

THEODORE STURGEON

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Weird Tales

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"Serpent Princess"

by

EDMOND HAMILTON



Weird Tales



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JANUARY, 1948

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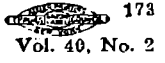
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Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 20 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, \$1.00. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. Copyright, 1947, by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.



PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

Vol. 40, No. 2

D. MCILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.

Serpent Princess

BY EDMOND HAMILTON

HUGH MACKLIN told himself that he was acting more like an imaginative boy than a serious, thirty-year-old archaeologist. But that couldn't stop the vague, meaningless dread that oppressed him.

He had lain awake for hours, on his narrow camp-cot. And it was not the hot closeness of the air inside the little tent, nor the solemn boom of surf from the nearby Persian Gulf, that had prevented him from sleeping.

"The wrath of Anu, lord of the sky; of Enlil, lord of the wind; of Adad, lord of the lightning; be on him who again opens this temple and uses its instrument to awaken evil Tiamat and her folk!"

That terrific invocation ran through Macklin's mind now, as it had ever since morning when they had first uncovered the blocked, sealed entrance of their great find, the temple of Tiamat.

De Ferdey, head of the expedition, had translated the crumbling columns of age-old cuneiform, his high-pitched voice shrill with excitement. The elderly little scholar had almost babbled, when Macklin and Thorpe confirmed his reading by independent translation.

"A temple dedicated to the serpent-goddess Tiamat! This proves that it's the oldest find in Babylonian archaeology! It makes Woolley's work at Ur, and de Morgan's at Elam, look modern!"

Roos, the hulking, fat Dutch artist who was sketcher for the De Ferdey Expedition, was the only one who had looked troubled then.

He had stood with them in the sandy excavation on the very shore of the blue Gulf, staring with puzzled eyes at the square, massive little stone building and the inscribed blocks that sealed its doorway.

"But why?" he had asked. "Why should they have put so terrific a curse on their own temple?"

"Enki wither his body, Nergal freeze his soul, Shamash burn him in fire, who awakens again those of the abyss whom I, Marduk, have bound!"

"Tiamat was the serpent-goddess of the sea-deeps, in ancient Babylonian legend," De Ferdey had explained. "She and her evil race were supposed to have been chained somehow by Marduk, ancient hero-king."

The little scholar's eyes had kindled. "It's always been supposed Marduk was only a solar myth—but this inscription proves he really lived! A ruler of the world's dawn who suppressed the worship of Tiamat!

"We'll know more of this when we open the temple tomorrow!"

Tomorrow was only hours away, now. And still Macklin had not been able to sleep, because of that vague oppression.

It was ridiculous, he told himself in renewed self-disgust. The people who had carved that inscription had been dust six thousand years and more. They and their invocations and curses were merely material now for a scholarly monograph.

Macklin knew an old trick of sleep he had learned from an Asian shaman. He

*A hidden temple full of people dead thousands of years should
make an archaeologist's life—yet it might mean his death!*



Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

used it now, willing his feet, his limbs, his body, to relax.

He slept. And, it seemed instantly, the vague oppression that he had felt leaped suddenly into horror.

THE sound came first. Faint and distant, the mere echo of a memory of a sound. It crept to him through the night and touched him with delicate cold fingers, and somehow he knew what the sound was. Someone, long ago in another world, had struck a great crystal bell. Hugh Macklin could hear it speaking still, clear and sweet and wicked, like the pulsing of an alien heart.

In his dream, Macklin saw himself rise and go out of the tent, because the bell-note called him and he knew that he must go.

He stood on the shore of the dark sea, looking outward, and now the crystal singing of the bell blended with the voices of the waves and the sea wind, but was strengthened rather than lost. It called him still, and Hugh Macklin followed, out into the sea.

The black water closed over his head. He was not afraid of the water. He was not conscious of cold or the need to breathe. He felt himself gliding swiftly downward, deeper and deeper into the gulf, and still the bell sang to him.

He was afraid of the bell. Terribly afraid. And yet as he plunged downward into the utter blackness of the ocean bed he was aware of a growing excitement, an eagerness that ran through him like sudden fire.

Then a strange knowledge came to him, though in his dream it did not seem strange. The lovely crystalline voice of the bell was only the stronger echo of another voice, more delicate, more beautiful, more evil.

The voice of a woman, calling from the long night shadows of the sea.

Pale phosphorescence, pale spreading light like the silver radiance of stars. Macklin knew that he was almost *there*. He saw the great cliffs rising sheer behind their veils of water, and the long clean stretch of sand and whitened shells that was the ocean floor. He saw—the city.

Crystal towers, cut from the clear green-

white crests of breaking waves. Walls of coral and floors of the shining silver sand. He passed over the clustered roofs, where they lay between the two folding arms of the black cliffs. He looked down, and saw the blurred, still shapes that slept in the crystal chambers, dreaming dreams as old as the sea.

But he did not pause. He rushed on, with a terrible hungry eagerness.

Above the city, apart from it, like a diamond on some great primal altar, a crystal palace stood on a ledge of rock. And the woman's voice spoke in Hugh Macklin's soul, and it was glad, and full of power.

The bright walls flowed past him like a broken star, and he was in the palace.

Upward through the silent gleaming halls, moving with the floating smoothness of a dream. Upward past vaulted chambers where the great golden doors stood open, swinging with the stately breathing of the sea. Upward to the highest tower, and the stillness was deeper than death.

She waited for him, there.

No one barred the way. No guard was at the door but a flight of little fish like a shower of butterflies. She had no handmaids, no courtiers, no one to attend her. But even now she had worshippers. Great shadowy creatures hung in the clear water around her as she slept, their fins moving slowly, slowly, and a long coiling shape curled lovingly around her, its shining head upon her shoulder, watching with cold strange eyes.

Macklin saw these things vaguely, as he saw the high clear vault of the roof and the couch whereon she lay, that was like an open shell and glowed like mother of pearl. But they did not matter. *She* was all that mattered.

