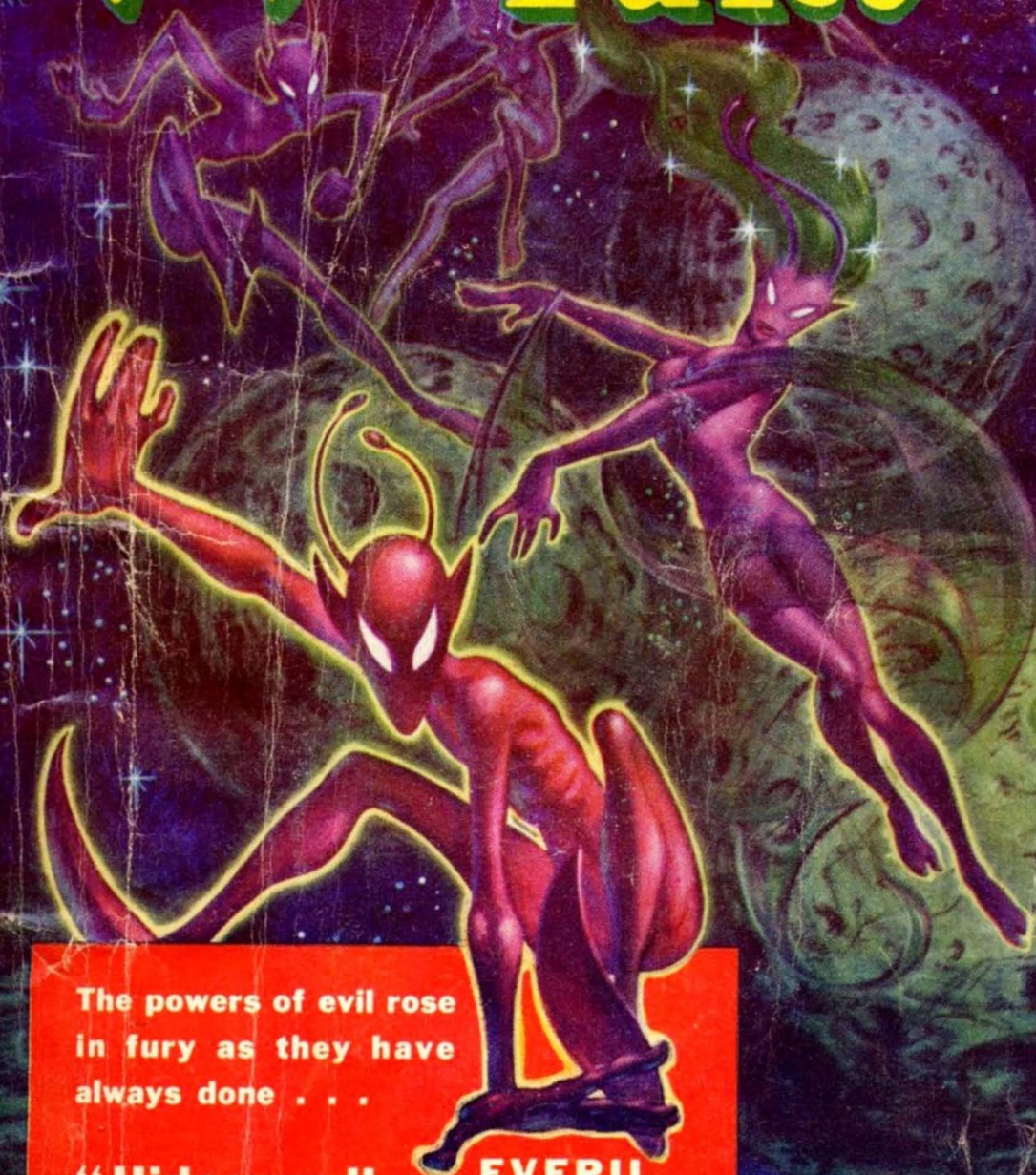


NOVEMBER

Weird Tales

25¢



The powers of evil rose
in fury as they have
always done . . .

“Hideaway”

EVERIL
WORRELL

Weird Tales



NOVEMBER, 1951

Cover by Frank Kelly Freas

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

HIDEAWAY

by EVERIL WORRELL



"THERE is our house," my driver said. His white teeth flashed in a wide smile that was like a gash in his dark face, and his oddly annoying laugh—something between a titter and the bray of a donkey—assailed my ears.

He braked the powerful motor of the old car sharply. We came to a standstill and I looked.

He had swung his left arm in a powerful gesture, and he was opening the door beside him preparatory to getting out. But where he pointed, I saw nothing but close serried ranks of lofty trees of some kind or other. I am not a botanist. Neither am I much of a walker by choice, and I thought grumblingly to myself: "Here's where we walk miles over an uneven path because the man hasn't cleared a way for his car to travel."

The next instant I saw that there was a primitive fence of the variety known as "snake," and that Bolo was unlocking a gate in the fence. Inside was a narrow dirt road just wide enough for a car to pass and partly grass-grown. The gate unlocked, Bolo leaped back into the driver's seat, slammed the door and negotiated the sharp turn with

... where even today the common people believe in vampires and werewolves, in wizards and witches.

another gleam of white teeth and another wave of the hand.

The gate, however, was not left open. He felt it necessary once more to leap from the car, carefully shoot home the bolt of the padlock and of course climb back into his place again. No intrusion was to be encouraged, obviously; although what there was to tempt an intruder, I wondered.

Looking ahead I believed we were a mile short of anything resembling a human habitation, when I saw it.

"Now you see!" Bolo cried at the very instant when I did. And again the titter and the flash of white teeth, so that, feeling I was expected to laugh in my turn, I hardly dwelt then on the idea which occurred to me—that the laughing little dark man must have studied with a scientific precision the exact distance from his house at which it became visible even when one was looking for it.

It might, in fact, have been an illusion, a shadow, some chance configuration of the growth of tree boles and bushes for just a little longer, even then. It seemed farther from us than it was; and then all at once Bolo drove the car out of the narrow shaded roadway into a comparatively sunny open space in which the shadows only played and dappled, and when we climbed out of the car and stood on the ground, we were within twenty feet of the man's front porch.

"We are here, Dear!" Bolo called in a voice that surprisingly made of the simple, every-day epithet a hymn of praise and worship, a lofty title of respect and a humble petition for permission to approach.

I had hardly time to more than glimpse the little shack—rustic in effect, built on

stilts like a house in the tropics, porch-furnished with box furniture—when a woman appeared and began tripping down the flimsy board steps to meet us.

"They live alone out there. They seem to be husband and wife, all right; but there's a rumor that he may actually be her servant. He speaks of her sometimes in a way that has given rise to that rumor. Yet he always refers to her as 'my wife' and with great pride. Once he told a fellow worker in the laboratory where he is an aid that his wife was the most beautiful woman in the world."



That had been part of my briefing in regard to the Bolos. (Bolo's first name at the plant, by the way, was "Juan"; nobody ever called him by other than his last name, like that, without a "Mr." It seemed to fit, and served as a plain cognomen, a mild epithet, and a pet name, in turn.)

