

ARGOSY

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ALL-STORY WEEKLY

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*Adventure
Treasure
Romance!*

in

The Golden Traitor

by R. de S. Horn

and

*Weird Mystery of a Strange World in
Madman's Buff* by Will McMorrow

ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY



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He whirled to face the onrushing bodies

Madman's Buff

To be hung by the neck, or to yield himself for the fantastic experiment of a probable madman—for Lawrence Carother it was one or the other

By WILL McMORROW

Author of "A World of Indexed Numbers," "King's Khaki," etc.

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

CHOOSE!

"**L**IFE or death! Your answer—and quickly. They are waiting for you."

The man twisted his untidy gray head around to peer up at Carother, pointed a skinny, long-nailed finger toward the group outside the cell-door.

Without looking, Carother knew what that group meant—the black-robed priest waiting to console him to the scaffold, the *alcalde* hissing sibilant Spanish through white teeth, the bare-footed soldiers lounging over their rifles, smoking their rancid cigarettes, and awaiting with little interest the sordid drama of a man's execution.

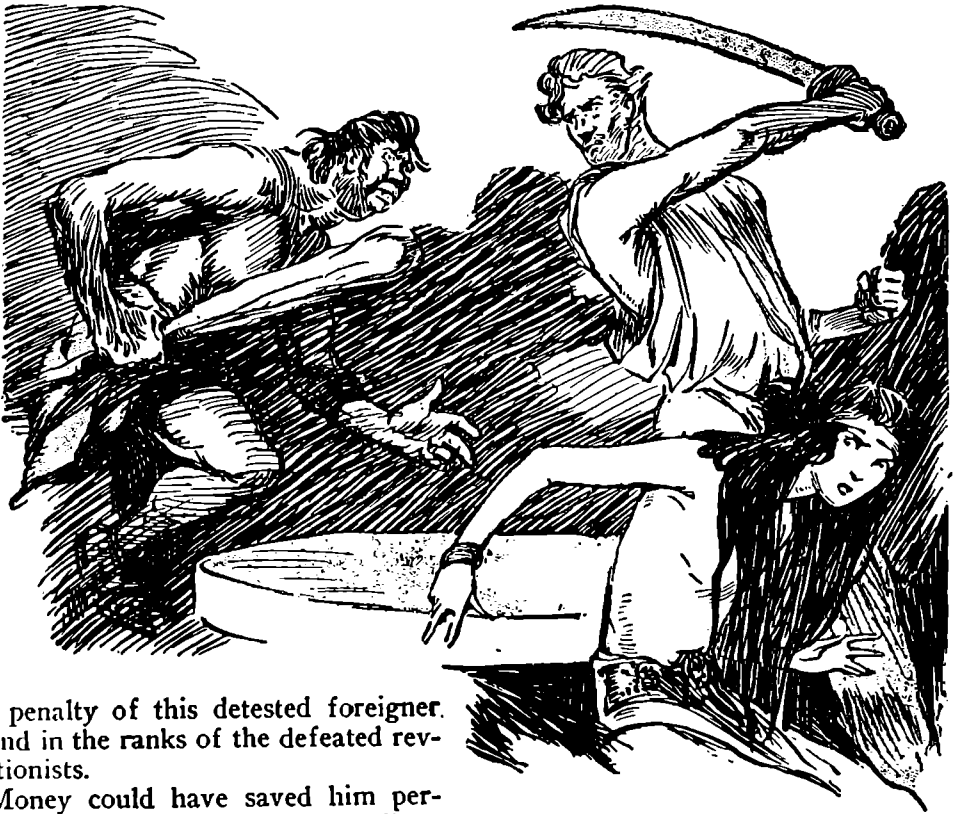
"I offer you a choice." The little man leaned closer, his sunken eyes gleaming in the shadow. "I promise nothing—only the barest chance of life

elsewhere, on this earth or beyond it, under I know not what conditions, in I know not what form.

"But it is a chance—better than the certainty of the hangman. Consider it, my friend. You are a strong man, young, an athlete. You will not die easily on the rope. What is your answer? I waste time here."

Carother, standing in his shirt-sleeves—they had torn his coat off in the struggle when he had been taken—folded his arms, pressed his lips tightly together as he gazed down at the queer creature who had come at the eleventh hour with so fantastic a proposition.

He was telling the truth. As far as Lawrence Carother was concerned, he was as good as dead. He had known that before that mockery of a trial had been well started on its predestined way—had seen his doom written in the faces of the judges, determined to exact



the penalty of this detested foreigner found in the ranks of the defeated revolutionists.

Money could have saved him perhaps. But Carother had been penniless, friendless, a stranded wanderer, without kith or kin, staking his life on the spinning wheel of political fortune. And he had lost. The time had come to pay the reckoning, without whining, as calmly as a man may who has received but little from life.

Then this man had shown up—this stranger, with the eyes of a fanatic burning under the domed forehead that seemed to dwarf his spare frame—this person behind whose back the superstitious soldiers made the sign of the cross, and before whose sneering face the pompous *alcalde* bowed profoundly, addressing him as Don Belisario.

Speaking English perfectly, in an eager, rasping whisper, he had offered the doomed man life, offered to buy the soldier of fortune free, on one condition.

It was a condition that made even a man in the shadow of the scaffold hesi-

tate—a madman's proposal on the face of it, sounding like some super-scientific nightmare brought on by overstudy and intellectual arrogance.

And still, there was about the man so much of sincerity, so much of lucid logic—

"It is impossible," Carother muttered. "Even if I were to consent—"

"Impossible!" The man's chin jerked up quickly, his long fingers plucking apart as if he tore the word to shreds. "What do you know of the impossible?"

"Thirty years ago fools said radio was impossible, only yesterday they were sneering at television, to-morrow they will be bringing the corners of the universe together, translating the souls of men through space, tearing apart the veil that hides the mystery of life.

"The same fools laughed at me, persecuted me for overstepping their ridic-

ulous laws, drove me here to hide in San Lomar—”

He broke off.

“Enough of that. I have told you my plan. I have found the secret after twenty years. I have explained, in so far as you can understand, my process. You, your personality, body and soul, are at my disposal to-night.

“I promise nothing. You may die in the laboratory. You may live to see things no man yet has seen. Space may be annihilated, time cease to exist for you.”

The soldiers stirred restlessly, rifle-butts grinding ominously on the dirty concrete floor. The *alcalde* fingered his jet-black mustache, peered at his watch in the dim light and through the bars into the cell.

“We must start, Señor Belisario,” he called softly, in Spanish.

The man they called Belisario plucked at the tall American’s sleeve. “You hear, my friend? You may die by the halter, or you may be sacrificed in the greatest experiment science has ever made. Your choice?”

Carother shivered. “It is only a choice of deaths perhaps. I’ll go with you.”

“Good!” The scientist turned, eyes shining, and spoke rapidly to the waiting official. He swung the door of the cell open, and beckoned to Carother.

IN the corridor Belisario spoke to Carother in English. “Remember, you have promised. I warn you if you should attempt to escape you will be immediately killed. The soldiers go with us to my laboratory.

“I have told these stupid people nothing except that I am helping you to get away, but I have paid them well, and they will guard the outside of the laboratory until the experiment is over and you have disappeared into the ether. It will be useless for you to attempt to escape—”

“I gave you my word on that,” Carother said shortly.

They passed out into the scented air of the tropical night. Four more ragged soldiers detached themselves from the shadow of a palm-clump in the courtyard and joined the others around Carother. The group moved toward a large closed car that throbbed at the curb.