Her voice would be like a faery bell, ringing silver in his heart. If she moved, her body would have the grace of all the sea's bright children, sinuous strength, wonderful ease and quickness. Her limbs were smooth, shaped out of the joyous whiteness of foam, and it seemed a pity that they should be so still.

She was human and yet she was not human. She was more beautiful than any

human woman Macklin had ever seen. She was beautiful like the morning of the world, when the gods were born out of sunlight and sea-waves and the strength of the wind. There was no weakness in her, no fear, no change. The heavy trampling feet of the ages of mankind had never touched her, and somehow Macklin knew that to her there was no such thing as death.

It was a pity that she slept. A pity that such wondrous life must be so still.

HE LOOKED into her face, her lovely face that had in it a shining wickedness so far beyond the petty evils of human life that it ceased to have the meaning of wrong as Macklin knew it. Her shadowed eyelids brushed her cheeks with gleaming lashes, and Macklin's heart was wrung with the pain of it, that she slept and he could not look into her eyes.

But she could speak to him! Macklin heard the singing crystal voice clearly in his mind now, and knew that it was her mind that spoke to his.

"Yes, my mind," came her sweet whisper of thought. "It is not chained in sleep, like my body. It can reach out and draw other minds to me—as it has drawn yours."

In his dream, Macklin's thought was awed, his hungry eagerness tempered by dread.

"You are—the goddess Tiamat?" he murmured.

"The *princess* Tiamat!" rang the answer. "Yes, princess of the older human race—the race who went back to the sea from the land, as the great sea-reptiles and the great whales went back."

Her speech, her thought, rushed swift and shining now through Macklin's dazed and dreaming mind.

"We of the sea were older—and wiser—than the men of land. That is why we sought to teach the brutish, barbarous land-folk our arts and wisdom. And we taught them much."

Macklin felt the heavy weight of ages of time in Tiamat's brooding thought.

"The land-folk called us, by a great bell whose sound was power. They called and we answered, rising from the sea to instruct them. We gave them the first elements of civilization. We even brought many of

them by our arts to this sea-city, land men who dwelt with us here in the sea! And they worshipped us as gods.

"All except Marduk, their king. He was jealous of us. He hid his hatred until he had learned our arts of magic science from us. And then Marduk proclaimed us as evil, and used our own arts against us to bind us in this paralyzed, death-like sleep!"

Like silver flame blazed the bitter wrath in Tiamat's thought, and then Macklin felt it sink back to dull despair.

"Sleeping, sleeping, as age on age has rolled across the earth—but only our bodies! And that was the horror of the fate that treacherous Marduk fastened on us, that our minds should remain wakeful!"

In his dream, Macklin's heart wrung to pity for her.

"Tiamat, can you never be awakened? Can you never live again?"

Swift came her answer. "There is one way! The great bell in the temple on the shore—the bell by which long ago the land-folk called to us! Its vibration can shatter the paralysis in which Marduk bound us! It would awaken us!"

"The bell still exists! Marduk dared not *destroy* it, for the very act of destruction would have sounded the bell and awakened us! He could but seal it up, with a curse upon it. You have but to open the sealed temple. First break the inscription on the outer block—"

("First break the inscription," Macklin murmured mechanically.

"—and then pull the center blocks aside," prompted Tiamat's silver whisper.

"The center blocks—" Macklin repeated, again.

Suddenly, in his dream, it seemed to him that the whole undersea world about him heaved and rocked to a violent shock.

And then it was all wavering and fading, the weird sea-city below and the crystal tower in which he was, and the pearly couch on which Tiamat's sleeping, unhumanly-human body lay.

"Macklin! Macklin!" a thunderous voice seemed roaring through the waters as all darkened and faded. "*Wake up!*"

Macklin opened dazed eyes. It was

Thorpe's voice he heard, and Thorpe's square, aggressive face was close to his as the other shook his shoulders violently.

"Macklin, what are you doing?"

Macklin looked dazedly around. He was not now in his tent. He stood in the moonlight at the sealed entrance of the temple of Tiamat.

But that entrance was no longer sealed! Hands had torn aside the blocks inscribed with *Marduk's* curse and warning!

His hands, Macklin suddenly realized! His fingers were bruised and bloody where they had torn at the blocks. In his sleep, in his dream, he had opened the long-sealed temple of Tiamat!

IN THE moonlight, Thorpe's aggressive face showed his astonishment and bewilderment.

"Why did you open the temple secretly? Why not wait till morning as we planned?"

"I didn't know what I was doing," Macklin stammered. "I was sleepwalking, dreaming—"

Dreaming? Of a sudden, he felt an aching sorrow that Tiamat's unearthly beauty had only been a dream.

He saw her again as he had seen her in that weird vision, sleeping in her crystal palace tower down deep beneath the sea, her loveliness warded and watched by grotesque creatures of the deep.

But had it been only—dream? Had not her mind urged him to open the temple and sound the mysterious bell that could awaken her again to life? And had he not, at the very moment he dreamed that, been blindly tearing aside the inscribed blocks to enter the temple?

Fear settled upon Macklin's mind like thin ice forming on a pool. A dream that could take possession of a man's mind and body like that, was more than dreaming!

New voices aroused him from his brooding.

De Ferdey and Roos had been awakened by Thorpe's shouting, and were approaching.

De Ferdey, his scrawny little figure ridiculous in a brilliant dressing-gown, had anger on his pinched face.

"Thorpe, what are you and Macklin do-

ing? You had no right to open the temple without me!"

Thorpe shrugged. "I found Macklin doing it. He says it was somnambulism, a dream."

Jan Roos' hulking, obese figure stiffened, his moon face and round blue eyes showing how much he was startled.

"A dream?" rumbled the fat Dutch artist. "I too was having one when I awoke—a *verdommt* nightmare about that."

He gestured with his flabby hand across the little strip of beach toward the moonlit, heaving expanse of the Gulf.

Macklin looked at him swiftly. Had the Dutchman too dreamed of—Tiamat?

