

Weird Tales

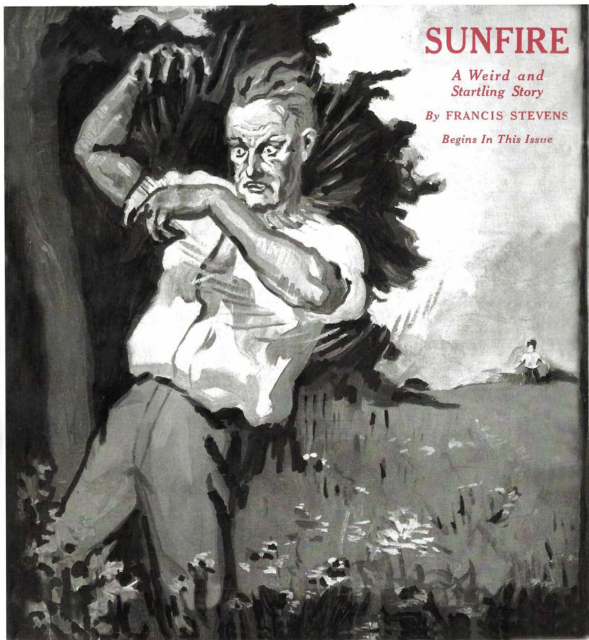
THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

Vol. II, No. 1

JULY-AUGUST, 1923

Printed in U.S.A.

25 Cents



SUNFIRE

*A Weird and
Startling Story*

By FRANCIS STEVENS

Begins In This Issue

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

EDWIN BAIRD, *Editor*

Published monthly by THE RURAL PUBLISHING CORPORATION, 325 North Capitol Avenue, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. (Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3 a year in the United States; \$3.50 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in our possession. All manuscripts and other editorial matters should be directed to WEIRD TALES, 854 North Clark Street, Chicago, Ill. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright, and publishers are cautioned against using the same, either wholly or in part. Copyright, 1923, by the Rural Publishing Corporation.

VOLUME II

25 Cents

NUMBER 1

Contents for July-August, 1923

Thirteen Thrilling Short Stories *Two Complete Novelettes*
Two Two-Part Stories *Interesting, Odd and Weird Happenings*

SUNFIRE	FRANCIS STEVENS	2
<i>Horrorous Events Which Startle Five Adventurers Who Land Upon a Faroff Island</i>		
THE OUTCASTS	GEORGE WARBURTON LEWIS	14
<i>A Story of Stark Adventure With an Uncanny Climax</i>		
THE ROOM OF THE BLACK VELVET DRAPES.....	B. W. SLINEY	18
DOCTOR X	CULPEPER CHUNN	21
<i>A Good Short Story</i>		
THE TWO MEN WHO MURDERED EACH OTHER.....	VALMA CLARK	23
<i>A Remarkable Novelette</i>		
THE STRANGE CASE OF JACOB ARUM.....	JOHN HARRIS BURLAND	33
<i>A Sardonic Novel of Witchcraft</i>		
BLACK CUNJER	ISABEL WALKER	46
<i>A Short Tale of Black Superstition</i>		
SHADES	BRYAN IRVINE	49
<i>A Realistic Ghost Story</i>		
VOODOOISM	WILL W. NELSON	55
<i>A Special Article About a Weird Oult</i>		
SEÑORITA SERPENTE	EARL WAYLAND BOWMAN	57
<i>A Strange Tale of the Mayan Snake Worshipers</i>		
THE ROOM IN THE TOWER.....	D. L. RADWAY	61
<i>A Terrifying Ghost Story</i>		
RIDERS IN THE DARK.....	VINCENT STARRETT	63
<i>A Grim Tale of Self Sacrifice</i>		
MANDRAKE	ADAM HULL SHIRK	66
<i>An Uncanny Tale of a Flesh Colored Plant</i>		
PEOPLE VS. BLAND.....	THEODORE SNOW WOOD	69
<i>The Mysterious Midnight Visitor Played an Important Part in this Murder Trial</i>		
THE EVENING WOLVES.....	PAUL ELLSWORTH TRIEM	73
<i>Final Installment of this Exciting Tale of Chinatown</i>		
THE CORPSE ON THE THIRD SLAB.....	OTIS ADELBERT KLINE	76
<i>Weird Tale of Happenings in a Morgue</i>		
THE GUARD OF HONOR.....	PAUL SUTER	79
<i>The Author of "Beyond the Door" Spins Another Erie Tale in His Masterful Style</i>		
THE CAULDRON	PRESTON LANGLEY HICKEY	85
<i>True Adventures of Terror</i>		
THE EYRIE	THE EDITOR	87

*Harrowing and Weird Events Startle the
Five Adventurers Who Land
Upon a Far-off Island*

SUNFIRE

By FRANCIS STEVENS



CHAPTER ONE THE DERELICT FLEET

IT WAS close to high noon of the fourteenth day since leaving their motor-yacht, when the five men in the traveling canoe had their first view of the island of "Tata Quaraha," Fire of the Sun.

The walls of the winding river they traveled had grown steeper, higher, barren at last of vegetation. The Rio Silencioso, in its lower reaches a fever-ridden, malodorous stream, here flowed in austere purity. Its color was no longer dark, but a peculiar, brilliant hue—like red gold dissolved in crystal. The effect was partly from reflection of the heights

between which it wound, slanting walls of rock, stratified in layers of rich color, from pale lemon to a deep red-orange.

The equatorial sun cast its merciless glare over all. The last half-mile of their journey bore a close resemblance to ascending a stream of molten gold flowing through a flaming furnace.

However, the lurid rock walls ended at

last. Poling through a channel too narrow for the sweeplike paddles, they floated out on the lake of the island.

That it was the place told of by their guide, Kuyambira-Petro, there could be no question. But in the first glance it seemed less like a sheet of water with an island in the midst, than an immense flat plate of burnished gold, and, rising out of it—a pyramid of red flame.

"There is a broad water," Petro had said. "There is an island. On the island is a strange power and some stone houses."

Had Kuyambira-Petro been taken to view the wonders of modern New York, his report on returning to his native Moju River village would have been much the same—and about equally descriptive.

Here before them, piled terrace upon terrace, constructed of rock that seemed literally aflame in its sunset colors, towered a monstrous mass of masonry. Even from where the canoe lay they could appreciate the enormous size of those blocks which formed the lower tier.

Surrounding the pyramid at water-level, extended a broad platform of golden-yellow stone. Immediately above that rose a wall, red-orange in color, thirty feet high, without any apparent breach or means of ascent. Set well back from its upper edge were the first tier of Petro's "stone houses."

They were separate buildings, all of like shape, the end walls slanting inward to a flat roof. Eight tiers of these, growing gradually smaller toward the top, completed the pyramid. The whole effect of the ponderous artificial mountain was strangely light and airy.

Above the truncated, eight-sided peak, there seemed to hover a curious nimbus of pale light. In the general glare, however, it was easy to suspect this vague, bright crown of being merely an optical illusion.

On board the canoe, the explorer-naturalist, Bryce Otway, turned a painfully unburned countenance to Waring, war-correspondent and writer of magazine tales.

"It's there!" he breathed. "It's real! You see it, too, don't you? And, oh! man, man, we'll be the first—think of it, Waring!—the first to carry back photographs and descriptions of that to the civilized world!"

"Bather!" Waring grinned. "Take one thing with another, what a story!"

The other three, the young yacht-owner, Sigbee, the little steward, Johnny Blickensderfer, more often known as John B., and Mr. Theron Narcisse Telfer, pride of Washington Square in

New York City, each after his own fashion agreed with the first speakers.

They had toiled hard and suffered much to reach here. Sigbee's motor-yacht, the *Wanderer*, they had been forced to leave below the first rapids. The canoe journey had begun with four *caboclos*, half-breed native Brazilians, beside the guide, Petro, to take the labor of paddling.

Every man of these natives had succumbed to beri-beri, inside the first week. The epidemic spared the white men, doubtless because of their living on a different diet than the farina and *chibê*, or jerked beef, which is the mainstay of native Brazil. Having come so far to solve the mystery of the Rio Silencioso, the five survivors would not turn back.

Rio Silencioso—River of Silence indeed, flowing through a silent jungle-land, where no animal life stirred or howled, where there was only the buzz of myriad stinging insects to heighten rather than break the quiet of the nights. Others before them had tried to conquer the Silencioso. None had ever returned—none, that is, save the old full-blood Indian, Kuyambira-Petro. His story had interested the party of Americans on the *Wanderer*, and, though the guide himself had perished, brought them at last to this strange lake and pyramid.

Reluctantly, merely because even a half-mile of further paddling under the noon sun promised to be suicidal, the heavy stone used for an anchor was dropped to a gravel bottom six feet below. Preparations were made for the mid-day meal and siesta.

From where they lay, the lake appeared as a nearly circular pool, sunk in the heart of this surviving bit of what had once been a great *chapadao*, or plateau, before a few thousand years of wet-season floods had washed most of it down to join the marsh and mire of Amazon Valley. The outlet by which they had entered formed the only break in its shores. It was probably fed by springs from below, accounting for the crystal purity of its waters and the clean gravel of its bottom. Reflected from the shallow depths, the heat proved almost unbearable. Yet no one felt inclined to complain.

"Geherma in temperature," as Telfer, the esthete of the party phrased it, "but the loveliness of yon mountain of pyramiding flame stones for all!"

Sprawled in the shade of awning and palm-hatched cabin, they panted, sweated, and waited happily for the hour of release.

Around four-thirty came a breeze like the breath of heaven. The waters of the

lake stirred in smooth, molten ripples. Across them moved a canoe-load of eager optimists. The vague haze of white glare that had seemed for a time to hover above the pyramid had vanished with the passing of the warmer heat.

On the side which faced the river outlet, the thirty-foot wall, which formed the first tier, boasted neither gateway nor stair. Since it seemed likely that the ancient builders had provided some means of ascent more convenient than ropes or ladders, the canoe turned and circled the pyramid's base.

On closer view, the flame-colored wall proved to be a mass of bas-relief carved work. In execution, it bore that same resemblance to Egyptian art which marks much work of the ancient South and Central American civilizations. The human figures were both male and female, the men nude, bearing platters of fruit and wine-jars, the women clad in single garments hanging from the shoulders. The men marched, but the women were presented in attitudes of ceremonial dance; also as musicians, playing upon instruments resembling Pan's pipes of several reeds.

As Telfer remarked, it seemed a pity to have spoiled what would otherwise have been a really charming votive procession, by the introduction of certain other and monstrous forms that writhed and twined along the background, and, in some cases, actually wreathed the dancers' bodies.

"Sun-worshippers!" scoffed Waring, referring to a surmise of Otway's regarding the probable religion of the pyramid's builders. "Centipede worshippers—hundred-legged devotees—or do my eyes deceive me? Hey, Otway! What price sun-worship now!"

"Don't bother me!" Otway's voice drifted back happily from the prow. "I'm in the land of undared dreams come true."

Part way around, in that plane of its eight-sided form which faced the west, they found what they were seeking. It was a stairway, fully a hundred feet wide at the base, leading from water-level to the very height of the pyramid, with broad landings at each tier. Where its lowest tread was lipped by the lake, enormous piers of carved stone guarded the entrance. It was a stair of gorgeous coloring and Cyclopean proportion. Its grandeur and welcome invitation to ascend should have roused the exploring party to even greater jubilation.

Strangely, however, none of them at first gave more than a passing glance to this triumph of long-dead builders. In rounding the pyramid, indeed, they had

come upon a sight more startling—in a way—than even the pyramid itself.

Drawn up near the foot of the stair floated a great collection of boats. They ranged in size from a small native dug-out to a cabined traveling canoe even larger than Otway's; in age, from a rotting, half-waterlogged condition that told of exposure through many a long, wet season, to the comparative neatness of one craft whose owners might have left it moored there a month ago at latest.

These, however, were by no means the whole of the marvel.

Over beyond the small fleet of deserted river-craft, floating placidly on buoyant pontoons, rested a large, gray-painted, highly modern hydro-airplane!

CHAPTER TWO

TO THE RESCUE

"THE BOATS," Otway was saying, "are a collection of many years' standing. We have to face the fact that we are not the first to reach this lake, and that, save for Kuyambira-Petro, not one of all those who preceded us has returned down that noble stairway, after ascending it. And that airplane! It has certainly not been here long. The gas in its tanks is unevaporated. Its motors are in perfect order. There is no reason why the man, or men, who came here in it should not have left in the same way—were they alive or free to do so!"

Otway, Alcot Waring and young Sigabee stood together inside the doorway of one of the buildings in the pyramid's first terrace. The other two, Telfier and John B., were still on board the canoe, drawn up among the derelict fleet at the landing stage.

Otway had demanded a scouting party, before landing his entire force. Though the war-correspondent and Sigabee had insisted on sharing the reconnaissance, Telfier had consented to remain as rear-guard on the canoe, with the steward.

Ascending the stairs, the three scouts had turned at the first terrace and entered the building at the right. As they were on the eastern side of the pyramid, and the sun was sinking, the interior was very dim and shadowy. Enough light, however, was reflected through the tall doorway and the pair of windows to let them see well enough, as their eyes grew used to the dusks.

They had entered a large room or chamber, in shape a square, truncated pyramid, twenty-five feet high, thirty-five in length and breadth. The floor was, bare, grooved and hollowed through

long usage by many feet. Around its inner walls ran a stone bench, broken at the back by an eight-foot recess. Therein, on a platform of stone slightly higher than the floor, a black jaguar-hide lay in a tumbled heap.

The hide was old and ragged. Its short, rich fur was worn off in many bald spots. Near the niche, or bed-place, a water jar of smooth clay, painted in red and yellow patterns, lay on its side as if knocked over by a hastily rising sleeper.

The walls were covered by hangings, woven of fiber and dyed in the same garish hues as the water-jar. In lifting the jaguar hide, a girdle composed of golden disks joined by fine chains dropped to the floor. The softly tanned hide itself, though worn and shabby, bore all around its edge a tinkling fringe of golden disks. Like those of the girdle, they were each adorned with an embossed hemisphere, from which short, straight lines radiated to the circumference. A crude representation of the sun, perhaps.

"Or free!" Waring inflected, repeating the naturalist's last words.

Bryce Otway flung out his hands in a meaning gesture.

"Or free!" he reiterated. "Man, look about you. These woven wall-hangings are old, but by no means ancient. In this climate, the palm-fiber and grass of which they are made would have rotted in far less than half a century. The animal that wore this black fur was roaming the jungle alive, not more than ten years ago. The golden ornaments—the painted pottery—they, indeed, might be coeval with the stones themselves and still appear fresh; but fabric and fur—Why, you must understand what I mean. You must already have made the same inference. This pyramid has been inhabited by living people within recent years. And if recently—why not now?"

"I say!" Sigabee ejaculated. "What a perfectly gorgeous thing it would be, if you are right! If you are, then the fellows that came in the airplanes are probably prisoners. I suggest we move right along upward—to the rescue. There are five of us. Every darn one knows the butt of his gun from the muzzle, and then some. If there are any left-overs of a race that ought to be dead and isn't hanging around here, strafing harmless callers, they'll find us one tough handful to exterminate. Come on! I want to know what's on the big fat top of this gaudy old rock-pile!"

Otway's eyes questioned the correspondent.

"Your party," Waring assured. "Agree on a leader—stick to him. But I think Sig's right. That airplane—

mighty recent. Something doggone queer in the whole business. Got to be careful. And yet—well, I'd hate to find those fellows later—maybe just an hour or so too late."

To Sigabee's frank joy, the explorer smiled suddenly and nodded.

"I want to go on up," he admitted. "But I hesitated to make the suggestion. Petro didn't tell us of any people living here. There's no knowing, though, exactly what Petro really found."

Fifteen minutes later the entire party of five, rifles at ready, pistols loose in their holsters, advanced upon the conquest of the pyramid.

The great stairway led straight to the top. For some reason, connected perhaps with the hazy glare that had seemed to hover over it at noontime, every man of the five was convinced that both the danger and the solution of the mystery: waited at the stairway's head, rather than in any of the silent buildings that stared outward with their dark little windows and doorways like so many empty eye-sockets and gaping mouths.

Ahead, at his own insistence, marched Alcot Waring. A vast mountain of flesh the correspondent appeared, obese, frockle-faced, with small, round, very bright and clear gray eyes. He carried his huge weight up the stairs with the noiseless ease of a wild elephant moving through the jungle.

Just behind him, as the party's next best rifle-marksmen, came the steward, John B. was a quiet little man, with doglike brown eyes, gentle manners, and a fund of simply-told reminiscence that covered experiences ranging almost from pole to pole.

Otway, the widely famed naturalist-explorer, peering through round, shell-rimmed spectacles set on a face almost equally round—and generally beaming with cheerfulness, walked beside young Sigabee, whose life, before the present expedition, had been rather empty of adventure, but who was ready to welcome anything in that line.

