

160 PAGES

Weird Tales

**APPRENTICE
MAGICIAN**

the face in the flames

SPAWN

an amazing story

**AUGUST
25¢**

Virgil Finlay

and other eery stories

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 34

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Published monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Entered as second class matter September 24, 1938, at the post office at New York, N. Y. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand, London W.C.2. England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"She reached her arms toward me."

Apprentice Magician

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

*A whimsical weird story about the lovely image with the lion's head, and the reason why conjuring spells are all in dead languages—
by the author of "The Stranger from Kurdistan"*

THE minute I saw Uncle Simon, I knew there wasn't a chance of fooling him about anything. Instead of being tall, like the rest of us Buck-ners, he was short. His face was pink and babyish, and the hair showing around the edges of his black skull-cap was just like cotton. You can't ever fool these kind and

simple-looking people, not when they've lived as long as Uncle Simon.

"So you're Duke's boy, Panther Warfield Buckner?" He looked halfway solemn, and halfway amused. "And you came all the way to California to see me. Well, well. That's nice."

We hadn't written him, but he acted like he'd expected me.

He was Grandfather's brother, but we always called him Uncle when we talked about how rich he was. Dad and the rest of the folks sent me to get friendly with Uncle Simon so he'd will me his property instead of giving it to a college or something. They figured since I'd been to high school I was bright enough to do that, but here I was, feeling doubtful already.

Uncle Simon reminded me of the sheriff who raided Grandfather's still, back home in Georgia. I hadn't been born more than a couple days when that happened, but I saw him later. Then I was old enough to understand that Grandfather wearing stripes so much of the time was why I was named Panther.

"Hit's because the Buckners don't never change their stripes," Dad would say, somewhat sourly.

The preacher said, "Duke, probably you're thinking of the leopard that doesn't change his *spots*."

But Dad was stubborn. Nobody could tell him anything about the Scriptures. He wouldn't read, and Grandfather couldn't, and so here I was, with Uncle Simon smiling to himself about my name.

"It's been mighty lonesome, Panther," he said, looking up suddenly. "I'm getting pretty close to ninety and I've got a lot of work to do. Maybe you can help me."

"I reckon I can, Uncle Simon." When a man is near ninety, he won't have long to work a fellow to death. "I can skin mules, and I can run a tractor, like some of these up-to-date plantations have."

"Do you suppose you can run a still?"

"No, sir, but I can learn; though Dad said times were changing, and I ought to be a preacher or lawyer or something, which is why I went to high school."

He looked at me and smiled like he was enjoying a good joke. "So instead of sending you to college, he sent you out here to see his Uncle Simon."

I got red and began fumbling with the arms of my chair. The room was so big I could hardly see the further end of it, and the carpets looked like silk; deep and soft and shiny. A man smart enough to get all those things and a big house was too much for me. I said, "Uh—yes, sir."

Uncle Simon's eyes bored right through me, even though he was smiling and friendly. I was wondering why his voice was so young. It wasn't particularly deep, but it didn't crack like Grandfather's.

"You came out here to inherit my money."

I was sweating. I let out a deep breath, and brushed my cowlick from between my eyes, though it never does any good. Uncle Simon went on, "Well, I need an apprentice to learn my business. Do you know any Latin?"

I nodded, having spent three years on Latin One.

"Any Greek?"

"Yes, sir. A little," though it wasn't a thin dime's worth.

"Any Hebrew?"

There was no use trying to fool him. "What I meant was, if I'd gone to the seminary to be a preacher, I'd have learned those things."

"That's all right. It won't take you long."

"Uncle Simon," I blurted out, "what kind of a trade is this, where an apprentice has to know all those languages?"

"I'm a magician. The spells are in dead languages, or ignorant people would run around practising and hurting themselves."

It was too late to back down. So I became a magician's apprentice.

