

Weird Tales

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QUEEN OF THE LILIN

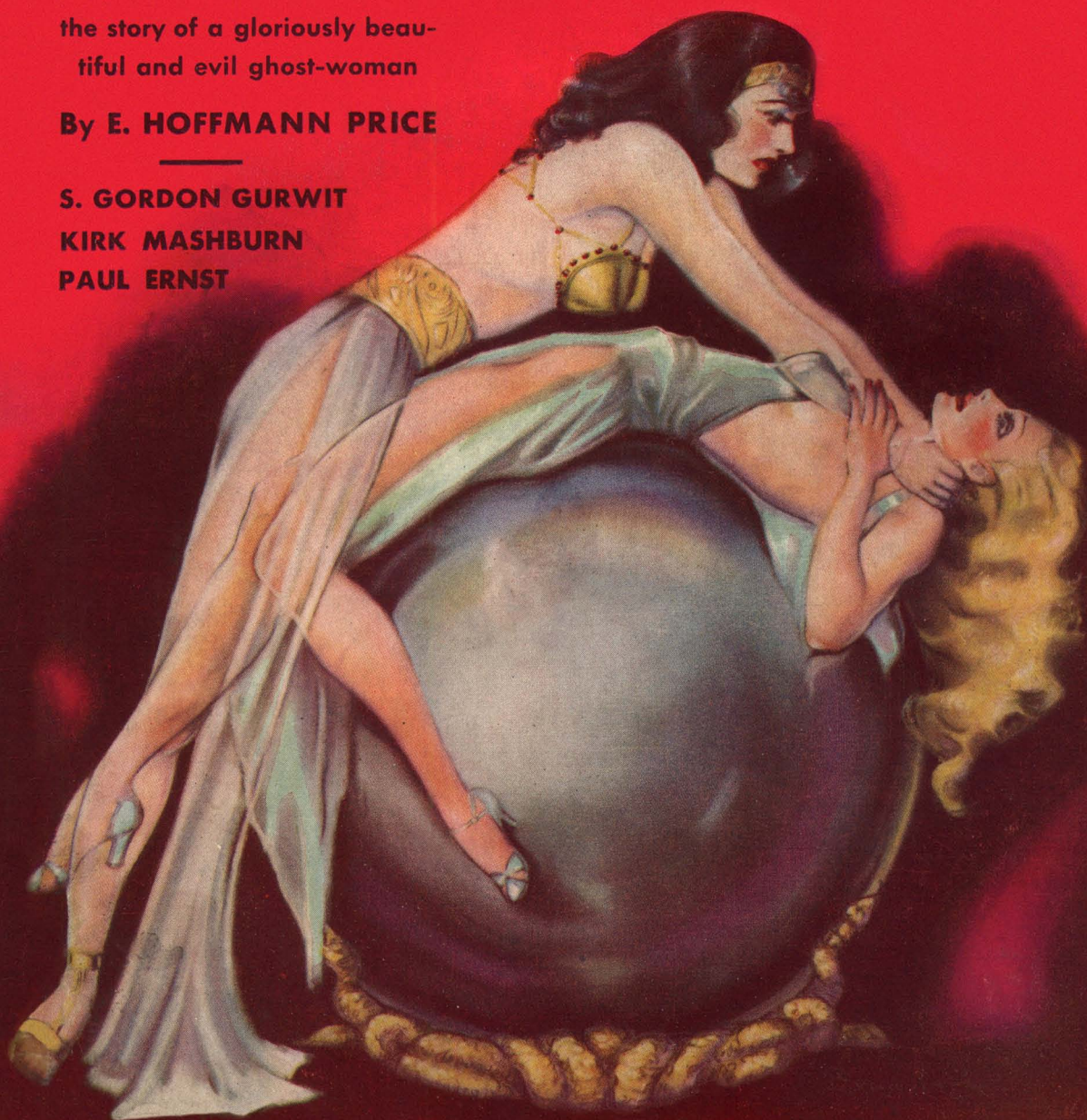
the story of a gloriously beautiful and evil ghost-woman

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

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A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL



Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"At the middle of the pentacle stood a woman of incredible loveliness."



Queen of the Lilin

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Out of the womb of Time, across the dusty centuries, came a gloriously beautiful but evil woman—a tale of Lilith, and the five adepts who sat at the corners of a weird pentagon

1. *The Lurking Menace*

FIRST a slater's hammer slides from a roof and comes within a hair of braining me. The next day a bust of Napoleon falls from its pedestal and narrowly misses me—and then one of my brother's collection of swords

joins the conspiracy of inanimate things and—*mon Dieu!* It's only a miracle that I wasn't beheaded!"

Diane Livaudais sighed wearily and made a despairing gesture. Glenn Farrell's bronzed, rugged features contracted in a frown, and his gray eyes narrowed

as he pondered on the sequence of accidents that had made Diane's past few days a nightmare. He turned to his old friend and host, Pierre d'Artois, a retired soldier whose scholarly pursuits had not obliterated his military bearing.

"That does seem to wrench the long arm of coincidence entirely out of joint," Farrell admitted. He no longer marvelled that Diane's dark eyes were haunted, and that her gestures were abrupt and nervous; but her next remark was too much for Farrell's practical mind to digest.

"And the worst of it is," d'Artois' lovely visitor continued, "I'm certain that those weren't accidents——"

"*Eh, comment?*" demanded d'Artois, leaning forward and twisting his fierce gray mustache. "If I'm not mistaken, you just said——"

"I've sensed a malicious presence lurking about me for the past week," Diane resumed. Then, noting Farrell's silent but unconcealed amazement, "Oh, I know it sounds insane! But I caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure which faded almost the instant I turned to confront it—and I know she's responsible."

Diane paused, regarded them with a touch of defiance, challenging Farrell and his host to dispute her sanity. Farrell stroked his square chin and said nothing. He could not very well declare that Diane Livaudais was the victim of delusions and hallucinations; but such was his conviction, and he thus disposed, somewhat regretfully, of the most attractive girl he had met during his few weeks in southern France. D'Artois' reply, however, caught Farrell like a hammer stroke.

"And so there's an apparition following you around, making heavy objects fall in your direction . . . hmmm . . . very well—I will summon this pestilential specter here and now!"

"Good Lord!" was Farrell's unspoken

comment as he saw that d'Artois was serious. "He's as bad as she is!"

They were sitting in d'Artois' study on the second floor of a Thirteenth Century tower that commanded the foot of rue Tour de Sault in the old city of Bayonne. The afternoon was young; but artificial illumination was needed to augment the sunlight that filtered feebly through the narrow casements that cleft the yard-thick masonry walls of the restored and modernized ruin in which d'Artois lived.

THE old scholar snapped the switch of the tall Damascus brass floor-lamp, leaving the circular room a somber depth of gloom unbroken save for the patch of sunlight that played on the wine-red Boukhara rug.

"We will see what manner of phantom is following you around," he continued. "Sit back in your chair, *Mademoiselle* . . . relax . . . forget your fear and your worry . . . do not fight it . . . it can not harm you . . . I am watching. . . ."

Diane's dark eyes became fixed and staring as she relaxed in response to that soporific murmuring. Farrell noted with wonder that though but a moment ago Diane had been not only wide awake but with nerves keyed to the snapping-point, she was now almost asleep. She was breathing very slowly and regularly; her long lashes drooped, masking the lower eyelids.

Such long lashes. . . Farrell himself felt the spell of that solemn, droning voice. He realized in a vague way that d'Artois was hypnotizing his distracted caller. Then Farrell frowned, shook his head perplexedly, glanced at d'Artois, and marvelled . . . but only for a moment—and then Farrell perceived something which made him start violently, catch his breath with a gasp, and sit rigidly erect, hands clutching the arms of his chair.

In the shadows of that ancient tower-room he saw what seemed to be a tenuous, wavering streak which despite its semblance to a wisp of smoke was throbbing and pulsing as though it were alive. Moment by moment it became more dense. Farrell knew that a fourth personality had entered the room; a newcomer whose presence he could feel more distinctly than he could see. A cold thrill raced up his spine, and he shivered as though an icy wind had displaced the blood in his veins.

