

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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*Gorgeous Tyash and her
feathered flock held all this
ancient city in thralldom*

DARK



VENGEANCE

FRITZ LIEBER, JR.

Adept at both science-fiction and the ultra-imaginative fantasy, the 41-year-old author of this exceptional tale comes by both skills quite honestly. His science background includes studies in physics, chemistry, physiology, mathematics; and for the past six years he has been associate editor of Science Digest. His training for closely reasoned fantasy covers a long pursuit of metaphysics at the University of Chicago, a year at General Theological Seminary in New York—or should this come under another heading?—and two seasons as an actor with a Shakespearean company, his most successful role being the pretended madman Edgar in King Lear. The company, incidentally, belonged to that famous Shakespearean actor who bears the same name as, and happens to be the father of, young Fritz.

Lieber's superior brand of logic-plus-imagination has made him not only one of the more popular writers of our day, but also a formidable chess expert ready to take on all comers, man or robot.

FEAR hovered in the moonlight over Lankmar, black-walled and proud metropolis of an ancient world unknown to history. Fear flowed like mist through the twisting thoroughfares and mazy alleyways, trickling even into that most intricately curved and crevicelike street where a sootily flickering lantern marked the doorway to the tavern of the Silver Eel.

It was a subtle fear, not the sort inspired by a besieging army, or warring nobles, or revolting slaves, or a mad overlord bent on wanton slaughter, or an enemy fleet sailing up the River Hlal. But it was none the less potent. It clutched the soft throats of the chattering women now entering the low doorway of the Silver Eel, making their laughter more sudden and shrill. It touched the women's

escorts too, making them speak louder and rattle their swords more than necessary.

This was a party of young aristocrats seeking excitement in a place known to be disreputable and somewhat dangerous. Their garments were rich and fantastic, after the fashion of the decadent Lankhmar nobility. But there was one thing that seemed almost too crazily faddish even in exotic Lankhmar. The head of each woman was enclosed in a small delicately-wrought silver bird cage.

Again the door opened, this time to emit two men who swiftly walked away. The one was tall and hulking, and seemed to be concealing some object under his great cloak. The other was small and lithe, clad from crown to toe in a soft gray that merged with the diffused moonlight. He was carrying a fishpole over his shoulder.

"I wonder what Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are up to now," murmured a hanger-on, peering curiously over his shoulder. The landlord shrugged.

"No good, I'll warrant," pressed the hanger-on. "I saw the thing under Fafhrd's cloak move, as if alive. Today, in Lankhmar, that is most suspicious. You see what I mean? And then the fishpole."

"Peace," said the landlord. "They are two honest rogues, even though much in need of money, if what they owe me for wine is any indication. Say nothing against them."

But he looked a trifle puzzled and perturbed as he went inside again,

impatiently pushing the hanger-on ahead of him.

IT WAS three months since the fear had come to Lankhmar, and at the beginning it had been a very different sort of thing—hardly fear at all. Just an overly numerous series of thefts of trinkets and gems, with women the chief sufferers. Bright and shining objects, no matter what their nature, were given the preference.

Gossip had it that a band of exceptionally light-fingered and haphazard pilferers was making a specialty of the tiring rooms of great ladies, though the whipping of maids and body-slaves failed to uncover any of the expected confederates. Then someone advanced the theory that it was the work of cunning children too young to judge well the value of objects.

But gradually the character of the thefts began to change. Fewer worthless baubles were taken. More and more often, valuable gems were plucked from a jumble of glass and gilt, giving the odd impression that the marauders were developing a sense of discrimination.

At about this time people began to suspect that the ancient and almost reputable Thieves Guild of Lankhmar had invented a new stratagem, and there was talk of torturing a few suspected leaders or waiting for a favorable wind and burning the Thieves' Quarter.

But since the Thieves Guild was a conservative and hidebound organization wedded to traditional meth-

ods of thievery, suspicion shifted somewhat when it became increasingly evident that a mentality of incredible daring and ingenuity was at work.

Valuables disappeared in broad daylight, even from chambers locked and carefully guarded, or from sheer-walled roof-gardens. A lady secure in her tiring room chanced to lay a bracelet on an inaccessible window-ledge; it vanished while she chatted with a friend. A lord's daughter, walking in a private garden, felt someone reach down from a thickly-leaved tree and snatch a diamond pin from her hair; the tree was immediately climbed by nimble servitors, but nothing was found.

Then an hysterical maid ran to her mistress with the information that she had just seen a large bird, black in color, making off through a window with an emerald ring clutched securely in its talons.

This story at first met with angry disbelief. It was illogically concluded that the girl herself must have stolen the ring. She was whipped almost to death amid general approval.

The next day a large black bird swooped down on the niece of the Overlord and ripped a jewel from her ear.

Many corroborations were immediately forthcoming. People told of seeing birds of unusual appearance at odd times and places. It was recalled that in each of the thefts an aerial route had been left open. The victims began to remember things that had seemed inconsequential at the time—the beat of wings, the

rustle of feathers, bird tracks and droppings, hovering shadows and the like.

All Lankhmar buzzed with amazed speculation. It was believed, however, that the thefts would cease, now that the authors were known, and suitable precautions taken. No especial significance was attached to the injured ear of the Overlord's niece. Both these judgments proved wrong.

Two days later, the notorious courtesan Lessnya was beset by a large black bird while crossing a wide square. Forewarned, Lessnya struck at the bird with a gilt wand she was carrying, shouting to scare it off.

To the horror of onlookers, the bird eluded the wild blows, set its talons in her white shoulder, and pecked her right eye viciously. Thereupon it gave a shuddering squawk, flapped its wings, and took off amid a flurry of black feathers, gripping a jade brooch in its claws.

Within the next three days, five more women were robbed in the same way; three of these were mutilated.

