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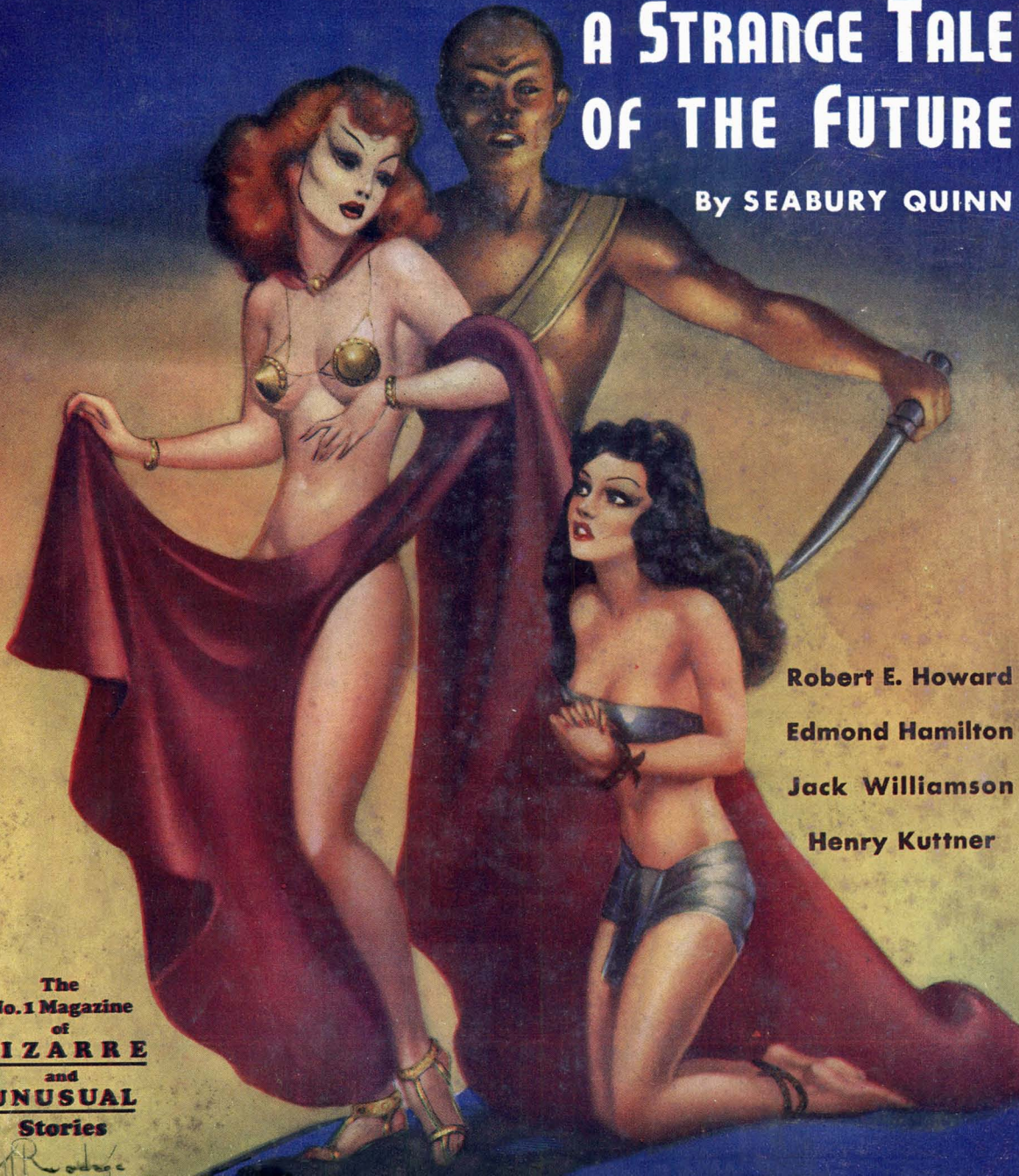
Weird Tales

MAY

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A STRANGE TALE
OF THE FUTURE

By SEABURY QUINN



Robert E. Howard

Edmond Hamilton

Jack Williamson

Henry Kuttner

The
No. 1 Magazine
of
BIZARRE
and
UNUSUAL
Stories

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



Goetterdaemmerung

By SEABURY QUINN

There was a moment of stunning impact as the two cars crashed together, then a strange awakening—but what was the inscription on the tombstone in that ancient graveyard?

THE predawn chill was in the air and wisps of vapor indistinct and intangible as dreams dreamt in another dream were spiraling and swirling from the Hudson's slowly heaving surface as Stacy passed the barricades which marked the Jersey terminal of the George Washington Bridge. Behind him reared the topless minarets and spires of New York, dull black as sharply serrated basalt cliffs with only here and there a firefly jet of light to show where janitresses labored late to clean the miles of checkered corridors that floored the towering office buildings, or bookkeepers worked tired eyes to exhaustion to make their reports ready for the morning. Against the crenelated skyline the east turned tawny gray, then steel, lightened to pale, cold blue. To his left lay Palisade, Coytsville on the right, and straight ahead the long, smooth ribbon of the concrete road.

He pressed his foot on the accelerator as he cleared the Port Authority police booths and the pointer on the dial of his speedometer swung in a sharp arc, forty, sixty, then eighty. The party that the boys had given him had been a grand success; cocktails, sherry, sauterne, burgundy, finally champagne with dinner; brandy and Chartreuse with coffee, then the evening's serious drinking. "All very well, my boy; quite the thing for bachelors, but tomorrow — no, today!—your bachelor days are done." There were

forty miles of road between him and an hour or two in bed, a hot bath and cold shower, an ice massage and careful toilet, then St. Dunstan's and the oh-ing and the ah-ing of the crowd when the organ started playing Lohengrin and Emily and Mr. Taylor started up the aisle with the bridesmaids pacing stiffly as automatons before them. Fumes of Scotch and Irish mixed with bourbon clouded through his brain, and he smiled the fatuous grin of the half drunken as he urged the car to greater speed.

Eighty — eighty-five, the indicator registered. "Tum — tum — te-tum," he hummed the opening bar of Wagner's Bridal Chorus—"here comes the bride . . . dearly beloved, we are gathered together here . . . swell condition you'll be in to go through with it, you half-baked, drunken lout . . . so what? Who cares? What'll be the difference two hundred years from now——"

The red light swinging from the stalled truck's tail came at him with a breathless rush. Like a meteor, a comet, a world gone blazing from its orbit it dashed at him, red as flames reflected in a pool of blazing oil, red as hell-fire licking at a sinful soul, red as the blood that seemed already spurting from his face to meet the smashing impact of collision. "O, God have mercy!" he exclaimed, and his voice though scarce above a whisper had the knife-edged sharpness of a shrilling scream. "O, God——"

THE voices had an oddly alien intonation, not quite English, not quite any foreign speech, but puzzlingly mixed, thick-tongued, queerly slurred, yet understandable. Stacy set his teeth and shut his eyes more tightly. The pain would be upon him any moment now! Presently the anodyne of shock or drugs would wear away, and he'd begin to feel the torment of mashed bones and mangled flesh in every nerve. Dully, he remembered the collision. He must have struck that stalled van like a cannon ball. Lucky to be alive . . . or was he? When he raised his lids he'd see 'em standing over him, nurse and doctor, looking at

him with professional cheerfulness, but underneath the bandages he knew his body would be maimed and broken like a china doll dropped from a tower. Crippled for life, probably; bed-bound, tethered to a wheel chair, helpless as a six weeks' babe. . . .

"You like get up now; mebbe so, Mister, please?" the softly slurring, slightly hissing intonation broke his gloomy mental monolog. "Long time you lie here like one piece dead man. You all right now, mebbe so?"

Slowly, lid by cautious doubtful lid, Stacy's eyes came open. This was no sterile-walled hospital room he lay in,



"What nameless horror sat enthroned upon a face that must be hidden from the eyes of men?"

nor were these people nurse and doctor. He lay upon a bank of rankly growing grass flecked here and there with brilliant trumpet-runner blossoms, and across the heaving mounds of sward-upholstered earth there sprawled a jungle growth of wild blackberry bushes. Oak and pine and poplar trees grew clustering on the row of hills that cut his vision on the west; eastward rose another thickly matted forest, its tree-trunks bound together by an undergrowth as unkempt as a giant's beard.

The men who bent above him were as hard to place as the wild countryside. They were short and thickly built, and while their skin was white it had a sallowness that hinted at an underlay of tan. Their hair was straight and black and coarse, their eyes dark brown and slanting upward at the outer corners, their noses short and rather flat, with flaring nostrils. Vaguely Stacy tried to catalog them. White skins with Mongoloid features. Finns, perhaps?

Resolutely he reclosed his eyes. "'Tisn't so," he muttered. "Can't be. I hit that truck ten miles outside of Hackensack; so if they didn't take me to a hospital I'd be lying by the road. There's no road here, and I'm dam' sure this is no hospital. I'm still under. That's it, they gave me ether when they operated, and I'm still under it. Go away, little men," he waved a hand impatiently. "You're not really here. You're just the figments of a fantasy. Pretty soon I'll wake up and begin to hurt like hell. I'd like to sleep till then. Go away, please."