The woman was graceful, as she negotiated the steps and walked to meet us. She was neither tall nor short—perhaps a shade taller than Bolo; and she was slender. Her skirts swung as she walked, but when I focused my eyes upon her face the odd light effect was gone, and I could meet her smile and take her outstretched hand.

I could do that, and I could return her greeting, which was gracious and welcoming, but for a split instant it was about all that I could do, because now I could see her face, and it shocked and startled me.

The most beautiful woman in the world? Bolo was overcompensating when he said that. Unless—surely he wasn't laughing at his wife, making a mean little joke nastily to himself about her?

Mrs. Bolo was not beautiful. In fact she looked a bit like a witch in some old story. Her face was seamed and fallen, heavily lined as with many years which the gay little curls denied. Her eyes, I thought, were keen and honest—whether they were also good I wasn't sure. Her mouth prejudiced me against any other features she could have had, for I've always been very sensitive to the beauty in a woman's mouth—when it is there; and repulsed when it isn't.

In this case, it wasn't. It was mostly teeth, huge "buck" teeth, which pushed aside the rather full lips and seemed a deformity in the middle of her face. It was merely a further detail that the lady's nose had been broken and not set straight again.

There were tables under the trees, and box-made chairs conveniently placed, and Mrs. Bolo asked me to sit with her while Bolo brought us cooling drinks.

"Men of the Orient and the Tropics love to wait upon their wives, and I think it's a charming custom, don't you, Mr.—?"

"Conant—" I supplied. "Miles Conant."

It was too cruel, too unfair, I was thinking. No woman should have a deal like this

one—and there had been that moment's impression of bodily grace and sure-footedness, there was the clear directness of the gray eyes in which dwelt other qualities I couldn't fathom.

What I couldn't stop looking at was the poor lady's face. You have to look at the face of your hostess, don't you? You couldn't sit talking with her and avoid looking at her. You had to school your expression—in my profession that should be easy, but I wasn't sure of my success.

I was photographing the other ravaged features. No eyebrows—actually not any. An accident—say in an automobile—might have broken the nose and done something to the eyebrows. I wished she had painted some on. The curls seemed to have slipped sideways, and I believed Mrs. Bolo wore a wig, so she shouldn't have conscientious scruples about a little mascara.

The accident might have done something to the bony structure of the face also, and maybe the teeth were false. I decided that they *were* false; but if that were so, why not a better job?

She was talking to me in that rapid, social manner when Bolo brought the drinks. She had taken the initiative, it seemed, and she kept it. She was asking me just why the Government had sent me out to interview the two of them, and I was explaining—in part.

"Some of that laboratory work is important, and some of it is secret, and the plant handles some Government work," I told her.

"I'd regard it as pretty routine in Mr. Bolo's case. A routine loyalty check. Everybody is having them, you know. If Mr. Bolo were entrusted with the really special work, he'd have to be very thoroughly investigated, as of course you know. As it is, it's just a matter of routine. Nothing to worry about, at all."

That was true, so far as it went. There had been so many disclosures of spy rings, so many spy confessions, so much accusation and counter-accusation, that it had gotten so you couldn't trust the spies themselves. In fact the spies often seemed not to know quite what they were talking about—the head people had so many aliases and

used the names of so many reputable people, that pretty often they thought the members of their gangs were named Smith in all good faith, when actually, the name might be Jones.

So when anything really had to be looked into, it was done now pretty thoroughly, and by trained people. I am about as thoroughly trained an investigator as the Government commands, and the fate of the Bolos would really be in my hands. If I found Juan Bolo to be reliable and loyal, he was due for some of that important secret work. If I found otherwise, he was on his way out.

What I wasn't telling the Bolos was that, due entirely to the heavy veil of secrecy with which they had surrounded themselves, neither I nor my superiors expected him to get a clean bill of health from me, and what I had already seen didn't make things look brighter for the little man.

You don't camouflage yourself right off the face of the earth, usually, without a pretty good reason. And if Bolo and his wife were just what they seemed, they were too insignificant a couple to need or warrant all of this. A mixed-race—yes; unless, after all, he was her servant—and that would be even stranger, wouldn't it? None of that was reason enough for "Hideaway"—appropriately, that was what they called their place.

TO SHORTEN my story, I won the cooperation of the Bolos—at least as much as they couldn't deny me. After all, they had to cooperate. They knew as well as I did that they had been watched, and that nobody knew quite what to make of them, and I think they were glad of a chance to show me a huge collection of papers establishing their harmlessness. Bolo kept them in a little steamer trunk; we went inside to look them over, and the place was the kind you'd expect a Malay to build. More box-furniture except for two plain iron bedsteads, everything plain, yet incongruously offset with knick-knacks, some cheap and some very fine indeed. A couple of hammered silver candle sticks, with blue shades edged with finely cut crystal dangles

that tinkled if you touched them or a breeze blew through, were lovely things; a collection of dime-store love lamps which exuded perfume, and incense burners, went better with the furniture.

The papers proved Bolo to be a Malay who had applied for naturalization, who was legally married to one Eugenia Evans in New York five years ago (about the time of Bolo's entry into the United States).

There was more, and it all hung together. I had seen the inside of Malay shacks, and the atmosphere was right. Yet, papers can be fixed in various ways, and I came back in my mind to that initial reason for doubting the Bolos were what they said they were.

They were too secret about it. And their relationship to each other; that crack he had made about his beautiful wife—had he more than one of them? His waiting on Eugenia, though, hand and foot; like a man deeply in love or—maybe like a servant.

It was on my tongue to ask some very personal questions along these lines. I began, though, a little farther from dead center, because it isn't easy to ask a man in the presence of his wife why he had claimed her to be beautiful, if he has more than one wife, or why he behaves toward her the way he does. I asked him, instead, the name of their home.

"Hideaway!" he said boldly, laughing his strident laugh again, flashing teeth at me. "Good, that—Yes?"

"Yes—" I agreed, then suddenly caught my breath.

I had seen a picture in a silver frame.

It was of a woman standing on a balcony, and it was lovely. I recognized it. It is my business to recognize things like that—faces that have been news remain on file in my memory.

This woman in the picture had been queen of a little country seldom heard of, bordering on Transylvania, the weird little territory widely associated with vampire and werewolf legends, and also with stormy political happenings. Some of these happenings had forced the sudden abdication of this young queen some half a dozen years ago, and there had been rumors (they could only have arisen in some such part of

the world!) of a tribe of devil-worshippers having threatened her life. She had disappeared suddenly, as completely as if she had dissolved into thin air, and that gave some weight to the story about the devil worshippers—not that their existence is mere rumor, of course, since they exist in a number of countries. Anyway, interest had waned after a second rumor went around saying the Queen Maria had escaped from her kingdom with a lover, a commoner. A few speculative articles had appeared in a few Sunday magazine sections given to that sort of vaporizing, and her affair had been compared to that of the Duke of Windsor and his romance, and then the world had forgotten.

I had forgotten, too; but now I remembered. I sat staring at the picture, not able to hide my absorption in it. For I remembered that Maria had been called the most beautiful woman in the world. And I thought I remembered that her second name, almost never used and seldom heard, had been Eugenia.

And I was seeing Eugenia Bolo now in a different way than that of the eyes.

