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# FANTASTIC

*Novels*

MAGAZINE

## THE RED DUST

by MURRAY  
LEINSTER



FAMOUS CLASSICS OF FANTASY!

## THE EYE OF BALAMOK

by VICTOR ROUSSEAU



# FANTASTIC

*Novels*

MAGAZINE

Vol. 3

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No. 1

*Novel*

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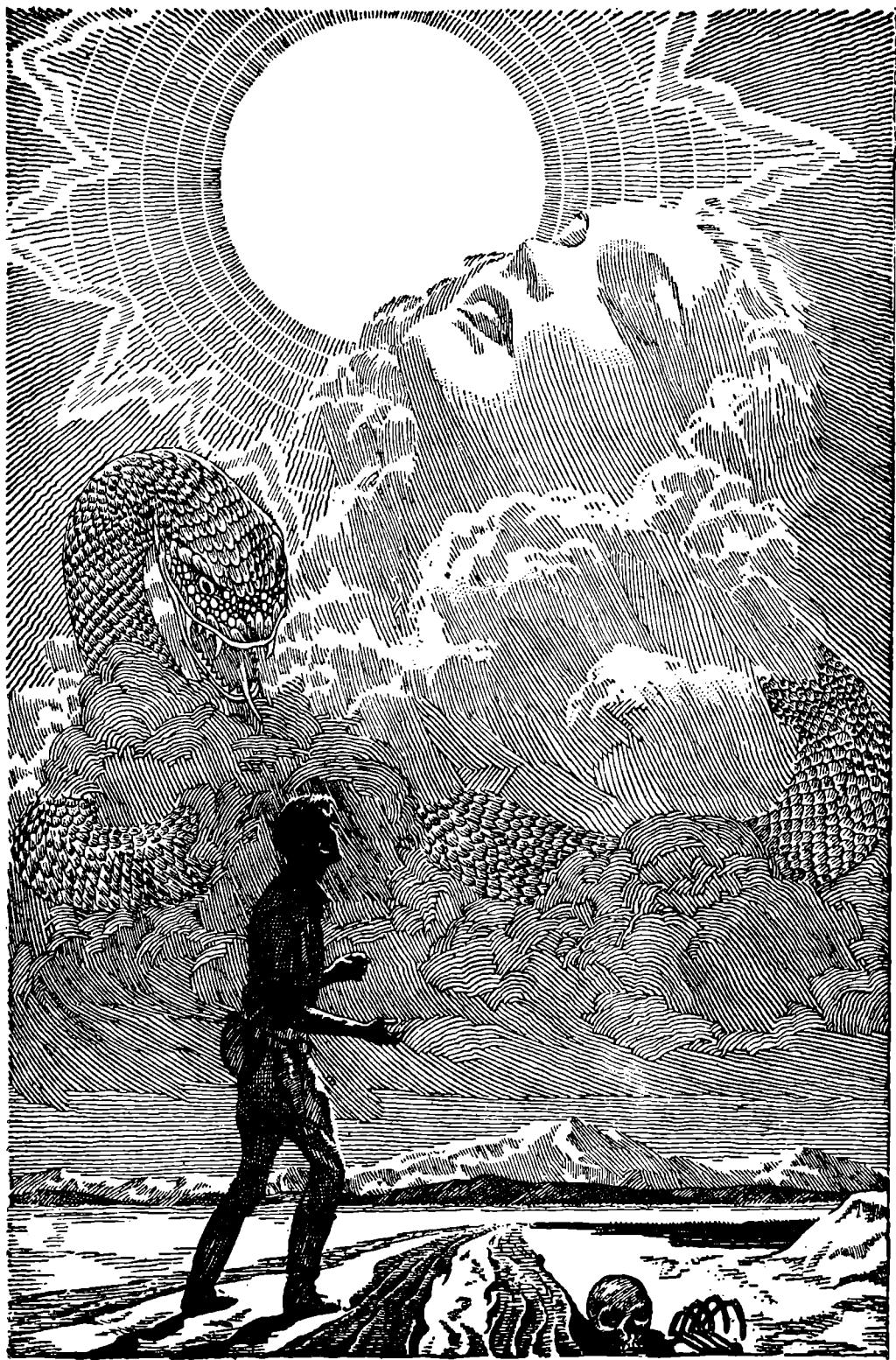
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living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.



# The Eye of Balamok

## CHAPTER I

### SAND AND SALT

IT WAS an eternity since the young Englishman had had any clear consciousness of his surroundings. When he forced his numbed brain to function, he knew, of course, that he was somewhere in the heart of the most howling, pitiless desert in the world—Central Australia. But that knowledge seemed as unreal as the reeling body which he was driving on by sheer force of will.

He was in the extreme northeastern part of the Great Victoria Desert, upon the boundary—which could be represented only by a longitudinal parallel—between West and South Australia. Three hundred miles eastward lay the Trans-Continental

By

**Victor Rousseau**

*Over the rim of hell he went, wanderlust-driven into a land more strange than his mad dreams. . . .*

telegraph. North, west and south, for twice that distance, there was nothing but sand.

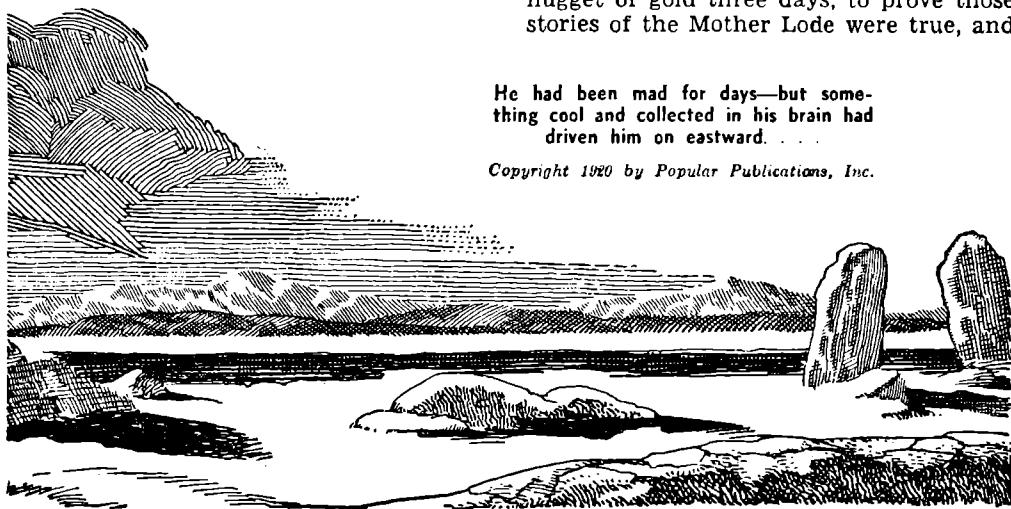
He had been striking eastward, shouldering his "billy"—his dwindling stock of tea, flour, matches and baking-powder. There was plenty of water in this region. But it was all salt. It varied from the salinity of the sea, bitter, purging, maddening stuff, to that of brackish seashore-resort water.

When he reached a pool it was a toss-up whether he would go mad or quell the fever in him with a kettle of tea that did not reek of Epsom. For days together he was mad. He was mad now. But all through his delirium something, cool and collected, sat in his brain and drove him eastward.

"It's been a fool's chase," it said. "But you were warned in the beginning that nobody ever crossed the Great Victoria. Your natives wouldn't go with you. The camel died—died of thirst—and—do you remember how you carried that nine-pound nugget of gold three days, to prove those stories of the Mother Lode were true, and

He had been mad for days—but something cool and collected in his brain had driven him on eastward. . . .

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then threw it away? You weren't mad then, as you are now. If you had been, you would have slipped it into the flour bag.

"Keep going! You've done three hundred miles since the camel dropped. You're half-way to the Trans-Continental. You'll strike a station there. Go, by sheer grit. If you can't make it, just drop down as the camel did. It may be you'll come across fresh water. If you can, the remaining three hundred miles will be nothing. Nobody knows what's in the Great Victoria. Remember those stories at Coolgardie?"

He set his teeth and staggered onward, through the blazing heat that had tanned him brown as a Kanaka.

He was lean, gaunt, staring of eye, white-breasted where the projecting bones compressed the sunken flesh. Sometimes he laughed, and sometimes scowled; he shouted as he saw the school competitors breasting the tape together; two or three times he found himself seated upon the ground straining at an imaginary oar in his college races.

Toward evening the delirium lessened. With it there came a languor of the limbs, the heave of the stomach against the anticipated douche of saline water. The camping place lay plain before him—a large, flat lake, blue and inviting, set in the middle of the inevitable salt crystals fringing it. All around were great, single rocks, aglisten with salt, rising like monoliths out of the hard, salty sand, which gradually began to change from yellow to white, as the salt grew denser.

"I'm going to drop here," he said, stretching out his arm toward the water.

He had said that every night. But this night he meant it. He had meant that every night, too. But he knew that this night was the last of his journeying, unless—miracle of miracles!—unless this were fresh water.

Unless he could soak the salt out of his flesh and bones, he would die as the camel had died. And its death had not been hard. In fact, he had not guessed it was going to die. He had thought camels' humps grew smaller as the beasts went without water. The camel had refused the salt water for five days, but its hump remained the same.

On the sixth morning it refused to be saddled, and, instead of crouching under a rock, lay down in the sun. It died upon its knees within an hour. Not a hard death!

The Englishman let his swag fall be-

neath a rock, took his "billy," and walked out over the salt crystals. This lake looked saltier than any he had encountered. It was one of the vast chain of salt lakes extending across the dead heart of unknown Australia.

Not more than five years ago it was discovered by an explorer that underneath the greater portion of the central continent—at least, beneath the explored portion—there flows perpetual water. Once, in the past ages, it flowed in river-beds upon the surface. Then Australia must have been an earthly paradise. Something happened—some subsidence, such as the sinking of Atlantis; something of which even the blackfellow retains no tradition.

The young man was ignorant of this discovery. It did not tantalize him as he splashed out through the salt-crystal swamp and dipped his "billy" into the pellucid depths. The thirst which always racked him was like a personal enemy. He had personified it in his madness, and he fought it at every lake and pond. Had he done more than moisten his cracked lips upon his journeying he would never have gone half-way to the Trans-Continental telegraph. It was only at evenfall that he made his salt tea and set himself to his night battle with the salt torturer.

He filled the "billy," raised it to his lips, and drank. The water was as fresh as from a bubbling spring.

He drained the "billy," filled it again, and dashed it from his hand before his lips touched it. He flung himself down upon the salt incrustation. At first he thought it was his madness. But the madness which had given him delirious visions had never sweetened his lips with such nectar as that!

Cautiously he tasted of the water again. It was fresh lake water. A sudden revulsion came over him. He knew now how near he had been to death. This was life! This meant the world of men once more! He would rest here for two weeks, till he had grown strong, till he had purged his veins of their incrustations. Then he would continue eastward. What he had done he could do again. And there was water about the station that he was aiming for. His flour would last him. He could do it again. He could face it again. But—

The reaction of joy was followed by that of hopelessness. Could he duplicate that awful eastward march? He staggered wearily toward the spot where he had left his pack.

Then, literally "lifting up his eyes," as

one does in a wilderness, he saw, quite near at hand, a little hut of stone. The stones were great blocks, evidently dragged with great exercise of strength and labor from their resting-places on the sand. And all about were larger blocks, great solitary monoliths, that seemed like ruins of some prehistoric city, now silted with sand up to their pediments.

It was a marvel of toil, for the stones had been squared with other stones, and fitted till the stone hut was constructed. The Englishman went inside, incredulous, half thinking it was a dream, until the shadow of the walls fell about him. The sand had drifted in to a depth of some three feet. It was almost upon a level with the stone bedstead in one corner, made by the same ingenious brain.

Upon a stone peg, chiseled out of a block, hung something that caused the traveler to shout with joy. It was a water-bag, made from the hide of a large animal. Examining a piece of fleece that adhered to it, the traveler concluded that it was a camel foal. Perhaps he, too, had brought a camel with him, and it had given birth to young, though the fleece was almost like that of a guanaco or llama. But of course there were no llamas in the Australian desert.

With this the young man knew that the remaining half of his journey could be accomplished safely. But who had lived there, and what fate had befallen him?

He dismissed his speculations as idle, dragged in his pack, and, before he knew it, he was asleep.

The sunlight, streaming through the opening of the hut, aroused him in the morning. Now, to his surprise, he saw in one corner the top of a stone table, rudely fashioned. Rising, he began to scoop the sand away from about the table-legs. Then it was he came upon the manuscript. It was a skin parchment, probably from the same beast as the water-bag, tightly rolled, and covered with writing in some dark-brown pigment.

It was in English. The traveler began to read, and, pausing only for breakfast, read all that day till sundown.

I SHALL set this down in my own English tongue, though I have no hope that I shall ever again meet with anyone who comes from my native America, or from England, either. I have an indefinite time to wait—it may be days, weeks, years even. There is plenty of time, at any rate, and to write English instead of Fendek gives me

a curious sense of reality, after my life in Ellaborta.

If I had not drifted to Australia after the war, if I had served in France instead of ending where I began, in the training-camp, if—well, if the spice of adventure had only lost its savor for me! But what's the use of speculating? All this was destined. And, besides, it was inevitable that Hita and I should meet. Even Victor Sewell was written across my line of fate at birth, I think.

I had trudged up and down Kalgoorlie for months, never earning more than board and lodging where others were striking gold in paying quantities and growing rich. Anyone, anywhere, can rinse a pan and find a few yellow flecks at the bottom. You don't get much in a day that way. I still had ninety pounds left when I fell in with Sewell in the place where men meet—the barroom of the "Phoenix."

"I can put in seventy pounds," said Sewell. "It don't cost much to start prospecting. And the McDonnell Range contains the Mother Lode of the continent."

I suspected that that was the stage at which most men left Sewell. The Mother Lode is the world Lorelei among gold-miners, and the bugbear of practical men. Nobody has ever found her. To speak of her is the mark of a dreamer.

Sewell was older than I—an Englishman of good family, who had served in the Dardanelles and Turkey. Taken prisoner, he claimed; there were ugly whispers about that part of his career. Not cowardice, but—well, I won't say any more. They were never proved. But he was certainly a drunkard, and I believe the drug story was true. Men shunned him. He had lived among the blackfellows, too, on the fringes of Kalgoorlie, and that gives a man a bad name.

"How long have you been out here?" he broke off in the midst of his talk about the Mother Lode to ask me.

"Two years," I answered.

He gave a short laugh. "My dear Ronald," he said—"you don't mind my calling you Ronald, Gowan?—I've been here seven. And I've never got over the—the queerness of Australia yet. Unique in the whole world, isn't it? Everything different: plants, animals, man. A chunk of the Quaternary Epoch, surviving into the present, but cursed, as if it had witnessed in its day orgies as dreadful as those of the fabled Atlantis."

The man interested me. He was well educated; so was I, and the rough-and-ready

company of Kalgoorlie was no reason why I should avoid an hour's talk with Sewell.

"Mammals that lay eggs!" he went on. "Nature experimenting! A fossil storehouse of early efforts. This piece of prehistoric left-over wasn't plugged down here for nothing. Australia's like the moon, Ronald."

I didn't follow him. He had been drinking just enough to loosen his tongue, and I like to study men when they are themselves. So I offered no objection when he called for two more whiskies.

"I mean, it's as unexplored as the moon, this enormous island," Sewell went on. "And it's like it, too, with its extinct craters, its huge depressions that receive the influx of rivers and have no outlet. Holes in the world that never will be fathomed! I've talked with the blackfellows. I've lived with them. They trust me."

I had read something about them, I think a "filler" in some West Australian paper, how our ancestors had been of the Australoid race, and the men of Spy and Neanderthal. I tried to say something. But Sewell glanced at me a little shiftily, and turned the subject. I could see that, whatever was said about it, he wanted to handle it.

"I want you to go in with me, Ronald," he said. "I've seventy pounds. An aunt died. Yes, she left more more than that. But I know I'm pretty much what the Kalgoorlie people think me—weak, unstable. You'd think me that, wouldn't you?"

He shot his shifty glance at me again, and I knew, as well as if he had told me, that he wanted me to tell him what else the people of Kalgoorlie thought about him.

I began to excuse myself, but he was off again in his erratic way. "I know what I'm talking about, Ronald. There's gold there—tons of it. Nuggets as big as bridal cakes! I've had it from the blackfellows. There's something hidden in the heart of this howling wilderness. And it isn't all gold, either."

Now he was on the other tack once more, and yet as much by design as haphazard, I thought. "Did you ever study the blackfellows? They're our ancestors, Ronald. And they're called degraded, but our school inspectors know few white men have their mental capacity. Did you ever notice the nose? Anthropologists class them as a distinct species because of that depression at the root of it. The monkeyman, Ronald"—he leaned forward, tense with an

excitement that seemed causeless. "They are not rising from the ape, but descending to the ape."

"You mean," I suggested, "that the Australian represents the remnants of some primitive culture?"

"I mean a damn sight more than that!" he shouted, flaming out, and subsiding as suddenly, as if ashamed. "The Australian is the watch-dog, the keeper of the door who absconded when some great catastrophe overtook the cradle of the human race in which our own ancestors were rocked.

"He carries remnants of what his masters taught him. Where did he get the boomerang? Why, we can't even throw it now that we've got it. We haven't been able to work out the exact mathematical formula for making it, which the blackfellow knows by that hereditary memory which we call instinct."

He hesitated a moment. "Did you ever study their marriage system?" he continued. "The most ingenious method of inter-mixture that the world has ever known. Worked out by some prehistoric genius. Now, he only knows he has it."

"I thought the blackfellow was a polygamist," I answered.

Sewell pulled out a piece of paper and a pencil. "Let's take four totems," he said, "the eagle, serpent, wallaby, and ornithorhynchus—that's the beaver with the duck's bill that lays eggs, you know. All the men of the eagle totem have for wives all the women of the serpent totem. All men of the serpent totem have all women of the wallaby totem. All women of the eagle totem have for husbands all men of the wallaby totem.

"We needn't run through the list. The point is, you have to marry outside your totem. Exogamy, the wiseacres call it. Polygamy, polyandry, too, but nevertheless a tie so binding that violation is undreamed of. An eagle man marries a serpent woman. Their child has to be a wallaby. So that the tribe splits up. Infusion of blood. It's wonderful, Ronald. I want to talk to you—"

He broke off again with that crafty expression of his flashing across his face, and drained his glass.

"You've heard of that white race across the desert?" he asked, fixing his eyes on me.

"Everyone has. Is that what you want to look for?" I demanded.

He laughed uneasily. "Good Lord, no!" he returned. "I want you to go in with me.

They say the Great Victoria can't be crossed. It can. The blackfellows cross it and my black, Peter, knows the water-holes. I shot a dingo once when it was at his throat. He'll do anything for me. And he knows where the gold lies."

He glanced cautiously about him. The barroom was empty, save for a prospector lounging at the far end, and engaging in an animated flirtation with the barmaid. Sewell put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a heap of pebbles. They were of virgin gold, and the largest weighed at least ten ounces.

"Eighty or ninety pounds there, if I wanted to cash in," said Sewell. "But I'm not going to have half Kalgoorlie on our trail. I'll let them go on miscalculating me for a while. Let's have one more, and we'll talk it over in the morning. By the way, that's a strange tattoo mark you have on your right forearm. Ingeniously done. An eagle, isn't it?"

I showed it to him. It had been well done by a Malay in Honolulu, but I had been sorry afterward. My father was an Englishman, and it had been a family crest. I had worked at it till I blurred the motto round it, but I couldn't get rid of the thing.

Sewell looked at it casually, and rose. We had our drink together, and he left me abruptly as soon as he had drained his glass. I was wondering at his peculiar manner, and whether it was the result of drugs, when a middle-aged prospector whom I knew to nod to, came up to me.

"If I was you, I'd steer clear of that fellow," he said.

"Why?" I demanded.

"Oh, no offense, partner. He's jest—he's—well, let's put it up to Miss Polly here. Miss Polly, how'd you like to be seen at the races in Victor Sewell's company?"

The girl tossed her head. "He gives me the creeps," she declared.

"If there is anything known against him, I'd like to know it too," I said. "That is, anything provable." I spoke less warmly than I wished, for I confessed to myself that Miss Polly's feeling was not very far from mine.

"Oh, there ain't nothing known, partner," the prospector answered. "Jest instinc', I reckon. There ain't nothing known against him, except jest instinc'."

I SLEPT over it. I was sure that there was something more than gold behind Sewell's proposal, and a great deal in his mind that he had not told me. But the

idea fascinated me, and I set down the girl's objections to the influence of popular opinion.

A mining town is a strange mixture of propriety and devil-may-careness, and like the army or a sewing-circle, full of gossip. In the end, when Sewell appeared at the door of my shack next morning, I brushed away my doubts.

There was nothing the matter with him that I could see, except that he looked hangdog and furtive. And most men would acquire that look when they were victims of a prejudice. It's hard not to live down one's reputation.

He brought a blackfellow and his gin with him: the first, his man Peter, a wizened old aborigine, with the strange, world-old look on his flat features; the second, Peter's wife, who Sewell assured me was a better carrier than Peter.

Once I had made up my mind to go partners with Sewell, we buckled to. It was a share and share alike agreement, for all that Sewell knew where the gold was, or Peter, rather. By midday we had loaded the black and his woman with our requisites. To me the burden looked enormous, but Sewell insisted that it was nothing to them.

