

SPRING
1944

JUNGLE

STORIES



20¢

WILBUR
PEACOCK
•
PAUL
SELONKE

KI-GOR JUNGLE
LORD

*IN A BOOK-LENGTH ACTION NOVEL
OF DARK AND DEADLY AFRICA*

COBRA QUEEN OF THE
CONGO LEGIONS

VULTURES ON SAFARI

by ARMAND BRIGAUD

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JUNGLE STORIES



T. T. SCOTT, President

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL OF KI-GOR'S NEWEST AFRICAN ADVENTURE
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Dear Pop:



Even an old Rainbow Divisioner like you would pop your eyes at the army we're putting together this time. Let me tell you, they're doing everything to make up just about the best bunch of fighting galoots you ever saw.

And that goes for what they do for us off duty, too! Take this new club house we got just outside of camp. It's got radios, dance floors, nice soft chairs and everything. And, Pop, you can get something to eat that won't cost you a month's pay.

Now, the army isn't running this. The USO is. And most of the other camps got USO clubs too, because you and a lot of other folks dug down and gave the money to the USO last year.

But, Pop, you know what's happened since then. Guys've been streaming into uniform. Last year there was less than 2 million of us. This year there'll be 4 million. And the USO needs a lot more dough to serve that many men—around 32,000,000 bucks I hear.

Now, Pop, I know you upped with what you could last time. But it would sure be swell if you could dig into the old sock again. Maybe you could get some of the other folks in the neighborhood steamed up, too.

It will mean an awful lot to the fellows in camp all over the country. Sort of show 'em the home-folks are backing them up. And, Pop, an old soldier like you knows that's a mighty nice feeling for a fellow to have. See what you can do, huh. Pop?

Bill



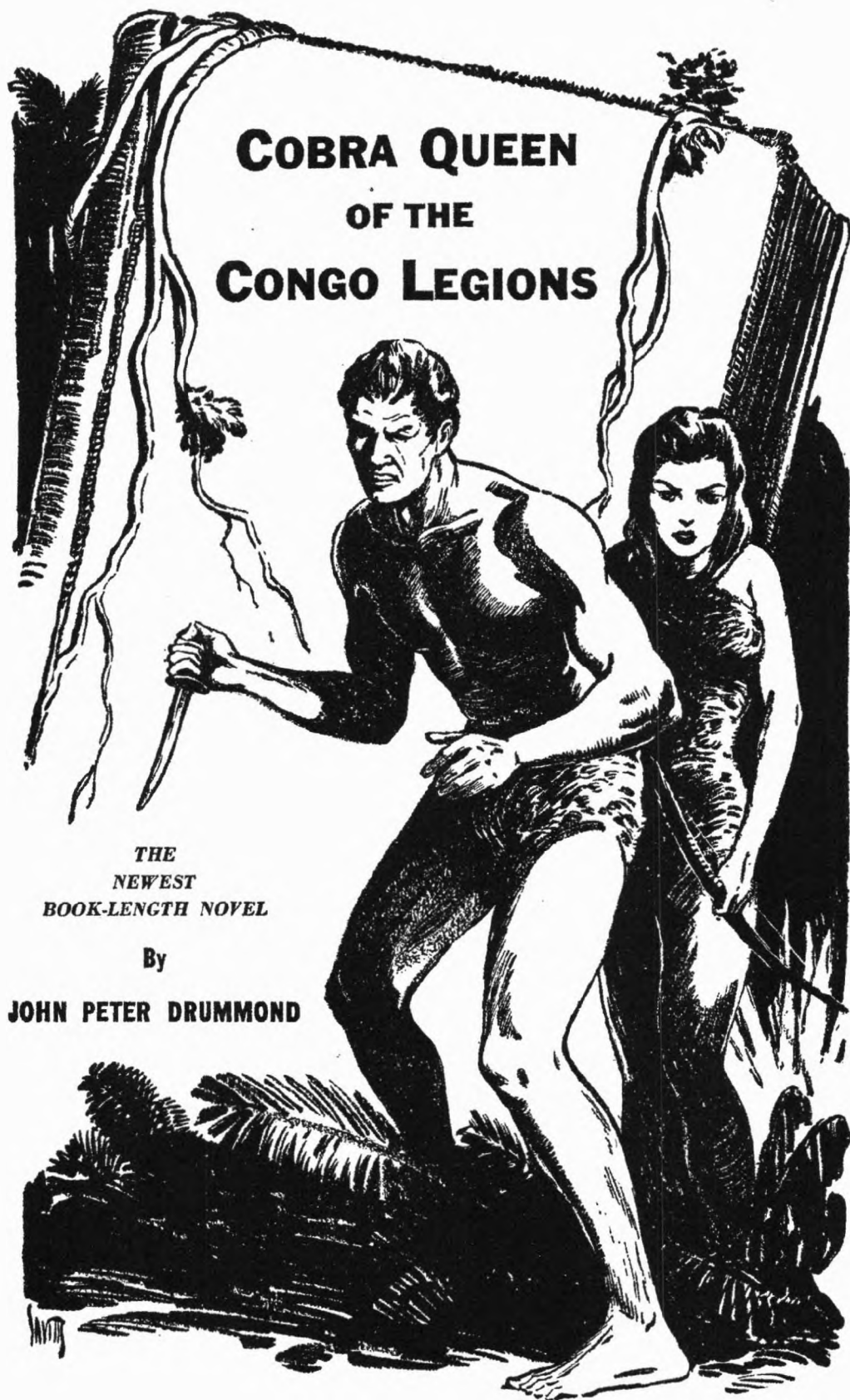
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COBRA QUEEN OF THE CONGO LEGIONS

**THE
NEWEST
BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL**

**By
JOHN PETER DRUMMOND**



Cobra Queen of the Congo Legions

By JOHN PETER DRUMMOND

In five days the lives of the White Lord of the Jungle and Helene would be forfeit for a crime unknowingly committed. Five days! And yet Ki-Gor was trekking ever deeper into his enemies' land, battling to save Helene from a murderous Arab and a Cobra Queen—his only chance of success lying in the blacks whose cry had become: "Ki-Gor must die!"





Ki-Gor fought alone against the Arabs' fury.

THE EAST WIND came sweeping in tangled heated currents across the *Balinga* forest, sucked chalky dust motes high into the grey-powdered trees, loosed them and sent spinning funnels of gritty dust in a drunken saraband through the patches of volcanic bluish lava-rock that spotted the forest and the open glades.

It drew the heat within itself from the brassy sun and sultry earth, carried it with a tangible strength along the lip of the

great man-made cup of rock, then dropped and spread it like a glowing blanket over the sweating toiling workers who slaved in dead silence in the crust of blue and red clay.

And with the heat brought by the rising wind, built against growing sounds of toil within the pit—came hate, the bitter brooding fanatical hate that breeds blood-letting and vicious vengeful murder. It spread like scum oil upon a still pond, spread

in concentric rings that merged and blended until all the surface was murder-lust, beneath which ran a powerful current ready to rise and slay in one awful engulfing tide of crimson might.

One man was the fountain-head of all that hate; he was the focal point for the blood-lust that surged with growing strength through the days of sweating toil in the diamond pit. He was the man who first had chained helpless blacks together and forced them to dig for the glittering stones, with death for their only reward, when broken by the whip and work they had collapsed upon the ground they robbed with crude tools of iron and wood.

He had been master then, his slightest whim a grim command and none had stood before him and his base desires. His face had been full, his belly big with the rich foods which were his. His hands had been soft and plump—and strong from sword-play. His eyes had been as sharp and cruel as a parrot's, and he had had the sneaking courage of the hyena, the *dango* which hunts only in packs and preys only on the dying and dead.

Once he had been Majd B'u Kalim. Now he was Kalim, the digger, the lean hard dangerous shadow of his former self. Now he was the man whose months of toil and unending labor had hardened his body and sharpened his mind. Now he was the mastermind whose aura of command and evil, while not as large as it once had been, was more deadly for its very smallness.

Kalim was the man whose only desire in life was to murder Ki-Gor, White Lord of the Jungle, and his golden titian-haired mate, Helene. A desire he had sworn by the sacred Koran to fulfill.

Majd B'u Kalim was a digger now, grubbing for a fortune in the blue clay of a diamond pit for those who once had slaved for him. His hands were calloused and stringy, and his full face had become a snarling mask on which the "slaver brand" was a white twisting worm against the mahogany of his sun-blackened forehead. His eyes were the feral orbs of an animal, alive with the glowing hate that burned within his cunning brain.

And like an animal he had bided his time, waiting for the moment when his jailers would relax their vigilance, when

their eyes would swing another way, when he could make his escape from the pit that had been his prison for many months.

HE SWUNG the iron pick against the tough blue clay, and the anger burned redly in his mind. His plans were maturing, would ripen at any moment; and he was feeling the first premonitory pangs that they might not have gone aright.

Chains clinked at his wrists and ankles, but he gave them no heed now. Once he had fought them, had hurled his strength against their cold quiet might, and lost the battle, even as slaves had done during the years he had wielded the whip of power. Now he worked with the automatic movements of a robot, utilizing only the strength necessary to do his task, wasting none.

Perspiration stained the single leather belt which clasped the dirty loin-cloth about his muscle-padded waist, and glistened like tan oil on his sun-browned body. He felt the crushing weight of the heat that flowed like liquid light about his body, and stopped work to wipe his hand across his sweat-stained face.

The whip hissed like a maddened snake, wrapped a fiery tip about his shoulders, drove him forward two full steps. He caught his balance, whirled in a snarling crouch, the murderous pick lifting in his hands.

"Back," the black overseer snapped brittlely. "Else I strip your skin and work you in your bones!"

The murder-lust flashed high, then faded, in Kalim's eyes. He nodded meekly, stepped back into position, began again the monotonous swinging of his heavy pick against the blue clay. Muscles ridged his jaw, but his work did not falter; and after a moment, the black guard moved away. Kalim turned slightly about, watched him go.

"He'll die for that," he said quietly to his basket-man.

"By Allah, they all shall die!" Barek, the basket-man, said softly in agreement. He lifted his head, watching the black guard move further away, then bent again to filling his basket with ruptured chunks of bluish clay. "But I remember the time when your metal-plaited whip slashed all of the skin from his back, nape to hips. Now that he is the master, you are lucky

that he scourges you only when he thinks you need it."

Kalim smiled grimly, did not falter in his work, and the stringy muscles of his forearms swelled with the temper of his thoughts.

"I shall wield the whip again," he promised quietly.

They worked in silence then, oppressed by the enervating heat, and the sound of their labors was but a tiny echo of the noise that rose in the great pit. To one side, steam purred in a yellow cloud from the bottomless cracks that led to the bowels of the sleeping volcano that had spewed the blue clay of the diamond field. Near the circular base of one towering wall, a muddy stream of sulphurous boiling water twisted and chewed its way through the patches of blue clay and red lava rocks.

Men were working throughout the entire pit, some with pick and spade, while others knelt beside the streams, there softening and gleaning the resulting blue mud for the gleaming lumps of raw diamonds. Over all stood the guards, former slaves who were now gaining back some of the rewards which should have been theirs years before.

Kalim glanced over the scene again, as he had done for brooding months, and he scowled bleakly, bitterly.

"The time is ripe," he said irritably to Berek, "why does not Selina come?"

Berek shrugged his broad apelike shoulders, blew his breath in a tired sigh. His gaze travelled up the hundred foot walls about them, studied the guards patrolling the top.

"She is a woman," he whispered softly, "she is not a corps of riflemen."

"Bah!" Kalim spat his disgust. "She has a dozen men behind her; they shall find a way to free us." He glanced at the brazen sun, then lowered his head. "It is high noon, the time she said that she would come."

Berek bent, grunted beneath the weight of the clay-filled basket, lifted it, then staggered to the growing pile beside the steaming yellow stream. Emptying the basket, he came slowly back to do again the work that had been his for unending weeks. His beady eyes swung surreptitiously about, then came to Kalim

and halted in sly suspicious belligerence.

"Why must you play secrets?" he asked. "Why do you not tell me of your plans; have I not worked blood and hand for you for Lo! half a lifetime?"

Majd B'u Kalim swung the pick in a sudden rushing of sweaty strength, heaved on the handle; and blue dust spurted upward from the broken bits of clay that churned from the ground. The pick came up again, then flashed down; and in between the steady blows, he spoke.

"There could be no chance of failure," he said softly. "A secret known by two is not a secret. Selina will come, for once I saved her life. I was to—"

HE WHIRLED about at the hissing *splat* of a whip on naked flesh, nodded his head slightly at what he saw. One of the prisoners had reached a guard, was strangling him with his bare hands, the chains clinking about his wrists as he strained for purchase. And at his back, the loaded whip swinging viciously in his hand, was a second guard. Once, twice, three times, the burning whip was laid across the gigantic Arab's shoulders; then his hands loosed their grip, and he staggered back in agony.

The half-strangled guard fell to his knees, shook his head like a wounded buffalo, then came slowly to his feet. He stared for a long moment; then the whip thonged to his wrist came circling about. He struck five times, reaching out with the five pounds of braided leather, utilizing every bit of strength in his shoulders. And on the fifth blow, the Arab crumpled, sagging in a dead faint.

The black guards stood over the body, their eyes circling the other prisoners, the whips swaying slightly in their hands until the prisoners had returned to their work. Then one walked to a leanto, brought back a skin bucket of water, emptied it over the unconscious man. The Arab came groggily back to consciousness, gazed blindly for a moment, then rolled to his feet and began again to work. The guards began to patrol their beats again.

"Mahmud is a good man," Kalim said quietly. "We shall take him with us when we leave." He watched the bold whiskered features of the beaten slave, chuckled lightly. "Mahmud murdered the brother

of that guard, broke both arms, then cracked his spine with a twist of his hands. It is a wonder that the guard did not kill him."

Barek dropped chunks of blue clay into the basket, and his voice was sullen and unfriendly.

"You evade my question," he said accusingly.

Kalim swung his pick aloft, sent it smashing downward. His lean vulpine face was twisted with the bitter irony of his thoughts.

"We shall go to the Valley of the Mummies," he said easily.

Barek went white through his sunburn, and clay dropped unheeded from his fingers. He shook his head, gazed in horrified superstitious terror at the man towering above him.

"Allah, no!" he whispered. "The place was cursed; it is banned for all of our people."

The glittering pick paused at the top of its sweep, and Kalim twisted slightly, bracing his legs. His voice was quiet and unruffled—but it held the deadliness of a *mamba's* hiss.

"I think you shall go with me," he said.

For one blinding instant of time, Barek watched the shining needle point of the uplifted pick; and a shudder raced his spine, ran into his voice.

"Thou art my Lord," he said humbly, cravenly.

THE PICK came down, showered blue clay. Majd B'u Kalim smiled with his mouth, but yellow fires still swirled in his eyes.

"We shall go to the Valley," he said, "and use Selina's place for our headquarters."

"Selina's place?" Barek was puzzled. "But she is an Arabian; she would not—"

"Selina is an Egyptian, the last of her line; for she is the Priestess of the Dead, she tends the tombs in the Valley of the Mummies."

"*Faah!*" Barek spat his disbelief.

"Naught lives there but the dead and their ghosts. I am no fool; I know that—"

He screeched in sudden agony, rolled his twisting shoulders from the lash that had darted from nowhere. Imperturbably, the black guard swung the whip back in

a lazy coil, smashed it forward again. Kalim swung about, wincing instinctively from the cracking snap of each blow. Barek screamed, tried to duck aside, tripped in his leg chains.

Kalim killed the guard.

It was easy to do; he simply let his pick fall in a whistling arc, guiding it so that the point soughed softly into the ebony belly of the guard, then jerked a bit with lean arms. The guard grunted in voiceless agony—and the pick's point emerged six inches from his back in a gout of foaming crimson.

The guard screamed. His mouth opened, and the sound rushed out in a thick turgid ululation of terrible agony. He screamed and twisted, then was dead, slumping down over the pick, tearing it from Kalim's grip.

And the murder-tide flowed up and over the men who worked in the great pit. A guard shouted a brazen alarm, died with his skull split like a melon, while the maddened slaver-prisoner turned and charged a second. A great knife came sweeping from its bull-hide scabbard, and the prisoner died.

Then hell broke loose as the prisoners turned on their former slaves. Tools became weapons that splashed crimson in gruesome sweeps across friend and foe alike. Knives danced on the hot air, slashed screaming life from the chained prisoners, drove them back toward the walls. Arabs and Houssas and sweating blacks charged the guards again and again in a mad frenzy, were counterattacked, and sent spinning backward in bloody dishevelled defeat.

But Kalim gave the battle no heed. His eyes were utterly insane, as he bent and ripped at the whip dangling from the dead guard's wrist. The leather broke with a tiny pop of sound; and then Kalim was lifting the plaited weapon aloft, was scourging the dead body before him. He was keeping the promise he had made.

He cursed as he struck, cursed and battered at the ripped bloody flesh, then tossed the whip aside with a shudder. He whirled on the panic-stricken Barek, caught at his shoulder, jerked him erect.

"Come," he yelled. "This is our only chance."

Without waiting for an answer, he bent,

jerked the bloody pick free, went at a clumsy run toward the single ladder that led to freedom. He was terrible in the awful simplicity of his purpose; but the clump of guards below the ladder did not hesitate in their quick swinging to meet his onrush.

They whirled about, formed a single line, and their swords were a glittering wall before them. A single shout came from one, and he hurled himself forward, his blade sweeping up.

Perspiration gleamed on his black skin, and the marks of old floggings were like grey ridges beneath the perspiration. Hate was in his face then, for he had been one of the first to dig in the diamond pits beneath the lashes of Kalim's overseers. Muscles bulged in ropy coils about his shoulders, and the strain of the blow he launched drew a soundless gasp from his twisting lips.

KALIM spun aside, trying to miss the smashing razor-sharp edge of the broad blade, threw his manacled hands high in desperation. Metal shrilled on metal, and golden sparks showered, as the blade struck the wrist chains and was deflected.

Then Kalim was driving in, grasping for a throat hold, his face livid with his maniacal rage, the twisting slaver scar on his forehead like a writhing white jungle slug. He spun and bent, caught with both hands, strained with all of the power in his lean body. His hands knotted about the black's columnar legs, lifted, and the guard was thrown from his feet. He landed with a grunt of pain, and the sword went clattering from his hand.

Barek was running to fight at Kalim's side now, running with a desperate slowness, for he saw that the other guards waited. Fighting had ceased entirely over the pit, the prisoners huddled together, guarded by the bloody weapons of the remaining guards. In clotted heaps from which crimson flowed sluggishly, black guards and brown prisoners lay in the grotesque postures of death.

And then Kalim was diving forward, his hands outspread to slay the guard before he could scramble to his feet. But a tiny stone rolled beneath his right foot, and he fell to one knee. And in that un-

earthly moment, when he saw that he had lost the fight, fear came to Kalim's heart.

He screamed in blind panic, twisted like a falling cat, his manacled hands reaching out for the fallen sword. But he was late; already the guard had thrown himself atop it, and was rolling to safety. A grim smile lifted the corners of his mouth; and then he was on his feet, and sword whirling in a glittering murderous arc.

He died at the top of the stroke, the long blue arrow churning deep into the base of his throat, rushing through, and gliding from the shattered back in a great pulse of spurting crimson. One second he paused at the apex of his stroke, the next he was a crumpled mass of insensate flesh, bucking out his life on the blood-stained earth.

"Aaaiiiieee!" a single cry went whirling upward from the guards, and they gazed upward at the new menace.

They, too, died as they stood, the smashing needle-pointed arrows drilling down from the crude cross-bows in the hands of the robed men who crowded the edge of the pit high above.

There was no defense, there could be no defense, for the guards wore only swords and carried whips. They were like oxen caught in a trap, and they were slaughtered just as brutally.

Then a voice pealed out in a single cry of command, winging down in a voice that rang like a high-toned bell, brooking no argument.

"The ladder, Kalim."

Kalim dashed to the crude ladder propped against the wall, climbed with a monkey-like speed up the lashed rungs. His chains hampered his movements, but he made a good speed; and even as he climbed his voice was calling names.

"Barek! Mahmud! Rajh! This way!"

Calls of agreement came hurtling back, and then the ladder swayed beneath the weight of climbing bodies.

And that was the signal that released the bonds of amazement from the horde of prisoners below. With a single shout of murderous triumph, the mob surged forward, beating madly with bloody hands, each fighting those nearest himself battling to reach that single avenue of escape.

Then Kalim was at the top, being pulled to safety by two of the robed men. He

half-sprawled on the rocky ground, was jerked erect, turned in time to see the three he had designated crawl over the diamond pit's rim. He laughed silently when he saw the bodies of the treacherously slain guards sprawled along the pit's edge in bloody death.

"Talík, Ibn!" the bell-like voice snapped, and two of the robed men stepped forward, cross-bows lifting in their hands.

A MAN topped the ladder, screamed once before the singing arrow of the first archer drilled the life from his heart. Corded fingers loosed their grip upon the ladder rungs, and the dead body fell limply onto the braced arms of the man directly below. Then the second archer bent over the edge of the pit, and the forefinger of his right hand touched the crude trigger of his bow. The gut string sang a deep bass note, and the arrow made a chugging sound as it drove squarely into the screaming face of the second man.

Both bodies fell, and their plunging weight cleared the ladder. Yelling prisoners fell in a tangled clot of churning arms and legs, battled frantically to free themselves.

But they were too late. Already, Selina's robed men had darted forward, and were drawing the ladder out of reach of those below. They swung it up, tilted it back, left the free end hanging over the edge of the pit, as though deliberately taunting the men who had been so close to freedom.

"The chains!" Kalim whispered hoarsely against the burst of yelling that smashed from below.

"Later, you fool!" one robed man snarled. "Help will come at any moment."

Anger swelled Kalim's face at the contemptuous tone of the robed man's voice; then he nodded shortly in agreement. He glanced at the smallest of the robed group, saw the dark esoteric eyes watching him.

"Selina—" he began.

"Later!" Selina snapped. "Come!"

And then, moving by mutual unspoken desires, they began to run. Blue dust spurted from their feet as they circled the edge of the great earth fault, and the prisoners' voices faded in the hot stagnant air. They ran in a compact clot, pacing each other, Kalim and the others running clum-

sily because the chains about their ankles permitted no long strides.

"This way," Selina said, and all swerved to the left, going toward a thick clump of *kobri* bushes that towered head high in a splash of dark green against the blue and red and steel-grey lava rock.

Two of the robed men pushed the fragrant foliage aside, and they heard the bubbling grunts of camels ahead. Within a fleeting second they were through the fringes of bushes, and ahead of them was a space where the bushes were sparse. Nine camels swung ugly heads their way, startled, fighting the hobbles that drew one foreleg of each back in upon itself.

Then knives glittered, and the legs were free, the camels standing upright, momentarily, then dropping to their knees at the cruel twisting of the lead ropes tethered to brass nose rings. They bubbled and grunted in habitual ill-humor, waited until their riders had mounted, then brushed through the foliage and began their lopsided run toward the forest that sprang like a solid black wall from the rock ground three miles distant.

"There," Selina said, pointed, and the others turned to gaze back.

Two miles away, men were racing toward the pit; sunlight glinting silver rays from their weapons, their voices barely discernible in a ragged whisper of maddened alarm.

KALIM laughed, he laughed with all of the tortured bitterness of a man who has seen his ascendant star fade into darkness, only to rise again with the faintest of silver glimmerings. He laughed, and the ironical mirth rose, twisted and hate-filled and vengeance-warped, to the cloudless sky overhead.

"I'll be back," he whispered. "I'll be back."

He urged the camel ahead with the toe of his right foot at the root of the evil-smelling beast's neck, forced it alongside of Selina's racing mount. He gestured with a toss of his head.

"Why did you not leave the ladder?" he asked.

Selina turned black eyes upon Kalim, and the words came steel-hard. "With them free, news of this land might have reached the soldiers who patrol about the district.

I care naught for the slaves; let them die in chains." Her gaze softened a bit. "I owed you a debt; now it is repaid."

Majd B'u Kalim nodded, swung his gaze about the group of silently-riding men. He could distinguish none of the features of the robed men. He looked at Berek, knowing he could not trust the man, yet conscious of his bull-strength and absolute lack of moral sense. Rajh he passed with a single glance, seeing the sly evil in the vulpine features, knowing the tactical knowledge that lay in the man's brain, knowing he might be useful later.

But on Mahmud his gaze rested the longest. He saw theropy muscles gliding beneath the bronzed skin, saw the snake-like welts that raced his back. He saw the strong features beneath the scraggly beard, mentally traced the line of his chin. But the eyes interested him the most; they were the blurred orbs of a weak-minded man, the blotched intelligence in them could be subordinated by a man of greater will. Mahmud would be useful, with his great strength and clouded mind.

For Majd B'u Kalim had a Koran oath to keep.

He turned on the wooden saddle, faced Selina again. Lambent flame glowed deep in his eyes, and the hate in his voice was a shrill overtone to his words.

"What of Ki-Gor?" he asked.

"You fool, you utter fool!" Selina snapped. "He bested you once; he will do it again—if he does not kill you. Leave him alone."

"I said, *what of Ki-Gor?*" Kalim said evenly.

Selina shrugged. "I know little. He is where he was months ago, as far as I know, still living in that glade beside the Silver River."

"You will help me?" It was not a question.

Selina shivered. "I will help," she said finally.

"Good!" Relief was in Kalim's tone.

Then the group was topping a slight swell of land, and the jungle was close ahead. They rode with a quickening speed toward the secret paths by which Selina and her men had come, going toward the Valley of the Mummies.

Behind, there was no sound. Ahead, the slight noises of the green jungle reached

out tenuous force to capture the attention of the riders.

Ahead lay the Valley of the Mummies, the taboo land where ordinary men and women refused to tread. Ahead lay vengeance and death and the murderous thrill that would mark the fulfillment of a vow.

Ahead lay the final end to a clot of twisted life threads. And Kalim was the man whose hands held those threads. He was the spinner and the weaver and the cutter of those life-lines—and in his heart was a vicious joy that it was so.

Ahead, lay Ki-Gor's and Helene's deaths.

And Kalim was content.

II

KI-GOR, White Lord of the Jungle, tried desperately to twist away from the gleaming knife; but a lithe body held him pressed against the rough bole of a *baobab* tree, while a hand was tangled tightly in his golden mane of hair. His grey eyes quested the deep shadows of the trees overhead, and he braced his mighty legs to make a sudden dash for escape.

"Please!" he begged fearfully.

The firm fingers tightened in his hair, jerked his head back, and the gleaming razor-point of the hunting knife poised menacingly before his face.

"Move once more, and you'll lose an eye!"

Ki-Gor nodded against the pull of his hair, swallowed heavily, thoroughly cowed by his captor. He slumped back against the tree, watched the knife disappear overhead, winced in pain as it slashed downward.

"Oooh!" he muttered.

He heard the unrelenting laughter at his side, scowled bleakly. "My turn will come," he said softly. "And when it does—*wah!*"

"*Wah*, yourself, you big sissy!" Helene said sharply, tugged at her jungle mate's hair again. "You've needed a haircut for days you're not getting up until I'm finished."

She wielded the big knife with a casual familiarity, slashed again, finishing the evening of the golden hair. Then she stepped back, watched approvingly as he brushed it into place with a sweep of bronzed fingers.

"Now," she said, "you look like a human."

Ki-Gor frowned into the smiling seriousness of Helene's face, tried to keep the tiny flecks of laughter from swirling into his keen eyes.

"*Women!*" he said in sharp scorn.

He came lithely to his feet, towered over the lissome stature of his mate. He reached out with a great hand, tangled the fingers in the golden-red waves of Helene's hair. Cunning came into his eyes, and he smiled with a fiendish leer.

"Now it is *your* turn," he said cruelly.

Helene blinked, smiled uncertainly into the eyes of the bronzed giant standing before her. Then the smile faded, and mock horror came into her soft features.

"*You would!*" she said. "You overgrown bully; you'd actually strike me. You'd beat me like a captive animal. You'd—oh, you!" She extended the glittering knife, hilt first, "Take your knife, take it, you beast!"

Ki-Gor grinned, loosed his grip on his mate's radiant hair, took the knife. Very carefully, he permitted his attention to center upon his scabbarding of the gleaming blade, then glanced up in blank astonishment, when Helene laughed delightedly.

"Smartie!" she cried. "You'll never cut *my* hair."

And she was gone, running like a jungle driad through the bars of golden sunshine, racing toward the far edge of the sleepy jungle glade. Her laughter floated back, and she threw a mocking kiss as she paused momentarily beneath a swinging vine.

Ki-Gor grinned, began to move with the graceful silent speed of a charging panther. Muscles slid smoothly beneath his skin, and his speed was uncanny for a man so great as he. He went forward, balancing on cat-like feet, hands slightly extended.

And Helene swung herself lightly up the dangling vine. She climbed with the tricky jungle ease taught her by her mate; and the Jungle Lord paused in silent admiration at the foot of the vine. Then he, too, began to climb, great muscles swelling and relaxing in his wide shoulders, carefully timing his speed so that he did not gain upon her.

He growled in the threatening bull tones

of a maddened ape, and his voice was dark with mock anger.

"I shall teach you that jungle women do not command their men. I shall nock your ears and put a ring in your nose. Each night I shall tie you to a tree by your nose ring, and laugh when your cries of fear reach my ears."

HELENE hesitated on the swelling curve of a great branch overhead, laughed into the eyes of the climbing jungle giant. She held a loop of a second vine in her left hand, while her right pressed in simulated terror against the yellow and black of the leopard-skin halter that cupped her breasts.

"I was right—you *are* a beast!" she said.

Then she was gone, swinging through the air at the end of a length of green vine, golden-red hair streaming free in the scented breeze behind. She swung in a great arc, ending the swing atop a stubby branch of an ironwood tree, fifty feet above the shadowed jungle floor. There she waited, balancing with an indolent grace, looping the vine's end over a small limb.

Ki-Gor reached up, caught with his right hand on the rough surface of a wrist-thick branch, drew himself easily to safety. His released vine swayed like a green snake below, slowly quieted.

The jungle giant perched upon the branch, his eyes searching the trees in unconscious vigilance, then relaxed and grinned at his slim wife.

"It will be much worse for you," he declared, "if I must run you down like a *klipvaard* antelope."

"*Faah!* Your threats are wind running through dry grass, gone and forgotten."

She laughed, and the gay sound went rilling through the tangled tree tops. A *virini* bird swelled its carmine throat, whirled its liquid burst of melody in thrilling mockery. Three monkeys perched on a side branch of a stately ironwood tree, turned their wizened old-men's face in comical bewilderment from Helene to Ki-Gor, then chattered busily among themselves, finally bursting into the high ululations of jungle mirth.

Ki-Gor grinned, began his stalking of his prey. He caught a hanging vine, swung easily into space, flipped from the first liana to a second, winging like some bronzed ape through the sunlight-dappled shadows.

Teeth gleamed white in his strong face, and his keen eyes flicked quickly about, estimating the strength of a third vine that hung thirty feet ahead.

Helene had whirled, with a tiny cry of pretended fear, and was climbing through the branches with the agility of the white-ruffed watching monkeys. Her golden body was white against the green and brown of the foliage, and her hair was a swirl of golden-red, flashing in the streaks of yellow sunlight.

Eighty feet above the ground, she crouched for a moment on a slender limb, then tore free a length of twisting vine, used it to ride in a great winging arc to another perch forty feet away and twenty feet lower.

Ki-Gor grinned in that flickering second before he reached for the third vine, the eternal amazement spreading in his mind again because she was so utterly at home in a land that she had adopted lazy months before.

Once she had lived in civilization; once the jungle would have been but a place of terror for her. But now, with the great Jungle Lord at her side, she was more content than she had ever been in her life. Now her life held a warmth and a meaning such as she could have found nowhere else in all of the world.

Ki-Gor thought of that in the fleeting second of rushing breeze, as he reached for the third vine, and a great contentment filled his heart. Then he had come to the end of the great arc, and his mighty hand had darted out to grasp the ropy liana.

And Ki-Gor missed his hold.

SO SLIGHT was the deviation of his hand's impulse another man would have considered the movement a success. But to Ki-Gor, upon whose every movement depended his chances of existence in a hostile world, that slight twist of his fingers spelled death.

He jerked his hand about, made a desperate effort to catch the vine again, and the back of his hand slapped the liana away. Already had he loosed his hold upon the vine that had been his swing, and its writhing end had flipped backward with an uncanny speed.

Ki-Gor twisted like a falling panther, blinking to clear away the black curtain

which had momentarily fallen over his keen eyes. He could see as through a thick smoke cloud, and thoughts were turgid in his mind. He gasped slightly, straining every preternaturally-dulled faculty in a burst of concentration to clear his vision and coordinate his thoughts.

He began to fall, arms flailing to gain his balance, muscled fingers spread to grasp any stray limb or twig that might give him a chance at life. Far below, the brown earth began its upward rush, and close at hand, a *colubus* monkey ceased its preening of the white ruff about its throat, stared in horrified bewilderment.

And the hanging vine fell into position again. Its pliant length surged against the jungle giant's arm; and he twisted about, snaked his hands out in a blur of flickering movement. Tiny shards of bark scored the skin of his palms, and oily pitch was sticky on his fingers.

Then great muscles sprang into bold relief on his massive shoulders, raced the length of his arms, coalesced titanic power into his knotted hands.

The vine tightened like a snapping rope, and terrific strain almost jerked Ki-Gor's hands free. Then he loosed his grip slightly, riding the liana for five feet, gradually tightening his fingers again. With a snap that jerked his chin against his chest, the jungle giant halted his earthward plunge.

For a second, he hung on the swinging vine, gathering his strength, catching his breath, shaken by the thoughts of the plunging death that had almost been his.

He shook his head, still trying to clear away the cobwebs of darkness which clouded his mind and eyes. For over two months now, an old head injury, which he had received in a battle with a grizzled bull ape, had blanked out his brain time and again. The last occurrence had been almost two weeks before, and he had thought that the injury was fully healed.

Slowly, then with greater speed, the blackness cleared. Ki-Gor sighed a bit in relief, then began to clamber swiftly up the liana. Muscles swelled in bold relief along his back and arms, and he moved with a careless grace, utilizing but little of his magnificent strength, going upward at a speed that naught but the smaller monkeys of the green jungle could emulate.

He reached a heavy limb, drew himself to safety, then stood on the rough bark, balancing with the agility of the jungle-born. Far ahead he could see the body of his mate swinging through the trees, going toward the blue lake which was their daily trysting place.

He began to move again, the death-filled moment already in the back of his mind, forgotten with the casual callousness of a jungle creature to whom death in the jungle depths is a daily occurrence.

But now he did not trust his weight to the vines that trailed and twisted like somnolent green and brown snakes through the branches of the crowding trees.

He went through the swaying treetops, utilizing the skill that was his from uncounted years in the jungle. His feet were cat-light on the branches, and his hands guided him with the strength of a monkey.

HE SPRANG catlike upon a bending bough, rode its whiplike strength down for five feet. Mighty thigh muscles cushioned the shock, and he balanced upon the brown scaly bark with a casual ease. Then the natural springiness of the live wood asserted itself; it flashed back into position again, and Ki-Gor was catapulted upward, riding the wind, flipping forward from the natural springboard.

His left hand slapped a tree limb, threw him a bit to one side; and his right hand darted out, grasped a small branch for a split second, then threw him forward so that his left hand could grasp and hold a wrist-thick branch. He swung for a flashing moment by his hand; then his feet found purchase on a heavy limb, and he was balanced again, his original perch twenty feet behind.

He caught the barest glance of his mate ahead; then she was gone through the trees, and her gay laughter came winging gently back on the soft warm breeze. He smiled, then bent forward, went headfirst from the limb. His bronzed body twisted like a falling cat, landed feet-first upon another bough twenty feet below. The branch surged low, then whipped high in reflex, and Ki-Gor was spun through the air with a thrilling speed. Judging his distance with uncanny precision, he caught with both hands at a loop of liana, flung his legs forward, landed on a far branch.

He laughed to himself, thrilled as he always was by the sheer sport of whirling through the jungle's roof. There was in him then a zest for life that would never die, a love for the jungle such as no other could ever know, a feeling that he could never explain to another.

He left his momentary perch with a rushing continuation of the movement which had brought him to the branch. His bronzed hands caught and held, threw him forward at a dizzy speed; and suddenly he was a great tanned ape, swinging easily through the treetops in pursuit of his mate.

He travelled that way for minutes, moving no faster than was necessary, not knowing but what another black cloud would fall over his mind. He winced mentally, remembering those first few weeks after his battle with the enraged gorilla, days in which he would go suddenly blank of mind, would do things of which he had no later knowledge. Without Helene's loving help, even with his superb physical condition, he might not have survived those days of mindless movement.

He swung higher into the tree, seeking the more open spaces, careless of the fact that safer travel lay thirty feet below. The hot sun laced golden bars of light in a tangled radiant pattern through the interstices of the green-brown branches, felt warm and solid and life-filled against the broad sweep of his shoulders.

He hesitated now and again, breathing deeply and easily, balancing gracefully on swaying limbs, searching the jungle about him with keen eyes. Tiny tree toads popped their eyes solemnly, grunted their three-noted calls of warning, then became again the inanimate tree warts they so closely resembled. A parrot flew by, screaming raucously, reptilian eyes watching with an insolent venomous stare. It sped past on vivid red and purple wings, disappeared into the trees far ahead. Ki-Gor grinned, began to make his way through the trees again.

He travelled with a rapidity that a walking man could not have matched; yet such was not the full rate of speed which he could maintain for hours along the leafy trail he followed. Ahead lay the cool waters of the blue lake where he and Helene swam each jungle day; and he knew that

already she had reached its banks, was swimming lazily in the clear water.

He drove faster through the trees, swinging to his right, dropping to the crowded branches thirty feet below. Going was easier here, and he travelled with the gliding grace of a bronzed wraith. Within seconds, he was within sight of the lake, and he slowed his speed, began to circle, so as to come up to one side of the tree from which he and Helene dived into the clear blue water.

Laughter rode his eyes, for this was a game which he and his jungle mate played every day. Yet it had its serious side, too; for only by constant vigilance, only by never permitting some jungle denizen to creep unnoticed to within striking distance was it possible to survive for long against the hostile men and beasts who prowled the shadowed jungle depths.

He swung with an uncanny silence about the edge of the lake, so quietly that two monkeys sat wide-eyed, not moving, unconscious that he had sped behind their backs. The trees thinned even more, and he could now see the lake clearly, finally seeing Helene standing on the thick limb of the arboreal jungle diving platform.

WATER rippled lazily beneath her perch, stirred by the warm breeze, glittering from the sun's rays. The white sand of the beach was a glistening snowy contrast to the blue water, and a blob of pink moved along the sand on yellow stilt legs. Then the pink resolved into a flamingo which ran clumsily for a short distance, then launched into the air on bright wings that rivalled the riotous orchids which clung with tiny roots to their host-trees.

Ki-Gor watched the great bird spin out of sight, then swung his gaze again to his wife. Softly, cautiously, he ceased his flight, crouched at the base of a heavy limb, rested his back against the tree's mossy bole.

For Helene was utterly lovely, as she stood on the diving branch, her soft hair a swirl of golden-red, her body a soft tan-gold against the darker yellow and black of the leopard-skin clout and halter which were her only clothing.

She was humming lightly to herself, blue eyes searching the trees for a glimpse

of her mate, and the sound came softly back to Ki-Gor in a lilt of muted music that was as thrilling as a half-remembered dream. She laughed softly, turned back to the water, stood wide-legged on the rough brown bark of the great branch.

Her beauty was such then that it caught at Ki-Gor's heart with an ecstasy which was like a physical pain. Never had he thought his life could be so completely wrapped within the person of another, as it had become so with Helene. But now she was all that he wanted from the world; she was his world, and he was content.

Unmindful that Ki-Gor watched from where he squatted in a tree, Helene stretched lazily, then glanced at the rippling blue water below. She nodded to herself, then lifted her hands to the halter at her breasts.

The leopard-skin halter was bright yellow and black against her body, and she shrugged it free of her rounded supple breasts, hung it on the stub of a broken twig. Then she loosed the thongs that held the spotted breech-clout to her slender waist, slipped it down slim legs, stepped free. She hung the clout atop the halter, then stood nude in the sunshine.

She was slender and smooth and supple as she stood in the bright sunlight; she was a golden titian-haired goddess standing in the radiance of her sun-God. She lifted her arms in a sleepy stretch of pure animal pleasure, yawned in delicious abandonment, white teeth glistening in her tan face. Then she turned puzzled eyes the way she had come, trying again to see Ki-Gor come swinging through the trees.

Shrugging, she turned away, poised lithely on the branch, then dived in a breathless arc into the water thirty feet below. Spray geysered, then settled back; and Helene was but a gliding golden shadow beneath the surface of the lake.

KI-GOR sat patiently, watching the surface of the water. He felt contented and relaxed, for this was one of the few moments in the jungle when danger felt far away, almost forgotten. A warm breeze stroked his bronzed skin, ruffled the golden mane of his hair, then sped onward into the jungle.

A fuzzy yellow and brown caterpillar dropped onto his arm, inched itself along



*Ki-Gor drove the blade
with savage force.*

the wrist, and he watched it with an interest about the jungle which would never die. He felt the first twinges of hunger in his belly, looked about, then reached up with his left hand, retrieved a softly-ripe pear from where it dangled almost at his shoulder, ate it slowly, savoring the crisp succulent tang of the white meat.

Far below, a tiny foot-high *dik-dik* deer minced from the underbrush walked daintily toward the lake. Ki-Gor waited until it was almost directly beneath him, then twitched the muscles of his heavy wrist,

sent the crawling caterpillar through the air. It fell in a twisting arc, landed squarely on the deer's small head, sent the timid creature whirling away in a burst of fright.

The Jungle Lord smiled, tossed the remains of his pear to the ground, watched Helene break water fifty feet from the white beach. She swept the gold-red hair back from her forehead with an utterly feminine movement then floated lazily on her back, her slender hands barely paddling to keep her afloat.

A gaudy *nuhana* fish flirted water with

a red and gold tail, came full length out of the water, snatched a low-flying insect from the air, then disappeared into the depths again with a tiny splash of white spray. Helene turned at the muted sound, then began to stroke easily toward the bank. Her slim arms moved in unconscious grace and rhythm, and her body was golden against the blue of the water.

Ki-Gor watched, as she reached the beach. She came upright, walked onto the white sand, stripped the water from her body with brief flickers of her fingers, then wrung water from her hair, fluffed the red-gold tresses so that the sun would dry them. Then, her eyes still puzzled as she watched the jungle, she walked toward the base of the tree from which she had dived.

She disappeared from the jungle giant's view; then a hanging vine straightened, twisted slightly for a brief moment, and she reappeared again, coming hand over hand up the pliant length. Stepping to the branch, she slipped into her breech-clout, thonged it tight about her supple waist, then fitted the halter to her breasts, tightened it.

She paused a brief moment on the branch, then caught the vine again, slid down it out of sight. It swayed for a moment, then hung limply again, and Ki-Gor knew his wife had reached the ground.

He came slowly to his feet, stretched lazily. And in the middle of the movement, horror gripped him. For pealing out to him, coming in the voice he knew so well, was a cry of alarm.

"Ki-Gor!" Helene screamed. "Help!"

For one eternal moment, Ki-Gor could not move. So sudden had been the change from an idyllic existence to one of terror, he could not grasp the meaning of Helene's cry.

Then he moved in a blur of speed. His right hand darted out, caught a vine—and he was swinging to the aid of his mate. He loosed his hold on the vine, caught another, swung to the limb upon which Helene had stood. One second, he paused there, estimating and evaluating the situation with an uncanny speed. Then he was sliding down a third liana, dropping squarely to face the man who had stepped out of concealment, weapons raised to slay the de-

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fenseless Helene as she stood helplessly.

He snarled like the jungle animal he was, all the thin veneer of civilization splitting and dropping aside. And then he was before his mate, the glittering hunting knife springing alive in his great right hand.

III

FOR ONE age-long moment that tableau held. Ki-Gor caught his balance with springy strength, protected Helene who was crouched at the base of a great tree, the quivering shaft of a slender spear standing straight out from the tree, almost touching her side. She gave a slight gasp of relief, then fell silent, awed by the drama of that which was happening.

Ki-Gor was huge, muscled like a giant; but the attacker was almost his size. He stood, half-crouched, couching a second spear in his right hand, while a thin splinter of a warrior's sword was gripped in his left. He wore the skin and head of a leopard over his shoulders and head, indicating that he was on the blood-trail of some hated enemy; and from his waist swung the brutal knob-ended club which was used in hand to hand fighting.

He snarled through set teeth, his eyes blood-flecked, his head crouching on a muscular neck. There was no mercy in his flat features, nor no fear. He was murder-crazy, and only death would stop him now.

And then, in that brief instant before the killer struck again, Ki-Gor recognized the assailant. Incredulity rocked his mind, and he spoke in a rush of torrential words.

"Nakeela!" he snapped. "Why is your weapon raised against me and mine? Are we not blood-brothers; have we not shared the same hut; have we not sworn mutual vengeance against all attackers?"

"I claim blood-hate," Nakeela said thinly, and lunged.

But Ki-Gor slipped lithely to one side, and his keen knife deflected the blow. Then his left hand darted out, wrenched the spear away, tossed it to one side. It fell behind the black, leaning slantwise against a stubby log.

Unbalanced for the moment, Nakeela almost went to his knees; then he regained his balance, and the sword flicked out in a driving lunge. But Ki-Gor met the

blade with the haft of the spear he had jerked from split wood of the tree trunk.

He parried with the lightning speed of the Masai spear-fighter, using the haft as a fortress behind which to work, crowding his foe, seeking for that first mistake which would make it possible to reverse the spear and use the blade. But to do this he had to drop his knife. It clattered on the sand, lay in a hollow scuffed by the black's sandalled feet.

Then Ki-Gor forced the fight, battling with a terrific savagery, driving the black before him, splinters from the spear haft drifting lazily to the ground each time the gleaming sword struck.

The black was grunting with the efforts of his exertion; he tried to make a stand, but was forced back two full steps. Then he made his play, viciously driving the sword forward, twisting it, trying to force the spear from Ki-Gor's mighty grip. And the jungle giant permitted the feint to flow without opposition, then twisted his spear—and the sword fell from pain-wracked fingers.

Ki-Gor bent, snatched at the sword, barely escaped the smashing rush of the knob-ended club. He licked up with the captured blade, drove it deep and hard even as he straightened to his full primal height. The blade went in silver, sliding as a hot knife through a chunk of fat, and emerged crimson a full foot from Nakeela's back.

And then Ki-Gor had stepped back, the sword and spear dropping from his hands, watching Nakeela cough away his life on the bloody sand. Helene cried out softly, one hand pressed against her forehead.

Nakeela writhed, then subsided, and his voice came clear and weak. "I claimed blood-hate; others have sworn the blood-oath. I die, but others shall come. May your soul never ride the canoe down *Kas-tadi*."

"But why?" Ki-Gor cried. "What have I done?"

"You know, though your tongue is forked. You slew my brother and two more, two hands of suns ago."

"But I—" the Jungle Lord began, and stilled.

For Nakeela was dead, slain on the vengeance trail by the man who was to have been his victim. His body twitched a bit

in dead reflex, then was still, and only the living stood on the beach.

KI-GOR turned to Helene, caught her close, felt the warmth of her body against his skin. "But why?" he muttered. "I am no killer; I do not fight my—" he caught his breath, and his grey eyes centered on the horrified blue ones of his mate.

"Two hands of suns ago—I!" he said in horror.

Then Helene was holding him tightly, shaking her head, trying to keep the terror from her voice.

"It is a mistake, a horrible mistake," she cried. "He was *takadu*, crazed with grief. You could not have killed his brother."

"Two hands of suns ago," Ki-Gor whispered, and turned away from his wife. "Two hands of suns ago, I was without a mind; I wandered for a hand of unknowing days through the jungle. *I do not know what I did!*"

"Oh, my dear!" Helene came to Ki-Gor's side. "It is not true. Even sick, you would not kill those you love. Nakeela was mistaken. He had to be."

There was in Ki-Gor then something that he had never experienced before. He had slain, had fought as all jungle animals do for existence. But always he had fought cleanly, never slaying deliberately, never provoking an unwarranted attack upon others. Never had he been accused of such treachery.

But now, deep in his great heart, he knew that he had done that of which he was accused. And the full horror of the situation was even now more clear. Because for a hand of times, five times, his mind had completely blanked out, and he had wandered the jungle without knowing what he did or where he went. He had been a mindless man without a past or a future, his very present something which would never be known.

Never?

No! For the past had crept up, had blasted the even tenor of his existence. He was a murderer now, had even slain the man who had tried only to revenge his brother's slaying.

Ki-Gor's breath caught in his throat, and he clenched his mighty hands. His mind was a whirling maelstrom of conflicting

thoughts, and he didn't know what to do.

Then Helene's soft hand was on his arm, and he held her tightly in a sudden rush of deep emotion.

"Tell me," he said, "tell me that I'm no killer."

But Helene was crying against his chest, and in her tears he read his answer. Gently, he stroked the soft fluffiness of her drying gold-red hair, traced the lobe of her ear with a forefinger. Slowly, her sobbing died away; and finally she freed herself of his arms, smiled gamely into his set features.

"We can explain it," she said. "They were your friends; they will understand."

Ki-Gor nodded, but deep in his heart he knew that nothing could be done. Blood-hate had been sworn, blood-vengeance would be demanded. Nothing could be done but flee to another part of Africa, there finding some place where both would be safe.

He looked across the lake, saw the rippling waves, descried the brown and green jungle that crowded the beach of the far bank. His gaze swung to the brilliant blue sky, saw the pink wings of a flock of flamingoes as they settled to feed; and his heart came as near to breaking as it ever would. This was his land, his home; nothing else could take its place.

