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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Fire Princess

By EDMOND HAMILTON

*A thrill-tale of intrigue and weird horror in the terrible valley of Koom,
the hidden city—a story of the Place of Power
that was the tomb of the Ancient Ones*

1. Secret Agent

IT SEEMED to Gary Martin that the malign mood of alien Asia was stronger tonight, that all this black labyrinth of Tientsin was sullenly brooding, listening darkly to the whispering west wind. And that furtive wind out of the mightiest and most mysterious of continents seemed muttering tonight of menace, and of an ancient hate.

The tall young American swore inwardly. After six years, he told himself, the East was getting on his nerves. Those six years of subterfuge and peril had taken their toll; his very soul was weary and homesick. Well, he'd soon be out of all this, for a while at least. And Gary's tired mind warmed with a yearning, precious emotion at the thought of home.

Tientsin had never seemed so squalid to him as it did tonight. The ill-lit, narrow streets of dingy shops and blank house-walls, the worn cobbles and stinking gutters, the infinity of indescribable smells—these did not rasp as much as the noisy crowds that buffeted him. Dignified Chinese merchants and stocky peasants, dusty donkey-drivers and wretched beggars and barrow-men—all the classes and almost all the races of Asia seemed represented in this whirlpool.

Gary Martin saw over the heads of the crowd the sign, "American Book Store, William Cray, Prop.," just ahead of him. He was glad to push out of the noisy crowd into the dim, quiet little shop.

Mr. Cray was arranging two-month-old magazines on a rack. He turned, a commonplace, gray little man with a colorless face and eyes that blinked uncertainly through thick-lensed spectacles.

"Ah, Mr. Martin!" he exclaimed, coming forward with a cordial smile. "I am glad to see you back, sir. I hope your latest paleontological researches up in the Gobi were successful."

"I didn't do badly—found some interesting fossils up there," Gary admitted. "You've saved my mail for me?"

"Of course. It is in my office, Mr. Martin."

He locked the shop door, and then Gary followed him back into the office. It was a lamplit, shabby little room with an old desk and a couple of chairs.

Gary sat down, his long, rangy form slumping wearily. His dark head sagged a little, but his earnest gray eyes held an anxious hope.

Cray had taken off his spectacles, and the little bookseller's face had subtly changed, as though something hard and ruthless had come alive in his pale eyes.

"You did fine work up in Mongolia, Gary," he was saying evenly. "Your reports on the Japanese military infiltration up there were thorough. I've already forwarded them to Washington."

Gary nodded uninterestedly at the compliment. Then he leaned forward, his tanned, tired young face suddenly eager.

"My leave, Cray?" he asked. "Has it come?"

For answer, Cray reached into the desk and took out a long envelope. He handed it over.

"It came last week," he said. "You can read it later—in consideration of your fine services to the United States Army Intelligence, you are granted six months leave, and so on."

"Six months?" Gladness leaped into Gary Martin's hungry gray eyes. "Lord, but that's good! Six months away from Asia, back in the States—football games and theaters and people talking my own language, and nobody trying to stick a knife into me——"

He stopped suddenly. There was something in Cray's pale eyes, as he watched. It was a shadow of pity. Gary stared hard at this commonplace little man who was the head of the American spy network in the Far East. Dim alarm checked the jubilation of the young secret agent.

"Cray, there's something on your mind. What is it?" Then, in dismayed divination, Gary added suddenly, "You've got another job for me? That's it, isn't it?"

"Yes, Gary, that's it," said William Cray slowly.

An intense bitterness came into Gary's gray eyes. His voice took on a rasping quality.

"I might have expected it," he said bitterly. "For six years I've been roaming up and down Asia, posing as a paleontologist, spying out the things you wanted to know. Now, when at last I'm granted my leave of absence, you're ordering me out on another mission."

"Not ordering you, Gary," corrected the little spymaster. His face was very grave, his pale eyes very steady. "There is a job, yes—the most terribly important any secret agent has ever had. I want you to take it, for I think you're my one man who might succeed. But I can't order you to take it," Cray continued, "since your leave is already in effect. I can only tell

you about it, and then if you wish to accept this mission, it is yours."

"Cray, I can answer that at once," Gary told him in hard accents. "I'm not taking your job! I want this leave and I'm going to have it."

Not a shadow of perturbation crossed William Cray's colorless face, but he asked a quiet question.

"Even so, will you let me tell you about this?"

"Go ahead," Gary said harshly. "It'll do no harm to tell me, as long as you understand I've refused the job."

CRAY idly twisted a little slip of paper in his fingers, staring broodingly at the wall. He did not turn his head when he finally spoke.

"Gary, did you ever hear of the legendary kingdom of Koom?"

Gary frowned. "You mean that hidden kingdom that's supposed to exist in eastern Tibet?"

The little spymaster nodded. "Yes, that's what I mean. Just what have you heard about it?"

Gary made a brusque, impatient gesture. "It's just another Tibetan legend—though it is believed by every race in Central Asia. The story is that there's a sacred, wonderful valley in the unexplored mountain ranges there, a valley that was once the home of the ancient gods. In that hidden valley of Koom is supposed to dwell a kingdom of people who keep guard upon the secrets of mighty power left there by the gods."

"What do you think lies behind this legend of the kingdom Koom?" Cray asked keenly.

Gary shrugged. "Koom is probably just a valley in those mountains inhabited by a people a little different from the ordinary tribes. That would be enough to start all kinds of superstitious stories."

"You've never been near the mountains

where the place is supposed to be situated?" the other asked. Gary shook his head.

"Not within four hundred miles of them. You see, the legended kingdom Koom is to the Tibetans the most sacred spot on earth. Not one of them will go into those mountains, for they think it's forbidden. And they would instantly kill any foreigner whom they suspected of trying to pry into the hidden valley."

"But you know at least where Koom is supposed to be located?" Cray persisted.

"It's supposed to be in the unexplored mountains beyond the desert plateau south of the Kun-Lun range, deep in northeast Tibet," Gary said, frowning. He asked, "Why all this interest in a Central Asian legend? What's it got to do with the big job you were talking about?"

"It has a lot to do with it," Cray said heavily. He swung around, his pale, intent gaze fixed now on the younger man's lean brown face.

"Suppose," Cray said quietly, "that a woman came out of the hidden valley Koom and announced to the peoples of Central Asia that she had been sent by the gods to lead them to war and conquest. Would they believe her? Would they follow her?"

Gary's tanned forehead furrowed deeper. "A woman who did that could stir up the nomad peoples, plenty," he admitted. "Tibetans, Mongols, Turks—all of them, even most Chinese, believe that legend." Then he asked sharply, "Is there a rumor like that among the interior peoples?"

"There is," the little man said shortly. "Our agents in the interior have heard it from every hand. All the nomad races of Central Asia are seething with undercover excitement. A whisper, a burning prophecy, has spread that out of the hidden kingdom Koom is coming a great princess or queen named Shirani, who will lead them to conquest."

"Shirani?" Gary repeated frowningly. "It's an unusual name. I suppose she is some witch or priestess of this valley Koom who has decided to play on the superstitions of the nomads. She could start a lot of tribal wars and conquests in the interior with that story, all right."

"Gary, she can do more than that," Cray said earnestly. "That woman, unless she's stopped, can plunge our whole world into another destructive war!"

Gary stared incredulously. The little spymaster leaned suddenly forward, and his words crackled like snapping firecrackers.

