

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

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Contents for July, 1941

STORIES

GODDESS OF FIRE	by Edgar Rice Burroughs	8
What was the mystery behind the Fire Goddess? How did she know of Earth, or Brooklyn?		
MURDERED—YET ALIVE	by Jep Powell	44
If you were broadcast by radio and became two men, would it be a crime to kill your other self?		
ABNER SCHLAP'S STRANGE INSIGHT	by Arthur T. Harris	56
Abner bought a pair of glasses, and found they enabled him to read minds—and life became hell!		
CITY OF LOST SOULS	by Ralph Milne Farley & Al P. Nelson	66
Daloss, the holy city, was one place the Foreign Legion of Mars had never licked—but this time . . .		
THREE TERRIBLE PEOPLE	by John York Cabot	90
This author's characters got tired of his plots, so they came to life and cooked up their own!		
ROBOTS CAN'T LIE	by Robert Leslie Bellem	116
The robot couldn't lie, because what it saw was recorded. This one saw the murderer . . .		
DOORWAY OF VANISHING MEN	by William P. McGivern	126
People walked into the revolving door of the big store, but didn't come out the other side!		

FEATURES

The Editor's Notebook	6	Introducing the Authors	136
Romance of the Elements	125	Quiz Page	137
Fantastic Forecast?	133	Reader's Page	138
Fantastic Oddities	134	Correspondence Corner	145

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FANTASTIC
ADVENTURES
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VOLUME 3,
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CITY OF LOST SOULS

by Ralph Milne Farley and Al P. Nelson

WARREN!" cried Hammersmith, as he thrust his shaggy head between my tent-flaps. "The desert chieftain, Mu-Lai and his blasted Mauros have wiped out our garrison at Wacco. Two hundred Legionnaires and a hundred Martians!"

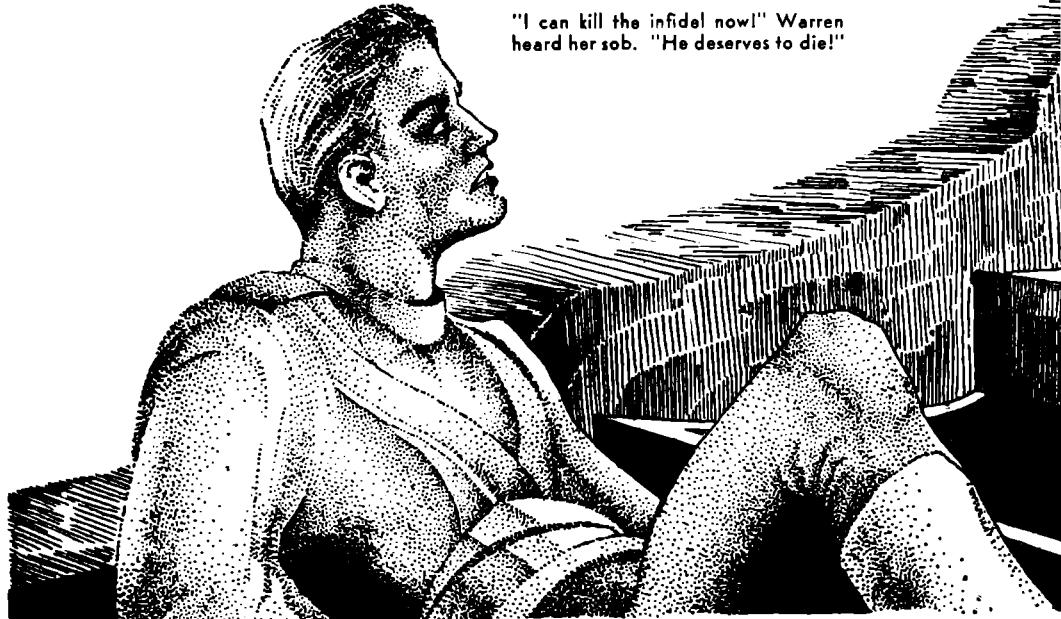
Hammersmith, a rangy red-haired Australian, with cold blue eyes, was the only Earthman to hold a commission in the Martian Foreign Legion; for all the other officers, and even some of the non-coms, were copper-skinned Martian aristocrats.

He eased his rangy frame into my tent and sat down at the foot of my canvas cot. Little Cedric, the Englishman, followed him in.

Three thousand Martian Legionnaires faced more than they could handle when they attacked the holy city of Daloss to rescue captured comrades

"It happened last night!" Cedric breathlessly added. "One of the survivors has just reached camp—he's over at headquarters right now reporting to Colonel Ak-Ak. He says the Mauros fell on the little city at midnight and slaughtered nearly every man, woman, and child. Babies—little babies — torn from their mothers'

"I can kill the infidel now!" Warren heard her sob. "He deserves to die!"





breasts and slit open with swords. Oh, my God!" His boyish face was blank with horror.

Hammersmith's leathery jaw was set and grim. His blue eyes flashed in the light of my tent-lantern.

"That's not the worst of it. The dead are dead, but think of what's going to happen to our buddies who were taken prisoner. Ten of them! Dragged off to Daloss to be tortured and then burned alive on the golden altar as a sacrifice to the Dark Star, Erlik. One of them in particular!" His voice broke.*

Daloss. In spite of my horror at the fate of my comrades, I could not restrain a thrill at the magical spell of that name. Daloss, hidden deep in the fertile valleys between the ranges of the

* The Foreign Legion of Mars (called Legion of the Damned by peoples of the other planets) is perhaps the most famous military group in history, not even excepting the French Foreign Legion of Africa, which was dissolved with the ending of the Second World War in Europe.

It boasts a history of one hundred years of bloody conflict, of victories and of defeats that can be equalled by no other fighting group on Mars or Earth, the only two worlds in the solar system where armies are maintained.

Like the Earth Foreign Legion, its members are mostly derived from the ranks of fugitives from justice, and from the adventurers of five planets. They are all a hard-bitten, careless, fearless lot, used to facing death.

And in the Martian Legion they do face death constantly. Nowhere in the system is there a planet where warfare rages more continually. This is perhaps because the peoples of Mars are comparatively few, and being segregated and isolated tribes, they develop a fierce animosity toward each other, which flares up into bloody battle at any chance meeting.

Fortunately these meetings are rare, since travel on Mars is a serious undertaking. Yet, periodically, migrations occur, when the site of a camp becomes too arduous, and then it becomes a matter of capture or defend a new site or what you already hold.

The Legion holds the unenviable position of being mediators (by the right of force) between migrating tribes, with the usual result that both tribes attack the Legion.

But of all Mars, Daloss, the holy city, alone has never bowed to the Legion.—ED.

mighty Fobian Mountains, was the age-old mystic city of the Mauros, a stronghold which bristled with guns and superstitions.

Here the worship of the Dark Star was most devout. Here plans were daily reviewed for the mighty holy war, which some day would find all followers of Erlik rising to wipe infidels from the face of the planet.

Scourge of Mars for generations, Daloss was known as the most holy city of the worshippers of Erlik. If a non-believer should venture to reach its borders, the curses of the dark religion, yea, the curses of Erlik himself would most certainly fall upon him. Disease and misfortune, like a raging storm, would seize the infidel crraat,* or would fill his soul with an evil dark spirit to torture him the rest of his days upon the planet, should he escape death from the Mauros themselves.

This city it was that the Martians dreaded to approach too rapidly, despite the despotic orders from the Capital city to seize the Mauro gold mines at any cost.

No believer in any other religion had ever come back from the holy city. Infidel captives were anointed with rare Martian perfumes, then burned alive on the great altar of gold in the Maadar, largest and most sacred of all of Erlik's temples. Then their ashes were scattered upon the fields, where the heavy hooves of lumbering oxlike Martian beasts of burden ground them into the soil, so that no trace of the unbelieving crraats might remain to taint the city of the Dark Star.

Truly a City of Lost Souls—Christian souls, Martian souls, doomed by incantation of Erlik's high priests to roam in misery over the red planet, pursued by evil dark spirits.

* "Crraat," a particularly repulsive desert rodent-like reptile.—ED.

And yet there was a romantic side to this city of mystery. The tales which reached us from Daloss were not all horror. There were things to draw us there, as well as to repel us. For not only was there the fabulous wealth of its gold mines—but there were its women!

Little Cedric, the English boy, was telling us this. But somehow it went against my prejudices.

“Filthy wenches!” I snorted.

“Not all,” said Cedric quietly.

Something in his tone caused me to look at him searchingly.

