

Weird Tales

January
1954

| | | |
|--|----------------------|-----|
| MOP-HEAD | Leah Bodine Drake | 2 |
| <i>Its mockery of speech it had made from fox's bark, owl's cry, rain's patter.</i> | | |
| EFFIE'S PETS | Suzanne Pickett | 17 |
| <i>. . . eons and eons—a long time to be hemmed in by a strong, wholly invisible wall.</i> | | |
| BLACK HEATH | Farfal Delano | 26 |
| <i>Since man can run, walk, jump, swim, and crawl—then why not fly?</i> | | |
| A VERY SPECIAL QUALITY | David Eynon | 39 |
| <i>Caveat emptor—and most especially when bartering with the devil.</i> | | |
| WALPURGIS NIGHT (Verse) | Dorothy Quick | 43 |
| TIGER DUST (A novelette) | Bassett Morgan | 44 |
| <i>. . . terrible magic in the hills.</i> | | |
| YOU SHOULD BE CAREFUL | Garnett Radcliffe | 65 |
| <i>How long does it take for a ghost to find itself?</i> | | |
| ATLANTIC ISLE OF MYSTERY | Cyrus Macmillan | 70 |
| <i>About the sea, and the mocking fugitive horizon, there is always mystery.</i> | | |
| SHADOWS OF BLOOD | Eando Binder | 79 |
| <i>It was Caesar's own wish to speak with the barbarian.</i> | | |
| THE CALAMANDER CHEST | Joseph Payne Brennan | 97 |
| <i>. . . the finger kept beckoning, beckoning. . . .</i> | | |
| REFLECTIONS OF AN EGYPTIAN PRINCESS (Verse) | Edith Ogutsch | 105 |
| THE STORMCLIFF PAPERS (A novelette) | W. J. Suprenant | 106 |
| <i>They ended with the ominous phrase, "the demon is impatient."</i> | | |

COVER BY W. H. SILVEY

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

Who dares the vengeance of the gods—emperor or barbari



BY EANDO BINDER

IT WAS late in the fall. Over the shadow-engulfed waters of the Tiber a raw wind blew down from the north. A cold white moon swung over the Seven Hills, riding half submerged through a bank of heavy black clouds.

A guard, standing before the portals of a secluded villa, drew his long cloak, cursed his metallic

accoutrements that seemed to absorb thricefold the chill of the night. Crouching closer into the small cubicle hewn into the marble of the wall beside the entrance, teeth chattering, he wondered if it were not better to be up north fighting the barbarians. True, there the cold was yet more intense, but one could warm his blood in the heat of battle, and

not stand like this, silently, like an evil spirit of the night, freezing and shivering.

As he stood there holding his great spear in cloak-muffled hands, the moon broke for a short spell through the dense clouds and momentarily illuminated the park-like expanse before him. Suddenly a shadow detached itself from a blotch of blackness cast by a group of poplars, and slithered toward him. Tago Titus flung aside his cloak and took firmer grip of the spear. His Emperor, Caligula Caesar, was within, and it was his duty to see that no enemy, or evil thing of the night, should pass beyond the entrance.

Closer and closer came the moving shadow. The fitful light of the moon made it appear as if an ugly portion of the black wraith above had been cast to earth. With appendages like beating wings, it seemed not human as it floated toward him over the shadowy lawn. Brave Titus of the Roman legions fought off a momentary awesome fear, and, forgetting the cold, stepped forth to battle this gruesome, unearthly thing. It was nearly upon him as he leveled his great spear.

"Who goes there?" he challenged with a throaty rasp.

The shadow stopped as if surprised to find opposition to its approach. The guard heaved a sigh of relief, for now he saw it was

human after all. Anything earthly a Legionary could fight. He called his challenge again, this time with a more confident ring in his voice.

"It is I, Junga of the Huns," came a hoarse voice from the head-folds of the cloak worn by the newcomer. At the same time the concealing cloth was withdrawn somewhat to reveal a visage of extreme ugliness. The swarthy, parched skin was drawn tightly over the bones. It was like the face of a mummified corpse.

"Bah—a barbarian!" rumbled the guard, angered because of his own superstitious fears. "Away with you, Hun! You have no business here."

"But I seek audience with the Emperor!" the trespasser remonstrated, not retreating a step.

Titus' lips curled scornfully. "Caligula Caesar does not give audience to every heathen from the north. Have you some talisman, some mark or sign of the Caesar's favor?"

"Nay, that I have not."

"Then you can not enter these portals!"

"But I say that Caesar—"

The guard Titus wasted no further words. It was not the custom in that time to listen to audacious persons of no authority. His huge hands showed white knuckles as he raised his spear to transfix the unlucky person before him. As he was about to deal the death blow,

a voice spoke over his shoulder, staying his hand.