"Suppose Japan gets hold of this woman Shirani? Or Russia or one of the other powers? *Then* what will happen?"

Gary looked startled. "You think one of those nations might use her to stir up the nomad tribes for their own purposes?"

"They will if they can!" Cray declared. "They'll utilize the superstitious veneration of the nomad tribes for her to set those millions of nomads moving in whatever direction they wish. Whatever power gets hold of this woman can use her to get a death-grip on all Central Asia, to dominate this whole continent!"

"It's true, it might be done," muttered Gary through tight lips, a frown on his tanned, lean face. "But there's nothing to show that any of the powers will try such a game as that."

WILLIAM CRAY smiled mirthlessly. "I had a report yesterday from our agent in Tokyo. He says that Major Okara has just left Japan, for a secret mission in Tibet."

"Major Okara?" The name came sharply from Gary's lips, his dark head jerking up.

"Yes, Okara," Cray repeated. "The ace spy of Japan, the most ruthless and diabolically cunning secret agent in the East."

If Okara's started for Tibet, it's for something big. It's to penetrate to that hidden valley and get hold of this woman Shirani, and make her a tool of Japan.

"Think what *that* will mean. That woman today is the key to control of all the nomad tribes, to domination of all interior Asia. If one nation gets hold of her and makes a tool of her, it means the end of all other nations on this continent. America must prevent that!"

"And the big job you spoke of is to prevent it, to get into that hidden valley and bribe or cajole this woman into refusing the offers of the other powers?" Gary stated grimly.

"Yes, Gary. I must send someone in there to play the game for America, against Japan and Russia and the rest. Some agent of America must keep them from making a tool of this Shirani, even if he has to *kill* her."

"Of course you know," Gary said harshly, "that whoever tries to get in there will probably be killed by fanatic Tibetans?"

"There's a chance that an agent can get through into the hidden valley," Cray said doggedly. "I must gamble on that chance."

Then he rose heavily to his feet, his face sagging as he told the younger man, "That's the big job I was hoping you'd take, Gary. You know something of Tibet, and you'd have the best chance of making it. But I don't blame you for refusing it—you've earned your leave of absence and you've got a right to enjoy it."

He held out his hand. "You'll be sailing for the States soon, so this is good-bye. I hope you have a fine leave, Gary."

Gary Martin looked up, his gray eyes bitter, something near to hate on his lean, taut face.

"Damn you, Cray," he said harshly, "you know I can't refuse the job, the way

you've put it. You knew that if I listened, you could talk me into it!"

William Cray's colorless face lit to one of his rare smiles.

"I knew that *America* could talk you into it," he said.

2. In Mysterious Tibet

REINING in his pony sharply, Uluk, the Mongol leader of the little caravan, pointed across the barren, rocky plateau.

"Look, khan!" he exclaimed. "Someone waits for us, ahead."

Gary Martin halted his own shaggy pony abruptly, while the two Chinese who rode behind with the pack-horses also stopped apprehensively. The young American squinted against the noonday glare, whose pale radiance made everything as unreal as moonlight.

This was the barren, semi-desert plateau of northeast Tibet, a drab, rocky plain thinly covered with scanty grass; an untraveled, unexplored waste fifteen thousand feet above the sea, inhabited only by fierce, wandering Tibetan tribes. Studded with great boulders, cut by deep gorges, it lay like the surface of an old, withered, dying planet. The winds that blew fitfully across it were bleak and chill.

A wall of huge mountains sheathed with perpetual snow and ice loomed far ahead, a marching range of icy peaks and cliffs that stretched a giant barrier obliquely across their path. For weeks Gary and his little caravan had been forging deeply southward into this unvisited region, toward those unknown mountains that were supposed to contain the legended valley of Koom. They had only sighted the distant white peaks this morning, and Gary had eyed them tensely as he rode toward them. Somewhere inside them must lie the fabled kingdom Koom, and the mysterious woman Shirani upon whom the peace of the world depended.

"It is one man on foot, waiting for us," Uluk was saying. The little Mongol's fierce, swart, high-cheekboned face was puzzled.

Gary Martin felt perplexed too as he stared at the small figure waiting ahead on the barren plain.

"It may be a trap—an ambush of the Tibetan nomads," he muttered. "I've been expecting them to try to stop us, ever since we sighted those mountains this morning."

Uluk nodded agreement, his sloe-black eyes fixed ahead. "The Tibetans have been watching us," he said grimly. "I have glimpsed them trailing us today, and that means no good."

Gary loosened his heavy pistol in its holster, and gave the order to ride on. The tired ponies plodded slowly forward, their hoofs raising fine clouds of dust.

The two Chinese looked more scared by the minute, but Uluk remained impassive. The little Mongol whom he had met and hired up in Koko Nor was a good man, Gary thought. He'd been a big help.

Then Gary uttered an ejaculation of surprise, his lean, brown face stiff with astonishment, as they rode up to the small figure waiting for them. It was a girl, dressed as he was in whipcord coat and riding-breeches and felt hat—a white girl, alone here in the barren waste, without horses or servants.

"What the devil are *you* doing here?" Gary cried in amazement as he dismounted. "Who are you?"

"I'm Joan Laird—and I never believed in rescuing angels until I saw you coming!" she told him. "Have you any water?"

He handed her the canteen from his hip. She drank eagerly, holding it in both small hands, and when she lowered it, sighed.

"That *was* good! I haven't had a drink since last night," she told him.

Joan Laird had a firm-looking little figure, with a sturdy strength in its rounded feminine outlines. There was something of childish stubbornness and tenacity in her obstinate chin and business-like mouth and slightly snubbed nose. Her clear brown eyes were unafraid and self-reliant.

There was a smear of dust on her nose, and stray locks of dark, curly hair had fallen across her forehead. But though she looked more than a little fatigued, there was no worry in her face. Her eager eyes were bright and excited as she handed the canteen gratefully back to him.

"I'm Gary Martin, an American paleontologist down here on a surveying-trip," he said, frowning at her. "I can't for the life of me understand what an English girl is doing alone in this unknown country."

Joan Laird drew a long breath. "It's soon explained. My father is a missionary, up in Mongolia. Three months ago he came down here into Tibet, in the hope of converting some of these unknown nomad tribes. He was to return in a month, but he didn't come back! Finally I got so worried about him I decided to come down here and search for him.

"I had a lot of trouble getting any servants to come with me—they all said this part of Tibet was sacred and forbidden, and that the Tibetans were now expecting some kind of superhuman revelation and would be likely to kill any intruding foreigners. I finally got a few Chinese to come, by offering them exorbitant pay.

"The Chinese got more and more frightened during the last few days. Yesterday, for the first time, we sighted those big white mountains in the south. My

servants became panic-stricken, said that those were the forbidden mountains, and wanted me to turn back. I wouldn't. When I awoke this morning they had deserted with the horses, food, and everything else but my tent. There was no use trying to go back and catch them, so I just started ahead on foot."

"You've got yourself into a dangerous fix, Miss Laird," Gary rasped. "You had no business coming down into this unknown region."

Joan Laird's chin set stubbornly. "I had to find my father. And I'm sure he must be somewhere near those mountains ahead."

"He may be, if he's still alive," Gary said bluntly. "Your father picked the worst possible time to come down here into Tibet. All the Tibetan tribes are seething right now with fanatic superstition, and if your father was fool enough to try preaching to them now, they've probably killed him."