Last, Mr. Theron Narcisse Telfier brought up the rear, not, let it be said, from caution, but because his enjoyment of the view across the lake had delayed him. Tall, lank-limbed, he kept his somber, rather melancholy countenance twisted over one shoulder, looking backward with far more interest in the color of lake and sky than in any possible adventure that might await them. It required a good deal of experience with Telfier to learn why his intimates used his initials as a nickname for him, and considered it appropriate.

So, in loose formation, the party essayed the final stage of that journey which all those who left their boats to rot at the stairfoot had courageously pursued.

The sun was dropping swiftly now behind the western cliffs. The vast shadow of the pyramid extended across the eastern half of the lake and darkened the shores beyond. The stairway was swallowed in a rapidly deepening twilight.

CHAPTER THREE

SCOLOPENDRA HORRIBILIS

THE FIRST real testimony the five received that they were indeed not alone upon the artificial island of rock came on the wings of a sound.

It was very faint, barely audible at first. But it soon grew to a poignant, throbbing intensity.

It was a sound like the piping of flutes—a duet of flutes, weaving a strange monotonous melody, all in a single octave and minor key. The rhythm varied, now slow, now fast. The melody repeated its few monotonous bars indefinitely.

The source of the sound was hard to place. At one moment it seemed to drift down from the air above them. At another, they could have sworn that it issued from or through the stair itself. They all paused uncertainly. The abruptness of a tropical sunset had ended the last of the day. Great stars throbbed out in a blue-black sky. The breeze had increased to a chill wind. All the pyramid was a mass of darkness about them, save that above the flat peak there seemed again to hover a faint, pale luminescence.

"Shall we go on?"

Instinctively, Otway put the question in a whisper, though, save for the quaint fluting sound, there was no sign of life about them.

Out of the dark, Tellifer answered, a whisper of nervous laughter in his voice:

"Can we go back? The strange thing that has drawn so many hither is calling from the heart of the pyramid. It is—"

"I say, go on," counseled Waring, not heeding him. "Find out what's up there."

"Oh, come along," Sigabee urged impatiently. "We can go up softly. We've got to find out what we're in for."

"Softly, they did go, or as much so as was allowed by a darkness in which the "hand before the face" test failed completely. They had brought a lantern with them, but dared not light it. Even intermittent aid from pocket flashers was

ruled out by Otway. Unseen enemies, he reminded, might be ambushed in any of the buildings to right and left.

The stairs, narrower toward the top, were also more uneven. They were broken in places, causing many stumbles and hushed curses. Once, Waring observed in a bitter whisper that the party would have formed an ideal squad for scouting duty across No Man's Land; they would have drawn the fire and located the position of every Boche in the sector.

Next moment Waring caught his own foot in a broken gap. The rattle of equipment and crackle of profanity with which he landed on hands and knees, avenged the victims of his criticism. In spite of mysterious perils, smothered laughter was heard upon the pyramid.

Yet none of these indiscretions or accidents brought attack from any quarter. The monotonous fluting continued. As they neared the top, its poignant obligato to their approach grew ever more piercing and distinct.

The final half dozen steps were reached at last. A bare two yards wide, they sloped up with sudden steepness.

Halting the party, breathlessly silent now, Otway himself crept up this last flight. From below, his companions saw his head rise, barely visible against the ghost of white luminescence that crowned the pyramid. His entire figure followed it, wriggling forward, belly-flat to the surface.

After a long five minutes, they saw him again, this time standing upright. He seemed, as nearly as they could make out, to be beckoning them on. Then he had once more vanished.

Some question entered the minds of all, whether the beckoning figure had been really that of Otway, or some being or person less friendly. With a very eerie and doubtful sensation, they crept up the narrow flight and over the edge.

Waring was first. He found himself on a broad, flat platform, or rim of stone. At its inner edge a crouching figure showed against the white glow, now appearing much brighter, flooding up from an open space at the center of the peak.

Certain at last that the figure was Otway's, the correspondent catfooted to his side. Over the other's shoulder he looked downward. Then, with a himing intake of breath, he sank to his knees. Supporting himself with hands on his rise, laid along the stone rim, he continued to stare downward.

One by one, the others joined the first pair. Very soon, a row of five sun-browned, fascinated faces was peering down into the hollow heart of the pyramid.

The eight-sided top consisted of a broad rim surrounding an open space, some hundred and fifty feet across and a third of that in depth. From the point where they knelt, an inner stairway, set at an angle to the eastern plane of the pyramid, led steeply to the bottom of the hollow.

In effect, the place was rather like a garden. On all sides fruit trees, flowering shrubs and palms of the smaller, more graceful varieties, grew out of soil banked off from a central court by a low parapet of yellow stone. It was not the garden effect, however, which had paralyzed the watchers.

Their eyes were fixed upon two forms, circling in a strange, rhythmic dance around a great, radiant, whitely glowing thing, that rested on a circle of eight slender pillars in the middle of the lower court.

One of the forms was that of a woman. Her hair, falling to a little below the shoulders, tossed wildly, a curling, fluffy mass of reddish gold. Arms, legs and feet were bare. A single garment of spotted jaguar hide was draped from shoulders to mid-thigh. For ornament she wore neither bracelets nor anklets, but the jaguar skin was fastened with golden chains and fringed with tiny gold bangles. Upon the red-gold hair a circle of star-like gems flashed in prismatic glory.

To her lips the woman held a small instrument like a Pan's pipe of golden reeds. It was her playing upon this that produced the double fluting sound.

Her dancing partner was a literal embodiment of the great demon, Terror. Its exact length was impossible to estimate. Numberless talon-like feet carried it through the dance figures with a swiftness that bewildered the eye.

The thing had the general shape of a mighty serpent. But instead of a barrel-like body and scaly skin, it was made up of short, flat segments, sandy yellow in color, every segment graced—or damned—with a pair of frightful talons, dagger-pointed, curved, murderous. At times the monstrous, bleached-yellow length seemed to cover half the floor in a veritable pattern of fleeing segments. Again its fore part would rise, spiraling, the awful head poisoning high above the woman's.

At such moments it seemed that by merely straightening up a trifle higher, the demoniah thing might confront its audience on the upper rim, eye to eye. For, eyes the thing possessed, though it was faceless. Two enormous yellow discs, they were, with neither retina or pupil, set in a curved, polished plate of bone-like substance. Above them a pair of

whip-like, yard-long antennae leashed the air. Below the plate, four huge mandibles, that gnashed together with a dry, clashing sound, took the place of a mouth. During one of these upheavals, the head would sway and twist, giving an obviously false impression of blindness. Then down it would flash, once more to enroile the woman's feet in loathsome patterns.

Not once, however, did the strange pair come in actual contact. Indifferent to her partner's perilous qualities, the woman pirouetted, posed, leaped among the coils, her bare feet falling daintily, always in clear spaces. The partner, in turn, however closely flashing-by, kept its talons from grazing her garments, her flying hair, or smooth, gleaming white flesh.

The general trend of the dance was in a circle about the luminous mass on the central pillars.

"*Chilopoda!*" a voice muttered, at last. "*Chilopoda Scolopendra! Chilopoda Scolopendra Horribilis!*"

It sounded like a mystic incantation, very suitable to the occasion. But it was only the naturalist, Bryce Otway, classifying the most remarkable specimen he had ever encountered.

"Chilo-which? It's a nightmare—horrible!" This from Waring.

It remained for John B. to supply a more leisurely identification, made quite in his usual slow, mild drawl:

"When I was steward on the *Southern Queen*, 'Frisco to Valparaiso," said he, "Bill Flannigan, the second engineer, told me that one time in Ecuador he saw one of those things a foot and a half long. Bill Flannigan was a little careless what he said, and I didn't rightly believe him—then. Reckon maybe he was telling the truth after all. Centipede! Well, I didn't think those things ever grew this big. Real curious to look at, don't you think, Mr. Sigbee?"

Young Mr. Sigbee made no answer.

What with the soft, glowing radiance of the central object on its pillars, the coiling involutions of one dancer, the never-ceasing gyrations of the other, it was a dizzying scene to look down upon.

That was probably why Telifier surprised every one by interrupting the dance in a highly spectacular manner.

His descent began with a faint sound as of something slipping on smooth stone. This was followed by a short, sharp shriek. Then, twenty feet below the rim, the willowlike plumes of a group of slender assai palms swished widely. Came a splintering crack—a dull thud—and "TNT" had arrived at the lower level.

It was a long drop. Fortunately, the esthete had brought down with him the

entire crest of one of the assai palms. Between the springy bending of its trunk before breaking, and the buffer effect of the thick whorl of green plumes between himself and the pavement, Telifier had escaped serious injury.

The men on the rim saw him disentangle himself from the palm-crest and crawl lamely to his feet.

The girl, only a short distance off, ceased to gyrate. The golden Pan's pipes left her lips. With cessation of the fitting melody, the dry clashing of monstrous coils had also ceased. But in a moment that fainter, more dreadful sound began again.

Up over Telifier's horrified head reared another head, frightful, polished, with dull, enormous yellow eyes—below them four awful mandibles, stretched wide in avid anticipation.

Telifier shrieked again, and dodged futilely.

CHAPTER FOUR

"SUNFIRE"

TWO OF THE men left on the pyramid's inner rim were expert marksmen. The heavy, hollow-nosed express bullets from four rifles, all in more or less able hands, all trained upon an object several times larger than a man's head, at a range of only a dozen yards or so, should have blown that object to shattered bits of yellow shell and centipedish brain-matter in the first volley.

John B. was heard later to protest that in spite of the bad shooting light and the downward angle, he really could not have missed at that range—*as, indeed, he probably did not.* Some, at least, of the bullets fired must have passed through the space which the monstrous head had occupied at the moment when the first trigger was pulled.

But *Scolopendra Horribilis*, in spite of his awesome size, proved to have a speed like that of the hunting spider, at which a man may shoot with a pistol all day, at a one-yard range, and never score a bull's-eye.

One moment, there was Telifier, half-crouched, empty hands outspread, face tipped back in horrified contemplation of the fate that loomed over him. There was the girl, a little way off, poised in the daintiest attitude of startled wonder. And there, coiling around and between them, and at the same time rearing well above them, was that incredible length of yellow plates, curved talons and deadly poison fangs.

From the pyramid's rim four rifles spoke in a crashing volley. Across the open level below, something that might

have been a long, yellowish blur—or an optical illusion—flashed and was gone.

There was still the girl. There was Telifier. But *Scolopendra Horribilis* had vanished like the figment of a dream. One instant he was there. The next he was not. And well indeed it was for those who had fired on him that retreat had been his choice!

At the western side of the court was a round, black opening in the floor, like a large manhole. Down this hole the yellowish "optical illusion" had flashed and vanished.

As the crashing echoes of the volley died away, the girl roused from her air of tranced wonderment. She showed no inclination to follow her companion in flight. Judged by her manner, powder-flash and ricocheting bullets held no more terrors for her than had the hideous poison fangs of her recent dancing partner.

She tilted her head, coolly viewed the dim figures ranged along the eastern rim. Then, light as a blown leaf on her bare feet, she fitted toward her nearest visitor, Telifier.

From above, Waring shouted at the latter to come up. Unless the girl were alone in the pyramid, the volley of rifle-fire must surely bring her fellow-inhabitants on the scene. Worse, the monster which had vanished down the black hole might return.

These perils, Waring phrased in a few forceful words. Seeing that, instead of heeding him, Telifier was pausing to exchange a friendly greeting with the priestess of this devil's den, Waring added several more, this time extremely forceful words.

Their only effect was to draw another brief-upward glance from the girl. Also, what seemed to be a shocked protest from Telifier. The latter's voice did not carry so well as his friend's. Only a few phrases reached those on the upper rim.

"Alcot, please!" was distinct enough, but some reference to a "Blessed Damsel" and the "seven stars in her hair" was largely lost. At best, it could hardly have been of a practical nature.

The big correspondent lost all patience with his unreckoning friend.

"That—fool!" he choked. "Stay here, you fellows. I'm going after TNT!"

And Waring in turn undertook the final stage of that long journey which so many others had followed, leading to the heart of this ancient pyramid.

The five adventurers had the testimony of the pitiful fleet of derelicts at the landing stage that the pyramid had a way of welcoming the coming, but neglecting to speed its departing guests.

They had seen the frightful companion of this girl.

And yet when Waring, breathing wrath against his friend, reached the lower level, he did not hale Tellifer violently thence, as he had intended. Instead, those still above saw him come to an abrupt halt. After a moment, they saw him remove his hat. They watched him advance the rest of the way at a gait which somehow suggested embarrassment—even chastened meekness.

"Mr Waring is shaking hands with her now," commented John B. with mild interest.

"This is madness!" Otway's voice in turn was raised in a protesting shout. "Waring! Oh, Waring! Don't forget that hundred-legger! Well, by George! You two stay here. I'll run down and make that pair of lunatics realize—"

The explorer's voice, unnaturally harsh with anxiety, died away down the inner stair.

"If they think," said Sigbee indignantly, "that I'm going to be left out of every single interesting thing that comes along—"

The balance of his protest, also, was lost down the inner stair.

John B. offered no reasons, for his own descent. Being the last to go, he had no one to offer them to. But even a man of the widest experience may yield to the human instinct and "follow the crowd."

When the steward reached the center of attraction at the lower level, his sense of fitness kept him from thrusting in and claiming a handclasp of welcome, like that which had just been bestowed on his young employer. But he, too, respectfully removed his hat. He also neglected to urge the retreat which would really have been most wise.

The trouble was, as Sigbee afterward complained, she was such a surprising sort of girl to meet in the heart of an ancient pyramid, dancing with an incredible length of centipede! Some bronzed Amazon with wild black eyes and snaky locks would have seemed not only suitable to the place, but far easier either to retreat from or hale away as a hostage.

This girl's eyes were large, a trifle mournful. Their color was a dusky shade of blue, the hue of a summer sky to eastward just at the prophetic moment before dawn. The men who had come down into her domain made no haste away. Moreover, the need for doing so seemed suddenly remote; almost trivial, in fact. The face framed in that red-gold glory of hair, crowned with stars, was impossible to associate with evil.

By the time Otway had reached the scene, however, and received his first startled knowledge that references to a "Blessed Damozel" were less out-of-place than they had seemed from above, Waring had recovered enough to laugh a little.

"Otway," he greeted, "priestess of the ancient sun-worship—centipede worship—some sort of weird religion—wants to make your acquaintance! You're the local linguist. Know any scraps of pre-Adamite dialect likely to fit the occasion?"

The explorer, too, had accepted the welcoming hand and looked into the dawn-blue eyes. He drew a long breath—shook his head over Waring's question.

"I'll try her in Tupi and some of the dialects. But this is no Indian girl. Can't you see, Waring? She's pure Caucasian. Of either Anglo-Saxon or French blood, by those eyes and that hair. Perhaps a trace of Irish. The nose and—"

"For Heaven's sake! Stop discussing her in that outrageous way," urged young Sigbee, who had fallen victim without a struggle. "I believe she understands every word you're saying."

There was a brief, embarrassed pause. Certainly the grave, sweet smile and the light in the dusky eyes had for an instant seemed very intelligent.

But when Waring spoke to her again, asking if she spoke English, the girl made no reply nor sign that she understood him. Otway made a similar attempt, phrasing his question in Portuguese, Tupi—universal trade language of Brazil—and several Indian dialects. All to no avail. French, Italian and German, resorted to in desperation, all produced a negative result. The resources of the five seemed exhausted, when Tellifer added his quota in the shape of a few sounding phrases of ancient Greek.

At that the sweet, grave smile grew more pathetic. As if deprecating her inability to understand, the girl drew back a little. She made a graceful gesture with her slim, white arms—and fled lightly away around the central pillars.

"Greek!" snorted Waring. "Think the Rio Silencioso is the Hellespont, Tellifer? You've frightened her away!"

The esthete defended himself indignantly. "It was an invocation to Psyche! Your frightful German verbs were the—"

"Gentlemen, we are playing the fool with a vengeance! She's gone to call that monstrous hundred-legger up again!"

"Beg pardon, Mr. Otway, but you're wrong." John B. had unassumingly

moved after the lady. He called back his correction from a viewpoint commanding the western side: "She's only closing the hole where it went down—and now she's coming back."

With needless heat, Sigbee flung out an opinion:

"You fellows make me tired! As if a girl like that would be capable of bringing harm to anyone, particularly to people she had just shaken hands with and—and—"

"Smiled upon," Waring finished for him heartlessly. "Otway's right, Sig. Playing the fool. And we aren't all boys. Queer place. Too mighty queer! Woman may be planning anything. We must compel her to—There she goes! Bring the whole tribe out on us, I'll bet!"

"Beg pardon, Mr. Waring," John B. was still keeping the subject of discussion well in view. She had disappeared, this time into one of several clear lanes in the banked-off shrubbery that led from the central space toward the walls. "I don't think the young lady means to call anyone, sir. She's coming back again."

As he spoke, the girl reappeared. In her slim hands she bore a traylike receptacle made of woven reeds and piled high with ripe mangoes, bananas and fine white guava-fruits.

Here was a situation in which the most unassuming of yacht-stewards could take part without thrusting himself unduly forward. When John B.'s young employer beat him to it by a yard and himself gallantly took the heavy tray from their hostess, John B. looked almost actively resentful.