The little men looked at him stolidly, showing neither pleasure nor displeasure at his words. They seemed more inquisitive than friendly as the smaller of them asked again, "You like get up now, mebber, please? You come along us?"

"Anything to be obliging," Stacy answered as he got unsteadily upon his feet.

The small, queer-looking men assisted him, one on either side, and as he spread his arms out, resting them upon his helpers' shoulders, he noticed that they wore a costume which combined the Orient and Occident grotesquely. Tight trousers cased their legs, and short jackets with wide sleeves and round necks sheathed their upper bodies. Upon their heads they wore round caps of knitted fabric, while their feet were shod with heavy knitted socks and sandals made of plaited straw. Each had a girdle belted round his waist and in it was a short, curved-bladed sword. One had a bow and quiverful of arrows slung across his back; the other bore a long spear which he used now as a staff, leaning on it heavily as Stacy's weight pressed on his shoulder.

Their path wound up a thickly wooded hillside, and as they mounted, Stacy's strength revived. By the time they reached the crest he walked alone, drawing back to let his helpers lead the way. But this, it seemed, they had no mind to do. When he motioned them to take the lead they stared at him, not hostilely, but, it seemed to him, suspiciously, then shook their heads decidedly. Finally a compromise was reached and the spearman stepped ahead while the archer dropped back several paces, pointing down the path which wound between the clustering pine trees. Stacy motioned him to come abreast, but the fellow laid his hand upon his sword and scowled.

"O. K., brother," Stacy answered. "If I'm to be brought in under guard it's quite all right with me. But don't prod me with that sticker or you'll wake me up; then you'd both go glimmering back to dreamland's storehouse."

As they crossed the little brook that trickled through the valley, Stacy saw the tracks of deer pressed in the sand, and an eery feeling rippled up his spine as, close beside a pool made by the brooklet's sud-

den winding, he noted larger paw-prints. Mountain lion tracks, he recognized them from his western hunting-trips. Farther on, a tree showed ragged gashes on its bark, and a tuft or two of brown-black fur. Bear! This was the wildest dream a fellow ever had, no matter how much he'd been drinking. Less than thirty miles from New York, and a country wild as California in Kit Carson's day, with deer and bear and mountain lion roaming through the woods!

They followed the rough track across another hill, dipped down into a deeper valley, then began a steep ascent. On the summit of the hill he saw a group of buildings set against the sky, and drew his breath in sudden wonder. The nearer structures were no more than huts, low, single-storied cabins with swooping overhanging eaves; foundationless, set flat upon the ground. Arranged in circular formation, they clustered round a knot of larger buildings reared on the summit of the hill. These were surrounded by a dry ditch six feet deep and possibly twelve wide; an earthen bank sloped upward from its inner rim, set with a palisade of pointed stakes. A wide gateway with massive overhanging roof led through the crude outwork. Within the compound was a group of low, ignoble-looking houses, larger than the huts outside, but still far from impressive, and rising like skyscrapers from the meaner buildings were two pagodas, one two floors high, the other three, the upward sweep of their veranda roofs described in crudely chiseled puncheons, their sides rough logs. As they passed through the gate Stacy noted that the earth before the taller structures had been scraped free of grass, and that a doorless gateway stood before the higher one. It was a simple thing of logs, two uprights with a projecting crossbar at the top, and underneath a shorter horizontal beam with unprojecting ends.

"Great Scott," breathed Stacy, "pagodas and a torii. Japan in Jersey! What the——"

His question broke upon a scream, echoed by a shout of terror from his guards. In the sun-splashed foreground of the taller of the two pagodas stood a female figure, rigid as if carved of stone, and before it, sunbeams burnishing its tawny scales until they shone like polished copper, coiled a six-foot rattlesnake, head reared for a stroke, its little fork-tipped tongue alive with flickering menace.

The fellow with the bow reached into his quiver for an arrow, but the spearman waved him back. "No shoot," he ordered hoarsely. "If arrow miss, the Singing One bites Holiness! Pray!" And down upon their knees they went, striking foreheads to the earth and gabbling frenzied prayers so fast their words seemed strung together in a rosary of unintelligible syllables.

Stacy ripped his topcoat off and held it by the shoulders, draped curtainwise before him. "Hi!" he yelled, stamping on the hard-packed earth till little puffs of dust came up around his feet. "Hi-yab!" The reptile's tongue shot out again with death-tipped menace as it swung its head inquiringly in his direction, but it made no move toward him.

Slowly, step by cautious, shuffling step, Stacy advanced toward the snake. Now he was twenty feet away, now fifteen—ten. The distance seemed incalculable, his progress like the heavy-footed motion of one who tries to run while held fast in the clutches of a nightmare. Two more feet nearer to the snake, another.

Again he shouted as he drove his heel against the earth, and this time action followed. Like a lance of summer lightning darting from a gravid cloud the serpent struck at him and the impact of its ar-

mored head against the fabric nearly jerked the topcoat from his hands.

He threw the garment forward, blanketing the reptile's coils, gathered up the edges till the squirming deadly thing lay bagged within it, then swung it high above his head, beating it against the hard-packed earth with stroke on flailing stroke, finally flinging it down with all his might and stamping on it till the writhing billows underneath the coat's folds ceased.

With a grin he turned to reassure the rescued woman, but a shouted order sounded in his ears and he felt himself seized in a flying tackle. "Down! Down and kiss the earth before the feet of Holiness! It is the law that none may stand before her till she gives permission!"

Strong arms wound round his legs, strong hands pressed on his shoulders, and as he stumbled to his knees a hand upon his neck forced his face down until his forehead bumped against the earth.

"Holiness!" The spearman's voice was hoarse with terror. "This one did not know the law! We kill him now if you will give permission——"

"Silence, you wooden thing, you less than nothing!" the sharp command cut off the spearman's offer. "Unloose the stranger who risked life to save me from the singing serpent, and get you to the guard room. When the tribe assembles I will deal with you who would have let me be a victim to the singing snake while you had weapons in your hands." The men rose trembling and the voice continued:

"Come, stranger. Come with me, and we shall talk."

Obediently, Stacy followed through the torii's open gateway to the log pagoda's entrance. His guide turned for an instant at the doorway and commanded: "Off shoes before you enter in the place of Holiness," and, suiting her own action to

the order, slipped her clumsy wooden clogs off and preceded him into the lamp-lit dimness of the building.

The place was larger than he had expected. The lower story seemed to be a single room hexagonal in shape with walls of carefully smoothed planks and ceiling beamed with rough squared logs. What the floor was made of he could not determine, for it was entirely covered with a smooth straw matting on which were laid round mats of softer straw some three feet in diameter. Lanterns made of parchment dangled from the ceiling beams, giving off a soft dim light which made the great room even larger in appearance. As he looked about him curiously he was surprized to see the place contained no article of furniture except the round straw mats. On one of these his guide had dropped down to her knees, tucked her feet demurely under her, then rocked back till she sat on them. Now she regarded him with bright-eyed curiosity as she motioned him to seat himself upon a near-by mat.

He tried to kneel, but found the posture tiring, then thrust his feet before him, only to be made aware that sitting so without a back support was most uncomfortable. Finally he compromised by squatting in tailor fashion on the soft straw disk, and:

"How are you called, and from what tribe do you come?" she asked as he completed his experiments and faced her with a rather shamefaced grin.

He had an idea she was laughing at him, for her long blue eyes were bright beneath the lanterns' mellow glow, but he could not tell certainly, for from the eyes down a veil of heavy cloth obscured her features, leaving only brow and eyes and base of nose exposed to view. For the rest she wore a woollen mantle of a dark plum purple embroidered round the hem and bottoms of the sleeves with wor-

sted of a lighter shade of the same color. In general outline it was like a kimono, and the Japanese effect was heightened by the broad band of soft woolen stuff that circled three times around her waist and tied in a coquettish bow in back. Her hands and what he could see of her face were almost ivory pale, her hair red-brown and glowing, "like embers burning in a bed of autumn leaves," he thought. She wore it piled in heavy coils around her head with strands of bright blue worsted plaited in it, and the general effect was like a crown of rose gold set with sapphires. The eyes above the purple veil were blue, sea blue which seemed to deepen as they looked at him, long and slightly lifted at the outer corners like an Oriental's. Her feet were naked, for she wore no stockings and her wooden clogs were left outside the door. He gazed embarrassedly at her. There was something strange in those long eyes that had a trick of lingering on his a second longer than he had expected, something pregnant with a knowledge far beyond her years, something which showed learning in the lore of things which he could only guess at.

"How do they call you, stranger, and from what tribe do you come?" the question was repeated softly, but the tone betokened one whose habit was to have an instant answer to her questions.

"Stacy is the name; Robert Atwood Stacy, attorney and counsellor at law," he answered with a smile, "but my friends all call me Bob."

"Boob?" she repeated tentatively.

"I hope not. Bob, you know, as in bobbing for apples at Halloween."

"Boob," she decided firmly. "Whence come you, Boob?"

