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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Crystal Curse

By EANDO BINDER

'A veritable weird rhapsody in blue is this fascinating story of dual personality and a man who bridged the gulfs between the dimensions of space

MY COUSIN, the writer of the following words, died insane—or so say the doctors. I wish I could believe them. In his last conscious moments before he died of thrombosis—insane or not—he whispered to me of a sealed envelope among his personal belongings. The envelope was addressed to me, his closest living relative; the carefully written sheets it contained were excerpts from his diary. My wife points out that for material from a diary, it is oddly bookish—descriptive and full of narrative. She thinks George made it up, a last outcropping of his small success as a writer. She agrees with the hospital diagnosis of his mental condition at the time of death, and long preceding. I wish I could.

* * * * *

EXCERPT from the diary of George Borland, dated August 3rd: It has been another of these sultry dog-days, and even now, at close to midnight, the air is still clammy and warm. Well, nothing important happened today. No, nothing of importance except—silly to think of it, but I have had a most strange experience—in a dream. I will put it down, probably to laugh at it sometime in the future.

Came home from the office listless, no doubt because of the humid weather. I had the evening free of any sort of appointment, so I peeled off most of my

clothes, turned the radio on and the lights off, and stretched my lanky form over the sofa. In this state of semi-comfort, with but the faintest of breezes from the open window to relieve my sweating body, I lay with a mind as blank as clean sheets of paper. The radio program barely impinged on my laggard senses.

It was the moonlight, streaming in through the open window like a flood of liquid silver, that first attracted me to the sapphire in my watch-fob. Sparkling eerily in the moonlight, it seemed to draw me—to intrigue me. Or maybe it was imagination.

The fob, I suppose, had slipped from my vest pocket when I draped my suit over the back of a chair. The faint breeze tugged at the leather-weave strand to

● Here is another fascinating weird tale by the two talented Binder brothers, Earl and Otto, who write their delectable stories under the pen name Eando (E. and O.) Binder. This symphony in blues is one of the most striking tales that the brothers Binder have ever hammered out on their typewriter, and we commend it to your attention, knowing that you will enjoy it. The illustration on the opposite page is the work of still a third brother in this talented family: John ("Jack") Binder.



"The old man gazed at him with eager eyes."

which it was attached, and the motion it imparted to the fob caused the stone to twinkle oddly with shafts of blue and indigo and violet. Then I had it in my hand, unconscious almost of having reached for it, and was peering at it closely. Near to my eye, it seemed, instead of glinting, to be merely glowing, like a tiny patch of sunlit sky. Idly I

W. T.—2

turned it over in my hand, trying to count its many facets. I gave that up wearily but then noticed, on peering still closer, that there were clusters of almost invisible bubbles immersed in its crystal-clear depths.

Gazing into the lambent heart of the sapphire, I felt my eyes grow heavy. It seemed that I made an effort to tear my-

self away from the hypnotic influence of the scintillations, and that some power—oh, it's silly, I know—but it seemed some external power, or *will*, held my eyes to the stone. . . .

Suddenly I was in a bath of violet-blue fog that shimmered like tinsel, engulfing me completely. I had the sensation of sinking, drifting feather-like, through endless layers of cerulean mists, as though being sucked into the depths of a deep lake. It was rather a pleasant and strange sensation. Strata upon strata of blueness eddied past me, exhibiting every shade and tone of that color there could possibly be. I began to feel the exuberance a bird must feel, circling the vaults of the sky.

Then, with an abruptness that shook my nerves, I found myself lying supine in a place strange to me. There was a redolence of earthiness in my nostrils. By the help of a dim luminescence that seemed to radiate from the solid ceiling of clay and earth, my eyes distinguished the details of this queer place. The chamber was roughly oblong, not more than twenty feet long and but half as wide and deep. One end was blank wall, but the other bore the outline of a doorway.

Jerking myself to a sitting position, I stared about, perplexed. My body lay, or had lain, full length on a bedding of fine-spun cloth of peculiar texture, which covered a rude wooden cot. Besides this there was no other article of furniture in the chamber except a small three-legged table on which reposed several objects of bone and tinted metal, strangely shaped, and beside them a thick book of crude construction. Dust covered everything and spiders had spun their webs in every corner. But my body was clean and free of dust, and also the big book on the table.

FOR a moment I stared around in amazement; I had the feeling that I knew the place—had seen it before. The sensation passed quickly, and in its stead came a subtle dread. What eery cavern was this? What was the meaning of my presence in it? Tomb-like in its aspect, it chilled my heart. My scalp tingled.

And then in the utter silence I thought I heard echoes of strange voices. The ghostly light from the walls and ceiling seemed to flicker now and then on shadowy forms which had no material substance.

In sudden unreasoning fear, I leaped from the low couch, possessed of but one thought—to get to the open air from this sepulchral underground chamber. I stumbled to the door and beat it frantically with clenched fists, shouting wildly. The reverberations of my own voice thundered in my ears till I was giddy from the noise of it. I leaned against the wall at one side, panting, and again there was a flash—like a twinkle of light in a rolling fog—of a previous memory of my surroundings. Suddenly calm after my panic-stricken outburst, I perceived that the door was equipped with a small handle.

Turning it, and putting my shoulder to the wood, I shoved the ponderous portal wide, to find beyond it an inky blankness. I shuddered in dismay. It looked like no more than the gateway to some vast depth of empty space.

But it offered my only chance to escape the place, and with reckless bravery I plunged into the gloom, feeling my way along one clammy wall. Like a corridor in the heart of a lightless world, it stretched endlessly to my unnumbered footsteps, till over my shoulder the doorway of the chamber I had left dwindled to a tiny ruby glow. How like a horrible nightmare, and yet how vividly undream-like it was!

A cold sweat chilled my forehead as I pictured fancied dangers before me. I stopped now and then, trembling in uncertain terror. Ghastly echoes of unnamable things from unknown throats seemed to whisper in my tingling ears, as though mocking my futile progress.

How long I wandered along this midnight passageway, reeling in mind and body, I do not know; but finally I met a barrier of wood. Eagerly I felt for the outline of the doorway—if door it was—and my hands clutched a handle.

