

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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a
rite
for
Stalek

by . . . Dorothy Madlé

Under Stalek's immortal guidance the genius of early man flourished and the pyramids arose. Why, then, should he fear love's young dream?

AS THE TOURIST folders explained, Goblin Cave was an impressive stop on the sightseeing route between Latchstring and Ozark Run. It extended nine hundred feet underground, and its marvels included Fairy Chimes, "The Angel," formed of intertwined stalactites, and in its largest chamber a giant throne fit for some Viking warrior or Druidic deity of legendary renown. Runways and stairs had been thoughtfully provided for the explorers' comfort, and an Intelligent Guide was at their disposal all day long and in the evenings by appointment.

What the folders omitted because it was not generally known, not even to Kerry Dennis, the Intelligent Guide, was that in sober truth an ancient god inhabited Goblin Cave. Stalek, Planner of All Caves, was in solitary residence, leaving his other caverns to the care of subordinates.

Had Stalek been visible at all he would have appeared to consist largely of grey whorls assembled in the approximate shape of a man, one of those curious two-legged creatures who, millennia ago, had

There is probably no more over-worked title in dramatic literature, from the Greeks to Anatole France, than "The Death of the Gods." But "The Life of a God!"—there we stand on more fertile soil ploughing a brighter furrow into the unknown, especially when the god in question is as lovable—and as mysterious—as the Stalek of this richly embroidered tale. Dorothy Madlé has a rare talent for evoking magic from "the far away and long ago."

adopted Stalek's caves for shelter and himself as their divinity.

For thousands of years he had been called direful names by many respectful tribes. Then gradually human beings had stopped calling on Stalek, and for the last thirty centuries the cave god had been free to devote all of his time to his own work. And that was how he had become acquainted with Kerry Dennis.

Busily engaged in the difficult task of diverting a tiny vein of oxidized copper, Stalek paused just long enough to listen to sounds from the pavilion. Tourists again! Their presence meant, of course, interruption. But it also meant another visit from Kerry, which afforded him the keenest pleasure.

The instant the guide opened the door and flicked on the lights Stalek hurried forward. He assured himself of his subject's continued health, did a quick stubble-count of Kerry's blond hair and made certain there was no look of distress on the young man's face. After that he observed the two tourists.

One was male, solid and brisk. The other was—female and young. Delicately formed she was, her eyes a deep copper and her hair a pale off-bronze tint, just such a tint as Stalek once had planned to produce by skillfully imbedding certain unusual metals in crystal. Idly he tuned into her mind pattern, and—tensed in instant alarm. It was an almost perfect complement to Kerry's. It had, moreover, an incipient aware-

ness of the guide's lean, grey-eyed person.

Stalek drew a weary breath. He had learned to expect dangerous complications whenever he let himself get involved with human beings. Very deliberately he gathered his baleful aspect—wished upon him centuries ago by worshippers who had seemed to think a baleful aspect necessary to a god—and aimed it at the girl.

In ancient times this force would have struck an intruder to the ground and stretched him out lifeless on the cave floor. Not that Stalek had any wish to kill. In the old days he had been compelled to do it now and then, when his subjects needed to be reassured as to his power. But now such vivid demonstrations were not only out of fashion—they were impossible. Now no one believed in Stalek.

His shaft of malignance struck instant, primitive responses. The girl was receptive, to a quite startling degree. She would have made a good priestess, possibly even a sybil. Stalek shook off a foolishly wistful memory of the Ritual of Divination by Flame, when robed priestesses had held their tapers steadily aloft and Stalek, in fine humor, had puffed wisps of force to make their lights caper in the windless dark. It had taken very little energy, and it had made his people happy.

Gooseflesh was rearing on the girl's creamy nape where her remote ancestors would have erected

their fur. She was getting a good enough scare, Stalek decided, to keep her out of Stalek's cave and Kerry's sight for the rest of her days. Good enough, surely, to keep her from ever tempting Kerry away from Stalek into some silly activity aboveground.

Stalek had ambitious plans for Kerry. True, he hadn't meant to take on even one human subject again. He had come to Goblin Cave on business, to correct schedules that had been thrown off by the electric lights. While they glowed, photosynthetic processes halted, and all formation-building stopped. Stalek had also set in motion measures to quicken the removal, or suitable re-designing, of the ugly runways and stairs. Then Kerry, young and eager, and straight out of university, had turned out to be delightfully interested in cave mechanics. He was even familiar with the legends of Stalek's godship. Almost in spite of himself, the god had developed a warm friendship for the guide. If he could repel distractions, Stalek would make of Kerry the greatest geologist on earth.