D'Artois' eyes were fixed, and his brow was furrowed with a frown of intense concentration. His lips moved inaudibly, and his lean hands gestured as to a slow, unheard rhythm.

The presence was becoming a transparent, clearly defined feminine form of exquisite proportion. On her head was a tall diadem of archaic workmanship; and her smile was a curved menace as evilly alluring as the loveliness of her delicate, haughty features. She was colorless, a mere luminous form; yet Farrell sensed that her hair should be black, with bluish highlights, and that the slightly aquiline face and graciously curved shoulders and slender arms should be a warm, olive hue.

Yet for all her loveliness, the presence was an evil brooding in the shadows. The tension in that somber circular room moment by moment became more acute. Farrell felt perspiration trickling down his cheeks, and wondered how much longer he could endure the uncanny menace that had taken form before his eyes. But d'Artois broke the spell. He sharply clapped his hands.

"Wake up!" he commanded bruskiy.

Diane started, regarded them both with eyes wide open and amazed. And when Farrell's glance, for an instant distracted from the darkness behind Diane, shifted

back toward the spot where the presence had appeared, he saw but a thin thread of silver mist which vanished even as he stared.

"Oh! Did I fall asleep? I'm sorry——"

Diane's bewilderment was obvious. Farrell knew that she had been utterly unaware of the strange shadow-figure at her shoulder.

"Now I remember," she continued, collecting her wits. "We were discussing an apparition; and——"

"It was here, and it left," replied d'Artois. "But let us talk about something else. Tell me about those objects that came so near to killing you. What's their history?"

Diane closed her eyes for a moment, and frowned.

"Well . . . really, I don't know," she said, speaking very slowly, "except that Graf Erich gave me the bust of Napoleon not long ago, and gave my brother that Moro kampilan. But——"

"Graf Erich?" interrupted d'Artois. "*Mordieu!* Your choice of playmates!"

"Why, what's wrong with him?" wondered Diane. "He's perfectly fascinating, and he's been ever so attentive."

D'Artois nodded, and pondered for a moment. Farrell saw that while his friend had apparently gathered another loose end, the riddle had at the same time become more complex.

"Suppose," suggested d'Artois, "that you ask Graf Erich to invite me and Monsieur Farrell to his chateau this evening at almost any convenient hour after dinner. Offer him any plausible pretext. And you will of course accompany us."

"Why . . . but yes, certainly," Diane agreed, although she was as puzzled as Farrell. "But did you really see—do tell me——"

D'Artois smiled and shook his head.

"Before I commit myself, I prefer to see Graf Erich. And now run along and leave me to my studies. In the meanwhile, do be careful of falling objects. We don't want a tile or coping-stone to drop and kill you before I can get to the bottom of this riddle."

Diane knew the futility of persistence. Acknowledging Farrell's bow with a smile, she allowed d'Artois to escort her to the door at the ground floor.

FARRELL perforce restrained his curiosity until d'Artois returned.

"How did you predict the appearance of that phantom?" he demanded.

D'Artois chuckled as he seated himself and struck light to a cigarette.

"I didn't predict it—and neither did I conjure it up. It follows Diane around——"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Farrell. "Why—that's worse than if you'd actually evoked it. Do you mean that the girl is actually *haunted*?"

"In a way, yes," replied the old man. "And the evidence of our eyes is corroborated by those unusual accidents. Some personal, directed intelligence is working against Diane."

"By hypnotizing Diane, I subdued her conscious resistance and thus allowed the spectral companion to materialize by appropriating some of Diane's etheric double. A glance at any work on occultism will explain that to you."

Farrell shuddered, then resumed, "But where does Graf What's-His-Name come in?"

"I don't know, exactly," admitted d'Artois. "But consider for a moment: Graf Erich gave her the bronze bust. He gave her brother, who is a collector of arms, a Moro *kampilan*. And every object which has featured in these uncanny accidents—excepting the slater's ham-

mer—has passed through Graf Erich's hands. Simple, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Yes, certainly—very simple indeed!" admitted Farrell with elaborate irony. "And so, very logically, a heathenish, Queen of Sheba sort of female ghost follows Diane around and makes a personal appearance when you do your hocus-pocus. Exceedingly clear, Pierre. I get it perfectly."

"Let it go at that," chuckled d'Artois. "I already begin to see a light; and to-night we may learn why all inanimate creation is conspiring to kill Diane."

2. *A Twisted Wire*

GRAF ERICH'S château was not much more than two kilometers beyond the Mousserole Gate. It crowned one of the knolls that were the advance guard of the Pyrenees. The salon, with its tapestried walls, its beamed ceiling and its ornate, massive chandeliers, reminded Farrell of a miniature of the dining-room of Henri IV at Pau.

Graf Erich received his guests in person. He made no reference to the lack of servants, and left it to his callers to decide whether poverty or eccentricity accounted for the absence of the servitors that should second the somber richness of the appointments.

"A fighting man," was Farrell's first thought as he grasped the Count's extended hand and met the unwavering regard of his dark eyes. And then Farrell shifted his gaze. He was disconcerted as at an unintentional eavesdropping, or spying. Graf Erich's eyes were too expressive for Farrell's entire comfort. In them he saw misery and regret, and an iron will that was equal to the terrific struggle that was branded in deep lines on his lean cheeks, and the droop of his mouth.

"He spends his time in the shadow of

the ax," was Farrell's thought. "Good God, what has he on his mind? . . ."

Diane, the first to acknowledge Graf Erich's greeting, had insisted that she would be quite content to leave her hat and coat in the Count's study, which was at the end of a low, vaulted passage that led from the salon.

"The light is just as good, and I have my own mirror," she assured him, as she declined his offer to escort her to a dressing-room. "And it's a day's journey from any one to any other part of this house."

Diane was in higher spirits than she had been that afternoon. Her laugh was light, and her eyes sparkled as she went on with her comments concerning architects who design a château that is a place of magnificent distances. Then she turned to step toward the study.

Farrell saw that a cluster of heavy Persian maces and battle-axes adorned the crown of the archway through which she proposed passing, and knew that Diane was stepping into line with peril from overhead. An instant later he caught her eye.

The mirth was gone. She also had seen. Farrell, while replying to Graf Erich's courtesies, shook his head. Diane's change of expression showed how plainly she had read his thought. She paused for an instant, then advanced.

"Going to fight it, eh? That's the spirit!" was his unspoken thought; but Farrell could barely resist his impulse to detain her.

"Er . . . beg your pardon, Count," he said, seeking to palm off his moment of inattention as a lapse in his actually excellent understanding of French. "My ear's a shade thick, you know—just landed on this side a week ago. . . ."

Even as he spoke, his eyes shifted to follow Diane's advance. Then he saw it happening, and could no longer doubt.

Nervous tension brings an abnormal sharpness of the senses, and an accompanying illusion of the cessation of time.

The flexible picture-wire that bound the cluster of heavy weapons together had parted. He plainly saw that the ends of the stranded wire were separating, knew that their deadly burden was about to fall. But there was plenty of time. Those heavy, skull-crushing weapons had to drop three feet before they struck her . . . and they had not yet started falling . . . but they would, soon—now, they were dropping . . . and faster. . . .

Farrell's fingers closed about Diane's shoulder and yanked her backward just a split instant before the burnished steel flashed down and rang crashing against the tiles.

"Oh-h-h! *Mon Dieu*, again!" cried Diane.

Graf Erich's dark face had become paper-white as he and d'Artois leaped forward.

"Look, *Monsieur!*" commanded d'Artois. His finger pointed accusingly at the ends of the stranded wire.

Graf Erich started violently. "*Was für Teufelei!*" he exclaimed in wrathful dismay. "That wire has been broken!"

"Broken? Are you sure it wasn't cut?" demanded Farrell.

"*Mais non!*" exclaimed d'Artois as he drew forward a chair and leaped to the seat. "Look! You can see how each strand has a sharp bend. *That wire was broken by repeated twisting, not by cutting.*"

"Oh, good Lord!" interposed Diane, who now trembled violently from the reaction of the shock. "Did you say someone broke the wires that secured those weapons to the wall? How—but what do you—it just couldn't—"

"Someone, or something," said d'Artois, regarding Graf Erich with stern, unwavering eyes.

The Count started. His swarthy features darkened.