Swinging outward, the heavy door, fully as ponderous as the other had been, brought with its opening a blessed wave of fresh, cool air. I staggered through into a roughly circular chamber from whose one side high up came shafts of bright light. Blinking in the sudden radiance, I ran to where a stairway hewn in stone led upward to the source of the light. In another moment I had parted thick bushes which hid the entrance, and stood in the open air.

Panting and shaking, I stared about me. I found myself by the side of a road; overhead hung a pall of leaden blue sky. The horizon was obscured in all directions by a haze similar to early morning mists, but hauntingly different in some respects. The shroud in the sky was uniform, and gave an immediate suggestion of oppression: it seemed to press down, to limit—to be slowly and relentlessly closing in. Something of panic again seized me, and I tried to pierce the azure mists which hemmed me in, for a chance glimpse of something familiar by which to get my bearings.

My immediate vicinity seemed to be entirely meadowland, whose luxuriant grasses covered the ground with a brilliant green carpet. Farther in the distance, half-way around the horizon, were forests, seemingly of the fir variety, as

though this were northern land. My eyes dropped to the road near which I stood, and I saw it was paved with crude wooden blocks.

This road wound erratically as my vision followed it, but remained entirely in view, as though ascending. Then I saw, looming ghost-like in the blue pall, a huge castle, not more than a mile away. Although it was obscured in detail, I could distinguish the serrate outline of the great structure, with its many spires, watch-towers, and abutments. It reminded me of medieval castles of Europe I had seen pictured, yet had the same surreptitious, haunting difference that everything else here seemed to have from the normal objects they resembled.

Perched on the broad top of a spreading hill, the castle seemed to be battling the slimy, curling, electric-blue mists which hovered, almost sentiently, over this queer land. Hurling an unvoiced challenge, the hoary man-made edifice stood like a symbol of Man's eternal battle against the forces of Nature, and it brought a warm glow to my somewhat chilled heart and mind.

Breaking from my reverie, I decided to approach the castle, where surely I must find people of some sort who would help me in my unprecedented predicament. Hardly had I started, when I observed the whirling mists grow suddenly thicker all about the castle, engulfing it completely. At the same time, the baffling, intangible stuff—which was neither moist, nor cool, nor definable to my sense of touch—closed around me inexorably, as though the skies above had fallen.

There was a strange sensation of motion. . . .

I started up from the sofa bewildered. Here I was in my room, the radio going, the moonlight bathing my near-nudeness—all normal and sensible as it should be. I rubbed my eyes, picked up the watch-

fob with the glinting sapphire from where it had fallen on the carpet, and laughed in relief. What a dream!

AUGUST 7th—Weather still sultry, as it has been now for a week. It is really a trial to do anything. I could write here of the day's little things—getting called down for day-dreaming at the office, for instance.

But the big thing that's burning in my brain is not what happened today while I was awake, but instead what I . . . well, what I dreamed again!

Well, speculation aside [The diary is evidently incomplete here.—EANDO.] . . . this evening when I came home from work I made myself comfortable, almost naked, on the sofa—it's getting to be a habit these hot summer evenings—and listening to the radio in the dark. At the time I did not realize how identically things happened as they did four evenings ago, even when the fob again dangled from my vest pocket, twinkling its inset sapphire in the moonlight before my blank eyes. I reached for it idly, peering into its iridescent depths at the bubbles that seemed to froth about as though alive.

Suddenly, with a start, I remembered my dream of that other evening, and I peered at it in deeper interest. Maybe it was just the humidity, or my being tired; again it may have been some sort of hypnotic influence from the sparkling shafts of fiery blues and violets in my heavy eyes, but I just winked out like a light there on the sofa. Then came my dream. . . .

Immersed in a world of lapis-lazuli fog, I felt myself floating downward through strata of indigo, royal blue, pale ultramarine, and cerulean shades. Then it changed and I was cooled in a cauldron of frost blue and ice blue, gelid and congealed blue. With a shower of sparkles

I slithered through electric blues, China blues, crystal blues. Blissfully soothed, I soared as a bird might through opal blues, sky blues, mauve blues, and water blues. Like an aimless feather I fell through rosy blues, iridescent blues, limpid blues, and topaz blues. Then, with a nameless uneasiness coming over me, I drifted in a mist of melancholy blue, which changed abruptly to poison and oppressive blues.

The last wisps of dull and venom blue whirled away fitfully, and with a crawling of my spine I found myself lying full length in a ghastly glow of phosphorescent light. The full remembrance of that other horrible experience came upon me; the breath choked in my throat. Was I again in that sepulchral crypt which the spiders had made their home for unmolested years?

It was the same place! With a gasp I sat up, already hearing the maddening echoes and ghostly mockings that seemed part of this subterranean cavern. I prepared to leap from the couch, tigerishly wild in my desire to escape—but a hand pressed lightly on my shoulder!

I twisted my head to one side, in the direction of the little table, and then relaxed, still sitting up on the couch. There beside me was a curious old man; his hand rested soothingly on my shoulder. I saw then that the huge tome was open and there were finger marks in the dust of the table. The old man gazed at me with eager eyes, and his presence so dispelled the funereal atmosphere of the place that I smiled a greeting to him, too astounded yet to speak. He then pressed my shoulder more firmly, indicating I should lie down, and this I did, watching him as he turned to the open volume on the table.

Small and bent with great age, the venerable old fellow, chin adorned with a long silvery beard, stooped over the

book, reading. He was dressed outlandishly, like a medieval priest of some wealthy cult, his toga resplendent with golden threads among silken designs alien to my eye. On his head was a bulky miter-like hat, inset with sparkling gems, oriental in aspect; yet the face beneath it was the face of a white man, noble with centuries of gentle breeding. His features were puzzling, Arabic in fineness and complexion, but with thin, Nordic lips and grave blue eyes. His gnarled fingers, as he turned the pages of the tome, flashed gem-encrusted rings in the pale rosy glow from above.