He saw her catch her breath, and whiten. He thought hard, then told her, "There's not much I can do for you. I can't take you back, for it's imperative for my purposes that I get into those mountains before I'm blocked off by the Tibetans. The best I can do is to give you a pony and rations. You'll have to find your own way back."

Gary knew how little chance there was that the girl could get safely back out of this country, alone. Yet he couldn't offer her any more help. Bigger things depended upon him than the fate of one English girl. For all he knew, Okara of Japan might already have sought out the legended valley Koom in the mountains ahead, might already be warping the mysterious woman Shirani into a tool of his nation. Even if this girl's life depended on it, Gary couldn't take the time now to see her safely back out of the country.

But to his surprise, Joan shook her head firmly at his offer.

"I'm not going back. I'm going ahead and look for my father until I find him. He's somewhere this side of those mountains."

"Are you clean crazy?" Gary exploded. "The chances are ten to one that your father's dead. And if the Tibetan nomads catch you near those mountains you'll likely die too."

"Yet *you* are going to the mountains, just to look for fossils," Joan Laird pointed out. "If you can run the risk for that, I can do so to find my father. I'm going on—even if I have to walk."

Gary swore. "Damn all missionaries and their families! All right, Miss Laird, it will be on your own head. You can have a pony and rations. You can go with us as far as the mountains. And there we part company—I'm going with my men into the mountains, and you can wander around outside them looking for your father until the Tibetans catch you."

"That's fair enough," Joan replied sturdily, quite unperturbed by mention of danger.

Gary felt a strong desire to shake the dusty, stubborn little figure before him. Instead he ordered the staring Chinese servants to dismount, and then after he and Uluk had made a careful inventory of their supplies, he jettisoned some empty water casks and extra clothing, and redistributed the rest.

WHEN the packs were made up again, it left one of the pack ponies unburdened. The girl climbed onto its back. Gary watched her harshly, telling himself that he was a fool to jeopardize his chances to help her. Yet he knew that he could not just ride ahead and leave her here to perish.

As they rode on, Uluk looked at him oddly and said, "Khan, I heard you tell

the woman that we go into the mountains ahead. That will be very dangerous."

"What makes you think so?" Gary asked, watching the Mongol closely. He had not yet told the man his ultimate objective, and watched now to see how he would take it.

"The Tibetans, and many other peoples too, hold those mountains very sacred," Uluk replied. "They permit no one to enter them, for they believe that in them is the most sacred place in the world, the hidden kingdom Koom."

"Do you too believe that the kingdom Koom is in those ranges?" Gary asked him bluntly.

The Mongol looked at him squarely. "Yes, khan, I do believe it. And I think that we go to our deaths if we enter the mountains. For all our race know that it was in there in the valley Koom that the gods dwelt long ages ago, and that the hidden people of Koom still guard the secrets of the gods."

"You would like to turn back, then, and save your skin?" Gary asked caustically.

Uluk raised his head proudly. "No, khan, I did not say that. I think we are all doomed if we enter the mountains. Yet I go with you, for when you hired me, did I not swear fealty to you? And a Mongol's word is good."

Gary felt a little ashamed of his doubts. The stocky Mongol added, "But I think the Chinese are afraid. They have been whispering to each other that we are moving toward the forbidden kingdom Koom."

He and Gary had spoken in Mongol. And Gary was astonished when Joan Laird, riding beside them, spoke up in the same tongue.

"What is this place Koom you're talking about?" she asked interestedly. "It seems to me I've heard legends——"

"You didn't tell me you knew Mon-

gol," Gary said, eyeing her accusingly.

"You didn't ask me," she replied coolly. "Of course I know it, after spending four years at a Mongolian mission. But that doesn't answer my question. What is Koom?"

"It's the name the Tibetans give a certain valley in those mountains ahead," Gary answered curtly. "It's where I'm going."

They forged on for a dozen miles that afternoon, over the rocky plateau, climbing steep little ridges, going far out of their way to head deep gorges. Except for a few scurrying marmots and a circling eagle, no life was to be seen. Yet Gary had the uneasy sense of human eyes watching them from the broken barrens, and he saw Uluk turn often and scan the horizon with keen, fierce black eyes.

Sunset came, casting a beautiful tinge of pink upon the white, mighty peaks far ahead. The air began swiftly to grow cold. Gary ordered a halt for the night amid a group of huge boulders. The two Chinese tethered and unpacked the shaggy ponies, under the sharp orders of the Mongol. They erected the little khaki tent in which Gary usually slept, and then started the erection of their own *yurta*, or conical tent of black felt stretched on wooden hoops.

Gary led Joan Laird into his little tent and made a brusque motion around its dark interior.

"It's yours. I'll bunk in the *yurta*, with the men."

"Thanks, a lot," she said, a little uncomfortably. And then she added impulsively, "I know I'm an awful drag on you. But I *had* to go after dad. You understand, don't you?"

Gary's hard, lean face relaxed a little. "Sure I understand," he said ruefully. "I think you've got a lot of pluck—too much of it for your own good. I wish I could get you to turn back, even now,"

he added earnestly. "We're only a dozen or so miles now from those mountains—and there must be Tibetan tribes outside them. I'm almost sure some of those nomads have been trailing us. Can't you use common sense?"

Joan bristled slightly. "I am using common sense. I'm sure father is alive, and I've got to——"

"*Ab-b-b-b!*"

That shrill, wild cry from the darkness outside came from one of the Chinese. Gary, his hand leaping to the butt of his pistol, ran out into the night with the girl after him.

A wonderful sky of white stars now tented the dim plateau. Uluk and the two Chinese, dark, squat figures in their shapeless sheepskin cloaks, were standing like statues beside their half-erected *yurta*, gazing rigidly south.

"What is it?" Gary snapped. "The Tibetans?"

Uluk turned, his flat face stiff with strange emotion. He said huskily, "No, khan. Look—to the south——"

Gary turned and stared. His heart skipped a beat. Miles to southward in the starlight, like dim ghost mountains, rose the mighty wall of white peaks. But now he could see something about them that had not been visible by daylight. It was an ominous glow of crimson light, a pulsating red glare flung up into the sky from far inside the distant, lofty ice-peaks. The light was not static, but wavered and shifted in great bands and beams, menacing the white-starred sky with shaking spears of red radiance.

He stared frozenly at that weird, blood-tinged aurora, his heart racing unaccountably. He heard Joan gasp beside him and knew that the English girl had seen also. Steadily the furnace-like glare flamed, wild and wonderful above the frosty fangs of the distant peaks.

"It is from the sacred valley of the

gods!" one of the Chinese wailed, terrified. "That glare is from the mighty fires of hidden Koom!"

3. In the Nomad Camp

"GARY — Mr. Martin — what *is* it?" gasped Joan, clutching his sleeve in her small hand, staring petrifiedly.

"I don't know," he muttered. "There must be a volcanic area inside those mountains, that throws up that glare."

"It is the awful fires of forbidden Koom that light the sky!" the Chinese was crying. "And the hidden people who dwell in Koom will slay us all if we do not turn back!"

"We're not turning back," Gary said sternly. He noticed that Uluk was still staring rigidly at the ominous red sky-glare. "There's nothing in those mountains to harm you. Do you wish to lose the rich rewards I promised you for accompanying me?"