Sigbee returned, triumphant. The tray was in his hands and the girl of dawn-blue eyes drifted light as a cloud beside him.

"If anyone dares suggest that she's trying to poison us with this fruit," he said forcefully, "that person will have me to deal with!"

"Cut-it, Sig. Matter of common sense. Know nothing about the girl."

Waring broke off abruptly. A selection of several of the finer fruits was being extended to him in two delicate hands. For some reason, as the girl's glance met his across the offering, the big correspondent's freckled face colored deeply. He muttered something that sounded remarkably like, "Beg pardon!" and hastily accepted the offering.

"Her eyes," observed Tellifer, absently, "were deeper than the depth of waters stilled at even."

"Cut it, Tellifer! Please. Girl's a mere child. Can't hurt a child by re-

fusing a pretty, innocent little gift like this fruit."

"She means us no harm," Otway came to his rescue firmly. "As you say, Waring, the girl is a mere child. She has never willfully harmed anyone. God knows what her history has been—a white child brought up by some lingering, probably degenerate members of the race that built this place. But clearly she has been educated as a priestess or votary in their religion. The fresco below, you'll recall, represents a votive procession with women dancers, dressed like this one, playing upon Pan's pipes, with the forms of monster centi—"

"Don't!" Young Sigbee's boyish voice sounded keenly distressed. He had set down the tray and was reverently receiving from the girl his share of the fruit. "What we saw from the upper rim was illusion—nightmare! This girl never danced with any such horrible monster."

"TNT!"

The exclamation, stout rather, came from Waring. Under the glance of those dawn-blue eyes, the correspondent had been trying to devour a mango gracefully—an impossible feat—when he observed Teller strutting over toward the central pillars. That great, glowing, white mass which they supported was of a nature unexplained. Waring, at least, still retained enough discretion to be deeply suspicious of it.

"Come back here!" he called. "We don't know what that thing is, Teller. May be dangerous."

The esthete might have been stone-deaf, for all the attention he gave. As he approached closer to the glowing thing, the others saw his pace grow swifter—saw his arms rise in a strange, almost worshipping gesture.

And next instant they saw him disappear, with the suddenness of a Harlequin vanishing through a trap in an old-fashioned pantomime.

A portion of the stone floor had tipped up under his weight, flinging him forward and down. They saw him slide helplessly into what seemed to be an open space of unknown depth which the eight pillars surrounded.

A faint cry was wafted up from the treacherous pit. Then silence.

Flinging the dripping mango aside, Waring dashed across the floor. The other three were close at his heels.

Unlike the massive construction of all other parts of the pyramid, the eight pillars were slender, graceful shafts of sunset-hued stone. Rising some dozen feet above the pavement, they were placed at the angles of an eight-sided pit, or opening.

The exact shape of the shining mass these pillars supported was more difficult to determine. Its own light melted all its outlines in a soft glory of pale radiance. The light was not dazzling, however. Drawing near to the thing, it appeared more definite. The lower surface, slightly convex, rested at the edges on the tops of the eight pillars. Rising from the eight-sided circumference, many smaller planes, triangular in form, curved upward to the general shape of a hemisphere.

The light of the mass issued from within itself, like that of a great lamp, except that there seemed to be no central brightest point, or focus. Looking at any portion, the vision was somehow aware that the entire mass was lucidly transparent. And yet so transfused with radiance was it that the eye could pierce but a little way beyond the outer surfaces.

Even in that excited moment, Waring had an odd, fleeting conviction that somewhere, sometime he had looked upon an object similar to this.

"Ware the edge," he called to his companions—and himself approached it with seeming recklessness.

He was more cautious than he appeared. There were sixteen stones in the pavement around the pillars. Eight of them were pentagonal in shape, the points laid outward. These large slabs alternated with narrow oblong blocks, each based against one of the square pillars, radiating like wheel-spokes. The large slab that had thrown Teller might be the only treacherous one, or all the pentagonal blocks might be pivoted beneath. Should the spokelike-oblongs drop, however, any one of them would fling its victim against one of the pillars, instead of into the pit.

Waring did not stop to think this out. He merely instinctively assumed that the spokelike stones were comparatively safe. Running to the inner end of one of them, he flung his arm about the pillar and bent forward, peering into the pit.

His companions had paused a little way behind him. They all knew what a really deep regard had existed between the big correspondent and the eccentric esthete. There was something pitifully tragic in seeing that great bulk of a man poised there, one arm stiffly outstretched, staring down into the abyss that had engulfed his friend.

They heard him draw a long, quivering sigh. When he spoke, his deep tones noticeably trembled:

"Like it down there? Darn you, TNT! Next time I hear your deathcry—stop

and smoke a cigar before I charge around any! What's wrong? Lost your voice?"

Respect for tragedy appearing suddenly out of place, the other men followed Waring to the edge.

That is, Otway and John B., having noted the correspondent's path of approach, followed to the edge. Young Sigbee, less observant, merely avoided the particular slab that had thrown Teller. He stepped out on the pentagon next adjoining and took one cautious stride.

The archaic engineers who balanced those slabs had known their business perfectly. The pointed outer ends were bevelled and solidly supported by the main pavement. But the least additional weight on the inner half was enough for the purpose intended. Sigbee tried in vain to fling himself backward. Failing in that, he sat down and slid off a forty-five degree slope to join Teller.

As he disappeared, there came a little, distressed cry—the first sound of any kind which the dancer had uttered. The girl ran out along one of the oblong paths to cling round a pillar and stare down after Sigbee.

The pit beneath the lucent mass was octagonal at the top, but, below, it curved to a round bowl-shape. Dead-black at the bottom, the upper planes shaded from brown to flame-orange. It was not over a dozen feet deep at the center.

Teller, it seemed, had been standing in the middle, arms folded, face thrown back, contemplating the under surface of the shining mass above him with a rapt, ecstatic interest which took no heed of either his predicament or his friend's irritated protest. He had attention for nothing save the lucent mass. When Sigbee in turn arrived, knocking the esthete's feet from under him, Teller emerged from the struggling heap, more indignant at being disturbed, than over his badly kicked shins.

In a moment he had resumed his attitude of entranced contemplation.

Standing ruefully up beside him, Sigbee answered several eager questions hurled by the others, with an scerbic:

"How do I know? Ask him! I can't see anything up there but a lot of white light that makes my eyes ache. I say, you fellows, won't you throw me a line or something and haul me out? Teller can stay here, if he admires the view so much. I can't see anything in it."

He glanced down at his clothes disgustedly—inspected a pair of hands the palms of which were black as any negro's.

"The Bottom of this hole," he complained, "is an inch deep in soft soot! What a mess!"

"Soot!" Adjusting his shell-rims, Otway viewed the bottom of the bowl with new interest. "What kind of soot?"

"W-what? Why, black soot, of course. Can't you see? It's all over me, and Telfer, too—only I don't believe he knows it." The younger man's wrath dissolved in a sudden giggle. "Niggers! Sweeps! Is my face as bad as his?"

"You don't understand," persisted Otway eagerly. "I mean, is it dry, powdery, like the residue of burned wood, or is it—er—grey soot, as if fat had been burned there? What I'm getting at," he peered owlishly around his own pillar toward Waring's, "is that sacrifices may have been made in this pit. Either animal or human. Probably the latter. I've a notion to fall in there myself and see—"

"Well, you can if you want to, but help me out!" Sigbee gazed in dawning horror at the black stuff coating his hands and clothing. "It is greasy! Help me up quick, so I can wash it off!"

"Mustn't be so finicky, Sig," chuckled Waring. "You aren't the burnt offering, anyway. At least, not yet. Hello! What's wrong with our little friend?"

Face buried in her hands, the girl had sunk to a crouching position behind the pillar. Soft, short, gasping sounds came from her throat. Her whole slender body shook in the grip of some emotion.

"Why, she's crying!" said Otway. "Or laughing." Sigbee looked from his hands to Telfer's face. "I don't blame her," he added loyally.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Sigbee, but the little lady is crying." John B. had quietly left his own post and walked out on the dancer's oblong of safety. "I can see the tears shining between her fingers," he added gravely.

Four helpless males contemplated this phenomenon through a long quarter-minute of shocked silence. Suddenly Otway flung up his hands in a gesture so violent that it nearly hurled him headlong into the pit.

"Gentlemen," he cried desperately, "what is this place? Where are the people who must be about it somewhere? Who and what is that girl? Why is she crying? And what in the name of heaven is that great thing shining there above a sooty pit surrounded by man-traps?"

It was Telfer who took up the almost hysterical challenge. He came to life with a long sigh, as of some great decision reached.

"Your last question," he said, "in view of the object's obvious nature, I assume to be purely oratorical. The others are of small importance. I have been deciding a real and momentous question—one the answer to which is destined to be on the lips of men in every quarter of the terrestrial globe, and not for a day or a year of fame, but through centuries of wondering worship! And yet," Telfer waved a sooty hand in a gesture of graceful deprecation, "with all of what I may term my superior taste and intellect, I have been unable to improve on the work of that primitive but gifted connoisseur, Kuyunbira-Petro.

"He has already christened this thing of marvelous loveliness. When he told us of this island he said that there presided here an *anyi*—a spirit—a strange power—and he called it *Tata Quarahy*. We could not understand him. The poor fellow's simple language had not words to describe it further. And yet, how perfectly those two words alone did describe it! *Tata Quarahy*! Sunfire! Why not let the name stand? Could any other be more adequate? 'Sunfire!' Name scintillant of light. Let it be christened 'Sunfire,' that even the fancy of men not blessed to behold it with material eyes, may in fancy capture some hint of a supernal glory. But perhaps," Telfer glanced with sudden anxiety from face to face of his bewildered companions above him, "perhaps I take too much on myself, and you do not agree?"

"TNT," said Waring desperately, "for just one minute, talk sense. What is that thing up there—if you know?"

Telfer's entranced vision strayed again to the huge bulk that seemed, in its radiant simbus, to hover above rather than rest on the eight columns.

"I beg your pardon, Alcot," he said simply. "I really believed you knew. The phosphorescent light—the lucent transparency—the divine effulgence that envelopes it like a robe of splend—Alcot, please! There is a lady present. If you must have it in elementary language, the thing is a diamond, of course!"

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BRONZE LEVER

GETTING the two entrapped ones out of the sooty pit proved fairly easy. The sides of the bowl were smooth, but a couple of leather belts, buckled together and lowered, enabled the men below to walk up the steep curve, catch helping hands and be hauled to the solid paths behind the pillars.

Four of the men then retired from the treacherous ground, and in an excited,

disputing group stood off, walked about, and from various viewpoints and distances attempted settling, then and there, whether Telfer was or was not right in his claim that the enormous glowing mass above the pit was a diamond.

It must be admitted that for quite a time, the girl was forgotten. Only John B. failed to join in that remarkable dispute.

"Half a ton at least!" protested Waring. "Preposterous! Hear! of stones big as hen's eggs. But this! Roc's egg! Haroun al Raschid—Sindbad—Arabian Nights! You're dreaming, TNT! Half a ton!"

"Oh, very well, Alcot. It is true that I have some knowledge of precious stones, and that in my humble opinion Sunfire is as much a diamond as the Koh-i-noor. But of course, if you assure me that it is not—"

"How many karat is half a ton?" queried Sigbee. "I say, Telfer, how about that young mountain for a classy stickpin?"

"I refuse to discuss the matter further!" Telfer's voice quivered with outraged emotion. "If either of you had the least capacity for reverent wonder, the faintest respect for the divinely beautiful, you would—*you would hate anyone who spoke flippantly about Sunfire!*"

"Gentlemen,"—Otway had dropped out of the discussion as he found its heat increasing—"why not leave deciding all this for a later time? Haven't we rather lost sight of our object in ascending the pyramid? What of those air-men whom we were so eager to rescue?"

Followed a somewhat shamefaced silence. Then the disputants, even Telfer, agreed that the surprising line of entertainment afforded by the pyramid had indeed shifted their thoughts from a main issue.

"But we haven't seen anybody in need of rescue, so far," defended Sigbee. "There is no one here but the girl."

"Beg pardon, sir," John B. had at last rejoined the group. In his brown eyes was a sad, mildly thwarted look, somewhat like that in the eyes of a dog left outside on the doorstep. "The young lady isn't here now, sir. After you and Mr. Telfer climbed out of the pit, she seemed real pleased for a while and stopped crying. I tried talking to her, and I tried eating some of her fruit, but she didn't seem very much interested. And just now she went away. She went," John B. pointed down one of the open lanes, "out through that door and shut it behind her."

The steward paused.

"And bolted it on the other side," he finished sadly.

The four eyed one another. There was mutual scorn in their glances.

"As a rescue party," opined Otway, "we are a fraud. As explorers of a perilous mystery, we are extremely unwise. As diplomats, we are a total loss. There we had a friend from the enemy's ranks who might have been willing to help free the prisoners—if there are any. She was intelligent. We might have communicated with her by signs. Now we have offended the girl by our neglect. If she returns at all, it may be in company with hostile forces."

"We've hurt her feelings!" Sigbee mourned.

"All too darn queer!" reiterated Waring. "Rifle-fire—shouting—produced not a sign of life anywhere—except this girl."

"Of course, she may really be alone here." Removing the shell-rims, Otway polished them thoughtfully. He replaced them to stare again at the radiant mass of "Sunfire."

"Whether that thing is or is not a diamond," he continued, "one can understand Petro's characterizing it as an *anyi*, or spirit. To a mind of that type, the inexplicable is always supernatural. It is obvious, too, that—something or other is frequently burned in that pit. The girl wept because two of us had fallen in! I wonder what manner of horrible sights that poor child has witnessed in this place!"

Again Sigbee bristled. "Nothing bad that she had any hand in!"

"Did I even hint such a thing?" The explorer's own amiable tone had grown suddenly tart; then he grinned. "Between the questions of 'Is it a diamond?' and 'Why is the girl?' we shall end by going for one another's throats. Suppose that instead of wasting time in surmise, we undertake a tour of inspection. We haven't half looked the place over. There may be other exits than the one our displeased hostess locked behind her. You are sure that it is locked, Blickensderfer!"

John B. nodded. "I heard her slide a bolt across. Besides, I tried it with my shoulder, sir."

"Very well. We'll hunt for other doorways."

Viewed from the central court, the eight walls of the great place were mostly invisible. Though the greatest of the palms were not over thirty feet tall, the radiance of Sunfire was not enough to illuminate the upper heights. The lower walls were hidden by a dense luxuriance of vine-bound foliage.

Following one of the paved lanes cut through this artificial jungle, they discovered that another path circumscribed the entire court, between walls and shrubbery. By the use of their pocket-flashers they learned also that these inner walls were carved with Titan figures like those of the fresco which banded the pyramid's outer base.

The walls were perpendicular. At this level, there must be a considerable space between their inner surface and the outer slope. That it was not a space entirely filled with solid masonry was proved by the fact that at the end of each clear lane was a doorway. These exits, like those of the outer buildings, bore the shape of a truncated triangle.

But, unlike them, they were not open, but blocked by heavy, metal doors, made of bronze or some similar metal. The one through which the girl had passed was set in the southeastern wall. It was indeed fastened.

In circling the boundary path they encountered two more similar doors, one centering the southern wall and one the southwestern, both of which resisted all efforts to push them open. Reaching the western side, however, they found, not one, but eight doors.

These were not only of different construction from the others, but all stood wide open. They faced eight very narrow paths through the greenery, running parallel with one another to the central court. The overarching shrubbery shut out Sunfire's light. But the party's pocket flashers made short work of determining where these eight portals led.

The entire party were rather silent over it, at first. There was something ominous and unpleasant in the discovery.

"Eight prison cells!" said Otway at last. "Eight cells, with chains and manacles of bronze, all empty and all invitingly neat and ready for the next batch of captives. I don't know how you fellows feel about it, but it strikes me we needn't have hurried up here. Our unlucky friends of the air-tours are, I fear, beyond need of rescue."

Waring stood in the doorway of one of the empty cells. Again he flashed his light about. It was square, six feet by six at the base, in inner form bearing the shape of a truncated pyramid—save in one particular. The rear wall was missing. On that side the cell was open. A black shaft descended there. That its depth was the depth of the pyramid itself was proved when John B. tossed over the remains of a guava he had been eating. The fruit splashed faintly in water far, far below.

"For the prisoner. Choice between suicide and sacrifice," hazarded the correspondent. "Cheerful place, every way. These leg cuffs have been in recent use, too—not much doubt of that."

The manacles were attached to a heavy chain of the bronzelike metal that in turn was linked to a great metal ring set in the floor. The links were bright in places, as if from being dragged about the floor by impatient feet.

"Suicide!" repeated Otway. "My dear fellow, how could a man fastened up in those things leap into the shaft behind?"

"One on me. Captive of these elephant-chains would certainly do no leaping. These triangular openings in the doors—"

"To admit light, perhaps. More likely to pass in food to the prisoner. But where are the jailers? Why are we allowed to come up, let off our guns at the sacred temple pet, be amiably entertained by the—priestess, or whatever she is, climb in and out of the sacrificial pit, and generally make ourselves at home, without the least attempt at interference?"