We had a tent, a prime requisite in that land of shadeless hell, a pestle and mortar, sluicing pans, and a small cradle. These comprised Peter's load. His woman toted a fifty-pound bag of flour and a side of bacon. We carried the sack containing the rest of our scanty provisions and cooking utensils, a blanket apiece for the chill nights, and, most precious of all, a great goatskin, for water, which, when full, would make a load for a man. We were to spend ten weeks upon our journey, which was all our stock would allow. If we struck gold in paying quantities, we would return and invest in a camel, or even two, load up, and prepare for an extended trip.

It was rather a desperate scheme—I can see that now; but at the time it seemed reasonable enough. Besides, there was something hypnotic about Sewell—not power, but a sort of jumpiness that he seemed to exude. A man would take desperate chances with him, but he would not take them because he trusted him to get him out of danger.

We went on for days into the salt desert. Kalgoorlie is very near the fringe of habitable land. Day by day the herbage became scantier, the salt thicker, the heavens brassier. And Sewell was hopeless. He

shirked his burden. He drank his share of water and whined for mine. Peter was a wonder, though, and so was his *gin*. They never failed to find the water-holes, even if the water was brackish. And it is not for some time that the taste of brackish water becomes insufferable.

We had brought no rifle or gun, because there is nothing to shoot—nothing edible—in the Great Victoria; but I had slipped in a couple of handfuls of cartridges, and I knew Sewell carried an automatic. There was no liquor; I had insisted on that. It's no use, except for a mad spurt at the end of a day, and the effects are bad, even then. But Sewell had brought drugs. I couldn't find out what it was he took, but I knew it was that that parched his throat and made him whine for my water as he staggered along under half a man's load.

I grew accustomed to him as the days went by. It was I who gave Peter his orders and directed the hours of marching. After a week in the desert one becomes largely an automaton. Heaven knows how faraway my thoughts were, as I trudged behind the blackfellow and his *gin*, under the blazing sky, cursing the folly that had brought me on that fool's errand with Sewell, and yet—

Why didn't I turn back? Well, there was something, some indefinable sense of adventure, that grew on me as the days passed, perhaps through the very monotony of them. I knew afterward that I could have foretold what was going to happen—when it would happen, rather—almost to the day. The expectancy began to increase, as when a looked-for thing is awaited. And it was a shivery instinct that drew me on. At night the sense became stronger, and the instinct more profound.

It was the sense of something coming to meet me. Something that was crossing from one diagonal of that checker-board of yellow and brown, as I from the other. A sense of fate. At night I would listen to Sewell's drug-crazed mutterings, and try to weave something out of them.

We had quarreled, of course, as even good men do when they are alone in a howling wilderness. I suppose my face was just as hateful a breakfast sight to Sewell as his became to me. We never spoke without a sneer or a scowl. One night, when I had thought him asleep, he sat up suddenly and turned toward me.

"What's that you were saying about gold this afternoon?" he demanded.

"I was saying that the McDonnell Range will have to assay mighty well to tempt me to go back," I answered, with a bitter taunt in my tone that I couldn't conceal.

"Damn the McDonnell Range!" he blustered. "Did you think I came on this trip simply to pick up a few pebbles?"

"I hope so," I answered, seriously enough. "That was the purpose of our partnership."

He sat silent awhile, and then he began to crawl out of his blankets toward me. There was a full moon, patching the entrance to the tent with white, the silence was hideous, and I was shivering with the cold, and mad for a drink of clean, fresh water. To be hot and thirsty is bad enough, but to be cold and thirsty is hell. Every prospector can tell you that. The sight of him, crawling like a great snake across the strip of sand between our blankets, rolling the yellows of his eyes, made me want to scream with panic.

If he had touched me I should have struck him. But he stopped a foot away, and sat up at my side, his blanket over his head and shoulders. "Listen, Ronald," he began. It was the first time in weeks he had called me that. "I'm going to tell you something. There's something better than gold here, though there's gold, too. Did you ever hear of the white queen of the McDonnell Range people?"

"I've heard that yarn of the old prospectors. But nobody's ever seen her—or that white race either."

"The blackfellows have."

"White men who have come down from the north coast, once in a blue moon, Sewell." I was thawing toward him; he could make one like him, though never respect him.

He leaned toward me, and I saw his eyes turn upward, as if the drug he had swallowed had its grip on him.

"Peter has," he said. He bent closer. "He's seen her!"

It was the creepiest moment I had ever experienced. There was no adequate cause for my sensation; even Sewell's words might have any simple explanation. And yet I was actually trembling, half terror, half eagerness.

"He won't tell," Sewell exploded. "He knows something—a whole lot of something, I suspect—something lying behind the Great Victoria. He won't say what it is. It's my belief"—his lips were at my ear now, and I had forgotten my revulsion—"it's something not—exactly—human—in our sense of the word."

"Rot!" I ejaculated.

He had an infernal cunning intuition. He knew I was afraid. It was the desert. It gets on a man's nerves. I never knew an old prospector, for that matter, who was quite sane.

"Look here, Sewell," I said. "Those yarns—white races, white queens—are the common property of all countries with an unexplored hinterland. Let's forget them. I didn't come here to look for that. I came to look for gold. If you're out of the game, you can leave me Peter and go home. Or you can take Peter with you and I'll go on alone."

He did not even trouble to answer me, and I fell to silence, listening for his next words, and all the while listening, as if with my whole body, and not alone my ears, for something creeping over the sand without. I knew that, whatever it was that I had come to meet, it had not very far to go—nor I.

"When I was taken prisoner," said Sewell, "they sent me to Aleppo. They put me to work upon the Taurus Tunnel at first. But I picked up Arabic—I have a born faculty for languages. I made myself their companion in a few weeks. The Tommies didn't like it. They thought I was betraying them. I wasn't. When I turned Moslem they'd have had my life if they could. But I was in Damascus then, studying.

"Queer thing, Mohammedanism. A sort of hotchpotch of left-over wisdom from the older peoples. You know the desert Arab's half a heathen still. He knows about the early races. Solomon wasn't a myth. Nor his powers, either. Nor the *djinns* and elementals and half-human things that come to you under hashish and poppy extract. Good Lord, Ronald, those visions are true! They're not imagination. You can't imagine anything that never had material existence.

"When I found traces of this primitive learning among the blackfellows I studied it. They had quite a clear conception of some white lords whom they stood in fear of. Sort of gnomes, or earth men, only not dwarfs. I overheard a lot before they knew I understood their language. Then they shut up. I thought when I got Peter and his *gin* out here I'd make him talk. But he won't. And she says she doesn't know.

"D'you know what was in my mind when I asked you to go partners with me? Because I knew—I knew this white race lived somewhere in the McDonnell Range, I had the idea of going there, getting their

gold, and—well, ruling them. Those stories of the old prospectors have some truth. You know they'll tell you there's a white queen the sight of whom drives men mad. That's true. A survival of the matriarchate. They're mad with thirst when they see her."

Heavens, how he rambled on in his disjointed, drug-crazed way! And yet, though I would never have admitted it, I was a credulous listener.

"It took me some time to get over my impression that the blackfellows had the power of seeing this world of elemental beings. It was not until I realized that this race is human—in a sense—that I got my idea of going there. And yet they're not human, Ronald, as you and I are. They are descendants of one of the primeval races that inhabited the world aeons ago. We're a million years ahead of them, as the world is a million years in advance of the kangaroo, the duckbill, and the black-fellow. Some things they'll teach us. We'll bring that knowledge back to the world and use it for power. Some things we'll teach them. And we'll get their gold and strip them bare as a bone."

His eyes were glowing with fire. I loathed him, and I was fascinated by him. What a mind, to have conceived that, to have worked over that huge conception; and what a mind to have turned it to the base purpose of robbery!

"You'd better go to sleep, Sewell," I said. He touched me for the first time. His hand was as cold as a snake's coils.

"You're with me on it, Ronald?" he almost whined.

"I'm with you on our partnership," I answered.

It seemed to satisfy him, nevertheless. He crawled back and lay down on his back, muttering and twining his fingers. Presently his mumblings stopped. He began breathing slowly and heavily, as the drug-user does.

I lay still. But the sense of foreboding grew stronger in me. What was it I was afraid of? I tried to shake away the influence of the desert, but I could not sleep. It was too cold, for one thing; and then—something was calling me.

At last I could stand it no longer. I slipped out of my blankets and went out of the tent. The moonlight flooded everything. Far away I saw a moving black object looking like a spot on the white surface of the sand.

I gripped my revolver, slipping a cartridge into the nearest chamber, and, my

heart beating fast, strode out toward the object. I need not have feared. When I drew near I saw that it was a white man, dressed in tatters and rags, and ambling aimlessly toward me. How he had struck us in that howling wilderness I never knew; nor indeed, how he had found the strength to move his limbs.

For he was hideously tortured, blinded, mutilated. And, as he trudged along, uttering a parched cry, I knew him for old Joe Mulock, a prospector who had disappeared a year or two before from Kalgoorlie.

## CHAPTER II

### PRIEST AND PRINCESS

**H**E SENSED my presence long before he could have heard me, but, not knowing that he was blind, I did not wonder when he turned round and stretched out his arms toward me. He dropped unconscious, and it was not until I got him into the tent that I realized the extent of his mutilations.

Cunning devils had wrought them, for there was hardly an inch of him that was not defaced. They had gone over him, nerve by nerve and sinew by sinew, armed with some infernal knowledge of anatomy. They had inflicted the maximum of pain with the minimum of damage before they turned him loose into the Great Victoria.

I remembered it was Joe who had told me of the white queen. He had talked of finding her and marrying her, and we had all thought him mad. But then he had been a hale man of about fifty-five, and now he was in the extremity of old age.

I got him into my blankets and poured the last drops of our water down his throat. Dawn broke soon after. Sewell lay in his drug slumber, and Peter did not come, as was his custom. Perhaps he had gone to look for water, I thought; the pool where we were encamped was undrinkable.

I could see at a glance that old Joe had not long to live. What the torture had not effected the Great Victoria had completed. His tongue was black, his body—what there was left of it—mummified with salt crystals. As soon as I had done what I could for him, I went to Sewell and shook him until he awakened.

He sat up growling, and his eyes fell on the wreck of a man beside him. He knew Joe—I could see that by his expression, though he must have known him anyway, for Joe had been a figure on the

Western goldfields. Then his eyes lit on mine in a cunning way, and I knew that he was resolved not to admit that knowledge.

"Joe Mulock came to the tent early this morning," I said. "I picked him up outside." And, as I was about to tell him what some fiends had done to him, I found myself cut short by some interior impulse. Somehow the shame of old Joe Mulock's body was mine—at least so far as Sewell was concerned.

Sewell growled, "Well, what are we going to do with him? We can't take him along with us."

"We'll have to stay here till—" I began.

"Till he dies? He won't die. Those old men are tougher than *male* grass."

"Did you ever have any feeling in your blasted wisp of a soul?" I demanded, feeling a mad rage at Sewell's presence in the tent at all, and a sense of helpless impotence at the knowledge that old Joe's presence had more than complicated matters. For we could neither go forward nor back, and our flour was half gone.

Generally he would sneer back at me, but now he simply got up and stalked out of the tent. I went to the opening and saw him squat down beside the blackfellow and his *gin*, who were lighting the fire in the shelter of a rock. I went back to Joe and tried to drain out a few more drops of water for him. Sewell had raided the water-bag the morning before, after his night of drug thirst.

There was nothing that I could do for Joe. Sewell looked in once or twice, but soon realized that I would not start that day—not until old Joe died. Peter brought some bacon and damper, and about nine told me that he was going to find water. Sewell sulked under the rock. I was watching old Joe, and it was not long before I saw that the problem which I had faced was no problem at all. The old man was growing gray, and the breath began to hiss more loudly through his windpipe.

He stirred, his twisted hands began to pick at the blanket, pulling up the threads and trying to wind them into yarn. I knew what that meant, and I knew he might recover consciousness at any time before his death. He could not last more than a day or two.

Suddenly the blinded eyes opened. "Partner!" gasped the tortured throat in a choking whistle.

I bent over him. "Listen, Joe!" I said. "You're safe, now. It's Ronald Gowan speaking. Gowan of Kalgoorlie—you knew

me there. We used to chum together evenings outside your shack."

He was too far gone to remember me, but he knew I was a friend. "Them black devils gone?" he whispered huskily.

"They're gone, Joe. You struck our camp. Cheer up, old man! You'll be all right now!" Heavens, what lies we can tell when we have to! That twisted ruin of flesh was less like a man than some misshapen animal.

**H**E SOUGHT my hand and held it to his breast. "I can tell you where—water," he mumbled. "Not far. A day's march, maybe, or two; due north, where you see the edge of the McDonnell Mountains sticking up into the sky. Follow that. You'll think it's salt, but it ain't. Fresh water, bubbling up in the middle of salt crust."

He broke into a babbling cackle. "You'll hev to be spry," he whispered. "Them black fiends is there. Look what they did to me! They'll get you if you ain't spry. But they don't come out till night. They can't stand sunlight. It withers 'em, like worms. I found that out when I got away from 'em. They couldn't follow me into the sunlight. Only don't let 'em catch you after dark."

Curious as I was, I would not question the old man. "Go to sleep, Joe, and forget it," I said.

"Forget it?" he screeched. "That's the white queen the old prospectors told of, in the Never Never country. If you was to know—"

He clutched at me fiercely. "Listen!" he cried. "I ain't mad, and I swear it's true. I was a king there. They made me king. They're waiting for somebody from the world outside. They thought it was me. But it wasn't. And it don't pay. My God! Listen! I swear I ain't mad. Them people's witches. They don't live—"

He fell back on the sand, and, as the eyes closed, an awful horror gleamed in the sightless orbs.

He was unconscious again, and in the slow coma that dissolves imperceptibly into death. I rose from beside him to see Sewell at the entrance, the empty water-bag in his hand, and a look of fury in his face.

"Damn it, it's dry!" he blurted out. "You've given our last drops of water to that old incubus, who'd have died anyway in a day or two! Great guns, Gowan, d'you realize what this is going to mean for us?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I might have told him that the thirst caused by the

drugs he took was responsible for most of our sufferings. But some men are too mean for argument. Sewell struck me that way.

He subsided, grumbling. "What are we going to do?" he demanded.

"Stay here till he dies."

He came nearer and looked at Joe. "You think he'll die today?" he asked with suppressed eagerness. "Peter thinks he can find water. But he isn't sure. And we've got to start, we've got to start, I tell you, or go back to our last camping-place. And the water there was like Epsom salts. What are we to do? My God, it's the end of everything, and just when—"

He stopped short and looked at me in his cunning way. It occurred to me that he had been talking to Peter.

Our throats were too parched to eat. We chewed some dry tea leaves. It was very drowsy in the tent, and I had not closed my eyes the night before. And it was long, waiting for Peter and the *git*, who had gone off with him. I felt my eyes closing. Before I knew it I was asleep.

When I awoke the sun was nearing the horizon. I had slept all through the merciless heat. I awoke, weak and faint for water. Sewell must have been sitting outside; he looked in as he heard me rise.

"Peter came back an hour ago, and he's found no water," he informed me. "We're going to start back at dark to our last camp. It's the only chance for us."

"Old Joe didn't wake up while I was asleep?" I asked, bending to look into the face of the prospector. The slow, stertorous breathing had ceased.

"Him? Oh, he's dead," retorted Sewell. "Crossed the divide about an hour after you went to sleep. Peter's hollowing out a grave yonder."

The callousness of his tone infuriated me. Old Joe had lived his life, and death had been a mercy to him; but this dog's death in the desert hurt me.

Stooping over him, I saw that his face was curiously discolored; there were mottled spots upon the wrinkled tan. I glanced up at Sewell, and what I read in his eyes confirmed my suspicions.

Sewell had suffocated the old man while he was in his last coma. He could not wait for death; he was afraid that there would be no water.

I leaped at him, and for a moment I had lost command of myself. I think I would have strangled him. He saw what was in my eyes and ran. He was faster than I, and he stopped about twenty paces

distant and then began to blether at me.

"I swear I didn't do that!" he cried. "The old man got his face caught in the blanket. He was dead when I looked at him. I knew you'd be unjust to me."

He was something like a woman in his appeals. But even the evidence in the tent didn't teach me what a murderous dog he was. Beneath his softness he had the ferocity of the hyena.

Peter came up carrying the spade. I wasted no more words on Sewell just then. We carried out the stiffening body and deposited it in the shallow grave. Luckily there were no beasts that could desecrate it.

"Now, you hear me, you dog!" I said to Sewell. "Here you and I part company. Take Peter and his *gin*, and half the supplies. The outfit I'll leave here. I'm going back to start again with proper supplies, and a human partner. But I'm going back just one day's march behind you. And if I see your face, or your back, before we reach Kalgoorlie, by the living God I'll shoot you!"

I THOUGHT afterward that it had given Sewell some sort of justification, my making that threat. But I was mad about Joe, and mad with the torturing thirst. Sewell saw I meant business, for he and Peter started striking the tent at once, and divided the supplies fairly. But then there came the question of the goat-skin. We could not divide that, and to travel without it meant death. We saw that simultaneously.

"Well, it looks as if we've got to travel in company after all," said Sewell.

I had to assent. Sewell let himself go. He began whimpering that we could never retrace our course; that the water at the last place was almost as bitter as this. Then it was that I remembered old Joe's words about a fresh-water spring.

I did not know, of course, how much truth there was in them, but it struck me that the old man must have found drinkable water on his journey; better than ours, or he could never have made the last stage in his condition.

And already I was in the beginnings of delirium. Though I was perfectly conscious of all that was taking place, things were whispering to me, and pictures kept coming in place of the eternal undulating sand. At first I thought it was a mirage. But it was not. It was home scenes; I had but to let myself go, and I should be back among them.

No, we could never make the last pool.

"Old Joe said there's water a day or two ahead," I said to Sewell. "He says it's fresh. Maybe it was delirium, but he must have got water somewhere. I'm going to start for it." I made a reeling clutch for the water-bag and swung it about me.

"I'll go with you—or, rather, you can come with me, Sewell," I said. "It's a toss-up whether we find it. It's a toss-up whether or not it's drinkable. Once we get water, I'll talk things over with you."

He agreed, whimpering. After all, I was master, with the possession of the water-bag. We tried to map out the route old Joe had taken. I was pretty sure that what he called a day's march or two was very much less—possibly no more than two hours' journey. I told Sewell so, to reassure him, because I didn't want a helpless man on my hands.

What puzzled me was old Joe's instructions to travel due north toward the edge of the McDonnell Range, which had been faintly visible on the far horizon for some days past. How had old Joe known north, or found his way southward? This increased my belief that the fresh-water spring was much less than a day's march distant.

It had grown dark when we started, but there was a brilliant moon, making the whole land as light as day. The wind had long since obliterated Joe's footprints. We aimed at the edge of the McDonnell, and trudged steadily under our burdens, Peter leading, then I, then Sewell, and the *gin* bringing up the rear. So the hours of night began to wear away.

The eeriest thing was the utter solitude. There was not even a bird to cross the black vault above us, wherein the stars blazed like diamonds. I felt utterly insignificant, a human ant plunged into that wilderness. A fitting setting for anything that might lie beyond!

By this time I knew that the thing which was coming to meet me was close at hand. Perhaps delirium contained that germ of truth within itself. And somehow my fears vanished. But the hours passed, and the stars circled the sky, and nothing happened until suddenly Peter stopped in front of me.

"What's the matter?" I asked. But he waited for his master.

"Me no go on," said Peter.

"I tell you we'll come upon fresh water by dawn!" I cried. I was sure of it now. I knew ever so many things that had hitherto been hidden from me.

Peter wrinkled his flat nose. "Plenty debbil-debbil," he said simply. "Me no go on."

"Rot!" muttered Sewell. I have said that I had hidden the truth about old Joe's mutilation from him. There was nothing particular about his face except the eyeless sockets, and the devils who did that work had left the eyelids. They were fiends at their job. Sewell knew nothing of old Joe having met with those black devils.

"Plenty debbil-debbil," Peter muttered obstinately. "If catch um white fellow, all same black fellow. Debbil-debbil catch um when sun come, white fellow dead fellow, same black fellow."

That startled me. Old Joe had said that. They "withered like worms" in sunlight. I gripped my revolver and slipped charges into the empty chambers while Sewell and Peter were holding a *corroboree*.

Sewell's thin voice rose into an exasperated scream. But he could not persuade Peter. He came to me presently. "This damn fool says that there are devils in this country that catch men and mutilate them," he said. "He won't go on, but he'll wait for us. What we going to do, Gowan? What we going to do?"

I was sorry for the broken creature before me. Sewell's thick tongue clove to his furred palate, and the words were almost undistinguishable. He was shaking from head to foot. "For God's sake tell me what to do, Gowan!" he pleaded.

I told him, "Leave everything with Peter, if you can trust him. You can? I'll take your word for it. All we want is the water-skin, and I'll carry that. It doesn't weigh much now. Keep by my side, and by daylight we'll find that water. If we don't—then it won't be any use to worry."

So we went on, leaving Peter and his *gtn* seated upon the baggage, looking after us. Heavens, what a journey that was! The chill air froze us to the marrow, the salt creaked in our very bones, and the thirst was yelling at us in every artery. All I knew was the McDonnell Range in the far distance.

I fixed my mind on that as a sort of focus, and I let myself go—all but that little point of consciousness. I was at home again, I was at the training-camp, I met a dozen old friends, including several dead ones. What talks we had! All the while I wouldn't let go of the McDonnell. I knew that would mean death, and something in me didn't want to die.

All the while, too, I knew that the Thing and I were on our last lap.

It lost its horror, too. It was something that froze my blood, but no longer with fear. It was a woman, exquisitely beautiful. I saw now that what had terrified me was the idea that she was not human. But she was. She was warm, yielding, supple in my arms. Only she was of a race that had lived a million years before.