Unreasoning, hot jealousy flared for an instant in Macklin's mind, at the thought that his strange dream-tryst with that sleeping princess beneath the sea had been shared by Roos.

Next moment, he was appalled by his own reaction. Was he cracking up mentally, to harbor such crazy ideas?

He got a grip on himself. "I'm sorry about the temple, sir," he told De Ferdey. "I guess I've been so eager about opening it, that when I started sleepwalking I went and did it."

The little scholar looked placated. "I suppose there's no harm done, Macklin. But if some of our Arab workers sneaked inside before morning, they might loot it."

"I'll stand guard," Thorpe offered. De Ferdey nodded assent and turned away. "I suggest we go back to bed."

Jan Roos looked at Macklin a little furtively as they parted outside the tents. "Macklin, this dream of yours—" he began.

Again, Macklin felt the prick of senseless jealousy, and it made his answer curt.

"There's no point in discussing nightmares. Good night, Jan."

In his tent, he did not go back to his cot. He lit his gasoline lantern and sat sprawled in a camp-chair, smoking mechanically as his mind churned.

Never before had he experienced the unpleasant sensation of losing control even briefly of his own body's action. And it had shaken him.

He told himself that he had to reason it out or it would leave a scar of fear on his subconscious.

"It's easy enough to explain," he assured himself. "The inscription on the temple, cursing anyone who might want to 'awaken Tiamat,' was what triggered off my mind."

Macklin had been steeped for a half-score of years in Babylonian archaeology, in the faith and thought of those men of ancient Sumer who had first of all men reared a civilization.

And their great legend of how Marduk, the warrior magician-king, had conquered and bound evil Tiamat and her serpent-folk of the sea, was so familiar to him that it had sprung alive in his dreaming mind.

"Yet there were some things in the dream that are *not* in the legend," Macklin thought, puzzledly.

He got out his reference books and leafed through the pages of transliteration from ancient cuneiform which told the epic story of that primal conflict.

"Evil and beautiful was Tiamat, of the serpent people of the sea. Evil taught she from the waters to the sons of men, luring them by her bright beauty to deathly life beneath the sea. Spirit of heaven remember! Spirit of earth remember!"

Like a stern voice out of dim ages spoke to Macklin this saga of an ancient and awful conflict.

"By their own tricks of force did Marduk conquer the serpent folk, binding Tiamat and her horde in sleep, to waken not till the world dies. Spirit of heaven remember! Spirit of earth remember!"

MACKLIN went through the pages twice, seeking reference to that part of his dream in which Tiamat had spoken of a great bell that had been used to summon her, and that now could awaken her.

He found no such reference. But that, he reasoned, must have been a fictive detail supplied by his own imagination. For all the rest of his dream obviously came from his own memory of the ancient legend.

The assurance quieted his shaken nerves. Even so, he was reluctant to sleep again. But when he did sleep, no further dreams came.

In the glare of morning sunlight, Hugh Macklin felt a little foolish as he recalled the night.

"Just nerves," he muttered as he shaved.

"Too much of ancient Babylon. I need a dose of New York, night-clubs, subways."

Thorpe, yawning and stretching, greeted them when they went to the temple on the sandy shore.

Their white-robed Arab workmen, curious to see the result of their long digging, stood in the background as De Ferdey, twitching with eagerness, directed the removal of the rest of the blocks that filled the massive door.

"The most ancient type of Sumerian masonry!" burred the little scholar: "Careful not to crack those blocks! Now we'll have a look inside!"

De Ferdey could walk in upright, but the rest of them had to stoop in the low doorway.

THE angling beams of their heavy flashlights showed the interior of the temple as a single dark, oblong, windowless room. Directly in front of them rose a low stone pier four feet high.

It was inscribed, but it was not the inscription but the thing that lay upon the pier that first caught their eyes.

"Why, it's a sistrum!" De Ferdey exclaimed, amazed. "But not like the Egyptian or any other known type."

The thing was a thick, foot-long bar of gold, with a handle midway by which it could be held. Projecting from the bar were seven little sistra on whose golden wires were strung tiny crystal spheres.

Thorpe was excitedly translating the inscription graven deep in the pier.

"The power of Marduk, the wisdom of Marduk, the scepter of Marduk, whose force can freeze and bind!"

Macklin picked it up, shook it slightly. The little crystal spheres chimed together on their golden wires.

Faint as was the note, it seemed for an instant to pierce his ears and brain. He felt himself reeling—

"Put it down!" ordered De Ferdey. "That sound is excruciating in this confined space."

An exclamation from Jan Roos made them swing around. The obese Dutch artist was playing his flashlight beam upon the walls of the room.

His fat face was suddenly strange. And

as Hugh Macklin looked up, he felt an equal impact of emotion.

"Those mural paintings—they're odd," De Ferdey was saying puzzledly, behind Macklin.

The ancient murals of Tiamat's temple were more than odd, to Macklin. They were stunning.

For they showed a city beneath the sea—a city of crystal towers and walls of coral, and floors of silver sand. Above the city on a great ledge glittered a crystal palace, and about palace and city swam serpentine humans who were not quite human.

"The same scene, exactly the same scene, that I saw in my dream last night!" gasped Macklin.

De Ferdey looked startled, for a moment. But then he said, "You must have squirmed in and had a look, while you were sleepwalking."

"But I too—" Roos began, and then fell silent.

Macklin noticed now that in the pictured undersea city, beside the swimming serpentine sea-folk, there walked ordinary men—men in ancient Sumerian dress, men with blind-staring eyes and strange faces.

He remembered that in his dream, Tiamat had said the sea-folk brought landmen somehow living to their city. And he remembered also a phrase of the ancient legend he had read during the night.

"Evil taught Tiamat to the sons of men, luring them by her bright beauty to deathly life beneath the sea."

"Look what I've found back here!" called Thorpe, his voice pitched high with excitement.

AT THE back of the temple room, a well eight feet across yawned in the stone paving. It was a black mouth of water, obviously connecting by a passage with the sea that boomed on the nearby shore.