As I fretted in impatience, my fingers accidentally encountered something strapped across my chest, and for the first time I looked down at my body. That other time I had been here I had not noticed—but now I saw that I was clothed in a harness of soft leather whose broad straps lay against my bare flesh. At my waist, attached to a gem-studded belt, was a short skirt of silken texture, embellished with queer symbols. My legs and arms were bare, but one finger of each hand held a golden ring, and on my feet were sandals of thick leather tied to my ankles with thongs of meshed silver. I also noticed that the muscles of my arms and legs were powerful and bulging, even in repose, and the breadth of my chest was unbelievable. Unless it was a trick of the flickering glow from the ceiling, I was a veritable giant of a man with the strength of a bear! Plainly, it was not I—as I knew myself.

I had no further time to conjecture over this miraculous thing, for the aged man turned from his book and addressed me in a solemn voice. He spoke softly and with apparent respect, but with articulations I had never heard before! He ended after a moment with a note of interrogation, and I shook my head bewildered. A look of surprize came to his features,

and also in his eyes I saw a gleam of uneasiness. He spoke again, more slowly and distinctly, but I shook my head vigorously.

Thereupon the old man stared at me perplexedly, and I, just as puzzled, stared back at him. For a tiny instant I had seemed to understand him—felt the impression of subtle familiarity—but it did not last, and we were silent before each other after I tried a few words of English and French on him.

I waited for him to make the next move, and suddenly the old priest—somehow he impressed me as a priest or patriarch—turned to his book and feverishly leafed its yellowed pages. When next he turned to me, he had in his hand a small thin rod of bone, with a carved metal tip. Waving the wand over my face in curious configurations, he muttered a cadence that writhed through the air like the sibilant hissing of snakes. I felt my senses reel as the rhythmic rune drummed into my ears, and the fogs of blueness that I knew so well danced before my eyes in legions of shade and tone. Royal blue and plum blue, tepid blue and wash blue—in tune with his softly modulated accents, they contorted in weird designs before me, forming mystic symbols and achingly remembered, yet not cognizable, letter forms.

Then a smoke-curl of rich, vibrating blue weaved purposefully in the air and wound itself on an invisible framework into a symbol that seemed to burn into my brain and put it afire. With searing force the symbol drummed at the closed portals of my subconscious mind, and suddenly poured through.

I SPRANG up with a cry, for it seemed my brain was bathed in hot acid, and shouted for the old priest to stop. He withdrew his weaving wand, and hushed his hypnotic chant; and the flames in my

brain died away. Then the venerable old man smiled in a pleased manner, for I had spoken to him in his own tongue!

"You understand at last, Prince Dahrin, do you not?"

"Yes," I answered fluently in the strange tongue. "Not only your words, but—other things. . . . It is not clear in my mind."

"Do you know me—and yourself?"

"I know your name to be Shorro-Kal, and mine to be Prince Dahrin, but beyond that——"

I stopped in perplexity. The aged man stroked his silvery beard thoughtfully, gazing at me with quiet eyes. Presently he said: "You have heard these names before: Jorentia—the Miskovites—Castle Oppor—Princess Alvena?"

"Yes, yes!" I cried, each name arousing strangely familiar, but always submerged, memories. "Yet of the connection they have with me, I know nothing, save a vague impression that they mean much to me——"

"And you to them," finished Shorro-Kal cryptically.

"Tell me more!" I said then. "Tell me all about those things. Somehow I want to know more. What land is this? What is this clammy, underground vault in which I have awakened from some mysterious sleep?"

I panted in my eagerness, for the power of the mystic blue symbol seemed to have charged my mind like an electric battery, and it had opened doors beyond which were scenes clouded in vagueness and mystery.

"Do not exert yourself, Prince Dahrin," admonished Shorro-Kal. "You have just awakened from a long, mesmeric sleep, and your heart and nerves must not be taxed with the duties of wakeful life too suddenly."

I lay back at his words, and he continued: "I will tell you a few things to

refresh the memory which in your long sleep has seemed to become sadly lacking. Jorentia, then, is this land in which we live, and of which you are the last of its extraregal princes. The Miskovites are the race who hold us in bondage, and may Tordok—who is our great God—blast them to damnation soon if I fail in my last desperate attempt to free our fair land of them. Castle Oppor—so old that the records of its construction have been lost—is, of course, our royal stronghold. And the Princess Alvena—do you not know her, Prince Dahrin? Can you not remember that you and she were——"

He paused suggestively. My mind seemed to break into a turmoil; fleeting impressions drummed at the portals of my waking thought—impressions of a ravishingly beautiful girl, whose grave, troubled eyes seemed to look at me sadly. For a long minute I attempted to remember more, but without success.

I relaxed wearily. "No, I do not, Shorro-Kal. She is much to me, it seems, but——" I pressed a puzzled hand to my forehead.

Shorro-Kal shook his head sorrowfully. "Strange!—strange indeed that you cannot remember *her*. Well, all in good time. I am sure that once you have seen Castle Oppor and those surroundings so familiar to you, memory will come back. As for this underground chamber, it is an ancient burial place for knaves and evil-doers who were executed by royal decree. Under this chamber, which is but a connection to the unnumbered catacombs below, lie the bones of countless evil men, for the kings of Jorentia, in olden times, buried them here for ages. It is said that their spirits sometimes wander through the upper labyrinths, in one part of which we are now, and drive to madness any mortals who dare to disturb their rest."

"How well I know!" I agreed, vehemently. "During my last period of wake-

fulness, I could feel their presence—somehow. By the way, that last time I fell to unconsciousness outside these corridors—how was I brought back here?"

Shorro-Kal nodded. "I found you lying by the road and carried you back in, as there is much danger in your being outside at present. I have visited this place every day for a long time—ever since you were immersed in your . . . sleep."

"You carried me in!" I smiled incredulously. "I doubt you could have dragged me this far, much less carried me."

"Ah, Prince Dahrin," replied my companion with an odd smile, "have you forgotten who I am? I have powers that at will can give me the strength of ten men. Forget not that I, and I alone, have dared to use these forbidden chambers of the dead, whose spirits have vainly tried to bring about my ruin."

"But why have you used this chamber, defying the spirits? And how long have I been asleep? And what sickness has been upon me? This is a most uncanny place for a sick-bed!"