“Well?” I asked.

“There was one,” the boy said dreamily. “Blue eyes, golden curls, skin pink and white like a sea shell. Her father was a very wealthy Mauro, and sent her to finishing school on Earth, in England. She was from Daloss. I’d like to see her again.”

“A Mauro—as beautiful as that?” I exclaimed.

“A Mauro, not a gunmetal-blue Martian,” said Cedric, with disdain, “nor a copper-red member of the Martian aristocracy. A Mauro, most of whom are white like ourselves. One of the reasons I came to Mars and joined up with the Legion, was the hope of seeing that little beauty again.”

Then he went on to tell us of what he had heard of the midnight ritual of the City of Lost Souls.

IT was said that, on moonlit Martian nights, these beautiful Mauro women, shedding their flowing white shawls and silken tunics, roamed the streets of Daloss, to perform weird, naked, worshipful dances in honor of Erlik the Unspeakable, while hidden stringed instruments throbbed with wild barbaric music. Every male inhabitant cast his eyes upon the floor of his hut while these dances held sway,

for worthy only is Erlik himself to gaze upon so much naked loveliness.

A growl from Hammersmith snapped our minds back from these dreams, to the horrid fate awaiting our ten captured comrades.

“Who were they?” I asked. “Any whom we know?”

“Well, there’s Gustav Schmidt,” little Cedric began.

I shook my head. The name was not familiar.

“And Victor Lafontaine.”

“Not Vic?” I cried. I knew him well, a lovable roly-poly Frenchman.

“And Hammersmith’s own brother!”

So that was the reason for the catch in Hammersmith’s voice a few moments ago.

“The others,” the young Englishman ended harshly, “were not of our outfit.”

“Well,” I demanded, “what are we going to do about it?”

“The Legion is wild with rage!” Hammersmith declared. “You and Cedric are the two senior Sergeants—other than the Martians. I want you two to come with me to headquarters to talk to Colonel Ak-Ak.”

“You’re on!” I cried, jumping up and jamming my desert hat onto my head.

Together the three of us made our way to the whitewashed stone house, which served as headquarters and dwelling for the red Martian aristocrat, who was our commandant.

Colonel Ak-Ak, a gross swarthy Martian with long drooping moustaches, received us with an air of graciousness, and listened quietly to the suggestions of Captain Hammersmith.

“Sir,” our Captain concluded—in Esperanto, of course, the official interplanetary tongue, “the men are eager to avenge this damned massacre, and to rescue their comrades from blood-

thirsty Mu-Lai and his savage Mauros. Is not this what you have been waiting and hoping for? An incentive to drive us to capture the gold-mines which the Capital City is anxious for us to seize?"

The Colonel seemed pleased at the suggestion, promised to take it up with the Staff early in the morning, thanked us profusely, and poured out some excellent wine—quite different from the rancid syrup, swimming with desert insects, which formed a part of our daily ration.

Then we returned to our encampment and spread the word of the rescue plans. The whole camp buzzed with excitement. Weird tales of the City of Lost Souls, and its beautiful women, were told far into that desert moonlit night.

Now at last we Legionnaires could look forward to a real war! No more mere slow skirmishing across the sun-baked red sands. No more cautious advances. Quick action, desperate action, decisive action would be necessary, if we would save our ten comrades.

NEXT morning we awoke—those of us who had slept at all—eager to set out for Daloss. But no call to the colors came. All through that sweltering day, we fretted and chafed beneath the boiling sun, watched the red haze of the mighty Fobian range, and waited.

We questioned the junior Martian officers and non-coms concerning plans for the advance. But they merely shrugged their shoulders.

"What are a mere ten men? And especially mere Earthmen, mercenaries?" they said, snapping their fingers. "Nothing, in a war like this. And the massacre? 'Tis but the fortunes of war, nothing more: a mere desert wind, which blows some good, some ill."

The Legion seethed. For with every minute that slipped by, rescue was becoming more and more difficult. So finally Captain Hammersmith and Little Cedric and I went back again to the Martian Colonel, Ak-Ak.

We intended to make demands—perhaps even to threaten a mutiny. But we never got that far. For, as we entered the Colonel's office, after cooling our heels in the outer room for an hour, we were set upon by a squad of men from one of the native Martian regiments.

"Seize—bind them!" shouted the swarthy red-skinned Colonel.

It would take more than eight Martian regulars to seize the three of us. Cedric and I dropped back several paces, and raised our fists to defend ourselves. But Hammersmith, our leader, seemed to slump with servility, as he meekly held out his wrists for the shackles.

Doubtless anxious to get him out of the way, before tackling Cedric and me, one of the native soldiers leaped forward, with the open handcuffs in both hands, ready to clap them on Hammersmith's wrists.

This was what Hammersmith had been waiting for. Lunging suddenly, he reached beneath the extended manacles, seized the soldier around the waist with both hands, lifted him aloft, and hurled him full in the faces of the others.

Then, our fists flying, all three of us waded in.

Through one corner of my eye, I saw Colonel Ak-Ak whip out his atomic pistol. I crouched low, and mixed up closer with the Martian soldiers, so that Ak-Ak wouldn't dare try to blast me. I heard several toots of the Colonel's whistle, and then more men came running.

It was a glorious fight while it lasted,

but at length we were downed, and our wrists and ankles firmly tied. Big, gross Colonel Ak-Ak twirled his long black drooping moustaches, his fat copper-hued face purple with suppressed rage.

"It may interest you crraats to know," he hissed, "that there will be no advance on Daloss. On the morrow, we retire to winter quarters at Ricca, there to await reinforcements for the spring campaign. *That* for your impertinence! Your comrades can rot in hell!"

He snapped his fingers; and strode, still bristling, from the office.

"Damn!" muttered Hammersmith to me, as the three of us were led away in the wake of Colonel Ak-Ak. "Now we've put our foot in it! Losing our tempers, when we needed to keep them at all costs. Poor brother, I have failed you!"

"Shut your face," snapped one of the guards, slapping him across the mouth.

We were led to the stinking guardhouse and locked in separate cells, so that we got no chance of further conversation.

ALL the rest of that hot stifling afternoon, I worried about the fate of our ten captured comrades. But occasionally—I must admit—my thoughts wandered to the *attractions* of the City of Lost Souls, as well as to its *menace*. To the unlimited gold of its mines, and to its beautiful blonde Mauro maidens.

At last came evening, with its weird green shadows, cast across the desert's hot sands, its soft cooling winds, its vast desert beauty. Black batlike desert reptiles sped through the green darkness with eerie flapping of leather wings. Over the red desert lay a satisfying peace; but not on us three incarcerated ones, nor—so we later

learned—upon the rest of the Legion of Death. Time was fleeting, and there was an outrage to be avenged, and comrades to be rescued.

In the corridors of our jail, we heard the sound of scuffling—a muffled groan—a dull thud. Then cautious footsteps approached our cells.

"Captain Hammersmith! Sergeant Warren! Sergeant Cedric! Speak up, where are you?"

"Here!" we whispered in reply.

A furtive group of enlisted men from our own outfit unlocked our cell-doors, and then untied our wrists and ankles. Next they dragged in the Martian guards, bound and gagged, and left them in our places.

"What's up?" Hammersmith whispered, as we slunk through the green darkness, back toward our own outfit.

"The men have organized everything," one of our rescuers explained, "but we want someone to lead us. If you will take command, Sir, we're all set to fall upon the officers, truss them up, seize the sliths,* and then off to Daloss. What do you say, Sir?"

"It's a go!" the Captain exclaimed, his blue eyes glinting eagerly. "Who made the plans?"

"Zenoff, Duke Keating, Bloch, and Kuswa."

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Send for them."

A few minutes of discussion with the plotters convinced him that the plans had been well laid. So he gave the word for action.

A single long low barking howl, like that of a crraat: this was our signal. Instantly every Martian officer and non-commissioned officer in our regiment was set-upon, gagged, and bound. Then we crept silently like dark shad-

* "Slith," a grey horse-like reptile, ridden by the Martian cavalry. Its splay feet enable it to travel with ease over the red desert sands, and it can go for long periods without water.—Ep.

ows toward the picket lines. Most of the guards were our own buddies; the few Martians we quickly overpowered.

We had saddled and mounted as the red disk of one of the two Martian moons climbed above the mountains, quickly shrinking and paling as it rose.

Leather creaked, sabers clanked in their scabbards; rifles were clasped in taut hands. Breath came in quick gasps; eyes flashed; faces were grim with determination.