On either side of the well rose a stone pillar, and the two pillars supported a massive stone cross-bar from which hung a bell.

The bell was of shimmering crystal, flaring out six feet from the ring at its top to its curving lip. It was inscribed with characters that were not Sumerian nor any

other human language. And it hung with its lower third submerged in the black water.

Macklin felt a deadly tightness close upon his heart. "The bell of Tiamat!" he whispered. "The bell by which long ago they summoned her, and that now can awaken her!"

He knew, now. He knew that his strange vision of the night could not have been mere dream built of memory.

For in the ancient legends, in his memory of them, was no mention of such a bell. But the bell, the bell that Marduk could not destroy without reawakening Tiamat's folk, was here!

Then Hugh Macklin suddenly shouted. "Roos, *don't!*"

Beside the crystal bell, there hung from the stone cross-bar a massive crystal mace, a striker. Nobody but Jan Roos had noticed it.

Roos had seen and grasped it, and was lifting it to strike the crystal bell. And a terror born in dream suddenly brought that cry of dread from Macklin's lips.

Roos paused, glaring at Macklin with eyes that at this moment were not the Dutch artist's naive blue eyes at all.

"And why not?" he asked thickly. "Why not sound the bell?"

Macklin, seeing the glazed, strange look in the other's eyes, knew beyond all doubt that Roos *knew*.

"You can't!" he cried. "It means—"

Thorpe was staring at them puzzledly, but De Ferdey's shrill voice intervened.

"Macklin is right—do you want to take a chance of cracking this bell?" he sputtered at Roos. "It's an invaluable relic!"

Slowly, Roos let the mace fall. It swung like a heavy crystal pendulum by the heavy gold wire that held it to the cross-bar.

"This place is unprecedented!" De Ferdey was babbling joyfully, now. "I'd like to see their faces in Philadelphia when we publish this!"

The little scholar peremptorily motioned them out of the dark stone room.

"Don't touch a thing until we can photograph everything *in situ!*"

Macklin was the photographer of the expedition. He was glad of that, for the pressure of excited work that day kept him

from thinking. And he dreaded to think.

He wanted not even to consider the implications of a dream that anticipated reality—a dream of beauty and horror that had wrenched his heart with a great throb of mixed fear and desire when Roos had almost struck the bell.

He had wanted that bell to sound. He had wanted it because something deep in his mind knew that its sounding would awaken that dream-visions sleeping sea-princess whose beauty was still an ache in his heart.

But even more deeply he had dreaded the sounding of the bell, for there was that in him which knew it was a tocsin for unutterable evil.

"We've made the find of the century!" De Ferdey exulted at dinner that night. "There must be other incalculably ancient relics in this region. We'll comb this whole coast!"

He told them that he had sent up to Basra for boats and diving-equipment.

"There has probably been subsidence here—we may find much more under the shallow waters along shore."

Hugh Macklin hardly listened. He was watching Roos across the table. The big Dutchman was unusually silent.

But his moonlike face was colorless, strange. Time and again, Macklin saw the man's eyes shift through the open door of the tent to the dark, tumbling sea.

Macklin could no longer doubt that the Dutchman too had dreamed, that a strange call from the sea had come to him too, that—

He clenched his fist beneath the table and silently told himself, "I am Hugh Macklin of Ardmore, Pennsylvania, and I am a scientist, and I blindly believe no thing that can't be proved."

It didn't work. It didn't take the shadow of that incredible memory out of his brain.

Lying on his back in his dark tent later, he felt that his defenses against the impossible were weakening. For now it seemed to him that in the breathlessness of the night there was something hushed and fearfully expectant, in the shout of the surf something joyously expectant.

"I am Hugh Mackling—"

Clang!

Earth and sea and sky seemed suddenly vibrating to that distant, muted silvery sound.

It was not loud to his ears. It was a ghost-sound, touching octaves of sonic vibration that his hearing could barely attain.

Clang!

Again, the ringing note, its swelling pulse making complex counterpoint with the first note's echoes, moving fast and far—

Macklin found himself on his feet, shaking. "Roos! He's sounding the bell of Tiamat!"

FEAR flung Macklin out of his tent like a giant hand, and urged him in a stumbling run along the moonlit shore.

It was not fear for himself. It was a quaking dread that that summoning bell might cause an impossible thing to happen—a thing that would forever shatter for him the solid-seeming surface of the ordinary world.

"It couldn't happen!" he told himself prayerfully. "It couldn't! But if it did—"

The intolerable ringing sweetness of the bell had died away. But on his right, as he ran, the black sea boomed hoarsely jubilant on the beach.

Tiamat's temple came into sight, low, squat and gray in the moonlight, its open door staring out to sea like a blind eye.

"Roos!" yelled Macklin, as he pitched forward.

Then he had his answer. But not from Roos. It came from far out on the heaving black ocean, out where great billows leaning toward land flung white spray-lace at the moon.

Over the sound of wind and wave there came from far seaward, a silver, singing cry. A high, sweet shout, throbbing with superhuman exultation.

Hugh Macklin stopped dead, seized by a cold breathlessness. He strained his eyes seaward.

"Tiamat!" he choked.

Like a hoarse, loud echo, from nearer in the sea came the sobbing howl of a great voice.

"Tiamat!"

It was Jan Roos' voice that uttered that

hoarse and eager cry. And now Macklin saw him.

The hulking Dutchman was floundering out through the shallows, half-stumbling and half-swimming, clumsily flailing his great arms.

He was going out to answer that silver, singing call, and already only his massive head was above the billows.

"Roos, wait! Wait!" yelled Macklin, breaking the spell and running out into the surf.

Roos never turned. He floundered madly on, toward—

Toward what? Was it a glistening, coiling white woman-shape that swam those distant wave-crests with lithesome ease? Was it that, or curling foam?

Then Hugh Macklin glimpsed white arms flung up from the waves toward the moon, glimpsed an exultant face, heard again the joyous, pulsing cry. And again, Roos shouted as he plunged on.

