

THRILLING WONDER STORIES



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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

RACE AROUND THE MOON

A Novel of
Lunar Conquest

By
**OTIS ADELBERT
KLINE**

THE WARNING FROM THE PAST

A Novelet of the
Time Capsule

By
**ROBERT MOORE
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THE MAN FROM XENERN

An Interplanetary
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By
**STANTON A.
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ROMAN HOLIDAY

A Short Story

By
KELVIN KENT

—and many others!

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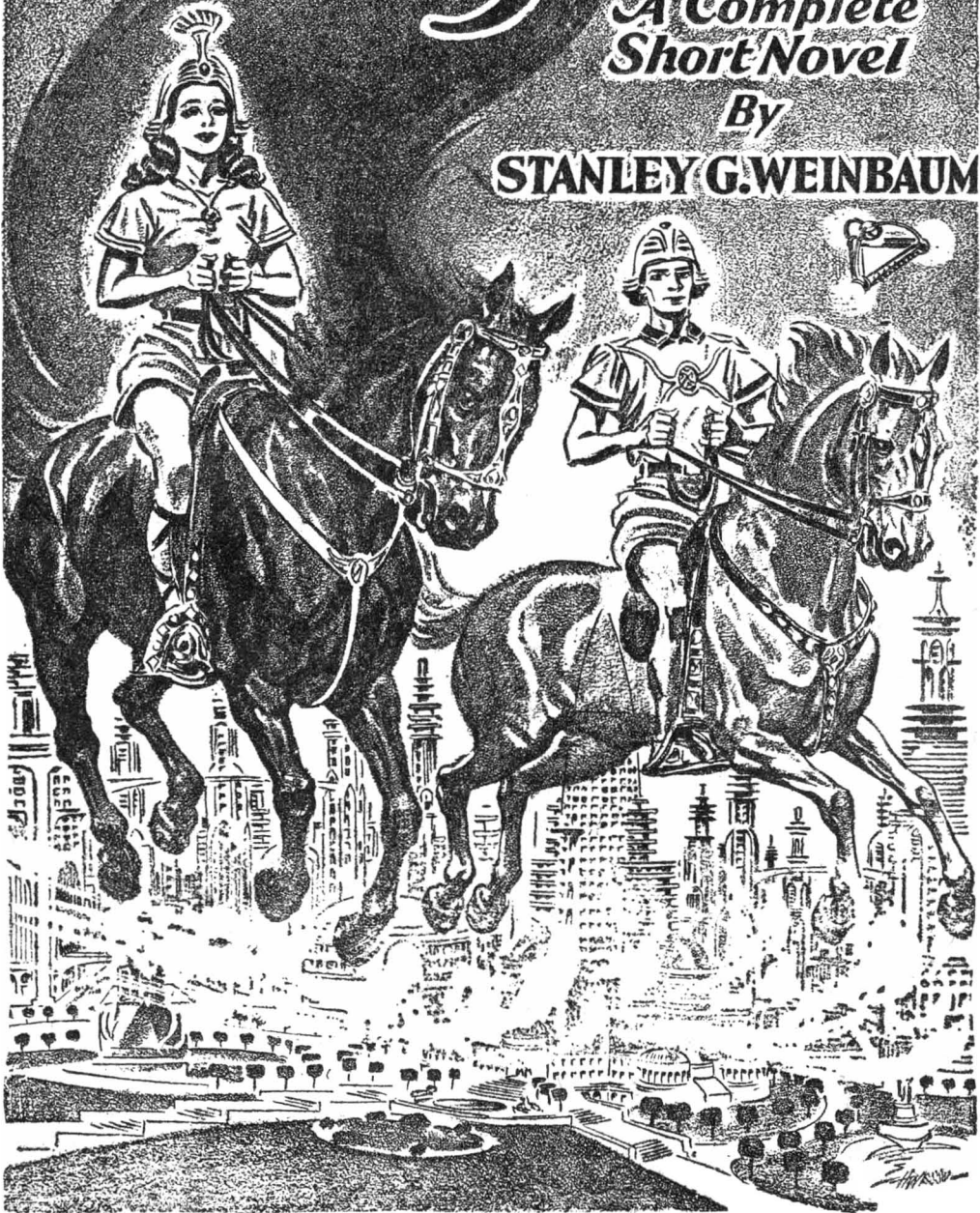
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DAWN of FLAME

*A Complete
Short Novel*

By

STANLEY G. WEINBAUM





Black Margot

Immortal Margot can conquer the world—but not the heart of Hull Tarvish, who defies the Master of the Centuries!

CHAPTER I

The World

HULL TARVISH looked backward for the last time at the little mountainside cottage that had been his home. Then he faced about, purposefully, and strode away—out of Ozarky.

He passed the place where the great steel road of the Ancients had been, now only two rusty streaks and a row of decayed logs. Beside it was the mossy heap of stones that had been an ancient structure in the days before the Dark Centuries, three hundred years ago, when Ozarky had been a part of the old state of M'souri.

They had been mighty sorcerers, those ancients; their steel roads went everywhere, and everywhere were the ruins of their towns, built it was said, by a magic that lifted weights. Down in the valley, he knew, men were still seeking that magic.

Tarvish whistled to himself, shifted the rag bag on his shoulder, set his bow more comfortably on his mighty back, and trudged on. He was going to see what the world was like. He had been always a restless sort, not at all like the other six Tarvish sons. They were true mountanines. Not Hull, however; he was restless, curious, dreamy. So he whistled his way into the world, and was happy.

At evening he stopped at the Hobel cottage on the edge of the mountains. Away before him stretched the plain, and in the darkening distance was visible the church spire of Norse. That was a village; Hull had never seen a village. But he had heard all about Norse, because the mountanines occasionally went down there to buy powder and ball for their rifles, those of them who had rifles.

Hull had only a bow. Powder and ball cost money but an arrow did the same work for nothing, and that without scaring all the game a mile away.

Morning he bade good-by to the Hobels, and set off. His powerful, brown bare legs flashed under his ragged trousers, his bare feet made a pleasant *soosh* in the dust of the road, the June sun beat warm on his right

cheek. He was happy; he was bound for adventure.

He swung placidly on toward Norse with a glistening spring-steel bow on his shoulder, and twenty-two bright tubular steel arrows in his quiver.

He stopped on a little rise and the town lay before him. He stared. A hundred houses at least. More than he'd ever seen in his life all together. He stared at the houses, and at the people, most of them shod in leather.

Hull didn't care for Norse, he decided. As the sun set, the houses loomed too close, as if they'd stifle him, so he set out into the countryside. There he found a good place and slept.

He awoke dewy wet. The sun shot golden lances through the trees, and he was ravenously hungry. He ate the last of his mother's brown bread from his bag, then strode out to the road. There was a wagon creaking there plodding northward. The bearded, kindly man in it was glad enough to have him ride for company.

"Mountainy?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Bound where?"

"The world," said Hull.

"Well," observed the other, "it's a big place, and all I've seen of it much like this. All except Selui.* That's a city. Twenty thousand people in it! Maybe more. And they got ruins there the biggest you ever saw. Bridges. Buildings."

"Who lived in 'em?" asked Hull.

"Don't know. Who'd want to live so high up it'd taken a full morning to climb there? Unless it was magic. I don't hold much with magic but they do say the Old People knew how to fly."

"I don't believe it," Hull said.

"Nor I. But did you hear what they're saying in Norse?"

"I didn't hear anything."

"They say," said the farmer, "that Joaquin Smith is going to march again."

"Joaquin Smith!"

"Yes. Even the mountanines know about him, eh?"

* Selui: The ancient St. Louis.

"Who doesn't?" returned Hull. "Then there'll be fighting in the south, I guess. I have a notion to go south."

"Why?"

"I like fighting," said Hull simply.

"Fair answer," said the farmer, "but from what folks say, there's not much fighting when the Master marches. He has a spell; there's great sorcery in N'Orleans, from the merest warlock up to Martin Sair."

"I'd like to see his sorcery against arrow and ball," said Hull grimly. "There's none of us can't spot either eye at a thousand paces, using a rifle. Or two hundred with arrow."

"No doubt, but what if powder flames, and your guns fire themselves before he's even across the horizon? They say he has a spell for that, he or Black Margot." †

"Black Margot?"

"The Princess, his half-sister. The dark witch who rides beside him, the Princess Margaret."

"I don't know," said the other. "It makes small difference to me whether I pay my taxes to N'Orleans or to gruff old Marcus Ormiston, who's eldarch of Ormiston * vil- lage there."

"The mountainies pay taxes to no one." Hull was silent a moment. Then he burst out. "The Master, is he really immortal?"

The other shrugged. "How can I say? There are great sorcerers in the southlands, the greatest of whom is Martin Sair. But I do know this, that I have seen sixty-two years, and as far back as memory goes there was always Joaquin Smith in the south, and always an Empire gobbling cities as a hare gobbles carrots. When I was young it was far away, now it reaches close at hand; that is all the difference. Men talked of the Sat- anic beauty of Black Margot then as they do now, and of the wizardry of Martin Sair."

