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**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**

"Destroy the Rose—and the powers of the  
Demon with it."



# Duar the Accursed

By CLIFFORD BALL

*A surprising tale about the Black Tower and the intrusion therein of  
a barbarian adventurer—a strange weird tale of the  
love of a queen for her enemy*

**N**IONE of the Krall Dynasty, ruler of Ygoth, for all her lithe beauty of rounded limbs, sat on her throne like a man, with an elbow resting on crossed knees and knuckles under chin. Before her a ring of guards surrounded a bareheaded man of great stature whose bronze, half-naked body was loaded down with heavy chains. Many scars and sword-cuts testified to the difficulty of his capture. The man stood insolently gazing over the Queen's head at the purple and

gold of the tapestries as though something of great interest held his attention to their scarlet colors. The fair occupant of the throne, accustomed to bended knees and supplications, was rapidly losing her temper.

"Speak, dog!" she cried. "Find your tongue, or by Krall I'll have my torturers find it with the plucking-tongs!"

At last the captive deemed it best to answer. He did not hurry. His gaze wandered slowly from the walls to the guards, from the guards to the chains on his limbs, at which he stared as though in surprised discovery, and finally to the enraged features of Queen Nione of Ygoth.

"Faith," he said, and his tone was slurred and deep, "by the look of you you'd be a better warrior than a man's mistress!"

Around him his chains rattled as the guards gave nervous starts. The two women-slaves crouching at the foot of the dais turned as pale as their brown skins would permit. Queen Nione lost all of her regal bearing and some of her dignity.

"I am no man's mistress!" she shrieked like any fish-wife. "But you will learn before long who I am, creature! I'll brand my name on you with letters of fire!"

"And I'll carry it a long way, Your Majesty," interrupted the undaunted captive. A slight curl of his firm lips belied any humility.

"Only to the slave galleys, dog!" taunted Nione. "I see by the marks on your back you are not unacquainted with them. You've felt the weight of the lash before."

"Sure. And I've felt the weight of a crown, too, but perhaps a little less heavily, for the mark of it seems to be gone."

The prisoner smiled with a flash of white teeth that split the tanned grinness

of his countenance like a beam of light over a dark battlefield. One of the guards jerked impatiently on a chain. The smile faded as the captive gave his captor a level stare holding the threat of death behind calm blue eyes. The guard shuffled his feet nervously until Queen Nione, watching the byplay, chose to become expressive.

"Fools! What have I in my guardsmen? Dancing-girls from Nyema?"

"Three of them danced into Hell but a little while ago," muttered the chained man.

"What is your name, O Mighty One?" mocked Nione.

"Men call me Duar."

The Queen of Ygoth relaxed on her cushioned throne as a wave of surprise swept the clouds of anger from her face. She raised one hand unconsciously to suddenly pallid features. If the guardsmen had been startled before, now they were certainly in panic, much as if they had captured one of the terrible white apes from the hills of Barsoom and were unable to let it go. Backing to the extreme limits of the chains they held, they attempted to go still farther without endangering themselves or their Queen by entirely releasing the iron bonds. Duar was forced to extend his arms as the chains threatened to pull him asunder.

"I see, Nione," he grimaced, "that even in this barbarous country men have heard of me." He shook his long mane of black hair impatiently. "Tell these jackals to ease my wrists before I tangle their bones in my fetters."

**N**IONE motioned wordlessly. The guards stepped cautiously nearer to leave slack in the weights; but one careful fellow placed his unsheathed sword-tip to the back of Duar's neck and held it there.

"I bring your person no harm, Nione,"

continued the prisoner, "nor harm to your subjects. The three I killed I was forced to when they attacked me in the mountain pass. Faith, it's a fine welcome you give to visitors to your kingdom!"

"Duar, the Accursed!" breathed Nione. "What demon brings you here?"

"No demon, O Queen. Merely my roving inclinations."

"Demons have always prompted your inclinations, O Duar! Even in this secluded mountain kingdom have we heard of your familiars from Hell! Whence came the red rain of blood that covered the battlefield of Kor and blinded the eyes of the Sivian hosts while your followers cut them to ribbons? And where the giant black raven that flew above your pirate galley when you ravished the coasts of Krem? Why did the mountains of Fuvia shatter themselves over your castles while the mighty hurricane destroyed your villages and your fields as the raging seas finally obliterated the whole of the kingdom King Duar had raised with his pirate hordes? Why, O King who is now a slave?"