But Ki-Gor was a man, with a man's keen intellect, and he knew that something might be done, some way found to partially alleviate the agony he had caused. He nodded slightly, and his indomitable spirit flamed in his grey eyes.

"We shall talk tonight," he said slowly. "Perhaps a way can be found."

Helene nodded confidently, and for the moment they were one in the jungle, their thoughts and lives and emotions so closely entwined that there was no need for speech.

THEY buried Nakeela, digging a shallow grave with the spears, laying the body out, while Ki-Gor intoned the Kamzila Prayer of the Dead. Then they scooped dirt over the body, packed it tightly, and rolled heavy logs over the grave to protect it from nocturnal jungle ghouls. Later, they went slowly down an elephant trail, going toward the sleepy glade which was their home.

They did not talk as they walked, for each was intent upon his thoughts. They

strode side by side, their feet making no sound on the brown humus carpet that padded the narrow trail, and even the chittering of an excited monkey brought no usual smile to their faces. Red and green and black orchids nodded brightly from beside the trail, and the black and red head of a *vanka* lizard watched with beady eyes from beneath a thorny *kalchi* bush. A blue and purple parrot swore irritably from its high perch, then fled on silent wings.

But Ki-Gor and Helene had no heed for any of the colors or sounds. They walked silently, and their minds were black with unspoken emotions. Their arms touched now and again, and they drew a strange comfort from the mere fact that they were together. Ki-Gor sensed the trust that lay in his wife's heart, and was strangely stirred; while Helene wanted nothing more than to bring the old laughing light back to the Jungle Lord's eyes.

They walked for minutes, following the trail; and was only when they were a hundred yards from their jungle glade that Ki-Gor gave attention for the first time to the forest about. He glanced up in quick attention, testing the air with his keen sense of smell, and halted Helene with a slight touch of his left hand.

"What is it, Ki-Gor?" Helene asked quietly.

"Wood smoke—from our *kraal*."

"Home!" Helene said automatically.

"Home," Ki-Gor repeated as automatically, then raced forward on silent feet.

He drifted from shadow to shadow like some great bronzed jungle wraith, his gaze centered on the end of the trail, his senses extending an aura of force about him which would cause swift reactions at the first signs of danger. Unhindered, he came to the edge of the clearing, stayed in the shadow of a great ironwood tree, watched with puzzled eyes. Helene drifted to his side, followed, as he stepped boldly into view of the four old men squatting about the small cooking fire.

"I come without weapons," Ki-Gor said ceremoniously.

The blacks turned startled heads, but did not stand. They watched from silently-accusing eyes, but made no move to answer.

"I see you, Pukela and T'uumbo and Bjubat and N'pelk," Ki-Gor said, flicked his gaze about the clearing for others.

"We are alone, O Ki-Gor," T'uumbo said brittlely. "We come with friend-words on our tongues, and hate in our hearts."

He stood, and the others ranged themselves at his sides, their hands close to their weapons, but making no overt move. They studied the jungle giant and his golden mate for a silent moment, and then T'uumbo spoke again.

"This is our speech," he said. "Leave our jungle; do not return. Your lives are forfeit to blood-vengeance if you ever return."

Pukela stepped forward, lifted a single red-painted arrow from his back-quiver, thrust it upright in the ground, then rejoined his companions.

"That is our hate," T'uumbo said quietly. "Do not leave; and others will follow on the wings of the wind."

MAJESTICALLY, he turned to go, the others turning as though by common consent to follow. But Ki-Gor darted forward, faced them empty-handed.

"I do not understand," he said. "You are my friends, yet you threaten the lives of my wife and myself. You order me from a land which is the land of all. By what right do you do this?"

Bjubat whirled, and his knife hand closed upon the wooden hilt of the skinning knife at his waist. His wizened face was twisted with hate for a moment, then cleared. His voice came hard and tense.

"You saved the lives of my people and myself during the great famine many seasons ago. I owe you much. But you slew my son, and that I can never forgive. I have four more sons, and they have sworn blood-hate for you and yours. I warn you now because I owe you a life debt. I hope the warning is not heeded, for my son was dear to me, and I would like to see your heart smoking over my cooking fire."

"But I did not—" Ki-Gor began.

T'uumbo silenced the white giant with a wave of a thin veined hand. He glanced at his friends, then faced the Jungle Lord squarely.

"We know not what has come to your brain; we do not care. You have slain our men and women in cold blood. Already warriors hunt for you; and it is our hope that their search is fulfilled. But we owe

you a debt and we give you this char-
Leave and do not return."

He turned away, followed by his friend went toward the jungle's edge. Ki-Gor took two darting steps forward, then halted and watched his one-time friends disappear in the forest. Pain came to his eyes, and his great shoulders sagged in bitter defeat.

He bent and retrieved the blood-red arrow, broke it easily between muscle-cab hands, tossed the halves idly aside. He gave no heed to Helene as he strode blankly toward the silver waterfalls that sent a purling stream whirling along one border of the glade.

Helene stood in silence, pain in her clear blue eyes when she saw the awful men and the agony which was her husband's. Her slender hands reached out in an unconscious effort to ease that which was his, then dropped to her sides. There was nothing she could do but wait.

She went to the small cooking fire, which sent a thin stream of fragrant smoke pencilling skyward, fed it fresh twigs, brought tiny flickerings of red and yellow flames into existence. Then she walked to the waterfall, unnoticed by Ki-Gor, reached behind the curtain of icy water into the natural icebox recess there, and brought forth a small slab of deer meat, four yellow *panyanox* pears and two green blue *vastoy* fruits. Returning to the fire she plucked three large green leaves from an elephant's ear plant, used them for jungle dishes.

She sliced the meat with the knife Ki-Gor had given her, spitted the tender steaks on wands of green wood, placed them so that they would roast over the glowing embers of the dying fire. Then she went a few yards into the jungle, used a spear blade to dig into the moist brown soil, removed four large *kava* roots which when spitted and roasted, would acquire a sugary crust and a succulent flavor.

She cleaned and spitted the *kava* roots then sank to the deep bed of silky green ferns, watched Ki-Gor squatting at the stream's edge.

The Jungle Lord crouched in utter misery. He watched the silver stream whirling by, was conscious that Helene moved at his back. But so tight were the thoughts in his mind, he gave but little heed to either.

He went over the entire situation, trying to find some loophole through which to escape the accusations, and found none. He could remember only too clearly the aftermaths of those mindless days, could recall the crusted brown blood that had been on his great Masai spear and his keen hunting knife. Too, his arrows had been depleted, and the skin of his left hand scored where the gut string of his gigantic bow had lashed while the weapon was in use.

No, he had slain the people he loved and respected. He had murdered them while his mind had been beyond his control. But even that excuse was not enough. He knew that he was morally and physically to blame for the grief that must fill the huts of many people.

The odors of roasting klipvaard meat came trickling to his nostrils, and his stomach cringed with hunger. He came slowly to his feet, a decision made, strode toward the fire. He smiled tiredly at Helene, warmed by the confidence in her answering smile.

She handed him a green leaf-plate on which rested a brown-glazed tempting steak, flanked by a golden-crusted *karva* and the yellow and blue fruit. He ate, squatting beside the slim figure of his wife, strong teeth tearing at the delicious meat, quenching his thirst from the melon-gourd they used for a water container.

HELENE ate silently, her eyes flicking now and then to Ki-Gor's face. She relaxed a trifle, seeing some of the tension had disappeared from his ruggedly-hand-some features.

Slowly the minutes passed; and then they were finished, resting on the great fern bed, watching the fire gradually fade into grey ashes that spurted in miniature volcanoes when tiny flames burst into view. The rilling of the water sounded bright and clear, and in a far tree a *virini* bird tossed its liquid notes into the still air, the music welling toward the cloudless sky overhead.

There was peace and contentment and everything a life demanded in the scene. This was their home, one for which they had fought, one that a bitter fate had decreed was theirs no longer.

Ki-Gor stirred, and power was in his

tone. He turned to face Helene, and hard purpose lay in his grave eyes.

"I shall see Tembu George and N'Geeso," he said. "They are my friends; they will help me."

Helene nodded, touched her great mate on his bronzed arm. "*We shall go,*" she said. "This is my home, too."

Ki-Gor shook his head. "No, I must go alone," he said quietly. "Blood-vengeance has been sworn, and the danger to you will be too great. By myself, there is a chance, for no man can follow me, if I must escape, rather than murder my friends. But clever as you are in the jungle, there are others more so." He watched the brassy sun sinking swiftly into the west. "I shall be back within a hand of suns if all goes well."

Helene began a protest, fear welling within her heart; then nodded slowly in agreement. She came close to the jungle giant, and the fragrance of her hair touched his senses. He drew her into the circle of one arm, held her tightly.

"The moons have followed one upon the other," he said softly, "and I have never been so happy. Should an accident happen, always remember that."

He stifled the tiny cry of alarm from Helene with the rough warm pressure of his lips, then pressed her gold-red head into the hollow of his shoulder, touched the gleaming waves with spread fingers.

"It has been long," he said softly, "and yet the time has been short. I knew that I had not the right to keep you here, so far from what was your life, but I could not let you go."

They watched the shadows trickling out across the glade, heard the lilting song of a *virini* bird singing to its mate. The bed of green ferns was soft and fragrant, and warm from the rays of the fading sun. Death had struck that day, would come again; but for the moment they were alone, and their oneness was a shrouding cloak against the world.

THE SUN was completely gone now, and the coolness of the night had not yet come whispering through the jungle. The forest glade was warm, and the sounds of the rilling stream were laughing melodies which sang tiny thrilling echoes through the night.

The myriad night sounds came trickling through the trees. First, the chirring of the tree locusts, their staccato chorus an obligatto to the deep bass notes of the calling tree-toads. Then a hyena cackled obscenely from far away, went silent as a bull-elephant followed a challenge to the world.

A shadow swooped overhead on silent pinions, flashed down, then whipped upward, a bush-rat screaming its life away on bloody talons. And from the dark skies a blacker shadow smashed in utter silence; then the carrion owl dropped its prey, fought with crimson beak and talons to fight free of the hawk's murderous claws that ripped the life from his greasy, fat-layered body. Then he was dead, and the victor lifted sluggishly away.

A roving lion coughed its challenge to the night, and Helene pressed closer to Ki-Gor. Then the world was forgotten, and they were utterly alone in a cocoon of their dreams' weaving. The orange moon came winging slowly upward, painted silver the shadowed trees and bushes of the glade, but they were uncaring.

They were alone in their jungle home, the past a dull memory, the future something which would come with the morrow. What was to come would come, and what had passed had passed. But this was the present, and this was their lazy jungle night.

A tiny monkey watched from the mossy limb of a tree, then surreptitiously slipped away. Bright eyes winked phosphorescently at the edge of the glade, then blinked out. The Jungle Lord and his Queen were alone in their jungle palace.

IV

THE rising sun was a great orange bonfire just over the horizon, the flames coloring the sky with sweeps of red and orange and yellow, light sifting in long pale bars through the shadows beneath the trees. The jungle clearing was still sleeping, the silver stream whirling softly along, the soft sounds of the night not yet disappeared.

Ki-Gor stood at the edge of the clearing, diamonds of icy dew clinging to his bronzed ankles, the growing light glittering on the broad shovel-blade of his great Masai spear.

He breathed deeply, swelling his mighty chest, arching the broad sweep of magnificent shoulders in the relaxing stretch of a waking jungle animal.

He stood in the darkness beneath a tree, the first bars of sunlight spearing toward him, and his eyes were soft as they watched the sleeping figure of his wife. She slept like a drowsing kitten, curled in upon herself, the silky golden-red hair lying in a bright swirl about her face. One hand was doubled in against her breast, while the other had dug itself deep into the warmth of the fragrant ferns.

The Jungle Lord had stood there for a long moment, steeling himself to leave her without a farewell. He had no illusions; he knew that only a jungle miracle could save his life, if the blacks chose to attack him in force. He was mighty, no man, nor a dozen men, could hope to best him in a single combat. But against an army of sword-swinging, spear-launching warriors even he would be helpless.

He stood in the shadows, and said his farewells, saying them deep in his heart, his features softened for a moment from the bold stern cast into which they had set. His glance went about the jungle glade, finding memories lurking in every bush and every twig. There it was that he and Helene had—

He broke his line of thought and turned away.

And even as the jungle giant turned away, Helene opened her eyes and watched his bronzed body disappear into the clinging foliage. She made no movement, other than the tightening of the slender fingers at the swell of her breasts; but suddenly there was the faintest sheen of a tear trail down one soft cheek.

"Come back, Ki Gor," she whispered. "Please come back."

But Ki-Gor, White Lord of the Jungle could not hear; behind him was already a hundred yard wall of crowding trees and fronds and tangled bushes.

He set his pace as a jungle animal does, gauging his endurance against the traveling he must do, shifting the great war-bow slung over his shoulder into a more comfortable position, couching the massive spear balancingly in his hand.

He went forward on cat-feet, darting like a bronze shadow through the land

which was his home, loosening his grip on his senses, permitting instincts to crowd to the fore of his consciousness, knowing they would not fail him if danger threatened.

There was but the faintest of rustlings to betoken his passing through the jungle; the mat of decaying brown and green vegetation that carpeted the moist ground absorbed all sounds of his footsteps, and he moved with the uncanny stealth and speed of a prowling carnivore.

The jungle came slowly awake, mist rising like a soft cool steam from the puddles of stagnant water in the hollows of limbs and at the gnarled roots of towering trees. Tree toads croaked final reluctant cries, then became silent, somnolent, as the first heat of the day came trickling through the tangled branches overhead.

A gaudy green and purple parrot turned cruel reptile eyes on the giant white man striding so swiftly down the dim game trail, swore fitfully, belligerently, bent its neck to preen night-ruffled plumage.

KI-GOR flicked a glance the parrot's way, then hurried onward, the usual smile not brightening his grey eyes. His thoughts were dark and sour in his mind, and defeat was in his heart in a way such as he had never thought possible. But against that defeatism was the natural optimism that had always been his. For years he had fought the jungle, sometimes winning, other times losing; but never had the laughter wrinkles disappeared from about his grey eyes, nor the song of rich living left his heart. Strong as were his feelings now, he still felt hope striving to beat back the darkness within him.

He swung to the left, following a wider game trail, running with the ground-eating pace of the Masai warrior. The minutes sped by, each growing warmer and lighter from the sun climbing skyward in all its brassy glory.

He felt the warm trickle of perspiration staining his bronzed skin, yet his even breathing did not alter, and his pace did not slacken as the minutes flowed one into the other, growing into hours that seemed to pass without end.

He paused when the sun was directly overhead, crouching in the shade of a gigantic *baobab* tree, eating a quick lunch of

sugar-juicy blue plums and yellow pears, washing away his thirst with the cool water of a tiny jungle spring bubbling gently from beneath the roots of the tree that furnished his shade.

He lay on his back beside the tree, watched a black and white butterfly swing lazily from blossom to blossom of a *maheena bush*, then go sailing as lightly as a vagrant thought away into the jungle. Some of the weariness trickled from his muscles, and he stretched indolently, rolled his head so as to stare into the unblinking eyes of the long-snouted anteater which watched from ten feet away. The creature snuffled inquisitively, digging the single claws of its front feet into the ground, then stalked majestically across the narrow clearing, its spiny hair thrust upright in unconscious disdain.

Ki-Gor grinned, slapped his hands together. The anteater moved with the same sluggish indifference. Overhead, a tiny howler monkey darted out of concealment, grinned evilly, skinning blue lips back from long sharp teeth. His long tail swung up, anchored him securely, so that he swung head down. And then he screamed, bellying his jungle ridicule in the shrill cry of an animal ten times his size.

He swung in lazy arcs on his tail, glared at the prone man, and the screams came screeching out in a howl that seemed to be one continuous flow of horrendous sound. Other monkeys popped their heads out of hiding places, watched with interested eyes in wizened faces, then chattered their approval.

Ki-Gor grimaced, sat slowly. Ordinarily, he would have given no heed to the monkeys; but now, the shrill warning cries might disclose his presence to a band of bloodthirsty blacks.

He cupped a juicy plum in the strong fingers of his right hand, then threw with a delicate precision and strength. The plum was a blue bullet that disintegrated with a meaty *plop* squarely in the howler's mouth. The monkey gulped, pawed at its face, squealed in sudden rage. And the second missile, a mushy yellow pear, splashed against its wizened features with a force that set the animal to swinging wildly by its sinuous tail.

The howler went silent, but not its mates. They watched silently for a moment, then

rocked with jungle merriment, their tones chittering and shrilling through the trees. The howler pawed the fruit from its eyes, climbed its tail, disappeared in ignominious defeat.

Ki-Gor smiled, came easily to his feet. He swung the bow to his shoulder again, caught up the heavy spear, went again toward the land where Tembu George ruled his Masais, the greatest fighting nation in all of deepest Africa.

He redoubled his original speed and caution. He was in the land now which might be a death-trap for himself. The black who had tried to slay him and Helene had been a Masai, and his fellows might even now be stalking the jungle paths, going toward Ki-Gor's jungle home.

The jungle giant almost paused at the thought, shaken by the memory of Helene's being alone at the camp. Then he forced the premonition of danger away. She would face far less danger where she was than if she had *trekked* with him.

THE TREES began to thin, and the fresh smell of running water came drifting through the jungle. He made better time now, for the ground was sandy, the green vegetation slight. Tiny puffs of sand-dust flicked upward from his driving feet, and his keen eyes quested ahead, watching for the slightest of movements which would betoken some warrior.

He saw the glint of sun on the water ahead, passed through the last line of trees, slowed his run to a walk. Nothing moved along the silent sandy banks of the muddy river; but far out in midstream he espied the swirls of water and knobs of eyes of several crocodiles swimming lazily against the current.

He scowled, knowing that he could not swim the stream. Too, none of the trees were close enough to the stream to permit his swinging over the water from branch to branch.

He went along the bank for a hundred yards, following a narrow spit of land that went halfway across the stream. There he paused, conscious of the coldly-malignant watchfulness of four water beasts lazily swinging about to face him.

A minute was all that he needed; for the water was shallow enough that he could splash through, if not opposed. **But**

that minute of freedom would be hard to gain.

He heard the ill-natured grunt behind him, turned slowly, saw the wild sow waddling from a thicket toward the water. He nodded unconsciously, gently laid his spear at his feet.

The sow stopped, seeing the movement, but its eyes were so near-sighted it could not make out the form of the thing which had moved. It dug with scarred hoofs at the ground, swinging its ugly snout from side to side, delicate nostrils testing the breeze.

Ki-Gor swiftly swung his bow from his shoulder, drew a slim arrow from his back-quiver. He nocked the arrow, drew the gut until the fletching was almost to his ear. He sighted with a deliberate slowness, knowing that if he failed to kill instantly, the sow's pack of killer-boars and killer-sows would cut him down where he stood.

He drew and sighted, then loosed the string fingers. The gut twanged with the deep bass note of a Bantu harp, and the arrow was a zipping streak of silver-tipped blackness through the sunlight. There was the meaty *chug* of the iron head churning through bone and flesh—and the hog dropped with a single grunt of expelled breath.

Then Ki-Gor was racing to the sow, was lifting its great weight with an uncanny ease, and running back to the spit of land. He dropped the hog, squatted, shoved the arrow through, then washed it with a quick flicker of his hand in the slow-moving water. His knife gleamed silver in his hand, then glowed with deep crimson, as he quartered the warm body with fast precise strokes.

He threw the bloody chunks with all of the power in his great shoulders, tossing two portions upstream and two downstream. Froth came to the muddy brown water, as the great crocodiles surged after the quarters of meat.

And even as the crocodiles surged away, Ki-Gor caught up his bow and spear, went across the unprotected stretch of water, grinning as a fifteen-foot monster whirled and came driving back, scimitar teeth clashing in futile rage and hunger.

He fitted the bow to his shoulder, caught

up the spear, and began again his steady pacing. He was close to his objective now; for Tembu George's *kraal* lay upstream; he had crossed and circled so that he might not meet any foraging parties of warriors.

He blinked a bit in the late sunlight, for the throbbing that had begun earlier in the day came again to his head. Tiny motes of blackness swam into his vision, and he paused briefly, shaking clearness back into his mind.

THEN he went on again, shaken by the knowledge that he must face the vengeful warriors ahead, while the old head injury might blur his keenness of thought and action. But impatience burned at his heart now; he was near his goal, and he wanted only to find some answer to the questions which were troubling him.

He ran at renewed speed, seeing the lengths of the shadows, knowing the day was fast ending. Tiredness was in his great body now, for he had rested but twice during the day. Yet he did not falter, and, when he reached and entered the green jungle, he still moved with the incredible stealth matched only by the animals of the forest depths.

He proceeded more cautiously as he approached the village, stopped in the shadow of a *kalchi* bush, watched for a long moment before venturing out into view.

Then he strode erect and unafraid toward the great swinging gates of the *kraal's* stockade, conscious of the dryness in his mouth, his fingers tightening unconsciously about the heavy haft of his spear. He heard the sudden cry of alarm from a group of naked playing children, but his step did not falter, nor did he give heed to the warriors who seemed to spring from the very ground of the *kraal* itself.

"Ho!" he called in formal greeting, stopping before the open gates. "It is I, Ki Gor, who comes without weapons."

A woman screamed a jungle curse, and her voice was a ragged screech of hate.

"Slayer! Killer in the night! Slay him, O son of thy father!"

And a half-grown youth whirled into sight, lifting the great Masai throwing spear shoulder-high, great muscles rippling and swelling along his ebon shoulders. He tensed for the cast, brooding anger and

semi-fear riding the planes of his intelligent face.

Ki-Gor sucked in a deep breath, knowing the incredible speed with which that spear would come. He made no move to use his own weapons, for he did not fight half-grown men, and he had not come to quarrel.

"Hold!" The tone was quiet, but the single word cracked like the tip of a braided bullhide whip.

Then Tembu George strode into view, walking slowly through the pressing crowd of muttering men and women, his usually friendly eyes blank and hard as he stared at the white giant before the gates.

"Slay the killer," the old woman screamed.

But Tembu George was beside the youth now, and a single glance from him quelled the murder-lust that had risen in the boy's eyes.

"There will be no slaying," Tembu George said quietly, and his gaze was a blazing knife that slashed all murmurs from the throats of the watching blacks.

Then the Masai chieftain turned and faced Ki-Gor squarely, both massive hands riding the bullet belt that hung so incongruously about his waist, the fingers of his right hand but an inch from the swinging butt of the .45 automatic at his hip.

"What do you want?" Tembu George asked quietly.

Ki-Gor swallowed; never had he thought to face such a scene as this. These were his friends, these were the laughing people for whom he had fought, and who had fought for him. This was Tembu George, the great valiant Negro, whose friendship had been a protecting armor in other times.

But they were his friends no longer; there was in their eyes the blood-lust that comes only when loved ones die from black treachery. Even Tembu George's intelligent face held not the slightest signs of friendliness; he watched with the hard purposefulness of a man who has been betrayed by a man he loved and trusted.

"What do you want?" Tembu George said again.

"An answer," Ki-Gor said quietly, and there was a dignity in the Jungle Lord then that drew grudging respect from his watchers.

"To what?"

"To this. There came to me yesterday several of my friends who said that I have slain like a *dango* in the dark. Is it true?"

A murmur of anger swept the proud men and women of the *kraal*; they moved forward in unconscious unison, halted at Tembu George's abrupt movement of his left hand.

"It is the truth," Tembu George said evenly.

KI-GOR swallowed the lump in his throat, felt the sickness of his heart cramping the muscles of his stomach. His shoulders sagged slightly, and his mobile lips grew thin and grim.

"Tembu George," he said, "I swear to you that I know naught of what I did."

"*Aaaiiee!*" a scream of hate pealed from the old woman. "He is self-confessed; kill him where he stands!"

Tembu George whirled and faced his tribble. His eyes blazed, and his anger was as burning as his words.

"I am the chief; I shall say what is to be. That is my right as your chief. And I say we hear Ki-Gor out." He turned slowly back to face the white man, and the first hint of pity came to his voice.

"Ki-Gor," he said, "you were my friend, the friend of all who live in this land. I do not know what caused you to forget your oaths of friendship, but I will listen to what you have to say."

The Jungle Lord stiffened beneath the censure of all the hostile eyes. There was no fear in his gaze then, only a black agony that nothing could erase.

"I did not know what I did," he said evenly. "Two moons ago, I fought a bull-ape to the death, and a great blow sent blackness to my head. The blackness went away, but came back again and again. I do not know what I did during those times; I know only that I returned to Helene, or that she found me wandering, mindless, in the jungle. I am no sneaker in the dark, all of you know that, nor do I kill for the sake of blood-letting. I came to find if the stories were true, to see if I could mend that which is broken. I—"

A man shoved through the crowd, his eyes terrible in his face, waved the stump of his left arm at the horrified jungle giant.

"Mend my arm," he cried. "Mend it

so that it can use a bow or a spear or a knife again. Mend the thing which your spear slashed to death in the dark of night."

"I swear to—" Ki-Gor began.

"Mend my heart," a young woman cried, stepped beside Tembu George, showed the cicatrix about her arm that was the mark of a widow. "Bring back the man who was my husband; bring him back from the pyre that was his before he traveled down the River of Life."

Ki-Gor cringed from the wave of brutal accusations that piled one upon the other from the raging crowd. Then he straightened, faced Tembu George again.

"There is no mistake?" he asked.

And Tembu George shook his head. "None," he said. "You were seen by two hands of men and women." He scowled. "Had you stayed to your land, all would have been well. Revenge-talk was quelled by me about the war-fires; I told of what good you had done. Now, I guarantee nothing, I promise nothing, for you are self-admitted as the killer."

"You want my life?" Ki-Gor asked simply.

A shadow of pain crossed Tembu George's eyes. He stilled the instant revengeful clamor of the people at his back, slowly shook his head.

"Many would die now, if such were the case." He glanced about, measuring the temper of his tribe. "I give you a hand of suns in which to take the Golden One and flee to safety. Stay, and you die."

KI-GOR stood immobile for an interminable instant, then turned and strode away with dragging steps. He twitched his head, driving the black spots from before his eyes, ignored the shouts of rage and abuse that thundered from behind.

He heard the chirring whisper of splitting wind behind him, saw the flicker of the spear that drove a foot from his shoulder, yet his steps did not falter, nor did he turn. He went toward the dark jungle, conscious that the night was coming with the incredible speed of central Africa, and the blackness in his heart was greater than even the night would be.

A clod of earth struck his shoulder, and he winced instinctively. Another brushed his arm, and a third caught him squarely

in the back of his head. Sudden blackness crowded his brain, and he stumbled momentarily. Dimly, as through the thick folds of the pressing jungle, he heard Tembu George's brittle words of command. Then he was at the jungle's edge, forcing his way through the tangled brush.

He turned, when screened from sight, peered back at the *kraal*. The men and women still milled excitedly about the gates, and Tembu George was speaking. The blackness came again to Ki-Gor's mind, and he clutched at a tree for support, his left hand gingerly touching the swelling at the nape of his neck.

He felt a dull anger stirring in his heart at the callousness with which he had been treated. For he remembered the eternal oaths of friendship which had been sworn to him when his mighty prowess had aided those people in troublous times.

He began to pace through the jungle, thoughts turgid in his mind. He bumped into a tree, staggered painfully for a second, trying to understand what was happening. Dull horror struck his heart when he realized that the thrown clod had revived the old hurt again. He began to run, trying to put as much distance between the Masai *kraal* and himself as possible.

The night came swiftly, the shadows deepening into inky wells. But the mental blackness within his eyes came even faster. He breathed in sharp hard gulps, feeling the panic in his heart building until it was the master of himself.

He knew that death might lie but minutes away, but he gave the thought no heed. There was but a single memory in his mind. Tembu George had set a day when he and Helene would be human game for the mightiest race of hunters in all of Africa; he had to warn her, had to get her to safety.

And the night was fully arrived. The orange moon was not yet up; there was only the inky blackness of the pressing jungle. He bulled through the bushes by main strength, anger and anxiety building in his clouded brain.

And slowly he began to circle, began to retrace the way he had come. The blackness was in his eyes now; he could see nothing of where he was going; there was only a dreadful urgency and anger in his mind.

He growled like the animal he was, pushed ever faster, feeling his way, sensing obstacles which his eyes could not see. Then the intelligence began to fade from his brain, and thoughts came hard and untrue.

He snarled at a turgid thought, the mighty muscles of his body swelling in blind anger. He had but one thought in his mind. He smashed against tree after tree.

Then he was moving like an automaton, his mind completely blanked out, his body moving with a blind panther-like grace and deadly purpose. And moving, he unslung the great brutal war-bow from his shoulder.

V

TEMBU GEORGE sat before the doorway of his thatched hut, and his bleak eyes stared expressionlessly into the blackness of the night. At his back, Mari, his slim wife, cradled the baby at her breast, her soft voice rising in the whispering melody of a jungle lullabye. There was a gentle peace in the hut, a slow drawing-in of personalities where no disunion could ever grow.

But the hut was an island of peace in a sea of hate. Stubby fingers drew a roll of brooding menace from the knee-drum before the red and white hut of the witch-doctor. Men squatted in motley clumps about the *kraal*, their voices rising in dull overtones to the throbbing of the leather drumhead.

Fires flickered dully about the compound, women moving like soulless shadows, clearing away the last of the evening meal; and mongrel dogs growled and fought with gnashing teeth over the greasy bones thrown carelessly their way.

Children whimpered uneasily within the huts, went silent, when the women paused long enough to call brief orders through the open doorways.

Over all the scene crawled the slimy curtain of black hate and desire for revenge. One massive warrior stropped the gleaming blades of his *assegais* with a scrap of rhinoceros hide, testing the razor-keenness with the ball of his thumb, then honing the blades still further. Another, at his side, trued his arrows in the heat of

glowing fire-embers, laid them side by side, ready for his war-quivers. A third patiently braided a new bow-string from the sinews of a *kagati* antelope.

Tembu George saw all those, and many more, and a deep sigh of unconscious distress welled up from his powerful chest.

"Ki-Gor will die," he said softly to his wife. "And Helene, too—unless they flee far."

Mari caught her breath in a tiny gasp, moved to the side of her husband. The baby cried fretfully, and she smoothed contentment back into its chubby body with gentle flickers of her fingers.

"You cannot let this happen," she declared.

Tembu George shrugged. "I can do nothing. I have talked about the council-fires, have forced the men to stay from the vengeance-trail; but I cannot do so much longer. Ki-Gor's appearance today brought fresh flames to a dying fire."

Mari shuddered, her brown eyes watching the grim knots of men sitting about the fires. She knew the temper of her people even more than the great man at her side; she had been a chief's daughter, and she had known the horror of painted warriors streaming brutally out of the *kraal* to avenge wrongs done them by others.

"His tale," she asked, "did you believe it?"

Tembu George shrugged wide shoulders, the intelligent lines of his Negroid face harsh and rocky. "I do not know," he admitted. "I have known the Jungle Lord for years, and never has he lied. But he was *seen*, and he confessed—even though he said his head was injured."

"He did not lie," Mari said firmly. "I've seen friendly animals go berserk from pain, then become docile again. He is like them, and he cannot be blamed for what his injury causes him to do."

Tembu George shook his head. "The problem has no easy answer such as that," he said slowly. "Men have died; there must be a payment exacted of some kind." He gestured toward the warriors before the witch-doctor's hut. "Those men will *trek* if their hate grows higher. One, Nakcla, has already gone to avenge his brother. If he attacks Ki-Gor alone, he will die, for the Jungle Lord is superhuman

in his jungle strength and quickness."

Anger came into Mari's eyes. "You will help Ki-Gor," she said flatly. "He is our friend, has helped us many times. No matter what he has done, you will help him."

Tembu George sighed, came lithely to his feet. He towered black and huge over his seated wife, and the steadiness of his tones did not disclose the awful agony that was tearing at his heart.

"I owe the Masais allegiance, too," he said simply. "I am their chief."

Firelight glistened on his skin, ran along the black and white of his *colubus*-fur breech-clout, drew a weird sparkle of brilliance from the worn grip of the automatic which hung so incongruously at his waist. He watched his wife and baby, and softness came to his eyes.

"I shall talk again," he agreed finally. "I shall do all in my power to save Ki-Gor and Helene. But I can promise nothing."

And a warrior died across the *kraal*, screaming in terrible agony, the yard-long arrow hammering him into the yellow flames of a council-fire, where he kicked his life away.

A SECOND ARROW came drilling in, whispering through the night-scented air, slashing briefly at a warrior's temple before churning deep into the face of a second.

"Aaaiiee!" a woman screamed, and a horrible burst of laughter pounded from the jungle pressing close to the *kraal*.

"I am the Lord of the Jungle: I am the master of all the jungle: none can stand before me."

There was something terrible in the very madness of those words. There was a stark menace in them such as none in the village had ever heard before. They were slurred, coming hard upon each other, the thin thread of insanity tangling syllable to syllable. They rose in a sharp crescendo of sound, then whirled back into a deeper register, ceased.

And from where they came, dully limned by the flickering shafts of firelight, a great war-bow in his hands—was Ki-Gor.

He laughed madly—and his third arrow skewered a defenseless warrior's throat.

He rode the swaying branches of a great tree, half-hidden by the foliage, his white

skin and golden hair identifying him completely. He drew the bow with the clumsiness stemming from his clouded mind, but with the arrows winging true to their marks. He laughed, as he fired, teeth whiter than the pale blur of his face, and the mad rich sound ululated in a booming peal of mirth that mocked the momentary consternation of the blacks. Twelve arrows he sent hurtling forward to dodging targets, and then he was gone, swallowed up in the inky darkness of the jungle.

"Blood-hate, I claim blood-hate!" a grief-stricken warrior screamed from where he bent over the murdered body of his only son.

And then his cry was lost in the raging thunder of vengeful voices. Spears came sweeping up, light winking in silver shards from the gleaming blades. Swords rustled in bullhide scabbards, and deadly arrows clicked brittly as they were thrust deep into quivers.

Then the mob of maddened men were sweeping toward the gate, going blindly into the night, their eyes inflamed, white-hot rage burning in their hearts. No man could hurl the challenge to them and live.

Ki-Gor would die.

And standing beside his slim wife, the pain in his heart spilling into the deep lines engraved in his face, Tembu George watched the men stream toward the gate. His gaze flicked to the bodies lying on the blood-soaked ground, and he winced at the cries of agonized sorrow that swelled from the women who crowded over them.

"I cannot stop them now," he said simply.

And Mari at his side nodded briefly, hopelessness in her mind. But she made one last effort.

"Find N'Geeso," she whispered. "And both of you do what you can to aid Ki-Gor and Helene. At least, see that they have a fair trial."

Tembu George turned, gathered his weapons from where they stood beside the doorway. His features held the rigidity of carved ebony.

"Ki-Gor must die," he said quietly, and raced after his men.

KI-GOR was running; how long he had been running, he did not know. Gradually, lucidity was coming back to his mind, and thoughts were struggling for

expression. He ran with the speed and agility that only he could attain, but during the black hours in which his mind had blanked out, he had bruised one leg and arm.

Pale moonlight streamed down in tatters of brilliance through the tangled branches overhead, made the shadows bottomless pits of inkiness, and tipped the brush with silver. The night sounds seemed unnaturally harsh, pressing with a visible strength against his nerves. He ran ahead, drifting through the underbrush, using the broad shovel-blade of his Masai spear to slash hanging vines and creepers from the dim path he followed.

He tried to probe the blackness in his mind, but there was only a sense of horror and pressing urgency to hurry, to answer the thoughts that crowded his brain.

He noticed for the first time that he carried his great war-bow in his left hand, and he slipped it automatically over his shoulder. His questing fingers checked the arrows in his quiver, and he frowned, finding that all were not there. Dull horror pounded at his brain, at the thought that he might have used them for murder weapons while under the control of a blank mind.

He shrugged. In all probability, they had fallen out of the quiver during the hours he had raced through the night. His eyes turned toward the sky as he came to a small glade, and instinct told him that the morning was close at hand. He dropped his gaze to the clearing, recognized the gnarled twisted stump of a dead tree, and he knew that he was close to N'Geeso's pygmy village.

He stopped, standing wide-legged, trying to understand why he had come this way. His glade, where Helene waited, lay further to the south.

But no knowledge of his motives came to his mind. He was conscious of the ache in his bruised arm and leg, and countless scratches from thorny jungle bushes stung the bronzed skin of his body. Fresh vigor was flowing into his rippling muscles, now that the dark cloud was lifting from his mind, and he stretched looseningly, some of the mad terror fleeing from him.

He debated as to whether to cut to the south; then decided to go ahead upon the

trail. Breathing deeply, easily, bronzed body moving with a deceptive ease, he went forward, finding the wide game trail, going soundlessly over the green and brown carpet which now lay black in the silver moonlight.

He caught the faint odor of dead wood-smoke upon the cool air, heard the lowing of native cattle close at hand. He walked now, instead of running, for the village lay less than three bowshots away, and there was no need for hurry.

Wonder still lay in his mind as to what he had done the past hours; for this village lay comparatively close to Tembu George's *kraal*, and the journey need not have taken so long.

Then he could see the end of the trail, outlined in the light of the moon, as though he walked through a tunnel which debouched on a small plain. A small smile lifted the corners of his mobile mouth, the first in hours. Here, he would find sanctuary of a sort, for N'Geeso and his tribe of pygmies had always been his friends, never would they desert him in time of need.

And even as the thought brought the smile to his face, even as he stepped from the concealment of the brooding trees—the white warning arrow slashed directly into the ground before his feet.

Ki-Gor stopped instantly, sensing the movement growing from the bushes about him. So preoccupied had he been, and so great was the cunning of the diminutive warriors, he had stepped squarely into a trap which might spring a death blow at any second.

He waited, silent, and there was no betraying rustle about him. From far away came the keening wail of a *dingo*, crying weirdly to the setting moon. Near at hand, cattle lowed, and from the village directly ahead, a dog growled an answer.

KI-GOR felt the cool sheen of perspiration on his body. For the first time in his life, his nerves betrayed him. He had never met a situation of this kind; he had been hunted, but always in his mind he had known his reasons for battle were just. Now, because of a clouded mind, because he knew that he could not fight those whom he considered his friends, he had to wait, and hope that words could do what weapons could not.

He took a step forward, barely moved his foot in time to escape the whistling rush of a second poison-tipped arrow. He stared at the twin omens of death, then peered about, making out the darker shadows within the shadows of trees and bushes.

"I am Ki-Gor," he said simply. "I come to ask aid from my friends."

"No friends are here. We give you until sunup to leave. If you are still here then, your death will fulfill what many have asked."

A shadow resolved into two parts, one stalking forward until it became the perfectly-proportioned figure of a tiny four-foot man. He was dressed in a loin-cloth of antelope leather, and the crocodile-teeth necklace of a chief clicked about his neck. He stood, straight and unafraid, hands empty of weapons, facing the white giant towering over him.

Ki-Gor was dumb for the moment, the shock of the moment driving all speech from his tongue. He watched the proud intelligent features of the pygmy, and his thoughts were a tangled chaos in his brain.

"Once we were friends," N'Geeso said without intonation, "but those days are of the past. For you have murdered my people. It is only because we *were* blood-brothers, and because we love your mate with the flame hair, that you do not die here and now."

"Is there no way to make atonement?"

"None." The single word echoed in a dry rustling of voices from the hidden pygmies.

Anger swelled the muscles of Ki-Gor's throat. His gaze swept the shadows, and his knuckles were white against the tan of his fingers.

"So I slew," he admitted condemningly. "So I killed with my weapons. So you, whom I have aided for many seasons, for many moons, now threaten my life—without hearing my story! You are the *dingoes* who slink in the night; and you are not *my* friends. Face me, face my weapons, if you dare! If you are not my friends, then you are my enemies, and I—"

They came, came in a sweeping rage that nothing could have stopped. N'Geeso screamed an order, the sound ignored. Their weapons glittered in their hands, and the rage and grief that lay in their hearts made brutal masks of their small

faces. They came at the Jungle Lord; and he lifted the great spear in his hand.

But he could not strike. No matter the strength of his will, no matter that weapons thirsted for his blood. Within him was not the brutal hardness that would permit his lifting gleaming blade to strike down his friends.

And because of that, he tried to race to safety. But before he had taken a step, small wiry arms and muscular bodies were clinging to his mighty frame.

He staggered, losing his spear, using the might of his great hands to tear the pygmies free and toss them aside. There were too many; they clawed to reach his erect body.

But their blades, too, were not wet. As though sensing that he would not strike them down, they threw knives and spear and blowguns aside, and swarmed in barehanded. They screamed and cursed, and battered with brutal fists.

KI-GOR went down; he fell like the toppling of a forest giant wrenched from the brown earth by a raging flood. Muscles rippled and swelled and buckled in his massive body, but his legs bent beneath the clawing weight of the diminutive warriors, and he fell to one side.

A small fist battered at his face, another smashed at his neck. He felt the dreadful numbness crawling back into his brain, and the horror of the moment gave him the strength of ten.

He went berserk, erupting from the clinging bodies, hurling them aside. A warrior clung to his bow, and the string cut deep into his shoulder; but he loosed the little man with a backswing of one hand, began to run, plunging through the clot of struggling figures which surrounded him.

He came to the edge of the jungle, fled into the branches. Growing daylight drew streaks of white through the trees, and he found foot and hand holds with the uncanny ability which was his. He went up hand over hand, caught a loop of liana, swung in a great soaring arc.

He heard the voices directly below, saw the miniature men racing through the jungle like murderous forest devils, and began his race against death. He went from vine to vine, from tree to tree, moving

with the surety and speed of a fleeing monkey, his gray eyes flicking ahead, his hands unconsciously doing what his instinct dictated.

But even as he fled, he felt the old terrible sensations of blackness crowding his senses. He sped even faster, leaving the running pursuers far behind, angling to the side of the narrow trails, feeling a dull relief that the horrid heart-breaking scene was over.

And the darkness closed in on his mind again. He was but a machine of bone and flesh swinging aimlessly through the trees. Then the aimlessness disappeared, and he moved with a steady growing purpose. He had no knowledge of what he did; he moved entirely through instinct. But a thinness had come to his mobile lips, and flames burned hotly in his gray eyes.

Ten minutes later, a pygmy died.

He was walking then, pacing at the side of his warrior comrade, the slow burning of shame replacing the mob-anger that had roused in his heart. He thought of the things which the jungle giant had done for him and his people. He thought of the food in times of famine, or how the white man had nursed men and women and children through the epidemic of the spotted plague. He thought of his eldest son, the stalwart youth whose name had been the pygmy name for the forest giant.

And in the midst of his thoughts—he died.

One moment he walked at the side of his comrades; the next, he swung by his neck from the choking loop of a liana lasso. One glimpse he had of the white man above him in the tree; but the knowledge that flickered there died—for with a sudden tug on the green liana, the white man broke his neck. He swung in a gentle arc from side to side over the head of his comrade.

"*Ki-Gor!*" the second warrior whispered.

He watched the golden-haired man perched over him on a thick bough, so paralyzed that he didn't dodge the second liana which whipped downward. Only luck saved him from the fate of his friend. The loop was large and slipped over his wiry shoulders, tightened, jerked him ten feet into the air.

He heard the mocking mad laughter of the jungle giant, looked again, just in time

to catch the brutal hand-blow squarely in his throat. The world blacked out; he hung limply at his dead friend's side.

And then Ki-Gor was gone, his laughter fading, as he went clumsily through the branches. Fifty feet away, he dropped to the trail, began to run. He laughed lightly to himself as he sped away, the eerie tones whispering into the lightening sky. He was far away, when the first twinges of consciousness came back to the black. He was miles away before the pygmy's calls brought aid.

He might have sensed the solemn oaths that filled each pygmy heart and mind; and great as he was, he might have felt fear when he saw the implacable vengeance-hate which filled all eyes. But he was miles away by then, and knew nothing of what had happened.

And coming through the dim jungle, padding single file along the damp dark trails, were the pygmies of N'Geeso. They carried their weapons in their hands, and murder lay in their hearts. They had been betrayed by a man they had trusted and loved—and no vengeance vows are more horrible than those made by betrayed friends.

They had made their common vow, and nothing could change it.

Ki-Gor was to die.

VI

HELENE hummed softly to herself as she worked over the velvet-soft leopard skin. She had laid the pelt on the glittering white sand beside the swift river, and on it placed her halter and breech-clout. Using the charred end of a thin half-burned twig, she marked about the two garments, tracing their outlines upon the tanned skin.

Light whirled sparkles of gold from her gleaming hair, highlighted the tan of her slim body, spread a long shadow away toward the water where it rippled with the tiny waves.

She sat cross-legged beside the skin, lifted the halter and breech-clout to one side. Then with deft strokes of the razor-sharp blade of her knife, she followed the black markings. Her blue eyes were intent upon her work, and she smiled un-

consciously, pleased with the job she was doing.

Amusement raced her mind when she thought of the hours she had spent in great cities while fashionable clothing had been fitted to her soft curves. Once, she had fretted about a button here, or a tuck there. Now, she wanted only the beauty of a tanned yellow and black pelt, cut and sewn into garments that would not impede her progress through the jungle, nor be too warm in the jungle heat.

There was no desire in her mind to be as she once had been; she was content, happier than she thought it was possible to be. She had her lazy jungle existence, with all of the life about her for amusement and knowledge. She had a great giant of a man at her side. And—she laughed softly—she had her sewing to do.

She lifted the cut-out pieces of skin, examined them, then caught up the slim bone needles Ki-Gor had fashioned for her. Threading one with the soft sinew of an antelope, she began to sew. And beneath the clever skill of her fingers, a new clout and halter emerged.

The minutes passed, but she worked with a steady patience. At last, she sighed a bit, laid the needle aside. Standing, she brushed the white sand from her tanned nude body, then slipped the halter over her supple breasts, fastened the clever jungle button at the back. Stooping, she slipped slim legs into the breech-clout, drew it about her hips, caught the laces in a knot.

With utter femininity, she paraded back and forth upon the beach, smoothing the soft yellow and black skin to her body, making minute adjustments until the pieces fitted perfectly. Satisfied, she turned to retrieve her discarded clothing, and froze into silent watchfulness, blue eyes suddenly keen and hard as she watched the bur-noosed Arab standing beside the dead embers of the cooking fire.

"What do you want?" she said clearly, flicked one glance at the knife five feet away.

Rajh smiled slyly, his head pulling in a bit toward his narrow shoulders, his hands drywashing themselves nervously. He squinted in the growing sunlight, hiding the vulpine evil that glittered in his eyes, and his voice came oily and timidly across the clearing.

"I have a message for you from your husband," he said.

Wariness came into Helene's eyes.

She forced back the excitement in her heart, stifled the soft cry that surged from her lips. Casually, but with a definite purpose of movement, she retrieved her knife, caught up the skin-remnants with her free hand. Then she walked slowly toward the greasy-skinned Arab.

"What is the message?" she asked.

RAJH smiled unctuously, swallowed, backed a full step. "Ki-Gor is hurt," he explained. "He wants you to come to him."

"Hurt!" Helene could not keep the anxiety from her tone. "What happened; where is he?"

Rajh's hands rustled dryly. "He is south of the *Balinga* forest, with some of my people. He was wounded by the Masai, left for dead. We found him. When he told me where you were, I came as fast as possible."

"Who are you?"

Helene could not keep the suspicion from her voice. Instinctively she did not trust the man; and despite his words, felt that his story was entirely too glib.

"I am Selim Jadh, a poor merchant." Rajh glanced uneasily about, perspiration oily on his swarthy face. "But we must hurry, for your husband is badly wounded."

Helene stood in indecision. Ki-Gor had given definite orders that she was to wait for him. Never had he failed her before; and even the exigency of the mission which had taken him away had not seemed to warrant his sending another with a message.

Yet she could not fully doubt the man's story; for Ki-Gor had been going into enemy territory, and he had spoken as though he might meet with an "accident."

She walked past the Arab, testing him, then continued to the mossy bed, sank to its softness. She scabbarded the knife, idly glanced at the skins she had dropped, smiled deep in her eyes. So casually that the action seemed engendered of her suspicious thoughts, she bent, smoothed the tan skin, idly marked cryptic whorls and lines with the charcoal stick.

Rajh glanced at the moving stick, studied

the markings, then swung his gaze impatiently to Helene's face. His shoulders seemed to draw even tighter, and his head was cocked a bit to one side, his nerves intent to catch any sound.

"Please," he said uneasily, "we must hurry.

Helene nodded abruptly, tossed the twig away. Rising, she retrieved her bow and quiver of arrows, gestured with a free hand.

"Ahead of me," she said.

Rajh turned with a silent sigh of relief. He led the way down a narrow path that disappeared into the jungle, felt the tension disappearing from within his body because the Jungle Lord had not been in the clearing with Helene.

He had been given two stories to tell; one if Ki-Gor and Helene were together, another if she were by herself. Deep in his heart he had known that never could he have faced the forest giant alone.

He forced the pace, drifting ahead with a tireless stride, marveling at the ease with which the titian-haired girl kept at his heels without apparent weariness. He had seen her before, had watched her on the auction-block of a slave market, before Ki-Gor had rescued her and turned the tables upon the slavers. He had made his sly bids then, his tongue touching dry lips, his fingers clenching and unclenching when he saw her slim body. Luckily, though, he had not attracted special attention in those days, and she had no memory of him.

The warmth of the jungle day came seeping into the tangled trees and shrubbery, drew beads of dampness from the green leaves, lifted a slight haze from the ground. Birds sang golden melodies high above, were silenced by the insolent chitterings of a troop of *colubus* monkeys disporting in high glee on the swinging vines and swaying branches. A snake hissed venomously, slithered away, and a *vanka* lizard watched from bright eyes, forked tongue flickering in vivid interest.