Hull made no answer, for Ormiston was at hand. The village was much like Norse save that it huddled among low hills, on the crest of some of which loomed ancient ruins. At the near side his companion halted, and Hull thanked him as he leaped to the ground.

He spun suddenly about as a voice called him from across the road: "Hi! Moun- tainy!" It was a girl. A pretty girl, slim- waisted, copper-haired, blue-eyed.

The voice of the farmer sounded behind him. "It's Vail Ormiston, the eldarch's daughter."

But Vail Ormiston was above much con- verse with a wandering mountainman. She surveyed his mighty form approvingly and then disappeared into the house.

But that afternoon, trudging toward Selui, he was richer than when he had set out by the memory of the copper hair and blue eyes of Vail Ormiston.

† It is a usual error of historians of the Conquest to speak of the Princess Margaret as either Margaret of Urbs or the Black Flame. Both terms are an- achronisms. She was not known as the Black Flame until the time of the poet Sovern, as yet unborn, while of course Urbs, the vast, glittering, brilliant, wicked world metropolis and capital, was at this time only a dream in the mind of Joaquin Smith.

* Ormiston: The present village of Ormon.



Joaquin Smith

CHAPTER II

Old Einar

THREE weeks in Selui had served to give Hull Tarvish an acquaintance with the place. He no longer gaped at the sky-piercing ruins of the ancient city, or the vast fallen bridges, and he was quite at home in the town that lay beside it. He had found work easily enough in a baker's establish- ment, where his great muscles served well. The hours were long, but his pay was munifi- cent—five silver quarters a week.

Ordinarily Hull was quick to make friends, but his long hours hindered him. He had but one, an enormously old man who sat at evening on the step beyond his lodging, Old Einar.

"I wonder," he said to old Einar, staring at the crumbling towers of the Ancients glowing in the sunset, "what the Ancients were like. Were they men like us? Then how could they fly?"

"They were men like us, Hull. As for fly- ing—well, it's my belief that flying is a legend. There was a man supposed to have flown over the cold lands to the north and those to the south, and also across the great sea.

"But this flying man is called in some ac- counts Bird and in others Lindbird, and surely one can see the origin of such a legend. The migrations of birds, who cross land and seas each year, that is all."

"Or perhaps magic," suggested Hull.

"There is no magic. The Ancients them- selves denied it, and I have struggled through many a moldy book in their curious, archaic tongue!"

"You can read!" Hull exclaimed. "That in itself is a sort of magic."

quin Smith, the Master—I do not know the words to describe so complex a character, and I know him well. He is mild, perhaps, but enormously strong, kind or cruel as suits his purpose, glitteringly intelligent, and dangerously charming."

"You *knew* him!" echoed Hull, and added curiously, "What is your other name, Old Einar, you who know the Immortals?"

The old man smiled.

"When I was born," he said, "my parents called me Einar *Olin*."

CHAPTER III

The Master Marches

JOAQUIN SMITH was marching. Hull Tarvish leaned against the door of File Ormson's iron worker's shop in Ormiston, and stared at the blue mountains of Ozarky in the south. Report had it that Ozarky was already under the Master's sway. As for Selui, the Master, encamped above Norse, had requested the city's surrender.

run under the dead city, and still stretched crumbling for miles underground toward the hills.

And then he recalled her story of how, when a child, she had lost herself in it, so that her father had planted the tangle of blackberry bushes that still concealed the opening.

He grinned, "Is it the eldarch's daughter speaking of humble folk? Your father will be taxing me double if he hears of this!"

Her eyes twinkled.

"I'd like to talk to you again this evening, Vail," he cried boldly.

"Would you?" she murmured demurely.

"Yes, if Enoch Ormiston hasn't spoken first for your time."

"But he has, Hull."

He knew she was teasing him deliberately. "I'm sorry," he said shortly.

"But—I told him I was busy," she finished.

"Then what a misfortune it is that I have work to do," Hull said.

"What does File make?" asked Vail.

A Master of Science Fiction

THE memory of the late Stanley G. Weinbaum's genius will endure forever. Perhaps the greatest popularizer of science fiction during the past decade, Stanley Weinbaum's stories are dear to every follower of fantasy prose.

When this magazine published Stanley G. Weinbaum's first science fiction story, "A Martian Odyssey," the narrative was recognized internationally as a brilliant work of fiction. Could this new author match his great success with stories equally as good? That was the question.

Time told the answer. From Weinbaum's pen flowed a steady stream of fascinating stories, each finer than its predecessor. And, climaxing his list of triumphs, there followed two masterpieces—the stories of *The Black Flame*.

The story of *The Black Flame* and the *City of Urbs* we have already published in our companion magazine, *STARTLING STORIES*, where it achieved immediate acclaim. And now we are privileged to present *DAWN OF FLAME*, a story that will be as immortal as its author.—THE EDITOR.



Stanley G. Weinbaum

Selui wasn't going to yield. Already the towns of the three months' old Selui Confederation were sending in their men, from Bloomington, from Cairo, even from distant Chicago on the shores of the saltless sea Mitchin.

Hull knew there was fighting ahead, and he had come to take part in it.

Ormiston was his home for the present, since he'd found work here with File Ormson, the squat iron-worker, broad-shouldered as Hull himself and a head shorter.

A voice sounded at his side. "Hull Tarvish! Are you too proud to notice humble folk?"

It was Vail Ormiston. He remembered pleasantly an evening two days ago when he had sat and talked with her on a bench by a tree.

And he remembered the walk through the fields when she had shown him the mouth of the great ancient storm sewer that had

Instantly Hull's smile faded. "He forges—a sword!"

Vail, too, was no longer the joyous one of a moment ago. Over both of them had come the shadow of the Empire. Out in the blue hills of Ozarky Joaquin Smith was marching.

Later that evening Hull watched the glint of a copper moon on Vail's copper hair, and leaned back on the bench near her house at the edge of town. Behind them the stone house loomed dark, for her father was scurrying about in town on Confederation business, and the help had availed themselves of the evening of freedom to join the crowd in the village square. But the yellow daylight of the oil-lamp showed across the road in the house of Hue Helm, the farmer who had brought Hull from Norse to Ormiston.

It was at this light that Hull stared thoughtfully.

"I like fighting," he repeated, "but somehow the joy has gone out of this. It's as if one waited the onslaught of a thunder cloud."

"How," asked Vail in a timid, small voice, "can one fight magic?"

"There is no magic," said the youth, echoing Old Einar's words.

"Then why is it that Joaquin Smith has never lost a battle?"

"Knowledge," said Hull. "The knowledge of the Ancients."

"The knowledge of the Ancients was magic," said the girl. "If Holland, Olin, and Martin Sair are not sorcerers, then what are they? If Black Margot is no witch, then my eyes never looked on one."

"Have you seen them?" queried Hull.

"Of course, all but Holland, who is dead. Three years ago during the Peace of Memphis my father and I traveled into the Empire. I saw all of them about the city of N'Orleans."

"And is she—what they say she is?"

"The Princess?" Vail's eyes dropped. "Men say she is beautiful."

"But you think not?"

"What if she is?" snapped the girl almost defiantly. "Her beauty is like her youth, like her very life—artificial, preserved after its allotted time, frozen. That's it—frozen by sorcery."

"At least," Hull returned, "there's no magic will stop a bullet save flesh and bone. Yes, and the wizard who stops one with his skull lies just as dead as an honest man."

"I hope you're right," she breathed timidly. "Hull, he must be stopped. He *must!* If Joaquin Smith takes Ormiston, my father is the one to suffer. His lands will be parceled out. He's old, Hull—old. What will become of him then? I know many people feel there is magic in the very name of Joaquin Smith, for he marches through armies that outnumber him ten to one." She paused. "But not Ormiston!" she cried fiercely. "Not if the women have to bear arms!"

"Not Ormiston," he agreed gently.

"You'll fight, Hull, won't you? Even though you're not Ormiston born?"

"Of course. I have bow and sword, and a good pistol. I'll fight."

"But no rifle? Wait, Hull."

In a moment she was back again. "Here. Here is a rifle and horn and ball. Send me a bullet through the Master's skull. And one besides between the eyes of Black Margot—for me!"

"I do not fight women," he said.

"Not woman but witch!"

"None the less, Vail, it must be two bullets for the Master and only the captive's chains for Princess Margaret."

"Yes!" she blazed. "Oh, yes, Hull, that's better. If I could ever hope to see that—" She rose suddenly, and he followed her to the gate. "You must go," she murmured, "but before you leave me, you can—if wish it, Hull—kiss me."

Of a sudden he was all shy mountainy again. He faced her flushing a furious red, but only half from embarrassment, for the

rest was happiness. He circled her with his great arms and, very hastily, he touched his lips to soft ones.

"Now," he said exultantly, "now I will fight if I have to charge the men of the Empire by myself."

CHAPTER IV

The Battle of Eaglefoot Flow

THE men of the Confederation were pouring into Ormiston all night long. There was a rumble of wagons, bringing powder and ball from Selui, and food as well, for Ormiston couldn't even attempt to feed so many ravenous mouths. A magnificent army, ten thousand strong, and all of them seasoned fighting men.