"Faith, and I know not," he answered. "Mine has been a strange life, it's true. Perhaps there is a destiny for me. I sometimes think that when I have swerved from the chosen path the Gods ordained, it is the very elements who rise to set me back. But I know little more than you. I have gone with the wind and the tide. When the Gods said I should be a king, I was, and a pirate I became likewise."

"It is easy to blame everything on the Gods!"

"Why not?" inquired the prisoner, and his white teeth flashed again. "I came to this world without asking, but if I leave it 'twill be no fault of mine."

"Aye, O King and pirate and slave! Whence did you come? What far-off country saw your birth, you who have the height of the mountain men, the thin

nostrils of the horesmen of Kor, the black hair of the cavemen, the blue eyes of those who haunt the islands of the seas, and the swift strength of the dwellers of the plains? In all of our world there has never been born such a composite prodigy of nature. Or are you of our world? A demon, perhaps, in the guise of man? You were never a child—to human knowledge. Even the seers can trace you no farther back than your first battles, and your history is not in the stars. Whence?"

"Again I am ignorant, Nione."

The captive's eyes were pensive and his brow furrowed in thought. The ruler of Krall gazed at his features watchfully, but some of the sternness was gone from her face and only the slaves and the wide-eyed guardsmen noticed the easy familiarity with which the prisoner ignored the rightful titles of their Queen. The highest member of the court would have had his tongue torn from its roots for using such a form of address to the Queen of Ygoth.

"My first memories are of the clash and ring of metal upon metal in the heat of a great battle and sweat and blood on my face as I called our battle-cry. I was a mercenary on the field of Sate fighting in the service of the fool King Tærus, whom later I had the satisfaction of spitting on my sword."

"Over a dancing-girl!" concluded the Queen spitefully, and sniffed.

The captive shrugged but remained silent.

Nione contemplated the swordsman through half-closed eyes. Calmly he returned her gaze, and something in the depths of his fierce blue eyes caused her pulse to beat a little faster, and a faint flush tinged her alabaster cheeks.

"If," she asked finally, irritated at these signs of weakness in her august person, "my guards should conduct you in safety to the limits of my borders, on

any side you desire, would you go—peacefully?"

Again Duar shrugged and the chains rattled. "Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps—not."

"You fool!" cried Nione, now crimson. "I am giving you your life! Know you I could have you impaled, torn apart, killed a thousand ways! I grant you mercy and you care nothing?"

"Mercy? For what? For defending myself from onslaught? From cruelty? Your eyes belie the name you seek to frighten with!" He sighed. "Almost I wish I were a king again!"

"Throw him into the Pits!" screamed the outraged ruler of Ygoth. "And—and put extra chains on him!"

As the guards led their captive away, the foremost stepping hastily before the long strides of the prisoner, Duar called mockingly back over his shoulder: "Beware, O Queen Nione, lest the red rain come and the black raven perch on the turrets of your castles!"

One of the guards dropped his end of the chain, whereat the captain, to hide his own fears, kicked him lustily as he stooped to recover it.

Nione stared, white-faced, as a peal of laughter rolled back from the dark corridor.

**T**HE Pits of Ygoth, far beneath the turrets and spires of the fair city above, reeked of the staleness and corruption of centuries. Age-old dampness permeated the foul atmosphere; small creatures of this dank underworld scampered and scurried just beyond the torchlights of the guards. The clanking of Duar's chains, now multiplied until even his mighty frame staggered beneath their weight, awoke echoes now near, now far, until it seemed to the small body of men that they were intruding into the haunts of all the long-dead kings and warriors

of ancient Krall and their lost souls were girding up rusty mail for ghostly conflict.

"This one will do." The captain's voice was harsh.

Duar was pushed through a rusty barred door and flung into a corner, the crash of his irons shattering the stillness of the Pits for a mile or more throughout their silent depths. His chains attached to corroded iron rungs on the wall, he lay watching the last glimmer of torchlight fade from the damp stones as the muffled footsteps of the guards died away down the passage. Darkness rushed in triumphant, clashing against his eyeballs with almost physical impact.