Down the moonlit red slope we raced, past spiky argan trees, past a honey-combed slag bluff, and out onto the open desert. Past the encampment of the native portion of the Legion we rode. Bedlam broke loose among the tents that dotted the floor of the broad valley. Atomic rifles sizzled, and hoarse commands rose on the night air.

Then the whole three thousand of us were gone—vanished into the night before the sleepy fire of the waking Martians could become destructive. Only a few men were lost to us in that encounter.

THUNDERING over the desert toward the distant Fobian Mountains, we headed for Daloss, the city of mystery. Behind us lay Martians and martial rule. Ahead lay rescue for our comrades, and adventure and perhaps death for us! What a step it was! We had outlawed ourselves. We were fugitives, subject to the wrath of a whole planet.

“Isn’t it great?” screamed Little Cedric, wonder and awe shining in his young eyes, as we pounded along on our grey desert mounts.

“Great?” mocked the deep voice of Ivan Zenoff. “Wait until you see the wild Mauros before you say that. They fight like hell, and torture like the demons of their own black saint, Erlik. Say, buddy, you haven’t seen or heard

anything yet!”

“Wait until *you* see the Mauro girls!” Cedric shot back at him.

Several miles onward, above the pungent stench of slith-sweat, drifted the thin English voice of the man whom we called the Duke.

“By Jove, they say the Mauro women are devils, too! They sneak out on the field of battle at night and sink knives into the wounded enemy, the bally things! No man comes back from this part of the world, what!”

Southward over the red dunes we swept, and up them again almost to the hurtling desert moon, yelling, singing, fair-warning the enemy. Fighting fever ran high. Singing rose louder. Our men shouted defiance at the moon, and shook their fists at the desert sky. Who cared if the Mauros heard? Who cared if anyone heard? Ahead of us lay a mission of rescue and adventure.

Hours later, small squat bushes and sparse blue-knobbed grey lichenous trees loomed before us, as the country became more hilly. We passed a black ersite shrine, solemn in its lonely glory. The hooves of our sliths clicked sharply on the bones of animals and of humans, left to scorch in the desert sun. Other battles had been fought here, grim to the very end. Life had pulsed at this spot long ago; caravans had come from the canal cities in long lines of swaying sliths, carrying plunder and Mauros, frowning Mauros with wide hats and colored capes.

“Something’s going to happen!” yelled Little Cedric, his eyes glowing. “I can feel it!”

“We ought to meet them soon,” I answered. “We’ve been riding for hours, advertising our whereabouts to all the planet. Where *are* the enemy?”

On thundered the three thousand, past lonely, rocky slag-bluffs, past salt-beds weirdly white beneath the desert

moon. Looming steadily nearer ahead of us, rose the mighty Fobian range. The second moon rose in the West, and hurtled across the sky, in reverse direction to its more sluggish brother.

Then suddenly from a grove of thick lichens on a rocky slope, spurts of livid flame streaked the night, as atomic rifles sizzled. Sliths shrieked and stumbled in our ranks, men fell, gasps and cries rent the air. The Legion of Death slowed down as though a huge wave had rolled against it. Again many shots sizzled forth, pouring death into our ranks. We were ambushed!

WAVING his saber, Captain Hammersmith shouted to us to follow him. Straight into that grove of fragrant blue-knobbed lichens he dashed. And we three thousand followed close behind. Sabers slashed down into the bushes; atomic pistols spurted sharply; atomic rifles sizzled sudden death. Cries rang out. More rifle shots sounded. Men and sliths tumbled into the bushes.

White-clothed Mauros appeared from everywhere, like ghosts in the moonlight. They poured from every bush, firing at close range.

A sharp cry of pain beside me, a youthful cry! It was Little Cedric. There was an agonized expression on his boyish face as he slid heavily from the saddle of his plunging slith, to be trampled and crushed by the splay feet of the sliths behind.

Poor Little Cedric! Never would he meet again his beautiful golden-haired Mauro maiden, whom he had come so far and lived through so much hell to see.

But we had no time to worry about Little Cedric or any other of our lost comrades, for we had a fight on our hands. And fight we did! Many a swarthy Mauro rose from behind a

blue-knobbed lichen, and toppled, never to rise again. Many were crushed under the thundering sliths of the Legion. But there were countless others to take the places of those who fell. From the hill beyond they poured in never ending numbers, white capes flowing in the breeze.

Cries from the mouth of a gorge ahead rose above the din of battle. Shots rang out, and a moving wave of men and sliths streamed forth, looming wild and fierce against the night's eerie horizon.

"Daloss must be close at hand!" shouted Hammersmith, his face streaked with blood, and his red hair disheveled. "These are the devils who massacre women and children, and who would burn our comrades at the altar of Erlik. Charge, men! Charge!"

The enemy cavalry met us with a fierceness that stunned us, that stopped us momentarily. Some were old bearded Mauros with flowing white capes wrapped around them, fighting with a recklessness like that of youth, their short broad-bladed lances darting back and forth with flying speed. Some, equipped with atomic rifles, fired like mad as they came forward. Some were young Mauros, haughty and disdainful, their white teeth flashing in snarls of rage, their practiced arms wielding spears with quick thrusts of death. And among them were many men with skins as white as our own—strange phenomenon of a strange planet!

Cries of the wounded rose on all sides. It was close in-fighting now, every man for himself. You could hear the sharp gasp of breath as blades sank into soft flesh. Then the agonized moan as the sabers or lances were pulled out, the heart blood leaping thickly on the slayer's arm. A wracking cough—some Mauro or Earthman choking on his own life's blood.

It was fight and slash, and slash and fight. At close quarters, rifles—even atomic pistols—were ineffective. The whole air seemed filled with stabbing spears and sweeping sabers, streaked red in the moonlight.

Suddenly a hoarse, victorious shout went up, rose loudly on the soft desert wind. The fighting mass began to shift toward the mountains. The Legion of Death was moving on!

MAD glorious joy surged in our hearts, and swelled in our throats. The enemy, battling desperately, retreated slowly at first, and then broke into a rout, the Legion following close behind.

At the entrance to the pass—a gash in the mighty Fobian range—we were met by a volley of shots. Here again were wild Martian natives hidden behind every rock and shrub. Determined hundreds, armed with atomic rifles, standing in the narrow defile, blocking our way.

Twice we swept against that line of white-caped Mauros, to be thrown fiercely back. But on the third charge we broke through into the rocky canyon. Clatter of hooves against the stony bottom, as we charged on; clank of scabbards echoing up the dark walls. Then we poured out into a broad valley, diminished in number, but still compact enough for battle array.

Ahead in the moonlight rose the majestic spires and minarets of a city, beautiful in its lonely glory. Jagged mountain ranges flanked it, while beyond it stretched a high plateau, red and barren and forlorn.

“*Daloss!*” shouted Hammersmith, digging his spurs deep into his slith. “God grant that we are in time to save our comrades!”

To a man, the two thousand who were left in the Legion of Death gave

rein to their sliths and raced toward the high red mud wall that circled the city. But the gleaming metal gate of fret-work design in the arched doorway, was closed. From the walls, hidden riflemen opened a sizzling death-dealing fire, shouting to Erlik to save their holy of holies.

Then Hammersmith, our leader, commanded our trumpeter to sound retreat. At the first notes of that well-known but little-used bugle-call, a snarl of incredulous rage arose from the parched throats of the Legion of Death.

Shouts of protest filled the air.

“What th’ hell! Come all this way for nothing? Are yez yeller, Hammy? Have youse fergot yer own brother?”

But our Captain rose in his stirrups, held up one hand commanding silence, and cried,

“It’s only to rest a moment, and take stock of losses, and form again for the final assault. Come on! To that lichen-grove over there!”

To a little lichen-grove, on a hill overlooking the city, he led us. There we found a spring and a small brook,* where we drank, and watered our winded steeds—but scantily, only scantily—and washed off our dust and clotted gore.

Scare two thousand of us remained, out of our original three thousand. Hammersmith left seven hundred in the grove as a reserve and a rear guard, to cover our return—if we ever should return. In command of them he placed a bull-necked bullet-headed Hungarian named Kuswa.

WITH thirteen hundred refreshed and determined men, as the sky began to turn pink above the mountain tops to the eastward, he moved once

* Apparently the land of the Mauros is watered by seepage from some of the quite distant canals, as no canal runs anywhere near it.—Ed.

more toward the city gates. On the way we found two water-soaked argan logs in the winding creek. With them we battered at the gate. Back and forth those battering-rams beat upon the metal doors, shaking them with every blow.