The stand was to be at Ormiston, and Norse, the only settlement now between Joaquin Smith and the Confederation, was left to its fate. Experienced leaders had examined the territory, and had agreed on a plan. Three miles south of the town, the road followed an ancient railroad cut, with fifty-foot embankments on either side, heavily wooded for a mile north and south of the bridge across Eaglefoot Flow.

Along this course they were to distribute their men, a single line where the bluffs were high and steep, massed forces where the terrain permitted. Joaquin Smith *must* follow that road; there was no other. An ideal situation for ambush, and a magnificently simple plan.

It was mid-morning when the woods runners that had been sent into Ozark returned with breath-taking news. Joaquin Smith had received the Selui defiance of his representations, and was marching, was close. His forces? The runners estimated them at four thousand men, all mounted, with perhaps another thousand auxiliaries. The Master's army was outnumbered two to one!

The time was at hand. In the little room beside File Ormson's workshop, Hull was going over his weapons while Vail Ormiston, pale and nervous and very lovely, watched him.

"Before you go," Vail whispered, "will you—kiss me, Hull?"

He strode toward her, then recoiled in sudden alarm. For he heard a series of the faintest possible clicks, and Hull fancied that he saw for an instant a glistening of tiny blue sparks on candle-sticks and metal objects about the room, and that he felt for a brief moment a curious tingling.

Then he forgot all of these strange trifles as the powder horn on the table roared into terrific flame, and flaming wads of powder shot meteorlike around him.

For an instant he froze rigid. Vail was screaming—her dress was burning! He moved into sudden action, sweeping her from her feet, crashing her sideward to the floor, where his great hands beat out the fire. Then he slapped table and floor; and finally there were no flames.

He turned, coughing and choking in the black smoke, and bent over Vail, who

gasped half overcome. Her skirt was burned to her knees.

"Are you hurt?" he cried. "Vail, are you burned?"

"No—no!" she panted.

"Then outside!" he snapped, reaching down to lift her.

Outside there was chaos. He set Vail gently on the step and surveyed a scene of turmoil. Men ran shouting, and from windows along the street black smoke poured. A dozen yards away a powder wagon had blasted itself into a vast mushroom of smoke, incinerating horses and driver alike.

"What—happened?" gasped Vail. "Hull, what—?"

He comprehended suddenly. "The sparkers*!" he roared. "Joaquin Smith's sparkers! Old Einar told me about them." He groaned. "There goes our ammunition."

He rushed toward the milling group that surrounded bearded old Marcus Ormiston and the Confederation leaders. He plowed his way fiercely through, and seized the panic-stricken graybeard.

He glared at the five leaders. "You'll carry through. Do you see? For powder and ball there's bow and sword. Gather your men and march!"

And such, within the hour, was the decision. Hull marched with the men of Ormiston. The Ormiston men were first on the line of the Master's approach, and they filtered to their forest-hidden places as silently as foxes. Hull let his eyes wander back along the cut and what he saw pleased him, for no eye could have detected that along the deserted road lay ten thousand fighting men. They were good woodsmen, too, these fellows from the upper river and the saltless seas.

Down the way from Norse a single horseman came galloping. Old Marcus Ormiston recognized him, stood erect, and hailed him. They talked; Hull could hear the words. The Master had passed through Norse, pausing only long enough to notify the eldarch that henceforth his taxes must be transmitted to N'Orleans.

The informant rode on toward Ormiston, and the men fell to their quiet waiting. A half hour passed, and then, faint drifting on the silent air, came the sound of music. Singing; men's voices in song. Hull listened intently, and his skin crept and his hair prickled as he made out the words of the Battle Song of N'Orleans.

Hull gripped his bow and set feather to cord. He knew well enough that the plan was to permit the enemy to pass unmolested until their whole line was within the span of the ambush. And now, far down the way beyond the cut, he saw dust rising. Joaquin Smith was at hand.

Then—the unexpected! Suddenly through the trees to his right, brown-clothed, lithe

little men were slipping like charging shadows, horns sounding, whistles shrilling. The woods runners of the Master! Joaquin Smith had anticipated just such an ambush!

Instantly Hull saw the weakness of his forces. They were ten thousand, true enough, but here they were strung thinly over a distance of two miles, and now the woods runners were at a vast advantage in numbers, with the main body approaching. One chance! Fight it out, drive off the scouts, and retire to the woods. While the army existed, even though Ormiston fell, there was hope.

He shouted, strung his arrow, and sent it flashing through the leaves. A bad place for arrows; their arching flight was always deflected by the tangled branches. He slung bow on shoulder and gripped his sword; close quarters was the solution!

Then—the second surprise! The woods runners had flashed their own weapons, little blunt revolvers.* But they sent no bullets; only pale beams darted through the leaves and branches, faint blue streaks of light. Sorcery?

Hull learned its meaning instantly. His sword grew suddenly scorching hot in his hands, and a moment later the queerest pain he had ever encountered racked his body. A violent, stinging, inward tingle that twitched his muscles and paralyzed his movements. A brief second and the shock ceased, but his sword lay smoking in the leaves, and his steel bow had seared his shoulders. Around him men were yelling in pain, writhing on the ground, running back into the forest depths.

Yet apparently no man had been killed. Hands were seared and blistered by weapons that grew hot under the blue beams, bodies were racked by the torture that Hull could not know was electric shock, but none was slain. Hope flared again, and he ran to head off a retreating group.

"To the road!" he roared. "Out where our arrows can fly free! Charge the column!"

For a moment the group halted. Hull seized a yet unheated sword from someone, and turned back.

Below in the cut was the head of the column, advancing placidly. He glimpsed a silver-helmeted, black-haired man on a great white mare at its head, and beside him a slighter figure on a black stallion. Joaquin Smith! Hull roared down the embankment toward him. Four men spurred instantly between him and the figure with the silver helmet. A beam flicked; his sword scorched his skin and he flung it away.

"Come on!" he bellowed. "Here's a fight!"

Strangely, in curious clarity, he saw the eyes of the Empire men, a smile in them, mysteriously amused. No anger, no fear—just amusement. Hull glanced quickly be-

*The Erden resonators. A device, now obsolete, that projected an inductive field sufficient to induce tiny electrical discharges in metal objects up to a distance of many miles. Thus it ignited inflammables such as gunpowder.

*Kohlmar's ionic beams. Two parallel beams of highly actinic light ionize a path of air, and along these conductive lanes of gas an electric current can be passed, powerful enough to kill or merely intense enough to punish.

hind him, and knew finally the cause of that amusement. No one had followed him; he had charged the Master's army alone!

Deserted! Abandoned by those for whom he fought. He roared his rage to the echoing bluffs, and sprang at the horseman nearest him.

The horse reared, pawing the air. Hull thrust his mighty arms below its belly and heaved with a convulsion of his great muscles. Backward toppled steed and rider, and all about the Master was a milling turmoil where a man scrambled desperately to escape the clashing hoofs. But Hull glimpsed Joaquin Smith sitting statue-like and smiling on his great white mare.

He tore another rider from his saddle, and then, from the corner of his eye, he saw the slim youth at the Master's side raise a weapon, coolly, methodically. For the barest instant Hull faced icy green eyes where cold, passionless death threatened. He flung himself aside as a beam spat smoking against the dust of the road.

"Don't!" snapped Joaquin Smith, his low voice clear through the turmoil. "The youth is splendid!"

But Hull had no mind to die uselessly. He bent, flung himself halfway up the bluff in a mighty leap, caught a dragging branch, and swung into the forest. A startled woods runner faced him; he flung the fellow behind him down the slope and slipped into the shelter of leaves.

"The wise warrior fights pride," he muttered to himself. "It's no disgrace for one man to run from an army."

CHAPTER V

Black Margot

HULL found File Ormson in the group that started across town to where the road from Norse elbowed east to enter. Hull had outsped the leisurely march of the Master, for there at the bend was the glittering army, now halted. Not even the woods runners had come into Ormiston town, for there they were too, lined in a brown-clad rank along the edge of the wood-lots beyond the nearer fields.

They had made no effort, apparently, to take prisoners, but had simply herded the terrified defenders into the village. Joaquin Smith had done it again; he had taken a town without a single death or at least with no casualties than whatever injuries had come from bursting rifles and blazing powder.

Suddenly Hull noticed something. "Where are the Confederation men?" he asked sharply.

File Ormson turned gloomy eyes on him. "They've fled." He scowled, then smiled. "You're a brave fool, Hull. Think not hard of us. Those fiendish ticklers tickled away our courage. But they can kill as well as tickle; when there was need of it before Memphis they killed quickly enough."

Down the way there was some sort of stir. Hull descried the silver helmet of the Master. He dismounted and faced someone; it was—yes, old Marcus Ormiston. He left

File Ormson and shouldered his way to the edge of the crowd that circled the two.

Joaquin Smith was speaking.

"And," he said, "all taxes are to be forwarded to N'Orleans, including those on your own lands. Half of them I shall use to maintain my government, but half will revert to your own district. You are no longer eldarch, but for the present you may collect the taxes at the rate I prescribe."

