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HUNGER

By JOHN D. SWAIN

HERITAGE had passed the stage where he was conscious of hunger. Indeed, there was an almost complete and ascetic severance of mental and physical consciousness, a serene exhilaration in which his mind functioned with amazing clarity.

Questions for whose answer he had often groped blindly were now revealed to him as vividly as a strange countryside is photographed upon the brain at night by a flash of lightning. He did not ponder on futile puzzles whose answer is a matter of numerals or statistical details, but for the first time he was able to grasp the meaning of eternity without beginning or end, of an universe without boundaries. Such a childish device as our Time conception amused him. He perceived the reasonableness of the Fourth Dimension, of other dimensions beyond.

Meanwhile, as he passed through the darkness, it seemed to him that he was immensely tall, his head among the stars, and that instead of walking he remained fixed in space while past him, on either hand, fled the trees and fields, the little hills and the scattered farmsteads. He realized that such a state could not long endure; that his mind was nicely balanced on a thin blade of consciousness from which the slightest breath would overbalance it and plunge him into dark hallucinations. He must eat soon, or delirium would claim him.

It was therefore with a fierce joy that at last, amid all these miles of darkened houses, he beheld a little house whose every window blazed with lights. Candle-lights; for as he drew near he observed that lighted

candles stood in rows on every sill.

Candles are in cathedrals, and coffee-houses. They are lighted in joy and sorrow. They grace austere old houses where are much worn silver and old books and solid furniture polished by generations of hands, and frowning portraits on faded walls. They burn in thieves' cellars. They are gay, arrogant, furtive. Seen in this isolated house, and long past midnight, they could indicate but one occasion: death!

Heritage, forgetting his first impulse to ask for food, was moved to pause here to pay his respects to the dead. With the urbanity of famine, he would salute the still one, old man, woman, child, with a *hail and farewell*.

He entered in; and as he thrust open the unlocked door, a venerable man rose and bowed. "I have been waiting," he said simply. "I knew you would come."

"How could you know, when I only took this road, a strange one to me, by chance?"

The old man smiled. "There is no such thing as chance. Of course, I could not know that it would be you, in particular. But *someone* was bound to come. I need an acolyte, that I may complete my task."

He looked down upon a little trestleboard over which had been thrown a gaudy red tablecloth, and upon which lay a long roll of fine white linen cloth, like a cocoon, with two large candles burning at each end.

The old man, Heritage noted as his eyes became accustomed to the flicker of many little candle flames, wore across his shoulders what appeared to be one of a pair of velour por-

tières, woven with florid designs in red, gold and black. He pointed to the shrouded figure on the trestle-board.

"This is a princess royal," he explained. "Her history is well known to Egyptologists. Because she refused to marry her own brother, her father the *pharaoh* caused her to be strangled, and her body denied the sacred rites of sepulture. It was embalmed, but thrust into the dry vegetable cellar of a slave's house. I bought it from a great museum of art and antiquities. It took all that I had saved up by fifty years of toil with my pen. Before the Nile grooved its channel to the sea, it was written in the planets that I should perform this thing. But I can not accomplish it alone."

Heritage gravely nodded. "What then can I do?"

The old gentleman handed him two candles, which he had lighted.

"You shall kneel at her feet while I recite the essential part of the ancient rite," he said; and, directly Heritage had kneeled, he began rapidly to intone passages from the *Book of the Dead*.

The wavering candle-light served to set everything in the still room into fluidity. The shrouded mummy seemed to breathe rhythmically. In the far corners of the room ludicrous shadows leaped and gamboled. Over Heritage's hands ran little rivulets of hot wax; but he did not feel them, famine having already released him from the tyranny of pain.

Abruptly, the voice of the old man ceased. After a moment he said: "There is no mummy case. That I could not afford to buy. So I have prepared a simple cedar box, lined with soft silk, outside in the grave I have digged for her. And now I must lift her in my arms and take her out; but this is sacrilege, and so, according to the immutable law of old Egypt, you my acolyte must curse

me, and make pretense of stoning me."

Heritage bowed. It seemed to him very fitting that he should do these things; and he carefully set down the candles, and took the stone that was handed him.

"*May the gods damn your soul for sacrilege,*" he said, his voice thin and high; and then he feebly cast the stone toward the old man, but not directly at him.

It struck the window at the back of the room; several candles were overturned, and there was a chuckle of glass as one pane was demolished.

From the black night there entered through the broken window-pane two black cats, with jade eyes. With solemn tread, eyes set hard ahead, they passed to the rude trestle, crouched, and leaped upon it, one at the head, the other at the foot, and there began ceremoniously to wash their faces, their soot-black paws making mysterious and cabalistic signs like the passes of a necromancer or the incantations of a priest.

The old man nodded. "It is well," he said; and stooping, lifted the light, dry mummy and bore it from the room and out into the night, followed by the two black cats.

Heritage was left alone with many candles, and the incense smoke from a cracked saucer upon which smoldered strange gums and spices.

Presently, since the old man did not return, he opened the front door and passed through the weed-choked garden and resumed his way down the turnpike, now lighted faintly by the first hint of dawn. By it he perceived that he was come to a covered toll-bridge spanning a river. Men had recently been at work restoring its planking; and just as Heritage was about to plunge into the black tunnel, his eyes made out the fragments of a lunch one of the workmen had left behind. There were dry crusts, the

fat rind of a slice of ham, a bit of cheese.

With a little sob he sank upon his knees in the wet grass and began to

cram the morsels into his avid mouth.

And as he swallowed them without chewing, far away across the dark river a cock challenged the dawn.