"H'm," he rubbed his chin. "I wish I knew the answer. An hour ago—this morning—maybe it was yesterday—I was on the road to Hackensack from New

York, then"—he spread his hands and broke off with a chuckle—"first thing I knew your little playmates were inviting me to rise and come with them, and here I am. What's your name?"

"What is your tribe, your nation?" her eyes came up to his with something more of seriousness in them. "Are you from across the high hills?"

Something, some flickering threat in her blue eyes, perhaps, warned him to be careful in his answer. "No, I'm from New York," he replied. "Just a poor boy from the little town——"

"New Yowork" — like the men who brought him in, she seemed to have some trouble in pronouncing *r*'s, though her speech was not as thick as theirs—"I do not know that tribe."

She looked at him in silence till: "What's your name?" he repeated.

"I ask, I do not answer questions, Boob."

"But—oh, come, be clubby, what do they call you?"

"I am the Holiness."

"Holiness? That's an odd name. Who wished it on you?"

"I am the Holiness, the priestess-servant of the Great One, the mouth through which He speaks. My wish is law, my whim is life or death, all must kiss the dust before me, none may stand or sit until I give permission. My words declare the Great One's will." She did not make the statement boastfully or arrogantly, she said it quietly and evenly, a statement of fact as it existed.

"My word, you are important in the social register," grinned Stacy; then as she answered nothing: "Now that we're duly introduced and have our hair down, how about removing the appendage?"

"Ap-den-dage?" she echoed tentatively.

"The masquerade, the veil, you know."

"No man may look upon the Holiness unveiled and live."

"Oh, come," he urged. "Don't be so coy. I'll bet you're pretty as a picture, and I never saw a pretty girl who didn't like to show her wares. Take the disguise off, Ho—Holiness!" He half rose from the mat, putting out a playful hand to lift the shrouding mask, then paused inert as though gripped by paralysis.

The pupils of her eyes seemed spreading till the blue corners gleamed black as polished onyx, and the rage in her was all at once a living thing, coiling venomously behind her hate-filled stare. "Fool, I'll have you flayed alive for this outrage, aye, and the raw flesh rubbed with salt!" The threat was scarcely louder than a whisper, but he saw the violet veil that masked her features flutter with the violence of her breath.

Before he knew what she designed she reached beneath a kneeling-mat and seized a metal disk strung from a length of cord. With one hand she swung the plate before her till its keen edge whistled through the air as though it were a lashing sword-blade; then, adeptly, she struck the knuckles of her free hand on the whirling circle. The metal shrieked as if in torment; a living quality seemed in the sick, shrill cry of pain that issued from it and thinned into a high sharp wailing whine which hung upon the air for second after agonizing second. Before the shuddering echo of the metal's whining scream died a squad of men came boiling through the door. They dropped upon their knees and struck their foreheads to the floor, but they knelt four deep before the exit, and the long knives in their hands gave promise of their readiness to act. Stacy reconsidered his intent to hurdle them in a wild dash for freedom.

"Take him to the castle," he heard the Holiness command. "Hold him there with those two others till I work my will on him."

TWIN bonfires blazed at each end of the stockade when the guards led Stacy and his fellow prisoners from their dungeon. All afternoon he had lain in the prison, a well-like room with rough log sides and an open wooden grating at its top, floored with earth and utterly devoid of furniture. Toward evening hunger had assailed him and a searing thirst made his sufferings more acute, but no one came to give him food or drink, and when he shouted one or twice there was no answer but the booming echoes of his voice reverberating in the barrel-like enclosure and the whimperings of his fellow convicts. When he sought to talk to these he had no answer but their hopeless groans. Plainly, the fear of punishment was on them, and its poison penetrated to the marrow. Gradually the cancelled pattern of the sunlight sifting through the dungeon's latticed roof had moved across the floor, climbed the rough log wall, and vanished. For an hour or more the condemned trio lay in utter darkness; then a torch flare blinded them as guards flung back the grating and dropped knotted cords of plaited rawhide down to them. Impatient at imprisonment, Stacy seized the rope that dangled by his shoulder and was drawn up quickly, but his fellows crouched in terror on the damp earth floor till several guardsmen dropped into the hole and dragged them screaming to the room above. A dozen pairs of rough hands seized each culprit, ripped his garments off and clothed him in a long loose robe of purple wool, bound his hands securely with a twist of cord, finally dropped a steeple-shaped straw basket on his head; so that while he saw the ground before him dimly through the meshes of the hamper he could see nothing at the sides and was, of course, entirely masked from all who looked at him. Thus penitentially arrayed they were led out.

Men and women squatted kneeling in the compound, and Stacy saw they wore an oddly semi-Oriental dress, the men in short, loose, full-sleeved jackets, long tight trousers and straw sandals, the women in loose mantles fashioned like kimonos and belted at the waist with wide, bright-colored scarves.

A sort of dais had been set up before the lower of the two pagodas, and on this squatted an old man whose brilliant red attire marked him as a personage of some importance. Around him grouped a knot of spearmen. Across the compound by the taller pagoda was another dais, unoccupied, and at its foot there stood a larger guard of men with bows and arrows.

Whispers, strident but repressed, rose in mounting susurrations as the condemned trio made the circuit of the area, and it seemed to Stacy that the audience looked more with pleased anticipation than with dread upon whatever lay in store for him and his companions.

A deep-toned gong beat slowly somewhere in the tall pagoda, and as if it had been formed of puppets actuated by a single string the whole concourse bent swiftly forward till every forehead rested on the ground. Stacy stiffened resolutely, but a spear-shaft struck him in the back and, hand-fettered as he was, he stumbled till he stretched full length upon the ground beside his two prostrate companions.

The gong reverberated twice again and, turtle-like, he raised his head and peered between the meshes of his basket helmet. In the dark pagoda doorway stood a figure white as something carved of Parian marble in a niche of burnished onyx. It was the Holiness, he knew, for he recognized her red-gold hair, but the transformation that was wrought in her was startling.

She had laid aside her purple mantle and stood starkly nude save for a sash of red

and green and yellow circling round her waist and hips and fastened in the front with a half-knot; he thought that never had he seen a thing as perfect as her pale, slim body with its slender hips, its tapering legs and full, high, pointed breasts. Oddly, she seemed more mysterious and aloof in the candor of her nakedness than when bundled in voluminous robe and veil.

Her veil. He had forgotten that. Now he might see her face. Eagerly he peered between the basket's criss-crossed straws. Would it match her blue, mysterious eyes? Would the lips be warm and soft and red, the nose sharp-cut and clearly modeled, the chin . . . an exclamation almost of dismay escaped him.

From throat to hair-line she was masked in a false face which might have been the work of a mad artist set afire with hashish. Surely, nothing quite so hideous was ever seen outside the frenzy of a nightmare. White it was, bone-white, as though its maker used a twice-bleached skull to fashion it, and on its hoary surface had been painted writhing zebra stripes of staring black, swirling upward in reversed interrogation points above each eye, running vertically from brow to nose, etching lines of age-old cruelty and lustful hate about the mouth; finally, upon the forward-jutting chin, a great black disk was set in obscene simulation of a dimple. The thing was devilish, a dreadful combination of Melpomene's tragic mask and one of those appalling horror-faces shaped by the olden sculptors of Japan. Despite the reassuring realization that he dreamed, Stacy felt a chill of terrified revulsion writhing down his spine. What sort of creature hid behind a mask like that, what nameless, secret horror sat enthroned upon a face that must be hidden from the eyes of men?

In her right hand she bore an eight-foot

rod topped with a hook-beaked halberd, and this she lowered as she passed the prostrate prisoners, tapping Stacy's two companions lightly with the blade. The metal might have been white-hot, for as they felt it on their shoulders the wretched convicts writhed as if in agony unbearable and uttered gasping, whimpering cries for mercy.

SLOWLY the Holiness made the circuit of the compound, then mounted to the straw mats set upon the vacant dais and squatted Buddha-like with slim feet turned sole upward on her thighs, her halberd laid across bent knees. "People of the Shô-gin," her voice though soft was vibrant, "I call you here to witness judgment of the Holiness on cowards. Two of these less-than-nothings yonder saw the Holiness beset by the serpent that sings and made no move to save her, though they had weapons in their hands. Behold the fate that waits those who would hesitate a breathing-space to give their lives to guard the mouthpiece of the Great One!"

Apparently the tribal custom gave no right of hearing to the accused, for as the woman finished speaking a dozen men dashed forward, seized the prisoners by their arms and dragged them screaming to a spot midway between the fires where two rough boxes had been placed. Into these they thrust the luckless convicts, and with wooden mallets fixed tops upon the chests with dowels; then, while Stacy retched and sickened at the sight, twelve more men hastened up with long two-handed saws, took station at the boxes, heads and feet and centers, and at a nod from the masked priestess bent their backs and drew the blades across the chests' closed lids.

Muffled cries came from the coffins as sharp metal bit into the soft pine planks, but the sawyers worked with prac-

tised unconcern. Before a dozen strokes were made it was apparent that the men who sawed the caskets' lower ends worked faster than their fellows. The confined convicts would be sectioned at the knees before the other blades could sever them at breast and throat. Now the screams of torment rose more shrilly and the mounting piles of sawdust showed a ruddy tinge as drops of blood began to dye the serrated teeth that gnawed inexorably at the writhing wretches prisoned in the chests. At last the gruesome bloody work was done and the coffin sections with their grisly contents tossed into the leaping flames.