Lankhmar was frightened. Such unwholesomely purposeful behavior on the part of birds roused all sorts of superstitious fear. Bowmen armed with triple-pronged fowling-arrows were stationed on the roofs. Timid women stayed indoors, or wore cloaks to hide their jewels. Shutters were kept closed at night despite the late summer heat. Considerable numbers of innocent pigeons and gulls were shot or poisoned. Cocky young nobles summoned their falconers and

went hawking after the marauders.

But they had difficulty in locating any; and on the few occasions they did, their falcons found themselves opposed to adversaries who flew swiftly and fought back successfully. More than one mew mourned the death of a favorite fighting bird. All efforts to trace the marauders failed.

These activities did have one tangible result. Most of the attacks and thefts thereafter occurred during the hours of darkness.

Then a woman died painfully three hours after having been clawed around the neck, and black-robed physicians averred that there must have been a virulent poison in the wounding talons.

Panic grew and wild theories were bruited abroad. The priests of the Great God maintained that it was a divine rebuke to feminine vanity, and made dire prophecies about an imminent revolt of all animals against sinful man. Astrologers dropped dark and disturbing hints. A frantic mob burned a rookery belonging to a wealthy grain merchant, and then milled through the streets, stoning all birds and killing three of the sacred black swans before being dispersed.

Still the attacks continued. And Lankhmar, with her usual resiliency, began to adjust herself somewhat to this bizarre and inexplicable siege from the sky. Rich women made a fashion of their fear by adopting silver networks to protect their features. Several wits made jokes about how, in a topsy-turvy world, the birds were loose and the women

wore the cages. The courtesan Less-nya had her jeweler contrive a lustrous eye of hollow gold, which men said added to her exotic beauty.

Then Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser appeared in Lankhmar. No one knew where the huge northern barbarian and his small, dexterous companion had been or why they had come at this particular time. Nor did Fafhrd or the Gray Mouser offer any explanations.

They busied themselves with inquiries at the Silver Eel and elsewhere, drinking much wine but avoiding brawls. Through certain devious channels of information the Mouser learned that the fabulously wealthy but socially unacceptable moneylender Muulsh had bought a famous ruby from the King of the East—then hard-pressed for cash—and was going to give it to his wife. Whereupon the Mouser and Fafhrd made further inquiries and certain secret preparations, and slipped away together from the tavern of the Silver Eel on a moonlit night, bearing objects of a mysterious nature which awakened doubts and suspicions in the mind of the landlord and others.

For there was no denying that the thing Fafhrd carried carefully muffled in his great cloak suggested strongly a large, trained bird of some sort.

MONLIGHT did not soften the harsh angular lines of the great stone house of Muulsh the moneylender. Square, flat-roofed, small-windowed, three stories high, it stood a little distance from the similar houses of

the wealthy grain merchants like a rejected hanger-on.

Close to it flowed the waters of the River Hlal, angrily churning past this portion of the city, which thrust out like an elbow into the mighty stream. Abutting and o'ertopping it on the side nearest the river loomed a lightless, towerlike structure, one of the several accursed and abandoned temples of Lankmar, shut up in ancient times for reasons now known only to certain priests and necromancers.

Crowding close on the other side were the dark, solid forms of warehouses. There was an impression of tight-lipped power about this house of Muulsh—of great wealth and weighty secrets closely guarded.

But the Gray Mouser, peering down through one of the usual Lankmarian roof-windows into the tiring room of Muulsh's wife, was seeing a very different aspect of Muulsh's character. The notoriously heartless moneylender, quailing under a connubial tongue-lashing, looked like nothing so much as a fawning lapdog—except perhaps an anxious and solicitous hen.

"You worm! You slug! You gross, fat beast!" his slender young wife railed at him, almost chanting the words. "You've ruined my life with your stinking money-grubbing! Not one noblewoman will even speak to me. Not one lord or grain merchant so much as dares flirt with me. Everywhere I am ostracized. And all because your fingers are greasy and vile from handling coins!"

"But Atya," he murmured timidly,

"I've always thought you had friends to visit. Almost every day you go off for hours on end—though without telling me where you've been."

"You insensitive clod!" she cried. "Is it any wonder that I slip away to some lonely nook to weep and seek bitter consolation, in private? You will never understand the delicacy of my emotions. Why did I ever marry you? I wouldn't have, you may be sure—except that you forced my poor father into it when he was in difficulties. You bought me! It's the only way you know of getting anything.

"And then when my poor father died, you had the effrontery to buy this house, his house, the house I was born in. You did it to complete my humiliation. To take me back where everybody knew me and could say, 'There goes the wife of that utterly impossible moneylender'—if they use such a polite word as wife! All you want is to torture and degrade me, drag me down to your own unutterable level. Oh, you obscene pig!"

And she made a tattoo with her gilded heels on the gleaming parquetry of the floor. Clad in yellow silk tunic and pantaloons, she was very pretty in a small, slight way. Her small-chinned, bright-eyed face was oddly attractive under its canopy of gleamingly smooth black hair. Her swift movements had the quality of restless fluttering. At the moment her every gesture conveyed anger and unbearable irritation, but there was also a kind of studied ease about her manner that suggested to the Mouser, who was hugely enjoy-

ing everything, a scene that had been played and replayed many times.

The room suited her well, with its silken hangings and fragile furniture. Low tables, scattered about, were crowded with jars of cosmetics, bowls of sweetmeats, and all sorts of frivolous bric-a-brac. The flames of slim tapers swayed in the warm breeze from the open windows.

On delicate chains were suspended a full dozen cages of canaries, nightingales, love birds, and other tiny warblers, some drowsing, others chirruping sleepily. Here and there were strewn small fluffy rugs. All in all, a very downy nest amidst the stoniness of Lankhmar.

Muulsh was somewhat as she had described him—fat, ugly, and perhaps twenty years older than she. His gaudy tunic fitted him like a sack. The look of mingled apprehension and desire he fixed upon his wife was irresistibly comic.