But Helene had no eyes for the jungle about her; she was woven in a cocoon of her own tangled thoughts. She paced automatically, following the narrow back of the small man ahead, repulsed by him, yet going with him because she dare not refuse.

"How badly is Ki-Gor wounded?" she asked.

"Not badly," Rajh answered, then caught himself. "I mean, he will be all right, now that my people are tending him."

HELENE watched the perspiration stains showing through his dirty white cotton robe, frowned. She shifted the bow into better position in her left hand, reached back, adjusted the quiver so that an arrow might be spun from its sheath in a single flashing moment. She could not hide the anxiety in her heart, and the blue of her eyes went into dark azure from the emotions that crowded her mind.

She said no more, knowing the uselessness of her questions; and Rajh offered no further explanation. They ran with a steady pace, going deeper into the jungle, swerving in the direction of the *Balinga* forest by taking cross-trails.

The minutes flowed into hours, and the hours marched steadily past. They stopped time and again for short rest periods, eating quick meals of golden-ripe bananas and blue *vastoy* fruit. With each passing hour, they delved deeper into a land which was not familiar to Helene, one that Ki-Gor had never shown her.

She remembered tales she had heard of this land. Once, it had been ruled by Egyptians from the north, their brutal raiding parties forcing peaceful blacks into slave labor to build their homes and temples, and to till their lands.

But those days had been centuries in the past, so the tales had said, and now there stood but the shadowed gutted cities and brooding empty temples to mark the passing of a race that had lived by rule of fear and strength.

Those tales had told of the final mad uprising of the slaves, had told of the battle and slaughter and routing of the Egyptians which had followed. Those tales had swung from tongue to tongue, each generation coloring them more and more, until now they had the fanciful embellishments that only a black could give them.

But through those tales had run the thread of truth. And some of the stories Helene had heard bore them out to a fine degree. She had heard warriors tell of invading the forbidding territory of the temples that reared to the sun, had laughed with others, when the warriors had told

of seeing the ghosts that prowled the land which once had been their own. Fanciful or not, the natives had taken the tales seriously, so seriously, that the land had been called *juju*, forbidden to all blacks.

Even Ki-Gor had never ventured within the area with Helene. He had passed the question with a laugh when she had asked what lay therein and when was he taking her on an exploration trip. Mighty as he was, utterly without superstition, he still had a respect for a land which was shunned by all of the people he knew.

Helene thought those thoughts as she paced behind Rajh, and a shiver coursed her back. She thought of returning to her jungle glade, was afraid to do so, for fear that the Arab's tale might be true. But she marked the trail in her memory, remembering the landmarks, felt certain that she could retrace it alone if necessary.

The sun reached its zenith, began its downward march. The heat was a dank miasma sucking the strength and vitality from all it touched. The trees crowded close upon each other, and the bars of sunlight were oddly bright in the eternal gloom.

The pace was slower now, the first bright edge of endurance worn away. Rajh had lost his air of oily servility, and his slitted eyes were utterly cruel and mocking when they swung to touch Helene's body. But he said no word, and they continued their gruelling *trek* in silence.

The forest began to thin, the ground slowly merging from brown earth into the rocky shale and split green-gray granite of a volcanic terrain. The air lost its heavy jungle fragrance, took to itself the slight bitter tang of sulphur. The sunlight came stronger, no longer impeded by the thick carpet of tangled branches and leafy vines overhead.

Some of the wariness had left Helene, for she had followed the greasy Arab the full day, and he had made no overt move of any kind. She was tired; there was weariness in the set of her shoulders and in the stretching stride which she had maintained for hours. But her eyes were clear and unshadowed, and she breathed with the easy grace of a jungle creature.

They crossed the first of two connected clearings, trodding carefully through the upthrust shards of volcanic rock, skirting the narrow cracks that raced

helter-skelter over the terrain, entered the narrow belt of trees at the far side. For a brief moment, they were in cool shade; then they had stepped into the second clearing, and the first climax of Madj B'u Kalim's murderous plot was reached.

Two ropes swished out of nowhere, settled almost casually about Helene's slim shoulders, tightened with a brutal force, pinning her slender arms to her sides. One second she was paralyzed with astonishment—and then she fought with the desperation of a trapped lioness.

But Helene could not win; the ropes held her so strategically she could get no leverage. There was no laughter in her blue eyes now, and she knew that she had walked into a trap of some kind, but as to the reason for the abortive attack, she did not know. She struggled for long seconds, then subsided, her soft skin abraded by the rough ropes, her glowing hair a gold-red tangle about her flushed face.

"So we meet again," a voice said mockingly, and into view stepped the thin hate-filled figure of Kalim. He laughed when he saw the knowledge dawn in Helene's eyes, nodded in agreement.

"Majd B'u Kalim!" Helene whispered.

Kalim smirked, nodded, his slitted eyes glittering with a savage enjoyment of the situation. Dirt scuffed in tiny puffs beneath his sandals, as he strode to Helene's side. He licked dry lips, his gaze sliding stickily over the slim figure of his captive.

He struck Helene twice, brutally sledging with his open hands, welts flicking into red existence on her fair cheeks.

"Remember?" he said tightly. "Remember, I promised?"

Helene fought against the blackness that crowded her mind from the treacherous brutal blows, tasted blood on her bruised mouth. But there was no fear in her eyes, and she stood straight and proud within the confines of the constricting ropes.

"Where is Ki-Gor?" she asked.

Kalim laughed. "I do not know," he admitted. "But he will come when he finds that you are gone. And when he does—I shall be waiting!"

Relief filled Helene's heart; she felt fear for herself, but the knowledge that her mighty husband was not dying of battle wounds gave her a growing hope. She

knew the greatness of her husband, she had seen him fight for that which was his, and she knew that no ordinary man could hope to best him.

And then, in that moment when gladness sang briefly in her heart, she felt the sickness of despair cramping at her senses. Her gaze swung to the greasy murderous Arab facing her, and read the answer in his eyes to the unspoken conviction which was hers.

Kalim nodded slowly. "Yes," he said softly, "he will come—and when he does, there will be no fighting. For he will take no chances, knowing that at his first wrong move—you will die."

Helene shook her head proudly. "Ki-Gor will come," she admitted. "But when he does—" She left her sentence unfinished.

The snaky brand of Kalim's forehead blazed crimson in his instant fearful wrath. He knocked Helene unconscious with one vicious blow. She crumpled instantly; and he kicked her brutally, savagely, the rhinoceros hide sandal lacerating the soft skin of her body. At last, he turned away, breathing heavily, gestured at Rajh.

"Help carry her," he ordered. "We must return to the pyramids."

Rajh cringed in fear, but he shook his head in negation. His voice came winging back in a whining plaint.

"No!" he said. "I do not return with you. I go back to my own people. You promised that to me, if I brought Helene or Ki-Gor here."

Majd B'u Kalim scowled, his dark hands clenching at his hips.

"I said, we go back," he snarled. "Now lift the girl."

"No!" The feral courage of a jackal flamed in Rajh's eyes. "I follow you no longer. Ki-Gor will come, and I fear him more than you." He took two paces backward. "I am leaving; try to stop me. and—"

THE ARROW made a dull sound when it smashed into his back. The point slid silver into his back, came crimson through his chest. He crumpled forward, clawing at the point with twisting fingers, his scream a weird ululation that scaled high, then broke in bubbles of bloody froth from his gaping mouth. His feet kicked

convulsively at the ground, and he bucked in the ecstasy of agony.

Kalim nodded approval at the robed man who appeared from where he crouched out of sight in the brush, then strode to Rajh's body, spat directly into the pain-filled face.

"You were too clever," he said thinly, "and I do not like clever men."

Rajh tried to gasp out words, but his voice was choked, and the only sound was a bubbling grunt. Kalim turned contemptuously away, strode to Helene, loosed the ropes still about her. Another robed man joined the first murderer; then both bent and lifted the slack body of the girl, one taking her across his shoulders. Kalim smiled crookedly, followed the men as they began their trek. He turned for one glance at the dying Rajh, caught the bubbled words.

"The knife, Kalim; I am in agony!"

KALIM watched the frenzied plucking at the arrow point by the clawing fingers, and a sadistic glitter filled his eyes. He watched silently for a moment, then shrugged, followed his men. Rajh watched out of agonized hate-filled eyes, while screams of pain tore at his throat. Then he was alone in the clearing—and winging out of nowhere, sliding through the sky on soundless wings, came the first of the scavenging vultures, waiting for the creature in the glade to die.

Already far away, Majd B'u Kalim paced at the backs of the robed men of Selina's. He felt the thrill of his first victory filling his mind, and he laughed lightly when he thought of that which was to come. He saw the limp body of the girl over the Egyptian's back, followed the clean line of her profile, tangled his gaze in the red-gold hair that swirled in the hot breeze.

His hands rubbed together unconsciously, and his thoughts were in the future. Helene would pay for her share in the ignominy that Ki-Gor had brought to him months before; she would pay, and he would revel in her pleas for mercy.

But that would come after Ki-Gor had been made captive; that would be the perfect climax to his plans.

And Ki-Gor would not escape. There were ways at hand to bring him into the trap prepared for him. Even his gigantic

strength and incredibly keen mind could not save him this time. He was not fighting some ignorant black or savage animal; he was battling an antagonist whose brain was quick and cunning. He would be fighting in a place which would not be his natural element, like a bird fighting a crocodile under water.

Ki-Gor could not win.

"Hurry," Kalim snapped.

The group broke through the last of the trees, descended into a narrow sandy arroyo, followed its twisting length for half a mile, then swung to the left and down into a deeper, wider valley of rock and sand.

Kalim shivered, despite the warmth of the day. The first long shadows of evening were crawling sluggishly from the cliffs at either side, sliding toward the stony pyramids that reared in bleak majesty from the rocky floor of the earth fault. There was an air of desolation and brooding mystery over the scene which plucked at his senses, an air of antiquity found nowhere else in all the world. He had seen other pyramids built by the ancient Egyptians, but they had been in the open, not hidden as these were. Here, the hoary cloud of superstitious ages had veiled all with a sense of evil *being* that frightened him deep within his heart despite himself.

But he forced himself to go ahead, laughing silently, grimly, at the thoughts in his mind. He knew this place for what it was; he had been shown about the pyramids by Selina days before. This was the only sanctuary for him until Ki-Gor was dead.

The party came to the base of the largest pyramid, stopped before the gaping square of a hole that pierced the base. Bending slightly, they entered, paused just within the entrance, while Kalim lit a faggot from a pile near one wall of the tunnel with the aid of a flint and steel he took from the slit pocket of his robe. He used the first to light a second, then passed both to the men ahead.

Turning, he caught at worn handholds on the granite block that jutted from the tunnel entrance, swung his weight against the pull of the massive stone. With a dry shrieking of stone on stone, the block came swinging in on heavy counter-pins. It grated loudly, then thudded into place.

There was blackness and silence, broken only by the sputtering crackle of the smoking flaming torches.

"Come," Kalim said, and led the way along the rubbly tunnel.

VII

KI-GOR shivered in the mossy crotch of the gigantic *baobab*, and stared blankly about the misty forest hemming him in. He didn't know how he had arrived where he was, nor what had happened during the time that had elapsed since he had faced N'Geeso and the revengeful pygmies.

His bow was gone, as was his spear, and he sighed a bit in relief when his questing fingers found the keen knife still scabbarded at his lean waist.

He came slowly to his feet, his mind clearing with a speed that amazed him, seeming to draw thoughts and conclusions with a swiftness such as he had not experienced in weeks. He stretched cramped muscles, shrugged strength back into his shoulders, ran his gaze about the jungle that surrounded him.

He knew where he was, and the knowledge brought a tired smile to his mobile lips. Lithely, he went down the tree, swinging from branch to branch, alighting on the damp ground with the flexing of muscles that cushioned the shock of the last ten foot drop. Without hesitation, he eeled through the bushes, found a narrow antelope trail, paced it with quickening speed.

The sun was well up now, and he felt its brazen heat seeping through the green tangle of branches and leaves overhead, turning the stagnant water of the jungle floor into a pallid mist that clung with febrile fingers to his tanned body.

He swung a bit to his right, followed a clearly-marked path that went to the clearing near at hand. The first twinges of hunger were in his belly, and sniffed the air, hoping to smell the odors of cooking food ahead.

Tightness came to his face, making it craggy hard for the moment, for there was in the slight breeze the odors that could only come from natives and their encampment.

He began to run, without conscious voli-

tion, mighty chest breathing with easy rhythm, columnar legs driving with tense speed. He threw caution to the wind for the moment, running with a burst of soundless energy. His gray eyes peered ahead, watching the side-bushes, while tendrils of nervous sense laced all about, searching for signs or sounds of hidden watchers.

He came to within a hundred yards of the jungle glade where he had left Helene, grasped a vine while in full stride, rode the pliant liana in a soaring arc to the limb of a tree twenty feet ahead. He crouched momentarily, watching his back-trail, then went with the agility of a monkey through the interlaced branches, going as soundlessly as a drifting shadow, proceeding with a caution engendered by the events of the past day and night.

He came to the thinning edge of the jungle, crouched out of sight in the crotch of a great limb, scanned the clearing for a brief second. Then he went hand over hand down a vine, dropped to the green grass of the clearing.

He stood alone; stood on wide-braced legs, while the first shafts of fear went driving through his heart. He stood and gazed about the sunlit glade, and panic built in his mind.

For blacks had been in the clearing; there were the marks for any jungle man to see. Fires had been laid and lit, and the powdery ashes still sent tiny tendrils of gray smoke spiralling upward. There, a bit of monkey fur, torn from an anklet, lay in a patch of greensward, and further on, gnawing ants roiled in a black and red mass over the meaty remnants of the meal consumed.

And then he saw the bright patch of leopard skin lying near the scattered ferns which had been the jungle bed for him and his mate. He went there with soundless steps, lifted the fur, recognized the garments which had been his wife's.

A SOUNDLESS gasp of pain came from the Jungle Lord's throat; then his face and eyes were as bleak and stony as the rocky bank across the stream. He searched the bits of fur for tears made by knife or spear, felt relief climb into his mind when he found none. He dropped the garments, began to pace the clearing.

He quartered it like a leopard scenting

its prey. His gaze flicked to each scuffed spot on the ground, saw every bruised grass blade, estimated and evaluated all that had happened. He saw the other bits of leopard fur near the remains of what had been Helene's cooking fire, then sent his gaze past.

There had been two tribes in the clearing, one, the Masais, the other, the pygmies of N'Geeso's. The Masai's had arrived first, had placed lookouts, then eaten their meals. The pygmies had arrived early in the morning, and scuffed circles in the grass showed where conferences had taken place between the Masais and their diminutive friends.

But as the minutes passed, a slight frown came to Ki-Gor's face. He halted his movements, stood motionless, trying to rationalize what he had found.

It was evident that the blacks had found the clearing deserted, for there were no signs of a scuffle, nor other clues to the fact that Helene had been made captive.

Ki-Gor turned thoughtfully, searching for anything which he might have missed. His gaze flicked by the patch of leopard skin, then came back. He strode to it, lifted it in steady fingers, frowned when he saw the manner in which the hide had been slashed. Comprehension lightened his eyes, and he tossed the skin aside, as the answer came to him.

Helene had not been captured by the blacks; she had apparently heard them coming and had raced to safety in the jungle. And that brought up the problem of where she had hidden herself.

But even as he thought, his eyes were caught by the black markings upon the skin, which had turned over in mid-air when he had carelessly thrown it aside. He squatted, spread the ragged bit of hide with nerveless fingers, studied the cryptic drawings.

Laughter came to his eyes when he read the message left him by Helene. He read the Bantu picture language with consummate ease, and slowly the laughter was erased from his features. He finished deciphering the crude pictures, went over them again, while terror mounted in his heart.

Then he straightened, knowing why Helene had gone to the Valley of the Mummies. But he couldn't understand the pur-

pose behind the story told her by the Arab. Grimness thinned his lips, and he turned with purposeful stride.

He climbed a towering tree at the edge of the clearing, retrieved his extra bow and spear from the long hole in the trunk, found extra arrows, filled his quiver. Then he climbed to the ground, began to run. He went in the direction taken by Helene and her traitorous guide, and he moved with an uncanny speed that nothing alive could have matched in going through the jungle.

He held the spear just behind the great shining blade, trailing the shaft so that it would not tangle in the underbrush. His massive body twisted and bent and straightened with an easy grace, as he went through brush and tangled vines that seemed impossible for any creature to enter.

There was but one thought in his mind; he must rescue Helene from whatever peril must face her. His own problem must wait for the moment. He was a jungle beast protecting his own, and by his jungle code there could be no other way of doing things.

His eyes were hard and shiny, and muscles were tight in his shoulders. Burning in his great heart was the desire for mortal combat. He was Ki-Gor, White Lord of the Jungle, and battle was in his mind.

He ran as never had he run before in his life. Great *vanka* lizards watched with bright eyes, too startled to dart from sight, as the golden ghost slid through the jungle. Parrots watched from beady reptilian eyes, their voices screaming insults too late for the jungle giant to heed. Snakes struck with a bewildering speed, only to recoil with angry hissings, their strokes unnoticed and ill-spent.

KI-GOR had no eyes for the jungle then; he paced with a speed that never slackened, giving but scant heed to the path that fled beneath his driving feet. He breathed with the ease of the jungle animal that he was, never slackening the rhythm of his chest, and he felt but the slightest draining of his strength as the seconds flowed into minutes, and the minutes grew into hours.

He ate as he ran, snatching fruit from

bushes, pausing briefly to drink from springs that purred ice-cold from beneath the roots of gnarled forest giants. Then he went ahead again, traveling at three times the pace of normal men, driving an almost-straight path through the jungle. He took to the trees only when the ground brush became a tangled morass that would have stopped an elephant, or again when small streams impeded his path, and he must needs cross by loops of swinging vine.

But for the main, he stayed on the ground. His sight was keen, and there was but the slightest of aches in his head; yet he was afraid that the old injury might react again, should he fall or bruise himself by a miscalculated swing upon a loop of liana.

The sun was far past its zenith, and still he ran. He went tirelessly on, going as never had another warrior in all of Africa, taking step after step, his keen gaze eternally searching the jungle about him for anything which might be a clue to Helene's passing.

And two hours before sundown, he found that first clue. He had swung to the left, taking a shadowed trail, following its winding course as a short relief from the effort of slipping like a wraith through the tangled jungle.

And as he ran, he saw the golden-red wisp of hair still knotted about the thorne of a *kalchi* bush. He paused, studied the bit of hair, smiled. Helene had left the clue herself; undoubtedly she had left others along the trail which she had followed. But since he had come in a direct line through the jungle, missing the trail almost completely, he had seen none of the clues.

He saw the footprints in the soft mold to one side of the trail, bent and studied them, testing them with a stiff forefinger, judged them to be but a few hours' old, at the very most. It was difficult to read trail signs in this bend of the trail, for the warm breeze came sweeping from ahead where the trees thinned, and its drying action erased slight clues which were essential to this type of trailing.

He went ahead again, going more cautiously, but still with a speed that a running man could not have matched for long. He felt the first hint of tiredness creeping

into his muscles, and he sighed deeply, breathing gustily.

Then he went utterly rigid, flowing into the shadow of a towering bush, trying to catch again the sound which had crept turgidly through the air to his ears.

It came again, a low whine from a wounded animal, and he took long graceful steps in its direction, spear held at casting position now, limber muscles swelling and set for instant flying action if this were an ambush.

He came to edge of a rocky clearing, stood at its side, keen eyes swiftly scanning the rocky glade and its jungle edge. He went on cat feet across the slanting sheets of rock, slid into the edge of the forest at the far side.

He heard the sound again, and went recklessly forward. He passed through the thin growth of trees, came to the edge of a second clearing, winced instinctively when he saw the pitiful huddle of the wounded man lying in the center of the stony compound.

He went to the man's side, bent over him, still watchful that this was not a trick to get him into the open. Satisfied, he turned the semi-conscious man with gentle hands. Eyes stared blindly at his set face, and lips mumbled words that held no meaning.

KI-GOR saw the arrow then, grimaced when his fingers probed and found that it could not be withdrawn. There was nothing he could do for the dying man; there were but a few hours of life left in the creature. The arrow had struck at the lowest part of the lungs, had driven through in such a manner that withdrawal of the arrow would bring death within seconds.

Ki-Gor rose, stood staring down at the moaning figure. Who the man was, he did not know; but his jungle code would not permit him to continue for the moment. He went toward the edge of the jungle, found two boils of milky sap on the side of a scrubby *m'tondo* tree, returned, and, breaking the rubbery bulbs, permitted the sap to trickle into the man's gaping mouth.

The Arab swallowed convulsively, and the action seemed to give him a brief moment of consciousness. Bleared eyes flickered open, and fear delated the pupils when

they saw the heroic blond giant bending over them.

"No!" The sound was barely a whisper. "No!"

"Easy," Ki-Gor said in fluent Arabic. "I but give you medicine that you may not feel the agonies of your wound."

"Kalim did—" The sentence trailed away, the Arab's head twisting from side to side in pain.

"Kalim!" Knowledge came to Ki-Gor's eyes, and the muscles rippled along his shoulders, as he ruthlessly shook the dying man's body.

"What of Kalim? Has he taken my mate?"

Rajh's eyes focused again. "I tricked the Golden One," Rajh whispered. "I told her you were wounded. Kalim promised that I could go back to my people." He shuddered, and the crimson spittle on his bearded lips was almost black in the dying sunlight. "He took her to the Valley of the Mummies, curse his soul!"

He raised himself by a supreme effort, clawed at Ki-Gor's knife.

"The blade," he whispered. "End my agony."

The Jungle Lord stood, looked at the treacherous Arab, with a strange pity in his bold grey eyes. He shook his head slightly. The man could not live; but the jungle giant could not murder him to ease the agony which was his. No, the man must die, but he must die in his own time, his last minutes on Earth made more easy by the numbing effect of the sap which he had swallowed.

He turned away, knowing the urgency of his mission, squared his broad shoulders against the weak cries of the dying Rajh. He forced himself to go ahead, hating himself because he must, yet knowing there was no other course to follow.

He found the footsteps of the murderous men who had kidnapped Helene, correctly read the story of the shooting of Rajh. He saw the deeper prints made by the man who carried Helene, and agony was in his heart that she might be injured.

He heard the frantic voice of Rajh behind him, half-turned to listen. The words came stark and clear.

"Pray to Allah for me, O jungle man, pray that I may die in peace." There was

a pause, then: "You walk into a trap. Kalim is waiting."

Ki-Gor bowed his head, whispered the Kamzilla Prayer of the Dead for the dying man. One second, he paused in prayer, then he went toward the Valley of the Mummies, trodding light and easy along the clearly-marked trail made by the kidnapers.

For ten minutes, he ran, trekking with a steady ground-eating pace. He knew that he walked into a trap; Rajh's words had told that much. How or when the trap would be sprung, he did not know—or care. He wanted only to come to grips with those who had laid their hands on the slim body of his wife.

He found the cross canyon, followed it, the trail darkening as he ran, then came to the large valley where the pyramids crouched in lonely grandeur. He paused at the valley's entrance, shaken despite himself by the sheer stark simplicity of brooding power that lay in the scene.

THERE WERE but four of the pyramids, forming a great square, each seeming to spring out of the rocky ground, each decayed by the ravages of time, bare stony skeletons showing where the sandy skin had been scraped away by the wind and the torrential rains.

There was age in the valley, and desolation, and the whisperings of ancient cruelties and ambitions. There was death there, hanging like an unseen pall that folded any onlooker in a clammy embrace.

But that death was of the past; now another death had taken its place. It could not be seen; there were no clues to its presence. But it was there, and the preternaturally-sharp sense of the jungle giant sensed that it lay in wait.

He shrugged looseness in the great sweep of his shoulders, checked the balance of the Masai war-spear couched in the fingers of his hand. He loosed the gigantic war-bow from his left shoulder, carried it in the fingers of his other hand, ready for instant action, the second the great spear went whistling in an arc of death.

Then Ki-Gor went forward in the valley.

He walked with a pantherish ease, still pacing the plain trail he followed, ready

for action at any moment, muscles relaxed for any quick movement that he might have to make.

Behind him, eyes watched at the valley's distant mouth. They watched and estimated the situation, then ducked from sight, when the jungle man stopped and swung about in sudden suspicion.

Ki-Gor went ahead. He skirted the edge of the first pyramid, the bottom blocks of greyed granite towering five feet over his head, dwarfing him against the ground. His shadow walked before him, sliding over the sand. He gave no heed to the carvings and bas-relief that scored the blocks of stone beside which he walked; he searched for nothing that a spear could not cut down.

The tracks went about the corner of the pyramid, and he circled outward, taking care that no one might ambush him from its shadow. He saw the line of footprints going directly toward the second of the great man-made structures, went ahead with a grim purposefulness in his face.

He saw the square of shadow at the pyramid's base, narrowed his eyes so that it might stand out with greater clarity. It was inky, depthless in the dimming light; and nerves tightened in his body, when he realized that this was the end of his quest.

The slanting wall of the pyramid was but a continuous shadow, the tunnel entrance a darker blot of blackness. He approached it cautiously, spear held for instant casting, feeling the tingling in his superb sense that forewarned him that this was the trap.

He could not turn; he had no desire to turn. Helene was here, and here he must go. If he failed, then he failed while doing that which must be done.

He heard the tiny scuff of feet on rock, saw the slim figure of the woman standing within the shadows of the tunnel. He saw the leopard-skin halter and clout—and relief was so great in his mind, he relaxed for the barest part of a second.

"Helene!" he cried.

He heard the whistling shriek of displaced air, tried to dodge aside, and the flickering blunt-nosed arrow seemed to swerve in mid-flight, catching him squarely in the temple.

He dropped like a pole-axed eland, sag-

ging inertly, eyes glazing from the shock. Blackness crowded his eyes, spread to his brain, and the light winked out in a fleeting instant of time.

One glimpse he had of the girl within the tunnel entrance. One instant of marvelment he had. He caught sight of the esoteric dark eyes that were dominant in a face as clean of line as that of a loved one in a dream. He saw the halter and clout which had been Helene's, saw that they accented the soft curves of a slender body. He saw the slow movement of her hand, the instinctive movement made by a woman who sees treachery come stalking out of nowhere.

Then he was but a crumpled heap in the shifting sands.

VIII

KALIM, striding past Selina, laughed openly, harshly, lashed with a bullhide-whip at the unconscious giant. Madness was in his eyes then, the utter madness of triumph such as only he could have. He spat at Ki-Gor's lacerated back, then stepped aside so that Selina's men could lift the Jungle Lord and carry him into the tunnel.

He followed the men, waiting while fresh torches were lit, then turning and pulling the massive block of stone into place again. He swung from the closed entrance, laughed in a peal of mirth that drew mad echoes from far down the tunnel. The livid worm that was the slaver brand on his forehead crawled and writhed in hideous contortions. The echoes of his laughter echoed and titillated down the tunnel, and was in turn echoed by the cracking of shifting rock, by the sifting downward of tiny rocks and fine dust from the ceiling, loosened by the vibrations.

Then Ki-Gor was stirring, was blinking at the knives held for ready use. He stood, unaided, faced Kalim.

"Where is Helene?" he asked steadily.

"That way!" Kalim pointed. "Lead the way."

His gleaming knife-point drew blood from Ki-Gor's back.

Tiny bubbles of water oozed sullenly from the dark walls of the tunnel, staring like venomous eyes at the group stalking the lichen-covered floor. Insects

scrambled for safety, their rustlings like the whispers of nasty little voices in a dream. Smoke rolled oilily from the torches, twisted in sinuous threads sucked by the slight draught along the tunnel's ceiling.

Ki-Gor walked steadily, blinking away the blinding pain that rode his head. Three times within two suns he had been bludgeoned, and he knew that another blow might drive his intelligence away for all time. He heard the shufflings of the feet behind him, winced inwardly when the sadistic Kalim touched the gleaming knife-point again and again to his wide back.

But he gave no outward sign; his grey eyes were probing the darkness that rolled grudgingly back from the wall of smoky light continually pushing forward. He saw the vines that trailed like black snakes from the cracks between the wall blocks, lifted his gaze, saw the split and riven blocks of the roof. A spear knocked against the wall; and slight as was the sound, vibrations sifted small rocks and dust from between the overhead blocks.

"Easy, you fool!" The girl's voice came in a thin whisper.

The careless man sighed an apology, followed silently. No one spoke, and the sounds of breathing were abnormally loud. The pulsing yellow radiance of the torch burgeoned ahead, splashed against the black vines that crowded like loathsome endless worms over the tunnel end.

Ki-Gor turned to his right, entering another tunnel, saw the slightest flicker of light ahead. Unconsciously, he went faster, knowledge that Helene was somewhere at the tunnel's end hastening his lithe steps. He heard the low mocking laughter of Kalim behind, and felt the muscles racing in a tightening net over his great frame.

He hated the greasy venomous Arab then, hated him with a gust of red passion such as seldom stirred his sensibilities. But he forced himself to walk steadily, giving the man no reason for a murderous blow with the keen knife.

They filed along the narrow tunnel, came again to a dead end, then bent and ducked through a low archway to the side, the stone lintel barely five feet above the flooring. They were in a room fully fifteen paces in

width, by half again as long; and the watchers seated about the long table did not turn to stare.

Ki-Gor felt nerves crawling his spine, as his eyes took in the grim tableau with a sweeping glance. Blue eyes glittered unwinkingly at him from almost-black leathery faces, and gnarled skeletal hands remained pressed in the grooves layered on the table by sifting dust.

They were dead, and yet they lived. Lived as they had hundreds of years before. They sat in awful quiet splendor, gems where their eyes had been, their desiccated mummified bodies erect in the queerly-carved thrones that ringed the table.

They were twelve, and they were evil. Centuries of death had not erased the aura of macabre menace from about them; but rather had intensified it and folded its clammy swirls even tighter as the endless years passed.

KI-GOR shivered, pausing briefly within the portal of the room and Kalim also stopped, his muted laughter strained and ill-sounding in the chamber of death.

"They ruled once," he said softly, "now they are nothing. They sit and rule over something which is nothing. They are gone, and we are alive—and *they do not like that.*"

Ki-Gor nodded unconsciously, could almost describe the slow twisting of the mummy's eyes, the gleaming ones belonging to the man who headed the table, the one who sat in regal dusty splendor, a steeped, golden crown on his withered brow, armlets and rings weighting his skeletal arms and hands to the table top, his shoulders hidden by a jewelled, gold-threaded robe.

There was hate in those withered features, vulpine hate for the intruders who stood in contemptuous contemplation of the scene. And like a gathering point for the flotsam of a whirlpool, the table seemed to catch the hate of the others who sat in grim terrible silence in the high-backed chairs, cast it with visible tangible force at the interlopers.

But now the rest of the party had crowded into the room, and the torch-light whisked gleams of red and purple and green from the dusty painted bowls

and slender urns laid out as those for a feast of the dead.

"Ahead," Kalim whispered, pointed toward a door directly across the room, the entrance of another tunnel which gleamed with the light of flickering torches close at hand.

Ki-Gor went about the table, awed by the menace radiated by the mouldy dusty cadavers of men and women who once had ruled their tiny nation with despotic power. He was squarely at the back of the head chair when the snake struck without warning.

The Jungle Lord moved with an instinctive speed which his mind could not have ordered in that split second. He whirled, lifting the leg at which the snake was striking, darted backward.

And his outflung balancing hand barely struck the chair of the master of the dead.

There was a sigh, a moan that was nothing in itself, something that was sensed rather than heard. Ki-Gor came to rest, safe from the snake which slithered into the darkness, and heard the awed gasp of the people at his back.

For the mummy was moving.

It bent forward at the waist, the wasted hands sliding deep grooves through the dust, the jeweled bracelets clicking one by one on the table edge. The jaw dropped down in a soundless laugh, shreds of brittle flesh popping with muted force. A gem thudded to the dust-blanket covering the table, and the empty eye socket glared in utter blackness.

The robe covering the wasted shoulders sifted into flakes of dust, the threads of gold and the dulled jewels woven into it dropping with clear clinkings to the stony floor. The mummy bent even further, going faster now, as the belly flaked into shards of dry-rotted flesh, and smashed face downward upon the weird banquet table it had presided over for so many ages.

Bone and mummified flesh disintegrated, even as the watchers stared. It crumpled and splattered and powdered into the dusty nothingness of itself. And a golden goblet rolled idly where the jawbone had knocked it aside in passing.

"*Thoth!*" the first torch-bearer whispered in blind panic.

"Silence!" The girl snapped the word with a brittle finality.

Ki-Gor stepped past the chair, felt the sweat of dread on his back. He felt no superstitious terror because the mummy had been crumpled; to him, the dead were nothing but the dead; he was sorry only that he had disturbed a tomb. But he knew that the accident might have meant his own death.

He ducked to enter the far tunnel, gave one last glance at the eerie room. There were eleven about the table now; and none was superior. They were the dead, and their past was as crumpled and forgotten as their leader.

Then Ki-Gor was in the tunnel, narrowing his eyes against the yellow flaring of torches thrust into the wall. He smelled the dampness in the breeze, watched the smoke roiling from the flames, followed the threads with his gaze. They went straight, then twisted into a side entrance.

The jungle giant paced ahead, halted at a low command, stared into Kalim's sweaty face. There was laughter there, there was the madness that only a driving hate could bring to a distorted mind. Ki-Gor studied that face for a brief moment, then glanced instinctively at the blackness behind the side-tunnel entrance.

"In," Kalim whispered mockingly.

KI-GOR hesitated, then turned and entered. He felt his way with the sensitive soles of his feet, moving as he did in jungle night. He smelled the odor of stagnant water, sensed that he stood above its surface. He halted with instinctive caution.

Then Kalim plucked a torch from the tunnel wall, followed at the jungle giant's back, lighted the interior of the room.

It was small, barely a hand of paces across, and around its walls ran a narrow ledge of lichen-covered stone blocks. Below the ledge, the dark water lay quiescent, light glinting from the even surface. In the center of the pool, a slim pipe speared upward a foot above the water. Ki-Gor frowned in perplexity when he saw the room, turned to face the Arab.

"Where is Helene?" he asked quietly.

Majd B'u Kalim shook his head. "Not yet, Ki-Gor," he said. "First, you must prove your worth of her." His voice

thinned, grew exultant. "In that pool," he said, "is a pump. The water is barely to your shoulders, but more is slowly seeping into the pool at all times."

Comprehension flickered in the Jungle Lord's eyes, and the great muscles of his shoulders tightened with sudden purpose, and as suddenly he relaxed beneath the threat of the murderous cross-bow held in the firm grip of the robed man standing in the doorway.

"The chains," Kalim said, and a second man tossed a clot of heavy slavers' chain at Ki-Gor's feet. Kalim watched the jungle giant's face, pale fury in his eyes because the white man did not flinch.

"Legs and arms," Kalim ordered, smiling grimly. "Or would you rather die before seeing your wife again!"

Ki-Gor bent, fitted the brutal cuffs about his ankles, snapped them shut, locking them together with four feet of the heavy links. Straightening, he untangled the longer chain, fitted and snapped the cuffs tightly about his muscle-cabled wrists.

He growled deep in his throat, the blind panic building in his mind; for he was a jungle creature, and fetters were things that he could not abide.

But if he were a jungle creature, he was also a reasoning animal. And he knew that his one chance at life lay in following the sadistic dictates of the madman's will before him. He straightened until he towered over the Arab, drove him back a full step by sheer force of his primal personality, then turned and dropped from the ledge into the pit below.

He heard the laughter, as he dropped, then struck with bent legs, threw himself to one side, cushioning the force of the jump with jungle cunning. The water was not quite at shoulder level, when he stood again, and he gazed at the men and woman overhead, the tiny ripples lapping coolly at the muscles padding his chest.

Selina spoke for the first time in minutes. She pressed close to Kalim's side, and horror lay in her dark eyes. She was beautiful then, beautiful in a sultry passionate way that was blinding in itself. She had said but little in the past moments, carried by her belief that she must help the man at her side. But the sheer stark simplicity of Ki-Gor's planned murder was more than she could stand.

"You can't," she said to Kalim. "You can't murder him like that!"

Kalim whirled, and there was no mercy in his grim face. There was only the blazing hate boiling from within, straining the white worm-brand on his forehead, kindling pale flames in his eyes.

"I slaved!" he hissed. "I sweated and dug and almost died in the diamond pit. Without help, I would still be there. I swore an oath then, swore by the Koran that some day Ki-Gor would slave for his life." He laughed, and the sound went whirling in mad tight echoes. "He'll drown, yes, he'll drown. But first he'll suffer the agonies of Allah's accursed. *And that shall be my revenge!*"

KI-GOR laughed then, laughed with the pride of his strength and his courage and his contempt for the man who had trapped him. He stood deep in the water, feeling it crawling lazily toward his throat, and he laughed with the free wildness which lay in his heart.

But when he spoke, his words were flat and toneless.

"Kill me now, Kalim," he said, "for do not—and I shall slay you."

Kalim went still, the smoky torch wavering in his left hand, light winking on the blade held in his right. Then he shook his head.

"I shall wait my time," he said, "Until then—"

His voice trailed away; he turned and shepherded the others before him, left Ki-Gor alone in the room. His laughter came swinging back along the tunnel; then the wavering light was gone, and the sound of footsteps dwindled into silence.

The Jungle Lord stood silently for a moment, then swam to the wall. He circled it patiently, searching for any slight crack that would provide purchase for toes or fingers in a climb to safety. He had estimated the height of the wall during those few minutes of light, knew that he could not scale them without a running jump. And the water was the thing which made that impossible.

He found no cracks that would permit scaling the wall.

He stood, discovered that the water had risen a full inch during the time he had made his search. He felt the first full

measure of his despair then, fought it away with the patience that life in the green jungle had given him. He forced himself to think calmly and clearly, without distortion.

Water pushed against him with cold hands as he forced his way toward the pumps. There was no doubt in his mind that the pump would not work; Kalim's revenge would draw the most from the murder trap he had set. He grasped the single pipe that was the handle, began to pump with steady rhythm, tilting his head so that he could breathe while working.

The crude pump went *ssshhh, ssshhh, ssshhh*, in the darkness, and a chill current swirled about Ki-Gor's ankles, eddying toward the inlet of the pump. The Jungle Lord pulled and pushed the slim pipe-handle, moving awkwardly, because a full stroke dragged his head into the strangling water. He pumped with a ragged rhythm, driving at a forced speed, striving to bring the water to a lower level within a few minutes.

The blackness of the pit pressed in with a force as tangible as the water; but he gave the sensation no heed, continued his work with a steady patience that nothing could disturb until the task was finished.

Minutes flowed by, and the constant awkward strokes drove sharp knives of tiredness into his shoulders. But the first tight grin of confidence wreathed the firm outlines of his mouth; for in fraction of inches at a time, the waters were subsiding.

The level of the black liquid dropped slowly, until at last Ki-Gor could hold his head in a natural position. He rolled his head on his neck, loosening the tension, flipped wet golden hair from his eyes with a twitch of neck muscles.

His feet went wide, bracing against the slippery slimy flooring of the pit, the chain-cuffs tightening about his ankles. Strength rippled along his braced body, and he pumped with a quickening speed, forcing himself to maintain a breaking pace.

The water fell more rapidly, swirling into the hole at the pump's base in a steady quiet rush, vibrating the pump slightly, as it vanished through a hidden pipe. Inch by inch, the water fell, sinking until it reached but midway of the jungle giant's chest. He slowed his driving pace, pumped slower, content for the moment to match his

pumping of liquid against the continuous flow that was entering the pit.

And in the midst of a stroke, the pump ceased functioning.

THERE WAS a sound which couldn't be heard. It was a muted click, a snapping vibration that raced the pump and climbed Ki-Gor's nerves. Without conscious thought, he swung his weight on the pipe-handle, felt the push against his hands from the forcing of water against a solid surface. Breath was heard in his throat, and the splashing of water from the handle was abnormally loud in the torture pit.

The answer came to him in a rush of memory. This was the sadistic Arabic machination used years before by murderous Arab chieftains. The answer was simple, diabolic in its ingenuity.

The victim was forced to pump water from a pit. But the pit was so constructed that, when the water fell to a certain level, the outlet pipe was stoppered by a plug or a gate, thus making it impossible for the victim to completely empty the chamber. The operation was entirely automatic, working on water-pressure, thus necessitating no human guards.

The machination was doubly ingenious in that the victim was never given more than a few moments of rest, and in that freedom always lay so close, and yet was impossible to achieve.

Madj B'u Kalim had planned well; he had rebuilt part of this pyramid chamber, changing it for his revenge. He had arranged it so that Ki-Gor could not scale to freedom, because of the impeding water-drag on his body, making a running jump impossible. He had smoothed the walls so that no handhold was there. And he had adjusted the pump so that his prisoner would live for hours, knowing that the jungle giant had the endurance of a dozen men.

Ki-Gor stood motionless, feeling the water climbing his chest again. Then he pumped vigorously the pump working smoothly again. A moment later, there was the same clicking vibration, and the water ceased its outward flow.

Ki-Gor's hands loosed their grip, and he stepped away from the pump, breasting the icy water. His legs tensed, and he drove

upward in an easy surge of strength, swam with wide breast strokes. He felt the effort of each stroke, knew that, mighty and clever as he was in the water, he could not swim for long with the weight of the great chains on his wrists and ankles.

He turned, floated on his back, felt the chains dragging his feet slowly down, standing him upright in the water. He came to rest, found the water had risen another inch. He shouldered through the water to the pump, toes digging deep for balance on the slime-greasy flooring. He pumped steadily, emptying the water that had flowed in during the time he had made his futile experiment.

When the pump became useless, he stood motionless, estimating his strength against the rise of the water. Cold horror touched his mind, when he realized that he could not swim until the pit filled enough for him to make a lunging escape onto the narrow ledge.

He reviewed the entire situation, trying to find even the tiniest loophole in the predicament which would give him a chance at life and to rescue Helene.

Impatience rocked his usually stable sensibilities, and his features were rock-hard, muscles ridging his jaw. He could think of no other course which he could have followed, nor could he find any loophole in anything with which he had contended.

Anger raced his mind, and he tested the strength of the chain between his wrists. Muscles glided like coiling snakes beneath his bronzed skin, tightened, and he gave a preliminary tug, sensing the give in the metal links.

A slow smile touched his grim mouth. He breathed deeply several times, then bent over, floated free of the floor. His hands clamped a foot apart on the chain between his ankles.

Power rippled and swelled and bunched in the tremendous sweep of his shoulders, raced along his arms, coalesced their titanic force in the cabled muscles of his hands. He drew the chain completely rigid, the tendons of his hands standing pencil tight against his skin. He drew his hands apart with a slow implacable energy that nothing could have withstood.

But the chain was heavy, one of the great slave chains used by the blackbirders of

years before. Rust cut into the palms of the jungle giant's hands, drew seeping of blood. The links slipped a trifle through the locked fingers; then the grip became tighter, and the chain was a solid immovable bar of iron.

KI-GOR sent a blasting wave of strength into his shoulders, fighting a double battle. He strained to tear the chain in two, yet did not have complete equilibrium, for the exertion spun him slowly in the water, his natural balance gone.

He bunched his shoulders, and muscles lifted in bold relief on his columnar neck. He felt the hotness of withheld breath within his lungs, knew that he could not fight the chain much longer.

Strain was in every muscle and nerve in his body. He fought with the single-purposefulness of mind which only he could have. He felt the weak link in the chain give slightly, threw every remaining atom of his strength into a final violent surge of unleashed force.

The chain broke. It ripped soundlessly in two, and Ki-Gor came erect, breathing heavily, standing with his head above the water. He went slowly to the pump, grimly emptied the water which had entered the pit in that last few minutes.

He saw the first flickerings of light upon the wall, turned slowly, saw that someone was coming along the tunnel with a lighted torch. Without hesitation, he locked his hands about the wrist chain, began again the task of breaking fetters no other man could have even strained.

Muscles were barred cables across his chest, and he arced his body in herculean strength. Wet blond hair swept into his eyes, but so great was the strain, he could not flip it aside. He bent even more, his head completely under water now, tiny bubbles of air trickling from his nostrils.

The chain broke like rotten rope, one great length dangling from his wrist. Without pausing, he breasted the water, going toward the section of the pit directly beneath the doorway through which the flickering light was streaming. He made no effort to stifle any sounds; he was too intent to reach the position he had decided upon. There, he pressed against the slimy wall, the great loop of chain held in his right

hand, to the wrist of which the links were still attached.

Light flooded the room, and he heard the scuff of sandalled feet above him. He stood absolutely motionless, grey eyes gleaming like those of a jungle creature, every muscle tight in his body.

He heard the soundless gasp from the person directly over him, saw the reaching arm that extended the torch for better vision.

His right arm drove out and up, and the chain was a spinning brutal whip that lanced for the man above. It whipped like a headless snake, water showering in a spray of silver drops, two feet of the end snapping over the edge of the ledge.

And Ki-Gor jerked. He waited until he felt the slightest tension come to the chain in his hand, then jerked with a rush of strength that nothing could have denied.

There was a shriek of pain, and the torch whirled in a falling arc to the ledge, where it lay in fitful flames. And the man who had carried it, the chain wrapped like a whip-tip about one ankle, toppled to one side, his hands clawing desperately for deliverance.

It was then that Ki-Gor received his first bit of luck in days.

The robed man fell, but in falling, he twisted about, not plunging into the pool, but dropping so that his hips and legs dangled over the ledge, while his hands clung to the stone door frame, locked in blind panic and terror.

KI-GOR climbed the man as though he were a jungle vine. The chain fell free, and leaping, he grasped a kicking leg, drew himself to safety so swiftly that the man could make no effort to shake him loose. And still atop the man on the ledge, he sledged with one brutal hand, smashed the other into unconsciousness. The man sagged blankly, hands loosing their hold.

"Barek!" Ki-Gor whispered in recognition.

Ki-Gor braced his widespread knees on either side of the senseless body, kept the man from falling into the pool. With quick deft hands, he ripped strips of cloth from the dirty robe, made a rude gag and efficient bonds for the man's hands.

Then he arose, lifted the man into the entrance, bent and retrieved the torch,

swinging it to kindle the flames into full life again. He stood beside the unconscious body for a moment, breathing deeply, feeling the blood running hot and warm in his veins again.

He searched the body with one hand, found a massive hand-forged key, used it on his fetters. Locks clicked reluctantly; then he was free of the chains.

He left the torture chamber, went down the tunnel. He felt drained and empty of all strength, for the cumulative effects of the past hours were such that even his body could not stand them indefinitely.

He blinked, seeing the fading light of the torch, and horror came to his mind again. For he could tell by the radiant heat that the torch still flamed brightly in his hand. He gasped a bit, knowing the injury to his brain was betraying him for what might be the last time.

He began to run, hoping to outrace the blackness. But his eyes began to dim, and he could feel the cold sweat of terror on his body. He paused, gathering three more torches from wall niches, lighted them from the torch he carried, felt a dull relief crowding his heart when the darkness stopped its closing-in upon him.

He went around a bend in the tunnel, saw ahead the first faint sheen of light on a far wall. He knocked his torches into smoky ruin on the flooring, crept ahead on cat feet. The blinding ache was in his mind still, and he shook his head, trying to clear away the haze that gloomed his vision.

He heard the sound of voices ahead, went more slowly, inching his way, thoughts coming hard and turgid. He staggered a bit, braced himself against the wall, stopped almost at the entrance.

He could see into the great vaulted chamber ahead, and his eyes widened at the spectacle spread therein. He gathered strength into his body, straightened from his half-crouch, left the tunnel, going into the torchlight filling the great room.

X

HELENE sat stiffly on the couch that ran the full length of one wall in the room where she had awakened. She stared from fearless blue eyes at the smirking features of Majd B'u Kalim who

lounced indolently against the jamb of the half-open door.

She was clothed again in her leopard-skin halter and clout, having dressed in them when they had been thrown through the slit window of the door an hour before. Her golden-red hair was a swirl of soft brightness about her face, and her teeth were white against red lips as she spoke.

"Ki-Gor will come," she said softly, confidently, in answer to the unspoken mockery in the vulpine Arab's eyes.

Kalim laughed aloud, and there was in the timbre of his voice a note that spider-webbed crawling nerves through Helene's body. She tensed, and color faded from her tanned features.

"Ki-Gor will come," she repeated.

Kalim turned, lifted an object from the floor of the outer room, swung it negligently in one hand, the glow brightening in his eyes.

"Where—?" Helene began, and Kalim cut her short.

"Ki-Gor is already here," he said throatily. "He came shortly after you, much sooner than I expected—and stepped directly into a trap I laid for him." He casually flipped Ki-Gor's arrow-quiver into the center of the floor, where it rolled gently before coming to rest. "I think he is learning his lesson—in fact, I think it has *already* been learned. Soon you shall see for yourself."

He turned, went through the door, locked it with a heavy cross-bar, stared at the girl through the tiny grille set in the door-panel. His face was greasy with perspiration, and the white worm of the slave brand writhed along his forehead.

"I swore an oath," he said thinly, "swore it by the Koran. Ki-Gor I could break by strength, but you must suffer another way. And by the sacred beard of Allah, that shall come to pass this hour."

And then he was gone, leaving her alone, the dread building in her heart, filling her with a pain that mounted by the second.

She stared about the room for the hundredth time, seeing the strange exotic carvings that rode the walls and ceilings. Men and women walked those walls, weirdly caricatured by the royal sculptors and painters of another age. They lived their lives and fought their battles; they played and worked; they existed and died. Colors

were bright and untarnished by the years, and the skill of the artisans had given an uncanny realness to all that was depicted.