"Lord, no riches are of value to a dead man and we shall all very soon be dead if we go nearer to Koom," answered the terrified Chinese, his slant eyes dilated with his fear.

"Aye," shrilled the other Chinese in terrified agreement. "We go no further—we must flee this haunted region."

They started frantically toward the tethered ponies. Gary snatched out his pistol, but Uluk was ahead of him. The Mongol bounded in front of the two Chinese, his long knife drawn.

"Grandsons of dogs, return to your duties or I will give your entrails to the vultures!" he hissed, his eyes glittering.

"Kill us, then!" wailed one of the Chinese wildly. "It is better to die here than to enter the forbidden mountains."

Uluk raised his knife with a hiss of rage. Joan gasped in horror, and Gary cried hastily, "Wait, Uluk!"

He started toward the furious little

Mongol. But suddenly Gary stopped, listening tensely. Then he heard again the sound that had startled him. The click of a horse's hoof, out in the darkness.

"Someone's out there!" Gary exclaimed swiftly.

"Tibetans!" Uluk rasped. "I hear them too."

All were silent, the Chinese frozen now by new terror, Joan's sturdy little figure petrified, as they stared tensely. In the dim starlight, they could make out nothing but the looming boulders around the camp. Then Gary discerned a shifting of shadows out in the dark.

"It's the Tibetans, all right, and they're all around the camp," he said. Uluk darted to pick up a rifle but Gary stopped him. "No, Uluk! We can't hope to fight off a crowd like that. Our only chance will be to talk our way out of this."

"Is there really danger?" Joan asked tautly.

"Plenty of it," Gary said curtly. "Those nomads have been trailing us the last two days. They're probably convinced by now that we're heading for the forbidden mountains.

"Act as though you had nothing to be afraid of," he ordered. "Uluk, you and the Chinese build a fire and start cooking supper."

The dung fire built by Uluk and the trembling Chinese burned up smokily, casting a tremendous light on the huge purple boulders around the camp. Joan sat beside Gary, her stubborn little face unafraid as she pretended to chat casually. His dark head was stiffly erect, listening.

A tenseness grew on them every minute as the muffled click of hoofs outside the firelight grew louder, nearer. The suspense became unbearable. Then, almost before they had realized it, mounted men became visible all around the edge of the firelit camp.

They were Tibetan nomads, more than a score of them, mounted on wiry little ponies and armed with old rifles and swords; tall men in shapeless sheepskin cloaks and queer fur hats with upturned lugs. Their flat, yellow-brown faces were impassive, but their oblique eyes gleamed fanatic hatred at Gary Martin and his companions.

A chief, at whose belt swung a sword in an ornamented brass sheath, dismounted. He stumped toward Gary in the rolling waddle of those who spend most of their lives on horseback. Cold black eyes stared malignantly out of the swart mask of his face.

"*Ku-sho*," Gary greeted him calmly, standing up.

The Tibetan chief did not answer the greeting of honor. His eyes swung over the others, then back to Gary.

"What do you here, traveling toward the sacred mountains?" he demanded harshly in the guttural Tibetan tongue, gesturing toward the glare-crowned peaks. "No man may enter those holy ranges."

Gary had already decided on his explanation. He said in surprise, "We have no intention of entering the mountains. We have come searching for this girl's father, who wandered into this country."

Joan stiffened a little as she heard his untruth, and he realized that she understood Tibetan. Uluk was glaring.

"I think you lie," snapped the Tibetan. "I think you came to violate the forbidden range, like the Urussu."

"The Urussu—the Russian?" Gary exclaimed. "Do you mean that there is a Russian down here?"

"Aye, a dog who tried to enter the sacred mountains and whom we caught," the Tibetan replied harshly. "We are keeping him to be killed on the great day of the coming forth of Princess Shirani."

Shirani? Gary stiffened as he heard the name of the mysterious woman of

Koom, whom he was seeking. So these nomads *were* expecting the princess of that fabled land to come forth soon?

And who was this Russian who had been captured trying to enter the mountains? A Soviet spy, a secret agent of the Kremlin down here on the same mission as himself? He was convinced it must be so.

"We take you to our Dzung-Pon—a chieftain of our tribes," the Tibetan was rasping. "He will know if you lie."

He ordered two of his men, "Disarm these people."

"Shall we fight now, khan?" asked Uluk in Mongol, his eyes blazing. But Gary shook his head quickly.

"No, our only chance of getting out of this is to convince their Dzung-Pon that we're just innocent travelers."

THE Tibetans snatched up the rifles and took Gary's pistol and the Mongol's knife. They roughly slapped Joan's garments to make sure she carried no weapons.

But when the Tibetans moved toward the two Chinese the nerve of the latter gave way. Their frozen terror dissolved into blind panic and they bolted wildly out of the firelight into the darkness.

Instantly Tibetan horsemen were after them like cats, drawing their swords. There was a brief, awful squealing out in the dark. Then the mounted men rode back, sheathing blades now stained red.

Joan shuddered uncontrollably. Gary, burning with rage, yet restrained himself. He muttered to her, "Keep your chin up! We'll be next if we make a slip."

"Your servants tried to escape!" the Tibetan chief cried fiercely, glaring at Gary.

"They feared you were going to kill them," Gary replied calmly. "And perhaps their consciences were evil. We did

not try to escape, for we have done no wrong."

"Mount your horses," the chief ordered harshly.

Gary saw Joan climb bravely into the saddle as he mounted. Uluk followed their example.

"We ride!" called the chief.

With a sudden burst of wild yells that shattered the tense silence, the troop galloped into the darkness, keeping Gary and his two companions in their midst.

They rode straight southward over the plateau, the ponies running in the short, jerky lope that the horses of the Central Asian nomads can maintain almost endlessly. In the distance, ahead, reared the starlit white ranges, crowned with that shaking crimson glare.

Gary felt cold premonition of disaster as he rode. Unless he could talk their way out of this, convince the Tibetans that they had no design of seeking out fabled Koom, his all-important quest was ended. And, he thought sinkingly, probably Okara of Japan was already in those mountains.

They rode on for hour after hour in the tireless, jolting gallop. Dawn came, the breaking gray light finally banishing the mysterious fire-glow above the mountains. They were now but a half-dozen miles from the first tremendous slopes, that climbed with sharp steepness to snow-hung peaks and passes. Far across the rocky plateau stretched the colossal barrier of the white range, walling the unknown.

Beneath the mountains stood a great Tibetan nomad encampment. There was a whole town of black tents, hundreds of them, with smoke curling from their peaks, ponies tethered outside of them, and great herds of pasturing sheep and horses grazing for miles on the scant grass.

"Why, there must be thousands of

them here!" Joan called to Gary as they galloped forward.

He nodded grimly. "They've probably been gathering here, to await the great revelation from inside the mountains."

As they reached the big encampment, the Tibetan riders urged their horses faster and swept through the camp in a wild run. Women and children scurried excitedly out of the way, and dogs barked as the troop galloped to the center of the encampment and stopped with a crash of hoofs in front of a black tent of unusual size, outside of which many sheep-clad tribesmen stood, eyeing them fiercely.

Gary could hardly stand when he dismounted, his muscles were so sore and stiff from that long, jolting ride. Joan's face was drained of color and she swayed against him, but smiled strainedly. He heard Uluk muttering curses against the Tibetans under his breath.

The Tibetan chief emerged from the big tent into which he had gone when he dismounted.