"Tago, hold your thrust. It is the Caesar's wish to speak to the barbarian."

Titus froze to attention as the voice from behind continued: "Know you not the chamber of spotless white marble within these walls? Perhaps"—here the voice became a whisper—"this newcomer would like to see it!"

The guard trembled. Well he knew of that chamber. Many were the nights he had heard the shrieks of the tortured and dying within its confines, despite the thickness of the marble walls. The voice that had spoken was that of Caligula, the wanton butcher, whom all Rome feared and hated. Here at this seemingly peaceful villa the mad Caesar held nightly debauches so cruel and vicious as to bring shame to his high office. It was whispered that Caligula was the nether-world spirit in the guise of man.

"See that he has no weapons, Tago."

The guard did as his master commanded and stepped aside, having found the barbarian unarmed.

"Come," Caligula spoke, note of suppressed satisfaction in his voice.

Junga the Hun hesitated not a whit. With an alacrity that astounded the guard, he followed his unholy host. But he slowed

and turned his head momentarily. "Wretched man!" he snarled at the Legionary "You raised your spear against my life this night. I shall not soon forget." Then he followed the Emperor, having lost but a few steps by the pause.

WITH Caligula in the lead, they passed through an anteroom in which a half-dozen guards stood as though carved into the marble walls about them, and thence into a sumptuous audience chamber. The Emperor made his way to a silk-carpeted dais and seated himself upon a throne-like chair of exquisite ivory workmanship.

The barbarian fell to his knees to await the Caesar's command to speak, but his sharp black eyes bored unflinchingly into the narrowed eyes of the other. He looked upon the face that could smile at a victim's screams of tortured agony, and there was no hint of fear in his manner. Caligula was impressed despite himself.

"Either you are a great fool," spoke the man on the throne, "or you have a silly courage without reason. To attempt entrance to my villa at night is the height of folly. Only by chance I passed the gate during a midnight stroll, and stayed my faithful guard's hand. Furthermore, your people, the Huns, have always been Rome's bitterest enemies. Speak!

I will hear a word from you before I take your life."

The ragged clothes of the stranger shook convulsively for a moment, and then the Hun rose slowly to his feet. "You Romans speak of death and bloodshed as if they were nothing. Yet tonight is not my time to die."

"If I command it, you die!" said Caligula, whitening in sudden anger.

"Ah, Caesar, Master of the World, I come first because I fear not death, and secondly because I have been commanded hither by the Sorceress of Belshewawar.

"Go," said her High Priest to me, "go to the south where there is one whose destiny has been written within the Holy Circle. Through you and your priestly knowledge of our secret powers shall he know of Rome's greatest hour.' These were the words spoken to me, and I have come, Caesar."

Caligula stared at the unflinching black eyes of the barbarian as though seeking to read his mind and soul. "Rome's greatest hour?" He repeated the words almost involuntarily, mystified at their suggestive rhythm. Prompted by a desire to call the wretch before him a wily liar, he yet withheld the words. He was known to have openly sneered at the impotent gods of Rome, but at heart his bloody soul quaked before powers which were reput-

ed to sway the destiny of human life.

Junga the Hun smiled inwardly. He could read the human face like a well-lettered book. Furthermore, there was something else that gave him secret amusement. Caligula had saved his life! Yet had he (Junga) but spoken one word out there by the gate, before the spear was thrown—a powerful sorcery would have seized the guard and rendered him helpless. And that same witchcraft could be used against even an emperor. . . .

"Do you think, barbarian dog," the Emperor broke the silence, "that I, Caesar of Rome, would forsake the gods of Rome?"

"Ah, Caesar, this is not a religious rite, but a strange power discovered by the Sorceress of Belshewawar that is beyond the knowledge of other men's minds. You can keep your gods. Take my life if you will, too, but I say to you that your destiny of knowing 'Rome's greatest hour' shall then die with me!"

The barbarian's beady eyes gleamed strangely. Caligula sat long in silent thought. The stranger's utter fearlessness and the tremendous portent of his words meant much to the Roman's superstitious nature.

"Have you proof, Priest of Belshewawar?" Already he addressed him respectfully and

Junga was not slow to see his victory.

"That I have," Junga spoke confidently.

"Lie not to me, Junga, or your body shall know pain no speaking tongue could describe. I have half a mind yet to take you to the White Chamber and wring the truth from your lips."

"If it please you, Caesar, take me there now. Such a chamber, I think, will suit me better than any other!"

Caligula started to his feet in astonishment. Then, with a sudden gesture, he led the way out of the room.