SOMETIMES I came back to consciousness with a start, to see Sewell shambling along beside me. He was muttering, too. I wondered where he was in mind. Then I was off again.

I don't know how many hours had passed. I think old Joe had not been so wrong in his first estimate after all, and that it was not far from dawn when the sand grew firmer. We trod on rock now, white and brittle as bones. We reached the summit of an elevation. Beneath us extended a flat plain, in which huge boulders stood up, curious shaped boulders, as if man's hands had wrought them. They might have been the posts and pillars of a prehistoric city.

And in the midst of them was a large, flat lake, ringed with white salt crystals. It was a lake saltier in aspect than any that we had seen.

A groan burst from me. Then I remembered old Joe words: "You'll think it's salt, but it ain't. Fresh water, bubbling up in the middle of the salt crust."

I left Sewell and staggered across the crystals. I reached the edge of the water. I leaned over the salt, made a cup of my hands, and drank—fresh water!

My yell must have been what apprized Sewell, though I did not know I had called to him. He was beside me, and we were both upon our faces, drinking up the life-giving fluid. Then we were plunged in it, rags of clothing and all, sucking it in at every pore of our bodies. Never was nectar sweet as that!

I dragged Sewell away, or he would have killed himself. It took force; but at last we stood, dizzy and gleeful, on the crystals again.

I was just about to fill my bag when something happened.

First it was a nameless fear, then the sense that we were no longer alone. Then I knew what that fear was, bred as it is into our bones from the beginnings of man, so that even the garden worm nauseates us. For the whole level surface of the plain beside the lake appeared alive.

Something was crawling under the sand. Imagine a mole not far below the surface,

increase its length a thousandfold, and picture the sand desert heaving as the invisible coils of vertebrae beneath stirred it!

I could not stir, but watched the outlines of the monster until it drew its great bulk through some hole in the bank of the lake, agitated the water, and disappeared. Everything grew still.

I glanced at Sewell. He had not seen it. He was looking the other way, his eyes wide, his mouth agape. And I had not seen what he saw, for, fronting us in a half-circle were a dozen of the most ferocious-looking savages imaginable.

Black Australians—but more Australoid than any of the black races of the continent. The hair covered face and head as thickly as on a dog, leaving only the thick lips and the great wen of a bridgeless nose, and the little, glaring eyes visible. They carried boomerangs and shields.

I drew my revolver and aimed at them. I yelled at Sewell, but he only stood gaping.

Then, remembering old Joe, I began firing steadily into their midst. One dropped, another—then a boomerang struck me upon the temple and I dropped helpless upon the salt.

A minute later we were in the hands of the savages. A huge fellow shouldered me and carried me toward a sort of wall of the great rocks, about a quarter of a mile away. He flung me down, and stood guard over me and Sewell, while his companions disappeared inside a sort of natural doorway.

Perhaps a minute passed. I was beginning to recover my full consciousness. I was speculating on the possibility of a rush upon the savage who strutted over me. Then, at the entrance, there appeared—she whom I had gone to see.

A girl of twenty years radiant with youth and beauty. Something of the Australoid type showed in the slight tilt of the nose, in the abundant hair. But she was white! Milk-white! Peach-skin and milk and roses, and tawny copper hair, in the heart of the Great Victoria!

She wore a long cloak of some blue material, sandals of polished wood on her bare feet; under the cloak there was a hint of white garments. Bangles of copper on her wrists and ankles, and a heavy torque of some milky gold about her slender throat.

She motioned to the savages, and we, too, were dragged inside a circle of monoliths. I knew them for that now. The place was a sort of temple, open to the sky, like

that on Salisbury Plain. In the middle was a flat altar-table.

Sewell and I were dragged up and flung down upon it. Ropes were procured, and we were bound, hands and feet, to four horns of stone, apparently chiseled out of the solid block of which the altar was composed. Sewell was chattering with fear.

The blacks stood round us, gloating like evil monsters. The girl, standing among them, looked passively and unemotionally on the proceedings. I waited for the sacrificial knife.

But no knife descended. Instead, one of the savages raised a sort of stone lid at the bottom of the altar and whistled into the aperture, a long, strident call that hissed like escaping steam.

Presently, as it were out of the bowels of the earth, a hissing shriek answered him. Louder and nearer came that hellish response; then the whole surface of the sand inside the circle of the monoliths began to agitate, as the coils of the great body glided upward.

And out of the altar-lid appeared the head of a disgusting and unbelievably abominable monster.

It was a serpent's head, in size no larger than the flat coil of the striped neck that followed it. The brain-pan was no larger, for all its bulk, than that of a snake. I saw two gleaming eyes, intense with the unorganized evil of that primitive intelligence, gloating on me, a hollow, spoonlike yellow tongue, rows of tiny fangs set in the palate and jaws. One of the natives tore the clothing from the upper part of my body. The head shot forward with an undulating, graceful sweep. I closed my eyes, every muscle tense against the sucking of that yellow tongue, the clinch of the tiny fangs in my flesh.

Suddenly a cry broke from the girl. She screamed again, and caught the chief savage by the arm, pointing to my own arm—to the tattoo of the eagle there.

And instantly Sewell and I were dragged from the altar-top, the monster was hissed back into its hole, and the savages untied us and were circling round us, with slow movements of adulation.

The girl came nearer. She took off her cloak of blue and placed it about my shoulders, standing before me enveloped now in a single, clinging garment of sheer white material, woven from some plant fiber unknown to me, and caught in at the waist with a flexible girdle of the same silver-gold, with the head of a serpent. She bent before me as if in adoration.

A shaft of light flickered across the monoliths. The sun was rising.

INSTANTLY a sort of panic seemed to seize the blackfellows. They seized Sewell and me, forcibly enough, but no longer as if we were captives, and hurried us toward a hole which I now perceived under the altar. We stopped and crawled for a few feet; then I felt steps under me, and suffered myself to be led down in pitch darkness which very gradually dispersed, until a dim and misty light began to permeate the scene.

Lighter it grew, though we were far underground. At last the mists seemed to gather above us, and, halting among my captors, I looked about me.

My amazement was so great that I could hardly believe I was not still upon the desert. I was standing upon a broad platform at the turn of a huge stairway, more grandiose than anything conceivable. It ran straight for five hundred feet up the side of an immense mountain, then began a succession of graceful spirals which carried it five hundred feet more, towards the cloud-veiled summit, on which, as I surmised, rested the circle of the monoliths.

Each stair was wide enough for a dozen horses to stand abreast on it. The platforms at the curves would each have held a company of soldiers. And, from the base of the mountain to the plain stretched out beneath me, rose a rock city of enormous size, but apparently deserted.

What staggered me was the realization that all this was underground. Above the city, level with the mountaintop, was the solid surface of the earth. Yet there was light here, as if from some invisible sun, and the flat plain beneath me gradually sloped downward, so that the horizon was perpendicular instead of horizontal. And over everything hung the steamy vapor, forming an impenetrable roof above.

I had forgotten my disgust at Sewell in the new companionship born of our common adventure. "What do you make of it?" I whispered.

He shot his quick glance at me, and I could see that he had already recovered his composure. "Keep your nerves, Ronald, old man!" he answered. "You see, I wasn't so far wrong. Have you got your revolver with you?"

"It was knocked out of my hand," I answered. "Have you your automatic?"

He shook his head. "I lost it, somehow," he stammered. "But we'll win, if we don't let them see we're afraid of them.

We'll carry out our program. Gold, Ronald, and—"

The blacks came between us. With the princess preceding, we continued the descent, with a sheer drop of five hundred feet on either hand. At the next stage, I was amazed to see three natives, each holding a strange animal like a large llama, saddled for riding, with finely polished leather and stirrups of the same milky gold. And they were shod with the white gold. I saw Sewell glance covetously at the delicate cloven feet that they lifted up.

The princess and we two mounted, and the beasts began to pick their way easily down the stairs, until we reached the topmost street of the rock city. Rock houses rose on either side of us, but it was evident that they had long been used only as camping-places for the blackfellows. They were heaped about with dust and débris. And the whole city had the appearance of a gigantic ruin.

We traversed innumerable streets of the same character, always descending, until we neared the base of the mountain. It was evident by now that thousands of years had passed since the place had been a center of civilization, and I began to surmise what I later verified—that the great public buildings had occupied the summit of the mountain, above the wreath of clouds, and had been involved in the catastrophe which had flung the whole place beneath the earth. At the base, however, we came upon evidence of habitation. There was a long street paralleled by a half-dry irrigating canal, with pools of water here and there, underhung by a straggling growth of trees. Patches of a sort of dwarf millet were growing along the edge. As we turned into this thoroughfare, which seemed the sole occupied street of the ruined city, a little group came forward to meet us.

Their leader was a venerable old man, with a mild face, and heavy white beard reaching to his waist. He was clad in a coarse black robe roped about with a cord. He was surrounded by some score of men and women, all wearing blue cloaks of the same consistency as mine. And they were white as the princess and us two prisoners!

At the sight of us they halted and bowed their heads, crossing their hands over their breasts, staring at us with a sort of pathetic hopelessness. Then the princess spoke, and suddenly a roar of welcome rang out from their throats.

The transformation was astounding. Seldom had I seen people wearing an air of deeper dejection, seldom so swift a transition. They thronged about us, clasping our hands, stroking our hair and faces, and all the while chattering in a musical tongue unlike any language I ever heard.

Then we were moving through the crowd, which grew larger every moment as new additions poured out of the houses—moving toward a low structure set at the edge of the city upon the flat of the plain, with the old man preceding, and the princess at his side, Sewell and I behind, and then the blackfellows.

At the doors of the building the old man turned and made a gesture of dismissal to the blacks, who turned and ran loping back. We entered a small hall, perfectly plain, with a row of low stone benches at one end, roughly hewn, and an increasing crowd that filled the interior.

Then, to my utter amazement, the old man, when the princess had seated herself, turned and addressed me in English.

Fluent English, though the pronunciation was strange, as if he had learned it from books, without vocal practise.

"I am Nasmaza, priest of the unknown god," he said, "and this is Hita, Princess of the Fendeks, and lawful ruler of Ellaborta, where her throne has been usurped by her half-sister Thafti, who has driven her into exile in this desolate ruin of Ethnabasca. Who are you, and how and why have you come here?"

I gave him my name, and told him Sewell's, and the purpose of our journey across the Great Victoria. As I spoke, he repeated my words to the princess, who sat with her eyes fixed on mine, while the crowd muttered its great astonishment, and murmured in an undertone of running comment.

"We know," said old Nasmaza, "that there are many peoples in the world above, to which we once belonged, until the anger of the unknown god plunged us back into the cradle of the race, the heart of the hollow globe. Now you must learn what your coming portends, for it was expected by us, and for that purpose the captive Jim-Smith was hidden from the wrath of the Serpent Priest Kammoda, until he had taught his speech to the wise men among the Princess Hita's party. Yet know that, but for the death of Kammoda, the serpent priest, five days ago, in the abode from which he watched us and carried out the orders of Thafti, in Ellaborta, you had not entered Ethnabasca alive, but had as-

surely been fed to the great serpents."

Jim Smith! That was the name of one of the band of old prospectors who had been supposed to have perished in the desert.

"**A** GES ago," continued Nasmaza, "the hollow earth, which had nursed her brood among the mists, sent them up to people the lands that lie beneath the eye of the great sun. And long after, the anger of the unknown god drew us back again, and filled the surface of earth with uninhabitable deserts, though we know the fair lands lie beyond them.

"We the remnant of the true worshippers, who offer no sacrifice but the prayer within the heart, were persecuted by the serpent priests. It was at their orders that the white men who found their way here, once in a century, were tortured and slain. Nor dared the Princess Hita here, who follows the true faith, restrain her black slaves, descendants of a race of captives, for fear of the vengeance of the serpent priests upon her people. But five days ago the evil Kammoda died, and the city of Ethnabasca is free until a new priest is sent from Ellaborta, the capital."

He paused, and continued speaking in a slow and very impressive voice, in order, I believed, that those among the crowd who had learned English from Jim Smith, might follow him.

"The Princess Hita is of the serpent clan, and heir to the Fendek throne. But she follows the mild unknown god, and when her father died, two years ago, the priests of the serpent raised up her half-sister, Thafti, to the throne in her place, though two days younger, and sentenced Hita to wander in exile until a certain prophecy was fulfilled. Now there were two reasons for this. One was that Thafti favored the cruel serpent worship. And the second was that the Princess Hita may never give an heir to the Fendek throne until the coming of him whom old prophecies have spoken.

"For women of the serpent clan may mate only with men of the eagle clan, and the eagle clan was exterminated in the rebellion of ten years ago, and no men of it were left alive.

"Now, Thafti, the usurper, is of the Wallaby clan, inheriting from her mother, as is our custom; but all the clans obey the serpent priests, and rather did the priests ordain that the Wallaby clan should rule than permit the unknown god to reign over Fendika. And Thafti may wed any male

of the Fish clan, but, being ill-favored, has not yet found a suitable mate.

"Thus you see that Hita must wander in exile until the fulfillment of the old prophecy.

According to this, there shall come from the regions outside the earth a white male of the Eagle clan, who shall mate with the Princess Hita and place her on the throne. But whether he rule with her, it says not. Therefore, Gowani, it seems you are the predestined mate for the Princess Hita here.

"Now, therefore, you must go with her to Ellaborta, after Queen Thafti and her councillors have been apprized of the prophecy's fulfillment, and claim the throne on the princess's behalf."

He ended, and such a storm of applause broke out as showed me that the English tongue had been generally studied among the exiles. I glanced at Hita. She was watching me from her seat on the stone bench, but now her eyes fell, and a red blush spread over her face and throat. Of a sudden the old instinct for adventure, which I had lost during the hardships of the long desert journey, flamed up in me again, and with it love for this woman, the fairest that I had ever seen; and I

vowed I would win her throne for her and make her mine.

Then I glanced at Sewell, and saw that he was eyeing me with a look of malignant rage. And suddenly I realized that I had his rivalry to face; he had thought to be the leader in this adventure which he had designed, and had all the jealousy of his type for the man who had unintentionally supplanted him.

Nasmaxa turned to me again.

"There is much to be done, and there are many perils to overcome before you can claim the Princess Hita as your mate," he said. "To Ellaborta you may journey safely, for none will dare openly to molest you. But the serpent priests and the usurper, Thafti, will not lightly render up their power, if they can win the people to their side. And, though the people hate them, and their cruel sacrifices, understand that the serpent priests are upheld by the fierce horsemen of Thaxas, the Avian Prince, while we have but the footmen of Aonoria, of which this city was once the capital, and they are disunited.

"Therefore"—he extended his arms over me—"let us pray, my son Gowani, that the unknown god keep you and the Princess Hita in his keeping until this mission be

fulfilled and the serpent priests banished from the Fendek land forever."

### CHAPTER III

#### A GRAIN OF TREACHERY

I WAS touched by the words, and by the attitude of the little throng about us—exiles of noble birth, for the most part, as I learned afterward, who had voluntarily accompanied Hita in her journey to the Ethnabascan ruins.

Thafti and the serpent priests were cruel and unscrupulous, but they had not dared risk the popular anger that would have followed on the imprisonment or death of Hita, nor the inevitable outbreak of the Aonorians—for Hita's mother had been of Aonorian birth, a princess of the Serpent clan, and of a line that had once ruled all Fendika, from the capital of Ellaborta.

We kneeled down, and the simple prayer that old Nasmaxa uttered in the English tongue would have been done credit to any assemblage of Christian worshipers. The adherents of the unknown god were simple deists, believing in a loving and protecting spirit who detested sacrifices. I think that they were not far from truth, for all that, like the Athenians of old, they gave their god no name.

Hita knelt at my side, clad in her simple robe of white, and we stretched forth our hands together in prayer. With her, I felt that the long journey had been well, that all was well; and the look on her face when we rose told me that our marriage might become more than a matter of statecraft.

There followed a simple betrothal ceremony. We faced each other in the circle of worshipers, and old Nasmaxa took our right hands in his.

"Do you pledge yourself, if you succeed in overthrowing the usurper Thafti and the serpent priests, to take this maiden Hita, to be your wife, and Queen of the Fendeks, according to the Fendek law and the customs of Fendika?" he asked.

And, when I had assented, "Do you, Princess Hita, pledge yourself that, if you are placed upon the Fendek throne, you will mate with this man of the Eagle clan, as becomes a true maiden of the Serpent clan?"

Hita whispered assent. She did not look at me until our hands were joined, and Nasmaxa spoke a few words of some archaic ritual; then she raised her eyes, and again the vivid red dyed her face, setting my heart to leaping.

After that we were conducted back, no longer captives, but free men, to a rock house at the end of the street not far from the little temple, and there that afternoon, and on successive days, the leaders of our band of exiles visited us.

I learned that it would require two weeks for the dispatch of messengers to Ellaborta, apprising Queen Thafti of our arrival. Probably another week would be spent in debate at the capital, whence a guard of honor would be sent for us. There was, therefore, a period of about five weeks at our disposal. I resolved to spend that time acquainting myself with the Fendek tongue, which, I was told, was very similar to Avian and Aonorian, and could be learned readily in that period. Nasmaxa also intimated that it was hoped to bring some of the leaders of the Aonorian, or popular party, to visit me before we started, to concert measures in case Thafti refused to yield the throne to Hita, as was morally certain.

But as the days passed we foresaw, and my increasing knowledge of conditions told me that my arrival and championship of Princess Hita's cause must plunge the land into sanguinary civil strife.

From Nasmaxa I learned the cosmogony of this land beneath the surface of the globe, according to the records of the ancient wisdom. It appeared that the earth, as many of our own scientists had suspected, was not a solid, but a hollow sphere. The centrifugal force imparted by its revolution had hollowed out the interior so that there was a superficial crust no more than a few miles in thickness at the Equator, which gradually increased until it formed a solid mass at either Pole. The old scientists who had imagined the entrance to the interior of earth to be at the Poles, and had hence been disconcerted when the North and South Poles were attained, had not reflected that, since earth's revolutions were along an axis, the northern and southern points were stationary, and, therefore, centrifugal force had no play in these directions.

Of course the Poles were not the true points of the earth's axis; but, roughly, it might be said that there was a hollow diameter of nearly eight thousand miles at the Equator, diminishing as one went north and south, the whole forming a concave sphere upon whose inner surface life existed in rich profusion.

And this, of course, explained many of the unaccountable discrepancies of geology. It showed how the disturbances of

this thin crust produced earthquakes. Then it had been erroneously supposed that we lived on a thin crust above an interior of fiery heat. But how could man have lived on the exterior of a fiery ball? The fluid lava of volcanoes was molten, not by interior fires, but by compression which, in turn, when suddenly released, generated heat.

Nevertheless, there was heat in the interior, and also light, produced by a small interior sun, Balamok, having a diameter estimated at five hundred miles, and constantly shrinking as it radiated its heat on either concavity of earth's interior. But this sun had rarely been seen by mortal eyes, owing to the constant mists, generated by the steam of seeping water, which at the same time veiled it and shut off its fiery rays.

Annyrili, as they called the interior world, was a land wrapped in perpetual giant ferns and evil monsters lurking in the veiled light of the perpetual day.

For of course there were neither seasons nor night beneath the eye of Balamok, and our first sleep was a source of the greatest astonishment to the Fendeks, who themselves merely sank into a half-comatose, torpid state when they took their leisure. They passed some six hours out of the twenty-four in this condition, but never sank into absolute unconsciousness—and they could remain awake for days together without distress.

It occurred to me that our need of sleep might prove a dangerous weakness in an emergency.

I learned from Nasmaxa that the Fendeks were the possessors of many inventions indicating a high degree of culture. Thus, though he spoke of swords and shields, as if firearms were unknown, there were flying-machines—at least, so I gathered—and many mechanical appliances, unknown to us, used principally for purposes of construction.

And in all things we were free and honored guests, save one. It had been in my mind to try to retrace our steps to the summit of the great mountain, for the purpose of investigation. But at the great midway platform I found a guard of the black Australians drawn up with spears and shields. They saluted me, raising the shields above their heads and shouting, but—I could not pass!

Sewell's attitude puzzled me in those days. He must have had a prodigious supply of drugs with him, for he appeared constantly under their influence. He was

listless and irritable, and totally disinclined to listen to any plans that I suggested. Knowing him to be a coward, I was surprised that he appeared to acquiesce in our situation, for I had expected that he would rather attempt to escape into the desert than to face the unknown perils confronting us.

I noticed that he made it his business to go about among the Fendek exiles, among whom he soon produced a favorable impression. I realized, too, that there was little hope of our cooperation; Sewell never broached his schemes to me as he had done that night in the tent, and I was compelled to await his move, which I suspected would not be a friendly one.

Old Nasmaxa had his own suspicions. He came to our house one night and crossed his hands upon his breast in salutation.

"Oh, Gowani, I would speak with you," he said, glancing at Sewell, who lay in a stuporous slumber, snoring loudly and breathing heavily.

When I had left the little house he put his hand on my arm and said, very earnestly:

"Who is this servant of yours, Gowani; and what is his clan?"

"He is not my servant, but my comrade," I answered. "He has come with me to dig gold from the rocks, which is used as a means of barter among our people."

"I know it," answered Nasmaxa. "For that purpose the Jim-Smith came to the Fendek land. That custom came to you from us, for we, too, seek the *toclanst*" (he meant the electrum or alloy of gold and silver which was plentiful in the Aonorian country). "But are there not, then, clans among your people?"

"Clans there are," I answered; "but they do not regulate the marrying. A man of a clan may marry any woman of the same clan, or another."

He made a gesture of horror. "It is a strange custom," he murmured, politely veiling his repugnance. "Then, do you not know that, being a clanless man, as, indeed, there exist men among us, your comrade Seoul may be made a member of any clan among the Fendeks?"