Carother, urged by the wizened scientist, climbed in, found himself rolling out of the courtyard and along the narrow streets of San Lomar, Belisario opposite him, the soldiers lining the running board and grinning swarthily as they clung to the swaying car.

In any other place but San Lomar the whole proceeding would have seemed absurdly impossible—a condemned man being delivered from jail and driven off with a military escort—but Carother was familiar enough with the corruption existing in the affairs of the diminutive banana-republic to realize the power of extensive bribery.

He leaned forward, trying to catch a glimpse of the man opposite.

“This experiment,” Carother muttered. “Have you succeeded before? As a man snatched from the executioner at the last moment—I suppose I have no right to be particular—”

“It has succeeded,” Belisario exclaimed. “Only last month—not with a man. I could not get one of these cowards to accept, not though I begged and promised. But last month—it will give you heart to go on with this greatest experiment in physicochemistry—shall I tell you what I accomplished?”

His face appeared for an instant in the light of a street lamp, eager, triumphant. “It is useless to try to explain to you how I did it. Sufficient that it required oscillating currents of five hundred thousand a second, and the use of my own ultra-etheral radiant.

“In forty minutes and eleven seconds I caused the body of a living horse—a colt of peculiar, easily identified markings—to disappear—vanish,

hide, hair, bones, every cell and corpuscle. It was restored to me—found grazing at the very moment of its final disappearance in a field fifty miles north of here in a closed paddock.”

The car swung sharply to the right, climbed upward slowly.

“You knew where you were—sending it—where it would reappear?”

“No.” The scientist slouched back into his seat. “It was a lucky accident. The animal was recognized. Others, a sheep, pigeons, white rats, disappeared. I heard nothing more from them. I cannot control it.

“Invisibly, cell by cell, the animal vanishes before my eyes in the powerful rays of the ultra-ethereal radiant as snow vanishes under hot sunlight. Where their journey ends, where those cells are reassembled to form the living animal I do not know. They reappear somewhere on the earth’s surface I know—or beyond.”

“Beyond?” Carother formed the word with dry lips.

“Who knows?” Belisario’s voice was low and penetrating. “There is no limitation, except the power of my radiant waves. Thousands of miles, millions of miles through interplanetary space. There can be no limit once the problem has been solved.

“I have waited for this chance—to find a human subject for the experiment—some one who can communicate with me wherever he may find himself on the earth’s surface. Once I tried it and was driven into this exile here when the experiment failed. As if the life of a man were worth more than the knowledge—”

“In Heaven’s name what kind of cold-blooded machine are you?”

THE car stopped before an ugly structure of concrete—long, low, nestling below an intricate framework of steel and wire that shone in the moonlight. From beyond the opaque-glassed windows came the rumble of electric machinery, a blue snap-

ping light contrasting with the yellow street lamps of San Lomar in the valley beneath them.

Belisario stepped to the ground. The soldiers closed around.

“Who am I?” the sneering voice repeated Carother’s question. “These simple souls would say I am a witch-doctor perhaps.

“If I told you my real name even you would recognize it as that of a star of science of the first magnitude—a star that set years ago in Europe, but will shine again with greater splendor from this hidden spot. You think I am a boastful madman. You will see.”

Carother hesitated, his nails gripping into the palms of his hands.

“And if I should decide, even now, to refuse to be another victim?”

The other pointed into the valley. “In that case the public hangman of San Lomar will work overtime tonight. I have waited too long for this opportunity to be turned aside. I care for nothing but this work I am doing. Nothing you can say can sway me.

“But I can promise you one thing. If the attempt fails and you should survive here I shall see that you go free from the country.

“On the other hand you must promise me that wherever you may awaken, in whatever part of the world after you are transported out of here, you will communicate with me so that I may know I have been successful. If you are afraid of the adventure there is always the meaner and surer death waiting for you.”

Carother nodded. He had not meant to hesitate; it had been the instinctive drawing back before the unknowable, the mysterious fate that might await him within that concrete chamber. He had been long resigned to death, hours and days of waiting in that fetid cell. He was resigned now to what might be in store for him at the hands of this thwarted genius with the glowing eyes.

It was a gamble—but all his life Lawrence Carother had gambled with

death and fortune. It came to him now, the trenches of Flanders, the turmoil of Wall Street, that made speculation in the rubber forests, the days of beggary on the beaches, this last and maddest attempt in San Lomar, a gambler always, losing always—

He pointed to the house under the skeleton of steel masts.

“Lead the way, then.”

Together they vanished through the door that clanged behind them.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE PALM FOREST.

CAROTHER stirred restlessly, awakening slowly.

Pain—excruciating, unbearable pain played in needle-pointed waves through every muscle and sinew—poured agonizingly through his veins in a molten stream of returning life, as he struggled gaspingly for breath, fighting upward through a black ocean toward a glimmering light far above.

Then, suddenly, he seemed to pitch forward into bright daylight, the stabbing needles of torment growing less poignant gradually, until they died away altogether, leaving him breathing quietly and pleasurably.

He opened his eyes.

He was lying on his side, on a warm and gritty strip of yellow sand, in what seemed to be a clearing banked on three sides by the dark green of huge ferns higher than a man's head. On the fourth side the clearing opened into a glassy desert of sea that stretched unbrokenly to the shimmering horizon. Overhead the blazing, furnace-heat of the sun beat down on his thinly-clad body.

He crawled under the protecting shadow of the nearest fronds of fern, lay face downward in the coolness, trying to piece together several memories of events that came glimmering back to him through the haze of semi-consciousness.

The scaffold—the waiting soldiers—Belisario with his insane notion that he could conquer space—eliminate matter—dissolve a living man to nothingness, send him forth in the form of energy to be reassembled a thousand miles away—the laboratory, blue light waving in ghostly streamers—the transparent table on which he had lain with the scientist bending above him, fitting that aluminium frame with its myriad silver wires—

Carother struggled to his feet, passed a hand across his eyes. What had happened to him? This was not the San Lomar country. There was no such place within a hundred miles, nor such foliage—weird, twisted forms, great palms that might have been painted on the still air with the fanciful brush of an unbalanced genius. Not the San Lomar country certainly.

Was it possible he had been made the victim of some maniacal practical joke on the part of Belisario who had rescued him from the scaffold, drugged him, and left him to starve in some unexplored part of the interior? Or was it possible—the experiment—had been successful—after all?

The thought caught the breath in Carother's throat, left him tingling as if icy water had been dashed against his naked body, awakening him to the full possibilities of an unheard of situation.

If Belisario had been telling the truth, then he, Lawrence Carother, six feet of vital bone and muscle, had been dissolved in that laboratory, recreated here, a living, breathing man, mind and matter, after that invisible journey through space.

But where was he—in what corner of the earth had he come to life, weaponless, defenseless, to find his way back to civilization?

It is characteristic of human nature that the most startling and miraculous occurrence cannot long occupy attention to the exclusion of the more pressing needs of the moment.

Carother's mind attempted no abstract solution of the problem of how he got there. That would wait. There were other important considerations—finding out where he was, taking steps to provide food and shelter.

He looked around, figuring in which direction to explore. No sound of man or bird or beast reached his ears. The ranks of giant palms, looking almost artificially cultivated in their orderly clumps, made no stir in the breathless air.

To Carother, accustomed to the myriad life that creeps and flies and stalks the jungles of the south, this absence of any indication of life gave the place an enchanted sleeping look.

Under their spreading fronds the trees grew openly, arching overhead, shutting out the sunlight, leaving broad avenues of shaded, carpeted moss. With so many paths available Carother hesitated, but decided to follow the broadest one, which led directly away from the gleaming desert of sea.