For a moment, Macklin glimpsed the two heads together—then saw white arms like supple serpents coil around Roos' neck, and heard the Dutchman's wild shout of joy as he sank beneath the billows.

And then there was only the wind, and the surf on the shore, and Hugh Macklin crying out across an empty, moonlit sea.

"Roos! Roos!"

Yet not horror for Roos' fate shook him most deeply, in this moment. The horror was there, but with it was blind jealousy.

Another had awakened Tiamat, another had answered her call and gone down with her into the sleeping city beneath the sea! He, Hugh Macklin, should have been her chosen—

Macklin knew later that he must have been very close to the brink of sanity at this moment, very close to hurling himself seaward in answer to that blind, aching impulse.

IT WAS the voices that held him—first the excited shouts of Arab laborers running toward the shore, and then the alarmed exclamations of Thorpe and De Ferdey as they dragged him back out of the surf.

"Macklin, what's happened?"

Hugh Macklin pointed seaward with a

shaking hand. "Roos! He sounded the bell to awaken Tiamat, and she came and called him! And he went!"

He heard Thorpe swear and tell De Ferdey, "He's out of his head. Stay with him and quiet him down, while I find Roos."

Macklin sat on the sand with his head in his hands, hardly conscious of De Ferdey's nervous voice or the low voices of the scared Arabs. Then Thorpe came back.

"Roos isn't here anywhere, sir! Macklin, exactly what happened?"

Macklin told them. And he saw the growing incredulity on their faces as he told.

"It's true!" he finished desperately.

Thorpe spoke swiftly to De Ferdey. "I don't doubt that Roos did throw himself in, sir. He and Macklin have both been acting queerly. I'll take Macklin back to his tent and give him some luminal."

The drug drew a thick, wooly blanket over Macklin's mind, with merciful quickness.

When he awoke, the late afternoon sun was slanting through the door of the tent. Thorpe sat in a camp-chair watching him, his square brown face thoughtful.

"Feeling better?" he asked Macklin casually. "Here, have some coffee."

The hot coffee from the thermos was black and bitter. Thorpe waited until he had drunk it, and lighted a cigarette.

"Now tell me all about last night, Macklin," he said quietly.

Hugh Macklin laughed mirthlessly. "I see. You're trying to humor the madman."

"Bosh!" retorted Thorpe. "You're not crazy. Roos may have been, a little. He was a high-strung, nervous type, for all his fat. But you've just had a little too much work, heat and flies."

Macklin shrugged. "It's a good explanation. Only it isn't so. Now listen."

He forced himself to talk carefully and coolly. Thorpe listened without attempt to interrupt, till he had finished.

Then he spoke deliberately. "You really believe, then, that the sounding of that bell awakened a sleeping woman in the sea?"

Macklin hesitated. "Not a woman—not as we know women. They're a different

kind of humanity, a species of man that split off long ago and went back to the sea. This is perhaps the last remnant of that offshoot human species.

"And Tiamat was not just sleeping. It must have been a queer form of suspended animation, the vital nervous centers paralyzed by some application of force. It's been done with animals in the labs."

"I see," said Thorpe. "And you think that Marduk did that to Tiamat long ago? And that the bell's vibration could break that paralysis and thus awaken her from suspended animation?"

Macklin flushed. "I know it sounds fantastic. But what other explanation is there?"

"The common-sense one," Thorpe said forcefully. "You and Roos were both tired, nervous, excited by our finding of the temple. The temple of Tiamat suggested a weird dream to your tired mind—"

"A dream in which I heard the bell, remember!" Macklin interrupted. "And at that time we didn't know there was such a bell inside the temple."

"You were sleepwalking—you must have squirmed inside and seen those mural paintings and the bell," Thorpe insisted. "It's the only logical explanation."

"But I *saw* Tiamat out there on the waves, calling to Roos!" exclaimed Macklin.

"By your own account, you saw something vague and white," Thorpe retorted. "Sea-foam in the moonlight—your overwrought imagination supplied the rest."

HUGH MACKLIN hesitated. The part of his mind that clung desperately to the common-sense, everyday world wanted to believe Thorpe.

But he couldn't believe. He knew that Tiamat lived, and had awakened. And, most frightening of all, that belief brought him a strange, singing joy.

Thorpe pressed his argument. "Look, Macklin—I want you to get this feverish fancy out of your mind. There's one sure way to do it. That's to sound the bell tonight and let you see for yourself that nothing really happens."

Instantly, again, Hugh Macklin felt that powerful throbb of mixed fear and desire.

If the bell were sounded, would Tiamat come again?

Or was it as Thorpe said, mere delusion born of an overtired mind? He had to know, one way or another. He had to know.

"All right," he said, keeping his voice carefully even. "We'll do it."

When he and Thorpe went out of the tent into the gathering twilight a little later, they met De Ferdey. The little scholar was too upset to give Macklin much attention.

"The Arabs are threatening to leave!" he shrilled. "What happened last night aroused their superstitions. You know—the usual talk about the ruins of the ancients being accursed. And right when we may be on the verge of further discoveries!"

He pointed toward the flat boats and heaps of equipment that now lay drawn up on the beach nearby.

"The boats and the diving suits came this afternoon—we could maybe find a whole city in this shallow water. But if they leave—"

"I'll talk to them, later," soothed Thorpe. "A little higher wages should fix it. Right now, we're going to the temple."

De Ferdey stared, seeming to notice Macklin for the first time. "To the temple? For what? Macklin, have you got over your delirium?"

"Of course he has," Thorpe said hastily. "Come along, Macklin."

In the deepening darkness, the little oblong temple brooded still as though watching with its blind eye the eager, reaching hands of wave-foam that grabbed up the beach toward it.

THE moon was rising but it was very dark inside—so dark that Macklin could at first discern only the glimmer of the sistrum on the stone pier, and the vague, shimmering outline of the great crystal bell back in the deeper shadow.

His uncanny feeling of mingled hope and dread was getting stronger by the minute. He had a wild impulse to turn and flee, but knew that to do so would be to prove to Thorpe that his wits were tottering.