The reorganized Mauro cavalry attacked our rear; but so fiercely did our rear-guard ward them off, that the work at the gates was not interrupted. For some reason, the firing from atop the wall and from within the gates was not heavy.

At last the grilled gates crashed open. We pushed, we surged through, with wild cries. Down the wide central street of the city we rode at terrific pace, toward the great rounded dome of the Temple of Erlik, which loomed ahead.

Low red-walled buildings flanked the street on both sides. Mosaics, blue and white and turquoise green, were visible in the pale light of early dawn. In the doorways, veiled women gave us hasty frightened glances, then scampered inside. A nearby grove of some unknown flowering tree poured its fragrance on the breeze. From a house on a narrow side street, a baby wailed, and its cry was quickly muffled.

Could a man ever forget that ride? Soft winds blowing on tired cheeks, worn bodies, steaming sliths. And behind the latticed windows which lined the streets, frightened faces staring out at us: children's faces; women's faces. Shutters quickly slammed shut.

On toward the looming black-domed temple we rode. High stone walls, with windowed stone towers atop them, stretched far to the east and west. Beyond this wall waved the velvety tops of many blood-green ktath-trees indicating vast, cool gardens. And deep in the center stood the immense black-plastered temple itself, with its seven rainbow-hued spires, and its vast black

dome reaching into the Martian sky.

The sight stirred our blood. Within those walls, within that temple, were our comrades, perhaps even now being roasted to death on the sacrificial altar of gold! With a growl of rage we spurred our sliths on again, firing spurts of atomic flame back at the charging Mauros behind us, firing sidewise at the snipers who lay flat on the roofs of nearby houses.

A sudden sharp twinge in my right shoulder twisted me in my saddle; then, a moment later, burning pain. I felt myself slipping from my saddle, and grabbed madly for the pommel, missing it. The ground struck my head a stunning blow. Thundering, thudding splay hooves sped by me, over me. Then a silent darkness swept down upon me, and I knew no more.

LATER, through moments filled with wild dreams, came the sound of women's voices in the universal tongue of Mars. My years in the Legion had given me enough knowledge of the language so that I could understand what they were saying. A strident voice was scolding, commanding,

"You are a little fool, Esta! Do as I tell you!"

A low sweet voice replied in pleading tones,

"But mother mine, I cannot kill them. Even to think of it makes my heart chill!"

"What! You will not slay these foreign crraats, these beasts from another world, who have killed our own men, these infidels who desecrate the holy city of the Black Star?"

"N-no! No! The thought of it makes my hand shrink to my body."

"Fie, child. Is the betrothed of the handsome Ab-Nadik a coward?"

"I care not what Ab-Nadik thinks! I—oh, mother, *what* are you doing?"

"See, it is like this, my child. Open his shirt, pull back his head by the hair, and let the point of the knife tickle, before you sink it deep into the Earthman crraat's throat. Ah! In Erlik's name! Hear his cursed blood gurgle!"

"Mother, mother! It is terrible!"

"Nonsense, child. Every Mauro woman must do her duty. Away with your soft-hearted foolishness— See over there! An Earthman stirs into consciousness. Slit his throat, my child, and praise Erlik."

It was all a horrible nightmare to my slowly awakening consciousness. Cautiously I opened my eyes, and stared about me.

I was lying on the paving-stones of a broad street lined with red clay houses. Far down this street in one direction was the grillwork of the city gate, now closed and guarded by swarthy men in wide hats and flowing white capes. Down the street in the other direction rose the rainbow spires and the black dome of the Temple of Erlik, with a surging thousand or so of Legionnaires massed in front of it. Around me on the pavement lay many dead and dying men, some clad in flowing white, and some in the red uniform of the Foreign Legion of Mars. And a few disemboweled sliths.

But what caught and held my eyes was the girl whose voice I had heard. Curls of burnished gold. Skin, shell-pink. Eyes of sapphire blue. And a slim but voluptuous figure, half concealed, half revealed by her flowing white shawl and diaphanous garments beneath. My heart beat wildly at such sheer beauty.

And standing with her, a hawk-faced crone—a white woman too, but gnarled and old and fiendish.

They moved away from me toward the side of the street, the mother leading; and almost I raised myself and

called to them to return, so smitten was I at the sight of the blonde young Mauro girl.

Louder voices, closer, shriller. More native women slinking through the streets, like gaudy vultures, tearing at men's throats and hearts. Then the wail of the hawk-faced crone near the wall of a building.

"Great Erlik! It is my son, your brother Ben-Stu, who lies here! He is badly wounded!"

The younger woman ran toward the wall, but the mother pushed her away. She put her scrawny old arms around the body of the young wounded Mauro, and weeping, hugged him to her breast.

"I will take him home," she cried with fierce mother love. "But you, Esta, be about your work. The cursed Earthmen have almost killed your brother!"

"Yes!" the young girl exclaimed, her beautiful face now bitterly contorted. "Give me the knife, mother. I can kill them now!"

SHE strode directly toward me, a long kris in her hand, and her glinting yellow curls stirring in the wind. As she neared me, she stumbled and fell, but even as she fell she made a lunge at me, the knife sinking between the stones of the street within inches of my side.

In another moment she had righted herself. Her slender hand ripped open my shirt. I tried to roll over, but was too weak. I groaned. Her hand took hold of my hair and jerked my head back cruelly. Her pink cheeks were flushed, and there was a wild light of fanaticism in her heaven-blue eyes.

My fingers reached up and fastened about her wrist, to stay that knife which was ready to plunge into my breast. I rose on my elbow, my grip still on her arm.

"I want to live a little longer," I said slowly. "And that knife is very sharp—Esta."

Her tense and panting body was close to mine. Fiercely she struggled to get the knife free, to plunge it into my heart. Then our glances met and held. I gazed deep into the blue pools of her eyes, and smiled—smiled happily, confidently, though I was close to death. Her gaze fell. Thick long lashes masked her eyes. Her face went white—then flushed again.

I took the knife from her nerveless fingers, and flung it to clatter against the wall of a nearby house.

"You are too beautiful to be a killer!" I said as I released her. Unthinking, I had spoken in English.

And she replied in the same tongue, but with a strange lilting cadence, which gave to the language a beauty that it had never had for me before.

"No," she said levelly, although her lips trembled slightly, "I cannot kill you. Yet why did you and your comrades come, bringing death to our peaceful city, if you expect not death in return?"

"Beautiful one," I replied, "I know now that I came here for *you*! Tell me that you believe it!"

My words were as unexpected to me as they were to her. Her blue eyes widened for one startled moment. Then she smiled shyly, frightenedly, wonderfully. I slipped one arm around her slim waist, but she pushed me slowly away and stared at me, as if searching, seeking for something. A subtle joy vibrated through my war-tired body. This lovely girl and I—there was a bond between us, growing stronger every moment. We two were alone together, in spite of the dead all around us, and the stalking vulture-women. Words were unnecessary, words were not swift enough to convey the flood of

thoughts and feelings that swept through us.

For a long time we sat in silence. Finally she spoke.

"You must be an American, for the English are not like this."

"What do you know of Englishmen or of Americans, or of any of the races of my Earth?" I asked. "And how does it come that you speak my language?"

"Ah," she laughed. "I went to school in England on your Earth for two Earth years. I am the daughter of the rich Mu-Lai."

I STIFFENED. Mu-Lai! Slaughterer of defenseless women and children. Scourge of the trackless deserts of Mars. The fiend who was about to offer up my ten comrades on the altar of gold! It was to rescue these comrades that I had waded through blood to this holy city. I had come here to fight against fiends—not for a love tryst with an angel.

Sternly I thrust the girl from me and staggered to my feet.

"Esta," I harshly declared. "I came here for rescue and revenge. When that is over I shall return to you."

"Oh, do not go," she cried in alarm. "You will be killed. You cannot hope to prevail against the forces of my father, and against the curses of Erlik, our god."

"I can try."

"I will not let you go to your death. Erlik has sent you here not to rescue your comrades but to rescue me. Against my will my father betrothed me to one Ab-Nadik, whom I do not love. You can—but no, no! What am I saying? I must keep my promise. Still I want you to live. I can hide you. Perhaps you can escape from Daloss under cover of night, when the two moons have set."

I shook my head, though the temptation to be with her was strong. I had work to do—man's work.

"I go to rescue my comrades," I cried. "But wait here for me, Esta. I'll come back."