"I did not know it," I returned indifferently.

"But it is so. And I fear that he is ill-disposed toward you."

"Well, Nasmaxa?"

"Watch him well! I understand the tie of comradeship; vile the man who breaks it. Yet, if signs of treachery appear, put him to death without scruple; otherwise

you shall hardly succeed in overcoming Thafti and the wicked serpent priests. For the people regard you with fear, as beings from the other world, and they do not know what we wise men know, that you are men as we are. A grain of treachery," he said sententiously, "is like the bark of the *adaura* tree; it swells into a mountain in the water of evil counsel."

"I shall remember your advice, Nasmaxa," I answered.

That was all he said at the time. But two days later an event occurred that raised the hopes of all of us.

THE arrival of Sar, the young Prince of the Aonorians, who had come four hundred miles, by forced marches, across the desert, with a body-guard of fifty llamanen, in answer to our summons, was an event of the first importance.

He was a young man of no more than twenty years, who had acceded to the throne the year before upon the death of his father, Metaxastahaba, and was bent, Nasmaxa told me, upon regaining for Aonoria the ancient freedom which she had had before the Fendek domination. With his curling, fair hair, blue eyes, and resolute expression, he made a very favorable impression upon me.

A meeting was summoned at once, and the pros and cons debated earnestly. With the exuberance of youth, Sar was all against our going to Ellaborta, unless accompanied by an army.

"From my capital, Zelryii, my lord Gowani," he said, "I can fling an army of forty thousand footmen against the walls of Ellaborta in as quick a time as you will take to traverse the desert. A peaceful army," he said with a chuckle, "which, nevertheless, shall meet you there to add weight to your demands upon Thafti and the Serpent Priests under Ptuth, the magician, who holds the whole empire in fear. Otherwise, surely you and the Princess Hita shall become victims of Ptuth's wiles."

At that the exiles shouted, and leaped up from their seats, waving their arms eagerly. "Many will join us from the Fendek marches!" shouted one of them.

"And I have fifty henchmen who are still loyal to me in my exile!" cried another.

"My brother who administers my lands will pledge himself with five score and baggage llamas!"

Nasmaxa stood up, and they subsided, looking at him eagerly. "We must not forget," he said, "that our chance lies chiefly

in the populace of Ellaborta. What can ardor and right do against the horsemen of Thaxas? Have we horses, or will they live? Can they be bred in the Aonorian desert where there is little herbage?

"Yet, even though these might be overcome, do not forget the flying warriors of the magician Ptuth, in number fifty. None but Ptuth and the Serpent Priests know the secret whereby they can move through the air. These alone can rout any force opposed to them, and on them rests the power of Thafti, the usurper."

Deep dejection was evident as the force of his words came home to the assembly. Unless the secret could be learned, or Ptuth and his followers overcome, it was clear that our cause was foredoomed to failure.

Then Hita stood up, and I was astonished at the expression of command upon her face.

"Nasmaxa, and you, Sar, Prince of the Aonorians, accept my thanks for your wise counsel," she said. "In part, Prince Sar, I accept your offer. You shall assemble what troops you can on the Aonorian border. But you shall not lead them over the boundary until I summon you, for I would not plunge my empire into war if it can be avoided.

"You, Nasmaxa, and you, my friends, shall accompany my Lord Gowani and me to Ellaborta, as an escort of honor, if you are of the mind to risk so much. But we shall rely chiefly upon the righteousness of our cause and the knowledge that the unknown God is mightier than the Serpent Priests, and can overthrow them, be they entrenched never so strongly with all the evil wiles of Ptuth."

And at that they sprang to their feet and cheered her to the echo.

\* \* \*

Prince Sar departed on the following day, and two days later Thafti's escort, consisting of twelve llamanen, under the command of a captain, arrived for us. And here it seems to me that I have set down in familiarity many names of men and places which will not remain clear to anyone who may come upon this history. I shall therefore recapitulate them briefly:

The Fendek Empire, with its tributary provinces of Avia, supporting Thafti, and Aonoria, supporting Hita.

Ellaborta, the capital of Fendika, and Ethnabasca, the ruined ancient capital of Aonoria.

Thafti, the usurping princess; Hita, the rightful and dispossessed heir.

Thafti's supporters: Thaxas, Prince of

the Avians, with his wild horsemen, and Ptuth, the Serpent Priest, with his band of flying warriors.

Hita's supporters: Sar, Prince of the Aonorians, and many exiled nobles, and most of the population of Fendika, and nearly all Ellaborta.

I had a long talk with Nasmaxa before we started, occupying the greater part of the night, during the course of which he enlightened me as to political conditions in the Fendek empire.

It appeared that the three lesser priesthoods, that of the Fish, the Wallaby, and the Ornithorhynchus were under the control of the Serpent Priests, headed by Ptuth. And the origin of these priests was a singular one.

According to the traditions of the wise men, who alone knew that the earth, Annoryii, was a hollow sphere, Balamok, the veiled sun, revolved at the same rate as earth herself—which, of course, I knew to be a fact, because it formed part of it. Hence it followed that Balamok always kept the same side of his orb facing the same interior of earth. Now it was supposed that the other side of Balamok was dark—that is to say, the heat within the little sun was unevenly distributed, so that a dark crust, like the great spot of Jupiter, had formed on the other side. Here, then, was a region of perpetual darkness, which could not be illumined; and here was a fabled city of darkness, the origin of the Serpent Priests.

These had originally been a caste of warriors, who had learned the secret of flight, and, flying past the scorching rays of Balamok, had landed on Fendek soil and made

themselves masters of the country. By their power of flight and other magical arts these priests held the people in terror. Ptuth was supposed to have the power of causing Balamok to unveil, an event which had occurred once or twice within human record, the rays causing the death of thousands—for, as old Joe had said, the inhabitants of earth's interior could not bear sunlight. Else they had overrun earth's surface as well.

Ptuth was thus the real ruler of the country, and it was certain that he would not allow Thafti, his protégée, to lay down her power at the bidding of a handful of exiles. Therefore we must be most wary in our plans, and be constantly on the watch for treachery.

All the exiles wished to accompany us; there was a pathetic scene when it became necessary to select those who were to come on the journey. But Hita and Nasmaxa insisted, and I agreed, that a certain number must be left behind to protect Ethnabasca against the blacks. This race had once been enslaved, but subsequently banished from the empire, except for a fringe on the remote borders; they were servile, but of a thievish disposition, a race very low in the human scale and useful only as trackers and body-men.

It was also considered necessary to have a nucleus of our supporters in Ethnabasca, in case any untoward event made this necessary. There, in the hills and caves, the fortunes of Hita could be upheld.

So we set off, riding on llamas, Nasmaxa and some twoscore accompanying us, and Sewell behind us. I noticed that Sewell was constantly in the company of

the leader of the escort, and that a good deal of conversation passed between them, but I thought less of this than I should have done. We were all armed with swords, but carried no shields, which etiquette forbade an embassy. Hita had presented me with a splendid weapon, a finely tempered piece of steel, with a serpent inlaid into the blade in yellow electrum leaf.

The journey across the desert occupied us fourteen days. I speak of days, but of course it was perpetual day, and our need of periodical sleep amazed our escort as much as it had astounded the exiles. It was the custom to pass the day in marches of three hours, alternating with a three hours' period of torpor, during which the Fendeks lay on the ground in dreamy contemplation. This habit was shared by the llamas, and, as I learned afterward, by all living things above the low scale of the serpent.

I do not think the Fendeks ever lost consciousness. I remember the first day, when I was sleeping upon the ground, being awoken by a sudden outcry from Hita. I started up, to see her kneeling with clasped hands beside me, and terror on her face.

She was weeping. "My Lord Gowani, I thought you were dead," she sobbed.

When I explained to her, in my halting Fendek, she was more amazed than ever, for, though she had heard of our strange habit, she had never, of course, seen me asleep. And then she said something which, had I but understood her, would have saved me much suffering.

"I think, my Lord Gowani," she said, "that your lives would be half wasted, unless they are longer than our own."

So we rode over the stony wilderness, a replica of the Great Victoria beneath us, and doubtless once one with it. The eye of Balamok was always veiled with clouds; and I was told that in fertile regions the fogs generally enwrapped the land for days together.

Knowing now that the center of gravity lay in the center of the earth's shell, and not in the center of the hollow sphere, I was not surprised to realize that our position was antipodean to that we had occupied in the Great Victoria.

Insensibly, in descending the mountain we had reversed ourselves till we were literally walking head-downward, and looking up toward the veiled orb that gave us light and warmth. And the desert always fell away beneath us as we moved toward the heart of the hollow ball. Soon

signs of verdure became apparent, and the mists descended lower. We traversed a pastureland, thronged with great herds of llamas. This gave place in turn to a forest of giant fern-trees. We picked our way along a wide path cut through this jungle, occasionally passing villages and small walled towns in clearings, but skirting these without entering, probably at the direction of Thafti and her counselors. On the eve of the fourteenth day, as I shall reckon periods of four marches, we camped outside Ellaborta.

THE next morning was clear. Beneath the low-lying clouds in the sky, uniformly gray, we saw the capital. Ellaborta was situated in a wide plain, with patches of tree-fern forest along the two rivers that flowed through it. It was ringed with a wall, evidently of immense strength, pierced at short intervals by massive gateways. The central part was occupied by a great mass of buildings, roofed with elec-trum.

Sewell and I had occupied separate tents upon the journey. We had hardly spoken, but the last few days I had noticed him endeavoring to make up to me. Now he took the opportunity to ride to my side.

"Ronald, old man," he said, "there's been a sort of misunderstanding between us since—since you suspected me of helping poor old Joe Mulock out of his misery—hasn't there?"

"There has," I answered.

"Of course," he continued, "you're master now, and you can literally put it all over me when you choose. But you'll acknowledge that it is I who brought you here. I told you about it—you remember?"

"Well?" I said.

"Remember our talk in the tent that night? I told you we'd strip these fools as bare as a bone. And you told me to forget all about white queens and so forth. You said that you came here to look for gold. You said you were with me on our partnership. Am I correct?"

"You are," I answered. "But suppose you come to the point and enlighten me as to what you are driving at."

"There's gold enough to shoe these llamas with," said Sewell. "There's gold enough on that temple roof, or whatever it is, to make us millionaires. Let's play up to these savages—they're white savages, nothing more—and keep that central fact of gold in our heads first, foremost, and all the time. If we can organize a caravan we can take it back across the Great Vic-

toria. And then we can come back with Maxims and Gatlings and wipe the place clean. What do you say?"

"I say that our partnership ended with the death of old Joe," I answered. "I have done my best for your safety since; I am going to continue to do my best for you. You can go back—if you can. Or you can stay with me. But we're not partners. We are on different enterprises. Is that clear to you?"

He flashed a vicious look at me. "Oh, perfectly, Gowan," he answered. "But have you thought that two can play at the same game? Remember, I understand these people, their origin, and what they stand for. You're making a big mistake. You'll find it out. Sure that's your last word?"

"It's my last word so far as you are concerned," I answered.

He scowled again, and then a sinister smile came over his face, as if he were brooding over the fulfilment of plans already under way. He drew back his llama and rode behind me.

By now we were approaching Ellaborta along a white road, densely lined with people. They were shouting welcome to us, as if the news of our coming, and its purport, were already public property. They swarmed about our llamas, despite the whips which the escort plied unmercifully about them, cheering us, and casting down flowers.

Suddenly the great gates before us opened, and out there came at a gallop a company of warriors on horses. They wore corselets of leather armor, embossed thickly with plates of steel, and carried long sabers. Dark men, for the most part, with flowing black hair and curled beards clipped short about the chin, Avians, and men of Thaxas' famed bodyguard.

But the sight of their horses made me gasp. They were huge beasts, almost as large as elephants, armored with three thicknesses of leather, and their flanks protected with plates of iron. But the hoofs, which were shod with the same electrum, were threefold in division.

It was the three-toed horse of prehistoric times, here a survival, and here, by some law of compensating development, grown to prodigious size.

They raced over the ground faster than a railway train, and with a fierce shout the warriors of Thaxas were riding down the people, sabering them, and leaving many upon the ground, while the heads of the fugitive mob streamed blood behind them.

In a twinkling the approach was deserted, and Thaxas' cavalry, forming into columns of six before us, led the way through the water-gate.

The drawbridge spanned the noble river that wound through the lower part of the capital. On either side rose the strong walls of stone. We passed within, and along a broad avenue, now absolutely deserted—though I knew that eyes watched us from every window—toward the great pile of buildings crowning the summit of the slight elevation up which we rode.

At last the tall houses fell away on either side, and we entered upon a stately quadrangle, surrounding a low hill, flat-topped, and the only elevation of any extent for miles around. This was the heart of Ellaborta, at once the keep and the administrative and religious center.

The hill was strongly walled, and there was a clear space a hundred yards in width about it, evidently for defensive purposes. Within the center rose the great temple with the roof of electrum; clustering about this were smaller temples; on one side was a massive building which I gaged correctly to be the palace; upon the other the council hall, built like the Parthenon, without doors to guard the entrances in the walls of granite.

Looking back, as we left the city proper behind us, I saw that the mob had swarmed out of the houses again, and stood congregated at the edge of the quadrangle, looking after us. There was something ominous in their fear-stricken silence.

We passed through another gateway, guarded by Fendek warriors with swords and shields, and, dismounting, made our way afoot up a flight of long steps toward the summit.

Reaching this, I paused involuntarily in admiration at the scene before us. The great Serpent temple, set in a grove of dwarf trees, lost nothing by the nearer view. Its massive, squat proportions, like those of an Assyrian fane, had diminished the effect of its height, yet now it towered above all, and the gold dome, which seemed to float on air, so gracefully was it poised in place, dominated everything.

Beneath the dome was the representation of a coiled serpent in gold, or, rather, of one of those prediluvian monsters which we had seen at the entrance to this buried world. And on each side of the parallelogram was a smaller temple, a replica in little, whose service could be discerned from the gold effigies upon their walls.

One was the Wallaby temple, another the Fish temple, another the Ornithorhynchous temple. The fourth, which stood in the rear, and hence was invisible to us, was the Eagle temple.

Our Avian guards, dismounting at the inner gates, had left us, in accordance with the etiquette which forbade the presence of horsemen within the citadel. Preceded by our llamamen, we crossed the empty quadrangle in a complete and eery silence. The whole place was deserted.

We halted before the council hall. And suddenly a trumpet rang out, and of an instant an immense multitude, all wearing scarlet cloaks—the colors of the Queen Thafti, as I discovered afterward—came pouring out and formed a double line between us and the main entrance.

Then, advancing slowly, a score of priests in yellow robes, with heads shaven as clean as billiard balls, advanced and took their station on either side of the approach. One of them held above his head a banner, depicting one of the hideous monsters of the place of sacrifice; and under this, an aged man, clean shaven, shorn of head, in sweeping yellow robes and shoes of blue, stood watching me.

He might have been a century old, so wrinkled was his parchment face; but the black eyes within the red-rimmed orbs burned with a malignant fire.

And I knew him for Ptuth, the evil magician and the chief priest of the Serpent.

Again the trumpet pealed. Our escort now advanced, and halted at the entrance of the council hall.

Ptuth strode forward and bowed low before Hita.

"Queen Thafti bids you welcome, O princess; and you, chief of the Eagle clan," he said.

He led the way into the interior. It was a massive hall, containing nothing but a circle of stone seats, covered with scarlet cushions, and in the center, two thrones of gold. At first I could see little, but suddenly a blaze of soft light burst forth, like sunlight, diffused from some undiscovered source within the walls, and almost blinding me after the sudden plunge into the obscurity.

Then I heard Sewell's voice in my ear. "Those thrones are four parts gold to one of silver, Gowan. Think! Think! Don't be a fool! You'll have your chance to change your mind if you act quickly!"

The words passed my consciousness like the wind. Hita and I were standing side

by side, facing the thrones. Without the circle of stone benches had assembled the escort, with all the crowd of Thafti's courtiers, resplendent in their scarlet. Ptuth sat upon his throne, and the Serpent Priests were ranged behind him, their yellow cloaks aglow in the brightly lit chamber.

Before the second throne stood a veiled woman wearing a scarlet cloak over white robes, adorned with woven wallabies. And I knew her for Thafti, the usurping Queen of Fendika.

HITA bent low before her, and I imitated her gestures, crossing my hands upon my breast as I had learned to do.

"Greetings, sister," she said simply, giving to Thafti honor, but not the royal honor.

I could see nothing of Thafti's face, which was completely hidden by her white veil, but she looked regal as she stood before us, restrained, and yet poised as if for instant decision. She was a splendid-looking woman, too, and every inch a queen in her scarlet and white.

Then Thafti's voice broke the silence, and her melodious tones rang out like silver bells.

"Greetings, half-sister," she said, emphasizing the relationship by the suffix, and using, somewhat to my surprise, the particle which denotes equality, instead of that denoting address to an inferior. "And to you, Gowani," she continued. "And likewise to you, Nasmaza"—she stood for a moment to where the old man stood outside the circle. "Your letters were received, and have been read by my council and my priests and servitors. We have studied them closely, in our anxiety to do our duty toward this Fendek realm. But now, since this matter is one of much perplexity, I call my faithful counselors once more to my assistance."

With that she resumed her seat upon the throne, and instantly the mob in scarlet scrambled into the stone seats. Their looks were haughty and derisive, and boded no good to us.

I saw them fingering the long swords that hung in their scarlet scabbards at their sides, and suddenly I realized how hopelessly we were entrapped among them, with the horsemen of Thaxas holding the gates behind us.

Ptuth rose from his throne, and of a sudden the immense hall was silent.

"Queen Thafti," he began, "long and keenly have we debated this matter at

issue. It is true that, through the spells woven by the priest Nasmaxa, who has neither god nor altars, thy birth was delayed until two days after that of thy sister Hita, so that she was appointed heir, in conformity with the Fendek laws. But inasmuch as she refused to perform the sacrifices to the Serpent god, she was declared outlawed and banished from this realm.

"Moreover, as is known to you all, there remained no male of the Eagle clan with whom she could mate, and so give an heir to the throne, and therefore to have crowned her would have been to bring the dynasty to an end. Wherefore it seemed good to the people to choose thee, Thafti, for queen."

At this the courtiers, sensing what the decision would be, rose in their seats, brandishing their swords in their scabbards, since etiquette forbade them to draw the blades in council.

"And how know we that this stranger is of the true Eagle clan?" continued Ptuth. Is it by virtue of the brand he bears on his arm, as llamas do? How know we that the Eagle clan without the world is of descent from that within Annoryii? Moreover, by coming hither he has exposed himself to judgment of the law which proclaims that all strangers shall be sacrificed to the Serpent. My judgment, therefore, is that these men be taken to the Serpent temple and—" He broke off, for of a sudden the quadrangle outside resounded with the yells of an angry mob.

We turned and looked through the doors. The whole enclosure was filled with a crowd of the populace, many wearing blue cloaks, some, the poorer, patches of blue upon their garments. They streamed toward the council hall, brandishing swords, staves, clubs, carrying stones, and

obviously bent upon a hostile purpose.

"Hita!" they howled. "Queen Hita of the Fendeks!"

Instantly the courtiers had sprung to the entrance and ranged themselves in a serried array, their swords in their hands.

It was not difficult to see what had occurred. Taking advantage of the dismounting of the horsemen of Thaxas, the Ellabortan populace, probably by a concerted plan, had rushed the inner gates.

And, in token of their victory, they carried, high in the air, a grisly spectacle—a horse's dripping head.

I learned afterward that only a bodyguard of Thaxas' men were then in the capital. Half of these had been captured, and their horses either killed or chased from the city; for so great was the fear of these ferocious monsters that none dared try to mount them.

But the remaining half had secured themselves, and were now riding against the populace from the rear. The great horses, agile as antelopes, were leaping among the crowds that hampered them, and a ferocious battle was taking place just inside the central gate.

At the entrance to the council hall the populace halted for an instant, facing the ranks of the courtiers. Then, with a sudden rush, they were upon them.

The courtiers fought with desperation, but so tense was the mob, so strong the pressure of the packed masses, that the line broke, and dissolved instantly into little groups, standing back to back, and keeping a ring of Ellabortans, mad with hate, at bay.

Whether or not the horsemen overcame their assailants, it was clear that Thafti's men and Ptuth and his priests would have short shrift. They, in turn, were now pent up and at the mercy of the Ellabortans.

Suddenly Thafti, who had sat impassive-

ly upon her throne, leaped to her feet and cried:

"Hold, people of Ellaborta! Am I Queen of the Fendeks, and shall I not be heard?"

A huge man, black from head to foot, wearing a tanner's apron, sprang forward before the people.

"Aye, queen who veils her face, you shall be heard. We shall hear you pronounce your abdication in favor of your sister Hita!"

"Hita! Queen Hita!" yelled the crowd. Thafti glanced through the doorless entrance. There was now no sign of Thaxas' horsemen, and the quadrangle was packed from end to end with the revolting populace.

Queen Thafti spoke again. "Is it the custom of the law-abiding Fendeks to fight in the council chamber? Put up your weapons and assemble to hear my judgment on this matter!"

"Aye, but you shall judge truly, or we pull you from your throne and Ptuth, the arch-rascal!" muttered the tanner in surly fashion.

I saw Ptuth's white face grow dark with blood. But a moment later the populace were gathering outside the ring of benches, on which the courtiers had again assembled, and more were streaming in at the doors, until the council hall was as packed as the outer courts.

And, with the curious inconsistency of the mob, I heard shouts raised for Queen Thafti. She resumed her seat upon the throne and, bending, whispered to Ptuth, who nodded. I wondered what rascality the old devil was contriving.