"Now it's my turn," Stacy gritted. What had she promised him? To be flayed alive and have salt rubbed into his raw and bleeding flesh? Please Heaven he'd not weaken too much as the flayers' knives bit into him; only let him show these savages how a man could stand the torture!

Now they had seized him by the arms and set him on his feet before the dais where the Holiness was seated, and at a sign from her they took the basket from his face. "Look well, O people of the Shô-gin," the voice behind the skull mask ordered. "What those craven ones with weapons dared not do this stranger did bare-handed. Alone and weaponless he faced the singing serpent and did battle for the Holiness' life. They had brought him in a prisoner, and he owed no duty to the tribe, but when he saw the coiling death he did not hesitate, not even long enough to arm himself, but did the needful with his naked hands. He is a hero worthy of your homage, and I declare that henceforth he shall wait on me and bear my spear and guard me while I sleep and wake. The Holiness has need of such as he. I have spoken."

"Not so!" The shrill denial sounded from the crowd of women gathered by

the fire that blazed before the smaller of the two pagodas. "The law demands that strangers die by flame, lest spies come in among us and take news of us to enemies. Our men were put to death for lack of courage, yet they dared not fight the thing that sings lest their movements anger it and make it give the Holiness the kiss of death. It was for the Holiness' safety, not from fear, they held their hands. The stranger risked the Holiness' life when he approached the singing serpent. For that if for no other reason he should suffer death by fire. *I have spoken!*"

"And for the last time, worm!" The Holiness' voice was low and soft, but charged with anger till it trembled like a harp-string in the wind. "Cast her in the fire, some of you. Such is the fate of those who speak unbidden to the Holiness."

Four archers leaped to execute the order, but the condemned woman cast herself on hands and knees before the dais on which the red-robed chief was squatting. "The law, O Shu-gan; I ask the law!" she wailed. "Let me die the death by fire, as Holiness decrees, but let the stranger also suffer as the law demands!"

The bowmen paused irresolute, and glanced back questioningly as the old chief nodded. "The law commands that strangers suffer death," he began hesitantly, but:

"Silence, beetle, would you too feel the flames' caress? How dare you speak without permission?" the masked woman demanded. "The law? The Holiness' wishes are the law which none may question. Down, down upon your face and lick the earth before my feet, or die the death!"

"Throw that creeping slug into the fire," she continued to the archers, "and throw yourselves in after her, you who dared delay or question my authority."

The woman screamed and fought with

savage despair, but her captors forced her toward the roaring flames, paused a second, then, ranged each side of her, marched straight into the flames without a backward glance. Her dying shriek still echoed as the aged chief, helped by two spearmen, descended from his throne, hobbled through the firelight and cast himself upon the earth before the Holiness' dais where, obedient to her order, he thrust his tongue out and began to lick the ground.

"Enough!" the priestess gave him leave to stop and waved him back. "You are excused, old man, but see that you do not offend again. Next time I may not have such patience with your insolence." She nodded her masked head toward Stacy, and two archers took him by the elbows to lead him to the chief's pagoda, where they stripped his long robe off and clothed him in a jacket of deep purple edged with scarlet, a pair of almost skin-tight trousers, coarse woolen socks and sandals made of plaited straw. Last of all they wound a yellow sash around his waist and thrust a sword into it.

"Humph, I must look like a chorus man in *The Mikado*," Stacy muttered as he glanced down at his costume. "Haven't you a fan? That would lend the final, necessary touch."

The archers had not spoken as they worked, but now one of them smiled. "You like fan?" he asked. "O. K."

"*What?*" Stacy asked amazed. "What did you say?"

"O. K.," the other answered. "You like for have a fan. I get one."

He shuffled off, returning in a moment with a folding fan and thrust it into Stacy's belt. "O. K.?" he queried.

"Where in blazes did you learn to say 'O. K.,' you blighted heathen?"

The fellow shrugged a shoulder. "Always knew it, never had to learn," he answered. "You know what it means?"

"I'm hanged if I know if I do or not. Nothing in this blasted place makes sense. If——"

"Hurry," bade the other archer nervously. "The Holiness will not forgive delay."

"You're a duly initiated member of the lodge, now, son," Stacy told himself as he crossed the compound with his guides; "you might as well go through the ritual." Accordingly, when they halted at the dais on which the priestess sat he dropped upon his knees and bumped his forehead three times on the ground with business-like efficiency.

Taking cue from his companions he rose when they did and at the summons of the priestess' nod stepped forward. She leaned a little toward him, and he caught the glimmer of blue eyes behind the peepholes of her hideous mask as she handed him her halberd.

"Take this, my Boob," she ordered. "It has been my staff of office; it shall be your symbol of authority, and under me you use it as you wish. With it I give my life and safety to your keeping. Come."

GUARDING one whose attributes were those of queen and goddess was no onerous task, Bob found. The pagoda which the priestess occupied was sacred ground, and save for the women who went over it with brooms of pine boughs and small dusters made of knotted feathers no one but the Holiness and he set foot across the threshold. The girl slept on the upper floor, mounting to her dormitory shortly after dark and drawing the light ladder of spliced willow withes up after her. From dark till daybreak Bob rested on a bed of soft straw matting with his halberd close at hand, and for the first ten nights his chief concern was staying wakeful. On the eleventh evening, wearied with his sinecure, he dropped off

in a doze, confident he would be wakened by the rattle of the priestess' ladder when she let it down at dawn.

"Good Lord," he murmured drowsily, "what wouldn't I give for a regular bed with a shower in the morning——" Drowned in rising tides of sleepy weariness, his voice trailed off. Bed or no bed, shower or no shower, a whole night's rest would be a luxury. . . .

Something stirred upon his chest, a thing no warmer than the night-chilled air, a thing that slid and slipped and seemed to melt into itself. He put a hand up sleepily to brush it off and the fluent weight went rigid, hardening like the knotted muscles in a boxer's arm as they tighten for a blow. Instinct—there was no time for reason—warned him to lie still, and from half-closed lids he strove to see the thing that rested on him. At first he could not make it out; then, distinguished from the outlines of his woolen blouse, but only half distinguishable, he saw flattened coils of body, wedge-shaped head, smoothly undulating, threatening length of upreared neck—a copperhead, silent cousin of the rattler, furtive, lightning-quick and deadly. The snake's head swung across an arc; its questing tongue flashed like a lambent flame between its fang-set jaws; finally, its evil temper lulled by Stacy's stillness, the wicked, deadly head went down again and came to rest upon the looping coils.

The minute hand of a run-down old clock moves faster than Bob Stacy as he let his hands down to the floor, spread rigid fingers on the matting and with infinite, slow patience bent his knees until his heels were braced. A deep breath, taken slowly lest the rising of his chest alarm the reptile, then—quick! A sidewise turn, a leap that brought him to his feet, a frenzied jump that took him out of reach of the mad, lashing death that coiled upon the matting, struck and

coiled again, then struck once more, like a steel spring bent and loosed by some infernal mechanism.

Now he had the halberd in his hand, now he chopped it down across the serpent's circling folds. Then using the wide, flat blade for shovel, he scooped the quivering segments up and flung them through the temple door.

The scuff of shuffling sandals sounded on the hard earth of the compound as he threw the dead snake from the door, and a shaft of moonlight showed the shadow of a figure darting round the angle of a house. But when Stacy raced across the clearing there was nothing to be seen, and though he searched the unkempt streets between the rows of cabins there was no sign of life in any of them, nor any gleam of light within the huts.

"Probably the thing crawled on me to get warm," he told himself as he retraced his steps, but the memory of those fleeing footsteps haunted him. Why should it be a copperhead rather than a rattler that came seeking warmth? Snakes did crawl into houses in the night, but the temple door was raised a full yard from the ground; could so small a snake have climbed the entrance ladder, or would it have been likely to have gone to all that trouble when the village houses were equipped with three-inch door-sills? "You'd better do your sleeping in the daytime, son," he muttered as he took his station in the temple's lower room again.

THE man bled from a dozen wounds, and an arrow's feathered butt protruded from his shoulder as he stumbled through the stockade gate. "Yoshi!" he gasped breathlessly, hiccupped once and fell face forward on the compound earth, blood gushing from his punctured lung.

Signal drums beat thunderously, the women raised a high-pitched, wailing

keen, from the near-by woods the hunting-parties and the workers in the fields rushed like frightened chickens to the shelter of the brood-hen's wings. The stockade gate was closed and barred and earth-filled baskets piled behind it while the men seized bow and lance and the women scurried to the armory in the chief's pagoda for supplies of javelins and arrows.

Stacy stood irresolute. Plainly an attack was coming, but what would be his duties? Did the Holiness remain inside the temple to make prayers for victory, or did she lead the warriors of the tribe? In either case, what should he do?