Osiris watched Re coming riding into the sky, and at his feet sat the *Ouer maa* and the *Thorp himet*, the priests whose following worshipped the god at whose feet they were seated. The *ka*, the soul, was rising from the mummy of the man whose ceremonies Osiris watched; and winging overhead was the sacred falcon to drive away the evil spirits.

HELENE saw the inscriptions and the carvings, marveled despite herself at the gigantic intellect which must have been within the minds of the race which once had ruled from this tomblike palace. She knew that this was the temple, the ceremonial chambers, for she had heard the talk of the priests who were in the central room, and bits of information had sifted to her, giving her most of the story of where she was.

Once there had been hundreds living in the valley; but their forces had been decimated by the fierce slaves who had rebelled. But a few dozen had escaped to the sanctuary of the pyramids, and there they had lived through the years.

Like moles living in constant fear of the predators which roam the earth, they had lived in their dim tunnels and rooms, venturing out only for food and to raid for women and men who would keep their strain alive. The centuries had passed, and their race had grown almost sterile, living now on half-forgotten dreams and legends, but a handful left of the thousands who had gone before.

Selina had been the last of the royal blood, and she had become the pawn of those who should have been her subjects. In their self-controlled isolation, those remnants of the inbred priesthood had become so fanatical about their decaying temples, they had sworn that all should die there. And even Selina, who once had tried to make her escape, had found that death would be her only means of freedom.

That much Helene had learned from the mutterings and scraps of talk which she had been able to understand. Yet she felt no sympathy for Selina; for to her all the dwellers of this place were enemies, and were to be counted as such.

She rose lithely from the stone bench which had been her couch, paced softly to the stone door. Her blue eyes watched the gloomy outer room, and she shivered unconsciously, seeing the remains of what once had represented a brutal grim power.

Horus ruled one wall, seated in a great stone throne, his blank stone eyes staring blindly at nothing. At his sides were his four sons; Mesti, the man-headed beast, Kebhsenuf, the bloody-taloned falcon, the skulking jackal, Duamutef, and the ape-headed monster, Hapi.

All gazed in blind intolerance at the men within the room, and their presence gave an aura of brooding evil to the smoky, ill-lighted scene.

There were paintings and sculplings, too, upon the great walls, sweeping murals of hunt and chase and life that defied description. Colors flowed and writhed in the murky light, giving an evil existence to things which had been dead for ages. Eyes watched from stony surfaces, and weird bodies danced a drunken saraband where the shadows rolled like strings of whipping black velvet.

But it was the eyes of the robed men within the room that tightened the fingers of dread about Helene's heart. They watched the door of her cell, and there was in them a look of gloating greed such as she had never seen in all her life.

They had thrown the cowls back from their shaven heads, and their skins were like greased brown leather in the torchlight. They did not stand in groups, but stood apart, and there was suspicion and distrust in their calculating faces when they darted glances at one another.

They wore their swords outside their robes, their veined hands knotted on the heavy pommels, and there was in their very bearing a lust which sickened the slim body of the entrapped girl.

They stared in silence now, held in thrall by the thoughts that raced their minds. And the thoughts glistened in their eyes, pebbled their faces with gleaming drops of perspiration.

Helene drew back from the grille, one hand pressed against the swell of her breast. Then firmness came to her features again, and she watched unafraid through the aperture.

←Jungle—Spring

Her gaze roamed the room, seeing the three walls, searching the dim shadows for the bronze figure of her mate. Despite the evidence of the arrow-quiver, despite the gloating assurance that had lain in Kalim's voice, there was still in her heart the thought that Ki-Gor might still come.

Never before had he failed her, never had she known the time when his heroic valor had not stood the stress and strain of battle so that he might be at her side. Yes, Ki-Gor would come, he would do that which could not be done. He would come with his great weapons, his unleashed strength, to wreak his cold vengeance upon those who had taken his wife.

And even as she thought those thoughts, she saw the great tanned body of her mate emerge from the dark gloom of a tunnel entrance.

SHE GASPED, then stifled the cry which rose unbidden to her lips. Her heart beat faster, when she saw him stalking the room.

And then Helene's eyes widened in vague astonishment and unbelief.

For although the men in the room shifted and whirled to face her mate, they made no move to draw their weapons. They stared in grim silence, apparently uncaring that the jungle giant had arrived.

Helene went utterly rigid, pressed tight to the door.

"Ki-Gor!" she called clearly.

And a sickness came to her mind and heart then, an illness that was more horrible than anything physical that she had ever suffered. She stared in growing horror, barely able to see Ki-Gor through the gloom, seeing his great body and gleaming golden hair, feeling the sheer animalism of his presence.

For even as she stared, Ki-Gor looked at the door behind which she was locked—and a laugh of derision came to his lips.

He deliberately turned away, went toward another tunnel entrance. And waiting in the shadow of that entrance, clad in the shimmering folds of a diaphanous gown—was Selina.

No man moved, no word was spoken. Selina waited, alluring and esoteric in the semi-darkness, and Ki-Gor went to her, circled her shoulders with one massive arm, His head bent, and his lips touched the,

warm red ones of the girl he held in his arms.

"No! No, *Ki-Gor!*" It was the barest whisper of a hurt that tore a heart to pieces.

"Yes!" Kalim stepped before the door, and his triumph was complete. He laughed aloud, and the echoes danced in wild rhythm from the vaulted ceiling.

"This is my revenge," he said. "This is the fulfillment of my oath. *Ki-Gor* has forsaken you; and you are a witness to the deed."

He laughed, and the worm-brand squirmed in diabolic life upon his forehead. He was completely mad then, the insanity glittering through slitted eyes; he was mad with the ecstasy of his revenge, and he pounded his hands against the door in murderous glee.

"You scorned me, *me* whom you might have had once! You slapped my face and permitted *Ki-Gor* to send me to the diamond pits, because I enslaved a bunch of ignorant blacks. Now is my turn, now I am slapping your face. Now I am repaying a hundredfold that which you did to me."

"He is sick, he is ill!" Helene whispered the words, her eyes drawn to the couple in the tunnel's arch.

Kalim nodded. "Maybe," he admitted. "But that does not alter the agony which is in your heart. *Ki-Gor* has forsaken you for another, and—"

He stopped in the midst of his gloating speech, whirled to face a robed man who had glided to his side. His hand was on the sword at his hip, and the man halted two yards away.

"Now?" the man asked, licked dry lips.

"Now," Kalim agreed.

HE TURNED to the door, lifted the bar, pulled the panel open. Helene did not move until his vicious hand closed tightly about her wrist; and then she went slowly, moving like a sleep-walker, her eyes intent upon the great blonde giant who watched from the shadows.

She went across the room, unresistingly, took the steps of the weird altar which squatted before the far wall. She felt hands draw her wrists high to shoulder-level, felt thongs bind them tightly to stone uprights on the altar.

Then full realization of what was happening came to her mind. She fought her bonds with the lithe strength of a tigress, wrenching with amazing force, but unable to break the thongs. Her hair swirled in a golden-red cascade about her slim shoulders, and she breathed heavily with the efforts of her exertions.

Kalim stood beside her, lifted a short bundle of thin sticks from near his feet, held them for Helene's inspection.

"You are the prize," he said softly, the worlds susurrating in a whispering rush through the silent room. "The one who draws the long stick—wins you—unless another can defeat him at swordplay." He laughed gently. "This is an auction, just as the other was—but now, there is no *Ki-Gor* and his black friends to help."

Ki-Gor's low blank laughter came winging from behind Helene. She bit her lips, said nothing, and the slow tears welled in her blue eyes.

The robed men came then, crowding about the foot of the altar, their dirty hands trembling as they reached for the sticks in Kalim's fingers. Each drew, one by one, and the ninth to draw sucked in his breath in a gasping sigh of greed.

"Mine!" he said.

And died.

The sword fled into his body, then came out in a rush of gouting crimson. He went slowly to his knees, hand plucking feebly at the weapon still belted to his waist. And his murderer, vaulted to the altar, faced the other men with bloody sword.

"I fight for her," he challenged.

Kalim fled down the steps, went ten paces away, whirled to face the scene. Mad laughter rode his eyes, and he dry-washed his palms. He faced the murderer atop the altar, and watched the men shifting in indecision before the sword.

"Me!" a second robed man snapped, and his blade came sweeping up.

They fought then, fought with the trained skill and fury of murdering skilful swordsmen. Light winked and glittered and sprayed from their sweeping swords, and the clang of the blades were like the hurtling sound of ill-tuned bells. They fought to possess the slim girl tied to the altar, and

others waited to battle the victor, for the prize.

"A fight!" The cry came wheeling from the tunnel where the bronzed giant stood beside the slender Selina. "A fight, and I am the greatest of them all."

Kalim spun, and his anger rose black in his shout of warning.

"Stay there, stay there, or die by my own hand. Stay there, or I kill you as I would a snake."

"I am the greatest fighter in the jungle!" the crazed cry came again, and the giant stepped from the shadows, paced his way on slow catlike feet toward the battle on the altar.

Helene had twisted at the cry from the massive man behind her, was gazing with incredulous eyes at the man who had stepped into clear light for the first time. She gasped a soundless voiceless cry, and the tears in her eyes blinded her for the moment.

Then she turned her head to watch Kalim, saw the black hate that was in his eyes. She saw the futile fury in his face, and laughter came rich and heady to her heart.

"He's not—" she began, and Kalim finished her sentence.

"He's not Ki-Gor," he said viciously, and his tones rose in a maddened shriek. "And he shall die for ruining my revenge on you."

"By my hand!" a great voice roared.

And Ki-Gor, the White Lord of the Jungle, came hurtling from a tunnel's mouth.

XI

THERE WAS no battle upon the altar then; there was only a stunned silence heralding the appearance of the jungle giant who should have been dead. Fighting blades came to rest, and the antagonists turned to watch the great man darting across the rough floor.

For Ki-Gor was death. He was a great bronze giant in whom the animal urge to kill had become dominant. He moved with a blinding flashing speed, was almost upon the false Ki-Gor before the other could turn.

"Mahmud—kill!"

And at Kalim's frenetic cry—the false

Ki-Gor flowed into action. Clouded his mind might have been, but his body was great, and he moved with a leopard-like quickness. He gritted white teeth, sprang at Ki-Gor.

They met with a crash of flesh that seemed to rock the very air. Massive hands locked, and ropy muscles strained for dominance. They were great bronze gods battling to the death, their bodies like live metal, neither moving now, as each strained for the advantage.

They were in a half-crouch, muscles locked with the savagery of their driving effort. Ki-Gor felt the strain drawing his last reserve of energy from his body, knew that he could not fight for long against the fresh strength of the Arab.

He relaxed, went to one knee, drove one shoulder into the taut belly muscles of Mahmud, as the man was thrown off balance. The Arab went hurtling to one side, breath oozing out in a whistling gasp.

But even as he fell, he twisted about, met the jungle warrior's plunge with the calloused soles of his feet. Thigh muscles took the shock, thrust, and Ki-Gor went whirling toward the altar. He landed on his right hip, felt the sickening agony of bruised flesh come sweeping over his mind.

He fell to his hands and knees, waited for the barest fraction of a second, expecting the tides of blackness to come sweeping over his mind again, as they had done for weeks whenever he had over-exerted himself.

But there was no blackness now; there was only the hot flame of his anger pulsing through his brain. He felt a dull wonder, then came hurtling upward from his crouch, fingers outspread, a reckless laugh of utter savagery rising in his throat.

He caught Mahmud by one arm, swung about, threw the man the width of the room; the smile froze on his lips and he followed up his foe. He darted in, hands ready to clutch and rend—and Mahmud met the drive with a blasting fist that caught the Jungle Lord squarely in the throat.

Ki-Gor gasped with agony, went whipping to one side, his lungs straining for breath. But he had no time for that; by sheer brute strength, Mahmud rolled to his feet, came surging in.

Ki-Gor ducked to one side, riding the

weight of the other man, taking one brutal blow to the head, then lashing the edge of a heavy palm against a muscle-padded neck. Mahmud grunted in agony, went to his knees.

But even as he dropped, his massive arms went out, clasped about Ki-Gor's legs, and both went to the floor, faces grim, hands striving for a death-hold. Their hands met, locked, and on their knees, they fought for supremacy as they had done in the first instant of their encounter.

It was then that their difference became clear.

MAHMUD was great, a perfectly-proportioned giant. But Ki-Gor matched him in every dimension. Ki-Gor's was a golden-yellow name that swept into his eyes; while it was only too obvious that Mahmud's had been crudely dyed with the yellow sap of some jungle herb.

But those were the only resemblances between the men. Ki-Gor's grey eyes were keen and purposeful, intent now only on his antagonist, watching every move, calculating with the swiftness that only a jungle man could have. Mahmud's eyes were like clouded brown glass, staring dully and stupidly, aflame now with the crimson of his murder-lust.

And while both were of the same build, there was a gliding suppleness about Ki-Gor that the other could never have. There was a feral quickness, a swinging liteness that came from countless years in the green forest which was his home.

And on the altar, Helene saw those differences, and the truth of everything came to her mind. She momentarily flicked her gaze from the mightily bat-tlers, saw Kalim's hate-filled face, knew the diabolic ingenuity he had used to create this situation.

Then her eyes went to the slim figure of the girl who had stolen from concealment, and a dim pity for the other filled her heart.

A gasp of agony from the two silent fighters drew her attention, and she swung her head to watch the fight.

Mahmud was losing, and the knowledge had given him a fierce brutality such as she had never seen in any man. His hands were still locked with Ki-Gor's, and he was being forced aside by the virile

strength which still lay in the jungle man.

He gasped as he fought, his teeth white against the red of his mouth, his heavy shoulders straining to regain his momentary superiority. His eyes rolled desperately, gauging his distance—and then he lashed out with his right foot, smashed the hard heel into Ki-Gor's groin.

Ki-Gor sucked in a breath of agony, whirled away, came slowly to his feet. He had no time to brace himself, for Mahmud was coming in.

They stood and sledged with brutal hands, each trying to batter the other to death, each seeing nothing but the other, the killer instinct dominant in each. They fought like two great primal apes, caring not for the blows they took, each wanting only to slay the other.

A smashing fist sledged Ki-Gor back a full step, and crimson seeped from his smashed mouth. He drove in instantly, his great hands beating smashing blows at Mahmud's chest.

Mahmud gave ground slowly, retreating slow step by desperate step. He breathed deeply, raggedly, one eye almost closed, a great bloody smear on his chest where a brutal blow had laid the white bone open to the air. He growled like a cornered gorilla, tried to capture the arms of Ki-Gor, then ducked and butted with his head.

But Ki-Gor darted to one side, his right hand flashing down in a blow that would have broken an antelope's neck. It smashed into Mahmud's shoulder, knocked him to his knees.

He groped blindly for support, tried vainly to gain his feet again. Ki-Gor dropped his full weight on the other, caught his left arm in a cross-hold, strained with mighty fluid strength.

Muscles ridged his back, knotted and rippled and bunched with the terrific power of his shoulders. He drew his strength into the hold, then whipped about, drew the arm across his hip, surged, and threw Mahmud in a flailing arc for twenty feet.

The Arab landed with a crash upon the dusty stones, lay unmoving for a fleeting second. But even as Ki-Gor came springing in, he regained his senses with the speed of an animal, scrambled aside, Ki-Gor's hands missing their throat-hold.

They circled now, weary with the surge of battle, knowing that another minute would see the end of the fight. Hands reached out, locked fingers—and Ki-Gor threw his weight to one side.

Mahmud fell clumsily into the trap, dropping forward, half-turned by the pull on his hands. And the Jungle Lord swung him about, loosed his hold, then slipped his arms beneath the Arab's arms, clasped his fingers behind the other's neck.

He put power into the hold, put a surge of power that brought a scream of agony from Mahmud. He forced the other to his knees, held him there, straining with every bit of power in his body to break Mahmud's neck.

And even as he turned, his broad back came square with the paralyzed onlookers. With a rustling of steel on leather, the first drew his gleaming sword, whirled it for a butchering blow.

He died at the height of the stroke, the knife hurtling from the shadows, smashing the blade's full length into his throat. He coughed a flood of blood, went down in a spinning convulsing heap of crimson flesh and robe.

"Ho!" a booming voice bellowed from one side of the room, "A fight it is, and warriors we are!"

And plunging from the tunnel mouth came Tembu George and N'Geeso.

THEY came with naked steel in their hands, and they were like devils out of hell. They were men and warriors, yet one was twice the height of the other. But both were deadly, and now they fought to save Ki-Gor.

They came swinging in, and two men died before their blades cleared leather. They swung bloody blades, and forced the fight on the Egyptians who screamed in frenetic rage.

Sparks raced the length of their great bush-knives, and they fought with the cool competence which only jungle warriors could attain. They fought together, each protecting the other's back, their blades building a glittering wall which nothing seemed able to pierce.

And even as they fought, Kalim screamed his futile rage, snatched a fallen sword, sprang at Helene. His features

were convulsed with mad hate, and the insanity in his eyes was a blazing inferno of blasted hopes and dreams and emotions.

But he never reached his objective. Selina came darting in, tripped the crazed Arab with one dainty sandalled foot, then struck with the haft of a spear she had snatched from the wall. The wood splintered, broke, and Kalim was battered into unconsciousness.

And Ki-Gor saw the instant deadly drama from where he strained to kill Mahmud. He relaxed momentarily, startled despite himself, and gave Mahmud a chance to move. The Arab doubled forward, rolled with a great shove of his naked feet on the floor, sent Ki-Gor hurtling away.

But the White Lord of the Jungle landed with a catlike agility, reversed his motion so swiftly and effortlessly that he met Mahmud's charging lunge with both hands outspread.

He sledged with the edges of his palm, battered the dazed killer to the floor, then dropped atop him, caught his long hair on one hand, lifted the bloody smashed head, and blasted home blow after blow with the clenched fist of his other hand.

Mahmud grunted, then went slack. Ki-Gor smashed two more blows, then came swiftly to his feet. The kill-lust still burned in him, but he knew that there was no time for revenge.

He scooped up a discarded cross-bow, ripped the handle away with one surge of mighty strength. He found arrows on the floor fitted it, fired one deadly arrow into a priest's throat, then darted in one great leap to the altar beside his mate.

"Ki-Gor!" he heard her whisper, then the bow came to life in his strong hands.

He saw the flicker of movement to his side, spun about, lifting the bow. He saw the upraised knife in Selina's hand, and his gaze flicked with an incredible speed to her features. Then he whirled about, and muscles rode his arm.

He drew the string, drew it with a powerful consummate ease, drew a bow that was built for winding as a cross-bow. The fletching came to his ear, and he loosed his hold.

The arrow flashed like light-tipped darkness, smashing deep into a robed man's chest, driving him back several paces,

dropping him like an arrowed *kajati* door.

And then Ki-Gor was at the side of Tembu George and N'Geeso. His battle-laugh whirled high in the air, and he caught up a sword dropped by a dead Egyptian.

So fast had the action been, there were but three men slain by the blacks' bush-knives. Now glittering weapons faced them, and the Egyptians came hurtling in. They met a wall of steel, tried to batter their way through, tried to slash a path to the men who faced them.

But there was no opening; there was nothing but death waiting them in those three weapons. They hurled themselves frenziedly forward, were driven back by three of the greatest fighting men in all of Africa.

An Egyptian took a knife point in his throat, went down, impeding the feet of his fellows. The Egyptians were driven back, fighting a losing battle.

And behind them, Selina slashed downward with her knife. Helene bit back the tiny cry of pain, felt the bonds drop free of her wrists. She saw Kalim come staggering to his feet, caught Selina's arm, pointed wordlessly.

They made a concerted dash for the Arab, missed him by inches; and he darted past, going with great running steps toward a tunnel mouth.

Selina swung about, screamed at Ki-Gor.

"The tunnel!" she cried. "He can close the entrance, and imprison us!"

FOR a brief second, Ki-Gor did not understand. Then the words came together in his mind, and realization formed. He slashed with his sword, cut deeply into the base of an Egyptian's neck, left the sword where it had slashed so deeply into the bone.

With a muted growl of rage, he spun about, darted past Tembu George and N'Geeso, sped after the fleeing Arab.

But that second's start had given Kalim the advantage. Ki-Gor whirled into the blackness of the tunnel's mouth, was forced to slow his movements, the darkness an impenetrable curtain before his eyes. He moved with as great a speed as possible, driving ahead, guided by his memories of the tunnel, hearing the scuffing of Kalim's sandals ahead.

He felt the pain of bruised muscles,

wincing at the twinge of agony from his battered chest. He went ahead, going faster now, his eyes adjusting themselves to the darkness.

He saw the glow ahead, growing by the second, caught the barest glimpse of a shadow slipping through it, ran with added vigor. He reached the end of the tunnel, came into the cross-tunnel, which was barely lighted by the remnants of a smouldering torch. He saw Kalim ahead, doubled his speed, flashed with the uncanny speed of a jungle warrior.

Kalim turned his head while still running—and the bound outthrust feet of Berek tripped him. He screamed, tried to scramble to his feet.

Ki-Gor caught him with both hands.

He held him for a breathless moment, all of the agony and rage of the past days flooding his mind. Muscles swelled along his heavy wrists, and his fingers tightened about the skinny throat of his murderous foe.

"Mercy, for the love of Allah, mercy!"

Ki-Gor's features held no expression then. Blood was on his mouth and staining his great body. He held a murderer in his great hands, throttling him, while fists beat with waning strength at his belly and chest.

He strangled the Arab with a slow remorseless pressure, killing with a brutal implacable will such as he had never thought to possess. And even as he tensed his muscle-cabled fingers for the final effort which would break Kalim's neck, he heard Helene's voice back in the tunnel.

He loosed his hold, watched color steal back into the Arab's face, heard the agonized gasping for breath. It was then he saw the opening in the wall. Effortlessly, he lifted Kalim, dragged him to the opening sent him whirling in. There was the splash of water, then the threshing of arms fighting to keep Kalim afloat.

More light came into the tunnel then, light burgeoning from torches carried by Selina and Helene. They came running, and behind was Tembu George, Mahmud, the false Ki-Gor, slung over his shoulder. N'Geeso brought up the rear, blood staining his skin, his great bush-knife still streaming crimson.

They said no word when they reached Ki-Gor. He spun and raced with them.

They fled along the tunnel, swinging into the room where the dead sat about their decaying festive board. The girls went about the table, followed by Tembu George Mahmud's feet struck the table—and dissolution came to the specters of dust and agelessness. They crumpled even as their leader had done.

But the group had no time for the room or its occupants; they ran with quickening speed, hearing the sounds of pursuit behind. They dodged into the tunnel, saw the silvery glow of night-light ahead, and ran with a clumsy speed.

The pursuers entered the tunnel, even as the group made their scrambling exit.

"The block!" Selina gasped.

"Too late," Tembu George snapped, tossed the unconscious body from his shoulders, caught the .45 from his belt holster.

He whirled, faced the coming men. He smiled as he lined the gun, smiled with death in his eyes. He saw the half dozen men come charging through the tunnel, aimed squarely at the chest of the leader.

His corded finger squeezed the trigger, and the gun jumped in his hand, the roar of the shot multiplied a thousandfold within the tunnel, the slug tunneling through the chest of the leading man, dropping him in his tracks.

He fired the one shot, and there was no need for more. He fired the one shot, and his eyes went wide at what he had done. He heard the gasp of Helene at his side, but his attention was on the tunnel.

He fired one shot—and slew six men.
He destroyed forever an empire.

XII

THERE WAS the grumbling screech of shifting stone, there was the tremor of rock grinding upon rock. There was the shifting of age-old blocks of stone finishing the thing which had been years in the making.

The single shot had smashed into the tunnel, and the vibrations of the shot had shattered the cohesion of the stone that was the tunnel's ceiling.

It came grinding down in splinters and shards of rocks and boulders, smashing in tons of weight, pulping the men who screamed in awful fear when they saw

the doom come hurtling down.

The tunnel closed from the rear first, closing and smashing shut, driving the remnant's of the Egyptian dynasty toward the open, toying with their lives as a leopard does with a baby monkey. It followed their screaming flight, death thundering in their wake, drawing closer by the split second.

And even as they made their last strides to freedom—the tunnel closed forever, blocking the entrance which had been for centuries.

There was silence then, the quiet of horror, the group before the pyramid staring blankly at the bloody hand protruding from the stone grave which had claimed the rest of the body.

Tembu George slowly holstered his gun, grinned relievedly at the miniature man at his side.

"*Wah!*" he said. "For a time, I thought Gimshaj was reaching for our souls."

N'Geeso spat reflectively, walked to Mahmud, who was just regaining consciousness on the sand. He studied the great man for a silent second, then lifted his eyes to Ki-Gor.

"Why?" the Jungle Lord asked quietly.

N'Geeso shifted in embarrassment, scratched his nose, dug a calloused toe into the sand. His voice was strangely subdued.

"Tembu George thought to aid you—I but came to see that no harm came to him."

"Liar!" Tembu George scowled bleakly, tried to keep the friendliness from his steady eyes. "You wanted to help Ki-Gor—and I came to see that someone did not slit your throat."

Ki-Gor swallowed about the lump in his throat, his great heart touched by the simple loyalty which had sent those two men of his aid, against the will of the people they guided by right of might and intelligence.

"I do not forget," he said quietly. "Men like you are like food to a starving warrior."

But there was no time for more speech; Helene was in his arms then, her tears warm on his broad chest, her body tight against him. He held her close, feeling the shackles of dread and fear dropping from about his heart, and he kissed her

very gently on her temple and cheek.

"I thought—" Helene began, and he silenced her with his lips on hers.

"What of Kalim?" Selina asked.

"In there," Ki-Gor said, and a shiver coursed his back, when he thought of the diabolical trap that was to be the Arab's grave. It was an ironical twist to the plans of Majd B'u Kalim that the other had not anticipated; even now, he must be pumping the pit, striving to lengthen his span of life by a few futile hours.

"Barek might free him," Selina said. "He could free himself of the bonds at the—"

"I think not!" N'Geeso thoughtfully cleaned the last of the thickened blood from the gleaming sweep of his great bush-knife.

Helene shivered against the body of her mate, and he held her tighter. "I think—" he began—and the war-spear hammered into the sand at his feet.

"WAH!" Tembu George whirled to face the charging blacks who had leaped from concealment.

But strangely, the massive Masais and the diminutive vengeful pygmies made no further move to injure Ki-Gor. They came racing in, weapons glittering in the pale moonlight—and halted in amazement, seeing the Ki-Gor on the ground and the Ki-Gor standing erect.

For one eternal moment, no one spoke. Then two of the blacks darted forward, lifted the now-conscious Mahmud to his feet. Understanding came to the blacks, and Tembu George's words brought complete knowledge.

"This Ki-Gor was false; he was sent by Majd B'u Kalim to slay, thus making us think that the White Lord was our enemy."

"Why?" Ki-Gor asked Selina.

Selina shook her head, tears bright in her eyes. "I do not know his reasons for everything," she admitted. "I think he had Mahmud act as you so that none would come to your rescue, your friends deserting you."

A mutter of anger swelled from the listening warriors, and they drew in closer to the small group. Mahmud screamed, the sound titillating toward the stars, was clubbed into a stunned silence by a smash-

ing spear shaft. He was held erect by the heavy hands of the Masais at either side, and his eyes rolled in weird fright.

"This woman aided him?" a warrior asked quietly, pointing at the slim Egyptian girl.

Ki-Gor felt the tightness of Helene's hands upon him, saw the courage flaming in Selina's eyes. He thought over the past hours, remembering the aid Selina had given. He probed the heart of the girl with his senses, saw the suffering which had been hers, knew that she had not known the full extent of that which Kalim had planned.

"She fought at our side," he said simply.

He heard the muffled crying of Selina, felt Helene leave him, saw her comfort the other. Then a slight gesture from Tembu George caught his attention, and he stiffened.

"No!" he snapped.

And Tembu George lifted the revolver from his waist, ranged himself at N'Geeso's side. Armed, they faced the jungle giant, and there was an implacable purpose in their faces that stopped him more surely than their weapons.

"We fought against you, for you—and now against you," Tembu George said. "Men and women and children have died; atonement must be made."

"Mercy, in the name of Allah!" Mahmud screamed frantically.

Slowly, the tension fled from Ki-Gor's shoulders. The jungle was his home, and he lived by its laws. He was the judge and the jury and the executioner, in many cases. But in this, he was only the spectator and the man against who some of the injury had been done. He could fight, but the ending would be the same as now. He realized that, and turned away.

"I do not like it," he said simply.

N'Geeso spoke, and there was a flatness to his tones that was of the chieftainship that mantled his shoulders.

"Tembu George and I came to aid you," he said clearly. "We found the dying Arab but a short time after you, and followed in your path. It took us a long time to find the secret of the pyramid, and to come to your aid—but we came because we are blood-brothers, united by sacred oaths. Our warriors came after, more slowly, because they followed spoor, while

we had read the message left by the Golden One. The night-slayers are dead, all but this one—and he shall receive his just reward.”

He stood, proud and unafraid, staring at Ki-Gor.

“Is it just?” he asked.

“It is just!” Ki-Gor said evenly.

HE DREW his wife and Selina into the circle of his arms, led them along the sandy path that went across the Valley of the Mummies to the jungle.

They heard the screaming of the murderous Mahmud behind; then it ceased, and there was only the keening of a lone jackal far away to disturb the night.

And behind, pacing side by side, Tembu George scowled at N’Geeso.

“Worm!” he said. “Saying that I had woman-feeling in my heart. It was you who wanted to aid Ki-Gor.”

“*Faah!*” N’Geeso spat disdainfully. “Ki-Gor means naught—”

The White Lord of the Jungle walked lithely at Helene’s side, Selina on the other. He was tired, but happy, all danger gone from about him. He smiled at the bickering behind him, knowing that both men had come because of that which had

lain deep buried in their hearts. He felt esteem again for them and their people, for they had come when his need was great.

He walked fast, leaving behind the macabre valley, wanting only to be in his beloved jungle again. Helene pressed close to him, smiled into his grey eyes.

“Selina will go upland,” she said.

Ki-Gor nodded, relieved. He touched Helene’s smooth arm with gentle fingers, thrilling as he always did at her nearness. Then they walked as one, almost at the entrance to the valley of terror which lay behind.

Far back, Mahmud screamed again and again, the sound shrill and tenuous in the night air. A black cloud scudded before the face of the orange moon, and the sounds were slashed away as sharply as though done by a knife.

Behind, the eternal bickering of N’Geeso and Tembu George sounded warm and friendly in the night. And close at hand, the first trickling burst of melody came from a night-bird’s swelling throat.

Ki-Gor breathed deeply, satisfied with all the world. This was his life; he would have it no other way. And at his side, Helene sensed his thoughts, and her slim fingers twined in his.

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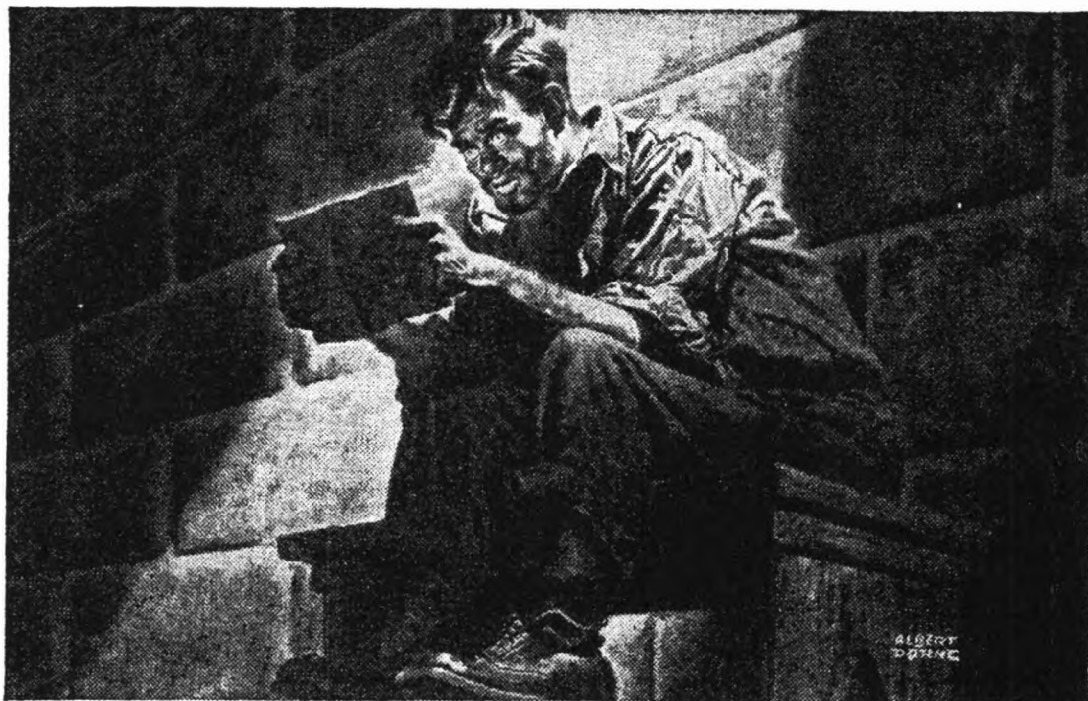
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Well, what are you waiting for? Go ahead, write the letter to Joe. Try to write it, anyhow.

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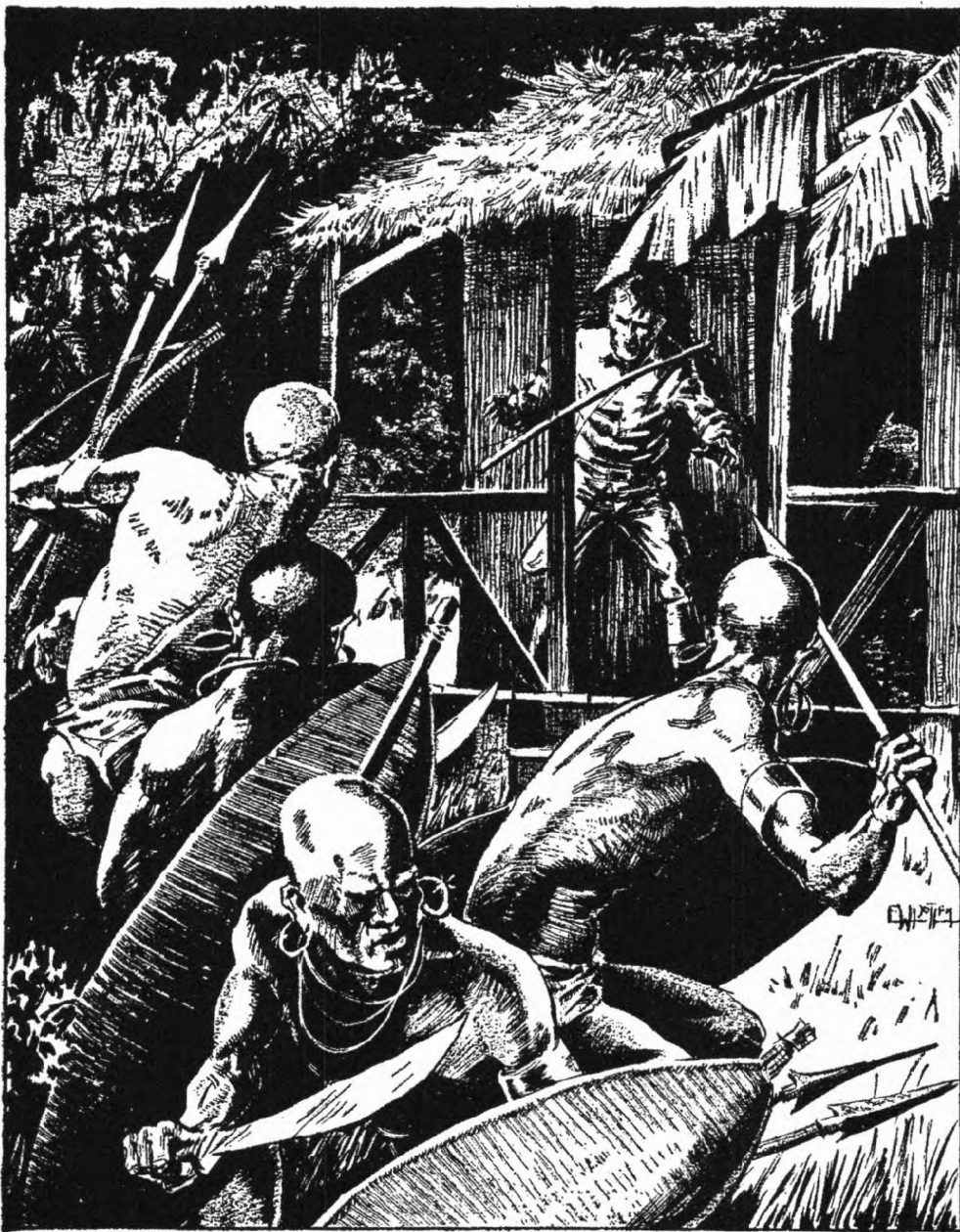
FICTION HOUSE, INC.

This advertisement prepared under the auspices of the War Advertising Council and the U. S. Treasury Department.

THE WALKING DEAD

By PAUL SELONKE

McTige, the Wailing Tiger, could solve the mystery of the stolen girls—if he could slay the men who had already been dead for days.



The spear slashed past McTige's shoulder.

DIRECTLY to the west of the Ranga elephant country, along the jungle banks of the treacherous Moolu River, lay the villages of the Jajabis, the

Mombasis, and the Ouranas, fierce warrior tribes all, who waged almost constant war against one another. Proud, sullen, fearless people, and of them the Jajabis were

the most mighty, undefeatable in their might.

But there came one morning, shortly after the brassy sun had risen up, that the Jajabis stood, sore afraid, in groups within the stockade walls of their *kraal*. Warriors nervously gripped ready weapons in their hands, still knowing that no mortal could do battle against the dreaded juju that had so inhumanly struck at them.

Of the thirty maidens who had retired into the unmarried women's communal hut the previous night, only twenty had emerged from the dwelling this morning. Ten of the most comely had vanished as silently as had the night darkness, leaving nothing except an oddly-sweet fragrance to tell of their departure.

Nor had the night guards, whom King Neryi kept posted in the event of prowling enemies, seen any sign of this *Thing* which had so cruelly borne the maidens away.

NERYI stood grimly before his house, tall, youthful, with naught covering his muscular nakedness save a breech-clout of monkey fur, and a pig *panga* knife at his girdle. He silently watched his warriors gathering before him, his brave heart pulsing with that same haunting fear.

"It is the *bwalla*, O King—the wrath of the recent men-dead," hissed Likki from where he stood among the assembled men. The wrinkled old witch doctor had heavy stone ornaments sagging from his pierced ears. A *m'bogo* robe hung loosely on his thin black shoulders.

"Can we be sure?" spoke Neryi. "As likely, one of our enemies stole our women-daughters, who are the most comely in all the bush. Remember, men have often come by great distances, seeking wives from among them."

"No mortal could enter our *kraal* so mysteriously. Nor could he stifle these maidens' outcries so that no sounds were heard." Likki's voice turned harsh. "I know what has brought this vile curse down upon us."

"Heed the words of Likki," growled one of the warriors. "*N'diyo*, the old person speaks truth."

Neryi studied the assembled men for a long minute, a chill in his savage heart. This was the first time the dead had risen up to strike at his people, though the elders of the tribe had told him of this

happening now and again in the remote past.

"It is claimed the *bwalla* comes only when the recent men-dead are displeased," he said. "And in the space of one moon, following their annoyance, they will punish the *kraal* which offended them. The men-dead of the previous six moons then rise up, each taking away one of our most comely maidens. The maidens vanish into the grave with these walking dead."

"*N'diyo*," agreed Likki. "And we have dug down ten men-dead in that time. Ten of our women-daughters have been snatched from us. That is complete proof."

The witch doctor stepped forward, his thin voice mounting. "Exactly one moon past, two white men visited us. He who is called the Wailing Tiger was one of them. In that early morning, he blew upon his sack of sticks, bringing forth sounds tenfold more hideous than the screams of a lemur. *N'diyo*, O King. I know that it is this which has angered our recent dead."

Neryi stiffened. "The white man is our friend and brother."

"Friend or no," intoned Likki, "the law of all river people is that we must burn to death the *shenzi* who brought the curse upon us. That is the only way our women-daughters can be safely restored to our *kraal*."

Neryi stood unmoving, alive with thoughts of *Bwana* McTige and that odd sack of sticks—*bagga pipi*, the white man called it—from which he evoked such evil sounds. During his last visit, a moon past, McTige had merely paused briefly to exchange greetings. Then he went on in his business of guiding his white companion to the Ranga elephant territory, where the other man intended to make some juju in the magic boxes he carried.

"The Wailing Tiger has frequently visited us and often made noises with his sack of sticks," Neryi reminded Likki. "Yet no harm came of it those times."

"No new men-dead lay in our burying *donga* at those times," hissed the witch doctor. "Our warriors are able fighters, and death visits us seldom. Only because of the great river flood, two moons past, did we lose ten of our brothers—even as the other *kraals* along the river lost men of their tribes."

"True, wise Likki. But do not condemn

too quickly. Let us learn first if some other reason has roused this *bwalla* curse."

"We cannot wait, O King," spoke another bleak-visaged warrior. "According to our holy law, we must hold the ceremony of fire within three suns."

Neryi nodded. "It will be done. Go now to thy morning duties, biding there until I give the word," and turned, gravely reentering his dwelling place.

HIS MIND was confused. McTige, the jungle guide who knew as much of the bush lore as did the native hunters, was a man of peace. The Wailing Tiger was one whom all river tribesmen had long termed brother, because of his many good deeds.

Yet the truth of McTige's guilt was thrust on him a short while later. He had just called the elders into his house and was making talk of this mystery, when he heard excited cries rising up in the compound. He hurried out into the sun brightness and saw a file of warriors entering through the wide-flung stockade gate.

Tension momentarily gripped him. Zanzi, the tall, leopard-eyed king of the Mombasis, was heading the procession. The fat, over-fed Bara, king of the Ouranas, was with him. It was incredible, seeing these two warring rivals peaceably walking side by side. Forgetful of all blood-hate, they strode up to Neryi and raised their arms in the familiar gesture of friendship.

"We see you, Neryi," Zanzi said soberly.

"I see you, O kings," answered Neryi. "I look in amazement at this rare visit."

"When fire races in the bush," grunted Bara, "doth not the lion and the zebra seek safety, side by side?"

"Ay-ee," nodded Zanzi, his leopard-eyes glowing in the sunlight. "The curse of the *bwalla* hath befallen us, even as it visited thy *kraal* last night. Our women-daughters have vanished to the number of our recent men-dead, all by reason of the vile Wailing Tiger, who made noises from his sack of sticks in our *kraals* the same sun he befouled thee. The white man must endure the ceremony of fire so we can be purged in the eyes of our dead."

Neryi stood, arms folded across his wide breast, showing no trace of the sudden raging fury in his savage heart. Friendship for the Wailing Tiger had turned to

hate, as doubt was swept away by the absolute evidence that the white man, with his devilish sack of sticks, had enraged the dead into snatching all these comely maidens.

"*M'baya sana*—it is bad business," he said. "I wait eagerly to see flames climb up the white beast's body and consume him. It is the ancient law of all the river tribes that this only will bring our women-daughters back to us."

The announcement brought rejoicing to the village. Neryi's warriors, and the men who had accompanied the visiting kings, danced and beat their spears against their shields. Likki, the witch doctor, cried in shrill, exultant tones, "The fire will cleanse us! Our men-dead will be locked in their graves again! Our women-daughters will once more be beside us!"

Neryi paid scant attention to all this. In due time he took his place, with some of his picked warriors, at the head of the company. He grimly led the way out of his *kraal* and in a westerly direction.

And long sweltering hours ground by.

MIDDAY found McTige seated on the verandah of his bungalow, which stood in an isolated, forest-hemmed *donga*, less than a half day march from the Jajabis *kraal*. On his maps of the district, he was tracing out some new trails which the government had cut through the jungle. It was this efficient way about him that made him one of the most sought-for guides in all the jungle wilderness.

A tall, skinny, taciturn Scot was McTige. A man who found bodily contentment in the untamed solitude of the jungle, while his artistic nature was appeased by the fierce music he wrenched from his battered bagpipes.

And it was in the moment that he re-folded his maps and carefully restored them to the oilskin case that lay on his verandah table, that he was attracted to the file of natives who were emerging from the fringe of trees beyond the bungalow. They were the fastidiously garbed men from Jung-la, the Tribe of the Spear-Makers. They were dressed alike as seeds in a pod—head-dresses of ostrich down, caracul capes draped over their shoulders, and their arms loaded down with bead bracelets of tiny emeralds.

It was startling to find the Jung-las trekking this dangerous jungle, for they were merely strutting, soft-muscled peacocks, neither warriors, hunters, nor artisans. More startling was the laughing voice that called out to him:

"McTige—damn you, you old Wailing Tiger!" and McTige saw a stocky, grinning, freckle-faced Irishman emerging from the ranks of this company of Jung-las. It was Doc Audley, physician and photographer. The very man he had guided through the Moolu River villages a month before.

McTige's mouth cracked into a wide grin. He descended down among the natives, shook hands with Audley and said, "I thought ye were back in Leopoldville, an' here I see you trekking the bush wi' the lazy Jung-las. What is this mucky business aboot, mon?"

"Your doings," chuckled Audley.

"Losh, mon—what ye hinting at?"

"When I came here to make a movie record of the Moohu River wild life for the American Museum, you acted as my guide and told me much of the history of these jungle tribes—especially in regard to the Jung-las and how they work an iron mine, manufacturing spears for other tribes. Back in Leopoldville, I figured the Jung-las were good picture material, and I found a black guide to take me there. He was killed by a leopard out in the Jung-la country, and these natives offered to escort me far as the Congo boat landing."

"Noo 'tis a wonder how ye talked the lazy jackadandies into taking you this far," growled McTige. For years, he had despised the tribe. He had too often seen how the Jung-las lolled and strutted in their *kraal*, while their women slaved, drudged, and died in the iron pits and spear-making huts. The utter cruelty of it had long sickened him.

"I had a few bolts of crimson velvet with me," smiled Audley. "These fashion-plates would barter their very souls for it. . . . But I merely stopped in to say hello, McTige. If we keep moving, I can reach the landing by sundown."

"Aye, so ye can," nodded McTige. He shook hands again with Audley, bade him God-speed and watched the procession worm away from the bungalow.

AFTER he was alone again, he sensed suddenly a queer foreboding, some haunting feeling that things were not entirely right. He knew it wasn't any mistrust of Doc Audley, because he liked the man and the fact that he was making a pictorial record of the fast-dwindling wild life of the vicinity. Rather, he pondered whether the sight of the Jung-las again had upset him.

Sighing, he picked up his bagpipes from the verandah table and played a serenade to ease his uneasiness. It began with a weird wailing, building up to wild screaming tones that brought an oddly-contented gleam in his eyes.

Then like something which had materialized out of the very jungle air, a heavy, hard-flung spear shafted toward the verandah. It imbedded itself with a *thud* into the stout door-timber beside McTige.

The music died with an eerie moaning wail as the white man leaped to his feet. With the swift precision of experience, he swept the automatic pistol from the holster at his skinny hip.

He saw the surrounding forest move—and the figures of Moolu River warriors emerged to stand sullenly, with weapons poised. And his astonished gaze watched the three rival kings of the tribes, striding grimly toward him, side by side. The kings halted within twenty paces of the verandah, and he saw Neryi, of the Jajabis, towering among them, his countenance cold and forbidding.

"O Wailing Tiger," Neryi said harshly, "drop your weapon that spits fire-death, and submit. Attempt battle, and spears to the number of ten hands will crash into thy hated body."

"Have you lost your reason?" the shocked, startled McTige exclaimed in Swahili. "Good Neryi, what prompts you to steal up on me like some hated enemy?"

Neryi scowled. "Must we tell *Tembo*, the elephant, why we slay him, when he tramples our *kraals* and our people? It is enough that you come peacefully with us."

As if by signal, the ebon warriors advanced toward the bungalow. Bewildered, frantic, McTige cried, "Wait! Long have you termed me brother, returning good for good! Now, without any reason, you turn against me. . . ."

Heedless, the warriors ascended the

verandah and reached out to seize him. And in an effort to halt them so he could learn what this belligerence was all about, he fired his automatic over their heads.

It was a mistake. They fell upon him, beating him down with the handles of their spears. The pistol fell from his grasp when a hard blow to the side of his skull blotted out all awareness from his mind.

Later, after consciousness returned to him, he found himself being borne on a litter through the jungle, his hands and feet tightly bound with strips of bark. He saw warriors of the Mombasi tribe were carrying him. They were singing a queerly monotonous song as they marched:

"Ay-ee, Ay-ee, goola askami,
"Ay-ee, Ay-ee, goola askami,

A TREMBLING chill shook McTige, a complete horror he had never before experienced in his life. This was the Vengeance Song of the Mombasis, which they chant while bringing in captured enemies for their torture stake.

He knew then he was doomed to death—some ghastly, lingering end that would drive him to gibbering madness before life departed from his pain-wracked body.

Naked feet stirred swarms of stinging flies from the dank trail. The sound was loud in the fetid heat, for few animals were abroad this part of the day. Disturbed parrots now and then squawked their irritation, as did bands of monkeys, scolding the moving file of warriors. Thus hour after hour flowed by, until the long day was spent.

Sundown, the company tramped into the kraal of the Jajabis. Women and children jeered the prisoner, pelted him with stones and sticks. Likki, the witch doctor McTige once had rescued from the river crocodiles, danced about the hapless white man in savage glee.

McTige frantically strove to learn the facts behind his capture and was silenced by blows and threats. He was untied and led to a stout blackened post in the center of the compound. They tied him securely to this post.

