I woke again it was full day, and a couple of sparrows were hopping round me on the turf within reach of my arm.

I sat up in the freshness of the morning, trying to remember how I had got there, and why I had such a profound sense of desolation and despair. Then things came clear in my mind. With the plain, reasonable daylight, I could look my circumstances fairly in the face. I saw the wild folly of my frenzy overnight, and I could reason with myself. "Suppose the worst?" I said. "Suppose the machine altogether lost—perhaps destroyed? It behoves me to be calm and patient, to learn the way of the people, to get a clear idea of the method of my loss, and the means of getting materials and tools; so that in the end, perhaps, I may make another." That would be my only hope, a poor hope perhaps, but better than despair. And, after all, it was a beautiful and curious world.

BUT probably the machine had only been taken away. Still, I must be calm and patient, find its hiding place, and recover it by force or cunning. And with that I scrambled to my feet and looked about me, wondering where I could bathe. I felt weary, stiff, and travel-soiled. The freshness of the morning made me desire an equal freshness. I had exhausted my emotion. Indeed, as I went about my business, I found myself wondering at my intense excitement overnight. I made a careful examination of the ground about the little lawn. I wasted some time in futile questionings, conveyed, as well as I was able, to such of the little people as came by. They all failed to understand my gestures; some were simply stolid, some thought it was a jest and laughed at me. I had the hardest task in the world to

keep my hands off their pretty laughing faces. It was a foolish impulse, but the devil begotten of fear and blind anger was ill curbed and still eager to take advantage of my perplexity. The turf gave better counsel. I found a groove ripped in it, about midway between the pedestal of the sphinx and the marks of my feet where, on arrival, I had struggled with the overturned machine. There were other signs of removal about, with queer narrow footprints like those I could imagine made by a sloth. This directed my closer attention to the pedestal. It was, as I think I have said, of bronze. It was not a mere block, but highly decorated with deep framed panels on either side. I went and rapped at these. The pedestal was hollow. Examining the panels with care I found them discontinuous with the frames. There were no handles or keyholes, but possibly the panels, if they were doors, as I supposed, opened from within. One thing was clear enough to my mind. It took no very great mental effort to infer that my Time Machine was inside that pedestal. But how it got there was a different problem.

I saw the heads of two orange-clad people coming through the bushes and under some blossom-covered apple-trees towards me. I turned smiling to them and beckoned them to me. They came, and then, pointing to the bronze pedestal, I tried to intimate my wish to open it. But at my first gesture towards this they behaved very oddly. I don't know how to convey their expression to you. Suppose you were to use a grossly improper gesture to a delicate-minded woman—it is how she would look. They went off as if they had received the last possible insult. I tried a sweet-looking little chap in white next, with exactly the same result. Somehow, his manner made me feel ashamed of myself. But, as you know, I wanted the Time Machine, and I tried him once more. As he turned off, like the others, my temper got the better of me. In three strides I was after him, had him by the loose part of his robe round the neck, and began dragging him towards the sphinx. Then I saw the horror and repugnance of his face, and all of a sudden I let him go.

But I was not beaten yet. I banged with my fist at the bronze panels. I thought I heard something stir inside—to be explicit,

I thought I heard a sound like a chuckle—but I must have been mistaken. Then I got a big pebble from the river, and came and hammered till I had flattened a coil in the decorations, and the verdigris came off in powdery flakes. The delicate little people must have heard me hammering in gusty outbreaks a mile away on either hand, but nothing came of it. I saw a crowd of them upon the slopes, looking furtively at me. At last, hot and tired, I sat down to watch the place. But I was too restless to watch long; I am too Occidental for a long vigil. I could work at a problem for years, but to wait inactive for twenty-four hours—that is another matter.

I GOT up after a time, and began walking aimlessly through the bushes towards the hill again. "Patience," said I to myself. "If you want your machine again you must leave that sphinx alone. If they mean to take your machine away, it's little good your wrecking their bronze panels, and if they don't, you will get it back as soon as you can ask for it. To sit among all these unknown things before a puzzle like that is hopeless. That way lies monomania. Face this world. Learn its ways, watch it, be careful of too hasty guesses at its meaning. In the end you will find clues to it all." Then suddenly the humour of the situation came into my mind: the thought of the years I had spent in study and toil to get into the future age, and now my passion of anxiety to get out of it. I had made myself the most complicated and the most hopeless trap that ever a man devised. Although it was at my own expense, I could not help myself. I laughed aloud.

Going through the big palace, it seemed to me that the little people avoided me. It may have been my fancy, or it may have had something to do with my hammering at the gates of bronze. Yet I felt tolerably sure of the avoidance. I was careful, however, to show no concern and to abstain from any pursuit of them, and in the course of a day or two things got back to the old footing. I made what progress I could in the language, and in addition I pushed my explorations here and there. Either I missed some subtle point, or their language was excessively simple—almost exclusively com-

posed of concrete substantives and verbs. There seemed to be few, if any, abstract terms, or little use of figurative language. Their sentences were usually simple and of two words, and I failed to convey or understand any but the simplest propositions. I determined to put the thought of my Time Machine and the mystery of the bronze doors under the sphinx as much as possible in a corner of memory, until my growing knowledge would lead me back to them in a natural way. Yet a certain feeling, you may understand, tethered me in a circle of a few miles round the point of my arrival.

So far as I could see, all the world displayed the same exuberant richness as the Thames valley. From every hill I climbed I saw the same abundance of splendid buildings, endlessly varied in material and style, the same clustering thickets of evergreens, the same blossom-laden trees and tree-ferns. Here and there water shone like silver, and beyond, the land rose into blue undulating hills, and so faded into the serenity of the sky. A peculiar feature, which presently attracted my attention, was the presence of certain circular wells, several, as it seemed to me, of a very great depth. One lay by the path up the hill, which I had followed during my first walk. Like the others, it was rimmed with bronze, curiously wrought, and protected by a little cupola from the rain. Sitting by the side of these wells, and peering down into the shafted darkness, I could see no gleam of water, nor could I start any reflection with a lighted match. But in all of them I heard a certain sound: a thud—thud—thud, like the beating of some big engine; and I discovered, from the flaring of my matches, that a steady current of air set down the shafts. Further, I threw a scrap of paper into the throat of one, and, instead of fluttering slowly down, it was at once sucked swiftly out of sight.

AFTER a time, too, I came to connect these wells with tall towers standing here and there upon the slopes; for above them there was often just such a flicker in the air as one sees on a hot day above a sun-scorched beach. Putting things together, I reached a strong suggestion of an extensive system of subterranean ventilation, whose true import it was difficult to imag-

ine. I was at first inclined to associate it with the sanitary apparatus of these people. It was an obvious conclusion, but it was absolutely wrong.

And here I must admit that I learned very little of drains and bells and modes of conveyance, and the like conveniences during my time in this real future. In some of these visions of Utopias and coming times which I have read, there is a vast amount of detail about building and social arrangements, and so forth. But while such details are easy enough to obtain when the whole world is contained in one's imagination, they are altogether inaccessible to a real traveller amid such realities as I found here. Conceive the tale of London which a Negro, fresh from Central Africa, would take back to his tribe! What would he know of railway companies, of social movements, of telephone and telegraph wires, of the Parcels Delivery Company, and postal orders and the like? Yet we, at least, should be willing enough to explain these things to him!

And even of what he knew, how much could he make his untravelled friend either apprehend or believe? Then, think how narrow the gap between a Negro and a white man of our own times, and how wide the interval between myself and these of the Golden Age! I was sensible of much which was unseen, and which contributed to my comfort; but save for a general impression of automatic organisation, I fear I can convey very little of the difference to your mind.

In the matter of sepulture, for instance, I could see no signs of crematoria nor anything suggestive of tombs. But it occurred to me that, possibly, there might be cemeteries—or crematoria—somewhere beyond the range of my explorings. This, again, was a question I deliberately put to myself, and my curiosity was at first entirely defeated upon the point. The thing puzzled me, and I was led to make a further remark, which puzzled me still more: that aged and infirm among this people there were none.

I must confess that my satisfaction with my first theories of an automatic civilisation and a decadent humanity did not long endure. Yet I could think of no other. Let

me put my difficulties. The several big palaces I had explored were mere living places, great dining-halls and sleeping apartments. I could find no machinery, no appliances of any kind. Yet these people were clothed in pleasant fabrics that must at times need renewal, and their sandals, though undecorated, were fairly complex specimens of metalwork. Somehow such things must be made. And the little people displayed no vestige of a creative tendency. There were no shops, no workshops, no sign of importations among them. They spent all their time in playing gently, in bathing in the river, in making love in a half-playful fashion, in eating fruit and sleeping. I could not see how things were kept going.

THEN, again, about the Time Machine: something, I knew not what, had taken it into the hollow pedestal of the White Sphinx. *Why?* For the life of me I could not imagine. Those waterless wells, too, those flickering pillars. I felt I lacked a clue. I felt—how shall I put it? Suppose you found an inscription, with sentences here and there in excellent plain English, and interpolated therewith, others made up of words, of letters even, absolutely unknown to you? Well, on the third day of my visit, that was how the world of Eight Hundred and Two Thousand Seven Hundred and One presented itself to me!

That day, too, I made a friend—of a sort. It happened that, as I was watching some of the little people bathing in a shallow, one of them was seized with cramp and began drifting downstream. The main current ran rather swiftly, but not too strongly for even a moderate swimmer. It will give you an idea, therefore, of the strange deficiency in these creatures, when I tell you that none made the slightest attempt to rescue the weakly crying little thing which was drowning before their eyes. When I realised this, I hurriedly slipped off my clothes, and, wading in at a point lower down, I caught the poor mite and drew her safe to land. A little rubbing of the limbs soon brought her round, and I had the satisfaction of seeing she was all right before I left her. I had got to such a low estimate of her kind that I did not ex-

pect any gratitude from her. In that, however, I was wrong.

This happened in the morning. In the afternoon I met my little woman, as I believe it was, as I was returning towards my centre from an exploration, and she received me with cries of delight and presented me with a big garland of flowers—evidently made for me and me alone. The thing took my imagination. Very possibly I had been feeling desolate. At any rate I did my best to display my appreciation of the gift. We were soon seated together in a little stone arbour, engaged in conversation, chiefly of smiles. The creature's friendliness affected me exactly as a child's might have done. We passed each other flowers, and she kissed my hands. I did the same to hers. Then I tried talk, and found that her name was Weena, which, though I don't know what it meant, somehow seemed appropriate enough. That was the beginning of a queer friendship which lasted a week, and ended—as I will tell you!

She was exactly like a child. She wanted to be with me always. She tried to follow me everywhere, and my next journey out and about it went to my heart to tire her down, and leave her at last, exhausted and calling after me rather plaintively. But the problems of the world had to be mastered. I had not, I said to myself, come into the future to carry on a miniature flirtation. Yet her distress when I left her was very great, her expostulations at the parting were sometimes frantic, and I think, altogether, I had as much trouble as comfort from her devotion. Nevertheless she was, somehow, a very great comfort. I thought it was mere childish affection that made her cling to me. Until it was too late, I did not clearly know what I had inflicted upon her when I left her. Nor until it was too late did I clearly understand what she was to me. For, by merely seeming fond of me, and showing in her weak, futile way that she cared for me, the little doll of a creature presently gave my return to the neighbourhood of the White Sphinx almost the feeling of coming home; and I would watch for her tiny figure of white and gold so soon as I came over the hill.

It was from her, too, that I learned that fear had not yet left the world. She was

fearless enough in the daylight, and she had the oddest confidence in me; for once, in a foolish moment, I made threatening grimaces at her, and she simply laughed at them. But she dreaded the dark, dreaded shadows, dreaded black things. Darkness to her was the one thing dreadful. It was a singularly passionate emotion, and it set me thinking and observing. I discovered then, among other things, that these little people gathered into the great houses after dark, and slept in droves. To enter upon them without a light was to put them into a tumult of apprehension. I never found one out of doors, or one sleeping alone within doors, after dark. Yet I was still such a blockhead that I missed the lesson of that fear, and in spite of Weena's distress I insisted upon sleeping away from these slumbering multitudes.

It troubled her greatly, but in the end her odd affection for me triumphed, and for five of the nights of our acquaintance, including the last night of all, she slept with her head pillowed on my arm. But my story slips away from me as I speak of her. It must have been the night before her rescue that I was awakened about dawn. I had been restless, dreaming most disagreeably that I was drowned, and that sea-anemones were feeling over my face with their soft palps. I woke with a start, and with an odd fancy that some greyish animal had just rushed out of the chamber. I tried to get to sleep again, but I felt restless and uncomfortable. It was that dim grey hour when things are just creeping out of darkness, when everything is colourless and clear cut, and yet unreal. I got up, and went down into the great hall, and so out upon the flagstones in front of the palace. I thought I would make a virtue of necessity, and see the sunrise.

The moon was setting, and the dying moonlight and the first pallor of dawn were mingled in a ghastly half-light. The bushes were inky black, the ground a sombre grey, the sky colourless and cheerless. And up the hill I thought I could see ghosts. There several times, as I scanned the slope, I saw white figures. Twice I fancied I saw a solitary white, ape-like creature running rather quickly up the hill, and once near the ruins I saw a leash of them carrying some dark

body. They moved hastily. I did not see what became of them. It seemed that they vanished among the bushes. The dawn was still indistinct, you must understand. I was feeling that chill, uncertain, early-morning feeling you may have known. I doubted my eyes.

As the eastern sky grew brighter, and the light of the day came on and its vivid colouring returned upon the world once more, I scanned the view keenly. But I saw no vestige of my white figures. They were mere creatures of the half-light. "They must have been ghosts," I said; "I wonder whence they dated." For a queer notion of Grant Allen's came into my head, and amused me. If each generation die and leave ghosts, he argued, the world at last will get overcrowded with them. On that theory they would have grown innumerable some Eight Hundred Thousand Years hence, and it was no great wonder to see four at once. But the jest was unsatisfying, and I was thinking of these figures all the morning, until Weena's rescue drove them out of my head. I associated them in some indefinite way with the white animal I had startled in my first passionate search for the Time Machine. But Weena was a pleasant substitute. Yet all the same, they were soon destined to take far deadlier possession of my mind.

I THINK I have said how much hotter than our own was the weather of this Golden Age. I cannot account for it. It may be that the sun was hotter, or the earth nearer the sun. It is usual to assume that the sun will go on cooling steadily in the future. But people, unfamiliar with such speculations as those of the younger Darwin, forget that the planets must ultimately fall back one by one into the parent body. As these catastrophes occur, the sun will blaze with renewed energy; and it may be that some inner planet had suffered this fate. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that the sun was very much hotter than we know it.

Well, one very hot morning—my fourth. I think—as I was seeking shelter from the heat and glare in a colossal ruin near the great house where I slept and fed, there happened this strange thing: Clambering

among these heaps of masonry, I found a narrow gallery, whose end and side windows were blocked by fallen masses of stone. By contrast with the brilliancy outside, it seemed at first impenetrably dark to me. I entered it groping, for the change from light to blackness made spots of colour swim before me. Suddenly I halted spell-bound. A pair of eyes, luminous by reflection against the daylight without, was watching me out of the darkness.

The old instinctive dread of wild beasts came upon me. I clenched my hands and steadfastly looked into the glaring eyeballs. I was afraid to turn. Then the thought of the absolute security in which humanity appeared to be living came to my mind. And then I remembered that strange terror of the dark. Overcoming my fear to some extent, I advanced a step and spoke. I will admit that my voice was harsh and ill-controlled. I put out my hand and touched something soft. At once the eyes darted sideways, and something white ran past me. I turned with my heart in my mouth, and saw a queer little ape-like figure, its head held down in a peculiar manner, running across the sunlit space behind me. It blundered against a block of granite, staggered aside, and in a moment was hidden in a black shadow beneath another pile of ruined masonry.

My impression of it is, of course, imperfect; but I know it was a dull white, and had strange large greyish-red eyes; also that there was flaxen hair on its head and down its back. But, as I say, it went too fast for me to see distinctly. I cannot even say whether it ran on all-fours, or only with its forearms held very low. After an instant's pause I followed it into the second heap of ruins. I could not find it at first; but, after a time in the profound obscurity, I came upon one of those round well-like openings of which I have told you, half closed by a fallen pillar. A sudden thought came to me. Could this Thing have vanished down the shaft? I lit a match, and, looking down, I saw a small, white, moving creature, with large bright eyes which regarded me steadfastly as it retreated. It made me shudder. It was so like a human spider! It was clambering down the wall, and now I saw for the first time a number

of metal foot and hand rests forming a kind of ladder down the shaft. Then the light burned my fingers and fell out of my hand, going out as it dropped, and when I had lit another the little monster had disappeared.

I DO not know how long I sat peering down that well. It was not for some time that I could succeed in persuading myself that the thing I had seen was human. But, gradually, the truth dawned on me: that Man had not remained one species, but had differentiated into two distinct animals: that my graceful children of the Upper World were not the sole descendants of our generation, but that this bleached, obscene, nocturnal Thing, which had flashed before me, was also heir to all the ages.

I thought of the flickering pillars and of my theory of an underground ventilation. I began to suspect their true import. And what, I wondered, was this Lemur doing in my scheme of a perfectly balanced organisation? How was it related to the indolent serenity of the beautiful Upper-worlders? And what was hidden down there at the foot of that shaft? I sat upon the edge of the well telling myself that, at any rate, there was nothing to fear, and that there I must descend for the solution of my difficulties. And withal I was absolutely afraid to go! As I hesitated, two of the beautiful Upper-world people came running in their amorous sport across the daylight into the shadow. The male pursued the female, flinging flowers at her as he ran.

They seemed distressed to find me, my arm against the overturned pillar, peering down the well. Apparently it was considered bad form to remark these apertures; for when I pointed to this one, and tried to frame a question about it in their tongue, they were still more visibly distressed and turned away. But they were interested by my matches, and I struck some to amuse them. I tried them again about the well, and again I failed. So presently I left them, meaning to go back to Weena, and see what I could get from her. But my mind was already in revolution; my guesses and impressions were slipping and sliding to a new adjustment. I had now a clue to the import of these wells, to the ventilating

towers, to the mystery of the ghosts; to say nothing of a hint at the meaning of the bronze gates and the fate of the Time Machine! And very vaguely there came a suggestion towards the solution of the economic problem that had puzzled me.

Here was the new view. Plainly, this second species of Man was subterranean. There were three circumstances in particular which made me think that its rare emergence above ground was the outcome of a long-continued underground habit. In the first place, there was the bleached look common in most animals that live largely in the dark—the white fish of the Kentucky caves, for instance. Then, those large eyes, with that capacity for reflecting light, are common features of nocturnal things—witness the owl and the cat. And last of all, that evident confusion in the sunshine, that hasty yet fumbling and awkward flight towards dark shadow, and that peculiar carriage of the head while in the light—all reinforced the theory of an extreme sensitiveness of the retina.

BENEATH my feet, then, the earth must be tunnelled enormously, and these tunnelling were the habitat of the new race. The presence of ventilating-shafts and wells along the hill slopes—everywhere, in fact, except along the river valley—showed how universal were its ramifications. What so natural, then, as to assume that it was in this artificial underworld that such work as was necessary to the comfort of the daylight race was done? The notion was so plausible that I at once accepted it, and went on to assume the how of this splitting of the human species. I dare say you will anticipate the shape of my theory; though, for myself, I very soon felt that it fell far short of the truth.

At first, proceeding from the problems of our own age, it seemed clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer was the key to the whole position. No doubt it will seem grotesque enough to you—and wildly incredible!—and yet even now there are existing circumstances to point that way. There is a tendency to utilise underground space for the less ornamental

purposes of civilisation; there is the Metropolitan Railway in London, for instance, there are new electric railways, there are subways, there are underground workrooms and restaurants, and they increase and multiply. Evidently, I thought, this tendency had increased till Industry had gradually lost its birthright in the sky. I mean that it had gone deeper and deeper into larger and ever larger underground factories, spending a still-increasing amount of its time therein, till, in the end——! Even now, does not an East-end worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth?

A GAIN, the exclusive tendency of richer people, due, no doubt, to the increasing refinement of their education, and the widening gulf between them and the rude violence of the poor—is already leading to the closing, in their interest, of considerable portions of the surface of the land. About London, for instance, perhaps half the prettier country is shut in against intrusion. And this same widening gulf—which is due to the length and expense of the higher educational process and the increased facilities for and temptations towards refined habits on the part of the rich—will make that exchange between class and class, that promotion by intermarriage which at present retards the splitting of our species along lines of social stratification, less and less frequent.

So, in the end, above ground you must have the Haves, pursuing pleasure and comfort, and beauty, and below ground the Have-nots, the Workers getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour. Once they were there, they would no doubt have to pay rent, and not a little of it, for the ventilation of their caverns; and if they refused, they would starve or be suffocated for arrears. Such of them as were so constituted as to be miserable and rebellious would die; and, in the end, the balance being permanent, the survivors would become as well adapted to the conditions of underground life, and as happy in their way, as the Upper-world people were to theirs. As it seemed to me, the refined beauty and the etiolated pallor followed naturally enough.

The great triumph of Humanity I had dreamed of took a different shape in my mind. It had been no such triumph of moral education and general coöperation as I had imagined. Instead, I saw a real aristocracy, armed with a perfected science and working to a logical conclusion the industrial system of to-day. Its triumph had not been simply a triumph over Nature, but a triumph over Nature and the fellow man. This, I must warn you, was my theory at the time.

I had no convenient cicerone in the pattern of the Utopian books. My explanation may be absolutely wrong. I still think it is the most plausible one. But even on this supposition the balanced civilisation that was at last attained must have long since passed its zenith, and was now far fallen into decay. The too-perfect security of the Upper-worlders had led them to a slow movement of degeneration, to a general dwindling in size, strength, and intelligence. That I could see clearly enough already. What had happened to the Undergrounders I did not yet suspect; but from what I had seen of the Morlocks—that, by the bye, was the name by which these creatures were called—I could imagine that the modification of the human type was even far more profound than among the "Eloi," the beautiful race that I already knew.

Then came troublesome doubts. Why had the Morlocks taken my Time Machine? For I felt sure it was they who had taken it. Why, too, if the Eloi were masters, could they not restore the machine to me? And why were they so terribly afraid of the dark? I proceeded, as I have said, to question Weena about this Underworld, but here again I was disappointed. At first she would not understand my questions, and presently she refused to answer them. She shivered as though the topic was unendurable. And when I pressed her, perhaps a little harshly, she burst into tears. They were the only tears, except my own, I ever saw in that Golden Age. When I saw them I ceased abruptly to trouble about the Morlocks, and was only concerned in banishing these signs of the human inheritance from Weena's eyes. And very soon she was smiling and clapping her hands, while I solemnly burned a match.

VI

IT MAY seem odd to you, but it was two days before I could follow up the new-found clue in what was manifestly the proper way. I felt a peculiar shrinking from those pallid bodies. They were just the half-bleached colour of the worms and things one sees preserved in spirit in a zoölogical museum. And they were filthily cold to the touch. Probably my shrinking was largely due to the sympathetic influence of the Eloi, whose disgust of the Morlocks I now began to appreciate.

The next night I did not sleep well. Probably my health was a little disordered. I was oppressed with perplexity and doubt. Once or twice I had a feeling of intense fear for which I could perceive no definite reason. I remember creeping noiselessly into the great hall where the little people were sleeping in the moonlight—that night Weena was among them—and feeling reassured by their presence. It occurred to me even then, that in the course of a few days the moon must pass through its last quarter, and the nights grow dark, when the appearances of these unpleasant creatures from below, these whitened Lemurs, this new vermin that had replaced the old, might be more abundant. And on both these days I had the restless feeling of one who shirks an inevitable duty. I felt assured that the Time Machine was only to be recovered by boldly penetrating these underground mysteries. Yet I could not face the mystery. If only I had had a companion it would have been different. But I was so horribly alone, and even to clamber down into the darkness of the well appalled me. I don't know if you will understand my feeling, but I never felt quite safe at my back.

It was this restlessness, this insecurity, perhaps, that drove me further and further afield in my exploring expeditions. Going to the south-westward towards the rising country that is now called Combe Wood, I observed far off, in the direction of nineteenth-century Banstead, a vast green structure, different in character from any I had hitherto seen. It was larger than the largest of the palaces or ruins I knew, and the façade had an Oriental look: the face of it having the lustre, as well as the pale-green

tint, a kind of bluish-green, of a certain type of Chinese porcelain. This difference in aspect suggested a difference in use, and I was minded to push on and explore. But the day was growing late, and I had come upon the sight of the place after a long and tiring circuit; so I resolved to hold over the adventure for the following day, and I returned to the welcome and the caresses of little Weena. But next morning I perceived clearly enough that my curiosity regarding the Palace of Green Porcelain was a piece of self-deception, to enable me to shirk, by another day, an experience I dreaded. I resolved I would make the descent without further waste of time, and started out in the early morning towards a well near the ruins of granite and aluminum.

LITTLE Weena ran with me. She danced beside me to the well, but when she saw me lean over the mouth and look downward, she seemed strangely disconcerted. "Good-bye, little Weena," I said, kissing her; and then, putting her down, I began to feel over the parapet for the climbing hooks. Rather hastily, I may as well confess, for I feared my courage might leak away! At first she watched me in amazement. Then she gave a most piteous cry, and, running to me, she began to pull at me with her little hands. I think her opposition nerved me rather to proceed. I shook her off, perhaps a little roughly, and in another moment I was in the throat of the well. I saw her agonised face over the parapet, and smiled to reassure her. Then I had to look down at the unstable hooks to which I clung.

I had to clamber down a shaft of perhaps two hundred yards. The descent was effected by means of metallic bars projecting from the sides of the well, and these being adapted to the needs of a creature much smaller and lighter than myself, I was speedily cramped and fatigued by the descent. And not simply fatigued! One of the bars bent suddenly under my weight, and almost swung me off into the blackness beneath. For a moment I hung by one hand, and after that experience I did not dare to rest again. Though my arms and back were presently acutely painful, I went on clambering down the sheer descent with as quick

a motion as possible. Glancing upward, I saw the aperture, a small blue disk, in which a star was visible, while little Weena's head showed as a round black projection. The thudding sound of a machine below grew louder and more oppressive. Everything save that little disk above was profoundly dark, and when I looked up again Weena had disappeared.

I was in an agony of discomfort. I had some thought of trying to go up the shaft again, and leave the Underworld alone. But even while I turned this over in my mind I continued to descend. At last, with intense relief, I saw dimly coming up, a foot to the right of me, a slender loophole in the wall. Swinging myself in, I found it was the aperture of a narrow horizontal tunnel in which I could lie down and rest. It was not too soon. My arms ached, my back was cramped, and I was trembling with the prolonged terror of a fall. Besides this, the unbroken darkness had had a distressing effect upon my eyes. The air was full of the throb and hum of machinery pumping air down the shaft.

I do not know how long I lay. I was roused by a soft hand touching my face. Starting up in the darkness I snatched at my matches and, hastily striking one, I saw three stooping white creatures similar to the one I had seen above ground in the ruin, hastily retreating before the light. Living, as they did, in what appeared to me impenetrable darkness, their eyes were abnormally large and sensitive, just as are the pupils of the abysmal fishes, and they reflected the light in the same way. I have no doubt they could see me in that rayless obscurity, and they did not seem to have any fear of me apart from the light. But, so soon as I struck a match in order to see them, they fled incontinently, vanishing into dark gutters and tunnels, from which their eyes glared at me in the strangest fashion.

I TRIED to call to them, but the language they had was apparently different from that of the Upper-world people; so that I was needs left to my own unaided efforts, and the thought of flight before exploration was even then in my mind. But I said to myself, "You are in for it now," and, feeling my way along the tunnel, I found the

noise of machinery grow louder. Presently the walls fell away from me, and I came to a large open space, and, striking another match, saw that I had entered a vast arched cavern, which stretched into utter darkness beyond the range of my light. The view I had of it was as much as one could see in the burning of a match.

Necessarily my memory is vague. Great shapes like big machines rose out of the dimness, and cast grotesque black shadows, in which dim spectral Morlocks sheltered from the glare. The place, by the bye, was very stuffy and oppressive, and the faint halitus of freshly shed blood was in the air. Some way down the central vista was a little table of white metal, laid with what seemed a meal. The Morlocks at any rate were carnivorous! Even at the time, I remember wondering what large animal could have survived to furnish the red joint I saw. It was all very indistinct: the heavy smell, the big unmeaning shapes, the obscene figures lurking in the shadows, and only waiting for the darkness to come at me again! Then the match burned down, and stung my fingers, and fell, a wriggling red spot in the blackness.

I have thought since how particularly ill equipped I was for such an experience. When I had started with the Time Machine, I had started with the absurd assumption that the men of the Future would certainly be infinitely ahead of ourselves in all their appliances. I had come without arms, without medicine, without anything to smoke—at times I missed tobacco frightfully—even without enough matches. If only I had thought of a Kodak! I could have flashed that glimpse of the Underworld in a second, and examined it at leisure. But, as it was, I stood there with only the weapons and the powers that Nature had endowed me with—hands, feet, and teeth; these, and four safety-matches that still remained to me.

I WAS afraid to push my way in among all this machinery in the dark, and it was only with my last glimpse of light I discovered that my store of matches had run low. It had never occurred to me until that moment that there was any need to economise them, and I had wasted almost

half the box in astonishing the Upperworlders, to whom fire was a novelty. Now, as I say, I had four left, and while I stood in the dark, a hand touched mine, lank fingers came feeling over my face, and I was sensible of a peculiar unpleasant odour. I fancied I heard the breathing of a crowd of those dreadful little beings about me. I felt the box of matches in my hand being gently disengaged, and other hands behind me plucking at my clothing. The sense of these unseen creatures examining me was indescribably unpleasant. The sudden realisation of my ignorance of their ways of thinking and doing came home to me very vividly in the darkness. I shouted at them as loudly as I could. They started away, and then I could feel them approaching me again. They clutched at me more boldly, whispering odd sounds to each other. I shivered violently, and shouted again—rather discordantly. This time they were not so seriously alarmed, and they made a queer laughing noise as they came back at me. I will confess I was horribly frightened. I determined to strike another match and escape under the protection of its glare. I did so, and eking out the flicker with a scrap of paper from my pocket, I made good my retreat to the narrow tunnel. But I had scarce entered this when my light was blown out, and in the blackness I could hear the Morlocks rustling like wind among leaves, and pattering like the rain, as they hurried after me.

In a moment I was clutched by several hands, and there was no mistaking that they were trying to haul me back. I struck another light, and waved it in their dazzled faces. You can scarce imagine how nauseatingly inhuman they looked—those pale, chinless faces and great, lidless, pinkish-grey eyes!—as they stared in their blindness and bewilderment. But I did not stay to look, I promise you: I retreated again, and when my second match had ended, I struck my third. It had almost burned through when I reached the opening into the shaft. I lay down on the edge, for the throb of the great pump below made me giddy. Then I felt sideways for the projecting hooks, and, as I did so, my feet were grasped from behind, and I was violently tugged backward. I lit my last match . . . and it incontinently went out. But I had my hand on the climb-

ing bars now, and, kicking violently, I disengaged myself from the clutches of the Morlocks and was speedily clambering up the shaft, while they stayed peering and blinking up at me: all but one little wretch who followed me for some way, and well-nigh secured my boot as a trophy.

That climb seemed interminable to me. With the last twenty or thirty feet of it a deadly nausea came upon me. I had the greatest difficulty in keeping my hold. The last few yards were a frightful struggle against this faintness. Several times my head swam, and I felt all the sensations of falling. At last, however, I got over the well-mouth somehow, and staggered out of the ruin into the blinding sunlight. I fell upon my face. Even the soil smelt sweet and clean. Then I remember Weena kissing my hands and ears, and the voices of others among the Eloi. Then, for a time, I was insensible.

VII

NOW, indeed, I seemed in a worse case than before. Hitherto, except during my night's anguish at the loss of the Time Machine, I had felt a sustaining hope of ultimate escape, but that hope was staggered by these new discoveries. Hitherto I had merely thought myself impeded by the childish simplicity of the little people, and by some unknown forces which I had only to understand to overcome; but there was an altogether new element in the sickening quality of the Morlocks—a something inhuman and malign. Instinctively I loathed them. Before, I had felt as a man might feel who had fallen into a pit: my concern was with the pit and how to get out of it. Now I felt like a beast in a trap, whose enemy would come upon him soon.

The enemy I dreaded may surprise you. It was the darkness of the new moon. Weena had put this into my head by some at first incomprehensible remarks about the Dark Nights. It was not now such a very difficult problem to guess what the coming Dark Nights might mean. The moon was on the wane: each night there was a longer interval of darkness. And I now understood to some slight degree at least the reason of the fear of the little Upper-world people for the dark. I wondered vaguely what foul villainy

it might be that the Morlocks did under the new moon. I felt pretty sure now that my second hypothesis was all wrong. The Upper-world people might once have been the favoured aristocracy, and the Morlocks their mechanical servants; but that had long since passed away. The two species that had resulted from the evolution of man were sliding down towards, or had already arrived at, an altogether new relationship. The Eloi, like the Carolingian kings, had decayed to a mere beautiful futility. They still possessed the earth on sufferance: since the Morlocks, subterranean for innumerable generations, had come at last to find the daylight surface intolerable. And the Morlocks made their garments, I inferred, and maintained them in their habitual needs, perhaps through the survival of an old habit of service. They did it as a standing horse paws with his foot, or as a man enjoys killing animals in sport: because ancient and departed necessities had impressed it on the organism. But, clearly, the old order was already in part reversed. The Nemesis of the delicate ones was creeping on apace. Ages ago, thousands of generations ago, man had thrust his brother man out of the ease and the sunshine. And now that brother was coming back—changed! Already the Eloi had begun to learn one old lesson anew. They were becoming reacquainted with Fear. And suddenly there came into my head the memory of the meat I had seen in the Underworld. It seemed odd how it floated into my mind: not stirred up as it were by the current of my meditations, but coming in almost like a question from outside. I tried to recall the form of it. I had a vague sense of something familiar, but I could not tell what it was at the time.

Still, however helpless the little people in the presence of their mysterious Fear, I was differently constituted. I came out of this age of ours, this ripe prime of the human race, when Fear does not paralyse and mystery has lost its terrors. I at least would defend myself. Without further delay I determined to make myself arms and a fastness where I might sleep. With that refuge as a base, I could face this strange world with some of that confidence I had lost in realising to what creatures night by night I lay exposed. I felt I could never sleep again

until my bed was secure from them. I shuddered with horror to think how they must already have examined me.

I WANDERED during the afternoon along the valley of the Thames, but found nothing that commended itself to my mind as inaccessible. All the buildings and trees seemed easily practicable to such dexterous climbers as the Morlocks, to judge by their wells, must be. Then the tall pinnacles of the Palace of Green Porcelain and the polished gleam of its walls came back to my memory; and in the evening, taking Weena like a child upon my shoulder, I went up the hills towards the south-west. The distance, I had reckoned, was seven or eight miles, but it must have been nearer eighteen. I had first seen the place on a moist afternoon when distances are deceptively diminished. In addition, the heel of one of my shoes was loose, and a nail was working through the sole—they were comfortable old shoes I wore about indoors—so that I was lame. And it was already long past sunset when I came in sight of the palace, silhouetted black against the pale yellow of the sky.

Weena had been hugely delighted when I began to carry her, but after a time she desired me to let her down, and ran along by the side of me, occasionally darting off on either hand to pick flowers to stick in my pockets. My pockets had always puzzled Weena, but at the last she had concluded that they were an eccentric kind of vase for floral decoration. At least she utilised them for that purpose. And that reminds me! In changing my jacket I found . . .

The Time Traveller paused, put his hand into his pocket, and silently placed two withered flowers, not unlike very large white mallows, upon the little table. Then he resumed his narrative.

As the hush of evening crept over the world and we proceeded over the hill crest towards Wimbledon, Weena grew tired and wanted to return to the house of grey stone. But I pointed out the distant pinnacles of the Palace of Green Porcelain to her, and contrived to make her understand that we were seeking a refuge there from her Fear. You know that great pause that comes upon things before the dusk? Even

the breeze stops in the trees. To me there is always an air of expectation about that evening stillness. The sky was clear, remote, and empty save for a few horizontal bars far down in the sunset. Well, that night the expectation took the colour of my fears. In that darkling calm my senses seemed preternaturally sharpened. I fancied I could even feel the hollowness of the ground beneath my feet: could, indeed, almost see through it the Morlocks on their ant-hill going hither and thither and waiting for the dark. In my excitement I fancied that they would receive my invasion of their burrows as a declaration of war. And why had they taken my Time Machine?

SO WE went on in the quiet, and the twilight deepened into night. The clear blue of the distance faded, and one star after another came out. The ground grew dim and the trees black. Weena's fears and her fatigue grew upon her. I took her in my arms and talked to her and caressed her. Then, as the darkness grew deeper, she put her arms round my neck, and, closing her eyes, tightly pressed her face against my shoulder. So we went down a long slope into a valley, and there in the dimness I almost walked into a little river. This I waded, and went up the opposite side of the valley, past a number of sleeping houses, and by a statue—a Faun, or some such figure, *minus* the head. Here too were acacias. So far I had seen nothing of the Morlocks, but it was yet early in the night, and the darker hours before the old moon rose were still to come.

From the brow of the next hill I saw a thick wood spreading wide and black before me. I hesitated at this. I could see no end to it, either to the right or the left. Feeling tired—my feet, in particular, were very sore—I carefully lowered Weena from my shoulder as I halted, and sat down upon the turf. I could no longer see the Palace of Green Porcelain, and I was in doubt of my direction. I looked into the thickness of the wood and thought of what it might hide. Under that dense tangle of branches one would be out of sight of the stars. Even were there no other lurking danger—a danger I did not care to let my imagination loose upon—there would still be all the

roots to stumble over and the tree-boles to strike against.

I was very tired, too, after the excitements of the day; so I decided that I would not face it, but would pass the night upon the open hill.

Weena, I was glad to find, was fast asleep. I carefully wrapped her in my jacket, and sat down beside her to wait for the moonrise. The hillside was quiet and deserted, but from the black of the wood there came now and then a stir of living things. Above me shone the stars, for the night was very clear. I felt a certain sense of friendly comfort in their twinkling. All the old constellations had gone from the sky, however: that slow movement which is imperceptible in a hundred human lifetimes, had long since rearranged them in unfamiliar groupings. But the Milky Way, it seemed to me, was still the same tattered streamer of star-dust as of yore. Southward, as I judged it, was a very bright red star that was new to me; it was even more splendid than our own green Sirius. And amid all these scintillating points of light one bright planet shone kindly and steadily like the face of an old friend.

LOOKING at these stars suddenly dwarfed my own troubles and all the gravities of terrestrial life. I thought of their unfathomable distance, and the slow inevitable drift of their movements out of the unknown past into the unknown future. I thought of the great precessional cycle that the pole of the earth describes. Only forty times had that silent revolution occurred during all the years that I had traversed. And during these few revolutions all the activity, all the traditions, the complex organisations, the nations, languages, literatures, aspirations, even the mere memory of Man as I knew him, had been swept out of existence. Instead were these frail creatures who had forgotten their high ancestry, and the white Things of which I went in terror. Then I thought of the Great Fear that was between the two species, and for the first time, with a sudden shiver, came the clear knowledge of what the meat I had seen might be. Yet it was too horrible! I looked at little Weena sleeping beside me, her face white and starlike under

the stars, and forthwith dismissed the thought.

Through that long night I held my mind off the Morlocks as well as I could, and whiled away the time by trying to fancy I could find signs of the old constellations in the new confusion. The sky kept very clear, except for a hazy cloud or so. No doubt I dozed at times. Then, as my vigil wore on, came a faintness in the eastward sky, like the reflection of some colourless fire, and the old moon rose, thin and peaked and white. And close behind, and overtaking it, and overflowing it, the dawn came, pale at first, and then growing pink and warm. No Morlocks had approached us. Indeed, I had seen none upon the hill that night.

And in the confidence of renewed day it almost seemed to me that my fear had been unreasonable. I stood up and found my foot with the loose heel swollen at the ankle and painful under the heel; so I sat down again, took off my shoes, and flung them away.

I awakened Weena, and we went down into the wood, now green and pleasant instead of black and forbidding. We found some fruit wherewith to break our fast. We soon met others of the dainty ones, laughing and dancing in the sunlight as though there was no such thing in Nature as the night. And then I thought once more of the meat that I had seen. I felt assured now of what it was, and from the bottom of my heart I pitied this last feeble rill from the great flood of humanity. Clearly, at some time in the Long-Ago of human decay the Morlocks' food had run short. Possibly they had lived on rats and suchlike vermin. Even now man is far less discriminating and exclusive in his food than he was—far less than any monkey. His prejudice against human flesh is no deep-seated instinct. And so these inhuman sons of men—! I tried to look at the thing in a scientific spirit. After all, they were less human and more remote than our cannibal ancestors of three or four thousand years ago. And the intelligence that would have made this state of things a torment had gone. Why should I trouble myself? These Eloi were mere fatted cattle, which the ant-like Morlocks preserved and preyed upon—probably saw to the breeding

of. And there was Weena dancing at my side!

THEN I tried to preserve myself from the horror that was coming upon me, by regarding it as a rigorous punishment of human selfishness. Man had been content to live in ease and delight upon the labours of his fellow man, had taken Necessity as his watchword and excuse, and in the fulness of time Necessity had come home to him. I even tried a Carlyle-like scorn of this wretched aristocracy in decay. But this attitude of mind was impossible. However great their intellectual degradation, the Eloi had kept too much of the human form not to claim my sympathy, and to make me perforce a sharer in their degradation and their Fear.

I had at that time very vague ideas as to the course I should pursue. My first was to secure some safe place of refuge, and to make myself such arms of metal or stone as I could contrive. That necessity was immediate. In the next place, I hoped to procure some means of fire, so that I should have the weapon of a torch at hand, for nothing, I knew, would be more efficient against these Morlocks. Then I wanted to arrange some contrivance to break open the doors of bronze under the White Sphinx. I had in mind a battering-ram. I had a persuasion that if I could enter those doors and carry a blaze of light before me I should discover the Time Machine and escape. I could not imagine the Morlocks were strong enough to move it far away. Weena I had resolved to bring with me to our own time. And turning such schemes over in my mind I pursued our way towards the building which my fancy had chosen as our dwelling.

VIII

I FOUND the Palace of Green Porcelain, when we approached it about noon, deserted and falling into ruin. Only ragged vestiges of glass remained in its windows, and great sheets of the green facing had fallen away from the corroded metallic framework. It lay very high upon a turf down, and looking north-eastward before I entered it, I was surprised to see a large estuary, or even creek, where I judged

Wandsworth and Battersea must once have been. I thought then—though I never followed up the thought—of what might have happened, or might be happening, to the living things in the sea.

The material of the Palace proved on examination to be indeed porcelain, and along the face of it I saw an inscription in some unknown character. I thought, rather foolishly, that Weena might help me to interpret this, but I only learned that the bare idea of writing had never entered her head. She always seemed to me, I fancy, more human than she was, perhaps because her affection was so human.

Within the big valves of the door—which were open and broken—we found, instead of the customary hall, a long gallery lit by many side windows. At the first glance I was reminded of a museum. The tiled floor was thick with dust, and a remarkable array of miscellaneous objects was shrouded in the same grey covering. Then I perceived, standing strange and gaunt in the centre of the hall, what was clearly the lower part of a huge skeleton. I recognised by the oblique feet that it was some extinct creature after the fashion of the *Megatherium*. The skull and the upper bones lay beside it in the thick dust, and in one place, where rain-water had dropped through a leak in the roof, the thing itself had been worn away. Further in the gallery was the huge skeleton barrel of a *Brontosaurus*. My museum hypothesis was confirmed. Going towards the side I found what appeared to be sloping shelves, and, clearing away the thick dust, I found the old familiar glass cases of our own time. But they must have been airtight to judge from the fair preservation of some of their contents.

Clearly we stood among the ruins of some latter-day South Kensington! Here, apparently, was the Palæontological Section, and a very splendid array of fossils it must have been, though the inevitable process of decay that had been staved off for a time, and had, through the extinction of bacteria and fungi, lost ninety-nine hundredths of its force, was, nevertheless, with extreme sureness if with extreme slowness at work again upon all its treasures. Here and there I found traces of the little people in the shape of rare fossils broken to pieces or

threaded in strings upon reeds. And the cases had in some instances been bodily removed—by the Morlocks as I judged. The place was very silent. The thick dust deadened our footsteps. Weena, who had been rolling a sea-urchin down the sloping glass of a case, presently came, as I stared about me, and very quietly took my hand and stood beside me.

AND at first I was so much surprised by this ancient monument of an intellectual age, that I gave no thought to the possibilities it presented. Even my preoccupation about the Time Machine receded a little from my mind.

To judge from the size of the place, this Palace of Green Porcelain had a great deal more in it than a Gallery of Palæontology; possibly historical galleries; it might be, even a library! To me, at least in my present circumstances, these would be vastly more interesting than this spectacle of old-time geology in decay. Exploring, I found another short gallery running transversely to the first. This appeared to be devoted to minerals, and the sight of a block of sulphur set my mind running on gunpowder. But I could find no saltpetre; indeed, no nitrates of any kind. Doubtless they had deliquesced ages ago. Yet the sulphur hung in my mind, and set up a train of thinking. As for the rest of the contents of that gallery, though on the whole they were the best preserved of all I saw, I had little interest. I am no specialist in mineralogy, and I went on down a very ruinous aisle running parallel to the first hall I had entered. Apparently this section had been devoted to natural history, but everything had long since passed out of recognition. A few shrivelled and blackened vestiges of what had once been stuffed animals, desiccated mummies in jars that had once held spirit, a brown dust of departed plants; that was all! I was sorry for that, because I should have been glad to trace the patent readjustments by which the conquest of animated nature had been attained. Then we came to a gallery of simple colossal proportions, but singularly ill-lit, the floor of it running downward at a slight angle from the end at which I entered. At intervals white globes hung from the ceiling—many of them cracked

and smashed—which suggested that originally the place had been artificially lit. Here I was more in my element, for rising on either side of me were the huge bulks of big machines, all greatly corroded and many broken down, but some still fairly complete. You know I have a certain weakness for mechanism, and I was inclined to linger among these; the more so as for the most part they had the interest of puzzles, and I could make only the vaguest guesses at what they were for. I fancied that if I could solve their puzzles I should find myself in possession of powers that might be of use against the Morlocks.