THE White Chamber was vaulted and of massive proportions. It was the private sanctum of one of Rome's most heartless kings. On its snow-white marble floor human blood had splashed too often, and its walls had echoed the groans of hellish agonies of torture. Tribune and slave, general and soldier, mistress and harlot, all had seen the dazzling whiteness only as a mock to their horrible death.

Scrubbed daily by slaves, the floor glistened like new-fallen snow in the dancing light of suspended lamps. One not knowing its ghastly history would think the chamber suited for some fair princess, with its priceless statuettes and costly furniture tastefully distributed around the

room. But the whole central portion had been reserved for instruments of torture — shuddery things of steel and bronze that contrasted horribly with the other fittings.

Junga the Hun surveyed the chamber without comment, while Caligula watched him surreptitiously, marveling that he had not even blanched at the sight of the machines of torture. The stranger nodded as though he found the chamber suited to his bizarre purpose.

"August Caesar, at the break of dawn I must have the best mosaic-worker in Rome. And before the noon sun shines upon the Tiber, the Magic Circle of Belshewawar shall be completed here upon this marble floor. Then will I show you I spoke not vain words, and will prove to you the power of the priests of Belshewawar, of whom, I am one."

"It shall be done, Junga." The mad Caesar gloated, for already he believed. His weak, cruel mind had a new toy for its amusement.

IT WAS shortly after the noon repast that a slave announced to the Emperor that all was in readiness in the White Chamber. Glutted with food and reeking from the fumes of overmuch wine, Caligula strode on sandaled feet across the marble floor.

Junga the Hun was not now the ragged barbarian of the night before. Attired in the villa's best choice of costly garments, he might have passed as one of the Roman nobility, except for the alien cast of his yellow, sharp-featured visage. He genuflected before the Caesar with a smirk that Caligula might have seen if he had had less wine to befuddle his eyes.

"Master of the World!" spoke Junga as the Emperor seated himself on a silken couch. "See there the two posts with bolted shackles so that a man in them stands with legs and arms stretched to the limit. Before them notice the mosaic upon the marble floor in the form of a circle. That is the Holy Circle—yea, the Magic Circle—of Belshewawar, whose designs and symbols only a priest of our cult can read and interpret."

"Ah, then you need a victim!" cried the Roman joyfully.

"That I do, Caesar. Where formerly human blood was wasted, I shall show you how it can be put to good advantage, enabling me to see many things hidden to ordinary eyes, and even to foretell the future. Through its powers I will bring you—'Rome's greatest hour!'"

Again that strangely suggestive phrase, and, despite the barbarian's bluntness in speaking of his wanton butchery, Caligula's head

came up an expectantly. He mused silently over its cryptical meaning for a moment.

"What sort of man do you want?" asked the Emperor finally. "Or, if you will—woman!" he added evilly.

"I have already chosen a victim," said Junga quickly. "One called Tago Titus."

The Roman clenched his fist and for a moment resentment stormed over his face. "Tago Titus is a trusted and faithful guard and knows well his duties. Choose another."

"There are a thousand such as Titus in the Roman Legions," returned the barbarian coolly. "You are Master of the World. All men's lives belong to you. Your guard Titus is my choice."

Caligula licked his lips in indecision, and for the first time Junga the Hun showed a sign of perturbation. His withered skin paled so that he resembled more than ever a living corpse. But in the battle of wills, the barbarian won, and with a clap of his hands the Emperor summoned a slave. He was given orders, and a short time later the unfortunate Legionary was dragged in, stripped naked. Brutal attendants of the White Chamber, long calloused to the distasteful work, shackled the former guard to the two posts facing the circle of strange mosaic patterns. The hapless victim seemed resigned to his fate,

but seeing the Hun resplendent in a costly toga, leering at him, he burst into speech:

"Heathen snake, this is your doing! May the gods of Rome curse—"

"Silence!" thundered the Emperor.

"My blood upon you both; may destiny bring you with me soon and—"

"Silence!" roared Caligula again. The Legionary set his jaw firmly and relapsed into silence, but his eyes glared accusingly at his master. "You are sentenced to death," went on Caligula coldly, "because you nearly took the life of this man Junga, when my previous instructions had been to conduct him into the portals when he arrived."

Titus' eyes flared dumfoundedly, and then lowered in resignation. The Caesar's word was law—and truth. Then Caligula tossed his head, and all left the chamber except Junga.

In the appalling silence that followed, broken only by the heavy breathing of the victim, Junga drew a sharp dagger from his girdle and approached the shackled man. The leer of triumph on his mummified face made the Roman soldier wince, though he had been unperturbed at sight of the shining blade.

His face close to that of the soldier, the barbarian hissed softly like a venomous snake:

"So you insulted me, and threatened my life! You see now—" He jerked back with an oath, wiping from his face the material scorn of the man he had brought to his doom.

"Come, let us get on with this," commanded Caligula, who had watched impatiently.