"Came on an off night," Waring surmised. "Nobody home but Fido and little Susan."

"Alcot!" Again the esthete's tones sounded deeply injured. "Can your flippancy spare nothing of the lovely mystery—"

But here Waring exploded in a shout of mirth that drowned the protest and echoed irreverently from the ancient carven walls.

"Lovely mystery is right, Tellifer! Lovely idiots, too! Stand about and talk. Stairway fifty yards off. Hole of that hell-beast between stairway and us. Somebody sneak in and let Fido loose again—hm! We can't shoot him. Proved that. Might as well try to hit a radio message, en route."

"But the noise and the flash drove him off," reminded Otway. "Remember, the courage of the invertebrate animals is of a nature entirely different from that of even the reptilia. Friend 'Fido,' as you call him, is after all only an overgrown bug—though I shatter my reputation as a naturalist in misclassifying the *chilopoda* as bugs."

"Oh, can him in the specimen jar later, Professor. Come on around the northern side. Haven't looked that over yet."

"Beg pardon, sir," John B. had strayed on, a little beyond the last of the eight cells. He was examining something set against the wall there. "I wonder what this is meant for! It

looks like some sort of a handle—or lever."

His companions joined him. The steward's discovery was a heavy, straight bar of metal set upright, its lower end vanishing through an open groove in the pavement, standing about the height of a man's shoulder above it.

"It's a switch," asserted Waring gravely. "Electric light switch. Throw it over—bing! Out will go TNT's 'diamond'!"

Battle glinted again in Teliffer's moody eyes.

"It is an upright lever," said he, "intended to move something. Though I make no pretensions to the practical attitude of some others here, I can do better than stand idly ridiculing my friends when there is a simple problem to be solved in an easy and direct manner." "TNT! I apologize! Don't!"

But Teliffer had already grasped the upright bar. He seized it near the top and flung his weight against it. The bar moved, swinging across the groove and at the same time turning in an arc. Where it had been upright, it now slanted at a sharp angle.

"Oh, Lawdy! he's done it! What'll happen now!"

The correspondent's eyes, and those of the others also, roved anxiously about what could be seen of the walls and central court. But their concern over Teliffer's rash act appeared needless. So far as could be seen or heard, throwing over the lever had produced no result.

Teliffer alone was really disappointed. "Old, ugly, wornout mechanism!" he muttered. And released the lever.

As if in vengeance for Teliffer's slighting remark, the lever flew back to the upright position with a speed and violence which flung the experimenter sprawling. The reversal was accompanied by a dull, heavy crash that shook the very floor beneath their feet.

"That was out in the central court!" shouted Sigbee. "He's wrecked his 'diamond,' I'll bet!"

"Nonsense! The light is still there." Waring started along the nearest lane. Then turned back and went to his friend, who had not risen.

"Hurt?" he demanded.

"Only my arm and a few ribs broken and a shoulder out of joint, thank you. But that frightful crashing noise! Alot, don't tell me that I have destroyed—destroyed Sunfire!"

"No, no. Your diamond's shining away to beat a Tiffany show-window."

"Hey, there, Waring! Throw that lever again, will you?"

Otway's voice hailed from the central court, whither he and Sigbee and the

steward had gone without waiting for the other two. As Teliffer's injuries were not keeping him from getting to his feet, the correspondent turned his attention to the lever.

The bar went over without heavy pressure. After a moment Otway's voice was heard again:

"All right. But let her come up easy!"

Once more Waring complied. He found that by slacking the pressure gradually the bar returned to the upright position without violence. This time no crash occurred at the end. Finding that Teliffer had deserted him, Waring left the switch and followed.

He found the other four all draped around Sunfire's supporting columns, staring down into the pit.

"He cracked the bowl," Otway greeted, "and showed us how the sacrificial remains are disposed of. That lever works the dump!"

Waring had selected his oblong safety-path and joined the observers. He saw that one side of the great stone bowl beneath Sunfire now showed a thin, jagged crevice running from upper edge almost to the bottom.

"Don't understand," frowned Waring.

"I'll work it for you, sir."

The obliging John B. fled to take his turn at the bronze bar. A minute later, Waring saw the whole massive, bowl-shaped pit beneath him shudder, stir, and begin to tip slowly sideways. It continued to tip, revolving as upon an invisible axis. In a few seconds, instead of gazing down into a soot-blackened bowl, he was staring up at a looming hemisphere of flame-orange stone that towered nearly to Sunfire's lower surface, twice the height of a tall man above him.

"Let her down easy, Blinksderfer!" called Otway again. "Afraid of the jolt," he added in explanation. "The remarkable thing is that when Teliffer allowed it to swing back full weight that first time, it didn't smash the surrounding pavement and bring these pillars down. But it merely cracked itself a bit."

Waring gasped. "D'you mean—Did I swing all these tons of rock around with one easy little push on that bar?" "Seeing is believing," asserted Otway, as the revolving mass turned easily back into place, and they once more looked into a hollow, sooty bowl.

"Those ancient engineers knew a lot about leverage. How were the enormous stones of this pyramid brought across the lake and lifted into their places? This bowl is somehow mounted at the sides like a smelting pot on bars that pass be-

neath the pavement. That pavement, by the way," and the explorer cast an eager eye across the space between the pit and the western wall, "will have to come up. Uncovering the mechanism which operates this device may give some wonderful pointers to our modern engineers."

"But what's it for?" pleaded Waring.

"Why, you saw the black depths under the bowl. Likely, there is some superstitious prejudice against touching the charred remains of victims burned here. By throwing over the lever, the pit empties itself into the depths below. As I told you before—that lever works the dump."

"What—sacrilege!" Teliffer murmured.

"Well, of course, from our viewpoint it's not a very respectful way to treat human remains. But if you'll think of the cannibalistic religious rites of many primitive peoples, this one doesn't seem so shocking."

"You misunderstood me," Teliffer cast a glance of acute distress toward the gleaming mass above the pit. "I meant the dreadful sacrilege of insulting a miracle of loveliness like that, with the agony and ugly after-sights of human sacrifice!"

"That's a viewpoint, too," grinned Otway.

"And we're still talking! Human sacrifices! Here we stand—candidates—fairly begging for it. Angered priestesses gone after barbaric hordes. Shoot us down from above. Regular death-trap. We take precautions? Not us! We'd rather talk!"

"Beg pardon, Mr. Waring, but the little lady has come back, and she hasn't brought any barbaric hordes."

John B. had returned and his voice sounded mildly reproachful.

"She seems to me to be acting real considerate and pleasant. I judge she noticed the soot on Mr. Sigbee and Mr. Teliffer, and she's gone and taken the trouble to bring some water and towels so they can wash it off!"

CHAPTER SIX

ASSAI WINE

THE STEWARD'S latest announcement proved correct, though not quite complete. While the guests had been entertaining themselves by inspecting the premises, the hostess must have quietly gone and returned, not once, but several times.

They found her standing beside an array of things which her slender strength could not possibly have availed to transport in a single trip.

There was a large, painted clay water-jar. Neatly folded across its top lay a little heap of what might have been unbleached linen, though on examination the fabric proved to be woven of a soft, yellowish fiber, probably derived from one of the many useful species of palms. Near this jar stood another smaller vessel, of the same general appearance, but surrounded by a half-dozen handleless bowls or cups carved out of smooth, yellow wood, highly polished. And still beside these things was another offering.

Waring removed his hat again and ran his fingers through his hair.

"What's the big idea?" he demanded at large. "Water and towels—fine. Sig and TNT sure need 'em. Festive bowls. May be finger-bowls, but I doubt it. Well and good. Though I, for one, draw the line at cocktails where I don't know my bootlegger. But why all the furrers' display? Does she want us to assume the native costume?"

Otway raised the largest of five black jaguar hides which were ranged in a neat row on the pavement.

"Here's yours, Waring," he chuckled. "The beast that grew this was a lord among his kind. You see, it fastens over the shoulders with these gold clasps. And there's a chain girdle. Suppose you retire to one of those eight convenient dressing-rooms and change? Then if the rest of us like the effect—"

"Set the example yourself! I'm no cave-man. But what's her idea?"

"She is trying to drive it through our thick skulls that she means only kindness toward us!" This from Sigbee, who, having reverently allowed his hostess to pour water over his hands was now, with equal reverence, accepting a fiber napkin to dry them.

As if handling the heavy water jar had at last wearied her, the girl thereupon surrendered it to the steward. Tellifer, with a vengeful glare at his luckier predecessor, proceeded to his ablutions.

"My experience," said Otway, "has been that among strange peoples it is always well to accept any friendly acts that are offered. No matter what one's private misgivings may be, no trace of them should show in one's manner. By that simple rule I have kept my life and liberty in many situations where others had been less fortunate. Despite our suspicions, we have shown not a trace of hostility toward this girl. We have offered no violence nor rudeness. Who knows? If we continue on our good behavior we may find ourselves accepted as friends, not only by the girl but all her foster-people. I've proved it to work out that way more than once."

"She's a mighty nice girl." Waring was weakly accepting a polished yellow cup. "But d'you think we should risk drinking this—purple stuff?"

The explorer sipped testingly at the liquor which his hostess had gracefully poured from the wine-jar.

"It is only assai wine," he announced. "No harm in it—unless one indulges too freely. See—she is pouring herself a cup! We had best drink, I believe, and then indicate that we would like to meet her people."

"Sensible girl, too," approved Waring. "Cave-man costumes. Nice little gift. But no effort to force 'em on us. Well-bred kid. Out-of-place here, hm?"

"Oh, decidedly," the explorer agreed. "I shall take her away with me when we go."

Otway was a man of morally spotless reputation. As leader of the expedition, he had every right to use the first personal pronoun in announcing his intent to rescue this white girl. Yet the statement seemed displeasing to every one of the explorer's four companions. The glances of all turned upon him with sudden hostility. Sigbee was heard to mutter something that sounded like "Infernal cheek!"

But Otway gave their opinion no heed. Like the rest, he had drained his cup of purple wine. Innocent though he had claimed the vintage to be, it had deepened the color of his sun-burned face with amazing quickness. The cool gray eyes behind the shell-rims had grown bright and strangely eager. He swayed slightly. He took an unsteady step toward the girl, who had thus far barely stained her lips with the purple liquor.

"Sure!" he added thickly. "Queer I didn't realize that sooner. Girl I've been—waiting for—always! Never got married, just that reason. Looking for this one. Take her away now!"

"You will not!"

Waring's mighty hand closed viselike on the naturalist's shoulder, wrenching him backward.

"That's right, Alcot," Tellifer approved. "He couldn't half 'preciate loveliness like hers. That's for me! I 'preciate such things. Lovely girl—lovely diamond—lovely place—lovely 'venture—"

As if in adoration of the prevailing loveliness of everything, Tellifer sank to his knees, and subsided gently with his head on one of the jaguar hides.

Waring discovered that he was not restraining Otway, but supporting his sagging weight. He released it, stared stupidly as the explorer's form dropped limply to the floor.

Something was very much wrong. Waring knuckled his eyes savagely. They cleared for an instant. There stood the girl. Her dawn-blue eyes were looking straight into his. There were great tears shining in them! Her whole attitude expressed mournful, drooping dejection. The golden-yellow cup had fallen from her hand. Across the pavement a purple pool spread and crept toward the little bare white feet.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE HAG

WARING knew that he, too, had fallen to the floor, and that he could not rise.

Over him was banding—a face. Above it a circle of star-white gems gleamed with a ghostly luster. The form beneath was draped in the spotted hide of a jaguar, fastened at the shoulders with fine golden chains.

But that face! Old, seamed, haggard, framed in wild locks of ragged, straying gray hair, with terrible eyes whose dark light had feasted through unnumbered years upon vicious cruelty, with toothless mouth distended in awful laughter—a hag's face, the face of a very night-hag—and up beside it rose a wrinkled, clawlike hand, and hovered above his throat! The vision passed. Merciful oblivion ensued.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"TATA QUARANY"

AS HE had been least to succumb under the terrific potency of that "harmless assai wine," so the correspondent was first to recover his normal senses. After a few minutes of fogginess, he grasped the main facts of the situation well enough.

In a way, they scarcely even surprised him. Now that the thing was done, he saw with dreary clearness that this had been a foregone conclusion from the instant when five fools, ignoring all circumstantial evidence, had placed their trust in a pair of dawn-blue eyes.

Just at first he had no way of being sure that he was not the sole fool who had survived. But as the others, one by one, awakened and replied to the correspondent's sardonic inquiries, he learned that their number was still complete.

Their voices, however, reached him with a muffled, hollow sound. They were accompanied by a clanking of heavy bronze chains, appropriately dismal.

Through the triangular opening in his cell door, Waring could see along a narrow lane in the greenery to the central court. The place was no longer illum-

inated by the ghostly radiance of Sunfire. It was daytime—and it was rainy weather. Through the open top of the pyramid the rain sluiced down in sheets and torrents, thundering on the palm-fronds, making of that small portion of Sunfire which was visible, a spectral mound of rushing water-surface. It also sent little exploring cold trickles beneath the closed doors of five prison cells—no longer empty.

"Lovely place!" groaned Waring. "Oh, lovely! Friends and fellow-mourners, it wasn't a new wine. It was the oldest of old stuff. K. O. drops. And we swallowed it! What's that? No, Otway. No more your fault than anyone's. I fell—you fell—we fell. The lot of us needed a keeper. From all signs, we've probably acquired one. It won't be little blue-eyed Susan, though. Her work's done. Such a well-bred kid, too! Wouldn't force native costume on anyone. Oh, no! Say, am I the only cave-man? Or is it unanimous?"

Report drifted down the line that reversion to barbaric fashions had not been forced on the correspondent alone. Not a stitch of civilized clothing, not a weapon, not a single possession with which they had entered the pyramid, had been left to any of the five. In exchange for those things, they had received each a neat stone cell, a handsome black jaguar hide, gold-trimmed, a chain adequate, as Waring had said, to restrain an elephant,—and a hope for continued life so slight as to be practically negligible.

After a time Waring informed the others of that last fading glimpse he had got of a frightful face bending over him. It was agreed that he had been privileged to look upon one of the 'tribe' who inhabited the pyramid. No one, however, was able to explain why this 'tribe' had allowed all those boats to rot, some of them through years, undisturbed at the landing atate. Or why all save the girl were so extremely shy about showing themselves.

The noise of the rain ceased at last. The outer court brightened with sunshine. For any sounds or signs of life about them, the five might have been chained alone in an empty pyramid at the heart of an empty land.

The utter strangeness of what had occurred combined with memory of their own folly to depress them. These cells, too, despite the increasing heat outside, were decidedly chilly. Damp, cold draughts blew up from the open shafts at the back. Much rainwater had crept in beneath the doors.

The jaguar-hides were warm as far as they went, but from the prisoners' civilized viewpoint, that wasn't half far enough. Bare feet shifted miserably on cold stone. An occasional sneeze broke the monotony. Except for fruit, none of the party had eaten anything since noon of the previous day. The drugged liquor, too, had left an aftermath of outrageous thirst. Yet neither food nor water had been given to them.

The noon hour arrived, as they could tell by diminished shadows and fiercely downbeating glare. Still, no attention had come their way.

Tellifer's cell commanded the best view of the main court. As the sun had approached the zenith, the esthete's dampened enthusiasm had to some degree revived. If the luccent mass of Sunfire had been beautiful at night, beneath the noon sun it became a living glory that gave Petro's name for it, *Tata Quarakay*, Fire of the Sun, new meaning. Tellifer exhausted his vocabulary in trying to do its rainbow splendors justice. But when he finally lapsed into silent adoration the other four made no effort to draw him out of it. Their more practical natures had rather lost interest in Sunfire. Diamond or not, it seemed that the sooty pit beneath it was likely to be of more concern to them.

The sun-rays were now nearly vertical. The central court grew to be a mere dazzle of multicolored refraction. Waves of heat as from a furnace beat through the openings in the cell-doors. With them drifted wisps of white vapor. Presently, a low hissing sound was heard.

The seething noise grew louder. In the court, great clouds of white steam were rising, veiling the brightness of Sunfire. The pit beneath it seethed and bubbled like a monstrous cauldron.

Practical-minded or not, it was Tellifer who solved the simple dynamics of what was going on.

"I was afraid of this," he said. "I was afraid last night, when I first saw the atrocious manner in which that miracle of beauty has been mutilated. Practically sawn in-half, for it is an octahedral stone and must originally have possessed nearly twice its present mass. But the lower part has been ruthlessly cleaved away, and the under surface ground and polished. The faceting extends only part way up the sides. The top is a polished cabochon. The wondrous!" Tellifer's voice shook with emotion. "The soulless vandals! Whoever the fiends were, they cut the most marvelous jewel earth ever produced to suit a vilely utilitarian pur-

pose! Sunfire is a great lens—a burning-glass. It is boiling the collected rain-water out of the pit now. When the pit is dry, the stone of its bowl will rise to red heat—white heat—who knows what temperature under that infernal sun! And that means—that means—"

"Death for any living thing in the pit," declared Otway quietly. "With a victim in the pit, sacrifice to the deity must occur at high noon on any day when the sky is free from clouds. But I say—" the explorer's voice was suddenly distressed—"don't take it that way, man! Why, there is always a chance so long as one has breath in one's body. Brace up!"