SUDDENLY Weena came very close to my side. So suddenly that she startled me. Had it not been for her I do not think I should have noticed that the floor of the gallery sloped at all. The end I had come in at was quite above ground, and was lit by rare slit-like windows. As you went down the length, the ground came up against these windows, until at last there was a pit like the "area" of a London house before each, and only a narrow line of daylight at the top. I went slowly along, puzzling about the machines, and had been too intent upon them to notice the gradual diminution of the light, until Weena's increasing apprehensions drew my attention. Then I saw that the gallery ran down at last into a thick darkness. I hesitated, and then, as I looked round me, I saw that the dust was less abundant and its surface less even. Further away towards the dimness, it appeared to be broken by a number of small narrow footprints. My sense of the immediate presence of the Morlocks revived at that.

I felt that I was wasting my time in this academic examination of machinery. I called to mind that it was already far advanced in the afternoon, and that I had still no weapon, no refuge, and no means of making a fire. And then down in the remote blackness of the gallery I heard a peculiar pattering, and the same odd noises I had heard down the well.

I took Weena's hand. Then, struck with a sudden idea, I left her and turned to a machine from which projected a lever not

unlike those in a signal-box. Clambering upon the stand, and grasping this lever in my hands, I put all my weight upon it sideways. Suddenly Weena, deserted in the central aisle, began to whimper. I had judged the strength of the lever pretty correctly, for it snapped after a minute's strain, and I rejoined her with a mace in my hand more than sufficient, I judged, for any Morlock skull I might encounter. And I longed very much to kill a Morlock or so. Very inhuman, you may think, to want to go killing one's own descendants! But it was impossible, somehow, to feel any humanity in the things. Only my disinclination to leave Weena, and a persuasion that if I began to slake my thirst for murder my Time Machine might suffer, restrained me from going straight down the gallery and killing the brutes I heard.

Well, mace in one hand and Weena in the other, I went out of that gallery and into another and still larger one, which at the first glance reminded me of a military chapel hung with tattered flags. The brown and charred rags that hung from the sides of it, I presently recognised as the decaying vestiges of books. They had long since dropped to pieces, and every semblance of print had left them. But here and there were warped boards and cracked metallic clasps that told the tale well enough. Had I been a literary man I might, perhaps, have moralised upon the futility of all ambition. But as it was, the thing that struck me with keenest force was the enormous waste of labour to which this sombre wilderness of rotting paper testified. At the time I will confess that I thought chiefly of the *Philosophical Transactions* and my own seventeen papers upon physical optics.

THEN, going up a broad staircase, we came to what may once have been a gallery of technical chemistry. And here I had not a little hope of useful discoveries. Except at one end where the roof had collapsed, this gallery was well preserved. I went eagerly to every unbroken case. And at last, in one of the really air-tight cases, I found a box of matches. Very eagerly I tried them. They were perfectly good. They were not even damp. I turned to Weena. "Dance," I cried to her in her own tongue.

For now I had a weapon indeed against the horrible creatures we feared. And so, in that derelict museum, upon the thick soft carpeting of dust, to Weena's huge delight, I solemnly performed a kind of composite dance, whistling *The Land of the Leal* as cheerfully as I could. In part it was a modest *cancan*, in part a step-dance, in part a skirt-dance—so far as my tail-coat permitted—and in part original. For I am naturally inventive, as you know.

Now, I still think that for this box of matches to have escaped the wear of time for immemorial years was a most strange, as for me it was a most fortunate thing. Yet, oddly enough, I found a far unlikelier substance, and that was camphor. I found it in a sealed jar, that by chance, I suppose, had been really hermetically sealed. I fancied at first that it was paraffin wax, and smashed the glass accordingly. But the odour of camphor was unmistakable. In the universal decay this volatile substance had chanced to survive, perhaps through many thousands of centuries. It reminded me of a sepia painting I had once seen done from the ink of a fossil Belemnite that must have perished and become fossilised millions of years ago. I was about to throw it away, but I remembered that it was inflammable and burned with a good bright flame—was, in fact, an excellent candle—and I put it in my pocket. I found no explosives, however, nor any means of breaking down the bronze doors. As yet my iron crowbar was the most helpful thing I had chanced upon. Nevertheless I left that gallery greatly elated.

I cannot tell you all the story of that long afternoon. It would require a great effort of memory to recall my explorations in at all the proper order. I remember a long gallery of rusting stands of arms, and how I hesitated between my crowbar and a hatchet or a sword. I could not carry both, however, and my bar of iron promised best against the bronze gates. There were numbers of guns, pistols, and rifles. The most were masses of rust, but many were of some new metal, and still fairly sound. But any cartridges or powder there may once have been had rotted into dust. One corner I saw was charred and shattered; perhaps, I thought, by an explosion among the speci-

mens. In another place was a vast array of idols—Polynesian, Mexican, Grecian, Phœnician, every country on earth I should think. And here, yielding to an irresistible impulse, I wrote my name upon the nose of a steatite monster from South America that particularly took my fancy.

AS THE evening drew on, my interest waned. I went through gallery after gallery, dusty, silent, often ruinous, the exhibits sometimes mere heaps of rust and lignite, sometimes fresher. In one place I suddenly found myself near the model of a tin-mine, and then by the merest accident I discovered, in an air-tight case, two dynamite cartridges! I shouted "Eureka!" and smashed the case with joy. Then came a doubt. I hesitated. Then, selecting a little side gallery, I made my essay. I never felt such a disappointment as I did in waiting five, ten, fifteen minutes for an explosion that never came. Of course the things were dummies, as I might have guessed from their presence. I really believe that, had they not been so, I should have rushed off incontinently and blown Sphinx, bronze doors, and my chances of finding the Time Machine, all together into non-existence.

It was after that, I think, that we came to a little open court within the palace. It was turfed, and had three fruit-trees. So we rested and refreshed ourselves. Towards sunset I began to consider our position. Night was creeping upon us, and my inaccessible hiding place had still to be found. But that troubled me very little now. I had in my possession a thing that was, perhaps, the best of all defences against the Morlocks—I had matches! I had the camphor in my pocket, too, if a blaze were needed. It seemed to me that the best thing we could do would be to pass the night in the open, protected by a fire. In the morning there was the getting of the Time Machine. Towards that, as yet, I had only my iron mace. But now, with my growing knowledge, I felt very differently towards those bronze doors. Up to this, I had refrained from forcing them, largely because of the mystery on the other side. They had never impressed me as being very strong, and I hoped to find my bar of iron not altogether inadequate for the work.

IX

WE EMERGED from the palace while the sun was still in part above the horizon. I was determined to reach the White Sphinx early the next morning, and ere the dusk I purposed pushing through the woods that had stopped me on the previous journey. My plan was to go as far as possible that night, and then, building a fire, to sleep in the protection of its glare. Accordingly, as we went along I gathered any sticks or dried grass I saw, and presently had my arms full of such litter. Thus loaded, our progress was slower than I had anticipated, and besides Weena was tired. And I began to suffer from sleepiness too; so that it was full night before we reached the wood. Upon the shrubby hill of its edge Weena would have stopped, fearing the darkness before us; but a singular sense of impending calamity, that should indeed have served me as a warning, drove me onward. I had been without sleep for a night and two days, and I was feverish and irritable. I felt sleep coming upon me, and the Morlocks with it.

While we hesitated, among the black bushes behind us, and dim against their blackness, I saw three crouching figures. There was scrub and long grass all about us, and I did not feel safe from their insidious approach. The forest, I calculated, was rather less than a mile across. If we could get through it to the bare hillside, there, as it seemed to me, was an altogether safer resting-place; I thought that with my matches and my camphor I could contrive to keep my path illuminated through the woods. Yet it was evident that if I was to flourish matches with my hands I should have to abandon my firewood; so, rather reluctantly, I put it down. And then it came into my head that I would amaze our friends behind by lighting it. I was to discover the atrocious folly of this proceeding, but it came to my mind as an ingenious move for covering our retreat.

I don't know if you have ever thought what a rare thing flame must be in the absence of man and in a temperate climate. The sun's heat is rarely strong enough to burn, even when it is focussed by dew-drops, as is sometimes the case in more

tropical districts. Lightning may blast and blacken, but it rarely gives rise to widespread fire. Decaying vegetation may occasionally smoulder with the heat of its fermentation, but this rarely results in flame. In this decadence, too, the art of fire-making had been forgotten on the earth. The red tongues that went licking up my heap of wood were an altogether new and strange thing to Weena.

She wanted to run to it and play with it. I believe she would have cast herself into it had I not restrained her. But I caught her up, and, in spite of her struggles, plunged boldly before me into the wood. For a little way the glare of my fire lit the path. Looking back presently, I could see, through the crowded stems, that from my heap of sticks the blaze had spread to some bushes adjacent, and a curved line of fire was creeping up the grass of the hill. I laughed at that, and turned again to the dark trees before me. It was very black, and Weena clung to me convulsively, but there was still, as my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, sufficient light for me to avoid the stems. Overhead it was simply black, except where a gap of remote blue sky shone down upon us here and there. I struck none of my matches because I had no hand free. Upon my left arm I carried my little one, in my right hand I had my iron bar.

FOR some way I heard nothing but the crackling twigs under my feet, the faint rustle of the breeze above, and my own breathing and the throb of the blood-vessels in my ears. Then I seemed to know of a pattering about me. I pushed on grimly. The pattering grew more distinct, and then I caught the same queer sounds and voices I had heard in the Underworld. There were evidently several of the Morlocks, and they were closing in upon me. Indeed, in another minute I felt a tug at my coat, then something at my arm. And Weena shivered violently, and became quite still.

It was time for a match. But to get one I must put her down. I did so, and, as I fumbled with my pocket, a struggle began in the darkness about my knees, perfectly silent on her part and with the same peculiar cooing sounds from the Morlocks.

Soft little hands, too, were creeping over my coat and back, touching even my neck. Then the match scratched and fizzed. I held it flaring, and saw the white backs of the Morlocks in flight amid the trees. I hastily took a lump of camphor from my pocket, and prepared to light it as soon as the match should wane. Then I looked at Weena. She was lying clutching my feet and quite motionless, with her face to the ground. With a sudden fright I stooped to her. She seemed scarcely to breathe. I lit the block of camphor and flung it to the ground, and as it split and flared up and drove back the Morlocks and the shadows, I knelt down and lifted her. The wood behind seemed full of the stir and murmur of a great company!

She seemed to have fainted. I put her carefully upon my shoulder and rose to push on, and then there came a horrible realisation. In manœuvring with my matches and Weena, I had turned myself about several times, and now I had not the faintest idea in what direction lay my path. For all I knew, I might be facing back towards the Palace of Green Porcelain. I found myself in a cold sweat. I had to think rapidly what to do. I determined to build a fire and encamp where we were. I put Weena, still motionless, down upon a turfy bole, and very hastily, as my first lump of camphor waned, I began collecting sticks and leaves. Here and there out of the darkness round me the Morlocks' eyes shone like carbuncles.

The camphor flickered and went out. I lit a match, and as I did so, two white forms that had been approaching Weena dashed hastily away. One was so blinded by the light that he came straight for me, and I felt his bones grind under the blow of my fist. He gave a whoop of dismay, staggered a little way, and fell down. I lit another piece of camphor, and went on gathering my bonfire. Presently I noticed how dry was some of the foliage above me, for since my arrival on the Time Machine, a matter of a week, no rain had fallen. So, instead of casting about among the trees for fallen twigs, I began leaping up and dragging down branches. Very soon I had a choking smoky fire of green wood and dry sticks, and could economise my camphor. Then I turned to where Weena lay beside my iron

mace. I tried what I could to revive her, but she lay like one dead. I could not even satisfy myself whether or not she breathed.

NOW, the smoke of the fire beat over towards me, and it must have made me heavy of a sudden. Moreover, the vapour of camphor was in the air. My fire would not need replenishing for an hour or so. I felt very weary after my exertion, and sat down. The wood, too, was full of a slumbrous murmur that I did not understand. I seemed just to nod and open my eyes. But all was dark, and the Morlocks had their hands upon me. Flinging off their clinging fingers I hastily felt in my pocket for the matchbox, and—it had gone! Then they gripped and closed with me, again. In a moment I knew what had happened. I had slept, and my fire had gone out, and the bitterness of death came over my soul. The forest seemed full of the smell of burning wood. I was caught by the neck, by the hair, by the arms, and pulled down. It was indescribably horrible in the darkness to feel all these soft creatures heaped upon me. I felt as if I was in a monstrous spider's web. I was overpowered, and went down. I felt little teeth nipping at my neck. I rolled over, and as I did so my hand came against my iron lever. It gave me strength. I struggled up, shaking the human rats from me, and, holding the bar short, I thrust where I judged their faces might be. I could feel the succulent giving of flesh and bone under my blows, and for a moment I was free.

The strange exultation that so often seems to accompany hard fighting came upon me. I knew that both I and Weena were lost, but I determined to make the Morlocks pay for their meat. I stood with my back to a tree, swinging the iron bar before me. The whole wood was full of the stir and cries of them. A minute passed. Their voices seemed to rise to a higher pitch of excitement, and their movements grew faster. Yet none came within reach. I stood glaring at the blackness. Then suddenly came hope. What if the Morlocks were afraid? And close on the heels of that came a strange thing. The darkness seemed to grow luminous. Very dimly I began to see the Morlocks about me—three battered at

my feet—and then I recognised, with incredulous surprise, that the others were running, in an incessant stream, as it seemed, from behind me, and away through the wood in front. And their backs seemed no longer white, but reddish. As I stood agape, I saw a little red spark go drifting across a gap of starlight between the branches, and vanish. And at that I understood the smell of burning wood, the slumbrous murmur that was growing now into a gusty roar, the red glow, and the Morlocks' flight.

STEPPING out from behind my tree and looking back, I saw, through the black pillars of the nearer trees, the flames of the burning forest. It was my first fire coming after me. With that I looked for Weena, but she was gone. The hissing and crackling behind me, the explosive thud as each fresh tree burst into flame, left little time for reflection. My iron bar still gripped, I followed in the Morlocks' path. It was a close race. Once the flames crept forward so swiftly on my right as I ran that I was outflanked and had to strike off to the left. But at last I emerged upon a small open space, and as I did so, a Morlock came blundering towards me, and past me, and went on straight into the fire!

And now I was to see the most weird and horrible thing, I think, of all that I beheld in that future age. This whole space was as bright as day with the reflection of the fire. In the centre was a hillock or tumulus, surmounted by a scorched hawthorn. Beyond this was another arm of the burning forest, with yellow tongues already writhing from it, completely encircling the space with a fence of fire. Upon the hillside were some thirty or forty Morlocks, dazzled by the light and heat, and blundering hither and thither against each other in their bewilderment. At first I did not realise their blindness, and struck furiously at them with my bar, in a frenzy of fear, as they approached me, killing one and crippling several more. But when I had watched the gestures of one of them groping under the hawthorn against the red sky, and heard their moans, I was assured of their absolute helplessness and misery in the glare, and I struck no more of them.

Yet every now and then one would come

straight towards me, setting loose a quivering horror that made me quick to elude him. At one time the flames died down somewhat, and I feared the foul creatures would presently be able to see me. I was even thinking of beginning the fight by killing some of them before this should happen; but the fire burst out again brightly, and I stayed my hand. I walked about the hill among them and avoided them, looking for some trace of Weena. But Weena was gone.

At last I sat down on the summit of the hillock, and watched this strange incredible company of blind things groping to and fro, and making uncanny noises to each other, as the glare of the fire beat on them. The coiling up-rush of smoke streamed across the sky, and through the rare tatters of that red canopy, remote as though they belonged to another universe, shone the little stars. Two or three Morlocks came blundering into me, and I drove them off with blows of my fists, trembling as I did so.

FOR the most part of that night I was persuaded it was a nightmare. I bit myself and screamed in a passionate desire to awake. I beat the ground with my hands, and got up and sat down again, and wandered here and there, and again sat down. Then I would fall to rubbing my eyes and calling upon God to let me awake. Thrice I saw Morlocks put their heads down in a kind of agony and rush into the flames. But, at last, above the subsiding red of the fire, above the streaming masses of black smoke and the whitening and blackening tree stumps, and the diminishing numbers of these dim creatures, came the white light of the day.

I searched again for traces of Weena, but there were none. It was plain that they had left her poor little body in the forest. I cannot describe how it relieved me to think that it had escaped the awful fate to which it seemed destined. As I thought of that, I was almost moved to begin a massacre of the helpless abominations about me, but I contained myself. The hillock, as I have said, was a kind of island in the forest. From its summit I could now make out through a haze of smoke the Palace of Green Porcelain, and from that I could get my bearings for the White Sphinx. And so,

leaving the remnant of these damned souls still going hither and thither and moaning, as the day grew clearer, I tied some grass about my feet and limped on across smoking ashes and among black stems, that still pulsated internally with fire, towards the hiding place of the Time Machine. I walked slowly, for I was almost exhausted, as well as lame, and I felt the intensest wretchedness for the horrible death of little Weena. It seemed an overwhelming calamity. Now, in this old familiar room, it is more like the sorrow of a dream than an actual loss. But that morning it left me absolutely lonely again—terribly alone. I began to think of this house of mine, of this fireside, of some of you, and with such thoughts came a longing that was pain.

But, as I walked over the smoking ashes under the bright morning sky, I made a discovery. In my trousers pocket were still some loose matches. The box must have leaked before it was lost.

X

ABOUT eight or nine in the morning I came to the same seat of yellow metal from which I had viewed the world upon the evening of my arrival. I thought of my hasty conclusions upon that evening and could not refrain from laughing bitterly at my confidence. Here were the same beautiful scene, the same abundant foliage, the same splendid palaces and magnificent ruins, the same silver river running between its fertile banks.

The gay robes of the beautiful people moved hither and thither among the trees. Some were bathing in exactly the place where I had saved Weena, and that suddenly gave me a keen stab of pain. And like blots upon the landscape rose the cupolas above the ways to the Under-world. I understood now what all the beauty of the Upper-world people covered. Very pleasant was their day, as pleasant as the day of the cattle in the field. Like the cattle, they knew of no enemies and provided against no needs. And their end was the same.

I grieved to think how brief the dream of the human intellect had been. It had committed suicide. It had set itself steadfastly towards comfort and ease, a balanced

society with security and permanency as its watchword, it had attained its hopes—to come to this at last. Once, life and property must have reached almost absolute safety. The rich had been assured of his wealth and comfort, the toiler assured of his life and work. No doubt in that perfect world there had been no unemployment problem, no social question left unsolved. And a great quiet had followed.

It is a law of Nature we overlook, that intellectual versatility is the compensation for change, danger, and trouble. An animal perfectly in harmony with its environment is a perfect mechanism. Nature never appeals to intelligence until habit and instinct are useless. There is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change. Only those animals partake of intelligence that have to meet a huge variety of needs and dangers.

So, as I see it, the Upper-world man had drifted towards his feeble prettiness, and the Under-world to mere mechanical industry. But that perfect state had lacked one thing even for mechanical perfection—absolute permanency. Apparently, as time went on, the feeding of the Under-world, however it was effected, had become disjointed. Mother Necessity, who had been staved off for a few thousand years, came back again, and she began below. The Under-world being in contact with machinery, which, however perfect, still needs some little thought outside habit, had probably retained perforce rather more initiative, if less of every other human character, than the Upper. And when other meat failed them, they turned to what old habit had hitherto forbidden. So I say I saw it in my last view of the world of Eight Hundred and Two Thousand Seven Hundred and One. It may be as wrong an explanation as mortal wit could invent. It is how the thing shaped itself to me, and as that I give it to you.

AFTER the fatigues, excitements, and terrors of the past days, and in spite of my grief, this seat and the tranquil view and the warm sunlight were very pleasant. I was very tired and sleepy, and soon my theorising passed into dozing. Catching myself at that, I took my own hint, and spread-

ing myself out upon the turf I had a long and refreshing sleep.

I awoke a little before sunset. I now felt safe against being caught napping by the Morlocks, and, stretching myself, I came on down the hill towards the White Sphinx. I had my crowbar in one hand, and the other hand played with the matches in my pocket.

And now came a most unexpected thing. As I approached the pedestal of the sphinx I found the bronze valves were open. They had slid down into grooves.

At that I stopped short before them, hesitating to enter.

Within was a small apartment, and on a raised place in the corner of this was the Time Machine. I had the small levers in my pocket. So here, after all my elaborate preparations for the siege of the White Sphinx, was a meek surrender. I threw my iron bar away, almost sorry not to use it.

A sudden thought came into my head as I stooped towards the portal. For once, at least, I grasped the mental operations of the Morlocks. Suppressing a strong inclination to laugh, I stepped through the bronze frame and up to the Time Machine. I was surprised to find it had been carefully oiled and cleaned. I have suspected since that the Morlocks had even partially taken it to pieces while trying in their dim way to grasp its purpose.

Now as I stood and examined it, finding a pleasure in the mere touch of the contrivance, the thing I had expected happened. The bronze panels suddenly slid up and struck the frame with a clang. I was in the dark—trapped. So the Morlocks thought. At that I chuckled gleefully.

I could already hear their murmuring laughter as they came towards me. Very calmly I tried to strike the match. I had only to fix on the levers and depart then like a ghost. But I had overlooked one little thing. The matches were of that abominable kind that light only on the box.

You may imagine how all my calm vanished. The little brutes were close upon me. One touched me. I made a sweeping blow in the dark at them with the levers, and began to scramble into the saddle of the machine. Then came one hand upon me and then another. Then I had simply to

fight against their persistent fingers for my levers, and at the same time feel for the studs over which these fitted. One, indeed, they almost got away from me. As it slipped from my hand, I had to butt in the dark with my head—I could hear the Morlock's skull ring—to recover it. It was a nearer thing than the fight in the forest, I think, this last scramble.

But at last the lever was fixed and pulled over. The clinging hands slipped from me. The darkness presently fell from my eyes. I found myself in the same grey light and tumult I have already described.

XI

I HAVE already told you of the sickness and confusion that comes with time travelling. And this time I was not seated properly in the saddle, but sideways and in an unstable fashion. For an indefinite time I clung to the machine as it swayed and vibrated, quite unheeding how I went, and when I brought myself to look at the dials again I was amazed to find where I had arrived. One dial records days, another thousands of days, another millions of days, and another thousands of millions. Now, instead of reversing the levers, I had pulled them over so as to go forward with them, and when I came to look at these indicators I found that the thousands hand was sweeping round as fast as the seconds hand of a watch—into futurity.

As I drove on, a peculiar change crept over the appearance of things. The palpitating greyness grew darker; then—though I was still travelling with prodigious velocity—the blinking succession of day and night, which was usually indicative of a slower pace, returned, and grew more and more marked. This puzzled me very much at first. The alternations of night and day grew slower and slower, and so did the passage of the sun across the sky, until they seemed to stretch through centuries. At last a steady twilight brooded over the earth, a twilight only broken now and then when a comet glared across the darkling sky. The band of light that had indicated the sun had long since disappeared; for the sun had ceased to set—it simply rose and fell in the west, and grew even broader and more red.

All trace of the moon had vanished. The circling of the stars, growing slower and slower, had given place to creeping points of light. At last, some time before I stopped, the sun, red and very large, halted motionless upon the horizon, a vast dome glowing with a dull heat, and now and then suffering a momentary extinction. At one time it had for a little while glowed more brilliantly again, but it speedily reverted to its sullen red heat. I perceived by this slowing down of its rising and setting that the work of the tidal drag was done. The earth had come to rest with one face to the sun, even as in our own time the moon faces the earth. Very cautiously, for I remembered my former headlong fall, I began to reverse my motion. Slower and slower went the circling hands until the thousands one seemed motionless and the daily one was no longer a mere mist upon its scale. Still slower, until the dim outlines of a desolate beach grew visible.

I stopped very gently and sat upon the Time Machine, looking round. The sky was no longer blue. North-eastward it was inky black, and out of the blackness shone brightly and steadily the pale white stars. Overhead it was a deep Indian red and starless, and south-eastward it grew brighter to a glowing scarlet where, cut by the horizon, lay the huge hull of the sun, red and motionless. The rocks about me were of a harsh reddish colour, and all the trace of life that I could see at first was the intensely green vegetation that covered every projecting point on their south-eastern face. It was the same rich green that one sees on forest moss or on the lichen in caves: plants which like these grow in a perpetual twilight.

THE machine was standing on a sloping beach. The sea stretched away to the south-west, to rise into a sharp bright horizon against the wan sky. There were no breakers and no waves, for not a breath of wind was stirring. Only a slight oily swell rose and fell like a gentle breathing, and showed that the eternal sea was still moving and living. And along the margin where the water sometimes broke was a thick incrustation of salt—pink under the lurid sky. There was a sense of oppression in my head, and I noticed that I was breathing very fast.

The sensation reminded me of my only experience of mountaineering, and from that I judged the air to be more rarefied than it is now.

Far away up the desolate slope I heard a harsh scream, and saw a thing like a huge white butterfly go slanting and fluttering up into the sky, and, circling, disappear over some low hillocks beyond. The sound of its voice was so dismal that I shivered and seated myself more firmly upon the machine. Looking round me again, I saw that, quite near, what I had taken to be a reddish mass of rock was moving slowly towards me. Then I saw the thing was really a monstrous crab-like creature. Can you imagine a crab as large as yonder table, with its many legs moving slowly and uncertainly, its big claws swaying, its long antennæ, like carters' whips, waving and feeling, and its stalked eyes gleaming at you on either side of its metallic front? Its back was corrugated and ornamented with ungainly bosses, and a greenish incrustation blotched it here and there. I could see the many palps of its complicated mouth flickering and feeling as it moved.

As I stared at this sinister apparition crawling towards me, I felt a tickling on my cheek as though a fly had lighted there. I tried to brush it away with my hand, but in a moment it returned, and almost immediately came another by my ear. I struck at this, and caught something threadlike. It was drawn swiftly out of my hand. With a frightful qualm, I turned, and saw that I had grasped the antenna of another monster crab that stood just behind me. Its evil eyes were wriggling on their stalks, its mouth was all alive with appetite, and its vast ungainly claws, smeared with an algal slime, were descending upon me. In a moment my hand was on the lever, and I had placed a month between myself and these monsters. But I was still on the same beach, and I saw them distinctly now as soon as I stopped. Dozens of them seemed to be crawling here and there, in the sombre light, among the foliated sheets of intense green.

I cannot convey the sense of abominable desolation that hung over the world. The red eastern sky, the northward blackness, the salt Dead Sea, the stony beach crawling

with these foul, slow-stirring monsters, the uniform poisonous-looking green of the lichenous plants, the thin air that hurts one's lungs; all contributed to an appalling effect. I moved on a hundred years, and there was the same red sun—a little larger, a little duller—the same dying sea, the same chill air, and the same crowd of earthly crustacea creeping in and out among the green weed and the red rocks. And in the westward sky I saw a curved pale line like a vast new moon.

SO I travelled, stopping ever and again, in great strides of a thousand years or more, drawn on by the mystery of the earth's fate, watching with a strange fascination the sun grow larger and duller in the westward sky, and the life of the old earth ebb away. At last, more than thirty million years hence, the huge red-hot dome of the sun had come to obscure nearly a tenth part of the darkling heavens. Then I stopped once more, for the crawling multitude of crabs had disappeared, and the red beach, save for its livid green liverworts and lichens, seemed lifeless. And now it was flecked with white. A bitter cold assailed me. Rare white flakes ever and again came eddying down. To the north-eastward, the glare of snow lay under the starlight of the sable sky, and I could see an undulating crest of hillocks pinkish white. There were fringes of ice along the sea margin, with drifting masses further out; but the main expanse of that salt ocean, all bloody under the eternal sunset, was still unfrozen.

I looked about me to see if any traces of animal life remained. A certain indefinable apprehension still kept me in the saddle of the machine. But I saw nothing moving, in earth or sky or sea. The green slime on the rocks alone testified that life was not extinct. A shallow sand-bank had appeared in the sea and the water had receded from the beach. I fancied I saw some black object flopping about upon this bank, but it became motionless as I looked at it, and I judged that my eye had been deceived, and that the black object was merely a rock. The stars in the sky were intensely bright and seemed to me to twinkle very little.

Suddenly I noticed that the circular west-

ward outline of the sun had changed; that a concavity, a bay, had appeared in the curve. I saw this grow larger. For a minute perhaps I stared aghast at this blackness that was creeping over the day, and then I realised that an eclipse was beginning. Either the moon or the planet Mercury was passing across the sun's disk. Naturally, at first I took it to be the moon, but there is much to incline me to believe that what I really saw was the transit of an inner planet passing very near to the earth.

The darkness grew apace; a cold wind began to blow in freshening gusts from the east, and the showering white flakes in the air increased in number. From the edge of the sea came a ripple and whisper. Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives—all that was over. As the darkness thickened, the eddying flakes grew more abundant, dancing before my eyes; and the cold of the air more intense. At last, one by one, swiftly, one after the other, the white peaks of the distant hills vanished into blackness. The breeze rose to a moaning wind. I saw the black central shadow of the eclipse sweeping towards me. In another moment the pale stars alone were visible. All else was rayless obscurity. The sky was absolutely black.

A horror of this great darkness came on me. The cold, that smote to my marrow, and the pain I felt in breathing, overcame me. I shivered, and a deadly nausea seized me. Then like a red-hot bow in the sky appeared the edge of the sun. I got off the machine to recover myself. I felt giddy and incapable of facing the return journey. As I stood sick and confused I saw again the moving thing upon the shoal—there was no mistake now that it was a moving thing—against the red water of the sea. It was a round thing, the size of a football perhaps, or, it may be, bigger, and tentacles trailed down from it; it seemed black against the weltering blood-red water, and it was hopping fitfully about. Then I felt I was fainting. But a terrible dread of lying helpless in that remote and awful twilight sustained me while I clambered upon the saddle.

XII

SO I came back. For a long time I must have been insensible upon the machine. The blinking succession of the days and nights was resumed, the sun got golden again, the sky blue. I breathed with greater freedom. The fluctuating contours of the land ebbed and flowed. The hands spun backward upon the dials. At last I saw again the dim shadows of houses, the evidences of decadent humanity. These, too, changed and passed, and others came. Presently, when the millions dial was at zero, I slackened speed. I began to recognise our own petty and familiar architecture, the thousands hand ran back to the starting-point, the night and day flapped slower and slower. Then the old walls of the laboratory came round me. Very gently, now, I slowed the mechanism down.

I saw one little thing that seemed odd to me. I think I have told you that when I set out, before my velocity became very high, Mrs. Watchett had walked across the room, travelling, as it seemed to me, like a rocket. As I returned, I passed again across that minute when she traversed the laboratory. But now her every motion appeared to be the exact inversion of her previous ones. The door at the lower end opened, and she glided quietly up the laboratory, back foremost, and disappeared behind the door by which she had previously entered. Just before that I seemed to see Hillyer for a moment; but he passed like a flash.

Then I stopped the machine, and saw about me again the old familiar laboratory, my tools, my appliances just as I had left them. I got off the thing very shakily, and sat down upon my bench. For several minutes I trembled violently. Then I became calmer. Around me was my old workshop again, exactly as it had been. I might have slept there, and the whole thing have been a dream.

And yet, not exactly! The thing had started from the south-east corner of the laboratory. It had come to rest again in the north-west, against the wall where you saw it. That gives you the exact distance from my little lawn to the pedestal of the White Sphinx, into which the Morlocks had carried my machine.

For a time my brain went stagnant. Presently I got up and came through the passage here, limping, because my heel was still painful, and feeling sorely begrimed. I saw the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the table by the door. I found the date was indeed to-day, and looking at the timepiece, saw the hour was almost eight o'clock. I heard your voices and the clatter of plates. I hesitated—I felt so sick and weak. Then I sniffed good wholesome meat, and opened the door on you. You know the rest. I washed, and dined, and now I am telling you the story.

"I KNOW," he said, after a pause, "that all this will be absolutely incredible to you. To me the one incredible thing is that I am here in this familiar room looking into your friendly faces and telling you these strange adventures."

He looked at the Medical Man. "No. I cannot expect you to believe it. Take it as a lie—or a prophecy. Say I dreamed it in the workshop. Consider I have been speculating upon the destinies of our race until I have hatched this fiction. Treat my assertion of its truth as a mere stroke of art to enhance its interest. And taking it as a story, what do you think of it?"

He took up his pipe, and began, in his old accustomed manner, to tap with it nervously upon the bars of the grate. There was a momentary stillness. Then chairs began to creak and shoes to scrape upon the carpet. I took my eyes off the Time Traveller's face, and looked round at his audience. They were in the dark, and little spots of colour swam before them. The Medical Man seemed absorbed in the contemplation of our host. The Editor was looking hard at the end of his cigar—the sixth. The Journalist fumbled for his watch. The others, as far as I remember, were motionless.

The Editor stood up with a sigh. "What a pity it is you're not a writer of stories!" he said, putting his hand on the Time Traveller's shoulder.

"You don't believe it?"

"Well——"

"I thought not."

The Time Traveller turned to us. "Where are the matches?" he said. He lit one and spoke over his pipe, puffing. "To tell you

the truth . . . I hardly believe it myself. . . . And yet . . ."

His eye fell with a mute inquiry upon the withered white flowers upon the little table. Then he turned over the hand holding his pipe, and I saw he was looking at some half-healed scars on his knuckles.

The Medical Man rose, came to the lamp, and examined the flowers. "The gynæceum's odd," he said. The Psychologist leaned forward to see, holding out his hand for a specimen.

"I'm hanged if it isn't a quarter to one," said the Journalist. "How shall we get home?"

"Plenty of cabs at the station," said the Psychologist.

"It's a curious thing," said the Medical Man; "but I certainly don't know the natural order of these flowers. May I have them?"

The Time Traveller hesitated. Then suddenly: "Certainly not."

"Where did you really get them?" said the Medical Man.

The Time Traveller put his hand to his head. He spoke like one who was trying to keep hold of an idea that eluded him. "They were put into my pocket by Weena, when I travelled into Time." He stared round the room. "I'm damned if it isn't all going. This room and you and the atmosphere of every day are too much for my memory. Did I ever make a Time Machine, or a model of a Time Machine? Or is it all only a dream? They say life is a dream, a precious poor dream at times—but I can't stand another that won't fit. It's madness. And where did the dream come from? . . . I must look at that machine. If there *is* one!"

HE CAUGHT up the lamp swiftly, and carried it, flaring red, through the door into the corridor. We followed him. There in the flickering light of the lamp was the machine sure enough, squat, ugly, and askew; a thing of brass, ebony, ivory, and translucent glimmering quartz. Solid to the touch—for I put out my hand and felt the rail of it—and with brown spots and smears upon the ivory, and bits of grass and moss upon the lower parts, and one rail bent awry.

The Time Traveller put the lamp down

on the bench, and ran his hand along the damaged rail. "It's all right now," he said. "The story I told you was true. I'm sorry to have brought you out here in the cold." He took up the lamp, and, in an absolute silence, we returned to the smoking-room.

He came into the hall with us and helped the Editor on with his coat. The Medical Man looked into his face and, with a certain hesitation, told him he was suffering from overwork, at which he laughed hugely. I remember him standing in the open doorway, bawling good-night.

I shared a cab with the Editor. He thought the tale a "gaudy lie." For my own part I was unable to come to a conclusion. The story was so fantastic and incredible, the telling so credible and sober. I lay awake most of the night thinking about it. I determined to go next day and see the Time Traveller again. I was told he was in the laboratory, and being on easy terms in the house, I went up to him. The laboratory, however, was empty. I stared for a minute at the Time Machine and put out my hand and touched the lever. At that the squat, substantial-looking mass swayed like a bough shaken by the wind. Its instability startled me extremely, and I had a queer reminiscence of the childish days when I used to be forbidden to meddle. I came back through the corridor. The Time Traveller met me in the smoking-room. He was coming from the house. He had a small camera under one arm and a knapsack under the other. He laughed when he saw me, and gave me an elbow to shake. "I'm frightfully busy," said he, "with that thing in there."

"But is it not some hoax?" I said. "Do you really travel through time?"

"Really and truly I do." And he looked frankly into my eyes. He hesitated. His eye wandered about the room. "I only want half an hour," he said. "I know why you came, and it's awfully good of you. There's some magazines here. If you'll stop to lunch I'll prove you this time travelling up to the hilt, specimens and all. If you'll forgive my leaving you now?"

I consented, hardly comprehending then the full import of his words, and he nodded and went on down the corridor. I heard the door of the laboratory slam, seated myself in a chair, and took up a daily paper.

What was he going to do before lunch-time? Then suddenly I was reminded by an advertisement that I had promised to meet Richardson, the publisher, at two. I looked at my watch, and saw that I could barely save that engagement. I got up and went down the passage to tell the Time Traveller.

AS I took hold of the handle of the door I heard an exclamation, oddly truncated at the end, and a click and a thud. A gust of air whirled round me as I opened the door, and from within came the sound of broken glass falling on the floor. The Time Traveller was not there. I seemed to see a ghostly, indistinct figure sitting in a whirling mass of black and brass for a moment—a figure so transparent that the bench behind with its sheets of drawings was absolutely distinct; but this phantasm vanished as I rubbed my eyes. The Time Machine had gone. Save for a subsiding stir of dust, the further end of the laboratory was empty. A pane of the skylight had, apparently, just been blown in.

I felt an unreasonable amazement. I knew that something strange had happened, and for the moment could not distinguish what the strange thing might be. As I stood staring, the door opened, and the man-servant appeared.

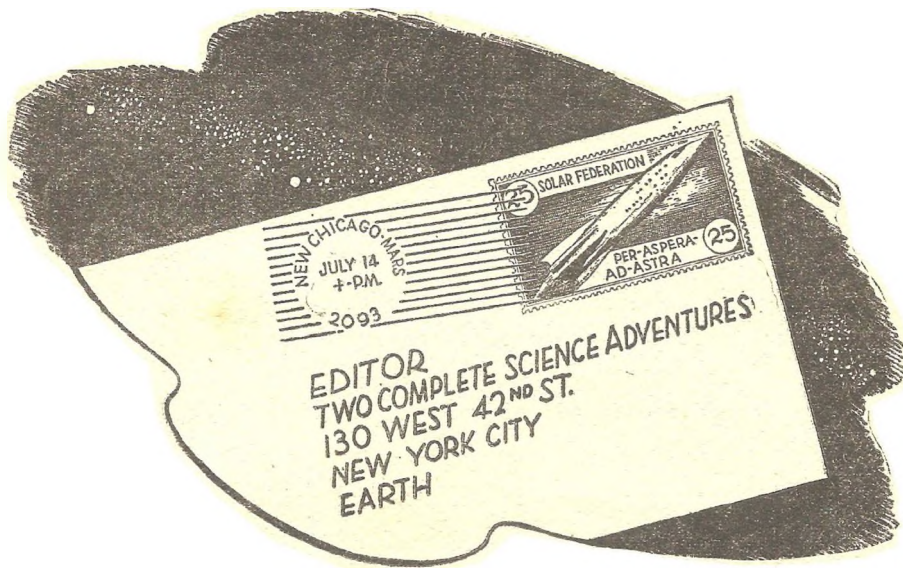
We looked at each other. Then ideas began to come. "Has Mr. — gone out that way?" said I.

"No, sir. No one has come out this way. I was expecting to find him here."

At that I understood. At the risk of disappointing Richardson I stayed on, waiting for the Time Traveller; waiting for the second, perhaps still stranger story, and the specimens and photographs he would bring with him. But I am beginning now to fear

that I must wait a lifetime. The Time Traveller vanished three years ago. And, as everybody knows now, he has never returned.

ONE cannot choose but wonder. Will he ever return? It may be that he swept back into the past, and fell among the blood-drinking, hairy savages of the Age of Unpolished Stone; into the abysses of the Cretaceous Sea; or among the grotesque saurians, the huge reptilian brutes of the Jurassic times. He may even now—if I may use the phrase—be wandering on some plesiosaurus-haunted Oolitic coral reef, or beside the lonely saline lakes of the Triassic Age. Or did he go forward, into one of the nearer ages, in which men are still men, but with the riddles of our own time answered and its wearisome problems solved? Into the manhood of the race: for I, for my own part, cannot think that these latter days of weak experiment, fragmentary theory, and mutual discord are indeed man's culminating time! I say, for my own part. He, I know—for the question had been discussed among us long before the Time Machine was made—thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilisation only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end. If that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so. But to me the future is still black and blank—is a vast ignorance, lit at a few casual places by the memory of his story. And I have by me, for my comfort, two strange white flowers—shrivelled now, and brown and flat and brittle—to witness that even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived on in the heart of man.



GAD, WHAT A NAME!

R.F.D. No. 3,
Peebles, Ohio

Dear Ed:

I was certainly in for a surprise, and a pleasant one, when I found the second ish of TCS-AB parked on the newsstand. For instead of turning out to be just "another one," it actually embodied a brand new ideal in stf mags. Real honest to Betsy novels—in a twenty-five cent mag! Can this thing be? And what's even more important—can it continue? It can save me some dollars if it does. I see you have made a slight policy switch. That of publishing original book-lengths. But surely the field of obtainable material is still a limited one. Providing quality is maintained. But perhaps the Fiction House genius can make this new venture a flowering success. You have certainly gotten off to a flying start.

Any criticisms? Well hardly. But what's wrong with the illos? They seem somehow dead and dull. The cover wasn't too bad. But who named the mag? Why not call it something whose initials spell something? No suggestions, no suggestions.

I won't say much of the stories, except that I enjoyed them. And that's what I'm out for—enjoyment.

To sum up, it was all better than excellent. And you have my best wishes. And what's more important, my 25¢ every time I see a new ish of old TCS-AB. (Gad, what a name.) So, see you next issue.

IVAN H. COPAS

KNOWS HIS OWN MIND

c/o C. A. A.,
Panguitch, Utah

Dear Ed:

Perhaps the first thing noticed about a mag is its cover. Yours (or, rather Anderson's) was up to par, and maybe slightly above. Out of only three issues this is hard to say, however. But it was wonderful. Anderson seems to have that subtle touch and beautiful blending of colors that mean so much in a good cover.

Well, next in line are the stories. They were all right, too, but, of course, didn't live up to issue No. 1. Now, there was an issue. However, SWORD OF XOTA and CITADEL IN SPACE did very well, with the latter story having the slight edge. Mr. Blish

just couldn't compare in ability with Neil R. Jones, although he did very creditably. The latter story, CITADEL, was truly a masterpiece with a wonderful plot and setting.

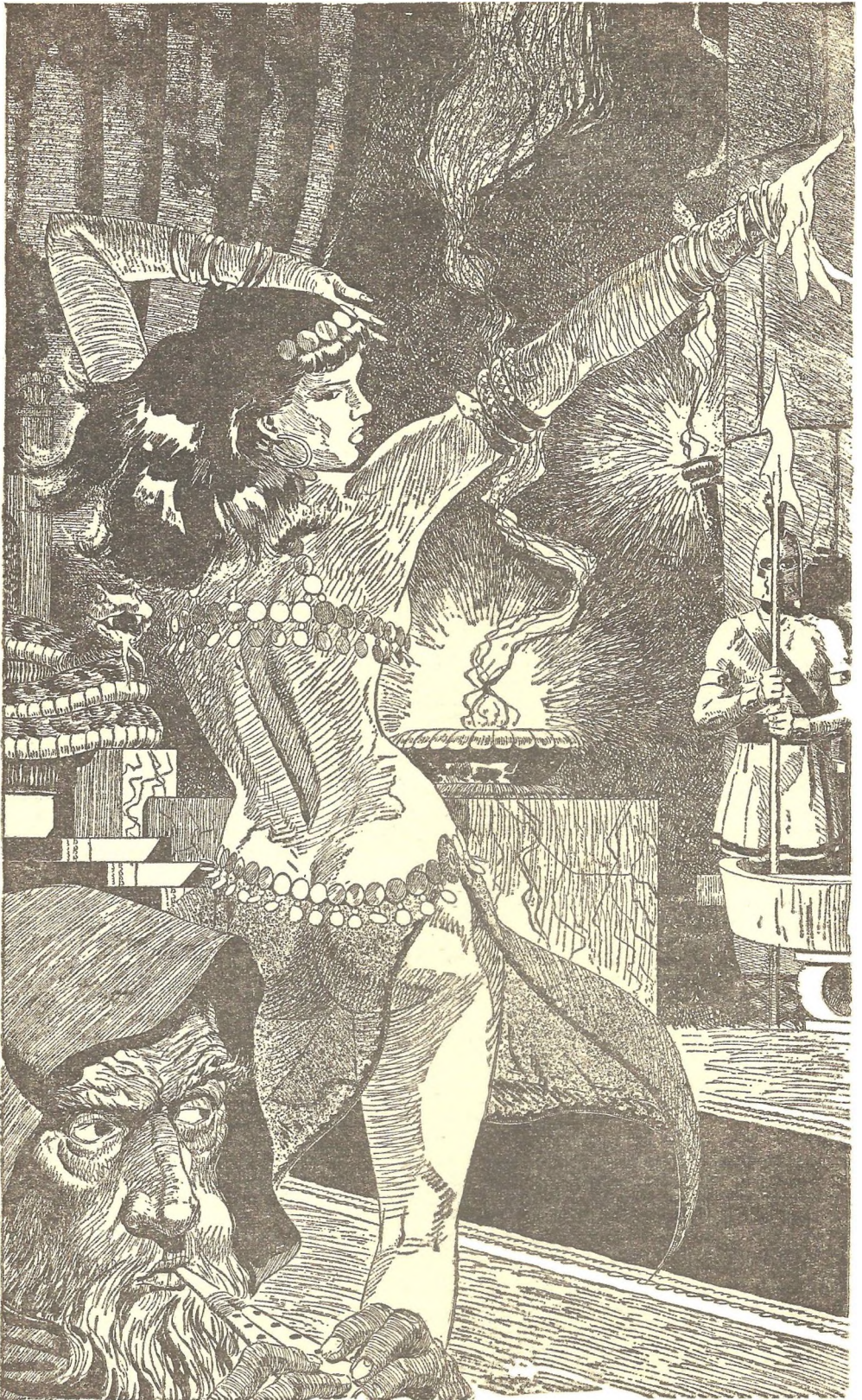
Then the interior illos. Vestal does O.K., but is he the only artist you have on the staff? A change is refreshing, you know.

Now, we touch on the one fault of the issue—and a large one, at that. No readers' column! No editor's page! There was, I'll have to admit, a small paragraph or two in the remote end of the mag explaining that the lead novels were rather long and you had to cut ROCKET-MAIL, but no news on what the Fall issue would contain, or why. Aw, heck! Why can't editors get it through their heads that we like their comments and a word from them each issue. Most eds shy off and say "aw, garsh," and let it go at that. C'mon, give us an editor's page, and try not to cut ROCKET-MAIL.

Now, an overall look at the mag. A nice mag from the exterior, it has some beat while it falls behind on others. Take for example *Galaxy*. This is a nice mag, and can hardly be equalled in its field, and FFM has a nice new format, too. But, in the case of FA or Future or some of those others, you're way ahead. Which brings up another point. Do you allow mention of competitors' names in your readers' column? Now, here is where many mags make a grave mistake! A lot of the mags simply refuse to believe the other mags exist, which is a lot of childish nonsense. They are fooling no one, not even themselves, and are getting a bad name in stfandom for it. While, on the other hand the mags that allow competitors' names mentioned (either as casual reference or for sale by the fen) get along O.K. I don't know which step you'll take, but I sincerely hope it'll be for the betterment of the mag, and you know which way I think that is.