His doubts were quickly set at rest. At the first throb of the drum the girl leaped from the mat on which she knelt while two serving-women combed her hair, bound her yard-long tresses in a hurried knot and swung nimbly as a monkey up the ladder leading to her sleeping-room. In a few moments she was back, kimono doffed and a suit of armor bound upon her. The breast and back guards were of hammered metal laced together by long thongs of rawhide, about her throat in place of gorget was a strip of knotted wool, her arms were cased in tubes of leather fastened to the body with thong lacings, about her thighs and lower legs were other leather tubes, upon her head she wore a leather cap with elongated back-peak like a fireman's helmet. In the sash that wrapped her waist was thrust an unsheathed sword, while with both hands she held an oval shield of wicker covered with a sheet of rawhide. This she thrust at Stacy, motioning him to hold it over her.

A man crouched at the temple doorstep and at sight of him the girl paused. "What do you here, Nashomo?" she demanded. "You are our foremost fighting-man; get upon the wall——"

"I come to bear your shield in battle,

Holiness. It is my right as Shu-gan's son——"

Above the veil that hid her face from eyes to chin a furrow formed in her smooth brow, and Stacy saw the darkening in her eyes that told of sudden deadly rage.

"Are you so tired of life that you would quit it in the fire or by the saw?" she asked. "Get to the walls, or by the god whose will I speak I'll have you sawn apart as soon as we beat off the Yoshi dogs!"

"Burn me, Holiness, give me to the sawyers, let my skin be torn away with red-hot knives, but let me bear your shield in battle first!" the young man choked. "Do not let the stranger take my ancient right."

Heedless as though the crouching man had been a log of rotting wood the girl marched toward the walls, Stacy close behind her with his halberd in his left hand and the shield swung from his right arm.

Now they could see the Yoshi coming at them, short, bandy-legged men, darker-skinned than the Shô-gin, and as they neared it was apparent that their faces were more Mongoloid. They charged in close formation, bent nearly double, long lances in their right hands, shields of rawhide in their left. Arrows flew to meet them, but the Shô-gin bows were weak and their adversaries cunning in defense; so the darts fell harmlessly upon their targets as they crossed the space of cleared ground by the moat, paused a moment, then, with a screaming battle cry, let fly their lances. At the close range the execution was terrific, and a dozen Shô-gin warriors fell impaled upon the long sharp spears, while many who survived fell from the walls demoralized.

"Stand firm, you men of Shô-gin; would you burn upon the Yoshi altars?" cried the priestess, leaping to the stockade top and brandishing her long sword. "Are

you men or are you rabbits to run off because the Yoshi dogs have bared their teeth?"

A lanceman of the Yoshi hurled his spear at her, but Stacy thrust the shield before her so the weapon glanced aside, and a yell of fierce defiance sounded from the Shô-gin.

Now the Yoshi leaped into the trench, hurling lances at the men upon the walls, stabbing every time a face appeared, shooting short, fish-hook barbed arrows from their bows and clattering their swords against their shields as a wild accompaniment to their war cries.

Shô-gin soldiers answered dart for dart, toppled boulders on the men who swarmed close packed in the dry moat, hurled great baskets filled with glowing charcoal down; finally, at a motion from the Holiness, brought closely woven hampers of stout wicker filled with hissing, writhing snakes and opened them upon the Yoshi battling in the trench below.

It was their trump card. What neither steel nor fire could do the snakes did quickly, and the Yoshi scrambled from the moat with screams of horror as the maddened reptiles struck them through their flimsy leggings or, fallen on their shoulders, sank poison fangs in cheek or neck.

The gates were opened and pursuit began, Yoshi and Shô-gin engaging in detached combats, more, it seemed to Stacy, for the sake of taking prisoners than to kill off any number of the enemy. They fought without much skill but with a reckless bravery that astounded him, and when he saw an overwhelmed Yoshi turn his sword upon himself he wondered at the pride that made a savage select suicide in place of capture.

It was not long before he understood. That night the council fires lit up the Shô-gin stockade and the captured Yoshi

were paraded past the gathered tribe. With sticks and clods and filth the Shô-gin women pelted them. Some of the prisoners were thrown living in the fires, others were encased in coffins to be sawn apart, still others were stripped naked and impaled on blazing stakes.

Among the captured Yoshi was a woman, bandy-legged and ill-favored like her tribesmen. Stacy marveled at the stoicism which enabled her to watch the torment of her men-folk, but when her turn to die had come her iron, savage nerve gave way, and she sank upon her knees before the priestess.

"I ask pity, Holiness," she sobbed. "You have had your will of me, my man lies crisping in the flames of yonder fire. Let it be that I may serve you as a slave."

Something close akin to pity, perhaps the instinct that makes women merciful to other women as the climax of their being nears, stirred in the priestess' cold eyes. "So be it," she assented. "Let her live."

"Not so!" Nashomo the chief's son raised his lance in protest. "I lost a brother in the fight today and claim the right of blood-feud on the captured enemy. Mine is the right to give the death stroke—now. What say you, men and women of the Shô-gin?"

"Let him give the death stroke in accordance with the law!" the tribesmen roared.

The Holiness inclined her head and a pair of posts were set up in the earth between the fires. They were about eight feet apart and a rawhide thong hung from the top of each. Working with a skill and speed that showed long practise, women of the Shô-gin stripped the wretched captive to the skin, then tied her by the ankles to the dangling rawhide thongs so she swung head downward, stretched between the uprights like

a wishbone ready for the pulling. Nashomo thrust a sharpened stake of pitch-pine in the bonfire nearest him, and when it flowered into flame walked slowly toward the pendent woman, waving the bright burning torch to keep it lighted. His horrible intent was obvious, and Stacy felt a wave of revulsion run through him.

"Are you going to let him get away with this?" he asked the priestess. "You say your word is law around here, and you gave your word to spare her life. Now you let this dirty scoundrel make a liar out of you. How long d'ye think you can rule these savages if you let 'em flout your word like that?"

BEHIND the peepholes of her ceremonial skull mask he saw the girl's eyes darken; then they softened momentarily. "You are right, my Boob," she answered. "I have passed my word that she shall live. Have you courage to enforce my orders?"

"I'll say I have. I'll stand off the whole bloody tribe if you'll command it."

The priestess raised her hand imperatively. "Stop!"

Nashomo halted in midstride and the flame upon his blazing pine stick died as he forgot to fan it. Every eye within the firelit circle turned upon the Holiness and above the snap and crackle of the blazing logs the rasp of quick-drawn, half-rebellious breathing sounded.

"It has come to me from the Great God whose will I speak that I cannot recall my spoken word. I have promised life unto this woman. She must live at least until——"

"Not so!" Nashomo shouted. "It is not the Holiness who speaks, my brothers, but the outland stranger who would have her break our ancient laws, the stranger at whose bidding she refused to give the ancient shield-right to the chieftain's son,

the stranger who according to our laws should have died long since instead of being honored as the Holiness' guardian. Men and women of the Shô-gin, I demand the right of blood-feud. I ask——"

"Will you wage battle for the woman's life with me?"

"It is unlawful for a man to offer violence to or even look upon the Holiness unveiled. How then can I battle with you?" asked Nashomo.

"I appoint a champion in my stead. Boob, my guardian and shield-bearer, dares to face you; you with all your weapons, he with nothing but bare hands—do you consent, my Boob?" she added in a whisper.

"To fight that swine bare-handed? I'd take on ten like him and never know that I'd been working."

"O thou Nameless One, thou fountain-head of might whose voice the thunder is, whose lance the lightning and whose breath the tempest, choose between these two and say which fights for right and which for wrong!" apostrophized the priestess as she raised her hands above her head and brought them down until they touched the dais, then bent her head until her forehead rested on the mats between them.

"Aye, let the judgment of the Great One show itself!" the tribe roared, and the champions moved toward each other.

Nashomo's lance was eight feet long, its staff a shaft of seasoned ash, its head a half-yard length of hand-forged metal, needle-sharp at tip, razor-keen at edges, fitted with two fish-hook barbs at bottom. He tossed it in the air so that the firelight glistened on the polished wood and glistening metal, caught it by the butt as it flashed down and swung it round his head as if it were a sword.

Stacy balanced on his toes, shifting his weight from foot to foot, shoulders

hunched, head forward, hands alert. A heavy pulse was throbbing in his ears, a quivering sensation ran through him, a mist seemed hovering before him. Nashomo shuffled a step forward. His leering face, vindictive, confident of victory, showed redly in the leaping firelight. The mist in Stacy's vision cleared as if a gong had sounded. He took a forward step, danced back upon his toes, raised his right hand to guard and drew his left fist back, then balanced waiting with bent knees. "Close in at the first opening and let him have it on the button," he advised himself. "Don't play with him, he's dangerous, and whole dam' pack's behind him."

Nashomo whirled his lance around his head until it whistled through the air, threw his arm back suddenly and whipped the weapon forward, letting go the handle as the point came level with Bob's breast. The spear shot forward like a rocket, but as it left Nashomo's hand Bob threw himself face downward on the ground and rolled quickly to the right. The lance struck quivering in the ground where he had stood a second earlier. Bob snatched the weapon ere it ceased to vibrate, jerked it from the earth and snapped the shaft across his knee as if it were a reed.