"Just what do you mean by saying *someone?*"

"That wire," countered d'Artois, "could not have kinked itself. My meaning should be quite obvious."

Wrath and dismay struggled for the supremacy of Graf Erich's features.

"Impossible! How could any person have timed the breaking of that wire?—who, for that matter, knew that she would pass through that door, instead of going to the rear of the building, and up a flight? How——"

"Do not misunderstand me," interrupted d'Artois. "This is not a personal accusation. Nevertheless, *Monsieur le Compté,*" he continued with a hard glitter in his blue eyes, "be pleased to correct me if I am wrong in saying that you might, with careful study, account for this fourth member of a series of coincidences."

Farrell saw Graf Erich's eyes suddenly drop before d'Artois' cold, unblinking gaze.

"Oh, what ever can you be hinting?" exclaimed Diane.

"Do not misunderstand me," repeated d'Artois. "I do not mean that you are *consciously* concealing anything. But ponder on this succession of busts, and kam-pilans and Persian maces and battle-axes that have dropped for no reason at all. And now, *Monsieur,* with your permission, I will escort Mademoiselle Diane back to the city. Later, perhaps, we can discuss this at greater length."

Graf Erich regarded d'Artois for an interval that was becoming perilously close to a painful silence. Then he bent over Diane's hand, and bowed formally to d'Artois and Farrell.

THEY drove in silence from the château. Farrell was communing with a growing conviction that Graf Erich could have explained why that heavy ax and heavier mace had dropped from their support; yet he was equally certain that Graf Erich was on the verge of desperation.

"Naturally, he'd be shaken," reasoned Farrell as they approached the Mousserole Gate. "Sure. But he looked as if he'd seen a ghost *that he was expecting to see.*"

D'Artois presently brought the Daimler to a smooth halt at the door of Diane's apartment on rue Lachepaillet.

Diane waved farewell as d'Artois headed the long car down the incline toward the old guardhouse at the Gate of Spain. Then, passing rue d'Espagne on the left, he skirted the city wall and drove toward the Nive and the little, square courtyard on which the d'Artois tower faced.

D'Artois pounded the massive brazen knocker that adorned the iron-bound and iron-studded oaken door to summon his man Raoul, who admitted them, then took the wheel of the Daimler and drove it to the garage.

"Now that we can speak our minds freely," began d'Artois as he led the way to the study, "what do you make of this last accident?"

"Someone twisted that wire and broke it," replied Farrell. "But how could anyone time the trap so that it would spring at the very instant? Why, it just doesn't make any sense!"

"I am not so sure of that," maintained d'Artois. "You heard Graf Erich's exclamation—*was für Teufelei!* That may have been nothing but an expression of wrath; but I believe he meant it literally. Deviltry. Graf Erich has been up to something that is now kicking back at him. That harassed look of his could not have been so deeply branded in a week.

"And just to give you food for thought," continued d'Artois, "I will now mention something which I withheld to avoid prematurely influencing you. *Graf Erich is and has for several years been noted as a dabbler in thaumaturgy.*"

"Thaumaturgy . . . thaumaturgy . . ." muttered Farrell. "Miracle or wonder worker, eh? Or is that just an impressive word for fakery?"

"Your first definition is correct," said d'Artois. "Although thaumaturgy at times descends well into the last named, surprizing results often flash forth from the quackery that clouds occult research. *Graf Erich has started something he's lost control of. But, *mordieu*, what is it that he has started? To wipe out that interrogation is our present problem. And in the meanwhile, I am certain that our charming young friend, Diane, is in much graver peril than she realizes.*"

3. *Lilith*

GRAF ERICH, immediately upon the departure of his guests, stalked toward the great fireplace at the far end of the salon. He halted at the hearthstone, glanced sharply about him—an instinctive precaution that had not yet given way to the security resulting from the absence of servants—and then knelt just clear of its edge. He fingered a tile which was nearest the foot of the andiron he faced. The hearth-slab swung silently on pivots, exposing a narrow flight of stairs that led into cavernous depths far below.

Graf Erich took from his pocket a small flashlamp and by its slender pencil of light illuminated his descent into the subterranean blackness. At the foot of the stairs he pressed a button. The click of the wall switch was followed by a glow of bluish-violet, wavering light.

He was standing in an alcove in the wall of a circular vault not more than five

yards in diameter. Seated cross-legged about the curved wall were five men, each with his arms crossed on his breast; and the head of each was inclined as in sleep, or profound meditation. Their eyes were open, but they stared as though fixed in the contemplation of something that was beyond the sight of normal, human eyes. The posture and the drape of their robes suggested adepts from High Asia.

They sat at the vertices of a pentacle inscribed in cinnabar, whose orange streak glowed fiery-golden in the violet light. Each squatted in a small circle whose center coincided with the vertex which he commanded; and in the center of the pentacle was another circle, this one scarcely more than a yard in diameter.

"It's there . . . always there, now," muttered Graf Erich, as he stared somberly at the phosphorescent haze that throbbed and pulsed with rhythmical beat in the center of the cabalistical pentacle. "I'll never get rid of her. It's too late. . . ."

He shook his head wearily, and sighed. Then he stepped from the alcove into which the staircase opened, and passed along the wall until he came to a station marked on the periphery that was circumscribed about the interlaced triangles of the pentacle. He halted there, facing the prime vertex; then, extending his arms, he bowed his head for a moment.

At first he spoke in low, hurried syllables, his voice scarcely more than a murmur; but as he warmed up to his recital, he assumed a more commanding tone until at last he was intoning a resonant mantra that rolled and thundered as though, besides reverberating through the vault, it also surged through caverns and passages that reached into the uttermost depths of the earth.

In response to Graf Erich's chanting came the low, sweet voice of a woman who basks in a perfumed garden and

purrs contentedly as a cat before the luxury of a fire. It was an amorous, caressing voice in whose suave, mellow murmur was the quintessential sweetness of all women who had ever been, and who ever would be: it was the voice of not any one woman, but rather a hierarchy of women, from dusky slave-girls to diademed queens.

"*Baali*," said that sighing, luminous mist, "Lord and Master, I warned you, but you would not heed. I have failed four times, now, but the Power is increasing. *Baali*——"

The voice addressed Graf Erich by that Semitic word which signified *lord* and implied *husband*.

"Abandon your attempts!" interrupted Graf Erich in a low, hoarse voice. "And from now on—from this very moment—I will never see her. I promise that as the price of her life."

The laughter of that shimmering, sentient haze was bitter and mocking and poison-sweet; and a breath of perfume heavier than jasmine and the roses of Shiraz was exhaled through the crypt.

"Too late," murmured the voice as the laughter subsided. "With your dark magic, and your knowledge of the True Name, and your command of Powers and Presences, you called me from the forgotten blacknesses of Time's beginning. You lured me from oblivion. And ears that for uncounted centuries had not heard the voice of adoration again thrilled to those solemn words which mocked Time and the higher gods and the laws that were ordained.

"*Baali*, I rose from the perished memories of uncounted lovers. From the dust of their dead brains and from the lingering traces of their time-bleached souls—bleached gray in the home of the cheerless dead—there came once more a memory of me, and I lived.

"You chanted like Lucifer singing to the Morning Star on the crest of Zagros. You sang like Lucifer crying his defiance across the vast gulf. And now that I am here, you are seeking her in preference to me. . . ."

She laughed, that woman's voice, with ominous sweetness.

"I am here. Even I, Lilith—Daughter of the Dancer, the Queen of the *Lilin*—and you thought that I would stand aside for any earth-woman? Whoever summons me must have thought for no other."

"You devil! I'll send you back——" Graf Erich choked with wrath.

The phosphorescent presence in the center of the mist column laughed again: low, musical, and withal, a bitter laugh.

"You can not send me back, *Baali*." The voice enunciated that appellation of respect with a finely modulated note of defiance.

Graf Erich's dark eyes flashed somberly, and shifted from the shadow presence to the bronzed, inscrutable faces of the five who, squatting at the vertices of the pentacle, stared with their fixed gaze beyond the Border.

"You dare not," murmured the voice of the iridescent mist. "You know that you dare not use that weapon against me," reiterated the softly speaking doom. "Even you would stop short of such infamy. They are your disciples in dark magic. Even to save *her*, you would lack the courage to attempt that hideous treason. And you know that!"