Another editorial mistake is the cutting of fans' letters. Fen love to see their name in print, and who doesn't? Cutting is something necessary, but in doing so you can't help but lose track of some of the writers' meaning and you can get the name of a prejudiced magazine, cutting out parts that don't agree with you.

(Continued on page 128)



THE TRITONIAN RING

by L. SPRAGUE de CAMP

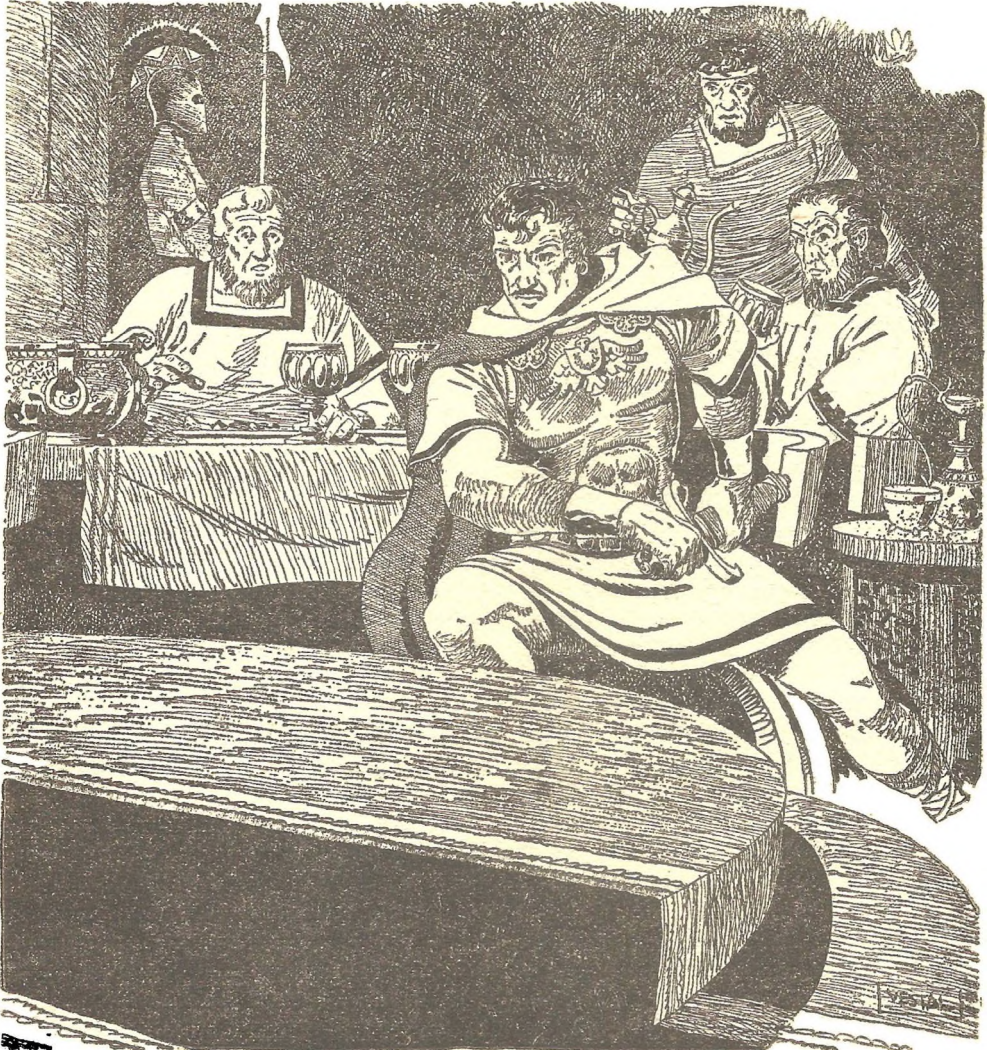
The Gods frowned as Prince Vakar set out in search of the elusive Tritonian Ring. But they could smile when he stopped at the snake-throned court of bewitching Porfia—the queen who made men forget their quests.

I

WHEN the gods of the West were gathered in their places of assembly, Drax, the Tritonian god of war, said in his ophidian hiss:

"Events will take a deadly turn for us in the next century unless we change this pattern."

The assembled gods shuddered, and the vibration of their trembling ran through the universe. Entigta, the sea-god of Gorgonia



(a kingdom so ancient that it had withered to mere myth when Imhotep built the first pyramid for King Zoser) spoke in his bubbly voice out of the midst of his tentacles:

"Can you not tell us the true nature of this danger?"

"No. The only further clue my science gives is that the trouble centers in the continent of Poseidonis, in the kingdom of Lorsk. There is something about its being caused by a member of the royal family of Lorsk.

I believe my own folk are also involved, but I cannot be sure. Since King Ximenon got that accursed ring I can no longer get through to them."

Entigta turned to Okma, the god of wisdom of Poseidonis. "That, colleague, would be in your department. Who are the royal family of Lorsk?"

Okma replied: "There are King Zhabutir and his sons Kuros and Vakar, and the infant children of the former. I suspect Prince Vakar, whose spiritual obtuseness is such that I cannot speak directly to him."

Entigta's tentacles writhed. "If we cannot communicate with this mortal, how shall we deflect him from his intended path?"

"We might pray to our gods for guidance," said the small bat-eared god of the Coranians, whereupon all the gods laughed, being hardened skeptics.

Drax hissed: "There is another way. Set other mortals upon him."

Okma said: "I object! Vakar of Lorsk, despite his defect, has been a faithful votary of mine, burning many fat bullocks upon my altars. Besides it might be true that such patterns of event are laid down by an inflexible fate, not to be altered even by a god."

"I have never subscribed to that servile philosophy," said Drax, his forked tongue flicking. He turned his wedge-shaped head toward Entigta. "Colleague, of all of us here, you command the most warlike worshippers. Send them to destroy the royal family of Lorsk and all of Lorsk if need be!"

"Wait!" said Okma. "The other gods of Poseidonis—" (he looked around, noting Tandyla with all three of her eyes shut and Lyr scratching his barnacles)—"and I

ought to be consulted before such devastation is loosed upon our own—"

The rest of the gods (or at least those not of Poseidonian provenance) shouted Okma down. Drax concluded:

"Waste no time, squid-headed one, for the peril is imminent"

IN SEDERADO, the capital of Ogugia in the Hesperides, Queen Porfia sat in her chambers with emeralds in her night-black hair and eyes as green as the emeralds, consulting with her minister Garal. The minister, a short stout bald man who deceptively appeared to radiate bluff good humor and sterling worth, rolled up a sheet of papyrus and said:

"Come, come, madam. You are not consulting your best interests in refusing to marry the King of Zhysk. Why should you boggle at the mere detail of his present three queens and fourteen concubines when—"

"Mere detail!" cried Queen Porfia, looking too young for a widow. "While Vancho was no god, at least while he lived I had that fat slob to myself. I do not care to wed one-seventeenth of any man, however royal."

"One-eighteenth," corrected Garal. "But—"

"Besides, who would run Ogugia whilst I languished in gilded durance in Amferé?"

"Perhaps you could spend most of your time here, where young Thiegos could comfort you."

"And how long before King Shvo found out and slew us both? Moreover, despite his fair promises to respect our independence, he would soon send some grasping Zhyskan governor to squeeze you dry as bones."

Garal gave a slight start, but said calmly: "You must remarry some time. Even your supporters murmur over the lack of a man at the head of the state. They would take even Thiegos . . ."

"I do not see it. The island flourishes, and Thiegos, while amusing as a lover, would be quite impossible as king."

"My thought also. But since you must eventually have a consort, you could hardly ask for one better situated than Shvo of Zhysk. Or is there some other man . . ."

"Not unless you count . . ."

"Whom?" Garal leaned forward, eyes bright with interest.

"Just a foolish idea. When I went to Amferé as a girl ten years ago for that wedding of Shvo's daughter, one young princeling took my fancy—Vakar of Lorsk. Though no great beauty or mighty athlete, there was something about him—an irreverent wit, a soaring fancy, a keenness of insight, unlike most of his lumpish compatriots— Oh, well, he will no doubt have collected a dozen women by now and have forgotten the awkward Porfia. Now about this rise in harbor dues. . . ."

ZELUUD, king of the Gorgon Isles, slept after his midday meal, lying on his back upon his ivory-legged couch. With each inhalation his paunch rose, and with each exhalation the paunch sank while the silken handkerchief that covered his face rose in its turn with the force of the king's breath, which issued from his hidden features with a mighty snore. A Negro dwarf, kidnapped years ago from Tartaros by Zeluud's corsairs, tiptoed about the chamber with a fly-swatter of reed and shredded palm-frond lest any noxious insect disturb the king's rest. And the king of ancient Gorgonia dreamed.

King Zeluud dreamed that he stood before the wet black basalt throne of Entigta, the squid-headed sea-god of the Gorgons.

The king knew from Entigta's dark coloration that the god was in no affable mood, and from the rapidity with which the color-patterns chased each other over Entigta's mottled hide Zeluud further inferred that the god was in a state of extremely ungodly agitation.

Entigta leaned forward on his sable throne, his slimy hands gripping the armrests carved in the likeness of sea-dragons, and fixed King Zeluud with his cold wet eyes. His voice bubbled out of the parrot-beak in the midst of the octet of tentacles that served Entigta for a face, like the gaseous products of decay bubbling up through the slime of one of the somber swamps of Blackland. Entigta said:

"King, do you obey me?"

"As always, as always, God," said Zeluud, beginning to shake uncontrollably in

his sandals for he was sure that Entigta was about to impose some outrageous demand upon him.

"Well, trouble comes upon us from the North, and it is your place to deal with it. Trouble not merely for the Gorgades, but also for the entire race of gods."

"What trouble, Lord?"

"The exact nature thereof we know not. I can but tell you it centers in the royal family of Lorsk in Poseidonis."

"And what, God, shall I do? Lorsk lies far from here, with its capital well inland, so that it is not vulnerable to a sudden raid from my corsairs."

Entigta's tentacles writhed impatiently. "You shall follow two courses. First you shall send my priest Qasig to deal with these princes in person. He is well qualified, being hardy and discreet, widely traveled, and devoted to my interests. Moreover he has two able non-human helpers."

"And the other course?"

"You shall prepare to conquer Poseidonis."

Zeluud, aghast, took a step back. "God! The Gorgades are but three small islands, whereas Poseidonis is a great land whose people outnumber ours fifty to one and are famed for their athletic prowess. Moreover bronze is so common there that they even use it for arrowheads. How in the seven hells do you expect . . ."

Zeluud fell silent as Entigta turned an ominous black.

"Is your faith then so fragile?" gurgled the squid-god. "By whose help have you long raided with impunity the coasts of Poseidonis and the mainland, and the rich commerce of the Hesperides?"

"Well then—what am I to do?"

"Seize Lorsk and the rest will fall, for Lorsk is the strongest of the Pusadian states, among whom there is no unity but only mutual hatred and suspicion. Your warriors are the world's mightiest, and even if they were not, my priests have the world's deadliest weapon: their captive medusas. With your warlike people and the mineral wealth of Lorsk you can conquer the world! And I," murmured Entigta, "shall be sea-god not merely of the Gorgades . . ."

"Still—" began Zeluud doubtfully, but Entigta said:

"There is another point of attack against Lorsk. King Zhabutir has twin sons, Vakar and Kuros. Vakar, being the younger by a quarter-hour, is heir according to their old system of ultimogeniture. Now Kuros, who mortally hates his brother, might serve your interest in return for a promise of the throne, even as a tributary of yours. And once in control you can slay all three of them."

"How can I deal with this Kuros? He is too far for messengers, and the Pusadian sea-god would not let you communicate with one of his votaries."

"I can handle Lyr. There is a Gorgonian fisherman on the west coast of Poseidonis, in the Bay of Kort. In accord with the pact between Lyr and myself, I visit this fisherman in dreams as if he were back in Gorgonia. You can therefore speak to Kuros through this man."

"Mightiest of gods though you be, not even gods know all, or you would know more of the doom overhanging you. What if we fail?"

"Then the reign of the gods is ended, unless Poseidonis be sunk beneath the sea."

"What?"

"Know you not the continent settles, the water round its shores having risen three feet in the last century? We can speed this process so that in a few centuries nought would show above the waves save the tallest peaks."

The god's slit-pupilled eyes stared into space. "The outlines of land and water would be altered from the swamps of Blackland to the snows of Thulê. Nor would this be all. Without Pusad's copper men might even forget the metal-working art and return to stone. But even that is preferable to the other doom, for without the gods to guide you, how could you poor weak mortals survive? Return to the waking world, then, and set about your allotted tasks."

Entigta dissolved into a swirl of slime. The king awoke, threw the handkerchief off his sweating, swarthy face, and sat up on his gold-knobbed couch. He brooded momentarily then shouted:

"Khashel! Go to the temple of Entigta and tell the priest Qasig to come to me at once!"

II

ON AN early spring evening months later, thirteen hundred miles north of the Gorgades, in the kingdom of Lorsk, in the capital city of Mneset, the king of Lorsk held council. A cold wind roared through the streets of Mneset, whipping tatters of scud across the pocked face of the moon and rattling the shutters of the houses. Inside the castle of King Zhabutir the wind swayed the wall-hangings and made cressets flare and lamps flutter, and the pigs in the castle courtyard huddled together to keep warm.

In the king's council room the light of the central hearthfire flickered upon the walls of massive cyclopean stonework and the ceiling of rough-hewn oaken beams. Four men, wrapped in cloaks against the drafts, sat around the council-table listening to a fifth: Söl the spy, a thickset commonplace-looking fellow with quick-shifting eyes.

As these eyes flickered across the table they first passed over, on the left, Ryn the magician, peering vaguely through watery eyes over a stained beard like an elderly and absent-minded billygoat. A hunched back added to the grotesqueness of his appearance.

Next sat the king's elder son Kuros, square-jawed and broad-shouldered, nibbling on a wedge of cheese. Then came King Zhabutir himself, in the chair of pre-eminence at the head of the table, looking with his high-bridged nose and flowing white beard like the serene embodiment of justice and wisdom, though his nickname of "the Indecisive" belied his looks. His golden crown glowed redly in the firelight, and little gleams from its uncut stones, polished by the black craftsmen of Tartaros, chased each other about the walls when he moved his head. A great shaggy wolfhound lay across his feet.

On the king's left sat his younger son Vakar, the twin, but not the identical twin brother of Kuros, looking a bit vacuous for age and experience had not yet stamped his features with character and a bit foppish. The jewels on his fingers shone as he nervously cracked his knuckle-joints. He had a narrow hatchet-face which swept back from

a long forward-jutting nose that had been straight until a fall from a horse had put a slight dog-leg in it. Instead of the normal Pusadian kilt he wore the checkered trews of the barbarians, and (another fad) copied the barbarian custom of shaving all the face but the upper lip. He was small for a Lorskán, a mere five-ten, with the swarthy skin and thick black hair of most Pusadians. Deepset dark eyes looked out of his narrow face from under heavy brow-ridges and thick black brows into those of Söl, who said:

"I couldn't get to the Gorgades myself, for their system of public messes serves to check all adult men, and they'd soon see through any disguise. Since the land lives by robbery the ships of other nations have no peaceful occasion to touch there. I did however spend a month in Kernê and there learned that the Gorgons are preparing a great expedition somewhither."

Kuros said: "Pff. The Gorgons' ferocity has been exaggerated by distance and the envy of their neighbors. If we knew them at first hand we should find their intentions as peaceful as anybody's."

Prince Vakár shifted his gaze from the smoking wood-fire to the pocked face of the spy. His tight-drawn lips betrayed his inner tension as he spoke:

"Certainly their intentions are peaceful, like those of the lion for the lamb. The lion wishes only to be allowed to devour the lamb in peace. But, Master Söl, if the Gorgons have no peaceful contacts with other nations, how could such news reach Kernê?"

"The Gorgons' isolation isn't so perfect as they pretend. They carry on a small secret trade with certain merchants in Kernê for things they can neither make, grow, nor steal. Though the Kerneans hang or behead any man they catch in this traffic, such are the profits that there's always someone to take the chance. A Kernean would brave the seven hells for a profit."

RYN the wizard spoke: "Was there any indication of the Gorgons' direction?"

The wind blew a gout of smoke into Söl's face as if trying to stop him from replying. When the spy got over coughing and wiping his eyes he answered:

"Nothing definite, but the shadow of the echo of a whisper that said 'Lorsk'."

"No more?"

"No more, sir. I had it from a harlot of the town who said she'd learned it from a sailor who worked for a trader who'd heard . . . and so on."

Kuros swallowed the last of his cheese, dusted the crumbs off his fingers, and said: "That's all, Söl."

Vakár wished to hear more, but before he could protest Söl had glided out and Kuros said:

"Very interesting, but let's not work ourselves into a sweat over the shadow of an echo of a whisper—"

"Is that so?" said Vakár sharply. "With due respect, my brother wishes us to take the attitude of the man in the story who went to sleep on the skerry thinking he had a spell that would hold back the tides. You remember:

*"Shoreward they shouldered
with crests ever-curling,
The waxing waves
washed higher and higher—"*

"For Lyr's sake don't start one of those!" said Kuros.

Vakár shot a dagger-glance at his brother and continued: "Where there's shadow there's more often than not a substance to cast it. And the words of so reliable a spy as Master Söl should not lightly be thrown aside. The Gorgons—"

"You have Gorgons on the brain," said Kuros. "Suppose they did sail against us? They must pass Tartaros and Dzer, sail west through the Hesperides, land upon the coast of Zhysk, and march through that land to come to grips with us. We should have ample warning, and one Lorskán's worth three Gorgons—"

"As I was saying when the yapping of a mongrel interrupted me," said Vakár. "The Gorgons don't even fight fair. I've been reading—"

"As if any real man ever learned anything from marks on papyrus," put in Kuros.

"Those who can't read can't judge—"

King Zhabutir said, "I forbid this dreadful quarreling. Go on, Vakár."

"You know how we fight, in loose groups, each led by a lord or champion followed by his kinsmen and liegemen and friends. We usually start out with challenges to single combat from our champions to the foe's, and sometimes the whole day is occupied with such duels. Moreover our men go equipped as they like, with swords, spears, axes, halberds, berdiches, war-clubs, and so on."

"What other way of fighting is there?" said Kuros.

"The Gorgons equip all their men alike, with helmets, shields, and weapons of the same pattern. They align their men in a solid mass, every man having a fixed place despite rank or kinship. They waste no time in challenges, but at a signal all move upon the foe, every man keeping his place in the whole. Such a mass goes through an army like ours like a plow through sand."

"Fairy-tales," said Kuros. "No true warriors would submit to be so forced into a single rigid mold . . ."

As usual the argument went round and round, with Vakar, whose disposition it was to take a gloomy view of things, arguing against Kuros while the other two remained mute. Kuros began to press the king.

"You agree, don't you, Father?"

Zhabutir the Indecisive smiled weakly. "I don't know . . . I cannot decide . . . What thinks Master Ryn?"

"Sir?" said the magician. "Before sending my opinions forth across the chasm of surmise, I prefer to wait until they're provided with a more solid bridge of fact. With your permission I'll call upon the witch Grâ for counsel."

"That old puzzel!" cried Kuros. "We should have hanged her . . ."

Ryn began his preparations. From his bag he produced a small bronze tripod which he unfolded and set over the guttering fire. The fire threw a streamer of smoke at him as if to keep him off, but at the mutter of a cantrip it drew in upon itself. At the first syllable the wolfhound jumped up, gave a faint howl, and trotted out with its tail between its legs, its claws clicking on the stone.

Ryn poked the fire and added sticks until it blazed up again. With a piece of charcoal he drew a circle around the hearth and

added lines and glyphs whose meaning Vakar did not know. Ryn rose to his feet and prowled around the room extinguishing the wobbling flames in the little oil-lamps. His hunched shadow reminded Vakar of that of a great scuttling spider—for all that Vakar esteemed the man who had tutored him as a boy. Ryn then went back to the hearth and into the miniature cauldron at the apex of the tripod he sprinkled powders whose smell made the others cough.

He resumed his stool facing the fire and spoke in a language so ancient that even the scholarly Vakar, who could read over a thousand pictographs, could not understand a word, all the while moving his hands in stiffly geometrical gestures.

VAKAR told himself that it was mere illusion that the room became even darker. A plume of smoke arose from the cauldron, and although the wind still sent drafts whistling through the chamber, the air within the circle seemed quite still. For instead of diffusing and dispersing as it rose, the column of smoke held together and twined itself snakelike into knots at the top of the column. Vakar would have nourished magical ambitions himself but for his peculiar disability, and held his breath, his heart pounding.

The smoke thickened and solidified and became a simulacrum of a tall heavy woman clad in a wolf-skin tied over one shoulder and belted around her thick waist with a thong. She was seated, half-turned so that she seemed to be looking past the four men without seeing them. In one hand she clutched a bone from which she was gnawing the meat. Vakar realized that it was not the woman herself, for the substance of which she was made was still smoky-gray in the semi-darkness and he could see the tripod and the fire beneath it through her massive legs and feet.

"Grâ!" called Ryn.

The woman stopped gnawing and looked at the men. She tossed the bone aside, and as it left her hand it vanished. She wiped her fingers on the wolf-hide and scratched under her exposed breast. Her voice came in a far-off whisper:

"What wish the lords of Lorsk with me?"

Ryn said: "Word has come of threatening movements by the Gorgons. We are divided as to what to do. Advise us."

The witch stared at the ground in front of her so long that Kuros squirmed and muttered until Ryn hissed him to silence. At last Grâ spoke:

"Send Prince Vakar to seek the thing the gods most fear."

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

Ryn spoke again in his archaic speech, and the phantom of the witch turned to mere smoke which wafted about making the spectators sneeze. Ryn took a burning stick from the fire and relighted the lamps.

Vakar viewed Grâ's message with mixed feelings. If the very gods feared the thing that she had spoken of, what business had a mere mortal pursuing it? On the other hand he had never been to the mainland and had long wished to travel. While Lorsk was a fine rich land, the real centers of culture and wisdom lay eastward: Sederado with its philosophers, Torrutseish with its wizards, and who knew what other ancient cities?

Kuros said sourly: "If we were fools enough to believe that harridan—"

Vakar interrupted: "Brother, since you always seem so eager to discredit warnings against the Gorgons, could you have a motive other than simple skepticism?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Such as—let's say a little present from King Zeluud?"

Kuros jumped up, reaching for his knife. "Are you calling me traitor?" he yelled. "I'll carve the word on your liver . . ."

Ryn the magician reached up to seize Kuros's arms while King Zhabutir laid a hand on Vakar's shoulder as the latter, too, started to rise. When they had pacified the furious Kuros he sat down, snarling:

"All that effeminate bastard does is to stir up trouble and enmity amongst us. He hates me because he knows if the gods hadn't fumbled, I should be heir and not he. If we followed the sensible mainland custom of primogeniture . . ."

Before Vakar could think of a crushing reply, Ryn spoke: "My lords, let's sink our now-differences until the matter of the foreign threat be resolved. Whatever you

think of Grâ or Söl, I've had confirmation of their tale."

"What?" said the king.

"Last night I dreamt I stood before the gods of Poseidonis: Lyr and Tandyla and Okma and the rest. As usual I asked if they had advice for Lorsk."

"What did they say?" asked Kuros.

"Nothing; but it was the manner of their saying it. They turned away their eyes and faces as if ashamed of their silence. And I recalled where I'd seen that expression. Many decades ago, when I was a young fellow studying magic in mighty Torrutseish—"

"God, he's off on another of those!" muttered Kuros.

"—and one of my friends, an Ogugian youth named Joathio, got excited at a bull-fight and made indiscreet remarks about the city perfect. Next day, though the remarks had been nothing dreadful, he disappeared. I asked after him at the headquarters of the municipal troop, and those tough soldiers turned away from me with that same expression. Later I found Joathio's head on a spike over the main gate. Not a pretty sight for one still young and soft of soul, heh-heh.

"I therefore infer something's impending in the world of the gods, unfavorable to us, against which our own gods are for some reason forbidden to warn us. In view of Söl's news it could well be a Gorgonian invasion. Therefore let's send Prince Vakar on his quest. If he fails—"

"Which he will," put in Kuros.

"—no harm will be done, whereas if he succeeds he may save us from an unknown doom."

King Zhabutir said: "But the gods—how can we oppose them?"

Vakar said: "It is cowardly to give up before the fight has even begun, merely because we might face odds. If the gods fear something they can't be all-powerful."

"Atheist!" sneered Kuros. "When do you go? While I can't understand sending Vakar Zhu on a supernatural quest, Grâ did name you and not me."

"Tomorrow."

"As soon as that? You'll miss the games of the vernal equinox, but that'll be small loss as you've never won a prize."

"Anything to get away from your brags and boasts," said Vakar.

KUROS had always boasted his superiority in sport: He could out-run, out-jump, and out-wrestle his brother. He had also annoyed Vakar by stressing the sobriquet "Zhu" which meant, not exactly "fool" or "deaf one", but "one who lacks supernatural perceptions". For Vakar had the unenviable distinction of completely lacking normal powers of telepathy, prescience, or spirit communication. Not even did the gods visit him in dreams.

"When you return," said Kuros, "you'll have thought up such a fine assortment of lies about your adventures that I, who must depend upon my known accomplishments, shall be quite outclassed."

"Am I a dog, that you call me a liar?" began Vakar with heat, but his father interrupted.

"Now, boys," said King Zhabutir in his vague way, then to Ryn: "Are you sure she meant Vakar? It does seem a challenge to the gods to send the heir to the throne on a wild chase for who-knows-what."

Ryn said: "There's no doubt. Say your farewells and sharpen your bronze tonight, Prince."

"Whither am I bound?" asked Vakar. "Your lady consultant was as vague in her directions as my brother is about the paternity of his wives' children."

"You—" began Kuros, but Ryn interrupted the outburst:

"I have no knowledge of anything in Poseidonis answering Grá's description. I advise you to go to lordly Torrutseish, where the greatest wizards of the world make their dwelling."

"Do you know any of these wizards?" inquired Vakar.

"I haven't been there for decades, but I recall that Sarrar and Nichok and Vrilya and Kurtevan were preëminent."

"How many shall I take with me? A troop of soldiery and—let's say—a mere dozen or so of servants?"

A faint smile played about the corners of Ryn's old mouth. "You shall take one—possibly two persons with you. One body-servant, let's say, and one interpreter—"

"I have the interpreter for him,"

chuckled Kuros. "A fellow named Sret with the most marvelous gift of tongues—"

"What?" cried Vakar in honest amazement. "No bodyguard? No women? By Tandyla's third eye!"

"Not one. For your kind of search you'll go farther and faster without a private army."

"Who'll know my rank?"

"Nobody, unless you tell them, and usually you'd better not. Princes have been known to fetch fine ransoms."

Kuros threw back his head and laughed loudly while the king looked ineffectually anxious. Vakar glared from one to the other, his knuckles itching for a good smash into his brother's fine teeth. Then he pulled himself together and smiled wryly, saying:

"If the hero Vrir in the epic can run all over the world alone, I can do likewise. I go to procure a beggar's rags, suitably verminous. Think kindly of me when I'm gone."

"I always think kindly of you when you're gone," said Kuros. "Only you're not gone enough."

"It's time we were in bed," said King Zhabutir, rising.

The others bid their respects to the king and departed, Vakar towards his chambers where his mistress Bili awaited him. He dreaded telling her of his plan, for he disliked her scenes. He would not be altogether displeased to be leaving her, for not only was she ten years his senior and fast fattening, but also her late husband had with good reason referred to her as "Bili the Bird-brained."

Moreover it would be necessary for him to take a wife or two one of these days when matches with the daughters of rich and powerful Pusâdian lords could be organized, and such matters were more easily arranged without the complication of a concubine already at home.

He shouted: "Get out!" and kicked at one of the royal goats who had somehow wandered into the castle.

"Prince Vakar!" said a low voice from the shadows.

Vakar whirled, clapping a hand to his hip where his sword-hilt would have been had he been armed. It was Söl the spy.

"Well?" said Vakar.

"I—I couldn't speak out in council-meeting, but I must tell you that . . ."

"That what?"

"You guarantee my safety?"

"You shall be safe though you tell me I'm the son of a sow and a sea-demon."

"Your brother is in league with the Gorgons—"

"Are you mad?"

"By no means. There's proof. Go ask—*urk!*"

Söl jerked as if he had been stung. The man half-turned and Vakar saw something sticking in his back. Söl gasped:

"They—he—I die! Go tell . . ."

He folded up upon the stone flooring, joint by joint. Before Vakar could have counted ten the spy was huddled motionless at his feet.

Vakar stooped and pulled the dagger from Söl's back. A quick examination showed the spy to be dead, and also that the dagger had been thrown so that the point had stuck in the muscle covering the man's right shoulder-blade: a mere flesh-wound. Holding the dagger, Vakar moved quickly down the corridor in the direction from which the weapon had come, his moccasins making no sound. He neither saw nor heard anyone and presently turned back, cursing himself for not having run after the assassin the instant Söl fell.

He returned to the victim whose eyes now stared sightlessly up, reflecting tiny highlights from the nearest lamp. Vakar held the dagger close to the lamp and saw that the bronzen blade was overlain with a coating of some black gummy substance, covering the pointward half of the blade. This stuff was in turn coated by a faint film of blood for a half-inch from the point.

Vakar, his blood freezing, pondered his predicament. Could Kuros be playing so deadly a double game? Somebody had shut Söl's mouth just as he had been about to reveal matters of moment. If Söl were right, what could Vakar do? Accuse Kuros publicly? His woolly-headed father would scoff and his brother would ask whether he, Vakkar, hadn't murdered Söl and then invented this wild tale to cover the fact. Whatever the proof Söl had spoken of, Vakkar had no access to it now.

At last Vakkar wiped the dagger-point—

lightly, so as not to remove the substance under the blood—on the edge of Söl's kilt and tiptoed away. As he entered his outer chamber he heard Bili's voice:

"Is that you, my lord and love?"

"Yes. Don't get up."

He picked up the lighted lamp from the table and held it close to the row of daggers and axes and swords that hung upon the wall.

He took down one of the daggers and tried the murder-weapon in the sheath. He had to go through most of the collection to find a sheath that fitted.

"What are you doing?" came the voice of Bili, whose curiosity must have been aroused by the snick of blades in their sheaths.

"Nothing. I shall be along presently."

"Well come to bed! I'm tired of waiting."

Vakar sighed, wondering how often he had heard that. Much as he esteemed Bili's lectual accomplishments, he sometimes wished she would occasionally think of something else. He replaced the dagger-sheaths on their rack, hid in a chest the dagger in whose sheath he had placed the murder weapon, and went into the bed-chamber.

III

BEFORE dawn Vakkar was awakened by a knock on his door and a voice: "Prince Vakkar! There's been a murder!"

It was the captain of the castle guard. His noise partly awakened Bili, who stirred and reached out. Vakkar eluded her embrace, tumbled out of bed, and pulled on some clothes.

They were all standing around the body of Söl, even that fisherman whom Kuros normally more rank-conscious than Vakkar—claimed as a personal friend to be entertained at the castle. King Zhabutir said:

"Terrible! Do—do you know anything about this, Vakkar?"

"Not a thing," said Vakkar, and looked hard at Kuros. "You, brother?"

"Nor I," said Kuros blandly.

Vakkar stared into his brother's eyes as if in hope of seeing through them into the brain behind, but could make nothing of

the man's expression. He turned away, saying:

"Perhaps Ryn can make something of this. I have to collect my gear for departure."

He went back to his chambers, but instead of packing at once he took down the murder-knife from the wall-rack, hid it in his shirt, and went down into the courtyard. The East was pale with the coming dawn and the wind whipped Vakar's cloak. A dozen swine lay in a mud-wallow, huddled for warmth, chins resting on each other's bristly bodies. An old boar grunted and showed his tusks. Vakar kicked him out of the way and grabbed a half-grown shoat, which burst into frantic struggles and squeals.

With a quick look around Vakar drew the murder-dagger from his shirt. He clamped his teeth upon the sheath, drew the blade, and pricked the pig's rump with the point to a depth of a quarter-inch. Then he released the animal, which raced across the court. Half-way across it began to slow down. Before it reached the far side its legs gave way under it, and it lay twitching for a few seconds before it died.

Vakar stared thoughtfully at the dagger as he sheathed it and hid it in his shirt. If the venom worked so fast upon a beast notoriously resistant to poison, there was no doubt of what it would do to a man. He started to return to his chambers, then paused as another thought struck him. It would not do to have this poisoned porker fed to the castle's dogs, or even more so to have it unknowingly fried up for the royal breakfast. Vakar walked over to the pig, picked it up, and carried it to the outer gate. There the usual pair of guards leaned on their zagnals or dagger-halberds: pole-arms with knife-like triangular bronze blades.

"Which of you is junior?" he said. When that question had been answered he handed the shoat to the startled young man, saying:

"Get a shovel from the tool-house and take this pig outside the city and bury it—deeply, so no dog or hyena shall dig it up. And don't take it home for your wife to cook unless you wish a sudden death."

At that instant Drozo, King Zhabutir's

treasurer, appeared at the gate on his way to work. Vakar went with him to pick up a supply of trade-metal. Drozo gave him gold rings and copper torcs and copper slugs shaped like little ax-heads, then handed him a semicircular piece of bronze, saying:

"If you get to Kernê and are pressed for funds, go to Senator Amastan with this. It's half a broken medallion whereof he has the other half, and will therefore identify you."

Vakar went back to his room. He took down one dagger for which he had rigged a harness of two narrow strips so that the sheath was positioned in front of his chest. He switched this harness to the sheath that now housed the poisoned dagger, took off his fine linen shirt, strapped the harness around his torso, and donned the shirt again.

Then he began collecting garments and weapons. He assembled his winged helmet of solid gold with the lining of purple cloth; his jazerine cuirass of gold-washed bronzen scales; his cloak of the finest white wool with a collar of sable. He looked over his collection of bronze swords: slender rapiers, heavy cut-and-thrust longswords, short leaf-shaped barbarian broadswords, and a double-curved sapara from far Thamuzeira, where screaming men and women were flayed on the altars of Miluk. He picked the best rapier, the one with the gold-inlaid blade, the hilt of sharkskin and silver with a ruby pommel, and the scabbard of embossed leather with a golden chape at the end . . .

At this point it occurred to Vakar that while he would no doubt make a glittering spectacle in all this gaudery, it would be useless to pretend that he was but a simple traveler of no consequence. In fact he would need a bodyguard to keep the first robber lord who saw him from swooping down with his troop to seize this finery.

One by one he returned the pieces to their chests and pegs and assembled a quite different outfit. As the rapier would be too light to be effective against armor he chose a plain but serviceable longsword; a plain bronze helm with a lining of sponge; a simple jack of stiff-tanned cowhide with bronze reinforcements; and his stout bronze

buckler with the repoussé pattern of lunes: work of the black Tartarean smiths. Nobody in Lorsk could duplicate it.

HE WAS pulling on a pair of piebald boots of shaggy winter horsehide when Fual, his personal slave, came in. Fual was an Aremorian of Kerys who had been seized by Foworian slavers and sold in Gadaira. He was a slender man, more so even than Vakar, with the light skin of the more northerly peoples and a touch of red in his hair that suggested the blood of the barbarous Galatha. He looked at Vakar from large melancholy eyes and clucked.

". . . and why didn't you call me, sir? It isn't proper for one of your rank to work for himself."

"If it makes you unhappy you may complete the job."

They were stuffing extra clothing into a goatskin bag when Bili, scantily wrapped in a deerskin blanket, appeared in the doorway, looking at Vakar from brown bovine eyes. She said:

"My lord, as this will be the last time—"

"Don't bother me now!" said Vakar.

He finished packing and told Fual: "Get your gear too."

"Are you taking *me*, sir?"

"And why not? Get along with you. But remember: You shall steal nothing except on my direct order!"

Fual, who had been a professional thief before his enslavement, departed looking thoughtful. It now occurred to Vakar that once they touched the mainland Fual could easily run away. He must try to learn more of what went on in the mercurial Aremorian's mind; Fual's attitude towards him might make the difference between life and death.

Bili's snuffing from the bedroom attracted Vakar's attention.

"Now, now," he said, patting her awkwardly. "You'll find another lover."

"But I don't wish—"

"You'd better, because there's no knowing when I shall return."

"At least you might . . ." She rolled over, throwing off her blankets, and slid her plump hands up his arms.

"Oh, well," sighed Prince Vakar.

* * *

They paused as they topped the pass to look out over the irrigated plain on which stood sunny Amferé. The spires of the city shone distantly in the afternoon sun on the edge of the blue Sirenian Sea. The capital of Zhysk was laid out as a miniature of mighty Torrutseish, with the same circular outer wall, the same sea-canal running diametrically through it, and the same circular harbor of concentric rings of land and water at the center.

Vakar twisted on his saddle-pad to look back at his convoy of two chariots, one carrying Fual and the interpreter Sret, the other the baggage. They were all splashed with mud from fording streams swollen by the melting snow on the higher peaks.

Vakar rode horseback instead of in a chariot because, in a day when equitation was a daring novelty, it was also one of the few physical activities wherein he excelled. This was not entirely to his own credit, but was due in some measure to the fact that the average Pusadian, standing six to six-and-a-half feet, was too heavy for the small horses of the age. Though Vakar was small for a Lorskian, his boots cleared the ground by a scant two feet.

"Shall we be there by sundown?" he said to the nearest charioteer, who replied:

"Whatever your highness pleases."

Vakar started down the slope, slowly, for without stirrups not even an accomplished rider can gallop downhill without the risk of being tossed over his mount's head. Behind him the bronze tires of the vehicles ground through the gravel and squished in the mud. Vakar smiled wryly at the reply, reflecting that if he asked them if the tide would obey him they would no doubt say the same thing.

They drew up to the walls of Amferé at sunset, to wait in line behind an ox-cart piled with farm produce for the last-minute rush before the gates were closed. The people were lighter in coloring than those of Lorsk, lending support to the legend that a party of Atlanteans had settled Zhysk some centuries back.

When Vakar identified himself, showing his seal-ring, the guard waved him through, for there was peace at the moment between Zhysk and Lorsk. Vakar rode for the citadel at the center of the city, meaning to

sponge on the King of Zhysk. The citadel comprised an island surrounded by a broad ring of water. The palace and other public buildings stood on the island, and the outer boundary of the ring formed the harbor, instead of three concentric rings as in Torrutseish.

When Vakar arrived at the bridge across the oversized moat (a bridge that had been the wonder of all Poseidonis when built, as the continent had never seen a bridge longer than the length of a single log) he found that the guards had already stretched a chain across the approach for the night. A guard told him in broad Zhyskan dialect: "King Shvo's not here. He's gone to Bienkar with all his people for the summer. Who's calling?"

"Prince Vakar of Lorsk."

The guard seemed unimpressed, and Vakar got the impression that the fellow judged him a liar. He tugged his mustache in thought, then asked:

"Is his minister Peshas here?"

"Why, didn't ye know? Peshas lost his head for conspiracy two months gone. Eh, ye could see it on its spike from here, rotting away day by day, but they've taken it down to make room for another."

"Who is the minister then?"

"Himself has a new one, Lord Mir, but he's gone home for the night."

Under these circumstances it would be more trouble than it was worth to try to talk his way in. Vakar asked:

"Where's the best inn?"

"Try Nyeron's. Three blocks north, turn right, go till ye see a little alley but don't go in there; bear left . . ."

After some wandering Vakar found Nyeron's inn. Nyeron, speaking with a strong Hesperian accent, said that he could put up Vakar and his party for six ounces of copper a night.

"Very well," said Vakar and dug into his scrip for a fistful of copper, wondering why Nyeron had looked surprised for a flicker of an eyelid.

After the usual period of weighing and checking they found a small celt of just over six ounces.

"Take it and never mind the change," said Vakar, then turned to one of the charioteers. "Take this and buy a meal for all

of us for Nyeron to cook, and also fodder. Fual, help with the horses. Sret . . ."

HE PAUSED to notice that Sret was speaking in Hesperian to Nyeron, who replied with a flood of that tongue, in the dialect of Meropia. It seemed that Sret, a small man with a long ape-like upper lip, had once lived in Meropia and that he and Nyeron had acquaintances in common. Although he had never visited the Hesperides, Vakar had a fair acquaintance with their language by virtue of having had an Ougian nurse. However, being tired from his day's ride, he said impatiently in his own tongue:

"Sret! Haul in the baggage and see that nobody steals it until we're ready to eat. And not then, either."

Vakar went back to the dormitory for the first turn at the washbasin and found Fual beside him.

"How are we doing, Fual?"

"Oh, very fine, sir. Except . . ."

"Except what?"

"You know it's unusual for one of your rank to stop at a vulgar inn?"

"I know, but fortune compels. What else?"

"Perhaps my lord will excuse me for saying so but he hasn't had much experience with inns."

"That I haven't. What have I done wrong?"

"You could have got lodging for three ounces a night, or at most four, if you'd bargained sharply."

"Why the boar-begotten thief! Am I a dog? I'll knock his teeth—"

"My lord! It wouldn't become your dignity, not to mention that the magistrates would take a poor view of the act, this being not your own demesne. Next time let me haggle, for my dignity doesn't matter."

"Very well; with your background I can see you'd make a perfect merchant."

Vakar handed over the washing-facilities. By the time the last of the party had washed, the water and towel were foul indeed. They ate from wooden bowls with the dispatch and silence of tired and hungry men, washing down great masses of roast pork and barley-bread with gulps of the green wine of Zhysk and paying no heed to a noisy

party of merchants clustered at the other end of the long table.

When they turned in, however, Vakar found that the chatter of the merchants kept him awake. They seemed to be making an all-night party of it, with a flute-girl and all the trimmings. When the flute-girl was not tweetling the men were engaged in some game of chance with loud boasts, threats, and accusations.

Vakar stood it for a couple of hours until his slow temper reached a boil. Then he climbed out of bed and knocked aside the curtain separating the dormitory from the front chamber of the inn.

"Stop that racket!" he roared, "before I beat your heads in!"

The noise stopped as four pairs of eyes turned upon him. The stoutest merchant said:

"And who are you, my good man?"

"I'm Prince Vakar of Lorsk, and when I say shut up—"

"And I'm the Queen of Ogugia. If you foreigners don't like it here, go back—"

"Swine!" yelled Vakar, looking for something to throw, but Nyeron, cudgel in hand, intervened:

"No fighting here! If you must brawl, go outside."

"Gladly," said Vakar. "Wait while I fetch my sword—"

"Oh, it's to be swords?" said the stout merchant. "Then you must wait while I send home for mine. As it's drunk the blood of several Gorgonian pirates it shouldn't find a Lorskian popinjay—"

"What's that?" said Vakar. "Who are you, really?" His initial burst of rage had subsided enough for his ever-lively curiosity to come into play, and he realized that he was making himself look foolish.

"I'm Mateng of Po, owner of three ships, as you'd know if you weren't an ignorant—"

"Wait," said Vakar. "Are any of your ships leaving shortly for the mainland?"

"Yes. The *Dvra* sails for Gadaira tomorrow if the wind holds."

"Isn't Gadaira the nearest mainland port to Torrutseish?"

"It is."

"How much—" Vakar started the say, then checked himself. He stuck his head

back in the dormitory and called: "Fual! Wake up; come out and haggle for me!"

Next morning Vakar was collecting his crew to ride to the docks when he found that Sret was missing. Back in the inn he found the interpreter chatting with Nyeron.

"Come along!" said Vakar.

"Yes sir," said Sret, and as he started out called back over his shoulder in Hesperian: "Farewell; I shall see you again sooner than you think!"

Then he came. They rattled down to the harbor where Vakar stopped at the temple of Lyr to sacrifice a lamb to the sea-god. While he did not take his gods too seriously (as they never visited him) he thought it was just as well to be on the safe side.

Then by questioning all and sundry he located the *Dvra*. Mateng was ordering the stowing of a cargo of copper ingots, bison-hides, and mammoth-ivory.

MATENG called: "Ruaz! Here's your passenger! He's all paid up, so take good care of him."

"A prince, eh?" Captain Ruaz, laughing through his beard. "Well, keep out of the way, your sublime highness, if you don't want an ingot dropped on your toe."

He bustled about directing his men until, after a long wait, they got the last goods stowed and the hatches closed and cast off. The crew manned four sweeps which they worked standing up, maneuvering the ship out from its quay. They plodded around the annular harbor to the main canal, Vakar craning his neck this way and that to see all he could of Amferé from the water.

As they entered the canal they picked up speed, for a slight current added its impetus to the force of the oars. Soon they passed through the outer city wall, where a great bronze gate stood ready to swing shut across the channel to keep out hostile ships. Then down the canal half a mile to the sea.

At the first roll of the *Dvra* in the oceanic swell, Sret curled up in the scuppers with a groan.

"What ails him?" said Vakar.

"Seasickness, sir," said Fual. "If you don't suffer a touch also you'll be lucky."

"Like what happened to Zormé in the poem?"

*"With eyeballs aching
and hurting head,
Sunk in the scuppers
the hero huddled
Loathing life
and desiring death?"*

"I'm not so badly off as yet."

Fual turned away with a knowing look. After a few minutes of tossing Vakar did experience a slight headache and queasiness of stomach, but not wishing to lose face he stood proudly at the rail as if nothing were wrong. The four sailors hauled in the oars, lowered the steering-paddles until they dipped into the water, and hoisted the single square scarlet-and-white striped sail. The west wind sent the *Dvra* plunging toward the Hesperides. Vakar now saw the reason for the high stern, as wave after wave loomed up behind and seemed about to swamp them, only to boost them forward and up and slide harmlessly underneath.

He staggered to the poop where Ruaz held the lever that operated the yoke that connected the two steering-paddles, and asked: "What happens when you wish to sail back from the mainland to Amferé and the wind is against you? Do you row?"

"You wait and pray to your favorite seagod. In this sea the wind blows from the west four days out of five, so you must wait for the fifth day. I've sat in port at Sederado a month awaiting a fair wind."

"That sounds tedious. What if some other sea-captain is praying for the wind to blow in the opposite direction?"

Ruaz's shoulders and eyebrows went up in a great shrug. Vakar looked past the poop towards Amferé, now fast dropping out of sight behind the bulge of the ocean. He felt a lump rise in his throat. Then for a long time he stared at the water. Though normally nervous and impatient, quickly bored by inactivity, he found that he could watch the soothing sight of the endless series of crests riding by.

But something nagged him, filling him with a vague feeling of incongruity and unease. In the late afternoon they skirted a mountainous coast.