THE work was interesting, sometimes, though for a while I didn't know but what Uncle Simon was mocking me. He hadn't promised me I'd be his heir if I did my work right, and I couldn't think of any way to bring the subject up again. Whenever I'd get around to it, he'd start conjuring.

There was the time we were out in the garden. The house was inside of a high stone wall with spikes that sloped in, and some that pointed out, so getting over it from either direction was mighty near impossible unless you could fly. Uncle Simon kept the key to the gate. Anyway, we were standing about ten feet away from the live coals in the bottom of the dry swimming-pool in the yard.

My hands were blistered from chopping wood for the fire. He didn't have any help, colored or white, excepting me. It was a shame to drain that pool. And the heat of the coals was scorching the leaves of the big fig-tree. I wiped off some sweat and leaned on my rake and said, "Uncle Simon, when a man gets your age, he hadn't ought to work like you do."

"Age don't affect me like it does most folks." He sat down on a stone bench and untied his shoe laces. "Take off your shoes!"

I guess I looked silly, but Dad taught me to mind when I was spoken to. In a minute I was blinking and barefooted. It's funny how quick you get used to wearing shoes. But another funny thing was how Uncle Simon had changed the subject. I was still figuring out another way of working up to him changing his will when he beckoned and said, "Now we're going to take a walk. Won't hurt you a bit."

"Shucks, Uncle Simon, my feet are pretty tough."

He rubbed his hands and chuckled. "We're walking in that fire. A first-class apprentice has to learn that one. You won't be burnt unless you're scared."

He didn't argue. He didn't even look back. He just climbed down the ladder and began walking barefooted across the coals. I could see the thin bits of ash crack off where his feet sunk in a little.

When I got to the bottom of the ladder, at the shallow end, I could smell the hot blast scorching the cuffs of his pants. They were frayed a bit, and it was the loose threads that curled up. But Uncle Simon didn't notice that. He made a funny humming noise, like he was singing with his teeth clenched. It made me dizzy to watch him.

The whole floor of the pool was dancing and waving up and down like a rug getting shook out. I felt like the time I drunk a mason jar of Grandfather's corn whisky. I got mad, too. Changing the subject every time I aimed to ask him about his will! Trying to mock me and make me act scared!

So I took a step—a long one. I'd seen the blacksmith pick up chunks of red-hot iron, only he dropped them real quick, and maybe that was the trick. But I pretty nearly forgot to keep on walking, I was so surprised.

My feet didn't feel hot. Just my face and hands. I was hearing music. It was heathen-sounding — deep notes that boomed, and funny little ones like someone whistling and crying at the same time. But it was the brass that made me shake all over. I was shivering, and I wanted to holler and dance and fight. Trumpets yelling, and gongs whanging like they couldn't stop if they wanted to.

The fire began to change color. It got blue and then purple. It seemed like Uncle Simon was walking down a covered bridge all roofed over with flames. A twisting hole reached way beyond the yard. I couldn't tell whether it was going up, down, or straight.

Then I saw things like the postmaster must've, when he had the DT's, only these

were so beautiful I couldn't believe it. There was a green woman, 'way off. Sometimes she had a lion's head growing right from her neck, and again, she had the prettiest human face I ever saw. She reached her arms toward me, as though she didn't see Uncle Simon at all.

I couldn't see him any more, either, and I wasn't scared. I ran toward her. The music was hitting me like a hammer now, and echoes began telling me what her name was.

THEN it all faded out. I was on the bottom of the pool, past the coals. Uncle Simon had his hand on my shoulder. "When your legs are steady enough to climb, get out," he said. "It's all-fired hot. You aren't burnt, are you?"

"Not a bit." I wasn't, though I still couldn't believe it. "Who was that green girl that was changing her face all the time?"

"What's that?" Uncle Simon looked at me narrow-eyed, and dropped his shoe. "When was this?"

"Back there, when the music started."