But he was not bound alone. Neryi stepped up with the battered bagpipes and ordered them trussed up with the Wailing Tiger. "It is right," he said, "that this King of evil be destroyed with thee."

"What have I done to deserve all this from the hands of my friends?" McTige implored desperately.

"Wah, it soon will be known," and the tall, lithe-moving king strode away.

In the gloom of evening, a fire was built before the place where McTige stood, tied and helpless. As the three kings took their places beside the licking flames, the remaining natives assembled behind them. A drum began thumping, slowly, dolefully—the eerie beat of Death.

Neryi rose up finally and spoke in hushed tones of the curse of the *bwalla*. Then Zanzi and Bara gave their proof of how McTige's bagpipes provoked the recent men-dead into robbing the river tribes of their daughters.

It momentarily numbed McTige. Until cold common sense told him that the dead had *not* snatched these maidens. This obviously was something else, some devilish plot.

He saw all eyes turned to him, waiting for his answer. Yet he knew that nothing he might say would aid him. These natives, who had been his friends, now held only hate for him.

"My music did not cause the *bwalla*," he told them at last. "It is the work of some enemy warriors who have snatched away thy woman-daughters for slaves."

"No near tribes use slaves!" shrieked Likki wildly. "Great kings, the Wailing Tiger tries to hide behind lies! I beseech thee—prepare the fire! This alone will bring our woman-daughters back unharmed!"

FRENZIED shouts burst from the ranks behind the fire. Parents, streaked with the ashes of mourning, voiced fervent joy.

"The ceremony must wait until the sun rises once again," Neryi announced gravely. "The visiting kings and the elders of our people agree with me on this. The smoke of the fire must be visible for the recent-dead of the other *kraals* to witness. These men-dead must know justice has taken place. Such is the law of the river."

The wild shouting died to sullen mutterings. Likki began screaming his disappointment, like an enraged baboon. But natives dispersed to their huts. The fire died to glowing, blood-red embers. In the complete darkness, the only sound in the

village was the bare-footed tread of the posted guards.

It seemed unreal to McTige, like some horrible dream peopled with monsters. Yet the darkness was real. The bark strips securing him to the post were real. Dead men had risen from their graves to—

"Losh!" he growled. "Some tribe is using this witch stuff as a cover for their kidnap of the lassies."

But who? Moolu River and the immediate district boasted of no tribes that retained slaves. Excepting, of course, the Jung-las, who made the veriest slaves and drudges of their women. But they were too cowardly to seek out additional slave labor.

Endless hours ground by before the startling thought gripped him—the realization that Zanzi and Bara, jealous rivals of Neryi, easily could have authored the kidnap business. Long hating Neryi's ruling power on the river, they might have built up this common situation so that they could remain unsuspected over-night in the *kraal* of the Jajabis.

The reason? That was plain too. These rival kings, in a position this night to open the stockade gates to their waiting warriors, could slay Neryi's brave men as they slept, reducing the powerful Jajabi tribe to impotency!

The reasonableness of this theory excited McTige, and he called out sharply into the darkness:

"Guard-men of Jajabi! I want talk with you!"

A close-by guard stepped up, gruffly demanded, "Why do you shout out, white jackal?"

"I must have talk with your king at once," McTige said. "Fetch him here to me."

"Great Neryi is not one to bow to thy bidding. Silence, Wailing Tiger, lest I spear you." And the warrior-guard tramped away into the dark again.

MCTIGE swore, desperately fought his bonds. If he were right—and he was sure he was—the Mombasis and the Ouranas would strike this very night. And his liking for Neryi over-rode the king's cruel turn against him. He wanted to fight beside him against this vile treachery by the hands of Zanzi and Bara.

The pressure of his churning muscles made the bark thongs slip, loosening shoulders and arms. Straining in a frenzy of hope, he got his arms free.

A hope quick to shrivel up within him. Despite this freedom, he was no better than before. Separate thongs held fast his legs and thighs. He could not bend and the knots were beyond his reach.

The tread of naked feet came near again and with quick thought he sagged in his bonds. He moaned loudly, like one suffering intense, unbearable pain.

"Silence, yapping jackal," the guard snarled as he stamped angrily up into the darkness.

McTige moaned the louder.

The warrior stepped nearer, threatening "I say silence, or I will—ugh!"

The Wailing Tiger had straightened sharply, his two bony fists launching like hard-flung stones. They smashed the guard's unprotected jaw, knocking consciousness from his black body.

McTige's hands caught at the magic girdle, held fast as the guard fell. He slid the warrior's knife from the girdle, dropped him, then swiftly slashed himself free of his remaining bonds. The next instant, he was stepping over the guard in sprawling form.

"I wouldna hae to do this if you had been so domned stubborn," he muttered. Automatically, much as though it were part of him, he picked up and hooked the battered set of bagpipes to his belt.

Full well he knew that to merely flee from here would make the jungle distrustful never again safe for him. Likewise, firmly believed what he had decided behind the *bwalla* curse. Stealing quietly through the darkness toward the king's hut he knew all depended on the hope that he could convince Neryi of this plot against the Jajabis. And he flung away the knife he was carrying so that Neryi would not misinterpret his intentions.

The moon was rising now, large and yellow, casting a dim glow over the *kraal*. It added peril to his predicament. If the remaining guards recaptured him, they surely would prevent this meeting with Neryi.

Yet as he drew abreast of the unmarried women's communal dwelling, all thought of his own danger was forgotten. The guard

posted there lay prone on the ground, oddly twisted and unmoving.

McTIGE bent down and learned the warrior was dead. The black man had died less than a half-hour before, and there was no wound nor mark on his body. McTige shivered. But he shook off the gnawing horror of the supernatural. He strove to convince himself that this was murder by men.

Rising up, his glance chancing beyond the communal dwelling, he stood like one made of stone, doubting his very faculties. Noiseless men-shapes, stark naked and the color of bleached, whitened bones, were gliding toward the stockade wall—and each carried a sleeping Jajabi maiden in his arms.

The *bwalla* had struck again!

Incredulous, McTige watched these walking dead approach a notched palm pole that leaned against the stockade wall. The men-shapes ascended the pole, vanished over the wall, dragging up the ladder behind them.

"Am I-daft?" McTige swore at his foolish sense of horror. "These be no walking dead. 'Tis merely another trick! Losh, I must get to Neryi an' tell him—"

But with the thought came the realization that such a move would bring him only more trouble. Neryi would be quick to believe that McTige had been an actual part of this newest kidnapping. He'd accuse him of black magic, and of being in league with corpse-men.

McTige saw his only possible move—the hope of saving himself by solving this *bwalla* mystery. Swiftly, he went to the stockade wall, where the kidnapers had scaled it. Slanting log cross-braces offered him foothold, and he climbed to the top of the wall. He leaped down to the outside, his heels jarring deep into the muck.

The moon was higher now, shedding a bright, emotionless light on the marks in the ground, here a second notched palm pole had been set against the outside of the wall. And there were other marks in the soil there. Keen-eyed jungle man as he was, McTige recognized the prints of naked feet.

Only live human beings would leave footprints, and he wondered what mad reason the rival tribes of Jajabi had for kidnapping

additional maidens. With this thought puzzling him, he followed this visible trail.

The footprints led nowhere near the Jajabis' burial ground, but traveled to the hewn jungle trail, which went toward the south. The patches of bright moonlight that splashed through the trees and down to the trail were sufficient illumination for McTige. Eagerly, at quick pace, he followed the spoor of these evil, ruthless kidnapers.

A prowling lion roared fierce challenge deep in the bush. It was answered by the shrill trumpeting of a disturbed elephant. Yet McTige was unconscious of all common jungle sounds. His eyes were fixed to the leading footprints.

ONE HOUR passed. Then another. And at last when he drew near Antara Creek, he stopped dead, his ears attuned to the sound of a sloshing in the waters, like animals come down to this drinking and bathing place. But he knew that these were no jungle animals. For he suddenly heard the sharp, throaty laugh of a human being!

Unarmed as he was, McTige recognized the folly of advancing past the tangled shrubbery which screened him from the creek. Still, he was almost convinced that the men he sought were directly before him.

He swung to an ironwood tree that stood near him—a tree which was a draped tangle of *lapimis*. He climbed up the rubbery, resilient vines, until he reached a heavy branch, ten feet above the trail. It gave him a full view of the obscured creek.

His face went cold and hard when he saw, lined upon the moonlighted creek bank, the dozen additional Jajabi maidens who had been stolen from their communal house. They cowered, dazed and drugged, a cruel chain linking them together like cattle.

And McTige caught sight of some of their captors—laughing and jesting men, who stood in the creek, washing the white stain from their bodies. They were those cowardly men from Jung-la, the Tribe of the Spear-Makers.

Bewilderment added to McTige's angry fury. Though it was obvious that the Jung-las had not found their women sufficient for the work in their iron pit and

had gone out to get additional women-slaves, it yet was puzzling that the slothful tribesmen would have the bravery to go slave-hunting. They were no warriors. And they did not hunt, but depended upon what food and all they could obtain through the barter of their spears and iron utensils.

McTige saw his duty before him. He had to return to the Jajabis *kraal* and tell of his discovery, so Neryi's warriors could march upon the place of the Jung-las and get safely back the poor stolen maidens of the Moolu River tribes.

He slid down the rubbery vines to the trail again, positive that the Jung-las were unaware of his presence. He turned quickly to hurry back up the trail. And in that instant, there was an explosion of blackness within the Wailing Tiger's brain. It wiped all thoughts from his mind.

Awareness returned to him slowly. First, he was conscious of the bright moonlight glaring into his eyes. Next, he noted that he lay on the opposite side of the creek to the enslaved maidens. He knew then that he had been observed up in that tree, and one of the Jung-las had bludgeoned him the moment he had descended. Angered that he had blundered into trapping himself, he finally sat up.

It was an awkward move, seeing his hands were bound behind him with *lapini* vines. He glared at the Jung-las about him, who now were arrayed again in their fancy garb. All of them were armed with spears and blowguns.

"I'm really sorry, McTige, that you had to get wrapped up in this," a voice said in English. And McTige saw the figure of Dr. Audley standing close-by.

McTIGE sat stiffly, like one who had been brutally struck in the face and could do nothing to protect himself. A complete loathing spread over his lean, bearded features, as the truth became manifest to him.

"Audley," he gritted, "what are ye up to? Or hae ye gone daft o' the jungle heat?"

"I'm merely taking advantage of opportunity," Audley said in a calm, matter-of-fact voice. And McTige saw a new, startling expression in the man's face—a cruel hardness that long had been hidden by Audley's wide and often smile.

"I merely went to the Jung-la village to get a few movie shots," Audley went on. "For some reason, the Jung-la chief took me for a great white magician and showed me the treasures of his juju house. He spoke of how many of the tribe's women had died in the gruelling work in the iron pit—and how it had hurt their business of providing spears and iron-stuff for the many tribes who traded with them."

"An' ye talked 'em into getting slaves o' the river tribes," gruffed McTige, squirming his skinny hands behind his back. "Hae ye no soul, mon?"

"The Jung-las have made it very worth my while," smiled Audley, "after I showed them how to get river maidens in such a way they would be never suspected. I gave them chloroform out of my medical kit, showing them how to use it when they got into the girls' communal houses. It prevented any outcry and heightened the effect that actually this was the work of the dead—the curse of the *bwalla!*"

"The Jung-las were dazzled by the comeliness of the Jajabi maidens and wanted additional slaves as their wives," he continued. "That's why they went there again this night. And knowing the Jajabis might be more watchful, I had the Jung-las smear their bodies with white to frighten any guards who might see them. I told them that if they needed to kill, they should use a blowgun and take away the dart after their victims were killed. Thus each victim would give the appearance of having died mysteriously."

"You're stark, ravin' mad!" growled McTige.

"Is it madness that I'm offered a king's ransom for my aid?" Audley laughed harshly, his eyes gleaming oddly in the moon glow. He unhooked a heavy-laden pouch from his belt, opened and thrust it before McTige's face. "Look, McTige, at their reward to me—one of the treasures of their juju house!"

McTige had to catch his breath, despite his perilous predicament. The pouch was loaded with emeralds—uncut, perfect gems, large as birds' eggs.

"I'm leaving Africa a rich man, McTige," Audley gloated. "These emeralds are worth any extreme I might need to go. You alone have been witness to the fact that I engineered the Jung-la slave coup."

McTIGE understood, all right. Too many times before he had seen how the discovery of sudden wealth in the depths of the brooding jungle had made beasts of white men. And the chance of ownership of these emeralds had turned Dr. Audley into a murderer and worse. He had sold the innocent river maidens into the horrible slave-hell of the Jung-la iron pit.

"Harken to me, Men of Jung-la," he cried at them. "This white beast, who has shown you how to make slaves of the river women-daughters, will bring only death and destruction upon your *kraal*."

"Kill him!" shrieked Audley. "Kill the Wailing Tiger and his lying tongue! Kill this devil juju before he fills your mind with false fears!"

The craven, unwarlike black men held back. Except for one young stalwart, who came at McTige, eyes blazing, his spear poised overhead. He jammed the spear hard at McTige's breast.

But McTige no longer was a helpless, squatting victim on the ground. He had bounded up, his trussed wrists miraculously free. Dodging lithely, he caught the spear.

McTige wrenched the weapon from the Jung-la's startled grasp. In almost the same movement, he slashed the man's throat with the razor-keen spear blade, then flung himself toward the remaining Jung-las, who stood in stricken surprise.

Dr. Audley was a shouting, frenzied beast. "Rush him! Overpower him by your numbers!" he screamed at the natives. He wrenched his pistol from his hip and fired at McTige—but he missed his target.

Like some incredible miracle, a spear blazed through the moonlight—an expert and powerful cast, true to the mark. It came from nowhere and crashed full into Audley's face, all but cleaving his skull in two.

Then a fearsome cry arose from the bush, like the scream of an enraged eagle swooping upon its prey. Joyfully, McTige recognized the battle-cry of the Jajabis, who swept down into the creek like a mighty, sudden wind.

The attack was short, merciless. Even in the short space of time that it took the Jajabi warriors to penetrate the creek clearing, the battle was done. Every man

of the Jung-la party had been stricken down, and the creek was red with blood.

Kings Zanzi and Bara had come here with the Jajabi fighting party, but it was Neryi alone who strode forth to where McTige was standing.

"Before you, *Bwana*, whom I long called brother, I am small as the dark between your hand and thumb," Neryi said in a bitter tone. "You, whom I was about to destroy, went forth to bring our woman-daughters back to us."

"It is not your blame, O King. This white beast showed the slothful Jung-las how they could steal your daughters that you would believe the *bwalla* had taken them. . . . Yet how is it you appeared now so opportunely?"

"One guard saw you leap the wall and gave the alarm," Neryi explained. "Finding more of our women-daughters gone, we followed your spoor, meaning to slay thee. We came to this creek to find you prisoner of the Jung-las. And when you shouted to the Jung-las of this white man's doings, we learned the truth. *N'diyo*, it was a miracle how you freed thy hands. You must be a great magician."

"*Hapana*, O King—it is that the Jung-las are poor jungle men and warriors. They bound me with *lapini* vines which stretch like the skin on thy knee. It was as if I had not been bound at all."

"*Wah*, you have the cunning of *simba*, the lion," smiled Neryi.

The great king of the Jajabis turned away from McTige then and went to his business. He placed some warriors in charge of the now smiling freed maidens of his *kraal*. The remainder were organized to set forth on a journey to Jung-la, where the kidnapped women-daughters of the previous night were being cruelly held.

McTige realized what this trek to Jung-la would mean. Still, there was nothing he could do to prevent the bloody business, for such was the brutal justice of the jungle. And he quietly left the creek clearing, heading back along the trail.

At long last, he unhooked the battered set of bagpipes from his belt and shivered the grim jungle quiet with its wild, wailing melodies. The fierce music gave him solace from the black, brooding bitterness in his heart.

JEWEL of JEOPARDY

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

It was the greatest gem in all the jungle, it was the diamond of destiny which had set Kurt Benton squarely on a murder trail. He overlooked but one thing—the jungle has a weird and deadly way of protecting its own.

THE MAP was a glowing spot of color on the stained brown table, the crimson and green dyes bright shadows on the dull cream of the crudely-tanned square of antelope gut.

Kurt Benton caressed the crinkled parchment with a calloused forefinger, tried to keep the feral excitement from his tone. Across the table Liam Flaherty watched with gimlet eyes, the corners of his thin mouth curving with satisfaction.

"What proof you got, Liam?" Benton asked. "That Knanato country is plenty tough; even the British patrols always number more than ten men, for less would be inviting massacre."

Perspiration rode oilily across the planes of Flaherty's face, and his tongue slid nervously across his lips. He drywashed his hands slowly, then reached out and covered the map protectingly with spread fingers.

"I seen 'em, I tell you; I saw the bloody things, winking and gleaming from the head and belly of that chunk of ebony. Emeralds, they was, and rubies, enough to buy us anything in the world. They're just waiting there for somebody with guts to bring them out."

Silence grew and swelled in the jungle hut, coalesced into a tangible force that pressed with choking fingers about the two men. They stared at the map, and their thoughts were interlocking tendrils that closed in upon the single idea and held it fast.

"How far in?" Kurt Benton said at last.

Liam Flaherty sighed, and the tension went from his shoulders. His thin hand scrubbed back sun-bleached hair, and pale eyes lighted with success. But caution was in the single hand on the map, and the fingers curled the gut into the palm in greedy protection.

"Then it's a deal?" he asked suspiciously.

Kurt Benton shrugged, and the muscles of his neck corded with the brutal strain of his thoughts. He spat to one side, leaned back against the thatched wall of the hut, and his flat dark eyes were as cold and alien as the eyes of a doll.

"What do you figure we'll make?" he asked.

Liam Flaherty shook his head. "Hell, I don't know! There must be twenty or thirty diamonds in the belly of that idol, a couple of big rubies for eyes, and ten or fifteen emeralds sunk into the forehead. There'll be plenty for both of us."

"And the necklace?" Benton's voice was oddly insistent.

"No!" Cupidity twisted Flaherty's face. "That's mine—mine! I seen it first; I'm claiming it as extra to my share."

"What about the necklace?"

Flaherty shoved back his rude stool, came swiftly to his feet, fingers cording on the edge of the table. Tension shook his head, and swirls of avarice darkened his pale eyes.

"You go to hell! That's mine; I seen it first." His voice scaled high against the roof. "I'm cutting you; I don't have to cut you in. I can get a hundred other guys who'd give their eye teeth to get just a part—"

"Shut up!"

KURT BENTON hadn't moved, yet he seemed to bulk even greater against the wall. There was no change of expression on his face, nor did his hands leave the table—but death was in him now, and the sheer brutality of him smashed against the other's senses.

He began talking, his tone low and un-hurried, the words flinging across the table with a distinctness and force that drained



Kurt Benton whirled, knife glistering in his fist.

all sound from the enraged Irishman.

"I'm in," Kurt Benton said. "You made your proposition, and I'm taking it. If those jewels are worth a tenth of what you think, I don't give a damn about that necklace." He swept the map from the table, jammed its folds into the front of his shirt. "I'm keeping the map," he finished. "Cross me, try to rat out—and I'll trek alone."

A gun was in Flaherty's hand then, and murder rode his eyes. He circled the table cautiously, free hand extended.

"The map," he whispered. "The map!"

Kurt Benton laughed, and the harsh notes whipped wildly about the hut. His hands dropped to his lap, and he watched from eyes that glinted sardonically.

"Put away the gun, Flaherty," he snapped finally. "You haven't got the guts to shoot a man from the front."

For one ageless second, murder squatted in the room. Then Liam Flaherty cursed viciously, steadily, holstered his gun. He sank to his seat again, kneaded the knuckles of one hand into the palm of the other.

"Look, Benton," he whined, "you can't use that map; let me carry it. I'm the only guy who can read it; without me, you'd never find the place." He smiled sullenly. "I won't cross you, you know that. Hell, did I ever before!"

Kurt Benton contemptuously flipped the map to the table, watched as the Irishman carefully folded and thrust it into a hip pocket. His spatulate fingers crammed tobacco into the pipe he lifted from the table, and he struck a match with a flick of his thumbnail. His eyes pierced the swirls of smoke, and deep in them rested the knowledge that the man he faced would never live to spend his share.

But he gave no hint of his thoughts, a tight smile curving his mouth, his close-cropped head nodding a bit.

"Okay," he said, "I'm in. Now I want the full story."

Liam Flaherty swallowed, began eagerly. "Well, me and Dunk Spaekert went back into the Knanato country, 'cause we heard there was plenty of ivory there for the taking. We was in about a week, cutting trail when we could, riding the river most of the time. Then we both got the fever about the same time. Our blacks deserted,

leaving us nothing but our guns. I don't remember much of those next few days; we musta gone in circles. Well, we was picked up by a hunting party of the N'gobe and taken to their village, where the witch-doctor fed us his jungle medicine.

"We hung about the village for a couple of weeks, getting our strength back, just taking things easy. The blacks treated us all right, I guess; anyway, we had plenty to eat and a place to sleep. But when we tried to leave, they got tough as hell. Seems we was the second bunch of white men to ever visit their village, and they was gonna do the same to us that they did to that first party of traders."

FLAHERTY shivered, groped for the squat bottle that rested on the chest beside the table. He drank, shuddered, then steadied at the raw bite of the jungle beer.

"Those first traders had been too smart for their own good; they had tried to rook those blacks. Now, their heads decorated the juju poles of the witch-doctor's hut. The blacks had declared blood-hate on all whites who entered their country—and me and Spaekert were slated to be the next victims.

"We was guarded night and day; but I knocked one guard out one night, and we made a run for it. Spaekert was killed by a spear before we had gone ten steps, and I ducked into the witch-doctor's hut. I just had time to get a good look at the juju idol and all its jewels, then I had to slug Krgai, the witch-doctor, and use him for a shield against the blacks.

"I didn't have time to make a play for those jewels; I just marched Krgai ahead of me with a knife at his throat, made my way to the river and stole a canoe. I knocked Krgai overboard, half a day down the river, then paddled to beat hell for safety. It took me four days of river and land travel to get to real safety.

"But I made a map, intending to go back after the jewels. I couldn't get the dough, or a man tough enough to go in with me, until I met you. Now, you've got the story; I've got the map; and we're all set."

Flaherty relaxed, grinning, his thin hands drywashing with a rustling sound loud in the hurt. Kurt Benton watched woodenly for a moment, his mind picking up the details, correlating them. Then he came

lithely to his feet, cleared the table.

"Better explain that map to me, Flaherty," he said. "You might stop as as-segai or a *kalchi* dart; then I'd have something to go on."

Liam Flaherty sat silently for a second, his gimlet eyes searching the big man's rocky face, then nodded to himself and drew forth the map, spread it on the table.

"These are the code instructions," he began, and his voice droned on for seconds.

Finished, he leaned back, grinned at his new partner. Kurt Benton scowled thoughtfully, laughed silently, as the fear came sliding into Flaherty's eyes.

Very carefully, with incredible speed, Kurt Benton shot Liam Flaherty to death.

Liam Flaherty took a long time to die.

II

KURT BENTON watched unmoved, easing softly to one side so that the flailing legs might not scar his polished boots. He filled and lit his pipe, smoked in the doorway of the hut, while reloading the heavy revolver. Holstering the weapon, he stepped from the hut, ranged his eyes along the muddy placid river that twisted its gummy way through the rank jungle.

Behind him, Liam Flaherty died.

Benton turned at sound of the choking rattle, reentered the hut, lifted the body with incredible ease, carried it to the river bank. He threw the corpse far out into the brown water, watched with a cold-blooded interest as a crocodile surged up from its muddy lair and took the body down in a swirl of oily bubbles. Then the stream was placid again, and he was going back to the hut.

He picked up the map, folded it, buttoned it securely in his money belt, then began gathering together his trek-equipment.

He packed only the bare essentials, taking only the equipment necessary to his living off the land he traveled. For fifteen years he had been a jungle man; there were few whites who could match his jungle craft.

The coppery sun was lifting high over the jungle when he had finished, and he ate a quick meal of fruit and *kava* roots before shouldering his pack. Finished with the meal, the pack settled upon his

broad shoulders, he paused before the hut, refreshed his memory with a glance at the map, then started directly south into the jungle with a veteran voor-trekker's pace.

His gleaming two-foot bush knife swished, then chugged, as it flashed through the tangled lianas and brush, clearing a path for his big body; and the dark of perspiration began to stain the khaki of his shirt.

He was an animal now, traveling like the jungle creature that he was, his eyes lambent with cunning and suspicion, his nerves tendrils of force that ceaselessly reached about him for the slightest of dangers.

He gave no heed to the chittering of the wizen-faced monkeys high overhead, nor did his gaze more than momentarily flick to the *vanka* lizard that darted to safety, its red and black tail bright against the shadowy green of the brush. He struck instinctively at the whipping shadow that darted from the length of a limb overhead, and thin laughter came to his eyes, when the snake's head dropped at his feet, while the black and tan body convulsed in writhing spasms among the tangled foliage.

He had no fear; there was not the capability or imagination in his mind to harbor such an emotion. He was just another jungle brute, glossed by the turn of the centuries until he walked upright and spoke a language; but in reality just another marauder of the black depths which were his home.

There was neither regret nor remorse within him because he had slain Flaherty; that had been but a thing which must be removed if he were to reap the harvest sown by the deeds of another. It had not been his first murder, nor would it be his last, and he gave it no more than a brief distasteful thought.

The sun rode higher in the heavens, and still he did not pause in his robot-like slashing of the jungle trail. He checked his compass bearings from time to time, then swung his path almost directly to the west, going again toward the river, knowing he would strike it below the neck, giving him a straight pathway into the Knanato country.

The dull ache of labor was climbing into his shoulders, but his expression did not change, and his breathing was even

and unhurried. His shirt was black with perspiration now, clinging damply to his muscled back; and the blackness writhed into life as *kumi* flies darted to ride the salty cloth.

He slashed at the flies with his free hand, cursing at the fiery bites, then fell silent, knowing the jungle had unseen ears for alien sounds. He hacked his trail, sliding through tangled thickets when possible, avoiding as much work as he could, for he knew he must conserve his strength.

The shadows grew thick and treacherous, as the sun sank lower in the cloudless sky. Heat was a dank miasma pushing against him like the current of a stream, yet he forced his way, pausing only now and then for a short pipe of tobacco.

HE CAME at last to the edge of the wide river, curtained it with the sweep of his gaze, then sank loosely to the scaly log of an ironwood tree. He cleaned his knife with a scrap of leaf, thrust it deep into his scabbard, rested for fifteen minutes, then rising, he went in search of the trees he needed.

He found them two hundred yards downstream, cut them down with great smashing slashes of his keen bush knife. Trimming the trunks, cutting them into even lengths, he carried the logs to the edge of the river, laid them side by side. He found great looping lengths of green liana, cut them free of their trees, brought them to the logs and used them as bindings to form a large raft. Satisfied, he went back up the bank, found a large clump of *kalchi* bushes.

He winced instinctively, as his knife cleared an opening into the thorny bush, then cut a space six feet wide in the center. He closed the opening with thorny branches, dropped his pack, spread his single blanket on the ground. His food was dried meat, a *panyanox* pear and a pint of cold tea from his canteen. Then he lay back, ready to sleep the night.

Light ceased. The night was an ebon pressing curtain crowding its force upon the land below. The sun was gone with the startling suddenness which is Africa's alone, and the orange moon was not yet climbing the ladder of the skies.

And sound came. It was there, as though waiting some unheard signal, then burgeon-

ing into life with the soft violence that lay within itself.

First, there were the insects, their chirrring drone springing alive from every bush and tree. Then the rustle and tiny yelp and cry of nocturnal animals began to feel their way into the chorus. Far away, a hyena cackled its obscene mirth, and a lion coughed its deep-throated challenge at the pressing jungle.

Stillness came—then a rogue elephant trumpeted shrill warning to all about. And the chorus came again.

Kurt Benton relaxed on the hard ground, drew a swirl of the blanket over his legs and hips, stretched sleepily. He heard the padding of feet about his thorn *boma*, chuckled lightly, drifted instantly into sleep.

A carrion-owl came drifting by, lambent eyes staring implacably, then dipped and flashed into soundless motion. A thicket-rat screamed its death cry, dangled limply from the curved talons of the owl as it fled into the night.

The moon climbed slowly, steadily; and the sounds blurred into one another, softening as the appetites were sated and the fierce desires were filled. Stars sprinkled the skies with bits of icy light, and the moon was a great orange disc that sailed on silent wings.

And then the first streaks of silver came spearing through the heavens, pushing the moon along its way, greying all with a crepuscular light. Jungle sounds dwindled, died. And then the sun was come, and the African day beginning.

Kurt Benton stretched tight muscles, sat and glanced at the sky. The warm sun rays felt good and solid against his back, driving away the chill of the night.

Unhurriedly, he rolled his blanket, fitted it to his pack. Then he used his bush knife to clear the path to the outside of his *boma*, stepped through, and went down the bank to the raft he had fashioned the night before. The liana rope had shrunk, tightening about the logs, making the raft solid and durable.

He slashed small branches from a sapling tree, made a long pole, then pushed the raft into the turgid water, stepped lithely aboard.

He poled the raft into the current, squatted in perfect balance on the spongy logs with the pole across his lap. He ate

then, sparingly, his eyes watching the river ahead.

LATER, he sat on the raft, using his long pole now and then to fend away floating logs and debris, waiting with the patience of a jungle man for this second phase of his journey to end.

The current was slow; but in the following hours he traveled a distance that could not have been traversed in a week of jungle trekking. He consulted his stolen blood-stained map, memorizing the cryptic markings, fitting them with the last words of the murdered Flaherty.

The land became more wild and rugged as the hours passed. He was deep in the Knanato country now, further than white men dared to penetrate except in large parties. He watched the shrub-crowded banks for the small signs which would betoken hidden watchers, for he fully knew the risks he was running in invading this forbidden land for a double handful of crudely-cut precious juju jewels.

His hand fled to his gun, as something pushed down to the water, then relaxed, as the antelope whirled and sped away in startled flight.

But despite his effort at total relaxation, the tension built ever higher in his mind. He saw the promontory mentioned by Flaherty, used his pole to steer the unwieldy raft into the shallows beneath the overhang of great trees at the river's edge. He saw the X-shaped tree formation described on the map, and stepped to the shore.

His knife glittered, as he slashed the raft's binding vines; and he shoved the free logs into the stream, where the current tugged them into motion.

Now he was on the third phase of the journey, and he could feel skin crawling on his back, as he peered into the thick tangled jungle, seeking the jungle path that was to be his trail. Finding it, he slipped into its coolness, drifted silently along the matted earth.

He carried his revolver in his left hand now, the gleaming bush knife in his right, ready to slay at the slightest moment of notice.

The river coolness slowly disappeared, sucked into the dank heat of the pressing jungle. He forced his way through crowd-

ing thickets, avoiding entangled creeping vines, treading with the feet and stealth of a jungle raider, trying to create no noises which would betoken his presence.

He paused once, in the sun-spangled recess of a narrow clearing, perused his map again. He had come in by one route, must leave by another, and he set the directions clearly in his mind.

Even as he tucked the map away, he heard the slight snap of a breaking twig ahead. Without conscious thought, he drifted into the bottomless shadow of a lush bush, crouched there, shifting the weapons from hand to hand.

A N'gobo warrior glided into the clearing, perspiration oily on his body, his keen features wary, spear ready in his hand.

Air shrieked in a tiny keening of sound, as the great bush knife smashed about in a sweeping arc of brutal power. The blade chugged deep, from neck to navel—and the painted warrior bucked his life out on the greensward, crimson gouting in a flood that cloyed the grass.

III

KURT BENTON spat in murderous triumph, crouched over the body, listening for any sound that might come from more of the N'gobos. Satisfied that the man had come alone, he cleaned his bloody knife with a broad green leaf, scabarded it, then caught the corpse by the heels, dragged it out of sight in the dense bushes.

Reentering the clearing, he cleared away the murder signs as best he could, then went again toward the jewels which were his goal.

Kill-lust was in him now, needing only a victim to bring it into the open in all of its brutal strength. He went ahead, thinking of the gleaming jewels which would be his, touching them with his imagination, the clammy sweat of desire springing onto his body.

He conjured up sight of the necklace which Flaherty had claimed, seeing the great egg-sized diamond that was its sparkling pendant, marveling at the rich colors that swirled in its heart. That stone alone would make him rich beyond his wildest dreams.

The taint of wood smoke tinged the air, and he froze motionless in the inky shadow of a baobab tree. His breath was hot in his throat, but his fingers were nerveless as he checked the action of his revolver.

He went ahead then, slipping from shadow to shadow, tension a hand that constricted his pumping heart. Dimly, he heard sounds of voices ahead, and then came the odors that were characteristic of the jungle *kraals*.

He saw the *kraal*, finally, saw the sun-seared poles that made the village a crude fortress, winced despite himself when he saw the sunlight-scalded human skulls that topped the poles directly to either side of the crude swinging gate. One slip, one faulty move, and his own would decorate those grim trophy poles.

He squinted against the sunlight, saw the thatched huts scattered haphazardly about the interior of the *kraal*. All faced the white and red juju hut of the witch-doctor, which squatted broodingly aloof in the center of the clearing.

Kurt Benton grinned mirthlessly, stalked the shadows, his eyes ranging ahead, estimating and evaluating the situation. Small cooking fires flamed before the huts, all tended by women; while the men lolled in somnolent ease in the huts' shade. Children dashed about, playing naked in the sunlight, bringing a touch of softness to the savagery of the jungle.

There were fully a hundred people in the *kraal*, which was a strange oddity of the N'gobo, for most interior tribes consisted of but five or six families.

Kurt Benton scowled, knowing the number of people would make his task more dangerous. Then he shrugged, began a slow patrolling of the area about the *kraal*. For minutes he circled the stockade, getting his bearings, finding the path that led straight to the swift river that lay a quarter of a mile away.

The sunlight slowly faded, grew dappled with grey, the night coming with characteristic swiftiness over the tangled forest. Kurt Benton slipped down the trail to the river, careful to make no sound, eyes keen and feral as he watched for returning warriors. He saw two, ducked aside, hands tight on his weapons, but holding himself in check, not risking failure now by any overt act which would betray his presence.

The warriors padded by, going toward the *kraal*, their muted speech throbbing with the dull guttural words of their primitive tongue. They were unsuspecting, the older carrying a heavy string of river fish, the younger carrying a great double-net.

KURT BENTON waited until they were gone down the leafy tunnel, then continued to the river. Satisfied that he was unobserved, he found the best canoe, shouldered it and carried it a hundred yards downstream. Hiding the dugout carefully behind a screen of overhanging foliage, he returned to the remaining canoes, set them adrift. Now, he would be able to distance any pursuit.

Night came as he worked, blanketing all with a smothering darkness, and he waited patiently for his eyes to adjust themselves. Then, able to see dimly, he went back up the trail to the village, going almost boldly now, knowing the raw strength that was his.

Flickering light built a canopy over the *kraal*, pushing back the night, reaching fingers of dull brightness to quest the shadows at the jungle's edge. Kurt Benton stayed out of the light, circled the stockade, crouched in the shadow of a tree, ate a quick meal of the dried meat in his pack.

Chinking had not been packed between the logs here, and he had a complete view of the village. He sat silently, watching the men and women eat, stiffened slightly when the movement came in the doorway of the witch-doctor's hut, shrank instinctively at the sheer brutal hideousness of the N'gobo witch-doctor, Krgai.

The man was walking death, for he had the face of a skull, and his body was so thin and emaciated the skeletal effect was like a physical shock to the watcher.

Paint striped his body, highlighting the bony weirdness of his frame. Dried monkey paws and clicking crocodile teeth were pendant about his scrawny neck, and he wore a clout of black and white colubus fur.

He paused in the flickering light of the large fire before his hut, and his voice raised in a susurrating whisper that incredibly drowned all other sounds in the *kraal*. Kurt Benton could understand none of his speech, for a great sword blow had slashed away the nose and half the face

of the witch-doctor, leaving the white bone gleaming against the black skin, making the speech distorted and nasal.

The warriors moved uneasily, and the children huddled in fear against their mothers' bare legs. The witch-doctor continued his speech, the words pounding in an unintelligible rush of sound which made sense to the listening blacks, then squatted a few feet from his fire and waited to be served by the women tending the cooking.

Kurt Benton twisted uneasily, held in thrall by the utter brutality of the emaciated sorcerer, then broke the spell by deliberately looking away. He could feel the fear in him then, and there was a sense of panic such as he had never known. For one interminable instant, he gave thought to his leaving without finishing the task he had set for himself.

Then he thought of the great diamond necklace, of the smaller jewels that studded the belly and head of a crudely carved idol of polished ebony, and the greed in his mind was something beyond his control.

He settled back more comfortably against the rough tree bole, laid his revolver and heavy bush knife at his side, waited with the patience of a hyena stalking a wounded antelope. Soon, very soon, his time would come.

The minutes passed, flowing one into the other, growing into hours. Silence drew slowly about the kraal, and the moon came out of hiding, silvered the night, made shadows bottomless pits of blackness. The night came alive with its myriad jungle sounds, the chirring of insects a vibrant overtone to the muted cries of the nocturnal prowlers of the forest depths.

THE FIRES drew into themselves within the kraal, died into glowing spots of red-yellow embers, and the warriors congregated by a common consent about the central fire before the red and white hut of the malignant Krgai. He sat silently, his narrowed eyes riding the averted faces of the group, his lean fingers toying with the macabre necklace that circled his scrawny throat.

Children disappeared into the squatty huts, shepherded by their mothers, until finally only the men were left. Slowly the hum of their voices came to the watching Kurt Benton, and he strained to hear

their speech. But he could make nothing of their muted talk, so he relaxed again, savoring the warmth of his thoughts, building a future existence upon the bloody spoils which would soon be his.

His gaze flicked back to the kraal, caught by sudden movement. He felt relief stirring in him; for now the warriors were slowly drifting to their huts. The group became smaller, until but five men sat with the witch-doctor.

He dominated the group, speaking now in his alien voice, his words increasing in tempo and frenetic volume, his skinny shoulders jerking with the violence of his emotions. The five warriors listened gravely, not moving, their bodies seeming to writhe from the fitful spurtings of light from the dying fire. At last, they, too, straggled to their huts, and Krgai sat alone.

He didn't move, but his voice rose in a tuneless, wordless, chant that pressed against the night with a weird ululation. His body swayed slightly, and as he turned a bit to closer hug the dying fire, he turned his back completely upon Kurt Benton.

The white man grinned tightly, came lithely to his feet. He scabbarded his bush knife, holstered his gun, then paced slowly along the stockade. He had already noted the partial break in the line of poles, and pausing before it, his heavy hands silently opened it enough to permit his body to wriggle through.

His pack caught for a brief second, and he froze motionless at the slight sound. Then, certain that he was unheard, he wriggled completely through, crouched in the stockade's shadow.

He shivered involuntarily, sensing the difference about him. Now he was alone in the enemy camp, his life forfeit at the first wrong move. And there was a chill, too, about the sleeping kraal that was like the quiescent power of a sleeping giant, ready to fling itself awake at the first signs of danger.

Ahead was a clear space, but silver-bright with pale moonlight. To either side were two of the huts, from which a light sleeper might wake to see his darting form. But that was the chance he had to take, and he darted forward on soundless feet.

The moonlight space seemed miles long; then he was against the back of the witch-doctor's hut, pressing against the thatch-

ing, hidden by the shadows. He could feel the hot pounding of rushing blood in his heart, and his eyes were the feral orbs of a cornered animal as he waited for the first cry of recognition.

He drew his gun with his left hand, held the bush knife tightly in his right. Certain that he was unnoticed, he bent, made a quick examination of the thatch. Luck was riding his shoulders, for the thick leaves were green beneath their paint, and would rustle but slightly as he cut an entrance.

His knife moved with a delicate precision; leaves and lacing vines fell softly to the ground. Within seconds, he had cut a doorway close to the ground; and squatting, he forced his way into the hut.

He came erect, nerves like steel wires, weapons ready for instant blinding action. But he was alone. He moved across the packed-earth floor, glanced from the narrow doorway, saw Krgai fifteen feet away, his chant still rising through his shattered bone-face.

Then Kurt Benton saw the jewels.

IV

HE GASPED, drew closer to the squat pot-bellied idol that sat atop a crude altar at one side of the hut. Light was dim and uncertain, but he could see the fires that flashed in each of the jewels, knew that a fortune lay there for the taking.

He shivered, for the ruby eyes of the juju idol seemed to laugh mockingly into his own. Then he scowled, holstered his gun, used the tip of his bush knife to force the jewels from their niches in the idol's gross body.

One dropped into his hand, and he held its coolness tightly, turning his head at a slight sound outside. Then he relaxed, turned back again—and saw the great diamond necklace for the first time.

He could see nothing else. His hand went out to caress the stone which glittered so coldly from its chain that hung on the crudely-painted plaque at the back of the altar.

He had done murder for that gem, had slain with a brutal callousness that was his nature. But he gave that no thought now; he was watching the stone glitter in the pale

light that trickled in from the doorway.

He took the necklace in his hand, lifted it from its wooden peg, gripped it with greedy fingers. His breath was hot in his throat, and he was conscious of nothing but the incredible wealth that lay in his fingers.

And across his hand fell the shadow of a man.

He whirled in a half-crouch, stared blankly at the warrior who stood at the doorway. He heard the startled gasp of the man, then flowed into blasting action.

He slipped the great bush knife with a vicious speed, heard the *chug* of the blade biting deep, then leaped forward and wrenched the crimsoned weapon from the breast of the falling man.

Krgai screamed outside, his wordless cry a grim unreal warning in the brooding night.

Kurt Benton hurdled the figure of the dead warrior, went toward the still-open stockade gate.

And before him, warriors whipped from their huts, weapons glittering brightly in their hands.

Krgai screamed again, and Kurt Benton shot him in the chest.

Then he had no time to single out his shots. He was a berserk machine of death, trying to blast his way out of the trap, his gun hammering red slugs of murder into the night. He felt the shocking kiss of a spear blade along one shoulder, screamed, as the gun dropped from his nerveless hand. Then he was swinging his deadly bush knife, charging forward, trying to cut a path through the warriors who faced him.

One bent over, sleep still in his eyes, blood flooding from the stub of his neck, his great spear swinging about and lancing the belly of a second. Both went down in kicking huddles.

A knife smashed through the air, drilled deep into Kurt Benton's left leg, rode there, the bloody point gleaming from the back of his breeches. He stumbled, then forced himself forward, taking a spear point in his wounded shoulder, but slashing life from his assailant with the ripping length of his bush knife.

Then bodies piled on him from behind, and he was going down, smothered with body stench, feeling the weapons scoring

his body, fighting like a crazed buffalo to rid itself of a pack of wild dogs.

His knife slashed upward, was dragged from his hand by the wrenching twist of the body that received it. He clubbed with both hands. Then weight smothered him completely, and heavy hands were beating him into unconsciousness.

Krgai screamed an order.

A heavy hand smashed a final blow at Kurt Benton, drove shards of blackness into his mind. Then the pressure was easing, the warriors untangling and coming to their feet. Brutal hands jerked Kurt Benton erect, pulled him before Krgai.

The witch-doctor stood unaided, a bloody furrow leaking crimson along his chest where the .45 slug had touched. He said nothing for a second, his eyes ranging over the five dead and six wounded men still on the ground. Then his hand came up, and his words carried with a clearness that seemed impossible from such a travesty of a face.

"Now!" he snarled. "Blood-hate is ours; there will be no ceremonies."

AND EVEN as he spoke, men were driving a great pole into the ground, fashioning a torture stake for their victim. Others had heaped fresh wood upon the coals of the single fire, and reddish-yellow flames were curling eagerly into life.

Three warriors forced the still-dazed white man to the stake, bound him to it with unyielding rope, then cut his clothes from his bleeding body with slashes of gleaming knives. He sagged against the pole, realization lurid in his mind, the first pleas for mercy tangling in his throat.

And then a glitter came from Krgai's hand, as he lifted the diamond necklace from where it had dropped but short moments before. He dangled it high, then turned and entered his hut, reappearing a second later with the ebony idol. Setting it on the ground, the ruby eyes staring malevolently at the victim, Krgai turned to the men and women crowding about.

"Slowly, he shall die, slowly and with great agony. He is white, and all whites are slayers in the night. By knife and flame he shall die and the sun shall be well in the sky before he rides down *Kastadi*, the River of Life."

And then Kurt Benton was screaming for his life, slobbering words that made no sense, but which could have but one interpretation. He strained against the ropes, fighting them, feeling the hot blood coursing down his skin from his wounds. His eyes went about the vicious circle of faces, found no mercy there, and he swung his head toward Krgai.

"Mercy!" he screamed. "Don't—"

A hand smashed the words back into his bloody mouth.

Then Krgai was coming forward, growing greater in the light of the leaping flames. He held the great diamond necklace aloft, watched it sparkle and spin in the flickering yellow-red light. The flames roared higher, and the night was far away.

"This is juju," Krgai said. "This is death. For this the white man came—and it shall be his as long as he lives."

He went forward two steps then, lifted the necklace to slip it over Kurt Benton's head and about his neck, so that its weight might be against his chest as he died.

For one ageless second, Kurt Benton saw the swinging sparkling necklace, recognized the markings engraven into the back. Then he went utterly, instantly insane, fighting his bonds again, feeling the weight of the great diamond about his neck.

The first knives came reaching in, slashing with a brutal delicate precision. Screams of agony came from the white murderer, spun high into the air. But it was only his body that felt the pain; his mind gripped but one thought.

He had seen the necklace for which many men had died in bloody agony, had read the cryptic markings on the back, lines and whorls which meant nothing to the blacks.

"*AJAX Novelty Mfg. Co.*," the markings had read.

The jewels were glass, part of the trade goods carried by every trader, part of the gaudy dime-store jewelry that the natives coveted and worshipped.

The imitation diamond winked and glittered, stained now by the crimson that leaked from the body of its wearer, bobbed wildly about as scream after scream reached toward the stars.

Kurt Benton, like Liam Flaherty, took a long time to die.



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BUY WAR BONDS

SPEARS OF KI-JALA

By JOHN STARR

One obstacle lay between Von Belthe and a fortune in gold, the weapons of Ki-Jala. But they were deadly—and invisible.



Von Belthe shot Ki-Jala squarely in the back.

VON BELTHE smiled thinly at the crudely-beaten gold ornaments which gleamed against the sweat-oily naked-
ness of the natives who wandered about

the sun-scorched compound. Sight of these adornments, day after day, had made his two-month stay in the filthy *kraal* of the Lingazis more endurable.

"Soon I will learn the location of these rich gold diggings," he muttered in satisfaction. "It will bring me to the notice of Der Fuehrer!"

The German jungle man had been ordered into the remote Nlaga jungle swamps to track down the rumor of gold fields—gold which was needed desperately by the Nazi undercover men in Africa, for British and American troop penetrations were gradually cutting them off from Berlin.

He had been skeptical of the venture, until he reached this *kraal* and laid startled eyes upon the ignorant Lingazis. Men, women, and children alike—all loaded down with gold ornaments worth a fortune.

And after he had been escorted into the hut of Tamulla, the lean, bony, gray-headed chief of the tribe, Von Belthe had quickly learned the secret behind this incredible display of wealth.

After presenting gifts of cotton goods and shiny trinkets, the German had smoothly said, "I am dazzled by the yellow metal your people wear, O Tamulla. I desire a shield made of it, so I can take it with me on my return to my own country."

Tamulla answered, "This metal does not come from my tribe, but from Ki-Jala, the great witch doctor who lives alone in the jungle. By the powerful magic of his ju-ju, he digs it directly from the earth. Once every five moons, he comes to our *kraal* to heal the sick, bringing these ornaments with him, which he exchanges for any gifts we can offer."

"Then you must have some of your warriors take me to this witch doctor."

Tamulla shook his head. "Only Afershi, an ancient warrior who now is dead, knew of where Ki-Jala lives. Though some of my men have since followed the witch doctor, they have never found his abode. He vanishes before their eyes, truly as though the ground itself swallows him up—proof that he *is* a god."

VON BELTHE frowned. "But do you not know any more of this strange being, Tamulla?"

"Aye—Old Afershi always said Ki-Jala abides in a secret hollow. Ki-Jala's ju-ju stands there, a huge holy image made of this same mysterious metal which the witch doctor digs from a large pit. And though Ki-Jala carries no weapons, yet he has

an abundance of food for himself. He pierces jungle animals with invisible spears given him by his ju-ju."

"That is hardly believable!"

"It is so," nodded the chief. "Once, when we were starving, Afershi begged Ki-Jala for aid. Ki-Jala told him that his ju-ju would provide. He instructed Afershi to return here and bring warriors back into the swamp forest, where they would find food. And Afershi and the warriors found a dozen slain antelope at the designated place, the animals stabbed again and again by Ki-Jala's invisible spears!"

"His ju-ju surely is mighty," agreed Von Belthe, thrilled with the realization that only one apparently unarmed native was in possession of this rich gold deposit—Ki-Jala, who had built a huge solid-gold idol that probably was in itself worth a king's ransom. "O Tamulla, when is it that Ki-Jala visits you again?"

"In two moons, White Man."

"Then, O Tamulla, I wish to send my porters back while I tarry in your *kraal* till the next coming of the great witch doctor. Can it be done?"

Tamulla nodded. "Your presence here will be an honor. But I cannot promise that Ki-Jala will grant your request. Further, you will be forced to remain with us another five moons before he will deliver the shield into your hands."

"I understand that," Von Belthe replied, his eyes gleaming.

Now, after two months, he sat in the shadow of one of the village huts, contentedly watching the natives moving about. The return of his porters alone to the Nazi headquarters on the Coast was proof that he was on the trail of something worthwhile—and the Reich would be depending on him to get results.