"Meropia," said Captain Ruaz.

By nightfall Sret had recovered enough to eat. Afterwards Vakar, though mon-

strously sleepy, got little sleep because of the moonlight, the motion, and the ship-noises. Next day they left Meropia behind in the afternoon and sailed eastward over the empty sea. Ruaz explained:

"We don't see other ships because we're the first out of Amferé after the winter layup. We're taking a chance on a late storm to get higher prices in Gadaira before the competition arrives."

Vakar wondered at his continuing unease until the sight of Sret chatting with Ruaz gave him a clue. He remembered Sret's saying to Nyeron he'd be back sooner than expected. Why? Did he think that Vakar would lose heart and turn back, or get killed in a brawl? Or . . .

Vakar felt like kicking himself for not having seen it sooner. Kuros, acting in concordance with the Gorgons, could have sent Sret along to murder him and then go home with a story of how his master had been eaten by a monster. Sret had spoken to Nyeron in Hesperian in ignorance of the fact that Vakar knew that tongue. Vakar fingered his hilt and glanced narrowly to where Sret huddled under his cloak, the hood pulled over his head, swapping jokes with the captain. He thought of walking up to the fellow and striking off his head. Still, he might be wrong in his suspicions, and at best the killing would be embarrassing to explain.

Vakar wondered whether to take Fual into his confidence. He asked:

"Fual, who is Sret? I never knew him before this journey."

Fual shrugged. "I think he's part Lotri, but I never knew him either."

If true, that made it unlikely that both Sret and Fual were in on the plot. After the evening meal Vakar told Fual that they should keep watch-and-watch through the night in case of foul play. Fual looked startled and produced a handsome silver-inlaid dagger.

"Ha!" said Vakar. "Where did you get that? You stole it at Nyeron's! I ought to beat you. . . . But perhaps it's a lucky theft for once. Go to sleep while I take the first watch."

Shortly before midnight Vakar was aroused by Fual's shaking him. The valet whispered:

"You were right, sir. They're gathering aft, whispering."

Vakar rolled over and peered aft from the bow where he and Fual lay. Below the lower edge of the sail he could see the whispering knot of men in the light of the just-risen gibbous moon.

He slowly drew his sword and whispered to Fual: "Get your knife ready. Keep close to me and cover my back."

His shield was still in the dufflebag, but for fighting on an unsteady deck one needed a free hand to grab things.

"You—you're going to attack six men?" quavered Fual.

"Lyr's barnacles! Shall I wait for them to cut my throat?"

"But six—"

"Our only hope is to rush them. If it makes you any happier I'm frightened too, but I prefer a small chance to none."

Fual's teeth chattered. Vakar inched cat-erpillarlike along the deck aft hoping to get close enough to overhear before the crew noticed him. As he neared the mast he found that he could make out the separate figures. Sret was talking in low tones to Ruaz, who turned a leaf-shaped broadsword this way and that so that the moon glimmered dully upon it. Sret was saying:

" . . . not an experienced fighter, though he's been in brushes with hill-robbers. But he's young and no giant; one quick rush while he sleeps. . . ."

"Come on," breathed Vakar, rolling to his feet.

IV

VAKAR ducked under the lower yard and ran towards the group. With a shout the sailors leaped apart, drawing knives.

Vakar bore down upon the nearest, feinted once, and ran the man through. The man's scream pierced the rising clamor. As Vakar stepped back to pull out his blade he glanced over his shoulder. Fual had hardly finished ducking under the sail.

Damn the coward! thought Vakar, setting his teeth. As his victim fell he faced Ruaz, Sret, and two sailors, plus one other on the poop steering. Sret and Ruaz were shouting:

"Forward! Kill him! Get in close! Rush him!"

Vakar leaped over the body on deck, slashing right and left. His sword clanged against Ruaz's blade and bit flesh and bone, and then he was through them. As he whirled to face them again, his back to the poop, he saw that they were all still on their feet.

As Fual finally came closer, a sailor turned and closed with him rather than face the sword. Now the twain were staggering about in a deadly waltz, each gripping the other's wrist.

The three facing Vakar closed, Ruaz in the middle. Vakar cut and thrust at the captain, who parried while Sret and the other sailor closed in from the sides. Vakar, wishing he had a light rapier against these agile unarmored foes, had to leap back until he backed into the high step up to the poop and almost fell.

They came on. Vakar slashed wildly, only his superior length of blade keeping them from finishing him. He could not quite reach them, for if he moved far enough towards any one the others would get him in the back. They moved on the swaying deck with catlike ease while he reeled and staggered. One got close enough to send a stab home, but the point failed to pierce Vakar's leather jack.

A shout came from behind: the steersman encouraging his mates. Vakar wondered what a ship would do without a man at the helm. He leaped back up on to the poop, turning as he did so, and swung a mighty blow at the sailor. The sharp bronze sheared through the man's neck. The head thumped to the deck, rolled off the poop, and continued its bloody course forward towards the mast while the spouting body collapsed beneath the steering-yoke.

Vakar turned to face his three antagonists on the main deck, but as they confronted each other the *Dura* slewed to starboard and heeled far to port so that water poured over the port rail.

Vakar found himself sliding down the steep deck toward the black water. He threw up his free hand and snatched at the night air for support—and to his infinite relief caught a main-stay. As the ship continued to heel, Vakar found his feet dangling over

the water while he gripped the stay in a death-grasp.

He glanced forward in time to see a figure that he took for Sret go over the side into the smother of foam while the others sprawling or sitting on deck, snatched at the ropes and each other for purchase.

As the wind spilled out of the sail the *Dvra* began to right herself. When his feet were firmly on the slanting deck again, Vakar let go his stay to creep forward on knees and knuckles. Captain Ruaz was also on all fours, groping for his sword. Vakar rose as he neared the Captain and brought his sword down on his head. Down went Ruaz.

One sailor clung to the rail, which was just emerging from the water. Vakar struck at the gripping hand, missed, and struck again. This time the edge hit home and the seaman disappeared.

Up forward Fual lay upon the deck, holding the mast with his arms while his antagonist, the remaining sailor, clutched Fual's legs to keep from going over the side with the roll of the ship. Only a few heart-beats had elapsed since the ship had started to right herself and roll in the opposite direction.

Vakar ran forward and, as the sailor rose crying a word that might have meant "mercy," he struck. The man threw up an arm, yelped as the blade bit into the bone, and an instant later collapsed with a split skull.

Fual started to rise, then clutched the mast as the ship rolled in the other direction. Vakar, staggering over to the starboard rail, cried:

"How do you straighten this damned thing out?"

"The steering-lever," said Fual. "You—you keep the ship's—that is—"

Without waiting for more explicit directions, Vakar, the next time the ship righted herself, bounded aft and seized the lever-arm. He hung on until with wind caught the sail and the *Dvra* began to pick up way on her former course. When she was straightened out and running free again, Vakar examined the steering-mechanism. He experimented so that the ship yawed wildly until he got the hang of steering. Fual said:

"My lord, I've never seen anything like the way you slew those four men! Just one—two—three—four, like that!"

"Luck," growled Vakar. "Must we always sail exactly with the wind?"

"No, I think one can sail at a small angle to it, or sailors would never reach home."

"I wish I knew whither we were headed. What land did Ruaz expect to sight next?"

"I don't know, sir. I believe Eruthea and Ogugia and Elusion lie somewhere ahead of us."

"In what order?"

"That I don't know."

"I once met the present Queen of Ogugia; a gangling child, but she'd be a grown woman now."

"Has Ogugia a king, sir?"

"Had; Porfia married a Lord Vancho, who was said to have been an amiable non-entity. He died of some pox, and as the Hesperian throne descends in the female line she'd still be queen."

"What sort of place is it?"

"OGUGIA? I know little, save that it's called the Isle of Philosophers. I've always wished to ask those sages some simple questions, say about the origin of life and the immortality of the soul and so on. Oh, Fual! Since you're no more mariner than I, throw these bodies overboard."

"Including this one without his head, sir?" said Fual with such a pronounced grimace of distaste that Vakar could see it in the moonlight.

"Especially that one. They clutter the deck."

Fual went to work, first stripping each corpse. When he had finished he came back to the poop with Ruaz's broadsword, which he had found in the scuppers, saying:

"May I carry this, sir? If we're to meet such perils we can't be too well armed."

"Surely, surely." Vakar turned the helm over to Fual while he straightened the kinks out of his own sword and smoothed down the nicks in the blade with his pocket hone.

Towards morning Vakar sighted another land ahead and said: "Let's follow this coast around to the right until we come to a port."

"What will you do with the ship, sir?"

"I hadn't thought." Vakar looked around.

"If somebody sees the blood they'll make trouble. Clean it up, will you?"

"And then what?" said Fual, hunting for rags.

"How does one sell a ship?"

"One finds a merchant who wishes to buy. Unless somebody recognizes it as belonging to Mateng of Po."

"How could we disguise it? When you finish with the blood, see if you can remove that image of Lyr at the stern."

Thus about noon a somewhat altered *Dvra* came in sight of a harbor full of tubby merchantmen and rakish fifty-oared war-galleys, with a fair city lying behind it. Vakar said:

"How do we steer this ship into the harbor without the wind at our backs?"

"I think one lowers the sail and rows in."

"And how—oh, I see! One unties that rope that runs from the upper whatever-you-call-it, that long stick, and lowers it until it rests upon the bottom one."

He meant the upper and lower yards, for the ship had yards at both the top and bottom edges of the sail. A tackle of ropes confined the sail and kept it from spilling over the deck when lowered. Vakar steered the ship as far into the port as it would go. Then Fual unhitched the halyard, but, as the upper yard and the sail were heavier than he, they sank down into their tackle hoisting the little Aremorian into the air. The spectacle so doubled Vakar up with mirth that, despite Fual's yells, it was some time before he came forward to pull his servant back down to the deck.

They got out the sweeps and pushed the ship shoreward. It was a long row for only two oars, and Vakar, though his hands were hard from weapon-practice, had begun to develop blisters before they reached the shore. Along the waterfront men were unloading ships and hauling their cargoes away in ox-drawn sledges and truckle-carts. As the *Dvra* neared the quay a small knot of loafers gathered to gaup: dark men smaller than those of Poseidonis. Vakar said:

"Get ready to leap ashore with the stern-rope."

As they drifted against the quay, Vakar sprang ashore with the painter and belayed the rope to one of the row of posts, while

Fual did likewise astern. Vakar caught the eyes of the nearest loafer and called in Hesperian:

"What place is this?"

"Sederado, the capital of Ogugia."

Vakar said to Fual: "Let's hope Queen Porfia remembers me . . . I know! As we can't drag this whole cargo with us, I might jog her memory with a portion of it and dispose her to help us on the next leg of our journey. Ho, you people! I wish four strong porters to carry a load to the palace. Fual, pick the four and make an arrangement with them for their wage. You with the nose! Is copper mined in Ogugia?"

"Yes," said the man addressed.

"Do you have mammoths or bison?"

"No mammoths, though there are a few bison in the royal park."

Vakar turned back to Fual. "Ivory is the thing she'll best appreciate. Help me get these hatch-covers off."

In a few minutes Vakar had his porters lined up, each with a great curling mammoth-tusk over one shoulder. He was about to order them to march when he noticed that the people on the quay were staring seaward.

Vakar saw another ship drawing up to the adjacent wharfage-space; a low black thirty-oared galley, much larger than the *Dvra* with a crew of a dozen besides the rowers and three passengers. The ship had a beak of bronze jutting out at the water-line forward, and like all ships, a pair of eyes painted on the bow so that, sailors believed, she could see her way. No device or insigne, like the mermaid of Ogugia, or the octopus of Gorgonia, variegated her plain brown sail, nor did any pennant or banderole betray her origin.

ONE of the passengers was a man of medium height with a small round cap perched on his shaven poll, a small pointed gray beard, and a loose robe to his ankles. The other two, who wore no clothes, were not really human. One was a pigmy about four feet high with huge membranous wings like those of an elephant in miniature, and covered all over with short golden-brown fur. The other was eight feet tall with a low-browed apish countenance and coarse black hair all over. He carried a great brass-

bound club over one stooping shoulder while his other arm embraced a large wooden chest with bronze clamps.

"By all the gods, what are those?" said Vakar. "Some kind of satyrs?"

"The larger I don't know, but the smaller is a Coranian," answered Fual.

"A what?"

"A native of the northern isle of Corania. It's said they can hear any word uttered for miles around."

The second ship tied up as their own had done, and its people climbed ashore and set out in various directions. Vakar said:

"We can't wait around all day; I'm for the palace. You stay here to dispose of the stuff. . . ."

Just then the shaven-headed man pushed through the spectators towards Vakar. After him came the giant ape-man and the Coranian.

"You are for the palace, sir?" said the man in strongly accented Hesperian. "Perhaps you will permit me to go with you, for my errand takes me thither also and I am not familiar with Sederado. And while I have never met you, something tells me I ought to know you. My name is Qasig.

"And whom have I the honor of addressing?" said Qasig, smiling pleasantly as he fell into step beside Vakar. His leathery skin was even darker than Vakar's, and his broad head bore a round blunt-featured face. He stooped slightly and shuffled rather than walked.

"My name is Vakar."

Vakar happened to be looking at the man's face as he spoke, and observed the pleasant smile vanish and flicker back again.

"Not Prince Vakar of Lorsk!" said the man.

Vakar tended to take a dour and suspicious view of untried strangers—especially queer-looking ones who travelled about in their own war-galleys with inhuman assistants and showed an egregious interest in his identity. He shook his head.

"Merely a relative. And what, sir, do you know of Lorsk?"

"Who does not know of the world's greatest source of copper?"

"Indeed. Where do you come from?"

"Tegrazen, a small city on the mainland south of Kernê."

"You have unusual servitors. The first, I understand, is a Coranian?"

"That is correct. His name is Yok."

"And the other?" said Vakar.

"That is Nji, from Blackland. The Blacks caught him young, tamed him, and sold him. He can speak a few words, for he is not the great ape of Blackland—the gorilla—but another and rarer kind, intermediate between apes and men."

Vakar fell into a wary silence until they arrived at the palace. He gauped like a yokel at the rows of gleaming marble columns and the gilded roof, for this was the first two-storey building that he had ever seen.

He sent in the four tusks with word that Vakar of Lorsk would like an audience. After a half-hour's wait he was ushered in, leaving Qasig staring pensively after him.

"Prince Vakar!" cried Queen Porfia, stepping down from her audience-throne and advancing upon him. She kissed him vigorously.

"I thank you for your splendid gift, but you need not shower me with wealth to assure your welcome! Did you think I had forgotten when we won the dance-contest in Amferé ten years ago? What brings you so far from the bison-swarmling plains of windy Lorsk?"

PORFIA, he thought, had certainly developed into a splendid-looking woman. Though she was not large, her proud carriage gave her a deceptive look of tallness. Lucky Vancho!

"I am on my way to Gadaira, madam, and could not pass by Ogugia without renewing so pleasant an acquaintance."

She looked at him keenly from emerald-green eyes. "Now how, I wonder, does it happen that you and one servant put into the harbor of Sederado navigating a small merchant-ship all by yourselves in most thwart tyronic fashion? Are you running away from Lorsk to become a corsair? Perhaps to sail under the octopus banner of the accursed Gorgons?"

"You seem to have learned a lot in a short time."

"Oh, I watch my kingdom's commerce, and was getting a report on you while you waited. Well, what happened? Was all the

ship's company but you washed overboard, or snatched by a kraken?"

Vakar hesitated, then gave in to his instant liking for Porfia and told the story of Sret's treachery.

"So," he concluded, "being as you have said no barnacled mariners, we propose to sell this ship and continue eastward on the next merchantman that passes that way."

"How much cargo have you?"

"By Tandyla's third eye, I do not know!"

"Well then, Elbien!" A man came in and Porfia told him: "Go to the waterfront, board Prince Vakar's ship, and reckon up the value of the cargo." As the man bowed and left she turned back to Vakar. "I will give you your ship's fair value in trade-metal. It Mateng squeals we will remind him that as owner he is responsible for the murderous attack upon you. And what do you know of that odd fish who came in with you? The one who arrived in his private galley?"

"He claims to be Qasig of Tegrazen, but beyond that I know no more than you, Queen. He is certainly as peculiar as a flying pig, though courteous enough."

"So? The description of him sounds like one of the Gorgonian race, though that proves nothing because Tegrazen lies near the Gorgades on the mainland and the people of those parts are much mixed. But tell me how things go in Lorsk; the land of warriors, heroes, and athletes, with hearts of bronze and heads of ivory?"

Vakar laughed and plunged into small-talk. A man of few friends, he felt at last he had found someone who spoke his language. They were chattering away some time later when Porfia said:

"By Heroë's eight teats, I have spent the whole morning on you, sir, and others await me. You shall stay at the palace, and we will have a feast tonight. You shall meet my minister Garal and my lover Thiegos."

"Your—" Vakar checked himself, wondering why he felt a sudden pang of annoyance. It was none of his affair if the Queen of Ogugia kept a dozen lovers; but the feeling persisted.

She appeared not to notice. "And I think I will have this Master Qasig too if I like him. He seems like a man of position, and

we should at least get some rare tales of far lands."

"Queen," said Vakar, "I told Qasig my name but denied being the scion of Lorsk, and should therefore prefer to be known simply as Master Vakar, a simple gentleman, while the fellow in the long shirt is about."

"It shall be done. Dweros! Take Pr— Master Vakar to the second guest-chamber in the right wing and provide for his comfort."

Vakar saw no more of Porfia until evening, but spent a lazy day sleeping, being washed and perfumed, and reading a Hesperian translation of the Fragments of Lontang in the library while his dirty clothes were being washed and dried. As the writing of the time was largely pictographic, the written languages of Ogugia and Lorsk differed much less than their spoken tongues. However, the symbols for abstract ideas differed widely. Vakar asked a dignified-looking oldster copying a roll of papyrus in the corner:

"Can you tell me what this means, my man? This skull-and-crescent thing?"

"That, sir, signifies 'mortality'. It combines the skull, which symbolizes death, with the inverted crescent, which represents the abstract aspect of the moon, to wit: time. Therefore the meaning of the passage is:

*"Though germinate generations
of mortal men
In thousands of thousands
while in dwellings divine
A god grows his eye-teeth,
yet time taketh all:
Even the gods so glorious
must march at the last
Down the dim dusty road
to death the destroyer."*

"Is Lontang trying to tell us that even the gods must die?"

"Yes. His theory was that the gods are created by the belief of men in them, and that puissant though they be, in time men will forsake them for others and forget them, and they will fade away and vanish."

Vakar said: "You seem a knowledgeable man in such matters. May I ask your name?"

"I am Rethilio, a poor philosopher of Sederado. And you . . .?"

"I am Vakar of Lorsk."

"Curious," mused the man. "I have heard your name . . . I know! Last night I dreamt I witnessed an assembly of the gods. I recognized many of ours, such as Asterio, and some of those of other nations like your Okma. They seemed to be rushing about in agitated fashion, as if dancing a funeral-dance, and I heard them ejaculate 'Vakar Lorska!'"

Vakar shuddered. "As I never dream of the gods I can shed no light on this matter."

"Are you remaining here long, Prince?"

"Only a few days. But I should like to return to Ogugia some day to study its famed philosophies."

Too late Vakar realized that he should have at once denied his principate; by failing to do so he had confirmed Rethilio's guess as to his true identity. Rethilio said:

"Many of my colleagues believe that if only kings would study philosophy, or the people would choose philosophers as their kings, the world would be a less sorry place. In practice, however, kings seem to lack either time or inclination."

"Perhaps I can combine the two."

"A laudable ambition, though broad. The gods grant that you achieve it."

"I see no difficulty. I have many ambitions and, I trust, many years to fulfill them."

"What are these ambitions, sir?" said Rethilio.

"Well . . ." Vakar frowned. "To be a good king when my time comes; to master philosophy; to see far places and strange peoples; to know loyal and interesting friends; to enjoy the pleasures of wine, women, and song . . ."

He stopped as Rethilio threw up his hands in mock horror. "You should have been twins, Prince!"

"I am—or rather my brother Kuros is my twin. What do you mean, though?"

"No man can compress all that into one lifetime. Now it seems life is endless and you can sample all experience while attaining preëminence in any careers that suit your fancy. As time passes you will discover you must make a choice here and a choice there, each choice cutting you off

from some of these many enticing possibilities. Of course there is the hypothesis of the school of Kurno, that the soul not only survives the body but is subsequently reincarnated in another, and thus a man undergoes many existences."

"I do not see how that helps if one cannot remember one's previous lives," said Vakar. "And if that be so, how about the gods? Are their souls likewise reincarnated?"

They were at it hammer and tongs when Dweros appeared to tell Vakar that his clothes were ready.

"I hope I shall see you again before I leave," he told Rethilio.

"If you are here tomorrow at this time we may meet. Good-day, sir."

V

THE banquet-hall was smaller than that of the castle at Mneset, but of more refined workmanship, with plastered walls on which were painted scenes from the myths of Ogugia. Vakar was particularly taken by the picture of the seduction of an eight-breasted woman by a bull-headed man of egregious masculinity.

He met the plump minister Garal and his wife, the latter a pleasant but nondescript woman of middle age; and Thiegos, a tall clean-shaven young man wearing splendid pearl earrings, who looked down a long nose and said:

"So you are from Lorsk? I wonder how you endure the winds and fogs. I could never put up with them!"

Though not pleased by this comment, Vakar was amused when a few minutes later Qasig came in and Thiegos said to him: "So you are from the South? I wonder how you endure the heat and the flies. I could never abide them!"

Another youth came in whom Thiegos introduced as his friend Abeggu of Tokal, who had come from far Gamphasantia to Sederado to study philosophy under Rethilio. The newcomer was a tall slender fellow, very dark and quiet. When he spoke it was with an almost unintelligible accent. Vakar asked the conventional question:

"How do you find these northerly lands?"

"Very interesting, sir, and very different

from my home. We have no such towering stone buildings or lavish use of metal."

"Still, I envy you," said Vakar. "I have met Rethilio and wish I had time to study under the philosophers of Ogugia. What have you learned?"

"He is discoursing on the origin of the world-egg from the coiture of eternal time and infinite space . . ."

Vakar would have liked to hear more, for philosophy had always fascinated him though it was little cultivated among the palæstral nations of Poseidonis. But Queen Porfia sat down and signalled to the servitors to pass a dry wine for an apertif. She poured a libation from her golden beaker on to the floor and said a grace to the gods, then drank.

Vakar was doing likewise when a startled exclamation from Garal's wife drew his attention across the ivory tables. Where Qasig's golden plate had lain there now stood a plate-sized tortoise, peering about dimly with beady eyes. Qasig laughed at the success of his feat of thaumaturgy.

"It is quite harmless," he said. "A mere illusion: It bites nobody and is housebroken. Are you not, tortoise?"

The tortoise nodded, and those around the tables clapped their hands. Vakar drank deeply and looked again. Where the tortoise had been he saw only the snub-nosed magician making passes over his plate, though from their comments he inferred that his fellow-diners still saw the reptile. He was about to boast of his ability to see through magical illusions when stimulated by drink, but forebore. He still harbored suspicions of Qasig and thought it imprudent to give the fellow any advantage.

He looked to where Porfia sat in her chair of pretence. This was a most unusual throne, carved from some olive-colored stone in the form of a huge serpent. The head and neck of the snake formed one arm-rest and a loop of its body the other. The rest of it was wound back and forth to form the back and seat down to the ground.

"It is unusual," said Porfia, whose pale flesh showed through the sheer sea-green robe she wore. "It was brought from Lake Tritonis, where such serpents are sacred, in the time of my grandfather. They say it was carried across the Desert of Gwedulia slung

between two curious beasts used in those parts, taller than horses and having great humps upon their backs. The legend is that it is a real serpent paralyzed by enchantment, and—"

"Of course," broke in Thiegos, "we as a civilized people do not believe such silly tales." He dug at the carving with a thumb-nail. "See for yourself, Master Vakar. This artistic monstrosity is nothing but stone."

Vakar touched the arm of the chair, which certainly felt like good solid chert.

Thiegos continued: "Still, my dear, you would do well to drop it into Sederado harbor and get another, not for superstitious but for esthetic reasons. What is to eat to-night?"

Ogugian custom called for a circle of chairs with a small table in front of each. Servitors placed the food on golden plates in front of each of the small tables. Vakar thought the stuffed grouse excellent, but found the bread peculiar. He asked:

"What sort of bread is this, pray?"

Thiegos said: "You Pusadians would not know. It is made from a new kind of grain called wheat which was brought from the mainland in the queen's father's time." He turned to Porfia, saying: "Really, madam, you must sell your cook before we all turn into swine from eating garbage!"

The wine was strong stuff, even better than that of Zhysk. Vakar drank deep and said:

"I beg to differ, sir. I find Ogugia's food the most delicious, its wine the headiest, and its queen the most beautiful—"

"You speak a fine speech, but you do not deceive anyone," said Thiegos, who had also been drinking hard. "You seek by flattery to wheedle favors from Porfia. Now, so long as these comprise such matters as trade-metal or ships or slaves I do not care. Should you however seek those of a more intimate kind, you must deal with me, for I—"

"**THIEGOS!**" cried Porfia. "You have already become a pig, if manners are any indication."

"At least," said Thiegos, "I know how to eat and drink in civilized fashion, instead of tearing my meat like a famished lion and swilling my wine in great gulps."

He looked down his nose at Vakar, who colored, realizing that by Ogugian standards his provincial table-manners left much to be desired. "So I am merely warning this mustachioed barbarian—"

"Shut up!" cried Porfia, half rising out of the serpent throne, green eyes blazing and oval face flushed.

The servitors took away the plates and brought more wine. Abeggu of Tokal looked shocked and bewildered; evidently he was unused to royalty with its hair down. Vakar, realizing that he was getting drunk, pulled himself together and said:

"Can one of you explain this?"

He pointed to the seduction-scene on the wall. Garal explained:

"Why, that illustrates the third book of *The Golden Age*, and represents the forest-god Asterio about to engender the first human pair on the earth-goddess Heroë. In the original it goes:

*"Panting with passion
the slaving satyr
Supine on the sword
hurled helpless Heroë . . ."*

Thiegos interrupted: "You cannot do it justice without singing it," and he burst into a fine clear tenor:

*"The rose-colored robe
by the dawn-goddess dighted
He savagely seized
and tore from her trunk . . ."*

"Curse it, even I cannot perform properly without accompaniment. Shall we get in the flute-girl?"

"I do not think that will be necessary," said Qasig. "I have here a small instrument wherewith I while away empty hours."

He produced a tootle-pipe out of his bosom and played an experimental run. "Now, sir, how does this tune of yours go? Ah, yes, I can manage. Sing!"

With the pipe ululating, Thiegos stood up and roared out the rest of the story of the Creation. When he finished, Vakar said:

"Sir, it pains me to admit it, but you have the finest voice I have ever heard. I wish I could do as well."

"That is nothing," said Thiegos, staggering back to his seat. "The song does have a certain crude barbaric vigor, but now we are more refined. For instance, I at least do not take all this mythology serious—uk!"

An attack of hiccups ended the speech. Porfia called upon Vakar:

"Now, sir, contribute your part! What can you do?"

"I can tell you what I cannot do," said Vakar, counting on his fingers. "Once I thought I could sing, but now I have heard Thiegos I know I can only caw like a carion-crow. I can dance when sober as the queen remembers, but just now I am not sober. I know a few stories, but not the sort a gentleman would repeat in such company—"

"Forget you are a gentleman, old man, old man," giggled Garal. "I have heard livelier tales from the lips of the queen herself than any you are likely to know."

"Very well; do any of you know the tale of the hunchback and the fisherman's wife? No? It seems that . . ."

They all laughed heartily; in fact Garal's wife got into a fit of hysterics and had to be pounded on the back. Vakar told a couple more, and then Queen Porfia said:

"You claim you once thought you could sing; let us hear this crow's voice!"

"But really, Queen—"

"No, I insist. Master Qasig shall accompany you."

"Then do not say I failed to warn you. Qasig, it goes da de-de da de-de . . ."

When the tune had been straightened out Vakar gave them the *Song of Vrir*.

When he had finished, Porfia clapped, crying: "Magnificent! While I do not understand Lorskán, you sing even better than Thiegos."

"I have heard no singing," growled Thiegos, who had got over his hiccups, "only the croaking of bullfrogs."

"What do you think?" said Porfia to Garal. "Vakar is the better, is he not?"

"They are both very good," said the minister with the adroitness of the practiced politician, and turned to Qasig. "Pray, play us one of the tunes of your native country."

Qasig played a wailing tune. Thiegos said: "By Asterio's arse, that sounds like the tune of our dance to the moon goddess!"

"How would you know, since men are strictly forbidden near when the maidens dance it?" said Porfia.

"You would be surprised. Here, Porfia, you are the best dancer in Ogugia; dance it for us! Qasig can play."

"It would be blasphemous . . ." said the queen, but the others shouted her down.

At last she stood up and, with Qasig playing, began a slinking dance. Being unsteady from the wine she repeatedly stepped on the hem of her thin trailing robe until she burst out:

"Curse this thing! How can I . . ."

She unfastened the robe, slipped out of it, and threw it across the serpent throne.

"Move those damned tables out of the way," she said, and continued her dance naked save for her jewelled sandals.

Vakar found the room swimming in a delightful fog. It seemed that the flames of the wall-lamps swayed in time to the weird music, and that the frescoes came alive so that the bull-headed god appeared to get on with his protogenic project.

Vakar felt an urge to leap up and seize the swaying white figure of Porfia in imitation of Asterio, for though small she had a form that practically demanded rape of any passing male. But at that moment the queen tripped and fell across Garal's knees. The minister raised a hand as if to spank the royal rump, but reconsidered in time. The sight sent Vakar into such a convulsion of laughter that he could hardly keep his seat.

"That is enough of that!" said Porfia, reeling back to her throne, where she struggled to don the robe and got wonderfully tangled in its folds until Thiegos came over to help. "Who knows something else?"

"**WE** HAVE a game in Tegrazen," said Qasig, "called 'Going to Kerné'. A number of stools are set in a circle, the number being one less than that of the persons present. Music is played and the persons march around the chairs. The music is stopped suddenly and all try to sit down, but one fails and is counted out. Then one chair is removed and the march repeated until there are but two players and one chair left, and whichever of these gains the chair wins. Now, suppose I play while

the rest of you march, for I am a little old for such athletics."

"A childish sort of game," said Thiegos. "I fear we shall be bored—"

"Oh, you sneer at everything!" cried Porfia. "Vakar, Garal, move that chair back to the wall. Master Qasig, sit here in the center and tootle. Great gods, look at him!" She pointed to Abeggu of Tokal, who had quietly curled up in a corner and passed out. "Wake him up, somebody."

Vakar said: "How any man with blood in his veins could sleep through the spectacle we have just witnessed . . ."

"It means nothing to him," said Thiegos. "They go naked all the time in Gamphasantia, he tells me. Ho, Lazybones, wake up!"

He kicked the sleeping man. When Abeggu had been aroused and briefed on the game they began marching unsteadily around the circle. When the music stopped all plumped on to the seats except Garal's wife, who being fat was slow on her feet. She laughed and went over to the wall to sit while Vakar lugged another stool out of the circle.

"Begin again!" said Qasig.

His music became more and more exotic. The whole room seemed to Vakar to writhe in time with the tune. He wondered what was wrong, for he had been prudently holding down his consumption of wine since his quarrel with Thiegos.

The music stopped and Thiegos this time was left standing.

"Oh, well," said the queen's lover, "I do not find these antics very amusing anyway," and went over to sit by Garal's wife. Out went another chair.

At the next halt, Abeggu of Tokal was out.

This time the music seemed to go right through Prince Vakar, to make his teeth and eyeballs ache. The lamps darkened; at least he could not see clearly. The music shook him as a dog shakes a rat . . .

Then it stopped. Vakar took a quick look and lurched towards a dark shape that he fuzzily identified as Queen Porfia's imported serpent chair, which as a seat of office was the only one in the room with arms and a back.

He half-spun and fell into its stone embrace just ahead of Porfia herself, who

landed lushly in his lap with a playful squeal that changed to a shriek of terror.

Vakar echoed the scream with an animal noise, half grunt and half shout, as he realized in one horror-struck flash that he was sitting on the coils of a giant live snake. There was an explosive hiss as the head and neck reared up and back to stare down at the two human beings, its forked tongue flicking. At the same instant a loop, thicker than Vakar's thigh, whipped around both of them, preventing them from rising.

Vakar vaguely heard screams and the sound of running feet as the coil tightened. His ribs creaked; it was like being squeezed to death by a live tree-trunk. He had no sword and his left arm was pinned between Porfia and the snake; his right was still free.

Vakar frantically ripped open his shirt and pulled out the envenomed dagger that had slain Söl. With all his strength he drove it into the scaly hide, again and again . . .

The snake hissed louder, but the pressure of the coil relaxed an instant. With a tremendous effort Vakar freed his other arm. The snake's entire body was writhing convulsively around him. He got a foot against the coil in front and pushed. The coil gave, and he and Porfia were out of the monster's embrace. Vakar half-dragged the queen across the room out of harm's way, then looked back at the expiring snake.

They were alone in the room.

Vakar put away his dagger and held the queen in his arms until she stopped trembling. She put her face up for him to kiss, but when he would have gone on with a full course of lovemaking she pushed him away.

"Not now," she said. "Is the monster dead?"

Vakar stepped forward to see, then jumped back as the scaly body twitched. "It still moves! What does that mean? We do not have these creatures in Poseidonis."

"They die as a frog swallows a worm, by inches, but I do not think this one will harm us any more. Evidently the legend at which Thiegos sneered is no empty fable. And speaking of Thiegos, what a fine pack of poltroons I am served by! Not one stayed to help, save you."

"Do not give me too much credit, madam. I was caught in the same scaly embrace as yourself, and could not have fled were I never so timorous.

But why should our cold-blooded friend here come to life just as we sat upon him? Do you suppose our extra weight was more than he could bear, and he showed his displeasure by awakening from his sleep of centuries?"

"No, for I have often sat in that same chair with that craven Thiegos. There is malevolent magic in this, Vakar, and we must solve the riddle before the clues are scattered by the winds of time. But where is everybody? Elbien! Dweros!"

No answer. She led Vakar about the palace, which proved entirely empty except for a trembling knot of guards in the front courtyard who pointed their spears at Porfia and Vakar as they approached.

"What is this?" she said. "Do you not know your own queen?"

A man in a cuirass of gilded scales stepped out and said: "You are no ghost, madam?"

"Of course not, Gwantho!"

"May I touch you to make sure?"

"Of all the impertinent nonsense . . . Very well, here!"

She held out a hand with a regal gesture. The officer took it and kissed it, then said to the men:

"She is real, boys. Your pardon, Queen, but the clamor of those that fled the palace so perturbed my men that but for me they would have bolted likewise."

"It would have gone hard with them if they had. Next time you hear I am in danger you might try to help instead of thinking of nought but your own hides. Now back to your posts!"

AS THE guards slunk off, Porfia said to Vakar: "That was Gwantho, the legate of the commandant of the city garrison. Are there no brave men outside the epics and legends? The runagates must have spread terror through the palace as they fled. What do you make of it?"

"I suspect our queer friend Qasig," said Vakar judiciously. "On the other hand he is a stranger, as is Abeggu of Tokal, while Garal and Thiegos, being among your

familiars, might harbor some hidden rankling resentment."

"I doubt that last. Neither is of royal blood and therefore neither could cherish regal ambitions."

Vakar smiled. "That is no sure barrier. How do you suppose most dynasties were founded in the first place?"

"Well, neither have I quarreled with either lately—unless you count my refusal to follow Garal's counsel to wed Shvo Zhyska."

"He so advised you? Hang the hyena! I know Shvo well, being his cousin. He is as grasping as a Kernean and as perfidious as an Aremorian."

"I am not likely to follow Garal in this matter. But we are not even sure the serpent came to life by human agency, instead of in the course of the natural termination of the enchantment that bound it . . . Fetch your sword and cloak while I likewise dress for the street."

"Where are we going?"

"In such perplexities I consult a wise-woman nearby. Hasten, and meet me here."

Vakar went. When he returned with the hood of his cloak pulled up over his helmet he found a very different Porfia with peasant's cowhide boots showing under her short street dress, a hood pulled over her head likewise, and a scarf masking her face below the eyes.

Porfia led Vakar out the front entrance, where he took a torch from a bracket. She guided him into the stinking tangle of alleys west of the plaza in front of the palace, where not even the starlight penetrated.

Porfia made a sharp turn and stopped to rap with a peculiar knock on a door. They waited, and the door opened with a creak of the door-post in its well-worn sockets.

They were ushered in by a small bent black figure, the only visible feature of whom was a great beak of a nose sticking out from under her cowl. Inside, a single rush-candle lent its wan illumination to a small cluttered room with a musty smell. A piece of papyrus on which were drawn figures and glyphs lay on a three-legged table with one leg crudely mended.

The witch mumbled something and rolled up the papyrus. Porfia said:

"Master Vakar, this is my old friend

Charsela. I need not tell her who you are, for she will have already discovered that by her occult arts."

The witch raised her head so that Vakar could see the gleam of great dark eyes on either side of the beak.

"Now do you know," quavered the crone, "I cannot tell you one thing about this young man? It is as if a wall against all occult influence had been built around him at birth. I can see that he is a Pusadian, probably of high rank, and that he is by nature a quiet scholarly fellow forced by his surroundings to assume the airs of a rough predacious adventurer. That much, however, any wise person could have inferred by looking at him with the eye of understanding. But come, child, tell me what troubles you this time. Another philtre to keep that sneering scapegrace true?"

"No, no," said Porfia hastily, and went on to recount the strange tale of the serpent throne.

"Ha," said Charsela and got out a small copper bowl which she filled with water and placed on the table.

She lit a second rushlight, placed it in a small metal holder, and stood the holder on the table. She rummaged in the litter until she found a small phial from which she dropped one drop of liquid into the water. Vakar, looking at the bowl, had an impression of swirling iridescence as the drop spread over the surface. Charsela put away the phial and sat down on the side of the table opposite the flame, so that she could see the reflection of the flame on the water.

Charsela sat so long that Vakar, standing with his back to the door, shifted his position slightly, causing his sword to clink. Porfia frowned at him. Somewhere under the junk a mouse rustled; at least Vakar hoped that it was a mouse. He shifted his gaze from the motionless wise-woman to a large spider spinning a web on the ceiling. At last the witch's thin voice came:

"It is strange—I can see figures, but all is dim and confused. There is some mighty magic involved in this, mark my word. I will try some more . . ."

She put another drop from the phial into the bowl and fell silent again. Vakar was watching her sunken face in the rushlight

when the door burst open behind him with a crash.

Vakar saw the witch and Porfia jerk their heads up to stare past him, and started to turn his own head when a terrific blow clanged down upon his helm and sent him sprawling forward.

He fell against the table, which overturned with a clatter as the bowl and the rushlight struck the floor. Charsela and Porfia both shrieked.

Finding himself on hands and knees with his head spinning, Vakar by a desperate effort sprang to his feet, whirled, and drew his sword all at once. He got the blade out just in time to parry another overhand cut at his head. By the light of the remaining candle he saw that three men had burst into the room, all masked.

VI

VAKAR thrust at the nearest, the one whose cut he had just parried. As the man stepped back his foot slipped on the wet floor where the water from the upset bowl had run around the table and made the worn planking slippery. Before he could recover, Vakar drove his blade past the fellow's awkward attempt at a parry, deep into the folds of the man's clothing. He felt his point pierce meat.

"Get her out, Charsela!" yelled Vakar, not daring to turn his head.

The man he had stabbed fell back with a gasp, clutching his side with his free hand. Behind him Vakar became dimly aware of a yammering from the witch and an expostulation from Porfia, and the sound of a back door opening and banging shut again. Meantime he was engaged with the other two, who were stumbling around among the junk and trying to get at him from two sides. Blades clanged as the two bravos drove Vakar, fighting a desperate defensive, back into a corner. With a shield and the advantage of left-handedness he might have handled them, but he had no shield and did not dare stoop for the witch's stool.

Instead he reached into his shirt and pulled out the poisoned dagger that had already saved his life once that night. The poison, he thought, must have pretty well worn off by now, but at least it might fur-

nish a diversion. He threw it at the shorter of the two men.

The man tried to dodge. The knife struck him anyway, but butt-first, so that it clanged harmlessly to the floor. The man's attention had however been distracted, and even the other man let his eyes flicker from Vakar to the flying dagger.

Instantly Vakar threw himself forward, and his ferocious *passado* went through the throat of the tall assassin. At that instant he felt a heavy blow and the sting of a cut on his right arm. The shorter man, recovering from his attempt to duck the knife, had thrown a backhand slash at the Lorskán.

As Vakar, withdrawing his point from the tall man, half-turned to face his remaining assailant, that one skipped back out of reach before Vakar could get set for a blow. The tall man dropped his sword, clutched at his throat, gave a gurgling cough, and began to sink to the floor. The man whom Vakar had first wounded was hobbling toward the door, but now the unhurt man turned, knocked the wounded one aside, and dashed out.

Vakar leaped over the body on the floor and made for the wounded man, meaning to finish him with a quick thrust. The wounded man had been knocked down by the one who fled and was now just getting up, crying: "Quarter!"

The man's mask had come off in the fracas, and just before he sent the blade home Vakar jerked to a halt at the sight of a familiar face. A closer look showed that the man was Abeggu of Tokal, the foreign friend of Thiegos at the rowdy supper-party at the palace.

"Lyr's barnacles!" cried Vakar, holding his sword poised. "What are you doing here? It will take uncommon eloquence to talk yourself out of this!"

The man stammered in his thick accent: "Th-thiegos told me I w-was to help thwart a plot against the queen. He never—never told me you were involved, and when I found out, it was too late to ask for explanations."

"Thiegos?" said Vakar, and bent to jerk the scarf from the face of the dead man.

Sure enough, the corpse was that of Thiegos, Queen Porfia's paramour.

Prince Vakar whistled. Either Thiegos had been in on the serpent-throne scheme, or had been smitten with jealousy of Vakar Zhu because of the latter's attention to the queen and had gathered a couple of friends to do the traveler in. Luckily they had not known that Vakar wore a helmet under his cowl, or he would have been choosing his next incarnation by now.

He looked at his wounded arm. The bloodstain was still spreading and the arm was hard to move. The hut was empty; Charsela must have pushed Porfia out the back door.

"Well," said Vakar, "this is the first time a man has tried to kill me because of my singing! What else do you know of this attentat?"

"N-nothing, sir. I am ashamed to admit that when the snake came to life I fled with the rest. Thiegos and I went to my lodgings near the palace to drink a skin of wine to steady our nerves and collect our wits. Then Thiegos left me to return to the palace. A little later, just as I was going to sleep, he came back with another man, saying for me to come quickly with my sword." Abeggu gulped.

"Go on."

"I—I do not know how to use the thing properly, as we Gamphasants are a peaceful people. I bought it merely as an ornament. When we entered here they pushed me forward to take the first shock; a fine friend *he* was! This is all most confusing and unethical; I hope the people back in Tokal never hear of it. Was there in sooth a plot against the queen?"

"Not unless your friend Thiegos was hatching one. I am probably foolish to let you go, but I cannot butcher one who comes from the rim of the world to seek philosophy. Go, but if you cross my path again. . . ."

Vakar made a jabbing motion, and Abeggu, still bent over with pain, hurried out.

Vakar looked out the door after him, but except for the wounded Gamphasant nobody was in sight. If any neighbors had heard the clash of arms they had prudently kept their curiosity in check.

Should he go back to the palace? Much as he liked Porfia, he was not sure that when she learned that he had slain her

lover she would not, in a transport of emotion, have him dispatched out of hand. She might regret the action later, but that would not help him if his head were already rotting on a spike on the palace wall.

No, a quick departure would be more prudent. He took a last look at the corpse and hurried out in his turn.

DOWN at the waterfront of Sederado he found the *Dvra*. Fual was asleep with his back against the mast and his broadsword in his hand. He awoke and scrambled up as Vakar approached, saying:

"I hope it's all right about those men who came aboard the ship during the day, my lord.

"They pawed all through the cargo, saying they were sent by the queen, and there were too many for me to stop. I don't think they stole much."

"It's all right," said Vakar. "We're putting to sea at once. Help me tie up this arm and cast off."

"You're hurt, sir?" Fual hurried to fetch out one of the cleaner rags for a bandage. The cut proved about three inches long, but not deep.

Vakar silenced the valet's questions, and presently they were laboriously rowing the *Dvra* out into the seaway. They got their ropes fouled up in hoisting the sail, and the ship took some water before they got her straightened out to eastward with Vakar steering as best he could with one arm and Fual bailing water out of the hold with a dipper. Vakar said:

"I don't see Qasig's black galley at its place on the waterfront. Has it gone?"

"Yes, sir. Earlier in the night a party appeared on the wharf and boarded the black ship in haste. I recognized the apeman by his stature even in the dark. There was some delay while the captain sent men ashore to drag his rowers out of the stews and then they pushed off and disappeared out into the bay. What happened at the palace?"

Vakar briefed Fual on their situation, adding, "If I remember the teaching old Ryn beat into me as a boy, we pass another one or two of these islands and come to the mainland of Euskeria. What do they speak there?"

"Euskerian, sir; a complicated tongue,

though I know a few words from the time I spent in Gadaira waiting to be sold."

"There should be a law compelling all men to speak the same language, as the myths say they once did. Too bad we couldn't have cut off Sret's head and kept it alive to interpret for us, as the head of Brang was kept in the legend. Teach me what you know of Euskerian."

During the rest of the night Vakar's arm bothered him so that he got little sleep. The next day the Ogugian coast faded away to port, and later another great island loomed up ahead. They coasted along this until, towards evening, Vakar noticed an unpleasantly hazy look in the sky and an ominous increase in the size of the swells that marched down upon them from astern. He said:

"If this were Lorsk, I should guess a storm were brewing."

"Then, sir, shouldn't we run into some sheltered cove until it blows over?"

"I daresay, save that being so green at seafaring we should doubtless run our little ship upon the rocks."

The night passed like the previous one except that Vakar suffered a touch of seasickness from the continuous pitching. His arm ached worse than ever, though he changed the bandage and cleaned the wound. The wind backed to the south so that it was all they could do to keep the *Dorra* from being blown on to the dark shore to port.

With the coming of a gray dawn, Faul glanced astern and cried: "Sir, look around! It's the black galley!"

Vakar froze. A galley was crawling upon their wake like a giant insect, a small square sail swaying upon its mast and its oars rising and falling irregularly in the swells. Vakar hoped that it was not Qasig's ship, but as the minutes passed and the galley neared he saw that Fual had been right. He could even make out the figure of Nji, the ape-man, in the bow. He assumed that their intentions were hostile, and presently the ape-man confirmed his guess by producing a bow twice normal size and sending a huge arrow streaking across the swells, to plunk into the water a few feet away. Qasig and the little Yok were standing in the bow with Nji.