Old Marcus was bitterly afraid.

"My—my lands?" he whined.

Joaquin Smith turned away indifferently, placed foot to stirrup, and swung upon his great white mare.

Tall as Hull himself, more slender, but with powerful shoulders, he seemed no older than the late twenties, or no more than thirty at most, though that was only the magic of Martin Sair, for more than eighty years had passed since his birth in the mountains of Mexico. His bronzed body was like the ancient statues Hull had seen in Selui, and he looked hardly the fiend that most people thought him.

He rose forward, and a dozen officers followed.

A voice, a tense, shrieking voice sounded behind Hull.

"You! It is Hull! It's you!" It was Vail, teary-eyed and pale. "They said you were—" She broke off sobbing, clinging to him, while Enoch Ormiston watched sourly.

He held her. "It isn't as bad as it might be," he consoled. "He wasn't as severe as I feared."

"Severe!" she echoed. "Do you believe those mild words of his, Hull? First our taxes, then our lands, and next it will be our lives—or at least my father's life. Don't you understand? That was no eldarch from some enemy town, Hull. That was Joaquin Smith. Joaquin Smith! He and Black Margot and their craft! *Look there!*"

He spun around. For a moment he saw nothing save the green-eyed youth who had turned death-laden eyes on him at Eagle-foot Flow mounted on the mighty black stallion. Youth? He saw suddenly that it was a woman—a girl, rather. Eighteen—twenty-five? He couldn't tell. The sunset fell on a flaming black mop of hair, so black that it glinted blue—an intense, unbelievable black.

Like Joaquin Smith she wore only a shirt and very abbreviated shorts. There was a curious grace in even the way she sat the idling steed, one hand on its haunches, the other on withers, the bridle dangling loose.

"Black Margot!" Hull whispered. "Brazen! Half naked! What's so beautiful about her?"

As if she heard his whisper, she turned suddenly, her emerald eyes sweeping the crowd about him, and he felt his question answered. Her beauty was starkly incredible—audacious, outrageous.

Those eyes met Hull's, and it was almost as if he heard an audible click. He saw recognition in her face, and she passed her glance casually over his mighty figure. If she acknowledged his gaze at all, it was by the faintest of all possible smiles of mockery

as she rode coolly away toward Joaquin Smith.

"She—she smiled at you, Hull!" gasped Vail. "I'm frightened."

His fascination was yielding now to a surge of hatred for Joaquin Smith, for the Princess, for the whole Empire. It was Vail he loved, and she was being crushed by these. An idea formed slowly as he stared down the street where Joaquin Smith had dismounted and was now striding into the little church. He heard an approving murmur sweep the crowd. That was simply policy, the Master's worshipping in Ormiston church, a gesture to the crowd.

He lifted the steel bow from his back and bent it. The spring was still in it. "Wait here!" he snapped to Vail, and strode up the street toward the church.

Outside stood a dozen Empire men, and the Princess idled on her great black horse. He slipped across the churchyard, around behind where a tangle of vines stretched toward the roof. He pulled himself hand over hand to the eaves, and thence to the peak.

He crept forward to the base of the steeple. Now he must leave the peak and creep precariously along the steep slope around it. He reached the street edge and peered cautiously over.

The Master was still within. Against his will he glanced at Black Margot, and even put cord to feather and sighted at her ivory throat. He could not loose the shaft.

Below him there was a stir. Joaquin Smith came out and swung to his white horse. Now was the moment. Hull rose to his knees, hoping that he could remain steady on the sharp pitch of the roof. Carefully, carefully, he drew the steel arrow back.

There was a shout. He had been seen, and a blue beam sent racking pain through his body. For an instant he bore it, then loosed his arrow and went sliding down the roof edge and over.

He fell on soft loam. A dozen hands seized him, dragged him upright, thrust him out into the street. He saw Joaquin Smith still on his horse, but the glistening arrow stood upright like a plume in his silver helmet, and a trickle of blood was red on his cheek.

But he wasn't killed. He raised the helmet from his head, waved aside the cluster of officers, and with his own hands bound a white cloth about his forehead. Then he turned cool gray eyes on Hull.

"You drive a strong shaft," he said, and then recognition flickered in his eyes. "I spared your life some hours ago, did I not?"

Hull said nothing.

The conqueror turned away. "Lock him up," he ordered coolly. "Let him make whatever preparations his religion requires, and then—execute him."

Above the murmur of the crowd Hull heard Vail Ormiston's cry of anguish. He turned to smile at her.

"I'm sorry," he called gently. "I loved you, Vail." Then he was being thrust away down the street.

He was pushed into Hue Helm's stonewalled tool shed. Hull drew himself up and

stood passively by the door, before which stood two grim Empire men.

One of them spoke. "Keep peaceful, Weed,"* he said in his N'Orleans drawl. "Go ahead with your praying."

"I do nothing," said Hull. "The mountanies believe that a right life is better than a right ending, and right or wrong a ghost's but a ghost anyway."

The guard laughed. "And a ghost you'll be."

"If a ghost I'll be," retorted Hull, turning slowly toward him, "I'd sooner turn one—fighting!"

He sprang suddenly, crashed a mighty fist against the arm that bore the weapon, thrust one guard upon the other, and overleaped the tangle into the dusk. As he spun to circle the house, something very hard smashed viciously against the back of his skull.

CHAPTER VI

The Harriers

FOR a brief moment Hull sprawled half stunned, then his muscles lost their paralysis and he thrust himself to his feet, whirling to face whatever assault threatened. In the doorway the guards still scrambled, but directly before him towered a rider on a black mount, and two men on foot flanked him. The rider, of course, was the Princess, her green eyes luminous in the dusk as she slapped a short sword into its scabbard. It was a blow from the flat of its blade that had felled him.

She held now the blunt weapon of the blue beam. "Stand quiet, Hall Tarvish," she said. "One flash will burst that stubborn heart of yours forever."

Perforce he stood quiet, his back to the wall of the shed.

She spoke again, letting her glance flicker disdainfully over the two appalled guards. "The Master will be pleased," she said contemptuously, "to learn that one unarmed Weed outmatches two men of his own cohort."

"But your Highness," the nearer men faltered, "he rushed us unexpect—"

"No matter," she cut in, and turned back to Hull. For the first time now he really felt the presence of death as she said coolly, "I am minded to kill you."

"Then do it!" he snapped.

"But I think also," she resumed, "that your living might amuse me more than your death, and"—for the first time there was a breath of feeling in her voice—"God knows I need amusement!" Her tones chilled again. "I give you your life."

"Your Highness," muttered the cowed guard, "the Master has ordered—"

"I countermand the orders," she said shortly, and then to Hull, "You are a fighter. Are you also a man of honor?"

"If I'm not," he retorted, "the lie that

* Weed: The term applied by Dominists (the Master's partisans) to their opposers. It originated in Joaquin Smith's remark before the Battle of Memphis: "Even the weeds of the fields have taken arms against us."

says I am would mean nothing to me."

She smiled coldly.

"Well, I think you are, Hull Tarvish. You go free on your word to carry no weapons, and your promise to visit me this evening in my quarters at the eldarch's home." She paused. "Well?"

"I give my word."

"And I take it. Away, all of you!" she ordered. She rode off toward the street.

Hull let himself relax against the wall with a low "whew!" Sweat started on his cold forehead, and his mighty muscles felt weak.

He wanted to find Vail, to use her cool loveliness as an antidote for the dark poison of the beauty he had been facing. And then, at the gate, he drew back suddenly. A group of men in Empire garb came striding by, and among them, helmetless and with his head bound, moved the Master.

His eyes fell on Hull.

"You again!" he said. "How is it that you still live, Hull Tarvish?"

"The Princess ordered it."

The frown faded. "So," said Joaquin Smith slowly, "Margaret takes it upon herself to interfere somewhat too frequently. I suppose she also freed you?"

"Yes, on my promise not to bear arms."

There was a curious expression in the face of the conqueror.

"Well," he said almost gently, "it was not my intention to torture you, but merely to have you killed for your treason. It may be that you will soon wish that my orders had been left unaltered." He strode on into the eldarch's dooryard.

Hull hurried toward his room beside File Ormson's shop, and there, tragic-eyed and mist-pale, he found Vail Ormiston. She was huddled on the doorstep with Enoch holding her against him.

Vail looked up with uncomprehending eyes, stared for a moment without expression, and, then, with a little moan, crumpled and fainted.

She was unconscious only a few moments, scarcely long enough for Hull to bear her into his room. There she lay now on his couch, clinging to his great hand, convinced at last of his living presence.

"I think," she murmured, "that you're as deathless as Joaquin Smith, Hull. Tell me—tell me how it happened."

He told her. "Black Margot's to thank for it," he finished.

Enoch cut in. "Here's one for the Harriers, then" he said sourly. "The pack needs him."

"The Harriers?" Hull looked up puzzled.

"Oh, Hull, yes!" said Vail. "File Ormson's been busy. The Harriers are what's left of the army—the better citizens of Ormiston. The Master's magic didn't reach beyond the ridge, and over the hills there's still powder and rifles. And the spell is no longer in the valley, either. One of the men carried a cup of powder across the ridge, and it didn't burn."