I looked into the grave eyes of the aged priest, but his answer was evasive: "You have heard enough for the present, Prince Dahrin. You must now go to sleep, and awake to another life——"

The old priest took from an inner part of his robe the wand of bone and metal and waved it before my face, mumbling some mysterious incantation that soothed me to sleep. The fogs of blue descended over me, shimmering in hues that were of many colors and yet were nothing but blue. Shorro-Kal faded into the ultramarine mists and with him the chamber and all in it. . . .

Then I was awake, blinking in astonishment at the room revealed in the moonlight, my ears suddenly filled with the music of a dance orchestra from the

radio. The sapphire and fob lay on the floor.

For an hour I just sat and thought over the vividness of my dream. Now I am writing and it is after midnight. After reading over what I have written, I see that I have made it sound as though it actually happened. To the critical eye it would seem that the thing must be mostly imagination, as dreams are never so well ordered nor so logical in their sequence. Yet that is exactly what the dream was in detail!

Dual personality . . . splitting of the consciousness . . . an unborn twin . . . something of that sort. . . . [There are apparently several deletions at this point.—EANDO.]

As for the "blue" complex in this and that other dream—that comes from falling asleep while gazing at the sapphire. Perhaps, just as an experiment, I shall try—days from now when the memory of this dream is hazy—to put myself asleep again with the sapphire in front of my eyes, and see if I get another "blue" dream out of it.

AUGUST 20th—Tonight I shall not attempt to put any trivialities at all under this date, nor shall I deny that in some sixteen hours, the last half-hour has been the most eventful—the last half-hour, and that taken up with but a dream!

Looking back at the entries of the 3rd, and again the 7th, I see that those dreams I had were singularly detailed, as though being real experiences. I also notice that at the end of the entry for the 7th, I promised to try the "experiment" again, just for curiosity, using the sapphire as well, as an inducer of sleep. I did just that, and with an uncanny ease I fell into sleep and—the dream. That occurred just an hour ago, and somehow I feel, instinctively, that I am being drawn into something above and beyond ordinary

things. The sapphire seems to exert a powerful influence on me when I am alone in the dark. Imagination?—hypersensitivity?—delusion?—I have ceased groping for an explanation. I record the dream I had under the influence of the gem in my fob—my mother's parting, loving gift—just as it came to me. . . .

First of all, there was again that indescribable drift through layers of blueness. All the words in our language could not begin to do justice to the strangeness of it, nor the beauty of it. There were thousands of blues, all different—all blue. Then again the awakening in the underground cavern which lies over the dust of countless dead. Just as twice before, there was the ghostly light shimmering on a myriad of spider webs, on clammy clay walls, on the table, and on my body—that new and powerful body dressed in the abbreviated harness of a Prince of Jorentia. There I was lying; a few minutes before I had been George Borland, citizen of the United States, in a world that knew nothing of the dreamland of Jorentia.

I turned my eyes to find Shorro-Kal thumbing through the huge tome on the table, stroking his long gray beard with gnarled old fingers. I called his name, sitting up, and he turned with a bow and a weaving salute of his old hands.

"You have slept long, Prince Dahrin," were his first words. "Tordok has been good, and I think you are fully recovered from that spell which has lain on you for so long."

"I am greatly refreshed, Shorro-Kal," I returned, "but tormented by a hunger nearly as great as my curiosity."

The old priest smiled. "Then come, Prince. I shall this day satisfy both hungers—of the mind and of the body. Put your strong young body to that door and open the way to the outside."

I sprang from my couch with alacrity,

and pushed the huge, ponderous door outward, revealing the midnight darkness of the passage beyond. I shivered in remembrance of how the first time I had awakened alone and had traversed the stygian corridor, my mind a prey to the evil spirits that haunted the labyrinths. But my venerable companion went first through the doorway, and in his hand he held the bone wand, from whose oddly shaped metal tip now shone a steady white light like a beacon. We walked along in the deserted, dank cavern, and I saw it to be curved and steadily rising. At the second door I again applied my shoulder, exulting in the tremendous strength of my lithe young body.

Then we were in the lighted pit whose egress to the outer air was so carefully camouflaged with bushes, and from there we stepped to the comparative brilliance of daylight, although I saw that again the skies were overcast with a leaden blue pall.

Saying never a word, Shorro-Kal whistled with puckered lips and from a clump of trees near by came a figure leading three horses. To Prince Dahrin, there was nothing in the horses to excite wonder, but in the memory of George Borland (as I now write) they were creatures having no comparison on earth. Somehow, I can find no words to describe the difference, because the variations were not such as having two extra legs, or feathers instead of hair, or anything of that sort. They were horses, but as subtly different from earthly horses as the topography I saw, though earth-like, was yet *not* earth-like!

The lackey, having come up, bowed and saluted me more elaborately than Shorro-Kal had done before, and looked at me with a light of worship in his eyes. I was mystified by this and also by his words of greeting: "Hail, noble Prince Dahrin! There will be great rejoicing at

Castle Oppor with the return of her great prince, long thought dead!"

I turned to the old priest inquiringly, but he was already trying to mount one of the steeds, and I ran to help him, the lackey beside me. Then, at Shorro-Kal's gesture, I vaulted lightly into my own saddle, intuitively knowing that I had ridden horses all my life here in Jorentia. At a slow pace, for the old priest was not able to ride at a gallop, we went a piece along the road paved with cemented blocks of wood, toward the castle that I had seen upon my first awakening. But the lackey, in the lead, suddenly veered into the forest before we had gone half-way, following an obscure trail that wound among the trees. Mystified, I followed, seeing that Shorro-Kal also went that way.

In a short time we had reached the castle by a winding route, coming before the utter sheerness of its one mighty wall. There was no moat at this point, for what enemy could scale the blank stone towering a hundred feet up?

"Why have we come here?" I inquired. "We cannot enter through solid walls."

For answer, the venerable priest beat a short tattoo with his wand on the stone before him, and a great oblong section of the wall sank silently into the ground. Our horses crossed over the leveled top of the sunken piece and we dismounted in a small, completely enclosed courtyard. The giant oblong of wall then arose to its place soundlessly, sealing the wall as though an integral part of it.