I was soon to know.

**A**PRIEST departed toward a door at the far end of the council hall, and presently returned, accompanied by an aged Fendek woman, whom he brought to the foot of Thafti's throne.

Queen Thafti spoke: "Hear me, ye men of Ellaborta!" she cried in ringing tones. "Ye know this matter at issue, and how my half-sister Hita, having found an Eagle man to mate with, claims my throne, as having been born two days before me."

"Hita! Queen Hita!" yelled the crowd.

"Queen Thafti! Hear Queen Thafti!" answered others.

Thafti made a little ironical obeisance. "I thank you, my people, who still have faith in my good-will and honorable intentions," she said quietly.

Instantly the hall was ringing to the mob's plaudits. Thafti was swaying them,

I knew not toward what deviltry of Ptuth's.

"Know, then, my people," she continued, in her melodious voice, "that this old woman is the nurse who had the care of both myself and my sister at birth. She shall speak for me, and you shall judge this issue, according to the ancient Fendek laws."

The old hag came forward to the center of the circle, chuckling and grimacing and displaying her toothless gums. But her voice was clear as a bell, and from the fluency with which she spoke it was plain that she had been thoroughly coached to her part.

"I am Ros Marra," she said. "You know me, Fendeks. Many a year I served our late lord the King and also his princess wives."

"We know you, Ros Marra, liar and trickster!" the tanner shouted. "Many an evil deed thou hast hidden from sight of men!"

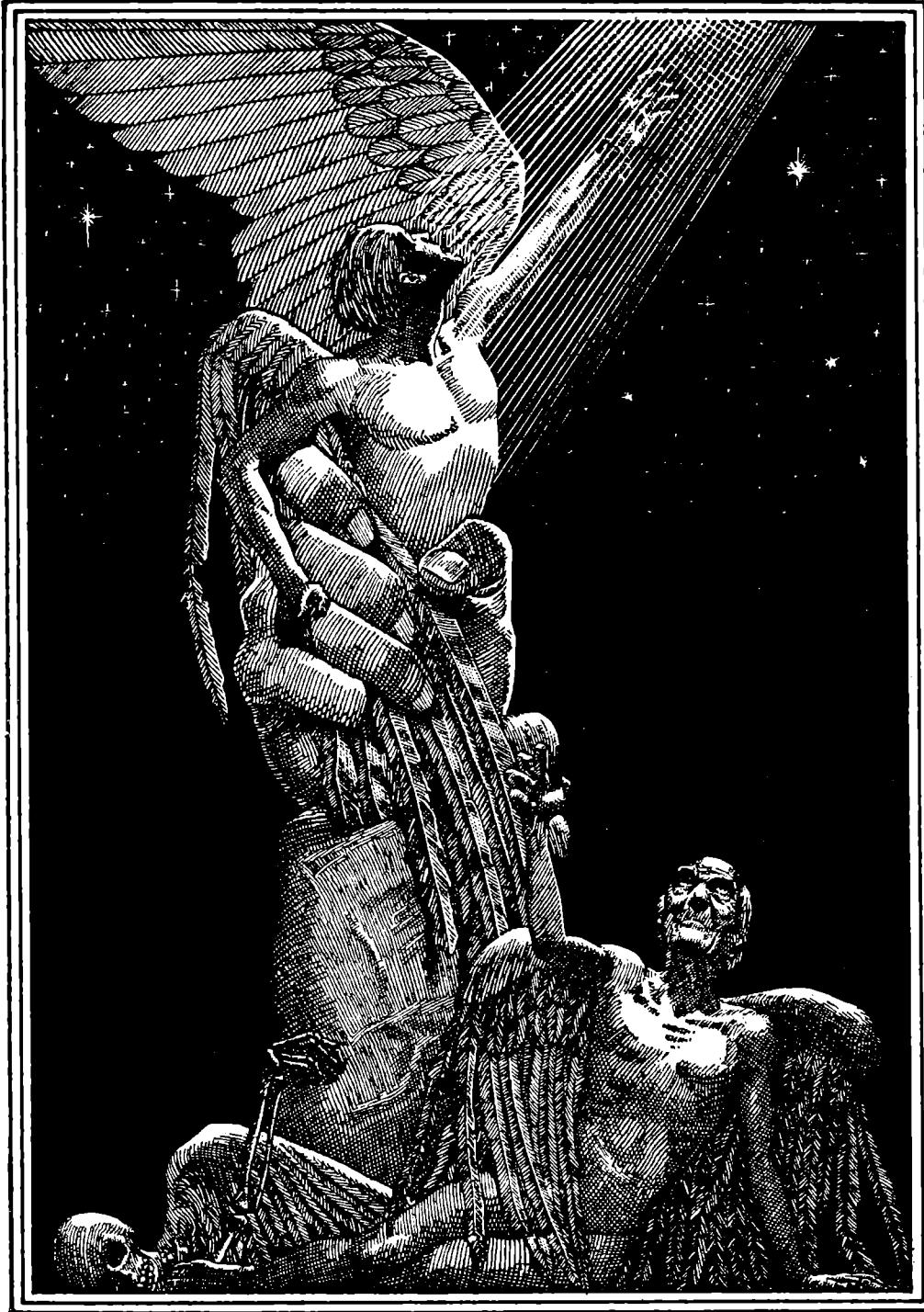
"I have served my master," muttered the crone. "Now hear this story. Upon a certain time, twenty-nine years after the calamity of Balamok's unveiling, which brought death to thousands who saw his fiery eye, a princess was born to our late master. And two days later a second princess was born. Now, my lord, having looked upon the second princess, found fault with the elder, because she was less well-favored. Now the first princess was a Serpent, but my lord, who had slain all men of the Eagles in his anger, knew that she could never mate. And the second princess was a Wallaby, with whom many nobles of the Fish clan would mate to their great honor. Therefore my lord gave orders that the princesses should be secretly changed—"

"Ah-h-h!" A roar broke from the mob. Their dramatic sense was mightily impressed by this astounding revelation.

"Instructing me that the secret should never be revealed except in case of grave necessity—"

The pandemonium was indescribable. But now it was the Ellabortans who were at odds among themselves—some shouting that the old woman lied, others howling for silence.

"Then know ye, by the truth of the Serpent god, by the great hidden Eye of Balamok, by the Wallaby and Fish gods—aye, and by the Eagle god of the empty temple, that Princess Hita is the younger, and of the Wallaby clan, while Queen Thafti is your lawful ruler, and truly of the Serpent!"



Always, there is the quest of the heart's desire, always the unobtainable, the lure that beckons across the deserts of life to those who watch.

"Queen Thafti!" yelled the mob. "Balamok preserve Queen Thafti!"

Ptuth stepped forward and held up his hand for silence.

"Wherefore, O Ellabortans," he said, "since this stranger of the Eagle clan has come hither, according to the ancient prophecy, to mate with our princess, it is meet that he mate with Thafti, and with her rule this Fendek land."

The mob roared its approval. Poor Hita was already forgotten. And Ptuth was on the job.

He was not going to give the populace any chance to remember her.

He believed in striking while the iron was hot.

I was dumbfounded. I did not know what to do at this awful turn of affairs, and I saw poor Hita trembling at my side. Then Sewell stepped forward, and I saw a look of singular understanding pass swiftly between him and Ptuth.

He spoke in fluent Fendek, though he had hitherto given me the impression that he knew only a few words of that language. "O Ptuth, priest of the Serpents," he said, "wonderful are your judgments! Yet it is not meet that the Princess Hita, having been promised marriage, should again be reduced to disconsolate spinsterhood. Since I am a man of no clan—for the great princes in my own land are clanless, according to our custom—deign to grant that I may be inducted into the Fish clan, and thus become the husband of the Princess Hita."

Hita quailed and shrank back toward me. The mob went wild at this prospect of the double marriage. And now Sewell's scheme stood revealed to me. He meant to become Hita's husband, and then, when the opportunity offered, to declare her the lawful queen.

Ptuth smiled all over his wrinkled face. "It is well said, Seoul, my lord," he answered, "and the people approve. Then let the double marriage be performed legally within the Serpent temple after six *psus*" (periods of three hours of labor, or about eighteen hours). "Queen Thafti, deign to look upon the face of your affianced husband."

Thafti stepped forward, and, standing before me, raised her veil for the first time. I could hardly restrain my horror. For her face was seamed and lined and twisted, so that the very sight of it repelled and nauseated me.

She was the most repulsive woman I had ever set eyes upon.

## CHAPTER IV

### OUT OF THE SERPENT'S MOUTH

**S**HE read the horror in my look, and a spasm of fury twisted still more the contours of her features; then she let the veil fall, and, with the mob still howling its applause, we were being led away. A guard of soldiers in scarlet cloaks conducted Hita with all ceremony toward the palace. Yet, before we were parted, she bent toward me and spoke hurriedly the words that set my heart to beating wildly:

"I love thee, my lord Gowani. Fear not, for in life or death I shall be thine!"

And the mob was not all for Thafti, for the great tanner leaped forward out of its midst, waving his arms. "Fair words!" he sneered. "Fine talk, but how know we Ros Marra does not lie?"

Thafti turned upon him as he stood near the circle of benches. She motioned to two of her courtiers, who seized the man and dragged him within.

"O my Councillor Ptuth, what shall be done with one who asperses the honorable birth of Fendika's queen?" she asked.

"Let the serpents be fed," responded Ptuth carelessly.

The tanner's face turned ashen. He glanced wildly toward the mob, but none stirred to aid him. He had counted too long upon the people's favor. Reformers shared the common fate in Fendika.

The guards led him away unresistant, and a moment later Nasmaxa and the exiles were being conducted toward the palace, while I followed alone, with four armed men around me, more like a prisoner than a prospective bridegroom and king, though the populace danced about us, cheering me.

The palace was a great, rectangular building of white stone, with innumerable windows, and the same squat appearance, with curiously carved columns about the doors, that had reminded me of an Assyrian temple. Two doors of fragrant, highly polished dark wood gave into a large interior, softly illumined with the same diffused glow, which as I learned later, was very sunlight, drawn from Balamok. The passages within ran irregularly, with no apparent plan, and at intervals were doors of the same wood, leading into rooms.

At the rear was a flight of wide, curving stairs. My guards conducted me toward them, but, instead of ascending, we entered a small room, with a carven stone

Serpent on a pillar on either side of it. Its interior contained two low couches, covered with scarlet pillows, a low table, not more than a foot high, designed for eating from the floor—nothing more, and the single window was heavily barred with a cross-work of iron.

Looking out, I could see the towering proportions of the great Serpent Temple, from whose walls the immense gold dinosaur seemed to rear and hiss at me. Moving along the walk among the dwarf trees, which was paved with blue pebbles, were two of the yellow-robed priests.

My guards left me, and, withdrawing, bolted the door behind me. Presently it was opened, and a servitor, bowing low, brought in a tray of food—grain porridge, and luscious fruits such as abounded in that land of perpetual daylight. I had never eaten flesh while in Fendika, nor did I ever; either the Fendeks were naturally vegetarians, or the llamas were not used for food.

Thus I was left to my reflections, gloomy enough; nor were they lessened by the perpetual daylight. For I find, on considering, that one looks forward to night as putting a temporary term to human ills; here there was only the everlasting day, and neither sunlight nor darkness.

Of one thing I was sure; I would rather die than become husband to Thafti. And my anger against Sewell, and my realization of his treachery, though it kept me from giving way to hopelessness, jangled my nerves and distorted my mind, and kept me from forming any coherent plans, if, indeed, such were possible.

At last, exhausted, I sank into some such torpor as characterized the Fendeks. I was not asleep, and dimly I was listening to a great tumult and shouting outside the inner walls, and trying to analyze it, when a click of the bolt startled me into wake-

fulness. I started up, to see a Wallaby priest confronting me.

He wore the yellow robe, indicating his subservience to the Serpent hierarchy, but there was a wallaby on either side of the breast opening. He was shaven, like Ptuth, except for a long forelock, curling over his forehead.

But there was nothing awesome about him. He was a little round, rubicund man, who looked as if he were not averse from good living, and he stood looking benevolently upon me as I rose to my feet, and made me an obeisance, crossing his hands upon his breast.

"Greetings, my lord Gowani," he said. "I am Mnur, chief priest of the Wallaby temple."

To my astonishment he winked at me, and, without further formality, seated himself upon the low couch at my side.

"If men in my lord's country are as men here," he observed, "he will not wonder that, though her weight in electrum was offered as a dowry with the Princess Thafti, there were no takers."

"I am not surprised at all," I returned morosely.

"Yet Thafti is a splendid woman," he went on thoughtfully. "Never was there one more fitted to rule the Fendek Empire. Yea, and moreover we were considering the sending of a marriage embassy to the blind prince of the Lassayii, with costly gifts; but your coming has wrought grievous confusion. Hark!"

He raised his hand for silence, and I heard the dying tumult in the lower parts of the city.

"Prince Thaxas, who was here on a mission, and had been hunting, has returned," he said. "He has brought reinforcements of his horsemen into Ellaborta, and has taken a bloody revenge for the people's insolent rebellion this past *psus*. Eight

hundred Ellaborts lie dead beneath his horsemen's swords, and the great serpents will grow fat to-morrow. Ah, Thafti is an excellent queen."

His words made me think swiftly. If Thaxas was now master of the capital, it was highly probable that I was not destined to become Thafti's husband after all—unless Thafti preferred an enforced marriage to the Fendek throne.

"But first," said Mnur, "I speak of the mission on which I have come. My lord Gowani, you possess knowledge of the secret which none here knows, save the magician Ptuth, whereby he lives forever."

"What is that knowledge?" I inquired.

"The secret of eternal life," he returned calmly, fixing me with his large, brown eyes.

"I do not possess it," I returned, "nor any of us, though many would give all they have for it."

He shook his head sadly. "I can hardly believe you, my lord Gowani," he answered. "The knowledge of Ptuth, the secret whereby the Princess Hita is renewed unto perpetual youth, until the coming of him of whom old prophecies have spoken, is reputed to be known to the men of the world without. For you well know that Hita's youth must be renewed forever, through the arts of Ptuth, until he of whom it is prophesied shall come. Whether you be truly he, I know not, but at least you have this knowledge."

"There is no secret, Mnur," I said again. "We die, even as you die."

"I know you die," he answered, "by accident or violence. But—" He checked himself. "Perchance my lord will some day reveal it to me?" he said slyly.

I was not going to waste further breath contradicting this obsession.

"For Ptuth's power is ended," he went on. "The story of Ros Marra was a great blow to us, for it had been planned to make the Wallaby priesthood supreme in the land, and drive back the tyrannical Serpents to the city of darkness and black magic, on the dark side of Balamok. It is only by their possession of wings that the Serpent Priests are able to retain their sway over Fendika, and all hate them.

"Now, my lord Gowani, the moment is ripe. The wings of the Serpent Priests are stored in the chamber above the temple. To-morrow (literally, *psus* seven, with the particle indicative of future time, but I shall not attempt to translate literally) while the assemblage is gathered in the temple, and the attention of the priests is

distracted, we shall seize the room of the wings, possess ourselves of them, and thus master the city. All our plans are made. Thafti shall rule one of the tributary kingdoms, and you shall mate with Hita and reign in Ellaborta, and the old clans shall be abolished and the Wallabies shall be supreme."

This was more than I was prepared to pledge. But I had learned wisdom in these latter days, and did not commit myself; so Mnur departed, assuring me that success was sure.

**W**ITH peal of trumpets and clashing of cymbals I was conducted across the quadrangle, densely packed with a crowd, driven and herded there by the horsemen of Thaxas, who lined all the four sides of it, and, with the remorseless use of whips and swords, showed their resentment for the outbreak of the day preceding, and their contempt for the populace.

Yet there was a sense of the impending revolt brooding in the air, in the very silence, and in the wistful looks which the people cast at me.

And when Hita, arrayed in her blue cloak, passed along the blue-pebble walk into the temple, upon her llama, shod with gold, cheers rang out at which the Avian horsemen could only scowl. For it showed where, after all, the love the people lay; and it was lawful to cheer Hita, though only scowls and muttering greeted the veiled Thafti, in scarlet.

Ros Marra's story was universally discredited, for the old woman was known to be an evil genius of the palace, and many dark and murderous deeds were ascribed to her.

Inside the Serpent temple the yellow lights cast only a faint luminosity, except about the altar, which was dazzlingly lit up.

The temple was packed with the populace, but there was a clear space about the chancel, which was guarded by a sort of cheval-de-frise of great golden spikes, worth a city's ransom. Inside this were the lines of yellow-robed Serpent Priests, the Wallaby Priests, also in yellow, with the Wallaby emblem; the Fish Priests, in scaly silver, and the priests of the Ornithorhynchus, in green. Ptuth was there, with Sewell at his side; and I noticed that Sewell was now attired in silver, as one who had just been initiated into the Fish Clan, and he bore the silver symbol of a fish upon his breast.

He turned his eyes on me with a look of

hate that showed me there would be no further dissembling between us.

Hita was standing opposite me, and old Nasmaxa beside her. There was something of hopefulness in the anxious glance that Nasmaxa turned on me, as if he were privy to Mnur's plot and anxious to reassure me.

Queen Thafti, in white and scarlet, with the heavy veil before her eyes, stood almost at my side. Upon the other side of her was a strongly built man, apparently of about forty years, with a commanding look and a short, curled, black beard. Him, I knew to be the tributary Prince Thaxas, head of the Avian State, and commander of the famous horsemen who upheld the Fendek throne.

I saw him staring across at the Princess Hita with all his might, as if hypnotized. Something about the girl seemed to fascinate him, and it occurred to me that he had probably never seen her, since I knew that he had lived in Asclaxa, the Avian capital, before his accession, which had occurred since Hita's banishment.

And, looking across at her sweet figure and face, in her becoming robes of white and blue, it seemed to me that no man in his senses could avoid worshiping her. Only, if Thaxas worshiped her, it added a new complication.

But the sight of these chief actors in our drama was forgotten as I looked within the chancel and saw the altar. The workmanship was beautiful in the extreme, and yet there was something hideous and degenerate about it, as if it was an evil mind that had conceived this thing and fashioned it.

Picture the whole scene illuminated by the reflected glow of a hundred invisible candles—two spiral stairways of purest electrum, one on either side of the high altar; near the temple room, a flat-topped white stone, with horns of stone at each of the four corners. The white stone floor before the altar was set about a circular orifice, covered with a golden grille, and between the grille, out of which it rose, and the altar-top, where it terminated, was an immense serpent, or rather dinosaur, fashioned of electrum, but so cunningly that it might have been alive.

The little claw feet, with the tiny legs, clung to the bases of the stairways, which separated and came together at the top, or appeared to do so, much as a twisted corkscrew seems to undulate; and at the tops were the claw feet again, as if supporting the altar stone. Now Ptuth came forward, with his priests drawn up about

him, and the lights within the body of the temple went out, leaving the space immediately about the altar densely illumined.

Ptuth raised his hand. "Ye know," he chanted, in ancient Fendek, "that I, chief of the Serpent Priests, possess the power over this land—yea, over the Royal House, given me by the Serpent God. Ye know that, at my command, Balamok unveils his evil eye, and the world perishes."

A shudder went through the assemblage, which grew as still as death. Ptuth drew a silver wand from his robes and struck the golden serpent.

At once, to my horror, the golden beast began to writhe, the golden head, which was above the grille—for it was molded head downward—opened and closed, and a hissing noise came from its throat. The people shuddered again. Ptuth mounted the altar stairs, until he stood upon the upper platform by the altar, from which he took some grisly thing that I had not perceived, and placed it on the serpent's tail.

The golden mass writhed and contracted, and simultaneously there came a renewed hissing from the grille, the lid of which flew back. A monster dinosaur appeared, flashing its wicked eyes at us as the snout, with the moist tentacles, disappeared inside the golden shell.

The dinosaur was climbing upward for its meal. After a period of horror we saw the head appear at the upper orifice, the scaly body emerged, and the crawling devil, bearing its meal in its distended jaws, crawled behind the altar and coiled itself upon a projecting ledge of the interior building, sunning itself immediately in the glow of the solar lights.

Ptuth descended and stood before us again, striking the golden serpent, which at once ceased to undulate.

"O Queen Thafti, princess, and people of Fendika," he began, "yesterday it was heard that Thafti remains queen of this land, according to the story of the old nurse, Ros Marra, which has been confirmed. Wherefore, we betrothed the Lord Gowani unto her, and gave her sister, Hita, to the Lord Seoul, ordering that the marriage ceremony should take place within the temple after six *psus*. Yet when this contract was made we were not aware of a previous contract, entered into between the late King of Fendika, and the father of Prince Thaxas, nullifying this. For the Prince Thaxas claims the hand of Queen Thafti thereby."

THE old scoundrel's game was perfectly plain. Having subdued the outbreak, he was resolved to eliminate me altogether from the throne by pressing this marriage, which might have been arranged, but had assuredly not been considered binding.

"How say you, Prince Thaxas of the Avian Kingdom, are you willing to take Thafti, Queen of the Fendeks, to mate with her and rule this land with her?" asked Ptuth.

"I am willing," answered Thaxas, still staring at Hita; and I saw Thafti grow rigid.

"And, you, O queen?" asked Ptuth of Thafti.

"I am willing," she answered in a low tone.

Ptuth paused, and a slow grin crept over his wrinkled face. "What, then, shall be done with him who has looked on the face of the veiled queen, not being her betrothed?" he purred. "Shall he not be paid divine honors, according to the ancient laws of this Fendek realm?"

A roar of approbation came from the spectators. The priests closed in about me. A silver cord was slipped adroitly over my body, binding my hands behind me. And, before I could defend myself or attempt resistance, I was wound round and round, as a spider winds a fly in the web that it spins.