"The Dzung-Pon awaits you," he said roughly.

They stumbled stiffly after him, followed by Tibetans with rifles and drawn swords, into the tent.

Its interior was like a dim, smoky cave, at the center of which burned a smoldering dung fire whose smoke partly escaped through the hole at the peak of the roof. Wooden chests standing around its walls, and a few cooking-utensils and silk hangings worked with figures of gods and demons were all the furniture.

THE Dzung-Pon, or chieftain of these tribes, sat upon a sheepskin and stared at the three captives with expressionless black eyes. His face was as cold and hard as a mask of brown stone. Beside him sat an old lama, huddled in his yellow robe and hood, his dim, filmy eyes

peering up at them out of an incredibly wrinkled saffron face.

"Why did you come to the sacred mountains?" the Dzung-Pon demanded of Gary, paying no attention to his polite "*Ku-sho*."

"We knew nothing of the mountains," Gary said with assumed bewilderment. "We came searching for an old white man, the father of this girl, who is somewhere in this region."

"No old white man has been in this country," the Dzung-Pon answered coldly. "I think that you lie, that you came like the Urussu to spy upon us who wait the coming of the princess Shirani."

"You cannot convince him, khan," Uluk muttered to Gary. "Shall we snatch swords and try to cut our way out?"

"No, wait!" Gary urged him in a low voice.

An interruption had come. As the Dzung-Pon pronounced the name of the princess, the aged lama's filmy eyes had flashed and he made a sacred sign with his claw-like hand. All were tensely silent as his cracked, quavering voice intoned:

"Aye, out of age-old Koom shall soon come Shirani, daughter and princess of the people of the gods! The ears of our peoples have heard the prophecy she has sent forth from the hidden kingdom: 'There shall be a Day of Destruction, and in that one awful day shall be cast down the wicked nations of Earth. And then I, Shirani, will come forth from Koom and lead the peoples who await me to conquest of all the dazed earth!' Such is the promise of the princess!"

The lama's voice was shrill with deep reverence and awe, and that awe was reflected on the fierce, fantastic faces of the rest. Then the claw-like hand pointed to Gary and Joan and the Mongol.

"If these have come with blasphemous intent to enter the secret kingdom, then

they must be kept and killed upon the day that the princess Shirani comes forth, that she may know we have kept faithful vigil."

The lama sat back, huddling again inside his yellow robe, and a fierce sigh ran through the Tibetans in the tent.

"Gary, what did he mean by the Day of Destruction?" Joan whispered, her brown eyes wide and startled.

Before he could answer, the Dzung-Pon raised his voice. "Bring the Urussu here! We shall soon see if these people are lying."

The Urussu? The Russian? Gary's mind raced as a chief left the tent to execute orders. But before he had time to think of possibilities, the chief and two guards entered with the captive Russian.

He was a big, bear-like man, with huge shoulders and a barrel chest and a bullet head with a great shock of black hair. He had the round, red face of a merry peasant, and small eyes that were always twinkling as though at some secret joke.

"Borchhoff!" exclaimed Gary, stiffening.

Borchhoff turned, and saw the captives for the first time. Sheer astonishment froze his features as he perceived Gary. He stared at the young American and at Joan. And then a deep, rumbling explosion of laughter burst from him. He laughed like a man who has been told the funniest joke in the world, his great shoulders shaking, his round face convulsed.

"Martin!" he gasped in accented English when he could speak. "This is funny—this is killing me——"

He went into another paroxysm of gasping laughter. Gary's heart was cold within him. For he knew this big Russian.

Boris Borchhoff had long been the most trusted spy of the Soviets in the Far East. Gary had clashed with him twice—once in Siberia and once at the headquarters of

a Chinese Communist general. He knew that that merry, stupid peasant exterior concealed a feline cunning.

"Do you know these people?" the Dzung-Pon was demanding of Borchhoff.

The chuckling Russian's pig-like little eyes gleamed cunningly at the stony-faced Tibetan.

"Will you let me go free if I tell you who they are?" he asked craftily.

"No, by Gesar!" spat the Dzung-Pon. "You die when the princess Shirani comes, for your crime of trying to enter the mountains. And if these others intended to commit the same crime, they die with you."

Borchhoff seemed unsurprized by that answer. Still chuckling, he gazed at Gary and Joan. Then he turned back to the Tibetan.

"Yes, I know them," he declared. "The white man is an American spy who undoubtedly came here to make his way into Koom and prevent the princess from ever coming forth. The girl is a spy also."

"Damn you, Borchhoff, that's a lie!" cried Gary wrathfully. "This girl is no spy—you're condemning her to death!"

"So you are spies, like the Urussu?" hissed the Dzung-Pon, rising and glaring at Gary and his companions. Hate raw and appalling was now on the fierce face of every Tibetan in the dim tent.

"Then you share the Urussu's fate!" the Tibetan cried. "Guards, take them and keep them with him until the day of death!"

4. *The Struggle in the Pass*

THEY were hauled out into the daylight without ceremony. A crowd of nomad men, women and children shrilled fierce maledictions at them, and wolfish Tibetan dogs barked savagely at them as

they were marched roughly through the camp toward another black tent.

Into this rude prison they were thrust, and two Tibetans armed with rifles posted themselves outside its door, while another went around to guard the back of the tent. In the dim, smoky interior, Gary turned on Borchoff, a deadly rage in the American's gray eyes.

"Don't be angry, Comrade Martin," chuckled the Russian. "I knew as soon as I saw you that you were down here too after this woman Shirani. I'd been sent on the same quest for my country, had failed and been captured; so naturally I had to keep the spies of other countries from succeeding. It is all part of the great game."

"It's part of the game for me, yes," Gary said savagely. "But why did you tell them that Joan is a spy? There was no need to doom an innocent girl to death by that lie."

"Lie?" echoed Borchoff blankly. His round, red face amazed, he stared at the English girl and then back to Gary Martin.

"Comrade Martin, do you mean to say you didn't *know* that this girl is a British government spy?"

"Of course I didn't know it, because it isn't true!" Gary flared.

Borchoff's big body shook with mirth. "My poor American, you have been deceived. This Joan Laird has for four years been a British spy, working from Hongkong. I know because she nearly got me executed down in Indo-China two years ago."

Gary was stupefied by the accusation. "Why, that's impossible. She's simply down here hunting for her father——"

Sudden doubt hammered at his brain, and he broke off and swung around to Joan Laird. His gray eyes narrowed as they bored into her stubborn face.

"Are you hunting for your father?" he

demanded suspiciously. "Or are you what Borchoff says, a British spy?"

"Of course I'm not a spy," Joan said indignantly. "This man lied, simply because he was doomed himself and didn't want one of us to escape." Her brown eyes flashed at the chuckling Russian.

"I wonder," said Gary slowly, his cold gaze searching her face. "Your story of a missionary father who'd come down here seemed a little strange to me, from the first. And the Dzong-Pon said that no elderly white man had been near here—and *he* had no reason to lie." Gary's eyes were suddenly hot. "By heaven, if I thought you'd been lying to me——"

"Of course she's been lying," Borchoff grinned. "Without doubt, she has her identification card on her right now."

"This is all insane," Joan said scornfully, turning her back on them.

Gary grasped her arm and whirled her around, his lean brown face dangerous. "Maybe it is—but I'm going to find out," he rasped.