The man who had been a king smiled into the black inferno. A memory of the alabaster features of Nione rose before him and the smile became a grin. He moved into a slightly dryer corner of the cell and stretched out his legs as comfortably as possible, removing some object that felt like a dried shinbone from beneath his spine. His chains grew quiet again. Something scuttled past the doorway and he had an impression of tiny, gleaming red eyes.

Duar slept.

**H**E AWOKE with a sense of uneasiness, akin to the disturbed nerves of a jungle animal before approaching peril; not as a civilized man, drowsy from deep slumber, but instantly, fully cognizant of his surroundings and predicament. Only a slight twitching of his sword-arm answered his first nervous impulse to reach for the weapon that was not there.

Silence and everlasting night reigned where the cleanliness of the sun had never shone. Duar's straining eyes met only blankness and told his tense figure nothing, but his ears gave proof that even the scamperings and rustlings had stilled, and sub-consciously he knew some alien presence had frightened them away—a

presence without sound, but his heart and brain and whatever intangible part of him men called the soul were clamoring a nerve-shattering alarm.

Suddenly tiny molecules of light flickered in the black chaos before him, twisting and tumbling in a circular area like separate parts, as if each held a tiny life of its own. They spread no beams to reveal the rude chamber; outside of their small circumference the dungeon remained as dark as ever, but within the whirling area of infinitesimal sparks an unearthly glow became brighter and brighter.

Duar had seen sorcery before over half the world, even in the black mountains of his own forbidding kingdom before the great walls fell to bury it for ever from the sight of man, but some intuition told him he was confronted by a hitherto unwitnessed demonstration. This, thought he, was a witch-fire. He sat quietly; he had not once moved a limb from the moment he awoke.

A voice came from the light, a sweet, soft, woman's voice that nevertheless, in spite of its obvious femininity, held undertones of power.

"Duar!" it called. "Duar! Do you hear, O Duar?"

"I hear you, devil," growled the man in chains. "What wizardry is this, you spawn of Hell, and what do you want of me?"

"Duar, my lord!" The scintillating area of light, if the unnatural glow could be described as light, expanded until it was nearly eight feet in diameter. The dethroned king felt terrific forces struggling in wild efforts for freedom there before him, but though the outlines of the circle quivered and writhed they held fast to their shape. Somehow the captive knew he should be glad that this was so; his barbarian blood felt the touch of fear.

"Duar, beloved, have you forgotten my voice in these few short eons?"

"What talk is this of love and eons?" growled the beleaguered man. "Faith, and I've never known the two to be associated outside of song! And if I had free hands with a sword in them I'd see what cold steel would find in that fire-ball of yours, demon or succuba, or whatever you are!"

"Perhaps if you saw me you would remember," said the sweet tones. "I had hopes——"

The center of the fire grew dim and blurred as a maid's breath blurs her mirror. Slowly, by degrees, appeared the face and figure of a woman—or a Thing resembling a woman.

"In the Name of——" gasped Duar, shocked from his philosophic calm at last.

"Nay, do not name the lesser Gods, O Duar," counseled the figure. "Rather, call on Him Whom you have the right to call on, the God of Gods, the Ancient One Who is older than the earth or men, He of Whom *you* were the high priest!"

The words only half penetrated the captive's mind. He was staring at a vision that within the innermost chambers of his mind he knew could not have been born of human flesh. Her form was incased in one long robe of shimmering white, a robe of strange weave and texture to Duar's astonished eyes, held by a black girdle at the waist. The perfect figure beneath the single garment was obvious in every line and curve up to the white column of the shapely throat and the queenly contour of face and brow. Her raven-black hair fell in a long cascade over the proudly held shoulders. In the depths of her dark, hypnotic eyes swam all the black suns of the universe in a constant play of ebony light. Neither flaw nor blemish marred the ivory perfection of her features. Beauty incarnate in the Pits of Ygoth!

"Do you remember yet, O Duar?" she of the fire was asking. "Can you recall—the Name?"

The barbarian warrior who had never flinched before man or beast or devil placed his hands over his face and crouched in the corner of his dungeon as a thousand wild memories and desires crashed at his brain—*from within!* The walls of the Pits seemed to shake, the very earth to tumble from its balance; great winds from the outer voids pulled and tore at his body. Or was it *his* body, this form composed of flesh and blood that called itself Duar? For an instant he and the figure in white were high among the stars in the infinity of space, and earth and men and kingdoms were no more. He was about to see, to comprehend, some great knowledge.