"If you must go, you must," she sighed wearily. "I shall wait. I shall watch, and hope."

Drawing my saber, I strode toward the towering black dome of the Temple of Erlik, scattering the gaudy-caped white-clad vulture women, who hovered about the dead and dying in the street.

"You carrion!" I shouted at them in Martian. "Leave them be! Begone, or may Erlik curse you!"

They scurried for cover, like the ghouls that they were. In a side street I spied a wild-eyed slith, stirrups swinging as it sniffed irresolute. Quietly I approached the animal. It permitted me to touch its velvet hide, to pat the smooth flow of its neck.

Painfully I raised myself into the saddle, though my wounded side burned. The quivering animal quieted as I took the reins and swung it about. Together, we clattered down the street toward the temple, where sounds of fighting rose loud upon the morning air. Rising in my stirrups and turning, I stared behind me for a moment. Standing where I had left her was Esta, her hands clasped to her heart. My blood pulsed wildly. She was mine—mine! No Ab-Nadik, nor any other blue or red Martian—or even a white Martian, for that matter—would ever take her away from me.

Then I faced toward the battle ahead, and gave my slith the spurs.

The whine of atomic impulses sped past my ears, and sang on into the morning, as I rode. The wide metal gates of the temple grounds were open. The Legion had already forced their way in. Two old Mauros in dirty capes,

ashed out at my slith's legs with their short broad-bladed lances, as we thundered on past them into the temple gardens.

At the entrance to the temple itself I saw large numbers of the Legion, fighting with Mauros. Many of our men were now on foot, their sliths slain.

IN front of the main doorway of the temple stood a giant one-eyed blue Martian, with a mighty broad-sword in each hand. On each side of him stood others of the enemy, clad in flowing capes, javelins darting as they tried to halt the rush of our Legion. Still others, hidden behind the ktath-trees, were pouring devastating spurts of atomic fire upon our men.

But the Legion did not stop. The unconquerable urge to rescue our comrades drove us on.

Never have I seen such a splendid physical specimen as that one-eyed blue giant, standing there guarding the temple gates. Naked to the waist, he stood, with a four-foot blade circling in each hamlike hand. His knotted shoulders were at least a yard across, and above them rose a neck corded like that of a bull. The muscles of his chest and arms rippled and rolled beneath his sleek blue hide, as he swung and lunged.

As I edged through the jostling throng, I saw our Legion surge against him three times like waves against a rock, and three times fall back in thwarted spray.

Then Hammersmith alone on slith-back charged the doorway of the temple. The huge Martian giant braced his feet, and gripped his two swords to resist this onslaught. But, just before our captain came within range of a cutting slash, he jerked his reins taut, and his charger reared up, to strike at the blue giant with its front splay feet.

The Martian gave backward not an inch. Dropping one of his swords, he seized the nearest foreleg of the slith with one mighty hand, and held the beast aloft with effortless ease, as he lunged at its heart with his remaining weapon.

With a gurgling cough, the slith collapsed. For an instant the blue giant held it up, then cast it from him with a gesture of disdain, and stooped to retrieve his second sword.

As the slith fell, Hammersmith slid from its back, and rushed the giant. Swinging his saber with both hands, he brought it down on the Martian's head with a blow that would have cleft the skull of an ox.

It never even fazed the blue man. Jerking suddenly erect, as though merely annoyed by a scratch, he swung one of his own blades at Hammersmith. But the Australian was in too close to be cut, and the weapon merely felled him with a glancing blow on the side of the head.

He dropped to the temple steps, and his adversary placed one huge bare foot on his shoulders, lowered one broad-sword to get the aim, and then swung it aloft.

I charged. On my saber I caught the descending blow, and turned it aside. The very fury of my foolhardy onslaught forced the giant back up the steps. He stumbled on the step behind him; and, by that time, I had recovered from my parry and swung at him with a low crossbody swipe.

Through the knotted muscles of his belly slashed my blade. But the blue man, though mortally wounded, was a powerful menace still. With a bestial roar of rage, he raised both his weapons aloft, and brought them convergingly down at my shoulders. The blood from his slit belly gushed out over my riding-boots. I slipped and fell. The

swords clashed together above me. Then the body of the Martian giant lurched on top of me, crushing me down to the foot of the temple steps.

SOMEONE pulled the carcass off, and I staggered to my feet and stared around. Captain Hammersmith stood beside me, his desert headgear gone, his red hair disheveled, rubbing a bump on the side of his head. The remaining Mauros had been brushed aside, now that the huge one-eyed blue Martian was no more; and the Legion of Death was surging past us up the steps.

Then Mauro reinforcements mounted on slith-back thundered into the gardens behind us, yelling wildly, their javelins flashing in the morning sunlight which now bathed the planet with pink-tinted glory.

But even this attack from the rear could not stay us. In fact, it drove us on. On we charged, fighting madly, till we streamed through the main entrance into the temple itself.

Into the high-ceilinged inner room of the Temple of Erlik we swept. All its defenders had fallen. We halted, panting for breath, and stared about us at the beautiful iridescence of the holy place. Intricate geometric weavings of pale blue, rose, and green greeted us on every side. At the south end of the vast structure, high in the glossy black vault, the sun—streaming in through many small windows in the dome—played upon a riot of colors. A million golden filaments sparkled, filling the air with a luminous haze that blended now to pale rose, now to delicate mother of pearl.

High above us, from the depths of a barred gallery, a loud unruffled voice chanted with Martian fatalism:

“Erlik! Erlik, the Dark Star! Erlik, the Unseen God!”

Then there burst upon us more

spouts of atomic energy from unseen places. Mauro riflemen, hidden throughout the temple, determined to glorify Erlik by killing the Earthman crraats who had dared to set foot therein.

We scattered to seek shelter behind the great round pillars in the labyrinth of intricate doorways and passages which angled from the spacious open center of the temple. Loud sizzling detonations echoed through the sacred place. Acrid smoke rose in grey clouds to mingle with the haze of color in the black dome of the god Erlik.

At the main doorway a small detachment of the Legion of Death were holding back the Mauro slith-mounted cavalry who had attacked our rear.

The radiance of the rising sun, constantly lighting more and more of the great dome, fell full upon a huge shining altar, filling the whole temple with bright rays of glinting gold. The altar gleamed as though it were the sun itself. It was the great golden altar of Erlik, famed throughout all of Mars.

But it was not the sight of this fabulous fortune in gold that sent us charging forward over the vast tile floor, disdainful of the atomic blasts that dropped our men like wilted insects.

No, it was the sight of the ten bodies which lay naked upon that golden altar: bodies with white skin, the bodies of our comrades captured two days ago by the Mauros.

AMONG them, I recognized the fat roly-poly face of my friend Victor Lafontaine. And the slim keen features of the brother of our Captain.

Golden straps clasped their ankles, their waists, their arms, their shoulders. And all were gagged with cloth of gold. Beyond the altar we could see leaping red tongues of flame licking at the thick dry faggots of lichen-wood piled there.

The bound men lying on top of the altar tried in vain to squirm, to roll away from that blistering heat. Their bodies were wet with perspiration; their eyes mirrored intense pain; and their fingers clenched and reclenched in agony.

Furiously Hammersmith raced in front of us, his red hair awry, his blue-grey eyes flashing.

"Look what the heathen devils have done to our comrades!" he shouted. "We must save them, even if it costs our own lives. I come, my brother! I come!"

As we rushed forward, two gold-en-crusted doors, leading to a small chapel to the left opened. Fierce, bearded Mauros debouched, atomic rifles in their swarthy hands. The leader, a tall hawk-nosed white-skinned man with thin lips, held up his left hand.

"Halt, you Earthmen!" he shouted. "Or all of you will be shot down where you stand. I, Mu-Lai, command you in the name of Erlik! Touch not the sacred altar of the Dark Star, lest your bodies and souls be bled with a thousand tortures!"

Only for an instant did that command stay us; then once more we surged forward in an angry wave.

"Ab-Nadik," cried Mu-Lai to a dark slim handsome young Martian with black flashing eyes standing by his side, "not an Earthman crraat must live."

Red stabs of flame jetted from our guns in reply. Mu-Lai and Ab-Nadik, the betrothed of my Esta, dodged nimbly behind the golden altar, and blasted back at us from that shelter.

Around us scores of our comrades fell, but still we charged on. So fierce was our onslaught that the Mauros were forced to retreat into their chapel, even their great chief himself, and his handsome young lieutenant, Ab-Nadik. But, in spite of this retreat, snipers con-

tinued to pour atomic death upon us from all sides.