He lifted his black cap and rubbed his bald spot. He hadn't ever looked half as thoughtful, not even when he was giving me lessons in Hebrew and Greek. Then he smiled and said, "You did pretty good for a beginner, Panther. It's mighty near time for you to study spells and incantations."

He walked away, like he'd forgotten I was there. If Father knew how I'd missed another chance to ask about that will, he'd beat me with a harness tug. He always claimed that until I was old enough to vote, an occasional whaling was a good way to build character. I hadn't dared write to tell him I was becoming a magician, but it looked now as if I'd ought to. Uncle Simon sure was a good one.

That evening I got a real surprise. He poked his head out of the library and asked me to come in. This was the first time he

ever let me see what was in back of that locked door.

"Panther," he said, "before we get through with your lessons, you're likely to get the tar scared out of you, but I think you've got backbone." He reached for a sheet of paper. "This is my new will. You get everything, though your kinfolk'll swindle you out of it soon enough. Now, tell me more about that girl."

He stuffed the will into the old-fashioned roll-top desk. The lamp that reached up out of the mess of papers and books didn't make enough light for me to see much of what was in the room, but I could feel things looking at me out of the shadows. I began telling him about the funny dress she wore, and the way her hair was fixed in a lot of long, shiny curls that hung down over her shoulders.

"She wore a crown with a snake on it?" he broke in.

"That's right. Except when she was wearing a lion's head and showing her teeth. It was just like——"

Then I sat up straight and started staring at something I'd just noticed in the far corner. I pointed. "That's her, now!"

Uncle Simon smiled as though I didn't know the half of it. He said, "That's just a statue," and snapped on another light.

It was shiny green stone. The woman was bigger than the angel over I-Will-Prevail Carter's grave, back home; only she was sitting, with her arms close to her sides, and her hands reaching to her knees. She'd been right pretty, except that it just wasn't natural, a woman having the head of a female lion.

The eyes looked 'way past me, like she was seeing something that was a million miles away, or a million years past. It made me squirm, but I couldn't look anywhere else. Finally I said, "Uncle Simon, you been worshipping graven images?"

He laughed and said, "You go to your room and get at your studies."

YOU can make a fellow look at books, but you can't make him learn a thing. Not when his mind isn't on it. And mine wasn't.

Even if Dad had stood over me with a harness tug, I'd not learned a line of that Hebrew, though I was getting so I could recite whole pages of it, out loud.

It's the funniest language. You speak some of the words from your collar-bone, and after you've been at it for an hour, your throat has cramps. But as I said, it's impressive-sounding, like when the parson pounds the pulpit and says you're going to hell sure as all get out, and almighty Gawd won't look at you whilst you're sizzling.

No, I didn't learn a single line that night. I was thinking of that green girl. Not the one that was a graven image, but the real one. I was mad now because the path of coals had been so short. If it'd been longer, I swear I'd have walked right up to her. She held her arms out to me, and I don't think she was mocking me.

It looked like Uncle Simon was interested, too. For a man his age, that wasn't quite right. I felt like a fool, the way I blatted it right out, but how was I to know he hadn't seen her? Now he knew about her, and he was foxy enough to have his way with people. Look at Grandfather, pretty near seventy, and marrying Lily Mae Carter—that's the postmaster's daughter—right under the noses of fellows her own age, when she wasn't a day over sixteen.

I didn't know just what, but I was fixing to do something. If Uncle Simon got riled at me, he'd change the will, and no telling what else he'd do to me. And on top of it all, Dad and the wagon spoke would get to work on me.

I began to get scared. You see, I was dead set on seeing that girl again. Ask her to quit pretending she had a face like a female lion, when it was plain as day that she was a woman. With that close-fitting skirt that reached pretty nearly up to her arm-

pits, you couldn't help noticing how pretty she was, all over.

There was something funny about it all. I was getting used to magic, but Uncle Simon knew ten times as much as I did. Still and all, he was surprised when I mentioned her. He acted like I'd found something he'd been looking for and not finding. That was hard to believe, but that's how he acted.