I was seeing her figure and the way she walked and moved, and remembering moving pictures I had seen of the lost, abdicated queen. I was mentally doing things with that terrible mouth—fitting teeth in it that looked as though they belonged, over which the full lips would close naturally; straightening the nose, changing it, putting those eyebrows on and a luxuriant growth of soft, fine, loose-waved hair around the face.

There remained the wrinkles, the fallen-in look. That was the thing that made her seem many years older than the dark little man whose eyes I knew, without looking at him either, were set on me in a fixed gaze that held a threat. I had let my thoughts show in my face, a thing I am seldom betrayed into. But I couldn't stop the inward study, the concentration that was engrossing me now—nothing short of a Malay kris buried in my body was going to stop me.

I was getting somewhere now. There were ways of doing all these things to a face. There's a plastic surgery that puffs up the flesh and lets it fall into folds and wrinkles when the wax melts. In this case,

it would have been done on purpose—if my wild idea was right. Though why, for God's sake, would a woman—

Bolo moved suddenly behind me, and I whirled. I didn't know then, and I don't know now, what he was doing, or going to do. I only know that Eugenia stopped him.

"He knows, my dear."

She spoke on a weary kind of sigh. It was as though something too heavy to be borne, that had weighed her down for an interminable time, was slipping from her, yet as if its going meant some heavy sort of sorrow too.

"We knew the sands were running out. Is it not so, my love? What is, cannot go on forever. We must trust, if we are to seek help. Also we have promised ourselves that we would never lie to the Government of this land that has sheltered us, and he is its envoy to us."

Bolo sank back into the chair he had arisen from; a chair made of crate and box parts, unpainted, roughly nailed together. The smile was gone from his face, and his whole manner was different. It was as if a clown had laid aside his motley.

Eugenia Bolo rose from her chair and stood before me, and she held out her hand to me.

"Will you accompany me?" she said. "I will speak with you alone. I will show you the virgin forest, and what lies beyond. I will take you through the Cathedral Forest."

I THINK it came to me in that moment, that I was in danger. I little knew just what kind. These two could talk without words, however, and Bolo had certainly made me feel that he could act with violence. I was sure I was right about Eugenia. She was the lost queen. But—I think I believed she might be, perhaps, a little mad. I didn't care to go farther into the deep woods with her, and the way she spoke of them was what made me wonder about her sanity then.

That, and the things she had done to her face. I couldn't believe a sane woman would have done them. There would have been some better way to be safe, or reasonably safe; and anyway, any woman I had ever known would have preferred death to

such disfigurement. That it was voluntary, that disfigurement, I felt sure.

The sun was setting, and level, slanting golden and red rays filtered through Eugenia's "virgin forest." As the light failed and faded and blue dusk took over, I wondered how far we were going. It seemed a long way, and a senseless thing to do. After a while Eugenia took from a deep pocket in her dress a small sized dark lantern which cast so strong and yet so softly diffused a ray before us, that I had to comment on it.

"Yes," she said. "You had to see it with your own eyes, to believe what I am going to tell you—Ahmed and I. He is not really a Malay, you know, but an Arab. An Arabian scientist. I had to take you on this walk—for two reasons. You will find it hard to believe what we will tell you; but after you have *seen*—"

Her voice trailed off, and we walked again in silence. The darkness was deep, now, and the light of her lantern beam illuminated the trees and shrubs, the tracery of branches and all about us in a most incredible way.

It wasn't only that it was clear and bright. Overhead moonlight struggled intermittently down through the branches, and the golden ray from the lantern made you not notice it, or miss it when the heavy forest growth shut it off and you walked through a close-roofed tunnel of heavy leafed branches.

No, it wasn't that. I was seeing things—or almost. As though something about that light hypnotized me. I lost my uneasy feeling, though, because what I saw was all lovely. I didn't put it in my official report that I watched new buds appear and break into bloom as we approached, where at first there were only green branches; that a dead and lifeless shrub which at first held up tortured, twisted boughs, swathed itself in a tender green verdure, the color of the first shoots of early spring. Or that twice I saw small winged things flying through the air which I knew were not birds or insects. They were about the size of humming birds, perhaps; but they trailed cobwebby gauze about them that looked like tiny, flowing garments studded with stardust; and I had a swift, vanishing impression of smiling

eyes and mouths set in lovely, exquisite, little faces.

Yet what I have just set down is true, even if it did not go into my report.

Suddenly Eugenia snapped off the light, and the night closed down on us, and the woods were changed.

"You have to see both sides of this," she whispered. "Have you matches? I need a light. Not the lantern, another kind of light."

I had my cigarette lighter, and I snapped it on. I had nothing to say, I felt let down and flat. I, Miles Conant, was no longer in fairyland. The dark—and something that closed down with it—had changed all that; but I had been through something I did not know about. I had been in fairyland, and I had been at home there, and now I was lonely and lost, and already ashamed of myself. How did the fakirs of India do it—the blooming shrubs out of bare branches, and all that? Hypnotism, that was it. I had been hypnotized, and by a madwoman, very likely, at that.

SHE took my lighter from me, and led me a step or two from the trail and held it so the puny flame lit up a part of the trunk of one of the tall trees.

"Look!" she said.

The word wasn't necessary. There was an ugly carving on the tree, a double carving.

Underneath, a cross—reversed. The long part uppermost, I mean. That's an age-old symbol of devil worship. And above that, there was in bas-relief the partly formed image of an ugly head. A long head with narrow eyes and cruel, back-drawn lips, and a forehead that sloped upward in two bulges: the little light, shining upward at this thing, elongated what were just the beginnings of horns.

It was a face I was never going to forget.

"Who—did that?" I managed, some double sense of sacrilege on me because of the crazy things I had been imagining about unearthly beauties and simple little miracles and the presence of tiny good elves.

"I could show you many," the woman beside me said, speaking low. "And I can tell you why they are put here. It is to

frighten me, to frighten me out of my wits—perhaps out of my life.”

“But who would—*who*, as a matter of fact, would know that you walk through these woods?” I said, trying to keep things half way sane. As I said it, a rather awful thought struck me, too. One I couldn’t say to her out loud. But there it was. Nobody on earth, it seemed, came here. There were no visitors. There were only this man and this woman. And if anyone did ugly little carvings on trees to drive the woman out of her mind, I thought it would have to be the man.

Maybe they were neither husband and wife, nor a lady and her servant. Maybe they were prisoner and jailer. Or—

Maybe—just a mad woman and her keeper. Maybe, it was that. She could still be the banished queen; no doubt the poor lady had had enough to make her lose her mind. In that case, perhaps she carved them herself.

I was forgetting the things I had been seeing myself, my own temporary insanity, if you like. Or maybe you can be hypnotized by a mad person as well as a sane one, and I rationalized it that way. I don’t remember exactly how I figured that part of it out, because in just a moment something happened that drove it out of my mind.

We turned back toward the shack, and I closed the lighter down. There was really enough direct and indirect moonlight when you got used to depending on it, and we walked quietly back Indian style, she leading the way.

Suddenly she stopped dead in her tracks, and in a moment I knew why.