"Oh, Atya, my little dove, do not be angry with me. I try so hard to please you, and I love you so very much," he cried, and tried to lay his hand on her arm. She eluded him. He hurried clumsily after her, immediately bumping into one of the bird cages, which hung at an inconvenient height. She turned on him in a miniature fury.

"Disturb my pets, will you, you brute! There, there, my dears, don't be frightened. It's just the old she-elephant."

"Damn your pets!" he cursed impulsively, holding his forehead. Then he recollected himself and dodged backward, as if in fear of being

thwacked with a slipper.

"Oh! So in addition to all your other crude affronts, we are also to be damned?" she said, her voice suddenly icy.

"No, no, my beloved Atya. I forgot myself. I love you very much, and your feathered pets as well. I meant no harm."

"Of course you meant no harm! You merely want to torment us to death. You want to degrade and—"

"But Atya," he interrupted placatingly, "I don't think I've really degraded you. Remember, even before I married you, your family never mingled with Lankhmar society."

That remark was a mistake, as the eavesdropping Mouser, choking back his laughter, could plainly see. Muulsh must have realized it too, for as Atya went white and reached for a heavy crystal bottle, he retreated and cried out, "I've brought you a present."

"I can imagine what it's like," she sneered disdainfully, relaxing a trifle but still holding the bottle poised. "Some trinket a lady would give her maid. Or flashy rags fit only for a harlot."

"Oh, no, my dear. This is a gift for an empress."

"I don't believe you. It's because of your foul taste and filthy manners that Lankhmar won't accept me." Her fine, decadently weak features contracted in a pout, her charming bosom still rising and falling from anger. "'She's the concubine of Muulsh the moneylender,' they say, and snigger at me. Snigger!"

"They've no right to. I can buy

the lot of them! Just wait until they see you wearing my gift. It's a jewel that the wife of the Overlord would give her eyeteeth to possess!"

At mention of the word "jewel" the Mouser sensed a subtle shiver of anticipation run through the room. More than that, he saw one of the silken hangings stir in a way that the lazy breeze could hardly account for.

He edged cautiously forward, craning his neck, and peered down sideways into the space between the hangings and the wall. Then slowly a smile of elfish amusement appeared on his compact, snub-nosed face.

Crouched in the faintly amber luminescence that filtered through the draperies were two scrawny men, naked except for dark breech-cloths. Each carried a bag big enough to fit loosely over a human head. From these bags leaked a faint soporific scent that the Mouser had noticed before without being able to place.

The Mouser's smile deepened. Noiselessly he drew forward the slim fishpole at his side and inspected the line and the stickily-smearred claw-like arrangement that served for a hook.

"Show me the jewel" said Atya.

"I shall, my dear. At once," answered Muulsh. "But don't you think we'd first best close the sky-window and the other ones?"

"We'll do nothing of the kind!" snapped Atya. "Must I stifle just because a lot of old women have given way to a silly fear?"

"But my dove, it's not a silly fear. All Lankhmar is afraid. And rightly."

He moved as though to call a slave. Atya stamped her foot pettishly. "Stop, you fat coward! I refuse to give way to childish frights. I won't believe any of those fantastic stories, no matter how many great ladies swear to them. Don't you dare have the windows closed. Show me the jewel at once, or—or I'll never be nice to you again."

She seemed close to hysteria. Muulsh sighed and resigned himself.

"Very well, my sweet."

He walked over to an inlaid table by the door, clumsily ducking past several bird cages, and fumbled at a small casket. Four pairs of eyes followed him intently. When he returned there was something in his hand that glittered. He set it down on the center of the table.

"There," he said, stepping back. "I told you it was fit for an empress, and it is."

For a dozen heartbeats there was breathless silence in the room. The two thieves behind the draperies edged forward hungrily, quietly loosening the drawstrings of the bags, their feet caressing the polished floor like cats' paws.

The Mouser slid the slim fishing rod through the sky-window, avoiding the silver chains of the cages, until the pendant claw was poised directly above the center of the table, like a spider preparing to drop on an unsuspecting beetle.

Atya stared. A new dignity and self-respect crept into Muulsh's expression. The jewel gleamed like a fat, lucent, quivering drop of blood.

The two thieves crouched to

spring. The Mouser joggled the rod slightly, gauging his aim before he dropped the claw. Atya reached out an eager hand and moved toward the table.

But all these intended actions were simultaneously interrupted.

There was a beat and whirr of powerful wings. An inky bird a little larger than a crow flapped through a side window and skidded down into the room, like a fragment of blackness detached from the outer night. Its talons made arm-long scratches as it hit the table. Then it arched its neck, gave a loud, shuddering squawk, and launched itself toward Atya.

The room whirled with chaotic movements. The gummed claw halted midway in its drop. The two thieves fought ungracefully to keep their balance and avoid being seen. Muulsh waved his arms and shouted, "Shoo! Shoo!" Atya collapsed.

The black bird swept close past Atya, its wings brushing and striking the silver cages, and beat out into the night.

Again there was momentary silence in the room. Even the gentle songbirds had been stilled by the incursion of their raptorial brother. The rod vanished through the sky-window. The two thieves scuttled behind the draperies and noiselessly edged toward a door. Their looks of bafflement and fright were giving way to professional chagrin.

Atya rose to her knees, dainty hands pressed to her face. A shudder tightened around Muulsh's fleshy neck and he moved toward her.

"Did it—did it hurt you? Your face. It struck at you."

Atya dropped her hands, revealing an unmaimed countenance. She stared at her husband. Then all at once the stare changed to a glare, like a pot suddenly come to a boil.

"You big useless hen!" she cried out. "For all you cared, it might have pecked out both my eyes! Why didn't you do something? Yelling 'Shoo! Shoo!' when it struck at me! And the jewel gone forever now! Oh, you miserable capon!"

She rose to her feet, taking off one of her slippers with a wildly determined air. Muulsh retreated, protesting, and bumped into a whole cluster of bird cages.