It finally began to make sense as I sat there. He was just too old for that girl, so she'd been hiding from him. Me, I got a face like a coffin, and Dad says I look like I'm always fixing to fall over my own feet, but women don't seem to mind that at all, as long as a fellow is young.

So I planned things out. I'd find that girl and stay long enough to talk to her. Warn her, so Uncle Simon and his magic couldn't make her mind him. He'd get mad when it failed, but he wouldn't be able to blame me.

If I went out and built a fire, Uncle Simon'd notice that, and then where'd I be? But there was another way. I'd learned some powerful spells; only I'd never tried any of them except when he was around to see I didn't get into trouble. And he wouldn't let me call up evil spirits. Sometimes they raise sand, and if a fellow even looks like he's scared, they finish him in a wink. That sort of thing is for master magicians.

But shucks, that green girl wasn't anything evil.

I SNEAKED out of my room, and went toward the library. It was late, and Uncle Simon was snoring upstairs. I didn't have to go out into the yard to try a window. He'd forgotten to lock the door. When a man gets close to ninety, he's absent-minded at times.

There were some books and stuff on his desk that hadn't been there when I left him. One of them had a snakeskin bind-

ing, and the title was on the back cover. The Hebrews started on the last page, instead of the first. The idea is to fool people that are used to ordinary books. They start reading backward and it don't make sense—not even to a magician.

I hadn't gone over more than half a page when I was so happy I nearly hollered out loud. It was all about the girl from the fire. There were notes in Uncle Simon's handwriting, and dates, and everything. He'd been trying for years and he hadn't as much as seen her.

And while I was in my room, he'd been trying to figure out how I'd met her, when I walked over the coals. I sat down and put my feet on his desk. My heart was going thump-thumpety-thump, like the Odd Fellows Band in Athens. For a second, I was so dizzy I nearly fell out of the swivel chair. That was when I learned who I'd been talking to, and what she was.

She was a *goddess*. Her name was Sekhmet, and she wore the face of a female lion to scare ignorant folks. She lived in the Land of Fire, and her disguise mask meant, fire is dangerous—don't monkey around unless you know how to act.

Sekhmet was from Egypt, but ever since King Solomon married Pharaoh's daughter, the Hebrews were more or less neighborly with the Egyptians. They quit feuding, and naturally, they wrote things about each other—which I saw when I read a couple more pages.

There was a chapter in picture writing, like on the base of that green statue of Sekhmet. Of course, I couldn't make head nor tail of those hieroglyphics, but that didn't hurt at all. The book was written for Hebrew magicians, and some of them couldn't read Egyptian either. There was a line of Hebrew to explain exactly how you said each line of picture writing.

Then I began to get sore!

Uncle Simon had been mocking me right along—making me chop wood, work in

the garden, just like a slave. I was his heir, only he wouldn't die. Not for hundreds of years, maybe never at all! I read it all. How fire walking, fire breathing, dealing with fire spirits burns the dust-to-dust things out of a man, and what's left can't die—providing he doesn't get killed while he's practising.

I began to see why he was hankering to talk to Sekhmet. That was the last step, the one he hadn't been able to make, not even with all his studying. Shucks, I'd be an apprentice all my life, and neither me nor any of our kinfolk would get ary a nickel of Uncle Simon's fortune!

That made me boiling mad. I got up and began cussing to myself and shaking my fist toward the ceiling, which was shivering a little from the snoring upstairs. It was so loud, I wondered if she could hear me unless I shouted.

But I went over and faced the graven image. The eyes weren't like those on General Lee's statue in the square in Marietta. They seemed to be looking and seeing. I was scared for a minute. My mouth was dry, and I couldn't pronounce the words. A lion is something that makes a man shrivel up inside when he looks at one, even if it's just carved. It's a symbol, I guess, not just an animal. But I felt better when I remembered how lovely Sekhmet was when she took off her mask.