A kind of black shadow seemed pouring along the path, coming from behind us. It was exactly as if a ray of darkness were de-luminating that pathway, if you know what I mean. The moonlight still fell brokenly from the sky through the branches, but it was darkened. You could make out the trees and leaves and things as well as before, but the darkness seemed rolling over them—a clear darkness that let you see things in an ugly, murky light.

And ahead of us in that murky light a tall figure standing suddenly directly in our way. A tall figure of a man with a long,

narrow head, a high forehead branching into two hornlike elevations. Eyes that you didn’t want—didn’t want to see—

The golden light flashed out again, but it was dimmer now, neither very clear nor very strong, and it showed the trees and shrubs and once some sort of night bird flying. It showed us the way back to the shack, and it showed me that the figure of the man must have been all illusion, for there was nothing there. We walked right through the place where we had seen it.

WE WALKED all the way to the shack, and we climbed the rickety back steps as earlier we had the shaking front ones, and Juan Bolo—or Ahmed—stood waiting for us.

The woman threw herself into his arms. It was the first time I had seen them behave exactly like equals.

She said: “Ahmed—he has come. He, himself!”

The dark man—he was not so little now; he seemed to stand taller, and his whole face looked differently because of some change in expression—patted her on the back. He didn’t know what she had told me about him, so he had one more try at the Malay, and at that horrible tittering laugh. (It was the last time I was to hear it.)

“My wife—” he said to me, “she is very superstitious. No?”

I sat down rather suddenly.

“I don’t know!” I muttered. “I don’t know what to think. I want to talk to you again—Mr. Bolo. But not here. I’d like to get back into the city. I would be glad to have you two come in with me. These woods seem to me a lonely place—maybe dangerous. Yet you leave your wife here alone through the daytime—”

Eugenia interrupted me, her head high.

“Sometimes at night,” she said. “I assure you, I am not unarmed. I have—an arsenal!”

It didn’t reassure me. An arsenal in a lonely shack in a place where even I had gone a little mad was not what I wanted. I wanted city streets, traffic, people walking along the sidewalks.

“I have some business yet tonight, anyway,” I said, and it sounded pretty lame.

"You—your wife seemed to think I might be of help to you, and God knows I'm willing. But if you aren't coming in with me, I must be going, myself. We'll go into whatever there is—say tomorrow. I'll call on you at your lab, Bolo."

"You take my car," he said quietly. "Tonight I will not leave my wife."

It seemed fair enough. He gave me some keys—one was the key to the padlocked gate.

"You can give me that tomorrow—if all goes well," he said.

I saw them standing together on the little porch, the light streaming from the windows behind them. A dimmish light from the oil lamps that were all they had out there. Somehow I had a vision of beauty—briefly. Not the crazy kind I'd had in the wood, something I could understand better. Bolo's—Ahmed's arms were around her in a gesture of love and protection that was eloquent. I could feel their love, just as plainly as I could hear the call of an early cricket and see the glimmer of a late-summer firefly.

Then I looked ahead to my driving. It was only a little way to the gate, and only a few moments more till I had negotiated the awkward business of doing my duty by it—locking and unlocking and getting back to climb into the car again.

I didn't make that part of it. The most beautiful display of the whole evening was the set of sky-rockets that burst before my eyes as some blunt, heavy object came down on the back of my head.

When I awoke I could feel the earth rocking with me, and I felt as though an abyss was likely to open and swallow me up. My head was splitting and it seemed the lesion must be macrocosmic—a sundering of the universe itself. My unsteady and unfocussed gaze fell on the moon riding high in the sky. It was gibbous and waning, and I knew the night was far advanced. So I had been out, cold, for a good many hours.

I moved a little, and tried to raise my head. My muscles welcomed the relief of a shift in position, but my head rebelled, and my dizzy eyes closed, fast. I was lying on the hard floor boards of the back porch of the Bolo house—the side farthest from

the road. But the boards felt all right, compared with the pain of moving my head.

My next venture was more successful. It consisted of getting my hands up to my head. At that, it wasn't too easy, because my wrists were tied pretty tightly together. So were my ankles. I was trussed like a fowl for market, in fact, and being able to lay sympathetic and inquiring fingers in a gingerly fashion against my face and the side of my head did little to reassure me. For I felt a warm, sticky wetness on my hands, and then I was compelled to open my eyes—they were steadier and clearer now—and to look at my hands as I lowered them awkwardly again. And they were the color I knew they would be. They were red.

Head wounds bleed freely, and I had seen blood before. I wasn't so worried about my physical condition. But no kind of training can steel you against the kind of terror I felt. Because of the way I was tied, like an animal—or say a man—about to be slaughtered. Yet—whoever had knocked me down and battered the side of my head could easily have finished me off at the same time. Right there on the dark road I could have been murdered, and carted away for disposal more easily dead than alive.

Therein lay the only element of hope.

This thought hit me like a shot of adrenalin, and I managed to sit up. It isn't easy with your hands tied, and doing it made me feel fairly certain that I had no concussion.

So now I could see my companions in this rustic little pavilion where I had seemed to be a welcome, although uninvited guest.

I had expected to see Juan and his caricature of a wife, but not the others. Four people sat on handmade chairs and up-ended boxes, watching me. Two men, and two women. Not any of them were prepossessing.

I have described Juan and Eugenia—the newcomers were more ordinary types. You could find their prototypes on a hundred isolated farms in any state, I suppose, although both of them looked foreign also. Peasant-type, I think you'd call them. And, as sometimes happens, the man was considerably slighter than the woman.

He made up for his less uncouth frame

by having a weasel-like, ill-featured narrow face lit by sharp, rodent eyes. And the unprepossessing quality of that face of his was in turn compensated by its obvious keenness, shrewdness, and intelligence. He didn't look like a man who had been taught or schooled much in any way. It was an earthy, native shrewdness that looked out of his eyes and stamped his narrow features.

The woman's face was stupidly brutal. A heavy, ignorance lay heavy on it like a cloud. Her eyes were dark and sullen, and her movements slow. But her squat, broad body would have, I thought, the strength of an ox.

Yet it was the woman who spoke.

"You screamed once," she said heavily. "We have the place beyond the wood. We know bad things of this couple and we started running, although I run not fast."

The man with the weasel face took it from there.

"They had dragged you here, Mister, and tied you like that. They have prevented our doing anything for you, because they carry guns. My wife picked up a cleaver we use in butchering a few hogs which we raise, but we have no other weapons. We are ordinary plain people, and farmers, and have not wanted dealings with this man and woman."

Naturally, I looked to Juan, and to his wife. I had not thought badly of them; as I left them I had seen in them something I thought was rare and beautiful.

I looked at them, where they sat side by side in the shadow. And they did not speak at all, and it was true that Juan held across his knees a very efficient looking rifle.

So I thought I'd make the woman talk, Eugenia— She had been the spokesman for them both; she had to say something for herself now. At least she had to explain.

"Mrs.—" I began, and I saw her lean toward me with the easy grace that was hers.

But the woman from the farm beyond the wood cried out sharply and roughly, and cut her off.

"Do not speak to her and do not listen. The woman is a *witch!*" was what she said.

Well! I had not been prepared for that.

I became aware of cross currents of passionate feeling in the room. Some of them

were my own. I was bewildered, shocked. I had been near to "going all out" for this strange couple in their hideaway in the deep woods.