"Oh, you don't understand! Let me be!" There had been a heavy clanking sound in Tellifer's cell. A thud as of a despairing form cast down. "You don't understand!" repeated the esthete sobbingly. "There's no chance! Or hardly one in a million. And it isn't being killed in that pit that's bothering me. It's—Oh, never mind, I tell you! I don't want to talk about it. The thing is too shameful—too horrible! Let me be!"

As all further questioning was met with stony silence from the central cell, his companions did "let him be," at last. That hysterical outburst from one of their number had not tended to brighten the general mood. It seemed to them, also, that if Tellifer really foresaw any more shameful and horrible fate than being broiled alive under a burning lens, he might share his knowledge and at least let them be equally prepared for it.

The day wore wearily by, measured only by lengthening shadows and lessening glare. The sudden night fell. There, on the eight rosy pillars, the iridescent splendor of Sunfire changed slowly to its ghostly glory of the dark hours.

Meantime, in the cells, four of the prisoners had reached that stage of physical and mental misery where, being the sort they were, they spoke to each other frequently and always in jest. The jokes exchanged were of a rather feeble order; it is true. The voices that uttered them were painfully hoarse and thickened. But the applause for each effort was resolutely cordial. Only Tellifer preserved his stony silence.

It was an hour past sunset. The stillness had remained unbroken since their early awakening. Death by mere chill and privation was beginning to seem a very possible alternative to the sacrificial fate they had expected, when the long waiting at last ended and their keeper came to them.

This Story Will Be Concluded in the Next Issue of WEIRD TALES. The Concluding Installment Is Filled With Strange and Unexpected Events. Don't Miss It!

Here Are the Last Thrilling Chapters of

SUNFIRE

By FRANCIS STEVENS

A RESUME OF THE EARLY CHAPTERS

FIVE young Americans, in quest of adventure, land upon upon the strange island of Tata Quaraby, and there behold, in the hollow heart of an ancient pyramid, a hideous monster, somewhat like a gigantic centipede, dancing to the music of Pan's pipe, played by a beautiful woman. Following a series of harrowing adventures in the pyramid, during which they discover a mammoth diamond of incalculable value, the adventurers are trapped in a tomb, where, it seems, they are to be burned alive as a sacrifice to the native deity. Death by starvation, however, instead of this horrible fate, begins to threaten them, when their long waiting at last ends. Their keeper comes to them.

THE STORY CONTINUES FROM THIS POINT

CHAPTER NINE

AN UNWELCOME INVITATION

FOR comfort, there was nothing but choice between sitting, lying down or standing on the cold, damp stones of their cramped quarters.

The heavy bronze shackles rasped the skin from their ankles in any position, and aching bones drove them to a continual uneasy shifting. But it so happened that Sigbee was the only man on his feet when the keeper arrived.

There had been no warning sound of approach. The first notice the four other captives received was young Sigbee's voice, breathing a husky word that brought them all clanking up in haste to their windows.

Into that single word Sigbee had poured a reproach for trust betrayed, a shocked amazement that the betrayer should shamelessly reappear, a wholly youthful satisfaction in being able to address that expressive "You!" to the right person, which told them instantly that their "Blessed Damozel" of yesterday was again with them.

The triangular openings were not large enough to permit the passage of a prisoner's head. Much as they would have liked to crane their necks for a first-hand view, they must rely on Sigbee's report. A volley of harsh questions exploded down the line. Sigbee's voice rose against them.

"Stop that, you fellows! You're frightening her. There—I told you. She's crying again. Now she'll go

*The first half of this story appeared in the July-August WIND TALKER. A copy will be mailed by the publishers for twenty-five cents.

away. No, it's all right. She's passing my things through the window. Brace little girl! Now listen, fellows. I don't care what you think, this girl is not responsible for what happened."

"Oh, Lawdy!" groaned the deepest of the harsh voices. "He's hooked again! Wake up, Sig. With her own fair hands she poured the k.o. drops. She'll never weep her way into my heart again. Is any one with her?"

"No, she's alone. Listen, Waring. She's coming your way. If you aren't decently civil to her, I give you fair warning I'll—"

"You'll what? Butt your head against the wall? Oh, there you are, Susan!"

The harshest voice had lowered to a base growl, suggestive of the jaguar which had once worn Waring's costume. Into his range of vision, staggering beneath the weight of a heavy reed basket, had come their fair betrayer.

There was justification for almost any degree of bitterness. Young Sigbee's reversal of judgment appeared mere weakness. And yet, either because he feared to anger or frighten away the source of supplies, or for some other reason, the correspondent's righteous wrath received no further expression just then. He was heard to mutter something about "more damn mangoes," a less depreciative, "Bananas—better than nothing!" and a final, "Water at last, thank God!"—and then the slender food-bringer was dragging her basket along to the next cell.

At close range the girl could be seen only as she reached each captive's

door. A little later, however, her task finished, the empty basket deserted, she drifted out into the general range of vision.

At the opening of that lane, which faced Tellifer's person, she paused. Silhouetted against the pale glow beyond, they saw her stand an instant, head bent, shoulders drooping, silent as always, by mere attitude suggesting a boundless, pitiful dejection. Then she moved slowly away.

Three minutes more, and Tellifer emerged from that unnatural speechlessness he had preserved all afternoon.

"She is gazing into the pit," he informed solemnly. "Now she has sunk to her knees beside one of the columns. She is weeping again, and she has much to mourn for! The human fiends whose servant she is are the inheritors of a truly monstrous crime."

"Let her weep!" The lunediate presence removed, Waring's vindictiveness had revived. "Decoy. That's all Susan is. And we aren't the first. Not by a damn sight! Those boats—the airplane. Nothing but fruit and water for starving men. Monstrous crimes is right, TNT!"

The estlette sighed deeply. "The crimes to which you refer are trivial beside the far more shocking one which I am certain has been accomplished in this place. But no more of it. The subject is too dreadful. I am not a practical man, but has it struck none of you as strange that except for the one old woman whom Waring caught a glimpse of, we have as yet seen only the girl?"

"Awake at last, hm? Been discussing nothing else all day."

"Is that true, Alcot? I was inattentive, perhaps. My mind was upon— But let me forget that. During the discussion was any probable explanation reached?"

"No, Mr. Telfier," Otway informed him gravely. "No probable explanation was reached. It is my own conviction, indeed, that no probable explanation ever will be reached. I don't say that none of us will survive to learn the true facts. Life and hope, remember; life and hope! But when those facts are ascertained, they will not be probable. Possible, perhaps, but decidedly—not probable! The situation simply doesn't admit of it. Oh, Waring! How about that story!"

"Sunday supplement stuff," disparaged the correspondent. "No magazine would dare touch it. Wonder how long we'll be left here! Safe for tonight, anyway. Fashionable beggars! All ceremonies at high noon. What news of Susan? Still weeping?"

His last question, addressed to Telfier, was answered from another source. Out in the silent central court a sound had begun. As when, ascending the outer stairway, that same sound had first reached their ears, every one of the five pooped through a long minute, breathless and listening.

Their reason for attention, however, had changed. Then it had been wonder and a devouring curiosity as to the source of that quaint, monotonous, double-fluted melody. Now they had no curiosity about it. They knew exactly what instrument was being played, who was playing it, and for what astonishing purpose. And every man of them was suddenly thankful that his cell possessed a thick, serviceable, bronze door, tightly closed, and with only one small window.

"Have to hand it to Susan!" gasped Waring at last. "Fido's coming out. I can see him. She afraid? Not little blue-eyes! Oh, Lawdy, Lawdy! How much more of him is there!"

"The—ah—anterior melle or so of Fido has strayed over to where I also can enjoy a view," Otway asserted. "They took away my shell-rim, but I can make out that the cephalite, or head-shield, is quite well-developed. About the size of a flour-barrel, I should say. And the toxilogomaths, or poison-fangs— Oh, ye gods! No, it's all right. For an instant I believed Fido was coming down my alley to call. But it was merely a thousand-legged prouette. This dancing rite probably takes place every evening and is entire-

ly separate from the noonday sacrifice. It is likely, also, that we are being saved up, as it were, for some special day or occasion. There being no one present tonight save the prisoners, we need have no immediate fears."

"Speak for yourself!" Waring's heavy voice broke on the words. "She's bringing it—she's bringing that thing down my alley!"

The monotonous melody of the Pan's pipes had indeed approached much nearer. A moment more, and not only Waring, but all the prisoners were given evidence that the pair of dancers were not content to exercise their art at a distance from their audience.

Between the cells and the artificial jungle was a space perhaps ten feet broad. For *Sceloporus Horribilis* to have elaborated his curious, coiling patterns on that cramped stage would have been impossible. Like a true artist, he did not even attempt it. When the girl swayed gracefully into view, turned to the narrow space and passed lightly along it, still piping, the sacred monster—or a portion of him—merely followed.

As she crossed each successive band of light at the clear lanes, those in the cells caught glimpses of her awful attendant.

The head, with enormous, blind-looking yellow eyes, gaping mandibles and huge poison-fangs, hovered close above the starry circlet of gems in the girl's red-gold hair. The talons of the plated length below seemed on the point of closing around her slender shoulders. Yet the girl cast not so much as a glance upward or back. In turning at the end, she took no care to avoid colliding with the frightful Death that followed.

Death for its part, however, respectfully drew aside, made a talon-fringed running loop of itself, and continued to follow. Through alternate light and shadow the girl passed back until she again reached the correspondent's prison-cell.

There the other four could no longer see her. In returning, she had moved close to the cell-rank. There followed a *clang*, as of a heavy bolt thrown back. A hoarse, wordless ejaculation. Another *clang*, suggesting metal tossed down on a stone floor. Then the girl had stepped into view again, still playing but holding the pipes to her lips with one hand. With the other she was seen to beckon gracefully.

"Boys," came the correspondent's desperate voice, "good-bye! That infernal little Jerebel! She has opened my door! She has given me the key

to these damn shackles! She's inviting me to come out! By God, I won't go out! There's that shaft behind the cell. I'll jump! Wait till I get these irons off."

A rasping sound, a crude key turning in a clumsy lock, a rattle of chains hastily discarded.

"Waring!" From the next cell Otway spoke with quiet, restraining force. "Don't jump! Do whatever she wishes. The sacrifice is to the sun, remember. If she had wanted that monster to destroy us tonight, why should she have bothered to bring us food? This is part of some preliminary ceremony. And your limbs will be free. Do whatever she wishes and watch your chance. It may be the chance that saves all of us."

After quite a long moment, the correspondent replied. "Right, Otway. Playing the cur. Glad you spoke. I'll—I'll go out. Here, you! Can't you see I'm coming? Start that music again!"

The girl, as if weary of waiting, had lowered the pipes from her lips. The instant she did so, the swaying monster behind had ceased to sway. With an ominous, dry clashing of avid mandibles, its head shot higher. It descended again in a curving loop that cleared the girl's head and, too obviously, had the open cell for its objective.

Seeing the prisoner obedient, however, the girl resumed her music. Immediately the menacing head swung back to its former position.

The freed correspondent faced the pair grimly. That slender slip of a girl, whom he could have easily lifted with one hand, was for the time his master. To overcome or interfere with her in any way meant death. To slay big, powerful Alcot Waring, she had only to cease the restraining music of her little golden pipes.

The dawn-blue eyes were deep, sweetly mournful as ever. But even Sigbee failed to suggest that Waring should place faith in them and act in any way save exactly as she might direct.

Her next order was given as the first had been. One delicate hand waved in a graceful gesture.

"You're elected, too, Otway," informed the correspondent. "Wants me to open your door. Shall I do it? Up to you."

The explorer affirmed his own unshaken nerve by instant consent. The same key that had released Waring having freed Otway from the bronze shackles, he stepped out beside the other.

"You know," he observed quietly, "they took my shell-rims, and everything nearer than three yards is just a blur. Only hope I shan't tread on Fido!"

"Stand still!" Waring advised between his teeth. "The damn thing is all over the place. What's she after now! Oh, I see. Sig, your divinity calls you!"

"I believe she intends releasing us all," opined the explorer, still resolutely cheerful. "In that case, we'll surely get a chance among the five of us."

"Oh, sure! Stiff upper lip and carry on."

To appreciate, however, the real deadliness of their peril was just then far easier than to foresee in what form that hoped-for chance was likely to come.

For one thing, "Fido's" mentality was proving to be as abnormal as its physical proportions. They had at first supposed that the monster merely answered the music as snakes writhe to the charmer's pipes. But its behavior before the cell-rank assured both training and intelligence. It was not dancing now. It was waiting—and what it waited upon was the will of its mistress.

As for the thing's destructive capacity, that was obviously terrific. In one lightning sweep it might have involved not five but a dozen men amid taloned coils beside which those of a python would have been easily escapable. The huge poison-fangs with which the first segment of its body was equipped, seemed really superfluous.

John B. was the last captive to be released. The number of her victims complete, the girl gazed toward one of the open lanes.

With their extraordinary jailors close at heel, the five moved meekly toward the outer court.

CHAPTER TEN

THE DANCE

THE proceedings of the next hour formed a study in grotesquerie exceeding anything which even the captives' experience of pyramidal customs had led them to look for.

They had, it appeared, been hailed forth to take part in the same ceremonial dance which their coming had interrupted the previous evening.

After bringing them out, indeed, the girl herself practically ignored them. As her light feet carried her about the sacred circle, she seemed wholly absorbed in an ecstasy of music and rhythmic motion. But the ghostly en-

forcer of her will gave the captives every attention.

The thing was clearly no novice in its part. Its age, of course, was unguessable. But one could conceive that years—decades—centuries, perhaps, had seen the slow growth and training of that monstrous votary. Nocturnal by nature, the vast, dull yellow eyes might have been blind as they appeared. If so, the sense of sight was replaced by those other, more mysterious senses which creatures of its species inherit. The whiplike antennae were continually alert. The thing's intelligence, too, seemed not confined to the brain, as in vertebrate animals, but instinct in every part of its active length.

The girl dancer need make no effort to avoid contact with the coils. They avoided her. Her foot could not move quickly enough to tread upon them. But of the unwilling male participants in the rite, the monster was less considerate.

A mere scratch from one of those myriad dagger-pointed talons would have amounted to a severe wound, quite aside from the infection they probably carried. The menace of them was used with amazing skill to force the prisoners around the appointed circle.

The stairway proved to be a blessed goal unreachably. At the slightest move in that direction, up would rise a barrier of clawing segments. With bare feet and limbs, to have dared over-leaping or standing before it would have been madness, even had not the worse threat of the head and poison fangs hovered ever close above them.

Of the five, Otway's troubles were the most dismaying. In the absence of glasses, his eyes were of little use to him at close range. Again and again, only the guiding hand of a fellow-initiate saved him from calamity. Had the explorer been alone he could not have survived even one round of that horrible, ludicrous, altogether abominable dance.

Yet the indomitable spirit of Otway was first to recognize the ridiculous side of the affair. He and Waring presently joined in a running fire of comment on its absurdities. Tellifer, solemn as ever, moved through the literal—and talon fringed—"mazes of the dance," with an effort at classic dignity which won their high commendation. John B.'s quiet, efficient side-stepping went not unnoted. But it remained for Sigbee to win the jesters' really whole-hearted approval.

It had dawned on them that the expedition's youngest member was not

merely avoiding trouble, like the rest of them. He was actually dancing, modeling his steps on those of their graceful leader, and doing very well indeed at it. Sigbee was an agile, athletic youth. The "cave-man costume" emphasized a certain grace of body and regularity of feature. Very soon, having perfected the step to suit his ambition, Sigbee coolly deserted his fellow-captives. Taking advantage of every convenient chance in the monster's running coils, he joined the girl.

"There are a lot of those steps," he called back, "that my sister at home taught me. Crazy about this—nature-dancing stuff. Oh, fine! That's a regular—fox-trot—step. Say, you fellows! I've seen this girl—before, somewhere! Been trying—to remember where—ever since—last night. Or else she—reminds me of some one."

"She reminded me!"—Tellifer availed a section of talons by one second's time and an undignified bound—"she reminded me," he repeated more forcibly, "of a girl in a poem. Not any more. Blessed Damocel!" Another leap and increased bitterness. "Where are her three lilies? Where is her—gold bar of heaven? Where—her sense of fitness? I could have pardoned the—jaguar-hide—if she hadn't forced one on me. I could have forgiven the—undignified dancing—if she hadn't made me join in it. Now—I disown the comparison. All she has is—the stars in her hair and the—eyes—and they are basely deceptive. She is not a Blessed Damocel! She's a—"

He hesitated for a fresh comparison. When found, it would probably have been inoffensive enough. Tellifer's classic fancy rarely sought force in vulgarity. But young Sigbee had again been indulging at close range in glimpses of the eyes Tellifer slandered. He came to an abrupt halt, fists clenched.