Contemptuously he threw the broken spear aside and leaped with flailing fists to meet Nashomo who was dragging at his quiver as he sought to fit an arrow to his bow.

Nashomo jumped back nimbly and Bob's savage right swing missed his chin, but the blow had not been wasted, for as his fist shot past his dodging foeman's face Bob spread his fingers wide and closed them round the bowshaft. Nashomo jerked away, and with a whip-like crack the weapon parted in his hand.

He let go of the ruined bow and

dropped his hand upon his sword-hilt, but the long blade fouled in his sash and before he had a chance to free it Bob struck up from the hip, landing a left uppercut upon his chin.

Muscles trained and hardened on the squash and handball courts backed up the blow, and behind them was contempt and loathing powerful as dynamite. Nashomo's teeth clicked like a snapping castanet. He fell back a pace, stepping slowly, heavily, and a look of wonder spread across his face. Then his knees gave, and he went down backward on the hard-packed ground, folding in upon himself so quickly that it seemed he must have been a rubber mannikin inflated and then ripped to let the air come from him with a rush. A tremor shook him; then he lay there quietly, as still as any of the Yoshi upon whom he had worked his savage vengeance.

"Behold, O people of the Shô-gin," cried the priestess, "the judgment of the Great One has been shown. Barehanded he I chose has vanquished your best fighter with his weapons in his hands. Let the Yoshi woman live. It is the judgment of the Great One."

They cut the writhing captive from her bonds between the posts, and presently, when she regained the strength to walk, she tottered to the priestess' dais and laid herself face forward on the earth, sobbing her thanks.

When Stacy and the priestess came into the compound the next morning the first thing they beheld was the body of the Yoshi woman laid before the temple door-step. The eyes had been gouged out with burning sticks, the lips and nose sliced from the face, the tongue cut out. Transversely on her abdomen, like a crude Cæsarean section, there gaped a raw-lipped wound a foot and more in length.

SPEARS were thrust butt downward in the earth to form a circle, and in its center squatted Nokomo the old chief, the Holiness, Nashomo the chief's son, and the elders of the Shô-gin. Stacy occupied his usual post behind the priestess. All the men wore their best costumes; save for skull mask and silk loin-cloth the girl was ceremonially nude, for this was a high council and the guidance of the god must be invoked and his protection sought.

"Our store of metal has grown low again, O Holiness," the old chief said. "Weapons lost in battle and the chase have weakened us until our hoard is well-nigh spent. We must seek the ruins of the Old Ones ere another freezing-time arrives or our fires shall lack for meat; perchance our enemies may hear of our condition and swoop down on us."

"The Old Ones guard their metal well. You know how they take toll of life through pestilence each time we raid their stores?" the girl returned. "Are we prepared to pay the price?"

"We must, O Holiness. In all the village we have scarce a hundred weapons in reserve, and every arrow lost or lance left unrecovered on the battlefield reduces our reserve. Twenty moons have passed since last we spoiled the treasures of the Old Ones, and scarce a moon has passed since then without a battle. Perhaps if we make fitting offerings the Old Ones will be satisfied and forbear to lash us with the scourge of pestilence this time."

"Perhaps," the priestess echoed. "Let the drums be sounded and the people warned to gather at the council fires tonight. Tomorrow I will lead the raiding party to the Old Ones' hoard."

A BASKET half the height of a tall man was placed between the council fires and by it stood a girl with bandaged eyes. Slowly, fearfully, the people of

the village filed past, everyone from toddling child to doddering graybeard and hobbling crone taking part in the procession. As each reached the basket he held out his hand and the hood-winked girl drew a chip of wood from the tall hamper and offered it to him. Stacy watched the drawings curiously. Fear was on each face in that parade, fear so gripping and abysmal that he was minded of a verse of Oscar Wilde:

"And Horror stalked before each man,
And Terror crept behind."

Now a young woman paused beside the fateful basket and the girl with bandaged eyes reached out a chip. The woman's scream was terrible. "No, no, not me; I am but three months wed, I am too young——"

"Not so, let me go for her!" cried a man's voice, and a young warrior left his place in the procession, snatching at the chip the woman held. "O Holiness, let me go in her stead," he besought. "It is my right. I am her husband and protector. Let it be that I go for her——"

The eyes behind the skull mask on the priestess' face seemed shining with a softer light than was their wont, but her voice was cold and even as she interrupted:

"Let be, O fool! Perhaps you, too, will draw the cross-marked chip. Seek not to meddle with the judgments of the Great One. Go to your place in line!"

Obediently he slunk back to his place, but his eyes were on the trembling girl who drew the cross-marked chip as she dropped out of line, nor did they leave her face when he came level with the basket. But when he glanced down at the chip the bound-eyed girl had handed him he gave a shout of joy. "I, too, dear love! We go together!" As though he went to keep a lovers' tryst he left the

line and took the trembling woman in his arms.

The dreary lottery of death progressed until ten victims had been chosen, men, women, even little children being in the list.

The sacrifices took leave of their families with tears and lamentations, then formed themselves in line between the fires, kneeling with their heads outstretched, hands folded in their laps. Nashomo, first-born son of the Shu-gan, strode down the line with his long sword, paused behind each crouching victim and with a single blow struck off his head. Last of all he came upon the married couple, and as he stopped behind the man a smile spread on his heavy features. Tentatively he laid his sword-edge on his prey's bent neck, then drew back for the stroke and — missed. The steel shore through the victim's shoulder, striking almost to the collar-bone, but the neck remained intact, and it was not until three strokes were given that the head came off. The woman knelt with eyes tight shut, but she could hear the flailing of the purposeful skill-less strokes, and her body shook so that a soldier had to loose her hair and wind his hands in its thick coils before her neck could be sufficiently extended for the death stroke. Nashomo's helper dropped the girl's long tresses as the sword blade circled down, and the small head with its curling strands of light brown hair fell bouncing on the trodden earth until it came to rest against the husband's severed head and lay there, lip to lip.

"Better few should die than many!" swelled the chant as Nashomo raised his bloody sword in a salutation to the Holiness. "Accept these sacrifices, O ye Old Ones; let them speak for us, and visit not your pestilence upon us!"

"HERE we halt," the Holiness commanded as the party reached the hill crest. "Make camp and wait for us, Nashomo. See to it that the fires are ready and the water hot for us to bathe when we return."

The chief's son looked at her, surprised. "Do not I go with you to brave the Old Ones in their dwelling-places, Holiness?"

"Not so. You watch the woods for sign of enemies, and hold your men in readiness for our return. Give Boob the food-bags and the sacred cords to drag the metal back when we have found it."

The way grew rougher with descent, for here there was no path, and often Bob was forced to beat a way with his halberd through the thick underbrush. Between the hills a little river gushed and they turned down its bank, following the tumbling torrent for a mile or more, crossing on a reef of moss-bound rocks, then fighting an ascent against the tangled briars and brush growth on the farther hill.

Memory, quiet-footed as a cat, elusive as the shadow of a shadow, stirred in Stacy's brain. The hill was steep and overgrown, the gently rolling land beyond was dark with pine and oak and poplar, there was no sign of man, no faintest trace of cultivation or restraint in all the tangled wilderness, but somehow he felt certain he had walked that land before. Not in its present state. Not when weeds and briars and scrub pine choked it, but in another day, another time. He needed but to shut his eyes to see the landscape carpeted with fresh shorn turf, to hear the *spat* and whir of golf balls driven down the fairway; there was little need to call on memory to hear the hoot of distant motor horns or the droning of an airplane overhead. There, to the left a quarter of a mile, should be a low-eaved, wide-porched house where one could rest with a long drink. . . .

"Let us rest on yonder hilltop, Boob," the Holiness' voice cut through his rev-cry; "the way is steep, but when we get there we shall find soft grass and bright sunshine."

They clambered up the slope, and as they came upon a place where wind-felled trees formed an obstruction Bob automatically put out his hand to help the girl across the barrier. She drew back from the outstretched palm as if it offered insult, then, as one who dares defy conventions, laid her fingers in it. Her skin was firm and cool, fine-textured, smooth, and he thrilled as it met his, for it seemed a current of galvanic force ran from her hand to his, quickening his pulses, quickening his breathing till a lump formed in his throat. Her eyes were on him steadily as he helped her from the fallen log; it was as if a lamp had flickered into life behind their somber velvet. Faint, but perceptible, a light flush tintured the smooth brow above the veil.

"Give me to eat," the girl commanded as they sank down on the soft grass of the little clearing on the hill crest. Bob opened one of the food-bags and produced a little bundle of baked meat wrapped in birch bark and a pack of fat, hard bread-cakes. She took them from him, laid them in her lap, then broke them, flinging half upon the grass.

"None is here to see that custom is observed my Boob," she said; "you may feed upon the scraps I throw away before I finish eating."

"Er—thanks for the concession," he returned as he picked the scattered food up from the grass.