Now I was nauseated, weak and ill, and in these last few moments feeling myself grow worse rather than better. There was the necessity for a decision, and I wasn't up to it. Some of these people were responsible for the blow that might have killed me, and probably was intended to do exactly that. Since Eugenia and Bolo were armed, and these others were accusing them, appearances indicated that Bolo and Eugenia were not a mysterious, glamorous pair of outcasts, but that they were criminals.

But that crack about Eugenia being a witch was too much for me, and it was natural for me to line up against anyone who made a crazy accusation like that.

The ferret-faced farmer may have read my thoughts in my face.

"Mister—" he began again, speaking easily and suavely, "my wife, she believes in the witchcraft. You, I can see, do not. Only those who come from the isolated, backward countries hold such a belief in these times.

"But perhaps there is another way of saying what my wife has tried to tell you. This woman whose husband, has tried to kill you, sir, is of those who can create strange fancies in the mind. Even in America, that is known, is it not? Once I attended a playhouse where illusions were created on the stage. They were only meant to amuse—but I have heard of cases where such things are done for harm. There was an old mansion set in wide fields in Pennsylvania, where I once was, which was believed to be haunted. Actually, a woman who lived there all alone was driven mad.

"Ghostly apparitions, they called the things she saw, and they used other big words. It was found that these things were done by an heir next in line, who wished to inherit. He was punished with a prison term."

Well. Like it or not, this talk made more sense. Yet I didn't get the connection. Why would a couple who wanted to kill me because, perhaps, I was in danger of learning

something about them which they wanted left hidden, play witch tricks on the simple farmer folk who were their not-very-near neighbors?

A GAIN the yokel seemed to read my mind.

"The truth is, Sir," he said, "that we are all from the same far country. From East Sylvania, where even today the common people believe in vampires and werewolves, in wizards and witches. This woman was our most unworthy queen, and she was driven out because it was believed she practiced sorcery with the aid of the man—who is an Arab of much strange knowledge.

"We—my wife, Matthe and I—came to this land only to share in its great richness. Learning by chance that Queen Eugenia was plotting against it, we have followed her and the Arab here. We have waited and watched, intending to act only if the time came.

"The time, Mister—Sir—is here. We were able to save you from the Arab's attack. It was my running up which prevented him from better aiming the blow which was to kill you, Sir. Our presence has saved you; and we are ready to testify against these two. My name is Ivor Wolfert, and I, and Matthe, are at your service."

My head was throbbing madly, and my tongue felt thick—not a good sign. It was no time to lose consciousness again. If Ivor's story was true, the guns were in the wrong hands, and how could he say he had saved me, and how could he expect to live to testify? "What is wrong with this picture?" I thought; and couldn't answer myself. Things were all out of focus.

I made a violent effort to come by something resembling logic and reason.

"If they are as bad as all that, why don't they shoot the three of us—and set fire to your house, after taking our bodies there?" I asked, feeling a little bit like the parent who told the boy not to put peas in his nose—and something like it, was a logical idea for a pair of international murderers and plotters, whether they were sorcerers or not.

That sorcery thing still stuck in my throat. I was weak, ill and dizzy, and my mind

had reverted instinctively to the first principles I had learned in my business as an investigator. When anyone tells too tall a tale, that person is the most likely one to suspect.

And another thing. Find out the end of the "tall tale." The end of the story. The objective.

The story against Bolo and Eugenia didn't ring true, because they could have thought of what I had just suggested, and they could have done it, but they hadn't. Now if I went along with the Wolfert family—

"What do you think I ought to do?" I asked, fuzzily, when no one answered that last little question I had put.

It was the woman Matthe who answered. Heavily she leaned her awkward body toward me. An evil light glittered in the little eyes that were too small for the big-boned face.

"The gun covers my husband, Sir!" she said. "Before I move fast, it will be pointed at me, perhaps. But all three of us it cannot control. You and I must leap upon the Arab. Two of us will live to beat the man to death!"

Her bloodthirstiness settled down in my mind with that charge of witchcraft. I didn't like her!

"It will probably be your husband who will be killed!" I reminded. "So far as you are concerned, he's Bolo's hostage."

"If it must be, it must." The woman's voice was a low mutter; her little eyes still glared into mine venomously. "A life is not too great a price, to kill a witch. And the woman must die also!"

"No. You'd have to promise no violence! No one to be murdered, neither queen nor Arab nor witch. No one, do you hear? And if you promised, I wouldn't believe you!"

I WAS shouting, and my shouting sounded just a little hysterical. I slumped down on top of the wooden-board table, propping myself on my two arms. I could feel a longish lock of hair dangle on my forehead, which happens when I am mussed up and bothered, giving me a rather juvenile look. I could feel something else slide across the skin of my brow and cheek

also—I had started the blood flowing again in my head wound.

Eugenia saw this. I looked at her just then, at the ugly, out-of-proportion face with those eyes I had had to like. I saw something shine out of those eyes that I had seen in the eyes of other women, when that lock of hair fell down. A shining tenderness—

She put down her artillery and rose, holding the queer lantern with which we had walked through her beautiful "virgin forest" a short while ago. All this time its beam had been directed into the far corner of the porch, where the house wall made a dark ell with the rickety little tacked on clapboard kitchen.

She came close to me—very close, her eyes looking into mine with that look which belonged on the face of a mother looking at a hurt child. She held the lantern high, so that it shone directly on my pounding, bleeding head. It also illumined her face, in all its lumpy, fallen-in and bulged-out contours, making ruddy shadows of the heavy wrinkles.

Behind me, the woman Matthe screamed in a strange, guttural croak.

"That's how she can bewitch—you will see strange things, until your mind goes and you are quite mad!" she cried.

The pain in my head abated, and I could think.

I was remembering. The path in the forest. The lovely, illusory things I had seen, walking in the golden glow from the little lantern.

You could long for such a moment's seeing, all through a lifetime. You could remember—as one who loves the sea remembers it living out a long life on a bleak prairie; as one who loves the changing mystery of stars and moon and sunrises and sunsets might remember, shut away for a lifetime in some prison-tomb.

With an ugly sequence of thought like the jangle of a broken harpstring in the middle of a symphony, I remembered something else, too. I remembered the horror that had suddenly followed the brighter vision, the dreadful demonic figure that froze my blood on the way back from that forest walk. If Eugenia had summoned that

phantom also—whether by hypnosis, lantern slide or any formula of psychology and/or physics, then Eugenia was dreadfully, potently, unbelievably evil.

I drew back a little, staring at her.

My breath drove out of me in a forced expulsion that might have been caused by a physical blow. I stared at her face.

The lines and furrows were gone from it, in some trick of that lantern's light, in some shift of position which showed no shadow at all. The scarified look was gone, the fullness where it didn't belong, the hard, gaunt lines. The nose was perfect and flawless, the teeth neat and small and pearly, the slightly parted lips like red flower petals. So had Queen Eugenia looked before accident or her wish had disfigured her. So had the queen looked in the royal pictures I had seen, and so did she still look in the silver-framed photograph inside the shack. So did she look—

So did she *not* look. For with an unsteady hand that recognized more plainly than the look of realization in her eyes, my sudden vision of her, she hastily lowered the lantern. It dangled from her hand, grown suddenly slack and purposeless; and in the light of the oil lamp set on a shelf built for it, the old, tired, marred face looked at me sadly.