Joan struggled suddenly like a wildcat, but he held her with an iron grip while he used his free hand to search the pockets of her jacket and breeches. He found nothing in the pockets but a miscellaneous assortment of feminine odds and ends.

"I hope you're satisfied now!" flared Joan.

"No, not yet," Gary said grimly, still holding her. His brown hand seized the collar of her white silk blouse.

"No!" she gasped, pounding him furiously with little fists. "You can't——"

"A spy has no room for chivalry," Gary grated. "I forgot that once, but I'm not going to forget it again."

Ruthlessly he ripped the blouse, which parted to disclose the silk bandeau that confined her firm breasts. A pattern of tiny stitches on the front of the silken band caught Gary's eye. Holding the fiercely struggling girl and imprisoning her

clawing hands, he thrust his own hand rudely down into the bandeau.

He felt a little oblong of thin cardboard inside the silk. Instantly he tore the scanty little garment completely away, and pushed the raging, struggling girl away from him. The thrust brought Joan up against the side of the tent, and she stood, her small hands covering her breasts and her brown eyes blazing.

Gary tore apart the silk, while Borchoff and Uluk watched in wonder. In a moment he had the thin gray card, with its official red seal, in his hands. The seal was that of the British Foreign Office. The card ordered all British consular and police officials to accord full co-operation to Miss Joan Laird, accredited agent of the Intelligence Department.

"You and your missionary father!" snapped Gary savagely to the girl. Joan met his harsh, accusing gaze defiantly as she rebuttoned her blouse.

"I had to tell you something," she retorted. "I was sent here to get hold of this Shirani, just as you and Borchoff were. Because I knew more about Tibet than anyone else available, my superiors thought that I had the best chance of getting to that legended valley Koom. My Chinese *did* desert, as I told you. Then when you appeared, I guessed you were an American spy on the same mission as myself, so naturally I lied to you. You'd have done the same, in my place!"

Gary Martin's lean face was still harsh with wrath, but he admitted bitterly, "Yes, I suppose I would have."

HE STEPPED to the door of the tent and looked out tautly. The Tibetan guards outside raised their rifles, watching him. The encampment was stirring with the indolent activity of nomad life—herdsmen riding back and forth to the grazing herds outside the camp, women

preparing food, snake-eyed youngsters riding unsaddled ponies.

He stared beyond the camp at the looming mountains. His yearning eyes made out a crack in the huge barrier, a narrow pass. The pass climbed steeply up through the looming, snowy peaks.

"If I could get into that pass, I could get on into the mountains," he muttered. "It would be hard going, but possible."

Borchoff chuckled. "I've thought that many times in the week they've held me here. But none of us will ever get into that pass. America and Britain and Russia will have to send new spies down here."

"It'll be too late, by then," Gary responded. "Okara of Japan is somewhere near here, probably ahead of us."

The Russian swore lividly. "Okara! I might have known it! That cursed little Japanese whom nobody knows will succeed where we three have failed. *He'll* get into Koom and find this Shirani!"

He began to rave and curse in his own tongue. "I don't mind dying so much, but to let Okara beat me! To let Russia be cheated out of the domination of Asia, by those little yellow devils!"

Gary said harshly, "An Asia dominated by Russia, or Britain either, would be as bad for the world as a Japanese-dominated one. America sent me in here to stop any of those things from happening."

"Maybe even Okara will not be able to succeed, inside those mountains," muttered Borchoff, staring at the mighty, icy range. "Maybe there is something in there too big for even Japan to handle."

"What do you mean?" Gary asked sharply. "You don't believe these Tibetan superstitions about Koom and its people?"

"I don't know what to believe," hedged the Russian. "There's something damned weird in there—you saw the fire-

glow that flares above the peaks each night? And all these people are sure that in there are still guarded the secret, mighty powers of ancient gods. And what's more, these Tibetans are sure that before Shirani comes out of Koom, she will do something that will shatter all the great nations of the world. That will be the Day of Destruction they talk about, and after that the broken nations will be easily conquered."

Uluk stirred uneasily. The little Mongol told Gary, "That is the story that has spread among my people too, khan."

The morning hours passed slowly. Soon after noon a sullen Tibetan woman, wearing a long woolen robe and queer cap, brought them food which she set down hastily inside their tent, and then left. The food consisted of *tsamba* or ground barley meal, mixed with strong butter.

Borchhoff ate largely and Uluk fed himself stoically, but Gary and Joan hardly touched the food. Gary sat staring, cold despair in his heart. In his brain was ringing the single somber thought, "You've failed. You've failed Cray, and America."

"Damn it, there must be some way to get out of here," he exclaimed fiercely, rising to his feet. They stared hopelessly.

Then Uluk suddenly stood up, eyes flashing. "Khan, there *is* a way by which we might win to freedom! I have just thought." He asked the Russian, "Will we be brought another meal, tonight after dark?"

Borchhoff nodded, his red face perplexed. The Mongol said quickly, "Then when the Tibetan woman brings in our food tonight, we can overpower her and I will walk out in her robe and cap. I look enough like a Tibetan to fool the guards in the dark. Once outside, I can steal horses and weapons and come back here, and you can crash out and escape."

"By heaven, it is a chance!" Gary cried,

his desperate gray eyes kindling. "Once you and I get outside the camp, Uluk, we can ride straight for that pass in the mountains."

Boris Borchhoff's eyes narrowed. "You don't go without me, Martin! If you try to leave me behind, I'll give the alarm."

"And I'll do the same," Joan Laird declared instantly. "You'll take me with you or I'll spoil the whole plan."

Gary gazed furiously from the grinning Soviet spy to the girl's stubborn little figure and determined face.

"All right, damn you," he swore, "you can both come along, and once we're out of here and inside that pass, we'll settle as to which of us is going on into the mountains to Koom."

For the rest of that afternoon they were tense with the desperate plan. Gary knew now that even if he got into the mountains he would still have Joan and Borchhoff to contend with, but he told himself that with Uluk's help he should be able to handle them.

NIGHT swept down on the great Tibetan camp. As darkness fell, above the looming white peaks flared the mysterious fireglow, painting the starred sky with wavering bands and rays of red light. They watched from inside the tent, and the Tibetans outside also were watching, talking excitedly. Then the nomads began to retire into the tents.

"What if the woman does not come with food tonight?" Joan asked tensely, in the darkness.

"In that case——" Gary began, then suddenly stopped and hissed, "She's coming now!"

The guards outside were speaking gutturally to someone. Gary and Borchhoff flattened themselves on either side of the door. The Tibetan woman's shapeless figure entered with the wooden bowl of food.

Instantly they jumped on her. It was no time for gallantry—Gary got his hands at once over her mouth, preventing an outcry, while the Russian held her thrashing arms and legs.

Joan swiftly and efficiently gagged her with a big handkerchief. They tied her arms and legs with strips of cloth they had made ready. Uluk had already pulled off the woman's long outer robe and cap, and the little Mongol was by now attired in them.

"Now get going!" Gary hissed at him. "Get four ponies and a couple of rifles if possible, and ride back here slowly. We'll be waiting, and will jump those guards when we see you coming."

"Yes, khan!" whispered Uluk, slant eyes gleaming.

Then he moved boldly out of the door of the tent, keeping his head bent and walking in the same ungraceful waddle the Tibetan woman used. One of the guards outside said something to him.