The better citizens, Hull thought smiling. She meant of course those who owned land and feared a loss of it such as Marcus Ormiston had suffered. But aloud he said only, "How many men have you?"

"Oh, there'll be several hundred with the farmers across the hills." She looked into his eyes. "I know it's a forlorn hope, Hull, but—we've got to try. You'll help, won't you?"

"Of course. But all your Harriers can attempt is raids. They can't fight the Master's army."

"I know. I know it, Hull. It's a desperate hope."

"Desperate?" said Enoch suddenly. "Hull, didn't you say you were ordered to Black Margot's quarters this evening?"

"Yes."

"Then—see here! You'll carry a knife in your arm-pit. Sooner or later she'll want you alone with her, and when *that* happens, you'll slide the knife quietly into her ruthless heart! If you've courage!"

"Courage!" he growled. "To murder a woman!"

"Black Margot's a devil!"

Hull scowled. "I swore not to bear weapons."

"Swore to *her*," snapped Enoch. "That needn't bind you."

"My word's given," said Hull firmly. "I do not lie."

Vail smiled. "You're right," she whispered, and as Enoch's face darkened, "I love you for it, Hull."

"Then," grunted Enoch, "if it's not lack of courage, do this. Lure her somehow across the west windows. We can slip two or three Harriers to the edge of the woodlot, and if she passes a window with the light behind her—well, they won't miss."

Vail's blue eyes pleaded. "That won't be breaking your word, Hull. Please. She's a sorceress. Please, Hull."

Bitterly he yielded. "I'll try, then." He frowned gloomily. "She saved my life, and— Well, which room is hers?"

"My father's. Mine is the western chamber, which she took for her—her maid. We," she said, "are left to sleep in the kitchen."

An hour later, having eaten, he walked somberly home with Vail. The guards let Vail in, but halted Hull. One of them ran exploratory hands about his body. "Orders of Her Highness," he explained gruffly.

Hull smiled. The Princess had not trusted his word too implicitly. In a moment the fellow had finished his search and swung the door open.

Hull entered. He had never seen the interior of the house and for a moment its splendor dazzled him. Carved ancient furniture, woven carpets, intricately worked standards for the oil lamps, and even a full-length mirror of ancient workmanship wherein his own image faced him.

Upstairs was a dimly lit hall where a guard stood silently. "The Princess Margaret?" he asked, but in place of answer came the liquid tones of Margaret herself. "Let him come in, Corlin."

A screen within the door blocked sight of the room. Hull circled it, steeling himself against the memory of that soul-burning loveliness he remembered. But his defense was shattered by the shock that awaited him.

The screen, indeed, shielded the Princess from the sight of the guard in the hall, but not from Hull's eyes. He stared appalled at the sight of her lying in indifference in a great tub of water, being bathed by one of her women. He could not avoid a single glimpse of her exquisite form.

"Oh, sit down!" she said contemptuously. "This will be over in a moment."

He kept his eyes averted while water splashed and a towel whisked sibilantly. When he heard her footsteps beside him he glanced up tentatively, still fearful of what he might see, but she was covered now in a full robe of filmy black and gold that made her seem taller.

Hull felt against the fascination against which he had steeled himself.

"So," she said. "You may sit down again. I do not demand court etiquette in the field." She sat opposite, and produced a black cigarette, lighting it at the chimney of the lamp on the table.

"Now," she said with a faintly ironic smile, "tell me what they say of me here."

"They call you witch."

"And do they hate me?"

"Hate you?" he echoed thoughtfully. "At least they will fight you and the Master to the last feather on the last arrow."

"Of course. The young men will fight—except those that Joaquin has bought with the eldarch's lands—because they know that once within the Empire, fighting is no more to be had. No more joyous, thrilling little wars between the cities, no more boasting, and parading before the pretty provincial girls." She paused. "And you, Hull Tarvish—what do you think of me?"

"I call you witch for other reasons."

The Princess looked narrowly at him. "Tell me," she said, "was that the eldarch's pretty daughter who cried so piteously after you there before the church?"

"Yes."

"And do you love her?"

"Yes." This was the opening he had sought. He took the opportunity grimly. "I should like to ask one favor."

"Ask it."

"I should like to see the chamber that was to have been our bridal room. The west chamber."

The Princess laughed disdainfully. "Go see it then."

For a moment he feared, or hoped, perhaps, that she was going to let him go alone. Then she rose and followed him to the hall, and to the door of the west chamber.

CHAPTER VII

Betrayal

HULL paused at the door of the west chamber to permit the Princess to enter. Her glorious green eyes flashed speculatively to his face, then she stepped back.

"You first, Weed," she commanded.

He did not hesitate. He turned and strode into the room, hoping that the Har-

rier riflemen, if indeed they lurked in the copse, might recognize his mighty figure in time to stay their eager trigger fingers. His scalp prickled as he moved steadily across the window, but nothing happened.

Behind him the Princess laughed softly. "I have lived too long in the aura of plot and counterplot in N'Orleans," she said. "I mistrust you without cause, honest Hull Tarvish."

Her words tortured him. He turned to see her black robe mold itself to her body as she moved, and, as sometimes happens in moments of stress, he caught an instantaneous picture of her with his sense so quickened that it seemed as if she, himself, and the world were frozen into immobility.

He remembered her forever as she was then, with her limbs in the act of striding, her green eyes soft in the lamplight. Witch and devil she might be, but she looked like a dark-haired angel, and in that moment his spirit revolted.

"No!" he bellowed, and sprang toward her, striking her slim shoulders with both hands in a thrust that sent her staggering back into the hallway, there to sit hard and suddenly on the floor beside the amazed guard.

She sprang up instantly, and there was nothing angelic now in her face. "You—hurt—me!" she hissed. "Me! Now I'll—" She snatched the guard's weapon from his belt, thrust it full at Hull's chest, and sent the blue beam humming upon him.

It was pain far worse than that at Eagle-foot Flow. He bore it stolidly, grinding into silence the groan that rose in his throat.

"Treachery again!" she said. "I won't kill you, Hull Tarvish. I know a better way." She whirled toward the stair-well. "Lebeau!" she called. "Lebeau! There's—" She glanced sharply at Hull, and continued, "*Il ya des tireurs dans le bois. Je vais les tirer en avant!*"* It was the French of N'Orleans, as incomprehensible to Hull as Aramaic.

"I've a mind," she blazed, "to strip the Weed clothes from the eldarch's daughter and send her marching across the window!"

He was utterly appalled. "She—she—was in town!" he gasped, then fell silent at the sound of feet below.

"Well, there's no time," she retorted. "So, if I must—" She strode steadily into the west chamber, paused a moment, and then stepped deliberately in front of the window!

Hull was aghast. He watched her stand so that the lamplight must have cast her perfect silhouette full on the pane, stand tense and motionless for the fraction of a breath, and then leap back so sharply that her robe billowed away from her body.

She had timed it to perfection. Two shots crashed almost together, and the glass shattered. And then, out in the night, a dozen beams criss-crossed, and, thin and clear in the silence after the shots, a yell of mortal anguish drifted up, and another, and a third.

The Princess Margaret smiled in malice, and sucked a crimson drop from a finger

* "There are snipers in the copse. I'll draw them out!"

gashed by flying glass. "Your treachery reacts. Instead of my betrayal, you have betrayed your own men."

Hull Tarvish bit his lip.

"Well," she said musingly, "you're rather more entertaining than I had expected."

He chose to ignore the mockery in her voice. "Perhaps," he said grimly.

"Why, then, did you weaken, Hull Tarvish? You might have had my life."

"I do not fight women," he said despondently. "I looked at you—and turned weak." A question formed in his mind. "But why did you risk your life before the window? You could have had fifty wood runners scour the copse."

She smiled, but there was a shrewd narrowness in her eyes. "Because so many of these villages are built above the underground ways of the Ancients—the subways, the sewers. How did I know that your assassin might slip into some burrow and escape? It was necessary to lure them into the disclosure."

Hull shadowed the gleam that shot into his own eyes. He remembered suddenly the ancient sewer in which the child Vail had wandered, whose mouth was hidden by blackberry bushes. So the Empire men were not aware of it!

"Your Highness," he said grimly, "unless you kill me now, I will be a bitter enemy to your Empire army."

"Perhaps less bitter than you think," she said softly. "See, Hull, the only three that know of your weakness are dead. No one can name you traitor or weakling."

"But I can," he returned somberly. "And you."

"Not I, Hull," she murmured. "I never blame a man who weakens because of me—and there have been many. Men as strong as you, Hull, and some that the world still calls great." She turned toward her own chamber. "Come in here," she said in altered tones. "Tell me, would you like to see the Great City, Hull?"

"You know I would."

She shrugged. "Oh, you can visit N'Orleans, of course, but suppose I offered you the chance to go as the *guest*, we'll say, of the Princess Margaret. What would you give for that privilege?"

"What would you ask for it?" he rejoined guardedly.

"Oh, your allegiance, perhaps. Or perhaps the betrayal of your little band of Harriers, who will be the devil's own nuisance to stamp out of these hills."