I SHOOK my head and shut my eyes and rubbed them. And it was then a shot rang out, and for a moment I stared wildly about me, seeing a confusion of struggling figures before I realized the change in the balance of power there on that embattled, rickety little back porch.

Wolfert had snatched the lantern from Eugenia, and dashed it to the floor, where it lay shattered. Bolo had fired the shot, but Matthe had flung herself upon him—probably just before Wolfert leaped. The gun lay on the floor at my feet, and I picked it up.

It came to me, then, that my head did not bother me at all. I don't think I made the connection immediately. It seemed natural and right not to be weak, sick and giddy, not to have blood flowing, to be in charge of the situation. After all, it was my business to be in charge.

"You are all under arrest," I said, and I said it very clearly, and with a satisfaction that was almost violent in its intensity. It was about time! A Government man is not supposed to spend hour after hour delving in the field of optical illusions, discussing shady characters with each other, trying to decide which way to cast his vote in order not to become a dead Government man while the shady characters go gaily on their various mysterious ways. At last, I had the situation in hand, and I wasn't going to let it slip again.

"You may all line up against the wall," I continued. "I'm going to search you for concealed weapons, and then you can walk single file into the kitchen lean-to, which has a door with a lock and only the cracks in the boards and the chimney for ventilation. There you'll stay until I can get to a phone and back here."

It seemed simple. Let them all tell their stories, their crazy, inconsistent stories, to the Investigation Committee. I had seen more than enough to warrant holding every one of them. For attempted murder, anyhow; and which of them was attempting the murder, and what they had been up to that made them attempt it, might presently appear. So far as I was concerned, it would be a pleasure to think of them all safe in jail for a while.

They moved back to the wall, exactly as I told them and motioned them to do. And it was not until then that I noticed I had an extra captive. There should have been four. But there were five.

He stood in the middle of a circle of dark light. I don't know how to describe it better; Milton wrote of "not light, but rather darkness visible." I'm not given to quoting the classics audibly or inaudibly, but my mind framed the words again.

The source of this livid green-blue-dirty purple light-cone—for it was a cone that narrowed rapidly down to a point—was not a lantern such as Eugenia had played her pretty games with, but a small, streamlined and normal appearing flashlight of the lead pencil variety. I found it by following the light back to its source. Someone had laid it down on a stool so that its light fell into that corner Eugenia had kept

the direct shine from her lantern turned into. Maybe the sulphurish light, the queer, darkish light, couldn't show so long as the other light was on it—just as white light is made up of all the various colored rays, maybe these two neutralized each other.

When I thought that, I was on the way to understanding a good many things. But consciously, my thoughts and my feelings were petrified and paralyzed, when I looked back, after tracing the source of the light, at *Him*.

He was the demon-looking character who had frightened me out of my wits out there in the forest. The same, with a difference.

In the forest, he had been a colossus. Something to come between you and the whole world, too big and dreadful to escape—yet somehow—I knew it now, looking back at it—he had been *tenuous*. Not altogether solid, even in all that clarity of vision. Something we had seemed to *pass through*, finally. We went right through where he had been, or seemed to be, or projected that huge image of himself, anyway.

This man I was looking at was life size, and no more; a little bigger than me—and I'm not a small man—but only a little. He was, however, very static, very solid, very much there to be reckoned with. And I had him standing there against the wall—but not because I had ordered *him* there. Oh, no! He had been standing there looking coolly at me, before I saw him, I knew that.

I guess Wolfert and his wife Matthe became aware of him by the look in my eyes. You do stare at a person who is gesturing you around with a loaded gun. They lost interest in the gun and swung round to face the Newcomer, and the intensity of their adoration lent them an incredible grace as they sank to their knees, facing him.

"Master!" I heard Matthe breathe.

He faced me across their kneeling forms, with a leering suavity impossible to describe. I still found nothing better to do than to stare at him.

He wore no hat, and his black hair receded in those two peaks from his dark brows, as suggestive as ever of horns. Small, concrete horns, not sweeping up into the

shadows; but incredibly wicked looking. Cruel, they looked; as though they could actually be used to butt with, as a goat or a bull butts. His mouth was cynical, and turned down at the corners. He wore unrelieved black; no white shirt front such as the gentleman Dracula affects in the movies; he was buttoned up in black to his chin. From his shoulders swept a voluminous black cape, or cloak; and you may believe this or not—I didn't want to at the time—but bats literally clung to him, to the folds of that great flowing garment. They clung, and crawled on it, and took little flights in circles that brought them right back to him, making little squeaking noises of delight.

"*Why*—I wonder, have artists and other speculative souls always known of the affinity between devils and bats?"

He said the words slowly, quizzically, as though we had all the time there was; as though there was no time to be considered. *As though there was no time*—

I remembered that talk of madness. I checked my thoughts. For a moment, I had fancied myself living in some other plane, or dimension, or state—I believe that I had thought myself in Hell.

STRANGELY, it was the thought of poor Eugenia that braced me. *She* had known of this. She hadn't produced an illusion in the forest, she had been terrified too, not shamming, it was a fear she knew and lived with—and fought.

The abdicated queen of a little country that believed in things like this—could fight it. A queen could fight it—a woman could fight—

A man had to fight it. *I* had to.

I made one last stab at authority. At least it was a gesture—it was a *sane* thing to do. It was an act of faith, an assumption that there was anything *anyone* could do.

"I wish you would tell me—what you want to accomplish here," I said, addressing *him*. "I have a loaded gun in my hands, and I can use it if—if it is necessary. On the other hand, it may be that I have no quarrel with you at all. You haven't interfered with my prisoners, although two of them—"

I broke off. I had made my gesture, I

had asked him—what he wanted. Maybe, I thought, he wanted to take his two worshipful followers away with him. Well, I thought I would let him. Maybe he wanted Eugenia and Bolo. I wouldn't let him have them, without trying what a bullet would do. It was silly, but I wasn't sure a bullet would do very much—against *him*. Still, I would try; if I had to.

Maybe he wanted something else, something that didn't matter to me as an agent of the Government, or as a man either. I could hope—

And he could answer.

"The Queen's lantern is broken," he said with a strange irrelevance. "I want *it*. All you have to do, my friend, is to keep these two—Queen Eugenia and her consort—from interfering. The three of us will go away peacefully to the farmhouse in the adjoining field beyond the wood, taking the broken lantern with us. You may go back to town. You may take this couple with you, or leave them—it does not matter. If you are not satisfied as to Ivor and Matthe, send for them later. They will not be leaving the farmhouse."

My relief was like feeling a mountain move off your chest, in a nightmare.

The man Ivor and the woman Matthe were not kneeling now. They leaned forward in an odd crouching posture. They were ready to snatch the lantern. Theirs was an avidity not altogether human; the man resembled a wolf crouching to spring, the woman was like nothing as much as a vulture.

They were too eager, and too ugly.

I hesitated, where I had intended to agree hastily. I returned to involved improbable conjecturings, though I was sick of them.

"I'll hear why you want the lantern," I said, doggedly, feeling that I was shutting the door that might have let me out of this fantastic nightmare.