ONLY Fafhrd's tossed-aside cloak marked the spot where the Gray Mouser had left him. Hastening to the roof-edge, he made out Fafhrd's large form some distance away across the roofs of the adjoining warehouses. The barbarian was shifting around in a strangely jerky way, apparently gawking at the moon-soft sky. The Mouser gathered up the cloak, leaped the narrow gap, and followed.

When the Mouser reached him, Fafhrd was grinning with great satisfaction so that his big white teeth showed. The size of his supple, brawny frame and the amount of metal-studded leather he wore in the form of arm-bands and broad belt were as much out of tune with civilized Lankhmar as were his long, copper hair, handsomely rugged features, and pale northern skin, ghost-

ly in the moonlight. Firmly clutching his heavy hawking-glove at the wrist was a white-capped eagle, which ruffled its feathers and made a disagreeable gargling noise in its throat at the Mouser's approach.

"Now tell me I can't hawk by full moon!" he cried out in great good humor. "I don't know what happened in the room, or what luck you had, but as for the black bird that went in and came out—Lo! It is here!"

He pushed at a limp bundle of black feathers with his foot.

The Mouser hissed the names of several gods in quick succession, then asked, "But the jewel?"

"I don't know about that," said Fafhrd, brushing the matter aside. "Ah, but you should have seen it, little man! A wondrous flight!" His voice regained its enthusiasm. "The other one flew swift and cunningly but Kooskra here rose like the north wind up a mountain pass. For a while I lost them in the gray. There seemed to be something of a fight. Then Kooskra brought him down."

The Mouser had dropped to his knees and was gingerly examining Kooskra's quarry. He slipped a small knife from his belt.

"And to think," continued Fafhrd, as he adjusted a leather hood over the eagle's head, "that they told me these birds were demons or fierce phantasms of darkness! Faugh! They're only ungainly, night-flying crows."

"You talk too loud," said the Mouser. Then he looked up. "But there's no gainsaying that tonight

the eagle beat the fishpole. See what I found in this one's gullet. He kept it to the end."

Fafhrd snatched the ruby with his free hand and held it up to the moon.

"King's ransom!" he cried. "Mouser, our fortune's made! I see it all. We shall follow these birds as they rob and let Kooskra rape them of their booty." He laughed aloud.

This time there was no warning beat of wings—only a gliding shadow which grazed Fafhrd's upraised hand and slid silently away. It almost came to rest on the roof, then flapped powerfully upward.

"Blood of Kos!" cursed Fafhrd, waking from his dumfounded amazement. "Mouser, he's taken it!" Then, "At him, Kooskra! At him!" as he swiftly unhooded the eagle.

But this time it was apparent from the first that something was wrong. The beat of the eagle's wings was slow, and he seemed to have difficulty gaining height. Nevertheless he drew near the quarry. The black bird veered suddenly, swooped, and rose again. The eagle followed close, though his flight was still unsteady.

Wordlessly Fafhrd and the Mouser watched the birds approach the massive, high-reared tower of the deserted temple, until their feathered forms were silhouetted against its palely-glowing, ancient surface.

Kooskra seemed then to recover full power. He gained a superior position, hovered while his quarry frantically darted and wheeled, then lifted his great wings and plummeted down.

"Got him, by Kos!" breathed Fafhrd, thumping his knee with his fist.

But it was not so. Kooskra struck at thin air. At the last moment the black bird had slipped aside and taken cover in one of the high-set windows of the tower.

And now it was certain beyond doubt that something was wrong with Kooskra. He sought to beat about the embrasure sheltering his quarry, but lost height. Abruptly he turned and flew out from the wall. His wings moved in an irregular and convulsive way. Fafhrd's fingers tightened apprehensively on the Mouser's shoulder.

As Kooskra reached a point above them, he gave a great wild scream, defiant yet somehow pitiable, that shook the soft Lankhmar night. Then he fell, like a dead leaf, circling and spinning purposelessly. Only once again did he seem to make an effort to command his wings, and then to no avail.

He landed heavily a short distance from them. When Fafhrd reached the spot, Kooskra was dead.

The barbarian knelt there, absently smoothing the feathers, staring up at the tower. Puzzlement, anger, and some sorrow lined his face.

"Fly north, old bird," he murmured in a deep, small voice. "Fly into nothingness, Kooskra." Then he spoke to the Mouser. "I find no wounds. Nothing touched him on this flight, I'll swear."

"It happened when he brought down the other," said the Mouser soberly. "You did not look at the

talons of that ugly fowl. They were smeared with a greenish stuff. Through some small gouge it entered him. Death was in him while he sat on your wrist, and it worked faster when he flew at the black bird."

Fafhrd nodded, still staring at the tower. "We've lost a fortune and a faithful killer, tonight. But the night's not done. I have a curiosity about these death-dealing shadows."

"What are you thinking?" asked the Mouser.

"That a man might easily swing and hurl a weighted line over a corner of that tower, and that I have such a line wound around my waist. We used it to mount Muulsh's roof, and I shall use it again. Don't waste your words, little man. Muulsh? What have we to fear from him? He saw a bird take the jewel. Why should he send guards to search the roofs?"

"Yes, I know the bird will fly away when I go after him. But he may drop the jewel, or you may get in a lucky cast with your sling. Besides, I have a special notion about these matters. Poison claws? I'll wear my gloves and cloak, and carry a naked dagger. Come on, little man. We'll not argue. That corner away from Muulsh's and the river should do the trick. The one where the tiny broken spire rises."

THE MOUSER hummed a fragment of song under his breath and kept glancing around apprehensively, as he steadied the big-knotted, double line by which Fafhrd was mounting

the wall of the tower-temple. He felt decidedly ill at ease, what with Fafhrd on a fool's errand, and the night's luck probably run out, and the ancient temple standing there so silent and desolate.

It was forbidden on pain of death to enter such places, and no man knew what evil things might lurk there, fattening on loneliness. Besides all that, the moonlight was too revealing; he winced at the thought of what excellent targets he and Fafhrd made against the wall.