I don't know exactly why I faced that graven image. It wasn't necessary, according to the book. The path of fire would open up, no matter where you were.

So I began to read out loud, and made motions with my hands, like it said to do. Shucks, I can't say it in English. It can't be said except in those dead languages. That's why they're dead. The people that used to speak them got killed off, practising such things and making mistakes. No wonder I was sweating and shaking when I started.

Then my voice steadied. The oak ceiling threw the sound back, like I was talking

into a well. I didn't hear Uncle Simon snoring any more. The echoes played tricks with each other, and with my ears. It's funny how pronouncing some words makes your chest and stomach shake like a busted clock-spring. You feel it all the way to your ankles when you say things exactly right.

That's how I knew I was getting the words so she could understand. I wasn't trembling a bit any more. At times I thought I must have bass drums and pipe organs in my stomach. It was nearly tearing me to pieces, but I was so happy I could have danced up and down.

Funny little lights cropped up all around the graven image, like the fires you see in swamps and graveyards at night. They seemed to be coming out of the air and crowding around. She wasn't green any more, and my eyes were getting so sharp I could see that the little bits of smooth stone had spaces betwixt them. They must have been the pieces the teacher called molecules, in the chemistry class, though that never made sense to me until right this minute.

I didn't need the book any more. I dropped it and made motions with both hands. I knew exactly what to say, and I wasn't always repeating what I'd read. The first thing I knew, you could throw your hat between those little grains of stone. No, that wasn't quite it, either. They weren't that far apart, really, only I could see between them. They hung together loosely, like a thick fog.

A shining fog it was. Trembling and twisting. It became like fire that kept a shape. Then all the flames and light made an arch, and Sekhmet was sitting there, with a woman's face, all sweet and smiling.

THE roof must have lifted when I spoke that last line. The sound in my ears was like grass fires, and howling winds and whanging cymbals. She got up from

her throne. I never saw such little feet. I could have put both of them in my coat pocket. She must have worn shoes all her life, and never followed a plow or hoed tobacco. Not with those tiny hands.

And proud, too. Her nose wasn't exactly bent, but it wasn't straight. Her nostrils flared like a high-stepping horse's. She had a chin that was little and a bit pointed. It was her cheek-bones that gave her face that shape.

I just stood there and looked at her, kind of stupid. Maybe I hadn't ought to stare that way, but the dress she wore was thinner than a cambric handkerchief. Probably it was all right in private. I liked it a lot, and she saw I did. That made her smile some more.

When she spoke, it was easy to understand, though it wasn't English. Or maybe I just read her thoughts and watched her lips. She seemed to know what I was thinking, anyway.

"Listen, m'arn," I said to her, all shaky and in a hurry. I had to talk quick before I forgot what I wanted to tell her. "My Uncle Simon's been muttering around about you and he's a magician and if you don't look out, the old sculpin's going to catch you and——"

I couldn't think of a polite way to say it, but women sort of understand things, just like children and cats and dogs. She up and kissed me, meaning I didn't have to tell her any more. She wasn't a flaming fog now. She was solid, and she smelled like all kinds of flowers and spices and that perfume they sell at the dime store back home.

"I can't take you into the Land of Fire," she told me. "Not tonight. You couldn't stand it. You've got to study some more. But I liked you the minute I saw you walking over the coals out in the yard. You weren't a bit afraid."

I pretty nearly laughed right out. She didn't know everything, either. I was scared silly, only I was riled at Uncle

Simon, mocking me. So I said to Sekhmet, "M'am, he's stubborn and he's smart. You'd better hide somewhere till I learn more spells, or he'll grab you and I'll get riled. Then we'll quarrel, and I wouldn't have a chance with a master magician."

"Panther," she whispered, "don't worry. Why do you suppose he's never seen me, with all the studying and practising he's done? I promise you, I won't let him into the Land of Fire."