The lackey, after a respectful bow, led the horses away through one portal, and Shorro-Kal shuffled slowly toward another door, beckoning me to follow. We stepped into a small room from which led many corridors to the various parts of the great Castle Oppor. The priest led the way down one and we traversed its great length, meeting not a soul.

"Is the Castle Oppor untenanted?" I asked at last, unable to bear the utter silence.

"Nay, Prince," smiled Shorro-Kal. "But I have purposely chosen a deserted passageway to reach the princess' chambers, as at present no one save certain trusted persons must know of your return. Even your own people—those faithful thousands who would weep with joy to see you—must be kept in ignorance of your presence yet for a time."

WE MADE our way up gloomy stairs and through dusty passageways, and my aged companion finally stopped before a wooden door and tapped on it lightly. I fretted, as there was a long wait. Then the door opened. Suddenly I felt strangely weak, why I did not know. That I was to see the Princess Alvena, I knew—and that for some reason it was to be a joyful meeting. A womanly face peered at us and lit up with joy at seeing me. This woman, a maid-servant, bowed low before me and gave me the royal salute, as had Shorro-Kal and the lackey before her. Then the priest had grabbed my arm and was tugging me forward, for I seemed to be paralyzed.

In the center of the immense, richly adorned chamber beyond the door was a couch, and from that couch strode a woman whose grace and beauty increased by the same law that governs the intensity of gravitation between celestial bodies. Then she stood before me, heavenly blue eyes moist, and my senses reeled—for I knew then that her face was dear to me, and that I loved her.

We were in each other's arms then, muttering broken endearments. Finally the Princess Alvena pushed me away from her gently, and looked over my body as though expecting to see me deformed.

"Thank Tordok that you have come

back as you left, dear lover. Despite Shorro-Kal's repeated assurances, I secretly feared that you might suffer hurt, in mind or body. Tell me, dearest, did you discover the Great Secret which you sought in that magic land?"

"Did I what?" I asked, frowning in perplexity.

The princess opened her eyes wide. "The Great Secret of Deliverance! Don't you remember——"

She faltered, seeing the perfectly blank look in my face, and stared horrified, it seemed. "Then—then—it *did* do you harm! not to your body, but to your—mind!"

I turned around to get an answer to the riddle from the old priest, but he was gone. "Princess Alvena," I said slowly, "I don't know what you mean. In fact, I am in a fog of doubt about everything except a few names. But one thing I know—I love you!"

With a tremulous cry, the princess fell into my arms. "It is no matter, lover, that your mind is not yet clear. Doubtless Shorro-Kal will remedy that. But come, there is food, and you must be hungry—you who have not eaten for three years!"

Three years! Where had I been for three years? But hunger drove speculation from my mind. I ate of tempting foods in the chambers of the princess, and said nothing as she watched me from across the small table. Somehow there was no need for words between us, and we grew happy in a blissful and mute understanding. While gradually appeasing my surprising hunger, I feasted my eyes upon her breath-taking beauty. Of all the beautiful shades of blue I had seen before the awakening in the underground crypt, none of them could compare with the wonderful celestial blue of this princess' eyes. And with a soft rose and cream complexion, delicate features of

aristocratic mold and hair of flushed gold, her sweet face formed a honeyed complement to those tender eyes that reflected only innocence and quiet charm. But there was a sadness reflected in them that it pained me to see, once the great joy of her seeing me had died down. I reached my hand out to her in mute inquiry, my appetite appeased.

"What is it, beloved," I asked when she dropped her gaze, "that puts the grave light of sorrow in your eyes, when there should only be joy that we are reunited again?"

"You should well know," she responded. "It is the heavy yoke that the Miskovites have been to our people for ten years. They came but yesterday to exact their usual tribute—the best of our crops and three of our fairest maids. Oh, Dahrin, have you forgotten everything?"

She ended with a reproachful cry, for I had frowned blankly.

"Come," she cried then, "come with me out on the castle wall and I will explain what used to bring the flush of righteous rage to your face—before you left."

A STAIRCASE took us to a corridor that opened to the uppermost parts of the castle, and we strode to the abutment walls, looking out over the land from an archer's cubbyhole. Whether it was morning or afternoon I could not tell, for the sky was of the same uniform shrouded cast it had always been since I had known it. And as I turned my eyes in all directions, I saw nothing of the horizon, but only the uncanny ultramarine mists that seemed to rest on the land like a curse.

"What is this indigo mist, Alvena, that hangs so heavy over Jorentia?" I asked, sweeping my arm around.

"It is the evil sorcery of the Miskovites," she replied solemnly. "And it has blotted out the sun for ten long years. If

but your memory were not clouded, you would recall that this land was once a place of sunshine and peace and happiness."

"Something of that I *do* recall!" I said reflectively. "I seem to recall also that we were a populous race, spreading over a great kingdom, and that you, or someone like you, was our—our ruler!"

The princess looked at me strangely. "My mother!—she who was queen of Jorentia for seven years after my father, the king, died; and who herself departed this life when I was but a girl. Her untimely death was brought on by the falling of the magical curse of the Miskovites, which split our happy kingdom asunder, and—made us slaves!"

"Then you," I supplemented, "are queen of Jorentia, by right of heritage."

A hurt look came into Alvena's eyes. "I, who should be queen indeed, am no more than a princess for whom there is no throne. And you, Dahrin, who should become king, are but the lord of Castle Oppor, vassal deputy to the Miskovites."

Involuntary anger surged through me. "These Miskovites—tell me how they hold us in bondage."

"Oh, Dahrin, your poor mind!" Alvena sobbed. Then she took hold of herself and spoke tonelessly, bitterly:

"It was ten years ago that the Miskovites, failing in the attempt to conquer us in war, visited upon Jorentia an evil curse, produced by their black-souled sorcerers, for which they sold themselves to the devil. This ghastly blue pall, which has hidden the sun for a decade, descended upon us without warning. It not only has thinned our crops and thus brought famine to us so that our numbers have been halved, but it has also split the kingdom of Jorentia in twain. Beyond that thick blue wall of magic to the west"—she pointed to where the indigo mists were almost black in their in-

tensity—"lie friends and loved ones whom we have not seen for ten years!"

"The barrier cannot be crossed?" I queried, incredulously.