Stalek had bestowed gifts before. He had been moved to tenderness by the Cro-Magnon people who had painted daylight figures on his cave walls, for the Dark God's amusement. By sealing those caves against time's erosion he had guaranteed the artists an endurance as close to immortality as man would ever know. And to the people of the Sunken Continent of Mu Stalek had given

calculus, a system he had devised to figure stresses and time schedules in the many caves over which he held sovereignty. It had spread to a red tribe of Egypt, who had built pyramids with it. It had passed down the centuries, and now Kerry had inherited that early knowledge too.

Stalek returned his attention to the girl's thoughts. She stood with tanned fingers curled firmly on the handrail, staring bewilderedly into the shadows.

This is queer! Something hates having me here, but there's no one but the guide and the middle-aged tourist. But now I'm being silly. You can't feel thoughts. This cave is terrible and lovely . . . swooping folds . . . columns and shadows. My legs have a separate will. To run back . . . to get out into the daylight. It is worse than the first day I taught kindergarten, when the twenty children staring up at me were terrible little beings watching my every movement with wise impersonal derision. I got to like them later . . . This is only imagination. I'll pay attention to the guide . . . I'll interrupt.

"What is the scientific name for getting dizzy in caves?" she asked, and was instantly startled by the way the walls of the cave echoed back her voice.

The guide turned. "Claustrophobia," he said impersonally. "If it gets bad, close your eyes and I'll lead you out."

Anticipating triumph, Stalek put

more power into his assault. If she gave up now, he would win.

"No, thanks," she declined coldly. "I never have claustrophobia."

"You'd better get out if you're nervous, Miss," the male tourist advised.

Jane drew herself half an inch taller. "My question was academic," she said. "I was simply curious—"

Kerry's eyebrows quirked as he led the way through a passage into the Throne Room. Ceilings towered into shadow, crusted with lances and gargoyles, and against the far wall a vast white pedestal loomed against looped stone draperies.

The guide paused near the entrance. Impressively he picked up a small mallet and tapped out an antique pentatonic scale on a row of small stalactites in a recessed niche. Stalek rejoiced inwardly and aimed an extra jet of balefulness at the back of Jane's neck.

"It may be pure coincidence," Kerry said solemnly, "that many caves in Europe—in the region of the Pyrenees—have such natural chimes as this, and even that nearly all contain what seems to be a great throne. But it used to be believed that gods inhabited caves of this nature and that visitors struck the chimes as they entered to celebrate rites of propitiation before his throne."

Jane flicked back a shining wisp of hair with a hand that stubbornly refused to quiver. "Since I already have had a few courses in comparative mythology," she said nastily,

"would you mind explaining from the geologist's point of view why certain stalactites resemble icicles and others suggest sculptured drapery?"

Kerry explained, in great detail. The male tourist listened with a look of undisguised astonishment on his heavy face. Stalek listened admiringly. There were times when he was convinced that Kerry, a mere human being, had sufficient intelligence to build a fair sort of cave himself.

Jane stopped before a thick white stalagmite standing waist-high against a wall. Clear water ran over its rounded top and when she put both hands on the top of the column the water rippled through her fingers.

"I am now interrupting one of your forty-million-year processes," she boasted quietly.

Kerry smiled. "You are now performing an ancient rite, purifying your hands in running water before approaching the Throne."

Jane snatched away her hands quickly.

The portly tourist was examining a frail cluster of stalactites on the under side of a concrete rail.

"How long has it been since the runways were built?" he asked.

"Seven years," Kerry informed him. "Ordinarily, formations grow at the rate of one cubic inch every five hundred years. You can see that the calcium in concrete accumulates much faster than in natural rock.

Right now new stalactites are forming under your feet."

Jane's face came alight with gratification and surmise.

"The cave is alive then! About ten thousand years from now some future geologist will re-discover it, and he'll notice the fantastic looking runways. People will call it Gnomes' Walk, or something of the sort, and they'll never suspect that man had anything to do with it."

Stalek leaned against a shelf of rock. It was almost as if the wench could read his mind.

