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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Eater of Souls

By HENRY KUTTNER

A five-minute tale of a strange entity on a distant world

THEY tell it in Bel Yarnak, in a language not of Earth, that a malignant and terrible being once dwelt in that incredible abyss named the Gray Gulf of Yarnak. Not on earth, nor on any planet that spins about any star in the skies we know, is Bel Yarnak; but beyond Betelgeuse, beyond the Giant Stars, on a green and joyous world still in its lusty youth are the towers and silver minarets of this city. Nor are the dwellers in Bel Yarnak anthropoid nor in any way man-like; yet there are fires during the long warm nights in curious hearths, and wherever in this universe there are fires there will be tales told about them, and breathless listeners to bring contentment to the heart of the teller of tales. The Sindara rules benignantly over Bel Yarnak; yet in the old days fear and doom lay like a shroud over the land, and in the Gray Gulf of Yarnak a brooding horror dwelt loathsomely. And a strange enchantment chilled the skies and hid the triple moons behind a darkened pall.

For a being had come to glut its evil hunger in the land, and those who dwelt in Bel Yarnak called it the Eater of Souls. In nowise could this being be described, for none had seen it save under circumstances which precluded the possibility of return. Yet in the gulf it brooded, and when its hunger stirred it would send forth a soundless summons, so that in tavern and temple, by fireside and in the blackness of the night some would rise slowly, with a passionless look of death upon their features, and would depart from Bel Yarnak toward the Gray Gulf.

Nor would they ever return. It was said that the thing in the gulf was half a demon and half a god, and that the souls of those whom it slew served it eternally, fulfilling strange missions in the icy wastes between the stars. This being had come from the dark sun, the hydromancers said, where it had been conceived by an unholy alliance between those timeless Ancients who filter strangely between the universes and a Black Shining One of unknown origin. The necromancers said other things, but they hated the hydromancers, who were powerful then, and their rune-casting was generally discredited. Yet the Sindara listened to both schools of mages, and pondered upon his throne of chalcedony, and presently determined to set forth voluntarily to the Great Gulf of Yarnak, which was reputed to be bottomless.

The necromancers gave the Sindara curious implements made of the bones of the dead, and the hydromancers gave him intricately twisted transparent tubes of crystal, which would be useful in battling the Eater of Souls. Thereafter the necromancers and the hydromancers squatted on their haunches in the city gate and howled dismally as the Sindara rode westward on his gorlak, that fleet but repugantly shaped reptile. After a time the Sindara discarded both the weapons of the hydromancers and the necromancers, for he was a worshipper of Vorvados, as had been each Sindara in his time. None might worship Vorvados save the Sindara of Bel Yarnak, for such is the god's command; and presently the Sindara dis-

mounted from his gorlak and prayed fervently to Vorvados. For a time there was no response.

Then the sands were troubled, and a whirling and dancing of mist-motes blinded the Sindara. Out of the maelstrom the god spoke thinly, and his voice was like the tinkling of countless tiny crystal goblets.

"Thou goest to doom," Vorvados said ominously. "But thy son sleeps in Bel Yarnak, and I shall have a worshipper when thou art vanished. Go therefore fearlessly, since god cannot conquer god, but only man who created him."

SPEAKING thus cryptically Vorvados withdrew, and the Sindara, after pondering, continued his journey. In time he came to that incredible abyss from which men say the nearer moon was born, and at its edge he fell prone and lay sick and shuddering, peering down into mist-shrouded emptiness. For a cold wind blew up from the gulf, and it seemed to have no bottom. Looming far in the distance he could just discern the further brink.

Clambering up the rough stones came he whom the Sindara had set out to find; he came swiftly, making use of his multiple appendages to lift himself. He was white and hairy and appallingly hideous, but his misshapen head came only to the Sindara's waist, although in girth his spidery limbs rendered a shocking illusion of hugeness. In his wake came the souls he had taken for his own; they were a plaintive whispering and stirring in the air, swooping and moaning and sighing for lost Nirvana. The Sindara drew his blade and struck at his enemy.

Of that battle sagas are still sung, for it raged along the brink for a timeless interval of eternity. In the end the Sindara was hacked and bleeding and spent, and his opponent was untouched and

chuckling loathsomely. Then the demon prepared for his meal.

Into the Sindara's mind came a whisper, the thin calling of Vorvados. He said: "There are many kinds of flesh in the universes, and other compounds which are not flesh. Thus doth the Eater of Souls feed." And he told the Sindara of the incredible manner of that feeding, of the fusing of two beings, of the absorption of the lesser, and of the emergence therefrom of an augmented half-god, while the uncaged soul flew moaning in the train of those who served the being. Into the Sindara's mind came knowledge and with it a grim resolve. He flung wide his arms and welcomed the ghastly embrace, for Vorvados had also spoken of the manner in which the doom might be lifted.

The thing sprang to meet him, and an intolerable agony ground frightfully within the Sindara's bone and flesh; the citadel of his being rocked, and his soul cowered shrieking in its chamber. There on the edge of the Gray Gulf of Yarnak a monstrous fusion took place, a metamorphosis and a commingling that was blasphemous and horrible beyond all imagining. As a thing disappears in quicksand, so the being and the Sindara melted into each other's body.

Yet even in that blinding agony a sharper pain came to the Sindara as he saw across the plain the beauty of this land over which he had ruled. He thought he had never seen anything so beautiful as this green and joyous land of his, and a pain was in his heart, a sense of empty loss and an aching void which could not ever be filled. And he looked away to the black evil eyes of the Eater of Souls that were but inches away from his own, and he looked beyond the being to where cold emptiness lay gray and horrible. There were tears in his eyes and a gnawing ache in his heart for the sil-

ver minarets and towers of Bel Yarnak, that had lain naked and beautiful beneath the glowing light of the triple moons, for he should never see that place any more.

He turned his head again, and for the last time, blinded with his tears and with his doom upon him. As he leaped forward he heard a frightful despairing shriek, and then half-god and man were

spinning dizzily downward, seeing the precipice rushing up past them. For Vorvados had said that thus, and only thus, could the spell be lifted.

And the cliff wall curved inward as it swept down, so presently it receded into the dim gray haze, and the Sindara fell in empty mist and into final unstimulating darkness.