In his ears droned the low but mighty clamor of the waters of the Hlal, which swished and eddied past the base of the opposite wall. Once it seemed to him that the temple itself vibrated, as though the Hlal were gnawing at its vitals. But that was fancy.

Before his feet yawned the dark, six-foot chasm separating the warehouse from the temple. It allowed a sidewise glimpse of the walled temple-garden, overgrown with pale weeds and clogged with decay.

And now as he glanced in that direction he saw something that made him raise his eyebrows and sent a shiver crawling over his scalp. For across the moonlit space stole a manlike but unwholesomely bulky figure.

The Mouser's impression was that the strange body lacked the characteristic human curves and taperings of limb, that its face lacked features, that it was unpleasantly froglike in appearance. It seemed to be colored a uniform dull brown.

It vanished in the direction of the

temple. What it was, the Mouser could not for the moment conjecture.

Intent on warning Fafhrd, he looked up, but the barbarian was already swinging into the embrasure at a dizzy height above. Disliking to shout, he paused undecided, half of a mind to skin up the line and join his comrade. All the while he kept humming a fragment of song—one used by thieves and supposed to enforce slumber on the inmates of a house being robbed. He wished fervently that the moon would get under a cloud, so he would lose that exposed, naked feeling.

Then, as if his fear had fathered a reality, something roughly grazed his ear and hit with a deadened thump against the temple wall. He knew what that meant—a ball of wet clay projected by a sling.

As he let his body collapse, two similar missiles followed the first. Close range, he could tell from the impact, and designed to kill rather than stun. He scanned the moonlit roof, but could see nothing. Before his knees touched the roof he had decided what he must do if he were to help Fafhrd at all. There was one quick way of retreat and he took it.

He grasped the long slack of the rope and dove into the chasm between the buildings, as three more balls of clay flattened against the wall.

AS FAFHRD warily swung into the embrasure and found solid footing, he realized what had been bothering him about the character of the weatherworn carvings on the ancient

wall. In one way or another they all seemed to be concerned with birds—raptorial birds in particular—and with human beings having grotesque avian features: beaked heads, batlike wings, and taloned limbs.

There was a whole border of such creatures around the embrasure, and the projecting stone ornament over which he hooked the knotted line represented the notch-beaked head of a hawk. This unpleasant coincidence loosened the stout gates of fear within him, and a faint sense of awe and imminent horror trickled into his mind, extinguishing a part of his anger at Kooskra's repellent death. But at the same time it served to confirm certain vague notions that had come to him earlier.

He looked around. The black bird seemed to have retreated into the interior of the tower, where tenuous moonlight revealed an obscurely littered stone floor and a door half open on a rectangle of blackness. Whipping out a long knife, he tread softly inward, shifting his weight slowly from one foot to the other in apprehension of possible weaknesses in the centuries-old masonry.

It grew darker, and then a little lighter, as his straining eyes accustomed themselves to the dimness. The stone beneath his feet became slippery. And in stronger and stronger waves there was borne to his nostrils the pungent, musty smell of a mews.

There was an intermittent soft rustling, too. He told himself it was only natural that birds of some sort—perhaps pigeons—should nest in

this deserted structure, but a darker train of reasoning insisted that his previous speculations were right.

He passed a projecting panel of stone and came into the chief upper chamber of the tower.

Moonlight striking through two gaps in the ceiling high above vaguely revealed alcoved walls, which widened away from him toward the left. The sound of the Hlal was muted and deepened here, as though it rose up more through the stones than through the air. He was very close, now, to the half-open door.

He noted a tiny grilled opening in it, like that of a cell. Rising against the wall at the broad end of the room was what seemed to be an altar of some sort, embellished by indistinct sculptures. And on either side of it, in regular terraces like those of the altar itself, were tier on tier of small black blots.

Then he heard a raucous, falsetto cry, "Man! Man! Kill! Kill!" and saw a portion of the black blots launch themselves from the tiers, expanding in size as they spread their wings and converged upon him.

And largely because his fear had been expecting this, he jerked up his cloak to protect his naked head and whirled his knife at them in sweeping strokes. This close he could see them better: inky-feathered, cruelly taloned birds, each a brother to the two Kooskra had fought, squawking, squawling, striking at him like fighting-cocks able to fly.

At first he thought he could readily beat them off, but it was like fighting an eddying storm of shad-

ows. Perhaps he struck two or three. He could not tell. And it made no difference. He felt talons grasp and prick his left wrist through the thin leather guarding it.

Then, because it seemed the only thing to do, he leaped through the half-open door, slammed it behind him, knifed off the bird that clung like death to his wrist, stripped off the glove, found the pricks by touch, nicked them with his knife, and sucked for the poison that might have been on the talons.

His shoulder instinctively pressed against the door, he listened to their baffled flapping and angry croaking. From here he could not escape; this inner room was indeed nothing but a cell, lightless save for the trace of moonlight that filtered through the grilled hole in the door. He could conjecture no even half-safe way of regaining the embrasure and descending—they would have him completely at their mercy as he clung to the knotted rope.

He wanted to bellow a warning to the Mouser, but was afraid that his shouts, probably unintelligible at the distance, would only summon the Mouser into the same trap. In a rage of uncertainty he trod vindictively the body of the bird he had slain.

Gradually his fears and anger calmed somewhat. The birds seemed to have retreated. No longer did they swoop futilely against the door or cling screaming to the grillwork in the opening.

Through this aperture he could gain a fair view of the shadowy altar and the ladderlike perches. The black

occupants were restless, edging back and forth, crowding one another, flurrying excitedly from perch to perch. The air was heavy with their smell.

And then he heard again the raucous, falsetto voice, only this time there was more than one.

"Jewels, jewels. Bright, bright."

"Sparkling ones. Shining ones."

"Ear to tear. Eye to peck."

"Cheek to scratch. Neck to claw."