He looked up, startled that she knew the name. "The Harriers? How—"

She smiled. "We have friends among the Ormiston men. Friends bought with land," she added contemptuously. "But what of my offer, Hull?"

He scowled. "You say as your *guest*. What am I to understand by that?"

She leaned across the table, her exquisite green eyes on his, her hair flaming blue-black, her perfect lips in a faint smile. "What you please, Hull. Whatever you please."

"Do you mean," he said huskily, "that

you'd do that for so small a thing as the destruction of a little enemy band? You, with the whole Empire at your back?"

She nodded. "It saves trouble, doesn't it?"

"And honesty, virtue, honor, mean as little to you as that? Is this one of your usual means of conquest? Do you ordinarily sell your—your favors for—"

"Not ordinarily," she interrupted coolly. "First I must like my co-partner in the trade. You, Hull—I like those vast muscles of yours, and your stubborn courage, and your slow, clear mind. You are not a great man, Hull, for your mind has not the cold fire of genius, but you are a strong one, and I like you for it."

"Like me!" he roared, starting up in his chair. "Yet you think I'll trade what honor's left me for—that! You think I'll betray my cause! You're wrong!"

She shook her head, smiling. "No. I wasn't wrong, for I thought you wouldn't."

"Oh, you did!" he snarled. "Then what if I'd accepted? What would you have done then?"

"What I promised." She laughed at his angry, incredulous face. "Don't look so shocked, Hull. I'm not little Vail Ormiston. I'm the Princess Margaret of N'Orleans, called Margaret the Divyne by those who love me, and by those who hate me called—well, you must know what my enemies call me."

"I do!" he blazed. "Black Margot!" he rasped. "A good name for you!"

"Doubtless. But you fail to understand, Hull. I'm an Immortal. Would you have me follow the standards of death-bound Vail Ormiston?"

"Yes! By what right are you superior to her standards?"

Her lips had ceased to smile, and her eyes turned wistful. "By the right that I can act in no other way, Hull," she said softly. A tinge of emotion quavered in her voice. "Immortality!" she whispered. "Year after year after year of sameness. I have no sense of destiny like Joaquin, who sees before him Empire."

His anger had drained away. He was staring at her aghast, appalled.

"When killing palls and love grows stale, what's left? Did I say love? How can there be love for me when I know that if I love a man, it will be only to watch him age and turn wrinkled, weak, and flabby? And when I beg Joaquin for immortality for the man I love he flaunts before me that promise of his to Martin Sair, to grant it only to those already proved worthy. By the time a man's worthy he's old."

She went on tensely. "I tell you, Hull, that I'm so friendless and alone that I envy you death-bound ones! Yes, and one of these days I'll join you!"

He gulped. "My God!" he muttered. "Better for you if you'd stayed in your native mountains with friends, home, husband, and children."

"Children!" she echoed, her eyes misting with tears. "Immortals can't have children. Sometimes I curse Martin Sair and his hard rays. I don't want immortality; I want *life!*"

Hull found his mind in a whirl. He scarcely knew his own allegiance. "God!" he whispered. "I'm sorry!"

"And you, Hull—will you help me—a little?"

Suddenly some quirk of her dainty lips caught his attention. He stared incredulously into the green depths of her eyes. It was true. There was laughter there. She had been mocking him! And as she perceived his realization, her soft laughter rippled like rain or water.

"You—devil!" he choked. "You black witch! I wish I'd let you be killed!"

"Oh, no," she said demurely. "Look at me, Hull."

The command was needless. He watched her exquisite face.

"Do you love me, Hull?"

"I love Vail Ormiston," he rasped.

"But do you love me?"

He rose. "Whatever harm I can do your cause," he said, "that harm I will do. I will not be twice a traitor."

CHAPTER VIII

Torment

HULL looked down at noon over Ormiston valley, where Joaquin Smith was marching. At his side Vail Ormiston paused, and together they gazed silently over the Selui road, now black with riding men and rumbling wagons on their way to attack the remnant of the Confederation army in Selui. Three hundred soldiers and two hundred horsemen remained in Ormiston to deal with the Harriers, under Black Margot herself.

"Our moment comes tonight," Hull said soberly. "Our numbers all but equal theirs, and surprise is on our side."

Vail nodded. "The ancient tunnel was a bold thought, Hull. The Harriers are shoring up the crumbled places. Father is with them."

"He shouldn't be."

"But this is his hope, Hull. He lives for this."

"Small enough hope! Suppose we're successful, Vail. What will it mean save the return of Joaquin Smith and his army?"

"Oh, no!" cried Vail. "If our success means the end of Black Margot, isn't that enough? Besides, you know that half the Master's powers are the work of the witch. Enoch—poor Enoch—said so."

Hull winced. Enoch had been one of the three marksmen slain outside the west window.

"Enoch," she repeated softly. "He loved me in his sour way, Hull, but once I had known you, I had no thoughts for him."

Hull slipped his arm about her, cursing himself that he could not steal his thought away from Margaret of N'Orleans, because it was Vail he loved, and Vail he wanted to love. But he could not blot Margaret's Satanic loveliness from his inward gaze.

"Well," he sighed, "let it be tonight, then. Was it four hours past sunset? Good. The Empire men should be sleeping or gaming

in Tigh's Tavern by that time. It's for us to pray for our gunpowder."

"Gunpowder? Oh, but didn't you hear what I told File Ormson and the Harriers, back there on the ridge? The casters of the spell are gone; Joaquin Smith has taken them to Selui. I watched and listened from the kitchen this morning."

"The sparkers? They're gone?"

"Yes. They called them reson—resators—"

"Resonators," said Hull, recalling Old Einar's words.

"Something like that. There were two of them, great iron barrels on swivels, and they swept the valley north and south, and east and west, and over toward Norse there was the sound of shots and the smoke of a burning building. They loaded them on wagons and dragged them away toward Selui."

"They didn't cross the ridge with their spell,"* said Hull. "The Harriers still have powder."

"Yes," murmured Vail, drawing his arm closer about her. "Tell me," she said suddenly, "what did she want of you last night?"

Hull hesitated for a moment. "Treason," he said finally. "She wanted me to betray the Harriers."

"What did she offer you for betrayal?"

Again he hesitated. "A great reward," he answered at last. "A reward out of all proportion to the task."

"But in what way? Men say so much of her beauty, of her deadly charm. Hull—did you feel it?"

"I love you, Vail."

She sighed, and drew yet closer. "I think you're the strongest man in the world, Hull. The very strongest."

"I'll need to be," he muttered, staring gloomily over the valley.

Vail left him in Ormiston village and took her way hesitantly homeward. Hull did what he could about the idle shop, and when the sun slanted low, bought himself a square loaf of brown bread, a great slice of cheese, and a bottle of wine. It was just as he finished his meal in his room that a pounding on the door of the shop summoned him.

It was an Empire man. "From Her Highness," he said, and handed him an intricately folded slip of black paper.

The mountain youth stared at it.

"This scratching means nothing to me," Hull said.

The Empire man sniffed contemptuously. "I'll read it," he said, taking the missive. "It says, 'Follow the messenger to our quarters,' and it's signed *Margarita Imperii Regina*, which means Margaret, Princess of the Empire."

"Suppose I won't go," growled Hull.

"This isn't an invitation, Weed. It's a command."

Hull grunted assent and followed the messenger.

* The field of the Erden resonator passes readily through structures and walls, but is blocked by any considerable natural obstructions, hills, and for some reason, fog-banks or low clouds.

This time, however, he found the Princess clothed, wearing the diminutive shorts and shirt that were her riding costume. She sat in a deep chair beside the table, a flagon of wine at hand and a black cigarette in her fingers. Her jet hair was like a helmet of ebony against the ivory of her forehead and throat, and her green eyes like twin emeralds.

"Sit down," she said as he stood before her. Fire danced in her eyes. "Hull, I am as strong as most men, but I believe those vast muscles of yours could overpower me as if I were some shrinking provincial girl. And yet—"

"And yet what?"

"And yet you are much like my black stallion Eblis. Your muscles are nearly as strong, but like him, I can goad you, drive you, lash you, and set you galloping in whatever direction I choose."

"Can you?" he snapped. "Don't try it." But the spell of her unearthly beauty was hard to face.

"But I think I shall try it," she said gently. "Hull, do you ever lie?"

"I do not."

"Shall I make you lie, then, Hull? Shall I make you swear such falsehoods that you will redder forever afterward at the thought of them?"

"You can't!"

"Do you love me?" Her face was saintlike, earnest, pure, even the green eyes were soft now as the green of spring.

"No!" he ground out savagely, then flushed crimson at the smile on her lips. "That isn't a lie!" he blazed. "I don't love your beauty. It's unnatural, hellish, and the gift of Martin Sair. It's a false beauty, like your whole life!"

"Suppose," she proceeded gently, "I were to promise to abandon Joaquin, to be no longer Black Margot and Princess of the Empire, but to be only—Hull Tarvish's wife. Between Vail and me, which of us would you choose?"