"They mean us to stop, sir," said Fual.

"I know that, fool!" fumed Vakar, straining his eyes towards the ever-nearing galley.

He wondered how they had traced him. This must be that strong magic spoken of by Charsela. Was Qasig then the author of the bizarre episode of the serpent throne?

Why should this strange man try to hound Vakar Zhu to his death? Who would benefit by his removal? His brother, perhaps. Who else? He, Vakar, was trying to thwart the impending aggression of the Gorgons against Lorsk by seeking the thing that the gods most feared. Therefore either the gods, or the Gorgons, or both, might be after him.

"Sir," said Fual, "if a mighty magician pursues us, shouldn't we give up now, before we inflame him further by our futile efforts to flee?"

"You rabbit! The chase has hardly begun, and I know he couldn't cast a deadly spell at this distance, from a tossing deck, in this stormy weather. A spell requires quiet and solitude."

"I'm still afraid, sir," mumbled Fual. "Do something to save me!"

Vakar muttered a curse upon his servant's timidity and searched his memory for what he had heard of the Gorgons. It was said that their wizards had the power to freeze anybody within a few paces into a rigid paralysis, by some means called a "medusa," though Vakar did not know what a medusa was. In dealing with Gorgons, then, the thing to do was to keep away from them. As for the gods . . .

Vakar rolled an eye towards the lowering sky and shook a fist. If it's war you want, he thought, you shall have it!

At that instant thunder rolled away to the North. The wind, which had veered back to the west, blew harder. Rain began to slant across the deck.

A VOICE came thinly across the waves: "Prince Vakar! Heave to!"

Vakar called to Fual: "Come back here and take cover!"

Vakar himself crouched down in the lee of the single high step up to the poop, holding the steering-lever at arm's length. In this position he was shielded by the sheer of the high stern.

Another arrow whipped by, close enough for its screech to be heard over the roar of the wind, and drove its bone point into the deck. Vakar said:

"So long as we keep down they can't reach us—"

"Beg pardon, sir!" said Fual, who had snatched a look aft. "They're drawing abreast!"

If they did that, the pair on the *Dvra* would no longer be protected, and Qasig could either have them shot down or sunk by ramming. As Qasig had called Vakar "Prince," the man had evidently not been fooled by Vakar's denial.

Vakar took a look around, shielding his eyes from the rain with his hand. Sure enough, the dark nose of the pursuing ship was creeping up to the *Dvra's* port quarter.

Vakar felt of his sword. He had no illusions of being able to leap aboard the galley and clean it out single handed, even with Fual's dubious help. For though he downed one or two sailors, it would be impossible to escape the weapons of the rest, the ape-man's club, and Qasig's magic all at the same time.

Closer came the bow of the galley, its bronze ram-spur bursting clear of the water each time the ship pitched. Vakar shifted his steering-lever a little to starboard, sending the *Dvra* plunging off to southward, away from the shore, though at that angle the merchantman heeled dangerously with a horrible combination of pitch and roll. The galley swung its stem to starboard to follow.

The wind waxed further and the rain became an opaque level-blowing mass, mixed with spray from the wave-tops. The *Dvra* rolled her port rail under and dipped the corner of her sail into the crests. Vakar was sure that she would capsize.

"Help me!" he shouted, and he and Fual strained at the steering-lever until the ship swung back on a straight down-wind course.

The mast-stays thrummed and the slender yards whipped dangerously, but at least the ship stayed on an even keel.

Vakar said: "You may let go . . . Take another look for the galley."

Fual tried but reported back: "I can't, my lord."

"Can't what?"

"Can't see. It's like thrusting your face into a waterfall."

Vakar fared no better. Clinging to the yoke they held the ship on her course, though Vakar expected momentarily to hear the galley's ram crunch through their stern. When the squall abated, Vakar left the helm to take another look.

There was no galley.

Vakar's heart leaped up with the thought that their pursuers had swamped and drowned. But another look showed the big black craft still afloat in the distance and making for shore. Peculiar bursts of spray rising up from the galley's deck puzzled Vakar until he realized that they were caused by the sailors of the galley bailing for dear life.

Fual asked: "Why did they leave us?"

"Couldn't take the blow. With her low freeboard the galley is even less suited to rough water than we are, and her skipper decided to call it quits and lie up in a cove."

"The gods be praised!"

The galley became invisible with rain, distance, and the loom of the shore. Vakar held his course, the ache in his right arm running through him. In wrestling with the helm he had started his wound bleeding again. Soaked and wretched, he wondered if even the forlorn chance of saving Lorsk from the Gorgons was worth his present misery.

Wind and rain continued all day, though never with the severity of that first squall that had all but sunk both the *Dvra* and her pursuer. The wind moderated but veered to the North so that Vakar had to hold the ship at an uncomfortable angle to the wind to avoid being swept south out to sea. During the night he got only a few nightmarish moments of sleep and faced the dawn feeling feverish and light-headed. His arm hurt so that every time it was touched or jarred he had to set his teeth to keep from yelling.

The rain petered out and the wind turned colder. The cloud-cover thinned until Vakar had an occasional glimpse of the sun. He took a good look around the horizon—and stopped, his jaw sagging in horror. A couple of miles aft the galley's small sail swayed upon its mast.

Vakar was overwhelmed with despair. With Qasig's magical powers tracking him

down, how could he ever shake off the fellow? He was in no condition to stand and fight.

He pulled himself wearily together. Somewhere over the horizon ahead lay the mainland, and from what he had heard it also projected eastward to the south of him in the peninsula of Dzen. Therefore if he angled off to the right, the way the wind was now blowing, he should fetch up against the mainland.

He would be taking a terrific chance, for out of sight of land an overcast that hid sun and stars would leave him utterly lost, and if the wind swung round to the East he would be blown out to sea without knowing it. On the other hand the ship would sail faster and with less of this torturous rolling . . .

Vakar pulled his steering-lever to the left so that the *Dvra* swung to starboard. The galley followed.

As the hours passed, the island sank out of sight and the galley drew closer, though the water was still too rough for the latter to use her oars efficiently.

"Ah me!" said Fual. "We shall never see our homes and friends again, for this time we are truly lost."

"Shut up!" said Vakar. Fual wept quietly.

In the afternoon another coast appeared ahead. As they drew nearer, Vakar saw a wooded hilly region with a hint of towering blue mountains in the distance. He wondered if this were the Atlantean range of sinister repute. Behind him the galley was almost within bowshot again.

"WHAT do you plan now, sir?" said Fual.

Vakar shook his head. "I don't know; I seem no longer able to think."

"Let me feel your forehead," said Fual, and then: "No wonder! You're a sick man, my lord. I must get you ashore and put a cowdung poultice on that wound to draw out the poison—"

Close came the shore and closer came the galley. Fual cried:

"Breakers ahead! We shall be wrecked!"

"I know it. Get our gear together and prepare to leap off the bow when we touch."

"Too late! They'll ram us before we can reach the beach!"

"Do as I say!" roared Vakar, straining his eyes ahead.

A glance back showed that the galley was overhauling them faster than they were nearing the strand. Vakar gripped his steering-lever as if he could thus squeeze an extra knot out of the *Dvra*.

Behind, the galley gained; Vakar heard the coxswain exhorting his rowers. Ahead a line of rocks showed between waves, a score of paces short of the beach. As the combers toppled over they struck these rocks and sent up great fountains of spray, then continued on to the beach with diminished force. If he could guide the little ship between these rocks they might escape, but if he struck one they would drown like mice . . .

Crash! Vakar staggered as the galley's bow struck the stern of the *Dvra*. Fual tumbled to the deck, then rolled over and sat up with a despairing shriek. Under the whistle of the wind, the roar of the breakers, and the shouts of the men on the galley, Vakar fancied he heard the gurgle of water rushing into the *Dvra*.

He recovered his balance and looked ahead. They were headed straight for one of the needles of rock. Vakar heaved on the yoke to swerve the *Dvra*, which heeled and scraped past the obstacle with timbers groaning and crackling. The change in the slope of the deck told Vakar that his ship was settling by the stern. The galley had withdrawn its beak and was backing water furiously to keep off the rocks.

"Get ready!" Vakar screamed to Fual, who blubbered with terror.

Then the deck jerked back under him as the ship struck the beach. Vakar staggered forward and stopped himself by grabbing the mast. He ducked under the lower yard to find that Fual had already tumbled off the bow into knee-deep water and was splashing ashore, leaving the bag containing their possessions on the deck.

With a curse that should have struck the Aremorian dead, Vakar threw the bag ashore and dropped off the bow himself, the pain of his arm shooting through him like red-hot bronze. He picked up the bag with his good arm and caught up with Fual, to whom he handed the bag, and then hit him across the face with the back of his hand.

"That'll teach you to abandon your master!" he said. "Now march!"

Staggering, Vakar led the way straight inland up the grassy side of a knoll that rose from the inner edge of the beach. At the top he looked back. The galley was still standing off the rocks while the *Dvra* lay heeled over on the edge of the sand, her sail flapping and water pouring in and out of her great wounds. As the galley did not appear to possess a ship's boat to send a search-party ashore, Vakar felt secure for the time being—until Qasig found a safer landing-place and took up his pursuit ashore.

Vakar led the weeping Fual down the back slope of the knoll until he was out of sight of the sea, then turned to the left and walked parallel to the beach.

They had tramped for an hour or so when a sound brought them up short: a fierce barking and snarling as of the dog that guarded the gates of the hells. They went forward cautiously, hands on swords, and over the next rise found a wild-looking shepherd clad in sheepskins tied haphazard about his person. In one hand he grasped a wooden club with stone spikes set in the thick end, while the other clutched the leash of a great dog, which strained to get at the travelers. The sheep huddled baaing in the background.

Vakar held out his hands. The shepherd shouted.

"What does he say?" asked Vakar.

"To go away or he'll loose the dog on us."

"A hospitable fellow. Ask where there's a settlement."

Fual spoke in broken Euskerian. After several repetitions, the shepherd waved his club, saying:

"Sendeu."

"That's a village," explained Fual.

"Tell him there's a wrecked ship back that way, and he's welcome to it."

Vakar began a detour around the surly shepherd and his flock. As they passed out of sight the man was gathering his sheep to drive them south along the coast.

Vakar's arm hurt with an agony he had never known before. He muttered:

"I'll never sneer at others' sicknesses again, Fual . . ."

Then the universe went into a whirling dance and Vakar lost track of what was happening.

VII

VAKAR ZHU awoke to the sounds of domestic bustle. He was lying on a rough bed in a log hut that seemed, at the moment, to be entirely full of children and dogs.

Fual was sitting on the dirt floor beside him. Vakar raised his head, discovering that he was weak as water.

"Where am I?" he said.

"You're yourself again, my lord? The gods be praised! You're in the hut of Djuten, a peasant of Sendeu."

"How did I get here?"

"You walked, sir, but you were out of your head. We stopped at the first likely-looking hut, and you told Djuten you were emperor of the world and he should order out your chariotry to attack the Gorgons. He didn't understand, of course, and after much struggle with the language I explained to him that you were a traveler who had taken sick and needed to lie up a few days. He was suspicious and unfriendly, but when I paid him out of your scrip he finally let us in." Fual looked around the hut with lifted lip. "Hardly people of our class, sir, but it was the best I could do."

"How long ago was this?"

"The day before yesterday." Fual felt Vakar's forehead. "The fever has left you. Would you like some soup?"

"By all means. I'm hungry as a spring bear."

Vakar moved his right arm, wincing. Still, it was better than it had been. Fual brought the broth in a gourd bowl.

As the day wore on Vakar met Djuten's wife, a very pregnant woman with lined peasant features. She began speaking to him while going about her chores, undeterred by the fact that they had only a dozen words in common, so the rest of the day Vakar was subjected to a continuous spate of chatter. From its general tone he guessed that he was not missing anything by lack of understanding.

The people were tall light-haired round-headed Atlanteans, who never bathed to

judge by their looks and smell. Vakar never did get the names of all the children straight, but a little girl of six named Atsé took a fancy to him. When he pointed at things and asked their names she told him, making a game of it and finding his mistakes a great joke. By nightfall he had a fair household vocabulary.

Then Djuten came in, thickset and stooped with dirt worked deeply into the cracks of his skin. He gave Vakar a non-committal look and spoke in broken Hesperian:

"Lord better now?"

"Yes, thank you."

Supper was a huge loaf of barley-bread, milk, and a strange golden fruit called an "orange." Djuten pointed apologetically to a jug in the corner:

"Beer not good yet."

Next day Vakar, now well enough to move around, continued his fraternization with Atsé. He encouraged her to talk, stopping her every few words for an explanation. She got bored and went out, but then a rainstorm drove her in again.

"What do you do for fun?" he asked, shaving the three days' stubble from his chin with his bronze razor.

"I play with the others and I visit the tailed lady."

"The what?"

"The lady with the tail. She lives in the hills over that way." Atsé gestured eastward. "I call her with this."

She produced a tiny whistle tied around her neck with a string of grass and blew on it. Vakar, hearing nothing, asked:

"How can she hear you when that thing makes no noise?"

"Oh, but it does! A magical noise that she alone can hear."

Vakar tried blowing on it himself, with no result save that the two dogs who happened to be in the hut both howled. Later, when Atsé had gone out again, Vakar asked Djuten's wife about the tailed woman.

"She told you that?" cried the woman. "I will tan her hide! She knows she should not . . ."

"Why? Many children make up imaginary playmates—"

"Imaginary! Would that she were! This is a satyr of Atlantis who has settled near

here and entices the children into stealing our food and taking it to her secretly. The men have hunted her with dogs, but her magic baffles them."

Vakar, who had understood only about half of what the woman had said, dropped the subject of the satyr to take a snooze. That evening, after supper, Djuten mumbled something about a village meeting and went out into the sunset. Vakar dozed until aroused by Fual's shaking him.

"My lord!" said the valet. "We must flee or they'll murder us!"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"I spied upon the village meeting, which was called to discuss us. Egon, the headman, urged that we be killed and persuaded the others."

"Lyr's barnacles! Why?"

"From what I could understand, they seemed to think that all foreigners are evil, and that we have wealth on our persons which the village could use. Moreover their witch-doctor said he could insure a year's prosperity by sacrificing us to their gods. They sacrifice people with torture, and the shaman claimed his gods had appeared to him in a vision to demand our lives. Djuten and one or two others wished to spare us, but were outvoted."

"What's their scheme?"

"They'll wait until we're asleep and rush in. They dare not attack us openly for fear of our swords."

VAKAR glanced to where Djuten's wife sat placidly in the doorway, milling barley with a hand-quern. He thoughtfully twirled his mustache. Feeling sure that she would not have understood the conversation in Lorskan he said:

"Is all our gear in the bag?"

"Nearly, sir. I'll pack the rest now."

Vakar got up, stretched, and put on his cloak. He bent over the children's beds until he located Atsé, whose single garment was wadded up to make a pillow. Vakar explored gently until he found the tiny whistle and withdrew it. He did not like robbing a child, but had little choice. He dropped the whistle into his scrip and said to Djuten's wife:

"Your pardon, madam, but we are going out for a walk."

"Are you strong enough, sir?" she said, rising to make way for the pair of them.

"I think so, thank you."

Vakar led the way, Fual following with the bag on his back. Vakar walked toward the corner of the hut. Just before he reached it the woman called after him:

"Sir, why are you carrying your belongings? Are you leaving us?"

Pretending not to hear, Vakar swung rapidly around the corner of the house and headed eastward between it and the next hut.

They passed a couple of store-sheds, detoured a pig-pen and a paddock containing horses, and strode through a plowed field, their boots sinking into the mud and coming out with sucking noises. Vakar felt a little weak and his arm was sore, but otherwise he seemed to be active again.

"This is the first I've seen of the neighborhood since recovering my senses. Can you lead the way?"

"No, sir. Except for a few glimpses of the main street of the village I know hardly more about it than you. Where are you taking us?"

Vakar told about the female satyr, adding: "I don't know whether she's real or a peasant superstition, but I brought the child's whistle along to try. She might conceivably help us, being of the third class of friends."

"What's that?"

"There's your friend, and your friend's friend, and your enemy's enemy. She seems to be of the last kind."

He blew experimentally, whereupon there was an outburst of barking from the village.

"For the gods' sake, my lord, don't do that!" said Fual. "There must be some sound emitted by that thing, even though we mortal men can't hear it. You'll have all those devils on our trail." He glared back at the village and muttered Aremorian curses upon the Sendevians.

They tramped in silence until they passed out of the fields and entered the zone of wild grass and scrubby forest. The stars came out though the moon, being past full, had not risen. Somewhere in the hills a lion roared. They were stumbling their way up a draw between two of the smaller foot-

hills of the Atlantean Mountains when Fual said:

"Sir, listen!"

Vakar halted and heard, far behind them, a murmur of voices and a chorus of barking. Looking back he saw a tiny glimmer as of a swarm of fireflies. That would be the men of the village setting out with dogs and torches to hunt them down.

"Oh, hurry!" said Fual, teeth chattering.

Vakar hurried. One or two peasants he would have faced, but if all the able-bodied males of Sendeu caught him, emboldened by numbers, stone axes and wooden rakes and pitchforks would do him in as surely if not so quickly as whetted bronze.

He blew on the whistle again. Nothing happened.

THEY stumbled on, pausing betimes for breath. Each time the sounds of pursuit became louder. When the moon rose, Vakar straightened out their course towards the East, where, he hoped, the more rugged terrain would give them a better chance of escape.

He looked back down the valley they were now traversing and plainly saw the swarm of torches at the lower end. He raised the whistle to his lips, but Fual cried:

"Oh, pray don't blow that again! It only draws the dogs faster."

"They'll track us by smell in any case, and it's our last—"

Fual sank to his knees, weeping, and kissed Vakar's hand, but Vakar pushed him roughly back.

"I shall blow, and if it doesn't work, look to your sword. I'm too tired to run further, and we can at least take a few of these sons of sows with us."

Ignoring Fual's prayers, Vakar blew. The torches came closer and the barking became louder. Vakar was feeling his edge when a voice spoke in Euskerian:

"Who are you, and what do you wish?"

Vakar saw nobody, but replied: "We are two travelers whom the villagers of Sendeu seek to murder. We thought you might give us sanctuary."

"You do not look or speak like peasants. Could you do me a favor in return?"

"What favor?" said Vakar, with a lively memory of legends wherein people offered

some petitioner anything he asked and lived to regret their impulsiveness.

"I wish help in getting back to my native land."

"We will do our best."

"Come then; but if this is a trap you shall be sorry."

There was a movement in the shrubbery on the hillside, and Vakar started towards the fugitive spot of pallor. His rest had given him strength to pull himself up the hillside. The three of them—Vakar, Fual, and their half-seen guide—crossed the crest of the ridge as the dogs and torches streamed past below. At the point where the fugitives had turned off, the dogs halted and milled.

Vakar whispered: "Will they not follow our scent?"

"No, for I cast a spell upon them. But come, for these spells are short-lived."

AN HOUR later Vakar followed the satyr into a cave on a hillside whose mouth was cunningly hidden by vegetation. The being rummaged in the darkness. Vakar saw the shower of sparks caused by striking flint against pyrites, and presently a rush-light glimmered.

"I do not use fire myself," said their rescuer, "but when my lovers used to come from the village I found they liked to see what they were doing, so I laid in a store of these things."

Vakar looked. The satyr was a young female, naked, about five feet tall and quite human except for the horse-like tail, snub nose, slanting eyes, and pointed ears. He asked:

"Have you a name?"

"Tiraafa."

"I am Vakar and he is Fual, my servant. What is this about human lovers, Tiraafa?" Vakar found the habits of the near-human species fascinating.

"With us," said Tiraafa, "one must have love, much more than among you cold and passionless humans. Since there are no others of my kind hereabouts I encouraged the lustier young men of the village to visit me. Of course the love of a man is a limp and feeble thing compared to that of a satyr, but it was all I could do."

"Why are there no others of your kind?"

said Fual. "I always understood satyrs dwelt in Atlantis."

"They do, but not of my tribe. I come from the Saturides, far to the North, having been seized by Foworian slavers. I was sold in Gadaira, but escaped and fled into the mountains. When I found a tribe of satyrs they thought, because I was a stranger who spoke a dialect different from theirs, that I must be a spy sent against them by the human beings. They drove me off with sticks and stones—and here I am."

"You wish to return to the Satyr Isles?"

"Oh, yes! Could you help me?" She seized his wrist imploringly.

Fual, cheerful again, said: "Have no fear, Tiraafa. My lord can arrange anything."

"Maybe," grunted Vakar. "What ended your relations with Sendeu?"

"The maidens of the village complained to their fathers, who forbade their sons to visit me. No longer having the food they brought, I had to steal or persuade the children to bring me some, and the headman swore to kill me."

"We have had our troubles with Egon, too," said Vakar. "A right friendly fellow. But as we seem safe for the moment, let us get some sleep and plan our next move in the morning."

"As you wish," said Tiraafa. "However, I have had no love for months, and expect as part of the price of your rescue—"

She began sliding her hands up his arms towards his neck in a way that reminded Vakar of Bili.

"Not me, little one," said Vakar. "Begin with Fual, and in another day I may be able to help out. Fual, the lady wishes love; attend to it."

And Vakar, not waiting to see how Fual took this unusual command, curled up in his cloak and dropped off to sleep.

"As I see it," said Vakar as he shared Tiraafa's meager breakfast next morning, "we must all head north to Gadaira, where I can put Tiraafa on a ship for her native land while we proceed up the Baitis to Tor-tutseish. How far to Gadaira, Tiraafa?"

As satyrs seemed to have no notion of measurement she was unable to answer his query. By questioning her closely about her erratic course from Gadaira to Sendeu, however, Vakar got the impression that the dis-

tance was somewhere between one and three hundred miles.

"Too far to walk," he said, "especially in a country where the peasantry sacrifice strangers to their gods. Whose horses are those I saw in the paddock last night?"

Tiraafa replied: "They belong to the village, which really means Egon as he and his relatives control the village. They rear these creatures not to use themselves but to sell in Gadaira."

"Do they not plow with them?"

"What is plowing?"

It transpired that neither Tiraafa nor the Sendevians had ever seen a plow. Vakar said:

"If we could steal these horses we should both provide ourselves with transportation and express our love for Headman Egon. They could not follow us, and we could sell those we did not need in Gadaira."

"Why are you going to Torrutseish?" asked Tiraafa.

"To seek the advice of the world's greatest magicians. Do you know which of them is the best?"

"Not much, but when I was captive in Gadaira, I heard the name of Kurtevan. All of us satyrs are magicians of a sort, and such news gets around among the brotherhood."

"Then we will look up Kurtevan," said Vakar.

Prince Vakar peered out of his hiding-place. The twelve horses were pegged out in the meadow, and the youth who guarded them sat with his back to a tree, wrapped in his black mantle, with his long copper-headed spear across his legs. With this, probably the only metal weapon in the village, the horse-herd could stand off a prowling lion long enough for his yells to fetch help. Vakar looked at the young man coldly, with neither hatred nor sympathy. He knew that many self-sufficient peasant communities looked upon city-folk as legitimate prey, for their only contact with cities was when the latter sent tax-gathering parties among them, and from the point of view of the villages these were mere plundering expeditions for which they got nothing in return. But while he realized that the Sendevians' attack on him was not due to sheer malevolence, he would not on that account spare them if they got in his way.

Tiraafa peered around her tree and called softly: "Olik!"

The young man sprang up, gripping his spear, then laughed. "Tiraafa! According to my orders I ought to slay you."

"You would not do that! I loved you the best of all."

"Did you really?"

"Try me and see."

"By the gods, I will!"

Olik leaned his spear against his tree and started for Tiraafa with the lust-light in his eyes. His expression changed to amazement as Vakar leaped out of the bushes and ran full-tilt at him. Vakar saw his victim begin to turn and fill his lungs to shout just as Vakar's sword slid between his ribs up to the hilt.

VAKAR, sheathing his blade, said: "Can either of you ride?"

Tiraafa and Fual, looking apprehensive, shook their heads.

"Well then, as it looks as though these beasts have never been ridden either, you both start from the same point."

Several days later, riding bareback, they halted in sight of Gadaira. Vakar, looking toward the forest of masts and yards that could be seen over the low roofs, said:

"Fual, before we take our little sweet-heart into the city, one of us must go ahead and buy her clothes, or the first slaver who sees her will seize her. And as you're a better bargainer than I, you are elected."

"Please, sir, then may I walk? I'm so stiff and sore from falling off this accursed animal that the thought of solid ground under my feet seems like a dream of heaven."

"Suit yourself. And while you're about it, inquire for a reliable sea-captain sailing northward."

An hour later Fual was back with a gray woollen dress and a black Euskerian cloak with a hood. The dress concealed Tiraafa's tail and the hood her ears. Fual said:

"I learned that Captain Therlas sails for Kerys in three or four days with a cargo of cork and copper, and that he is said to be a man of his word." The little Aremerian hesitated, then burst out: "My lord, why don't you set me free? I'm as anxious to see my home again as she is, and I could keep

an eye upon her until Therlas dropped her off on her wild island."

"I didn't know you so wished to leave me," said Vakar. "Have I treated you badly?"

"No—at least not so badly as most masters—but there is nothing like freedom and one's home."

Vakar pondered. The appeal did touch him, as he was not unsympathetic for an aristocrat and the ex-thief was at best an indifferent servant. On the other hand Vakar was appalled by the prospect of finding a reliable new slave in this strange city, even though he did need someone with more thews and guts than his sensitive valet.

"I'll tell you," he said at last. "I won't free you now, because I badly need your help and I think Tiraafa can take care of herself. But when we win back to Lorsk with our mission accomplished I'll not only free you but also provide you with the means of getting home."

Fual muttered a downcast "Thank you, sir," and turned his attention to other matters.

They found lodgings and sold eight of the twelve horses, keeping the four strongest for their own use. Vakar took a variety of trade-goods in exchange for the animals: little ingots of silver stamped with the cartouche of King Asizhen of Tartessia; packets of rare spices from beyond Kheru and Thamuzeira in the Far East; and for small change the ordinary celt-shaped slugs and neck-rings of copper. Fual, looking with undisguised hostility at the horses, suggested:

"At least, sir, you might buy a chariot so we could continue our journey in comfort . . ."

"No. Chariots are all right for cities, but we may be going where there are only foot-tracks for roads."

When the time came they escorted Tiraafa to the docks and saw her aboard ship with provisions for the journey. She kissed them fiercely, saying:

"I shall always remember you, for as human beings go you are quite fair lovers. I hope Captain Therlas will equal you in this regard."

On an impulse Vakar pressed a fistful

of trade-copper into Tiraafa's hands and helped her aboard. Fual wept and Vakar waved as the ship cast off, and then they turned away to the four horses hitched to one of the waterfront posts. Vakar vaulted on to his new saddle-pad and clamped his knees on the barrel of the beast, which under his expert training had become quite manageable. Fual tried to imitate his master, but leaped too hard and fell off his mount into the mud on the other side, whereat Vakar roared. He was still laughing when he glanced out to sea, and the laugh died as if cut off by an ax.

"Fual," he said, "mount at once. Qasig's galley is coming into the harbor."

A few seconds later the four horses were headed away from the waterfront through the streets of Gadaira at a reckless gallop.

VIII

A HUNDRED and sixty miles up the Baitis lay mighty Torrutseish, the capital of the Tartessian empire and the world's largest city, known by many names in different places and ages. In Vakar's time it was so old that its origin was lost in the mists of myth. Millenia later, when Poseidonis had vanished beneath the waters of the Western Ocean and the Phoenicians first sailed their ships into those parts, it was still there. The Phoenicians called it Tarshish; the Greeks, who followed close upon their heels, Tartessos. By that time the settling of the continents had brought the ocean waters to Torrutseish's front door and buried the original Gadaira deep in the submarine sediments of the Baitis.

In the days of Vakar Lorksa, the king of Tartessia had extended his sway over most of the Euskerian nations; the Turdetanians, the Turdulians, and even the Phaiaxians who were not Euskerians at all. The city of Torrutseish, preëminent among all the cities of the world for its magic, stood on an island where the Baitis forked and rejoined itself again. Prince Vakar approached it up the river road, leading his two spare horses and followed by Fual, who kept his seat by gripping a fistful of his mount's mane. To their left the broad Baitis bore swarms of dugouts, rafts of inflated skins, and other fresh-water craft.

Vakar sighted the walls and towers of the metropolis as he came around a bend. The outer wall was circular like that of Amferé but on a vaster scale. Like the lofty towers that rose behind it, it was built of red, white, and black stones arranged in bands and patterns to give a dazzling mosaic effect. The bright blue Euskerian sun flashed on the gilding of dome and spire and tourelle, and flags bearing the owl of Tartessia flapped lazily in the faint breeze.

Vakar thrilled at the sight of buildings of three or even four storeys, though he would have enjoyed it more if he had not felt obliged to look back down the river every few minutes to see if the sinister black galley were rowing up behind him. For the Baitis was fully navigable thus far, and Vakar was sure that with his supernatural methods of tracking, his enemy would soon be breasting the current in pursuit.

When he had passed the inspection of the guards at the city gate and had found quarters, Vakar asked where the house of Kurtevan the magician was to be found.

"You wish to see Kurtevan? In person?" said the innkeeper, his jaw sagging so that Vakar could see the fragments of the leek that he had been chewing.

"Why, yes. What is so peculiar about that?"

"Nothing, nothing, save that Kurtevan does not cultivate the custom of common men like us. He is the principal thaumaturge to King Asizhen."

Vakar raised his bushy eyebrows. "That is interesting, but I too am not without some small importance in my own land. Where can I find his house?"

The innkeeper told him, and as soon as

he had washed and rested Vakar set out with Fual in the direction indicated. They got lost amid the crooked streets of one of the older sections of the city, and asked a potter, who sat in his stall slowly revolving his tournette:

"Could you tell us where to find the house of Kurtevan the magician?"

The man gave them an alarmed glance and began turning the tournette rapidly, so that the piece grew under his fingers like magic. Thinking that perhaps the fellow had not understood his broken Euskerian, Vakar laid a hand on his arm, saying:

"I asked you where to find the house of Kurtevan, friend. Do you not know, or did you not understand me?"

The man muttered: "I understand you, but not wishing you ill I forebore to answer, for prudent men do not disturb the great archimage without good cause."

"My cause is my own affair," said Vakar in some irritation. "Now will you answer a civil question or not?"

The Tartessian sighed and gave directions.

"Anyone would think," said Vakar as he set out in the direction indicated, "we were asking the way to the seven hells."

"Perhaps we are, sir," said Fual.

The house of Kurtevan turned out to be a tall tower of red stone in the midst of a courtyard surrounded by a wall. With the handle of his dagger Vakar struck the copper gong that hung beside the gate. As the sound of the gong died away the gate opened with a loud creak.

Vakar stepped in, took one look at the gate-keeper—and involuntarily stepped back, treading on Fual's toe.



"O!" said Fual. "What—"

Then he too caught sight of the gatekeeper, gasped, and turned to flee, but Vakar caught his clothing and dragged him inside. The gatekeeper pushed the gate shut and stood silently facing them. He was silent for the good reason that he had no head.

THE gatekeeper was the headless body of a tall swarthy man, dressed in a breech-clout only, whose neck stopped halfway up. Skin and a sparse growth of dark curly hair grew over the stump, except for a couple of obscene-looking irregular openings that presumably represented the thing's windpipe and gullet. A single eye stared out of its chest at the base of its neck. Its broad bare chest rose and fell slowly. A large curved bronze sword was thrust through its girdle.

Vakar looked blankly at this unusual ostiary, wondering how to communicate with one who lacked ears. Still, the thing must have heard the gong. Vakar cleared his throat uncertainly and spoke:

"My name is Vakar, and I should like to see Kurtevan."

The acephalus beckoned and led the way to the base of the tower. Here it unlocked the door with a large bronze key and opened it, motioning Vakar to enter.

Fual muttered: "Perhaps I should stay outside, sir. They seem all too willing to admit us to this suburb of hell . . ."

"Come along," snapped Vakar.

He stepped inside. The setting sun shot a golden shaft through the wall-slit on the west side of the tower, almost horizontally across the room in which Vakar found himself. As his eyes adapted to the gloom he made out a lot of furniture gleaming with gold and precious stones, but the gleam was muted by quantities of dust and cobwebs.

Evidently, Vakar thought, headless servants did not make neat housekeepers.

He stood in a great circular room that took in the whole of the first floor of the tower, except for a spiral stone staircase that wound up to the floor above and down to some subterranean compartment below. There was nobody in the room; no sound save the frantic buzzing of a fly caught in one of the many spiderwebs. Overhead a

grid of heavy wooden beams across the stonework from one side to the other, supporting a floor of planks. Vakar tried in vain to see through the cracks in the planks.

"Let's try the next floor," he whispered.

Holding his scabbard, Vakar tiptoed over to the stair, followed by Fual wearing a stricken look. Up he went, though a stair to him was still a somewhat mysterious new-fangled contrivance. Nothing barred his way as he came up the curving stair to the second floor. Here, however, he halted as his swift-darting glance caught the outlines of a man.

The man was sitting cross-legged on a low taboret with his eyes closed. He was a spare individual with the face of an aged hawk, and wrapped from head to foot in the typical black Euskerian mantle. The cloak was however made of some shiny fabric that Vakar had never seen. The man's hands lay limply in his lap. Before him stood a small tripod supporting a copper dish, in which burned a little heap of something. A thin blue column of smoke rose steadily from the smolder. Vakar caught a whiff of a strange smell as he stalked towards the still figure.

Vakar froze as the man moved, though the movement was the slightest: a minute raising of his head and the opening of his eyes to slits. Vakar had an uncomfortable feeling that if the eyes opened all the way the results might be unfortunate.

The man spoke in perfect Hesperian: "Hail, Prince Vakar Zhu of Lorsk; Vakar the son of Zhabutir."

"Greetings," said Vakar without wasting breath asking Kurtevan how he knew his name.

"You have come to me to seek that which the gods most fear."

"True."

"You are also fleeing from one Qasig, a Gorgonian priest of Entigta—"

"A Gorgon?" said Vakar sharply.

"Yes; did you not know?"

"I guessed but was not sure."

"Very well, there shall be no charge for that bit of information. However, for the other matter, what are you prepared to pay for this powerful agency?"

Vakar, who had expected this question, named a figure in ounces of gold that

amounted to about half the total value of his trade-goods.

The old man's hooded eyes opened a tiny crack further. "That is ridiculous. Am I a village witch peddling spurious love-philtres?"

Vakar raised his bid; and again, until he was offering all his wealth except barely enough to get him back to Lorsk.

Kurtevan smiled thinly. "I am playing with you, Vakar Zhu. I know the contents of that scrip down to the last packet of spice, and had you thrice that amount it would not suffice me. I am chief thaumaturge by appointment of King Asizhen, and have no need to cultivate common magical practice."

Vakar stood silently, frowning and pulling his mustache. After a few seconds the wizard spoke again:

"Howsoever, if you cannot pay my price in gold and silver and spice, it is possible that you could recompense me in services. For I am in need of that which trade-goods cannot buy."

"Yes?" said Vakar.

"As all men know, I am the leading wonder-worker of Torrutseish and receive the king's exclusive custom in the field of thaumaturgy. That, however, is but half the practice of magic, the other half comprising the divinatory arts. Now the leading seer of the city, one Nichok, receives the king's patronage for oracles and prophecies and visions. I would add that art to my own practice."

Vakar nodded.

"I HAVE composed a beautiful method of doing so, except that it requires the help of a strong man of more than common hardihood. Briefly, it is this: my rival Nichok lies most of the time in a trance while his soul goes forth to explore the world in space and time. If I could possess myself of his body while he is in one of these trances, I could seal it against the reentry of his soul, and by threatening to destroy this body I could force Nichok's soul to divine for me as long as I wished."

"You wish me to steal this body for you?"

"Precisely."

"Why me?" said Vakar warily.

"Because the men of Torrutseish are so imbued with fear of us of the magical profession that none would dare let himself be involved in such a *coup-de-main*. Moreover your slave has, I believe, some authentic knowledge of the theory and practice of larceny and could help you."

"Suppose that fear is well founded?"

"It is, to a degree. But this task, while admittedly dangerous, is by no means hopeless. Were I Nichok I could give you the precise odds on your success. As it is I can tell you that they are no worse than pursuing a wounded lion into its lair. As your friend Qasig will not arrive in Torrutseish before tomorrow night, you have ample time."

Vakar stood silently until Kurtevan spoke again: "There is no likelihood of my reducing my demand, young man, so make up your mind. Either make this attempt or go elsewhere for means to thwart the Gorgons."

Mention of the Gorgons gave Vakar the extra push needed to make up his mind. If Qasig were indeed a Gorgon, then Söl's story of the Gorgons' impending descent upon his homeland was true.

"I will try," he said. "What must we do?"

"First you must wait until dark and go to the tower of Nichok. It is much like this one but smaller, and across the city—I will give you a map."

"How do I get in?"

"There is a secret entrance that even Nichok does not know."

"How is that?"

"For the simple reason that I built his present tower, and sold it to him when I erected this edifice fifty years ago. Now, when you have entered his tower by the secret entrance, you will find a trapdoor, and underneath the trapdoor a ladder leading down to the underground chamber where lies the body of Nichok. My arts tell me he is not lying completely unprotected; he has summoned a guardian from some other plane of existence, though its precise nature I cannot ascertain."

"Hmm. How shall I cope with this guardian? An unarmed man I can take a chance with, but some ten-armed demon from another universe . . . What am I supposed to do when I cut at the creature and my sword goes through it like smoke?"

"Do not let that concern you. Things

from other worlds and planes, if they would dwell in our world, must obey the laws thereof. Therefore if this guardian is sufficiently materialized on this dimension to harm you, by the same token it must be equally vulnerable to your attack."

"Well, if Nichok's soul is wandering about, how do you know it is not eavesdropping on us now?"

The wizard smiled. "Every dog is invincible on its home ground. For one thing all openings in my tower are sealed with the juice of rue, garlic, asafetida, and other spirit-repellants. But come; it will be another hour before full darkness, and you must be hungry. Sup with me and then set out upon your task."

Kurtevan clapped his hands. The headless servitor appeared and set out two stools and a low table. At least a headless servant appeared; Vakar realized that without faces to go by it was almost impossible to tell whether this were the same gatekeeper or not. He said:

"You have unusual servants, Master Kurtevan. Do you find them more obedient without heads? What is the creature?"

"A gift from the Lord of Belem. Do you know Awoqqas?"

"I have heard sinister rumors of the land of Belem, that is all."

"King Awoqqas has found a method of reanimating a freshly decapitated corpse by constraining a certain type of spirit of the air to animate it. If the operation is performed carefully so that the body is prevented from bleeding to death, the wound can be healed and a servant created who is more docile than any whole man. Its only disadvantage compared to a whole man, like yours, is that with that single eye in its chest it cannot look up or around. Awoqqas has a whole army of these izzuneg, as they are called in the language of Belem, and if your travels should take you thither I am sure you could persuade him to convert your slave to an izzuni."

"An interesting idea," said Vakar, "but I must take Fual's feelings into account. Being very sensitive he might not like the loss of his head."

"Ahem. You see," continued Kurtevan, "there are three schools of thought regarding the location of the intelligence: that it

resides in the head, or in the heart, or in the liver. Now Awoqqas appears to have proved the first-named correct. Lacking a brain, there is no likelihood that the memories and thought-patterns that the acephalus had as a whole human being will be reanimated along with the rest of the organism, and perhaps interfere with the control of the body by the sylph . . ."

THE thin old wizard became almost animated as he discussed magical theory. Vakar, despite Kurtevan's callous disregard for other human beings, became so absorbed that he almost forgot the peril ahead of him. Fual continued to quake. But when the food arrived, Vakar said:

"I trust you will not deem me unduly suspicious, but do you swear by your magical powers that this food contains nothing harmful—no drug or enchantment that might affect us at any time?"

Kurtevan smiled crookedly. "Old Ryn taught you well. Of course even the most wholesome food can be harmful if eaten in abnormal quantities—"

"No quibbling, please. Do you swear?" For Vakar knew that if a magician swore falsely by his magical powers these powers would at once leave him.

"I swear," said Kurtevan, and addressed himself to his plate. "Does this convince you?"

The tower of Nichok stood black against the stars. Although Kurtevan had said that it was smaller than his present keep, it loomed larger in the darkness. Vakar and Fual leaned against the wall surrounding the tower, listening. They had left their cloaks and satchel at Kurtevan's so as not to be encumbered any more than was necessary.

Something moved around inside the wall, though the sound was not that of human footsteps.

There was a curious sort of shuffle and a scaly rattle about the sound, and something breathed with a hiss that was almost a whistle.

A light showed in the distance.

"The watch!" said Fual, convulsively gripping Vakar's arm.

"Well, don't twist my arm off. Remember what he told us."

In accordance with Kurtevan's instructions, both men put their backs to the wall and froze to immobility. The wizard had thrown a glamor over them so that so long as they remained still the watch would simply not notice them; they were for practical purposes invisible.

The watch—a group of eight citizens holding torches and with staves and zaghnals over their shoulders—tramped past. Vakar caught a muttered comment about the price of onions, and the group swung by, never looking towards Vakar and Fual. When the watch had passed out of sight, Vakar led Fual silently back to the place where they had been listening.

"Six paces from the gate," he breathed, "and two feet from the wall . . . Fual, your feet are smaller than mine, more like those of a Euskerian. Put them one behind the other . . ."

VAKAR marked the spot with his toe and began digging in the dirt with his fingers. When the ground proved too hard he attacked it with the blade of his knife, going round and round in an increasing spiral from the spot where he had started, and also deeper and deeper.

Once the blade struck something. Vakar scabbled eagerly, but it turned out to be nothing but a mere stone, not the bronze ring he had sought.

On the other side of the wall the peculiar footsteps came and went again.

Then the blade struck another obstacle. This time it was the ring, rough with corrosion. Vakar, wishing he had a shovel, cleared away the dirt around it; then grasped it with both hands and heaved. It stuck fast.

He cleared away more of the dirt from the stone slab in which the ring was set and motioned Fual to hook as many fingers as possible into the ring also. Both heaved, and with a loud scraping and grinding the ring rose.

As the slab tilted up on one edge, dirt showered into the hole, about two feet square, that yawned beneath it. Vakar pulled the stone up until it stuck in a nearly vertical position.

"Come on," he whispered, lowering himself into the hole.

IX

THEY had to crawl through a mere burrow. Vakar's knees were sore and he was sure that the tunnel had taken them clear to the other side of Nichok's lot when he rammed his head into the end of the tunnel.

He felt around overhead until he located the contours of the stone slab that topped this end of the tunnel. Gathering his forces he heaved. Inch by inch the stone rose. A wan light wafted into the tunnel.

Vakar thrust his head up through the opening. A single oil lamp feebly illumined a great round room like that which comprised the ground floor of Kurtevan's tower. A massive timber door was bolted on the inside.

Vakar climbed out, tiptoed over to the door, and listened. Though he thought he could hear those peculiar footsteps again, the door was too thick to be sure. He began hunting for the trap-door which Kurtevan had told him led to the underground chamber where the rival wizard lay. It was not hard to find, for a bronze ring like that of the first slab was stapled to its upper surface. He bent and heaved upon the bronzen ring. This slab came up easily, revealing a square hole and the upper end of a ladder.

"Fual," he said, "get your sword ready . . . What ails you?"

The little man was kneeling with tears running down his face. "Don't make me go down there, my lord! I had rather die! I won't go though you torture me!"

"Damned spineless coward!" hissed Vakar, and hit Fual with the back of his hand, which merely made the Aremorian weep harder. "I don't see how you could have ever worked up the courage to steal anything when you were a thief!"

In his nervous fury Vakar could have killed the valet, save that he feared making a lot of noise and knew that he would need the fellow's help with Nichok's body later.

At this point even Prince Vakar's grim resolution nearly failed him. What if he went quietly away and returned home to say that he had failed in his search? Perhaps he could find another magician. Or he need not go home at all, but could hire

out as a mercenary soldier in one of the mainland kingdoms, and to the seven hells with Lorsk . . .

Then he caught Fual's eye, and pride of caste stiffened his sinews. It would never do to let a slave see him quail before peril. He started down into the hole.

He descended rapidly, anxious to get the worst over. The ladder led down into another chamber, smaller than that above, and like it lit by a single lamp. This lamp stood on one end of a large bier of black marble, on which lay a pallet and on the pallet, supine, a man. The light of the lamp fell upon the man's upturned face and cast deep shadows across the hollows of his eyes and cheeks. The rest of his body, except for his sandalled feet, was wrapped in a black mantle.

The man lay quietly, only an occasional movement of his chest betraying the fact that he was alive. However, there should be something else in the room. In fact Vakar, though little given to fancies and premonitions, was sure there was something else. Something, he felt, was watching him. He could neither see it nor hear it, but the faint smell in the stagnant air was not simply that of an unventilated crypt.

GRIPPING his scabbard lest it clank, Vakar tiptoed toward the bier. He was about to mount the single step around the black block to look into Nichok's face when a noise caused him to start back.

Something stirred in the shadows on the far side of the bier. As Vakar watched, the thing unfolded and rose on many limbs until its stalked eyes looked across Nichok's body into those of Vakar Zhu.

It was an enormous crab.

The crab began to scuttle with horrifying speed around the bier. Before Vakar could move it was coming at him from his right. As he leaped back, sidling around the bier in his turn to keep the obstacle between them, the crab swung round and with a sweep of a huge chela knocked the ladder down. It fell with a loud clatter. Sweating with terror, Vakar realized that this was no mere crab, but an intelligent being.

The crab came at Vakar again, its claws rasping on the stone floor. Vakar dodged around the bier; the crab stopped and began

circling the bier in the opposite direction. Vakar perforce reversed too.

How in the names of all the gods, he wondered, was he to get out of this? They could go on circling the stone block until one or the other collapsed from exhaustion, and he knew which that would be . . .

No, they would not circle indefinitely; the crab had other ideas. Leg by leg it began climbing *over* the bier. Delicately it raised its feet so that its claws did not touch Nichok's body or the lamp, and stood swaying, balanced, its stalked eyes looking down into those of Vakar. The small forked antennae between the eye-stalks quivered and the many pairs of mandibles opened and shut, emitting a froth of bubbles.

THE thing started to topple towards Vakar, who whirled and snatched at the ladder in the forlorn hope of getting it back in position and bolting up it. He had it partly raised when he heard the sharp sound of the crab's eight claws striking the floor behind him, and then the ladder was snatched out of his grasp. As he turned he heard the wood crunch under the grip of the great chelae that could snip off his head as easily as he could pinch off the head of a daisy.