Junga waited no longer, but plunged his dagger into the bowels of the naked man, making a circle so swiftly that it was etched in a fine red line before the entrails burst forth from the body. The barbarian had leaped aside to escape being spattered with blood, and he glided like an evil wraith to the side of the seated Emperor.

With a groan of intense pain, the Legionary's head fell upon his chest. He gritted his teeth and not another sound came from his lips.

"Look, Caesar!" cried the priest of Belshewawar solemnly. "Look! The shadow of blood creeps toward the Magic Circle! When it reaches the mystic symbols and flows around them, I shall read what portends of importance in the empire." He pointed a scrawny finger at the huge-patterned ring on the snowy marble floor.

CALIGULA looked alternately at the creeping blood and the mosaic of intricate and mysterious figures. There were the age-old

symbols of the planets and stars, interspersed with crude outlines of human beings, and the writhing shapes of cabalistic signs. Wavy lines ran through and about the area, connecting one to another with great complexity.

Long the two waited, while the miserable victim prayed silently for a quick death. Gradually the shadow of blood, a darkly red reflection from the vaulted ceiling above, crept on its way to the Holy Circle. Two heartless pairs of eyes followed the moving red reflections, unmindful of the tortured man waiting for an end to his death-agony, and of the revolting mess at his feet, from which flowed the scarlet stain that filled the chamber with a fearful ruby glow.

Suddenly Junga leaped from his perch beside the Caesar's couch. The long crimson shadow of blood of the mosaic's intricate pattern began to form a gruesome design. The barbarian knelt down beside the circle. After minutes of silent contemplation, he arose with a look of intense excitement on his face, and cried: "Look, Caesar, and mark my words well. The Magic Circle has brought you great news. It tells that the Roman Legions in the north have won a great victory against the barbarians, and the frontiers of the empire are secure. Oh, Caesar, thus speaks the Magic Circle of Belshewa-

war!" And Junga the oracle sank with his face upon the marble floor in proper respect for the man before him.

Caligula sat in silence, speechless. At the words of the other his hands had gripped the arms of the chair until the knuckles glared white. News of such magnitude and importance astounded him. For many days he had worried over the matter, for the Legions of Rome had been beaten back time and time again until it seemed the very frontiers of the empire must succumb before the barbarians. He had shifted generals and military leaders ceaselessly in an effort to find one who might turn the long and doubtful campaign into victory.

The Emperor leaped to his feet, both anger and a mad joy intermingled on his face. Pointing a long finger at the sorcerer, he shouted loudly: "Priest of Belshewawar, you have spoken. This shall prove to me the truth or untruth of your supposed powers. In a few days there will come a courier from the north. If he had other tidings than yours for my ears, your doom is sealed; I shall then know you for a liar."

Caligula strode from the chamber.

Junga, still kneeling on the floor, fairly laughed to himself. His schemes had been crowned with utter success. An adept in the dark art of anthropomancy,

he had come to the key city of the world to make use of his evil profession. It had struck him, while pursuing an obscure life as a much-feared sorcerer in a barbaric land, that his powers entitled him to greater honor and fame. He had come to the Caesar, therewith, intent upon advancing his own interests. The Sorceress of Belshewawar, supposedly his patroness, was but the figure of an impressive myth. Junga had come of his own will.

And how well it had all gone! He had taken a great risk, facing the mad butcher of Rome in his own stronghold and speaking to his own face of his atrocities. But he had cunningly played on the depraved instincts of the Emperor, knowing that would overshadow any audacity on his part.

JUNGA rose to his feet. Already engrossed with plans for a glorious future as Caligula's honored soothsayer, he straightened the folds of his toga and stepped toward the doorway. But a low sound brought him to pause, startled. It had been Titus, the guard, moaning in his death-agony. The barbarian glanced at his mutilated victim, shrugged disdainfully, and made for the doorway, suddenly aware of the stench of freshly spilled blood.

"Junga! Junga of the Huns!"

The barbarian stopped and turned half fearfully in his vic-

tim's direction. Titus, with the shadows of death in his eyes, had raised his head from his chest. Those eyes, sharp and accusing, focused till they met those of the heartless man of the north.

"Junga of the Huns! Do you hear me?"

Perspiration started from the sorcerer's forehead and he tried to break away from the sudden spell that seemed to have bound his feet—tried to escape the accusing tones of the agony-ridden voice of the man he had murdered.

"You have done evil, Junga," came from the pain-twisted lips of the dying Roman. Soft though the tones were, the words rang through the vaulted room like funeral chimes. "Your evil shall live after you—but before that it shall compass your own doom!"

The barbarian stared speechless in terror and saw the eyes of the suffering man turn to the mosaic ring between them. What could he be seeing there? Why did those eyes, swiftly glazing in the mists of death, light up as though having seen something in the configurations on the marble floor?