Suddenly the universe began to spin. A black cloud from nowhere enveloped his brain and it became a blank thing. He was back in the Pits of Ygoth with a whirling light and the Thing that was too beautiful to be a woman.

"Failure, O Ancient One!" the voice was saying. "Again I have come too soon! How many more eons must your servant wait? How many more earths must crumble and suns grow cold before he remembers Shar, this poor earth-bound spirit that was once your greatest worshipper? Then, and then only, with his aid and the knowledge which is locked in his spirit, I may resurrect the truths so that your greatness and our elder race will prevail once more! How long?"

**K**ING DUAR, now released from the power waves that had enmeshed his mind, became his bold self again. He set his eyes fiercely on the shining form, and although his limbs still shook from the internal holocaust he spoke bravely.

"Curse these hell-haunted dungeons where a man cannot even die in peace!

And curse your chattering, woman—if woman you are! If I had but freedom and a sword——"

"Pity, O Duar! I never gave pity to anyone else, and the feeling of it is strange. You, who could have all the kingdoms of the world—yes, and of other worlds—and all you want is a sword!"

"With a sword I cut my own kingdom!" boasted Duar, undaunted. "With a sword I could cut your throat!"

"Poor Duar, housing a spirit too great for himself! Do you ever dream you are not as other men? That once, long ago, you were one of the Masters? I trailed you across time, O little man——"

"Little man!" exploded the fuming barbarian, his rage bursting all mental bonds and carrying away his power of coherent speech in a red torrent of madness.

"Losing the world and caring naught," said she of the light. "Losing a kingdom and caring naught. Losing liberty—all for the sake of the Rose of Gaon!"

The prisoner ceased to rattle his chains in his frenzy. With great gulps of the foul air he stifled the madness in his blood.

"How did you know that?" he whispered harshly. "How did you know what only I, the only living man on earth, had knowledge of?"

The figure smiled at him. "The only living—yes. But I am Shar, who knows everything save the knowledge locked in your spirit that belongs to another greater than common men, the knowledge of the high priest you once were and which you do not know you possess."

"Indeed you are a demon," grunted Duar.

"No demon. You have forgotten the arts. Demons are my slaves. It is a demon who guards the Rose of Gaon in the northwestern tower of Ygoth. If you

must, go strike him down. Maybe combat with the evil forces will shrink this human flesh of yours and the true spirit will escape to join me and end my quest. Perhaps! Even I, Shar, cannot tell! Go."

"Go?" roared Duar. "You may go, you devil sent here from Hell to torture me! You may be as beautiful as the Devil's mistress, but if I could get my fingers on that white neck of yours——"

He rattled the mocking chains in an agony of despair.

"Those?" Shar smiled.

Suddenly a portion of the light circle broke away from the revolving main mass, and darting like a flash of steel in campfire light it touched the heavy chains on the prisoner's body. Amazed, the barbarian leapt to his feet as a hundred severed links of iron that had been his fetters clattered about his ankles.

"Go," said Shar, "to the Rose of Gaon and the demon in the tower. I will be watching, my lord, even as when I blinded your enemies in battle and guided your ship at sea. Perhaps even Time will relent its waywardness!"

Abruptly Duar stood alone in the blackness of the Ygoth Pits.

"Accursed witch!" he exclaimed aloud. "Rescue it may be, but no good will come of it! In another hour or two Nione would have been curious enough to send for me. Now where in the name of the Seven Gods is that door?"

**T**HE Queen of Krall braided her golden hair in preparation for retirement to the royal bed and smiled an appreciative commendation to her reflection in the jewel-studded mirror. She was fully aware of her beauty and exercised it on occasions before visiting diplomats. Before the nobles of her own court she retained the masculine manners of her dead father, and although she knew they penetrated her brusqueness, she cared little.

In her judgment there was no one in the kingdom of Ygoth fit to share the double throne.

As she completed the last plait and thrust the braids back, a vision arose before her of the statuesque adventurer she had that day committed to the Pits. He was a handsome man; obviously interesting. A bold warrior, also, with a hundred legends to his record. Apparently a temper to match her own. Her thoughts strayed. If he had been a noble of the court instead of the vagrant, dispossessed ruler of a buried kingdom! . . . A tinge of pink embellished her fair complexion. Nione, thinking like a courtesan!