The mist presence was becoming momentarily more substantial, until finally at the middle of the pentacle a woman of incredible loveliness stood in the place of the luminous haze-column. And from the half-parted lips of the solemn-faced hierophants came faint wisps of vapor that were drawn toward the center, even as

cigarette smoke is drawn to an air-vent by the draft of an exhaust fan. The Presence—Queen of the Lilin—was now transparent . . . now translucent . . . finally opaque, solid, and despite her fantasmal origin, seemingly of flesh and blood. Her exquisite, exotic features were lovely with a beauty that the world has not dreamed or fancied for uncounted years. Lilith who smiled from the pentacle was a loveliness too long forgotten even to exist as a remote memory; Lilith, the everlasting Queen of all moonlit nights, the Queen of the Lilin, who danced before Suieiman, upon whom be prayer, and the peace!

She smiled a slow, carmine sorcery. The dark, long-lashed eyes were without fear. Her slender arms gestured like twin serpents of nacre as she patted the midnight of her elaborately dressed, long hair.

"You prefer me to all earthly women, *Baali*. . . . And even though you did not . . . you could not kill those five acolytes . . . could not buy her safety at the cost of such infamy. . . . *Baali*, am I not lovely? . . ."

4. Two Long-Haired Women

FARRELL and d'Artois in the meanwhile had been pondering on the events of the evening, and seeking to devise a wedge to split the solid front of contradictions that opposed them.

"The fact that in three cases the falling object which almost struck Diane," said d'Artois, "came from the house of Graf Erich is certainly significant. But on the other hand, I can scarcely imagine his wishing to harm Diane."

"Yet it must track back to him," persisted Farrell. "Consider, the strongest manifestation: that of flexing a wire until it snapped and released its deadly burden."

"*Pardieu*, you have right," admitted d'Artois. "Graf Erich's château must be the focal point where maximum intensity is developed."

Farrell stared somberly into the glowing coals of the grate. D'Artois paced slowly back and forth, each trip marking the length of the wine-colored Boukhara rug that filled the center of the study. Suddenly he halted, and flung open the casement.

"Look!" he commanded, making a sweeping gesture of his arm.

Farrell gazed across the moon-drenched wilderness of roofs. It seemed for a moment that he stood in the tower of some mediæval necromancer, looking into a vista of freshly opened hyper-space and across the roofs of a dead city of enchantment.

Wraith-like mists were slowly marching from the Nive, and along the dry moat that girdled the walls, and up into the citadel, to clamor at the heavily armored door at the ground level. Farrell felt a sudden chill flash down his spine, despite the warmth of the study.

"Like a Chinese dream," he muttered. "Old, and evil, and beautiful . . . like some pearl-gray sphinx smiling through her veils of mystery. . . . Lord, but it's old—I never realized, till just now——"

"Old? Old indeed, *mon ami*," said d'Artois solemnly; "old when the Moslem conquerors took the city by assault; old when the Roman legions drove the stakes of their first encampment on the banks of the Nive. And beneath this citadel there are passages and crypts. . . ."

Farrell sharply regarded his friend and noted the stern, hard lines about his mouth and the glitter of his eyes.

"Do you mean to say," demanded Farrell in a low, hoarse whisper, "that you think that some elemental has emerged from the everlasting midnight of the

vaults beneath this city to destroy Diane?"

D'Artois shrugged, slowly shook his head, and smiled somberly. Then his eyes shifted for a moment toward the open casement. He ceased smiling.

"Pierre," Farrell abruptly resumed, "I've got a whim, and I'm going to humor it, whether you think I'm goofy or not. I'm going for a walk, along rue Lachepaillet—to see the moonlight advance across the parkway, down below."

D'Artois' eyes narrowed as he scrutinized his friend.

"Me, I will go with you," he announced. "Unless——"

"Glad to have you," assured Farrell. Then, as he picked up his hat and jammed it well down on his head, "I've had the creeps for the past hour. And it's been getting worse ever since we left Diane. Now, if you must laugh——"

"But no, I refuse to find anything humorous about the thought," protested d'Artois. "Your interest in the young lady, while a trifle sudden, is certainly warranted."

"You've got me all wrong. *She* doesn't interest me. It's just that I've got a hunch. That ever increasing force! Just as we were saying——"

"Precisely," agreed d'Artois. "In fact, no one was contradicting you." Then, with a malicious grin, "Which contentions on your part prove indubitably that you are not one damned bit interested in Mademoiselle Diane."

D'ARTOIS selected a Malacca stick from his collection, then led the way to the door; but he had scarcely crossed the threshold when the telephone rang.

"*C'est moi, d'Artois,*" he assured the speaker. Then, "But yes—we will see you at once. With pleasure. *À bientôt!*"

"Diane?" wondered Farrell.

"Certainly none other," said d'Artois.

"No, there is nothing wrong, yet. She sought to explain, but I gave her no chance, lest she end by explaining herself into a state of mind. You two, it seems, have had a hunch, yes? Dignifying it by the name of telepathy or intuition is hardly necessary."

D'Artois paused at his desk and took from a compartment a small device in the shape of a Greek letter *tau* with a circular handle where the cross-bar joined the stem. He shook his head in response to Farrell's query, and thrust the silver symbol into his pocket.

"*A crux ansata,*" he said. "Later, perhaps, I will explain."

They walked briskly up rue Tour de Sault toward the head of rue d'Espagne, where the latter reaches out toward the breach in the fortification. From there they turned to their right and followed the Lachepaillet wall for two short blocks to Diane's door.

"I've been so terribly uneasy," Diane explained as she admitted Farrell and d'Artois. "Ever since Graf Erich phoned——"

"Eh, what's that?" demanded Farrell. Mention of the Count abruptly jarred him from his preliminary survey of the exquisite effect of apricot-hued negligée and coral *lamé* mules worn by a girl of Diane's coloring. "When was that?"

"A little over half an hour ago," said Diane as she ushered them into the living-room. "He seemed terribly agitated, and hinted that I might expect a repetition of the accident at the château. But I couldn't get him to be explicit about it; and that's what alarmed me. I fancied it must have been because he was worried about those accidents, and particularly the one of tonight. So——"

She made a quick, nervous gesture of her hand.

"So, as you see, I've taken down the

pictures and bric-a-brac and everything that could possibly fall. But that's not why I called you. It was something Graf Erich said tonight: before he hung up, he insisted that I should cut my hair."

"Comment?" demanded d'Artois. "Cut your hair?"

"Yes," replied Diane. "He hinted to that effect shortly after that bust fell down and nearly struck me as I lay on the chaise-longue, over there in the corner. At the time I fancied that he was teasing me about my whim of wearing long hair. But his mentioning it again tonight, and insisting on it, despite his agitation about the possibility of something falling——"

She stopped short, shook her head, and made a gesture of perplexity.

"It seems to me that our friend Graf Erich is plumb loco!" declared Farrell. "Good egg and all that, but just off his chump! Worried about a succession of uncanny accidents, and then kicking about the way Diane wears her hair."

D'Artois shook his head.

"*Au contraire*," he said, "I fear that Graf Erich is only too well balanced. Tell me, did you say that you would cut your hair?"

"But yes," replied Diane. "Anything to please him, he sounded so upset. And as soon as I agreed, he hung up."

"My dear," said d'Artois, "suppose that you get a pair of scissors."

Diane and Farrell regarded him with amazement.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Farrell, "now you've got it!"

D'Artois stifled the retort that was on his lips. He considered for a moment the sleek, blue-black coiffure, then smiled mirthlessly.

"Perhaps it would be hasty to sacrifice such exceptionally lovely long hair in this day and age—still—but suppose that I call Graf Erich and see if I can get some

sense out of his incoherence. That one is far from irrational. There is something in what he says; and right now I will find out!"

He glanced about him, seeking the telephone. Farrell stroked his chin and regarded d'Artois with wonder and a tinge of alarm. Diane indicated the adjoining room. But as d'Artois rose, a bell rang.

"Perhaps," he said, stopping short, "it is Graf Erich calling back."

Diane shook her head.

"That's the door-bell, not the telephone. Excuse me—just a moment, please."