"Good Lord!" He paused, a piece of meat raised half-way to his mouth. He had an answer to a puzzle, but one which posed another, and a harder query. Why, he had wondered, was this plot of grass so short and fresh-appearing, almost like a lawn instead of being wild and weed-

choked like the grass that overran the other clearings? As he leant to pick the food up he received his answer. It was not ordinary grass, but creeping bent, the hardy, wiry, short-leaved grass which roots itself so firmly that it chokes out weeds and dandelions. Bent, the pride of the green-keeper. How in heaven's name did it come here in this abysmal desert?

She fed herself with dainty skill, holding out her veil's edge to permit her hand to reach her mouth. He watched her musingly. What sort of face was hidden by that curtain which was never lifted, even when she ate?

"Who are these 'Old Ones' that you talk about?" he asked.

"S-s-sh, Boob, do not speak so here. It is perilous to call their names in this place."

"Why?"

"Because they hate us, hate us for the things our fathers did, because we come to steal their precious metal and violate their sleep."

"Are they gods or demons?"

"Who can say? No man has ever seen them, though once I saw one of their dead——"

"Their dead? How could that be?"

She glanced about half fearfully, then took the bread and meat remaining in her lap and cast it from her. "I make you sacrifice of this my food, you Old Ones," she exclaimed. "Forgive us if we speak your names in this place, and do not send your pestilence upon us."

The libation made, she turned to him:

"Long and long ago, when the world was very young, a race of men like gods lived in this land. We know but little of them, for none remembers them, and the little that we know is from tradition which is like a child's tale that grows greater with each telling. But we have heard they tilled the land until in all the country there were fertile fields and herds

of beasts which gave them food and milk, and roads as hard as rock and wide as rivers joined the mighty cities where the buildings towered mountain-high and night was turned to day by some strange light they had which glowed as brightly as the sun yet gave off neither smoke nor flame. They were very wise, those Old Ones; they knew how to fly like eagles through the air, and when they rode upon the earth they rode in strange things like a moving house that traveled faster than the wind.

"But presently there rose a mighty war among them, and other Old Ones, not so wise, but fiercer, came upon them in their flying houses and dropped great thunderbolts upon them so their mighty cities fell and broke like forest trees beneath the wind and lightning's fire, and tumbled down in ruins. Then these invading Old Ones went through all this land with fire and sword, and whenever they came on a man of the inhabitants they killed him, whether he were young and strong or old and gray, or just an infant at the breast. And they burned and broke the houses of the Old Ones so that in all the land no dwelling-place was left intact, and they broke the fine hard roads and burnt the flying houses and the houses that ran swiftly on the earth until the land was desolate and ruined, with none to live in it except the women who had run for shelter to the woods.

"Then the conquerors turned to go to their own land, which some say lay across a mighty river called the ocean, but a pestilence fell on them, so they died by scores and hundreds, and there were none to work the mighty floating houses that they came in. They tried and tried again to get word to their homeland, but no answer came, and some say that a mighty earthquake came and struck that land from which they came and sank it in the waters. We think it was the magic of the

Old Ones working, for they are very terrible in vengeance. At any rate the pestilence they sent reached into every land, so that it ran like fire among the brushwood, and nearly all the people in the world were killed by it.

"Then these men who came to break the Old Ones' cities had to stay here; so they sought among the woods to find the women who were hidden there, and took them to wife.

"Their leaders were all dead, and those remaining were all crude and untaught men who could not duplicate the wonders that the Old Ones wrought; neither did they have the skill to build the ruined cities up again. Besides, there was a curse upon those places, and whoever tried to live in them, or even visit them, took sick and died of pestilence. So the conquerors built their villages in the waste spots of the land and settled in them with the women they had taken for their wives.

"They were little men, these conquerors, their skins were brown as autumn leaves, their eyes were not like those the Old Ones had, so when their children came some looked much like their fathers, while others were more like the women of the Old Ones. Then a law was made and by it every man child who was like the Old Ones was at once destroyed, while girls were spared. So it was that there grew up a race whose women seemed of a stock different from their men. Also, girl children took names from their mothers' tongue, while all the boys were called by names their fathers knew."

"But you speak English," Bob objected. "How is it——"

"English? What is English?"

"The language that you speak. From what you've said I think these conquerors might have been Mongols; certainly your dress and architecture hint at it, yet you speak——"

"The captured women could not speak

the conquerors' tongue, so their husbands had to learn the Old Ones' language."

"But how'd you get your horrible religion? These Old Ones whom you speak of must have passed beyond the point of human sacrifice, and Mongolians are either Buddhists, Taoists or Shintoists. How did such a cult grow up?"

HER eyes came slowly up to his from under her long lashes. "It is from my mother's people. When the small brown conquerors first set up their houses in the wilderness there came a plague among them, and it seemed the vengeance of the Old Ones would destroy them utterly. Then arose a woman of the conquered race who knew the secret of the pestilence and how to stem its rising tide. She wore a mask upon her face so none might see her nose or mouth or chin, and she went among those stricken by the plague in safety. "Do this or that," she told them, and those who followed her instructions lived, while those who disobeyed her died. Then when the plague was gone she told the people that the spirit of the Old Ones was upon her, that her words were theirs and her will law, and they who disputed her must surely die. At first they scoffed at her, but those who mocked her died. Then they believed, and from that day her lightest wish was law unalterable. It was she who ordered human sacrifice, and it is said she always chose her victims from the men and boys, but spared the girls and women. We no longer have that custom, and those whose lot it is to die as sacrifices bear their fate, whatever be their sex.

"When the years came on this wise old woman, she chose a young girl from the tribe and took her to a place where once the Old Ones dwelt. There she schooled her in the wonders of the olden days, and instructed her in government of the people. When this was done she veiled her

pupil's face and told her none must ever look upon it, for if a woman looked upon the Holiness unveiled her eyes must be put out; the man who looked on her must surely die before he told what he had seen. If the Holiness unveils her face to any man both she and he must suffer death. When she had given these commands she sent her pupil back to rule the village while she walked off into the ruined city of the Old Ones and was never seen again."

"But why must you obscure your features with a veil?" Bob asked.

The shadow of a smile shone in her eyes, he knew her lips were smiling underneath her mesh as she replied:

"Men fear the thing they do not understand. If Holiness walked like an ordinary woman in their midst the people would not fear her; they might even dare to disobey. I am but a girl so weak that any half-grown tribesman could bend me to his will with his bare hands, did he but dare. They have no love for me, these people whom I treat like dirt beneath my feet, but they have fear of me. Do I not order them to death by torment for the slightest fault? Do I not make their chiefs and headmen kiss the earth before me? I cannot rule as king or warrior, I cannot rule by love, they would not understand it; but I can rule by fear. Have you not seen them tremble as I pass for fear that I may touch them with my lance and order them to death? Had they not feared me as they fear the grave, could I have made them break their ancient law and let you live, my Boob?"

"I've wondered about that. Just why did you spare me?"

"You saved me from the singing snake——"

"That's true, but I almost tore your veil away that day; you were going to have me

skinned alive, and then relented. It would have been safer to get me out of the way, especially when your sparing me almost brought on mutiny."

"Listen carefully, my Boob. When I was being taught by her who wore the veil before me I was told about the Old Ones while I lived in what remained of a proud city. The Holiness who taught me took me to a ruined temple where they worshipped in the ancient days and there I saw the gods they revered, a beautiful young man nailed naked to a cross and a weeping woman kneeling at his feet. Also, my Boob"—her breath came quicker and a look of fear came in her eyes, shadowing their cerulean blue as a drifting cloud obscures the noonday sky—"also I saw one like you!"

"Like me? Good heavens!"

She nodded slowly. "He was in a small stone house which stood near by the temple. The conquerors' thunderbolts had broken it, but some of it remained, and in it was a metal coffin with a crystal top. The body of a man lay in it, not beautiful and young like you, my Boob, but old, with thin gray hair and a face of strength and power. He lay there in his endless sleep with hands crossed on his breast and a string of beads in them. The clothes he wore were like your garments when you came into our village and saved me from the singing snake. Of all the people in the village I alone knew the clothing that the Old Ones wore. Think you those others would have let you live if they had known?"

Bob stared at her in silence. There was a dizzy, baffled feeling in his brain, as if he had just landed from a tossing ship or stepped off of a whirling carousel. The vague familiarity of the brush-grown countryside . . . the ruins of a Christian church . . . a man long dead found in a

broken, long-forgotten tomb, dressed in modern dinner clothes. . . . Something terrible, unformed and undescribable as the shadow of a specter seemed leering at him from the ambush of a half-matured suspicion.

"The conquerors had little metal," she went on, "and without it they were helpless; so they took it from the ruins of the Old Ones' cities. But the ancient race was jealous of its treasure, and for every ounce of metal that was stolen they took toll of lives till none dared seek the precious stuff, and a law was passed that made it death to trespass past the boundaries of the Old Ones' ancient dwelling-places. Only the Holiness who is immune to the swift death that visits those who dare the Old Ones' wrath may go beyond the boundaries, and with her she may take one man to bear the metal out. Under her protection he is safe, but any others who transgress the taboo are given the flames, lest they infect the rest."

STACY scarcely heard her. His thoughts were busy with a question, yet he dared not think the question through. The answer might be . . . but he had to know!