Suddenly her eyes grew wide with terror and the blush became a pallor as reflected movement in the glass surface showed billowings in the draperies. Someone had entered, unannounced, the sacred precinct that was the bedchamber of the Queen. Her personal handmaiden had already been dismissed; the guardsmen outside would never have had the temerity to enter unless an alarm had been given. What danger stalked here? Assassination?

In spite of the trembling in her limbs and the pounding heart beneath her flimsy night attire, regal Nione of Ygoth spoke in a calm, authoritative voice: "What coward comes skulking in the dark?"

"One who resents the appellation, Your Majesty," replied Duar, stepping through the portieres, and still damp from the dungeons. His right hand held a sword, unsheathed.

However the apparition of a vengeful prisoner released in her boudoir may have affected Nione, there seemed to be more color to her cheeks and a returned ease to her posture as she swung to face him. In her heart she knew here was no assassin.

"Apparently my Pits are not deep enough!"



"Nor would be the pits of Hell if I wished to view Your glorious Majesty!"

"Nor my guards strong enough!"

"Nor guards, nor swords——"

"Whence came the one you hold?" asked the Queen, pointing to the bright blade Duar held at rest.

"The guard without, my Queen, is now without his sword." Again the white teeth flashed. "I was hungry and I could not find the kitchens. But as I wandered about, marveling at the splendor—and the inhospitality—of so magnificent a Queen, I perceived before these doors a certain belligerent person who rudely accosted me. When he became vicious I was forced to relieve him of his weapon. I trust his skull is not so badly cracked; I but wished to pacify his war-like inclinations."

Nione interrupted with a gale of silvery laughter. Her merriment, the thrown-back head and pulsing throat, momentarily swept his senses with a surge of admiration. Whatever Shar was, she might be, but here was something human!

"You burst the heaviest chains in my deepest Pits, find your way through endless corridors, wander through my halls at will and, unarmed, smite down one of the best warriors in my kingdom to force your way into the chambers of the Queen where no man has trod in years—then you apologize!"

She rocked in unqueenly mirth.

"You—are not afraid?" he asked softly.

"Of Duar? No! I know your history—the part known to men—too well! You are no evil ravisher or torturer of women. Of Duar the Accursed—perhaps—a little! There may be demons in your shadow I care not to see!"

"Then in the Names of the Gods, get me something to eat!" swore the ex-captive. "I starve, woman!"

He flung the sword carelessly on the silken coverlets of the royal couch.

A DROWSY hand-maid, eyes still blurred from sleep, appeared in answer to the imperial summons on the bell-rope. Evidently she surmised the outstretched guard at the portals was in a state of slumber instead of unconsciousness, for her features registered no alarm until they espied the giant form of the adventurer sprawled in a royal chair. To her fear-stricken eyes and gaping mouth Nione said: "Food, immediately, for myself—you understand? And if you breathe one word you go back to slavery! Hasten."

"Or I slit your throat!" added Duar lazily.

The startled servant vanished in a whirlwind of terror.

"I ordered food for you in the cells," stated the Queen, ominously. "Were my guards afraid to serve it?"

"I did not like the banquet hall," observed the late captive. He regarded her through lowered eyelids. Was this ready acquiescence some feminine trick?

When the food arrived, Duar commanded the slave to sit on a divan in the corner. He trusted little to a servant's tongue, fearful or not, and if he perceived the sigh of relief Nione emitted over the enforced chaperonage, he chose not to comment on it. When the tender meat of the fowl's flesh was devoured and washed down by the white wine of Ygoth's slopes, he shoved away the serving-tray and reached for the sword he had won.

"And now?" questioned the hostage Queen.

"We pay a visit, *you* and I, to the object of my visit—a rare jewel, if truth be told. And perhaps a demon."

"A—a demon?"

"Aye. The plagued land appears to be

surfeited with them. Faith, I've for ever expected them, never to find them, and found them where I never expected. But this night I have been made certain by good authority. Nione, if a thing was stolen from you that you never knew you possessed, or counted among the values of your kingdom, would it be robbery?"

The Queen was mystified and a little angered, as puzzled women so often are.