He walked silently through this silent palm-forest, eyes and ears alert for signs or sounds of danger. Before him the ordered lines spread out fanwise as he advanced, closed behind him, interminably. His feet padded noiselessly on the springy softness of the moss.

In occasional open places where the sun shone through brilliantly, the ground was a gorgeous rug of flowers such as Carother had never seen—shaped like lilies in glowing scarlet, star-shaped flowers in somber black, golden yellow, blue and white and purple, garlanded with leaves of every shade of the spectra, as if that same mad genius who had painted the monstrous and singular palms against the blue sky, had here caught the secret of fantastic beauty on his spattering brush.

Close to one of these clearings Carother came upon a spring of clear water bubbling in diamond gleam in a natural basin of stones. He knelt down on a

flat rock to drink, feeling the cold liquid flow soothingly down his extended throat.

HE straightened up, remained on his knees, his eyes on the rock. Plainly imprinted on the gray surface was the wet impress of a hand—a hand much smaller than Carother's muscular paw. Some one had been there at the spring but a few moments before, some one who had rested a palm against the rock for a moment in rising.

Carother stood up, searching with keen eyes the green foliage that encompassed the circle of stones, waiting for the next move on the part of the person who had left that fading imprint.

He opened his mouth to call out, but changed his mind abruptly. There was no way of telling what tropical corner of the world he was in—what danger impended from savage tribe. A shout might be just as liable to bring an arrow from ambush as a rescuing hand of fellowship. He decided to reconnoiter further.

If he had gone carefully before he was doubly cautious now that he knew there were others abroad in the palm forest. He looked about for some sort of weapon, and decided on a jagged chunk of rock.

With the rock clutched in his hand Carother stepped softly ahead, skirted another glowing flowerbed, and stopped at sight of the figure in the path a few paces away.

It might have been a statue—a breathlessly lovely statue of some sylvan goddess carved in smooth marble, milk-white except for the black metal girdle that encircled the slim waist and held in place a narrow apron of shimmering silver, the jet-black hair that escaped from the forehead bandeau and ringleted upon the shining shoulder, the long, shaded eyes of blue-green, the coral stain of lips.

Then the figure moved, stepped slow-

ly forward on sandaled feet, the sheathed muscles rippling beneath the snowy skin of thigh and leg.

The blue-green eyes opened widely, surveyed Carother with no trace of fear in their limpid depths, only a great curiosity. One bare arm pointed toward him, the tapering, pink-nailed forefinger almost touching his breast.

"Lana." The parted lips formed the word in a kind of whispered song—a full-throated contralto that prolonged each syllable of the word. "Lana-Lo." There followed a succession of musical words incomprehensible to Carother.

He stared. The unexpectedness of the encounter, the vision of this strange and beautiful creature, so different from the women of any race he had ever seen, left him speechless for the moment. He recovered his composure immediately, spoke to her in his native tongue.

"I'm afraid I—don't understand you. I've been—lost, I guess you'd say. What is this place?"

The green eyes opened more widely. She gave no indication of grasping the meaning of his words. Carother frowned, sought in the memory of a wandering life for scraps of Spanish, French, German, ventured even a question in Russian. At the sound of his unaccustomed, guttural accent she laughed lightly, displaying even, lustrous teeth as white as her smooth skin.

Carother glanced down at his ragged clothing. "I suppose I am a funny spectacle at that," he muttered. "At the same time you're not exactly overdressed yourself."

"Lana-Lo," she repeated soberly.

Carother shook his head helplessly. "We're not getting anywhere this way." He reverted to the oldest tongue in the world—the sign language, pointing to her and to the four points of the compass inquiringly, pointing to his mouth to indicate his hunger, squatted down and drew with his finger nail on a soft leaf, a crude picture of

a cup, a bed, a boxlike house with a door in the center.

She knelt down beside him, looked at the broad leaf, and studied the drawings, her black hair falling forward on either side of her bent neck. It was not until much later, when Carother learned that she had never, in her short life, seen any of the objects represented in just that form, that he appreciated the keenness of intellect that enabled her to grasp the significance of those awkward drawings.

She pointed through the palm forest and together they stood up, her glossy head, for all Carother's six feet of height, but an inch or so below his. Beckoning to him to follow, she turned and glided away, through the feathery green of the foliage.

So swiftly and deftly did she wind through the tree trunks that Carother found difficulty in keeping the tall, graceful figure in sight. He was breathing heavily when he caught up to her ten minutes later, where she waited, standing on the edge of a steep bank.

She waved her shining arms outward in an embracing gesture, as if to call his attention to the view before them. It was a repetition of the scene that had opened to his eyes on awakening—an endless expanse of empty sea, stretching out from the low promontory on which they stood, to the line of horizon.

CHAPTER III.

THE MAN IN THE TOWER.

"GOOD Lord!" Carother breathed. "An island. Now, where in the world—Asia, Africa, America—"

She turned abruptly to the right, led the way along a well-defined path that skirted the shore for perhaps a quarter of a mile and then wound inland, between the tufted fern growth that was higher than Carother's head.

So dense was the foliage at this point

that Carother did not see the tall structure in front until the path opened out into a clearing. He slackened his pace, gazing in some wonderment at the shining, black object that rose for forty or fifty feet into the air—a round, smooth tower of basaltic rock, twenty feet or so in diameter, set in the center of a glowing flowerpot.

It could hardly be a house, Carother considered, for there were neither doors nor windows in evidence. It had more the look of an observatory, of eccentric shape, set down here on the edge of a changeless sea on an island presided over by a lovely and mysterious deity.

But Carother's capacity for wonderment received a ruder shock a moment later. It might have been the rustle of the ferns behind him, or it might have been the protective instinct of the man of action that made Carother swing around to face the crouching figure in the path.

It was a man—naked except for a breech-clout—but not such a man as Carother had ever seen in a varied career. At first glance there was more of the ape than the man about this creature—the powerful arms, covered with a fine, reddish hair, swinging low ready to grapple—the vicious little eyes, set deeply beneath the low, tousled forehead—the heavy lips, drawn back from yellow teeth, bubbling forth a low snarl.

Lawrence Carother was neither a coward nor a weakling in terms of muscular development and fighting heart, but it came to him sharply that, with no weapons but his bare hands, he would be no match for the hulking brute, and that, unless something happened, an unpleasant death was creeping forward on those flat, unshapely feet.

Something did happen—the voice of the girl, its musical intonation sharpened commandingly.

"Soola!" The attacker swung his heavy head around, blinked his eyes,

and waited like a dog whose name has been called.

The girl brushed by Carother, pointed down the path, and spoke sharply again, one sandaled foot stamping imperiously on the ground. The man swung about, and lurched out of sight.

"Thanks," Carother smiled grimly at the girl, "for shooin' off that fellow. I'd have lasted about a minute and a half."

She looked at him uncomprehendingly, stepped lightly toward the tower, beckoning again to him to follow. Close to the stone side of the ugly structure she stopped, reached for a projecting handle, and a section of the round surface slid noiselessly aside, leaving an oblong opening through which she passed.

Carother hung back for a moment, his eyes probing the dimly-lit interior of the place, then followed his guide.

If the outside of the domed tower was ugly, the inside was not particularly colorful. The round room, lit from above by a kind of open skylight, in which a stairway led upward, held a wooden bench with curiously carved legs, a rough table with a stone ewer on top, a couple of trestle benches. On the curved wall a glassless, copper lamp of ancient design shed a feeble and smoky light.

Carother did not have an opportunity to investigate the lower room. The girl was already halfway up the curving stairs, waiting for him. Another sparsely furnished room, another wooden stairway, and Carother stepped upward into full daylight.