"Let's go," he told her almost roughly. "I'd like to see this ruined city."

They crossed a weed-grown field and climbed another slope. "Here is a dwelling of the Old Ones," she announced, bending back a branch of pine to show the vestige of a path.

He followed her across the turf-ringed flagstones of the ruined walk till the circling trees gave back on a small clearing. Almost obscured by weeds and thick-grown brambles curved the remnants of a concrete drive; here and there among the raffish undergrowth a rosebush struggled like a thoroughbred pulled down by mongrels. Leaning crazily from marble

bases were two rust-gnawed iron urns. A pile of twisted metal and broken stone marked the outline of a summerhouse. Beyond, almost effaced by pine and oak trees, stood a pair of shattered chimneys, all that remained of a once stately mansion.

Recollection beat against the doors of Stacy's mind with muffled hammer strokes. "Here — here — here —" it seemed repeating in an endless monody. "See—see!"

A little patch of color showed among the straggling growth of weed and lichen — phlox, marigold, larkspur. Beyond there showed a dim white form, broken, stained, leprous with a growth of rust-brown moss, but recognizable. It was the marble image of a Naiad holding out a conch-shell from which there feebly dribbled a small stream of water.

Stacy's lips were trembling, his teeth were chattering, little hummocks of horripilation roughened on his forearms, he felt the short hair bristling on his neck. He had to know—he had to!

With a leap he cleared the circling briars and scratched frantically with his dagger, stripping off the moss that scaled the fountain's base. Dear God, if it were there! . . .

The thick moss flaked away, the pallid stone showed clear. Scratched into it with schoolboy crudity was a heart encircling the initials: "ET and RAS—Emily Taylor and Robert Atwood Stacy."

Fifteen years since, a century—God knew, it might have been a thousand years ago!—he scratched those letters in the stone when he wore knickerbockers and Emily's hair hung down in braids.

His shriek of laughter split the quiet of the little glade, mounting like a licking flame, higher, thinner, a scream of awful, macabre mirth which seemed to

mock the ghosts of long-forgotten years that hovered round the place. "Goetterdaemmerung!" he shouted while tears as hot as smelted metal coursed his cheeks. "Goetterdaemmerung!"

*They say the lion and the lizard keep
The courts where Jamslyd gloried and drank deep.*

"The gods are dead; the world is dead, and I remain! *Ave tempus Cæsar! Te morituri salutamus!*"

"Boob, my Boob," her voice came softly through his scream of sharp hysteria. "Look, Boob, I show you something no man living ever saw before!" With a wrench she tore her veil away and stepped toward him.

His geysering laughter stopped abruptly as he looked at her. She was lovely with an odd, uneven kind of beauty. Very young, not more than eighteen, he surmised, with a skin as fine and creamy as a child's. Beneath her long blue eyes, deep-shadowed by their silky curling lashes, he saw her straight, proud, narrow nose, her red mouth chiseled in long lines, her small, sharp chin. Now her eyes were languishing and passionate, inviting, teasing, promising. They seemed to probe his very heart's depths. A quince-hued flush was on her cheeks, her throat, her smooth, white brow. She smiled at him, a curious smile that added mystery to a face instinct with mystery.

She made a forward step, feet soundless on the moss around the fountain, and stood close to him. Then without warning she bent toward him, seized his cheeks between her palms and kissed him on the mouth, hungrily, greedily, with an avidness in which the sterile longings of her years of isolation blazed like fire among the trees in rainless August.

His response was instinctive. Too quick for thought the man in him rose to her siren challenge. The lure of her raced

through his nerves like voltage through electric wires and crashed against his brain with devastating force. He staggered back a step and felt himself go weak with desire.

"Holiness—O lovely little Holiness!" he gasped, tearing his lips free from her red, clinging mouth. "In all this awful barren world there's only you and——"

The savage *spat* of a wild missile striking stone arrested him. In the little pool that gathered at the fountain's base an arrow lay, its head bent by its impact on the marble. The fretful *zing* of a bowstring sounded in the near-by thicket, and with a rageful hornet's whine another arrow whipped toward them, burying itself half shaft-length in the earth.

A crackling sounded in the shrouding circle of dark evergreens and a man stepped out into the glade, fitting a third arrow to his bow.

"Nashomo!" cried the priestess. "What do you in this taboo place; how dare you stand unbidden in my presence? Down, down upon your face, you dog, or I will have you sawn apart——"

"The Holiness who shows her face to any man no longer speaks the Great One's will," the fellow interrupted. "It is the law that she must die, and he who looks upon her naked face——"

The force of Stacy's halberd, thrown with all his weight behind it, drove him back upon his heels as though he had been pushed by a gigantic hand. The wide blade sheared his breast-bone as if it had been butter. "Damn you, that'll pay you something on account," cried Stacy, but the girl's sharp warning stopped him:

"Run, run, my Boob, it is a mutiny—they are surrounding us!"

He glanced around the clearing. From behind the thick-grown pine trees heads appeared, before them, to the right, the

left. An arrow whined at them, followed by another, and another, and another.

"Run, make for the old temple," the girl panted. "That is a very taboo place. They may not dare to enter it!"

CRASHING through the bracken, snatching back their garments from the clutching claws of bramble bushes, they ran across the thickly wooded slope, broke out in another clearing, and hastened toward another copse of pine and cedar. As they ran they heard the view halloo of their pursuers; the pack was circling, cries were coming not alone from side and rear, but from the front as well. An arrow whistled at them, clipped a pine branch overhead and struck the tree-bole with a vicious *pung*. Another struck the ground before them, a third came whizzing past Bob's face so close he felt the draft of it upon his cheek. Here and there among the trees they saw flitting shadows as the hunters closed their cordon.

"Oh! I'm struck! Run, run on, my Boob, you may win through alone. I—cannot—go——"

He swung the girl up in his arms as though she were a child. On . . . on. Something stung him in the shoulder, viciously. He winced with pain but forged ahead. A high, thin, irritable whine, as if a monster hornet drove at him, was followed by a searing pain in his right arm. He stumbled, loosening his hold upon the girl's light form, circled his left arm more tightly round her, and crashed ahead through the entangling brush.

"Boob, put me down. I—think—that—I—can—run——"

He halted, breathing with deep, retching sobs, and leant against a tree. Blood was soaking through his trouser leg, blood dyed his sleeve, a steady trickle wet his

forehead, running down into his eyes and blinding him. He felt the pressure of her hand on his as she drew him forward, then felt her fingers close with a convulsive grip. Dashing the ruddy film from his eyes he saw her sway and stiffen. She gave a dreadful, strangled cry. From her left breast an arrow's feathered butt protruded, and a gush of blood ran from the corners of her mouth. "Boo——" the gurgling welter of fresh blood drowned out his name half uttered, and she dropped limply to the ground. A glaze as of thin isinglass was on her eyes, her mouth fell open and her tongue protruded slightly.

He bent and kissed her swiftly, not on the bloody, gaping mouth, but on the brow, then stumbled on.

Arrows hissed at him, whining past his ears, striking little puffs of smoke-like dust up from the ground about his feet. Sometimes he felt a fresh burn in his arms or shoulders, something like a streak of white-hot iron passed across his neck, and the collar of his blouse went wet and sticky with red sopiness.

He ran mechanically. Right foot up, leg forward, back—left foot up, leg forward, back . . . somehow he was still on his feet, but he had no idea how he kept on them. His breath was wheezing with asthmatic rales. Presently he would fall down on his face, but he wouldn't feel it; he'd not feel anything again; just go to sleep—a long, sweet, dreamless sleep . . . that damned pain in his back, just underneath the shoulder-blade . . . now it was hurting in his chest. . . .

He charged across a little clearing. Shouts came faintly to him—gleeful, savage shouts. Something struck him on the shoulder, not painfully this time, but heartily, almost like a friendly slap. Damn these creepers, they were tripping him . . . why no, there were no creepers

here, he was running over straggling, unkempt grass. To right and left ran aisles like streets, choked with dwarf trees here and there, but still discernible. Bordering them were stone erections, some straight, some leaning crazily this way or that. Where was he, in a cemetery? Nonsense, he was running . . . why was he running, anyway? What was there to be afraid of?

"Oh, here's a fine big stone, just the thing to lean against and rest. Rest, a grand word, that. . . .

"Who is that moving over there? A girl in white, all in white, with a veil upon her head. She has a bouquet in her hand and orange blossoms in her hair. She's coming nearer. Funny, I can't see her face. Why, yes, it's Emily. Emily

Taylor in her bridal gown. I'm going to marry her today . . . no, it's not Emily, it's the Holiness. She's taken off her veil. No man has ever seen her face before . . . she loves me.

"What's carved upon this stone? Some sort of epitaph:

*To the Glory of God
And the Memory of Capt. Robert Atwood Stacy
Who Met a Hero's Death Defending his
Homeland
From the Invasion of the Mongol Horde
A. 1940—1972 D.
Dulce et Decorum est pro Patria Mori*

"That's silly. This thing says I'm dead. But I'm alive.

"Or am I?" he amended as the shouting pack closed in and a storm of arrows swept him down.