"You speak in riddles, O slave-king. Though you hold my person you cannot make a fool of me. Do you know there is not one chance in a million of your leaving Ygoth alive? And not one chance in ten million of your crossing the boundaries? You have my person, Duar, but not my kingdom!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Duar meaningly, "a kingdom lacking a king."

Nione was hushed into apprehensive silence. The fear-stricken maid trembled in her corner. The erstwhile captive continued his narrow-eyed scrutiny and a nervous quiet reigned before he spoke again.

"Nione, have you ever heard of the Rose of Gaon?"

"I have fed you and offered you freedom but I will not guess at your riddles!"

"Spitfire! Have you heard of the Black Tower of Ygoth?"

The Queen shuddered. "Who has not, O Duar? The most feared spot in all my land, shunned by all! Would I could destroy it, but the ancient laws and the commands of the priests forbid. My subjects avert their gaze as they pass, and even the birds of the air will not circle above those ominous turrets. What seek you in the Black Tower?"

"Fortune! Power to raise a kingdom once more!"

"A kingdom from the lost souls of dead murderers?"

"Aye. I know of your customs. If a man, or a woman at times, commits a

crime so foul that they cannot even be awarded the punishment of a clean death by sword or of slow starvation in the Pits, the ancient law of Ygoth ordains the priests shall march them to the entrance of the Black Tower. There they are left to some inevitable and horrible doom; inevitable, for they never return from beyond the grim portals. The secrets of the Tower are lost in antiquity. Only the legends of your priests, who themselves have never entered, hint at the unknown fates of the condemned who were driven within the walls. A calloused criminal may laugh at the sword, but no human heart will fail to beat a little faster at the threat of the unknown danger."

"They say," whispered Nione, "the Black Tower stood alone when all this land was barren and my forefathers who founded the dynasty of Krall were yet unborn! It is a hateful place where even a shrub or vine will not crawl from the earth. I care not to look upon it."

"And dim the glory of your eyes," commented Duar pleasantly. "Yet this night we visit therein."

"We? Do you think you can drag *me* there, of all places, like a common wench?"

"Or carry. You are my password. Ygoth is too well patrolled, by your own word, even for me."

"The first guard we meet will imprison you!"

"Not with the ring of Nione before his eyes—and a whisper or two. He will elevate his eyebrows as we pass and comment to himself that even a Queen must have diversions."

Nione's cheeks flamed. "Never! No man in all my kingdom would ever think so of me."

Duar laughed. "Men are always men, even when thinking of a Queen!"

"Beast! Slave! Barbarian!"

"For the moment, 'King.' But to con-

tinue. An unfrocked priest, dying on a battlefield, told me of a jewel called the Rose of Gaon that lay within the walls of the Black Tower of Ygoth, a jewel magnificent in size and beauty. He said that I, being Duar the Accursed, could pass in safety through the chamber of the hopeless dead who have been condemned there and claim the stone. He was a vengeful creature and I believe he meant to send me to my death even as he lay dying. Perhaps he did, for here I am. Now you know why I came to Ygoth. If the words he spoke were true, with that jewel I could buy enough men to conquer a new kingdom. Slave I may have been, but there is royal blood in my veins and I cannot rest unless I am a king!"

**H**is last words were delivered in such impassioned tones that the servant girl was hardly able to stifle a scream. Nione's gaze searched the depths of his blue eyes and moved on to wander over the scars of his ragged person.

"It seems," she observed, "the Queen is dethroned. But I have my pride—and courage. My guards will not break down the doors to find me screaming like a street-wench in your arms. Maid, bring cloaks!"

"I wonder," mused Duar aloud, "if you'd scream."

Twice in their journey through the streets they were halted by an inquisitive night patrol, but each time the sight of the Queen's personal ring gave them free passage and each time Duar chuckled quietly at the amazed expressions on the faces of the captains confronted by the royal seal. The second time, as the patrol with its dim hand-lights passed on, he laughed aloud. Nione deliberately kicked his shin in a most unqueenly manner.

"If a Queen is ridiculed, no one laughs!" she reminded him fiercely.

"You are the most marvelous of Queens!" swore Duar devotedly.