"Look!"

The word came almost sharply from the disemboweled victim. "My blood—see? It seeps into the Holy Circle. It is forming a design—a portent of the future. I, too, can read that sign! It says

—that you—fiendish slayer of—innocent men are—warned of your black gods—that you—Caligula—doom—”

The agonized voice ceased and the great head of Titus the Legionary dropped to his chest. Junga the Hun fled from the room with hands to his ears, vainly trying to shut from them the words he had heard.

IT HAD happened that several days before, there had come to the ears of Caligula the tale of a ravishingly beautiful female captive of Egypt, who was in the hands of one of his generals in Rome. He had forthwith decided to see her and perhaps take her for his own. The fair creature was brought to his villa, and by chance, it fell upon the day after the courier from the north, coming with news of victory for Rome, vindicated the sorcery of Junga.

The northern wizard saw the coming of her litter from the window of his room. Attracted by her manner and poise even from that distance, as she stepped gracefully from the vehicle in the courtyard, Junga contrived to be in the hall as the retinue conducted her to the presence of the Emperor. Stunned by her beauty, so perfect in contrast to the gnarled, unshapely women of his own hardy, northern race, Junga silently vowed then and there

that Caligula should not have her, but he himself. Already he counted himself an authority in the villa, to whom nothing was impossible. Knowing he must work fast if he would be the first to have her, as was his fierce desire from the moment he saw her, the barbarian dispatched a slave to the Caesar with a message.

An hour later, in the early evening, a summons called him to the Emperor's reception room, but not before Junga had seen the beautiful slave conducted to the guarded quarters in the rear of the villa where Caligula's loves of the day were kept in luxury and idleness.

Junga bowed low before the Caesar, who gave him permission to speak. "August Caesar, we must again watch the shadows of blood creep over the lineaments of the Holy Circle of Belshewar. But an hour ago in my room there came to me a message borne by certain spirits from my patroness, saying we must read the first of the portents that shall bring you knowledge of 'Rome's greatest hour'."

"So be it," said Caligula. "Tomorrow evening—"

"Nay, but it must be this very evening," cut in Junga softly.

Caligula waved an imperious hand. "Tomorrow evening, I say. I have just laid eyes upon the most beautiful creature ever to

draw breath in the land of Egypt, and tonight—"

"And tonight," again interrupted Junga, "must you forgo your carnal pleasure to hear the prophecies of Belshewawar."

Caligula leaped to his feet angrily. "But it is my will," he fairly roared, "that tonight the fair Egyptian—"

"And who knows—the Holy Circle of Belshewawar may have something to say about this most gorgeous captive? It is best, Caesar, that you listen to the wisdom of the sorceress who sent me, before you do in folly those things you contemplate without regard to the future."

The firm quiet voice of the barbarian, delivered in sepulchral tones, played upon the superstitions of the Emperor. As a result, later in the evening, they again met in the White Chamber.

The same gruesome rite that had taken place a week before was enacted, the victim a guard accused of having fallen asleep on watch. Not quite as stoical as his predecessor, this man screamed aloud as the plunging knife searched his vitals. His powerful body writhed and knotted in the grip of the gyves, and each throb of agony brought piteous groans to his lips.

But the two archfiends who had brought him to that ghastly end showed little interest or compassion to his suffering, except

that Caligula turned scornful eyes upon him and said that most men died with far more pain in the infamous White Chamber. The Caesar then turned his undivided attention to the reflection from the vaults above that slowly crept upon the Magic Circle of Belshewawar.

Apparently in a semi-trance while deciphering the symbols of the mosaic, Junga the Hun, mumbling in a strange cadence, stared with beady eyes at the mystic signs, and suddenly leaped to his feet.

"Alas, Caesar! It is not always that the Holy Circle tells that which the heart desires. For it reveals now that you should not have this fair creature from the south!"

Caligula rose from his couch, enraged. "Do you dare to command a Caesar what and not to crave? By the throne of Jove, you go too far. I will have the Egyptian girl, whatever your Holy Circle says."

As Junga stood silent and arrogant in his total lack of fear at Caesar's mighty wrath, Caligula calmed down, asking "And why, Priest of Belshewawar, must I deny myself the possession of a mere woman?"

"Harken, Caesar," answered Junga quietly. "The Egyptian maid you so desire, the magic of Belshewawar tells me, is tainted—tainted with leprosy!"

Caligula turned ashy and fairly staggered back to his seat. The barbarian continued, his eyes narrowing craftily. "No one knows it, as the disease is in that stage where outward signs are hardly detectable, but none the less, it is there. If you will dispatch your physician to her to conduct a close examination, he will confirm my prediction."