The male tourist's glance said as plain as words that a woman's place was in the home, and that Jane would be a most welcome guest in a home for the feeble-minded. He drew a card from his pocket and handed it to Kerry. Stalek peered. The card read: *Thomas W. Saunders, Saunders Sand and Gravel Company, Junction City.*

"I've been observing you," he told Kerry. "We operate gravel pits throughout the Middle West, and we might be able to use a bright young man with a knowledge of rock formations, and a knack for handling people. I'll be at the inn at Ozark Heights for two days. If you're interested—come and see me.

"I'm sure," he added, "you don't expect to spend the next ten years guiding sightseers through a hole in the ground. It's definitely not a job with a future."

Stalek trembled with fury. Gravel pits! Hole in the ground! He,

Stalek, was being maliciously misrepresented as a doddering builder of misshapen formations! By concentrating on protecting Kerry from the girl he had let this abomination among tourists get to the very point of luring Kerry from his appointed future.

"Thank you, sir," Kerry said, taking the card. "I'll think it over. I'd planned to go back to school in the fall."

The industrialist frowned slightly, and inspected a thin gold pocket watch. "I have an appointment at six," he told Kerry. "It's after five now. I'll find my way out, and you may continue the tour. I'll expect you at the inn."

He turned at the foot of the steps in an ingratiating final attempt to influence Kerry. "School's all right," he said. "But don't forget that a young man can miss his best chances by making too inflexible a decision. I earnestly suggest you give my offer considerable thought."

Kerry and Jane continued on alone, descending several steps with an eagerness that greatly increased Stalek's uneasiness.

"This is the deepest part of the cave," Kerry said. "At the end is Fairy Pool. The legends say the cave god always bestows a gift on the person who dips in the pool, but I shouldn't advise it. The water's as cold as ice."

The runway formed a bridge across the shallow white basin. As Kerry walked on ahead, Jane paused an instant to lean over the railing.

The banister, weakened by the sapping of calcium that formed its small clustered stalactites, began to sway and tremble, and then, with appalling suddenness, it gave way completely.

Jane fell into the pool with a terrified scream. Instantly Kerry sprinted back, swung himself down, and lifted her into his arms. He waded from the pool, set her on the wet stone floor, and dabbed at a trickle of blood where her forehead had grazed a jutting piece of limestone.

Both young persons, Stalek noted clinically, were experiencing strange electric sensations which they attributed to sudden contact with cold water.

Suddenly Jane scrambled up, pushing Kerry away. "You and your cave!" she exclaimed, angrily. "I might have been drowned." Then she surveyed the guide's dripping jeans and his expression of horrified concern, and her indignation vanished. She looked down at the sopping ruin of her green dress, and laughed. The sound rippled pleasantly among the stalactites and suddenly Kerry was laughing too. Even the worried Stalek smiled, but with wry restraint.

Kerry sobered. "That cut should be treated," he pointed out. "Will you come back to the pavilion while I call Dr. Sorens?"

Jane took a compact from the shoulder purse, and examined the small wound. "It would be silly to

call a doctor for a scratch like this," she said.

"But I'm responsible," Kerry insisted. "If that cut should become infected—"

"It won't. And if it does it will be my own fault. I promise not to sue, Mr.—"

"Kerry Dennis. But I'll have to insist on the doctor. It's part of my job."

"Oh, all right!" Jane shrugged and started for the cavern entrance. "I've a great respect for cave-hazard regulations. Aren't you supposed to take down the statistics? Name, Jane Mallory; occupation, school teacher; sex, female; age, twenty-one. Anything more?"

Kerry grinned. "Regulations have their advantages."

"It's ridiculous to bring the doctor here," Jane said. "I'll go with you to his office after I've gone to the hotel for dry clothes. Do you have a change with you?"

"I live back of the pavilion," Kerry replied. "Are you sure you don't mind waiting?"

Stalek watched their dripping retreat. As soon as the lights were out, he told himself, he would start a change of precipitation that in fifty years or so would lower by one thirty-seventh of a note the resonance of the second stalactite in Fairy Chimes. It was off by that much. But for the first time Kerry forgot to turn off the lights, and Stalek could do nothing except think.

It was late when Kerry's key

grated in the pavilion lock. Stalek hoped his friend would remember about the lights, but Kerry passed in an almost trancelike state into his own quarters. Stalek stretched the antennae of his mind as high as he could from the cave door. Only a jumbled exhilaration reached him from Kerry. Stalek sighed. In the morning he would find out just how grievous his failure had been.