"Those who try meet death," answered Alvena simply. "The black magic of the Miskovites is great. And then, our numbers depleted by starvation, our land bisected, the formerly weaker enemy poured upon us with its armies and conquered us. Doubtless the other half of our people have been also subjugated. At present we obey their dictates. From me they took the throne. From my people they take every season a third measure of our crops. Worst of all, they come once a month to pick out three of the fairest maids from the whole land. What evil fate visits them, we can only guess; they never come back from Miskovia. And to keep us weakened in strength, they take with them also as many of our strongest young men as they deem necessary—to become slaves; for soldiers they would not become for the hated Miskovites. That, Dahrin, is our tale of wo."

I burned with hot anger at the recital of atrocities practised by the tyrannical enemy. "Yes, I remember those things now, and I recall also that we staged a futile resistance once; there was much heroic fighting on our part; there was confusion——"

I hesitated, lost in vague doubt as to the rest, and the princess continued for me:

"And there was utter defeat for you and your brave men, Dahrin. I swooned away when I heard that you had all been killed; for not a week before we had made lovers' vows, you and I. Then I was brought before a bed, and there you lay, nearly dead from loss of blood. I nursed you tenderly, and with the help of Shorro-Kal's blessed magic, we fanned the spark of life yet left in you. Then it

was, after you had recovered, that Shorro-Kal suggested sending you on the Great Quest of Deliverance, more especially as the Miskovites wanted your head for your part in the rebellion."

"And then——?" I prompted.

"Why, then, Shorro-Kal weaved his necromantic spell over your body, and sent your spirit in search of the Deliverance."

The princess turned her large eyes upon me. "You have been gone three long years, beloved Dahrin. You have come back—not as you left!"

"Alvena, I do not know what you mean! I——"

But now the princess was staring horrified down on the landscape below. I followed her eye and saw a group of horsemen approaching the castle, having just emerged from the concealing blue fog to the west.

"The Miskovites!" gasped Alvena. "For what purpose can they be here, when but yesterday——"

My teeth clicked together involuntarily at sight of the hated enemy, and my right hand automatically darted for a sword-hilt that was not there. The party clattered up to the huge front portcullis, and I heard, a moment later, the screech of drawbridge chains.

I went mad then, it seemed, in an anger that had its roots in past memories. Hurling curses upon the Miskovites, I whirled from the bastion rampart and ran in furious rage toward the stairs that led below. Down these I fairly flew, only vaguely aware that the Princess Alvena was following me and begging me to stay and not run headlong into danger. All I knew at the moment was that the hated Miskovites were upon us, and that I wanted nothing more than to confront them and fight. Having gained the princess' chambers, I raced by instinct toward a doorway leading to the frontal part of

the castle. Swinging it open savagely, I found myself face to face with Shorro-Kal, who, panting, had evidently at that moment arrived from the lower halls.

At sight of him I hesitated, and he read my purpose at a glance, by the livid fury in my face. Then I stepped forward, intending to brush past him, but his hand, with a surprising strength for one so old and weak, clutched at my arm.

"Let me go, good Father," I fairly shouted. "I have business below."

"Nay, Prince Dahrin." His hand remained firm on my arm. "Below you must not go!"

Our eyes met, his sparkling strangely, and suddenly my madness left me, and I stepped back obediently. At the same moment the princess flew up and threw her arms around me.

"Dahrin, beloved. You would have walked to your death!" she panted, a look of mingled fear and relief in her eyes. Then she turned to Shorro-Kal:

"What have they come for this time?"

THE old priest eyed me in silence for a moment. Then, reassured that I had full command of myself, he spoke:

"They have come—oh, the utter atrocity of it!—for ten more of our ablest-bodied youths!"

The Princess Alvena gasped and paled. Such was her tender heart, and her love for her people—a heritage from Jorentia's long line of beneficent monarchs—that the news hurt her as much as though they had been her own brothers or children.

"Tordok have mercy on us!" she cried despairingly. "When will this tyrannical yoke be lifted?"

As for myself, I think I growled in anger, so that Shorro-Kal again clutched my arm.

"Have no fear," I said then. "I will not do anything against your will. But I

feel I should be fighting the thrice-damned enemy, instead of moaning our fate up here in a woman's boudoir."

Shorro-Kal shook his head sadly. "You do not understand, brave Prince. The Miskovites are too many and too strong for us. Once before you and a band of courageous martyrs attempted to beat them back, with results you may, or may not, remember."

At my nod, he continued: "Remembering that, perhaps you also recall that, after long and careful deliberation, it was planned to try another way of ending the heart-breaking tyranny. Your spirit, under the influence of a powerful enchantment, was sent to another world——"

As the old priest paused mysteriously, I urged impatiently: "Go on, tell me all. Too long have you kept me in a fog of ignorance about the whole matter."

But the venerable magician, instead of answering directly, consulted a bit of parchment that he took from his robe. "Nay, my son. Time shortens, and you must now go back to that land in which your spirit has sojourned for so long. It is important that we keep the rapport between you and that other land intact. But when you next return, you will be told all."

The old priest then motioned the princess back, and in another moment was waving his curious wand before my face. Even as I turned to Alvena to say goodbye, a tenuous fog of spectrum blue—those indigos and ultramarines I knew so well—dissolved out of the air, and thickened rapidly. There was a long sensation of drifting in the shimmering veils of cerulean mists—or perhaps it was but an instant—and then——

Yes, back to my room in the big city, with incongruous tin-pan music drumming into my ears from the radio, and

nothing more mysterious around me than worn furniture and calcimined walls.

This, the third of my eery "blue" dreams, each a continuation of the former like the chapters of a book, has placed my mind in a quandary. It is but a dream. I have told myself that a hundred times. What else could it be? Surely it is nonsense to suppose that the events I seemed to go through were actual—in another world!

The first two times I dreamed of Jorentia, I was able to scoff lightly at their significance, despite the uncanny vividness with which the dreams visited me. But now . . . [deletion.—EANDO.]