"Not another word, there!" he called sharply.

The girl was within a yard of him. As if in appreciation of her gallant defender, she swayed still nearer, stretched one hand and touched Sigbee lightly on the shoulder. At the same time, she lowered the pipes from her lips. She pointed with them toward one of the five men.

There followed a swift yellow flash—a sharp, broken-off cry.

Again the pipes were set to the girl's lips. Up swayed the colossal yellow head to resume its guardianship of the victims. But there were only four of them now who required guarding!

The girl danced no more. She continued to play her piping melody, but the great, mournful eyes beneath the star-crown grew brilliant with slowly forming tears.

CHAPTER ELEVEN THE SACRIFICE

"WHAT the devil good is her weeping, Sig! She deliberately pointed. And that horror knocked poor old TNT into the pit! He's there now. Can't get out. We're locked in here. Thirty minutes at most till noon. And that little Jezebel you're infatuated with comes to weep over him! Who cares how she feels! Actions speak!"

It was morning of the next day. That four of the party, even in the face of that yellow Death, had consented to return to their cells after the abrupt end of last night's grotesque ceremony, had been due to Telfifer's own appeal.

Beyond a few bruises, the latter had not been injured. When the girl, as Waring accused, had deliberately showed her terrible familiar that Telfifer was the evening's appointed victim, the unlucky esthete had been a little apart from his companions, close to the eight-sided pit. The great opalite or head-shield of the monster had struck Telfifer between the shoulders with battering-ram force.

Knocked off his feet, he had rolled upon one of the treacherous pentagonal slabs that surrounded the sooty pit. He had gone down head first, but, sliding down the steep slope of the bowl, had arrived at the bottom without being stunned.

He had presently replied to the anxious hails of his friends. When it became clear that the latter were required to return to their cells, leaving him in the pit, he had urged them to do so. For them to be slain on the spot could do him no good. And in the hours before Sunfire should again justify its name he might escape from the pit.

Waring had made a gallant effort to join his friend. But he had been blocked by the alert yellow death's head, and finally allowed himself to be driven back with the others. As the correspondent had been required to release his fellow-slaves, so the girl saw to it that he duty re-acknowledged and boxed them up. Under the gentle glance of those pitying eyes, Waring had finished the task by adjusting his own fetters and tossing the key out to her. The thing was maddening beyond words, but there had seemed no alternative save death.

The monster had then been led back to its lair, and the girl had bolted down the bronze cover that debarred its return and departed.

It had seemed that the captive of the pit, left thus unguarded, must surely find some way to climb out and release his companions. Yet dawn had returned, bringing Telfifer's strange executioner to march slowly up the sky, and that means still remained undiscovered. Though the pit was deadly through only a part of the day, alone in it Telfifer was helpless as a beetle at the bottom of a bowl.

As the morning wore on and the temperature of the court slowly rose, Telfifer ceased his efforts to climb out. The time soon came when shouted advice or questions from the cell-rank drew no response. That the victim might be already dead, or in heavy stupor, appeared the best hope left for him.

Small wonder, then, that when a slender form drifted on light feet across the central court, poised beside one of the eight columns, and at last sank down there, a figure of desolate mourning, Waring had cursed her and her grief together. Chivalry was all very well, and Waring was not deficient therein. But a weeping she-fiend who chained him in a stone cell, prepared the agonizing murder of the closest friend, and then came to mourn over her work while watching its progress, seemed to him outside the pale of toleration.

In young Sigabee, grief for the victim was still strangely united with concern for their betrayer. But his view met scant sympathy in any quarter. Otway expressed his own attitude with decision.

"That woman," said he, grimly just, "is acting under compulsion of some sort. Probably, superstitious religious training. But were she what she appears, the revulsion of her nature against all this vile, cold-blooded treachery and cruelty, would not stop at mere weeping. She is not white blood, but she disgraces it. Any Indian woman, feeling as she pretends to feel, would dare the wrath of her people on earth and the gods beyond and be true to the humane instinct. It's no use, Sigabee! A man is dying in that infernal hole, and she isn't doing a thing to help him—is she!"

"She goes there and cries!" snarled Waring. "Cries over him! And not the bare decency to give him a drink of water. Not a drop of water in nearly eighteen hours! My God, Otway—"

"Steady, old man. You can be pretty sure he isn't suffering now. The

chances are that he won't revive enough to realize what is happening to him. I know that sun. Under that great lens above the pit, and with no water—why, the poor fellow probably went out soon after he stopped answering our hails, two hours ago. Is the girl still hanging about there? I wonder she can endure the heat!"

"She's such a kind of queer creature," offered John B. gloomily, "that I don't reckon it's possible to guess what she could or couldn't stand, sir. I've met lots of queer kinds, different places, but I didn't suppose there could be one just like her. She seems to me a lot more horrible than that big centipede, sir."

"She isn't!" cried the youthful Sigabee despairingly. "She's—Oh, I don't know what she is, but I tell you that girl is not wicked! It's all some abominable mistake!"

"Mistake that poor old TNT is dead or dying there! Mistake that she's hovering over him like—a weeping vulture!"

"No, she isn't, Waring. She's gone away—or at least, I think she has. There's such a glare that a fellow can't see much."

"The focus," Otway observed, "must have been complete for some minutes past. My friends, poor Telfifer is—"

He paused. Indeed, to finish the sentence was needless. The sun, centered now in a brass sky, had too obviously reached the full altitude of its murderous mission.

Waring was worst hit, but the others felt badly enough. The esthete had been eccentric, fanciful, sometimes more than a little trying; but with all his moods and nerves, he had carried a reckless bravery; there had been a certain odd, innocent loveableness about him.

Dim against the blinding glory beyond, a slender form fitted past the sullenly silent cell rank. To the left, where rose the bronze lever that controlled the great stone bowl, a slight, metallic, grating sound was heard.

Sigabee and Otway, whose cells were nearest the center, vaguely beheld the phantasmic rising of a huge rounded mass beneath Sunfire.

A few seconds later the faint but unmistakable splash of a solid mass striking water far below reached their ears.

CHAPTER TWELVE REVENGE!

"CUT it, Sig! I'm past caring. That little Jezebel murdered Telfifer! Woman! Murderess—torturer—she-

send! Tears! Yes—of the crocodile brand. Part of her stock-in-trade. Don't know what the rest of 'em are like here. Maybe there aren't any others. Maybe she and that old hag I saw are the last of a rotten crop. But fifty or a thousand, take this from me: little Susan is head-devil of the lot! We're all due to go West. One at a time or en masse. No difference. But she's going with us! Oh, she's wise. Kept out of my reach just now. If she hadn't, I'd have—But no matter. She'll release us again. She'll trust that crawling horror to protect her. And then—"The vengeful correspondent's voice sank to a sinister whisper—"then I'll get her!"

Night had returned, bringing the silent, strange little food-bearer with her basket of fruit and small water-jars. She had come alone as before, but there had been a slight variation. The first time she had handed in the provisions at close range, seeming assured that the prisoners would not try to harm her.

Tonight she had brought a second, much smaller basket. Before each cell she had filled this small receptacle from the large one, and gravely extended it, keeping such distance that the reach of a man's arm through one of the triangular windows might achieve a grasp on the basket, but not on her hands. Emptied by the cell's occupant, the basket must be tossed back and used again.

The procedure indicated a clear understanding of the bitterness toward her. Yet, aside from this, there had been no change in appearance or manner. The eyes that blessed and grieved were innocent of evil as before.

While she passed along the rank, none of the four had spoken a word to her. She had never indicated that she understood, when they had addressed her. Words were useless. Moreover, there had come to be something indescribably shocking in that difference between her acts and the promise of all gentle good in her appearance.

One flash of mockery, one taunting curl of the childlike mouth, and the whole affair, terrible though it was, would have seemed a shade more endurable. But the taunt never came. She pitied them, it seemed, deeply. She had no consciousness of wrong toward them, but to witness their captivity and consider the fate on its way to them, grieved her. Sad, very sad, that in the world should be pain and mourning and the ludicrous, unadvised helplessness of four strong men at the mercy of one slender maiden!

In Waring, the effect of all this came dangerously near to real madness. Agony over Tellifer's lingering death had instilled his friend with a ruthless hate, against which dissuasive arguments beat vainly. Waring's threats, uttered after the girl had gone, were sincere!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN AN AWFUL CRIME

AN HOUR later, and again the grotesque ceremonial progress of victims and captors about the sacrificial pit.

Between this occasion and the first, however, were differences. Not only was the captive band's number reduced to four, but these four moved with a strangely absorbed interest in each other.

Otway, blinking desperately, must rely on the steward alone to warn and guide him. Young Sigbee had lost his enthusiasm for "nature dancing." Silently, without admission of their purpose, he and Waring were engaged in a duel of approach and defense.

At the cells, as if aware of her danger, the girl had passed Waring by and laid on John B. the task of releasing himself and his fellows. The last had been first and the first last with such effect that when Waring finally emerged, sinister purpose in the very poise of his massive person, he had found a barrier of three men between him and his quarry.

There had been some words exchanged, then. In the very shadow of death, the quartette had come close to a violent quarrel. Unreasonable accusations of disloyalty from Waring, however, were met by a cool counter-accusation from Otway that headed off active strife. Woman-killing aside, said the naturalist, Waring had no right to rob the rest of any slim little chance for life the evening might bring.

On that score, Waring had grimly yielded. But he made no promises for his behavior in the court's more open field. There, should he attack the dancer, he would surely be slain. But while the monster's attention was upon him, the others might grasp their "almighty chance for life" and welcome.

The compromise was neither accepted nor declined, because just at that point the obligato from the Pan's pipes had ceased and the disputants had hastily taken the hint and the outward path. But though no more was said, Waring's set determination was plain enough.

The dancer, as before, danced as though alone in the hollow pyramid.

The hideous, scampering coils that followed and surrounded them all might have been bodiless smoke-wreaths, so far as she was concerned. The angry, maddened giant of a man whose blood-shot glances gloated threateningly on her light movements had no seeming existence for her.

But young Sigbee knew that her danger was very real indeed.

Forty-eight hours in the pyramid had reduced a big, good-humored, civilized man to a savage with one idea in his head, and one only. Waring had stood by helpless while the friend he loved was tortured to death. Now, unshaven, red-eyed, massive and dangerous as the "cave-man" he resembled, the correspondent stalked his indifferent prey, while again and again Sigbee took outrageous risks to keep his own person between them.

In actual physical conflict, the young yacht-owner would have had little chance with the correspondent. For all his feishiness, Waring was quick as a cat, light-moving almost as the little dancer herself—far more powerful than Sigbee. But even a few seconds of bodily struggle would mean death for both. Neither dared pause an instant in that constant avoidance of hideous running claws.

Sigbee got no help from the girl's official defender. Whatever its training, the monstrous guardian lacked intelligence to understand that strange duel between captives over the life of their tyrant. Its scampering talons threatened defender and attacker alike.

The end came at last with great suddenness.

For just an instant the girl poised motionless in one of the graceful poses that interspersed the dance steps. Tellifer's avenger had achieved a place not six feet from her. Sigbee was momentarily entrapped in a running loop, the inner edge of which had flung up knees-high above the floor.

Seeing his chance, Waring took it like a flash.

In almost the same instant a number of things happened. What some of them were was understood by only one person; the rest merely found themselves involved in a chaos of peril.

Waring sprang. Sigbee, taking another desperate chance, bounded over the clashing loop. He collided in mid-air with his massive opponent. The two crashed heavily down at the girl's very feet.

John B., a little distance off, saw the hovering yellow death's head swing around with a darting motion. He shouted warningly. But the combat-

ants on the floor were seeking each other's throats with a whole-hearted attention which ignored the shout. The girl shrank back a step—and lowered her Pan's pipes.

At that signal, John B. saw the hovering head rise a trifle. Those curved daggers, its poison-fangs, opened wide. All the scampering pattern of segments halted—the head poised—

And then, instead of shooting downward, John B. saw the head give a great, sweeping jerk sideways.

Inexplicably, it swung over and struck the side of the faceted, luminous crystal above the pit.

Next instant it was as if a yellowish tornado had been loosed in the central court. The air seemed full of a blurred chaos of convulsive segments.

The yellow blur flashed around the pit, enveloped the eight pillars in a coiling cloud. The cloud condensed—became the taloned, yellow length again, but wrapped around the columns in a straining, writhing skin. Up from this skin rose the head, twisting from side to side as if in agony.

Above the pit, a single, distinct, ringing sound shivered out—a quivering ping-p-p, as of a great crystal goblet sharply struck. It was followed by a silent convulsive shock—a kind of bursting scintillation of white glare. Then, like the downward swoop of a vast, black wing, utter darkness.

IN THE central court men called to one another in hoarse shouts, groped and blindly sought each other.

They could not understand! The monstrous creature of talons and venom was gone. At least, the dry rustle and clash which had accompanied its presence were no longer heard. Cautiously exploring feet found none of the dangerous segments.

In that first mad flurry of rage, convulsive agony, or whatever had smitten it, the thing had knocked John B. and the explorer off their feet, and one of the talons, catching in Otway's furry tunic, had broken the shoulder-straps and jerked it partly off him. Aside from this, no damage had been sustained by any of the four captives.

Waring and Sigbee had forsaken their death-grapple. Meeting at last, the other couple found them like a pair of dazed children, hand in hand, seeking nothing save escape from the incomprehensible.

The light of Sunfire had exploded to a scintillant glare and left them blind. Overhead, in a humid, blue-black sky, great stars winked down at them, but not brightly enough to shed one re-

vealing ray on this latest mystery of the pyramid.

Girl, monster and glowing crystal, the three presiding elements of their strange captivity, seemed to have been simultaneously wiped out of existence. The jaguar-hide tunics alone were left as assurance that the experience had been a real one.

Suddenly, in the dark, young Sigbee grasped the arm of his late adversary.

"Look!" he gasped. "Look up at the rim there! A light—and somebody crouched down beside it!"

There on the pyramid's rim indeed, fifty feet above, a small light glowed warm and yellow. It showed what seemed to be the form of a man. It was not standing nor even looking down toward them. The form squatted with rounded shoulders and bent head. Its face was hidden in its hands. The attitude was one of overpowering grief.

A moment later and the figure had risen slowly. It raised the light, evidently a common oil lantern, and began a leisurely descent of the inner stair. As it came on, the head was still bent and the shoulders drooped dejectedly.

"Who in God's name!" breathed Waring—and was silent.

They were four civilized men, who did not believe in demons, apparitions, nor that, as primitive folk hold, the newly dead are restless and may rise in their lifeless flesh. Therefore they stood their ground.

It was true that for Mr. Theron Narcisse Telfer, or any other man of flesh and blood, to have spent those last hours exposed without water in the heat of the pit, passed at least ten minutes beneath the fully-focused rays, and finally been dropped five hundred feet or so to some dark pool within the pyramid's base, and still survive, was, on the face of it, more incredible than even the living-dead theory. It was also true that Waring's hand closed on Otway's bare shoulder in a grip that left the shoulder numb, and the explorer was not even conscious of it. Still—they stood their ground.

He—it—the thing that wore Telfer's seeming—had gotten rid of the indecorous jaguar-hide-and-gold-bangles effect, and was again dressed for roughing it in civilized style. A very small, light rifle was carried under one arm.

Reaching the lower level, the mysterious form raised its dejected head, lifted the lantern, and spoke.

"The final consummation of an awful crime," it began, "has been accomplished! Alcot, I know that you are

there somewhere and alive, for I heard you swearing. I trust that you are satisfied! You denied that Sunfire, that lost miracle of loveliness, was a diamond. You were wrong. Sunfire was a diamond, though it is now, alas, only a shattered wreck of dust and fragments! Wondrous though its beauty, Sunfire was but a vast carbon crystal. The heat beating upward from the pit must long since have prepared this end. The stone could never have been re-cut. It could hardly have been lifted down intact from the columns. The impact of my unlucky air-gun bullet striking the side dissolved it in a shining cloud of dust! My friends, I was fairly certain yesterday that Sunfire's ruin had been wrought. But to have finished the evil work of those ignorant vandals with my own hand! I wish—I wish that I had returned to New York by liner from Para, as I was tempted to do!"

While the voice spoke, no one had even thought of interrupting its ad discourse. As it ceased, Waring drew a great breath.

"That," said he with deep conviction, "that's Telfer! Damn you, TNT! All those hours and—yes, you even took time to shave! How'd you get out of that bow! Why didn't you come back sooner! D'you know you nearly made a damn, cold-blooded woman murderer of me? Come here with that lantern. My foot just struck something. It's the girl! Is she—is she badly hurt, Sigbee?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FLIGHT

ON EXAMINATION by lantern-light, the mysterious little tyrant of the pyramid was found to be still breathing. As there were no wounds on her, it was decided that she had fainted from shock or fright.

Dread that her monstrous companion might be lurking near in the darkness was soon dissipated. Over beyond the pit, a vast tangled heap of loathsome yellow proved to be the thing's lifeless body. The head-shield trailed out on the pavement, presented a very peculiar appearance. One of the eyes was pierced by a small, round bullet hole. Also, the entire head plate was scarred with innumerable scratches and perforations through which oozed a whitish, semi-liquid substance.