It gave him a glowing sense of power. Sure of his veteran ability as a jungle man, he was convinced that it would be only days until he'd take over the rich gold diggings of Ki-Jala for Der Fuehrer. . . .

Night gradually settled like a black cowl over the swampy jungle. The unnatural quiet of the *kraal* bothered Von Belthe—a puzzlement which mounted when a huge bonfire suddenly crackled into being in the barren compound. The leaping flames flung long writhing shadows about the

village as the naked blacks paraded out silently and squatted down in a gigantic circle. Drums commenced thumping, softly, regularly, like the beating heart of the swamp jungle itself.

Tamulla walked with slow, kingly strides toward the circle of natives. He was in gala attire, wearing a huge, towering feathered head-dress.

Von Belthe hurried over to him. "O Tamulla, what is this strange ceremony?"

"It is the night of Ki-Jala," Tamulla intoned, and continued on his way into the firelight.

The news that the long-awaited moment was here brought a devilish expression to Von Belthe's square-jowled face. And the instant he, too, walked into the compound, he suddenly saw a wizened little negro trudging out of the jungle blackness—a native unadorned with ornaments, clothed only in a bark breechclout. The savage walked with a knobbed staff, slowly, bent under the large pack he carried on his back.

The great, all-powerful Ki-Jala!

THE LINGAZIS did not rise from the circle, nor was there any indication of welcome, save that they began droning out a weird chant which matched the rhythm of the drums. The witch doctor silently entered the circle and eased the pack from his back.

Ki-Jala drew his small body to full height, raising both his arms in a long wordless gesture. And when he slowly dropped hands to his sides again, natives rose up, one after another, to come forward. First, it was the sick to be healed, and he gave out his balms and fetishes. Others then came forward with small gifts. Ki-Jala, in turn, brought out crudely-beaten armlets, necklaces, and girdles—a small fortune in gold being doled out to savages.

After all was done and Ki-Jala had stuffed all his gifts into his pack, Von Belthe stepped into the firelight. He advanced within ten paces of the witch doctor and halted.

"O Supreme Ki-Jala," he cried. "The odd yellow metal you fashion into ornaments is a gift of the gods. I desire a shield made of it, which I intend to present to the king of my country far beyond the

jungle. I want him to know of your great ju-ju."

He paused, caring little whether Ki-Jala agreed or not. Yet he knew the advantage of putting on an act and raised his arm to display the watch that was strapped to his thick wrist.

"This is my gift, Ki-Jala. A creation of my country's ju-ju—a bracelet which makes a ticking sound within itself!" He unstrapped the watch, moving forward as he offered it to the native.

Ki-Jala halted him with a gesture. "I will heed your words, White Man," he replied, "but accept nothing in return. The shield will be ready when I return in five moons—my gift to your king."

"Ki-Jala is kind," nodded the Nazi. "This shield will spread the fame of thy ju-ju to all corners of my country!" He backed away from the witch doctor in the manner as had the natives before him, then remained in the shadows beyond the circle, smiling shrewdly. He was waiting and watchful, like a beast of prey.

The drums and chanting began again as Ki-Jala lifted the heavy pack to his back. Without a word, he turned, picked up his staff, and left the flickering glow of the fire. He plodded slowly toward the eerie black wall of the jungle.

And as Ki-Jala went his way, Von Belthe moved stealthily behind him. The Nazi had lived many years among jungle tribes and knew much of their lore. He had trained his ears, as do the native hunters, to take the place of his eyes in the black of night.

He followed no more than ten paces behind Ki-Jala as they wound along an old trail through the stagnant swamp forest. Night insects were one loud continuous drone, interrupted now and then by the sliding gurgle of a crocodile slipping into scum-covered waters. But Von Belthe's ears were attuned only to the footfalls of his quarry, the monotonous thump of the knobbed staff.

HOURS LATER, the moon rose up, full and bright. And although the moonlight came down to the tree-canopied trail in silver patches, he was able to make out Ki-Jala plodding slowly ahead of him.

They were at a slanting place in the trail, where huge misshapen rocks stood

alongside the way. Von Belthe watched Ki-Jala ascending the slope.

And then the witch doctor was gone.

It was an eerie thing, for the rocky slope, hemmed on either side with impenetrable jungle, afforded no by-path. And as Von Belthe stood in consternation, a hyena yelped nearby, mocking him with its chilling, half-human laughter.

Von Belthe cursed and ran forward along the trail, but found no trace of Ki-Jala. He ran back again, and still there was no sign of the native. Then he returned to the point where Ki-Jala vanished.

"Gott, I know this is no magic," he panted. "And no native is alive who can trick me!"

He went over the moon-bright vicinity, inch by inch, but saw there was no way the witch doctor could have penetrated the surrounding jungle without hacking himself a laborious path through the vines.

Baffled, he stepped up on a large rock beside the spot where Ki-Jala vanished, searching about in desperation. He spotted the fissure between two other rocks behind the boulder on which he stood—a fissure that was invisible from the trail!

Climbing down, he wriggled his thick body into the cleft. It led into a kind of natural passageway between the rocks some ten paces long, and he emerged to find himself in a hewn trail in the tree-choked jungle barrier. And after he traversed the trail a short distance, he began laughing throatily. He was standing before a long grassy, rockbound hollow—the very abode of Ki-Jala, as Tamulla had described it!

It was a treeless place, scorched by the sun, totally different than the swampy jungle that hemmed it on all sides. As he advanced deeper into the hollow, the German saw a herd of antelope grazing nearby. They did not run from him in fright, but went on feeding without concern.

He came at last to a thatched house that was without walls. Beside it stood a crude wooden anvil, some iron pots for melting down gold, and stone hammers. And when Von Belthe moved into the house, he saw no sign of Ki-Jala anywhere. He marveled over how the building floor was padded and covered completely with expertly-stitched antelope skin. Clean, neat, it was an abode finer than the most pretentious tribal huts he had ever visited.

Wandering out to the anvil again, he found a cask half-filled with gold-nuggets, the majority of them the size of .45 caliber bullets. It hinted that Ki-Jala had a placer mine—an incredible bonanza!

"So you *did* find my valley entrance!"

VON BELTHE whirled around, his hand on his revolver. He saw Ki-Jala behind him, and he relaxed as he noted that the native was unarmed.

"Do not be alarmed," Ki-Jala went on. "I am not offended that you have come. But I must ask you to remove the shoes from your feet. This place, O White Man, is holy ground."

Von Belthe was tempted not to obey. But he realized the wisdom of temporarily humoring the witch doctor. And he removed his heavy shoes.

"Your great ju-ju led me here," he said. "I know that he wants me to witness the place where you dig out this holy yellow metal, O Ki-Jala. It is so that I can relate to my people and king—"

He stopped short as an antelope came walking up to them. Incredulous, he watched Ki-Jala speak gibberish to the animal, which advanced to nuzzle against the witch doctor.

Ki-Jala slapped the antelope on the rump and sent it loping away. He said quietly, "The animals are my friends. We are all one family here."

Von Belthe grinned wisely. "So that is how you capture your food without weapons."

"No, White Man, the beloved ju-ju provides that for me. Even the time the Lingazis were starving, he provided bountifully, bidding me to hew a path through the jungle to bring antelope to their warriors. Come, let us walk up the Trail of the Ju-Ju."

Ki-Jala led the way past boulders, a trail through a stretch of tall elephant grass. The stony path bruised Von Belthe's feet, but the urge to lay eyes on the ju-ju made him ignore it.

As they advanced, Ki-Jala said, "I was still a young man, an outcast from my tribe, when I stumbled on this holy place. The discovery of this odd yellow metal here told me that my god had given me a mission. So I built this great image of him."

He paused as they reached the edge of

the elephant grass. A small slope was before them, leading to a rocky, grass-thick ridge. Perched on the ridge, weathered by storm and rain, stood the ju-ju.

Von Belthe gasped in astonishment. Tamulla had not lied. The huge crudely-executed idol gleamed a rich yellow in the moon-glow. It was scarcely believable. Plainly, the idol was made of solid gold.

"Let us climb the ridge!" he babbled excitedly. "I want a closer look at the great ju-ju!"

Ki-Jala caught him by the arm. "No, the ju-ju will be displeased. If we climb to the ridge, we will die horribly by his invisible spears. That is true as the stars that gleam down on our heads!"

These ignorant superstitions irked the Nazi. It made him impatient to conclude his mission.

"Ki-Jala," he said, "the ju-ju has placed the moon in the sky tonight so that I can see all his wonders. Take me to the pit of yellow metal, and I will depart and return to the Lingazi *kraal* to await my shield. It is the will of your god."

"So be it," nodded Ki-Jala. "Let us return to my abode and take the second trail."

VON BELTHE followed him eagerly, his square visage tight-set and gleaming. This gold—the very thing his government needed desperately here in Africa—was almost in his grasp. It would make him a great man in the Reich.

Hardly aware of the stones torturing his feet, he followed Ki-Jala along the second trail. A small herd of antelope grazed nearby, unmindful of the men passing them to the mine.

It was a shallow gravel pit alongside a tiny creek. When they reached there, Ki-Jala picked up a punctured pot, scooped out some of the gravel at random and washed it in the creek. He thrust the pot at Von Belthe and said, "Look, White Man. The ju-ju makes this holy yellow metal bountiful."

As the unsuspecting witch doctor turned, he was unaware of Von Belthe's swift-moving hand. The pistol leaped up from its holster, thundering out flaming death at the naked black back. Ki-Jala collapsed

on his face and lay bloody and unmoving.

The report of the gun echoed through the hollow like an evil thing, bringing with it the drumming of hoofs as the frightened antelopes went crashing away. Von Belthe ignored the dead native beside him, dropped to his knees, digging his hands into the gravel, like a man bereft of his senses.

He had succeeded. This rich gold deposit was now his gift to the German Reich. And it would bring him the everlasting gratitude of Der Fuehrer himself!

He returned to Ki-Jala's anvil and put on his shoes again. Yet in the instant he rose up to leave the hollow, he found himself staring at the path which Ki-Jala had called the Trail of the Ju-Ju. It stirred his blood—this gigantic image of pure gold. It couldn't be believed without touching and examining.

Jogging quickly up the trail, through the tall elephant grass, he once more was at the foot of the slope below the ridge.

He reached the ridge, which was mantled with a heavy carpet of soft beaten grass. There seemed nothing to fear, and the urge to touch and examine this incredible idol drove him forward at a half-run.

THEN the ground seemed to vanish from beneath his feet. He felt his body thrash thin air, and the cruel spears stabbed him unmercifully, turning his startled brain to black nothingness.

Awareness ebbed back. With it, the unbearable pain of the spears in his back.

He saw that he was in a long narrow pit below the foot of the ju-ju—a pit that was studded with sharpened stakes. And impaled on the stakes near him, even as he was, lay two dead antelope.

It was ghastly plain how Ki-Jala had arranged that the ju-ju provide food for him. The witch doctor had built an animal trap-pit at the foot of the idol, a pit that was covered with grass to trap the antelope that ventured on the ridge.

Von Belthe tried to scream out curses at the dead witch doctor. But only what remained of his draining blood frothed from his gasping lips. And blank darkness overpowered him again.

This time, the darkness of death.

THE FOS-FOS JUJU

By FRANCIS GERARD

Tribal war was about to start on the sacred grounds of K'Kulu, and but one of Sanders' men was there to stop the crimson carnage—Tibbetts, the subaltern who always did things wrong.

A continuation of the Edgar Wallace character "Sanders of the River."

SANDERS had many problems in the district which was under his control. What with tax-collecting and tending to the ailments, both real and imaginary, of the people who looked to him for guidance, he had to cope with the jujus and the devils forever being foisted onto the superstitious tribesmen by the witch-doctors and tribal leaders.

Let a man profane the devils of another tribe, and blood would flow; for the people were childlike in their beliefs, and very warlike in their likes and dislikes.

So Sanders had a full time job, what with maintaining order, along with sundry other tasks which were not of his choosing, but done because of certain Crown regulations.

But of all his tasks, he hated most the one which made him the temporizing appeaser for the three countries which came more under his direct control.

For the devils of the blacks were more trouble to him than to them.

That is, all except one.

There were tribal devils and personal devils; devils of the forests and of the river; large devils and small devils, but of them all K'Kulu was the most respected, and Mr. Commissioner Sanders, for one, was most appreciative of his presence.

Between the Akasava and the Isisi lay the country of the K'Kulu-Lombana-Osoogi, a deep, wedge-shaped piece of territory which acted as a buffer-state between the two big tribes.

Sanders had created many of these buffer states himself, placing peaceful little tribes between two possible aggressors and thus separating two types of fighting men who were very touchy on the point of honour and quick to kill in their anger. But the K'Kulu-Lombana-Osoogi were not of Sanders' creation, having been there "since the world was young."

Numerically a small people the inhabitants of this little buffer-state were extremely important and very conscious of being so, for their name meant "the Children of K'Kulu," and K'Kulu was a devil that no man in the territories was prepared to deal lightly with. In fact they preferred not to deal with him at all.

K'Kulu was such a terrible devil that he had not even got a name, for "k'kulu" roughly translated from the vernacular means "it" or "the thing." No one was quite certain as to what exactly it was, but all agreed that the devil was shaped like a man and "bright as the sun." T'Luki-N'Kema, who had lived longer than any other man in the land, said that K'Kulu was a small piece of the sun which had been left behind one evening when the sun crept into a hole in the ground. This explanation was popularly accepted, and it was common knowledge that if anyone had the misfortune to see K'Kulu, unless he placed the fingers of both hands over his eyes and, bending forward with his head between his knees, spat in three directions, his tongue would swell to such a size that he would no longer be able to take food or drink, and would thus starve to death.

ON ONE occasion a party of Isisi had arrived at the Residency bringing with them one of their hunters with a dreadfully distended face and a body emaciated like a living skeleton. Examining him, Sanders came to the conclusion that he was suffering from a form of elephantiasis and sent him down to the hospital on the coast.

The Isisi had a simple explanation for his condition.

"Lord," said their spokesman, "he saw It, and in his terror forgot to do those holy things ordained."



Befi fought like an enraged panther.

"How is it," asked Sanders quickly, "that this Isisi hunter saw K'Kulu, for does not It keep his lovely presence beyond your borders?"

The headman shifted uneasily. "Lord," he said, "the buck he hunted did not know of your lordship's fine boundaries, and this man in his joy pursued without thought." Sanders read the deputation a little homily on the question of poaching and infringement of hunting rights, for the open country where It roamed by night was a good

many miles from the Isisi border, and in point of fact ran straight up the middle of the little state about half-way between Akasava and Isisi.

"I've packed that poor devil off down to the hospital," Hamilton reported later. "He looks in a bad way, sir."

"I don't think he'll live," said Sanders, "but whether he does or doesn't he'll prove a salutary example for those with any idea of going into K'Kulu's stamping-ground."

"Dooeed interestin'," observed Bones from behind an enormous and disgustingly noisy pipe. "I'd like to investigate the jolly old K'Kulu person." He leant forward and nodded ponderously. "You see, dear old Ham, I'm interested."

"What's so extraordinary about that, Bones?" asked his superior. "We're all interested."

Bones clicked. "Of course," he said, "from a superficial point of view, but I'm different."

"Yes, thank goodness," agreed Hamilton heartily.

"Without in the least wishin' to draw attention to my jolly-old qualities," observed Bones seriously, "I've got some perfectly extraordinary gifts."

"True," agreed the captain of Houssas, "like the two left-handed gloves your aunt sent you by the last post."

Bones smiled in a superior manner. "No cause to be jealous, Ham," he said outrageously. "We poor old fellow mortals can't all be made alike. I was referrin' to my natural gifts. I have certain spiritual qualities, dear old superior, and sometimes they amaze me."

"They amaze us, too," said Hamilton seriously, and Bones leant forward eagerly and said, "Do they, dear old Ham?"

"They amaze us like anything."

"It seems to me," said Bones, his pipe making a noise like a small bath emptying, that you're really beginnin' to appreciate poor old Bones," and the young man turned a genuinely surprised face toward the Commissioner as Sanders chuckled delightedly.

THE LITTLE Akasava village of Umbolo was undistinguished in any way. It was similar to a dozen other bush villages, and its headman, B'Kari, was as undistinguished as the village which was his responsibility. He was the father of seven daughters and not one single son, a matter of great sorrow to him, for how may a woman-child gain distinction or profit for her family?

The youngest of his daughters, Togani, was in no way different from her sisters except that possibly she was slightly more stupid. Her father's surprise, therefore, was the greater when one morning, when he emerged from his hut and stood yawn-

ing in the doorway, he beheld this shameless girl standing before him naked from top to toe.

Outraged, he was reaching for his whip of hippopotamus hide when Togani spoke.

"Bring me fire," she said, and so commanding were her tones that her father gaped at her and then obeyed.

They brought her fire in a little pot, and she stood staring down at the little flames and then did something which was a great wonder, for she thrust her hand into the fire and took out a burning stick, and though the fire was hot all men could see that her hand had taken no hurt.

"Take me to the king," she said in a queer high voice, a slight fleck of foam showing on her lips.

"Wa!" exclaimed the astounded villagers. "Togani is a Woman of Marking!"

"Wa!" said her father, gratified, and in that moment repaid a thousandfold for his girl-children.

In the spring of every year there arose somewhere in the Akasava a Woman of Marking, and during the term of her office she was honoured above the chief himself and there was no man among the Akasava but would have died lest she should take the slightest hurt.

Escorted by her father and half the population of her village, Togani progressed—there was no other word for the circus which accompanied her—to the chief city of the Akasava, where they brought her before M'Bilini the chief.

"O chief, I see you," said Togani's father importantly, "and behold, here is the woman my daughter who is become the Woman of Marking."

M'BILINI, seated on his stool surrounded by his counsellors and headmen, grunted.

"I see you," he said, "but when you say that this woman is the Woman of Marking, how shall I know, for behold three other women have come to my city making the same claim."

"O ko!" exclaimed Togani's father, very annoyed. "Yet, M'Bilini," he went on, "does not the law lay down that the Woman of Marking shall be a maiden, clean and undefiled, and so-and-so and such and such a thing?"

"That is the law," nodded M'Bilini, and

calling his chief witch-doctor, caused the three other girls to be brought with Togani before him.

The witch-doctor was painstakingly thorough, and it was not long before he decided that Togani was the only one of the claimants who had all the qualifications necessary.

Then a cloak of a certain magic colour was placed about Togani and a wreath of flowers upon her woolly head and in her hand was put a thin metal cylinder into which the stick of a certain tree was thrust.

Her escort was assembled: twelve young girls to wait upon her, twelve young men to act as litter-bearers, twelve spearmen, the pick of the chief's own regiment, and twelve herders to drive and care for the food-dogs which should accompany her, for the Woman of Marking must eat no lesser food.

Then they brought her the little red-shafted spear which was used annually in the ceremonial, and this she took in her hand and threw from her, and it fell to the ground pointing to the south. To the south she would go, and thus Togani set forth upon her wandering mission.

Each year since time immemorial a Woman of Marking had left the Akasava and wandered in a haphazard manner through the territories until the spirit moved her to return home. Whatever tribe or people she came to she went to the chief's hut and there with her burnt stick made a certain magic mark upon the door-post. Tribes thus distinguished and singled out by her became for the time being sacred in the eyes of the Akasava and immune from attack, no matter how deadly an enmity lay between them in the normal course of events, safe from attack until the rind of the new moon.

Moving slowly, for the litter in which Togani travelled was made of iron-wood and about the size of a four-poster bed, so that the litter-bearers had to be changed every half-hour, the little mission came at last into the country of K'Kulu, where it was greeted by the chief and his headmen. Togani paused half-way through the territory and, descending from her litter, went apart from her escort and, flinging herself upon the ground, communed with the spirit of It, while the

Akasava and their hosts stood in silence with their hands over their eyes.

A WEEK after she arrived at the city of the Isisi, where the chief turned out his dancing-girls to go swaying with lithe bodies before the litter of the Woman of Marking singing a wailing little song and spreading Isisi palm fronds in the path of the newcomers. Before the chief's hut a fire was burning, and to this came Togani and kindled her stick. Then she made the devil-mark on the door-post, and a sigh of relief went up from the watching Isisi, for should she fail to do this it was the worst possible omen.

That night a great dance was given in honour of the Woman of Marking to which the headmen of quite distant villages had hurried at the chief's summons. Among these was one Gugoro, who was a great hunter and a hater of the Akasava. Seven moons before Gugoro had been caught by the Akasava hunting inside their borders, and they had slung him up by his ankles between two young trees and had beaten him with the hafts of their spears until he reached the point where he would have taken no interest and they beaten him with axes. Half-dead, he had crawled home to his village with a back like a swamp of blood and an undying hatred in his heart for anything that smelt of the Akasava.

That night at the dance Togani, the Woman of Marking, sat slightly in advance of the chief, for a guest was always given the best place. The light from the great fires danced and flickered on her serene face and her eyes seemed to stare not so much at the dancers as through them. There was much drinking of beer, and Gugoro the hunter drank more than most, so that the unending beat of the drums seemed to boom in his brain the word "Aka-sava! Aka-sava! Aka-sava!"

Suddenly Gugoro leapt to his feet, a spear gripped in his shaking fist, and with a great roar of "Die, she-dog of an Aka-sava!" threw with unerring aim.

Togani, the Woman of Marking, died without a sound.

A moan of horror went up from the crowd at this impious killing.

"O ko!" exclaimed the chief in stupefaction, and then in sudden rage, "Kill that man."

Gugoro died instantly.

"O kol exclaimed the chief again. "This woman's death will be the death of many."

"Not if we slay the others, leaving not one to tell this tale," suggested a counsellor at his elbow.

The chief hesitated, his face working and then,

"Kill," he muttered hoarsely.

Togani's hand-maidens and litter-bearers and the herders of dogs died like slaughtered pigs in that shambles, but the twelve Akasava spearmen stood back to back, and when only two of them were left standing, there were more than thirty still shapes which had gone down before their spears.

The two who still lived were brothers. Said the elder to his junior, "Oto, you shall live to reach your chief and tell him of this evil and I will guard your going. I have lived, but you have yet to live."

Fighting like demons, the two smashed their way through the Isisi, who had no heart in their work, and it is a fact that while Oto's brother died, Oto himself lived and got away, though the Isisi clung to his trail for two days and two nights.

"Wa!" roared M'Bilini of the Akasava when the exhausted man lay before him and told his story. "This is the worst shame ever to be spoken, and by Ewa, that is death, these Isisi dogs will be sorry."

"M'Bilini," said his witch-doctor, "even though they have made this great evil, still are they marked by Togani until the rind of the new moon."

"Better so," nodded the chief, "for in the three days before the rind shall come I can summon my regiments. Send runners to every village, sound the *Iokali*, for to this killing I will carry every spear I have, and when Sandi knows the cause of our wrath his face will be kind."

"**B**ONES," said Sanders, coming into the Residency for tiffin, "I want you to go up to the N'Gombi and settle a woman palaver."

Bones nodded solemnly. "My jolly old long suit, dear old Excellency," he said complacently, "Ah, the ladies, God bless 'em."

"This one's no lady," said Sanders, "she's a menace."

"Good Lord, not a jolly old murderess, sir?"

"No, not a jolly old murderess, but in England she'd have been through the Divorce Courts several times, and would certainly be refused permission to land in the United States on the grounds of moral turpitude. The chief of her village asks that she should be removed. She is called Befi, and I'm told she has 'loving eyes.'"

"Just a case of the jolly glad eye," nodded Bones, already satisfied that he knew all about it. "Leave her in my hands. I'll deal with the naughty old miss, or is she missis?"

"She's unmarried."

Bones clicked. "I'll talk to her like a Dutch uncle," he said. "I know just how to handle these cases. Lots of jolly old tact."

"That's what I'm afraid of," murmured Hamilton.

"You'll notice, dear old Ham," said Bones offensively, "that when it's a fearful old woman palaver, the Commissioner sends Bones to deal with it, well knowin' that he has those spiritual qualities necessary. You'll notice that he doesn't send my wicked old superior. Mind you, I ain't suggestin' he don't trust you, but . . ."

Bones shrugged, spread out his hands, and his face showed exactly what the end of the sentence would have been.

"I'm not sending Hamilton," said Sanders coldly and waving the Houssa captain to silence, "because I need him here and because this palaver is the thing of least importance we have to deal with at the moment."

Bones went very red. It was not often that Sanders reprovved him so openly, but when he did it completely crushed Mr. Tibbetts and reduced him to abject silence and thoughts of imminent suicide.

Hamilton came down to the quay to see his junior off.

"Mind you keep it on a spiritual plane," he called as the strip of water between the little ship and the dock grew wider.

"Thank you, Ham," said Bones icily. "I know how to behave with the jolly old ladies. Not," he added, "like some I could name."

"'Because,'" sang Hamilton, "'his sweet heart is pu-ah.'"

Bones saluted so stiffly and turned away

so abruptly that he tripped over a deck-chair and nearly fell, nor were his injured feelings mollified in the least when, glancing swiftly towards the steersman, he saw that, though Yoka's black face was looking anywhere but at him, it was split from ear to ear in a colossal white-toothed grin.

"Full steam ahead," roared Bones. "Splice the main brace and port your jolly old helm."

"Sir," said his servant, Ali Abid, popping up from the deck beside him, "close proximity of shelving bank of sand makes porting of helm inadvisable. Similarly movement ahead of vessel injudicious, as construction of dock forces same to proceed backwards first. Total absence of spirituous rum aboard deprives respected officer of ability to splice the main brace."

"Dooce take it," grumbled Bones, stumped on all points. "What's a fellow to do, then? Ali, you depressin' old blighter, go and mix me a lemonade."

WHEN Sanders had described Befi of the N'Gombi as being a menace he had been strictly accurate, for with the coming of her fourteenth birthday and her recognition as a woman, she had completely disrupted the communal life of her village. The daughter of an unimportant fisherman, she was a lithe, straight-backed girl with cleaner-cut features than most of her people and born with a complete and instinctive knowledge of men and those things which men desire.

The first time when the headman of her village realized that Befi was unusual was when an outraged wife came to him and said, "This woman has taken my man."

"Yet your man has fect to walk away," replied the headman wisely.

"Lord," replied the injured wife, "my man is become a fool, for the woman Befi has loving eyes."

"Go back to your hut, woman, and I will see this Befi."

The headman was not a young man, and when he went to the hut of the girls' father and called to her to come out he eyed Befi with some amusement until she raised her eyes and looked at him. Some say that the headman put his hands up to his face as though blinded by the sun, but though this may be an exaggeration, it is an undisputed fact that the girl went unpun-



LOST

Where'll I eat?

Where'll I Sleep?

Where's my girl?

Last week on KP I kept thinking, "When I get to New York on my furlough, that'll be the day!"

So here I am, only I don't know my way around any more'n the Man From Mars. Can't even find my girl in this whale of a station.

Tell me: what's a guy to do?

Listen, soldier, sailor, marine! We'll find a room for you, a good place to eat.

We'll even help you find your girl, who's probably hovering around this minute, looking for you.

That's what the Travelers Aid is here for—at the booth with the kindly light—to help you out!

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ished. The trouble was there was nothing anybody could take hold of as a charge against her save that she looked at men and their knees turned to water.

The crowning abomination her silent enslavement of the male population came when two young hunters fought each other with their spears so that one of them very nearly died, and in that hour the headman sent off his message to Sandi.

"For," said he, "I do not think I may deal with her naughtiness."

How right he was was proved not an hour later, when Befi came gliding to where he sat and looked at him, her big dark eyes reproachful, and . . .

"I see you, Befi," said the headman huskily. "What do you wish?"

"What does any woman wish when standing before a proper man?" she asked directly, and the headman's chief wife inside his hut slammed a cooking-pot down on the ground so that it broke.

"O ko!" she muttered in dismay. "Now indeed my man will put me away for this Befi, who is such and such a one and so forth and the other."

"You have sent a book to Sandi," said the girl, standing before the headman, "and behold Sandi will come and he will take me from you and I will go to some other place and stand before another man looking at him with loving eyes, for that is my mystery."

"Here you shall stay," said the headman hoarsely, "though Sandi come with all his soldiers."

THAT NIGHT another scandal was added to the growing list for the village to discuss.

In happy ignorance of the delicacy of his mission, Bones came in time to the N'Gombi and went ashore. There was no headman waiting as he should have been nor any of the elders of the village, but instead a dense feminine throng which seemed to comprise every woman of the population who was of marriageable age.

"O Tibbetti," cried one, "give me back my man, for he is gone from me."

"O Tibbetti, take this witch Befi in your fine ship that we may see her no more," screeched another.

"O son of Sandi, this woman is a so-and-so doing such and such a thing and . . ."

"Oh, lor'!" said Bones in dismay, and then in the vernacular, "Peace, peace. Would you deafen me with your cries, chattering like *n'kema-n'kema*, the monkey folk, who scream in the treetops? Behold am I come that Sandi may do justice through me, for as all men are equal in this land before his face, so all woman are the same, both young and old, no matter how loving their eyes may be."

Bones went on up to the village with Abilboo and two Houssas at his back, and here he sent for the headman.

"Tibbetti," said one woman sullenly, "the *capita* of this village is gone hunting."

"Bring the woman Befi to me," commanded Bones.

"Lord," he was informed, "Befi is with the *capita*."

"Since when have woman hunted?" asked Lieutenant Tibbetts patiently. "Now behold," and he looked round at the expectant ring of women, "you shall build me a great fire before the headman's hut, and if he has not returned when the sun has crept into the ground, that fire will be thrown into his hut, and all he has will be burnt."

BY NIGHTFALL Sumumu the headman was standing before Bones and at his back the woman Befi.

"I see you, Tibbetti," he said sullenly.

"But I do not see you, Sumumu," said Bones quietly, "for behold my lord Sandi left one here as *capita* who was man, but now he is a thing of such little consequence that no proper man may notice him."

"O ko!" said Sumumu, for he saw all his authority gone in Bones' words.

"Come to me, Befi," said Bones, and the girl came, her body swaying, and stood before him.

"They tell me," began Bones, looking up into her face, and then stopped.

The limpid dark eyes gazed down at him with an expression compounded of the strangest yearning and compassion, and Bones stared like a stuck pig.

"Tibbetti," she whispered. "O my lord Tibbetti," and dropped to her knees before him, holding his eyes with hers.

"Arrrk!" said Bones in no known language, and no one could tell how the scene would have ended if Abiboo had not leant down and, catching the girl ungently be-

neath the armpit, pulled her to her feet.

"In the presence of my lord Tibbetti you will stand as others stand," he said harshly.

"Jolly old Abiboo," said Bones, and then, without looking at the girl, "I am taking you, Befi, upon the puc-a-puc so that you may stand before Sandi, where I think your mystery will vanish into a hole in the ground."

At a sign from Bones, Abiboo and the Houssas led the girl towards the *Zaire*.

"As for you, Sumumu," said Francis Augustus Tibbetts to the miserable headman, "you shall sit as *capita* of this village until such time as my lord Sandi shall have decided whether to make you once a common man or to leave you in your high place."

"Lord," said Sumumu, "if you take this woman from me I think I will be *capita* once more such as you desire, for I tell you, Tibbetti, I would rather you watched her loving eyes than me."

The woman Befi was locked into a spare cabin and Bones gave strict instructions that no Houssa was to go near her. Ali Abid was to take her meals to her, and Bones warned him in advance.

"Sir and respected employer," replied Ali with dignity, "probity of Ali Abid's moral rectitude never questioned heretofore. Beg to state that Lieutenant Tibbetts' employee no voluptuary. While serving victuals to pagan female prisoner will direct optics towards floor after pious manner of mediaeval and hairless monks."

"Cheer oh!" said Bones.

BONES was anxious to get back to the Residency as soon as possible, and continued under way after dark had fallen. It was as the *Zaire* was approaching the K'Kulu country that, strolling along the deck in the dark, Bones nearly fell overboard. He saved himself in time, but it was a near thing.

"Abiboo," he called, "the magic paint which Sandi uses to show the rim of his ship where the fine bars run no further is worn away. Therefore, man, you will take a little brush and renew it."

"Master," nodded Abiboo, "the fos-fos devil has grown tired as is his way. I will fetch the magic-paint, smearing it gently

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with my own hands in the manner you have shown me."

The Houssa saluted and turned away towards the little ship's store-room in search of the phosphorescent paint.

The *Zaire* tied up for the night in the lee of the bank not three-quarters of a mile from the stretch of open country where nightly It was reputed to roam. A few miles to the north sixty thousand Akasava spearmen moved behind the tall figure of M'Bilini, who strode south to avenge the sacrilegious murder of the Woman of Marking. Five miles to the south of the K'Kulu border the chief of the Isisi halted his men and questioned the three scouts he had sent out ahead.

"Lord," said one, "M'Bilini comes with all his spears."

"Let him come," said the Isisi chief grimly, "for I, too, have spears," and he looked back at the dense ranks of his fighting men. "Now I think we will meet M' Bilini in the long valley of the K'Kulu People."

"Lord," queried one of his captains, "what of It?" and he spat to the left and to the right in propitiation.

The Isisi chief looked anxious, but finally he said, "If It is angered will he not be as wroth with M'Bilini as with ourselves? Behold, we shall meet the Akasava where I have said, for better that we should die before the K'Kulu than have one single Akasava set foot on Isisi soil."

To Sanders at headquarters came a hurriedly-scrawled pigeon message from Bosambo.

"I hold my spears for your king and go north to the K'Kulu country, placing my young men, God will, between M'Bilini and the Isisi until such time as you, Sandi, may come with your soldiers, but haste is urgent, for I can hold them not long."

Completely unaware of the fact that he was within a few miles of two advancing armies, Bones retired to bed in Sanders' cabin and, having yawned over his prayers and reproved himself for so doing, fell instantly asleep to dream that he was married to the woman with the loving eyes and he was having the devil of a time explaining her to his relations at home.

He awoke in a sweat from his nightmare

and heard a stealthy footfall on the deck outside.

"Quiet," he whispered urgently as the bed creaked under his weight when he swung his thin legs to the floor.

He pulled on his mosquito boots and, softly opening the door, stepped out onto the deck. Instantly something blundered into him, and the next moment he was drenched in what looked like liquid fire.

"Steady the Buffs," roared Bones, and his knobby fist caught some yielding substance very hard.

"Tibbetti!" gasped Abiboo.

"Lawks!" said Bones, and stared down at the figure sitting on the deck and then at himself, for he blazed like the Angel Gabriel.

"Tibbetti," explained Abiboo, "I had forgotten that I left the little bucket with the fos-fos devil paint in it on the deck and, fearing that your lordship might place your pretty foot in it, I came to take it away."

"My pretty foot, my foot," swore Bones. "You've poured it all over me. Gosh I must be a fearful sight."

"Master," said Abiboo truthfully, "you are a sight to cause great surprise. Forgive me, for what I did I did without intent."

THE MAN went on along the deck and disappeared into the crew's quarters forward, and Bones was just about to re-enter his cabin when, as he turned towards the door, he caught sight of a dark shape flitting across the gang-plank to the bank. Bones waited for the Houssa sentry at the other end to challenge, and when no sharp word rang out, cursed the man silently for being asleep. Suddenly it dawned on him who it was, for the figure had been practically naked.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "Jolly old Glad-Eye Gladys, for a tanner."

A quick glance at the woman's cabin showed the flimsy lock had been forced, and the next moment Bones was streaking past the snoring Houssa and along the bank.

Ahead of him he heard the woman running and, saving his breath, tore after her. Things caught at his clothes and twigs whipped his face, but he ran on, and ahead of him went Befi, running lightly and

easily, until, on the fringe of the trees with a bare plain before her, she hesitated and looked back, and in that moment she screamed, a yell of mortal terror being expelled from her with the full force of her lungs, for the thing that she saw coming after her was not Tibbetti, as she had expected, but a devil, and as she recalled where she was she knew that, leaping with great strides behind her, came K'Kulu!

At that single sudden scream some ninety thousand heads turned in its direction. The plain was unoccupied, but just beyond the fringe of trees on either side stood rank upon rank of opposing spearmen, and M'Bilini of the Akasava stared in astonishment at the spectacle of this terrified woman racing out into the plain.

Obvious of everything save the flying girl ahead of him, Bones' flashing figure raced on, and he never even saw that tens of thousands of men were bent double with their heads between their legs hastily spitting in all directions.

Bones caught Befi, who screamed and struggled like a wild thing and then went suddenly limp. He threw her over his shoulder and started back the way he had come. The spectacle of the blazing personification of It thus carrying off a victim was more than the opposing armies could face, and without a sound they vanished in opposite directions, taking care that not a twig should snap beneath their feet lest that dreadful devil should hear them and pursue.

BONES stepped ashore from the *Zaire*, and as he placed one foot onto the tiny dock he stared about him in amazement, for the Residency and its surroundings were alive with men, officers in khaki drill were everywhere, company upon company of scarlet-tarbooshed Houssas were drawn up on the parade-ground and to one side, wonder of wonders, was ranged a whole battery of field-guns.

"Bones!" exclaimed Hamilton, catching the other's hand in a bear-like grip. "We never thought to see you alive. You've done your best bit of work since coming to the territories. The Commissioner's frightfully pleased, old man. I'm going to mention you in despatches."

Bones coughed. "Well, Ham, old boy,"

he said, "it's dooced nice of you and a! that sort of rot, but it wasn't as difficult as all that."

Completely bewildered, Bones was led up to where Sanders stood chatting with the colonel commanding the battalion.

Bones was shaken by the hand by the great man, who said, "Mr. Tibbetts, may I be allowed to add my congratulations to those of the Commissioner? You've done single-handed what it would have taken a whole battalion and field-guns to settle. I wish I had a few subalterns like you."

Bones saluted violently three times, opened his mouth to speak and then said, "Thank you, gentlemen. And now if I might be allowed to go to my quarters. Fearful strain, you know."

"But we shall see you at dinner, Mr. Tibbetts, I hope?" said Colonel Foster.

Bones nodded dumbly and, reaching his hut, sent for Ali Abid.

"Ali," he said when that stout man presented himself, "what the dooce is all the rumpus an' sky-hootin' about?"

"Sir," replied Ali Abid, "subject in equal state of bewilderment and brain now revolving like tee-to-tum. Regret complete inability to offer explanation for sky-hooting and rumpus. With your permission will enter into verbal communication with sergeant of Houssas to ascertain reason for display of military might."

Even through dinner that night Bones had not the mistiest idea what he had done, because, of course, he did not dare ask anybody, and his unusual modesty was so extraordinary that before they turned in that night Hamilton said anxiously to Sanders, "You know, sir, Bones has behaved awfully well over this and you can see that the strain really has told on him."

He would have been interested to see his subordinate at that moment sitting on the edge of his bed while a round-faced black man who called himself an Arab acquainted the hero of the hour with the truth about his own heroics.

"Lor'!" said Bones incredulously. "D'you mean I was between the Akasava and Isisi armies?"

"Sir," replied Ali Abid, "the point is well taken."

"Phew!" whistled Bones and broke into a gentle perspiration.



VULTURES ON SAFARI

By ARMAND BRIGAUD

The orders were brief and to the point. "Bring oaths of allegiance from the barbaric Ouelliminden. Use flattery and gifts first, and force as a last resort." Lieutenant Conant smiled grimly. Flattery and gifts had failed, and force was definitely out—for he was the slave-victim of those he had come to see.

A Thundering Novel of African Intrigue.



Conant fired with blind instinctive speed.

AS THE observation airplane flew on, Military Intelligence Lieutenant Ed Conant, attached to the airforce unit stationed at Colomb-Bechar, remembered the instructions received from his squadron commander, Major Bailey, and from Colonel Hutton of G-2.

"Conant," Major Bailey had said, "You are a Philosophy Doctor specialized in Anthropology, no less. You have mastered the Bedouin-Makil, the Peuhl, and also the Tamashek language spoken by the

veiled Touareg. You are also an all-around star athlete. Altogether, just the man we need for a very special job.

"Now, listen carefully:

"The basin of the Niger River—some two hundred and fifty miles south of here—is inhabited by the roughest hordes of barbarians this side of hell. But the southern Touareg are the toughest of them all. They ran the non-Touareg races with a fist of iron until, at the beginning of the present century, the French came and shot

their iron supremacy to Kingdom come.

"From that time on, the Administration of French West-Africa sent 'at regular intervals strongly escorted executives of the Bureau Indigene, or Colonial Secret Service, among the southern Touareg, to seize the repeating rifles that the veiled tribesmen managed to obtain in defiance of all regulations and penalties.

"But the southern Touareg were not tamed by such round-ups of weapons, by the seizure of their camels and horses, and by the removal of their meager hoards of sorgho grain and other staple foods. Time and again they revolted, charged wildly the firing machine guns of the French Colonial troops, and died cursing the French and calling upon their sons to avenge them.

"Then the day came when the *Troisième Republique* lost the battle of France. Her far flung Colonial Empire plunged into a state of chaos. That was the chance the Southern Touareg had been waiting and hoping for, for a long time. In some habitats they forced the local French officials to bow to their will. In others they launched murderous raids, resulting in the annihilation of skeleton garrisons of Mehariste Camel Corps units and Senegalese Tirailleurs.

"The Ouelliminden, recognized leaders of the southern Touareg, have not left their stamping grounds so far. But, if they should, the other Touareg confederations, and the neighboring half-breed and negro races would pitch in, in a monster uprising, because they are all looters, always spoiling for a fight."

Conant shrugged.

"A few dive bombers will make short work of any Ouelliminden revolt."

"Yes, provided that we get accurate aerial maps of the Ouelliminden habitat, and that we find the exact location of every Ouelliminden semi-permanent camp, hide-out and pasture. Otherwise any repressive campaign will drag on and on until we grow grey beards," Major Bailey snorted.

"You will make the necessary aerial reconnaissance," Colonel Hutton explained. "In the course of it you will drop packages of gifts into the Ouelliminden camps. You shall look on your way back to see if they show appreciation by waving cordially. Then you'll use your judgment as to whether to land or not for a palaver. A

check-up from the ground would render your survey perfect. You would earn our undying gratitude if you could bring the Ouelliminden to our point of view. But, damn it, we cannot ask anyone to put his head into the lion's maw unless he feels that he can get away with it."

"The Ouelliminden are unpredictable," Conant said. "Some devil-may-care explorers and army officers went in their Tobols and lived with them for months without trouble. But several French scientists, Government officials and soldiers were greeted by them like lost brothers and murdered the next day."

"I don't see why you shouldn't get along with them," Colonel Hutton said after a pause. "You are unencumbered by the grudge that the Ouelliminden nurse against all Frenchmen. Your physical strength and skill as a swordsman are the qualities that Touareg admire most.

"You are tall and well shaped. You have the face of a matinee idol and an engaging smile—when you feel like smiling. The Targuias—that is, the Amazonian Touareg women—are not finicky when ugly strangers are carved to ribbons. But they often take personable outsiders under their protection, which goes a long way in the matriarchal social organization of their tribes. Really, I'm inclined to believe that the Ouelliminden women will restrain their fellow tribesmen from murdering you."

"Colonel," Major Bailey winked. "Don't you think that Conant's marriage with a barefooted Ouelliminden chieftess would help?"

"It certainly would, and it is a pity that we cannot order him to contract such a union," Colonel Hutton replied with a poker face. "Conant, however, could make a noble gesture for the good of the service, and . . ."

"No, thanks," Conant replied solemnly, "I'll manage to do what's expected from me without saddling myself with an African bride."

And that was the conference.

"THEN we went to lunch and had I Colomb-Bechar pullets fried Southern style, and pie, made with dehydrated apples but quite good," Conant mused, when he looked alternately at the ground below and at his wrist watch and came out

of his trance with a yelp: "We are already over Ouelliminden territory. Set the radio working, McNamara!"

Sergeant Fred McNamara, former reporter for a Chicago daily, bent his elongated frame over the dials and gave them a turn or two. Nothing happened. McNamara tried again, with growing nervousness. Then his chin dropped, and he cursed: "The darn thing went dead on us. It may take a bit of work to set it right again, Lieutenant!"

"Go to it, quick!" Conant replied.

After a pause Conant asked.

"How does it run, Aberdikian?"

Private Aberdikian grinned and nodded vigorously to show that all was well with the motor. He was a husky man over thirty who looked exactly like an unshaven Assyrian of old. He had slaved in a sweatshop in childhood, and had been a garment cutter up to the day of his induction. Assigned to the Airforce, he had gone into ground training with a feeling akin to awe. But, in due time, he had become an exceptional pilot.

Conant leaned back on his seat, uncorked a thermos bottle and gulped a swig of ice-cold grapefruit juice. The crisp tang of it acted swiftly on his robust system. He felt full of vigor when he turned to the cameraman:

"How are the films rolling, Hormel?"

Hormel shrugged his squat shoulders. He wrinkled his button of a nose, thrust forward his jutting jaw and rumbled:

"Okay. The mess of jagged stones was duly taken in. Now I'm shooting plenty of steep hills, way-down deep gulches, sand dunes and funny trees growing all on one side . . ."

"Hey!" Aberdikian suddenly shouted, "The motor is going screwy!"

As to confirm his words, a sharp knocking rang. Then, unexpectedly, the airplane bucked like an angry mustang. Hormel fell backward. Conant was thrown against the gun rack.

The hard knock set a thousand bells ringing in his brain. He made an effort to pull himself up, caught a fleeting glimpse of McNamara beside Aberdikian and striving to help him. Then a roar filled his ears, a black mist fell before his eyes and he lost consciousness.

7—Jungle—Spring

THE AIRPLANE had righted when he reacquired his senses. Livid under the black stubble covering his cheeks, Aberdikian kept it on an even course. Conant managed to return to his seat. He had just buckled the safety belt around his waist, and was hoping that the danger could be over, when the airplane made a dizzy turn, rocking violently from side to side.

"The trouble in our motor was not bad enough that we had to run into an air pocket!" Aberdikian shouted.

Conant swallowed hard. His head ached abominably, and there was a cut on his chin. As he wiped the blood seeping from it with the back of his glove, confused thoughts crowded in his throbbing mind. A few French pilots had told him time and again that they feared the ceiling over the zone between the middle-Sahara and the Niger River.

Conant's body was limp. He could only gaze at Aberdikian and McNamara, who were striving to pull the airplane out of the whirlpool of swirling eddies of tempestuous air, when a sound like a gun-shot rang. The plane made a prodigious leap, reared, and climbed so steeply that the backs of the four men in it pressed hard against their seats.

Then, uncontrollably, it slid into a succession of spirals.

In vain Conant stared at the instrument board, but he was too dizzy, he couldn't read anything on it. He gazed out of the window, saw the mounds and the ravines below revolving madly and growing larger with the passing of every instant. He thought: "What a crazy way of dying, after pulling through a score of air combats and bombing expeditions without a scratch!" And then he felt as if his stomach and heart were crowding in his throat, and the agonizing throbbing in his head became unbearable. Behind him Hormel shouted:

"The Lieutenant is hurt! He's going to faint again!"

In that moment, however, the airplane slid out of the air pocket and Aberdikian lost no time in righting it. Conant slumped back on his seat. Little by little his sickness and pain faded, strength began to seep back into his body.

But Aberdikian was still pale and un-

easy. Pursing his lips, he listened tensely, absorbed and analyzed every vibration.

"I saw something flashing on that hill down to our left! Just like a gun-barrel struck by the sun!" Hormel called.

But only Conant paid attention to him; and Conant was still too much under the weather to do anything about it.

A couple of minutes later, his constitution of iron had asserted itself; and he was almost recovered, when Aberdikian stammered:

"Lieutenant, the motor can and must be fixed, the leak somewhere in our tanks that's draining our gasoline must be tapped. But what a fat chance have I to put a damn thing in order while we fly? There's little to choose. We must land on our own power before we crash!"

"That would be a good spot!" Conant replied, pointing at a stretch of flat ground between a chain of thickets and a hillock.

Guided by the expert hands of Aberdikian, the plane glided smoothly toward it. But after a few seconds the motor sputtered and died.

"Curse our luck!" Aberdikian ranted, "We cannot land on that safe place. We are going to crash a full hundred short."

"Look out there!" Hormel suddenly shouted.

An avalanche of tribesmen were gushing out of a ravine and riding hell for leather toward the falling airplane. Conant had barely time to notice that they wore long dark tunics, and that their heads, wrapped in black cloths, gave them an appearance of faceless wraiths, when, in spite of the frenzied efforts of Aberdikian and McNamara, the plane banked sharply, and turned over.

The ground was too near for parachutes. There was no time to bail out. For the next minute or so Conant gripped his seat for dear life and felt like a frog trapped into a box shaken by a mischievous country boy. Then he got a glimpse of a rocky slope, which seemed to hurtle upward at tremendous speed, and he heard a bedlam of ear-splitting yells and a thunderous volley.

All these noises were suddenly drowned by a tremendous crash; then the occupants of the doomed airplane felt as if the whole world was exploding and crushing them in its ruin.

CONANT never knew what happened immediately after. Only that the plane struck a patch of soft ground, because there was no other explanation of the fact that he was still living. But the moment came when, with all his senses deadened by the tremendous impact and the shock, he wrenched his legs free from a mess of splinters, and fumbled for the gun rack. He swore madly because he was unable to locate it. Then he heard Aberdikian weakly calling his name.

Aberdikian was pinned between the motor and his seat. A hail of bullets tore through the wreckage of the fuselage and shattered his skull as Conant hastened to his help.

Conant slunk back, sickened, convulsed by helpless rage. Somehow he got hold of an ammunition belt and a Garand rifle, and hammered a hole with the butt of the latter through the crumbled side of the cabin and the smashed fuselage that had flopped over it. Just in time, because only some six hundred yards—less than two minutes for galloping horses—separated the wreck from the charging razzou.