"Couldn't he sneak in?" I was worried about that.

She sighed, and her eyes were sort of sad. Then she smiled, and this time she showed her teeth, just for a second. I was glad she was looking past me when she did that. Somehow, it was like a cat thinking about something to eat.

Sekhmet looked back at me, and now she was sweet again. But all of a sudden, there was a gosh-awful crackling and roaring, and fire spinning like a pinwheel. I felt like someone had hit me over the head with a maul, and I thought I was looking right into the sun.

I tried to grab Sekhmet to go with her, but she wasn't there. My hands were empty, and I stumbled to the floor. Then I heard Uncle Simon's voice, and I got up to my knees. But I was so dizzy I grabbed at the green statue. It was all solid again, and awfully hot. Sekhmet was gone.

"You young fool," Uncle Simon said, "get on your feet."

He had a razor strop and I thought he was going to whale me. His face was pink, but it wasn't babyish, and his eyes weren't kind. He was downright sore, and if I hadn't been one of the family, I know he'd have killed me or tried to. I looked at him, but didn't know what to say.

"It's lucky I came along and stopped that spell. Do you know if you'd read another line, you might have been burned to a cinder and the whole house along with you?"

"No, sir."

"What's more," he went on, "you got that girl on the brain. I knew you had, so I pretended I was snoring, and I left that book out, on purpose, to see if you'd sneak in to practise."

Uncle Simon was smart, and I was a plain fool. He'd been listening to everything. Nothing was a secret now. He hefted the razor strop like he was going to larrup me. Then he smiled, sort of sour, and he said, "I'm not whipping you, though your father would, if he knew you weren't minding me. But if you don't do what I say, I'll just kick you out of the house, and you can go back home and then see what happens."

Talking to Sekhmet had done something funny to me. I'd never dared talk back. Not until this minute. Then I shook my fist and took a step forward. "By heck," I hollered, "you can't boss me around even if you are my dad's uncle! Maybe I'm not twenty-one, but I'm grown up and there ain't anybody going to whale me. I don't want your damn money. None of us do!"

He backed away, looked puzzled, and he let the razor strop hang along his leg. I felt kind of ashamed. He was an old man.

Then Uncle Simon said, "You be a good boy, Panther. You've been ambitious and hard-working. You're not as dumb as you look, and I've been thinking of making you my partner."

"You mean, I'll be a master magician, and not an apprentice?"

You see, I wasn't as dumb as I looked. After what Sekhmet told me about practising some more, I wasn't going to lose such a good chance.

"That's right, Panther." He picked up the book I'd dropped and set it on the table. He sort of smiled to himself and nodded. Then he said, "You go to bed now, while I think about this. You've got to be initiated before you become a master magician."

"You mean, fasting and meditating and all that?"

He nodded and pointed to the door.

I WENT to my room. He was awfully foxy, and I wasn't quite sure if I had fooled him. But maybe he didn't think I knew I was pretty close to being a master magician already. Shucks, you don't always have to be initiated. Some people can skip a grade. I heard of them doing that at school.

One thing I was certain of. He didn't allow for me having read as much as I really had. That was because I hadn't let on about knowing that if you practise fire-walking and the like, you live for ages and ages and maybe never do die. You see, he'd figured I'd be so set on talking to Sekhmet that I wouldn't read further than the first couple pages.

But it would end up in a fight. I knew that. I felt kind of sorry. He was a nice fellow when he wasn't unreasonable about Sekhmet. Just like my grandfather, fixing to shoot the young fellows who were playing up to Lily Mae.

I studied like all get out. Once in a while, I used to sit there, tired and dizzy, wondering what the folks back home would say if they could see me conjuring. But what'd really open their eyes was where Uncle Simon's money came from. He just up and made gold bars out of the air, or mud, or something.

I found that out when some revenue men came in to find out where he got it. He said, "Gentlemen, I'll show you," and he did. They came out looking goggle-eyed and muttering.