At the northwestern corner of the city of Ygoth, where the ancient walls rose against the invaders of centuries ago and the possible ones of tomorrow, stood the Black Tower, alone in all its majestic solitude, with no other building or dwelling to share its vicinity. No one cared to live within the shadows of its evil memories. Once in a decade the feet of men approached its portals carrying some drugged wretch to be cast inside the doors that stood always open, like the gates of Hell; some creature in the form of man who had committed a monstrous crime. What horrible fate they met within or below the black walls no living soul ever knew, and only the priests guessed. None ever returned from the forbidding, evil tower whose ebony turrets rose against the pure sky like the clutching fingers of a demon from the lowest pits.

Once close to the grim walls the woman who was a Queen and the man who had been a king halted in silence to survey their goal. Not even a bat stirred the ghostly stillness. All was darkness, still and remote. Here in the shadow of the tower the moonlight was gone as if a hand from Hell had stricken the silvery orb from the heavens. A monument to the shadowy God of Death.

"Wait for me here, O Nione," said Duar. "If I come back I'll bring you a king's ransom—if I find you here to lead me again through the guards. If I find you not—I'll come through the guards alone and drape the dead demon over your palace walls!"

"My will prevailing, I will be here."

"I'll bring back a share of the Rose for you," promised Duar as he vanished into the night. An answering whisper came from behind, momentarily checking his stride: "Bring back yourself, O Duar!"

AT THE threshold, where the great dark portals swung wide, he paused in a fruitless attempt to peer down the long flight of carven steps he knew lay before him. The dim reflection of moonlight showed only the gaping entrance and the rubble and debris of passing centuries; the time-worn descent to unknown punishment was blotted from the eye. Barbarian though he was, Duar muttered a prayer to the Seven Gods before he descended the topmost step, after which he ventured downward, surely the only man in eons to come upright and not falling in screaming terror from the hands of executioner priests.

He counted the steps. One hundred, one hundred and fifty—how far into the earth did they go? He cursed his lack of foresight in not bringing a torch. A minute later his outthrust foot struck level floor and he felt his way cautiously along a damp wall, testing each step lest he cast himself into an unseen pit. The wall was carven curiously; after feeling some of the figures beneath his fingertips he was almost glad he had neglected a torch.

Abruptly he felt the Force. It struck him, body and face, like a blast of hot wind from the deserts. First obstructing, then suddenly altering, it impeded his progress little as it seemed to hurry him onward. He became conscious he was almost running in a desperate effort to keep up with the passage of the air, or Force.

"By the Gods!" he muttered through set teeth. "This is an undignified way to receive me into Hell!"

The passage ended with startling suddenness; he was in a great chamber lit by a ruddy glow. The glow came from an object lying upon a huge stone, carved as a perfect square and resting in the exact center of the great circular hall. Duar advanced cautiously with drawn

sword toward the source of the light. Several times he stumbled clumsily over irregular heaps of rubbish on the floor, and once it seemed to him he only managed to keep from falling by the intentness of his gaze on the lurid fire before him.

Now he was wading, like one who crosses a mountain torrent breast-high, and the Force was roaring in his ears until his temples hurt. It pressed on his head and shoulders, inexorably, urging him to lie down and rest. Tearing his eyes from the glory of the light, he glanced about, seeking a level spot on which to relax. The horror he beheld smote his weary brain back to activity. He was treading over the *remains of countless skeletons!*

Here lay the answer of the destiny of the wretched culprits condemned to the Black Tower. Hundreds upon hundreds of them, back through the centuries, had been thrust down the dark stairway to feel the Force and hasten onward to their doom. Those who sat down to rest rested there for ever. An effort to retreat would be like forcing a stone wall with bare hands; the demon power was too strong. Always must the victim proceed to the light. The strength and will-power of each was denoted by the distance he or she covered toward the beckoning light before they succumbed to the baleful Force. The long-dead bones reflected dimly the weird glow of the goal they never had reached.

"A curse on you!" roared Duar through the deathly silence of the death chamber, before he realized he was cursing the object of his quest. For the light he approached was coming from the heart of the Rose of Gaon! It lay on a black table of stone, its size as large as Duar's clenched fist. A magnificent ruby of unnatural circumference, it shone clear

and glowing with a life of its own, shedding supernatural rays over the dead bones of the underground tomb; the ransom of a thousand kings, but so great in its dreadful power that no human could own it without sorcery. The barbarian king stood looking upon its baleful beauty, and even as his heart surged within his breast he knew it was not for him.