The crab flung the ladder across the room and scuttled towards Vakar, chelae spread and opened. Vakar, backing towards a corner, drew and cut at the monster as it came within reach, but the sharp bronze bounced back from the hard shell without even scratching it. When Kurtevan had spoken of the guardian demon's vulnerability he had not mentioned the possibility of its having this loricated form.

Vakar felt the wall at his back. The chelae started to close in upon him.

In that last instant before he was cut to bits like a paperdoll scissored by an angry child, a picture crossed Vakar's mind. It was of himself as a boy playing on one of the royal estates on the coast of Lorsk along the western margins of Poseidonis, in the Bay of Kort. He was talking to an old fisherman who held a vainly struggling crab from behind with one horny hand and said:

"Eh, lad, keep your thumb on the belly of him and your fingers on the back, and he can't reach around to nip ye . . ."

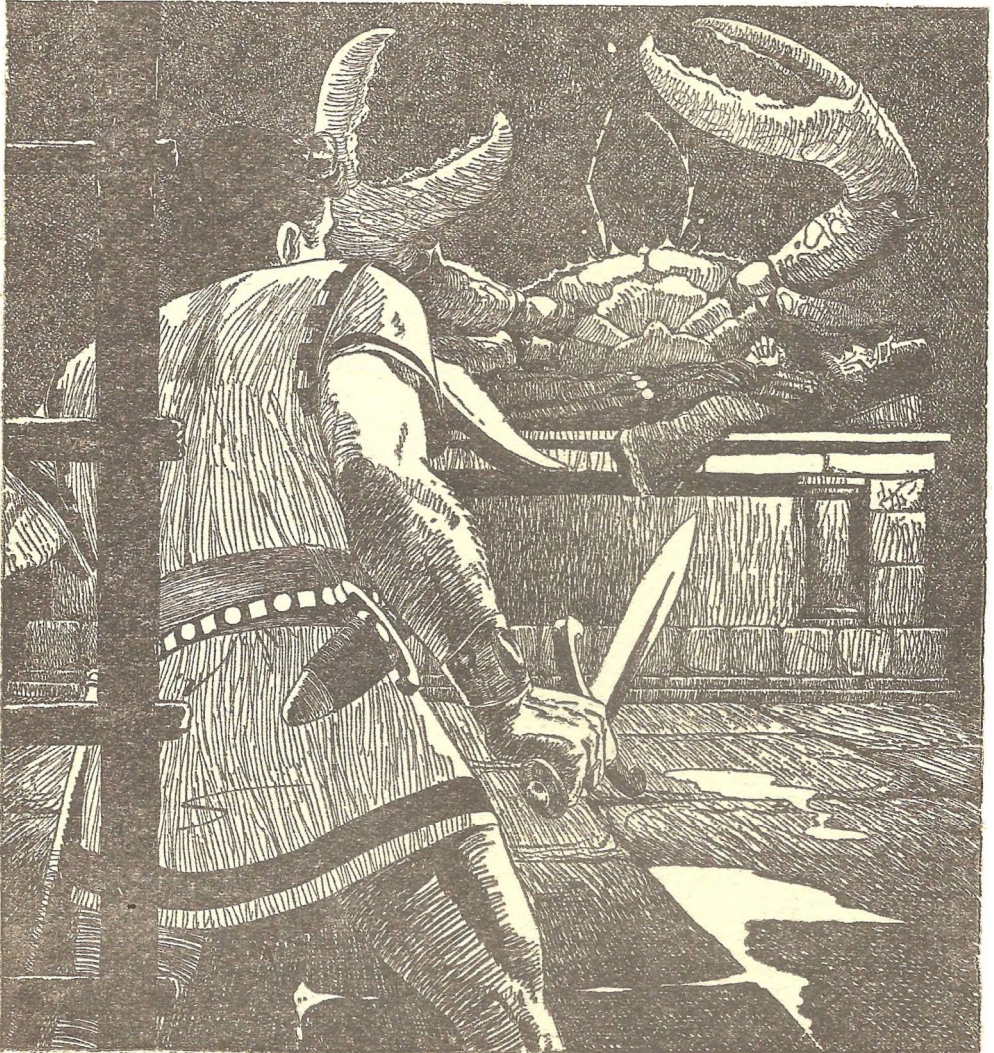
With that Vakar knew what he had to do. As the chelae closed in he threw himself forward and down. He hit the floor beneath the crab's mandibles and rolled frantically under the creature's belly, which cleared the floor by about two feet. As the chelae closed on the empty air with a double snap, Vakar rose to his feet.

He was now behind the crab, which swivelled its eye-stalks back towards him and began to turn to face him again. Vakar leaped to the creature's broad hard-shelled back. With his free hand he seized one of the forked antennae, then pulled it back and held it like a rein, standing balanced with legs spread and knees bent on his unusual mount.

The crab circled, its chelae waving wildly and their great pincer-jaws snapping as it strove to reach back to grasp its foe, but the joints of its armor did not permit it that much flexibility.

Vakar swung his sword, with a silent prayer to the gods of Lorsk that his edge should prove true, and slashed at one of the eye-stalks; then at the other. Blue blood bubbled as the blinded crab clattered sideways across the room—and blundered into the stone bier.

The impact threw Vakar off its back, breaking his grip on the antennae. He scrambled to his feet, ignoring the painful knock that he had received against the bier, and dodged away from the chelae. The crab



set off in the opposite direction until it crashed into the wall. Then it crept slowly sideways, the hinder end of its shell scraping against the stone, until it reached the nearest corner. There it crouched, its chelae raised and spread defensively.

Moving quietly, Vakar picked up the sword he had dropped, sheathed it, and replaced the ladder. One of the rungs had been broken out of it when the crab seized it, and one of the uprights had been cracked by the pinch of the chelae. Vakar looked at it dubiously and then went to fetch the body of Nichok. He heaved the man up over his shoulder, staggered to the ladder, and began to climb. An ominous cracking came from the weakened upright, and he could feel the thing begin to give and turn under his hand and feet. Wouldn't it be just fine if it broke and dumped him down again into the trance-chamber with the crab for company and no way out?

He heaved his way up. Just as the ladder seemed about to give completely he heard Fual's voice—

"Hold, my lord! I'll pull him up."

Fual reached down and got hold of Nichok. With much grunting and heaving they manhandled the body up through the hole. Vakar followed as quickly as he could. When he gained the surface above he sat down with his feet dangling into the hole.

"Just a minute," he said.

He sat having a quiet case of the shakes while Fual whispered, "Let's hurry, sir; that thing outside is still prowling around . . . When the crab came at you I was so sure you were a dead man I couldn't watch any longer; but when I looked around again you were putting up the ladder."

Vakar gave a last glance down into the hole. Though no sentimentalist he felt a little sorry for the crab, crouching in darkness and waiting for the succor of a master who never came.

A few minutes later they were outside Nichok's grounds, having issued forth by the same tunnel. They pushed down the hinged slab and held Nichok between them, one of his arms around each neck as if they were taking him home from a drunken party. As they staggered along, Vakar limping from his fall from the crab's back, they sang a lusty Lorskian drinking-song.

Kurtevan was bent over a heap of yellow manuscripts, shuffling them back and forth and tracing out their lines of cryptic glyphs with a long fingernail, when Vakar and Fual staggered up the stairs into his living-room with Nichok's body between them. They let the body slip to the ground, and Vakar said:

"Here you are."

Kurtevan raised his heavy lids a little. "Good."

Fual went over to Vakar's scribe and began checking its contents under the contemptuous glance of the thaumaturge. He laid out the rings of gold and the ingots of silver, the copper torcs and celts, and the packets of spice in neat rows on a stool to facilitate counting. Vakar said:

"WELL, sir magician, what is the thing the gods most fear?"

Kurtevan finished what he was reading, then rolled up the manuscripts and dropped them into a chest beside his taboret. He raised his head and said:

"The thing the gods most fear is the Ring of the Tritons."

"What is that?"

"A finger-ring of curious gray metal that is neither tin nor silver nor lead, and why the gods should fear it I cannot tell you. This ring is on the finger of the King of the Tritons, one Ximenon, whom you will find on the island of Menê in Lake Tritonis, in the land of Tritonia, which lies south of the Thrinxian Sea.

"Now you have all the information you need, pray leave me, for I have strenuous magical works to perform."

Vakar digested this speech with astonishment. "You mean—you do not have this thing here?"

"Of course not. Now go."

"I will be eternally cursed—of all the barefaced swindles—"

"That is enough, young man. I do not tolerate insolence, and I have not swindled you. If you remember our conversation, I did not make you any definite promise in return for your help in the matter of Nichok. You said you were seeking the object; very well, I have done what I could to help you by telling you where and what it is."

The fact that the wizard's statement was

literally true did nothing to check Vakar's rising anger. He felt the blood rushing to his face as he shouted:

"Oh, is that so? You asked me how much I would pay for the thing itself, and if you—"

"Silence! Get out!"

"After I have taken my payment out of your hide—"

Vakar reached for his sword and took a stride toward Kurtevan. The wizard merely opened his eyes all the way and stared into those of Vakar.

"You," said the thaumaturge in a low voice, "are unable to move. You are rooted to the spot . . ."

To his horror, Vakar found that as he advanced he met more and more resistance, as if he were wading in cold honey. By exerting all his strength he just barely made his next step and got his sword a few inches out of the scabbard. His eyes bulged and his muscles quivered with the strain. He was vaguely aware of Fual, crouched over their trade-goods, gaping with an idiotic stare as if he, too, were ensorcelled. Meanwhile the wizard also seemed to strain.

"You are no spiritual weakling," grunted Kurtevan, "but you shall see that your will in no way compares with mine. Stand still while I make preparations for your disposal."

Kurtevan reached behind him and threw a powder into the brazier on the little tripod, which thereupon smoldered and smoked heavily. He picked a staff from the floor beside him and drew lines on the floor with it. Then he began an incantation in an arcane tongue.

Vakar strained like a dog on a leash. Sweat ran down his forehead as with a mighty effort he dragged his right foot a further inch along the floor and pulled his sword a finger's breadth more from the scabbard. Beyond that he could not go; he could not even turn his head or force his tongue to speak.

A shimmer appeared in the air over the diagram that Kurtevan had drawn. As the recondite syllables rolled on, the shimmer grew to a rosy brightness. A spindle-shaped mass of flame swayed and rippled in mid-air. Sometimes it looked vaguely man-like; again it reminded Vakar of a writhing rep-

tile. He could feel its heat on his face and hands.

Kurtevan paused in his incantation to say: "A fire-spirit makes an admirable means of disposing of garbage. It is unfortunate that you will not be able to appreciate the full effectiveness of the method—Ho, stay where you are!" he barked suddenly at the flame, raising his staff. "They are dangerous, like captive lions, and must be treated with firmness. You should have departed when I first commanded you, foolish boy. The responsibility is entirely yours."

KURTEVAN began speaking to the flame again in an unknown tongue, evidently giving it orders for the disposal of Vakar and Fual. Vakar strained at his invisible bonds with the strength of a madman.

Then, just as Kurtevan was reaching the climax of his conjuration, Vakar saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. Something flew through the air and struck the wizard in the chest, to fall lightly to the floor.

Kurtevan stopped, his mouth open to show his blackened teeth. Then his head jerked back and forward in a tremendous sneeze.

As he opened his mouth for a second sneeze, the flame left its diagram and swooped upon the wizard. Vakar heard a single frightful scream as the body of the sorcerer disappeared in a mass of flame. Then the flame soared up and up until it licked the ceiling. It washed over the beams and the planks of the floor of the third storey, so that they began to blaze fiercely.

At the instant of Kurtevan's death-scream Vakar had found himself able to move again. A glance showed that Fual was sweeping their trade-goods into the scrip. Vakar slammed his sword back into the scabbard, bounded forward even before the fire-elemental had entirely disappeared, dug both arms into the open chest beside the burning taboret, and scooped up the mass of manuscripts piled therein. Some of them were beginning to burn at the edges and corners. Vakar held the papyrus in one arm and batted out the flames with the other as he turned for the exit.

He ran down the spiral stairs, Fual be-

hind him. As they raced across the ground-floor chamber, a thunderous crackling above told them that the third-storey floor was giving way. Vakar could see the firelight through the cracks between the planks overhead. They rushed out.

In the yard Vakar stumbled over the acephalus lying limp. Evidently on Kurtevan's death the spirit that animated it had fled. They burst through the gate and ran in the direction of their lodgings just as people began to put their heads out to see what was up. Somebody banged a gong to turn out the neighborhood with buckets. Vakar doubled around several corners in case anybody should follow them, while behind him flame and sparks erupted out of the top of the tower of Kurtevan the magician.

Fual said: "Sir, these Euskerian wizards are not really gentlemen, or they would be served by proper human retinues and not by these acephali and crabs and such spooks. Why did you pause to gather up that stuff? Are you planning to become a magus yourself?"

"Not I. But I hated to see that arcane knowledge perish, and these sheets should fetch a pretty nice price among Kurtevan's colleagues, which will give us the means to reach Tritonia . . . Damnation, where are we?"

When Fual's sense of direction had straightened them out, Vakar continued: "I'm sorry about poor Nichok, but it's too late to drag him back to his dwelling now . . . What did you throw at Kurtevan?"

"Our rarest spice, sir. It's from the Farthest East, beyond fabled Thamuzeira. The merchant who sold it to us called it 'pepper'."

X

A MONTH later Prince Vakar and Fual arrived in Huperea, the capital of Phaiaxia. They had followed a trade-route that ran up the River Baitis, overland to the headwaters of the Anthemius, and down the latter stream to its issuance into the Thrinaxian Sea.

Where the Anthemius widened out into the Thrinaxian Sea stood Huperea: a

spacious city of well-built houses instead of the usual combination of stockaded castle surrounded by a huddle of huts. Vakar had no trouble getting through the gates and rode down a broad street flanked by houses in front of which flowers grew in neat patterns around painted marble statues of gods and heroes. Feeling at peace with the world, Vakar sang as he rode.

Vakar pulled up in front of a house where a stocky man sat naked on a bench and worked with adze and saw on a bed-frame. He shouted:

"Ho there, my good man, where can I find lodgings for myself and my servant in Huperea?"

The man looked up and replied: "Strangers, if you seek a public inn like those of Torrutseish, know that there is none such here. Our custom is to lodge travellers among the citizens of the town, each in accordance with his rank. For three days you will be entertained without cost, except that you shall tell us freely of the land whence you come and of the world outside Phaiaxia. After that you must be on your way, unless a pressing reason prevents."

"An interesting custom," said Vakar. "What is its purpose?"

"Thus we receive warning of dangers gathering against us, and also learn of markets affording rich opportunities for our merchants. Now, if you will tell me your name and station, I will make arrangements."

The lack of servility in the man's manner suggested to Vakar that the fellow was no slave, as he had supposed, but a citizen of standing. Since his entertainment would be proportioned to his status, Vakar saw no reason to minimize the latter. He said:

"I am Vakar the son of Zhabutir, heir to the throne of Lorsk in Poseidonis."

The man wagged his full beard sagely. "I have heard of Poseidonis and Lorsk, though no Phaiaxian has ever travelled so far west. Stranger, it is proper that you should lodge with me."

The man picked up his cloak, threw it around him, fastened it with an ornate golden pin, and turned to call a servant to take the animals. Vakar was at first taken

aback, wondering if the man disbelieved him. Then a horrid thought struck him. He said:

"May I ask who you are, sir?"

"Did you not know? I am Nausithion." As Vakar continued to look blank the man added: "King of Phaiaxia."

Vakar felt his face reddening as he began to stammer apologies for his condescending tone, but King Nausithion said:

"Tush, tush, you are not the first to make such a mistake. We are a merchant kingdom and make no great parade of rank and precedence as do the Euskerians. And since I am the most skilled carpenter in Huperea, I prefer to make my own bed rather than to hire it done. But come in. You will wish warm baths and change of raiment, and to-night you shall tell your story to the leading lords of Phaiaxia. We believe that a man who can sing as I heard you do cannot be altogether evil."

VAKAR found that he was enjoying himself among these hearty hedonists more than any time since the party at Queen Porfia's palace. He had cautiously watched his host's methods of eating and drinking so as not to commit any gaffes like those at Sederado. Here, for instance, it was customary and proper to convey one's meat to one's mouth on the point of one's dagger . . .

The bard Damodox was singing, to the twang of his lyre, a lay about the lusts of the Phaiaxian gods: what happened to Aphradexa, the goddess of love and beauty, when her husband Hephaestes learned of her tryst with the war-god. Vakar had been told that Damodox was the winner of last year's singing-contest, an event as important in Phaiaxia as athletic meets were in Lorsk. The paintings on the walls were the most vivid and realistic that Vakar had ever seen, and the repoussé patterns on the silver plates and beakers were of an incredible delicacy and perfection.

When the bard finished, Vakar said: "Master Damodox, you certainly have a fine voice. Mine cannot compare with it, even though at home I too am considered something of a singer."

The bard smiled. "I am sure that if you had spent as many years in practice as I,

you would far surpass me. But such tricks are no credit to a lord like yourself, as they show he has been neglecting his proper business of war and statecraft."

"Are you sure your gods do not mind your speaking so frankly of their peccadilloes?"

"No, no, our gods are a jolly lot who relish a good joke. As a matter of fact, Aphradexa visited me only last night. She had a message for you from one of your western gods: Akima or some such name."

"Okma," said Vakar. "Say on."

"It is hard to remember exactly—you know dreams—but I think this Pusadian god was trying to warn you against a danger that has pursued you many miles, and that will soon catch up with you if you do not hasten."

"Oho! I will bear your warning in mind."

"And whither are you bound after you leave here, my lord?" the king asked.

"Tritonia. That lies south of here, does it not?"

"Southeast, rather. What is your purpose?"

If he had not been heated by the sweet wine of the banquet Vakar might have been more cautious, but as it was he told openly about his quest for the Ring of the Tritons.

The king and the other lords nodded, the former saying: "I have heard of that ring. It will take uncommon force, guile, or persuasiveness to get it away from King Ximenon."

"What," said Vakar, "is its precise nature? How does it differ from any other ring?"

A Phaiaxian lord said: "It is said to be a powerful specific against magic of all kinds, and to have been cut by a copper-smith of Tartaros from a fallen star in the possession of the Lord of Belem."

"Which," added Nausithion, "means it might as well be on the moon, for nobody leaves Belem alive. Tritonia is bad enough . . ."

"What is hazardous about Tritonia?" asked Vakar.

"The situation there is peculiar. There are two dominant peoples in Tritonia, the Amazons who live on the island of Kheronex in Lake Tritonis, and the Tritons who live on the island of Mené. The subject

tribes live around the lake on the mainland. Now the Tritons and the Amazons are the men and women of what was once a single nation. In my father's time they had a great war with the Atlanteans to the Southwest of here, which so depleted their supply of fighting-men that their king armed their women and defeated the Atlanteans. Then however the women, being the more numerous, conspired against the men, and rose against them in one night, stripping them of their arms and reducing them to subjugation.

"This condition endured for several years, with the women ruling and the men doing all the work, not only in field and meadow but in house and hearth as well. At last the men revolted and fled to the island of Menê, where they armed themselves and stood off the women. So now there is war between them, and when a stranger arrives in Tritonia both sides try to capture him—or her—to take to one island or the other. If the visitor is of the sex of that island, they enroll him in their army; if not, they amuse themselves carnally with the newcomer until the latter's powers are exhausted."

"A visit to Tritonia sounds strenuous," said Vakar.

JUST then a man came in and said: "My lord King, there are strangers outside who wish to speak to you."

Nausithion swallowed a mass of roast pork to make himself understood. "What sort of strangers?"

"Very odd strangers, sir. They drove up in a chariot. One is a giant who looks like a Laistrugonian but uglier; one is a pigmy with enormous ears . . ."

Vakar said: "Excuse me, King, but I feel unwell. May I withdraw for a moment?"

"Certainly . . . Ho, that is the way to the kitchen!"

Vakar plunged through the door and shouted: "Fual!"

"Yes sir?" The Aremorian looked up from where he was eating.

"Qasig has caught up with us. Get our gear and meet me in front, but don't go through the banquet-hall."

"You mean to leave?" wailed Fual. "Oh, sir, these are the first people since Sederado

who have shown us the respect due our rank—"

"Don't be a bigger fool than you can help. Where are the beasts?"

A few minutes later Vakar led the four horses around the house to the front. Fual came after him. At the corner Vakar paused to peer around in time to see the shaggy back of Nji the ape-man disappear into the king's mansion.

"Hold the horses," commanded Vakar.

He picked up a stone and walked towards the chariot hitched to the post in front of the king's residence. Several servants of the Phaiaxian lords clustered there, throwing knucklebones. Vakar strode around them, bent over the near wheel of the chariot, and with one blow of the stone knocked out the pin that held the wheel to the axle.

"Here, you help me!" he said, and such was his tone of assurance that two of the nearer gamblers got up and came over. "Grasp the edge of the chariot and lift."

The chariot was a heavy northern model with old-fashioned leather-tired solid wheels and a frame of elm and ash. The frame rose as the servants lifted. Vakar pulled off the wheel and rolled it ahead of him like a hoop to the corner of the house where Fual waited.

"Help me tie this on this horse," he said.

The servants stared after Vakar but showed no inclination to interfere. A laugh ran through the group as they evidently took the act for a practical joke and went back to their game.

"Now," said Vakar, "to Tritonia, and fast!"

Off they went. Not this time would he settle down in fair Phaiaxia, forgetting his duty to his land and his dynasty.

"**T** CAN'T tell whether it's a man or a woman," muttered Vakar, lying on his belly under a bush. "It looks more like a reptile with a man's shape."

He peered around the hill at the figure that sat the oddest horse that Vakar had ever seen: a creature entirely covered with black and white stripes. Behind him, up the draw, Fual held their own horses in a clump of acacias. They had ridden across Tritonia, where the people wore fringed buckskin kilts and goatskin cloaks with the hair dyed

vermillion, to the shores of Lake Tritonis.

Vakar wriggled back out of sight of the immobile rider and told Fual: "The thing seems to be covered all over with scales, with a pair of enormous feathers sticking out of the top of its head. I'm sure King Nausithion didn't describe any race of reptile-men in his account of the peoples of Tritonia."

"He might have omitted to mention them," said Fual with a shudder. "I remember once having heard that the Tritons worshipped a snake-god named Drax. And who knows . . ."

Vakar said: "The only way to settle the question is to capture the thing. Luckily the shrubbery is dense. I'll circle around and come upon the creature from the far side while you creep out—"

"Me? No, my lord! The idea turns my bones to water—"

Vakar caught Fual's shirt in both fists and thrust an angry face into that of the Aremorian.

"You," he said, "shall do as you're told. When you've given me time to approach from the other side you shall make some small noise to distract the thing's attention, and I'll do the rest. Be ready to rush in and help subdue it."

He was more than ordinarily exasperated by Fual, who still bore the marks of the beating Vakar had given him when the latter learned that his servant had stolen one of Nausithion's silver plates in Huperea.

A quarter-hour later Vakar crouched by the rider. He had laid aside his scabbard so as not to be encumbered in the kind of attack that he had in mind. Through a tiny gap in the leaves he saw that the scaly skin was a cleverly made armor of reptile hide, covering the entire rider except the face. The rider carried a long lance and a small round shield of hide.

Though Vakar waited and waited, no distracting sound came from the direction of the draw. The striped horse snorted and stamped and Vakar feared that it smelled him.

At last he could wait no longer. He gathered his feet under him and sprang towards the sentry. The striped animal snorted again, rolling an eye towards Vakar, and shield

away. Its rider turned too and began to swing the lance down to level.

Vakar left the ground in a long leap, caught the rider about the upper body as he struck it, and both tumbled to the turf on the far side in a tangle of thrashing limbs. Vakar, recovering first from the fall, slammed his fist into his victim's jaw. The slight body relaxed long enough for Vakar to roll it over and twist its arms behind its back.

"Fual!" he roared.

"Here, sir—"

"Where in the seven hells have you been?"

"I—I was just going to make the noise, my lord, —but it took me so long to work up my courage—"

"I'll deal with you later; meanwhile lively with that strap!"

Vakar indicated the wrists of the rider, which Fual bound. The rider began to struggle until Vakar belted it across the face with his fist.

"Now we'll see about its sex," he said.

The reptile-skin armor opened down one side and was kept closed by a series of thong ties. Vakar fumbled with the unfamiliar knots, then impatiently saved the garment open with his dagger, and pulled the front of it away from the wearer's chest. There was no questioning its femininity.

"Not bad for a warrior maiden," said Vakar, then spoke in Phaxian: "You! Do you understand me?"

"If you speak slowly," said the Amazon in a dialect of the same language.

"I wish to make contact with the Tritons, and you shall guide me to their camp."

"Then what will happen to me?"

"You may do as you like, once the Tritons are in sight. Come along."

With her hands still tied and Fual holding the striped horse, Vakar boosted the Amazon back on to her mount. She sat glowering at him with her torso bare to the waist. Vakar handed the shield and lance to Fual, put his own baldric back on, mounted, and drew his sword.

"WHICH way?" he asked, grasping the Amazon's bridle.

The Amazon jerked her head westward,

so Vakar set off along the trail in that direction. After they had ridden for some time he turned his head to ask:

"What do you call these horses with the giddy color-scheme?"

She glared silently until he hefted his sword in a meaningful manner, then sullenly answered: "Zebras."

"And what is that shield made of? The hide of some great beast?"

"A rhinoceros. A beast with a horn on its nose."

"Oh. I saw one of those on my ride thither, like a giant pig. And what do those feathers come from?"

"A bird called an ostrich, found in the Desert of Gwedulia."

"A bird with such feathers must overshadow the earth with its wings like a thundercloud when it flies."

"Ha, it does not fly at all! It runs like a horse, and stands as tall as you and your mount together."

"How about your armor?"

"That is from the great serpents found in the swamps around Lake Tritonis."

"Truly Tritonia must be a land of many strange beasts. Yesterday I saw three beasts like our Pusadian mammoth, but hairless—"

Everything happened at once! They had come around a hill to see a group of Amazons trotting towards them along a side-road leading up from the lake, which showed blue through notches in the dusty olive-green landscape. The captive Amazon leaned forward and dug her heels into the zebra's ribs. The animal bounded, tearing the bridle out of Vakar's grasp. The Amazon shrieked something and galloped towards her fellows.

Vakar slashed at her as she went by him. Though he struck to kill he struck too late; the blade whistled through empty air.

He leaned forward in his turn and galloped. As the Amazons came up to the main road, Vakar and Fual and the spare horses thundered past, going in the same direction as before. A glance showed Vakar that his ex-captive, hampered by her bound arms, had fallen off her zebra. Vakar hoped that she had broken her neck.

Vakar's animals had been travelling all day and so were too tired to keep ahead of their fresh pursuers. Little by little the Ama-

zons gained. Vakar thanked the gods of Lorsk that none of them carried bows; no doubt the scrubby trees of this dry country did not provide good wood for bow-staves.

Still the long slender lances came closer through the clouds of dust. A determined thrust would get through Vakar's leather jack, and even if it did not they would kill Fual and take the spare mounts and the baggage. There were five of them, too many for Vakar to wheel and charge into the midst of them.

A few more paces and they would be up. . . .

The pursuers reined in with high feminine cries. Ahead of them appeared a score of riders clad in similar snakeskin armor, with crests of zebra-tail instead of ostrich-plumes.

The Amazons galloped off. Vakar was tempted to do likewise, but reason told him that the panting horses would not get very far, and besides these were probably the Tritons whom he wished to reach.

As they came up he called: "The gods be with you!"

The surrounded him, long lances levelled, and one said: "Who are you?"

"Vakar of Lorsk, on my way to visit your king."

"Indeed? Our king does not admit every passing vagabond to his intimacy. You shall enter our service at the bottom and work your way up, if you have the guts. Seize him, men."

XI

THEY took away Vakar's sword and knife, but missed the poisoned dagger in his shirt. They tied his and Fual's hands, while one rummaged through Vakar's scrip and exclaimed with delight over the wealth therein.

"Come along," said the leader.

Vakar rode slowly in the midst of them, with spear-points poised to prod him should he make a break.

"Am I a dog?" he growled. "I am a prince in my own country, and if you do not treat me as such it will be the worse for you."

The leader leaned over and slapped Vakar's face with his gauntleted hand.

"Shut up," he said. "What you may be in another country means nothing to us."

Vakar's face became suffused with blood and he gritted his teeth. He rode silently fuming until they came to the shores of the lake, where a permanent fortified camp was set up. On the lakeward side of the camp a jetty had been built out into the water, and to this was secured a big shallow-draft galley-barge.

The leader of the Tritons placed his hand against Vakar's shoulder and gave a sharp push. Vakar fell off his horse into the dirt, giving his shoulder a painful bruise. Fual followed his master into the muck, and the Tritons laughed loudly.

While Vakar was struggling into a sitting position a kick in the ribs knocked him over again, sick and dizzy with pain.

"Get up, lazybones!" said the officer. "And get aboard."

Vakar hobbled down the slope to the barge while the Tritons made off with his horses and property. He and Fual were prodded aboard, and the boat was cast off and rowed out into the lake. Vakar huddled in the bow, too despondent to pay heed to his surroundings until Fual beside him exclaimed:

"Sir! Prince Vakar! Look at that!"

Something was floating beside the barge—a thing like a great rough-barked log, except that logs do not keep up with galleys by swimming with an undulant motion. Vakar gulped and said to the nearest Triton:

"What is that? One of your great serpents?"

"That is a crocodile," said the man. "The serpents keep to the swamps. The abundance of crocodiles accounts for the fact that although we live on the water, no Triton can swim, for if you fell overboard that fellow would have you before you could yell for a rope. So think not to escape from Menê by swimming."

Another Triton said, "It would be fun to lower him by a rope and then snatch him out when the crocodile snapped at him."

"Amusing, but it would probably cost us a recruit. Do you not value unlimited commerce with women more highly?"

Vakar mulled over this exchange. The last remark no doubt referred to the Triton's

hopes of winning their war and reducing the Amazons to the status of housewives whence they had risen. It gave him an idea of how to approach King Ximenon. After all he had helped to negotiate the treaty of Zhysk last year. If he was not overly likeable, his dour reserve gave some folk a trust in his impartiality that they might not otherwise have.

When an hour later they tied up at a similar pier on the island of Menê, the Tritons hustled Vakar and Fual ashore. A small fortified city, also called Menê, stood tangent to the shorefront. The Tritons conducted Vakar to a stockade, thrust him inside, removed his bonds, and left him. Fual they took elsewhere.

Vakar stretched his cramped arms and looked around. There were about a score of men of various tribes and races, from a stout ebony-skinned fellow from Blackland to a towering fair-haired Atlantean. Most wore ragged clothing and straggly beards.

"Good day," said Vakar.

The men looked at him and at each other, and began to sidle towards him. Soon they were all around him, grinning. One of them professed much interest in his clothing, pinching it and saying:

"A gentleman, eh?"

Another gave Vakar a sharp push, which made him stagger against another, who pushed him back. Prince Vakar had never been hazed in his life, so this treatment bewildered and infuriated him. At the next push he shouted: "I'll show you swine!" and hit the pusher in the face.

He never had a chance to see how effective his blow had been, because they all jumped on him at once. They caught his arms, and blows rained upon him. . . .

VAKAR came to an indefinite time later lying in a corner of the stockade. He tried to move and groaned. His body seemed to be one vast bruise. He inched up into a sitting position and found that he was nursing a swollen nose, a split lip, a pair of black eyes, and a few loose teeth. They must have stamped on him.

The sun was low when the gate of the stockade opened and a man stepped in with two buckets, one full of water and the other of a repellent-looking barley-porridge. The

men crowded around the buckets, scooping up water and mush with their hands. A couple of fights broke out. Vakar, though hungry, felt that he had no stomach for such rugged competition in his present state. The turmoil around the buckets subsided as the men stilled their most acute pangs of hunger.

"Here, stranger," said a voice, and Vakar looked up from his broodings to see the Black standing over him with an outstretched fist.

Vakar held out his cupped hands and received a gob of mush. The Negro said:

"You did not look as though you could get any for yourself. Next time the boys want a little fun with you, do not be a fool."

Vakar said: "Thank you," and fell to eating.

The following morning the same man came in, this time with an apronful of pieces of stale bread. Vakar hobbled over and snatched up a piece that rolled to his feet out of the scrimmage. He turned back towards his solitary place to eat it when a long arm came over his shoulder and tore the bread from his grasp.

He whirled. The tall blond Atlantean who had taken his bread was already turning away and beginning to eat it, confident in his superior size. He was the biggest man in the enclosure, and Vakar inferred that he was the unofficial leader.

Vakar saw red. His hand darted inside his shirt and came out with the dagger. A second later he had buried the blade in the Atlantean's broad back. The Atlantean gave a strangled noise, jerked away, and collapsed.

The rest of the men chattered excitedly in a dozen languages. They looked at Vakar, standing over the dead man with the dripping dagger, with more respect than they had shown before. One said:

"Quick, hide that thing! They will be here any minute!"

It sounded like good advice. Vakar wiped the dagger on the Atlantean's leather kilt, took off the harness under his shirt, sheathed the blade, dug a hole in the dirt with his fingers, buried the weapon, and stamped the earth into place over it.

He had hardly done so when a pair of Tritons entered. When they saw the corpse

one of them shouted:

"What happened? Who did this? You there, speak!"

The man addressed said: "I do not know. I was relieving myself with my back to the rest, and heard a scuffle, and when I looked around he was dead."

The Triton asked the same questions of the others, but got similar answers: "I was throwing knucklebones and was not watching. . . ." "I was taking a snooze. . . ."

"Line up," said the Triton and passed down the line searching the men's scanty clothing. He finally said: "We could torture you, but you would tell so many lies it would not be worth while. Off you go to drill. Lively, now. Ho, you!"

Vakar saw that the Triton was addressing him.

"You look battered. Have they roughed you up?"

Vakar, who had been limping towards the gate said: "I fell."

"Well, you need not drill today."

"I am Prince Vakar of Lorsk, and I wish to speak to your king."

"Shut up before I change my mind about the drill," said the Triton, following the recruits out.

AFTER about the tenth day Vakar lost track of the time he spent in the stockade. He learned that life among these unwilling soldiers was on a lower level than he had ever known to exist.

So long as Vakar wore his dagger nobody molested him. When he had somewhat recovered from the despair induced by his beating, he engaged some of his fellow-inmates in conversation, picking up what information he could about the peoples and customs of the surrounding regions and a few words of their languages. In line with the scheme that he was concocting he asked what the Tritons deemed their most sacred oath.

"They swear by the horns of Aumon," a small Pharusian told him. "That is some sheep-headed fertility-god of theirs. While they break all other oaths, that one holds them. Though why any right-minded people should chose such a stupid and timid beast. . . ."

Before a month had elapsed, a day came

when the Tritons announced that as the men were now well enough trained, they would be moved elsewhere. But instead of sending Vakar off with the rest, one of them told him:

"You shall see the king after all. Step lively, and bear yourself respectfully in his presence."

Vakar was conducted back to the waterfront of the city of Menê and aboard a large red galley. On the poop, in a chair of pretence, sat the man whom he had come to see: King Ximenon, big, stout, clean-shaven, in bright shimmery robes, with a golden wreath on his curly graying hair. Beside him stood a man in gilded snakeskin armor, and a pet cheetah lay purring at the king's feet. On the middle finger of his left hand, Vakar saw, he wore a broad plain ring of dull-gray metal.

The Ring of the Tritons.

"Well?" said the king.

Vakar gathered his forces. "Have they told you who I am, King?"

"Something about your being a prince in some far-western land, but that means nothing to us. We cannot prove you are not lying. Get to your business, or by the fangs of Drax it will go hard with you."

"All I wish to suggest is that I may be able to end your war with the Amazons."

The king's porcine eyes glittered with interest. "So? Some new weapon or strategem? I listen."

"Not exactly, sir, but I think I could negotiate a treaty of peace with them."

The king leaned forward with an impatient motion. "Peace? On what terms? Have you reason to think these doxies are ready to surrender?"

"Not at all."

"Then are you proposing that *we* give up? I will have you flayed—"

"No, sir. I had in mind a half-and-half arrangement, whereby each should respect the rights of the other. It might not give you all you would like, but at least thereafter you could strive with them as men and women should strive, on a well-padded bed . . ."

Vakar gave King Ximenon another quarter-hour of argument, with an eloquence that he had not known he possessed. He depicted the beauties of cohabitation until the

king said:

"A splendid idea! We should have tried it sooner, but after the bloodshed and bitterness between us no one on either side would make the first move. As an outsider you are in a position of advantage. Queen Aramnê is a fine-looking woman; could you arrange for me to wed her as part of the peace-settlement?"

"I can try."

"If you can do that along with the rest you can practically name your own reward."

"I have already chosen it, my lord."

"Huh? What then?"

"The Tritonian Ring."

"What? Are you mad?" shouted the king, looking at the dull circlet on his finger. "I will have you—"

At that instance the man who stood beside the king's chair leaned over and spoke in the king's ear. They muttered back and forth, and the king said to Vakar:

"Your price is impossible. We will instead give you all the gold you can carry."

"No, sir."

The king roared and threatened and haggled, and still Vakar held out. Finally Ximenon said:

"If you had not caught us at a time when prolonged continence has driven us nearly mad . . . But so be it. If you can put this treaty through you shall have the ring."

"Do you swear by the horns of Aumon?"

The king looked startled. "You have been inquiring into our customs, I see. Very well. I swear by the holy horns of Aumon that if you negotiate this treaty with the Amazons successfully, without impairing our masculine rights to equal treatment, and get me Queen Aramnê to wife, I will give you the Ring of the Tritons. You are a witness, Sphaxas," he said to the man beside him, and again to Vakar: "Does that satisfy you? Good. How soon can you set forth for Kherronex?"

XII

QUEEN ARAMNE was indeed an impressive-looking woman, as tall as Vakar, with a broad-shouldered mannish figure clad in a loose short tunic that left one small breast bare. She sat in a chair of pretence on her galley-barge, the torchlight

gleaming on the pearls in her diadem, and rested her chin on one capable fist.

The queen said to Vakar: "I have almost decided to accede to your proposal—with a few minor reservations. However, words are not enough."

"Yes?" Vakar wondered what was in store for him this time.

"Before I commit my people to this course, I should like a sample of the benefits offered by King Ximenon."

Vakar's heavy eyebrows rose. "You mean, madam . . ."

"Exactly. You shall attend me tonight." A faint smile touched the queen's frosty face. "I too have lost time to make up for."

At least, thought Vakar, this new test promised to be one that he was competent to surmount, even though he had never contemplated it as a method of earning a living.

For the next few days Vakar shuttled back and forth between Menê and Kheronex while King Ximenon and Queen Aramnê bargained over the final terms of the treaty: what rights each sex should have in the reunited Tritonian state, the marriage contract between the king and the queen, and other details.

At last all was settled. The royal galleys of the two sovereigns should meet in the lake midway between the islands. To show mutual trust, Queen Aramnê should come aboard the king's galley for the signing of the contract; then the king should board hers for the wedding ceremony and the feast to follow.

The ships met. A dinghy brought the queen across the short stretch of the glassy lake between them. The red ball of the sun was just touching the smooth blue horizon when Aramnê, followed by a small guard of Amazons, clambered up the side of the king's galley.

Sphaxas, Ximenon's minister, spread a big sheet of brown papyrus on a table on the deck and read the terms. The king and queen swore by Aumon and Drax and all the other gods of Tritonia to abide by the terms of the treaty and called down an endless concatenation of dooms and disasters upon their own heads should they fail. Finally, as neither could write, they impressed their seals upon the papyrus and ex-

changed a kiss as a pledge of amity. Then they turned, the tall woman and the grossly massive man, towards the companionway, laughing at some private joke. Sphaxas followed. Before they put foot over the side the queen turned her head back and said:

"You shall come too, Prince Vakar. What would the celebration be without the man who did the most to bring it about?"

VAKAR followed, grinning, and hoping that Aramnê would not betray their recent relationship to King Ximenon—at least not before he was out of Tritonia. But impatient as he was to get his ring and begone, he saw no harm in one good binge.

On the queen's ship a priest of Aumon performed the marriage ceremony. The king cut the throat of a white lamb and let the blood trickle on the altar. He dipped a finger in the blood and marked a symbol on the queen's forehead, and she did likewise to him. All sang a paeon to the gods of Tritonia, after which there was much familiar back-slapping and lewd jests. Vakar, feeling thoroughly pleased with himself, said:

"And now, King, how about my ring?"

King Ximenon grinned broadly and pulled the ring off his finger. "Here," he said, dropping it into Vakar's palm.

"And now," continued the king, "there is one other small matter we must attend to before proceeding with the feast. Seize him!"

Before Vakar knew what was happening, muscular hands gripped his arms. His mouth fell open in bewilderment as the king stepped forward and wrenched the ring out of his hand.

"I will borrow this," said the king, slipping it back upon his finger. "Strip him for sacrifice."

"Are you mad? What are you doing?" cried Vakar.

Ximenon replied: "We are about to sacrifice you to Drax."

"But why, in the name of Lyr's barnacles?"

"For two reasons: First, old Drax has not had much attention from us lately. Curiously, since I came into possession of the ring, not one god has visited me in slumber. Secondly, I have sworn by the horns of Aumon to give you the ring. But I have not

sworn to respect your life and liberty afterwards, and I cannot let so valuable a talisman leave the kingdom."

"Queen Aramn !" shouted Vakar. "Can you do nothing about this?"

The queen smiled frostily. "It is your misfortune, but I fully agree with my consort. We planned this stroke just now on the king's barge, while you were gauping at the flute-girls. And why should you complain? Better men than you have died upon our altars to insure our land's fertility."

"Strumpet!" screamed Vakar, straining in the grip of the guard. "Was my nocturnal performance then insufficient, that you turn me over to this treacherous hyena?"

The king put on a sardonic smile, saying: "If you had been wise you would have kept your mouth shut and gained a quick death. Now, for slandering the queen, you must receive additional punishment. Flog him."

The first stars were coming out as Vakar's wrists were bound and hoisted above his head, so that he half-dangled with only his toes on the deck. He had sometimes wondered what he would do if flogged, and had firmly resolved not to give his tormentors the satisfaction of seeing him weep or hearing him scream.

But when the whip whistled behind him and struck across his bare back, sending a white-hot sheet of pain shooting through his torso, he found it much harder to bear than he had ever imagined. The first blow he took in silence, and the second, but the third brought a grunt out of him, and the fourth a yell. By the tenth he was screaming like all the others, and felt warm blood trickling down his back.

Swish—crack! Swish—crack! He jerked and screeched with each blow, though hating himself for doing so. The pain filled his whole universe. He would do anything—anything—

Then a vestige of his natural craft asserted itself. With a terrible effort he stopped screaming and relaxed, letting his legs bend, his head loll, and his eyes close.

After a few more lashes came a pause. A voice said: "The wretch has swooned. What now, sir?"

"Wake him up," said the king.

The rope that held Vakar's wrists was let run so that he fell at full length on the

blood-spattered deck. He continued to play dead, even when a heavy boot slammed into his ribs and when a gout of cold water splashed over his head.

THE queen said: "Let us waste no more time on him; I am hungry. Sacrifice him now."

"Very well," came the voice of the king. "Drag him over to the altar. You shall do the honors, Sphaxas."

Vakar felt his wrists being untied. He was dragged across the deck to the small altar on which the lamb had been sacrificed for the wedding. Watching through slitted lids, Vakar saw the minister draw the broad knife and try the edge with his thumb, while the king stood nearby, leaning back against the rail.

Vakar relaxed as completely as possible, so that the Tritons had more trouble dragging him than they otherwise would have. When they got him to the altar they asked another of their number to help them hoist him across it, for by Tritonian standards Vakar was a big man.

Then came the moment when the grips on his arms were relaxed while the Tritons braced their feet and shifted their hands to lift him. In that second, Vakar came to life with the suddenness of a levin-bolt.

With a mighty twist and jerk he broke the loose grips upon his arms, got his feet under him, and dealt the nearest Triton a punch in the belly that doubled the man up in a spasm of gasps and coughs. There was a shout from those watching:

"Watch out!" "Seize him!" "He is—"

Hands reached out from all sides, but before they could fasten on to his naked hide, slippery with sweat and blood, Vakar burst through them. He brushed past Sphaxas, standing open-mouthed with the sacrificial knife in his hand, and as he passed dealt the minister a buffet below the ear that stretched his length upon the deck.

Now one man stood between Vakar and the rail: King Ximenon, three paces away. Vakar strained forward, leaning as if he were starting a hundred-yard sprint, and smote the deck with the balls of his feet while the hands of the closing Tritons snatched at his bloody back. At the first break Ximenon had reached for the silver-

shafted palstave thrust through his girdle, and as Vakar bounded forward the bronze hatchet-head whipped up and back for a skull-shattering blow.

Vakar left the deck in a diving leap and, as the palstave started down, struck the upper part of the king's body head-first with outstretched arms. The stubble on the king's chin rasped his ear as he caught the king around the neck, and his momentum bore the king back against the rail. Down and back went the king's torso and up flew his feet. In deadly embrace the two men tumbled over the rail into the dark water below.

Then Vakar felt a movement of the water behind him: the fluid pushed sharply at him as if displaced by the passage of a large body. A glance over his shoulder saw an immense crocodile, a forty-footer, bearing down upon them from the murk.

Vakar let go the king to use his arms for swimming just as the crocodile arrived with a tigerish rush. The great jaws gaped and clomped on the still struggling king. A hide of horny leather brushed past Vakar, tumbling him over in the water and lacerating him with its projections. He had a brief impression of the great serrated tail undulating lazily as it propelled the monster past him.

Vakar came to the surface again. As he shook the water out of his eyes and ears he perceived that he was now somewhat further from the galley, on which people rushed about madly, some yelling for bows, some for spears, and some for oars.

A bowshot away lay the king's galley. Vakar struck out for it, simultaneously trying to think up some special story.

He swam as he had never swum before, ears straining to hear the first splash of the oars of the queen's galley behind him. He was over halfway to the king's ship when he heard it. At the same time an arrow plunked into the water nearby.

He plowed on. Another arrow came closer. The king's ship was near now; a row of expectant faces lined the rail. Someone called:

"What in Drax's name goes on over there?"

"A rope!" yelled Vakar.

The oars of the king's ship moved too, gently so as not to run Vakar down. A rope

slapped across his tortured back. He grabbed it but was too exhausted to climb. At last they dropped a bight for him to wriggle into and hauled him up. He gasped:

"They slew the king! It was all a plot to get him into their hands. They cut the throats of the king and Sphaxas and all the other Tritons, and would have cut mine had I not dived over the side."

EXCLAMATIONS of horror and amazement burst from the Tritons crowding round. An officer of the galley said:

"How do we know you are not lying?"

"Look at my back! Does that look like a fake?"