I saw the look of horror on Hita's face. She sprang toward me. But she beat impotently against the line of yellow priests, and I was dragged away to where the open mouth of the great gold dinosaur hung over the grille.

Ptuth struck the serpent again, and now the beast began to undulate once more, but this time the contractions were upward instead of downward. The infernal mechanism within would gradually force me up to the altar, behind which I saw the evil eyes of the abominable reptile watching the preparations.

They dragged me to the serpent's mouth. There was not the least stir among the mob. I fancy that they were thrilled in anticipation of the exciting spectacle of my sacrifice. I saw their eyes all fixed on me.

I heard Hita cry out, I saw her struggling in the arms of the priests; then she had collapsed in an unconscious heap upon the floor of the temple. I looked up. Over my head the gold jaws were opening and closing, with a mechanical movement. I could see, inside them, the undulations of the devilish mechanism. I knew that so

soon as my head was placed in position on the padded gums I would be snatched up and carried painlessly into the moving interior, to the top, where the serpent awaited me.

But there was a formality yet to be pursued. Ptuth turned to Thafti.

"O queen," he said, "deign to look upon the face of your affianced husband."

After a moment of hesitation Thafti raised her veil. Prince Thaxas started back, and a low cry broke from his lips.

He stammered pitifully, "O Ptuth, before the marriage is made I must consult my councilors about a marriage settlement. I must take horse to my capital speedily for that purpose, that the matter be not delayed."

"That, O Prince Thaxas, may not be, since you have looked upon Thafti's face," answered Ptuth, chuckling. And, leaning forward, he touched some mechanism upon the serpent's mouth. He stepped back hastily, still leering at me, and the priests who held me released me at the same moment.

The huge jaws closed on my forehead, but the pads that lined them aided the devilish mechanism in such a way that they grasped me tight without injuring me. In a moment the suction had drawn me wholly within the cavernous interior.

It was pitch-dark, of course, but I could feel that the serpent was about four feet in width, and the scaly sides within lined with innumerable rows of revolving belts, studded with tiny teeth, which hooked into my clothes, and then, being turned to a different angle, released me, and passed me on to the next row. It was quite impossible to stay myself in that fearful progress. I could not hold the teeth, which swung upward, gripped me, and passed me on; and there seemed also an air suction which contributed to my movement.

Suddenly the mouth beneath me opened again. Plainly I saw Hita lying still unconscious upon the temple floor, the lower part of Ptuth's figure, and then—something that came crawling upward through the opening of the grille beneath!

It was a second serpent; the monster, whose scales would nullify the steel teeth in the tube, would follow in swift pursuit of me. My heart beat like an engine in my ears. I was paralyzed with horror and loathing.

Somehow I had had it in my mind that I should at least emerge at the altar top, to meet my fate in light, to struggle for life; not to be mouthed in the dark. The

difference may seem trivial, but it was real enough to me.

At that moment there came another flash of light from above. I saw a dark form glide toward the upper entrance of the gold serpent, and disappear within. It was the first dinosaur; the two would meet me in the interior and devour me from either end.

With a fury of which I had thought myself incapable I strained at the bonds that bound me. I felt them cut deep into my arms—then suddenly a cord snapped. My hands were free, and, as I traversed the rows of teeth, I unwound the cord from about me. I was free!

So far as I could be free. I heard the hiss, as of escaping steam, above and below me. I must be nearing the belly of the monster. In another moment the sucking rending jaws would be fastened into me from either side.

And suddenly I perceived a gleam of pale light in the monster's belly.

There was a plate in the wall, and it was opening! By the light I could now discern the head of the dinosaur above me, the wicked, glancing eyes, the open mouth, lined with the rows of teeth, the yellow, spoonlike tongue.

Then a man had reached in and dragged me forth. At the same time, the hissing mouths above me and beneath me met.

The jaws of the dinosaurs, balked of their prey, met and gripped in violent combat.

I looked into the face of Mnur, Priest of the Wallabies.

FOR a moment I became unconscious, but the subconscious realization of my peril aroused me. He was supporting me, and, seeing that I was already master of myself, he beckoned to me to follow him.

I was in a small, square room, with stairs

of plain stone leading upward. It was the interior of the block that upheld the altar stone, against which a coil of the gold serpent rested, so that the aperture was invisible from the body of the temple.

A flight of steps, almost perpendicular, led upward behind the altar to a small room, used as a robing-chamber by the priests. It was filled with men, wearing short swords, who looked up eagerly as we entered.

They had thrown off their Wallaby robes, which lay heaped on the ground, but I knew they were the Wallaby priests, assembled to carry out the plot to make themselves masters of the serpents.

They gathered about me, treading softly and speaking only in tense whispers. One of them thrust a sword into my hand. Mnur gave the signal, and in single file we ascended a second, longer flight of stairs, leading upward, until I saw the interior of the great dome above my head.

Suddenly Mnur grasped me by the arm and made a gesture of danger. We were crouching in the angle afforded by two walls, with an open door set into the masonry a few paces away. Behind this I could see a corridor, with another door opposite, and through this a room, in which a score of Serpent Priests were seated, drinking and jesting together. The sound of their laughter rang out loudly through the apartment.

Pacing the corridor was a sentry, wearing the yellow serpent cloak, and carrying a sword. He passed us, and I heard the tramp of his footsteps die away along the corridor.

Presently they grew louder again. The sentry was returning. Mnur looked at his companions and stepped forward with surprising agility for so stout a man. In his hand he held a short dagger.

As the head of the sentry appeared in

the doorway, Mnur sprang upon him from behind and buried the dagger in his throat. The man dropped with a bubbling gurgle.

Instantly we were across the corridor and among the Serpent Priests, a score against a score.

Taken altogether by surprise, they had hardly time to draw their swords before ours were at their throats. A few blades clashed, one of our opponents dropped, stabbed through the heart; and then they had dropped their weapons and raised their arms in token of surrender.

Mnur issued some order, and sullenly they filed away before us into an interior chamber looking like a large, modern factory. It was filled with the whir of mechanism. Many of the machines were unknown to me, but among them I recognized a variety of dynamo, run, however, by no visible power. Above it streamed a cone of purple light, tapering to a thin point above a glass set into the top of the mechanism.

This was, in fact, the solar dynamo of the priesthood, by which the rays of Balamok, drawn through the clouds, were concentrated and made to run the dynamo, which, in turn, by the conversion of light into a form of kinetic energy, stored them and gave them out again to illuminate the city.

Ranged all about the room were the famous flying-machines of the priesthood. These consisted simply of a pair of tenuous steel wings, attached to a small solar engine. This, resting against the hips when the wings were strapped on, at the touch of a button set them to vibrating furiously, with more revolutions than those of a gas engine.

The Serpent Priests had discarded, centuries before, the old flying-machine, which had evolved much after the cumbersome pattern of our own, and had resolved it into the simplicity of wings, guiding themselves in air by the motion of their own bodies.

Herding the disarmed priests into a corner, the Wallaby Priests quickly adjusted each other's apparatus by means of straps over the shoulders and around the waist, under the directions of a Wallaby who had formerly served in the Serpent Priesthood. Then Mnur turned to the priest nearest him.

"Where are the light bombs?" he demanded.

The man began to stammer and shake. "O Mnur, the oath which we swore by the great Serpent God never to reveal—"

Mnur's sword at his throat cut him short. With trembling fingers he tapped three times upon a panel in the wall, a part of which swung open. Inside, piled in wooden boxes, were about a hundred bombs, the size of baseballs, but tapering at one side, which formed a handle.

They seemed composed of a sort of mica, or flexible glass, and inside was a play of bluish light, changing to red, green—in fact, to all the colors of the spectrum. They were simply compressed light, held in an ether vacuum, and at the time I imagined, although erroneously, that they exploded violently when broken.

Attached to the straps which held our machines in place were large pockets with individual compartments, one on either side, each capable of holding a dozen of the bombs, which weighed almost nothing. Having thus armed ourselves, we left the trembling priests behind, and made our way down toward the entrance to the Serpent.

Arriving in the little chamber I could hear the sound of muffled chanting. Now I perceived that there was another entrance, leading to the altar top itself.

Very softly we crept up the stairs. Suddenly I saw the figure of old Ptuth. He was standing upon the altar-top, chanting a hymn. With a bound Mnur and I leaped forth and seized him.

A deep roar from the assembled multitude greeted this spectacular action. I saw Thaxas and Thafti standing with joined hands. The priest was about to unite them. The expression on the face of Thaxas was pitiful. Neither Sewell nor Hita was to be seen.

Suddenly Ptuth, who had stood as if petrified, made a swift, flying leap, broke from our grasp, and hurled himself to one of the stone stairways about the altar. At the same moment the yellow priests came swarming up at us with drawn swords, while the scarlet cloaks of Thafti's courtiers blended with them.

Mnur, seizing one of the bombs, hurled it full in the face of the nearest man.

With howls of terror the assaulting party dropped their weapons and fled. No discharge followed, but of a sudden the interior of the temple was filled with released sunlight, compared with which the tapped solar light that came through the vents was but of candle-power.

It was real sunlight, dazzling, blinding, and—warm. It was the very essence of Balamok, of which the solar light was a poor shadow.

And the Fendeks could not endure sunlight. As old Joe Mulock had said, they "withered like worms" in it.

JOE had not been far wrong. The stairs were cleared in an instant. The crowd were streaming in panic out of the temple doors.

We stopped, ran down the other stairway. The temple was empty now.

Suddenly I saw Ptuth glide like a yellow shadow across the chancel and disappear. I yelled, and rushed at him, with drawn sword. But he evaded me and slammed the door in my face. With all my strength I forced against it. It yielded.

I saw a flight of plain steps above me, and Ptuth nearing the summit. I went up, taking four at every bound, sword in hand, intent on gaining Princess Hita or killing them.

At the top was a corridor—the same corridor that I had seen before.

Ptuth had turned down a second corridor. I followed him, and saw that he was now bearing a limp figure in his arms. It was Hita, and he was racing for some place of safety which I could not determine. Seeing that I was almost upon him, he let her fall.

He knew I would not dare to hurl a bomb with Hita in the way, and he ran with surprising celerity. I stopped and seized the unconscious girl. I clasped her in my arms. A sigh escaped her lips. Her eyes opened.

She clasped her arms about my neck, and we stood there in our imminent peril, forgetful of it, and of all, save one another. Hita was the first to remember. She pointed toward the end of the corridor, where, now that the vivid bomb-light had worn away, I saw the front of the Council Hall through a large, open window that gave upon a balcony.

We ran toward it. But as we reached it the corridor fell away to right and left, and I saw Ptuth, with a crowd of the Serpent Priests at his heels, running toward me, a bomb in his hands. We hurled ours simultaneously.

A flash of vivid light—and suddenly darkness. The light went out as a candle-flame. The darkness was overpowering. Ptuth had an antidote for the light bombs, in the shape of dark bombs that extinguished them; this was one of the profoundest of the secrets of the Serpent Priests, and none of us had guessed it.

I heard them all about us, clawing at us in the darkness. I fought my way to the

window—the darkness extended like a black cloud without, so that nothing was visible any longer. I set Hita behind me, and slashed about me with my sword. It found the throat of one who came too near, and he fell with a choking groan. My foot slipped in the blood that streamed from him. I staggered, and regained my footing. Then I heard Ptuth speaking.

"You are trapped, my Lord Gowani," he cried, "and you cannot use your wings, because the apparatus is not charged. Yield, and your life shall be spared, and you shall be conducted to the upper world again. Yield—"

I poised myself upon the balcony with Hita in my arms, and leaped. I fell like a stone.

Then, suddenly, the radiant wings behind me opened, and, as the dark began to clear away, they whirred like turbines, despite the load I bore and, holding Hita clasped to me, I alighted upon the ground in the middle of the quadrangle.

## CHAPTER V

### THE FALL OF THE FAITHLESS

**S**LOWLY the darkness cleared away. I heard shouting all around me, and through the drifting spirals which the fading blackness assumed I was aware of confused struggling in the quadrangle.

Then I perceived Mnur with a band of Wallaby Priests about me.

"Quick, my Lord Gowani!" he cried. "The Ellabortans are in battle against the horsemen of Thaxas, and we must save the day. Leave the princess in the charge of these two of my priests, who will know where to guard her, and come with me, for our people are hard pressed."

Even as he spoke I saw a squadron of Thaxas' cavalry, upon their ferocious, three-toed horses, surge over the mob, which fled in all directions. The inner wall was lined with Ellabortans, shooting arrows into the Avian horsemen, which, however, had little effect against the formidable leather and iron armor which protected man and beast, and only goaded the huge monsters into greater fury.

It was a terrible sight to see the horses tearing with their great jaws at the flying Ellabortans, and doing hardly less damage than the riders with their sabers, while their fearful three-toed hoofs split skull and face together as they brought them down upon the prostrate men beneath them.

Reluctantly, but inevitably, I consigned

Hita to the care of Mnur's two men. She smiled at me bravely. "You must leave me, my lord," she said. "For, if Ptuth and Thaxas win, all is lost, and our love, too."

I pressed her to me for a moment, and then the two Wallaby Priests extended their wings and, each holding one of Hita's hands, rose with her into the air. I watched her as she ascended to the temple top, and then a drift of darkness swept across her, and, when it drifted away, she was no longer to be seen.

Next moment Mnur and I had risen above the quadrangle, surrounded by a band of our Wallaby Priests. I had discovered, in the brief space of time during which I had flown, that I could direct my course instinctively with my arms and legs, much as a swimmer does.

A confused picture lay beneath us. The Ellabortans had turned out *en masse* to aid in the revolution, and the streets of the lower city were packed with a great armed mob, carrying spears, swords, bows and arrows, and shields, all surging up toward the wall.

Unfortunately, this was a period where armor had outstripped propulsive weapons in development—that is to say, the bow. Fendika appeared to be on the eve of the discovery of firearms, or something of that nature, although at present explosives were known only in the form of a sort of coarse gunpowder, used in construction work.

It was curious that the Fendeks should have invented the dynamo, and learned laws of light which were wholly unknown to us, while in other respects the people were semibarbarians. But of course their situation in the interior of the planet would turn their energies in this direction.

Thus the arrows did little harm, but the fury of the assaults soon won the inner wall. The Ellabortans also held the outer walls of the capital, from which they successfully repelled the hordes of Thaxas' cavalry, who seemed to fill the plain.

But the Avian cavalry were supreme inside the inner keep, and it was here that the decision must be made. And there was no doubt that Thaxas was gaining the day. Once he had the inner part of the city under control, the Ellabortans would be crushed like the meat in a sandwich between the Avians within and without. Then a terrible revenge would be wrought upon them.

Unfortunately there was no doubt but Thaxas was gaining the day. The cavalry swept in furious and untiring charges

across the square, driving the last vestige of the defense before them. And behind them, gathered about Ptuth and Thafti, I saw the columns of red-cloaked swordsmen, ready to regain the inner walls with a rush, as soon as Thaxas had crushed out all resistance.

High overhead, but flying singly, for the most part, were priests of the Serpent, directing the charges of the Avian cavalry with signs, and dropping dark bombs wherever a charge or rally of the Ellabortans temporarily changed the issue.

However, only a few of the Serpent Priests had managed to obtain wings, presumably from some reserve store which we had not discovered, and there were forty of us. Sailing overhead in squadron formation, we forced them to flee before us.

But one, a huge man, carrying a sword in his hand, suddenly turned as we went sweeping past, and made a furious charge at me. I was trying desperately to draw a light bomb, but I was compelled to turn all my thoughts to the endeavor to evade him. Twice the sword came within an inch of my heart, and we circled round about each other for half a minute before I flung the bomb and broke it against his breast.

In the flash of blinding sunlight he seemed to crumple up. I saw his hair catch fire, his clothing begin to char. He yelled out of his twisted lips; then he collapsed and went crashing down upon the court below, a shapeless mass of burned flesh and crumpled iron.

Now, at Mnur's command, we wheeled, and let our light bombs fall among the horsemen of Thaxas, as they swept over the quadrangle, driving the last vestiges of the defense before them. I saw the Ellabortans on the walls bending their futile bows in vain. The horsemen drove madly up the ramp which led to the summit from the interior, Thaxas leading them. They had almost gained the top when our bombs fell.

Instantly the situation was reversed. A panic broke out among the horses, which bolted wildly along the ramparts, the Ellabortans flinging themselves to the stones beneath them, and, as they passed over them, rising to hamstring them, or thrust their long spears into their bellies, or pull the horsemen from their backs and plunge their swords through leather corselet and body.

A squadron, however, managed to regain the quadrangle, and, before they could disperse, we flung our bombs again.

And that restored the fortunes of the day. With shrieks of pain and terror, the monsters flung their riders and bolted in all directions, racing round and round the quadrangle until they dropped exhausted or dying under the withering light. And, with shouts of execration, the Ellabortans leaped down from the walls and rushed upon the red-cloaked swordsmen.

It was now impossible for us to drop further bombs, for fear of destroying our own men. We could only watch; and there followed as gallant a feat of arms as I have ever seen.

For, though outnumbered by a score to one, the red-cloaked courtiers gathered about Thafti and Ptuth. Their weapons, used with terrible effect, worked havoc among their assailants, who soon lay in a ring of dead about them. Foot by foot they fought their way toward the walls. Among them I saw Thaxas, dismounted, his helmet awry, his armor bloodstained, his sword dripping red. He leaped forward alone, scaled the rampart, and held it single-handed against the snarling, crouching, fearful Ellabortans about him, until, with a rush and a cheer, the red-cloaks followed him, bearing Thafti and Ptuth among them, and emerged into the lower city.

Within the streets, a compact legion, they easily scattered the mob, which fled before them, and so, even as we watched, they gained the outer wall, forced it, and were received by the horsemen with a wild cheer that reached us where we flew over the quadrangle.

But Ellaborta was ours, and the remnant of the Avian horsemen within were at our mercy. They came forward with hands upheld in token of surrender. We lodged them as prisoners in the keep, under the inner gate. The ferocious horses, being untamable except by the Avians, who knew the secret of subduing them, were put out of their suffering.

My first thought was, of course, for Hita. She had been safely hidden in a secret room in the Wallaby Temple, and our reunion, though we could find time only for a brief exchange of words, filled me with joy and resolution.

We placed strong forces of trained men upon the outer walls, and our fears of an immediate assault disappeared within the next hour, when we saw the vast hosts of Thaxas effecting a retirement to their camp upon the river, some two miles from the city. From this point bodies pushed out to right and left, until they were posted

on all the main roads leading out of Ellaborta. Within a *psus* the capital was surrounded and in a condition of siege.

OUR position was thus a perilous one, for there was little store of food within the walls, and, whether or not Ptuth guessed it, we had used up all our light bombs. My first act, therefore, was to summon the scientists of the capital into the chamber where were the dynamos.

It was soon seen that it would be an easy matter to control the light supply, for the machines were automatic in their action and would run indefinitely. But not even the Wallaby Priest who had once served the Serpent knew the secret of manufacturing the bomb.

This would make our situation more precarious daily, for there was little doubt that Ptuth could set up a laboratory and fashion both bombs and wings. We should have secured his priests when we had captured them.

I sent out criers to summon a popular meeting in the quadrangle for two *psus* later, resolving that the Ellabortans should ratify any decision arrived at. And I must mention something—a trivial matter, but one which rather depressed the spirits of the people, who looked upon it as an omen of ill.

It was the custom to keep the two dinosaurs beneath the grille supplied with victims, chosen from among petty malefactors. These men were tossed alive to them twice weekly, and it was this custom that the people demanded should be abolished forever. They surged into the temple, shouting for the destruction of the monsters.

The grille was quickly pried up with crowbars, and men descended, carrying swords and torches. The floor of the crypt was white with human bones, but the dinosaurs could not be found.

In vain the upper parts of the temple, and all the rooms over the altar, were searched and ransacked. The dinosaurs had evidently ascended through the hollow serpent, and made their escape by way of the roof; but all search proved fruitless.

I thought they might have destroyed each other when they met within the gold serpent, but, after the mechanism that controlled it had been stopped, a venturesome lad ascended, and emerged at the upper orifice, reporting that the gold shell was empty.

At our council, the very first thing decided was that the Serpent worship should

be driven out of Fendika forever, and that of the Unknown God established as the state religion. The lesser priesthoods, however, were to be allowed to exist under the rule of the Wallabies, being of the old Fendek order before the Serpent Priests had overcome the country. This compromise ill pleased Mnur, who had expected to be proclaimed chief pontiff, and he submitted with an ill grace.

Then Hita and I, standing in the center of the quadrangle, were acclaimed by wildly cheering crowds. And the old hag, Ros Marra, being led forward by Nasmaxa, publicly acknowledged that she had lied at the bidding of Ptuth, and in fear of him.

Nasmaxa and I had previously decided that so long as the land was in the throes of civil conflict, it would not be advisable for Hita and me to be married, as jealousy of a stranger might cause a change in the fickle Fendek mind. But now, being chief pontiff, Nasmaxa solemnly reaffirmed our bethrothal, and proposed that, after the overthrow of Thafti and the Avians, we should rule the land jointly.

At that there was thunderous applause. I recall Hita, in her blue cloak, wearing the electrum circlet of plain gold that betokened rulership about her forehead, addressing the crowd in simple and dignified words, surrounded by the exiles. She told them that the time had come to expel the Serpent priesthood forever from the land, and to reassert the supremacy of the Fendeks over their hereditary enemies of the Avian province.

And so the meeting dissolved, and every man went to his post, and preparations for the coming fight were made. Swords were hammered out on anvils, and trained officers endeavored to form an invincible army out of the Ellabortan footmen. If this succeeded, there was little doubt that we could overcome Thafti and Ptuth, even with the aid of the Avian horse.