Conant's heart leaped wildly as he recognized the tribesmen. Touareg, so big and husky that their mounts, horses of average size, seemed mere ponies under their imposing bodies. Faceless and formidable, they rode upright, with their big toes stuck into the loops of the ropes acting as stirrups and hanging from the sides of their saddles. The lifted naked swords, the barrels of their guns, and their spears, formed a blanket of bristling steel above their massed squadron.

"Allah K' Akbar!" Their concerted and ear-splitting battlecry rent the air, mixed with the roll of thunder of hundreds of quick pounding hoofs, and with the booming of the ground under them.

For a split second Conant wondered if his coming out of the wreckage without showing fight could stop them and pave the way for a friendly understanding. The gory pulp into which Aberdikian's head had turned, and the sharp "Zing!" and hiss of the bullets flying close to his head, recalled him to the grim reality of his predicament. To make matters worse, he smelled burning gasoline.

He could not see McNamara and Hor-

II

mel through the wreck. As a matter of fact he did not know if they were still alive. Nevertheless, he frenziedly called their names, and was cheered by the sound of their answering voices.

"I'm getting out of the right side, smash your way out of the left and run for shelter. I'll join you shortly!" he quickly shouted, and waded out of the broken cabin wall. Instantly he saw through the shimmering pillars of heat haze the first rank of the charge, coming in an avalanche of bared equine teeth spewing foam, and running hoofs lashing out at top speed.

The butt of the Garand kicked hard into his shoulder as he pressed the trigger. Followed a chaotic moment, when horses and riders plunged into a cloud of lifted dust, other horses reared almost vertically unseating their masters, and the mounts which came next hell for leather struck the dead, the wounded and the fallen, and tumbled and rolled over them and with them, in a wild tangle of thrashing equine bodies, kicking hoofs and tribesmen attempting to tear themselves out of that crush.

The momentum of the charge was temporarily broken. Conant took advantage of it to sprint around the wreck and to run after McNamara and Hormel.

But plenty of Touareg rode like the wind around both sides of the crashed plane and tore after him. The hundred yards separating Conant from the natural rampart of boulders, singled out by McNamara and Hormel for their last stand, could have been as well a hundred miles, so little chance the three of them had of reaching it ahead of the fast-running Touareg horses. Sure that his last moment had come, Conant turned and pressed the trigger. A big hellion of a veiled warrior flew spreadeagled out of the saddle, then Conant caught a glimpse of a dark object streaking straight for his head and ducked.

Thus, not the sharp point but the shaft of a two-yard long spear of solid iron struck glancingly the side of his head. The blow, however, rang like a peal of thunder all over his skull and into it. His knees caved in, the rifle slipped from his numbed fingers; then a veiled warrior sprang out of the saddle and threw himself at him.

CONANT fell so hard that the breath was knocked out of his lungs. Before he could recover his wits, his throat was crushed by a hand small but strong as a steel vise, a knee struck the pit of his stomach and imbedded itself in it. Choked, dazed and hardly able to move, Conant saw, to his utter amazement a slit between head cloth and face veil through which glared a pair of long-lashed eyes blue as turquoises, two breasts, round and firm like pomegranates, panting under a gorgeous blue and silver embroidered waistcoat above his own gasping breast.

A Targuia, a Touareg woman, had thrown and pinned him down, and was about to kill him. Gathering all his remaining strength, he swiftly lifted an arm and grabbed her veil aside, exposing her to his gaze. He was safe now—for a veiled woman could not slay one who had seen her features.

The Targuia above Conant would have never dared to break such a rule.

Her very womanly scream of dismay rang. Her shortened sword, about to plunge into Conant's side, swept clear of his body when she released him and sprang on her feet, shaking with baffled passion. As Conant fell back, struggling for breath, she shouted vibrantly, disdainfully:

"Messaoud taalabein!"

"She is calling me accursed fox, but I'm still alive!" Conant thought. As his lungs filled, a flow of renewed strength cursed through his veins. Soon he arose and nobody made a move to strike him down again.

A single glance at the warriors on horse and on foot who had formed a ring all around him, proved to Conant what a melting pot of a multitude of races the Touareg nation was. For some were massive six footers of unmistakable all-Berber strain, with the skin of their bare arms and feet ruddy under a thick coat of tan. Others, shorter and with an enormous spread of shoulders, had big feet, big square hands with spatulated fingers, and a brownish complexion. A few men who had the appearance and bearing of western warriors of old stood side by side with very tall and extremely lanky individuals, with hawk-featured fighting men of Semitic

stock, and with fighting men of a decidedly Armenoid type. Light and dark-skinned mulattoes were also in that barbaric crowd.

An aura of seething and ruthless ferocity, which was the only characteristic that they had in common besides their attire, wafted from all these tribesmen like a tangible aura. But the most forbidding of the whole lot were some incredibly ferocious-looking Touareg who did not resemble any other living race. Almost seven feet tall, raw boned, leathery, and with long muscles under the tanned skin of their forearms like steel cables, these veiled warriors glared at Conant through the slits of their lithams out of disconcerting eyes, whose pupils had brown or grey irises surrounded by glittering yellow rims.

Behind the massed Touareg, the leaves of an euphorbia tree swayed in the breeze. A big winged beetle buzzed around Conant's head, found no interest in his disheveled hair and flew away. The sun bore down like a tangible weight on the battered and cornered American officer, drew blinding flashes from the pommels of the cross-hilted swords of the Touareg, from their gun barrels and from the telaka poniards strapped to their left forearms.

"Horde of filthy murderers!" Conant shrieked in Tamashek, "I came bringing gifts to the whole lot of you, but you fired against my machine that flew, you killed one of my men, you would have killed me also if one of your tricky customs had not helped me in the nick of time!"

A WILD jabbering broke out. A few hands pointed him out derisively, ribald guffaws of laughter rent the oven-hot air. Suddenly the Touareg turned about and swarmed all over the wreck. They beat down the flames that were flickering over it, while Conant cursed the fact that the leak, or whatever else had worked the trick, had emptied the tanks and no explosion was likely to occur for their undoing. Then the Touareg tore the smashed airplane apart, looking for booty. Only the Targuia who had almost killed him remained before Conant.

"There's no place where you can run, where you can hide!" she said scornfully, "Your weapons were taken away from you. They would ride after you and re-

capture and cripple you easily, the Ouelliminden warriors! Look at your friends! They have been badly beaten, they lay unconscious! There!"

Following the direction singled out by her shapely outstretched arm, Conant saw, some twenty paces to his left, two tan shapes imbedded in the grass. Red devils of helpless rage played riot in his mind as the Targuia continued pitilessly:

"How much I regret that, unaware that you were familiar with our language and customs, I gave you unwillingly an opportunity to see my face. Now I cannot spill your foreign blood, may Allah curse it! But I conquered you! I'm your *tamelit*, your female owner! Serve me and obey me well, O dog of a Rumi! Because your trickery enabled you to remain alive today, but your immunity will not last forever!"

"I'm not French. I'm from America, a mighty faraway country which never before sent armed men in Touareg land. As I told before, I came as a friend!" Conant retorted.

But the Targuia had never heard anything about America and was not impressed.

Presently the Touareg returned, boastful and happy because they had stripped the wrecked plane of everything worth taking, and were loaded with booty. Conant cursed as he recognized the blood soaked uniform of Aberdikian in the hands of a veiled warrior. The Touareg had found the packages of gifts, they had broken them open, and had helped themselves to their contents. Mirrors, watches, knives of stainless steel, scarfs and Woolworth jewelry. But their attitude toward Conant and the unconscious McNamara and Hormel had not undergone any change for the better.

Conant saw an immense warrior—the tallest among the giants with yellow eyes of beasts of prey—coming toward his *tamelit* mistress with his big bony hands full of shiny bracelets and necklaces, and he heard his voice, which had a curious ring of clanking brass and distant thunder, booming:

"May the sun of Allah shine always over you, Idene oult Amastane! Take these gifts, accept me at last in the compact of *asri*!"

Idene made an imperious gesture. The leathery giant stopped in his tracks and

sighed like a steam valve switched open. Then humiliation and rage upset his savage temper so, that he shook in every limb as if afflicted by palsy. Suddenly his disconcerting eyes fell on Conant, and, beside himself, he choked:

"Idene oult Amastane! Let me take that living carrion of a Rumi out of your hands!"

Someone behind Conant said in Tamashék:

"Inshallah! If Rhammad ag Bechir gets hold of you, O Rumi, you will wish that you were dead."

Idene, however, remained adamant. Staring haughtily at her towering suitor, she said vibrantly:

"I told you, time and again, and I even swore by the soul of my father, the Amenokal Amastane ag Moussa, that the dust of my sandals shall be always shaken over you—that you can never hope to win my favor, O Rhammad ag Bechir! Now I repeat once more, and for the last time: I shall never enter any compact, of love or otherwise, with you! Go!"

RHAMMAD had winced at every word of Idene. When she was through, his terrible eyes of beast of prey almost popped out of their orbs. Conant felt the hair bristling on the back of his neck when he heard the rejected giant, snarling and grating as if he were choking:

"I take the two other Rumouaren, to tear and crush, as they deserve!"

But Idene was more than a strong-willed woman facing a challenge. Idene was a Targuia of a tribe where a woman's wish was a law in itself, and the daughter of the last ruling chief of that tribe.

"How I despise you, O, Rhammed ag Bechir!" she replied furiously. "Who are you, but a headman because a mistake of fate made you such at birth, and a foul, bloodthirsty beast at heart? Do you forget that, next to me, Amosar ag Tabarek ranks highest in our Tobol of the Oueliminden people? Amosar is by right the *emeli*, the master of the other two strangers. Amosar is a head shorter than you. But you would never dare to challenge him, sword in hand! Because you bask in the fear that you inspire in all other warriors, but you know that Amosar, the unsurpassed fighter, would kill you, as

surely as there is a sun in the sky!"

Conant saw Rhammed stumbling backward, as if pushed back step by step by an invisible and irresistible force, and was almost hypnotized by the heinous malevolence and hatred flaring in his terrible yellow eyes, when he felt the impact of a heavy hand over his shoulder and heard a raucous voice:

"Come, harratin! Come, slave of Idene oult Amastane!"

Then a mulatto Imrad, or half-caste Targui, whirled him around and pushed him roughly toward a cluster of saddle-camels, which squatted in the shade of a row of trees, under the watchful eyes of several negro attendants.

When they got among the mehara, the Imrad brought Conant to a halt and growled:

"O man who turned from a flying eagle into a harratin, can you sit on a rhala saddle and lead a mehari?"

Conant had learned to handle camels in Colomb Bechar. Without a moment's hesitancy, he grabbed the rope fastened to the nose-ring of a rangy russet-pelted mehari, climbed over its wooden rhala saddle, and placed his left foot on the root of its snaky neck.

A few minutes after he rode in the middle of the returning raiders, who had left their camp in the morning to attack, kill and spoil wandering non-Touareg tribesmen as a sport, and had instead bagged the wreck of the airplane sent to photograph their territory, after noticing its fall by a chance.

A COUPLE of hours later, the returning razzou crossed a grove of tamarisks and ju-jube trees, and rode over a spread of thick-stemmed akresh grass swaying in the wind.

The tribal Tobol lay at the opposite end of the plain, under the almost perpendicular gray-blue slope of a long ridge.

As a rule, Touareg Tobols are semi-permanent camps of tents of camel hide. The tents composing this one, however, were larger than usual, brightly painted, and shiny with metallic disks, half-moons and rectangles. The numberless goats grazing all around them, the long lines of picketed horses, and the multitude of camels, hobbled in Saharan style with the

right knee bent and the fetlock fastened to the thigh above it, vouched for the high-standard of prosperity of the fellow tribesmen of Idene oult Amastane.

The tent before which Idene and her retinue brought their mounts to a halt, was a huge pavilion partitioned into several compartments. But Conant had to go with other harratin slaves to a huge shelter in the rear of it, where four middle aged negresses industriously pounded millet into flour with wooden pestles over flat stone slabs, while two negro girls squatted in the deepest shade, wrapped in long tunics which left bare only their necks and arms, and grinned because their special duties enabled them to loaf at will, to their utter delight. Their suddenly-alert eyes and their white teeth shone even more than their long earrings and bracelets of hammered brass, when the Imrad who had taken charge of Conant rumbled gruffly:

"Tene, this Rumi has become a harratin like you. Give him a matting to squat and sleep upon, until Idene oult Amastane assigns him a chore, or the curse of Allah kills him!"

Tene, coppery brown rather than black, and with quite dainty and pretty Fulane-Zande features, scanned Conant from head to foot so searchingly that he felt as if his ragged clothes were peeled away from his person. When the Imrad was gone she chuckled:

"What kind of a Rumi harratin are you? What does your face look like, under the dust?"

"Give me water to wash myself and you will find out," Conant replied curtly.

Tene wrapped her slim arms around her knees and uttered a derisive sound. Then she drawled:

"Teba! Why should I serve another slave? If you want water, grab a bowl, fill it, and soak yourself until you burst. The water jar is in that corner. Are you blind that you don't see it?"

The jar in question was an enormous container, of a shape already old when Carthage was founded. Conant took one of the bowls of baked clay heaped at its foot, filled it and went out of the pavilion. In the open, he washed himself painstakingly, unmindful of the jabbering of a swarm of naked children. Then he pulled

a small comb out of a pocket and brushed back his wavy hair.

When he returned into the tent, Tene stared at him admiringly for a long time.

"Inshallah!" she exclaimed at length. "You are alaba-beautiful!"

"Leave him alone, daughter of all mischief!" a shrill voice snapped. "Idene oult Amastane, who should order you lashed out of your skin, calls for this new slave of hers. Therefore, he must come at once to kneel before her sandals!"

A veritable mountain of a mulatto woman had lifted a lap of cloth acting as a door with a meaty hand, and was beckoning to Conant with the other.

CONANT obeyed her summons, all the more eagerly because curiosity prodded him, and crossed at her side into a dark cubicle. Then her hands lifted a second curtain, her shrill voice urged him on. Conant stepped into a wide room, stared all around, and wondered if he was dreaming.

For this section of the tent reserved for Idene's use was tastefully furnished with priceless hanging draperies. A thick and soft Persian rug covered the packed earth acting as its floor. A wide, gorgeously upholstered couch stood against one of its sides.

Conant admired next a low cedar table of exquisite workmanship, sculptured vessels of hammered silver, graceful tripods over which burned thyme leaves and delicate scents, and some beautiful lamps fastened to the tent poles supporting the room's ceiling of stiff hides sewn together.

Undoubtedly, all that magnificent and exotic furniture had been wrested from caravans, or dragged out of the houses of wealthy Songhais, when Idene's ancestors had ruled Timbuctoo and the whole basin of the Niger river by the sword. But the silence and peace of that sanctum were supreme—refreshing and almost unearthly for Conant, after all the nerve-wracking experiences that he had endured since his arrival in the Touareg country. A pukkah, pulled rhythmically by an invisible slave, flapped in a corner, cooling the air. Its cadenced, muffled noise, made Conant drowsy. He sank on a pile of cushions, and was sleeping as he sat, as all weary soldiers have done since the dawn of his

tory, when a soft call jerked him out of his slumber.

He tiredly opened his eyes and instantly he sat up, fully awake. For the beauty of the girl before him was such that it galvanized him like an electric shock and took his breath away.

Her complexion was the color of roseate coral. Only her lovely arms and feet were tanned. Her face was so symmetrically and delicately perfect that it would have inspired awed admiration instead of any warmer feeling, if her eyebrows had not been so silky, if her long lashed blue eyes had not been so intensely human. Two dimples, near the corners of her lips red like ripening cherries, enhanced the sparkling effect of her smile.

The soft light of a sunbeam, filtering through a slit on the tent-wall of the room, drew golden gleams from her light brown, curly hair, revealed her slim, rounded and faultless body through the diaphanous silk of her pale-yellow gown. A diadem of gold leaves, and two golden bracelets, studded with turquoises as shiny and blue as her eyes, added an exotic touch to the entrancing loveliness of the appearance of that girl, who stood so still, smiling so mysteriously, before the battered American lieutenant.

"Iselane! What news!" Conant finally uttered the Touareg greeting as if in a trance, and pulled himself up, stretching his hand tentatively.

"Elouane!" the girl replied softly and placed her slim hand over his. Suddenly her delicate fingers closed over Conant's fist, and their grip was like a steel vise. Her eyes opened, stared into those of the young American officer, who startled as he recognized in them the gleam of the blue eyes which had glowered over him, when he had laid flat on his back and about to be slain, near his wrecked airplane.

"You are," he gasped, "Iselane, the daughter of the Amenokal Amstane."

"Yes, I'm Idene, your tamelit, who could order your head lopped off for greeting her as equal to equal!" Idene replied severely. Then her red lips parted in a smile, uncovering a set of pearly white teeth! "I could not make out what you looked like, with that mask of soot and dust over your face, but now I see how handsome it is

and how well it matches your strong and straight body."

Her hennaed fingers released Conant's hand and caressed lightly his forehead and mouth while she said softly: "I cannot turn you free after enslaving you. It would be unwise of me and dangerous for you, because where would you turn, in this Tobol where every hand would be lifted at once against you? However, I can . . . but, before taking a final decision, I must understand how your mind and heart work."

Her bearing was so graceful that Conant thought that she was floating through the air when she went to the coach and stretched herself over it, revealing every bewitching particular of her slim and willowy body.

Conant went to sit near her, wondering if he was dreaming.

He had seen, admired and often desired scores of beautiful girls in his native America. But he could not make out why Idene, as physically perfect as all American beauty contest winners, was somehow different from everyone of them.

The truth was that Idene's lure was the composite of a thousand exotic lures, inherited from a long line of mysterious ancestresses who had lived glamorously in a bygone and forgotten past. Consequently, her fast-growing spell over Conant was an irresistible force which intoxicated his senses and went straight to his heart, all the more surely because he had no defense whatsoever against it.

LITTLE tongues of flame leaped and flickered on the tripods. The burning thyme and perfumes filled the tent-room with delicious scents. The flap, flap of the pukkah, the tiny gratings and squeaks of the pulleys through which ran the ropes that kept it moving, added a homely touch to the breath-taking setting that was the fitting background of the beauty of Idene out Amstane.

Conant remained still for several minutes, held in a trance by the enigmatic glance of the dark-blue eyes of the Targuia princess. But at length Idene lowered her long lashes. The delicate oval of her face became reposed as she whispered:

"Tell me all about your country, its

people, and your activities before you came here."

As a rule, Conant was not fond of long speeches. But, somehow, vivid word-pictures flowed freely and easily from his lips of the sunny and fertile states of the Western Coast, of the borderless flatlands of the Middle States, and of the bustling life of the East, where numberless factories are perpetually at work, and the skyscrapers surge challengingly toward the sky. Then he described the salient points of the life of an average American family, the mighty sweeps of public opinion, the hopes and struggles of the younger generations of the mightiest nation on earth, in a world where the wisdom of experience can hardly cope with the problems of an era of epochal and hurricanous changes.

Although she could not fully understand most of the things that he said, Idene oult Amastane listened enraptured. Her eyes flashed with keen interest when he spoke shortly of his father, a school teacher killed by pneumonia in his prime, and of the hardships incurred by his mother in giving him an education.

Conant thought that he had told enough, when she unexpectedly asked:

"What do the women of your country look like when their youth is over?"

A vision flickered in Conant's mind of his mother, neat, cheerful and white haired, and also of some well-preserved dowagers well provided with worldly goods who, with the help of the best complexions packed in jars that money can buy, and of skilled hairdos and svelte clothes, managed to look breezier and younger than their granddaughters. But he simply replied that American women know how to keep active and youthful up to a late age.

Much to his surprise, this assertion irritated Idene, who sprang out of the couch and stamped her small feet. But soon her face cleared. Her slim arm made a wide gesture:

"I give you this place to live in. You shall do no work, because you will be harratin in name, and my friend in fact. Now come, look and draw your own conclusions!

The three-hundred pound mulatto woman reappeared as if by magic and lifted a curtain used as a door. A corridor

stood revealed, heaped on one side with scabbarded swords, spears and guns of various vintages. Idene crossed it swiftly followed by Conant and went to lift a second curtain.

The room behind it was small, round and typically Touareg: full of cured camel-hides, round clay pots, and cushions studded with strips of multicolored leather and metallic disks.

In the middle of that room a flabby and unkempt woman squatted on a pile of heaped rugs. Her feet and ankles were monstrously swollen. Her ragged gray head swayed from side to side, and a disconnected rumble issued from her puffed lips. Her rough hands, ending in cracked fingernails long as claws, were busy assembling and binding together the pieces and bent slabs of a wooden rhala saddle.

It would have been difficult to think of a sight worse than the one presented by that obviously deranged Targuia. Nevertheless, the more he stared at her, the more Conant noticed how uncannily she looked like a swollen, sagging and obscenely foul caricature of Idene. When that poor being lifted her eyes, Conant gasped. For, in spite of their vacant expression, they were as beautifully shaped and blue as Idene's eyes. But the dimples in her cheeks only enhanced their puffed and pimply texture when she said raucously: "The Tobol drum was beaten. The afuda is waiting. I must hurry, hurry with my work. . . ."

Idene's face froze into a tragic mask. Only her lips moved as she whispered:

"For years she has been obsessed by the idea that a racing camel waits outside and cannot leave without this saddle that she is assembling. But, as soon as she places the last cog in it, something in her snaps and, grabbing a dagger, she tears it apart. Then her wild fit fades and, moaning, she gathers every piece of the broken saddle, and starts all over again her work which has no end.

"Look at her! You would never believe that there was a time when the greatest chiefs and the most famous warriors fought among themselves for the privilege of throwing themselves at her feet. But I can show you the skulls of Intalamar ag Kheradna, Amenokal of the Tanguereguedef, and of Hassikoula, king of kings

of the entire Air nation, who were killed in single combat by my father Amastane, for the love of this woman; Ameema out Adorali, my mother, who once was the greatest beauty of the Ouelliminden.

"Oua . . . mekkeret . . . what an urgent need! What a hurry!" the insane woman blubbered. Her disheveled gray head bobbed up and down, her still beautiful eyes squinted painfully. Two rivulets of spittle dripped from the corners of her twisted mouth and fell on the saddle.

Conant stared at her as if he were seeing a ghost. He groped for fitting words to comfort Idene, but, having no way of knowing how her pride would react to any expression of sympathy, he eventually decided to hold his peace.

Idene was no longer at his side when he turned his head, and in vain he searched for her in the nearby corridor. Back in the gorgeous room which had become his own, he asked the huge Ajessa where Idene had gone. But Ajessa replied gruffly:

"You have no right to know. When Idene will decide to meet you again, Idene will send for you."

III

FOR THE next two days Conant rested comfortably and was abundantly fed; but he chafed at his unaccustomed inaction.

He had been given Touareg garments, including a tunic of a blue cloth that probably had been pillaged, because it did not stain his fingers when he rubbed it, as any homespun, indigo-dyed Touareg cloth would have done. But, being a harratin slave, he was forbidden to wear weapons within the camp. As a result, the children pelted him with stones whenever he got a notion of leaving the huge tent-house for a walk. Their parents added insult to injury by reviling him, and stood ready to draw steel and attack him with impunity at his least answer.

Nobody told him a kind word, not even Tene, the Fulane girl who had shown such a decided liking for him in the day of his arrival. Tene thought that he had become the private property of Idene. Therefore, kept away from him, for fear of incurring the wrath of her mistress.

Thus, in the third day of his enslavement,

Conant received the invitation to partake of Idene's *diffa* like a reprieve from a status akin to solitary confinement.

He found Idene and the high-cast Imouaren of her retinue squatting in the open Touareg style before a spread of foods; platters heaped with chunks of broiled kid, bowls containing kuskouses of chopped vegetables, bowls of spiced fig and date kuskouses, bowls of boiled sorgho flour, *takadnarin* cheeses, sharp and hard as rocks, and great pitchers of goat's milk.

The trouble with that abundant meal chock-full of vitamins and proteins was that the table manners of the Imouaren Ouelliminden were simply atrocious. Lifting their litham veils with one hand, they scooped food with the other and crammed it into their mouths. Or they grabbed huge morsels of meat and gnawed at them like ravenous dogs, pausing now and then to suck their teeth or to spit out bits of bone. Nor did Idene behave any better. To look at her, with grease pouring down her chin, was like the foundering of a dream for Conant.

Nevertheless, his youth and healthy appetite asserted themselves. He was rendering full justice to that barbaric lunch, when he heard a sound that was partly an angry exclamation and partly a beastly snarl. He turned and saw Rhammad, immense and threatening, and a half-breed Targui with a huge fist wrapped around the hilt of his sword.

These two uninvited guests had come treading noiselessly on their sandals of *nyel* hide. But, after the first shock, Idene's temper flared.

"Insistant, revolting Rhammad! And you Matalli, the son of Rhammad's father and a nameless negro concubine" she yelled at the top of her lungs, "How many times did I tell you. . . ."

Rhammad's frenzied shout drowned her voice:

"Inshallah! What made you believe that I would stay away cringing like a gecko lizard of the sands when you eat shamelessly besides your strange slave and have perhaps made him your paramour?"

Bedlam instantly broke loose. Idene sprang indignantly on her feet. Her Imouaren did likewise, unsheathing their swords.

"Matalli!" Rhammad thundered, "The

time has come to make our steel sing!" and he whipped his immense sword out of the scabbard.

Matalli unsheathed his sword also, shouting to a negro slave who was looking upon the quarrel from a distance:

"Call our men, or tonight you will be dead!"

However, warriors came running out from the tents all around and, sword in hand, forced back Rhammad, Tegama and other Touareg who were hastening to their help.

Meanwhile, half-cast Imedreden and armed negro harratin slaves rushed out of Idene's pavilion and the tents close to it. A clash seemed inevitable, with the peacemakers likely to bear the brunt of it because they stood on the way, when a richly attired Targui appeared, followed by a compact group of veiled warriors with ready guns and spears lifted to strike.

"I'll fight him and his men until he dies or I'm slain!" the frenzied Idene shouted. "You come in vain, Amosar ag Tabarek, and you, warriors of Amosar! The insult struck me like a blow, naked steel is singing! Nothing can stop me any longer!"

HOWEVER, Amosar kept on coming, sword in hand. He was less than six feet tall, and wiry rather than muscular. But the feline agility of his every motion was such that Conant easily visualized how deadly he was bound to be in any duel, all leaps and lunges Touareg style, when his voice rang, brassy like the call of a bugle:

"Idene swore that her honor is above all reproaches and who says otherwise lies by the throat!

"If you insulted her, O Rhammad, knowing fully what you were doing, you shall not fight her, but me! But if you acknowledge that you were crazy when you slandered her name, the immunity of the deranged by Allah shall protect you, on condition that you give an atonement-indemnity of six full grown camels and twelve faultless horses to Idene, the daughter of our dead Ameonokal!"

"This I shall do!" Rhammad quickly replied. "And you will get a snow-white mehari in recognition of the soundness of your decision. I shall give you also, O

Amosar, my best stud-camel for one of your two Rumi slaves."

"Why do you want one of my Rumis?" Amosar thundered.

Rhammad bowed his long head, stuck his sword back into the scabbard and replied abjectly:

"Idene rejected my suit too many times. I became insane for a moment and my present humiliation is the result of it. The possession of a Rumi will be my face-saver."

Amosar was brave and generous, but not very wise. Before anyone could interfere, he blurted impulsively:

"I never turned down a bargain likely to improve good feeling. The taller of my Rumis sings often beautifully for my delectation, so I keep him. I have no use whatsoever for the shorter one. Therefore, why should I not give him to you? The bargain is struck!"

"Let's make the deal complete," the sharp-witted Rhammad continued maliciously, "to prove that Conant, Idene's Rumi, deserves his mistress' favor, let's admit him to our next lion hunt!"

All eyes turned on Conant. A Targuia shouted derisively: "Do you dare to face the lion with a sword in your hand, O harratin with clipped wings?"

Conant saw the agony of inevitable humiliation in Idene's eyes, and understood clearly that her prestige and whatever chance he still had of bringing his mission to a successful end were at stake. He remembered also how much the Touareg honor the memory of those who die fighting superior odds, regardless if they are friends or foes, and the utter contempt felt by every veiled tribesman for any man who prizes his life more than his honor. Therefore he replied:

"The few lions available in the mighty country from which I come are all safely locked in cages. Consequently I don't know how to fight with cold steel the strong-maned beasts of the wilderness.

"Just the same, I accept the invitation and I meet the challenge out of regard for Idene outl Amastane. If a lion kills me, consider my death as a sacrifice to friendship and receive all my fellow tribesmen who will visit your Tobol in the future as friends."

A concerted murmur of approval arose

from among the massed Touareg. When it subsided, Amosar exclaimed:

"There's no greater bravery than to fight a fierce unknown foe in an unfamiliar way. Why was this Rumi ever enslaved? If he dies, let his request be granted! And may the stain of his blood remain with Rhammad to the end of his days!"

Rhammad ag Bechir and his followers walked away, pursued by derisive shouts. Conant hastened to Idene's side and whispered tensely:

"Tell me, please, what can be done to pull my soldier out of Rhammad's clutches?"

"Nothing, because Amosar gave his word," Idene replied sadly, "We can only pray Allah to grant swift and merciless death to your companion and friend. But . . . how can you fight a lion with a sword, in the name of the four thousand saints who roam the earth?"

THE next day a messenger from Rhammad asked admission to Idene's pavilion. When Idene asked him what was the reason of his visit he replied:

"Rhammad said that Conant can have his Rumi friend if he comes for him."

Idene clenched her shapely fists.

"Rhammad," she snapped, "is shaped like a giraffe, and has the soul of a hyena and the cunning of taaleb the fox. But he blunders like a jackass with a tail full of ticks if he thinks that I'll send Conant to die at his hands."

"Conant will be safe," the messenger retorted, "because Rhammad swore by Allah to touch not a single hair on his head as long as he keeps the peace. If you don't believe me, send your Imouaren along with Conant. Rhammad would never break his promise before them, because that would provoke a fight and set the entire Tobol at his throat."

Conant had listened anxiously to that conversation. In Rhammad's proposal he saw the unexpected fulfillment of his hope of rescuing Hormel. Therefore he pleaded so ardently to be allowed to go that finally Idene, after exacting from him a solemn promise to hold his temper before Rhammad regardless of provocation, granted the necessary permission—and sent two of her Imouaren to watch over him.

Rhammad's tents were pitched out of the

Tobol camp proper, and all around a stockaded corral where he kept some camel mares.

Conant and the two high cast Ouelliminden Imouaren of Idene's retinue were greeted courteously enough by some warriors of Rhammad and notified that their headman waited for them in the camel mares' pen.

Conant and Idene's men thought that the procedure was unusual, but the Touareg code of bravery forbade them to show worry or make inquiries. With their heads high they strode to the stockade. The gate swung open.

The first thing that Conant saw as he came in, was a naked man fastened upside down to a big wooden pillar. He could not make out at first who that man was or what he looked like, so thoroughly was he drenched with blood. He only noticed that the feet of the poor fellow were white, and that his gory hair hung from a head rounder than the heads of most Touareg.

"Dib! Dog! Aziz! Smashed tarantula!" Rhammad roared with savage cruelty. The muscles of his arms bulged like steel cables as he swung a heavy whip of hippopotamus hide and struck the helpless bound man.

Conant heard a dull "*swlaapl!*" saw drops of blood flying, and felt sick at the stomach, when Rhammad threw the whip away, turned and shrieked with savage exultation:

"This Rumi friend of yours was brave, O Conant, who hides behind the hem of Idene's tunic: When my whip tore one of his eyes, he did not utter a sound. When I slashed the skin and muscles of his shoulders until I saw bits of his gory bone, he did not make a single plea for mercy.

"It was only when the pain and the weakness from lost blood drowned his reason that he whimpered—like a dying dog!"

A mad frenzy convulsed Conant. The corral, the camel mares hobbled at the opposite end of it, whirled madly before his eyes. Only the pillar to which the gory body of Hormel was tied, and Rhammad, remained in full focus before them. He had no weapons, only his hands. Suddenly an overwhelming urge obsessed

him to dig his fingers into the sinewy throat of Rhammad, and to hang to it, squeezing, crushing. . . .

One of Idene's Imouaren got hold of him in the nick of time, growling:

"Think of the promise you gave to our mistress, of the compact, which guarantees your immunity as long as you hold yourself in check, and which restrains us from helping you if you don't! Abide by our Touareg proverb, which says that necessity forces the wise snake to walk on his belly! If you will jump on Rhammad you will break your word and you shall die under his sword and the swords of his men without redress! Pray Allah to grant you revenge some day! Keep on living until that day comes!"

Conant stepped back, dropping his arms. His Imouaren companions released him, but remained at his side.

RHAMMAD glared at the three of them and impatiently flicked a long bony hand. His disappointment was very keen, because he had counted on a flaring of Conant's temper to dispatch him with impunity.

But it was not like him to give up so easily.

"Cha!" he laughed stridently. "Are all your fellow countrymen as cowardly careful with their lives as you, O Conant?"

"If I utter a single word in reply, if I make a single move, I shall not be able to restrain myself and shall be slain. But that must not be! I must keep on living, until I kill you, Rhammad!" the weaponless Conant thought frenziedly.

"Cha!" Rhammad sneered, as if divining his thoughts, "If you fear my sword and poniard I shall throw them away and fight you barehanded, harratin style!"

When Conant still failed to reply, he shouted to one of his attendants to bring him a heavy spear of solid iron and bent it between his hands as easily as if it had been a sapling. Then he straightened it again without apparent effort and growled disdainfully:

"You did not care to come to grips with me because someone told you how strong I am and your blood got chilled."

That last slur was too much for one of Conant's Imouaren companions.

"Rhammad ag Bechir," he said, stepping

between the cruel headman and the young American officer, "Conant promised Idene to keep his temper. If you provoke him any longer, breaking your oath in the sacred sight of Allah, the entire Tobol will indict you as a blasphemer."

The litham veil hid the venomous rage that convulsed Rhammad's features on hearing that warning, but the glare of his dilated yellow eyes became awesome to behold. With a sudden lunge he unsheathed the cross-hilted poniard strapped to his left forearm and slashed the ropes binding Hormel's body. Conant leaped forward just in time to catch the unfortunate cameraman before his head could strike the ground, while Rhammad boomed:

"Take this carrion and go, all of you!"

Then, as Conant stepped back, holding the dying Hormel in his arms, he turned and kicked dust backward in his direction.

This is the supreme and foulest insult among Touareg, and Conant knew it. Yet he managed to keep himself under control in spite of an overwhelming fit of rage that set his heart pumping so fast that he almost got a stroke, and he walked out of the corral apparently calm.

But, a few paces further, he halted and exploded:

"I swear over the bloody body of this man who is dying in my arms, and in the name of God, whom you Moslems call Allah, that I'll repay Rhammad with suffering for suffering, with shame for shame, and that finally I'll tear the life out of him!"

"Well said, Rumi!" one of Idene's Imouaren approved, "To kill in war is worthy. To strike or maim an unruly servant is no crime according to our law. But to torture and abuse the helpless, and to try to circumvent snakely a sacred oath, is a stench and an abomination in the eyes of Allah! Rhammad deserves to fall before your vengeance!"

IV

LATER ON, Idene washed Hormel's wounds with boiled water and Conant filled them with the sulphur drugs of one of the medical kits pillaged from the wrecked airplane. But Hormel had been battered and cut too badly, and had lost

too much blood. The sun was declining on the western horizon and a scarlet radiance covered the top of the akresh grass on the plain and the Tobol tents, when he died, without recovering consciousness.

Being a harratin among the Touareg of the camp, only Idene's slaves could help Conant to bury him. But these humble negroes and negresses had learned to like and respect Conant, and they pitied the slain Hormel all the more because they feared and loathed Rhammad, who abused frightfully and often crippled or killed his slaves. Therefore they wrapped carefully the corpse of the American soldier in a clean sheet and lowered it gently into a hastily dug grave.

When the last hunk of sod was shoveled over the latter, Conant planted at the head of it a crude wooden cross, over which he had previously carved with a red-hot dagger point Hormel's name, quality, matriculation number, and the date of his death, in both English and Tafiñar characters.

That cross stood in full view in the middle of a bare patch of ground, about a hundred yards away from Idene's pavilion. As long as he remained with the Tobol, Conant stared at it often. And when he did, he saw in his thoughts Hormel's homely face, and the yellow eyes of beast of prey of Rhammad, and was convulsed by poignant sorrow and by a maddening rage.

The monthly lion hunt of the Tobol-clan took place three days later.

About two hundred Imouaren and Imedreden Touareg and Targuias, and about a hundred harratin assembled for it at dawn, camelback and on horse, in a gully south of the camp. But, to Idene's discomfiture, her staunch and powerful friend Amosar was kept in his huge tent by a turning for the worse of the illness of his oldest son, of whom he was extremely fond.

In the wood and bush country of the Niger river basin, it is not hard to locate lions. Toward noon the harratins, acting as beaters, drove against a steep cliff shaped like a horseshoe some six maned lions and three lionesses. These huge beasts had gorged themselves on their kills during the previous night. Sorely in need of sleep, and blinking at the sun, they had

been driven by thumping drums, rattling calabasses full of pebbles, and high-pitched yells, until they had been cornered.

Conant stared at their huge heads, at their swaying, tawny backs and twitching tails. They did not look particularly vicious from a distance; but one of them sprang onward with the speed of an express train when a none too bright harratin came close to it waving his arms, and dancing on bent legs.

The harratin saw that tawny dynamo of lion fury catapulting toward him and became paralyzed by fright. A couple of seconds later he recovered his wits and the speed of his legs, and ran as fast as he was able to. By that time, the lion was almost on top of him. Several Touareg fired; but the average Targui is a poor marksman. Not a single bullet found its mark.

The harratin shrieked like a butchered hen when the lion struck; but no sound came from him when the clawing and snapping lion dragged him through the thick grass.

A towering Targui lifted his spear and ran forward to rescue the slave's body. The lion whirled around like a huge spinning top and sprang on that new foe. Quick as a flash, the Targui sidestepped his charge and stabbed him through as his outstretched paws struck empty air. Then the Targui leaped back and, unsheathing his sword, watched the lion rolling over and over, spitting, snarling and attempting in vain to bite the iron shaft of the spear sprouting from his side.

When the agonized struggles of the lion grew weaker, the Targui ran onward. The lion attempted to arise, with his cavernous fanged mouth wide open and a paw lifted to strike; but the Targui darted around him and slashed at the back of his neck a couple of times. And that was the end of the lion.

RHAMMAD was the next Ouelliminden to pull his big toes out of the loops into which ended the lengths of rope hanging from the sides of his saddle.

The lion, which he provoked with a shout and a thrown stone, was huge and brown. But he seemed puny compared to the gigantic Rhammad when he charged at top speed almost flattened on the ground.

Rhammad jumped right, then left, to confuse the catapulting lion. Then he hurled his spear with uncanny timing.

The sharp point of that lance of solid iron sliced through muscles and tendons between the maned neck and the shoulder bones of the lion and stabbed deeply into his vital organs. The lion roared horribly, fell, spasmodically clawed the ground and suddenly stretched out dead, with the iron spear still half imbedded in his body.

Rhammad, frenzied with killing lust, whipped out his sword and ran against another lion. Two lionesses surged onward with the latter, and instantly two Ouelliminden warriors rushed to help Rhammad. The following action was so confusing and swift that Conant saw in it only a whirlwind of striking arms, swords and spears, a dazzling leaping and counterleaping of flapping blue tunics and wide, white Touareg trousers, and the veritable tawny buzzsaws of clawing and biting fury into which the lion and the lionesses had turned. A few moments later the *mêlée* opened and Conant saw clearly Rhammad, hacking savagely with his huge sword at the dying lion, a dead lioness stretched on the grass beside a motionless Ouelliminden warrior, and the second lioness tearing the huge shield from the left hand of the other Ouelliminden Imrad henchman of Rhammad, who slashed at her and missed. Whereupon the lioness let go of the shield, turned, jumped over a ledge, then over a higher ledge, and finally got away.

Rhammad cursed savagely after her, then vented his rage on the Imrad, until he became aware that only a lame lioness and a medium-sized yellow lion remained, and roared:

"Stop hiding behind Idene's tunic, Conant, and do your duty!"

The moment of the supreme test had come. Conant strode resolutely onward clutching the handle-bar of his shield in his left fist, and a straight Touareg sword in his right one.

The yellow lion did not move. Just watched Conant coming, without even flicking his tail.

Suddenly he flew through the air in a prodigious leap. Conant struck with all his might, missed and felt as if a building was crashing on him. But he instinctively

pulled the shield over his face and body as he fell down hard.

That instinctive parry saved his face, breast and belly from the rending claws of the lion, when he heard the desperate cry of a woman, a fearful neighing of a horse, a thumping and clattering of equine hoofs and agonized snarl. The next instant the huge weight of the lion did not press any longer the big shield and Conant under it.

Ribald sallies of laughter greeted the young American officer as he pulled himself up holding his sword ready to strike. For, by that time, the lion which had nearly killed him thrashed weakly on its back, with the point of a spear jutting from the left side of his body, and with the spear's butt protruding from under his right shoulder.

"Your tamelit, your mistress, killed your lion for you without dismounting," a warrior explained, pointing to Idene who was patting her rearing horse to pacify its horror of the lions' scent.

"You gave proof of courage, but not of skill," another Imochag Ouelliminded warrior added, "O Conant, thank Allah and Idene who kept you among the living!"

While the lion-fighting was on, some harratins had tracked and killed four wild pigs. Then they had brought them near their assembled masters, had skinned them and were actually broiling their quartered pieces over a camp-fire, with true Touareg disregard of the Koranic dietary laws; which fill a real need in Africa, where the flesh of all animals of the pig family is often infested with all kinds of parasitic germs and diseases.

Idene had never heard of sanitary precautions; but she knew only too well that Rhammad would ridicule Conant's poor show, and endeavor to break down his self-control during that hunters' meal. Therefore she ordered Conant and all her retinue to follow, and rode back to the camp.

THEY had hardly come in sight of the foremost tents of the Tobol when, to Conant's utter amazement, McNamara, still in a sergeant's uniform ran toward his mount, shouting excitedly:

"Am I happy to see you, Lieutenant!"

"The feeling is reciprocal," Conant replied earnestly. "But, what in thunder

gave you the freedom of this camp of fire-eaters?"

"I was sent by Amosar ag Takarbaz on behalf of his boy because I told him that you can cure him."

"The hell you say! I never was a doctor!"

"That's immaterial," McNamara explained, "Young Edelli, Amosar's son, cut his foot on a piece of rusty iron a few days ago, and stepped all over a lot of hides in process of desiccation—still cluttered with rotting matter—without bandaging his wound. A son of civilization would be dead of blood poisoning by now. Edelli is just badly sick of tetanic poisoning, if you ask me. An anti-tetanic injection or two, a physic and some protein pills as soon as the worst crisis is all that he needs."

"Well," Conant replied, "what stopped you from giving such a treatment to Amosar's son yesterday or the day before?"

"The Mollah, the so-called learned man of the Tobol, who insisted in mumbling Koranic verses over bits of cloth, which he applied to Edelli's anatomy, and who spat every minute or so through the air shouting Allah! Allah! to chase away the evil spirits. Also the fact that, on your suggestion, your kind mistress rounded up all the medicine kits stolen from our airplane."

"I cannot understand," Conant said, "how you managed to make yourself understood by Amosar."

"Easily," McNamara smiled, "I learned several words of Tamashek and I can draw. You should have seen how Amosar jumped with glee when I designed a picture of you lifting his son from his couch as good as new!"

"You are a wonder, Sergeant McNamara!" Conant chuckled, and reverting to the Tamashek Touareg spoken language told Idene what was expected of him.

A half hour later he was beside the couch over which Edelli, Amosar's son, lay wide eyed and burning with fever. A glance at the swollen foot of the boy, at his mouth and at his eyeballs, convinced Conant that, as far as he could make out with his crude knowledge of medicine, McNamara had diagnosed right. Therefore he disinfected and cut a little the boy's

foot, to allow the pus to flow out of the wound, than he gave him a tetanic injection.

The Touareg are the descendants of the sturdiest individuals of scores of ancient races famous for their stamina in a bygone past. Centuries of hard living without any medical attention whatsoever in the harsh Saharan climate, subjected the Touareg to a further process of elimination, which left alive only the extraordinarily fit. Therefore the actual Imouaren, or full-blooded Touareg, are endowed with exceptional recuperative powers.

Edelli confirmed such a rule by staging a remarkable improvement a few hours after the injection, when his temperature began to fall. Toward evening he was definitely out of danger and able to speak coherently with his father.

At that, the joy of Amosar ag Takarbaz knew no bounds. He jumped, howled, embraced his son, breathing close to his face, which is the equivalent of kissing among Touareg. Then he turned to Conant:

"In my quality of highest ranking headman, I declare you free and a member of our Tobol. Iselane!"

His right hand shot out, palm upward. Conant placed his hand palm downward over it, shouting happily: "Elouane!"

Then he said:

"My sergeant McNamara was the one who called me to the bedside of your son in the nick of time. He's a brave and worthy man, and my friend. I ask his freedom also, O Amosar ag Takarbaz!"

"I grant it, and may Allah bless both of you and my son!"

"And also you, O worthy Amosar!" Conant exclaimed.

"Wait! Nobody must accuse the son of Takarbaz of sending away the men freed by him without gifts!"

AMOSAR shouted orders. His har-ratins brought in takarbast tunics of fine cloth, waistcoats embellished with silver embroideries, disks, and St. Andrews' crosses, memories of the time when the Touareg practiced Christianity; also wide trousers of white linen, sandals of choice nayel hide, two straight swords of fine steel, and two cross-hilted poniards.

Amosar had no rest until his freed men and guests took away their garments and

put on the better ones taken from his chests. Then he strapped the cross-hilted poniards to their left forearms, slung the bandoleers from which the swords hung across their shoulders, surveyed the wrapping of their head and face veils and finally he shouted joyously:

"Inshallah! I never saw high cast Ouelliminden with a carriage better than yours! But I must see what you can do with a Targui sword!"

He howled an order. One of his Imdreden brought in two blunt and dull iron swords.

"Take one of them!" Amosar ordered Conant, and fell on guard.

For the next minute or so, Conant had a hard time of it.

He was, by all means, the better orthodox fencer of the two. The trouble was, however, that Amosar did not observe any orthodox rule. Instead of advancing or giving way, he swarmed all around Conant like a whirlwind, stabbing and slashing from every side. The speed of his lunging arms and leaping legs was beyond description. His sword could not cut, but it delivered blows as heavy as those of a lead pipe.

Conant was full of sores when he reached the conclusion that he needed time and practice to cope effectively with the peculiar fencing style of the Touareg; but he found out also that Amosar, the Tobol's best swordsman, was at a loss whenever he launched swift feint-and-stab attacks of his own. Consequently he took the offensive for the next few minutes and, if he did not score at every stroke, at least he did not get nasty blows in return.

"There are only two things that you must still learn!" Amosar panted after a half-hour of all that strenuous fencing; and, happy of finding a grateful pupil in Conant, he taught him how to deliver or parry low hamstringing slashes, and a complicated trick, consisting of a quick sinking of the knees while bringing one's sword up to neutralize a particularly heavy blow, and of a swift counter-stab at the adversary's throat while coming up in a leap.

It was quite late when Conant and McNamara left, escorted by two warriors of Idene and two of Amosar. The silvery beams of the full moon covered the rows of tents of the camp-village with a

silvery radiance, but the twisting alleys between them were in a deep shade. A westerly wind swept through the numberless crevices of the nearby ridge, and through the gullies beyond the plain, sounding like the concerted moans of countless souls in hell. When the wind blew harder, the eerie bedlam became an earsplitting wail, and the camels and horses picketed and hobbled in the Tobol and all around it joined in with their raucous barks and neighings.

"A bad night! The evil spirits of the invisible world are loose and flying all around us!" one of the four Touareg said lugubriously.

V

CONANT translated for McNamara. McNamara, however, felt too much like a child who has just been given a sealed package full of brand new toys, to worry about the wind and the vagaries of Touareg imagination. For the adventurous side of his nature was both flattered and excited by his admission into the Imochag high-cast of the Ouelliminden Touareg; and his fervid imagination worked overtime.

"Just think of it, Lieutenant!" he said ecstatically, "I shall be able to take all the notes I want, and what a book shall I write about these strange people!"

"There's a pip of a girl, way up in Boston. . . . You have seen her picture haven't you? If she could only see me with this silver-spangled waistcoat and a long sword hanging from my side!"

The girl in question, Conant remembered quite well, had blond wavy hair, a pert upturned nose and a very engaging smile. She was a young thing. Eighteen years old, at the most. And McNamara was crazy about her.

"Don't forget me, when you need a best man," Conant said.

"You bet. . . ."

The roar of a volley drowned McNamara's voice. Conant saw the stabs of flame of firing guns at the opposite end of the path and snarled a curse because he had not a gun with which to return bullet for bullet. Then he unsheathed his sword and charged. McNamara did likewise. But he had barely covered a few yards when he pitched headlong and

became indiscernible from the darkened bottom of the alley.

From the corner of his eye the running Conant saw his Touareg companions, ghastly in their dark and forbidding attire, leaping onward right and left of him. Then naked steel flashed. Additional reports crashed, near and deafening. A black-clothed giant suddenly towered before Conant, who caught a glimpse of a descending enormous sword and, remembering what he had learned from Amosar, ducked on his bending knees while he lifted his sword to parry.

The blow almost knocked its blade to the top of his head but, before his adversary could strike again, he brought his sword in line and lunged. He felt the impact of and the caving-in of pierced flesh, heard a raucous grunt. With a turn of his wrist and a quick pull he disengaged his sword. The towering aggressor sank down.