The captain of the galley roared: "I knew there was some such trick in the offing! Bend the oars; we will sink them before they slip away in the darkness! Stroke! Stroke!"

The galley moved with increasing speed in a path that curved towards the other ship. As the king's barge bore down, the oars of the queen's ship, which had been idle for some minutes, began to move again. But the king's ship was going too fast for the other to dodge. As the former neared its target, a chorus of screams burst from the queen's barge. In the dusk Vakar could see the Amazons running about, waving arms, and shrieking at the approaching ship.

Crash!

The ram of the king's ship crunched through the side of the other as if it had been papyrus. With a terrible clatter and roar of breaking timbers and a thin screaming of women, the queen's barge broke up into a floating tangle of boards, ropes, oars, gilded ornaments, bright hangings, and thrashing human limbs. The king's ship plowed through the mass and out the other side, ropes trailing from her ram.

As the king's galley turned and headed back towards Mené, Vakar caught sight of a couple of moving objects on the dark surface of Lake Tritonis: crocodiles swimming towards the wreck. He felt a little badly about having caused the deaths of all those Amazons of lesser degree, who might not have had anything to do with the attempt to murder him. Vakar disliked killing

women on grounds of waste not, want not. But then, he consoled himself, they were probably all as perfidious as their queen. And what else could he have done?

Though his experience had been exhausting, Vakar Zhu turned his mind immediately to his next step. The Tritonian Ring was gone for good in the belly of a crocodile, but the thing from which it had been cut, the "fallen star" lay to the south in the realm of Belem. And if one ring had been made from it, another could be.

WITH the bronze buckler slung against his back Vakar felt better, though the sparse inhabitants of this barren land continued to flee from the sight of him.

"Why no houses?" he said. "I never heard the Belemians lived in the open like wild beasts."

Fual shrugged. "Who can say. This is the home of the blackest magic in the world."

The mountains became ever steeper and rockier and grimmer-looking.

"This seems to go on forev—what's that?" said Vakar, whose ears had picked up the echo of the sound of many men moving. "Are some more of our unwashed friends coming to greet us?"

He set his horse in motion at a walk, peering ahead. The sounds grew louder.

The noise came from a group of twenty-odd izzuneg—the headless zombies that served Lord Awoqqas. These were dog-trotting three abreast down the road, carrying copper-headed spears. Behind them a pair of men rode small horses, like sheep-dogs herding their flock. These men shouted and pointed at the travelers, and the izzuneg broke into a run, their spears raised and their single pectoral eyes staring blankly ahead.

XIII

VAKAR wheeled his horse and started back down the defile. As he turned he saw that Fual had already done so, and was going at a reckless gallop, though the little Aremorian was usually afraid of anything faster than an easy canter. Vakar could hear the slap of the bare feet of the izzuneg on the trail behind him. A glance back

showed that he was gaining on the pursuers, and after a few more bends in the defile they were out of sight. Vakar kept on at an easier pace as Fual called back:

"Do they wish to kill us too, sir?"

"I don't know. How can you judge the expression on a man's face when he has no face? But that charge looked hostile. It seems we are not welcome in Belem."

They rode on until Vakar began to look for the lower end of the defile. And then—

They came around a bend in the road and almost ran headlong into another group of izzuneg with a single mounted man behind them. Again the horseman pointed and shouted, and the headless ones rushed.

Vakar and Fual whirled again and galloped up the trail down which they had just come. Behind him Vakar heard Fual's wail:

"We're lost! We're caught between two armies!"

"Not yet lost," grunted Vakar. "Keep your eye peeled for a place to climb."

He remembered Kurtevan's remark that the izzuneg could not look around or up, and the sides of the defile, while steep, were not unscalable. After several minutes of hard riding he sighted a suitable place. With a warning cry to Fual he thrust down upon his horse's back with his hands and threw himself into a crouch, his feet on the saddle-pad. Then before he could lose his balance he leaped up and to the side.

He landed on a ledge six feet above the roadway, skinned a knee, and then went bounding and scrambling up the hillside, sending down a small landslide of rocks and pebbles. Fual panted and clawed after him. Below them the horses trotted a few paces further, then stopped to eat the scanty herbage.

"Hurry up there," gritted Vakar. "And no noise!"

The horses snorted and whinnied as the two groups of izzuneg converged. The animals collected in a solid group, rolling their eyes and showing their teeth. The headless ones trotted from either hand and met right below Vakar, milling witlessly and accidentally pricking each other with their pikes. As they brushed against the horses, these lashed out with teeth and hooves. One headless one was hurled flat and lay still.

The horsemen shouted back and forth over the neck-stumps of their strange force, carrying on a conversation in which Vakar could sense astonishment and frustration. Finally one of them dismounted, gave his bridle to an izzuni to hold, and pushed through the crowd toward the horses. He reached for the bridle of Vakar's own horse.

Watching from his ledge, Vakar felt red rage rise within him. These were grossly stupid beings.

"Come on," he muttered and rose to his feet. He seized the nearest stone of convenient size and sent it crashing down the slope; then another and another. Fual joined him.

The rocks bounded and plowed into the milling mass below. Some struck other rocks and started them to rolling down. Horses screamed; the three men with heads yelled and pointed to where Vakar and Fual, working like demons, were hurling every stone within reach. The bigger stones plunged in among the izzuneg, who did nothing to avoid them, with a sound of snapping spear-shafts and breaking bones.

WHEN the slide stopped, the mass of izzuneg was nearly buried, as well as the officer who had dismounted among them. Limbs and spears stuck up here and there among the rocks, and all four of Vakar's horses were more or less buried. The remaining two mounted men still sat their horses. Then they wheeled and were gone.

Next day as Vakar and Fual climbed complainingly along the trail on foot a man rode out of the mountains ahead of them and held up an empty hand in a gesture of peace. Vakar let him approach but kept his hand near his hilt. The man spoke a little Tritonian and Vakar a few words of Belemian, so that with effort enough they managed to make themselves mutually understood. The man said:

"I am Lord Shagarnin, and I have been sent by King Awoqqas to welcome you to our land and guide you to Niowat."

"That is kind of Awoqqas," said Vakar. "Were those his servants who gave us such a boisterous reception yesterday?"

"Yes, but that was an error. The gods had warned Awoqqas that a certain Vakar Lorska was approaching from Tritonia, and

that the interests of gods and men required that he be destroyed. You are not he, are you?"

"No, I am Thiegos of Sederado," said Vakar, giving the first name that popped into his head.

"That is what the king thought when report was brought to him of what a mighty magician you are, for the gods had specifically described Vakar as an ordinary man of no fearsome powers. So when the survivors of this unfortunate attack told how you flew straight up in the air on bat's wings and hurled a mountain upon your attackers by your spells, he thought there must be some mistake. He hopes you will pardon his fault and accept his hospitality."

"I shall be glad to do so," said Vakar.

HE UNDERSTOOD what had happened: The surviving officers had galloped back to Niowat and, to avoid blame for the disaster, had told a highly colored tale of the battle. Vakar was not sure that Shagarnin or the king would be taken in by his denial of his identity; this looked like an effort to lure him to destruction.

"This is the most remarkable land I have seen in my travels. For example, the day before yesterday we were also attacked, but by savages with heads."

"That is unfortunate," said Shagarnin, eyes opening in something like fear. "It must have been some of our commoners."

"Why do your commoners attack you?"

"Because the fools do not wish King Awoqqas to make izzuneg of them. As if such filth had rights!" Shagarnin spat.

"Does he plan to make your whole commonality into these—izzuneg?" asked Vakar, keeping the astonishment out of his voice.

"Yes; it is his great plan. For our king is the world's greatest magician and has learned that izzuneg make ideal subjects: docile, tireless, fearless, orderly, with no subversive thoughts of their own. He has even found it possible to breed them, though the children have heads like normal folk. Come back in a few years and you shall see an ideal kingdom: The *ullimen*, that is to say us, ruling a completely headless subject population, and everybody orderly and happy."

"It is an astounding idea," said Vakar.

"I am glad you think so. Meanwhile we have trouble rounding up our subjects for decapitation. As if heads did the rabble any good! And since the making of an izzuni requires a mighty spell, this great design cannot be accomplished all at once."

As they neared Niowat, Vakar saw more of the round stone huts, but few people. Those whom he did see darted into huts or behind rocks with the speed of a lizard fleeing into a crack in the wall. Once he saw a little group of filthy faces peering around a hut with an expression of such concentrated hatred as to make him shudder.

"Here is the palace," said Shagarnin.

Vakar did not at first see what the Belemian meant. Then he observed a hole in the side of a craggy hill that dominated Niowat. A bridge of logs with a straw paving crossed a deep ditch in front of this opening. Several izzuneg stood about the entrance with spears.

As the party trotted over the bridge, the hooves of the horses sounded like muffled drums. They dismounted, and an izzuni led the horses away. Shagarnin talked with a whole man inside the entrance to the tunnel, then said: "Come."

He led them through a maze of tunnels. Vakar whistled: If the palace was a rabbit-warren of holes dug out of the inside of the hill, Awoqqas had spared no trouble to make it a handsome warren. The walls were plastered and painted with geometrical patterns outlined with nails of gold and silver; no representations of living beings as in Ogugia and Phaiaxia. Every few feet a yellow oil-flame danced on top of a great copper torchère. Vakar passed an izzuni lagging a copper kettle along the corridor and pouring oil into the lamps as he went. Vakar tried to remember the turns and cross-tunnels, but soon gave up, saying in Lorskian to Fual:

"I hope we shan't have to leave in a hurry, because we should never get out without a guide."

After much winding and waiting and passing of passwords and pushing through massive doors ornamented with gold and precious stones, Shagarnin led them into a room where several izzuneg stood guard. The nobleman said:

"Take off your weapons and hand them to this izzuni."

As this was a standard regulation for visitors to royalty, Vakar complied. Another izzuni opened a door on the far side and Shagarnin said:

"The king! Prostrate yourselves in adoration."

Coming from Lorsk with its free-and-easy manners, Vakar did not like prostrating himself for any mortal and would have even been choosy about which gods he so honored. However, not wishing to become an izzuni over a matter of protocol he did as he was bid until a squeaky voice said:

"RISE. Shagarnin, show our visitors' slave to the chamber they will occupy, so that he shall prepare it for his master. You—what did you say your name was?"

"Thiegos of Sederado," replied Vakar.

"Fiegos, remain where you are and be quiet, for I am about to perform a divination."

Vakar looked around. The man speaking to him sat on a throne cut in the stone of the side of the chamber, six steps above the floor-level. He wore many-colored robes of that shimmery stuff called silk, which Kurtevan had also worn, and which Vakar had been told came from the land of Sericana beyond the sunrise. Awoqqas was a slim yellow-skinned balding man with deep lines in his careworn face—commonplace-looking enough except for his size. He was, Vakar judged, less than five feet tall.

In a flash of insight Vakar realized why Awoqqas sat upon a throne six feet up, and why he was beheading the entire commonality of his kingdom. He could not bear to be smaller than his subjects, and therefore was employing this drastic method of reducing their stature so that they should no longer look down upon him in any sense of the phrase.

Awoqqas was staring at a cleared space on the stone floor in front of his throne. On the edges of this space two small oil-lamps with copper reflectors burned and, as Vakar watched, an izzuni came in and extinguished the torchères, leaving the chamber illuminated only by the two little lamps on the floor.

The space lit by the lamps, Vakar saw, was marked with a large and complex pentacle. Awoqqas extended his arms towards it, fingers pointing, and muttered a spell in a language that the Lorskan did not know. Gradually the pentacle faded from sight as a phantasm appeared on the illuminated space. The phantasm was a reproduction in miniature of a stretch of sandy desert, across which flowed a mass of riders. These riders bestrode tall humped animals that Vakar recognized from descriptions as camels, but like the rest of the scene they were in miniature, man and camel together standing no more than a span in height. The men wore shroud-like black cloths that were fastened to their heads by head-bands and fell away in folds to cover most of their bodies, and the lower parts of their faces were concealed by veils. They carried long spears. Their number seemed endless; as some passed out of sight on one side of the phantasm, others came into view on the other.

King Awoqqas spoke a word and the phantasm vanished. As the izzuni came in again and relit the torchères, the king said: "You have seen the army of the Gwedulians marching westward along the southerly borders of my land. I thought they might turn north to attack us; but they are continuing west. I suspect they mean to cross the Tamenruft to assail Gamphasantia."

Vakar said: "Do you mean to warn the Gamphasantians, King?"

"No. I have nothing to do with them; I do not wish to antagonize the Gwedulians; and it would do no good, for the Gamphasants pay no heed to outside advice."

"Are they a civilized people?"

"One might say so; they have a capital city and raise their food by farming. In other respects they are very odd. But tell me what you are doing here, Master Fiegos?"

"I am traveling for pleasure, to see places far and strange before settling down. For instance, I have heard of the—ah—unusual customs of Belem, and of your talisman, the Tahakh, and should like to see these marvels with my own eyes."

Awoqqas nodded. "It is proper that the barbarous and disorderly outer lands should send men to learn our superior ways. Per-

haps some day they will all be as orderly as we. You have seen the izzuneg, and tomorrow I will have you shown the fallen star. There is a fascinating story of how it got into my possession after it originally fell in Tartaros. But—you are something of a magician yourself, are you not?"

Vakar made a modest gesture. "Not compared to you, my lord King."

Awoqqas nodded with the ghost of a smile. "That is the spirit I like. Most travelers are insufferable braggarts and disorderly to boot. But I cannot continue this audience because I must eat. I need all my strength in this business."

THE king ate for a few minutes, then said: "Perhaps you would like livelier entertainment," and to the izzuni: "Send in Rezzâra and a musician."

As the headless servant went out, Vakar asked: "How do you control those beings? How can they hear you without ears?"

"They do not hear with material ears. When you speak to one your thoughts are perceived directly by the sylph animating it. The sylph will, however, obey only me or one whom I have expressly delegated to command it; otherwise a fearful disorder would ensue. Ah, here is our most accomplished dancer. Dance for the visitor, Rezzâra!"

Two people had come in: a small Belemian with a tootle-pipe and a woman. The latter was young and voluptuously formed—a fact that was patent at once, for she wore nothing but an assortment of rings, bracelets, anklets, and pendants of jewels and amber beads suspended from ears, neck, and waist. This gaudery clattered and clicked as she moved.

The little man sat cross-legged on the floor and began playing a wailing tune that reminded Vakar of the music that Qasig had played in Sederado when he had brought the serpent to life. Vakar braced himself for some such marvel, but all that happened was that Rezzâra went into a sensuous dance. She sank to her knees before him, leaning back and looking up through half-closed lids, her arms writhing like serpents. Had he been alone with her . . .

Rezzâra finished her act with a pros-

tration in front of Awoqqas and ran out, her ornaments jingling. Her accompanist followed.

"A splendid performance," said Vakar sincerely.

"Yes, she too is among the wonders of Belem. Now I must return to my labors. You shall hear when it is convenient for you to be shown the Tahakh."

"Thank you, sir," said Vakar, making his belly-flop.

An izzuni at the door handed Vakar back his sword and guided him through the maze of tunnels to a chamber lined with gay-colored cloths that concealed the cold rough rock behind them. There was a substantial bed with a kind of canopy over it, a couple of stools, and a niche in the wall in which stood an ivory carving of an ugly Belemian god. Fual, who had been sitting on one of the stools, rose and indicated a tray of food and a jug of wine.

"Now where," said Vakar, "did you get those?"

"I stole them from the king's kitchen while the chief cook's back was turned. As the under-cooks are all headless they presented no problem. Let me pour you some of this wine. Sour stuff, but better than water."

Vakar sat down upon the edge of the bed, saying: "I could use a little, after my interview with the wizard-king."

"How did it go, sir?" said Fual, handing his master a brimming silver cup.

"I thought I'd seen everything, but—"

A knock interrupted. Vakar called: "Come in!"

The golden rivets of the door glittered as it swung inward to reveal Rezzâra the dancer, who said: "Send your servant away, my lord Thiegos. I would speak to you alone."

XIV

FUAL looked alarmed, but Vakar hitched his sword around and said: "Go on, Fual. What is it, Rezzâra?"

Fual went out. Vakar tensed himself, but reflected that at least he need not worry about her whisking a dagger from her clothing. Any weapon that could be concealed in her costume would be too small for any-

thing but cleaning finger-nails.

She waited until the door closed, then said: "Lord, when do you plan to go?"

"I had not planned. Why?"

"Take me with you! I can stay here no longer."

"Huh? What is this?" Vakar's suspicions were at once alert.

"I hate King Awoqqas and I love you."

"*What?* By Tandyła's third eye, this is sudden!"

She blinked her large dark eyes at him. "I cannot endure that fiend, with his fanatical notions of order, and I burned with passion for you from the moment I saw you. Oh, take me! You shall never regret it!"

"An interesting idea," said Vakar dryly, sipping his wine, "but how should I carry you out?"

"You are a man. You can overcome obstacles. What are you really here for?"

"To see the sights."

"I do not believe that. You wish to steal the Tahakh."

"The Tahakh is certainly valuable. Would you like some wine?"

"No! All I wish is for you to crush me in your strong arms and cover my eager body with your burning kisses." She writhed at him.

"You are nothing if not explicit, Rezzâra. But—"

"Do you seek the Tahakh? Do you?" She grasped his wrist in both her hands and shook him.

"I have come a long way to see it."

"If I show it to you, to do with as you wish, will you take me?"

"If I can," he said, stroking his mustache.

She stepped over to the niche in the wall and lifted out the ugly ivory image. Behind it Vakar glimpsed something dark.

"There," she said. "Take it yourself, but be careful not to get it near me. Its touch is said to make women barren."

"Hm." Vakar advanced cautiously and looked into the niche. There lay what looked like a stone: about the size of two fists, a dark brown that was almost black, and rough and pitted on its irregular surface.

He extended a finger. When nothing happened he continued to advance his finger

until it touched the stone. It felt colder than he would have expected. He grasped it and lifted it out with a grunt of surprise. It must weigh well over ten pounds.

He turned the thing over and found a place where tools had worked upon it: evidently to saw or chisel off the small piece from which the smith of Tartaros had made the Ring of the Tritons. He gazed at it in wonder. So this was what a star looked like up close? He would have expected something bigger. He asked:

"Are you sure this is the Tahakh?"

"Quite sure."

She lay back on the bed, stretching luxuriously. "You will soon realize you have never known what joy life can hold. Come kiss me!"

She held up her arms. Well, thought Vakar, why not? Life did not go on forever, and in this career of adventure into which he had been pitched it was likely to be even shorter than otherwise. He laid down the Tahakh, lifted his sword-belt off over his head and laid baldric and scabbard beside the fallen star, and picked up the silver wine-cup for one more swallow.

He stood by the bed, holding the cup in his hand and looking down at Rezzâra's sleek olive-skinned form, from which the jewels winked up, adorning without concealing. He realized that these ornaments represented enough of an asset to take a traveller a long way. . . .

And then the wine-cup dropped from Vakar's limp fingers as a horrifying change took place before his eyes. The girl's head faded from view, leaving her nothing but a female izzuni.

"Rezzâra!" he called sharply.

A faint voice—Rezzâra's, but barely audible, sounding inside his skull, replied: "Come, my love, let us take our fill of passion. . . . I burn for you. . . ."

He leaned over and passed his hand through the air where her head had been. It met no resistance. He could not quite force himself to touch the downy neck-stump. Again that tiny voice sounded in his head, like the cry of a distant bird flying off into the sunset:

"So—you know? Do not blame me, stranger, for I am but a wandering sylph, constrained by Awoqqa's will. He cast a

glamor upon this body to beguile you. If you wish, you may still. . . ."

THE suggestion was never completed, for a sound over Vakar's head caused him to look up and then to jerk frantically back as a great net detached itself from the canopy. It fell down upon the bed and was drawn tight over Rezzâra's body. One of the ropes brushed Vakar's hair as he leaped, and at that instant the door flew open.

In rushed a squad of izzuneg, unarmed with hands outspread to clutch, and behind them came the little king.

Vakar stooped for his sword. His right hand snatched up the scabbard while his left touched the Tahakh. He rose, whirling to face the intruders with both objects, and hardly knowing what he did he tossed the heavy stone over the izzuneg at Awoqqa, then drew his sword just as the izzuneg reached him.

There was no time for thrusting. Sidestepping, he struck right and left, slicing open torsos and reaching arms. The izzuneg, spraying blood, came on anyway. Hands clamped upon his arms. . . .

The grip of the hands relaxed. All the izzuneg, with a faint exhalation of breath, slumped to the floor in a tangle of bare brown bodies. Looking across the shambles, Vakar saw the king lying near the door with his head staved in. And in his mind was the thin voice of the sylph that had animated Rezzâra sounded:

"The spell is broken and we are all free. . . . Thank you, stranger, and farewell. . . ."

Vakar stood staring stupidly, his mind wandering, until Fual burst in, crying: "What's happened, my lord? I was in the kitchens, where this king ordered me to go, when all the headless ones fell dead! Isn't that the king, dead too? And who's that on the bed? Have you cut off her head? I should not have thought that of you, sir. . . ."

"She never had any, poor thing," said Vakar slowly.

Fual's teeth chattered. "What now, sir?" "Collect our stuff and get out."

Fual leaned over the body of Rezzâra, cut the ropes of the net with his dagger, and started stripping the carcass of its ornaments. The bodies began to stink of decay

with unnatural rapidity. He said over his shoulder:

"My lord, whither now?"

"Since the smiths of Tartaros seem to know how to make things of this star-stuff, I thought we should go there."

"To Blackland? But they *eat* people!" wailed the Aremorian.

"Not all of them, and we're too lean to be appetizing. Roll the Tahakh up in our blanket."

THEY were riding towards Lake Koku-tos, the chief body of water in Gamphasantia, having retraced part of their route from Tritonia to Belem and then turned off westward at Lake Tashorin, skirting around the northern end of the Tamenruft. The tropical midsummer sun glared down cruelly upon them from a cloudless sky.

Fual said: "Let's hope these next people won't be even worse company."

"I'm not worried. I met one in Sederado who seemed decent enough even if he did try to murder me, and if I can warn them of the attack by the Gwedulians I should earn their gratitude."

Fual shuddered. "If the Gwedulians haven't got there before us. Why not go straight home, sir? We have that lump of star-metal . . ."

"Because I'm minded to have this lump made into rings and things, and the smiths of Tartaros are the only men who can do it. Are you thinking of that promise of freedom I made you?"

"Y-yes, sir," said Fual, mopping his forehead.

"Don't worry; I keep my word . . . These Gamphasants keep good-looking fields, don't they?"

"Hé!" cried Vakar.

As they entered a hamlet, people rushed out of the huts and surrounded the ponies in a jabbering mass. All were tall and slender with curly black hair and narrow aquiline features, and all were nude and burnt nearly black by the sun. Dogs ran barking around the edges of the crowd.

"Stand back!" shouted Vakar, drawing his sword. He repeated the warning in all the languages he knew. "Get away from those animals!"

When they paid no attention he whacked one with the flat to clear a path. With an outburst of yells the mass closed in. Before he could strike again, Vakar felt himself seized in a dozen places and ignominiously hauled from his horse. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Fual being likewise dismounted. He gritted his teeth in rage; what a fool he was!

THE Gamphasants hauled Vakar to his feet and wrenched the sword out of his hand, but did not strike him. A wrinkled leathery-looking man with a white beard and a melon-like potbelly stepped in front of Vakar and spoke to him.

Vakar shook his head. "I don't understand."

The oldster repeated his inquiry in other languages and finally in broken Hesperian:

"Who are you?"

"Vakar of Lorsk."

"Where is Lorsk?"

Vakar tried to explain, but gave up with a vague gesture toward the northwest.

"You come with us."

The old man gestured, and a couple of younger ones slipped a noose over Vakar's head and another over that of Fual. These nooses formed part of a single rawhide rope whose ends were held by several husky Gamphasants. Under the old man's direction these now started along the road towards Tokal, dragging the travelers with them. Others led the horses. Vakar, masking his fury, asked the old man why they were being so treated.

"Foreigners no live in Gamphasantia," was the reply.

"You mean you will kill us?"

"Oh, no! Gamphasants good people; no take life. But you no live."

"But how—"

"Is other ways," chuckled the patriarch.

Tokal, on the marge of sparkling Lake Kokutos, was a sprawling unwallled town, essentially a mud-hut village on a larger scale. Vakar shambled down a broad street in his noose, eyeing blank walls of sun-baked brick. Few of the folk were abroad in the heat of the day, and those few looked stolidly at the prisoners.

Vakar was dragged into some sort of official building. He listened uncompre-

hendingly to a colloquy between the leader of his present escort and a man who sat on a stool in a room, and then was stripped and shoved into a cell with a massive wooden door, closed by a large bolt on the outside. The door slammed shut, the bolt shot home, and they were left in semi-darkness.

The door had a small opening at eye-level with wooden bars; a similar opening served as a window on the opposite side of the cell.

"Well, sir, now you have got us in a fix!" said Fual. "If you'd only—"

"Shut up!" snapped Vakar, cocking a fist.

But then he relaxed. Their energy had better be put to uses other than fighting each other, and he had resolved not to hit Fual any more over petty irritations. He prowled around, scratching at the soft bricks with his thumb-nails and wondering how long it would take to claw one's way through the wall. The window gave a restricted view across the main street of Tokal. All that could be seen was another mud-brick wall opposite, and occasionally the head of a passing pedestrian. The Gamphasants seemed neither to ride nor to use chariots, and Vakar had seen no metal among them. The window also revealed that the wall was at least two feet thick.

At the other opening, that through the door, Vakar started back with a grunt of surprise. Another cell stood opposite this one, and through the grille in its door a fearful face looked into Vakar's. It was huge, ape-like, and subhuman, and at the same time vaguely familiar.

"Ha!" said Vakar. "Look at that!"

Fual got up from where he crouched and looked, raising himself on tiptoe. He said: "My lord, I think that's the ape-man we saw in Sederado, or another just like him."

Vakar called: "Nji!"

A low roar answered.

"Nji!" he said again, then in Hesperian: "Do you understand me?"

Another roar, and the thump of huge fists against the door. Vakar tried various languages, but nothing worked, and he finally gave up.

VAKAR ZHU had seen enough nudity in his life not to be impressed by it, but he still found the sight of the nation's highest

court meeting in that state incongruous. It was the morning after his arrival in Tokal.

His interpreter said in Hesperian: "You are accused of being a foreigner. What have you to say to that?"

"Of course I am a foreigner! How can I help where I was born?"

"You may not be able to help where you were born," said the judge through the interpreter, "but you can help coming to Gamphasantia, where it is illegal for outlanders to trespass."

"Why is that?"

"The Gamphasants are a virtuous people, and fear that commerce with barbarian nations would corrupt our purity."

"But I did not know about your silly law!"

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse. You could have inquired among the neighboring nations before you so rashly invaded our forbidden land. We will therefore stipulate you are a foreigner. Next, you are accused of carrying weapons in Gamphasantia. What do you say?"

"Of course I carried a sword! All travelers are permitted to in civilized countries."

"Not in Gamphasantia, which is the only truly civilized country. As no Gamphasant ever takes life, there is no reason why anybody should go armed, save when a farmer in an outlying region is allowed a spear to drive off lions. We agree, then, that you are guilty of carrying this murderous implement I have here before me. Next, you are accused of wearing clothes. What say you?"

Vakar tugged at his hair. "Do not tell me that too is illegal! Why can you not let folk do as they please?"

"If such a shocking anarchistic suggestion were followed we could never maintain our standard of ethics. Clothes are worn for three reasons: warmth, vanity, and false modesty. Gamphasantia is warm enough to make them unnecessary, and vanity is such an obvious sin that we need not discuss it. As for the third motive, found in some barbarous nations, the gods made the human body pure and holy in all its parts, and it is therefore an insult to them to cover any part as if it were shameful. We will therefore agree that you have worn clothes. But we are just people. If you object to this trial or the conduct thereof, speak before sentence

is passed."

Vakar cried: "I do indeed have something to say! I could have skirted your country, but chose to enter it instead to warn you of a deadly danger."

"What is that?"

"Do you know of the Gwedulians?"

"A barbarous tribe, I believe, who live far to the East around Lake Lynxama. What about them?"

"A great army of Gwedulians is nearing Gamphasantia across the Tamenruft on camels, to assail and plunder you."

"How do you know this?"

Vakar told of his séance in the throne room of King Awoqqas. The judge pulled his scanty beard and said:

"It might or might not be true, but it makes little difference."

"Little difference! The difference between life and death!"

"No; you do not understand us. We deem it unethical to oppose aggression by force; why, we might cause the death of one of those Gwedulians! If they come, we shall show them there is nothing worth stealing—no gold or jewels or fine raiment or such gewgaws—except food which they might have for the asking. Then we shall courteously ask them to leave, confident that, faced by our greatness of soul, they will do so."

"Oh, is that so? Judge, the usual wont of such robbers is to kill first and discuss ethics afterwards. If you do not—"

"The gods will take care of us. I find you guilty and sentence you both to be placed in the arena this afternoon with the ape-man Nji, and then that will happen which will happen. Take them away."

"Ha!" shouted Vakar. "You speak so virtuously of never taking life, but if you shove me into a pit with that monster it is the same thing—"

The attendants dragged Vakar, still shouting, out of the courtroom and back to his cell.

XV

"THIS time it looks as though they had us," growled Vakar as the big bolt slammed home again.

Fual said: "Oh, my lord, don't say that, or I shall die of despair even before the

ape rends us! You've gotten us out of worse fixes . . ."

"That was mostly luck, and any man who presses his luck too far will run out of it." Vakar kicked the wall, hurting his toes. "If this were a civilized country the door would have a bronze lock to which you might steal the key, but I have no idea of what to do about that great stupid bolt."

They settled down to a despondent wait, but before they had sat staring for long Vakar heard the bolt drawn back. In came a young Gamphasant.

"Master Vakar!" said this one in Hesperian. "Do you not know me? Abeggu the son of Mishegdi, in Sederado?"

"I am glad to see you," said Vakar. "I did not know you without your clothes. What brings you here?"

"Hearing two foreigners were to be tried today I came to watch and recognized you. I tried to catch your eye, but you were otherwise occupied."

"You find us in a sad state indeed, friend Abeggu. What is your tale? How goes it with you?"

"Far from well."

"How so?" asked Vakar.

"My travels unsettled many of the ideas with which I started out, and when I returned home I imprudently went around telling people how much better things were done abroad. As any such talk is frightful heresy to a Gamphasant, I was ostracized, and for months nobody would have anything to do with me. If my family had not let me have access to their food-stores I should have starved. Now, though folk are beginning to ease up, they still look down upon me as one corrupted by foreign notions. But what brings you to this doom?"

Vakar outlined his travels since leaving Sederado, adding: "What happened in Sederado after Thiegos's body was found?"

"I do not know, for like you I went into hiding and fled at the first chance after my wound healed."

A rumble came from the cell across the corridor. Vakar said: "That thing across the way looks like the giant servant of Qasig, that wizard who tried to kill Porfia and me—"

"It is indeed Nji! Not many days ago Qasig and his ape-man came to Gampha-

santia in a chariot. They were not stopped when they first appeared, as you were, because they raced through the villages and because the peasants were afraid of the chariot, most of them never having seen a wheeled vehicle. However, as they entered Tokal their way was blocked by an ox-drawn sledge and the people seized them. The ape-man slew three with his club before they threw a net over him. It was intended to expose them in the arena to the attentions of a lion we kept for the purpose, but the next day there was a great hole in the wall of this cell and the wizard was gone, no doubt with the aid of his magic. You can see where the wall has been closed up with new bricks.

"When the ape-man was thrust into the arena, he wrenched the door out of its sockets and broke the lion's back with it. Then it was decided that as Nji was more beast than man, it would be more just to keep him as the national executioner in place of the lion he had slain."

Vakar said: "Why do you kill people in this unusual manner? For such a peaceful people it seems like a bloodthirsty amusement, watching men eaten by lions."

"It is no amusement! We are required to attend as a salutary moral lesson. Since our principles forbid us to kill undesirables ourselves, our only alternative is to let a beast do it."

"Quibbling!" said Vakar. "If you force a man into a pit with a lion you are as responsible for his death as if you had sworded him personally."

"True. We Gamphasants, being an honest folk, admit it, but what can we do? Our ethical standards must be maintained at all costs, or at least so think most of my people."

"What happened to Qasig's other servant, the one with the ears?"

"I visited Qasig in his cell—did I understand you to say he had tried to kill you and the queen?"

"Yes; he brought the serpent throne to life with his damned piping. But go on."

"I did not know that and supposed him merely an old acquaintance. Besides I do not often get a chance to converse with foreigners, and after my travels I find my own folk dull.

"Qasig told me he had been following you—he did not say why—with the aid of this Coranian, whose ears served not only to hear sounds of the usual sort but also to hear men's unspoken thoughts—even though the men were miles away. Thus so long as he followed you closely enough Yok could always tell what direction you were in. You left Huperea at such a clip that for a while you were out of Yok's range, but the King of Phaixia had told Qasig you were bound for Tritonia—"

"However, let us concern ourselves with methods of saving you, for I have no wall-shattering magic like that of Qasig. I have a plan, though. If when you enter the arena you take three paces straight out from the door and dig in the sand, you will find two broadswords. These I brought back from my travels, but I had to hide them or the magistrates would have had them thrown into Lake Kokutos."

"Why are you helping us?" asked Vakar.

"Because you once spared my life in Sederado when, by your principles, you were entitled to take it."

"If we beat Nji, what then?"

"It will give us time to plan something else while the consuls send men to catch another lion. This is a hard land to escape from, being a flat treeless country with few places to hide; and horses are not tamed here. However, I must go now to bury those swords, or it will be too late."

HE CALLED to the jailer, who came with his assistants to unbar the door. Vakar, watching Abeggu's departing back, said:

"It's nice to know we have one friend in this hog-wallow of a country. Cheer up, Fual; we're not dead yet . . . Yes?"

The jailer had placed his face against the grille and was saying: "What is this?"

Vakar took a look. The fellow had the Tahakh in one hand and held Abeggu's arm with the other. Using the latter as interpreter the jailer explained:

"We have burned your clothes and thrown your weapons into the lake, and your other possessions we have placed in the common store, but we do not know what to do with this. What is it?"

"Tell him," said Vakar, "it is a talisman

—you know, a good-luck piece.”

The jailer went off, staring at the heavy blackish mass.

UNDER the blazing tropical sun the sand of the arena glared whitely in Vakar's eyes. He put a bare foot upon it, then hopped back with a yelp.

“That's hot!” he said.

“Out you go,” said the jailer behind him. “Or must we push you?”

“Come Fual,” said Vakar, setting his teeth against the heat of the sand. “We should have toughened ourselves by walking barefoot on hot coals like the devil-dancers of Dzen.”

A door opened in the far end of the arena Nji slouched in with the same old brass-bound club over his shoulder. Vakar took three paces quickly and started to dig.

“Help me, ass!” he snarled at Fual as his sifting fingers met nothing solid.

Nji swaggered closer. Vakar was too busy scrabbling in the sand to notice the elliptical plan of the arena, the tiers of mud-brick benches, and the silent brown crowd.

“Ha!” His fingers struck metal. An instant later he and Fual were on their feet facing the ape-man, each with a broadsword in hand. A murmur of surprise came from the spectators.

“Remember,” said Vakar, “our only hope is a headlong attack. If we run in under his club fast enough, one of us may get home before he knocks our brains out. Ready?”

Vakar tensed for a dash. Nji took hold of his club with both hairy hands and opened his great mouth.

“Go!” cried Vakar, sprinting.

Nji gave a roar and charged—but not at Vakar. He ran at an angle, in pursuit of Fual, who in a spasm of panic had dropped his sword and run towards the side of the arena, apparently with the idea of climbing up among the spectators.

Vakar struck at the ape-man as the latter lumbered past him but missed; then doubled, leaning for the turn and cursing his servant's cowardice under his breath. Fual had almost reached the wall when Nji caught up with him and brought the club down in a mighty blow. Fual's skull crunched and his brains spattered. And at

the same instant Vakar came up behind Nji.

With no time for a survey of the towering hairy back, Vakar bent and struck a powerful backhand draw-cut at the monster's leg just above the heel, then sprang back just as Nji started to turn. As the creature put weight on his hamstrung leg the member buckled under him. He fell with a ground-shaking thump. Vakar sprang in again to slash at the ape-man's throat. The great teeth snapped and an arm caught Vakar's ankle and hurled him to the ground, almost dislocating the attached leg.

Vakar rolled over in an effort to twist free, but the bone-crushing grip held fast. Feeling his foot being drawn towards the ape-man, Vakar looked and saw that the creature was about to stuff the appendage into his gaping mouth. The Lorskans doubled and twisted, planting his other foot against Nji's chest to give him a purchase and, getting a grip on Nji's shoulder-hair with his free hand, hacked at the hairy hand that held his ankle.

Nji screamed shrilly and let go the ankle, but instantly caught Vakar's right arm in one hand and his hair with the other. This time the monster began to pull Vakar's head towards his jaws while it scratched and kicked at his body with its great splay feet.

Vakar grasped Nji's thick throat with his right hand, not to choke the ape-man, a task far beyond his strength, but to hold off the slaver's fangs that wanted to tear off his face. Meanwhile his left arm was furiously driving the sword into Nji's chest and belly. Again and again he stabbed, but the ape-man's immense strength seemed undiminished.

Though the muscles on Vakar's lean arms stood out like iron rods, little by little his right arm bent as the ape-man drew him nearer. Blood and spittle ran over his gripping hand, and the creature's foul breath blasted into his face. The tusks gaped closer.

At last he drove the sword into the gaping mouth itself, and up through the crimson palate—and up—and up . . .

Nji relaxed with a shudder as the bronzen point broached his brain. For an

instant Vakar, battered and worn, lay panting on the baking sand, his blood and that of the ape-man running over his skin in big red drops. The front of Nji's body was covered with wounds any of which would have killed a man.

Then Vakar staggered to his feet. He was covered with blood and dirt and some of his hair had been pulled out. His ankle was swollen and discolored where Nji had wrenched it, and the scratches from Nji's toe-nails on his belly and legs stung like a swarm of hornets. When a glance showed him that Fual was patently beyond help, he turned towards the exit.

HE FOUND himself facing a crowd of Gamphasants with nets and ropes in their hands. For an instant he considered trying to cut his way through, but gave up that idea. Though he killed two or three, the rest would overpower him and then things would only go harder with him. A similar crowd had issued from the other entrance, the one through which Nji had come.

"All right," he said in his rudimentary Gamphasantian. "I will come quietly."

The jailer, scowling, asked: "Where did you get that sword?"

Vakar smiled. "The gods visited me in my dreams and told me where to dig. Does this make me the official executioner?"

"No. Nji was made executioner because he was more beast than man, and the Gamphasants, being a just people, do not punish dumb brutes for breaking laws beyond their comprehension. You, however, are not only a man but also an intelligent one, and must therefore pay the full penalty as soon as we can get another lion."

Vakar limped back to his cell feeling forlorn. Poor Fual would never see the silver beaches of Aremoria again. The tears were running freely down Vakar's own face when his cell door opened and in came Abeggu lugging a ewer and a towel. The Gamphasant said:

"You did a great deed, and I am sorry your servant was slain. I cannot spend much time with you for I think I am suspected of having a hand in this affair."

"I hope," said Vakar, "you can think of something before the next lion arrives."

"I will try, but I am not hopeful."

"How about a tool to dig through the wall?"

"No good. The jailer comes into your cell every day, and since Qasig's escape one of his assistants walks continuously around the outside of the prison. But we shall see." And off he went, leaving Vakar feeling let down.

In the morning Vakar was awakened by a distant murmur. Still stiff and sore from the previous day's ape-handling, he called the jailer:

"Ho there, Nakkul! What is happening?"

The prison seemed deserted. Vakar went to his window but could see nothing. The murmur grew and the heads of several Gamphasants shot past Vakar's window, going at a run. Now Vakar could distinguish shrieks of pain and terror.

If anyone were here to bet with, he thought, I'd wager ten to one the Gwedulians have come. And then the bolt of his cell door thudded back and the door creaked open. Abeggu, standing in the doorway, cried:

"The Gwedulians are slaying us! Flee while you can!"

In the jailer's office Vakar paused to glance around on the slim chance that some of his belongings might still be there. It was no easy thing to flee forth in a strange country without clothes, arms, or trade-goods. He saw none of these, but in one corner lay a dark lumpish thing: the Tahakh. He snatched it up by the knob at one end and turned down the short corridor that led out.

At that instant a Gwedulian stepped into the entrance, a few paces away. The intruder wore the usual head-cloak and face-veil. On his left arm was strapped a small round ostrich-hide buckler that left his left hand free, and in both hands he carried a long copper-headed spear. Before he could do more than stare at the newcomer Vakar heard a shriek beside him and saw that the Gwedulian had thrust his spear deep into the brown belly of Abeggu, who seized the shaft with both hands.

Vakar took three long steps forward, swinging the Tahakh down, back, and up in a circle at the end of his straight left arm. The Gwedulian tugged on his spear,

but Abeggu still gripped it. Then the Gwedulian released the shaft with his right hand to fumble for a hatchet in the girdle of his breech-clout. Before he could pull the shaft free the Tahakh descended on his head with a crunch. Down went the Gwedulian.

VAKAR looked back at Abeggu, who lay huddled against the wall of the corridor, still clutching the spear-shaft, though the Gwedulian's tug had pulled the head out of the wound.

"Can you walk?" asked Vakar.

"No. I am dying. Go quickly."

"Oh, come along! I will help you," said Vakar, though in his heart he knew that men seldom recovered from deep abdominal wounds.

"No, go. It will do you no good to drag me, for I shall be dead soon, and you will merely get yourself killed if you try."

Muttering, Vakar tore the head-cloak and veil off the dead Gwedulian and put them on. Under them the nomad was a lean dark man, physically much like the Gamphasants, with his head shaved except for a scalp-lock. Vakar also took the man's sandals, the buckler, the ax with the head of polished stone, and the spear.

In front of the entrance knelt the Gwedulian's dromedary. Vakar glanced up and down the street. Gamphasatian corpses lay here and there, and other Gwedulians rode hither and thither in pursuit of live victims, riding them down with their lances or hurling javelins into their backs. A swirl of pursuers and pursued raced past Vakar while the camel sat placidly chewing its cud.

Vakar gathered up his meager booty and climbed on to the camel's back, trying to assume the Gwedulians' posture. The Tahakh and the ax he dropped into the large bag.

The sounds of massacre died away behind Vakar as the camel racked along the road that followed the shore of Lake Kokutos southward.

XVI

A MONTH later Vakar arrived at Tegrazen, at the mouth of the Akheron, and once again heard the boom of the surf. He thrust through the teeming tangle, tow-

ing his camel. The town boasted an inn where Vakar took a place on a bench with his back to the wall. The innkeeper set down big blackjacks of tarred leather and filled them with barley-beer from a gourd bottle. Vakar was setting down his mug when he saw, on the end of the bench, a man dressed as a Kernean trader, a horny-skinned fellow with a full black beard speckled with gray—but the man was less than two feet tall. This midget was drinking barley-beer too, but out of a child's cup.

When the innkeeper came to refill Vakar's blackjack, the latter jerked a thumb, saying: "What on earth is that?"

"Him? That is Yamma of Kernê. When his accident happened he did not dare return home, but settled in Tegrazen as a dealer in metals. Would you like to know him? He is a friendly little fellow."

"I should indeed," said Vakar.

The innkeeper picked up the midget by the slack of his tunic and set him down upon the table in front of Vakar, saying: "Here is a traveller named Vakar Lorska, Yamma, who would like to know you. Tell him the story of your life: tell him what happened to you when you told that witch-doctor he was full of ordure."

"I should think it were obvious," said Yamma.

"What witch-doctor is this?" asked Vakar.

"Fekata of Gbu, the greatest smith of Tartaros. If I had known who he was and had not been drunk I should have been more careful."

"Tell me more of Fekata. He sounds like the man I seek."

"It is said he can pull down a star from heaven with his tongs and hammer it into shape on his anvil. He is headman of Gbu, in the middle of the peninsula of Tartaros, halfway to the Abiku country. When you find him, spit in his soup for me, though he will probably turn you into a scorpion for your trouble."

Gbu was, like all Tartarean towns, a cluster of beehive huts, whence came the barking of dogs, the yelling of children, the tinkle of bells hung round the necks of Kernean trader's asses, and the buzz and clang and clatter made by craftsmen of Tartaros as they plied their trades. Vakar

threaded his way among the stalls of wood-carvers, bead-drillers, jewel-polishers, shield-makers, and the goldsmiths until he found the premises of Fekata, headman of Gbu, smith, and wizard.

Fekata had his smithy in an open shed alongside the clump of huts that served him and his wives for a home. A fresh leopard-skin hung at the back, drying in the sun. A young Negro tended the furnace, while in the middle of the shed Fekata himself hammered a bronze ax-head into shape with a stone-headed sledge-hammer. He was a middle-aged Negro of about Vakar's height, but much broader, with a prominent pot-belly and the most massive and muscular arms that Vakar had ever seen. One eye was blinded by a cataract, and a short grizzle of gray wool covered Fekata's head.

As Vakar approached, the smith looked up and stopped hammering. The buzz of flies became audible in the quiet. Vakar identified himself and asked:

"Are you he who made a ring from the metal of a fallen star?"

"That is true, and if I ever catch the blackguard who swindled me out of my price on that job. . . ."

"What happened?"

"Oh, it was long ago, though I, Fekata of Gbu, do not forget such things. There was a beggarly trader from Tritonia, one Ximenon, who had been in the Abiku country when the thing fell with a great flash and roar and buried itself, and he had tracked it to the spot and dug it up. He promised me enough ivory and gold to break the back of that camel of yours if I would make him a ring of the metal of the star. I did, though it took a crocodile's lifetime to learn how to work the stuff. Then when he had the ring he started off on his ass as jaunty as you please. 'Ho,' said I, 'where is my price?' 'Come to Tritonia when I have made myself king and I will pay you,' said he, and away he galloped. I threw a curse after him that should have shriveled him to a centipede—not knowing then that the star-metal was a protection against all magical assaults. Later I heard he had become king of the Tritons by the help of this ring, but I did not see fit to travel halfway across the world on the slim chance that Ximenon would honor his promise. What

do you know of this?"

"**K**ING XIMENON is dead, if that pleases you," said Vakar. "As for the fallen star, is this it?" He produced Tahakh.

Fekata's eyes popped. "That is it! Where did you get it? Did you steal it from Ximenon?"

"No, from another king: Awoqqas of Belem. How he got it I do not know, though I should guess Ximenon gave it to him in return for help in making himself King of the Tritons. Could you make more rings from it?"

Fekata turned the lump over in his huge hands, his good eye gleaming. "For what price?"