"Tell me what you think it will do for you. Tell me what it *is!*"

"You Americans are so practical," *He* sneered. "You understand a lantern, Mr. Conant. Metal and glass, and something to make a light. A kind of—battery, an electric filament, shall we say?"

Queen Eugenia of East Sylvania came

slowly, haltingly and laid her hand upon my arm. It was a graceful, slender hand, like her body which moved so fluently. Nothing had been done to disfigure her hands, I hadn't noticed them before.

"Let Juan—let Ahmed tell you. And believe him—"

Her voice died. The man who was not a Malay, but an Arabian, not a misplaced houseboy, but a scientist, not an oriental half of a common mixed race marriage, but the banished scientist who had married his exiled queen to protect her—this man from whose face the foolish grin had vanished, whose shoulders were squared back so that the straightness of his spine added something to his stature—stood close to us, and somehow we three become undeclared allies in something dreadfully important, maybe more important than life.

"There is so little time," he said in a falling intonation of sorrow. "Little time for any of us here, perhaps, perhaps for the whole world. You will believe, or you will not, Mr. Conant. But the source of light in that lantern—only obscured, only lacking the focus of a broken lens—is actually something like the Philosopher's Stone. You are familiar with the old quest, the ancient alchemical theory and research of legend and fact?"

"They wanted to turn base metals into gold. It could never be done," I said stupidly.

"It was—in part—a concealed symbol," the Arab said quietly. "Base metals into gold, base creatures into noble, all that involve the transmutation into gold as well. By changing the *atoms*—not fission, the source of high explosives, potentially of power and energy. By changing things without destroying them. By transmutation!"

"This man—" Eugenia's voice was proud, but it was not the pride of wife for husband, so much as the gracious pride of a queen bestowing a knightly honor. "This man worked in a secret laboratory—endlessly, tirelessly, heroically without despair or giving up. He—Ahmed, son of a long and ancient line of Arabian scientists. He worked with the new forces, the new knowledge. He made possible the old dream that was impossible before the new knowledge.

He built the Philosopher's Stone. Combined powers of electricity and magnetism forged it. And then—the powers of evil rose in fury, as they have always done. The kingdom was destroyed. I, who protected Ahmed, was forced to abdicate. He came with me, loyal to me, and we two have hidden our secret. But the other half of the Stone, *they* took."

"The other half—?"

"The other side of the shield. The obverse. The dark side. For Ahmed himself had been compelled to forge it, when he learned the truth—that only combined with the binder of an opposite and nearly equal force, are permanence and stability added to the light which reveals, but has by itself no material substance. There are thought forms. There are forms of light and of darkness. Light and matter have a common quotient; but to weld them into one, the vibratory forces which oppose them must be present also. Present in a balance finely determined; a proportion exhaustively analyzed, made a little less in potency, but present as God has balanced the forces that support the stars and planets."

I look back, wondering at myself; and a little proud.

Because I understood him, and I believed him. It must be that when you hear an absolute truth, you recognize it; however little you've thought the thoughts which could prepare you for it, you know, and you say to yourself that you know. And you behave accordingly. Like a man to whom it has been given to understand.

"The other light, the dark one. The one *he* is standing in, that comes from the little flashlight there. *That* was the one that showed horrible things in the forest. And they couldn't be solid and real, because—that is the other half of the stone, the obverse. Neither one is much good without the other. And *he* has the half that makes things that are evil appear."

I was thinking aloud, as much as answering Ahmed, but his eyes lit up, and then he and Eugenia exchanged a look which flashed the most utter triumph.

"He knows. He is on our side, now," Ahmed said; and she breathed a sigh of relief, and pressed my hand.

Yes, I was on their side. But—

"What is it you want me to do?" I asked her. "And—what can *he* do? I can keep Wolfert and his wife quiet with my gun. But if *he*—used force, would—would my bullets stop him?"

I COULD feel the fury, the cold hate, pouring at me from the dark-clad figure standing in the circle of lurid light. I could imagine those long arms leaping at me, the dark cloak with its horror of clinging bats enfolding, smothering me.

"His force is what he is using. He must act through other hands," Ahmed told me. "If he can possess our lantern, or rather what is in it; if he can secure the good half of the Philosopher's Stone, through the physical means of Wolfert and Matthe; then he will be able to materialize.

"No one—least of all I—know all the things the Philosopher's Stone can do. If the good preponderates, all things exposed to its emanations will come into better vibrations, higher forms of being. The sick will be healed—your wound was healed just now because of the temporary power of the unbalanced Stone, for it was only a surface wound. The true Stone would cure much worse deviations from what is sound and whole. But, you see the converse is true also. If he can possess our half of the Stone, and unite it with that which he has—making the adjustment so that the evil is the stronger—then the emanations of the thing will be evil, and what evil can manifest itself only as a phantasy and a powerful mental force, will be able to incarnate itself as well.

"*He* will incarnate himself."

As it stood, then, he was powerless. Only through others could he act; and if he was trying to force his way into my mind, he was not succeeding.

For I hated him, and I meant to see that Eugenia and Ahmed had their way with the dark light, with the thing in the little flashlight that made it shine.

"I'll hold Wolfert and Matthe with my gun. I'll shoot if I must," I promised. "Take the flashlight, and get out the other half of your Stone. It's yours. You made the two halves, didn't you? Both of them. So

you know how to put them together, and in the right proportion. Can you do it here?"

"It will have to be!" Ahmed said promptly. There was something in his voice that made me wonder. Regret. Or fear. But he walked across the little shake-down porch, and lifted the flashlight.

I half expected Wolfert and Matthe to try to stop him. I was ready for it. The butt of the gun would do, I thought.

And I thought that I mustn't look into that dark corner from which the light had vanished. Ahmed had put it out, by the simple expedient of pressing his thumb on the button. And yet, I didn't want to look into that corner. It would be empty, now, in the pale, white light from the hurricane lantern hung from a hook. But there would be *Something* there—a malignancy. I didn't want to confront it.

"We will have to hurry," Ahmed's voice now was all urgency.

"The Dark One is still there, although invisible. He will try to create confusion in your mind, my friend. You are strong in part because of the light that healed your wound. It made you very open to perceptions of truth. But that part may fade, and we must hurry now."

He busied himself with the flash. Something slid out of it into the palm of his hand, and he winced as he held it closed under his fingers.

"The touch is not pleasant," he said.

EUGENIA had been working over the little lantern, where it lay smashed on the floor. She also had taken out a small object, and this also she held so that I could not see. Only, through Ahmed's locked fingers trickled small broken rays of the greenish light; and through Eugenia's, a rosy gleam, which made her flesh appear translucent and daintily veined.

They turned from me, then, and I saw that they meant to walk away from the house, out into the leaf-roofed night.

"There is some danger," Ahmed said, turning back to speak to me when they had descended the steps. "This should be done in a laboratory, under very exact conditions.

"You see, the Stone must unite its two

halves, previously forged, at an exact temperature. This temperature, strangely enough, is about that of the normal human body; I think the Stone when it is united becomes actually a living thing, perhaps a sort of link between the inorganic and the organic world.