He hardly gave a glance to the objects with which he was surrounded—the huge globe of silvery metal that occupied the center of the room, the odd-looking rolls of parchment strewn in scholarly disorder on a wide table, the narrow opening in the domed roof through which the blazing sun poured.

His attention was directed to the man who sat wrapped in a cloak of fibrous red, behind the littered table.

Except for the gleam of the sunken eyes, beneath the hairless brows, it would have been difficult, at first glance, to decide that this was a living man and not a mummified body, so aged and wrinkled and emotionless the face that turned toward Carother.

The girl broke into rapid sentences in her caressingly musical language, and the old man leaned forward, clutching the arms of his chair and studying the tall, reddish-haired newcomer, standing in the revealing shaft of sunlight.

THE ancient croaked out a sharp question at Carother, and the girl interrupted with further explanation. The old man waved her aside sharply and shot another rasping, sibilant sentence at Carother. The latter listened, trying to connect that language with some memory of the past—something that had to do with school days—Cæsar—all Gaul divided into three—

It occurred to him with something of a shock that the old man was addressing him in Latin.

He bent nearer to catch the words that were being repeated. *Quis*. He caught that several times. He gathered that the ancient wanted to know who Carother was. The rest of the words were lost to the American. He made a valiant effort to resurrect buried fragments of a classical education.

"*Sum American—Americanus sum—non scio qua*— Damn it! I can't talk that language." He switched to Spanish. "Look here, I don't know where I am nor how I got here. I need decent clothes and a chance to work my way off this island on some ship—I hope you understand me."

The old man nodded his head, a faint suggestion of a smile wrinkling the withered lips. He enunciated slowly, and this time Carother caught the meaning of the words.

"Thou speakest the Latin of Gaul. I have seen it in the parchments. We

shall speak that tongue, then, though it is difficult. How earnest thou from the outer world to this place? We, here, know of no way. No stranger has come from beyond the barrier in memory of man."

Carother repressed the questions that were on the tip of his own tongue and explained patiently as much as he knew of the scientist Belisario and the affair of the San Lomar prison up to the time Carother lost consciousness in the laboratory. The girl edged in beside the old man on the wide chair and, elbows on the table, gazed at Carother in sober silence.

"It is impossible," the old man rasped, when Carother had finished. "I know not what has happened—what wise men can do in that land of thine to the north—we have been many generations here cut off from the world. But this thing thou sayest is impossible. There is a better explanation."

His black, beady eyes darted toward the girl. "Melva hath said it. It is true. Thou wast brought by the sun that we worship from thy land to this."

Carother leaned across the table, frowningly. This whole astounding affair, the awakening on the sand, the beautiful creature that had led him here, this senile sage with his ancient language and mad gibberish about lost generations and impassable barriers—it made Carother wonder whether he were awake or dreaming in Belisario's laboratory.

"Who are you people?" Carother demanded. "What is this place?"

The old man's clawlike hand stretched toward the metal globe.

"Look. It is written there on that ball by the wise men of the past."

Carother's somber gaze was directed at the globe. Markings were etched into its metal surface—a crude and incomplete outline of the map of Europe, a vaguely drawn semblance of the Americas.

"There." The skinny finger quiv-

ered downward, stopped at the very bottom of the ball, indicating what should have been the frozen wastes of the Antarctic. "There—beneath all things—beyond all things—cut off forever from other men. That is where you are now—where the followers of Zama, of Carthage, have lived for untold centuries. And there is no way of leaving again."

CHAPTER IV.

"IT IS THE LAW!"

CAROTHER looked from the composed face of the girl to the brown and wrinkled mask sitting beside her.

"The Antarctic! You tell me that this place—warm, sunny, palm trees and all—is inside the frozen Antarctic Circle? I'm afraid, *amigo*, living on this island has turned your head."

"Not so," the old man rasped on in his ancient Spanish. "It is you who must be convinced. True, there are leagues upon leagues of snow and ice to the north of us.

"But this group of islands—I know not why it is, a great stream of warm water bathing our shores the wise men of our nation have said—this climate exists here and has existed ever since the first followers of Zama crossed the ice barrier twenty centuries of years ago."

The withered hand rustled among the parchment rolls.

"Ours has been a strange and tragic history. Once we were many, now we are as you see us. Melva, the priestess, and I and one or two others, perhaps in distant islands nearer the barrier, and a handful of the slave men.

"I know not how you came here to this lost world. Your story of the wise man and his wondrous machine is fanciful—or the philosophers of your land have attained great knowledge. The sun-god has sent you, it may be.

"I know nothing of these things. I

am old. I have seen much. No new thing can astonish me. It is sufficient that you are here—for all your life."

Carother's amazed and doubting mind grasped the import of this whispered harangue slowly.

"You mean to tell me that you people have been living here unknown to the rest of the world, since before the time of Christ?"

"I have said it. Since the Romans sacked Carthage and drove us forth into exile. I know not the One you speak of, but it is so. You doubt now. Presently you will be convinced."

"I can find out for myself," Carother suggested, "by doing some exploring on my own account. I'll manage a makeshift boat of some kind before I resign myself to living here for the balance of my life."

The old man leaned forward, a smoldering flame in his dead eyes.

"Listen attentively, youth. It is for your own welfare I speak. You cannot leave this place. Even if you could construct such a craft there is no way of crossing the ocean and the ice barrier and the frozen ocean beyond that.

"And if you attempted it you would be stopped at the nearest island. It is the law. Too many of our young men vanished in times gone by trying to reach the outer world. If you resisted you would be killed."

Carother frowned. "You mean I am a prisoner here?"

"Not so. Say rather a welcome guest in the temple of the sun-god. Resign yourself to staying. Life is pleasant here. Soola and his brother slaves provide food and comfort. There will be no necessity to labor.

"No one of the followers of Zama may come near to this place. It is sacred—devoted to Mithras, the god of light and life. Here you will dwell with me, Mylo, son of Zoram, and my great-grandchild Melva, priestess of Mithras. But there is the law, too. And you must obey."

Melva's slim figure glided past Carother and vanished down the stair well. From below came the tinkling clash of bells. The old man tottered to his feet and across the stone floor until he stood in the shaft of sunlight that streamed in from the opening above. Slowly he raised his thin arms and face, lowered them, stood with clasped hands and bowed head for several seconds before resuming his chair.

CAROTHER waited with as much patience as he could manage until this religious rite was concluded.

"I suppose you don't intend to keep me confined here in this tower while I'm your welcome guest?" he inquired dryly.

"You will be told when to remain here. At other times you may roam freely through the island. A sleeping place will be provided you in the tower below. Soola will attend to your immediate wants now."

He reached out for a tiny mallet and struck a brazen gong hanging beside his chair. It sent a booming note through the cavernous interior, hardly dying away before the shaggy head of Soola appeared in the stair well. He listened, stupidly attentive, while the old man spoke, in their own unintelligible tones.

Mylo turned to Carother. "Go with him," he said. "He will show you your dwelling-place. There is food if you are hungry, and clothing more suitable to this place than that strange garb."

In the wake of the shambling Soola, Carother descended the narrow stairway, turned off through a short passage, and found himself in a smaller room than the one above, a room that was lighted only by a copper lamp holding a flickering wick.

A couch, covered with soft but coarsely-woven cloth, a stool of palm-wood, and a table holding a goblet of pewter and a plate of the same metal

heaped with food were all the furnishings of the place.