As Diane left the living-room, d'Artois caught Farrell's eye.

"*Mon vieux*, I am not demented," he protested.

"But why cut her hair?" persisted Farrell, scrutinizing d'Artois as though he expected to find symptoms of delirium.

D'Artois shrugged. "To be frank, I don't know—*yet*. But I do know Graf——"

A scream at the front door cut d'Artois' remarks short. Then another: an agonized shriek that betokened an outraged mind rather than a wounded body.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Farrell, as he sprang toward the door, and started down the hallway. "Diane!"

"*Mordieu! It's after her!*" And d'Artois followed.

THE front door was wide open. They saw Diane on the sidewalk, struggling hand to hand with a slender, sinuous woman who sought to drive home a long, frostily glittering dagger. Diane, straining and gasping, strove to wrench back and break the grip of the woman who relentlessly menaced her with that deadly slip of steel.

Farrell halted for an instant in utter amazement. Like Diane, the other woman was dark and long-haired and exceed-

ingly lovely; and like her, arrayed in a shimmering, silky fabric which, conspiring with river mists and moonlight, lent an unreal, almost terrible beauty to the swaying, lithe forms that struggled for the icy splinter of a blade.

The enemy's features were branded with a venomous smile that made her crimson lips seem like a fresh wound.

All in a glance; all in one fleeting instant which can be longer than a lifetime.

Farrell leaped forward and seized the enemy's wrist.

He gasped in dismayed horror as his fingers closed about the exquisite, nacreously gleaming arm. She was serpent-cold; yet an electric thrill numbed his arm all the way to the shoulder.

"Oh, Glenn!" panted Diane as she caught her breath and renewed her efforts.

"Tenez!" snapped the voice of d'Artois as Farrell extended his arm again. He clapped his hands sharply, then continued in a brusque, dominant tone, "*Lilitu! Agrat bat Mabhat!*"

The smile vanished from the crimson lips as d'Artois pronounced those strange words. The dagger wavered in her grasp. She suddenly wrenched her wrist free from Diane's grip, but instead of striking, she turned to confront d'Artois. The lovely features were menacing, but they were also clouded with apprehension.

Farrell, his arm still tingling from the uncanny contact, supported Diane, who shrank away from the diabolically lovely enemy.

D'Artois again addressed the stranger. He stood firm and erect, and looked her full in the eye. His right hand flashed from his coat pocket. He grasped the silver *crux ansata*.

Once more he pronounced, "*Lilitu!*"

Then he began intoning in a language that Farrell dimly recognized as an archaic Semitic tongue. His voice rolled and

thundered like a distant surf; it crackled and snapped sulfurously, and his fierce old eyes were frosty cold as he intently regarded that evil beauty whose luminous loveliness seemed to be a concentration of solidified moonbeams rather than any aggregation of flesh and blood.

"Who is that woman?" muttered Farrell as Diane clung to him. "A human snake? Look!"

Then, before Diane could turn her head from his shoulder, "*No, don't look!*"

The nacreous gleaming arms and shoulders and the imperious features were becoming diffused and misty. Farrell heard a low, wrathful cry, and the tinkle of steel against masonry.

"Where is she?" he demanded, seeking to collect his outraged senses. "Where——"

As d'Artois turned, Farrell saw that the lean, leathery features were drawn and haggard, and that the old man's brow glistened with sweat. The outstretched arms dropped wearily back to his sides. One hand still clutched the silver *crux ansata*.

"Back in whatever unknown hell hatched her," said d'Artois.

Farrell started at Diane's half-articulate cry.

"I'm all right," she said. "Only . . . *mon Dieu!* . . . where did she——"

Farrell shook his head. "I thought——"

But Farrell's thought had been too wild for expression. So he abruptly cut his speech; and then, seeing a glitter on the paving, stooped to pick up a dagger whose jeweled hilt glowed and flamed in the moonlight.

"It seems so ghastly and unreal, now that I look back at it . . . as though it happened years instead of just seconds ago," said Diane as she led the way back to the living-room. "I greeted her, and then she said something in a language I

couldn't understand. Instead of asking her in, I leaned forward and asked her to repeat. And before I knew it, she had seized me by the shoulder, pulled me off my balance—she was terribly strong, in spite of her slight figure——”

D'Artois and Farrell had exchanged glances during Diane's remarks; and from long association, they understood each other's moods without the aid of spoken words. Farrell yielded the floor to d'Artois.

“The strength of madness,” said d'Artois as his eyes shifted from Farrell to Diane. “If you'd seen how she slipped clear of me! Too bad that anyone so beautiful would be so utterly insane.”

D'Artois paused to note the effect of his bit of fiction, and saw that Diane was accepting his story at its face value; which, in view of her fright, and distracted attention, was reasonable enough.

“Now run along to bed, *chère petite*,” continued d'Artois. “I'm certain she won't be back tonight.”

Diane rose from her chair, and would have protested.

D'Artois shook his head.

“We must go. I will explain later. Wake Félice and have her sit up with you. She'll grumble, but pay no attention to that.”

“I will——” began Farrell.

“Of verity, I know that you would,” replied d'Artois. “But you and I have to find that poor demented girl. And in the meanwhile,” he continued, again addressing Diane, “do not admit *anyone*. When we return, we will ring two long and two short; but before you open the door, first peep out the window and identify us.”

Diane made no further effort to detain them.

D'ARTOIS turned to Farrell as they reached the paving.

“Monstrous blockhead!” he exclaimed. “I was wondering just when you would declare that that accursed creature vanished in a wisp of fog—and then you insisted on remaining to guard the roost!”

“But,” protested Farrell, “it seems that leaving Diane there with old Félice, the cook——”

“Would I have left her alone if there were reason to fear danger? This creature lured Diane to the door because she could not bring a material thing like a dagger into the house in the same manner in which she herself could have appeared therein. Had she materialized in the house, she could not have injured Diane with her bare hands. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” assured Farrell with elaborate irony. “Among other things, who was she, and what happened to her? I'd have sworn that she vanished in a puff of mist. Can you——”

“She did indeed so vanish,” said d'Artois. “And let me see that dagger which you picked up.”

They were close to the old guardhouse now, and about to turn down rue Tour de Sault.

“Ah . . . just as I expected,” muttered d'Artois as he examined the dagger and its sapphire-sparkling hilt. “I suspected it from Graf Erich's warning Diane.”

“How does he fit into it?” demanded Farrell impatiently.

“This,” declared d'Artois, “is a dagger from his collection. I know it well indeed. A rare and distinctive piece.”

“Good Lord!” gasped Farrell. “And we thought he wasn't mixed up—at least, not——”

“We'll soon know!” interrupted d'Artois.

“But I'd still like to know what hap-

pened to that girl," persisted Farrell. "That was an illusion, or else——"

"You were so certain that it was an illusion that you suddenly checked your speech so as to avoid alarming Diane, yes?" D'Artois chuckled mirthlessly.

"Graf Erich's devil-mongering?" hazarded Farrell.

D'Artois nodded.

"Well, what was she—it—that creature?" demanded Farrell. "And did you or didn't you begin talking to her in what sounded something like the Arabic you hear in Nejd?"

"I did," replied d'Artois. "I solemnly commanded her to leave. I presented the *crux ansata*, a very ancient symbol of power. And she left. My will against hers. None of what you call hocus-pocus. I called her by her proper designation; at least, by one of her names. That is an essential in any ritual of exorcism. I guessed, but not blindly, when I called her *Agrat bat Mahbat*, the Daughter of the Dancer."

Farrell perplexedly shook his head.

"How did you know—where did you ever meet——"

"She had exceptionally long, heavy hair, if one were to judge by her curious coiffure. So had Diane. Then she is *Agrat bat Mahbat*, said I. Very simple."

"Pierre, this is getting to be a mad-house!" despaired Farrell. "Even a bit of common sense would help——"

"Wait till we see Graf Erich," countered d'Artois grimly. "Then you'll understand."

5. *The Vengeance of Lilith*

THEY found Graf Erich sitting at a table in the circle of illumination cast by the single chandelier that burned in the salon. As he rose to greet them, they saw that his dark features were wan, and his eyes haggard and feverish. Far-

rell and d'Artois sensed that Graf Erich was on the verge of making a monstrous confession, and was nerving himself for the plunge.