One of them said, "But you can't do this, Mr. Buckner. You'll wreck the whole Government, flooding the treasury."

"No law agin it," Uncle Simon answered. He winked, and jabbed him in the ribs.

"Listen, bub. When a man gets to

be my age, he has sense enough to know that too much of a good thing is worse than not enough. You suppose I'd make so much gold you could use it for paving, instead of asphalt? You might, but I wouldn't."

"Mr. Buckner," the other one said, foxy-like, "someone's going to break in here and steal the recipe, and he might get pig-gish. How about putting the paper in a bank?"

Uncle Simon laughed right out. "The recipe isn't written down. I carry it in my head. And you young fellows better not snitch that bar you seized, or I'll tell the chief revenue man on you."

That's the kind of man I was dealing with. Those revenue fellows had been to college, and they were about as stupid as foxes, and they couldn't do a thing with my uncle. I reckon he really didn't have the recipe written down on paper.

But most of the time, I was too busy to sit there and wonder about the home folks. You know, a fellow just gets used to being a magician. And I was learning faster than Uncle Simon suspected. I played dumb, which was easy.

I naturally couldn't have picked up so many tricks by just studying. Sekhmet was telling me things.

She wasn't speaking in my ear. She was whispering into my mind. I never saw her, never heard her, though once in a while I could almost smell her. That sweet stuff she wore in her hair. It must have been what they called frankincense and such-like in the Sunday school lessons. From Arabia. Like the Queen of Sheba sent King Solomon. I was getting so I knew more than the preacher back home.

But I had to hurry up. Uncle Simon was fixing to play a dirty trick, making me do all the work, and helping him conjure, and then never dying nor giving his kinfolks any gold bars. He said the stuff isn't good for people who don't work for it, unless

they're magicians. I knew I had to move fast.

This time I climbed out of my window and took the book with me, along with a little flashlight. I knew now I didn't have to stand and look at the graven image. Sekhmet would open the road to the Land of Fire no matter where I was, as long as I said the right words. I didn't even have to holler the words. Just as long as I held my mouth right, they'd be good at a whisper.

So I went to the far corner of the big yard, where the old stable was. It stood crosswise of the house and close to the back of it.

I SET the flashlight on a sill where it would shine on the book and then I started reading. The reason I needed it at all was because it had directions on what to do when you get 'way into the Land of Fire. In case Sekhmet didn't show up then and there, I'd have to know what to say to the fire spirits. Magic is just like conjuring away warts, or making a neighbor's cow go dry, back home, only it's a lot more serious.

The difference is, a magician can get himself killed, if he makes a mistake. But he doesn't have to wait for the dark of the moon, nor sit around in graveyards.

I began reading. It happened faster this time. First a little spinning spot of light like a whirlpool in a stream. It spread, and changed colors, and all those sounds began shaking me apart. But I had learned that nobody else could hear them. Couldn't hear anything except what I was speaking, and I kept my voice low.

Sekhmet came walking down a tunnel of shivering light. It reached so far that the other end of it was small, like the inside of an ice-cream cone. Twisting and spinning. When she saw me, she began to run, with her arms reaching out. Then she got impatient, and she picked up her skirt to her knees so she could stretch her legs.

Her corkscrew curls were all blue and

flaming. I knew now that the sweetness wasn't perfume. It was the smell of pure fire—the stuff lightning is made of. She was so beautiful I was almost scared. She wouldn't let me kiss her.

"We've got to hurry." She was breathing real quick, and she caught my hand. "You shouldn't have called me tonight."

Sekhmet turned around and pulled me after her. I got long legs, but I could hardly keep up. It was like being shot out of a gun. My breath was hammered right back into my teeth, and her curls reached back. "What—what—what's the matter?" I asked her.

"Your uncle's been laying for you, and he's a-chasing you with a book in his hand."