Chalmers replied listlessly to many questions, while Sigbee and the steward bathed the unconscious girl's brow with some of the water she had brought them in their cells.

Waring watched these ministrations with concern. Discovery that her watch over a tortured man's death, and the cold-blooded dumping of his corpse afterward, had been acts only of seeming, had wrought a change in even the correspondent's feeling toward her. Why she had "gone through the motions," as Waring phrased it, was not at all clear. But Tellifer's story revealed that he had certainly not been present while she wept over his supposed agony. The thing actually dumped, when she threw the lever, was a piece of rock.

Use of the lantern for examination of the pit confirmed his tale. Near the bottom of the great bowl was now a large, irregular aperture. The shock which cracked the stones when Tellifer allowed it to swing back, full weight, the first evening, had saved the experimenter's life. There had then been a jagged, branching crevice. The shrinking effect of next day's white-hot noon-focus had completed the work.

Tellifer explained that about the time he ceased answering their calls, he had discovered that a part of the bowl's curving side was in actual fragments, only held in place by pressure. With the buckle of his metal girdle he had managed to pry out one of the smaller pieces till he could get finger-grip on it. After its removal, taking out the larger fragments was easy.

He had, he said, refrained from telling his friends of this, partly because he was too dry to speak easily, and partly out of consideration—lest he raise false hopes. No, he hadn't expected them to thank him for that. But how could he know that he was going to get through alive? Very well. He would continue the story if there were not too many interruptions.

His first idea had been a dive into the depths. On casting down several of the rock fragments, resulting splashes told him that there was water below. Well, if his friends had heard no such splashes, he was not responsible for that. They were making so much noise yelling at him that the fact was not surprising. Such a dive, however, proved needless.

Through the hole he had found himself able to swing by his hands and fling himself sideways into an open, floored space beneath the upper pavement. It was very dark down there, but, feeling about, he had come upon a system of great metal bars and cylinders. It dawned on him that the ancient engineers had arranged the machinery which revolved the bowl in an open horizontal shaft, probably for

convenience in case of breakdown. There seemed a chance that at the other end of this shaft he might find an exit.

Stumbling through blackness, he had come upon a narrow flight of stairs, had fallen down them, and, upon recovering from that a little, had found himself near an open doorway at the back of one of the outer buildings, in the fifth terrace of the pyramid's western plane.

Though privations, a bad night and his latest tumble had left him very weak, he remembered the need of his friends. He had managed to drag himself around to the eastern stair and down it to water-level. After drinking and getting himself a little food aboard the canoe, he had lain down to rest a few minutes.

Nature had betrayed him and it was dusk when he awoke. Yes, certainly he had slept all afternoon. While in the bowl he had hardly been able to sleep at all. Their shouts had disturbed him. Very well. He would accept the apologies and continue.

Though not a practical man, he had deemed best to be prepared in every way possible to meet difficulties. Therefore he had taken time to eat again and exchange that abominable jaguar-hide for a more dignified costume. Also to shave. Yes, he felt that the moral support received from these two latter acts was worth the time expended on them. He was not a practical man—

"Oh, get on with it, TNT!" grinned his friend. "Providence looks out for such as you—and us. You surely made a clean finish. Maybe the shave helped. How'd you happen to think of the air-gun?"

Tellifer had, it seemed, recalled efforts of his own to shoot loons on the northern lakes. This is an impossible feat since the birds dive at the flash and are beneath the surface before the charge can reach them. Applying past experience to present emergency, it occurred to him that if there was no flash, the monstrous centipede could not take warning.

The air-rifle, which belonged to Otway, was a very powerful one. Because of its small caliber, however, Tellifer had not meant to use it except in dire need. Climbing to the pyramid's rim, he had seen his comrades led forth, and watched with much interest and curiosity the singular evolutions of Waring and Sigabee. When they finally fell at one another's throats, and the venomous yellow head poised to strike, he had perceived that the air-gun idea must be tried out at once.

The first shot struck one of the monster's enormous eyes. The second missed the head and hit the great crystal.

Like any diamond that has been subjected to high temperatures, Sunfire had acquired a brittleness that made it more fragile than glass. It had "splintered" at the impact, with such completeness as had all the effect of a silent explosion.

The monster had been slain, not by the bullets, but by Sunfire. Over a dozen feet above floor-level, Sunfire had perished without claiming any further human victims. But the head of its monstrous votary, almost in contact with the exploding crystal, had been perforated by the sharp dust and splinters.

Practical man or not, it appeared that with a couple of shots from an air-gun TNT had made a complete clean-up of the two main perils of the pyramid. The third—if peril she could be termed outside her relations with the other two—was left at the mercy of her victims.

It was decided to carry the girl with them to the canoe. Food, a night's rest, and counsel, were needed before any effort was made to seek out the pyramid's other and strangely retiring inhabitants. For one thing, there was the question of weapons. Beside the air-rifle, a couple of shotguns and a spare Winchester had been left on board the canoe. But all their small fire-arms and the rifles they had carried the first night, were in the enemies' hands. Even were the "tribe" few in number, this superiority of armament made seeking them an adventure to be approached cautiously.

They had had enough of reckless indiscretion. Hereafter every act should be well considered. The conquest of the pyramid, begun by Tellifer, should be carried to a finish with the least possible risk.

So they spoke, like wise, intelligent men, the while they viewed pityingly the unconscious form of their de-throned tyrant.

Waring in particular, seeing her, frail, graceful, with her face of a sleeping child supported on Sigabee's knee, felt a hot wave of shame and a great wonder at himself.

This child had been brought up in these barbaric surroundings. Doubtless religious training had fought the gentle instincts natural to her, and made her bitterly unhappy. She had done as she had been taught was right, and in the doing—suffered.

She seemed rousing, at last. Color had returned to the tender lips. The steadfast, reverent boy who held her, smoothed back a curling tendril of the red-gold hair. Waring, shamefacedly gentle, dropped to his knees and attempted to take one of the fragile wrists. His innocent intent was to feel the pulse. But Sigbee struck at his hand in a flare of resentment which showed that a certain recent incident was neither forgotten nor forgiven.

The rebuke was accepted with meekness. Waring retreated. He felt less a man at that moment than ever in his life before.

The great eyes opened slowly, closed, opened again. The lantern in Tellifer's hand showed a look of frightened doubt—of dawning wonder. She struggled to raise herself.

Not one of her freed captives spoke. Perhaps they were all a little curious to see how she would bear herself in the face of this changed situation. They were not left long in doubt.

She had risen to a half-crouching position, slender limbs drawn up under her. For a long minute she stared from figure to figure of those about her. They had never seen her show any signs of fear. But now something like abject terror was creeping into the dawn-blue eyes.

With a quick jerk of the head, she glanced behind her. The solicitous face of the youngest "cave-man" at her back seemed to reassure her not at all.

She looked down, fingered the gold bangles on the edge of her jaguar-hide tunic, raised the Pan's pipes, still firmly clasped in one hand, inspected the fatal instrument—and—

It happened so quickly that five wise, intelligent men had plunged into a fresh indiscretion before they had time to think about it.

With a low cry, the girl flung the Pan's pipes from her. The slender, gathered limbs shot her erect. She sprang sideways, ducked under Waring's arm, sprung to check her, and was off across the court!

They had seen her dance. This was their first opportunity to see her run. The quondam captives charged after, but the shadow of a flying cloud would have been as easy to catch.

The door in the southeastern wall stood open. It closed with a clasp before the pursuers had crossed half the intervening space. Reaching it, they learned that the illusive one's panic had been genuine. She had not paused to bar the door behind her. It had even swung open again an inch or so.

Hurled wide, it revealed a long flight of descending stairs. Tellifer held the lantern high. Part way down the flight, a flash of starlike jewels—the flirt of a flying jaguar-hide tunic.

Discretion! The masculine fever of the hunt had them now. Four unshaven, wild-eyed cave-men and one civilized and freshly enthused esthete plunged recklessly down in pursuit of the flying tunic.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DOWN THE STAIR

THE descent proved not so deep as it had seemed from above. Thirty seconds brought the pursuers to a blank wall and a landing.

The flirting tunic had flashed around the corner ahead of them. They turned after it. The landing proved to mark a right-angular turn in the stair.

Not very far ahead now the starry jewels glittered and bobbed to the flying leaps of their wearers. Suddenly there was a sharper plunge—a shrill cry.

Tellifer's long legs had carried him into the lead, but now the youngest "cave-man" cleared four steps at a bound and took the lead away from him.

"She's fallen!"
Sigbee's voice wailed back in an anguish of solicitude. By the time the lantern caught up with him again he had reached a second landing—had gathered in his arms a slender, softly-moaning form that lay there.

Tellifer arrived, panting. He raised the lantern.

Sigbee stared down at the form his arms guarded. He made a queer little choking sound in his throat. Then, not roughly, but with considerable haste, he laid the form down on the stone landing.

As he did so, its lower limbs trailed limply, but a clawlike hand at the end of a scrawny arm darted scratchingly upward. A quick jerk of the head just saved Sigbee's cheek from mutilation.

The toothless mouth of the creature he had laid down mowed and chattered wordlessly. Gray, ragged locks strayed from beneath a circle of glittering stars. The spotted jaguar-hide was clasped over scrawny, yellowish shoulders. The contorted face glared up with terrible eyes—eyes that had feasted long on cruelty and raged now, aware that their years of evil power were spent, but dying with a frank, though wordless, curse for the victims that had escaped.

The claw-hand made another dash for Sigbee's face—flung back—beat upon the floor convulsively. A shuddering heave of the upper body—a strangled, gurgling sound—

"Dead!" said Waring a minute later. "Broken spine. It's the old hag I saw. But how, in God's name—where'd the girl get to!"

The question was more interesting than any of them cared to admit. Descending those two flights of stairs, they had passed no doorway nor openings of any kind through which she might have turned aside and eluded them. Of course, there was the possibility of some disguised, secret passage. Yet, if so, why had the old woman not retreated by the same road?

It was a question which poor Sigbee made not even an effort to answer. He was very white, looked strangely older. He was shivering in the dark, breathless chill that enveloped them.

There were no sounds down here, nor any light, save that of Tellifer's lantern.

This lower landing was really the foot of the stair. Off from it opened a triangular arch. Standing in the arch, they found themselves peering into what seemed a great, eight-sided vault or chamber. The lantern did not suffice to illuminate the far wall, but those nearby were chiseled in colonial forms of women, dancing as the girl had danced, charming loathsome monsters with their Pan's pipes.

The place, damp as an underground tomb, contained no furnishings. The only signs of human occupation were several vague heaps of what appeared to be clothing.

On investigation, the explorers found stacked there an accumulation of divers garments in as many stages of freshness and mouldering rot as marked the derelict fleet on the lake. Most were trade-cloth shirts and more or less ragged trousers, such as the rubber-workers wear. There were also better outfits that bespoke the white man. The cascock of a Jemut spirit was among them, falling apart with great age. Also, the heavy costume and hood which told them that the gray hydro-airplane on the lake might wait in vain for the return of its pilot.

The five found their own clothing, and also their weapons stacked on a great pile that included the rust-acked, muzzle-loading guns of dead *seringeiros*, some modern weapons ruined by the damp, a red blow-pipe, and a great, badly warped bow of raripari wood with a quiver of long arrows.

Nothing of theirs was missing. John B. even found and restored to the naturalist his precious shell-rims. But the vault reeked and dripped with maldorous dampness. The rotting garments exhaled a breath as from the tomb of their former owners.

Very silent in that lifeless place, the five returned to the stairfoot and bent above the withered dead thing there. The starry diamonds in its hideous hair gleamed with a cold, wicked luster.

Where was the mournful, innocent child who had entrapped them? She who had—dwelt, perhaps, in this tomb-like lair?

"I am going away from here," announced Tellifer abruptly. "I don't like this place! It is—ugly!"

No one objected. Despite cave-man costumes, they were civilized men who did not believe in vampires, demons, or hideous night-hags that dwelt in underground vaults and issued forth to trap victims with a false illusion of loveliness. Yet they felt that further investigation of the pyramid might wait for a later time. The chill atmosphere was sickening. They wanted open air—wanted it badly.

Due to this need, their return to the upper level was marked with a certain haste. The garden court held nothing to keep them lingering. Only a very few minutes were needed to reach the rim and negotiate the outer descent.

The traveling-canoë—exceptional among the derelicts—received its returning crew. There was something consoling, something sane and homelike in the very feel of its deck-planks. But it occurred to them that the night would be passed more pleasantly at a distance from the pyramid.

Then, having paddled out a way, somebody suggested that if anything—anyone, that is, of course—were inclined to be dissatisfied with their escape and come after them, the rest of the fleet offered a too-convenient means.

Despite fatigue and starvation, they found strength to paddle back and attend to this potential menace. In consequence, it was nearly midnight when they at last dropped anchor. By the time they had finished supper, cooked on the vapor-stove, three of them were past reeking of perilous pyramids and suspicious that diabolical philosophy might have more reason in it than they had believed. Sleep gripped these three like a heavy drug. Tellifer, who, having slept all afternoon, was elected watchman, gave characteristic respect to duty by drawing off soon afterward.

Sigbee, however, did not sleep. On the foredeck, he lay for hours, staring at the mountainous black mass outlined by humid starshine. There was no faint luminescence hovering above it now. *Tata Quasaky*—Fire of the Sun—was destroyed. Its monstrous guardian lay dead. Its priestess—?

Young Sigbee felt very strange and old and uncertain about it all. Yet if at any time that night a light had flashed in the dark mass, or a voice had called, he would not have roused the others. He would have taken his life and his soul in his hands and gone back alone to the pyramid.

SUNRISE, and the eastward stair a flaming height of red and orange and gold.

The reflected splendor, beating on Tellifer's face, awakened him. He opened his eyes, recalled that he was a watchman, sat up and viewed the pyramid in conscientious scrutiny.

It was still there, and its loveliness in this early morning light atoned in a measure, he decided, for the ugly things that had gone on inside of it. Those things seemed very dreamlike and remote this morning. As for a vampirish night-hag who could appear at will as a beautiful girl—Tellifer considered the idea with interest. Last night he had wanted nothing save to get away from it, but this morning his fanciful taste dealt with it more kindly.

Sunrise is a bad hour, however, to believe in ghosts and vampires. Tellifer regretfully shook his head. Then he uttered a sharp ejaculation, shot to his feet, dived into the cabin and was back an instant later, a pair of binoculars in his hand. En route, he had given a rousing kick to the correspondent and Otway.

Stumbling forth, they found their alert night-watchman with binoculars focused on the head of the sun-lit stair.

Far up there, against the background of flaming stone, a small, dark figure was moving.

Waring ruthlessly appropriated the binoculars by force, while the equally curious Otway squeezed against his shoulder as if trying to get at least one eye to the glasses.

Sigbee, who had dropped asleep just before dawn, roused, took in the scene, and reached the group in a bound. His boyish voice broke and crackled.

"Is it she? Is she alive? Is she coming down?"

Waring shook his head. "Somebody's coming down. But it isn't a 'she,' Sig. It's—Yet how can that be? The cells were empty—and we saw—"

"I know," Tellifer cut in. "We saw his clothing down there with that of all the other dead men. But this pyramid, Aleot, is not limited as are less distinguished haunts of the un-dead. Night, noon or sunrise, its ghosts may walk as they please. The ghost of the air-pilot

comes now to offer his congratulations on our escape!"

But no one was paying attention to Tellifer.

Sigbee, in turn, had annexed the glasses. What he saw through them caused him to give a kind of choking gasp, and thereafter, on the selfish score that they were his, he kept the binoculars.

The figure, however, soon came near enough so that even with the naked eye its costume, at least, was unmistakable. The goggles were pushed up visor-like on the close-fitting hood. A trifle awkwardly in the loose, heavily lined suit, the mysterious air-pilot whom they had once thought to rescue, accomplished the full descent.

He walked slowly forward on the broad stone landing stage. Reaching the edge, he contemplated the canoe, turned his gaze to the airplane, returned it to the canoe.

Then he called across to those aboard the latter. The voice was slightly tremulous!

"I beg your pardon! After all that has happened, I dislike so much to trouble you! But you've taken all the boats away. Would you mind very much if I asked you to just—just push one in where I can reach it and paddle out to my 'plans'?"

Sigbee dropped his binoculars. They splashed unheeded in the lake. His companions were in pajamas, blanket-draped but Sigbee's blindly devotional foresight had led him to shave and dress before retiring the night before. Ere any of the others could move, he had made a flying leap from the canoe to the nearest derelict, a crudely hollowed native dug-out.

"I told you!" he flung back as he hauled in the dugout's mooring-stone. "Didn't I tell you I'd seen that girl before? And I know where, now! Just as I said. Everything absolutely all right, but you fellows—Never mind! Coming, Miss Enid!"

Oars splashed, and the dugout fairly shot across toward the landing stage.

Of those left on the canoe, Tellifer was the first to find voice.