Still we came forward, scant scores of us, who had been hundreds before. With splintering swords we pried off the golden bands that bound our comrades on the altar. Weeping, sobbing, they gasped their gratitude. Captain Hammersmith clasped his brother in his arms for one brief moment. Then more blasts of force winged about us. Fast we retreated to the shelter of the columned passages, and from there we returned the fire of the Mauros.

But the enemy had reorganized, and now poured into the temple at all sides from many concealed entrances. The place swarmed with them. Swords and javelins flashed, atomic pistols barked, atomic rifles sizzled. We Earthmen had profaned the golden altar of Erlik. We must not be permitted to escape!

BACKING from pillar to pillar, the handful of us who were left, made our way slowly and painfully toward the main exit of the temple. But that way of escape we now found blocked by solid ranks of the enemy.

A black passage loomed to one side, and we slid into it, only about a hundred of us now, out of the fourteen hundred who had stormed the place, and the ten men whom we had rescued. Behind us, in the mazes of the temple, our wounded were putting up a fight as long as there was any life left in them. And we knew that they would never permit themselves or each other to fall alive into the hands of the Erlik-worshippers.

Along the sides of the corridor we found some movable stone benches, and with these we threw up a barricade at the entrance. Then our red-headed Captain called to me and Keating:

"Warren and Duke, come here. I want the two of you to take a dozen

men and go down this passage to its other end. Duke, you guard the exit, and send back one man to report to me. Warren, if you can get out, take four or five fellows with you, fight your way to the lichen grove, and send in the reserves. We've given these Martian heathens so much hell, that with seven hundred reinforcements, we can cut our way to safety. Get going."

The Duke and I warmly shook our leader's hand, selected our squad of men, and felt our way down the dark corridor.

It turned and twisted, then gradually got lighter. Finally as we rounded a turn, we sighted a crouched figure in a white cape, sneaking toward us. Up came Keating's atomic rifle; but, as he pressed its button, I knocked the weapon aside. Just in time, too, for the skulking figure was that of Esta.

"Oh, my beloved!" she cried in English, flinging herself into my arms.

"What ho! Eh, what?" the Duke exclaimed, edging forward. "I say, Warren, I didn't know that you had friends in this blarsted heathen city. Introduce us, will you?" But his words, light as they sounded, had no humor in them. They were as cutting as cold steel.

"This is Miss Esta," I stammered, "the daughter of Mu-Lai."

"So!" came with a hiss from my squad. The Mauro chieftain had spared no women in his raid on Wacco. The Martian women had slit the throats of our wounded in today's battle. Then what hope for mercy could a woman of the household of Mu-Lai have, from even a British gentleman?

Up came a menacing row of atomic rifles. But I thrust Esta behind me, and drew my saber, and faced them. Knowing that it would do no good to appeal to their chivalry toward a woman of a race which had shown no

chivalry to us, I appealed to their common sense.

"Don't be fools!" I cried. "Esta was educated in England. She has no stomach for this heathen slaughter. She has come to help us. Tell them so, Esta."

"Yes, oh, my beloved. What is it that you wish? Only command me, and Esta will obey."

A snort of contempt came from my men, but I cried triumphantly,

"There! What did I tell you!" Then to the girl I said, "Can you lead me safely out of this city?"

"Yes, beloved," was her reply.

"It looks fishy to me," the Duke gritted, his aristocratic eyes flashing cold. "Well, Warren, run along with your girl friend; but Heaven help you, if you double-cross us. And I'm sending four men to trail you."

"Some day you'll apologize to the lady for this. She's saving your worthless hide," I shouted, contemptuously. Then I turned and followed Esta.

The last that I heard behind me, as I rounded the next corner, was one of the squad anxiously asking,

"'Adn't I better pot the blarsted blighter?"

And Keating's disdainful reply,

"Don't bother. If she takes him home with her, he'll end up on the golden altar of Erlik. So what's the bally difference?"

OUT through a door in the side of the temple, hidden by lichen-trees, she led me. This door opened upon a quiet peaceful sunlit court. Tied to a ring in the wall was a stately white slith, saddled and bridled.

"My brothers," she said simply. And, at the memory which those words kindled in her, her blue eyes flashed fire for a moment. God, but she was beautiful in her anger!

Then her face cleared, and she smiled

up at me. I clasped her in my arms, and covered her face with kisses. For several minutes, she pressed close against me; then drew bashfully away. Suddenly she whipped off her white cape, and stood revealed to me in her blouse and pantaloons. Never had I seen such beauty! Her perfect features were lit with the light of service.

"Take this cape," she softly murmured. "With it wrapped around you, and riding my brother's slith, you can make a dash for safety."

"Safety?" I cried, though my heart was in my eyes, which were devouring Esta, rather than in my words. "Safety? Never! I shall bring back reinforcements, and we shall win!"

Alarmed, she clutched my arm, and her touch thrilled me.

"No, no!" she cried. "They will kill you all. Already your men are almost overpowered. Soon they will capture all of you, kill some, and throw the others into the dungeons. Then on each holy day many of you will be sacrificed to Erlik on the golden altar. Go, before it is too late, beloved."

"Never!" I cried. "I shall return to die here with the rest, if that be our fate. But I am grateful to you. I—I love you." My gaze burned into hers.

She hid her head. I thought I heard a sob. Then she straightened, and looked me squarely in the eye.

"My beloved is brave, as becomes the chosen of the daughter of Mu-Lai," said she. "Go, then, and bring back help to your comrades if you can. And may Erlik go with you. Esta will be waiting for you."

Once more I held her girlish form close to me. Then, as the hidden door in the side of the temple opened to disgorge the four Legionnaires whom the Duke had sent to follow me, I released my darling, untied the white slith, wrapped the cape about me, vaulted

into the saddle, and clattered off out of the little courtyard.

As I turned the corner at the end of the alley, I twisted about in the saddle, and glanced back. The golden-haired Martian maiden stood waving one dainty hand at me. On each side of her stood two Legionnaires with jaws dropped open in stupefied surprise.

A strange exaltation thrilled through me. I felt that I could ride down any number of heathens. I filled my lungs with glorious thin morning Martian air, and drove my spurs into the sides of my splendid white mount.

SOON I had found the main thoroughfare of the city, and was winging down it, away from the temple, and toward the big fretwork gates of the main entrance. They stood slightly ajar, for we had smashed their locks and bars with our argan logs earlier that morning. To one side squatted two white-clad Mauros, their long atomic rifles leaning against the parapet.

"Ho, Ben-Stu," one of them shouted, recognizing the white slith as belonging to Esta's brother.

"It is not he!" cried the other, leaping up and reaching for his rifle.

I snatched out my atomic pistol, and sent a blast of pure force through his head. Then reining my mount, I shot down the other. Two dead Mauros. Two less enemies to meet our depleted forces.

Dismounting, I propped the two bodies up against the wall, so that they would look like the sleepy watchmen they had been but a moment before. Then vaulting once more into the saddle, I sped out of the city to the lichen grove on the hill.

Here I found the bullet-headed Hungarian, Kuswa, and his seven hundred men, fretting with inaction, and chaf-

ing over the delay. Briefly I sketched the situation. Then, with Kuswa and me at their head, the reinforcements filed quietly out of the grove and down to the city gates. No one showed up to oppose us. The two dead Mauros sat still as though dozing on guard, as we entered the city.

No time for concealment now! With a cheer, we charged down the central street toward the black-domed Temple of Erlik at the other end. The Martian cavalry heard us, and formed and met us just short of the temple. At their head rode Mu-Lai himself, slim, hawk-nosed, white-skinned, with thin sneering lips. I spurred to meet him.

But, as the two forces crashed together, I was swept slightly to one side, so that it was Kuswa, not I, who took on this chieftain of the enemy.

I sent atomic blasts from my pistol at Mauro after Mauro, until its force-chamber was exhausted; then drew my saber and laced out at the fiendish wide-hatted faces all around me. Two javelins lanced at my neck, and I could guard against only one.

My slith foundered, pulling me down with him. I ducked, and the blades flashed harmlessly above me. Then I was up and out of the saddle, fighting on foot, slashing the bellies of sliths, cutting at legs of Mauros, dodging the thrust of javelins.

It was not long before most of the combatants on both sides were off their sliths, struggling on the rubbed pavement. And gradually the tide of battle worked its way up to the wall of the temple, and through the garden gates, and to the temple steps beyond.

Down the steps to join us came our red-haired Captain and his mere handful of survivors.