Thorpe turned, at the bell, and his voice

was embarrassed. "Macklin, don't take offense. But you haven't been normal. And I don't want to take a chance of anything happening to you when I sound this bell."

Hugh Macklin was puzzled for a moment. "What do you mean?"

The other took a pair of leather straps from his pocket. "I want to secure you before I sound this bell. Sounds can have queer effects. I don't want you throwing yourself into the sea, too."

It took Macklin aback. He knew now that despite Thorpe's calm manner, the other thought him at least partly insane.

But he forced himself to nod assent. "All right. I quite understand."

Thorpe tied him around the shoulders with the straps, to one of the two stone pillars that supported the bell.

Then the other grasped and raised the heavy mace. "A sound is just a vibration of the air. Keep remembering that, Macklin."

Thorpe struck the bell.

It wasn't as Macklin had expected. It wasn't a faint, ringing pulse of sound such as he had heard the night before.

HE HAD been at a distance, then. But now he was right beside the crystal bell, inside the confined space of the little temple. The sound was different.

It was not like a sound at all. It was like an explosion of immaterial force that threatened to rive heaven and earth. A god might signal the end of a universe by such a mighty note.

Macklin, half-stunned, saw the water in the black well quivering wildly around the submerged bottom of the bell. The sound was going out through the water to the sea, out even faster and farther than it could go through air.

Thunderously drowning the ringing echoes came Thorpe's second stroke upon the bell. Another stroke followed, and another, until the dark little temple seemed crowded with raging, silvery sound.

Thorpe let the mace fall, and stood panting. "That was loud enough, wasn't it? And you see, nothing has happened."

Nothing? The last ringing reverberations were dying away, and Macklin's ears could now again detect the sound of the

sea-wind and the boom of the dark surf out there beyond the open door.

Nothing? Why was it that the murmur of the wind suddenly strengthened, grew louder and keener, grew to a high, sweet singing cry outracing the leaping billows toward the land?

Macklin uttered a cry. "Thorpe, she is coming! Tiamat! I can hear her—"

Thorpe's voice broke in, taut with anxiety. "Macklin, get a grip on yourself! You have to conquer this thing in your mind right now!"

He pointed at the moonlit ocean out there beyond the open door and the beach.

"Can't you see that there's nothing there, that—"

Thorpe broke off. His shadowy figure became rigid as he stared.

For there was something out there on the moonlit sea. A slim shape, swimming with seal-smoothness toward the shore.

A serpentine white arm broke from the water, and dark hair swept back like wind-driven seaweed as a delicate, triangular face tilted moonward to utter that singing silver cry.

"Tiamat!" Macklin yelled again. "Thorpe, I told you—"

But Thorpe didn't hear him. Thorpe was striding out of the temple, toward the beach and the breaking waves.

"It's a woman, only a woman!" Thorpe's thick voice came back. "I'll prove it!"

Macklin knew that the man's matter-of-fact world was shattering beneath his feet, and that it was the supreme need for reassurance that drove him.

He saw Thorpe walk out until the breaking waves clasped his waist, staring fixedly ahead toward that white woman-shape that was swimming swiftly, swiftly, in toward him.

Macklin suddenly strained against the straps that bound him to the pillar, and yelled an incoherent warning.

He knew that Thorpe could not hear him. But Thorpe's own sudden dread spun the man around to start toward shore.

Swiftly, smoothly, flashed the lithesome swimming shape of Tiamat after him. In the moonlight, Thorpe's pallid face became suddenly ghastly as white arms coiled round his neck from behind.

Macklin heard a cry of horror that mingled weirdly with a joyous silver shout. And then two heads went down.

HE GUESSED afterward that for a time he hung half-conscious in his straps. For his next clear sensation was of hands nervously unbinding him, and De Ferdey's shrill voice.

"I saw!" De Ferdey was shrilling, over and over. "I saw that—something—come in and drag Thorpe down!"

The little scholar was shaking, his hands quivering violently as he tried to unbuckle the straps.

"And the Arabs saw too! They've gone, fled! Macklin, what are we to do?"

A queer, cold calm had come upon Hugh Macklin's soul. He answered evenly.

"I am going out there, after them. After Tiamat. She will have no more victims."

De Ferdey recoiled from him a little. "Are you mad? Go out into the sea—drown yourself?"

"There are the diving-suits," Macklin answered. "They're tank-suits, self-contained, strong enough for any reasonable depth. I'm going in one of them."

His voice suddenly shouted. "What else can I do? We've wakened something ancient and evil, by our blundering disregard of Marduk's warning! As though our modern science was the only science that ever had existed!"

The little scholar wrung his hands! "It's mad, what you say! And yet—I saw!"

Macklin disregarded him in the next feverish hours. He assembled one of the diving-suits. It was a simple affair with duralumin oxygen-tank between the shoulders, devised for amateur divers in shallow waters.

He fastened the lead-weights to his belt, and then as the sun rose, clumped back on the lead-soled shoes toward the temple.

De Ferdey followed him fearfully. The little scholar watched wide-eyes as Macklin lifted the sistrum of Marduk from its inscribed pier and thrust it into his belt.

"Macklin, you're crazy!" he cried. "If you think that there is any power in that ancient magical instrument—"

Macklin's somber eyes traced the inscription on the stone. "*The power of Marduk,*

the wisdom of Marduk, the sceptre of Marduk, whose force can freeze and bind."

Macklin said, "There was power in the bell."

He turned and went slowly toward the sea. The slow, swinging, ponderous tread of the heavy boots, the unhuman outlines of suit and helmet, gave him the look of some antediluvian god-thing striding toward judgment. With every movement the sistrum gave out a faint chime of sound, softer than a child's breathing, and yet Macklin thought that the waves shied from it like frightened horses in their landward rush.

He walked out into the surf, but this time there was no voice of singing crystal calling to him. The water closed over his head. He was afraid of the water. He was conscious of the cold, the crushing, numbing weight of it. This time he did not glide with the smooth bodiless ease of a dream. He walked, and his steps were slow and painful, and there was no joy in them.