Two of Conant's Touareg companions had charged into a side alley, from which came a bedlam of shouts and a sharp clanking of steel. The other two were in the midst of four adversaries, and at the very peak of a swift and ferocious mêlée. Conant sprang, slashed at a huge sword arm.

"We lost! Dar lerasen! Hide and escape!" the shout rang in the darkness. The cutthroat tribesmen, still unscathed, scattered, ducked behind tents, and disappeared in the gloom of the night. But a mob of awakened and alarmed Touareg ran out of the tents and milled in the alley, asking angrily what all that uproar was.

Conant shouldered his way through them and went to kneel near McNamara. But, after that, his dread of finding him dead was so great that he did not touch him until the wavering light of a torch covered his prone form with a scarlet sheen.

A middle-aged Targuia turned McNamara over for Conant and pointed at a ragged hole in his forehead.

"There is a pip of a girl, in Boston. . . ." Conant could almost hear McNamara's excited voice, and felt a sinking sensation at his heart.

"Poor Mac," he muttered, "Poor fellow. . . ."

8—Jungle—Spring

"Conant!" a sharp voice rang, "We forced the man wounded by you to talk! He is an Imrad henchman of Rhammad ag Bechir. He says that an Imochag of Rhammad's retinue lay the ambush and led his five Imedreden companions!"

So it was Rhammad who had indirectly killed McNamara after torturing Hornel to death.

Conant arose, shaking with murderous fury.

"Quick!" he choked, "Lead me to Rhammad's tents!"

"We are all going there!" one of the Touareg who had fought at his side replied gravely, "But don't forget that when you became an Imochag you were supposed to forget your past life as a harratin, with all its hatreds and quarrels. You cannot challenge Rhammad until a new occasion for it arises, or until his guilt in the ambush that we just smashed has been proved."

"And, in the latter case, Rhammad will have to answer not to you, but to the whole Tobol!" a Targuia shrilled from the threshold of a nearby tent.

A HALF HOUR later an angry mob of veiled warriors and Targuias confronted Rhammad before his tents.

Rhammad protested his innocence and asked time to investigate. When this was granted to him grudgingly, he assembled all his followers, shouted inquiries to them and finally announced to the mob that an Imochag called Adouilj ag Bellah and Six Imedreden were missing.

"Not all of them. Conant killed one of these cutthroats of yours and wounded this other—here he is, confront him!" a burly veiled warrior growled, pushing forward the bleeding prisoner.

Rhammad stared at him simulating horror like a consummate actor and shouted:

"Kelowi, accursed of Sheitan! So you left my tents to ambush and rob, and now they are blaming me for your crime, in which I had no part!"

Swift as lightning, Rhammad unsheathed his sword and slashed down with all his might. Kelowi fell, with his skull cleaved to the root of his nose.

"I was his master. It was my right to kill him as he deserved, and to protect my name!" Rhammad roared dramatically.

Idene, warned by a breathless tribesman of the attempt to murder Conant, in the course of which McNamara had been killed, came just in time to hear Rhammad's resounding protest and to reply to it:

"You saved yourself from a punishment that you amply deserve because you are as shrewd as you are cruel. But your murderous schemes are about to be curtailed, because I don't intend to wait any longer.

"Out of respect for the memory of my beloved father, our tribal council decided in our last Arheal meeting to appoint Amenokal the warrior that I'll select as my husband.

"I have not found a mate as yet. But this Tobol needs an enforcer of our customs and laws. Therefore, in my quality of daughter of the last Amenokal, I call for an Arheal a week hence, and I endorse the appointment as chief of Amosar ag Takarbez, who'll bridle your activities, O Rhammad!"

"Inshallah!" Rhammad shrieked. "I want to become your husband. I'm the warrior who should lead our tribe!"

"That's what you say!" Idene replied disdainfully, "But woe to our Tobol if you should become its chief! For you would rule for the sole end of fattening your greed and sating your vicious lust. As far as I am concerned, I would marry a hyena rather you!"

"I'm a free warrior of high cast. I'll pit my candidacy against that of Amosar!" Rhammad ranted, stamping and punching at the empty air in his excitement.

"Do!" Idene retorted sarcastically, "and see how far you get with it!"

Rhammad made a threatening gesture in her direction. But the mob had had enough of his antics. Howling furiously, and brandishing spears, swords and guns of various vintages, they surged toward him.

Rhammad stared at them for a moment. Then he turned about and ducked into his tent.

"No Imochag was ever slain by his own people within the limits of a Tobol. Leave alone Rhammad, the dishonored son of Bechr, for the time being!" Idene shouted to her fellow tribesmen. When silence was somewhat restored, she added:

"The vengeance of Allah never fails. Rhammad's crimes ride on his back. The day draws near when they will draw a taut rope around his neck."

After that, Idene turned and walked through the lane respectfully opened for her. Conant followed in her footsteps. And next came the two warriors who carried the limp body of McNamara, who had become a full-fledged high-cast Ouelliminden Targui for less than an hour.

IN THE afternoon preceding the evening chosen for the Arheal, Amosar ag Takarbez called on Conant.

"I came to give you a warning," he said after the customary greetings, "Our Arheals are celebrations of our ancient lores, and meetings in the course of which important decisions are made. But, during the Arheals, no interference is allowed with challenges, and with tests of life and death—with duels.

"Therefore, beware; because Rhammad will defy you if he gets a chance. And you will be at a disadvantage against him, because you are not experienced in our way of fighting, in which Rhammad tops all of us."

"But," Conant objected, "I saw time and again that he does not care to clash with you."

"Like all tricksters and deceivers, Rhammad is not immune from deception," Amosar confided, "I'm older than he. I fought and conquered more foes than he ever did—and quickly, because I know how to use my speed. Therefore our fellow tribesmen think that I'm the greatest warrior of the tribe, and Rhammad's master. Rhammad, in his turn, is fooled into believing that I would kill him if we ever crossed steel.

"But I know how strong he is, how swiftly he can jump on his enormous, sinewy legs. Furthermore, I have not one-tenth of his endurance. If we should fight a duel, and if his feeling of inferiority would not numb him into giving an opening to my sword during the first few passes. . . ." Amosar shrugged and made a hopeless gesture with his hands. "It would be my end," he concluded. "So, Conant, saviour of my son, avoid Rhammad during the Arheal. And count on me to remove his offensive presence from the

Tobol and from your path, if I become Amenokal."

Amosar arose. The warning was given. The visit was ended. After he was gone, Conant thought it over and was deeply moved. For there's nothing that a Targui prizes more than his prestige and his pride. And Amosar had sacrificed both with him and for him, on the strength of a moral obligation which he had already amply repaid when he had elevated him to the rank of Imochag from the abject harratin state.

When evening came, a surge of excitement swept over the Tobol-camp. Expectant murmurs wafted from every tent. Masters and mistresses called on their slaves from every side. And the crooked thoroughfares between the rows of tents remained free of the usual motley gossipers and wayfarers.

At length a rising glow appeared behind a grove of flat-topped acacias, on the bare esplanade confronting the steep cliff. Targuias and Touareg in full regalia began to go toward that monster camp-fire.

Conant was one of the last to go because he wanted to catch a full sight of the meeting.

He expected to see an unforgettable scene and he was not disappointed. Because he found row upon row of Targuias, sturdy and comely women for the greater part, draped in soft robes, with majestic blue mantles hanging from their shoulders, and glittering with barbaric bracelets, necklaces and earrings.

The leaping flames of a ten-yard wide pool of burning branches threw an alternately golden and scarlet glow on so many magnificent women. And it added majesty to the forbidding appearance of the towering veiled warriors who stood behind them, with tawny eyes gleaming through the slits of the lithams.

No spears or guns were permitted on the Arheal grounds. But each Imochag or Imrad had his cross-hilted poniard strapped to his left forearm and his heavy sword hanging from a bandoleer or a belt, and seemed to seethe with ill-repressed ferocity, like a two-legged beast ready to spring and kill at the least provocation.

Conant saw Idene, more dainty and beautiful than ever, across the pool of leaping flames of the camp-fire. Rhammad stood behind her enormous, threatening,

and never averted his eyes from her.

"There sits your former tamelit mistress; and the man who wants to possess her whether she likes it or not is close enough to grab her," a shrill voice said.

CONANT turned and saw Tene, the Fulane slave girl. Tene had become bold in the night of the Arheal, when all cast-barriers are considered effaced among Touareg. Her coppery brown fingers brushed Conant's sleeve as she explained: "Idene will have a hard time with Rhammad at the end of this Arheal, which is not ruled by the restraint of respect due to the recently dead Amenokal Amastane like the last one. On the other hand, Amosar, our next Amenokal, will be restrained by age-old custom from fighting any man of his people as long as darkness lasts, and he shall not be entitled to exact and enforce obedience until the next dawn.

"With Amosar out of the way, Rhammad will attempt to drag Idene into some thick bush, and will challenge to a duel whoever shall dare to interfere. But nobody will seek sure death at his hands, not even for Idene's sake. But let us keep still. The amzad is going to play."

The notes of a single-string Touareg violin were already fluttering over the crackling of the burning branches, and the murmurs of scores of conversations. With this introduction dictated by ancient custom, the meeting was open.

A stately Targuia arose. The scarlet glow of the camp-fire surrounded her like a glimmering shroud. Far behind her and her imposing barbaric audience, a velvety darkness enveloped the steep slope of the cliff, while the moonlight bathed its top with a silvery radiance.

The whole scene appeared worthy of an oriental poem, when the tall Targuia began to recite the poem of thirst composed by the late Moussa, Amenokal of the Northern Touareg of the Ahaggar, which told how, while riding back from a successful raid, Moussa separated himself from his companions for the sake of tracking down an antelope, and became irretrievably lost in the arid wastes of the Erg Eyedeyen or Oriental desert.

For thirteen days Moussa wandered without finding water. At last, exhausted and almost demented, he reached the shal-

low well of Takket and drank so greedily that he fell to the ground unconscious.

The next morning an old woman came to the well, found him gravely ill and nursed him out of pity.

Eventually Moussa was able to return to his clan. But there a great disappointment waited for him. His beautiful and gifted cousin Dassine had married during his absence a brainless high-caste, Imochag of the Kel Rhela.

The stately Targuia sat, amidst murmurs of approval. Idene arose, and once more Conant was dazzled by her loveliness as he heard her melodious voice, warning solemnly:

"Moussa's experience must be a lesson to us. Nobody can stray from his duty without paying a penalty. I call on this burning fire at my feet, and on the power of Allah above all of us, when I say:

"The Tobol where honor and sincere brotherhood are not observed disintegrates like a sand heap lashed by the wind. Remember it when you elect our next Amenokal."

Conant saw Idene returning to her place, and making an angry gesture because Rhammad had stepped on it. Then he saw Rhammad brushing Idene's shoulders with his long brown hands and was unable to restrain himself any longer. Smarting with rage he walked quickly around the camp-fire.

Amosar saw him coming, divined what passed in his mind, and made a friendly gesture in his direction. Then he squared his shoulders, walked up to Rhammad and deliberately kicked dust over his sandaled feet.

Rhammad jumped back, as if brushed by a red-hot poker. But the insults that were instantly shouted at him from every side, and a barrage of hoots and derisive yells coming from the bushes where the har-ratins squatted, exasperated him so that he forgot his rooted fear of Amosar.

"Inshallah!" he shrieked convulsively, "So you leave it to the sword to decide who will be Amenokal!"

Several Targuias arose, stepped back. In the clearing thus formed, Amosar seemed almost puny compared to the giant size, enormous spread of shoulders and tremendous reach of Rhammad.

When they unsheathed their swords, all

whispered conversations subsided, and only the excited breathing of hundreds of human beings and the crackling of the burning branches of the camp-fire became audible.

CONANT dug his nails into the palms of his hands. For he remembered what Amosar had confided to him in the afternoon, and he knew that, as a brave and loyal friend, Amosar had provoked a duel which he had but a scanty hope of winning, only to save him from dying at Rhammad's hands.

A fearful suspense convulsed Conant as the two headmen crouched, holding their swords low, point forward.

Suddenly Amosar sprang. But Rhammad's backward leap covered more ground. Amosar pursued him. But Rhammad kept on leaping out of his reach, on a wide circle.

"Damn him, he is trying deliberately to wear my friend down!" Conant snarled.

"Rhammad! Dib! Ebres! Dog of a Rhammad! How long will you keep on fleeing?" the Ouelliminden Touareg of the audience shouted.

But Rhammad was not to be goaded. Minute after minute passed, when the duel was a race, and no blow was struck or parried.

Eventually Amosar, a little dazed from turning round and round at top speed, and panting hard, realized how inane his efforts were, and halted. But, by that very action, he gave a proof of inferiority, and instantly the overcaution of Rhammad became the frenzy of a man-beast who scents the kill. Without giving Amosar a chance of resting, he passed to the attack.

Followed a whirlwind of action, when the tunics of the two duelists whirled madly and their wide, white trousers moved so fast that they seemed to fill the entire clearing. Then steel clanked sharply on steel, as Rhammad endeavored to beat down the guard of his adversary, and to numb the muscles of his right arm as well, by raining tremendous blows on his sword.

Suddenly Amosar stumbled. Quick as lightning Rhammad lunged low and slashed at his ankles.

The audience roared as Amosar fell on a knee, weaving his sword frantically in front of him.

Conant gripped furiously his sash with both hands and his mind nearly burst at the thought that Amosar was about to be killed and that the unwritten law ruling all Touareg duels forbade him from interfering under penalty of death at the hands of all the other spectators.

Meanwhile Rhammad, dancing on the balls of his feet, circled his stricken adversary. With a supreme effort Amosar managed to twist his body around and parried, blow after blow. But four times the long arm of Rhammad shot out like a striking cobra, four times his blade found its mark.

Amosar swayed from side to side. He was done for and he knew it, but he proudly kept his head high while rivulets of blood fell from his body, drenching the ground into a gory mud.

"This is sheer butchery. Why does not anybody stop it?" at length Conant exploded.

"No quarter is given or asked in the fights of our people, and only death washes the shame of defeat, O stranger who has been an Imochag for such a short while!" a veiled tribesman who overheard him replied severely.

A red veil fell before Conant's eyes. As in a nightmare he heard the savage shout of victory of Rhammad, which was soon drowned by the thunderous concerted howling of the barbaric audience.

When Conant's sight cleared, Amosar was down. But Rhammad still slashed and stabbed at his body, snarling:

"Now you are dead, dust under my feet! Who will dare to oppose me when I shall get hold of Idene? Who wants to deny my right to become Amenokal?"

Idene, pale as a ghost, wide eyed, and with her hands clutching her throat seemed on the verge of collapsing. Metalli, Rhammad's half-brother, pointed a square dark hand at her and burst into a guffaw of ribald laughter.

In that very moment, the exasperation, the sorrow and the forlorn sense of isolation in an alien and barbarical crowd, all left Conant. He felt sure of himself, freed of the weight of his body, more like an avenging force of nature than like a man. Coldly, impersonally, he went to confront Rhammad, and there was such an inhuman gleam in his eyes that, as

soon as he stared into them, the villainous giant became silent and fell on guard.

"I swore on the body of Hormel, on that of McNamara, and I swear now over the remains of Amosar, that I'll inflict shame and suffering on you, and finally I shall kill you!" Conant exclaimed.

He stared calculatingly at Rhammad, saw no weak spot in his person. Then the blood-stained sword of Rhammad whirled.

VI

CONANT parried nimbly, but the impact of Rhammad's blade on him sent a numbing shiver up the muscles of his arm.

"He's too strong. Has muscles like steel cables," Conant thought grimly.

The next instant he was in terrible danger. The whirlwind of lunges and strokes of Rhammad were hard to parry, and constituted an impenetrable wall of steel at the same time. The fleetness of his long legs, however, constituted his most redoubtable asset, for he covered almost three yards with every leap, and his ability of changing stance at top speed was amazing.

To make matters worse, he knew how to use his tremendous reach.

Conant was a perfectly conditioned athlete. Yet a moment came when cramps began to knot his legs and his sword arm became heavy.

But that only induced him to feint, and feint again, at top speed.

Rhammad did not understand what he was up to. In a fit of killing lust, he lunged like a leaping leopard, almost flattening himself on his right knee, and slashed at Conant's ankles.

But Conant had observed carefully that stroke which had been the undoing of Amosar. Quick as a flash he parried, so low that he imbedded the point of his sword into the ground. The next instant his sword leaped up, and slashed Rhammad's shoulder.

Rhammad sprang back. But Conant catapulted after him, and hacked twice at his forearm.

Snarling like a cornered beast of prey, Rhammad transferred his sword to his left arm. But he could not do much with it. Conant feinted, slid his blade around

that of his gigantic enemy, and slammed an upward blow under it.

The sword flew from the left fist of Rhammad. Conant's blade darted again, pierced his litham veil and tore it from his face.

An explosion of yells rang among the audience; for there's no greater shame for a Targui than to show his face to anyone else than his wife.

But a morbid curiosity seized Conant, because never before had he seen a face as long of nose, lips and chin, and as hard and thin as that of his enemy. Then he remembered how cruelly Rhammad had carved Hormel to ribbons with his heavy whip, and he slashed that long, cruel face before him from the root of its nose to the immense jutting chin below it, growling:

"Now you are dishonored. You cannot become any longer an Amenokal. And the mark of your humiliation will remain on you, to be seen by everyone through the slit of your litham, as long as you live!"

"O, if I could only get hold again of my sword!" Rhammad yelled.

"You are welcome to it!" Conant replied ironically. Rhammad sprang to retrieve his weapon. But his right arm was getting numb, stiff and useless. Conant rushed him, forced him to give way, again cut his face, peeled his head cloth also, and slashed a bit of skin from the top of his long and narrow head.

Then he again slid his blade around that of Rhammad, heaved, and sent the sword of the giant flying out of his fingers.

Idene stepped forward.

"Rhammad," she shouted, "how long will you shame this Tobol which is no longer your home? Leave the Arheal, tear down your tents and go!"

"Out! Climb on a camel and ride away with your dishonor! Beast, foul abomination, leave us! Away, Rhammad!" Scores of Ouelliminden warriors, who had never revolted against the haughty demeanor and prevaricating ways of Rhammad up to that moment only because they did not dare to fight him man to man, crowded around him, kicking dust all over him, hitting his bare face and his shoulders.

In that moment of utter humiliation, Rhammad found a friend only in his half-

breed brother Metalli, who threw a piece of cloth over his head and dragged him away.

"We will rally all our followers and go to unleash a vengeance that will efface this Tobol from the face of the earth!" Rhammad choked convulsively when the leaping flames of the Arheal were far behind him.

But some of his followers had preceded him into the tents, and had stolen most of their contents and his best camels and horses.

Rhammad frenziedly hit his bleeding head when he found that out. But Metalli left him for a moment and, using alternately promises and threats, mustered some six half-caste warriors and three harra-tins.

With that meager retinue and a small herd of camels and horses, Rhammad and Metalli rode into the night.

WHEN THE first grey of dawn spread on the eastern sky, they stopped near a brook to drink and to wash Rhammad's wounds, over which the blood had stiffened. As they climbed again on the saddle, Metalli asked:

"Where shall we go, brother?"

"Your mother was a sister of Hamadou Brahimo, chief of chiefs of the Peuhls," Rhammad snarled through his slashed and swollen lips. "The Peuhls never forgave the Ouelliminden and the Tangueredief, who overthrew their supremacy over the other races of this land, and forced them to pay tribute. So we will enlist the Peuhls for our revenge."

"The Peuhls shall follow your bid," Metalli replied ominously, "but if we gain a victory with them, they will not share their reborn power with us. Not even I, who am half-Peuhl, will be spared by their wide-bladed spears."

"Inshallah, do you think that I don't know it?" Rhammad growled. "Attinanar and Hanki Kallakdi, listen to me!"

Attinanar and Hanki Kallakdi, two burly veiled warriors of the Imrad caste, glowered at him through the slits of their lithams.

"You shall ride north, to offer my submission to the king of the Air Touareg, who are part negroes like you," Rhammad explained. "And you'll tell him that he

has only to come with a strong column of his warriors to get all the booty of the Peuhls, and the booty that, by that time, the Peuhls will have wrested from the Ouelliminden."

Attinamar and Hanki Kallakdi shook their heads from side to side, which is a signal of approval among Touareg, climbed on two mehara, took along two other mehara well loaded with water skins, and rode away.

"And now," Rhammad said to Metalli and his remaining companions, "We can deal safely with the Peuhls."

HAMADOU BRAHIMO, the Peuhl chiefs, received Rhammad squatting on his hams in his house of sun-hardened clay, full of big roaches against which a multitude of scurrying centipedes waged relentless war.

"Every Touareg is a walking abomination. I don't order my men to kill you," Hamadou grunted to begin the conversation, "because your father got a son—the warrior who is with you—from my sister."

Rhammad showed him his wounded face and arm and shrieked:

"I was chased from among the Touareg. Do you wonder why I'm thirsty for their blood?"

Hamadou stared at him and grinned wolfishly, showing his long and decayed teeth. Then he inhaled snuff, rubbed his toes, picked some dry dates from a wooden platter and ate them leisurely.

"I don't believe in Allah, but you do!" he said at length. "I may trust you if you swear by Allah that you are telling the truth."

Both Rhammad and Metalli complied. Then, coming to the point, they proposed a plan of campaign, consisting of the destruction of the Ouelliminden Tobols, one by one, by the massed might of the Peuhls.

Hamadou listened carefully and was impressed. Then he traced lines on the packed dirt that was the floor of his house.

"These," he said, "Are the Ouelliminden Tobols. We attack and they are destroyed." His big black hand swept all the lines away. "And these," his horny fingers made little holes, "are you two. What do you want for your share?"

"One-tenth of all the booty," Rhammad countered, "One-tenth of all the comely

Talguias captured. One out of every ten seized harratin slaves."

Hamadou sneered maliciously and filled his big nose with snuff.

Rhammad understood what passed in his mind. Hamadou was already planning to double-cross him, without knowing that the Air Touareg would come and make short work of the Peuhls, decimated and worn by the savage resistance of every Ouelliminden Tobol. So Rhammad showed only anxiety to conclude the deal when he added:

"If the Ouelliminden get an inkling of our invasion, and rally some force, I will show you how to defeat them in mounted battle. But, besides what I asked before, I want for my own a special woman and a special man: Idene and an ebrasker—a soldier—from a far away land called Merrica, who got stranded in Ouelliminden territory and was admitted into the Imochag upper cast by a headman who later fell under my sword."

The breath taking beauty of Idene was famous even among the Peuhls. And as far as America was concerned, Hamadou had heard extraordinary tales of its magnificence and riches from some Songhais who had lived in the colored section of New York for a few years.

Consequently the wily and vicious Hamadou thought that luck was offering him a unique opportunity of annexing Idene into his harem, and of bartering the American soldier mentioned by Rhammad for a fat ransom—after the annihilation of the Ouelliminden power and the death of the no longer useful Rhammad under torture.

But there was a rooted belief in Hamadou's mind that it was in his interest to dissimulate, to lie, and to wait patiently for the right moment of showing his true intentions with devastating finality.

Therefore, he forced as much of a benign and convincing expression as possible on his surly face as he exclaimed: "I agree to your conditions, O Rhammad ag Bechir. From this moment on we are allies, and my Gods and your Allah cannot fail to give us victory!"

Then he sent *griots*, the despised singers, story tellers and messengers of the Peuhl nation, to rally the fighting men of all his tribes.

IN THE seven days needed by Rhammad to reach Hamadou's village of mausoleum-like houses of hardened clay, Conant had gradually broken down the conviction of Idene that the expulsion of Rhammad had ended his cycle of villainies among the Ouelliminden. For, through the ages, numberless Touareg insufferent of local conditions or guilty of crimes had been chased away from their Tobol, and either had died in the wilderness or had founded minor Tobols of their own, which had never turned against their kin. But, after analyzing thoroughly the complexity of Rhammad's mind, with its mixtures of cowardice and savage bravery, of treacherous guile and ruthless purpose, of cruelty and inordinate greed and lust, Conant had reached the conclusion that he was bound to prove more dangerous at large than within the Tobol and under the watchful eyes of his fellow clansmen.

When he finally prevailed, and scouts were sent on Rhammad's trail, the latter had grown old, and was consequently traced with great waste of time and effort. As a result, the Peuhl rally was already under way when the Ouelliminden scouts and the faithful harratins who rode with them observed the magnitude of it from concealment.

The scouts returned, extending their mehara racing camels, to the limit only four days ahead of the advancing Peuhl hordes.

But, as soon as they rode exhausted and dusty through the rows of tents of the Tobol, shouting their warning of impending invasion, the Ouelliminden of the tribe sprang into action. The awning was torn from on top of the two-yard wide Tobol drum of war, anchored on a mound in the very middle of the camp-village, and steady succession of Imraden pounded furiously on it with special drum-sticks shaped like big Indian clubs and covered by leather wrappings.

That steady, thunderous tattoo, boomed without a stop for the next two days, while messengers rode out hell for leather to urge the nearest Tobols to send help at once, and to carry the call to war to all the distant camps of the Ouelliminden nation and of all its allied confederations of Touareg tribes.

The deafening thumping and booming

of the huge Tobol drum subsided only when the first friendly clans arrived.

When some eight hundred warriors were gathered, their chiefs called a council of war; and Conant took a part in it as the chief assistant of Idene, because the tumultuous end of the last Arheal had left her tribe without a newly-elected Amenokal.

The impetuous bravery of the Touareg is as great as their contempt for all the other fighting races of their habitat. In vain Conant remonstrated that, according to the scouts sent to observe their advance, the Peuhls were about two thousand strong, and that it was expedient to wait for additional reinforcements. But he only succeeded in obtaining an offer of freedom for the harratin slaves of the Tobol as a reward for their participation in the coming battle beside their masters.

About one hundred and fifty harratin slaves availed themselves of that opportunity. The muster took place soon after.

The moment came when the Ouelliminden warriors and their black auxiliaries lined up in several rows on the plain before the Tobol camp.

They looked forbidding and incredibly fierce as they stood clutching their spears of solid iron, with their guns strapped across their shoulders, their straight swords hanging from their bandoleers, and their telaka poniards strapped to their left fore-arms.

EACH of these fighting men of the veiled people kept the end of the halter hanging from the nose ring of his racing mehara firmly pressed under his left foot. The horses, fully saddled, were herded behind that martial array, under the supervision of the harratins too cowardly to make a bid for their freedom at the risk of their lives.

The odors of saddle grease, of the tar plastered on the harness wounds of scores of camels and horses, floated above the plain. The water-skins swollen, and faultless, and the bags crammed with non-perishable rations, were strapped on the sides of the camels constituting the barbaric train of the squadrons.

Finally the gigantic Tahatta ag Zem-mahi, Amenokal of a nearby group of Tobols, and leader-elected of the small

army, looked proudly at the waiting warriors and grunted:

"Everything is ready!"

Conant begged for the last time with Idene, who, in full warlike attire, stood beside him to keep out of the coming battle. But Idene vibrantly replied:

"I always rode to war at my father's side. Nothing will stop me from striking with spear and sword in the struggle which shall decide the destinies of my people.

Tahatta ag Zemmahi lifted his huge right arm. The Tobol drum began booming. Every warrior climbed on his rhala saddle, gathered the halter in his left fist and patted the root of the neck of his mehari with his left foot.

The mehara arose clumsily. The riders set them in motion, group by group, until a long column snaked out on the plain, toward the East and the advancing Peuhls.

The Targuias, the old men and the children of the Tobol shouted greetings and waved after their departing champions until they and their mounts became tiny specks in the distance.

VII

AROUND noon of the next day, the scouts reported that the Peuhls were near. Tahatta ag Zemmahi instantly called a halt and a council of war.

As it was to be expected, all the present chieftains proposed the usual Touareg break-neck charge. Conant, however, had not forgotten the numerical superiority of the Peuhls and had other ideas, which he explained carefully:

"It is better to wait on a strong position, and to break the attack of the Peuhl horsemen with gunfire. Our charge will prove irresistible when the Peuhl ranks begin to break. To clench the victory we should send a hundred picked men by a round-about route, to attack unexpectedly the rear of the Peuhl hordes at the critical moment."

The last ruse appealed to the assembled chieftains. But the idea of waiting on foot and of firing, instead of tearing into the Peuhls horseback from the very beginning, was simply against their grain, and Conant could not make any headway against their stubbornness. A lot of wrangling obtained him only the authority

of leading Idene's Tobol as he saw fit. But Idene did not like that and decided to take part in the initial charge at Tahata's side.

Thus Conant was harassed by all kinds of worries, when the hundred picked warriors entrusted with the surrounding maneuver rode away. And he was in a frenzy when the Ouelliminden allies discarded their camels for their horses and set on march with Idene, ahead of her Tobol warriors under his direct orders, who felt humiliated because they were left at the end of the column, and expressed their feelings of insufferance of the alien caution of Conant in not uncertain terms.

The Ouelliminden Toureg came in sight of the Peuhls suddenly, as they emerged from a deep valley.

The Peuhls had undoubtedly heard of the advance of the veiled warriors from their own scouts, because they waited for them half a mile ahead of a steep ridge.

Conant gazed at the massed squadrons of the enemy tribesmen, bristling with wide-bladed spears, and at the thick vegetation covering the top of the hill behind them, and did not like the look of it.

Hastening the pace of his mount, he rode up to Tahatta and Idene, and warned:

"Beware! Perhaps there are plenty of Peuhl riflemen ambushed on that hill top! We should ride around it, forcing the Peuhl chiefs and Rhammad to revise their plan of battle."

Idene turned her head and shrugged. Tahatta stared at him contemptuously, and snarled.

"Inshallah! When did ever Imouaren adopt craven ruses before miserable Peuhls? Do as you want with the men under your orders, O Conant, and be ready to face their anger after the rout of the Peuhls, in which they will play such a little part because you keep them hobbled like load camels at the end of a march!"

There was nothing left for Conant but to return to his veiled charges, and to endure the insults and jibes with which they reacted against their enforced inaction.

A dreadful suspense convulsed Conant when the Peuhls' squadrons surged forward and the Ouelliminden under the command of Tahatta broke into a trot which soon became a gallop.

The distance between the two mounted forces was growing smaller and smaller. The Touareg battle cry of "Allah k' Akbar!" already rent the air, when what Conant had foreseen and feared happened. For the Peuhls suddenly turned around their mounts and galloped along the foot of the hill toward its northern end, and blindly carried by their warlike frenzy, the Ouelliminden tore hell for leather after them.

They were quite near the hill, and already scattering in a long and ragged pursuing column, when a deafening volley rang. A white cloud from burning black powder wafted out of the thickets on the hill-top, and enveloped them.

THE EFFECT of that discharge of bullets into the thundering Touareg squadrons was not as fatal as if well-trained American infantrymen had handed the guns. Nevertheless, several Touareg tumbled from the saddle, killed or wounded. Additional Ouelliminden Touareg were slammed down by their struck and collapsing mounts. And more and more were hit and slain or disabled, as the guns of the ambushed Peuhls on foot kept on firing.

Conant saw several Ouelliminden turning against the cliff and attempting to climb on it on horse and on foot. But the slope was too steep. Before they could make much headway they were shot down one after another.

In that critical moment the thought crossed Conant's mind that it would have been absurdly easy to clear the hill-top and the ambush with a few machine guns and the shells of a section of howitzers. Unfortunately, he was a minor commander in a combat waged with outdated weapons. The Garand rifle salvaged from the wreck of the airplane remained in Idene's pavilion, useless for lack of bullets.

Suddenly Conant noticed that, far on the southern end of the hill, the slope declined gently. Without losing an instant, he shouted a frenzied order and urged his mount forward. His Tobol warriors galloped after him like madmen, howling at the top of their lungs.

The decimated squadrons of Tahatta had gone around the northern end of the hill after the escaping Peuhl horsemen, and

were no longer in sight, when Conant, in spite of serious losses, finally reached the top and rode like a whirlwind through a mob of desperately yelling Peuhls on foot.

These tribesmen were easily stabbed, cut, trampled under the galloping hoofs of the Ouelliminden horses, or chased in all directions, too terrorized to fight any more. But, as he cantered down the opposite slope, Conant saw a disheartening scene.

For additional Peuhl squadrons had been waiting behind the hill, and now, together with their fellow tribesmen who had lured Tahatta into the trap, were converging hell for leather on the Ouelliminden from every side.

Like most Touareg, the Ouelliminden composing Conant's unit were hand to hand fighters, accustomed to close in on their enemies and to finish them with sword and spear. Their lack of faith in their firearms of various vintages was as decided as their distaste for using them.

However, the set-back suffered by their fellow Touareg led by the Amenokal Tahatta around the foot of the ridge, and the successive conquest of that natural stronghold thanks to the quick reception and skill of the young American officer, had impressed them so that, save for a few grumblings, they obeyed with alacrity Conant's order to dismount and deploy in a chain of riflemen.

Touareg are poor marksmen because they never have bullets and powder to spare for target practice, and they invariably close their eyes when they press the trigger. But not even a blind man afflicted by delirium tremens could have missed the compact masses of Peuhl horsemen on the plain below.

Hamadou Brahimo and Rhammad saw the havoc done by the volleys fired from the lost hill; but they were not worried by the terrific casualties of that phase of the combat, because they knew that it was bound to be over soon. For, after slackening the gait of their horses to a trot at the sight of so many enemies waiting for them, Tahatta's squadrons had decided to make a supreme bid for victory with a headlong charge, and were breaking into a gallop; and the ground already boomed thunderously under the tempest of fast pounding

hoofs of the savage Peuhl cavalry, who were taking up the challenge.

A couple of minutes later, the blue-clad Touareg squadrons and the compact swarms of half-naked, black and fuzzy-headed Peuhl horsemen collided with the jarring impact and deafening noise of a volcanic eruption. Whole rows of tribesmen and horses were instantly impaled by the lowered Peuhl lances, topped by wide and razor-edged blades, and by the spears of solid iron thrust forward by the Ouelliminden warriors. Then, in a terrific mix-up, Touareg and Peuhls' stabbled and slashed at each other like madmen. By the score they grappled, fell from the saddle, and were trampled to death by the frenzied crush of horses fighting horses with vicious bites and pile-driving kicks of their forehooves.

A cloud of lifted dust soon shrouded the combat; half blinded by it, groups of fierce fighters from both sides smashed through all opposition, amidst a nightmare of rabid yells and agonized shrieks, and a ringing din of steel hammering on steel.

Eventually, the deadly skill with which the majority of the Ouelliminden used their swords and threw their spears, which transfixed the Peuhls and pinned them on top of their desperately neighing mounts, proved more effective than the sweep and overhand stab of the heavily tipped and wooden-staffed lance, national weapon of the Peuhls. The Ouelliminden broke the Peuhl hordes in several points and drove deeply into them. But wherever a Peuhl fell, three other Peuhls surged to fill his place. The outnumbered Ouelliminden became inextricably mixed with their foes in a vast and chaotic mêlée.

CONANT was cursing his luck because his veiled warriors could not fire any longer without hitting friends as well as foes, when he recognized the tall headwear and silver-spangled bandoleers of the Amenokal Tahatta, and the golden bracelets and the grey Arabian-Asil thoroughbred horse of Idene, on the very middle of the battlefield.

Tahatta, big and deep-chested, slashed right and left with a two-handed sword. Idene clutched a sword which looked as thin as a wand, compared to the ponderous weapon of Tahatta. However, Conant

knew that Idene's fencing skill was as deadly as her sword was keen of point and sharp of edge; he was not surprised when, quick as lightning, the Targuia princess slammed aside three Peuhl spears striking at her, and stabbed their owners out of the saddle.

Unfortunately, only a few Ouelliminden rode immediately behind their Amenokal and Idene; and most of these veiled warriors were suddenly engulfed by the Peuhls who rushed them compactly from two sides.

"Inshallah!" a towering Ouelliminden snarled from behind Conant, "How long must we stand here like heaps of dung, while Idene out Amastane is fighting for her life?"

Conant was appraising the odds as he was able to, when the chance he was waiting for came; for one of the inexplicable and speedy fluctuations occurring in all old-style cavalry battles broke the compactness of the struggle on the plain below, and spread it over a wider area.

"Keep always massed behind me!" Conant shouted, and leaped on his mount. His followers did likewise and rode after him downslope, gaining momentum with every leap and stride of their horses.

A moment later they hit the mêlée like a thundering avalanche, and shot through it at breakneck speed. Crouching above the mane of his horse, with his outstretched arm ending in a long and sharp sword point, Conant caught out of balance a wildly-screaming Peuhl chief and silenced him by splitting his throat wide open. As the dying Peuhl chief fell from the saddle, the young American officer saw a stretch of ground covered with corpses of men and equine carcasses, and, behind it, a cyclone of crazy and plunging horses, mounted by wildly-yelling Peuhl warriors, and coming hell for leather against him.

The redoubtable efficiency as a fighter of the big-nosed and wide-shouldered savage who led that band was proven by the four-inch wide blade of his lance, dripping with Touareg blood. But Conant cut the tip of that lance with a parrying sword blow, and sent the shaft flying upward, so that the Ouelliminden who galloped after him had only to thrust out his sword in order to stab the big-nosed Peuhl in the breast and knock him out of the saddle.

Followed a jarring clash, a split second

when swords and spears flashed and struck through the clouds of lifted dust, then Conant and his Ouelliminden galloped on, yelling the Touareg battle cry. The confused tangle of slain and crippled men and beasts which they left behind vouched for the success of that charge, which was their third since the beginning of the combat.

A few moments later, another fluctuation of the fast-moving mounted combat opened before them a strip of ground some hundred yards wide and as many long, streamed with dead and wounded. And the alert and tense Conant saw, on the opposite end of that clearing, Idene and two veiled warriors, surrounded, hard-pressed and fighting desperately the Peuhls attacking them from every side; while, a score of yards further, Rhammad ag Bechir, recognizable by his giant size and the long arms of a human orang-outang, fought a furious mounted duel with the Amenokal Tahatta.

"Rhammad, accursed murderer of Hormel and McNamara, betrayer of your people!" Conant snarled, and frenziedly urged his mount forward, when, unexpectedly a swarm of Peuhls galloped into the middle of the clearing.

CONANT'S Ouelliminden howled like frenzied beasts of prey, because they could not see any longer their princess fighting for her life, and tore into these Peuhls like fiends. But the Peuhls fought back with desperate tenacity. Some of them, wounded and unhorsed, crawled under the mounts of friends and foes, at the risk of getting their heads bashed in and their bodies crushed by the whirlwind of the quick-pounding hoofs and, whenever they saw through the choking dust equine bellies between pairs of Touareg trousers, they stabbed at them.

That furious melee was at its peak when Conant heard Idene crying out desperately and, half-crazed, catapulted his horse onward like a live battering ram. He never knew how he smashed through a cluster of Peuhl horsemen without getting his head hacked off. But the moment came when he rode clear and saw, with a sinking sensation at his heart, only corpses on the place where Idene had made her supreme stand.

Conant's eyes shone like those of a mad-

man, when, bending on the saddle, he searched anxiously for the golden bracelets of Idene among the bodies of Ouelliminden and Peuhls frozen by death in the strained positions in which they had exhaled their last breath.

He located the carcass of the beautiful gray Asil thoroughbred, stabbed through the neck and disembowelled. Then he came upon the body of the Amenokal, flat on his back, with a huge arm almost severed at the shoulder, and all smeared with the blood pouring from the terrific wound with which Rhammad's sword had slashed him from sternum to groin. But he could not find any trace of Idene; and his brief rejoicing at the thought that she had managed to escape somehow gave way to grim exasperation when the conviction dawned on him that the triumphant Rhammad had overpowered and abducted her after restraining the Peuhls bent on her destruction.

A hundred odd Ouelliminden and haratins joined Conant, one by one and in scattered groups. These survivors of the proud band placed under his orders by Idene were exhausted men astride played-out mounts. And, on the plain all around, the overwhelming numerical superiority of the Peuhls was asserting itself at last. The Peuhls had suffered far superior losses. But the remains of the tribal army of the slain Amenokal Tahatta were hopelessly split into little groups, and each of these groups was surrounded and subject to relentless attacks.

Then Conant noticed a band of Peuhls, sitting their saddles on a knoll far to his left.

A hail of bullets soon came from the dismounted Peuhl tribesmen ringing that knoll. But the haughty appearance of a chief, from whom all other Peuhls on the knoll seemed to take orders, captured Conant's attention so exclusively that he did not pay any attention to the hissing bullets.

"Grab the bit of my horse and keep him still!" he ordered to one of his followers. When the Ouelliminden complied, Conant got hold of his rifle. It was a modernized Lebel, which he had found in Idene's pavilion, and he had not much faith in it. Nevertheless, he aimed carefully and pressed the trigger.

The roar of the report was still in his ears when he saw the authoritative Peuhl chief tumbling from the saddle, and all the nearby Peuhls leaping from their horses and rushing to his help.

Then Conant heard a wail, which was taken and repeated by all the other Peuhls fighting all over the plain, until the very air rang with the savage lament: "O Hamadou Brahimo, invincible lance! You shall strike no more for the glory of the Peuhl people!"

"Inshallah!" shouted the Ouelliminden who still held Conant's mount, "O Conant, you killed Hamadou Brahimo, the chief of chiefs of our enemies! And look! Look, there! The veiled warriors sent by you to fall unexpectedly on the rear of our enemies are arriving! Glory of Allah! This is no longer a day of death, but of victory, for the Ouelliminden nation!"

CONANT stared with bated breath at the distant fringe of thickets pointed out by the Ouelliminden and saw swarm after swarm of blue-clad horsemen emerging at a breakneck gallop from among the trees, and heard the warriors lined up behind him exclaiming:

"We fought when disaster stared at us in the face! Why must we be robbed of the pleasure of making our steel sing in the last moments of this battle? Lead us forward, O American!"

Conant turned on the saddle and saw that a surge of revitalizing excitement was propping up the weary bodies of his men and communicating itself to their sensitive mounts, which were pricking their ears and stamping impatiently their forehoofs.

When he urged his horse forward, they all surged after him, shouting happily, and the ground boomed under the tempest of their gallop.

But the death of Hamadou Brahimo, and the sudden appearance at their shoulders of a new Touareg horde, which they mistook for a veritable army, turned the blood of the surviving Peuhls to water. After a few attempts at a desultory resistance, they scattered all over the plain, throwing away their weapons in their desperate urge to escape. The Ouelliminden tore after them, drunken with victory and lust for booty.

Conant, deserted by his men who did not want to lose their share of the spoils

of the vanquished Peuhls, left his weary horse for a fresher one wandering without a rider, and began his search for Idene.

About an hour later he was growing desperate, when a wounded Ouelliminden recognized him and, pulling himself up on an elbow, unexpectedly called:

"Oudst Idene oult Amastane . . . if you want news of Idene oult Amastane . . . I saw her passing, while the fighting was still on, with her hands tied behind her back, between Rhammad ag Bechir and his brother Metalli, may Allah curse their names forever!"

"Which direction did they take?" Conant exploded.

"That!" the wounded pointed out with a motion of his head, "You cannot miss their trail, because it must perforce follow the only path through the wastelands to the left of this plain, and the bottom of the ravine of Tagazith. The sun, high for a few more hours, will help you, if you get a mehari."

The wounded sank back on the ground. Conant made a mental note of his location and rode on. Luck was with him, because a few minutes later he came upon an Ouelliminden who had just captured three fresh racing camels, and forced him to surrender one of them and to come along.

After a lot of fast riding, Conant saw a ravine which split an unclimbable bank as neatly as a knife stroke. Muttering: "This must be the gully of Tagazith," he spurred his mehari into it.

The bottom of the ravine slanted at an upward angle; which was no hardship for camels, because these clumsy and enduring beasts are good climbers. But the going became insecure for camel hoofs when Conant had to ride over winding ledges only a few inches wide.

The sun was bearing down on his head, and to the discomfort of the perspiration drenching his forehead and stinging his eyes was added the nuisance of swarms of blood-sucking winged pests, when he rode over the very middle of the ravine and caught a glimpse of Rhammad, Idene and Metalli, riding camel-back in a single file over a steep trail. Without losing an instant, he forced his mount to squat; and then lifted his gun and fired.

He aimed low, to avoid hitting Idene instead of Metalli, who rode last. To his

dismay the bullet hit not Rhammad's half-brother, but his camel, which collapsed.

Metalli, however, managed to hit the ground on all fours, clear of his falling mount. And thereafter he lost no time in grabbing his gun and firing, while Conant pressed the trigger a second time.

THE TWO detonations rang almost simultaneously. Over the booming of countless echoes, Conant heard a muffled scream and saw from the corner of his eye that the Ouelliminden behind him was falling backward, clutching his breast. But, far above on the trail, Metalli also was sinking to the ground. He pitched on it head first and remained still, when Idene, with her hands still bound behind her shoulders, slid down from her camel and ran.

Rhammad had dismounted and ducked behind a boulder as soon as the bullets had begun to whistle. At the sight of Idene slipping from his clutches, however, he became obsessed by a cruel urge to kill her rather than surrender her forever. Discarding all caution, he left his shelter and leaped after her like a giant grasshopper, cursing obscenely and firing from the hip.

Conant never hated Rhammad as much as in that moment. Clenching his teeth, he grabbed his rifle firmly. The reports of his gun crashed all along the winding gully, magnified by countless echoes when, through the swirling eddies of heat haze, he saw Rhammad spinning, falling against a boulder, firing a last shot after Idene, and toppling on his side under the impact of a second bullet.

Conant stepped onward crouching, finger on the trigger, while Rhammad strove desperately to pull himself up again, or, at the least, to get hold of the rifle which had fallen from his hands.

Suddenly, myriads of cicadas began chirping in that forlorn African gorge. Rhammad's head bobbed up and down, as if dazed by all that strident noise. Then he rolled over, on his back. The wind lifted the hem of his blue tunic, flapped it up. But his feet remained spread, at a dismal angle.

A few minutes later Conant met Idene, who was sound and healthy save for a few scratches and bruises, and almost hysterical with joy, because she had been rescued be-

fore Rhammad could abuse her, and because her American friend was unscathed.

When their first flurry of greetings, questions and answers was over, they went together to the place where Rhammad lay.

One of Conant's bullets had shattered the left hip of Rhammad ag Bechir, another had pierced his stomach. Rhammad was dying. But his hatred of the young American officer was such that, forgetting his agonizing pain, he attempted to whip the telaka poniard from the sheath strapped to his left forearm when he saw Idene drawing near with her rescuer at her side.

Conant saw in his thoughts Hormel, drenched with blood and hanging by his feet; and McNamara, with the pallor of death on his face, stretched in the dust of a Touareg alley. As he had sworn to do while he was still a helpless harratin slave, he had repaid Rhammad with shame and mental suffering, and had finally wounded him mortally. But now that the sinister giant lay shaken by the death rattle at his feet, he felt only contempt for him.

Shimmering pillars of heat haze danced mockingly all over the slope. The crest of the hill above it shone like copper against the flame of the sky. Suddenly a strong wind blew from the west. Conant felt it swishing over his face, neck and arms, drying the perspiration in which they were bathed. The clean air rising from the bottom of the gully, the pull of his billowing garments, gave him a heady sensation that his body was losing weight and getting ready to soar into space.

"We won, otherwise you would not be here," Idene's soft voice broke the vagaries of his tired mind.

"The timely arrival of the surrounding column, and the death of the Peuhl chief of chiefs worked the trick," Conant explained. "But now that all dangers are removed," he added as an afterthought, "I must confide to you that I have a mission to accomplish. . . ."

"After what you did for all of us," Idene interrupted, "you can ask anything. The Ouelliminden and all the other Touareg confederations of the Niger country will satisfy your every wish."

That was all. And plenty. Conant could almost see the faces of his command-

ing officers in Colomb-Bechar when he would tell them that the southern Touareg had been converted from potential patrols of trouble into barbaric allies.

“CONANT,” Idene suddenly said, “before the battle I wanted to ask you to rule my Tobol at my side. But when I rode between Rhammad and Metalli as a helpless captive, I thought that you were irretrievably lost to me, and I realized that it had to be, because you would never give up your country . . . and . . . just think how I would look, with my feet encased in the footwear used by your fellow countrywomen, and stumbling at every step! Besides, there are two kinds of Targuias: the husky and rawboned, who remain unchanged as the years pass; and those shapely like me in youth, who become like my mother, in middle age . . . Do you remember when I showed you my mother, Aemena, tearing apart and reassembling endlessly a wooden saddle? Perhaps I shall not lose my reason as she did. But in ten, in fifteen years, I could be just as shapeless and wrinkled and crude as her, in your house, in America. . . .”

Conant saw the dark blue eyes of Idene searching anxiously into his face, in a forlorn hope that he could surrender to

her spell in spite of her warning. But the visions that she had created in his mind were shattering, and he could not hide his revulsion of feelings.

Idene understood and shrank back, as if struck by a physical blow. Then her red lips curled in a forced smile, an unfathomable expression shone in her eyes.

“Soon you will go back to your people, or your people shall send another flying machine to retrieve you,” she said in a broken whisper that went to Conant’s heart, “But, until that happens, I want to be still your tamelit-owner when we are alone. And now, my dear friend . . .”

Conant did not expect the suddenness with which she suddenly clasped him in her arms. They were exquisitely shaped arms, but strong as steel. Then her hungry lips sought his own, and the sensation of her kiss was such that he forgot everything else.

Rhammad’s eyes, yellow as those of an angry leopard, seemed to glare at them through the slit of the litham. But a scavenger vulture had already alighted on a boulder, below the crest of the hill. For the vulture waited with the patience of his kind for Idene and Conant to go. The vulture knew that Rhammad ag Bechir was dead.



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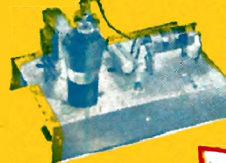
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