SUDDENLY I found myself facing Mu-Lai in the press. We crossed

blades, his javelin and my sword, and the Mauros and Legionnaires gave way to let us fight.

At first we fenced cautiously, until finally the Martian chieftain forced me back a pace, and drew back his javelin to spear me through. Putting both hands to my saber, I swung it around my head with such force that it swept his spear from his grasp. Caught off his balance, he crashed to his knees before me. He was at my mercy. I drew back my blade to pierce the heart of this slayer of women and children, this torturer of Christian men.

But the memory of a blue-eyed gold-framed face stayed me. I lowered my point.

"Rise, father of Esta," I mumbled in Martian. "I cannot kill you."

Mu-Lai glanced up at me, with surprise and perhaps gratitude in his cruel eyes. Then something struck my head from behind, and I pitched forward into black unconsciousness.

MY return to my senses was equally black, the blackness of night. Not a star flickered above. I lay on damp stones; and around me was a musty, foetid smell.

I sat up. I stood. I groped about. Stone walls on three sides of me, hemming me in. And on the fourth side iron bars. A prison cell!

I stumbled over something soft and yielding. A human body. It groaned. Kneeling, I felt of it. It wore a military uniform, the uniform of an officer of the Legion.

"Hammersmith!" I cried. "My Captain!"

"That—you—Warren?" he thickly replied.

"Yes. What happened?"

He sat up, and clasped my hand in the black darkness.

"They got us. All of us," he said.

"I was the last to go down. Well, I guess we shall grace the golden altar of Erlik together, you and I. But it was a glorious fight while it lasted. There *were* three thousand of us. Now there are just you and I."

"We can kill ourselves—or each other," I suggested, feeling for my weapons. But they had been taken from me.

A flickering light appeared in the distance. I could now see a dimly lit corridor, stone walled, stretching away from the barred door of our cell, and two white-swathed figures coming toward us, one of whom was carrying a torch.

It was my Esta! And her father, Mu-Lai, the Mauro chief!

My darling looked sweet and worried and wholly desirable. And, strange to relate, the bloodthirsty old Martian did not seem at all fierce or wicked at the moment. Perhaps it was due to some strange effect of the flickering torchlight. But, as I stood there, clutching the bars of my cell, he looked to be a courteous kindly gentleman of my own Earth.

And why not! We of the Legion of Death were regular fellows when off duty—no better, no worse, than the average run of mankind. Yet to our Martian enemies, in the heat of battle, we doubtless seemed like fiends from the hell of their dark god. And so, by the same token, the Mauros were probably quite charming in the bosom of their own homes.

These thoughts flashed through my mind, as I stood there staring out through the bars at Esta and her hawk-faced father.

Mu-Lai advanced and held out his hand.

"My dear Sir," he said in perfect English. "You are a brave fighter, and a worthy foeman. Erlik loves such as

you. And so, I am informed, does my daughter." He smiled at his little joke. "Furthermore, you spared my life in the battle. So I am prepared to offer you your freedom—if you will embrace the faith of the Dark Star, and will join the desert tribe of Mu-Lai."

I glanced from his aquiline face to the pleading eyes of the girl. Why not? It seemed my only chance for life; and perhaps, if I accepted, Esta might—Perhaps the unloved Ab-Nadik had perished in the battle.

And then I thought of Bill Hammersmith, lying behind me, wounded, in the cell.

"The Chief is very kind," I replied, "and the Chief's offer is most magnanimous. Set my Captain free likewise, and I will gladly accept."

"The *other* Earthman crraat must die on the golden altar of Erlik," he snapped.

"Even if he embraces the Dark Star faith like me?" I asked.

"I wouldn't trust the infidel."

"Sir," I said, "neither the Captain nor I can ever return to the Martian Foreign Legion. We would be shot for treason. So it will be safe for you to trust us."

Esta cut in with, "Oh, my be— Oh, Sir." She was speaking English, like her father and me. "You cannot save *him*, but you *can* save yourself. What is the use to throw away two lives, when one can be saved? And I *want* you saved."

"I'm sorry, dear!" I replied with sad dignity. Then, turning to her implacable father, "Captain Hammersmith and I stand together, Sir!"

FOOTSTEPS sounded in the darkness, and the rattling of a scabbard. A tall dark handsome young Mauro came forward out of the gloom. It was Ab-Nadik!

Esta's face whitened. Fear leaped into her beautiful eyes.

"Ah, father of my betrothed," said Ab-Nadik in Martian, casting a respectful glance at Mu-Lai. "I see that you are preparing to pass sentence on the last two of the Earthman crraats. But what are *you* doing in this foul place, sweet Esta?"

Mu-Lai's eyes flashed a warning at his daughter.

"She came with me, to see the infidels who have killed so many of our men. She is a fearless girl, Ab-Nadik—a worthy bride for you."

Ab-Nadik showed two rows of white teeth in a self-satisfied grin.

"Yes, my chief, she is pure and steadfast. Now that the enemy have been repulsed, Sir, perhaps we can plan for an early wedding."

"There will be no wedding!" Esta spoke clearly, calmly, though her face was pale. She reached through the bars and took my rough hand in her smooth soft one. "*This* is the man I love!"

My heart pounded at her words. Yet it all seemed so hopeless now.

Mu-Lai's face clouded with anger. Ab-Nadik stared at Esta, unbelieving; then rage and hate welled into his dark molten eyes. A sneer overspread his handsome face. He whirled savagely toward Mu-Lai.

"She, the daughter of a chief, marry an unbeliever?" he gasped. "She must be mad!"

Mu-Lai jerked his daughter away from me with one sinewy hand.

"Ab-Nadik," he gritted, "I did not tell you of this, for I thought the girl had but a passing fancy for this man from another world. Then, too, he had saved my life. But he slew our men, so many of them that my heart is now hardened against him. Esta shall be yours."

"No! No!" cried my beloved. "I shall kill myself first."

Ab-Nadik grinned with malice, his burning eyes filling with hate as he glowered at me.

"Then," said he to Mu-Lai, his voice like the hiss of a desert serpent, "the crraat shall die?"

Mu-Lai nodded.

"Yes, he shall die. *Both* of the Earthman crraats shall die!"

"On the golden altar of Erlik."

Once again Mu-Lai nodded, his eyes black slits of fanatic hate.

Esta, in a frenzy, flung herself upon Ab-Nadik and pounded his chest with small clenched hands.

"Oh, I hate you," she cried brokenly. "I love him, I tell you. I love only him."

Ab-Nadik laughed harshly and drew her within his arms.

"But you shall learn to love *me*, light of my heart," he exulted, "after *he* is dead!"

The young Martian tried to kiss Esta, but she twisted her face aside.

"Come, Ab-Nadik, let us go!" Mu-Lai said sternly. "Esta, I command you!"

THEN they dragged Esta away, kicking and squirming. With tense fingers I stood gripping those bars. Oh, that I were free to fight for her, to carry her with me, far from this heathen city of a strange planet.

Ab-Nadik turned, and cast a triumphant leering glance back at me. Helpless, raging, I shook my fist at him. How I longed to get my fingers around his throat. My Esta! Would I ever see her again?

Hammersmith patted my shoulder.

"The fortunes of war, my boy," he said comfortingly. "You passed up your chance. The old chief would have saved you, had you accepted his offer.

You should have seized your freedom and let me die on the altar."

"Never!" I declared. "It was freedom for *both* of us or for *neither*."

"Bosh!" he retorted. "You're just being quixotic. I'd have butted in while you were buzzing the old buzzard, but I hoped you might get away with it. Looked like you might, till that Ab-Nadik guy showed up."

"Skip it!" I snapped.

For a while we sat in the darkness, each busy with his own thoughts. Death was close at hand. It is one matter to face death in the heat of battle; it is another to face it in the quiet calm darkness of a stinking prison cell.

I knew that Hammersmith felt the same as I. He reached over and clasped my hand warmly in the dense darkness. No fear in that clasp—only an attempt to probe what lay ahead, that which has baffled men since time began. Weak and wounded, he awaited death—unaframed.

Suddenly, I released his hand. "Look!" I whispered.

His gaze followed mine down the corridor. Someone, carrying a torch, was coming toward the dungeon.

It was Esta, alone!

In one hand she carried the torch and in the other a large brass hoop strung with heavy iron keys.

A hurried word of greeting. Then the barred door of our cell was unlocked and swung open. Esta handed the torch to the pale Hammersmith; then I clasped her slim, warm body in my arms. It was a long, long embrace, filled with pent-up emotion. I could feel the rapid beating of her heart against my breast. Was there ever such a courageous girl as she?