His half-coherent hints, his jerky and meaningless gestures, his nervous glances about him as he sought to anticipate and, at times, evade d'Artois' questions made it plain that Graf Erich was indeed being driven to death by some terror of his own evocation.

"You, *Monsieur*," he finally said, jabbing his forefinger like a sword-thrust at d'Artois, "doubtless know already what I have sought to hint. Look at this."

He reached into a drawer and produced a sheet of paper on which were drawn astrological charts and cabalistical figures.

"An experiment in an ancient magic," continued Graf Erich. "I need not name those symbols. You understand them. And you"—he glanced at Farrell—"would do well *not* to understand."

Farrell nodded his whole-hearted agreement, and shivered as he caught the full force of Graf Erich's glance.

"In a word, I evoked her. Lilith, the Demon Queen of Zemergad."

"*Diable!*" exclaimed d'Artois. "But why did she attempt to assassinate Mademoiselle Diane? *And with this dagger!* Yours, Graf Erich!"

The Count turned paper-white at d'Artois' accusing words and gesture.

"Jealousy," he replied in a low voice. "Insane jealousy of Diane, to whom I recently began paying my respects.

"As to the method of evocation? I assembled five adepts, and caused them to put themselves into a state of catalepsy induced by auto-hypnosis. You understand the principle and purpose?"

"Quite," assured d'Artois.

"She is their thought-image," continued Graf Erich. "Thought is in the last analysis electrical energy. And all matter

is, ultimately, electrical energy. They—the Five—concentrated, all on the same image and same concept, and achieved what you might call resonance.

"You know what resonance will do in electrical circuits. Further comment on my part would be insulting to your intelligence; not so?"

D'Artois nodded his agreement. Farrell felt that his intelligence would be none the worse for a bit of additional insult, but he held his peace.

"At all events, she materialized. And at first, she subsisted only on their vital force. She told me of those ancient days when bearded kings built monstrous *zig-gurâts* on the plains of Babil. She spoke of Naram-sin of Agade. She spoke——"

Graf Erich shivered as though an icy blast had been deflected into his marrow, and made a despairing gesture.

"*Herr Gott!* And she spoke of other things. I listened . . . too long . . . and finally believed her outrageous claims. No living woman——"

"I know," muttered d'Artois. "Beautiful as no human woman ever could be. Like that one they still speak of as *Bint el Kafir* . . . others call her *Agrat bat Mahbat*. Many titles, but the same entity."

Farrell's eyes widened at the ominous, half-understood names d'Artois and the dark Count pronounced in awed whispers, like the mutterings exchanged when a pair of necromancers encounter each other.

"And then Diane entered the picture," resumed Graf Erich. "You know the rest. Lilith—or a thought-image resembling that which Lilith was supposed to be—became wildly jealous of Diane. I tried to induce Diane to cut her long hair. But I dared not tell her why; and she laughed merrily and ignored my whim."

"Her hair?" wondered Farrell.

But d'Artois, nodding, silenced him with a glance.

"I knew, tonight, that that ax——" Graf Erich's voice failed. He muttered inarticulately, then raised his head from his hands and regarded d'Artois with a somber, smoldering glare.

"And now—yes, I knew, even before you showed me that dagger. *She* told me how you had beaten her, flayed her with words of power, driven her into the night——"

The Count paused and looked at d'Artois with wonder and respect.

"But she defied me and challenged me to use the sole way that remains to send her back into the shadows."

"And that is?" wondered d'Artois.

"Killing those adepts. Fellow students and disciples who trust me to the uttermost."

"Why not awaken them?" asked Farrell.

Graf Erich shook his head.

"At first she existed but as a figment of their imaginations; but their concentration became so intense that even when they are awakened from their trance, she will continue to exist. She is now not only their materialized thought-form, but also an accretion of disembodied energy and matter that has been attracted by the terrific vortex of power we have set up."

"Good God!" muttered Farrell in dismay as he caught the full import of Graf Erich's statement, and its implication of independent life created by thought-concentration.

"Something," said d'Artois in a low, solemn tone, "must be done. And at once." He slid the dagger slowly across the table toward Graf Erich. "You are responsible for the existence of this terrible creature from the shadows who not many minutes ago sought to murder Diane, and who would even now be re-

peating the attempt if her meeting with me had not sapped most of her energy. You must send her back to that nethermost hell where she belongs. And quickly!"

"But how?—*Herr Gott!*—how?" despaired Graf Erich. He leaped to his feet, thrusting back his chair. For a moment he regarded d'Artois steadily; then he paled, losing the color he had somewhat regained. His eyes stared vacantly, through and past the old man.

"I can not command you to kill your disciples," said d'Artois slowly. "Neither can I permit you to hold your hand. . . ."

The evening was becoming a vortex of horror, whose center was the tense face of Graf Erich. His deep-set eyes shifted, and stared at the sparkling pommel of the dagger that lay on the table.

Finally he spoke. His face was grim with a terrible determination.

"I will settle it. Here and now."

He strode across the salon, knelt at the great fireplace, and fingered for an instant an embossed tile in the hearth. As the slab sank out of sight, Graf Erich descended the stairs that it had concealed.

Farrell regarded d'Artois intently for a moment.

"Is he crazy, or are we? Are there really——" He gestured, indicating the floor, and the foundations of the *château*. "Is he going to——"

D'Artois nodded.

"Yes. All five of them," he affirmed, slowly shaking his head. "It is horrible, damnably so . . . his acolytes . . . his friends . . . but if he doesn't——"

D'Artois' voice and gesture were remorseless, without pity, or passion, or prejudice. Farrell, now whiter than his shirt-front, sat poised on the edge of his chair.

"Isn't there any other way?" Farrell muttered. He leaped to his feet.

"Idiot!" snapped d'Artois, as he seized him by the arm. "If you stopped him, you would condemn her to death. If this horrifies you, remember that before you are many hours older—many minutes, perhaps—this will seem a pleasure excursion. . . ."

Farrell resumed his chair.

THEY heard Graf Erich's footsteps ring hollowly in some subterranean vault at the foot of the stairs. They heard a faint, metallic tinkle . . . then no sound at all—only the breathing of an awful silence, and the presence of fivefold death.

Then at last came a familiar *swish*, and the impact of steel driven home. A heavier, likewise familiar sound. . . .

"*Un . . . deux . . .*" d'Artois counted; "*trois . . . steady, there! quatre . . .*"

"Good Lord," muttered Farrell, wondering whether the fifth stroke would ever fall.

"*Dieu de Dieu!* He is collecting his courage, poor devil . . . they were his friends . . . *cinq!*"

With a deep, weary sigh d'Artois sank back into his chair. They exchanged glances; and each saw the pallor of the other's tanned features. Then d'Artois rose.

"Five men have died so that Diane may live," he said solemnly, and bowed his gray head for a moment, then added, "*Grâce à Dieu!*"

But before Farrell could second the older man's words of gratitude, there came from that subterranean slaughter-vault a voice whose amorous sweetness was an outrage and a blasphemy to ears that had heard the impact of steel on flesh, and the sound of bodies as they toppled one by one across the flags. That woman's voice was the ultimate mockery.

It told d'Artois and Farrell that Graf Erich's terrible decision had been in vain.

"*Baali*," she was saying, "I know now beyond any doubt that you planned to drive me back again into unending darkness—me, Lilith, Queen of Zemargad."

Her laughter was crystal-clear and poison-sweet.

"*Cordieu*," muttered d'Artois, speaking as one stunned by a severe cudgelling, "even *that* failed. . . . And now that female fiend is free and unhampered."

"Is she out of control?" demanded Farrell.

D'Artois nodded. "Yes. She is living in her own right. Malignant, vengeful, satanically jealous. Human malice, and superhuman power-- you saw her an hour ago."

The voice was speaking again:

"Look at them, *Baali*! Lying in their blood. Sprawled across that pentacle at whose center I appeared when their old magic evoked me from the shadows of time and from the ghosts of memory. And now I shall go on with my plan."

D'Artois started violently as he caught the sinister implication.

"Quick!" he snapped. "Before it's too late."