"I have several ounces of gold, and some copper. . . ."

"Pff! I, Fekata of Gbu, have little need of gold and copper. I make enough from my regular work to keep myself and my six wives and twenty-three children in food and drink. But to work on a new metal. . . . I will tell you. I will make one article for you—one only—from this piece, and in payment you shall give me the rest of the piece. How is that?"

"What? Why you damned black swindler—"

The smith shot out a hand and gripped Vakar's arm. The great fingers sank in and in, and Fekata pulled and twisted until Vakar thought his arm would come off. Though a wiry and well-muscled man he was like a child in the hands of this giant.

"Now," said the smith in a deadly-soft voice, "what was that again?"

"I said I thought your price was a little high," grunted Vakar, "but perhaps we can agree."

The crushing relaxed. Vakar, massaging his arm and inwardly cursing the cross-grained temper that got him into these tiffs, said: "Will you agree before witnesses to make one article, anything I demand, in return for the rest of the star?"

"I agree." Fekata spoke in his own tongue to the youth, who trotted off.

"What did you say?" asked Vakar.

"I told my son to fetch the heads of the Ukpe, our secret society, to act as witnesses."

In time four men with ostrich-feather

headdresses and faces painted with stripes and circles, wrapped in buckskin blankets and an immense dignity, showed up. Vakar and Fekata repeated their engagement before these. Fekata asked:

"Now, how big a ring do you wish?"

"Who said a ring? I will have a sword-blade, made to my measurements."

The smith stared blankly; then his face became distorted with rage until Vakar feared the fellow might spatter his brains with a hammer-blow. But then Fekata's expression changed again and he burst into a roar of laughter, slapping his paunch.

"How can an honest craftsman make a living with you rascals cheating him? But I will make your sword. I, Fekata of Gbu, keep my word, and the biggest sword an insect like you could swing will take less than half the star. Give me that thing. Angwo, fetch a few of your brothers; we shall need all the lungs we can get on the blow-pipes. You see, Vakar, the trick in working the star-metal is that it must be forged at a bright-red heat where copper or bronze would shatter, and with a hammer of double the normal weight. . . ."

XVII

VAKAR rode back to Tegrazen, where he found little Yamma of Kernê drinking barley-beer in the same tavern. Yamma was telling the story of his life to a shaven man with the yellowish skin of a Gorgon.

"Hail," squeaked Yamma as Vakar sat down. "You are that fellow who was on his way to see Fekata, are you not? Did you spit in his soup?"

"No; he and I did a bit of business."

"It is always like that! Nobody will take up the cause of poor Yamma, who is now too small to fight his own battles."

"You know what Fekata looks like," said Vakar. "I should want a small army at my back before I crossed him. But who is your friend?"

"Wessul, late of the Kingdom of Gorgonia."

"Why late?"

Wessul spoke: "A slight difference of opinion with my captain, which developed into an exchange of knife-thrusts." The Gorgon sighed. "Now I am out in the great

world with nobody to order me about, and I do not mind telling you gentlemen it is a lost and lonesome feeling. Worst of all I shall miss the great raid."

"What raid?" said Vakar sharply.

"Have you not heard? The mainland has been buzzing with it. King Zeluud has gathered all the forces of Gorgonia and its tributaries for an assault upon some northern land."

"What land?"

"He is not saying, though some rumors named Fuseria, some Poseidonis, and some far Arenoria."

"When will he sail?"

"He may have done so already for all I—ho, where are you going?"

"Kernê," Vakar flung back, "Innkeeper! The scot, quickly."

Five days later Vakar jounced into Kernê, haggard from hard riding with mere snatches of sleep. Upon making some inquiries he learned that one Jerro of Elusion was sailing in two days. Vakar found Jerro's ship, engaged passage, sold his camel, got a much-needed haircut—and then waited three days for an easterly wind. They coasted along the south shore of the peninsula of Dzen. Then, as the wind turned southerly enough to carry them north towards Merope, Jerro headed in that direction across the blue Sirenian Sea.

The wind held fair, keeping the sail taut and creaking on its yards as one blue crest after another heaved against the high stern and slid underneath. For a day and a night they drove northward, and then a sailor cried:

"Ships aft! A whole fleet!"

Vakar's heart sank, for the horizon was pricked by a score of mastheads, and every minute the number grew. Soon the low black hulls of a great fleet of war-galleys could be seen.

Another sailor cried: "It is the fleet of the Gorgons!" and fell to praying to his Hesperian gods. Jerro cursed.

Vakar said to Jerro: "What do you mean to do?"

"To run as long as I can. You might as well be dead as a Gorgon's galley-slave. If they are in haste they may not stop for us."

The fleet of galleys came closer, crawling across the smooth sea like a swarm of centi-

pedes from under a flat stone. All their sails bore the octopus of Gorgonia, a symbol which ignorant landsmen sometimes thought to represent a human head with snakes for hair—which it did somewhat resemble. One galley detached itself from the rest and angled towards Jerro's ship.

Vakar interrupted his fuming to say: "If we are taken alive, pray say I am Thiegos of Sederado."

"Aye-aye," said Jerro. "But what in the seven hells is that?"

Vakar looked. On the forward deck of the galley stood a man in the garb of a Gorgonian priest. He held one end of a golden chain, the other end of which was linked to a golden collar that encircled the neck of a creature whose like Vakar had never seen. It was a little smaller than a man and vaguely human in shape. It had a tail, pointed ears, and a hooked beak, and was covered all over with reptilian scales, something like a Triton in his snakeskin armor. It squatted on the deck like a dog.

"That must be a medusa," said Vakar.

"A what?"

"Creatures said to have strange powers of fascination, though I see nothing fascinating about that overgrown lizard. Watch out, there!"

The approaching galley swerved to avoid running down the little merchantman. Somebody shouted across the water. Jerro shifted his steering-yoke to send the ship angling away from the galley, but a sailor in the bow of the latter threw a grapnel over the rail of the merchantman. Several sailors pulling on the rope began to draw the two vessels together.

Vakar leaped to the rail of the merchantman, drawing from his girdle the curved sword-knife that he had taken from the Kernean at Kiliessa, to chop the grapnel-rope. Before he could complete the action, the priest on the galley pointed at him and spoke to the medusa. The latter reared up against the rail of its own ship, extended its scaly neck, opened its beak, and gave a terrific screaming hiss, like steam escaping from a hundred cauldrons.

In mid-stride Vakar's muscles froze to stony rigidity. His momentum toppled him forward so that his head struck the rail. He saw a flash of light and then nothing.

VAKAR found himself facing the gunwale a few inches from his face. Since he could move neither his neck nor his eyes he was forced to stare at the weathered wood by the hour as the ship plowed on. His paralysis had not diminished his capacity for discomfort, and after a few hours of lying on the heaving deck his body was one vast ache. He could barely breathe, and his mind ran in futile circles trying to figure what course he should have followed instead of the one he had.

Towards morning Vakar's paralysis wore off sufficiently for him to blink and swallow. His mouth tasted foul and his eyeballs were dry and scratchy. At length a change in the motion of the galley told him that they were drawing into a quiet cove. They stopped with a lurch as the galley's bow grated on the sand, and there were sounds of men running about. Hands seized Vakar's body and half-carried, half-dragged it along the catwalk between the rowers' benches to the poop. Here he was stood upright leaning against the rail, facing a dark paunchy man who sat on a chair like that on the other ship but more ornate. The paunchy man said:

"The effect should have begun to wear off. You there, can you speak?"

With a great effort Vakar forced his vocal organs to say: "Y-yes."

"Who are you then?"

"Th-thiegos of Sed-sederado."

"A Hesperian, eh? Well . . ."

Just then another man thrust his way forward. Although Vakar could not yet turn his head or eyes, he was able to see that this was his old acquaintance Qasig.

"King!" said Qasig. "This is no Hesperian or Kernean, but our main quarry himself: Prince Vakar of Lorsk! I know him despite the whiskers."

The paunchy man, thus identified as King Zeluud, gave an exclamation. "Let us slay him quickly, then, and go on with the rest of our mission. Khashel, take this sword. Lean the body of the prisoner so that his neck lies across the rail, and strike off his head."

"N-no!" murmured Vakar, but they paid no attention.

The man addressed as "Khashel" seized Vakar's body and pulled it inboard so that

Vakar's neck lay across the rail. He spit on his hands, spread his feet, and grasped the iron longsword in both hands for a full-strength downward cut. He extended the blade in front of him and made a half-swing, sighting on the neck and checking the sword before it reached its target. He lowered the blade so that it just touched Vakar's skin, then raised it high above his head . . .

The instant the blade touched Vakar's neck, before Khashel raised it for the definitive blow, the paralysis departed from Vakar's muscles. Suddenly relaxing, he fell into a huddle against the gunwale. Khashel's blow, descending with terrific force, drove the blade into the rail where Vakar's neck had just been.

Khashel, eyes popping, tugged the hilt as Vakar rose to his feet, still clutching the curved Kernean weapon he had in his hand when the medusa had petrified him. Khashel still had both hands on the hilt of Vakar's longsword when the Lorskan stepped forward, bringing his arm around in a backhand cut that laid the bronze blade across Khashel's throat below his short beard.

As Khashel slumped into the scuppers, blood streaming from his severed throat, Vakar hurled his bloody blade at King Zeluud, who ducked. In the same movement Vakar seized the hilt of the longsword, yanked it out of the split rail, and vaulted over the side.

He lit with a splash in waist-deep water. As an uproar arose on the ship he bounded shoreward, half falling as a wave tripped him, then sprinted across the beach, ignoring the stares of the Gorgonian soldiery scattered about taking their ease. He plunged dripping into the woods and raced up the slope, away from the sea, dodging trees, until pounding heart and panting breath forced him to slow down. After him came sounds of turmoil: shouts, trumpet-blasts, and the clatter of armament as the Gorgons rushed about like a disturbed anticy and organized a pursuit.

VAKAR continued straight inland for a while, then angled to the right to lose his pursuers. Bushes scratched at his bare shanks as he fled.

Several days later Prince Vakar trudged into Sederado—for, as he had soon learned, he was on Ogugia. He had lived by stealing from farmers and now was looking for means of subsistence with no assets save the naked sword thrust through his girdle. Queen Porfia might still have it in for him because of Thiegos, but he hoped that between his beard and the prominent scar across his left cheek he would pass unrecognized.

He had been in Sederado but a few hours when Dweros, one of Porfia's lackeys, approached him. "Prince Vakar, the queen asks that you come with me to the palace."

XVIII

VAKAR looked up narrowly. So she knew he was there already!

He pulled his mustache in perplexity. Strike down Dweros and flee? This time he had no ship waiting, and on such an island it was only a matter of time before he was hunted down . . .

He made his decision, told Dweros: "Wait here," and a few minutes later was back with his magical sword (in a borrowed scabbard) at his side. Now let somebody try to disarm him!

He followed Dweros through the streets, scowling somberly. At the palace gates he saw no sign of ambush: only the usual bored-looking guards leaning on the helms of their zaghnals, and the thin traffic of petitioners and officials going in and out. Inside, Dweros led him through the ante-room ahead of his turn, so that he was conscious of sour looks from those who waited. He tensed as Dweros pushed the curtains aside, ready to whip out the star-sword . . .

And Porfia's arm was around his neck and she was pressing her lips to his. Then she thrust him back, saying:

"Well! By Heroe's eight teats, when I kiss a man, he does not usually stand like a statue with his hand on his sword!"

Vakar smiled, his eyes darting around the chamber, ready to seize Porfia for a hostage if need be. He said:

"Excuse my caution, dear madam, but I thought you might have cause to kiss me with sharpened bronze."

"So that is why you skulk about my king-

dom under a false name with that bush on your face! Why should I kill you?"

"Thiegos," he said dryly.

"Oh, him! I was disturbed by his taking off, true, but you did the only thing you could. Anyway I had ceased to love the cowardly jackanapes, with his airs and his sneers."

"Well then?" said Vakar, making a movement towards Porfia and raising his arms.

She held out a hand. "Not until you are cleaned up. Elbien! Take Prince Vakar . . ."

In the chamber he had occupied on his first visit he found a fine Ogugian tunic laid out: a knee-length garment of sky-blue linen embroidered with sea-monsters. There was also a razor, with which he removed the beard, leaving the luxuriant mustache. In the silver mirror the pallor of his newly-exposed jaw contrasted oddly with the swartheness of the rest of his face, which bore a lean, worn look, like an old and oft-whetted knife-blade.

He dined alone with a radiant Porfia. When she saw him she said: "I wonder I knew you, you look so much older."

"Oh, is that so? The things I have experienced in the last seven months would age a god."

"I always thought those Pusadian epics to be mere barbarous bombast, but here we have such an adventurer-hero in the flesh."

"I am neither hero nor adventurer, but a quiet bookish fellow who would like to settle down in Sederado and study philosophy. In all these fights and flights I have never known that mad joy of battle of which the epics speak. Before the combat I am frightened, during it I am confused, and after it I am weary and disgusted."

"Well, if that is what you can do when you are frightened, confused, and disgusted, I hate to think of the slaughter you would wreak if you really took to the trade. Are you sure King Awoqqas tried to net you before the headless woman's temptations had time to take effect?"

"Quite sure, madam, though I do not claim any special virtue. I have merely been fleeing my ill-wishers for the past few months too fast for dalliance." Vakar thought it more tactful to say nothing about Queen Aramnê and Tiraafa the satyr. "But

now that we are being frank, who is the lucky successor to Thiegos?"

As he spoke, Vakar tried to keep the glitter of interest out of his eyes and the pant of passion out of his voice. He could not look at Porfia without feeling the blood rush to his face. Though he had as a matter of course been introduced to the arts of love early, he had never met a woman who affected him like this.

She said: "In truth I have the same tale to tell as you. For seven months I have slept in a cold bed; I have forsworn all light loves and resolved to hold myself inviolate until I find another consort, as Garal has been plaguing me to do. But I will not have that grasping Shvo; I will have none of your Pusadian polygamy."

Vakar nodded sympathetically. Though in Poseidonis the male ruled the roost absolutely, his detachment enabled him to appreciate a different point of view. Porfia continued:

"Besides, it is time I produced some heirs, lest I die and leave my cousins to fight for the throne and rend the kingdom in their struggles. But enough of me. Tell me of your plans. You will be off to Lorsk on the first ship, I suppose?"

"That depends. What have you heard of the Gorgon fleet?"

"When our combined Hesperian fleets broke off following them they were still headed north."

THE servants had taken away the food. They faced each other across a small table supporting a jug of wine. Porfia sat on a new carven chair of pretense, replacing the serpent throne, while Vakar sat on an ivory stool. The flames of the lamps made little highlights in her green eyes.

"Then," he said, "they cannot intend to attack Lorsk, and I need not hasten home." He rose and stepped around the table and took her hands and gently raised her from the throne.

With an easy fluid motion their arms went around each other and their lips met. After a while he sat down on the chair of pretense and pulled her down upon his lap, marvelling again at her lightness. Vakar rapped the oak of the chair with his knuckles, saying:

"Let us hope this chair does not act in the uncanny manner of the other, the last time you sat in my lap."

Porfia giggled. They kissed. Vakar slid one hand over her shoulder and down inside the thin robe, but she snatched it out and gave it a slight slap.

"No," she said. "I told you I had forsworn light loves, and that includes you, Vakar dear, even though those big black eyes of yours almost turn my will to water."

"Who said light? I, madam, am heir to the throne of Lorsk, and do hereby most solemnly propose myself as your consort and wedded spouse."

"Oho! That sheds another light upon the matter. But what should we do when you are King of Lorsk? Where should we dwell?"

"Let us ford that stream when we come to it."

He drew Porfia's face to his and kissed her some more. This time she did not object as he slid his hand over her shoulder, but pressed his hand against her with her own. After a while she gently disengaged herself and rose to her feet. As Vakar stood up, his bushy brows making a question, she held out a hand.

"Come," she said.

He stood up, picked her up as if she were a kitten, and carried her in the direction that she indicated.

NEXT morning, with a fistful of copper celts borrowed from the Ogugian treasury in his scrip, Vakar Zhu threaded his way through the streets of Sederado, gaily whistling a Lorskian lyric, until he found the house of Rethilio. Porfia had offered to send a lackey to fetch the owner of the house, but such was Vakar's respect for philosophy that he preferred to go in person. Besides he was curious to see how a philosopher lived.

Like other Hesperian residences, Rethilio's house was built around a court, presenting a blank brick wall to the outer world. A porter let Vakar in and presently the philosopher himself appeared, saying:

"Why, I know you! I met you some months ago . . . Let me see, you are . . ."

Vakar identified himself.

"Of course!" said Rethilio. "And what

can I do for you, sir?"

"As I am likely to be in Sederado for an indefinite time, I should like to study philosophy under you."

The Philosopher seemed delighted, and presently Vakar was listening ecstatically to Rethilio's theory of the world-egg. Vakar sat rapt through the afternoon lecture, and at its close could hardly tear himself away—until he thought of Porfia. He grinned with pure happiness.

He was bidding farewell to the philosopher when the porter announced: "Master, a man to see you. He says he is Ryn of Mneset."

Vakar gave a violent start as Rethilio said: "Show him in. I have heard of—what is the matter, Prince? Do you know him?"

"All too well. He is our court wizard, who sent me on this chase."

The hunched figure of Ryn scuttled in. "Well, well!" he cackled. "They told me I should find you here. So our young savior, instead of rushing home, is learning how to split a hair and cut blocks with a razor! Hail, Master Rethilio. I arrive just in time, before he becomes so entangled in your sophistical cobwebs that nothing will extricate him."

As they walked towards the palace Ryn asked:

"What are you doing here instead of hastening back to Lorsk in her hour of peril?"

"I stopped here because I saw the Gorgon fleet sail off to northward, having no intention of landing in Zhysk. I see no reason why I shouldn't settle here, wed Queen Porfia, and become a real scholar and not a brainless Lorskian bison-hunter."

"Oh, so you'd marry her green-eyed majesty! At least your taste in women is good. Does she know of this?"

"Knows and approves. So you may tell my loving family—"

"Young fool! Don't you know what the Gorgons are up to? They're sailing around the north end of Poseidonis, around Lotör, to come at us from the West!"

"Oh!"

"Yes, oh! They thought to surprise us by the maneuver, and would have save that one of our lords, Kalesh of Andr, happened to make a pilgrimage to the temple of Three-eyed Tandyla in Lotör and heard a rumor among the Lotris. He scouted the

coast and saw the Gorgon fleet creeping along upon the sky-line, and posted home as fast as his nag could bear him. Now, what's this magical what-not you were supposed to run down? Have you found it?"

VAKAR told his tale and showed the sword of star-metal.

"Ah!" said Ryn. "This all ties in together. Now I know what the gods most fear and why."

"What is it?"

"Before I took ship across the Sirenian Sea, I stopped in King Shvo's library in Amferé. I found a tattered old papyrus from a ruined temple in Parsk that bore the legend of Kumiö."

"What's that?"

"It's a legend referred to in Omá's *Commentary*, of which only a fragment survives and which is itself so old it can no longer be dated. But here was the original, or at least a copy of a copy of a copy of the original."

"What did it say?" asked Vakar.

"It tells how a thief and blasphemer named Kumiö found a fallen star as your friend Ximenon did. He broke off a piece and wore it around his neck as an amulet, gradually discovering it rendered him proof against all supernatural influences. Witches could not cast spells upon him; demons could not harm him; even the gods could neither touch him nor communicate with him.

"In time the gods took counsel, for it occurred to them that if knowledge of this metal became widespread, all men would seek to carry a bit of it, and then the gods would be unable to communicate with men, who would forget the gods and cease to worship them, which for a god is virtual death."

Vakar said: "Rethilio was explaining the Fragments of Lontang along those lines."

"So," continued Ryn, "the gods decided to do away with Kumiö. First they tried to take him off by sickness, but he was proof against plagues from any but natural causes. Then they incited another thief to steal his piece of metal, but the thief relied upon a spell of invisibility he bought from a wizard, and Kumiö saw him coming and knifed him. I won't tell you all the things they tried; but at last, growing desperate, they sank the

whole Kingdom of Kort beneath the waters of the Western Ocean. Thus Kumiö was drowned along with all the other Kortians save a handful of survivors."

"Is this true?"

"Who knows? Probably not in all details. But it gives us the reason for the gods' fearing star-metal."

Vakar mused: "I see how the sword broke that spell the medusa put upon me, when the fellow who meant to cut my head off touched my neck with the blade first, as you do to aim your stroke. Now that we know it works, what shall we do with it?"

"That will transpire at the proper time; I've never known Grá's prescience to fail. Meantime you must hasten back with me before the seas wax too boisterous."

"Hells!" Vakar kicked a clod. "Why should I, when I've just found what I really want? What's there in Lorsk save a perpetual bicker with my brother? Why can't you take the sword—"

"There's the kingdom to which you're heir. Your father is unwell, and if you're not there at the time . . . I leave the inference to you."

VACILLATING, undecided, VAKAR marched gloomily back to the palace. He sent a footman in to interrupt an audience the queen was giving, and told her the news.

"No!" cried Porfia, a hand to her throat. "You shall not go! Our nuptials are in six days, and having found the one man to share my throne I will not let him be slain in some petty brawl on the edges of the world . . ."

Her tone nettled Vakar enough to make him say: "Consort or none, dear madam, I shall make my own decisions. After all I have my duty to my people as you have yours."

After further argument she said: "Let us take counsel with Charsela. Will you abide by her advice?"

"I will take her counsel into full account," said Vakar carefully, "if you will let me send for Rethilio likewise."

"I see where I shall have to feed all the seers and sages of Sederado," said Porfia, "for the dinner-hour draws nigh."

"Huh!" said Ryn. "As if my advice were not so good as that of that hairsplitter! He

will wish you to stay here, so he can continue to milk the treasury of Lorsk by his lectures."

THE old she-wizard arrived first, saying: "It is the young gallant who saved the queen and me! Though you did leave my house in a gory mess. And this if I mistake not is the great Ryn of Mneset?"

"Yes, yes," gruffed Ryn. "How is the love-potion business?"

"Poorly, your honor, for the maggots of philosophy have so far addled the brains of the people that they have little thought for love. I of course except our royal protectors here, who obviously have thought for little else at the moment."

Rethilio arrived, gravely greeting those present. Queen Porfia led them to a dark little chamber in the midst of the palace, lighted by a single lamp. Charsela filled her cauldron and went into her trance. After a long while she said:

"If Prince Vakar returns to Lorsk he will suffer great loss, but will not long regret it."

Porfia cried: "Do not go, my love! She means you will lose your life!"

"While I do not hold my life cheaply," replied Vakar, "yet after the perils I have lately escaped I am not to be deterred from returning home by fear of a doubtful oraculation. What do you think, Rethilio?"

The philosopher said: "Most men possess an inner voice that informs them what is the righteous course to pursue. Some attribute this to a guardian spirit, some to a favorite god, and some to the soul of the man himself. Which is right I know not, but you disobey this voice at your peril, for it will have its revenge upon you. Thus if you steal despite the prohibitions of the voice, it will cause you to stumble when the watchman is chasing you and so bring you to justice."

"Then," said Vakar, "I will return to Lorsk forthwith. What transport is available, Ryn?"

"A galley of the navy of Zhysk awaits at the waterfront. We can be off tomorrow."

"So be it. We shall—why, Porfia!" Vakar started to rise.

For the Queen of Ogugia had dissolved in tears. She rose, saying between sobs: "I will have my servants bring you dinner, but

pray excuse me. I wish to be alone—no, Vakar, you shall remain here to entertain our guests. Later you may come to me."

Vakar unhappily watched Porfia depart, fingering his mustache and wishing that he were better able to cope with such emotional crises. While he stood indecisive the servants brought in food and wine.

Later, Porfia clung to him with a violence that made his ribs creak, alternating spells of passion such as he had never known from a woman with periods of tempestuous tears.

"I shall never see you again!" she wailed.

"I know Charsela meant you will be slain!"

"Oh, come, love. She did not say so, and we all have our time—"

"Nonsense! That is one of those philosophers' arguments, sounding impressive and meaning nothing. I love you to madness and cannot give you up."

He stubbornly refused even to defer his sailing for a day or two and she was still asleep when he stole from the palace with Ryn before dawn. As the Zhyskan galley creaked and crawled out of Sederado Harbor, Vakar leaned on the after rail, staring somberly back at the graceful city, pink in the sunrise.

XIX

AT THE grim craggy walls of Mneset, Vakar reined up as the guards crossed their halbreeds and said: "I'm Prince Vakar! Let me through, fools!"

The guards were profuse with apologies to which Vakar paid little heed as he spurred for the castle.

The first person of rank he met there was the chamberlain, whom he asked: "Where is everybody? Where are my father and brother?"

"The king lies sick, sir, and Prince Kuros has gone to the Bay of Kort with the army."

Vakar went quickly to his father's chambers. King Zhabutir lay on his bed, surrounded by servants and adherents and looking blankly up. Vakar pushed through them and said:

"Hail, Father."

The king's eyes looked out of their sunken sockets. He said faintly:

"Oh, Vakar. Where did you come from, dear boy? Have you been away? I haven't

seen you lately."

Vakar exchanged glances with the people who crowded the room, and it seemed to him that they looked at him with pity.

Vakar went to his chambers feeling shaken, for though he had never been very close to his father the loss of a near relative is sobering. He armed himself with his jazerine cuirass of gilded bronze scales, his helmet and a bronze shield like that he had started his journey with. He kept the sword of star-metal, which in odd moments he had honed down to razor sharpness. Then he and Ryn set out for the Bay of Kort, where the Gorgonian fleet was expected.

Four days later they reached the pass through the hills around the bay, where from a bend in the road they could see the whole bay and the crescent of flatland between it and the hills spread out below like a dinner-plate. The cool autumnal wind whipped their cloaks. In the foreground lay the Lorskans camp.

"Lyr's barnacles!" cried Vakar.

The Gorgonian fleet was already drawn up along the beach line miles long, hundreds of vessels great and small with sails furled, oars shipped, and bows resting on the strand. The Gorgonian army had disembarked and was drawing up in a great rectangular mass, in regular ranks with big wood-and-leather shields and helms in exact alignment, bristling with spears, while clumps of archers gathered on the flanks. Over each unit floated its vexilla, hanging from a gilded cross-yard:

A half-mile inland from the Gorgonian array, the forces of Lorsk were strung out in loose aggregations, each group comprising the followers of some lord or high officer.

"The damned fool!" croaked Ryn. "He told me he meant to attack while they were disembarking! A good enough plan, but it's gone somehow awry. Having failed to catch them with their kilts wet, he should withdraw into the hills to ambush and block them, meanwhile harassing them with cavalry, of which they have none. On the plain that Gorgonian meat-grinder will make short work of our gallant individualists."

"We have an advantage of numbers."

"That'll avail us little. The headstrong

fool . . ."

"Perhaps he's planned it that way," said Vakar, and told Ryn of the words of the dying Söl.

"Ye gods! Why haven't you told me before?"

"I left Mneset in such a rush I had no time, and so much happened later that it slipped my mind."

RYN muttered something about the dynasty's ending in a litter of half-wits, then said: "Let's get on to the battle."

"It'll take us an hour," said Vakar, but started his horse down the slope. Ryn's chariot bumped behind.

As Vakar rode he saw the course of the battle like a game played on a table-top. The shrill Lorskans trumpets rang out and the horsemen and light chariots moved out to harass the foe, dashing up to within a few feet of them to discharge bows or cast javelins, then wheeling away. A few such skirmishes swirled around the ends of the Gorgonian line, but the archers drove them off with flights of bone-tipped arrows.

Others galloped towards the ships drawn up along the beach beyond the ends of the Gorgonian army. As they came, these ships pushed off. Vakar saw the Lorskans catch one still beached. There was a scurrying of little figures and a twinkle of weapons in the sunlight, and then smoke rose from the ship as the Lorskans set it afire.

Now the deeper tones of the Gorgonian trumpets answered those of Lorsk. Vakar saw the ripple of motion go through the Gorgonian array as the phalanx began to advance. The Lorskans chariots and horses bolted back through the gaps in their own force to the rear, and the towering kilted Lorskans foot-soldiers loped forward under their bison banners, yelling and whirling their weapons.

Then Vakar could see clearly no more, for he had reached the level of the plain. Now the battle was a dark writhing line of figures on the horizon, the plan and progress of the battle being hidden from view by the backs of the rearmost Lorskans and by the clouds of dust that now arose.

"I halt here!" called Ryn. "I'll cast a few spells; you go on and see what you can do."

Vakar rode forward, skirting the Lorskans

camp whence camp-followers yelled unintelligibly at him. The roar of battle strengthened until he could make out individual shrieks. Behind the main battlefront the Lorskans cavalry and chariotry stood awaiting orders. As Vakar approached he glimpsed the faces of foot-soldiers, first a few, then here, there, and everywhere. That meant that they were facing the wrong way—were running away. Had the battle been lost already?

The fleeing foot zigzagged between the horses and chariots and ran past Vakar through the grass towards the hills: first one or two, then hundreds, most without weapons. Now the cavalry and chariots too began to move retrograde, sweeping past Vakar and overtaking and passing the infantry. Once Vakar glimpsed his brother Kuros, riding rearwards with the rest. Kuros would naturally be among the first to flee, knowing that his men would soon follow his example and that his secret pact with King Zeluud would thereby be carried out. It was a full-fledged rout.

Vakar caught one foot-soldier by the crest. The chin-strap kept the helmet from coming off, and the jerk nearly broke the man's neck.

"What's happened?" roared Vakar into the dazed man's face.

"Magic!" gasped the man. "They had creatures like great lizards in front of their line, and as we closed with them the lizards hissed at us and our men fell as if struck by thunderbolts. Let me go! What can mere men do against such magic?"

Vakar released the man, who resumed his flight. The bulk of the Lorskans army had now swept past Vakar, who almost wept with rage. Never in the memory of man had the proud men of Lorsk suffered such a disgraceful defeat. After the Lorskans came the Gorgons under their swaying octopus banners, the sun gleaming on their cuirasses. Most of them had dropped their heavy shields of wood and bull's hide to run faster after their foes. In their pursuit they had abandoned their rigid rectilinear formation so that they now surged forward in a great irregular and scattered mass. From his height Vakar could see over the heads of the Gorgons the bodies of thousands of Lorskans lying stiff and stark in the grass.

Off to his right King Zeluud stood in the Gorgons' only chariot, trotting at the head of his men.

Vakar drew his sword and put his horse towards one of the gaps in the Gorgonian line. The Gorgons stared at the single horseman hurling himself into their midst. One or two took a few steps in Vakar's direction, but he went past them like a whirlwind. A plumed Gorgonian helmet appeared in front of him. The Gorgon swung a battle-ax, but before he could strike, Vakar drove his sword into the man's face. He felt the crunch of thin bones and wrenched his point out as the man fell. Then he was through the hostile array and pulled up to look around.

Back towards the hills he now saw the backs of the Gorgon mass, still running after the Lorskans. Their officers urged them on with hoarse shouts; nobody bothered with the lone horseman whose mount had evidently gone mad and carried him willy-nilly through the army.

BETWEEN Vakar and the sea the victims of the medusa attack lay in long rows, in stiffly unnatural positions like statues toppled from their pedestals. Their heads lay towards the sea, for when the screams of the medusas had petrified them in mid-charge their momentum had caused nearly all of them to fall forward.

Between Vakar and the fallen Lorskans he saw what he sought: the medusas and their attendant priests of Entigta. There were nine reptiles, each on a leash. At the start of the battle the priests had been spaced evenly along the Gorgonian front, but now that their part was over they were gathering in a single group in the middle of their line, a few hundred feet to Vakar's right as he faced the sea. Half a dozen of them had congregated there already, and the remaining three were walking towards this group.

Vakar spurred his horse and cantered in a wide curve that brought him up to the last of the priests from behind. Before he reached the Gorgon, the priest, aroused by hoof-beats behind him, looked around. The priest pointed at Vakar and spoke to the medusa, which opened its beak and hissed.

The horse shied, and Vakar felt a vibra-

tion run through him, but gripping the magical sword he plunged at the pair. So long as he gripped the hilt, the contact between his hand and the tang of the blade protected him. A downright slash sank into the medusa's scaly head and then he was past, sparing only a glance back to where the reptile writhed in the dust.

Then he was on the second. A sweeping backhand cut shore through the snaky neck and sent the medusa's head flying.

He swept past the clump of priests and rode towards the remaining individual who had not yet reached them. His swing missed a vital spot and sheared off one of the medusa's ears; he jerked his horse around in a tight circle and came back. This time another head flew off.

"Prince Vakar!" cried the priest, and Vakar recognized Qasig.

But now he had no time to settle old scores with mere men. He rode at the remaining six priests who stood in a group and watched uncertainly. At the last minute they grasped what he was doing. There was a flurry of movement as they tried to form a circle around the medusas, drawing knives from their belts to defend their beasts with their lives. Then Vakar crashed squarely into the group. There were screams of man and medusa as bones crunched under the horse's hooves and Vakar's sword flashed down on shaven polls and scaly crania.

Then he was through and wheeling to charge back, blood spraying from his sword as he whirled it, yelling wordlessly. Crash! A sharp pain in his leg told him that one of them had gotten home with a knife, but he kept on slashing and thrusting . . .

And he was chasing one surviving medusa over the grass. The reptile went in buck-jumps like a rabbit, the golden chain attached to its collar leaping and snaking behind it. Vakar rode it down and left it writhing with its entrails oozing out. Four priests, including Qasig, were running for their ships, hiking up their robes to give their legs free play.

Back towards the hills the Gorgonian army receded in pursuit of the Lorskans. Vakar knew that the road up to the pass would get jammed and the Gorgons would have a holiday massacre. And now what? The sword that had destroyed the medusas

would also revive the fallen Lorskans, whom the Gorgons had not taken time to bind or slay.

Down at the waterfront, among the beaks of the beached ships, men were pointing at Vakar and shouting, but seemed undecided what to do. Most of them were mere unarmed servants.

Vakar rode down to one end of the windrows of stricken Lorskans and turned back. Holding his horse's mane with his shield-hand he leaned down as he passed the bodies and slapped them on faces and hands with the flat of his blade. As he did so they lost their rigidity and scrambled up. Vakar shouted:

"Get up! Get in formation! Pick up your arms!"

There seemed to be no end to the process. He had to keep looping back to touch men whom he had missed, hundreds and hundreds of them. It was as tiring as a battle. But the crowd of recovered Lorskans grew and grew. For want of other guidance they obeyed him. Down at the shore the Gorgonians' galleys, alarmed by the springing to life of an army of corpses, were putting to sea.

Time passed. Vakar's arm ached. Only a few-score more bodies to go . . . Vakar speeded up, careless of slicing off an occasional nose or ear. And then they were all on their feet. He rode back to the middle of the line and waved the sword, shouting:

"Get in line and follow me! The magical powers of the Gorgons have been destroyed. We can take them in the rear and wipe them out!"

He harangued them and got them into motion across the plain at a fast mile-eating walk—tall bearded Lorskans yeomen with their miscellany of weapons.

AS VAKAR neared the Gorgon rear with his force he could see Gorgon officers rushing around trying to get their men faced about to receive the new attack. Vakar, judging the distance, yelled:

"Charge!"

Forward they went at a run with deep roars, stumbling over bodies. They plunged through the camp, sweeping the plunderers before them and trampling them down, and then the lines met with a crash and a crush

that lifted men off their feet and snapped the shafts of spears and halberds. Weapons rose and fell like flails. Behind the Gorgonian array the Lorskans fugitives picked up courage and instead of trying frantically to elbow their way up the road or to scale the steep hillsides to safety, some turned back, picked up discarded weapons, and plunged into the fight. As most of the Gorgons now lacked shields, their advantage in equipment was neutralized.

Howls of dismay rose from the Gorgons as they realized that they were trapped. Vakar, caught in the *melée*, hewed at every plume-crested head he saw until he could scarcely swing his blade. A spear-point gashed his leg again; another drove through the chest of the already wounded horse.

With a scream the animal died, but such was the press that it could not fall, but gradually subsided on to a struggling knot of fighters. Vakar, exhausted, dragged himself clear and then was knocked over and buried under a welter of bodies.

He dragged himself out from under the pile of wounded and dead, battered and bruised and covered with his own and others' blood, to find that the Gorgons had been split into several small groups being ground to nothing. In the midst of the largest knot rose King Zeluud's chariot. The horses had been killed and the king stood in the vehicle, swinging over his followers' heads with a long two-handed sword at any Lorskans who tried to break through to reach him.

Vakar began to push through the press towards the chariot. The Gorgons around the chariot fought like fiends until a huge Lorskans burst through to climb up behind the king, seize him by the neck, and drag him over the side. King Zeluud disappeared.

Now the Gorgons began to lose heart. Some cast down their arms and cried for quarter. Most of these the infuriated Lorskans struck down without mercy, but Vakar managed to save a few from slaughter. There was much about Gorgonia that he wished to know, and dead men could tell him nothing.

The sounds of battle died away, leaving several thousand Lorskans leaning on the shafts of their weapons and panting. Those

who had the breath to do so raised the shout of victory.

Vakar Zhu sheathed his blade and tied up his leg-wounds with strips of cloth from the garments of fallen men. He found Lord Kalesh, who had brought word of the Gorgons' circumnavigation to Lorsk, astride a blood-spattered horse. Vakar put Kalesh in charge of the army with instructions to secure any Gorgonian ships that had not gotten away, and to camp on the plain that night. Then he borrowed Kalesh's horse and set off up the steep road for Mneset. At the top he picked up Ryn with his chariot.

"Do you mind if I ride with you? These wounds in my legs will heal faster."

"Get in, get in."

NINE days later they reached Mneset in a drizzle with several hundred men trailing behind them. They found the gate shut and signs of preparations for a siege. Vakar shouted:

"Ho there! Open for Prince Vakar! The Gorgons are beaten!"

An armed man stuck his head over the wall. "Get away, Prince! We have orders to kill you!"

"What?"

"Yes, your father died while you were gone, and Prince Kuros claims the king named him successor."

"But that's illegal!"

"I wouldn't know, sir; I'm just a soldier."

With a muttered curse Vakar wheeled the chariot and drew out of range, snarling at Ryn: "I'll back-track and pick up the rest of the army! I'll take Mneset and hang that traitor from the gate-towers until he rots . . ."

Ryn shook his head, clawing his goatish beard. "That would be hard on the city, no matter who won."

Vakar leaned against the side of the chariot, staring somberly into space. Ryn added softly:

"And is that what you really want? Think now."

Vakar straightened up with a laugh. "Now I see what Charsela was driving at! And I also know what Rethilio meant when he said I should have to make a choice of destinies; I couldn't encompass them all in one lifetime. Why should I fight that oaf

for a drafty old castle and the right to boss a mob of yokels when I have a much pleasanter berth awaiting me in Ogugia?"

"Why indeed?"

"I'm no conqueror, but a quiet fellow who asks only to be let alone to acquire true scholarship. Say farewell to Bili for me and lend me some trade-metal. I'm for Sederado!"

The gods, gathered in their place of assembly, all yammered at Drax: "Fool! Why told you us not that the center of this malign influence would shift to Tartaros, Vakar Lorska being but one minor link in the chain of causation . . ."

Drax writhed uncomfortably. "Pray be

patient, divinities. I gave you all that my science had revealed to me. Perhaps all is not yet lost. By speeding the sinking of the western regions we can submerge not only Poseidonis but Tartaros as well."

"What matters it," said Lyr, "whether we perish by the spread of the star-metal or the extermination of our worshippers?"

"No doubt all this was fated from the beginning," said Okma.

This started a furious argument over free-will versus predestination, in the course of which Asterio, the bull-headed forest-god of Ogugia, pulled Entigta's tentacles cruelly.

But Vakar of Lorsk rode happily towards Amferé to take the last ship of the season for Sederado.

(Continued from page 45)

I've poured out my heart to you, and I've tried to be helpful in all the ways I can. The suggestions I've given, I've meant, and that goes for all of it. Until the Fall issue, then, I remain,

GREGG CALKINS

Ed's Notes: 1. We would like to run a bigger letter section since we have to leave out dozens of good letters but with two novels we're desperate for space.

2. Glad to mention other mags if not libelous.

3. We cut letters not for fun but because of lack of space.

AUSTRALIA ON THE LINE . . .

232 James Street,
Perth,
Western Australia

Dear Editor:

No. 2 of 2CS-AB just arrived, and it is a big improvement over No. 1, both in story content and art work.

On the whole, the choice of reprints in the two issues I have read to date, have been good, but I much prefer THE STAR KINGS and SEEKER OF THE SPHINX to KINGSLAYER and PEBBLE. Any story by Edmond Hamilton is good. Ham is one of the best writers in the sf and fantasy field, and I can honestly say I have never read a story by him which was not tops with me. However, it is in the art work department that the biggest improvement in 2CS-AB is noticeable. Your first cover was lousy, but the cover on No. 2 is excellent. However, splitting the cover in half does not give your artists much scope, so I suggest that you use the whole of the FRONT cover to illustrate a scene from Book No. 1; and taking the ad. off the back page, you use the whole of the BACK cover to illustrate Book No. 2. (Gaaaagghhh! A BEM from your advertising department is after me with a zap gun!)

I couldn't help grinning at your reply to Vernoo McCain's letter. To Vern's request that you print WALDO and MAGIC INC. you reply, ". . . both have appeared in magazine form before. No dice." Unquote. I hate to tell you this, but it is about time you learned the facts of life, pal. Don't take it too

badly, but—THE STAR KINGS too, has seen magazine printing before appearing in 2CS-AB! It originally appeared in a certain magazine published in Chicago, which shall remain nameless in this letter, but which every fan undoubtedly knows of. In fact, I'm betting that by now, you have received several thousand letters pointing this out to you.

Quarterly publication is just fine. For heavens sake don't go monthly or bi-monthly. We completist collectors living outside the magical dollar area, have a tough enough time keeping up to date with all the prozines as it is.

I think 2CS-AB is here to stay. Keep up the good work.

Fantastically yours,

ROGER DARD

Ed's Note: You were right, we did get a number of comments on THE STAR KINGS. Now trying for half new classics and half old ones.

HERE SPEAKS AN N. R. JONES FAN

Winchester Hotel
Syracuse, N. Y.

Dear Editor:

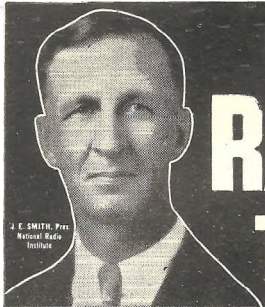
Boy! Was CITADEL IN SPACE good! Reminds me of Edgar Rice Burroughs. His best ones, I mean. Wish you could get something more by Neil R. Jones. Isn't he an old favorite? You speak of CITADEL IN SPACE as a Durna Rangué story. Then he must have written others of this kind. I would like to get and read them.

SWORD OF XOTA was good but it suffered from being in the same issue as CITADEL IN SPACE. This is the best of your three issues so far. I've read every one. Yes, there is something I want to point out. Did you not get your illustrations on the cover mixed up? The bottom illo on the first issue belonged to CITADEL IN SPACE. You had six months to correct the second mistake and slipped on that, too.

Get more stuff from Edmond Hamilton if you can. His STAR KINGS was the second best you've had in all three issues so far. And if Neil R. Jones has any more good Durna Rangué stories, as you call them, here is one who would like to read them.

Yours for a bi-monthly,

JACK SHELDON



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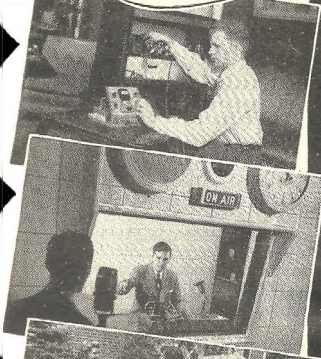
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Gets First Job Through N.R.I. "My first job was operator with KDLH, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. I am now Chief, King of Police Radio Station WQDN, 11 S. NORTON, Hamilton, Ohio."

2. GOOD PAY JOB

Your next step is a good job installing and servicing Radio-Television sets or becoming boss of your own Radio-Television sales and service shop or getting a good job in a Broadcasting Station. Today there are over 90,000,000 home and auto Radios. 3100 Broadcasting Stations are on the air. Aviation and Police Radio, Micro-Wave Relay, Two-Way Radio are all expanding, making more and better opportunities for servicing and communication technicians and FCC licensed operators.



3. BRIGHT FUTURE

And think of the opportunities in Television! In 1950 over 5,000,000 Television sets were sold. By 1954 authorities estimate 25,000,000 Television sets will be in use. Over 100 Television Stations are now operating, with experts predicting 1,000. Now is the time to get in line for success and a bright future in America's fast-growing industry. Be a Radio-Television Technician. Mail coupon for Lesson and Book—FREE.

I Will Train You at Home

Read How You Practice Servicing or Communications with Many Kits of Parts You Get!

I send you many valuable Kits of parts for PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. They "bring to life" theory you learn in my illustrated texts. As part of my Servicing Course, you build a complete, powerful Radio Receiver, a Multi-tester useful in earning extra spare time money, AM and FM Signal Generator, etc. In my Communications Course, you assemble a low-power Broadcasting Transmitter that shows you how to put a station "on the air," a Wavemeter, etc. This and other equipment I send you, is yours to keep.

This is just part of the equipment my students build. You keep all parts I send.

NOW! Advanced Television Practice

Now, special TV kits furnished to build high-definition scope... RF OSCILLATOR with feedback power supply... complete TV set... many other units. You see pulse, responsible, low-cost wave forms. Get valuable PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE locating and correcting TV troubles. Mail coupon.

Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Most had no previous experience; many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE—build valuable Electronic Multi-tester for conducting tests; also practice servicing Radios or operating Transmitters—equipment with circuits common to Radio and Television. At left is just part of the equipment my students build with many kits of parts I furnish. All equipment is yours to keep. Many students make \$5, \$10 a week extra fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time.

Mail Coupon For 2 Books FREE

Act Now! Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Coupon entitles you to actual lessons on Servicing; shows how you learn Radio-Television at home. You'll also receive my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." You'll read what my graduates are doing, earning; see photos of equipment you practice with at home. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal.

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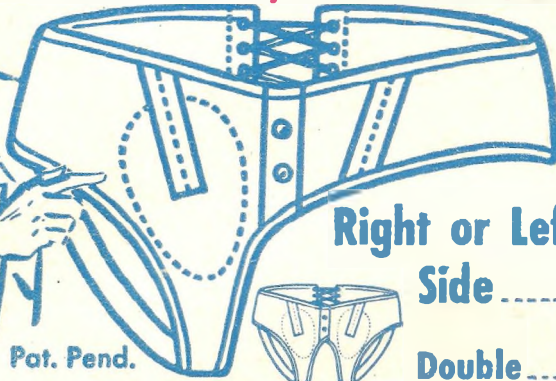


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