The Emperor nodded, too stunned to speak and they parted.

A CLOSELY muffled figure stood in the shadow of a tethering-post in the courtyard, nervous and impatient. At times it peered carefully beyond the post where the moonlight flooded the flagstones, and as often it would turn its head backward where a darker shadow seemed inked into the gloom-ridden corner beside the little-used stable entrance of the villa.

Suddenly a second figure stirred in the shadows along the one wall, and resolved itself into a man swathed from head to feet in a faded toga and tattered woolen scarf. The watcher melted to the side of the concealing post and waited silently.

"Hsst! Bogamus! Are you there? It is I, Junga!"

The watcher thereupon stepped from the shadow. "Be quiet, on your life! This is business that calls for more care than daring."

Junga the Hun, for it was he

in the nondescript clothing, grunted softly, it may have been in derision or acquiescence, and came close to the other. "And the—our merchandise, it is here all right?"

Bogamus the physician pointed to the impenetrable darkness of the stable corner and nodded. "That which you wish is there; but by the gods, now I wish—"

"Wish what, Bogamus?"

"—that I had not agreed to it. Caligula is a wicked man, a devil when wrathful."

"But he is stupid," Junga said quickly. "Fear not, Bogamus; none but you and I know that the Egyptian girl is untainted and pure. Only we two shall know that she is yet here at the villa, accessible to me. Tomorrow Caligula shall see a veiled woman hurried from the villa to be exiled from human society. He will quickly forget the matter when the captain of the guards reports she is gone from this place."

Bogamus shook his head, worried and frowning. "But only the gods can save us if someone be suspicious and raise the veil to find another woman in the Egyptian's place."

"What brave man will touch the veil of a leper?" Junga's voice reflected great confidence. "But come, we waste good time in idle talk. Lead the way to my rooms. I shall carry the—merchandise."

Bogamus in the lead, Junga staggering behind with the limp and bound figure of a girl in his arms, they passed via the stable entrance into a dark corridor that led upward on ramps of sturdy wood. It being the hour before dawn, the villa was silent in sleep and there was none to question the two wary evil-doers.

In the week that Junga had been at the villa, he had already cast his eyes upon the various people in the Caesar's service, with the possibility of contacting some of them as helpers in his nefarious operations. Bogamus the physician, gaunt and avaricious, he had quickly gathered to his evil fold with the promise of that lure that knows no honesty—gold.

Finally a stray candle-beam lighted their feet as they gained the living-quarters of the villa, and Bogamus parted from the barbarian after seeing him safely in his rooms. Junga the Hun laid the unconscious, drugged girl on a couch, and strode to the doorway. After listening for long minutes in the utter silence, and assured that no one had detected him and followed, he closed the door, shot home its bolt, and turned to the girl lying pale and alluring in the flicker of the candle. In his face grew a concentrated lust that transformed his natural ugliness into utter bestiality.

IN THE week that followed, Junga and Caligula forgathered three times in the White Chamber, staining the marble floor each time with the blood of innocent men, doomed by command of the Caesar. The Priest of Belshewawar, skilled in his art, read from the Magic Circle omens and portents that related mainly to Caligula's northern operations in extending the empire. The mad Caesar, engrossed in his superstition, became convinced that the magic of the barbarian sorcerer would eventually lead him to "Rome's greatest hour."

Junga, in turn, knew there was to be no such fantastic climax in their relationship; it was his purpose merely to lead the trusting Emperor on, and make his favor secure. But one thing bothered the cunning man of magic: try as he would he could not forget those fateful words Titus the Legionary had said with his dying breath. Had the revelations of his dark magic been able to open his eyes to his own future, the barbarian would have been yet more disturbed. . . .

It was not many days later a guard came to Caligula with a strange tale of what he had glimpsed in a window of Junga's private quarters. The guard had been a close friend of the deceased Titus, and had gained his information more by design than

accident. The daring fellow had climbed, at risk of life and limb, to the only vantage-point, high on a peaked gable, from which one could see into the chambers of the sorcerer. It had been well worth the while, for the information he imparted startled the Emperor not a little. Caligula spent an hour in deep thought, his black brows furrowed in a thunderous scowl. Then he called to him a trusted steward, to whom he gave certain whispered instructions, enjoining him to secrecy.

That very night Caligula himself repaired to the White Chamber, and not long afterward the door opened to reveal two of his attendants carrying between them the struggling form of Bogamus the physician. The attendants stood him on his feet before the couch of the Caesar and stepped back a pace with brawny arms folded.

Trembling in every limb, Bogamus attempted to put on a righteous front before the Emperor's accusing eye. "Hail, August Caesar! For what reason am I, your faithful physician, thus dragged to the—White Chamber? I told these rough fellows they had made a mistake. Will the Caesar give me permission to leave?"