Instinct, or the memory of his dream, led him toward the city, and it seemed to him that ages went by in the dark green depths of the sea, and his heart was heavier than the lead weights that held him down.

Pale phosphorescence, pale spreading light like the silver radiance of stars. The great cliffs rising sheer behind the veils of water, and the long clean stretch of sand. The crystal towers, carved from the crests of breaking waves. And above, on the black ledge of rock, the palace of Tiamat like a fallen star caught on the breast of a storm-cloud. And Hugh Macklin cried out in his heart, a broken, desperate shout of negation.

He had known that he would see it, as he had seen it all before. And yet it was a shock—to be awake, terribly awake, and see the country of a dream.

He knew that even after all that had happened he had still not quite believed. A man, if he were sane at all, could not quite believe. A man, if he were sane at all, could not help hoping that it had only been insubstantial dream.

He went on, across the sand and the crumbling shells, with the slow leaden tread of doom. The doom of all mankind,

which had abdicated an ancient, alien glory for the sake of a human soul.

The sleepers no longer slept.

HE SAW them in the open spaces, bright beautiful shapes that sported with their cousins of the sea. Great gleaming fish went arrowing between the crystal towers, and the people of Tiamat played with them, more fleet, more graceful, than the perfect children of the sea. The game they played together was more than a frolic. It was a living hymn of joy because the long sleep was over, because the shackled bodies were free again. And the sea was glad, and her children welcomed back their gods.

Hugh Macklin walked between the coral walls of the city, and one by one the people of Tiamat stopped and watched him and drew back before him, and the fish ceased from their flashing play and watched him too, drifting motionless beside the white shoulders of their lords. It seemed to Macklin that the very motion of the sea had stopped, as though the water itself had life and were watching him.

His hand was on the shaft of the sistrum, and he could feel its chiming vibrant whisper as he moved.

Sceptre of Marduk, whose force can freeze and bind.

The people of Tiamat were afraid.

Macklin looked upward to the palace, and waited.

She came, as he had known she would. She came like a drift of pearly foam, bright as the morning sun, and her beauty was like a stabbing pain in Macklin's heart. Tears came hot and blinding to his eyes, and he shook them away because he must look at her, must see her clearly and for all time, because there would not again be light and loveliness in all the world for him.

Dark hair floating around the delicate face, the flesh like soft pearl, tender and radiant. The strong sweet shoulders and lifting breasts, the long line of the flanks and slender hips, the limbs that were all sinuous grace.

He tried to see where and how she differed from the human, and realized that the difference lay in inner structure. There

was no stiffness, no awkward articulation of joints, no heaviness. Her bones were light and supple, and all the lines of her body and the motion of it were curving and perfect as the waves, without angularity or limitation. She was the original, the perfect creature, unmarred by the restricting shackles of evolution on the unfriendly land. She was the mold, and humanity was only the broken echo.

He wanted to fall down on his knees and worship her. More than that, he wanted to tear off the hampering suit that weighed his body and gather her loveliness into his arms and kiss her little curving mouth that had in it the laughter and the mocking joy of all the waters that ever danced in the morning of the world under a warm young sun.

He looked into her eyes.

He was sorry that he had. He was sorry that he had not been satisfied to remember her as he had seen her first, with her lids closed in sleep.

Dark mystic depths, and lighter shades like shallows over sand, and little errant glints of light like the touch of moonbeams. Knowledge long forgotten and visions half remembered were in her eyes.

They were eyes that had watched the banners of all the nations of man brighten and fade and go down into dust, and yet were not sad, but like the eyes of a child that watches an endless and fascinating play. Youth was in them, and joy, and above all they were the eyes of a woman and they smiled.

Hugh Macklin forgot the cold and crushing weight of the sea. He forgot the sceptre of Marduk, and the reason for his coming. Very softly he spoke her name—"Tiamat! Tiamat!"—and the sound of it inside his helmet was like the whisper of distant surf laughing at the shackled land.

The remembered voice of his dream spoke within his mind, like silver speech transformed to thought.

"Why have you come, Hugh Macklin?"

For a long time, he could not answer. The still sea waited, and the people of the city waited, and the great fish lay motionless and watching. The sistrum, too, was silent, unshaken by any motion of the water.

And Hugh Macklin could not answer Tiamat because her eyes were on him, and he knew that she had known the answer to that question before he had left the temple, and she was laughing at him.

She was not afraid. Her people might fear, but not Tiamat. He knew that even Marduk had not been able to teach her fear.

Finally he answered hoarsely, speaking the thought that he knew her mind could hear.

"You know why I've come."

SHE had floated closer to him, imperceptibly. Her flesh glowed with the warm soft lustre of pearl. Macklin's hands reached out, unconsciously, blindly, and she laughed, a little silver ripple in his mind.

"I know," she said. "But do you?"

He had to tell her. He had to look into her eyes and tell her. The words hurt him, each one separately as he dragged them out.

"You're evil, Tiamat. You killed my friends. You—"

He stopped. It was hard to speak. Her body was long and wonderfully slender and her shoulders were like white coral under her dark floating hair. He tried again.

"I came to—"

He could not say it. It was blasphemy. It was worse even than if he said, "*I have come to kill you.*" To chain that breathing vibrant loveliness in a living death—

Tiamat smiled and whispered, "You came because you love me."

And Hugh Macklin knew that she was right.

She stretched her white arms upward, lazily, and said, "I have taken lovers before from the world of men."

She drifted closer on the breath of the sea, and her eyes were merry and full of light.

"Would you like that, Hugh Macklin? To love me, to stay with me always?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes."

He was racked with longing, just to be near her, to watch her move among the crystal towers and listen to the singing music of her voice. Through her, a man might

glimpse the wonder of eternal life, of youth and never-ending beauty.

"Take off your helmet, Hugh Macklin. That ugly thing that hides the beauty of the sea. Let the water touch you. Let me touch you, let me kiss your lips and set you free of the land forever."