I was assigned new quarters in the palace. And that night—strictly, I should say, to what corresponded to our midnight—when the alternate *psus* of torpor held the city, Nasmaxa came to me.

I was struck by the old man's look of utter weariness. He seemed to have aged even in the few weeks I had known him.

"My Lord Gowani, would you have your heart's desire?" he asked.

"Who would not?" I returned.

"Listen then. Although statecraft forbids your marriage with Hita to be made publicly, what is there to prevent a private

ceremony, according to our laws, so that your mind may be at ease, knowing that she is wholly yours? Besides, my time is come, and I would see you united before I die."

I sprang to my feet, wide awake, despite the torpor which had overcome me—for by this time I had fallen into Fendek habits, though, where they rested merely, I actually slept.

He smiled and laid his hand restrainingly upon my arm. "Hope not for overmuch," he said, "for in truth I do not know what the ultimate issue shall be. But at least I shall know before I die that the princess is mated with you, whom I have come to look on as a son."

"Soon I go to my rest, but I shall return. For we know that it is our fate, when we are dead, to be born again in other bodies, and perchance next time it will be in the world above us."

"Many *psus* must pass before you die, Nasmaxa," I answered.

He said nothing to that, but led me out of the palace, past the guards drowsing at their posts, across the quadrangle, and into the Temple of the Eagle, on the further side of the Serpent Temple. The empty fane—for, of course, there were no males left alive to worship there—was a plain structure of white stone, with an altar at the far end, and an electrum eagle, with wings extended for flight, above it.

Before the altar, wearing her blue cloak, stood Hita. At her side was an Eagle Priest—the sole surviving one, who remained as guardian of the empty temple.

Hita came forward, and, as I took her hands, a vivid blush suffused her cheeks, and her eyes, raised for an instant timidly to mine, dropped again.

"Nasmaxa has told you, my lord?" she murmured.

"He has promised me all that my heart longs for," I answered ardently.

"My dear lord, before this takes place I must say something you do not know," said Hita. "Nor even you, O Nasmaxa, for I have kept this hidden until now even from you, fearing to distress you and cause you anxiety."

As she spoke I saw a look of fear creep into her eyes.

"Ptuth has revealed to me," she said, "that it is prophesied that my Lord Gowani and I shall indeed be happy for a brief space, but after that he shall lose me. Yet not forever, for some day we shall be reunited; but not until all this has passed away. And more than this I know not."

"And know, my Lord Gowani, that there is a means devised whereby the Princess of the Fendeks who shall be in mortal peril may find respite. And this secret has been from of old in the charge of the Eagle Priest. What it is, I know not, but he knows; and at the appointed time by its means he shall deliver me."

"Aye," croaked the old man, "it is in my keeping for the use of the princess whenever she shall demand it."

"Or I?" I asked.

"If you demand it in her name, my Lord Gowani," he answered.

I made light of Hita's fears, and told her that Ptuth lied, that he could no more foresee the future than he could unveil the dreaded Eye of Balamok. But Hita listened without encouragement.

"O my dear Lord," she answered, "it should be known to you that Ptuth, the magician, has lived since the beginnings of time. Nor can he ever die, and, even were he slain, he would create a new body for himself by his arts. And by this secret I must be renewed unto eternal youth when I grow old, until the dubious prophecy be fulfilled."

"A long time hence, beloved," I answered, thinking of the many years that must elapse before old age stole on us.

But she only glanced at me with a troubled brow, until Nasmaxa, coming forward, pronounced the words that secretly united us. And then, as if her fear had gone, she let me take her in my arms.

Standing thus, we heard Nasmaxa's benediction die away. Suddenly there came an exclamation from the Eagle Priest. We turned hastily, to find the old man lying upon the ground.

He opened his eyes as we knelt over him. "My time has come, as I foresaw, O my Lord Gowani," he said simply. "May the Unknown God preserve you—and my prin-

cess—against the wiles of Ptuth—against—"

Nasmaxa died.

DURING the successive *psus ama* (ten *psus* periods) we perfected our plans of defense. Hopes began to run high within Ellaborta, for the enemy remained inactive, and only those of us who understood the powers of Ptuth feared the outcome.

It was mortally certain that he would attack as soon as he had fashioned new wings and prepared light bombs, and in this predicament it was resolved to send a trustworthy messenger at once to summon Sar, the Aonorian prince, to lead his footmen to our rescue. Then, by a simultaneous sally from the gates, we could hope to place Thafti and Thaxas at our mercy.

But the question whom to send was a perplexity. He would have to fly, and this limited us to the choice of one or other of the twoscore Wallaby Priests. Now the Wallaby Priests were clearly disaffected since the establishment of the Unknown God in place of the Wallaby God, as they had expected. Indeed, Mnur's attitude toward me was constrained and distant. I did not distrust him, but it added worry.

About the fifth *psus ama* an embassy arrived under the llama flag, the symbol of truce, and, when it was admitted within the walls, we were astounded to discover that it consisted of Thaxas himself, with three retainers.

So great was the awe of the great Avian prince, that the people followed only at a great distance. Thaxas was hated more than any of our opponents, on account of the cruelties of his horsemen. Nevertheless, my impression of him had been a favorable one, and it was not lessened when I saw him stand before Queen Hita in the Council Hall.

"Greetings, queen!" he began—and at that recognition of her a murmur of surprise ran through the courtiers. "I am an Avian, and our speech is short, and not honeycombed with praise like that of the Fendeks, although here there is need of it."

And he bowed low before her, and his compliment left us agape with wonder.

"You know, O queen," he continued, "that I had no part in your exile, nor care I whether you or your sister reign, so far as my desires rule me. I was betrothed to the Princess Regnant after your father's death; therefore, since I do not believe the story of the old hag, Ros Marra, I claim you as my queen."

At this the courtiers were fairly stupefied, and could only stare at Thaxas, wondering what was to follow.

"For a contract cannot be annulled," continued the Avian Prince. "My task is but to support the rightful queen, my duty and my right to mate with her; but I tell you, Hita"—here he made a sudden, violent gesture with his gloved hand—"I would sooner be false to my word, my vow, my duty, and the great Avian God than mate with Thafti.

"My desire is for you, and, where my desire is, there my will is. Aye, and my will is unbreakable. Therefore, bid this foreign lord depart in safety out of the Fendek realm, and let the land have peace."

He ended, and a murmur of admiration stirred the counselors. For the man spoke honest and true, and there was a dignity in him commanding admiration, while the vehemence of his words commanded even sympathy.

Hita rose from her throne, and I think she was a little touched by Thaxas' outspokenness.

"I have heard you, Prince Thaxas," he said. "Truly, I would that all my counselors were as frank and outspoken. But what you say may never be, for I had no part in my father's contract, and no contract can annual a woman's wishes in such a matter as marriage."

Thaxas glared at her. "Aye, queen, well I know it is this foreign lord, this imposter, who hath won thy heart," he answered. "Yet, I swear that within *psus ama hak* (five days) I will have him torn limb from limb and feed the serpents with his flesh. That I, Thaxas, swear. And as for you"—he swung upon the assemblage—"I will level your proud city flat with the earth, and pass the plowshare over it."

He bowed to Hita and stalked away, leaving us silent and troubled. Especially myself, for I well knew that this placed the responsibility for the future on my own head.

I think the counselors perceived that, too, and pondered, for a few of them eyed me askance as we broke up. And it became clearer than ever, what with this new event, added to the disaffection of Mnur, that matters must be brought speedily to an issue.

In fact, the mission of Thaxas so infuriated the people that they surrounded the Council Hall, clamoring to be led out against the Avian hosts. They looked warlike enough, and, being well-armed, and led, it seemed to us might effect at least a sortie that would prove the forerunner of a general victory. Accordingly it was decided that a surprise attack should be made that night upon the main host of the Avians, encamped upon the river bank.

At the same time we selected one of Mnur's priests, and gave him letters for Sar, who lay on his frontier with his army, telling him that Ellaborta was closely invested, and that he must march to our relief immediately.

We watched him rise from the quadrangle and wing his way beyond the walls, where the low-lying mists hid him from view. And then we set about our preparations for the sortie.

Five thousand men, under K'hauls, a veteran campaigner, were to move in a single column upon the main camp of the Avians. Smaller bodies of about three thousand apiece were to make feints against the other positions along the main roads. I myself, with a reserve force of ten thousand, was to string out my men obliquely along the river bank, thus keeping them in touch with the capital, in case of need, and being, at the same time, able to unite forces with K'hauls should his attack prove successful beyond expectation.

It was a splendid sight to see the bodies of Fendek warriors marching out, confident of victory, and to hear their ringing applause as Hita, clothed in her blue cloak, and wearing the royal diadem, stood on the ramparts, surrounded by her counselors. Not a man but would have died for her! I knew that I filled her thoughts, and I resolved that I would make Thaxas' boast meaningless, and strike a blow that should decide the fortunes of the day.

Before us, across the meadows, marched K'hauls' men, first a line of veterans, armed with long spears, then two lines of

youths, with short stabbing-spears, with which to break the columns of our opponents; following them the main body, armed with the wide, straight Fendek swords, capable of terrible execution.

My men, on the contrary, were all swordsmen, and mostly veterans of other wars. I divided them into three parts. One body, under Nohaddyii, a brave and skillful old general, I placed between the main gate of the capital and the road that ran northeast, in support of one of the subsidiary forces. The second, under Hamul, I left encamped about a half-mile from the city, to hold the principal bridge which gave us touch with our right flank. The third I myself commanded, following about a half-mile behind K'hauls.

Overhead flew the winged priests, but useful only for reconnaissance, since our light bombs were exhausted.

At length, having reached the place appointed, I ordered my men to rest, and took my seat upon a small mound in front of them, which partly concealed their number from any Avian airmen. Here and there I saw a winged priest of the enemy floating high above both lines; but he always fled when tackled by our own Wallaby fliers; and very soon the clouds descended so low that aerial reconnaissance proved impossible.

There was, of course, no possibility of surprise in that perpetual day. We had moved out during the last *psus* of work, and we had a *psus* to wait before attacking, since a breach of this resting period would have been considered an abominable atrocity; furthermore, it was very doubtful whether the languid warriors could have been driven to the attack during the rest *psus*, even had they been willing to violate what was regarded as a divine law.

My thoughts were strange as I sat there alone, watching the weary soldiers, devoid of all interest or thought, resting in their habitual torpor. I thought of Hita principally, of Sewell, wondering where he was; then of old Joe, who dreamed that he had been a king, and wondered whether by any chance he had entered this subterranean country. And I, too, drowsed, until at last the thrill of the *psus* of battle ran through my veins, and, turning, I perceived my men rising, and gathering up their corselets to strap them on, and taking their swords in hand.

FROM where I stood I could see the panorama of the whole battlefield.

On our extreme right, across the river,

our outposts were already driving in the skirmishers of Thaxas' cavalry, who circled about them on their ferocious horses, but dared not charge those lines of well-armed spearsmen. A few of the hostile forces were reconnoitering the bridge, but, finding it well guarded, also withdrew.

In front of me the hostile camp was throwing out line after line of horsemen, who circled to right and left to find the weak places in our forces. Before Thaxas' camp an enormous force of horsemen was marshaling, and I fancied that the rider who moved up and down before them was Thaxas himself.

Between ourselves and them, K'hauls was quietly and resolutely marshaling his own men into column formation to receive the attack.

It came. With wild cheers, and the flash of swords, and the thunder of thousands of hoofs, the Avian horsemen rode straight at the massed column before them. I caught my breath as I saw that unbroken leading line make straight for our spearsmen. In another moment the fight was joined.

Yells dinned in our ears, the clash of sword on spear; a cloud of heavy dust covered the face of the plain. For whole minutes that mad medley continued, a dust whirl like a cyclone, broken by serpentine gleams of light.

Now all along our front the issue was joined. Simultaneously with the charge of Thaxas I saw a large force of horsemen riding toward the bridge. But I had only time to glance at them and pray the Fendeks would hold. Then, to my dismay, as the dust began to settle, I saw K'hauls' line cleft asunder. It was falling back sullenly on either wing, in two irregularly shaped masses; and straight through the cleft, yelling, Thaxas rode at the head of his men.

I gave the sharp command, and our forces moved forward in unison and lined the crest. Beneath us I saw the Avian cavalry riding straight toward us, Thaxas leading them, his helmet half sheared away. Now they were within fifty paces. And Thaxas knew me. I heard his roar of challenge. I saw his monster horse uprear.

Now! *Khoom!*—go at them. We were at them and among them, slashing, receiving blows and fighting like madmen in the midst of those thunderous hoofs. One slit my arm from shoulder to the wrist, as if the three toes had been razors. I felt nothing. Time and again I ran at Thaxas,

but before we could more than exchange blows men ran between us. The Fendeks were fighting loyally to the death.

Dust all about us, everywhere confusion, and no longer the merest semblance of a line. The battle had resolved into a series of individual contests. But presently the tumult thinned, and in the subsiding dust I saw that Thaxas had ridden clear through us, even as he had ridden through K'hauls. But there was this difference: then his horsemen and their beasts had been fresh and flushed with victory; now their strength and ardor were spent, and nearly all the horses were suffering from wounds. The field was a swamp of purple blood.

Thaxas was re-forming. We far outnumbered him, but by this time, what with our own broken ranks and stragglers from K'hauls' men, it was impossible to present any sort of front to the Avians. Yet we surrounded them.

I saw the victory was ours. For the body at the bridge had held victoriously, and now the old veteran, Nohaddyli, was coming up to our support. I saw the gleam of his helmets, and heard the shouting of his fresh troops.

Then I saw Thafti among the soldiers of Thaxas, wearing a long veil, flying in the air. She was pointing toward us and inciting her men to the charge, while Thaxas seemed to sulk beside her.

Once more there came the thunder of the charge. Once more the savage horses were upon us, straining with outstretched necks and snapping jaws. Again the play of sword and spear, again the dreaded Avian war-cry. Again the dust, and once again I found Thaxas and lost him, found him, lost him finally, and found myself with dripping sword standing alone in a sort of center of the dust-storm, while the roar of the battle raged unseen about me.

Suddenly I was aware of Sewell at my side. He was dismounted, clutching at the bridle of a spent horse, on which was Thafti.

"Take her, Gowani!" he shrieked. "I have made her prisoner for you. And take me, too. That was my game. Don't you see, Gowani? I was helping you—"

Thafti raised her veil, and her hideous face was stern, and almost beautiful with command and spirit.

Now men came running up. They knew them and, shouting eagerly at such prizes, surrounded them. I called one of my captains and ordered him to convey the prisoners with a strong guard to Ellaborta.

Then I turned to the battle, which was dwindling into the distance. Nohaddyli was at my side, and pointing with his sword. "The day is ours, my lord!" he shouted.

As the dust settled I saw Thaxas retiring with the remnant of his forces.

"Now, my lord, let us charge their camp, and they are beaten beyond hope!" old Nohaddyli cried.

But even as he spoke there came a renewed tumult from our right wing, and to my dismay I saw the Avian horsemen swarming over the bridge, and Hamul's troops borne backward, fighting bravely but impotently against overwhelming numbers.

If the Avians could hold our communications at their central point, the day was not won, but lost.

I at once despatched Nohaddyli with his reinforcements to retake the bridge. But as his men attacked they became mingled with the dispersing remnants of Hamul's men, and, in their confusion, the Avians rode them down easily.

Simultaneously Thaxas launched forth a last attack upon us. But seeing that we formed front to receive him, he declined the shock and spread fanwise along our front and toward our left, seeking to roll up our flank with an enveloping movement. Meanwhile Nohaddyli's men were in full flight back toward Ellaborta. I saw the brave old warrior, scorning to flee, turn, face the victorious enemy alone, and receive his death-thrust.

There was nothing to do but give the order to retire, for now our communications were cut by the loss of the bridge. The Avians, swarming across, had already joined Thaxas, and we were completely encircled by the savage horsemen, who made desperate rushes to throw us into confusion, and so complete their victory.

In this they were disappointed, for my men held steadily. And yard by yard we fought our passage back toward the capital, seeing clearly the ramparts packed with spectators and encouraged by their cries. We left a bloody trail behind us, and at the last, seeing that we were unshakable, the Avian cavalry sullenly withdrew a little more than bowshot range from the walls.

The gates opened to receive us. In the entrance stood Hita among her counselors. And, to my amazement, instead of reproaches for a lost fight, we were received with thunderous applause.

"Bravely fought, my lord Gowani!" Hita

cried. "Assuredly one never thought our Ellaborta swordsmen would make so brave a show against invincible Thaxas."

And after all the battle had been in no sense a defeat save one. Thaxas had left nine thousand men upon the field; our own losses were a little more than half as many. But for the forcing of the bridge we had won the day completely. And that, as we learned afterward, was by the disaffection of a small body of Fendek auxiliaries, men from another city, who had broken before the first charge of the Avian horsemen.

Yet in one respect Thaxas had won the day. For now the lines of communication between our forces were obliterated, and we had been driven back within the shelter of the walls. And on the next day, Thaxas advanced his camp until almost within bowshot of us.

But we had Thafti. The princess was already lodged, with Sewell, her captor, in the dungeon beneath the inner gate, and was to be brought, after the rest *psus*, before Hita and her council.

So our return to the inner city was more a march of triumph than an acknowledgement of failure. Thaxas had won a victory of the Pyrrhic kind; another such and his army would exist no longer. Already half his men were dismounted and resolved into infantry.

But what was Ptuth doing? How soon might we expect his dreaded fire-bombs to come into play, and his winged warriors to scatter destruction over Ellaborta?

Would they come before Sar, Prince of the Aonorians, arrived to aid us?

The answer was to be supplied sooner than any of us dreamed.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE EYE OF BALAMOK

AT THE end of the rest *psus* we assembled in the council hall, which was packed with a multitude. The scarlet cloak of Thafti gleamed in the midst of all.

Beside her stood Sewell, and even those who hated Thafti most, pitied her, to have been made prisoner by such an act of baseness.

And I could see that Sewell's treacherous act lessened my own prestige among the Fendeks, for the man had been my comrade, and I saw doubtful looks cast at me, and realized by how slender a thread I held my place—and that thread but a woman's love and faith in me.

Mnur arose. "It is the custom to interrogate the captives," he said. "Therefore let the Lord Seoul explain how he comes here with the Princess Thafti and claims to be her captor."

Sewell spoke boldly, apparently without the consciousness of shame committed. "Listen, then, O queen, and lords of the council—and you, Gowani, who came into this land with me in friendship," he began.

"Not many *psus* since my Lord Gowani was betrothed to Thafti, Queen of the Fendeks—aye, and protested not at all, though his heart had already turned toward you, O queen. Therefore, seeing that we are equals in our own country, I sought the hand of your sister, O Thafti, who was then merely a princess. And this, too, was accorded me. Then in the temple the Prince Thaxas claimed you, Thafti, and his honor was accorded him. And then, seeing that treachery surrounded us everywhere, I, too, resolved to play a part. Therefore, to save my life, and place it at your service, Queen Hita, whose hand was given me, I feigned to ally myself with Thafti here. And I knew that by this means I should be able to deliver her into your hands. So, having proved myself a loyal servant, I ask that my service may be rewarded."

At this a great hubbub broke out among the populace, and the council, too, some protesting that Sewell was a double-dyed traitor, and others that he had been hardly treated, and had acted loyally. And one by one we gave our opinion, some favoring Sewell's release and reward, and others demanding that he be put to death or driven from the city. Finally came my turn to speak, and I was silent some time, for I did not know how to answer.

I knew Sewell to be a coward, traitor, and murderer, but this knowledge of mine had no bearing upon present circumstances; and then, despite all this, we had come into Annoryii together.

"O queen!" I said at last. "He has performed a service and come of his free will into Ellaborta. Therefore no punishment can befall him. But place no trust in him."

Hita arose. "It shall be as you say, my Lord Gowani," she answered. And at that black looks were cast at me by all, for it was seen that Hita's judgment favored mine.

"Soon," whispered one of the priests of Mnur, "we shall be altogether under the foot of this stranger."

Hita turned to Thafti. "Greetings to you,

sister," she said. "Not many *psus ama* since, I stood before you in this place; therefore my heart inclines to pity for you."

"I seek no pity." She turned to Thafti haughtily.

"Nevertheless," said Hita proudly, "you are a captive and in my hands. What have you to say, sister, concerning the lie that Ptuth, the magician, put into Ros Marra's mouth concerning your birth and mine, usurper?"

With that Thafti stiffened herself with that characteristic gesture of contempt and pride that I had observed before. She stood erect before the queen and flung her veil aside. And there was hardly a man present but winced at the sight of her. And Thafti turned her eyes on each in turn, as if she wished to drain the cup of humiliation to the dregs.

"O queen! O Hita! O sister!" she began in a melodious voice that gradually increased in tension and in volume until it filled the hall with melody. "Sister, we two were born under different moods of our Lord Balamok. For I go veiled, like him, because my face is hideous in the sight of men, while you are fair and good to look upon. And yet I have a heart—strangely, for it should have been seared, like my face, by suffering and the contempt of men.

"Many times it has been sought to give me in betrothal to some prince, and each time he has scorned me. Aye, and did not the blind prince of the Lassayli send word that, though his eyes were sightless, his ears were open to the repute in which men held each other? A delicate hint to send his liege, truly.

"Therefore, sister, because the love of man was denied me, I sought power. I sought to rule this realm. Worthily I ruled it."

Here, to our consternation, a voice among the spectators in the vast council hall called, "Aye!" And two or three more took up the shout before it was drowned by the disapprobation of the rest. And then a storm of cheers broke out for Hita. And again two or three called for Thafti. Thafti listened and bowed ironically toward the spectators.