Uluk only shrugged, and moved on. In a moment he was out of their sight in the darkness of the encampment.

"So far, so good," Borchhoff muttered. "If he can just get the horses now, we've a good chance."

"He'd best hurry," Gary grated. "The moon rises soon."

Joan Laird, taut with excitement, was crouching beside him. They waited in unutterable suspense.

Suddenly a wild yell of alarm floated across the nomad camp. It was echoed by other alarmed cries, and over them sounded the thud of galloping hoofs, rapidly receding in the night.

"Uluk was discovered!" cried Gary dismayedly. "He's had to flee out of the camp."

"Then we're done for!" exclaimed Borchhoff.

The Tibetan encampment was rousing to the fact that something had happened.

Voices were calling shrill questions, dogs barking wildly. The din of alarm still came from the south end of the camp.

Gary saw the guards outside the door staring in that direction, and realized that in this confusion there might still be a slim chance of escape. Fiercely he resolved at once to take that chance.

"We've got to make our break anyway—now!" he snapped to Borchhoff and Joan. "Once they find one of us has escaped, they'll guard us so closely we'll never have another chance. Come on!"

There was no time for him to discuss details with them. Action was the paramount necessity now, for the confusion in the dark Tibetan camp could not last long.

Gary acted. He sprang out of the tent with the Russian and girl close behind him. Instantly the staring guards heard him and whirled around, leveling their rifles to shoot.

Gary struck up the muzzles and leaped in. The guns banged crimson flame over his head as his fists smashed the stomach of one of the two Tibetans. The man went down, falling on his rifle. Gary snatched the sword from his belt and whirled wildly.

Borchhoff's huge fist had smashed the other guard's face to red pulp. The Tibetan guarding the back of the tent was running around it, aiming his rifle. Joan thrust him fiercely off balance, as he pulled the trigger. Then the Russian's great fist knocked him flat.

"Quick—here are horses!" Gary yelled, running toward a near-by tent outside which a half-dozen ponies were tethered.

The ponies were saddled and bridled, waiting to be used by the herdsmen who lived in that tent. Gary slashed the tether-lines with his sword and the three sprang into the saddles.

Now Tibetans were running out of all the tents and through the encampment

toward them, drawn by the shots. Men grabbed for their bridles. Gary slashed down with the sword and they recoiled.

"Ride!" Gary yelled, digging his heels into the flanks of his wiry steed.

The horses, maddened by the gathering uproar, bolted wildly between the dark tents. Rifles blazed behind them and bullets whistled past their heads. The whole camp was in wild excitement.

Tibetans ran out in the dark to stop them, but the desperate trio crashed through them, Borchoff shouting hoarsely, Gary wielding his sword like a madman. Then they were out of the camp, galloping wildly over the dark plateau.

Full before them, five miles away, loomed the majestic white barrier of the colossal mountain range, crowned by that weird, shaking red fire-glow. Gary headed his bolting steed for the narrow crack of the snowy pass. Behind, the Tibetan camp was a din of raging yells.

"They'll be after us!" Joan cried above the wind, her small figure jolting on the plunging, galloping pony.

"I don't think they'll follow us into the sacred mountains," Gary called. "We may be safe once we get up in that pass."

Gary grimly resolved that even if they gained the pass, neither Joan nor Borchoff—neither Britain nor Russia—would go farther inside the mountains with him. Somehow, he'd stop them from that, even though he did not now have the help of Uluk to count on.

Now they were riding up the first long slopes toward the cliffs and buttresses of the mighty range. The moon was rising, its blank white shield casting a silver light over the vast, snowy range and the plateau behind them. Far back, a dark mass was following them.

"The Tibetans are after us, all right," Gary called.

"Those mutton-faced dogs will never

catch us now!" came Borchoff's exultant laugh.

They were at the mouth of the pass, a moonlit, narrow canyon strewn with great boulders. It was hardly more than a crack in the range, its upper walls hung with great masses of snow and ice. It twisted and turned, winding steeply upward. The air became freezing.

Gary saw moonlit snow ahead of them, on the floor of the narrow canyon. At these altitudes, the snow-line was soon reached. It was thin at first, but rapidly deepened until the ponies were struggling upward through yard-deep drifts. Huge white masses of ice and snow hung over them, bulging out from the rock walls high above their heads. There were places where such masses had fallen, showing that slides were common.

Gary suddenly perceived that there were fresh horse-tracks in the snow *ahead* of them. Instantly he understood.

"Uluk must have come up into this pass when he was discovered and had to flee the camp!" he cried. "He's somewhere ahead."

He shouted joyfully up the moonlit canyon. "Uluk!"

His shout reverberated between the snowy walls. Then came a whispering, echoing answer. "Here——"

GARY'S hopes soared as he urged his tired pony upward through the snow. Uluk's presence here meant that he could easily keep Joan and Borchoff from following him into the mountains. He, and he alone, would yet win to secret Koom!

They came soon upon the little Mongol standing in the moonlit snow, a rifle in his hand, a pony beside him.

"Thank the Lord you knew enough to make for this pass when you had to run!" Gary cried as he dismounted.

Uluk said calmly, "I was discovered by the Tibetans when I stole this rifle. I did not think you others could escape then."

Joan and Borchoff had ridden up by now, and they too dismounted in the snow. "So it is really the Mongol!" Borchoff exclaimed. "Good—now we can get on into the mountains."

Gary laughed mirthlessly. "I am going on into the mountains, with Uluk. You and Joan go no further." He told the Mongol, "Keep them covered, Uluk, and shoot to kill if either tries anything."

"So America wins?" Joan said bitterly.

"America wins, yes," Gary told her harshly. "You two can freeze here in the snow or go back and give yourselves up to the Tibetans—I don't care which. I'm going on in to Koom and Shirani."

"You are wrong, Martin," said the new, cold voice in English. "American does not win. *Japan* wins."

Gary spun amazedly. Uluk was covering him with the rifle, as well as the other two. And the Mongol's fierce face was changed.

"What are you talking about, Uluk?" Gary cried.

"Let me introduce myself," Uluk said calmly. "I am Major Doijji Okara, of the Imperial Japanese Intelligence."

"*Okara of Japan!*" cried Joan. Borchoff stared, his red face gaping. Gary burst into stupefied speech.

"You *can't* be Okara!" he cried wildly. "Why I hired you myself, up in Koko Nor——"

"Certainly you did," Okara answered quietly. "I was in Koko Nor ready to start south into Tibet on the same mission as yourself. I recognized you as an American spy on the same quest as I, so I thought it good strategy to hire myself to you and accompany you most of the way—then dispose of you. Thus I could be sure you did not beat me.

"Tonight," the Japanese added coolly, "I had no intention of helping you escape the Tibetans. I simply escaped myself."

Gary plummeted the black depths of despair. Of all the crushing blows that had ever been dealt him, this was the worst.

Tricked, fooled—he, the ace American spy in the East, gulled by both Joan Laird and the renowned Okara of Japan, and his all-important mission ruined by his own crass stupidity!

Okara said calmly, "There are enough bullets in this rifle for all of you. I am sorry, but I never take chances. Inside these mountains lies the key to control of Asia for Japan, and three lives are nothing against that."

A fanatic patriotism flamed in the little Japanese eyes as he deliberately raised the rifle. And Borchoff began to laugh! The huge Russian choked, strangled, with unaccountable mirth.

Okara's burning eyes fixed on him, and he said, "I am glad to see that you can meet death so bravely."