And Farrell, crossing the room in three great bounds, charged after d'Artois, and into the violet glow of the circular vault that was at the foot of the steep staircase.

He stared in horrified bewilderment as he sought to convince himself that his first glance had not been a hideous illusion.

Graf Erich, red-handed, shrank against the curved wall of the vault. He stared at the luminescent figure of a woman whose long, ornately dressed dark hair sparkled with bluish highlights, and whose imperiously carried head was crowned with a tall, curiously wrought diadem. Her jewels and her costume and

her dark eyes suggested an antiquity that no living creature could have; and in that insane, purple light, she seemed even more unreal than in the moonlight and mists on the Lachepaillet wall as she sought Diane with a dagger.

At Graf Erich's feet lay the sword that had done its vain, red work.

D'Artois was advancing across the floor, seeking to avoid touching those whose heads and blood had become so terribly intermingled. As he stepped forward, he gestured with his hands, and chanted.

That dark, imperious woman for an instant shrank before the fierce eyes of d'Artois; and then she smiled as if in sudden remembrance.

"Meddler," she murmured in low, clean-cut syllables, "that will not work a second time. I have gained too much strength for you, as well as for him."

Her laugh was mocking as she became a shimmering haze that thinned and spread, dividing like the tentacles of an octopus. D'Artois, seeing the enemy flowing away in a five-branched mist, halted, lowered his arms, and ceased his chant. He was bewildered by the defiance and mockery that had accompanied the apparent surrender of the apparition.

As the last trace of luminous vapor flattened out, and writhed serpent-like among those who lay on the floor, the evening's horror reached its apex. There was a rustling and a sighing, and an unbelievable stirring among those dead forms sprawled across the dark, slippery tiles.

D'Artois turned to Graf Erich.

"What kind of devilry is this?" he demanded. "Quick! Tell me, before it's too late!"

Graf Erich's reply was an inarticulate groan, and a despairing gesture. Farrell, as he saw those dead forms stir and

twitch, wondered if his own face was as stricken as that of the Count.

The vault had become a swamp of dark blood and darker things which paddled about in it. Then, as their motion became more directed and more terribly distinct, Farrell saw the pattern of the devilish manifestation: *they were closing in on Graf Erich to exact their vengeance.*

Farrell stooped and snatched the curved sword from the floor. In the extremity of his terror he scarcely realized what he did.

They were on their feet now, tottering, but momentarily becoming more steady. Horrible, blood-drenched headless trunks, guided by some omniscience toward their slayer, were closing in on him. Their hands were flexing, opening and closing as if to test their newly gained strength. A faint, luminous cloud of mist enveloped the monstrously animated dead, and supported them when they faltered, guided their steps, directed those lifeless hands.

Yet Farrell's terror did not reach its climax until he heard Graf Erich's outcry as they closed in, seeking remorselessly to tear him limb from limb. Then he heard no more. He lashed out with his blade, hacking, hewing, slashing with a blind, outraged frenzy. The curved simitar bit and sheared through flesh and bone; but Farrell saw that his sweeping cuts were vain. The portions that he had shorn off persisted in their awful advance, twitching, crawling, squirming with diabolical animation as though Farrell's devastating cuts had been puffs of wind; and then they closed in and joined those that had escaped the shearing steel.

The time of the ghastly *mêlée* could scarcely have been more than a few seconds; but each of those seconds was a lingering lifetime of red horror to Farrell, whose blade rose and fell with no result other than to multiply the grotesque,

sanguinary morsels that were clutching at Graf Erich.

"Stand clear!" d'Artois cried. And as the red blade sank again, d'Artois leaped in from the rear, pinioned the sword-arm, and dragged Farrell from his futile task. "You can't save him."

Farrell stared at that which had overwhelmed Graf Erich.

"Look! *They* are dying now."

A hand relaxed its death-grip, and dropped. Other fragments one by one subsided from their unnatural motion.

"Let's get out of here," added Farrell.

"*Tais-toi,*" replied d'Artois, shortly. "There is something worse in the wind. She dematerialized in order to destroy Graf Erich. Now the next move——"

"Lord! Look at that!" interrupted Farrell.

A misty exhalation was creeping from the gory butchery that concealed the hapless Count. It was as though the ghosts of serpents were writhing and twining, seeking in the farthest dim nooks of the vault a refuge from the violet glow.

"Quick! Do you drive as though the devil were after you!" exclaimed d'Artois as he saw the eery manifestation. "Arouse Diane, and bring her here, at once!"

"But why——"

"Because she—it—that fiend will be seeking Diane in her apartment. By taking Diane away, you will gain time, since materialization is not instantaneous—but hurry! I'll wait here."

D'Artois led the way upstairs to the salon.

"He has books and charts here," explained d'Artois as he took the steps three at a bound. "I will study this thing out. It fooled him. But I know now that the death of those five adepts has nothing to do with her. Thus one fatal side-issue is eliminated—hurry, *mon ami!* I have the hunch!"

D'Artois, softly cursing, tore out one drawer after another of the tables and cabinets in the salon.

"*Grâce à Dieu!*" he muttered as he heard the Daimler crunch down the driveway and start thundering down the river road. Then he proceeded with his search, leaving the salon, and working his way into the study of Graf Erich.

A bed of coals glowed sullenly in the grate at the farther end. By the red glare d'Artois saw that the walls of the study were hung with black arras embroidered in silver to depict the monstrous and unhallowed images of obscure Asian myths. One medallion represented a woman mounted on a lion, and receiving the adoration of three bearded kings. Another depicted a woman who drove a chariot drawn by a quadriga of grotesque monsters that no sane artist could have limned; and on the mantel was a chryso-prase statuette of Agrat bat Mahhat in all her evil loveliness.

All at a glance: then d'Artois found the wall switch, snapped on the lights, and continued his search for the saving clue that might yet thwart that vengeful demon-beauty before she found and killed Diane.

6. *The Chryso-prase Statuette*

SOME fifteen minutes later d'Artois heard the Daimler drawing up in front of the château. He went to the door to meet Farrell and Diane.

"Do tell me what this is all about! As if I've not had my fill of mystery for tonight, with that nightmare of a woman!"

Diane had quite recovered from the shock of her encounter with what she supposed was a madwoman who waylaid her on her front steps. Then, as they stepped into the study, "Where's Graf Erich?"

"He has been detained," said d'Artois,

"and presents his regrets. You were right. Those seeming accidents were the work of a malignant entity bent on your destruction."

"Aren't you consoling!" exclaimed Diane. Her laugh, however, was forced. "And was she—oh, where did he get *that*? The very image of her!"

"Where?" wondered Farrell.

"That little green statuette," replied Diane. "Why, it's an absolute likeness of that girl that tried to stab me!"

"Coincidence, my dear," declared d'Artois. "And now let's get to work."

He indicated with a gesture the heap of diagrams and manuscripts he had been studying during Farrell's absence, then thrust aside the table at the center of the room and rolled up several small Persian rugs that masked the tiled floor. He took a lump of chalk and laid out a circle, which he divided into quadrants. Each quadrant was then marked with cabalistical symbols, some drawn from memory, others from consultation of the scrolls and heavily bound vellum books he had selected from their cases and laid out for reference.

"What in the world is he doing?" whispered Diane, after having watched d'Artois in silent wonder.

Farrell, still horrified by the memory of what he had seen, and the older man's hints about what might be seen before the evening was over, shook his head.

A bowl of beaten copper served as an improvised censer, which d'Artois filled with coals from the grate. He added a handful of incense which he had found in a compartment of one of the cabinets; and as the fumes rose in thick, bluish clouds, pervading the room with a stifling, resinous sweetness, d'Artois said, "Step into those quadrants. That's right. Number two, and number four. I'll occupy number one, and then command her to

materialize in the remaining sector, and, *pardieu*, I'll cook her to a turn!"

A low, soft laugh interrupted d'Artois' remarks.

"Ah . . . but I prefer to elect my own time, *Baali*," said a voice, "when I will not be bound by any conditions of yours."

In a dim corner of the room a spot of misty luminescence was elongating to a spindle of quivering light. Then it expanded, and solidified. The materialization was more rapid than before.