"He has seen her before," said he solemnly. "Ah, yes! Her name is Miss Enid, she is an air-pilot, and these facts make everything absolutely all right. Naturally. But do you know, Aleot, despite my love for the beautiful and mysterious, I have had about enough of that pyramid! By all means, let Sig have it! I suggest that the rest of us go away now, while we are still able, and leave that pair in possession!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
THE STORY OF MISS ENID
WIDDIUP

IT IS so good in you all," the girl began, somewhat later in the day, when they were all seated together under the big canoe's awning. "so very good in you to understand and not blame me in the least for any of it. Of course, Mr. Sigbee's remembering me helps. I am almost sure that I recall his face, too, though I drove so many officers back and forth to Camp Upton—Oh, you were 'just a sergeant' and I didn't drive you? Why, I drove lots of the non-coms and the boys, too. We all did. Well, if you couldn't get near my car, I'm sorry. There was a crowd—Oh, you were transferred to Georgia just after I began driving at Camp Upton? And then never got across? That was stupid. But I can sympathize with you fully. They wouldn't take me in the ambulance corps, because they said I was too young and not strong enough. Wasn't that absurd? I'm not so awfully large, of course, but my physical endurance is simply endless. But I must begin at the beginning and tell this properly.

"My father, as I have already told you, was Dr. Alexander Widdiup, the archaeologist, and I was born on the Amazon, in Manaus. Mother took me home to New York when I was a baby, and I never saw Brazil again till this summer.

"I was nine years old when poor Dad wrote us that he was planning a trip up the Rio Silencioso. An Indian had brought him word that at the Silencioso's source were some remarkable ruins and relics of an ancient people. This Indian—his name was Peter or—no, Petro, that was it—I beg pardon, Mr. Otway? Yes, his name was Kuyambira-Petro. Dad said he came from some cannibal tribe on the Moju river. He was a wizard, too, and made charms to protect people from jungle and river-demons. He showed Dad one of those jaguar tunics, and two small diamonds, cut to symbolize the sun. But the expedition my father organized, never came back.

"Dad had been with us in New York only part of each year, but he and I were best pals. I used to say to myself that some day, when I grew up, I'd find a way to at least learn how he died.

"Then the War came. Mother always lets me do about as I please, and I had learned to fly a Blériot, but of course they wouldn't take me in the aviation corps, either. So finally I had to content myself with motor-car service at home. After peace was signed, poor Major Dupont agreed to help me in my scheme

to reach the source of the Rio Silencioso by the air-route. Major Dupont was English—Royal Flying Corps—but he was visiting friends in New York on six months' leave. When I told him my plan he considered it very practical and interesting.

"We decided on the hydro-airplane because we had to rise from the Amazon, and over these forests if we couldn't come down on water we couldn't come down at all.

"Mother is at Manaus now, waiting for me. She is probably terribly worried, but still she knows that I always do get through safely somehow. I beg pardon! Oh, I inherit an adventurous disposition from father, and I don't think size and physical strength count for so much in these days. . . .

"Why, Mr. Waring! You mustn't say that! Why, I didn't mean that at all! You poor things, of course you couldn't help yourselves with that frightful beast threatening you every moment. But let me go on, and you'll understand better.

"Mother drew the line at my making this trip alone, but poor Major Dupont was so resourceful and had such a splendid flying record that when he offered, that made it much safer, of course. The Major and I only meant to make a reconnaissance flight this first trip, but we had no trouble in finding the lake. The top of the pyramid flashed its location to us miles off. Of course, we didn't know what the flash meant. It was like an enormous, bright star shining in broad daylight, and on earth instead of up in the sky where stars belong.

"Mr. Teller! A fallen star—yes, that was just what poor Major Dupont said it resembled. It is a little strange that he should have used that comparison, because of what was told to me later on.

"We planed down to the lake and landed in the collapsible boat we carried. There have been several heavy rains since, and our little craft must have filled and sunk. I notice it is not among the others. Major Dupont wished me to wait and let him go up the pyramid alone, but I wouldn't, so we went up together. It was noon, but of course we had no means of knowing that noon meant anything dangerous.

"We looked over the upper rim, and there was that strange hollow place, with palms and shrubbery and in the middle—something glorious. Major Dupont said it must be the grandfather of all diamonds, and we joked over it. We knew it was fearfully hot in the court, but it was hot outside, too. We walked over to the pit. Major Dupont said there must be a furnace below it. He stepped

on one of the five-sided stones—By mere chance, I had one foot on the solid pavement and pulled myself back in time. I ran out on one of the oblong stones. The column I caught hold of was so hot it scorched my hands. I—I find I can't tell you much of this. . . . Thank you. Yes, I believe I'll just leave it out. I couldn't help him. There wasn't time. I—fainted, I think.

"Afterward, for a long while, everything was like a dream. My first memory is of looking up into the face of an old woman, very strangely dressed. She was lying on the floor of one of the outer houses. She had taken away my own clothes and dressed me like herself. This seemed a bit strange for a few minutes, and after that quite natural. I accepted everything just as one does in a dream. Some of the time I would even seem to know I was dreaming, and wonder a little why I couldn't wake up. I felt very sad always, though there didn't seem any real reason for it.

"I think it was the shock of what I had seen happen. There was a Miss Blair that mother and I knew. She was the dearest girl, but she had been at a hospital base in France when it was shelled by the Germans. For nearly a year afterward she wasn't herself at all. She cried a great deal, and couldn't take interest in anything. I used to bring her flowers, and when I called I noticed she would never do anything unless the nurse or I suggested she should. I suppose I was very much like that. . . .

"Why yes, Mr. Waring. If any of you had asked me to release you or told me to shut that hideous creature in its hole, I think I would have done it. When you all seemed so—so annoyed over what was happening, I used to wonder why you never asked me to do differently. But then, you were just people in a dream, and dream-people never do behave consistently, you know. So I went on acting as Sifa directed me, because that was easiest.

"The old woman's name was Sifa. She spoke English and some other language that meant nothing to me. Her teeth were nearly all gone, but very soon I grew used to the numbing and the broken accent and understood almost everything she said in English.

"I did whatever she advised me to. She didn't hurt me or even threaten. In fact, she was extremely considerate and—kind, I was going to say, but that hardly expresses it. Her face and eyes were too wicked. I followed her advice because she seemed to know exactly what I ought to do, and it was such an effort to think of things for myself. Besides,

it was all so dreamlike. Nothing mattered in the least.

"Sifa said that Ama-Hotu, Lord of Day, had sent me in a cloud-canoe from the skies, so that the ancient worship might not fail. She was the last of her people. Many seasons ago, a great sickness carried off all that were left of her race, the Oello. I can't tell you much of the Oello people's history. You see, though I understood what she said, I didn't feel like speaking at all to anyone, and I asked no questions.

"But Sifa, of her own accord, told me that a long time ago, at the beginning of all seasons, Ama-Hotu, Lord of Day, caused the great star Husc to descend upon the earth. Husc the Star was jealous of his honor. So Ama-Hotu commanded that Corya the great Earth Serpent with Feet, should give him worship in the dark hours, and that the sacred women dedicated to Ama-Hotu's service should also serve Husc the Star. By day, in return, Husc was servant to Ama-Hotu and presided over the offerings.

"Corya, the Serpent with Feet, had many children of which the Star was father.* For seasons beyond number the children of Corya and the Star dwelt together in the pyramid, and the sacred women of Ama-Hotu danced with them in worship of the Star and Sun. But a season came when Corya, the Earth Serpent devoured her children.

"Two of them were saved by one of the sacred women and carried to the surrounding land. Until that time the Oello, Sifa's people, had dwelt in great numbers on the land. The pyramid was a place of worship, and only the sacred dancing women dwelt here. But the pair of Corya's children multiplied. They would not harm the sacred women, whose music they loved, but they slew so many of the people that at last there were only a few left, and those came to dwell under protection of the dancers in the pyramid. They still grew crops along the shores, but for this the sacred ones must go ashore and protect them with music.

"There were so few of the Oello people left that the human offerings to Ama-Hotu could no longer be selected from their number. For many seasons, long before Sifa was born, it had been the custom to send secret emissaries who traveled upon water, which the children of Corya could not cross, and brought back victims from the outer tribes. Some-

*There is at least a question among the naturalists, as to whether the rather curious creature, *CHILOPODA SCOLOPHEDEA*, feeds it always necessary to mate in order that the species may be perpetuated.

times they would do this by force, but more often by tempting them with tales of wealth or whatever the victims most desired.

"Sifa said that after all her people died in a great sickness, she lived here many seasons alone. Sifa gave up trying to cultivate the fields on shore, and lived on fruits and nuts and fish from the lake.

"Corya, the great Earth Serpent, was content to be fed on the fruits of the Earth, her father. Flesh had never been offered to her. I suppose really they were afraid the horrible thing would acquire a taste for blood and turn on them. Corya's children ashore, by the way, had never grown to any great size—never more than eighteen inches or so. I think now that all that part was merely a legend, made up to account for the common centipedes one finds in the jungle, and that Corya herself was just an unaccountable freak.

"Sifa had obtained what victims she could to offer Ama-Hotu. In the old days, her people had many friends among the forest tribes, and this dreadful cannibal wizard, Kayambira-Petro was one of them. She told me that sometimes Petro came to visit her. He believed that Husc the Star was greatest of all the empi or spirits. *Tota Quoraky, Life-Breath of the Sun*, he called it. He brought it victims when he could to win its favor.

"I remembered the name—Petro—and it made me sad, so that I cried for hours after she had told me that. But I didn't remember my father or what I had come here for.

"She taught me to play on the little golden pipes and Corya came out of her lair. No, I wasn't afraid of the creature. I wasn't afraid of anything. I tell you, it was all just a dream to me.

"Sifa said that Corya would never harm me, because now I was a sacred woman. She danced with Corya to show me how I was to do. I have always been very fond of dancing, and I liked that part. It was the only thing that interested me, even a little.

"When I—woke up, at last, and found myself sitting there on the floor with you standing around me, I was terribly frightened. I knew for the first time that all those things I had been seeing and hearing and doing were real! And oh I was scared! It was silly in me, but I was actually afraid you might be angry enough to kill me. Mr. Waring? Oh, I thought you spoke.

"So I jumped up and ran. When I reached that doorway, there was Sifa inside. She pulled the door shut and mumbled something at me, and I heard her bare feet go pattering down the stair.

The stairway is wider than the door, you may remember. I just flattened myself tight to the wall inside the doorway. After you passed I ran back in the court and hid among the shrubbery.

"Before the night was over, I had collected my senses and decide the best thing I could do was to tell you I was sorry and go away. So I went down after my suit—Oh, yes, in the dark. Sifa never had any lights, but I had learned to know my way around without. No, certainly we didn't live down in that musty old vault. There are ever so many passages between the inner chambers of the pyramid and the funny little houses outside. We lived outside, of course. Sifa used to be always watching the river mouth in case more victims should come. I was with her when your canoe entered the lake. Sifa was watching you all the time. When you started up the stair, she sent me to call forth Corya, and directed me how to act toward you. I was to send Corya to her hole after a while, and beckon you to come down. But poor Mr. Teller, by falling in, changed that part, and rather confused me for a few minutes. . . .

"It didn't change things enough to hurt! N—no—oh, no, of course not. Really, if you are angry with me, I can't blame you in the least. . . . You're not! It's so dear in you all to say so. And now I—I think I must go. Why, yes, thank you, I can handle the 'plans very nicely alone, and I couldn't think of imposing on you. Why, certainly I'm not angry! But—

"Well, so long as you put it that way, I'll wait, of course. Maybe a day or two of rest would make it safer. And I can show you all around the pyramid. After I've relieved mother's anxiety, I'm coming back here, of course. Oh, yes, I feel it's my duty. You see, poor Dad gave his life to find this place, and I must get the—measurements, you know, and photographs of the carvings and all that. Then I shall give the notes and pictures and what I can remember of the Oello people's history to some archaeologist who understands such things, and he can write a book about it and give the credit to father.

"Mr. Otway! I'm so glad you think that's a splendid idea! And Mr. Waring, you say you write for the magazines. You won't spoil my book by telling about any of it in advance, will you?"

NOON. Ama-Hotu, Lord of Day, glared fiercely down upon Husc the Star's empty shrine and the drying corpse of Corya, the many-taloned Earth Serpent. Old Sifa, last devotee of the

(Continued on page 90)

SUNFIRE

(Continued from page 58)

trio, lay also dead, her withered remains sealed up in a crypt of the pyramid.

But Ama-Hotu, Lord of Day, has been worshiped in many lands. Invariably has he survived his worshipers; outlived a multitude of fellow-gods as well. The empty shrine of Huao, the drying segments of Corys, made no difference at all in the glory of Ama-Hotu.

Four hard-working humans had retreated before his potency. In one of the ancient pyramidal dwellings they lay about in pajamas, sweated, drowsed, and waited for the undisputed Lord of Day to go seek his victims elsewhere.

All morning they had been at work taking the measurements, photographs and notes which were to make the name of Widdiup famous. Sigbee, however, was not among the toilers. The gray hydro-airplane was missing from the desert fleet.

"Miss Enid's pyramid," yawned Waring after a time, "was a wonderful find!"

No one disputed this. He redistributed his mass to a more comfortable posture.

"We never had a chance, you know. First to last—not the ghost of one!"

Otway looked up with a flash of philosophic gray eyes behind the shell-rims.

"I am entirely willing," he said, "to surrender all the honors to Dr. Widdiup's memory."

"Of course you are! So'm I willing to surrender writing it up. TNT was willing—we all were—to surrender the diamonds stored in the pyramid's crypts. P'nest of starving Armenian orphans. Splendid idea. Girl with eyes like hers, bound to think of it. Sig is willing to surrender himself. That is, if she'll have him. Ex-actly! First to last—not a chance!"

"The treacherous spirit of Kuyambira-Petro," began Tellifer—and for the first known time in his life broke off as if for lack of ideas to continue.

"Quite right," approved his friend. "Treacherous cannibal wizard, not worth mentioning. Half-ton diamond cut to broil you alive—easy. Pyramids—monsters—night-hags—burning pits—got a chance with all of 'em. But a girl like Miss Enid—never! Oh, Lawdy, Lawdy! The penalty of being fat and forty! Declined with thanks for the air-trip. Yet I've flown and Sig hasn't. What's your trouble, John B.?"

"I was just thinking, sir, that maybe I might have tried a little harder to get her to take me. Before the War, after I quit the Buffalo Bill show, I used to make exhibition fights in a little old Antoinette I got off a flyer that broke

his neck in it. I had a good deal of experience. Mr. Sigbee means well, but I can't see what real good he could be in case of accident."

"With her airplane and selected captive, she will arrive in Manaoa," spoke Tellifer, the prophet. "I know that she will, for she is a very wise and practical person: she refused to take me! Dr. Otway, I presume you also are among the declined-with-regrets!"

"I am not." The philosophic eyes twinkled again. "In the first place, there was only one of us who deserved to be chosen. And in the second, I had already engaged myself to collect this material for the Widdiup book. But at least, if we are not helping her to make a flight, we are saving her the need of risking another one back here. And the honor of that is something!"

"It is much," agreed Waring, very meekly.

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE.—When the book to be entitled "*Recent Discoveries Pointing to Confirmation of the Theory of Egyptian Origin for South American Aborigines*," collated from material gathered on the spot by four faithful captives, and accredited to the posthumous fame of Dr. Alexander Widdiup, is published, it will be a worthy tome of great interest to archaeologists. But I doubt if its pages will appear the incidents of this tale.

The surrender of Alcot Waring was honorably adhered to. On his return to New York he sadly reported, "No material."

Young Mr. Sigbee has not had leisure to tell a word of it. He is devotedly engaged in keeping up with the inherited disposition of Dr. Alexander Widdiup—an exciting occupation which suits him perfectly.

Mr. Theron Narcissus Tellifer is far too proudly impractical to commit his weird thoughts and adventures to the cold, definite keeping of paper and printer's ink.

But John B. is a very good friend of mine—and John B. told it all to me!

Table of Contents

The contents of *Weird Tales* is fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. All communications should be addressed to the publishers main office at 854 North Clark St., Chicago, Ill.

THE PEOPLE OF THE COMET.....	3
THE BLACK PATCH.....	17
THE SOUL OF PETER ANDRUS.....	19
THE CASE OF DR. JOHNSTONE.....	23
THE DEAD-NAMING OF LUKAPEHU.....	26
THE CUP OF BLOOD.....	27
BLACK MAGIC.....	33
THE DEVIL'S CABIN.....	35
THE OLD BURYING GROUND.....	39
SUNFIRE.....	45
THE OORILLA.....	59
THE TALISMAN.....	62
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A BLUE GHOST.....	64
THE DAMNED THING.....	70
THE TEAK-WOOD SHRINE.....	73
THE MONEY LENDER.....	75
THE BLOODSTAINED PARASOL.....	77
THE EYRIE.....	79
THE CAULDRON.....	86

For Advertising Rates in *WEIRD TALES* apply to YOUNG & WARD, Advertising Managers, 128 North Michigan Blvd., Chicago, Ill.