"How did you get away, Esta, dear?"

"I slipped out while father and Ab-Nadik held council!"

Again I embraced her.

Finally she gently pushed away from me, and said,

"Hurry, beloved. There is a secret passage out of this dungeon. There are sliths, saddled and awaiting, beneath the city wall."

"How many sliths?" I asked, scarce daring to hope.

"Three," she replied, with bashful downcast eyes.

A fierce wild joy surged through me. I straightened my shoulders and drew a deep breath.

"Lead on!" I cried.

DOWN the dark corridor we followed the girl, until she paused at a heavy barred door at one side, and unlocked it.

"The treasure chamber of Daloss," she whispered.

And indeed it was! The light of the torch, held high by Captain Hammersmith, disclosed unnumbered bars of solid gold piled high about the walls. Brass-bound chests, containing who knows what wealth, filled the center of the room.

"Precious jewels," said Esta, noting the direction of my gaze.

One chest stood open, overflowing with the thin gold minted slabs which pass for coinage on Mars.

"Take!" the girl commanded. "We shall need them."

But I shook my head.

"I am robbing thy father of a more precious jewel than any of these," I said. "And that is enough to have on my conscience. I am no common thief."

She sighed. Then gazed at me with blue eyes full of approval.

Suddenly she stiffened, alert with listening.

"Someone comes," she said fearfully. "If he finds the cell empty, he

will try this door, knowing it to be the only possible means for your escape. Unfortunately it does not lock on the inside." She unsnapped the huge key-ring from the key in the lock, and handed the key-ring to me, as she continued breathlessly,

"Quick! That other door over there, across the treasure chamber, leads to the secret passage. I will lock the door through which we entered, and hold back whoever comes, until you have time to reach the sliths."

Brushing a kiss on my forehead, she snatched the torch from Hammersmith's hand, and darted from the chamber, shutting and locking the door behind her. We two Legionnaires were in darkness—alone.

It had all happened with such stupefying swiftness, that I had had no chance to remonstrate. And now she was gone—my Esta!

I crowded my ear to the door, in an effort to learn what was going on in the corridor outside. Esta was speaking.

"Oh, my father, do not ask me."

"So, it is you! Ab-Nadik was right. You did loose the Earthmen crraats from their cell," came Mu-Lai's voice. "You, my trusted daughter, descendant of the Dark Star himself! Where are the prisoners?"

"I—I will not say, Father. I—I love him so."

"Perhaps in the treasure room," suggested the savage voice of Ab-Nadik. "If she would cheat *me* of my love, she would not be above cheating *you* of your jewels."

"Ah—could it be?" Mu-Lai snarled. "We shall see. I have a key."

I heard a scuffle, evidently Esta trying to keep her father away from the door. Then came his voice.

"Aside, girl. You have vexed me enough today. If you are a traitor—"

Hammersmith spoke in my ear.

"Warren—come. They'll be inside in a minute."

I dreaded to leave Esta to the savage mercy of her angry father, yet there was no other course. Free—perhaps I could come back to rescue her. Imprisoned—I would die, unable to help her.

I STUMBLED across the room. Once

I bumped against a chest—an open one, filled with the slablike coins. My hand clasped one, and I slid it into the pocket of my blouse—as a souvenir of Daloss. I have it still, an unbelievably ancient Martian coin, solid proof to me of my adventure, when sometimes even I doubt that it could have happened.

"Here." Hammersmith reached for my hand in the darkness. "I have the door open. There's a tunnel ahead."

Hurriedly we stepped into the tunnel, as a key grated in the lock of the main door of the treasure chamber behind us. Hammersmith closed our exit and locked it.

"They will be delayed getting *that* open," he said grimly. "Now, let's move for those sliths."

Rapidly we proceeded along the dark tunnel. Esta had said it led to freedom, and we knew that she would not betray us. Sliths were awaiting us, she had said. But how could I bear to leave Daloss without her?

Finally we saw faint light far ahead. We pushed forward, and came to a small barred iron grating hidden in a gully of shrubs. The grating was locked.

"One of these keys ought to do the trick," Hammersmith said grimly, lifting the huge key-ring. "I hope those fellows got detained in the treasure room."

With fumbling nervous fingers he tried one key after the other. At last a

key slipped into place, and the lock mechanism turned. The grating gave way at our touch, and we stood in the silvery starlight of a Martian mountain night.

Three sliths, saddled and bridled, and slung with food and water, were tethered behind some bushes to our right.

"The girl did not lie," breathed Hammersmith. "Here are our mounts!"

But I shook my head. A mad desire for Esta surged within my veins.

"I must go back to get her," I said bitterly. "I cannot leave her behind."

"You are right!" spoke a guttural Martian voice nearby. "You cannot leave her behind, for you yourself shall never depart from here."

A tall figure in flowing cape rushed from the bushes, brandishing a javelin.

"Infidel, you die! I suspected you would try to escape this way."

It was Ab-Nadik. The man had evidently circled back alone, while Mu-Lai was following us through the treasure room passage.

DESPERATELY, I glanced about for some weapon of defense. I saw a long lichen branch lying in the bushes near me. It was about five feet long and several inches thick.

Hammersmith, though weak from his many wounds, also saw the stick and lunged for it just as I did. Faster, however, was I; and up I came with it clenched tightly in my right hand.

Ab-Nadik loomed above me. I saw the quick flash of moonlight on his downward-thrust blade; saw beyond it the triumphant leer of the white teeth in his copper-hued face.

With one despairing effort, I swung the stick forward and upward at the shaft of his spear with all the strength in my body.

Crash! Wood hit metal shaft, and sent it hurtling away out of Ab-Nadik's hands, to fall with a rattling clangor on a nearby rock. My soft lichen stick bucked under the impact. I cast it away.

"Now, you heathen murderer," I snarled, "it's my turn to crow!"

Like two madmen we met. A sinewy fist sent stars whirling before my eyes, but I did not fall. Instead my own fist bored into his ribs.

I heard the Martian grunt. His arms flayed blows at me, but I would not yield. Again my fist shot out. This time a louder grunt.

My dazed bloodshot eyes caught a glimpse of a sagging face before me. Quickly I shot still another blow at that vision, felt knuckles sting from the impact.

I looked again, and the vision was gone.

"Come on. You knocked him cold. Let's light out before any more come."

It was Hammersmith. Vaguely I could make out his swaying form on a slith.

Stumbling through a red haze, I groped my way to one of the sliths, and somehow managed to clamber astride it.

"But what about Esta?" I groaned. "We can't desert *her*."

"Okay, Warren. I'm with you. I'll go back and fight the whole crowd for you. I'll—"

Hammersmith slumped forward on his slith's neck. Game to the end in spite of his wounds, he had at last fainted dead away.

I could not leave him, for I owed him a loyalty higher than love. Riding close to his mount, I lifted him across my saddle, grabbed his reins, and set out for the mountain pass which led to the red sands of the great desert of Mars.

The third slith whined softly, sending a pang through my heart, for *that* beast was to have carried my Esta.

In the pass, I revived Hammersmith with water from a small skin in one of the saddle-bags. Then we dashed past the Mauro sentries at the outer defile, and were on the open desert, now lit by the full glare of both moons.

THE rest of our journey across the red sands is an uncertain nightmare to me. I have a vague recollection of hiding the keys in some rocks. I remember reaching our old encampment, only to find it abandoned. Then of pushing on to the canal city of Ricca, winter quarters of the Martian forces. Our water gave out. Hammersmith died—at least, I think so. At any rate, I remember burying his body. And I slid off my slith and dropped unconscious on the desert sands, within sight of the first Martian sentry at Ricca.

Of course, I was tried for treason and desertion. They could not make the first charge stick; for, after all, the Capital City *had* ordered the attack on Daloss. Furthermore, a conviction for treason must be reported to the higher-ups, and pig-eyed old Colonel Ak-Ak was afraid of the effect of such a report. But they did convict me of desertion.

My sentence was three long Martian years in the penal labor battalion. I have five more days to serve, and then I shall be free!

Three thousand of us, I say. There were three thousand of us, who rode like mad, with sabers held high and hell in our eyes, into Daloss, the City of Lost Souls—but only one returned.

And he, as soon as he is free, will not return to the Earth, but rather will struggle back across the red desert sands of Mars to the City of Lost Souls, where—he hopes and trusts—his Esta will be waiting for him.