"It will not unite firmly, unless the two halves are—as now—equal. After the union is made, very carefully, the evil half must be chipped away. Lessened a very little bit; so that the good will predominate, without appreciable loss of any element. This balance, as I think I've said, is as delicate as the balance of the Universe itself.

"But—even over-excitement, even a slightly raised temperature in Eugenia or in myself; these might cause fusion to take place violently. Hence, the danger.

"Of course—if one of us is cold; if we were to feel, one or both of us, that deadly fear which causes subnormality—than the fusion might not take place at all.

"We can only try, Mr. Conant. But—if the first unfortunate circumstance should

develop; if Eugenia and I should both receive a shock comparable to a strong shock of electricity. Then, Mr. Conant, I confide to you what may be the last hope of the world.

"You would find the stone lying where it had fallen, Mr. Conant. And you would take the risk of carefully chipping from it a very small sliver or particle of the dark side of that stone.

"It is strange, is it not? The obverse of the coin, the constant balance of forces and discoveries?

"Fission of the atom, and its potential power to destroy every living thing and the planet itself. And in the same period of time, the fusion of the proper elements into what may become the magic stone of the ancients, potent to transmute that which is evil into that which is good!"

I felt a sudden burning desire to help, in some way, to be a part of the danger, to share in the glory. I took a step forward—

"Please stay where you are, Mr. Conant!" Ahmed said, sharply.

HE AND Eugenia walked a little way down the path, to where stood the well from which—she had told me—they drew all their water. It seemed to me very strange that they paused beside the well. The moon threw a broken shaft of light on them, and on the well, a beautiful old-fashioned well with some kind of trailing vine grown up over it.

I saw the silver flash of moonlight as Ahmed drew up the dripping bucket, using the hand that was free. He tilted the bucket carefully into a tin cup there on the flat coping, and lifted the cup to Eugenia's lips. She drank from it, and then he drank, and then he poured out the water on the ground.

The moonlight made a cascade of light of the arc of water as it fell. It was like drinking a toast, and drinking it in moonlight.

The man and woman standing there turned to face each other, then, and they joined hands there in the moonlight. They joined hands, but it was not exactly that: they held out each a hand to the other, and it was the hands holding the two halves of the Philosopher's Stone that met so, and the two halves were held to each other so—and pressed firmly together. I could see their figures show the tension. I could feel the tension in the very air, in the whole big night. Like a powerful magnetic force, a big current of electricity, and the funny smell of ozone.

Two awkward scrambling forms dashed past me.

I had forgotten Wolfert and Matthe, and they were hurling themselves down there. I knew what they intended. To snatch the stone the minute it had fused together, to beat down the frailer woman and the man who was rapt in the moment, in the thing he was doing there. They would murder Ahmed and Eugenia both, to get that stone. But until Ahmed and Eugenia's hands fell apart, and one of them held the fused, united stone—they would wait that long.

I started down the steps. If they started something, I must be there. I wouldn't be able to shoot, whatever they did, because of the danger of hitting Ahmed and Eugenia, who were beyond them.

I started down the steps, but I didn't

make the bottom step before it happened.

A column of flame shot from earth to heaven. Silent, swift, it came and was gone.

But—Ahmed and Eugenia were a part of that flame. For a split instant they *were* flame. Then—they were not.

Wolfert and Matthe were there. They were lying face down on the ground, fallen as they were still running, leaping forward. And they were dead.

I spent hours in that spot. I don't know how many hours.

Did I find the Philosopher's Stone?

I don't know. Or yes, I'd rather say I didn't, but of course I did.

There was this stone. It wasn't luminous, any more. There were queer things about it, yes.

One side was light, and the other side was dark. It reminded me, somehow, of the moon, Earth's eternal, inscrutable partner in space. One side visible, and one side never glimpsed at all. Because that was how this stone struck me.

It was about two inches in diameter, and round—flattened at the poles, I started to say. I found it strangely planet-like. Strangely *living*, too. The flame, that soaring column of fire and light and silence, hadn't left things hot, or burned around there, and the round stone was neither hot nor cold. It was just about the temperature of a man's hand. Not my hand, I could feel the fever of too much excitement and nerve strain burning in me. So to me it had the slightly cooler touch of a normal person's hand when you have a fever. Poor Eugenia had looked burning, flaming with hope and excitement, when she had walked out there into the moonlit night with Ahmed. I realize now, that she, at least, must have been much too far off the norm to achieve that impossible laboratory exactitude of normal temperature Ahmed had said was needed for safety.

So it was up to me to carefully chip away a bit of the dark side of this stone.

I STUDIED it. It was the *strangest* blackness, or darkness. Darkness visible. Once more I had to recreate that phrase. Looking at it was like looking into a soft nothingness that had a hypnotic effect. It

set me to dreaming, as a psychoanalyst sets a patient off by having him look at something bright. Only this was the reverse of bright; the *obverse*, Ahmed would have said. Yet it drowned your gaze, lost you in a soft, dark dream.

By and by I began to wonder why I had assumed that the dark side was the evil side, and the bright one—the light one, with just the look of the inside of a seashell, was the one that was powerful for good. Ahmed had implied that—I guessed. Maybe even Ahmed didn't know how it would seem, once it was fused.

Then I began to wonder what would happen to me, if I handled it roughly.

Or how anyone could know just how much of it ought to be chipped or slivered away.

And finally, I began to wonder how any of it could be true.

I had two dead people on my hands, dead of a sort of shock, probably electrical in nature, which seemed actually to have annihilated the physical bodies of Eugenia, once queen of East Sylvania, and Ahmed, her scientific protegee against whom the people of East Sylvania had risen.

I had in my hands a stone which—perhaps—had chemical properties they had loosed in putting the two halves of it, with varying and unknown chemical compositions, together.

Maybe a slip in handling the thing would cause more destruction, a lot of it. Not merely myself; there's that chain reaction they talk about in connection with the atom bomb. There's radioactivity, and a lot of other things I know even less about.

It seemed like a miracle, the way things around that spot were unharmed: except for poor, unattractive Wolfert and his wife,

who were dead, and the two who were gone. The organisms of men and animals are different from other things.

Anyway, miracle or not, the pretty sylvan well was as before, silent and lovely in the moonlight.

I tossed the strange little stone into the well. I heard it splash. I thought: Who was it that went looking for truth at the bottom of a well?

And I thought I heard Someone laugh. An ugly, sardonic laugh, that mixed itself up with little squeaking noises.

The noises were bats. The night was full of them.

It would be hard to get a stone, just one little round stone, out of the bottom of a deep well, wouldn't it? No man in his senses would undertake a job like that. Of course, *he* didn't get *his* way either—whichever one of the various demons escaped from their own place *he* was.

But the thing I wake up at night over is this.

He may find another pair of hands to serve *him*, someday; a pair of hands belonging to a stupid clod of a person just foolish enough to do a stupid thing like that. Drain a well in the deep forest, and grub out a rather ordinary looking round stone, and chip away just a little of the *light* side—

And if that happens, fission or fusion, it won't matter much. If the world isn't blown up, it will change, and not in a good way. What is bad could be so incredibly worse, and what is good could be so incredibly destroyed.

And yet—the man who caused all that would be powerful. More powerful than Nero or Caligula.

I wish I had never seen the dark form in the shadows.