And he did. Kerry whistled as he came down with a shovel and a basket for an early morning inspection tour of the cave. He had been disastrously impetuous, the god divined. Not only had he fallen in love, but he had let the bright-haired girl know it on the first evening of their acquaintance. Stalek accepted the inevitable. But as Kerry's elation increased the god's mood darkened. Kerry's plans could only lead to tragedy and remorse.

A car stopped outside. Jane called "Kerry!" in a fresh morning voice and Kerry took the top six steps in two strides and a slight stumble. Warm daylight came with Jane across the threshold. Her skin looked golden against the cream-and-rust brown of her blouse and slacks.

"You invited me for a specially conducted tour, remember?" she laughed, and added quickly: "Complete with climb to The Angel's shoulder. Am I too early?"

Suddenly she stood quiet as if listening. "Strange, yesterday I thought your cave was vindictive. Now it just seems eerie—and almost friendly."

"Yesterday I wasn't in love with you," Kerry reminded her.

They swung themselves up along the wall behind the towering angel. Jane's brown playshoes found toe-room in small crevices and Stalek noted how careful she was not to scuff against delicate, translucent formations. She was as considerate, he reluctantly admitted, as Kerry himself.

At the top they sat on the level edge of a giant wing. Kerry struck a match, and the flame stood for an instant motionless in the damp still air. Their cigarettes met over it.

"When will you marry me?" he whispered, pressing his lips against her hair.

Jane blew out the match and rested her head against his shoulder. "Later rather than right away would be more sensible, I guess. But I don't feel sensible about you, darling. Let's make it *very* soon, and I'll teach in the town where you study. We can manage."

Kerry snapped the burnt match, and let it drop. "That isn't what I have in mind," he said. "I have a date with Saunders today that's going to make you the bride of a guy with a job—and a future."

Jane tried to pull away, but Kerry's arm tightened about her. "Look, I fell in love with a geologist," she protested. "That's important."

Kerry employed both arms in a behavior pattern which Stalek instantly recognized as a male means of concluding female argument.

"Darling, nothing is so important as—"

A gruff hail from the pavilion interrupted him.

"Tourists," Jane whispered. "You'd better take care of them. They won't see me if I duck my head."

Kerry swung himself agilely down from one of the angel's rippling draperies. Before he reached the door it was blocked by the impatient bulk of Thomas W. Saunders.

"I expected you last evening," Saunders said. "Now, quite unexpectedly, I find I am leaving today. I assumed you'd be at least interested in at least some details of the position I had in mind for you. I'm not accustomed to having a prospective employee take his work for granted. Do you want to work for me, or don't you?"

"Y-yes, sir," Kerry stammered. "That is—"

"You will start in a technical capacity. If you make good, I think I can promise an assistant managership of my Junction City plant within the year. After that it's up to you."

A strange singing tone, one note held and swelling, seemed to fill the cave. Kerry flinched. The voice was clear and high, almost but not quite human as it took on crystal overtones among the stalactites. It seemed to be keening, "No-ooo—oohhh—"

Kerry ran a hand wildly through his hair.

"That's one of the weird sound effects of Goblin Cave," he said. "The stalactites pick up wind sounds from the outside and amplify them."

"Humph," Saunders commented. "As I was saying, you'll start at—"

"No—ohh—ohh—nooh—" wailed the stalactites.

"It comes from that damned angel of yours," Saunders announced.

Jane came sliding down the angel's flank, bouncing across the runway and choosing Saunders' padded frame as a check for her momentum.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed as she caromed sideways and landed upright beside the industrialist, who now was sitting in a belligerently indignant attitude on the cave floor.

Saunders got swayingly to his feet, red annoyance spreading from his conservative tie to the circle of hair around his bald spot.

"I'm sorry to interrupt a conference," Jane apologized.

Saunders summoned restraint, and ignored her. "We'd better continue our talk outside," he suggested huffily to Kerry.

"All right, let's," Jane agreed.

"Idiot," Saunders exploded.

Jane dug a pathetic fist into one eye and, quite irrationally, Kerry got mad at Saunders.

"You called my fiancée an idiot," he said, furiously. "Get out of here."

Stalek, grinning inwardly, so-

bered the instant he discovered that Kerry's outburst irritated Saunders for only a moment. In the next, the industrialist decided such loyalty and courage was just what the Saunders Sand and Gravel Company needed. Saunders' mind started framing an apology.