Carother, with a famished appetite, required no signal from Soola to eat. The food was simple enough—unleavened bread, that somehow reminded Carother of ship's baking, a sweetish, mild wine, and a mixture of baked vegetables, none of which he took the time to define or analyze, making good use of the wooden spoon, the only table utensil. Apparently, the descendants of Zama, the Carthaginian, were not given to luxuries.

When Carother had finished Soola pointed silently to a little heap of garments on the couch. They were similar to those worn by Melva, but larger in size—a girdled apron, a pair of sandals and a long, red cloak such as the old man had worn.

Carother selected the sandals and left the rest.

"They look fine on her," he grinned at Soola, "but I'm no Follies beauty. I'll stick to my own duds."

The pleasantry was all lost on Soola. But it was evident that he understood Carother's gesture. The slave-man gathered up the garments, swung around, and shuffled off through the doorway.

Carother sat down on the edge of the couch and surveyed this dismal guest chamber by the light of the smoky lamp on the wall. Near the ceiling was a narrow, slitted opening, meant, doubtless, for ventilation. No light came through it.

He rubbed the growing stubble of beard on his chin thoughtfully. Was he, Lawrence Carother, sound presumably of mind as he was of body, to believe that he had been wafted through the ether to be set down in the midst of a page of ancient history—the descendants of a forgotten race living on in an unexplored region?

Or was it more probable that Belisario had lied—that this weird old man and his outfit of fire worshippers, led by this lovely girl—

A loud whistle sounded from above, followed by a rolling, grinding sound of metal.

Carother stood up quickly and stepped through the passage to the stair well. The yellow light from the lamp there showed the hairy bulk of Soola barring the way, a curved, heavy weapon in his great paw.

"What's going on here?" Carother continued in Spanish. "Let me pass."

Soola's sword-arm swept backward menacingly. He pointed dumbly toward Carother's stone chamber. The rasping voice of the old man Mylo came from the head of the stairs:

"It is the law. The dome of light has been closed. Return to your place to sleep before Soola strikes."

"But, look here. You claim I'm not a prisoner," Carother protested.

"But it is the law here. Return."

Carother did so. There was something particularly uninviting about that curved sword, and Carother had an idea that the dumb Soola would enjoy an opportunity to use it.

"The law," Carother muttered, as he stretched his weary frame on the soft couch. "Darned fellow's as mad as a hatter. I'll find out more about it from the girl to-morrow. She seems to look sane anyway. I wonder how many more of those Neanderthal men are floating around these parts?"

He fell asleep presently to dream of being pursued by half a dozen gorillas with flashing scimitars, round and round a tall statue of Venus, while Belisario and an old recluse in a red cloak croaked unintelligible words of advice.

CHAPTER V.

CONCERNING A LATIN VERB.

SOOOLA was gone when Carother awoke. On the table was a brass basin of water and a meal similar to the last one.

Carother spent little time at either

his ablutions or his breakfast. He was anxious to find Melva and have a talk with her—even if it had to be carried on in a language dead and buried for twenty centuries.

The stair well was empty, the dome in the roof open wide again letting in a flood of brilliant sunlight. Carother went carefully down the winding steps, found the sliding door at the bottom ajar, and stepped out into the open.

A few yards away Soola crouched over a flowerbed, spraying a stream of water from a leather bag he carried under his arm. He gave Carother no more than a cursory glance from under his heavy brows and continued with his work. But the curved blade of the sword was in plain sight, shoved through a belt of palm fiber.

Carother detoured around the tower and came upon the girl bending over a tall cluster of blazing red flowers.

"Melva!" he called.

She straightened up, brushed back the glossy cloud of hair that had fallen over her face, and picked her way daintily between the blooming rows toward him. She waited for him to speak.

"I don't know just how to express myself," Carother enunciated the Spanish words slowly and carefully, trying to imitate Mylo's peculiar inflection. "But you seem to understand that hodge-podge of Latin-Spanish your ancestor and I were talking yesterday. Do you?"

"It is, as he said, the language of Gaul." She smiled teasingly. "And thou speakest it badly, Lana-Lo, with many strange words."

"Mine is the modern version," Carother nodded. "*Bueno*. We can get along somehow. What I wish to find out is this—are all those strange things he told me true—about this place being at the bottom of the world, and you people being descended from ancient explorers?"

Her eyes opened wider in wonder, mirroring his face in their candid and

fearless depths. "I know not, Lana-Lo. Only that it has always been told me as true. All my life—which has not been long as you may see—I have lived here with this grandfather of my own dead father. I am the priestess of Mithras and must not leave the place of the temple. It is the law."

"But these other islands he speaks of—have you seen their people?"

"No. For it is forbidden that they may look upon me or I upon them. When they come here I must always retire to the temple, there to stay until they depart again. They bring food and offerings. At other times I may roam wherever I wish, but I must return quickly when the signal sounds to tell me that strangers approach."

She raised a rounded arm, pointing toward the palm forest.

"Let us walk there now, Lana-Lo, where it is cool and green. For, indeed, I grow weary of the temple sometimes and the parchment rolls of Mylo."

"I should hope you would," Carother muttered. "Darned old mummy, making a girl like you stay cooped up and feeding you that hokum—"

"I do not understand thee, Lana-Lo."

"I was just expressing my feelings in my native tongue," Carother explained. "It is of no importance. So you believe in this sun-god Mithras and all the rest of it."

THEY walked side by side beneath the interlacing palm branches. "It is true," she whispered, in her liquid accents. "I have heard the thunder of Mithras on a day when the sky was cloudless, and have run to hide myself in the temple as Mylo told me to do when Mithras was angry."

They went forward silently on the cushioned ground, the girl's lithe form, free as a wood nymph's in her native forest, abreast of Carother in the wider spaces, skipping lightly before him where the path narrowed.

Carother wondered just how the thunder had been produced. He had an idea that Mylo, that super medicine man, had a hand in it. It was all nonsense, of course—this ancient cult of Mithras.

But the girl evidently had been brought up to it from infancy, knew nothing else, poor kid, but being a priestess, which was, as far as Carother could judge, about as much fun as being in jail. No women folk around, no people of her own age, nobody to tell her what a rare and beautiful creature she—

He frowned and hurried his steps a trifle as if to escape the dangerous aura of her vibrant personality. He felt her hand on his arm.

"You are angry, Lana-Lo? You are so silent."

He shook his head. "I am not angry with you, Melva."

"I am glad," she said simply. "I had waited for you to come—prayed to Mithras to send you—"

He stopped, faced her squarely in the path. "Do you—do you mean to say you expected me?"

She stood, a white wraith in the speckled shade, poised as if for flight. "For a long time, Lana-Lo. It is the meaning of the name I called thee—Lana-Lo, the one awaited."

"Mylo promised me a companion—some one who would be from the other islands, who would be with me always. I wept because I was alone and wearied by the parchment rolls of Mylo, so he promised me. But I do not think he expected such as you."

"Probably not," Carother muttered. "Some fossil like himself."

She slid her hand within his. "I am glad it is not another, Lana-Lo. We will sit here by the spring where I found thee and we will talk. There is so much I would ask thee about thyself."

Seated on the gray rock, her arms infolding her knees, she looked up at him. Carother remained standing.

"There is not much to tell about me, Melva," he laughed shortly. "A beggar, an adventurer. Sometime a soldier—though I suppose you know little of soldiers and wars."

"I do know," she nodded quickly. "Mylo has read me from his knowledge. There were the soldiers of Egypt, the centurions of Rome—"

"Well, these were a bit different. At any rate I didn't come from Mithras as you thought. Sometime I can explain more about that great civilized world outside—the men and women in it and the lives they lead. You are happier here, Melva, in your island temple, in spite of the false god that you serve."