"I would talk with you, Bogamus," Caligula said, transfixing the terror-stricken man with

ominous eyes. "Some ten days ago there was brought to this villa a captive Egyptian maid. You remember?"

"Yes, Caesar."

Caligula said nothing for a long moment. Then: "Where is she now?" he suddenly shot out.

Bogamus, licking dry lips, answered as confidently as his shaken nerves would allow: "If you will but recall, Caesar, she was tainted with leprosy and by your own orders exiled from this place."

Caligula arched his heavy brows and straightened a sleeve of his tunic. "That is your story, Bogamus?"

"Y—yes, August Caesar."

Suddenly, at a wave of the Emperor's hand, the two stalwarts grasped the physician by the arms, and unmindful of his sudden shriek, dragged him off his feet and carried him away from the couch. With practiced familiarity they strapped him by wrists and ankles to an apparatus gleaming with much metal. Bogamus came out of a momentary faint to find himself suspended horizontally four feet off the floor. Unable to see underneath himself, his mind sickened at the thought of what devilish instrument might be there. His eyes focused then on the leering, insane face of Caligula and he cried loudly for mercy.

"Strip him!"

The mad Emperor strode to a position where he could peer into the drawn and frightened face of his erstwhile trusted physician.

"Bogamus, you have lied to me and deceived me. The fair Egyptian was not taken from this place! She had been observed in the chamber of another supposedly faithful servant of mine. Now tell me, traitor, was the girl tainted with leprosy or not?"

"No, no!" cried the now naked and trembling man. "It was but a trick. Release me, and I will tell you all! You do not have to torture me! I will tell all!"

"You will tell all now, Bogamus," grated the Emperor, with a great anger clouding his face. "Who incited you to play this deception?"

The physician rolled his eyes fearfully, unable to see any way of not being revealed a traitor and double traitor. "Junga! Junga the Hun! He wanted the fair Egyptian. He plotted to get her. In his cunning and lust, he came to me. He cast a spell over me. I swear it, Caesar, he played his magic on me. Never of myself would I have—it was Junga—he—not I—"

His suspicions suddenly confirmed, the boiling wrath of the mad Caesar exploded. With a roar of violent curses, he turned from the babbling physician and his incoherent pleas for mercy

and forgiveness, and jerked a finger at his minions.

Without a word one of the slaves stooped beside a large wooden wheel whose outer edge, strewn with a score of jagged-edged knives, revolved beneath the unprotected spine of the doomed man. Grasping the crank handle with which it was equipped, he slowly turned it. Its axle uncentered, the wheel's larger arc reared from the floor and swung its freight of knives upward.

Bogamus the physician screamed in sudden pain as a knife flicked his flesh underneath, and arched his body desperately so that the next revolution of the wheel left him untouched. The attendant methodically turned the crank, and Caligula looked on in vengeful gloating, knowing that in a short time the straining man would have no further strength to arch his back and then he would sag, so that the knives—

Two hours later the mad Caesar left the White Chamber as the last echoes of screams and groans had died away.

SITTING resplendent before a table loaded with delicious foods and rare wines in the vaulted White Chamber, Caligula Caesar drummed his fingers on the arms of the chair. At times his cruel face lighted with a smile of anticipation.

It was apparent that he awaited someone, and at last the door swung aside and two guards ushered in Junga, the Priest of Belshewawar, sumptuously clothed in contrast to the corpse-like lineaments of his face. The attendants retreated at a signal from their master, and Junga stood a moment hesitant, surprised at the sight of food and drink in such a place.

"Come, my Junga," cried Caligula jovially. "This night shall we dine in our citadel of sport. I have for our rites tonight a victim whose heart's blood shall surely tell when and how Rome shall know its greatest hour. Come, a grateful Caesar invites you to dine with him!"

Unsuspecting, the barbarian sorcerer came forward, and upon his parched and wrinkled skin a smile of satisfaction grew. To dine with a Caesar! This honor had not yet been his.

Caligula raised a goblet of wine as Junga seated himself. "This is the choicest vintage of the Carduc Hills. Drink, my incomparable soothsayer, and the toast—to what the Holy Circle will this night reveal."

Junga started in suspicion at this, and darted a quick glance at the Emperor. But seeing the Caesar's goblet already upraised, a veritable royal command to drink, he drew up his own goblet and drank deep of it. A moment

later a cry escaped from his lips. His arms fell helpless to his side and the golden goblet crashed to the floor to taint with its dark red wine the snow-white purity.

The color drained from his swarthy face so that he looked like an actual corpse, a dead man sitting in a chair with living eyes—eyes that glared a confusion of emotions: hatred, rage, and above all, a horrible fear. His voice, as if from the grave, croaked: "You have poisoned me!"