AUGUST 22nd—It is but two nights ago that I stared at the hypnotic sapphire in my fob and found myself transported to Castle Oppor, either in a dream or—not in a dream. Last evening I came home from the office worn in spirit and body. It was miserable, trying to do my work, with my every thought revolving around Castle Oppor and everything in it. Yet—despite what I might call a craving to try again the experiment with the sapphire—I resisted, and went to a sleepless bed instead. Today was still more ragged, so that even my fellow workers noticed it and told me to take an afternoon off, as I was obviously ill.

Tonight, all resolves shattered, I again fastened my eyes to the queer bubbles in the crystal heart of the sapphire. That was two hours ago.

Awakening after another of those mysterious transitions through azure clouds, I found myself in that curious state of being two persons—and yet one. In Jorentia, I had, it seemed, the full memory of George Borland, but my action and thought were primarily under the dominance of that mysterious Prince Dahrin,

with whom I was somehow closely associated.

But this fourth revival in that other land was not as the first three had been, for I opened my eyes upon walls I immediately knew to be those of Castle Oppor's lowermost chambers. Furthermore, I awoke with my mind and memory wholly cleared so that I remembered without any obscuring my entire previous life as a prince of Jorentia. Only one thing remained hazy to my understanding—the strange journey which my spirit had undertaken to an alien world.

With my new-found cognizance, I immediately recognized the room in which I lay as part of the private chambers of Shorro-Kal, the last and greatest of Jorentia's magicians. Situated in what had been dungeons in ages past, these gloomy spaces were now the scene of the exorcism and necromantic rites of Shorro-Kal, whose art was the magic lore of Jorentia's many powerful sorcerers of the past.

I turned my head when the last wisps of blueness had cleared away, and saw the priest of magic seated before a huge desk, thumbing gravely through one of many ancient books of thaumaturgic lore piled thereon. Some sixth sense seemed to tell him I was conscious, and he turned to me with a bow and the deferential salute that he had always used to me.

"You have returned quickly, noble Prince, from the other world," were his first words.

I smiled. "At your bidding, of course."

"Nay," returned the aged magician, to my astonishment. "I could send you at will to the other world, but calling you back—that was not within my power. It rested solely with the will of that being with whom you were identified."

"You mean that it rested with that

other—with my own—with my other—oh, Shorro-Kal, I am bewitched! You say that other person sent me back at will, and yet I *am* that other person!"

The venerable savant of sorcery nodded sagely. "Small wonder that you feel you are still enthralled in magic, for you have become so closely identified with the mind in that other world that truly perhaps you *are* one!"

"What do you mean?" I begged, standing up from my couch. "Three times I have been there to that other world and back, and yet I know but vaguely the why and wherefore of it."

"You shall know, my son," soothed Shorro-Kal. "Have patience for a while yet. First of all, Prince Dahrin, you must tell me all that you remember of that other world, and all you can of that other being whom you feel to be yourself. Then, and then only, can I make clear to you the entire story of this, my greatest feat in the ancient profession of magic."

I puzzled in thought for a moment, and then began:

"In that other life I was—or am—named George Borland. He is a youth of perhaps my age, but far punier in body and meeker of heart. He lives—or I live there—in a great city of stupendous structures which tower ten times the height of Castle Oppor."

I paused, and then went on, giving a picture of the world of George Borland, drawing from a well of memory that seemed my own, and yet not my own. Finally Shorro-Kal, who listened attentively, interrupted and asked a few leading questions that brought out in broad detail the life of George Borland. It came at last to the mention of the sapphire and how through its inexplicable influence I had transported myself from that world to Jorentia. At this point the old priest's face became a picture of great interest; he hung on my words as though

they were the distilled essence of eternal wisdom.

Then I had told all I could, and fell silent, staring at the fervent concentration displayed on my companion's bearded visage.

SHORRO-KAL remained in this state for long minutes, till I thought he had perhaps cast a spell about himself and sent his spirit to some forgotten outland. I squirmed fretfully, for I had never been the kind to spend time in idle waiting, and was about to touch his arm when his eyes came suddenly to life.

And he spoke: "You say this gem which had seemed to enmesh you in dreams was blue in color?"

I nodded. "A beautiful iridescent blue, which exhibits every tone and shade of that color, in various kinds of light."

Shorro-Kal stroked his beard thoughtfully: "And when the spell of the blue-stone was upon you, you seemed to drift in strata of blueness, shade after shade, till of a sudden you were here in Jorentia?"

I nodded again.

"Picture the scene which you saw from the ramparts of Castle Oppor with Alvena," said the aged man then, with a tense note in his voice. "Was there anything in that color to—remind you of the stone?"

I started in surprize. "Yes! Yes! It strikes me now at your mention of it. Those obscuring mists which roll over Jorentia and hide the light of the blessed sun, and form also a wall that bisects our kingdom, have the nature and quality of the blue-stone's radiance! I would swear it!"

At this Shorro-Kal heaved a long sigh and turned his eyes heavenward as though thanking Tordok for some great favor. Then he trembled like a leaf and would

have fallen if I had not sprung to his aid. I carried him to the couch, alarmed at the sudden pallor that overspread his withered cheeks. But he pushed me away as I started to rub his wrists, and his color returned.

"It is nothing, Prince Dahrin. My old bones are but feeling their age."

I could not know, but I felt it was more than just that.

Then Shorro-Kal turned his oddly luminous eyes on me. "Prince Dahrin—or George Borland, as you are also known—you shall now hear as much as it is possible for you to understand of the mysterious spell which sent your spirit—your soul-mind—to another world on a strange quest."

He folded his robe carefully, and I waited with caught breath, for the mystery of it had me deeply interested.

"Know then," began Shorro-Kal, "that when I perceived the Miskovites had broken our power with a great and evil magic, and when I saw how impossible it was for even such a great fighter and leader as yourself to drive them out of our fair land, I decided that only in one way could the scourge be lifted—magic must be fought with magic!

"Thereupon I girded my supernatural powers and exorcised from nadirs of the universe certain benign spirits, and communed with them. Through their kindly aid, I was shown a way to combat the hideous sorcery of the Miskovites, for these spirits hated those leagued with our enemy. Yet it was not to be easy.