"Getting stronger," muttered d'Artois. "She has absorbed additional energy." Then, to the presence, "Lilith, back to the darkness of forgotten midnight! All those who evoked you from the ghosts of memories and from the shadows of ancient prayers are dust and less than the dust of those who loved you long ago!"

From his waistcoat pocket d'Artois drew the silver *crux ansata*, which he advanced at arm's length as he paced deliberately toward the Presence, stepping to the cadence of the adjuration which he pronounced.

"Go therefore in peace; Ardat Lill!

"Go in peace, Queen of the Lilin!

"Go in peace, and trouble no longer the living. For he is dead, and so also are his friends, and for you there is neither vengeance nor hope, Queen of Zemargad! Go therefore to the shadows and the early dawn of time, and to the dust of those whose fancy gave you life anew!"

Diane and Farrell, standing in their quadrants, thrilled as they heard d'Artois' sonorous voice intoning as he advanced toward that malignant beauty whose wondrous body had become firm and substantial in the dim glow, and half shrouded in a diaphanous mist that served her as a gown.

Again that poison-sweet, evil laugh; but instead of shrinking or retreating as she had done earlier in the evening, she

stepped forward to meet d'Artois. Her smile mocked him, but her phosphorescent eyes regarded Diane from beneath their long lashes with a cold, deadly stare.

D'Artois halted. He was baffled. His solemn command had failed. For an instant his shoulders slumped hopelessly. Then he reasserted his will. His teeth clicked grimly together, and he extended his arms. But the diabolically lovely enemy evaded his grasp as though she were a wisp of haze drifting in the wind. Farrell, seeing d'Artois' futile gesture, leaped clear of his quadrant and sought to intercept the demoniac beauty who slipped forward like a panther to seize Diane. She evaded Farrell's grasp, and closed in.

An instant later, d'Artois and Farrell vainly sought to break her deadly hold on Diane's throat. The phantom woman's strength was great, and her limbs, seemingly solid flesh and blood, were flexible and yielding and elusive as writhing serpents.

Diane's desperately won gasps of breath told how those relentless, slender fingers sank home, mocking the strong hands that tried to break her fierce grip. The phantom snarled in bestial fury, and thwarted the efforts of the two men striving with her as vainly as though they were wrestling with eels.

Farrell snatched a knife.

"God!" he gasped in despair. "She's not human——"

Even in that extremity, he instinctively paused to justify the use of force against such a radiant, feminine beauty, evil though it was.

"*Tenez!*" cried d'Artois, seizing his wrist. "The blade will go through her and stab Diane."

D'Artois stepped clear. He was baffled and beaten. She—Lilith—Queen of the Lilin—had stolen the energy of five adepts whose mangled bodies lay in the

vault below; she had summoned from out of space bit after bit of disembodied force; her strength had become super-human.

Diane had ceased to struggle. The slender, deadly fingers were sinking remorselessly home. The scarlet lips were twisted in a sneer that was made all the more terrible by the beauty of Lilith.

D'Artois flung the silver *crux ansata* into a corner with a wrathful, despairing gesture. Then with a triumphant cry, he saw and recognized his last hope: the image of green chrysoprase. He snatched it from the mantel.

His lips moved soundlessly as he smote the image against an andiron, fracturing the lovely throat, so that the head rolled across the floor. He struck again, cracking the faultless body.

Farrell stared for an instant; then, "Bust it again, Pierre! Look!" he shouted.

He shrieked the last word in a frenzy of exultation.

The phantom woman was becoming misty . . . almost transparent.

Smash! Another spattering of fragments as they glanced off the column that buttressed the fireplace.

Farrell turned just in time to catch Diane, who, no longer supported by the spectral slayer, was about to collapse.

"A last-minute guess. And it worked," muttered d'Artois. He glanced about for a moment as if to reassure himself that vengeful Lilith had indeed vanished. Then he continued, "Let me give you a hand. Get Diane out of here—quickly!"

WHEN Diane regained consciousness, the grayness of early dawn was making the electric lights of her apartment a sickly, yellowish glow. She sat up among the cushions of the chaise-longue, smiled wearily, and declined the glass of brandy d'Artois offered her.

"My throat's terribly bruised, but otherwise I'm all right," she said. "And now tell me what it was all about."

Farrell and d'Artois exchanged glances. They remembered all too well the horrors of the night just past. Diane sensed their thought.

"I wasn't so nearly unconscious as you supposed," she resumed, "and I heard what you two said. So tell me the rest—I mean, the reasons."

"All of our memories, our thoughts, our emotions," began d'Artois, "are vibrations in the ether, similar, perhaps, to radio waves. And the occultists agree that a thought vibration, however attenuated it may become, never actually dies out. And just as by amplification a radio wave can be increased a millionfold, so also by harmonious mental concentration can a thought be infinitely strengthened.

"Graf Erich's five adepts by their contemplation of the chrysoprase statuette summoned from the vast limbo of undying thought-forms an entity that had once been associated with the green image. That entity was Lilith—*Ardat Lili*—*Agrat bat Mabbat*—whatever name you wish. They all imply a female demon.

"She should have vanished with the death of Graf Erich and his adepts; but the accretions of countless disembodied entities, human and otherwise, that were attracted by the thought vortex created by the intense concentration, were all assimilated by the personality whose materialization became strong enough to strangle Diane.

"That chrysoprase statuette was the focal point of the concentration; it was the model for the visualization of the adepts, so that they would have an absolute unity that could not have been gained from verbal description. I noted this fact from the records I studied, but did not

get its full significance until the very last and almost fatal moment.

"My plan was to force the demon to materialize in the circle, and then command her to depart for ever—but she thwarted me by materializing of her own volition, thus evading the compulsion I intended to exercise.

"And the last, and perhaps the strangest feature of this grotesque tragedy, is the apparition herself——"

"You've confused us," interposed Farrell, "by using so many names in addressing her and speaking of her."

D'Artois laughed and struck light to a cigarette.

"Different designations for the same entity. Most of the terms I used are not proper names but class designations. According to Assyrian tradition, Lilith is the head of a hierarchy of female demons or *lilin*. She is Queen of *Zemargad*, *Agrat bat Mahbat*, Daughter of the Dancer, who roams about at night with myriads of *lilin*, whom Solomon is said to have summoned to appear and dance before him.

"Graf Erich, poor devil, tried to perform a similar feat, and fell afoul of the vengeance of Lilith."

"But how about cutting my hair?" wondered Diane. "What in the world——"

"The old tradition," said d'Artois, "describes Lilith as '*a seductive woman with long hair*.' To use an awkward expression, long-hairedness is an essential of the Lilith-image or concept.

"Graf Erich, therefore, wanted you to cut your hair so as to destroy that which you had in common with her. In other words, divested of your exceptionally long hair, you would be degraded in the eyes of Lilith and thus beneath her jealousy. Again, you might have lost your identity as Diane, the rival."

"But why didn't you get scissors instead of drawing that circle and making the other preparations?" wondered Diane.

"Lilith had become too strong," explained d'Artois. "First, you recollect, she had but enough power to cause a hammer to slide from a steep roof. Later, she appeared in person to stab you; and finally, she gathered enough strength to throttle you with her bare hands, and to resist our efforts to overpower her. And, anticipating such an increase, I recognized the need for more desperate measures than the sacrifice of your hair."

"A terrible sacrifice," interposed Farrell, as he admiringly regarded Diane. Then, seating himself at the foot of the chaise-longue, "And now that you're through diverting us with demonology, I'm going to quote a modern author, on an old theme: '*Diane is a seductive woman with——*'"

"*Pardieu!*" interrupted d'Artois, "if that is what you call the lay of the land, there is nothing for an old man but to go home and get some much-needed sleep, and leave you to the mercy of this seductive, long-haired woman!"

"I think," said Diane with a smile and a gesture toward her blue-black hair, "that I'll ask the *coiffeur* to take the biggest, sharpest scissors the first thing in the morning, and——"

"Over my dead body!" protested Farrell.

D'Artois paused at the entrance of the hallway, twisted his mustache, and grinned broadly.

"By the rod, *Monsieur*, if you do not this afternoon return with worthwhile amendments to an ancient Assyrian tradition, you are an oaf, a mouse, and an uncouth fellow! *Cordieu!* Were I but your age!"