I looked back. There was Uncle Simon, laughing to himself. He was scrambling through the clouds of fire that were closing up, 'way behind us. We must have been a million miles away from the barn, and if he'd not gotten there when he did, he'd have been left. But here he was, with those short legs pumping up and down. He was waving one hand, and reading from his book while he ran. It got me worried, seeing anyone his age so spry. He was mad and happy. That's a funny way for a man to look. I guess he was riled because Sekhmet wouldn't wait for him, and glad he'd caught us in time.

Ahead I saw fires that made those in back of us look like a pack of matches. The flames had faces. They had hands. They were leaning like rushes in a wind, closing in to block the path.

And beyond them everything was dancing. The roaring and crying and twittering sounds began to have *color*. I could feel the flames reaching into me. I was part of them now, and they wouldn't kill me. It was like being full of corn whisky and going to a camp meeting and being struck by lightning, all at once.

But Uncle Simon was right on our heels. Short legs weren't stopping him. Sekhmet

was sinking knee-deep in purple fire. She was choking for breath. And all of a sudden, I sobered up and noticed my feet were getting heavy. I stumbled.

She wiggled herself clear of the swamp of flame that was clogging our legs. She reached out and tried to pull me up. Uncle Simon was roaring at us.

"Get your hands off that girl, or you'll drown in fire! You young squirt, maybe you can open the road, but I followed you and you got not a chance. Not with me inside."

Sekhmet looked like she was going to cry. She was panting and pulling, but it didn't do any good. I was just making her sink deeper. And the fires we'd been running toward were crowding forward something awful, like they were mad at us.

"Don't get scared," she screamed. "I can take care of myself."

But I knew she couldn't. Uncle Simon had a trick that wasn't in the books. He was so close now that I could see the picture-writing on the paper he had. He was giving me one chance to shut up before he began singing an incantation in Egyptian.

"He'll call Osiris and all the other gods!" Sekhmet moaned. "He knows their right names, and they'll help him against me."

Then I lost my head. I pulled my hand away from Sekhmet and began reading. I shouted him down, and anyway, he was too surprised to make a sound. It was like when my dad up and knocked Grandfather down to prove he'd grown up.

What I did was read my spell backward.

All the banked-up flames began pouring out like I'd knocked the bottom from a barrel. The whole Land of Fire and everything in it came a-roaring. It tumbled me over and over. For a second I thought I was dead. I couldn't see and couldn't hear and couldn't smell anything.

The next thing I knew, I was sitting

against the high wall, all doubled up and feeling busted to pieces. I didn't know but what a couple of mules had cut loose and kicked me silly.

The barn and the house were blazing. You'd have thought someone had doused them with gasoline and touched it off all over at once. I ran around, yelling for my uncle and Sekhmet, but the fire just howled and crackled.

Maybe I did say you couldn't get over that wall without flying. I didn't have wings, but I made it. My hands were all torn and my pants ripped, and I fell so hard I couldn't move for a minute. I had to crawl toward the road. And the smoke reached after me, and so did the blaze.

That crazy second when I made the fire go backward scared me. When a magician's scared, he loses his power. I think what really made me that way was knowing that I was finishing Uncle Simon, catching him off guard before he could fight back. It was no longer than a wink, my wanting to kill him for trying to take Sekhmet. But that kind of a thought is wrong, and makes things go wild.

I don't know why I wasn't killed, unless she got me out of it.

When people and motorcycle officers came a-helling, they allowed it was an explosion. They didn't ask me much. I looked too dumb, which was lucky.

I NEVER saw Uncle Simon again. Everything inside the wall burned to ashes. And I couldn't call Sekhmet. The books and everything were gone, and I was afraid, anyway, to try it.

We didn't inherit Uncle Simon's money. The new will was burned, and the old one was still in the bank. So they built another college in California, and when I went home, Dad whaled me within an inch of my life for not saving the will when the house burned down.