He said nothing for a moment. "You're unfair," he said bitterly at last. "Is it fair to compare Vail and yourself? She's sweet and loyal and innocent, but you—you're Black Margot!"

"Nevertheless," she said calmly, "I think I shall compare us. Sora!" A woman appeared. "Sora, this wine is gone. Send the eldarch's daughter here with another bottle and a second goblet."

Hull stared appalled. "What are you going to do?"

"No harm to your little Weed. I promise no harm."

"But—" He paused. Vail's footsteps sounded on the stair, and she entered timidly bearing a tray with a bottle and a metal goblet. He saw her start as she perceived him, but she only advanced quietly, set the tray on the table, and backed toward the door.

"Wait a moment," said the Princess. She rose and moved to Vail's side as if to force the comparison on Hull. Barefooted, the Princess Margaret was exactly the height of Vail in her low-heeled sandals, and she was the merest shade slimmer.

But her startling black hair and her glorious green eyes seemed almost to fade the unhappy Ormiston girl's to a colorless dun. It wasn't fair. Hull realized that it was like comparing candlelight to sunbeam.

"Hull," said the Princess, "which of us do you love?"

He saw Vail's lips twitch fearfully, and he remained stubbornly silent.

"I take it," said the Princess, smiling, "that your silence means you love me the more. Am I right?"

He was in utter torment. His white lips twisted in anguish as he muttered finally. "Oh, God! Then yes!"

She smiled softly. "You may go," she said to the pallid and frightened Vail.

But for a moment the girl hesitated. "Hull," she whispered, "Hull, I know you said that to save me. I don't believe it, Hull, and I love you. I blame—her!"

"Why do you delight in torture?" cried Hull after Vail had left. "You're cruel as a cat."

"That wasn't cruelty," said the Princess gently. "It was but a means of proving what I said, that your mighty muscles are well-broken to my saddle."

"If that needed proof," he muttered.

"It needed none. There's proof enough, Hull, in what's happening even now, if I judge the time rightly. I mean your Harriers slipping through their ancient sewer right into my trap behind the barn."

He was thunderstruck. "You—are you—you *must* be a witch!" he gasped.

"Perhaps. But it wasn't witchcraft that led me to put the thought of that sewer into your head, Hull. Do you remember now that it was my suggestion, given last evening there in the hallway? I knew quite well that you'd put the bait before the Harriers."

His brain was reeling. "But why—why—" "Oh," she said indifferently, "it amused me to see you play the traitor twice, Hull Tarvish."

CHAPTER IX

The Trap

THE Princess stepped close to him, her magnificent eyes gentle as an angel's. "Poor, strong, weak Hull Tarvish!" she breathed. "Now you shall have a lesson in the cost of weakness!"

He scarcely heard her. His gyrating mind struggled with an idea. The Harriers were creeping singly into the trap, but they could not all be through the tunnel. If he could warn them — His eyes shifted to the bell-pull in the hall beside the guard, the rope that tolled the bronze bell in the belfry to summon public gatherings, or to call aid to fight fires.

His great arm flashed suddenly, sweeping the Princess from her feet and crashing her dainty figure violently against the wall. Then he was upon the startled guard, thrusting him up and over the rail of the stair-well to drop with a sullen bump below. And then he threw his weight on the bell-rope, and the great voice of bronze boomed out, again and again.

But Black Margot was on her feet, with

the green hell-sparks flickering in her eyes and her face a lovely mask of fury. Men came rushing up the stairs with drawn weapons. Hull gave a last tug on the rope and turned to face death. Half a dozen weapons were on him.

"Hold him—for—me!" gasped the Princess. "Take him—to the barn!"

Behind the barn a close-packed mass of dark figures huddled near the mouth of the ancient tunnel where the bushes were trampled away, and a brown-clad file of Empire woods runners surrounded them. A few figures lay sprawled on the turf, and Hull smiled a little as he saw that some were Empire men. Then his eyes strayed to the Princess where she faced a dark-haired officer.

"How many, Lebeau?"

"A hundred and forty or fifty, Your Highness."

"Not half! Why are you not pursuing the rest through the tunnel?"

"Because, Your Highness, one of them pulled the shoring and the roof down upon

shook her ebony flame of hair. "How can I? I remained here purposely to wipe them out."

"I ask their lives," he repeated.

A curious, whimsical fire danced green in her eyes. "I will try," she promised. "Lebeau!" she snapped. "Hold back a while."

She strode into the gap between the prisoners and her own men. Hand on hip she surveyed the Harriers, while the moonlight lent her beauty an aura that was incredible, unearthly.

"Now," she said, passing her glance over the group, "on my promise of amnesty, how many of you would join me?"

Two figures moved forward, and the Harriers stirred angrily. Hull recognized the men; they were stragglers of the Confederation army, Chicago men, good fighters but merely mercenaries, changing sides as mood or advantage moved them.

"You two," said the Princess, "are you Ormiston men?"

"No," said one. "Both of us come from the shores of Mitchin."

himself, and blocked us off. We're digging him out now."

"By then they'll have left their burrow." She strode over to Hull. "Where does this tunnel end?"

File Ormson's great voice rumbled out of the mass of prisoners. "Hull! Hull! Was this trap your doing?"

Hull made no answer, but Black Margot herself replied. "No," she snapped, "but the warning bell was."

"Then why do you spare him?"

Her eyes glittered icy green. "To kill in my own way, Weed," she said icily.

Her eyes blazed chill emerald fire into Hull's. He met her glance squarely, and said in a low voice, "Do you grant any favors to a man about to die?"

"I am not disposed to grant favors to you, Hull Tarvish, who have twice laid hands of violence on me."

His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "It is the lives of my companions I ask."

She raised her eyebrows in surprise, then

"Very well," she said calmly. With a movement swift as arrow flight she snatched her weapon from her belt, the blue beam spat twice, and the men crumbled, one with face burned carbon-black, and both sending forth an odorous wisp of flesh-seared smoke.

She faced the aghast group. "Now," she said, "who is your leader?"

File Ormson stepped forth, scowling and grim. "What do you want of me?"

"Will you treat with me? Will your men follow your agreements?"

File nodded. "They have small choice."

"Good. Now that I have sifted the traitors from your ranks I shall make my offer." She smiled at the squat ironsmith. "Would you, with your great muscles and warrior's heart follow a woman?"

The scowl vanished in surprise. "Follow you? You?"

"Yes." Hull watched her in fascination as she used her voice, her eyes, her unearthly beauty intensified by the moonlight, all on hulking File Ormson. "Yes, I mean to fol-

low me," she repeated softly. "You are brave men, all of you."

"But" — File gulped, "our others —"

"I promise you need not fight against your companions. I will release any of you who will not follow me. And your lands—it is your lands you fight for, is it not? I will not touch one acre save the eldarch's." She paused. "Well?"

Suddenly File's booming laugh roared out. "By God!" he swore. "If you mean what you say, there's nothing to fight about! For my part, I'm with you!" He turned on his men. "Who follows me?"

The group stirred. A few stepped forward, then a few more, and then, with a shout, the whole mass. "Good!" roared File. He raised his great hand to his heart in the Empire salute. "To Black—To the Princess Margaret!" he bellowed. "To a warrior!"

She smiled and dropped her eyes as if in modesty. When the cheer had passed, she addressed File Ormson again. "You will send men to your others?" she asked. "Let them come in on the same terms."

"They'll come!" growled File.

The Princess nodded. "Lebeau," she called, "order off your men. These are our allies."

The Princess stepped close to Hull, smiling maliciously up into his perplexed face.

"Will you die happy now?" she asked softly.

"No man dies happy," he growled.

"I granted your wish, Hull."

"If your promises can be trusted," he retorted bitterly.

She shrugged. "I do not break my given word. The Harriers are safe."

Beyond her, men came suddenly from the tunnel mouth, dragging something dark behind them.

"The Weed who pulled down the roof, Your Highness," said Lebeau.

She glanced back of her, and pursed her dainty lips in surprise. "The eldarch! The dotard died bravely enough."

Vail slipped by with a low moan of anguish, and Hull watched her kneel desolate by her father's body. A spasm of pity shook him as he realized that now she was utterly, completely alone. Enoch had died in the ambush of the previous night, old Marcus lay dead here before her, and he, Hull, was condemned to death. He bent a slow, helpless, pitying smile on her, but there was nothing he could do or say.

And Black Margot, after the merest glance, turned back to Hull. "Now," she said, the ice in her voice again, "I deal with you!"

He faced her dumbly. "Will you have the mercy to deal quickly, then?" he muttered at last.

"Mercy? I do not know the word where you're concerned, Hull." She moved closer. "I cannot bear the touch of violence, Hull, and you have laid violent hands on me twice. Twice!"

"One was to save your life" he said, "and the other to rectify my own unwitting treason."

She smiled coldly. "Well argued, Hull, but you die none the less in the way I wish." She turned. "Back to the house!" she commanded, and he strode away between the six guards who still flanked him.

She led them into the lower room that had been the Master's. There she sat idly in a deep chair of ancient craftsmanship, lit a black cigarette at the lamp, and thrust her slim legs carelessly before her, gazing at Hull. But he, staring through the window behind her, could see Vail Ormiston weeping beside the body of her father.