"No," she looked fearfully over her ivory shoulder. "Do not say that, Lana-Lo. If Mylo should hear he will bring down on us misfortune."

Her gaze became fixed on something behind Carother. He turned to find the bulky figure of Soola between the tree trunks.

Again, as on the first day, the girl's voice rose in sharp command. Soola swayed uncertainly on his feet, loath apparently to leave. In response to another imperious gesture and word he slouched off, disappearing in the shadows.

"Was he trailing us?" Carother asked her.

"He would not dare," she answered haughtily. "It is Mylo, perhaps, who would keep watch over us through him, so that we may not wander far away. But it is pleasanter here than in the temple."

She stretched out a sandaled foot, paddled it in the cool water of the spring, laughing up at him.

"Thou art silent again, Lana-Lo. Art thou murmuring again those strange words of thine?"

Beneath the stubble of beard, Carother's tanned face reddened. Recklessness gripped his throat, thrusting from his mind the dangers of his present position, the menace of the future.

"Melva"—he bent above her gleaming hair—"there are no words in your language or mine, to say to you how lovely, how wonderful—Melva, white goddess of the temple, shall I tell you the first Latin word of my schooldays? I can think of none other now. It was *Amo*—'I love,' *amas*, 'you love'—Melva—"

She threw her head back, gazing up at him with parted lips.

"Always, oh, Lana-Lo, I have dreamed of thy arrival!"

He crushed her slim hand in his grip, determination hardening the youthful lines of his face. "I will take you away from this place, Melva. Away from that black temple and that old madman. I can manage somehow—"

A SHRILL, moaning whistle floated through the palm forest, rose piercingly to a demoniac shriek, died away again slowly. She leaped to her feet, fright darkening the blue-green of her eyes.

"It is the signal," she shuddered. "We must hurry to the temple. Quickly, Lana-Lo!"

He barred her flight with his arm, encircling her waist, drawing her closer to him.

"We will wait, Melva. I am curious to see these strangers when they come. I am tired of this Mylo and his mysteries."

She struggled feebly in his grasp.

"No. It is death to wait here. You do not understand. It is the law. He will send Soola—others with their swords—they will come to kill us!"

"Let them come." He looked down at the marble whiteness of her face. "You may go—there is no need to risk your life. I will stay here and see for myself just what goes on. I am not afraid of a fight."

"Nor I, Lana-Lo." She drew away smiling at him. "Where thou stayest, I stay. With thee I have no fear now. But canst overcome Soola?"

Carother grinned, selecting two round stones from the rocky border of the spring. "I'll give him a run for his money," he remarked in his own vernacular, "if he shows up by himself."

He motioned the girl into the shadowed side of the path. "Wait there out of sight."

She obeyed silently. Carother stole back the way they had come, toward the temple, keeping well back from the winding pathway and dodging cautiously from tree to tree. The palm forest seemed empty, quiet except for the rustling he made under the low-hanging branches.

Fifty yards or more from the spring, Carother crept back toward the path, crouched behind the decaying foliage of a fallen tree, and waited, gripping the two stones in readiness.

CHAPTER VI.

CAROTHER GIVES BATTLE.

CAROTHER had no definite plan of attack in mind, beyond ambushing the burly Soola and possessing himself of that wicked-looking weapon. After that things would depend on chance and the luck that usually accompanies a bold attack.

If what the old recluse in the tower said was true, and there were other people of Mylo's persuasion coming from the neighboring islands, Carother's chances of winning the uneven battle would be slight, even if he managed to win through to the tower and stand a siege.

If, on the other hand, Mylo had lied about the other islands, there would be only Soola and his helpers to contend with. Carother had acted on impulse in disobeying Mylo's signal, but the American did not regret it.

Eventually he and Mylo were bound to have a show-down, for Carother had no intention of spending the rest of his life in a windowless cell, occasionally

let out for exercise. If a battle was coming he wanted to strike first.

He hefted the stones, satisfied of their weight, and hoped he would not miss. If he did, Soola would make quick work—

His ears caught the shuffle of passing feet on the path. He half rose, peering over the top of the foliage, his right arm already swinging back for the throw.

It was Soola, shambling forward in a stooping posture, great paw gripping the pommel of the curved sword, little red eyes gleaming ahead toward the spring.

Carother stood up, threw his arm back, and let fly. But even a young man with the pitching ability of four college years behind him needed some practice, and the stone was a lot heavier than a baseball. It missed the slave man's head by a foot, thudded against a tree-trunk, and landed heavily and harmlessly in the brush beyond.

Carother had very little time to regret his failure. Soola had turned with the agile quickness of a jungle cat, and was charging for the fallen tree.

It seemed to Carother that he would never shift that other stone from left hand to right. He set himself for the throw, measured the diminishing distance to that shaggy head, flung the projectile with all the force at his command.

It was not a clean hit. But with the weight and force behind it, it didn't have to be. Soola pitched forward almost at Carother's feet, and crashed into the brittle tree branches, the sword glinting through the air to land twenty feet away.

CAROTHER jumped to possess himself of it and returned to the fallen slave man.

He had twisted over in his plunge and lay on his back, the heavy brutality of his countenance more repulsive than ever with the trickle of blood from a blue bruise on his temple matting the

bearded chin. He was breathing quietly and gave all indications of being "out" for some time.

If the positions had been reversed, Carother was quite sure Soola would not have hesitated to use that sharp blade and make an end of the business there and then.

But, much as he disliked leaving this man-brute alive as a future menace, Carother could not bring himself to the logical and primitive precaution of killing Soola in cold blood. There was nothing to bind him with except his own belt of twisted palm fiber that would have snapped like paper under the powerful wrench of those hairy arms.

In the end Carother left him lying there, and sought out the girl, standing as when he had first seen her, a molded statue of Diana beneath the spreading trees.

She gave a low cry of relief when he came in sight. "He is dead, Lana-Lo?"

"Stunned only. We must act quickly before he recovers and gives the alarm. How many more of his kind are there?"

"Two—Mardec and Bomilcar, who are brothers of Soola, dumb also from birth. Their hovel is beyond the temple in the forest, where they till the ground. Mardec is the stronger, Bomilcar more cunning. But they come not near the temple, Mylo having forbidden them."

"Good. That will give me a chance to have a talk with him. You must come with me. You cannot remain alone here in the forest now."

Her frightened eyes pleaded with him. "Go not there, Lana-Lo. I fear for thee. He is wise and powerful, cruel in his anger."

"It's the only thing to do." Carother shook his head. "We cannot escape from the island, and it is useless to try to hide in these open woods. I carry the battle to them before they can organize."

He strode down the path, his fingers tight on the wooden handle of the curved, machetelike sword. It was getting slowly toward dusk, the still branches of trees shutting out the fading light. Carother stopped at the place where Soola had fallen and parted the branches to peer through.

There was no one there. Soola had gone.

Carother whistled softly. "Sure made a quick recovery. Now to watch my step." He turned to Melva, speaking in Spanish:

"We must hurry now to reach the temple, if it is not already too late. If they should kill me, you must say I kept you by force. Mylo may not harm you."

"I care not, Lana-Lo, what they do then," she said softly. "Without thee there is nothing."

At the edge of the clearing he stopped, scanning the broad space before him. There was no sign of activity. From the center of the flower beds the stark outlines of the tower rose blackly against the sky.

He reached for the girl's hand. "Come."

They hurried across the open to the sliding door. Carother jerked at the handle and stepped back a pace as the metal door opened, his arm posing the sword for a slashing blow. But the interior of the lower room, lit by the yellow flare of the lamp on the wall, showed no lurking enemy.