And this time there was no doubting that it was the birds themselves who spoke. Fafhrd stared, fascinated. He had heard birds talk before—cursing parrots and slit-tongued ravens. Here there was the same monotony of tone and impression of mindlessness, the same vituperative repetitions. Indeed he had known parrots able to mimic human voices much more accurately.

But the phrases themselves were so devilishly apt and so suggestive of malign intent that he momentarily feared they would cease to be mere isolated chatterings and become an intelligent discourse, with question and answer fitting. And he could not forget that undeniably purposeful command, "Man! Man! Kill! Kill!"

As he listened spellbound to their cruel chorus, a figure stole past the grilled opening toward the altar. It was manlike only in its general form, featureless, with a uniform, leathery brown surface, like a heavy-hided, hairless bear. He saw the birds launch themselves at this strange figure too, and swarm around it, squawling and striking.

But it paid them no attention

whatever, as though it were immune to beaks and poisoned claws. It strode unhurriedly with upraised head toward the altar. There the shifting moonlight from a gap above now struck almost vertically, making a pallid puddle on the floor before the altar itself, and Fafhrd saw the creature fumble at a large casket and begin to lift out small things that gleamed and glittered, unmindful of the birds which swirled around in ever greater numbers.

Then the creature moved so that the moonlight fell full upon it, and Fafhrd saw that it was a man clad in an ungainly suit of thick leather, with two long thin slits for eyeholes. He was clumsily but methodically transferring the contents of the casket to a leather bag he carried. And Fafhrd realized that the casket had been the cache for the many jewels and trinkets the birds had stolen.

The leather-armored form completed its task and strode off the way it had come, still surrounded by the small, black stormcloud of perplexedly squawking birds.

But as the figure came opposite Fafhrd the birds suddenly dropped away from it and flew back toward the altar, as if in obedience to a command that had come to them through the general din. The leather-armored form stopped dead and glanced searchingly around, the long eye-slits giving it an appearance of cryptic menace.

Then it started forward again. But simultaneously a noose dropped and tightened like a drawstring around the leather bag that formed its head.

The figure began to struggle and to stagger erratically, pawing at its neck with its leather-cased hand. Then it flailed both arms around in a ponderous, desperate way, so that the bag it still held came open and spurted jewels and jeweled metal. Finally a cunning jerk of the lasso sprawled it on the floor.

Fafhrd chose this moment to make a break for freedom. He relied on confusion and surprise. But in this he was not wise. Perhaps the trace of poison in his veins had touched his mind a little.

He almost reached the passage leading to the embrasure before a second noose tightened cruelly around his own throat. His running feet went out from under him and his skull thumped the floor as he fell. The noose tightened further until he felt he was suffocating in a sea of black feathers wherein all the jewels of the world flashed blindingly.

As consciousness painfully pounded its way back into his skull, he heard a voice crying out frightenedly and jerkily:

"In the name of the Great God, who are you? What are you?"

Then a second voice answering—high, sweet, swift, birdlike, imperious, icy: "I am the winged priestess, mistress of the hawks. I am the clawed queen, the feathered princess, incarnation of She who has ruled here forever, despite priests' interdict and Overlord's command. I am she who visits suitable injury on the haughty and voluptuous women of Lankhmar. I am she who sends messengers to take the tribute that was

once laid freely though tremblingly upon my altar."

Then the first voice spoke, in great apprehension, though not weakly: "But you cannot mean to doom me in so hideous a way. I will keep your secrets well. I am only a thief."

Then the second voice again, "You are indeed a thief, for you sought to ravish the altar-treasure of Winged Tyaa, and for that crime the birds of Tyaa mete out punishment as they see fit. If they think you deserve mercy they will not kill; only tear out an eye—or, perhaps, two."

There was a trilling and chirruping quality to the voice, so that Fafhrd's tortured brain kept picturing some impossibly monstrous song-bird. He sought to struggle to his feet, but found he was bound tightly to a chair. His arms and legs were numb, his left arm in addition ached and burned from the poison.

Then the soft moonlight ceased to be so much of a shooting pain, and he saw he was still in the same chamber, near the grilled door, facing the altar. Beside him was another chair, and in it sat the leather-armored man, similarly bound. But the leather hood had been removed, revealing the shaven skull and pockmarked, heavy-featured face of a man whom Fafhrd recognized — Stravas, the Master Thief.

"Tyaa, Tyaa," squawked the birds. "Eyes to peck. Nose to rip."

The eyes of Stravas were dark creases of fear between his shaven brows and thick cheeks. He spoke again toward the altar.

"I am a thief. Yes. But so are you.

The gods of this temple are banned and forbidden. The Great God himself cursed them. Centuries ago they left this place. Whatever else you may be, you are an interloper. Somehow, perhaps by magic, you taught the birds to steal, knowing that many of them by nature like to pilfer shining things. What they steal, you take.

"You are no better than I, who guessed your secret and contrived a way to rob you in turn. You are no priestess, meting out death for sacrilege. Where are your worshippers? Where is your priesthood? Where are your benefactions? You are a thief!"

He strained tautly forward against his bonds, as if wanting to hurl himself toward the doom that might answer his reckless speech. Then Fafhrd saw, standing behind Stravas, a figure that made him doubt if his senses had rightly returned. For it was that of another leather-masked man.

But, as he blinked hard and peered again, he saw that the mask was only a small visor and that otherwise the man was clothed as a falconer, with heavy jerkin and huge gauntlets. From the broad leather belt hung a shortsword and a coiled lasso. Twisting around, Fafhrd glimpsed the outlines of a similar figure behind his own chair.

Then the voice from the altar answered, somewhat more strident and shrill, but still musical and horribly birdlike. And as it answered, the birds chorused, "Tyaa! Tyaa!"

"Now indeed you will die, and in

tatters. And that one beside you, whose impious eagle slew Kivies and was by him slain, shall die too. But you will die knowing that Tyaa is Tyaa, and that her priestess and incarnate self is no interloper."