"By the crown of Olympus, but the Priest of Belshewawar has again guessed the truth. What evil magic gives you this strange power?" Caligula's voice hissed mockingly as he burst into a spasm of triumphant laughter. Then his face became stern and he shook a clenched fist in the barbarian's face. "A rare poison that robs men of their strength, and sorcerers of their supernatural powers. Weave a spell if you can," he taunted, "and you shall find it dying unborn in your own treacherous heart."

Clapping his hands, Caligula arose as the two attendants came running up, and ordered them to shackle the barbarian to the gyve-posts before the Holy Circle of Belshewawar. As quickly as they had come, the slaves left, and Caligula faced the horror-stricken eyes of Junga.

"But five people knew that you have made a fool of Caesar;

Three of them are gone already: Bogamus, the Egyptian maid and one of my guards. You and I— are left!"

With deliberate eagerness, the mad Emperor drew from his girdle a sharp dagger, while Junga stared speechless and powerless, for the poison was truly an antidote against witchcraft. "Look, Junga! There before you lies the mosaic ring whose mysterious convolutions and signs reveal great secrets when the shadows of human blood creep over them. What more fitting than that your blood should now be spilled for the purpose!"

"Who are you," croaked the voice of Junga suddenly, "that dare threaten the life of one of Belshewawar's priests? Beware, for the Sorceress who sent me here is jealous of her own."

Caligula drew back in awed fear, but only for a moment. "Bah! I have no dread of her power, for I am Master of the World, all-powerful and protected of the gods of Rome. Furthermore, will the Sorceress of Belshewawar avenge the death of a priest of her cult who has proved a traitor to his gods?"

With these words Caligula came closer to the doomed man, dagger extended, gloating at the intense fear that shone from his victim's anguished eyes. One quick motion and swing of the

arm and Junga the Hun became as those others had been under his own ministrations.

Turning his back upon the man shrieking in agony, Caligula strode to his table and drained a goblet of wine. "You see, heathen and traitor, that although the poison robs you of motion and of your black skill in magic, it does not deaden the capacity for pain. Now let us watch the shadows of blood, and see what the Holy Circle will tell."

No longer a man, but a monster, the mad Caesar taunted the dying man, exacting vengeance for the trickery that had lost to him a beautiful woman. Caligula might have forgiven him the act had he been a Roman, and had he been a soothsayer of years of standing. But for a wretched barbarian to steal from the Caesar, within three weeks of being there, a desirable woman—that was unforgivable.

THE scarlet light that rebounded from the vaults above slanted gradually toward the mosaic ring from the pool of blood at Junga's feet. In an ecstasy of pain that groaning could not alleviate, Junga fell to silence except for labored, choking breath, and stared fixedly at the shadows of blood writhing over the symbols of the Magic Circle.

"I will read the meaning of the oracle of Belshewawar,"

gleefully cried the Emperor of Rome. "There, it says Junga is a thief, one who thought to rob a Caesar. It says he has murdered innocent men, and despoiled a woman whose feet he was not worthy to kiss. And for these things, sorcerer though you are, death has been your lot. And what more does it say?" leered Caligula insanely. "It says that I, Caius Caligula Caesar, shall know Rome's greatest hour—with your death!"

The barbarian's eyes flared wide suddenly. "That, Caesar of blood, is blasphemy against my gods!"

The words rang ominously through the vaulted White Chamber, and Junga fixed his eyes intently on the mosaic ring before his mutilated body. Seeing this, and shaken by those portentous words, Caligula felt an icy finger touch his heart. Almost he wished he had not tampered with the powers of Junga's alien gods. His eyes turned involuntarily to the Magic Circle, wondering what could be written there. Then he saw that there was something there—shadows that should not be.

Caligula whirled and in that instant knew his doom. A dozen men with drawn swords and

daggers were behind his back, their faces reflecting none of the reverence that should have been there for their Emperor. With cries of "murderer" and "wanton butcher" they rushed upon him, and before he could cry out, a dozen daggers plunged into his body. He fell mortally wounded as they rushed out again.

A silence as of the grave fell upon the White Chamber. The shackled barbarian sorcerer stared with wide eyes, forgetful of his great agony, for he had witnessed the assassination of a Roman Emperor.

A groan came from the wounded man, as he stirred his hacked body in a growing pool of blood. Weakly he raised his head. His eyes encountered those of the barbarian.

Junga's lips opened, and his voice, already vibrant with the rattle of death, came forth prophetically: "Rome's greatest hour—has come! For Caligula the mad, murdering Caesar, is no more!"

A harsh chuckle, ghostly with the tones of death, reverberated from the white marble walls as the shadows of blood slowly crept in deepening shades over a circle of strange mosaic patterns.