"Now," said the Princess, "how would you like to die, Hull?"

"Of old age!" he snapped. "And if you will not permit that, then as quickly as possible."

"I might grant the second," she observed. "I might."

The thought of Vail was still torturing him. At last he said, "Your Highness, is your courage equal to the ordeal of facing me alone? I want to ask something that I will not ask in others' ears."

She laughed contemptuously. "Get out!" she snapped at the silent guards. "Hull, do you think I fear you? I tell you your great muscles and stubborn heart are no more than those of Eblis, the black stallion. Must I prove it again to you?"

"No," he muttered. "God help me, but I know it's true. I'm not the match for Black Margot."

"Nor any other man," she countered. Then, more softly, "But if ever I do meet the man who can conquer me, if ever he exists, he *will* have something of you in him, Hull. Your great, slow strength, and your stubborn honesty, and your courage. I promise that." She paused, her face now pure as a marble saint's. "So say what you have to say, Hull. What do you ask?"

"My life," he said bluntly.

Her green eyes widened in surprise.

"You, Hull? You beg your life? You?"

"Not for myself," he muttered. "There's Vail Ormiston weeping over her father. Enoch, who would have married her and loved her, is dead in last night's ambush, and if I die, she's left alone. I ask my life for her. She'll die without someone to help her through this time of torment."

"Let her die, Hull, as I think you'll die in the next moment or so!"

Her hand rested on the stock of the weapon at her belt. "I grant you your second choice," she said coolly. "The quick death."

CHAPTER X

Old Einar Again

BLACK MARGOT ground out her cigarette with her left hand against the polished wood of the table top, but her right rested inexorably on her weapon.

A voice spoke behind Hull, a familiar, pleasant voice.

"Do I intrude, Margaret?"

He whirled. It was Old Einar, thrusting his good-humored, wrinkled visage through the opening he had made in the doorway. He grinned at Hull, flung the door wider,

and slipped into the chamber.

"Einar!" cried the Princess, springing from her chair. "Einar Olin! Are you still in the world?" Her tones took on suddenly the note of deep pity. "But so old—so old!"

The old man took her free hand. "It is forty years since last I saw you, Margaret—and I was fifty then."

"But so old!" she repeated. "Einar, have I changed?"

He peered at her. "Not physically, my dear. But from the stories that go up and down the continent, you are hardly the gay madcap that N'Orleans worshipped as the Princess Peggy, nor even the valiant little warrior they used to call the Maid of Orleans."

"Seeing you now, Margaret, I wonder instead if I were not very wise to refuse immortality. Youth is too great a restlessness to bear for so long a time, and you have borne it less than a century. What will you be in another fifty years? In another hundred, if Martin Sair's art keeps its power? What will you be?"

She shook her head; her green eyes grew deep and sorrowful.

"I don't know, Einar. I don't know. I might have been different, Einar, had you joined us. I could have loved you, Einar."

"Yes," he agreed wryly. "I was afraid of that, and it was one of the reasons for my refusal. You see, I *did* love you, Margaret. All of us did at one time or another. 'Flame-struck,' we used to call it." He smiled reflectively. "Are any left save me of all those who loved you?"

"Just Jorgensen," she answered sadly. "That is if he has not yet killed himself in his quest for the secret of the Ancient's wings."*

"Well," said Olin dryly, "my years will yet make a mock of their immortality." He pointed a gnarled finger at Hull. "What do you want of my young friend here?"

Her eyes flashed emerald, and she drew her hand from that of Old Einar. "I plan to kill him."

"Indeed? And why?"

"Why?" her voice chilled. "Because he struck me with his hands. Twice."

The old man smiled. "But I think I shall ask you to forgive young Hull Tarvish."

"Why should I?" asked the Princess. "Why do you think a word from you can save him?"

"I am still Olin," said the aged one, meeting her green eyes steadily with his watery blue ones. "I still carry Joaquin's seal."

"As if that could stop *me*!" But the cold fire died slowly in her gaze, and again her eyes were sad. "But you are still Olin, the Father of Power," she murmured.

With a sudden gesture she thrust her weapon back into her belt. "I spare him again," she said, and then, in tones gone strangely dull: "It is a weakness of mine that I cannot kill those who love me in a certain way—a weakness that will cost me dear some day."

Olin twisted his old lips in that skull-like smile, turning to the silent youth.

"Hull," he said kindly, "if you're curious enough to tempt you luck further, listen to this old man's advice. Go twist the tail of a lion before you again try the wrath of Black Margot. And now get out of here."

"Not yet, Hull," snapped the Princess. "I have still my score to settle with you," She turned back to Olin. "Where do you wander now, Einar?"

"To N'Orleans. I am homesick besides for the Great City." He paused. "I have seen Joaquin. Selui has fallen."

"I know. I ride to meet him tonight."

"He has left Jacob Sair as governor."

"I know, Einar."

"He has sent representations to Chicago."

Old Einar shook his thin white hair. "What will be the end of this, Margaret?" he asked gently. "After Chicago is taken—what then?"

"Then the land north of the saltless seas, and east of them. N'York, and all the cities on the ocean shore. Later South America, Europe, Asia and Africa."

"And after all of them?"

"Afterward," she replied wearily, "we can rest. The fierce destiny that drives Joaquin surely cannot drive him beyond the boundaries of the world."

"And so," said Olin, "you fight your way around the world so that you can rest at the end of the journey. Then why not rest now, Margaret? Must you pillow your head on the globe of the planet?"

Fury flamed green in her eyes. She raised her hand and struck the old man across his lips, but it must have been lightly, for he still smiled.

"Fool!" she cried. "Then I will see to it that there is always war! Between me and Joaquin, if need be—or between me and anyone—anyone—so that I can fight!" She paused panting. "Leave me, Einar," she said tensely. "I do not like the things you bring to mind."

Still smiling, the old man backed away. At the door he paused. "I will see you before I die, Margaret," he promised, and was gone.

Slowly, almost wearily, the Princess turned to face Hull.

"Hull," she said gently, "what do you think of me now?"

"I think you are a black flame blowing cold across the world. I think a demon drives you."

"And do you hate me so bitterly?"

"I pray every second to hate you."

"Then see, Hull." With her little fingers she took his great hands and placed them about the perfect curve of her throat. "Here I give you my life for the taking. You have only to twist once with these mighty hands of yours and Black Margot will be out of the world forever." She paused. "Must I beg you?"

Hull felt as if molten metal flowed upward through his arms from the touch of her white skin. His fingers were rigid as metal bars, and all the great strength of them could not put one feather's weight of pressure on the

* He did, just one week after this date, the date of the Battle of Selui. He crashed at N'Orleans after a flight of thirty minutes in an atomic rocket of the Ring type.

soft throat they circled. And deep in the lambent emerald flames that burned in her eyes he saw again the fire of mockery—jeering, taunting.

"You will not?" she said, lifting away his hands, but holding them in hers. "Then you do not hate me?"

"You know I don't!" he groaned.

"And you do love me?"

"Please," he muttered. "Is it necessary to torture me? I need no proof of your mastery."

"Then say you love me."

"Heaven forgive me for it," he whispered, "but I do."

She dropped his hands and smiled. "Then listen to me, Hull. You love little Vail with a truer love, and month by month memory fades before reality. After awhile there will be nothing left in you of Black Margot, but there will be always Vail. I go now hoping never to see you again, but"—and her eyes chilled to green ice—"before I go I settle my score with you."

She donned her silver gauntlets, raised her hand.

"This for your treachery!" she said, and raked him savagely across his right cheek. Blood spouted, but he stood stolid. "This for your violence!" she said, and the silver gauntlet tore his left cheek. Then her eyes softened. "And this," she murmured, "for your love!"

Her arms circled him, her body was warm against him, and her exquisite lips burned against his. He felt as if he embraced a

flame for a moment, and then she was gone, and a part of his soul went with her. When he heard the hoofs of the stallion Eblis pounding beyond the window, he turned and walked slowly out of the house to where Vail still crouched beside her father's body. She clung to him, wiped the blood from his cheeks, and strangely, her words were not of her father, or of the sparing of Hull's life, but of Black Margot.

"I knew you lied to save me," she murmured. "I knew you never loved her."

And Hull, in whom there was no falsehood, drew her close to him and said nothing.

But Black Margot rode north from Selui through the night. In the sky before her were thin shadows leading phantom armies, Alexander the Great, Attila, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Napoleon, and clearer than all, the battle queen Semiramis. All the mighty conquerors of the past, and where were *they*, where were their empires, and where, even, were their bones? Far in the south were the graves of men who loved her, all except Old Einar, who tottered like a feeble gray ghost across the world to find his.

At her side Joaquin Smith turned as if to speak, stared, and remained silent. He was not accustomed to the sight of tears in the eyes and on the cheeks of Black Margot.*

* All conversation ascribed to the Princess Margaret in this story is taken verbatim from an anonymous volume published in Urbs in the year 186, called "Loves of the Black Flame." It is credited to Jacques Lebeau, officer in command of the Black Flame's personal guard.