Wildly Stalek seized, and discarded possibilities. Crude methods, such as clunking Saunders with a chunk of limestone, were clearly beneath Stalek's dignity. They were also physically impossible, since the god had no power to wield material objects. Then he thought of the small wind-like currents he had once produced to sway the flames of his worshippers' candles. Quickly he made one, iced it and aimed it at the back of Jane's neck, where it instantly struck and crawled horribly toward her left ear.

Jane screamed.

As the sound shrilled and echoed, a thickish three-foot stalactite shivered, broke from the ceiling and fell like a flung weapon. It grazed Saunders' head and splintered at his feet.

"This is a madhouse," Saunders roared. Limping, he stalked toward the sane daylight world.

Stalek relaxed. That stalactite had been eroding thin at its suspension point—so incredibly thin it had been ready to snap under the vibrations of a high-pitched scream.

In his relaxed mood the god gave his attention to the two who were quarreling in his cave. Kerry was being stuffy, Stalek had to admit,

and Jane seemed unreasonably angry.

"If you think," Kerry was saying, "that you can manage my affairs for the rest of our lives, you are wrong. Saunders or not, I'll get a job. I'll leave here in two weeks, and it won't be to go back to school."

"I haven't the slightest interest in where you go," Jane flung back. "I don't care if—if Saunders adopts you. I shall know nothing about it, because I'm leaving today."

Jane's steps made angry echoes as she left the cave. Kerry listened dully and in despairing silence to the outraged grinding of a car starting much too fast. The motor sputtered down the hill. Then—silence, chill, heart-rending.

Escorting three tourist parties through the cave took up most of the afternoon, and at each trip the guide's face grew more strained. Stalek's triumph had turned to ash. Kerry was unhappy. Perhaps it would have been better to let him follow his own disastrous impulses. Kerry was wretched, and Stalek saw nothing a god could do about it.

At nightfall Kerry drove away. He usually did that, either to have dinner at the Ozark Lunch, or to return home, and read. This time, Stalek worried. Kerry might—Stalek tried to imagine what a modern young man might do when his heart was broken. A Neanderthal Kerry would surely have rushed out with his club, and depopulated a

neighboring colony of cave-dwellers. A later Kerry might have gone away to sea, forever. Stalek had heard that getting drunk was a popular balm in modern days. He hoped Kerry would do only that.

But Kerry came back in an hour, and for interminable minutes Stalek heard him pacing restlessly. Sometimes there was an angry slamming. Then dull, absent-minded steps. A heavy case was dragged from a closet. Stalek was appalled. Was Kerry packing to go away so soon?

For perhaps ten minutes Kerry fumbled with the box. Then he came out into the pavilion. Stalek heard him settle into a chair. There was silenee, pages turning, slappings and impatient mutterings. It must be stuffy up there, Stalek thought, with insects crowding to Kerry's light. Finally, carrying a book and a bundle of papers, Kerry came down into the cool windless quiet of Stalek's cave.

A gentle, high tantara sounded. Jane was on the runway, tapping the Fairy Chimes. Then she flung away the mallet and came down the steps, her tanned legs flashing below white shorts. She carried a white cylindrical package. Kerry stood up slowly. Papers slid to the floor.

What he said sounded obvious, even to Stalek.

"You didn't go."

Jane said, "No," and stopped with a strangely shy, offering gesture.

"Kerry, I was wrong. I caught Saunders before he left and explained the whole situation to him. He wants you to go to St. Louis for an interview."

Kerry stared at her, looking happy.

"No, Jane. You were right. I'm going back to school, and I'm going to be a *geologist*."

While they kissed in passionate abandonment, an exultant expression spread over Stalek's misty face.

Jane and Kerry drew apart. Her fingers tore wrappings from her parcel.

"I brought a libation. Champagne, for celebration."

Stalek ascended the throne. Libation. Celebration. She had said that. He crouched majestically, looking down at his beloved subject and his new young priestess. His fingers shook, his hands stretched out.

Jane removed two glasses telescoped over the neck of the bottle, and applied the corkscrew. A satisfying pop tingled among the stalactites. Bright liquid shot up and gushed over the foot of Stalek's throne. That was as it should be.

Kerry held the glasses, Jane poured and put the bottle away. She accepted one of the glasses. Almost solemnly they touched rims.

As they drank, Stalek's hands rested unfelt and invisible upon their heads. Strong perfume of that which was spilled upon his altar rose pleasantly to his nostrils. His blessing held benevolence stored up for three thousand years.