The demon Force struck him squarely. For the fraction of a second he was back on his heels as his sword cut only the thin air before him. Ferocious, snarling, the barbarian fought against an intangible substance he could not see, while the weight of the unknown Thing pressed about his throat until his breath came in uneven gasps. Furiously he cursed and struggled before the unseen power as weakness flowed into his veins and his muscles became lax with fatigue. His vision encompassed only the dim light of the jewel and the litter of decayed corpses about, but he battled an invisible monster of fangs and claws. Long red furrows appeared on his arms and chest, and brutal welts arose on his head and shoulders.

Duar, the king, knew he was beaten, but Duar the barbarian knew that only when he died he was dead. The primitive instinct kept him upright, thrusting into the dark cloud that had risen before him with a last desperate effort. Still, he recognized doom. No mortal man could withstand the powers of the demon of the Black Tower, and well he knew it. The end was inevitable; a barbarian king would join the corpses of the underground graveyard. So Duar slashed thin air with a useless weapon and prepared to die.

A FAINT glimmer of sparks in motion caught his eye. They appeared at his left elbow, not close enough to interfere with sword-play. Shar!

"I cannot fail you now, my lord," came the well-remembered tones he had heard in the Pits. "Even though you fight for that which is not yours and the body of another woman, I still support you and your childish desires. You cannot go in safety now unless you destroy the Rose—and the powers of the demon with it! Strike the Rose! Strike before the Hell-spawn destroys the spark in you which belongs to the Ancient One!"

The heavy, two-handed sword slashed into the very center of the baleful jewel reposing on its ebony pedestal. If a mountain had collapsed the thunder could have been no greater. Staggering, Duar perceived the precious fragments flying into a thousand disintegrated bits, while death winds blew into his face and the walls shook with their mad forces. Even the corpses seemed to rustle and stir as the elemental being that had guarded the Rose of Gaon departed the Black Tower for ever.

Bit by bit the skeletons were crumbling into dust, released from the eternal slavery of the fatal Rose. Through their shifting dust Duar stumbled toward the passageway. The shimmering form of his mystifying ally stood in his path; he halted, eager to depart but unwilling to desert even a sorceress in the loathsome chamber holding the remains of dead felons.

"I owe you thanks. My eyes were blinded like those who came before me. Alone, I would not have thought of striking the jewel."

"No mortal man could have touched that stone, O Duar! It was not even a jewel—but the heart of a demon. If the blood of the Elder Race did not flow in your veins you could never have approached so near to it."

"What is your interest in me, witch-

woman?" queried the barbarian, stubbornly. "Why did you free me in the Pits? I have no friends. I am Duar, the Accursed! I fight for no cause but my own, and my only power is the sword I hold!"

"You are mistaken!" Shar's voice rose to a higher pitch with the eloquence of her plea. Duar, you admit that, even to yourself, your life has been a mystery. I can explain the mystery and bring back to you your past, the age-old past when you were a priest of the Elders and all these peoples now inhabiting the earth were only things crawling in its mud. Of all the Elders I am the last. Only you, Duar, have some of the ancient blood, mixed with mankind's, in your human flesh. I watched you throughout your re-incarnations until, at last, I determined to arouse your sub-consciousness to the point where you could remember. I need your help! You were a priest of the Race once—you can be again! We will rule again, with the aid of the ancient powers, supreme and undefeatable, over the entire world! Think, my lord! Remember!"

Once again the witch-fires burned in his brain, rose and swirled and fell, and when his brain revolted against the tor-

ture of their passage his sight was cleared. All he could recall was the haunted underground pit, dust-laden and befouled with cursed souls.

"I am Duar."

Shar sighed. "Go then, Duar. When you are reborn I will come again—and again! Some day——" Her voice grew dim.

Heedless, he rushed up the stone stairs, in the direction no man had ever trod, to where Nione waited in sobbing anxiety, up to where the kingdom of Ygoth lay before his regal eyes. He knew she waited for him, long before he saw her silhouetted against the moon as she placed a hesitant foot on the first of the steps leading to the unknown depths. Exultation flooded his heart. She had been willing to follow him to a nameless death! What more could a barbarian wish than a powerful kingdom and a beautiful Queen?

But there came a whisper to his ears as he emerged from the haunted tower, a thin, ghostly strain from the echoes of his past:

"O Duar, you fool! You who could have possessed the world, taking but one little kingdom for yourself!"