Carother stepped inside, the girl pressing after him, and he slid the door closed again. He listened. From above came the rasping tones of Mylo's voice, rising and falling in a monotonous chant. Carother's eyes sought the dim face of the girl questioningly.

"He is praying," she explained in a whisper, "to Mithras."

The gleaming blade in readiness before him, Carother crept up the winding stairway, stopped on the next landing to listen. The chanting had stopped.

Carother mounted the last stairway and stood in the upper room.

Wrapped in his red cloak behind the table, the old man crouched, beady eyes glittering at the tall figure before him. The clawlike hands opened and closed spasmodically on the arms of the chair.

"The Priestess of Mithras!" he croaked hoarsely, in his Latin-Spanish. "Where is she?"

Melva stepped forward into the dimly lighted space beneath the dome opening, and faced him calmly. "I am here, oh, Mylo."

"You did not come when the signal was given," he said harshly. "It is the law of Zama—the law that you were born to, have lived under for eighteen years as priestess of this temple. Stand aside from that stranger who has wounded my slave and defied the power of Mithras. He, at least, shall not escape the wrath of the sun-god."

She drew closer to Carother. "I care not for that, Mylo. Always I have believed what you have taught me. But Lana-Lo has told me other things. Your god is a false god and I care more for Lana-Lo than Mithras. Thou canst but put us both to death."

Mylo half rose from his chair, his eyes glowing with the fire of fanaticism. "You dare to deny Mithras! Mithras the powerful—"

"Lies, Mylo, foolish lies." Carother frowned at the old man's contorted face. "Like that fantastic tale you related to me yesterday to make me think there was no escape from here.

"A fool would know that at the bottom of the world, where you say we are, the sun does not rise and set as it does here. Look at the opening in the dome! Already it grows darker—"

He caught Melva's gasping cry, and whirled around to face the onrushing bodies that hurtled forth from the stairwell, Soola leading, two other bestial faces snarling over his shoulder.

There was no time to complete the turn. Carother ripped downward and

across in a back-handed stroke of the sharp blade, felt it bite into flesh and bone, and was borne backward against the table by the rushing attack.

He ducked sidewise to avoid a crushing blow from a club wielded by Soola, and discovered that the sword-blade had snapped in two.

Carother hurled the useless remnant into the scowling face before him, and leaped to the table top.

For an instant he had a photographic view of the disordered room—Melva's slim figure pressed against the farther wall, white-faced, wide-eyed—the body of Soola's helper, sprawled nakedly in a black pool beneath the flaring lamp—Mylo, clawing the air, screaming shrill commands to the attackers—the two hairy bodies hurtling forward again, gaping mouths roaring inarticulately.

Then the table went over with a splintering of wood and Carother was struggling on the bottom of a writhing heap, in the débris of broken table and parchment rolls, powerful hands tearing savagely to reach his throat, hot breath on his cheek.

He was jerked to his knees in the grip of sinewy arms. Soola stepped back and swung the heavy palm-wood club overhead.

CHAPTER VII.

FLAMING MADNESS.

"NO, Mylo! No!" Melva leaped in front of Carother, spread her arms wide as if to offer their frail defense against the descending club.

The old man's harsh voice barked out a sentence to Soola, and the slave-man dropped the club, pinioned both Melva's wrists in the grip of one of his mighty hands, and looked expectantly to his master.

The latter tottered forward, arms upraised, and began a triumphant chant, in a high, quivering voice.

"Woe to thee, false priestess! Woe

to thee! Mithras is great! Mithras is powerful! Thou hast denied! Death shall be thine! Death for thee and for the stranger! Great shall be the sacrifice to Mithras!"

He swayed back and forth, his shadow dancing on the wall behind him, his sunken eyes like coals of fire in the wrinkled face. The suspicion that had been only a suspicion in Carother's mind the first day became a chill certainty. There could be no longer any doubt but that insanity—the homicidal fury of madness—lurked in those burning eyes.

"Bind them well, Bomilcar — Soola!" he cackled. "You have brought what I told you? Good. Tighter, Bomilcar! He must not escape the sun-god."

Carother, yanked to his feet, felt the rope of palm-fiber, that had been whipped about his arms, cut sharply into his flesh. Mylo peered up at the face of the girl, rubbing his skinny hands together.

"There is still time to save thyself. Mithras will be satisfied with him alone. But thou must apply the torch and rejoice with me as the flames devour him. Such a sacrifice Mithras has not had in half a score of years. Shall I tell thee, oh priestess, what was the fate of that woman who nursed thee and tended thee as a child?"

White-faced, she shrank away from him. "You told me she had died when the hut in the forest burned."

"She went as thou shalt go—thou and this tall youth, a sacrifice to the great Mithras—"

"You madman!" Carother writhed uselessly against the tight bonds. "Have you no spark of feeling—"

"Feeling!" the old man's voice shrilled upward to a scream. "What canst know of these things, thou fool? I sacrifice what is dearest to me—this child whom I have brought up in the mysteries of the temple—whom I have kept apart from all men so that she should be more acceptable to Mithras.

I sacrifice her gladly—as gladly as I give these!"

He shuffled over to a large chest of carved wood beneath the lamp, flung up the lid with surprising strength.

"All to the flames." He flung out on to the floor a ringing handful of gold pieces; another and another, sending them rolling into the shadows. "Into the fire they go—gold, jewels, wealth that the men of thy world crave. Riches I sacrifice here, beauty also. Into the fire they go. It is the end."

HE whirled on Soola and Bomilcar. Whipped by his snarling voice the two slave-men worked fast, tying Carother's ankles, binding Melva in like manner, and winding length after length of the tough palm fiber about both victims as they stood back to back in the center of the room.

The old recluse scrambled about in a frenzy of activity, spilling the lamp oil, that Soola brought him, over the littered floor, soaking parchment rolls and furniture with the inflammable substance, leaning over the stair-well to direct the activities of Bomilcar below, muttering to himself, breaking forth into a singsong chant at intervals.

Carother could hear the rustle of dry brush below, the snapping of branches being crammed into the lower part of the tower. He made a final plea to the madman who was directing the preparation of this pyre.

"At least let the girl go—Melva—you can't mean to—"

"No one escapes." Mylo's hands clutched at his own throat. "No one. Not even I. Do you hear that? It is the door below that I have closed from here. Soola, Bomilcar, Melva, all of us, doomed together."

His palsied hands tugged at the flaming lamp on the wall, removed it from its bracket. He tottered to the edge of the stair-well and raised the lamp over his head.

"Great is Mithras!" he screamed. "Great is the sun-god!"

The brass lamp clattered on the rail, disappeared. From below came a flash of light, a hoarse, guttural snarl of fear, and Mylo leaned over the railing in the column of smoke that began to billow up through the opening.

"Rejoice, oh Soola and Bomilcar! You also ascend into the sun! Try not to escape. It is useless! None may escape Mithras!"

Carother strained against the tough fibers with every ounce of strength in his body. Above the croaking chant of the man in the red cloak, came the sharp crackle of flames as the brush piled in the lower room took hold.

A tongue of yellow fire licked upward through the stair-well, lighting up the smoke-filled room. Carother tried to reach with his fingers the knots that tied Melva to him, but his wrists were bound in such a way that it was impossible.

"Wait, Lana-Lo," her voice was clear and unshaken, despite the trembling he could feel from the body pressed closely to his. "I have another plan. He will listen to me—Mylo!"

The old man lowered his arms, groped through the choking fumes toward her. "What is it, false priestess?"

"I am no longer false, Mylo. Free me so that I may strike; give me a knife, and thou wilt see how I shall sacrifice this stranger."