And now Fafhrd looked straight at the altar—an action which he had unconsciously avoided up until this moment because of an overpowering superstitious awe and a queer revulsion.

The downward-striking shaft of moonlight had moved a little further toward the altar, revealing two stone figures which jutted out from it on either side, like gargoyles. Their carved faces were the faces of women but the menacingly bent arms ended in claws, and folded wings thrust over the shoulders. Whatever ancient craftsman had formed them, he had worked with devilish skill, for they gave the impression of being about to spread their stony wings and launch forward into the air.

On the altar itself, between the winged women, but further back and out of the moonlight, perched a large black shape with pendant, converging crescents of blackness that might have been wings. Fafhrd stared at it, licking his lips, his poison-dulled mind unable to cope with the hideous possibilities it conjured up.

But at the same time, although he was hardly aware of what they were doing, his long-fingered supple hands were beginning to work very cautiously at the tight lashings that confined his wrists.

"Know, fool," came the voice from

the black shape, "that gods do not cease to be when banned by false priests, or flee when cursed by a false and presumptuous god. Though priest and worshipper depart, they linger. I was small and I had no wings when I first climbed to this place, yet I felt their presence in the very stones. And I knew that my heart was sister to them."

At that moment Fafhrd heard the Mouser calling his name, faintly and muffledly, but unmistakably. It seemed to come from the lower interior regions of the temple, mingling with the faint, deep-throated roar of the Hlal. The shape on the altar gave a trilling call and made a gesture, so that one of pendant crescents moved.

A single black bird skimmed down to perch on the wrist of the falconer behind Stravas. Then the falconer moved away. His footsteps sounded as though he were descending a stair. The other falconer hastened to the embrasure through which Fafhrd had entered, and there was the sound of knife sawing rope. Then he returned.

"It seems that Tyaa does not lack worshippers tonight," chattered the shape on the altar. "And some day all the luxurious women of Lankhmar will mount terrified but unresisting to this place, to sacrifice portions of their beauty to Tyaa."

It appeared to Fafhrd's sharpening eyesight that the blackness of the shape was too smooth for feathers, yet he could not be sure. He continued to work at the lashings, feeling those on his right wrist loosen.

"Beauty to spoil. Beauty to spoil," hoarsely chanted the birds. "Kiss with beak. Pet with claw."

"When I was small," continued the voice, "I only dreamed of such things, stealing away secretly when I could from my father's house to this holy place. Yet even at that time the spirit of Tyaa was in me, making me feared and avoided by others.

"Then one day I found a young wounded bird hiding here, and I nursed it back to health. It was a descendant of one of the ancient birds of Tyaa, who, when the temple was defiled and shut up, flew away to the Mountains of Darkness to await the time when Tyaa would call them back. Sensing by dim occult means that Tyaa had been reborn in me, it had returned. It knew me, and slowly—because we were small and alone—we remembered some of the ancient rituals and regained the power of conversing together.

"Then as year followed year, the others straggled back from the Mountains of Darkness, one by one. And these mated. And our ceremonies grew in perfection. It became difficult for me to be a priestess of Tyaa, without the outer world uncovering my secret. There was food to get, grain and flesh. There were long hours of instruction.

"Yet I persevered. And all the while those of my station in the outer world hated me more and more, sensing my power, and they affronted me and sought to humiliate me.

"A thousand times a day the honor of Tyaa was trampled in the dust. I

was cheated of the privileges of my birth and station, and forced to consort with the uncouth and vulgar. Yet I submitted, and acted as if I were one of them, mocking their witlessness and frivolity and vanity. I bided my time, feeling within me the ever-strengthening spirit of Tyaa."

"Tyaa! Tyaa!" echoed the birds.

"And then I searched for and found helpers in my quest: two descendants of the ancient Falconers of Tyaa, whose families had cherished the old worship and the old traditions. They knew me and did me homage. They are my priesthood!"

Fafhrd sensed the falconer behind him bow reverently low. He felt as if he were witnessing some malign shadow-show. Apprehension for the Mouser was like a lead weight pressing down on his confused thoughts. Irrelevantly, he noted a pearl-crusted brooch and a sapphire bracelet on the dirtied floor a little way from his chair. The jewels still lay where they had spilled from Stravas' bag.

"Four months ago," persisted the voice, "in the waning of the Moon of the Owl, I felt that Tyaa had grown to full stature in me, and that the time had come for Tyaa's reckoning with Lankhmar.

"So I sent the birds forth to take the old tribute, bidding them punish when tribute was refused, or when the woman was notorious for vanity and pride. Swiftly they regained all their old cunning. Tyaa's altar was fittingly decked. And Lankhmar learned to fear, though not knowing they feared Tyaa. It shall not be so

for long!" Here the voice became piercingly shrill.

"Soon I shall proclaim Tyaa openly. The doors of the temple will be opened to worshipper and tribute-bringer. The idols of the Great God will be cast down, and his temples broken. The rich and insolent women who despised Tyaa in me will be summoned here. And this altar will feel again the sweetness of sacrifice." The voice rose to a screech. "Even now it beings! Even now two interlopers will feel Tyaa's vengeance!"

Sound of a shuddering inhalation came from Stravas' throat, and he rocked futilely from side to side against his bonds. Fafhrd pried frantically at the loosening lashing of his right hand. A portion of the black birds rose at command from their perches—but then settled uncertainly back, for the trilling command was not completed.

The other falconer had returned and was advancing toward the altar, his right hand raised in solemn salute. There was no bird on his wrist now. In his left hand he carried a bloody shortsword.

The shape on the altar eagerly edged forward into the moonlight, so that Fafhrd saw it clearly for the first time. It was no giant bird or monstrous hybrid, but a woman muffled in black draperies with long, pendant sleeves. Her black hood fallen back revealed, white in the moonlight though stranded with gleaming black hair, a triangular face, whose glassily bright eyes and predatory aspect were suggestive of a bird, but also of an evil, oddly beau-

tiful child. She moved in a crouching, short-stepped, fluttering way.