"I thank the few of my former subjects who remember their past faith and loyalty," she said. "But I speak to you, sister. When it was proposed that you should be put to death, I forbade it, though I knew, in accordance with the old prophecy, that you should supplant me, and

that my death should come through you in some measure.

"I have shown you clemency in my day of power, but were I queen in Ellaborta now, I swear that you should die under torture, and your carcass should be cast to the serpents."

There was a sudden tremulous stir, then breathless silence in the council hall at these bold words. The seamed face of Thafti looked steadily into that of Hita. And I saw that Hita's gentleness masked a no less indomitable will.

For Hita's face was red with anger, and her mien was now no less haughty than Thafti's.

"It is ill for you, a captive, to threaten me, a queen," said Hita. "Perchance I may forget the appeal for pity that you have made; also, that we had the same father."

"I do not ask your pity, sister," returned Thafti steadily. "Yet you shall know that even I, who veil my face because of its abomination—I have a heart and loved. Once I loved—one man whom I shall love all the short remainder of my life—even my Lord Gowani here!"

She paused, and in that dramatic moment she held the assembly spellbound. And, with her woman's heart, even Hita was softening into pity—that pity that Thafti scorned.

As for myself, I felt unutterably foolish.

Suddenly, without a word, Thafti caught a little hidden dagger out of her robes and thrust it into her body. The gush of blood was dark upon her crimson cloak.

For another moment she stood, looking defiantly upon her sister. And then her eyes sought mine. And it seemed to me in that moment that love made Thafti almost beautiful.

Then, as the counselors rushed toward her, Thafti sank to the floor, sobbed, and lay still. The blade had pierced her heart.

Hita cried out, and then, forgetting their enmity, forgetting that she was queen, she kneeled at Thafti's side, holding her head upon her knees. She looked up at me with anguish in her eyes.

Suddenly shouts from without stirred us to other action. The crowd was fleeing in panic from the assembly chamber. As some of the counselors clutched at me, reluctantly I left Hita beside her sister and went out.

High overhead appeared one of the flying Serpent Priests, and as he swooped toward us it could be seen that the llama flag of truce, upon a long stick, hung from his breastplate.

Lower he dropped; and now we saw that he held something in his left hand. He raised and hurled it, and we saw it curve through the air and smash upon the stones of the quadrangle.

It was a man's severed head. It was the head of the Wallaby Priest, our messenger to Sar.

Hamul came up to me. "This means the end of all unless—" he said, and led me to the ramparts. Looking down I saw the warriors of Thaxas encamped all about the walls.

"Unless some other messenger fly swiftly," I interrupted. "Whom can we trust?"

And, seeing his eyes bent in silent deference on mine, I understood.

"How long will it take to reach the Aonorian border?" I inquired.

"With wings, *psus hak*, if one fly steadily."

"I will go," I returned. "Inform the council."

And without hesitation I made my way to the palace and strapped my wings upon me.

HARDLY five minutes elapsed between my leaving the council hall and my flight toward Aonoria. And fortunately I had started during the beginning of the rest *psus*. Already an apathy was falling upon the mob below. They dropped down where they stood, and lay in dreamy, careless meditation. Inside the council hall I knew Hita would recline beside her sister's body, and the councilors in their seats until the rest *psus* ended.

As for myself, I was not yet so acclimated to this custom but that I could shake off the languor stealing over me. And I knew that this time would render me safe from pursuit by any of the Serpent Priests. I rose high into the air, and then directed my course, straight as an arrow, and al-

most as swift, over the horsemen of Thaxas, encamped beneath me, winging my course toward the Aonorian border.

Soon Ellaborta was but a blur in the distance, and in a little while it disappeared. For hours I flew over the tops of the great fern-trees, suffering no fatigue, since the action of the wings was automatic. Resolutely I fought back the sleep that weighed upon my eyelids. Hours passed—days, perhaps; I dozed in the air, waking with a start to find myself falling, orientating myself by a strange instinct which, in the absence of any stars or visible sun, seemed common to all of us in Annoryll.

At last I discerned through my bleared eyelids the fires of a great host spread out over a level plain beneath me. I dropped into Sar's camp.

The sight of those thousands of spearmen, young, vigorous and disciplined, revived my courage. I was conducted to Sar, who crossed his hands on his breast and then took mine, and listened while I recounted briefly the events of the past days.

"Rumors of this have already reached me," Sar answered, "and I was but awaiting the summons to lead my troops across the border, as Queen Hita commanded me. They shall start within an hour. Do you, my Lord Gowani, rest and accompany us then?"

But I shook my head, and told him that I must return immediately. Weary and worn though I was, I felt that I could not close my eyes until I had carried back news of my success to Hita.

At that Sar looked at me very strangely. And this is a curious thing, for which I cannot account: as he looked at me I seemed to see in him the lineaments of a young prospector whom I had known in Kalgoorlie a year or two before—a young man who had gone on a prospecting trip and never returned. Some had thought

him lost in the desert, others that he had gone out by another route.

It was the merest fancy, of course, and next moment Sar was saying:

"My Lord Gowani, what came you into this country for, and why do you linger? Ethnabasca is no further from here than Ellaborta. If you flew there resolutely and made your way up the mountain, and so emerged into the world without, none would hinder you.

"My father, who was versed in much wise lore, told me that it is a secret known to the Priests of the Sun, who rule in Zelryii, my capital, that every man has two lives: a waking one, and one of his *psus* rest. And in the *psus* rest the waking life seems but a dream. And in the waking life the *psus* rest seems but a dream. And which is the dream, and which the reality, none but the gods know.

"Nevertheless, if one tarry too long in either state, the gods who attend the man, waking or dreaming, may seize him utterly, so that his alternate life is lost. Oh, my Lord Gowani, if I were you I would leave Annoryii, where all these combats, battles, rivalries and treacheries may be no more than a dream of your *psus* rest, and seek the land of your birth."

A strange philosophy. And he went on to say something which I do not wholly recall; something to the effect that the whole drama of life is but illusion, staged for the benefit of the individual soul in its progress from life to life. I think he tried to convey the impression that all that had happened in Annoryii was a sort of play for my benefit, a sort of morality play for the soul. I listened with impatient, listless interest.

For Heavens, how real it all was!—Hita and the traitor Sewell, Ptuth, Thaxas, and that great host of his spread out beside the camp-fires.

So I bade him adieu, and rose into the

air to wing my weary course back to Ellaborta. Now this was at the end of the working *psus*; the instinct common to us all told me that the rest *psus* was at hand, and that it was doubtful whether I could pass through another.

And suddenly unutterable weariness came over me. I could no longer even guide my course. Softly I let myself fall to earth, and slept almost before I touched the ground beneath the giant fern-tree.

I awoke as suddenly as if I had been hauled out of sleep by some invisible hand. A presentiment of danger was growing stronger every moment. I did not know how long I had slept, but I felt that many *psus* must have passed while I lay unconscious.

I rose hastily, started the mechanism, and began my flight once more. But as I flew my uneasiness increased. For there was a strange heat in the air, such as I had never known in that land of clouds, and lurid luminosity about the zenith, like a great halo of light. And there was also the undefinable sense of danger to Hita.

Hours passed. At last the forest ended, and the great Ellabortan plain lay extended beneath me. That distant blur was the capital. But the plain was filled with legions of armed men—men of Sar who had preceded me while I lay days in a stupor. And the walls were packed with fighting warriors.

I heard the din of battle raised, and, as I neared the ramparts, I saw the Avians swarming up the streets of Ellaborta driving our men before them.

Other bodies, having gained the walls, were holding Sar at bay. The Avians must have been hugely reinforced, and only a miracle could save the city before Sar could storm the outer defenses.

As I circled above the keep I saw that Thaxas was already master of the inner city. The palace was on fire. The council

hall was flaming furiously, and bodies of horsemen were driving our men like sheep to massacre.

I swept to the ground in the middle of the quadrangle, where a small force of Ellaborts still disputed supremacy with the Avians. I snatched a sword from a dead man and, placing myself at the head of the defenders, led them against the advancing horsemen.

Then out of the press Thaxas leaped at me, dismounted, his eyes shooting fire. "Well, met, my Lord Gowani!" he cried. "Here and now do I fulfil my promise made to you in the council hall, impostor from the upper earth!"

In a moment we were in the center of a ring of warriors, who ceased their combat in order to see the singular duel between the two leaders. Thaxas dealt terrific blows at me with his huge sword, but his armor encumbered him, and I was able to parry them or leap aside, always watching for my opening. He aimed a fierce stroke at my head, and as I sprang to one side the point of his blade caught my cheek, laying it open from ear to chin. Next instant my point had gone through corselet and breastbone, and stood out three inches or more behind him.

He coughed, whirled, snatched at the blade and tried to draw it forth; then, sinking upon his face, his eyes upturned in hate to mine, he died.

FOR an instant the Avians remained stupefied at the death of their great leader, and, seizing the advantage, the Fendeks drove them back toward the smoking palace. All was not lost, although our situation was a desperate one. But suddenly one of the Wallaby Priests came running to me, clutching at me.

"Treachery, my Lord Gowani!" he screamed in my ear. "The Lord Seoul, the traitor, came here for no good purpose, for, being pardoned, he conspired with Mnur, the double traitor, according to the plan which they had made, and opened the inner gate to the Avian forces during the rest *psus*, so that, the moment the *psus* was ended, the Avians stormed our defenses."

"Hita?" I cried.

"She is in the Eagle Temple, where a bodyguard defends her. But, my lord, there is worse work afoot. Mnur has been in conspiracy with Ptuth, and has wrought evil in the Room of the Light. I know not what, but something impends worse for Fendika than anything that has—"

I shook him off and raced toward the

Eagle Temple, over a ground littered with dead and dying. Upon the steps I saw a swarm of Avians, dismounted, but fully armed, running forward, their swords in their hands, their shields raised above their heads. Inside, I saw the blue cloaks of Hita's defenders, now reduced to a handful, with a ring of slain about them.

But Hita was not there. I ran past the blue cloaks, who, recognizing me, turned toward me for an instant and then resumed their battle. None regarded me, so fierce was the fray, so mad the hate.

In the interior of the temple I saw a very aged man standing by the low altar in an attitude of contemplation. It was the Eagle Priest, the last attendant left after the massacre of the Eagle males; but in the few *psus* that had passed since I had seen him he seemed to have passed from hale old age to utter senility.

"The queen!" I gasped.

He looked at me, and recognition slowly dawned on his wrinkled face.

"Was it not you who came to me to demand the secret in the queen's name?" he babbled.

"No, fool!" I shouted, seeing Ptuth's trickery in this. For of course Ptuth had known; nothing escaped the knowledge of the magician whose hold upon Fendika appeared unshakable.

"Then it must have been the other lord from afar," he mumbled.

I caught his shoulders and shook him violently. "Which way?" I howled in his ear.

He staggered to the altar and, pressing a knob, swung around a great block of stone, disclosing a secret stairway.

I rushed down into utter darkness. But at the end there was a gleam of light. Before me lay a courtyard, concealed from view from the quadrangle by the high walls that rose on all sides of it.

The center of this yard was filled by an enormous, hideous monster. It was a pterodactyl, a great lizard, twenty feet in length, with short, stout limbs and a curving undulating back, on which was strapped a softpad saddle.

Beside it Hita was struggling in Sewell's arms. He was holding her tightly, and striving to mount the enormous beast with her, though how it could escape from that enclosure I could not divine.

Seeing me, he stopped and gaped in fear and astonishment. And I was struck in that instant by a singular change in him, even as in the Eagle Priest. For he seemed to have aged, too; he had left Kalgoorlie

with me as a young man; now he looked in middle life.

But I ran at him with my sword raised, and he dropped Hita and fled. Unarmed though he was, to all appearances, I would have struck him down even in flight. But suddenly he turned and pulled from his cloak the automatic which he had told me he had lost in the encounter with the savages at the entrance to the underworld.

Six shots followed in rapid succession before I could close with him. I heard them hiss about me, and I was conscious of a vicious pain in the breast, over the heart. Next instant I had sliced his right arm from his body with a blow of my sword.

The little court was swinging round me. I turned to Hita; I saw a band of Avians burst into the place. They had overcome the last resistance of Hita's followers and surged forward, yelling with triumph.

Half swooning, I felt Hita drag me to the pterodactyl. With all her strength she dragged me upon the monster's back, and sat behind me, holding me.

And, even as the Avians were within sword's reach of me, the winged lizard rose into the air.

It rose; it cleared the temple roofs. Beneath me the quadrangle was filled with a confused clamor, and little groups were fighting to the death. The outer city was now in the possession of Sar's men, who were advancing with locked shields toward the keep. And all the capital was afame. Ruin and destruction everywhere.

Then suddenly the clouds above were rent, and there appeared a huge, fiery sun that seemed to fill all the zenith. Mnur's treachery had succeeded. The removal of the cones that concentrated the rays had permitted the interior luminary to disperse the clouds. Men had spoken truly when they ascribed this power to Ptuth.

A fearful cry arose: "The Eye of Balamok! The Eye of Balamok!"

I drew Hita's cloak over her head and mine above that. I placed my face beside hers. I heard her whisper:

"With thee, my lord, to the dark lands beyond Balamok!"

## CHAPTER VII

### THE PROPHECY OF OLD

**H**ERE the manuscript was torn, as if intentionally. It ended, and the young Englishman, who had read all day in utter absorption, looked up for the first time.

The sun was dipping toward the west, the afternoon mirage still danced on the horizon of the Great Victoria, but there was the cool breath of night in the air. He rose and paced the little house of stone.

He was consumed with eagerness to learn the remainder of Gowani's adventures. He scooped the sand away about the table legs, without much hope of finding anything more, and it was with a cry of delight that he came upon another piece of the manuscript, apparently written and then flung away. He smoothed out the wrinkles in the brittle sheet and read, as well as he could decipher:

... that earthly paradise, where ripe fruits hung from the trees and never a soul but Hita and myself. Cool water from crystal springs... was the origin of the story of creation, the lost Garden of Eden... and of passing time, seeing each other's faces dimly in the darkness.

... sadness that I could not but notice. For a long time she turned a smiling face to mine and professed her happiness. Yet at last the time came when I prevailed on her to tell me what troubled her.

"My Lord Gowani," she answered "said I not to you in the Temple of the Eagle that Ptuth the magician cannot be overthrown, and that I must be renewed unto eternal life when I grow old, according to the command laid upon me, until the prophecy be fulfilled?"

"Many long *psus ama* must pass before you grow old, Hita," I answered. "And as for the prophecy, has it not been fulfilled?"

"No, my lord," she answered softly. "For we have not ruled in Ellaborta, as it decreed. Therefore I must be renewed unto youth by Ptuth, who doubtless rules there still."

I strangled down the cry that choked my throat. "Do you mean that—that I am not he who shall rule with you?" I cried.

"I do not know, my lord," she answered simply. "But take me in your arms once more and look upon me."

I did so, and as I looked into her face a cry of terror broke from me. I was looking at an aged woman. The hair that hung formerly in great clustering curls about her head was thinned and white, her eyes were dimmed, and her face lined and pucker.

Then it was that I knew the fearful lot that had been laid upon me. I have said how Hita expressed the thought, when first she saw me sleep, that my life must be half wasted unless it were immeasure-

ably longer than her own. I have written of old Nasmaxa's death from old age, of the senility of the Eagle Priest. And yet it had not occurred to me that, living without real sleep, the inhabitants of Annoryil must needs have a shorter span of life than we.

How long had we dwelt there? Where there is no sun to measure days, no seasons to tell the passage of the years, the sense of time soon vanishes. I tried to think. One year? Two years? Hardly two weeks, as my own senses spoke.

Hita had grown old, and I was still a young man. A cry burst from me; I flung myself upon the ground. When I arose I saw Hita watching me with infinite compassion in her eyes.

"Let my lord order me," she said.

"If the old prophecy must be fulfilled, so be it," I returned. "Let us go back to Ptuth and bid him renew you too unto eternal life. And once again I shall attempt to rule Fendika, that I may show you I am he whose coming was foretold."

She smiled very wistfully, but made no answer. And so she veiled her head once more, and we mounted the winged lizard and made our way toward the light.

But this precaution was needless, for the Eye of Balamok slumbered beneath his eyelids of cloud. Long afterward we came into the Fendek land, and halting the winged monster, looked down on Ellaborta.

But this was a city such as I had not known before. The inner walls were gone. The capital extended far beyond the outer ones, and in the heart of all a huge structure towered into the skies, apparently palace and council hall and temple all in one.

As we descended and came to rest in the great enclosure, a big crowd came round about us, shouting in wonder. And, to my

astonishment, they dressed differently from the Fendeks. Even their speech, though recognizable, was different.

A chant was raised. Through their midst came a band of priests, dressed, not in yellow, but red. At their head, unchanged, his smooth face wrinkled as of yore, was Ptuth.

Hita and I were conducted into the great temple set within a grove of flowering trees. But the interior was different, the altar stood low toward the ground, and there was no longer the electrum serpent, nor any sign of serpent worship.

And Ptuth, eyeing me strangely, seemed only to have some vague remembrance of me.

"Who are you, strangers?" he asked in his curious Fendek, which I could hardly understand.

At that my anger flamed out, as if some scurvy trick had been played on me. "You know me, O Ptuth!" I cried. "Aye, and the princess here, Hita, Queen of Fendika!"

At that a gasp of astonishment ran through the temple, and men put their heads together and whispered.

"You know us both," I cried. "I came to this land, O Fendeks," I continued, turning from Ptuth to the assembly, "to restore Queen Hita here to her own throne, against the usurper, Thafti, and Thaxas, chief of the Avians. And what I could do I did; but at the last, to save the queen, being sorely wounded, I left the country with her. That is known to all of you, and not least to Ptuth the magician."

There was a constrained silence for a minute before Ptuth answered me.

"I am not Ptuth, but Lokas, Priest of the Unknown God," he answered. "All that you say is well known to us, as you have claimed, but surely you and this old woman are bewildered with age, to come here with such a story. For the events of which you

speak happened *psus* uncountable ago, at the time of the last unveiling of the dreaded Eye of Balamok, and even our records admit them to be dim legends of the past. The Priest Ptuth died long ago, and the Serpent Worship is banished forever as a relic of our barbarous ancestors, and the descendants of Sar, legendary chief of the Aonorians, rule this land from Zelryii, the capital of the Aonian Empire."

I gazed about me in a frantic bewilderment. It was true, everything was strange; and yet this old man before me was either Ptuth, or Ptuth reincarnated.

And I wondered whether the "renewal unto eternal youth" meant birth in a new body, with hardly a memory of the past.

"Nevertheless, O Gowani, if indeed by any possibility you can be he whom you claim to be," Lokas continued, "our ancient prophecies foretell the coming of a stranger, an old man, and of an aged woman, whose appearance shall be the forerunner of a queen named Hita, who shall rule this land. And the wisdom of our fathers tells us, furthermore, that this old woman, dying, shall pass into the body of a babe about to be born, who shall be she. But as for you, Gowani, our prophecies are silent."

I caught Hita in my arms. "Tell him that I am yours," I cried out. "Tell him that if you die I shall die to be reborn with you. Am I not he of whom the prophecy spoke?"

"I do not know, my Lord Gowani," she answered wistfully. "Fair was our love while this body was mine, but whether—whether you—be he—"

She trembled, and suddenly collapsing, sank down upon the temple floor.

And it was only that which had contained Hita's dear, loyal and loving spirit that I held in my arms.

THEY took me many days' journey across the desert, telling me that when they had deliberated they would summon me. And so I wait here until the call comes.

What gives me cause for hope is this: I am a young man, and hardly a year will pass before the babe that is Hita will have grown to young womanhood. Surely, if she be queen, she will remember me and bid them recall me.

They have given me food, and every few days some of the natives appear with supplies brought from Ethnabasca underneath. By that I know that they have not forgotten me.

Surely in a few weeks, or months, they will recall me. Meanwhile I wait, and sometimes all seems like a dream to me, but for my memory of that surpassing love which I dare to dream is destined to be mine again. I have employed the time in drawing up this memoir, for my relief, rather than in the hope that—

Here the fragment of manuscript ended abruptly, as if the writer had suddenly been surprised, for there was the scrawl of the implement with which the manuscript had been written, terminating in a blot.

The reader rose, stretched himself and went outside. In the glancing rays of the sun, now almost on the horizon, he saw something among the salt crystals beside the pool. Approaching it, he found it to be the skeleton of a man.

The right arm lay a little distance from the body, but whether it had been severed after death it was impossible to say, for even the bones had been corroded by the salt crystals. Nor was it, for the same reason, possible to determine whether it was the skeleton of Sewell or of the native man, Peter.

If the traveler had found a second skeleton, he might have believed that Gowans screed was the product of delirium, induced by the sufferings of the Great Victoria. But though the tale seemed unbelievable the fleece upon the water-bag was like a llama's. And Gowan had not brought a camel from Kalgoorie.

Had the priests come for Gowan at last and summoned him back to the underworld to meet Queen Hita, rearisen, lovely and radiant, from death?

He, too, had heard legends of a white queen across the Great Victoria. If the story was true, Gowan had not known that he had grown old with Hita in that earthly paradise whose description had been torn from the parchment.

At least the story seemed symbolical of life—the quest of the heart's desire, always unattainable, the lure that beckons across the deserts of life to those who watch.

Gowan, old Joe, the prospector—what were these but symbols of those who seek, attain and ever lose the paradise of the soul, only to hope with hope unquenchable?

The traveler looked wistfully about him. Almost he was tempted to seek for the hidden entrance into the city below. Then, shrugging his shoulders at his folly, he filled his waterskin, swung it upon his shoulder, and set out on his long journey eastward.