Her hands, reaching out to him. Her mouth, tender and passionate and laughing—

"Take off your helmet, Hugh Macklin."

He wanted to, he hungered to, but one last memory of fear held him. The remembered picture of the temple walls, covered with paintings of other men who had answered the call of Tiamat.

"What of them?" he asked harshly, above the pounding of his heart. "Were they happy here, the dead who could not really die?"

"Why do you call them that? They had eternal life, until Marduk destroyed them because he was mortal and must die himself. Look around you. Could you be unhappy here?"

No, thought Macklin, not unless one could be unhappy in fairyland.

Tiamat said, "Could you be unhappy here—with me?"

Macklin slowly raised his hands, and began to fumble with the heavy bolts of the helmet.

It was then that Roos and Thorpe came, thrusting their clumsy way between the people of the sea. They had lost their goddess, and they had hunted for her, and now they had found her.

They scrambled toward her across the sand, floundering, their human bodies pitifully unsuited to the task. The huge Dutchman, the lean, hard-bitten Thorpe, men Macklin had known and worked with—but they were men no longer.

They were nothing, not beast nor fish nor anything that lives normally under the sun. They were not even alive. They did not breathe for they had no need of breath, now that their life was only a pseudo-life fanned within them by the magic of an ancient, evil science.

Their faces were the empty patient faces of the dead, and their eyes were without sight or soul or hope.

Until they saw Tiamat.

THEN it was as though torches had been lighted in a dark cave. They scrambled toward her, dog-like, and fell at her feet and worshiped.

Hugh Macklin said heavily, "Are they, too, your lovers?"

Tiamat's eyes had narrowed as she sensed the sick, cold horror that struck him like a blow. But she only smiled.

"One is ugly, the other old. You are young, Hugh Macklin, and you are not ugly." Her face was lovely, tempting, eager, with lips that would be for him alone.

"Take off your helmet. Stay with me—and love me."

Roos reached out one water-wrinkled, flabby hand and touched her little foot, and ground his forehead in the sand.

Macklin took his hands away from his helmet and gripped the sistrum, and the golden haft of it seemed to burn his hand.

He saw dreadful anger flash into Tiamat's face.

He saw the waiting ranks of her people break into chaos, into movement, into attack.

He felt the fear that was greater than the fear of death run like a wave through the sea, and all the universe was full of rushing silver bodies like a rain of stars.

He felt himself go down under the attack, but still he gripped the sistrum and shook it, and the shock of his fall shook it harder.

More with his soul than with his hearing, Macklin heard the first piercing chiming of the sistrum swell into a terrible, rending sword of sonic vibration.

Sound could daze, sound could stun the nerve-centers. And this awful, poignant sound could stun them into—paralysis.

It seemed to him that all the torrent of living things rushing upon him was instantly shocked and frozen by that dread, piercing note that struck and stunned their more delicate brains. It seemed to him that all the waters and life of earth were stilled.

The awful voice of Marduk's sistrum commanded, and the world obeyed, and Hugh Macklin knelt on the floor of the sea, blinded with tears, as he shook the sceptre made of gold and crystal and living death.

After a time he dropped the sistrum, and he also lay still.

HUGH MACKLIN rose, like an old and broken man, from the floor of the sea. He lifted the sceptre of Marduk from the sand and thrust it into his belt again, and then he raised his eyes and looked at the thing he had done.

The crystal towers stood as they had before, but their domes were cracked and riven by the vibration-voice of the sistrum. The fish had fled before it. And on the sand between the broken towers, the people of Tiamat slept.

In all the city, only two things moved. Roos and Thorpe, whose human mechanism, ilke Macklin's, was too dull to be paralyzed by the subtle vibration. They crouched like two weeping children on the sand, and watched Tiamat.

Hugh Macklin raised her lovely body in his arms. Her eyes were closed now. No more memories, no more light, no more laughter. All the wonderful swiftness and grace of her body stilled, all the life and the joy. Macklin had ceased to weep. What he felt in his heart was too deep for tears.

He started off, toward the cliff where the shining palace waited. Thorpe and the Dutchman followed. They moaned for Tiamat, and they could not understand.

Hugh Macklin climbed a precarious path up the black cliff to the ledge, bearing the sleeping Tiamat in his arms. He entered the palace.

Upward through the silent gleaming halls, slowly, heavily, sadly. Upward past vaulted chambers where the great golden doors stood open, swinging with the stately breathing of the sea. Upward to the highest tower, and the stillness was deeper than death.

When he entered Tiamat's chamber, he saw that already the fish were coming back, slipping-like shadows into the room.

He laid Tiamat on her couch, gently, tenderly, straightening her limbs so that she might be comfortable, stroking the dark hair back from her face. Roos and Thorpe crept to the foot of the couch and knelt there, and Macklin knew that they would stay, beyond the end of the world if need be, waiting for Tiamat to awake.

He leaned over her, wishing that he might kiss her lips, and the slow tears fell and blurred the glass window of his helmet.

Just at the last she spoke to him, very faintly because her mind was still stunned. She spoke his name, and the singing, crystal sweetness of her voice was far off and infinitely sad.

"You will come back, Hugh Macklin."

Macklin closed his eyes. He said, "I love you, Tiamat. But I will not come back."

He turned and went out of the room. At the door he paused and looked back, once, and saw that again that great coiling creature of the deep had looped itself around the still shape of beauty, and that its head was once more pillowed on her shoulder.

Roos and Thorpe crouched unmoving at Tiamat's feet, and he knew that they would never move from there.

He went away from the palace, down through the crystal city, and still the chiming echo of her voice followed him.

You will come back. You will come back.

He was full of a terrible weakness. The ocean floor was dark, and empty, and very cold.

He knew that the land, when he reached it, would be no better. He knew that he could not bear to live where he could not hear the sea, and yet also that the sound of every breaking wave would break his heart again.

You will come back, Hugh Macklin.

"Perhaps, Tiamat," he whispered. "Perhaps some day I will."