"Three in a night," she cried. "You have killed the third. It is well, falconer."

Stravas could be heard saying in a gasping voice, "I know you. I know you."

Still the falconer advanced, until she said quickly, "What is it? What do you want?" Then the falconer leaped at her with catlike swiftness and advanced the bloody sword so that it glittered redly against the black fabric covering her bosom.

And Fafhrd heard the Mouser say, "Move not, Atya. Nor command your birds to any evil action. Or you will die in a wink, as your falconer and his black pet died."

For five choking heartbeats there was dead silence. Then the woman on the altar began to breathe in an audible, dry, strangled way, and utter short, broken cries that were almost croakings.

Some of the black birds rose from their perches and beat about uncertainly, dipping in and out of the shafts of moonlight, though keeping clear of the altar. The woman began to sway and rock from side to side. The sword followed her unalterably, like a pendulum.

Fafhrd noted the second falconer move up beside him, raising his short sword for a throw. Putting all his strength into one mighty leverage of wrist and forearm, Fafhrd snapped the last of the lashings, ponderously heaved himself and the chair up and forward, caught the falconer's wrist as it started to whip the short-

sword forward, and hurtled down with him to the floor. There they twisted mercilessly until the man squealed from pain and a bone snapped. Then Fafhrd lay there heavily atop him, staring at the leather-masked, gauntleted Mouser and the woman.

"Two falconers in a night," said the Mouser, mimicking the woman. "It is well, Fafhrd. I did not see that one in the shadows." Then he continued pitilessly, "The masquerade is over, Atya. Your vengeance on the highborn women of Lankhmar has come to an end. Ah, but fat Muulsh will be surprised at his little dove! To steal even your own jewels! Almost too cunning, Atya!"

A cry of bitter anguish and utter defeat came from the woman, in which her humiliation and weakness showed naked. But then she ceased to sway and a look of utter desperation tightened her decadent face.

"To the Mountains of Darkness!" she cried out wildly. "To the Mountains of Darkness! Bear Tyaa's tribute to Tyaa's last stronghold!" And she followed this with a series of strange whistles and trillings and screams.

At this all the birds rose together, though still keeping clear of the altar. They milled wildly, giving vent to varied squawlings, which the woman seemed to answer.

"No tricks now, Atya!" said the Mouser. "Death is close."

Then one of the black fowl dipped to the floor, clutched an emerald-studded bracelet, rose again, and beat

with it through a deep embrasure in that wall of the temple which overlooked the River Hlal. One after another, the other birds followed its example.

As if in some grotesque ritual procession, they sailed out into the night, bearing a fortune in their claws: necklaces, brooches, rings and pins of gold, silver, electrum, and green-metal set with all colors of jewels, palely rich in the moonlight.

After the last three for whom no jewels were left vanished, Atya raised her black-draped arms toward the two outjutting sculptures of winged women, as if imploring a miracle, gave voice to a mad lonely wail, recklessly sprang from the altar, and ran after the birds.

The Mouser did not strike, but followed her, his sword dangerously close. Together they plunged into the embrasure. There was another cry, and after a little the Mouser returned alone and came over to Fafhrd. He cut Fafhrd's bonds, and pulled away the chair, helping him up. The injured falconer did not move, but lay whimpering softly like a dog.

"She sprang into the Hlal?" asked Fafhrd, his throat dry. The Mouser nodded.

Fafhrd dazedly rubbed his forehead. But his mind was clearing, as the effects of the poison waned.

"Even the names were the same," he mumbled softly. "Atya and Tyaa!"

The Mouser began to saw at the lashings of the Master Thief. "Some of your men tried to pepper me to-

night, Stravas," he said lightly. "I had no easy time eluding them and finding my way up the choked stairs."

"I am sorry for that—now," said Stravas.

"They were your men too, I suppose, who went jewel-stealing to Muulsh's house tonight?"

Stravas nodded, uncramping loosened limbs. "But I hope we're allies now," he answered, "though there's no loot to share, except for some worthless glass and gewgaws." He laughed grimly. "Was there no way to get rid of those black demons without losing all?"

"For a man plucked from the beak of death, you are very greedy, Stravas," said the Mouser. "But I suppose it's your professional training. No, I for one am glad the birds have fled. Most of all I feared they would get out of hand—as would surely have happened had I killed Atya. Only she could control them. Then we'd have died sure. Observe how Fafhrd's arm is swollen from a couple of tiny pricks."

"Perhaps the birds will bring the treasure back," said Stravas hopefully.

"I do not think so," answered the Mouser.

TWO NIGHTS later, Muulsh the money-lender, having learned something of these matters from a broken-armed falconer who had long been employed to care for his wife's songbirds, sprawled comfortably on the luxurious bed in his wife's room.

One pudgy hand clasped a goblet of wine, the other that of a pretty maid who had been his wife's hairdresser.

"I never really loved her," he said, pulling the demurely smiling wench toward him. "It was only that she used to goad and frighten me."

The maid gently disengaged her hand.

"I just want to hang the coverings on those cages," she explained. "Their eyes remind me of hers." And she shivered delicately under her thin tunic.

When the last songbird was shrouded and silent, she came back and sat on his knee.

GRADUALLY the fear left Lankhmar. But many wealthy women continued to wear silver cages over their features, considering it a most enchanting fashion.

And some time afterwards the Mouser said to Fafhrd, "There is a thing I have not told you. When the creature leaped into the Hlal, it was full moonlight. Yet somehow my eyes lost her as she fell, and I saw no splash whatever, although I peered closely. Then, as I lifted my head, I saw the end of that ragged procession of birds across the moon. Behind them came, I thought, a very much larger bird, flapping strongly, though in a somewhat ungainly and unnatural fashion. That is all."

"And you think—" asked Fafhrd.

"Why, I think she fell into the Hlal," said the Mouser slowly, his face a mask.