Mylo hesitated, clawing at his mouth. It seemed incredible to Carother that so bald a proposal should be entertained by the recluse, but apparently, in this madman's tower anything was possible. Mylo bent down, peering through the smoke along the floor.

"A moment, my daughter. It is here—the broken blade of the sword. Thou wilt strike surely and swiftly, oh priestess! Mithras will forgive thee—here. I release thee. Strike to the heart!"

A cloud of smoke swept between them, hiding him from view. Carother felt Melva's frantic fingers at his

bonds, felt her slash the palm-fibers to free him.

"Quickly!" she urged. "The opening at the side where he watches the sea. Over here!"

She grasped his hand. Together they stumbled across the room to the curved wall. Her hands fluttered over the surface, found what they sought, and a section of wall two feet high slid open, forming a wide window through which the smoke eddied into the night air.

Carother turned, fought his way back through the smoke clouds to the place where they had stood. A moment more and he was back at the opening, knotting together the lengths of twisted fiber that had bound them. He glanced out, measuring the distance to the flowerbed that showed indistinctly at the base of the tower—thirty feet at least.

"You will have to chance dropping the last couple of yards." He looped the end of the improvised rope under her arms. "Hold tightly to it and let go when I stop lowering."

"And you, Lana-Lo?" she held to his arm.

"I will follow. There is no time—"

Above the crackling of the flames, the mad screaming of Mylo, the snarling of the imprisoned slave-men surging up the burning stairway, came a new sound—a rushing roar that seemed to sweep downward from the stars and overhead, fading off into the night.

"The thunder of Mithras!" she shuddered close to him. He shook his head. There was no time to explain to her now that Mylo had lied about his thunder of Mithras as he had lied about other things. Carother helped her through the narrow opening, braced himself back against her weight and lowered swiftly hand over hand.

The rope slackened suddenly, showing that she had reached the ground, and almost throwing Carother off balance. He stumbled across the wreck of the table underfoot, wrenched one

of the legs loose from the débris and, half strangled with the smoke that rolled upward through the chimneylike opening, he managed to wrap the loose end of the rope about the fragment and wedge it across the window.

As he crawled through the opening into the cool outer air, the light from the inferno below flared up in a burst of flame, throwing into sharp relief the red-clad figure of the old recluse, his cloak ablaze, his arms wrapped around the bulky form of Soola, as they grappled at the edge of the stairs.

Then the hot breath of the furnace licked out at Carother, and he felt himself plunging downward.

CHAPTER VIII.

"ASK HER YOURSELF."

"CAROTHER — Lawrence Carother—isn't it? I recognized you from your description. I was sorry I was away at the time of your trial, for I could have smoothed things over. As it is you have nothing to worry about. They changed the government again day before yesterday."

Carother sat up, blinked at the smiling young man in white linen who squatted on the sand a few feet away. Beyond his neatly-clad shoulders a smooth expanse of seascape showed with the gleaming wings of a hydroplane riding the calm surface of the water.

"I—er—don't just get it. Got a bump when I landed, I guess. Who are you?"

"You did." The young man in white linen flicked his cigarette into the lapping waves of the shore line. "You bumped hard—which is natural enough when you consider you dropped at least twenty-five feet into a flowerbed back there. But you'll snap out of it. No broken bones. I'm the American consul at San Lomar. Enright's my name."

"San Lomar!" Carother sat up straighter. "Why, the old fellow, Mylo, said this was a lost colony—Antarctic Circle or some such non—"

"Out of his nut," Enright nodded. "Been getting worse lately, I guess. This island belonged to him. It's only sixty miles from San Lomar as the plane flies, but it's off the usual steamer track. Lucky thing I decided to investigate, or you'd be marooned here for a long time."

Carother accepted a cigarette from the case offered him. "Let's get this straight. I'm still all up in the air. This old hermit, for instance, they call Mylo—"

"Crull was his name," Enright explained, "Sebastian Crull. Or at least it was until he went balmy on the subject of ancient religions and settled down here to run a one-horse temple of his own.

"We've always considered him rather a harmless hermit. Plenty of money. Bought this island, planted it in his own peculiar way. Been here about fifteen years.

"We understood he had a granddaughter or some one he had adopted as an infant that he was bringing up in his own peculiar way, but he always kept her out of sight when any one came near the island. He was a funny old chap!"

"Funny," Carother said decidedly, "hardly expresses it. But how about this bird Belisario—the scientist who sold me the idea of being shot through the ether? It seems to me he needs explaining."

Enright grinned. "I heard about the hokum he handed you. He's in jail now—got mixed up with that latest revolution. It seems he was an old servant of Sebastian Crull's. Devoted to him. Acted as agent to buy food and supplies for the colony, Crull supplying the money.

"They used to have a sloop, but lately Belisario used that hydroplane there. I borrowed it to come here. The her-

mit, you see, had plenty of money and could afford the latest luxury even if he insisted on living the simple life himself."

"The thunder of Mithras," Carother frowned thoughtfully at the seaplane. "And that poor kid swallowed that nonsense whole."

"What did you say?" Enright inquired.

"I was wondering what Belisario's game was in telling me that weird tale about scientific experiments."

"He explained that to me, too," Enright said. "Belisario was loyal to his old employer. When Crull wanted a thing, Belisario tried to get it for him."

"He wanted a young man here. What for I don't know. Marry him to the girl perhaps, and raise a brood of hermits. Or maybe he decided in his own mad way to go in for human sacrifices. At any rate Belisario agreed to find one and picked on you, since they were going to hang you anyway."

"The main thing was to keep you put when you got here. So Belisario persuades you that he is sending you off bodily across space—as a matter of fact he put you to sleep and carried you here in that plane—and Crull tried to make you think you were cast away out of the world with no hope of getting back."

AND the three slave-men?" Carother stood up. His head was clearing and he felt no trace of his accident beyond a fading headache.

"They were three half-witted unfortunates that Crull brought here when he first settled the place. I think that explains everything."

Carother frowned toward the green line of trees, the black outline of the tower from which a wisp of smoke curled slowly upward in the still morning air. Carother was thinking of something else.

"It does and it doesn't," he said slowly. "There's the girl."

"Oh, she'll be all right. There'll be a mean pile of money coming to her from the old hermit's estate. No other heirs. Belisario is going to see to that, or I'll let him stay in jail."

"I didn't mean that. Her future—you don't understand—she's hardly ever met a soul—brought up here alone, speaking a language that no one else talks. This going out into a strange world—a helpless—"

Enright stood up, brushing the sand from his linen suit. "My wife and I will put her up for awhile. I'm taking you both back to San Lomar. There's a job waiting for you there, by the way, now that your friends are back in power. And, speaking of angels—"

He pointed toward the line of trees. Across the yellow sand she was coming toward them, lovely as the dawn that bathed her limbs, blue-green eyes as calm as the limpid sea they reflected.

They watched her slow approach—the ragged adventurer and the man in neat white linen.

"She spoke to me as she helped to carry you here," Enright said quietly. "I couldn't make out what she was saying, but her expression was enough!" With a friendly grin at Carother, Enright continued, "If I were a bachelor and a girl like that, a combination of Venus de Milo, beauty-contest winner, and cloistered saint—if she felt about me the way this girl does about you, I wouldn't worry a darned bit about her future. I'd worry about some other fellow beating me to it with a ring and a parson."

Carother's haggard face reddened. "You—you might have misunderstood her. Just how did she—"

"Ask her yourself." Enright turned away. "I've got to get busy and warm up the motor. I have to be on way. I'll give you folks two minutes to make up your minds."