"The black magic of the Miskovites is very powerful. The sorcery I had at my command was hardly able to cope with theirs. But the one way was there for my use, providing I was willing to risk not only my own life and soul, but the soul of another—yourself! For only a strong-spirited man, good and pure in thought

and deed, would suffice for my purpose, and in all the land of Jorentia, none could be more fit for the part than yourself. I risked your soul to a horrible fate, in the event of failure, my son, because I placed the welfare and future well-being of Jorentia even above you—or myself."

He paused; then: "We have met with success, my son, for which thank Tordok. But I greatly fear that the price will be paid after all——"

I glanced up, startled.

"You are safe," he pursued, "but myself, and one other—it rests between us, or perhaps jointly upon us."

I ATTEMPTED to elicit further information on the matter, but Shorro-Kal shook his head:

"Let that be; it concerns directly neither you nor Jorentia. To continue—I having made my plans, and acquainted you with them, you readily agreed, thinking, perhaps, that the spell I was to weave would make possible your carrying on a successful war against the Miskovites. It was just three years ago that the Princess Alvena bade you a tearful, but brave, good-bye—she being fully in accord with my scheme—and I took you from her and conducted you down here to my chambers."

I nodded eagerly, remembering vividly that last hour of life—that tender caress from Alvena, the beautiful Alvena whom I loved dearer than life, and who less than a month before that had promised to become my bride upon my safe return.

"For three days and nights I labored," went on the old priest. "I called upon my most terrific powers of magic, and sent you into a deep trance. Then, the enchantment completed, I transported your stiffened body to the crypts of the executioners, knowing it would there be unmolested by enemy or friend alike, as

none dares defy the ghosts that wander there.

"There lay your body, Prince Dahrin, but your spirit—ah, it wandered afar indeed! Where—I myself cannot know that. But I had bidden it search—if need be to the ends of the universe—for the Secret of Deliverance for Jorentia. Under the compelling command of my sorcery, your consciousness—your *soul* in very fact—plunged into the abysses of unnumbered worlds, searching, ever searching. And there lay the great danger: that your soul, never reaching its goal, would wander for ever—and never return to bring to life your sleeping body once again!"

I shuddered, and at the same time felt glad that I had not known those things *before* I had been sent on the ghostly mission.

"But your soul was strong, my son, strong and relentless in its search, and it finally came upon its goal. That goal was in the world in which you lived as George Borland. Thereupon, through what processes I cannot make clear to you, your soul fastened itself in proximity to the goal which it had found—and that was the first of George Borland's strange 'dreams'. Somehow—even to myself it is not fully clear—your soul identified itself with that of George Borland's, and as one with him, you dwelt in that land for a short space of time."

"But where *is* that land?" I queried as the old priest paused. "Surely it must lie in some remote corner of this world. Yet it cannot be, for from what I know through my identity with George Borland, they knew no such land as this—Jorentia."

"Try not to fathom that, my son," answered Shorro-Kal solemnly. "It is not of this world, nor of any world your mind can conceive. Despite your rapport with

George Borland, your respective material worlds are separated by impassable gulfs of dimensions—inconceivable distances—impenetrable veils of time!"

I shrugged the problem away willingly enough, and waited for the magician to go on.

"Through the medium of what to George Borland was dream-stuff, your soul, still bent on its mission, came back to Jorentia, carrying with it the soul of that other being, for you two had become inextricably entwined in identity.

"Imagine my great joy—it could have been no less than the joy of your beloved Princess when she heard—as I paid my daily visit to the crypt in which your body lay, to find it lying outside by the road. I knew immediately your spirit had returned, and I stayed there constantly, after bringing you once again inside, hoping and praying that nothing had gone amiss.

"Of course, we now know all has gone well. You are safely returned, and with you the Great Secret of Deliverance for which I sent you to search the universes."

"What then is the Great Secret?" I asked, trembling.

"This," and his voice became grave—portentous. "The master magicians of Miskovia had locked the evil blue mist over Jorentia, and split it in twain, *and they had placed the key to its unlocking in that other world*, fully content that it was out of my reach, for well they knew that I was also a powerful sorcerer. Any puny and inadequate spell I would have dissolved in a trice. Ah, it was a master move! And well-nigh it proved beyond my reach!"

For a moment Shorro-Kal expanded in a sudden mood of exultance, and I said nothing, for he fully deserved an instant of self-elation and triumph. But the aged

priest was not the one to lose himself in such vain thoughts for long. He went on:

"The key"—now his voice fell to a whisper, and he glanced about as though fearing eavesdroppers—"the key to the evil curse of the blue fog which clouds Jorentia *is nothing more than that sapphire which George Borland possesses!*"

I sat stunned. Then I heard Shorro-Kal's voice again, fraught with excitement. "You must make one more journey back to that alien world where you live as George Borland. One more and it will be the last, *for with the smashing of the sapphire, the evil spell of blueness will dissolve from our skies!* And you and George Borland will separate, never to meet again!"

I REMEMBER little more, beyond the fact that Shorro-Kal led me to the chambers of the Princess, and left us alone for a while so that we might caress each other and rejoice together over the coming deliverance of our loved land. Then I was back with Shorro-Kal in his gloomy caverns, and he smiled encouragingly upon me as he waved the wand before my face. There was a swirling of indigo mist, hazes of ethereal ultramarine, and then——

I was staring at the sapphire in my hand—I, George Borland.

I have the sapphire before me now as I write. It glints oddly in the lamplight: it seems to twinkle with weighty secrets. Is it just a sapphire, a mineral with some tinsel value, as anybody I'd ask would hasten to assure me without question? Is it merely a colored bit of stone which has hypnotized me into a species of dream? Is it nothing but a speck from Nature's furnaces, about which and under the influence of which, I have deluded myself into believing I have traversed strange

dimensions to an utterly alien, yet incredibly earth-like, world?

Or is it more than that?

[End of diary excerpts.—EANDO.]

* * * * *

INSIDE the sealed envelope containing the above writing was a smaller envelope, which I did not notice till I had

read the manuscript. Then my eye fell on the object and I carefully sliced it open with my pen-knife. Tipping it to see what could be inside, I dropped it suddenly with an involuntary cry.

With the sound of dried peas in a gourd, a stream of roughly ground bits of blue stone scattered over the table top!