"We *all* meet death—together here," Borchoff roared in laughter. He pointed back down the moonlit, snowy pass.

A half-hundred Tibetans were urging their ponies up the pass!

"We thought they wouldn't follow us into the sacred mountains," Borchoff roared. "But they have—they have!"

The Tibetans had sighted them. Fierce yells came up the snowy canyon, and bullets spat into the snow around them.

Okara's face seemed to sag and wither as he looked down at them, unheeding of their fire. Then he raised his head proudly.

"What is written, is written," he said calmly. "Fate has declared that even Japan shall not succeed in this quest."

"Don't talk like a fool!" Gary cried hoarsely. "We can still get away from those Tibetans."

Okara merely stared at him. "It is useless to feed ourselves with false hopes. We can die fighting, that is all."

"What are you thinking of, Gary?" Joan cried.

Gary pointed wildly up at the great masses of overhanging snow and ice that bulged out far above from the canyon walls.

"If we can bring that ice down in an avalanche it will block this whole pass! Shoot up there just under those overhanging masses and you can loosen them enough that they'll start to slide."

"But once it starts, the slide may run along the whole pass—bury us!" Borchoff shouted.

"There's a chance it won't!" Gary cried. "Take that chance, Okara!"

For answer, Okara whipped up the rifle, aiming just under the great overhanging masses of snow and ice that bulged far outward. His rifle cracked five times quickly, the reports hardly audible over the bursting yells and shots of the oncoming Tibetans below.

He lowered the empty rifle. They all stared up, hearts pounding. A few tiny fragments of ice, dislodged by the bullets, slithered down. Then these stopped, and there was no other change.

"It was a *good* idea, Comrade!" Borchoff told Gary. He turned, clenching his great fists. "But since it failed, we can only——"

A dim, low whispering sound interrupted him, a faint rumble high above that grew slowly to a crackling and groaning and crashing. The vast masses of hanging snow and ice above were beginning to bulge ponderously, majestically, outward.

"It's going to slide!" Gary screamed. "It'll come right down on us——"

They flung themselves wildly through the deep snow, struggling and floundering farther up the pass, forgetting the

ponies and everything else in that dim, ominous roar.

The Tibetans who had been charging up the pass retreated hastily with yells of terror and upward-pointed hands. For what seemed an eternity, the crackling roar over their heads gathered, gathered.

Then with an ear-splitting thunder like the crash of doom, from the high walls all along the pass, the tremendous avalanche poured down on them.

5. *Up the Flaming River*

GARY felt dimly that he was floating in a featureless white world, lulled to sleep by cozy warmth and a hushed silence. It was with dull irritation that he felt someone intrude into his sleep, felt a pair of hands clawing at him, chafing his face, trying to awake him. Why couldn't they let him alone, let him sleep?

Then as consciousness came back to him, he was aware of freezing cold, of an urgent voice in his ears. He wrenched open cold-numbered eyelids. He was lying half covered with snow, in the moonlit pass, and Joan Laird was bending over him, seeking to revive him.

"Gary!" she cried. "I thought you were dead—I had to dig and dig to uncover you——"

Gary staggered to his feet, with her help. He looked dazedly down the silent, snowy, moonlit canyon.

"What happened?" he asked hoarsely. Then he remembered suddenly. "The slide—the avalanche that Okara started!"

"The edge of that slide knocked you out—covered you, Gary!" Joan exclaimed. "You grabbed me and pushed me forward out of it, and then it thundered down. It buried our ponies and half the Tibetans."

Mention of the Tibetans made Gary turn unsteadily in apprehension. He saw that there was no fear now of immediate

pursuit, for the great avalanche had blocked the narrow pass with masses of snow.

"Where are Okara and Borchhoff?" he asked thickly.

"They've gone on, into the mountains," Joan told him. "Okara first—then the Russian, when he revived, trailing him. I wanted them to help me dig you out, but they wouldn't even listen to me."

"They were right," Gary told her harshly. "A hell of a spy you are, saving the life of a rival agent. Why did you do it?"

Joan's voice faltered. "I couldn't leave you to freeze in the snow. You'd saved my life, by pushing me out of the slide."

"That was a purely instinctive action," Gary told her. "Your digging me out wasn't—it was weakness on your part. Women never did make good spies—they don't know how to play the game."

"You talk as though you were sorry I'd saved you," Joan flashed furiously.

"I'm not sorry, I'm glad," Gary said grimly. "For I'm going on, get into Koom and find Shirani, and beat you out by any means that I can possibly employ. You'll find no sentiment in *me*."

But then, as he stared up the steep, moonlit pass, his face fell, his dark head sagged a little.

"With Okara and Borchhoff both ahead of me," he muttered, "I'll be hard put to win out now. Damn that little Jap! I should have suspected that no Mongol would come down here as willingly as he did! And he double-crossed me so neatly, escaping from the Tibetan camp alone——"

He winced suddenly with pain. As circulation returned to his numbed limbs, he found that his left leg had been hurt. Gingerly he rubbed and flexed its injured muscles, then turned to Joan.

"I'm going on," he told her. "I can't very well keep you from coming with me,

short of killing you, which I can't do now. But I won't help you in the slightest, understand?"

"I understand," she said shortly, her stubborn face obstinately set.

Gary started on up the steep pass, floundering through the deep snow with the girl close behind him. Inwardly, his heart was leaden. How long could he last in these icy wastes, without food, weapons or shelter? Yet he had to go on, follow the quest for Shirani until the end. He must somehow overtake and defeat the Japanese and the Russian.

Brooding, ice-hung cliffs looked down upon the man and girl as they struggled up the moonlit pass. A whistling wind that froze their cheeks screeched like a demon down the canyon, making snow-whirls dance like white genii around them. They floundered and stumbled in the snow, Gary's left leg now a throbbing pain at each step. Joan Laird made no complaint as she followed him. This was a white, icy world, infinitely inimical to man, a frozen hell through which they struggled.

Gary perceived that the dawn was breaking, a pale light filtering down into the snow-choked pass. As the sky grayed, the crimson fire-glow in it faded. And in the paling dawn, he saw the crest of the pass a thousand feet above them, a narrow, icy crack between towering white peaks.

WINDS that whooped like all the fiends of hell smote and buffeted them as they pressed upward. Snow that felt like fine sand stung their faces, clogged their eyelashes. When they finally stumbled onto the crest, they stood a moment, struggling to retain their balance against the shrieking wind, before they peered ahead.

They looked into the tumbled white mountains that lay inside this first range.

Colossal peaks reared their icy masses like brute survivals of an earlier world. Most towering of all the monsters was a distant, huge white peak from whose truncated summit curled a thin plume of smoke. And now Gary and Joan perceived that it was the highest of a whole ring of peaks from whose summits drifted wisps of black smoke.

"A ring of huge volcanoes!" he exclaimed, shouting to Joan over the yelling wind. "That's where the fire-glow in the sky must come from—those volcanoes must encircle the legended valley Koom."

"Gary, look down there!" cried Joan, pointing. His gaze dropped to the wide, snowy valleys that lay below them.

Through those snow valleys, coming from the direction of the volcano-ringed land, crawled a river. But it was a river that glowed bright cherry red, and upon whose surface danced changing flames.

"A river of fire!" Joan was exclaiming, gazing in wide-eyed awe at the incredible spectacle.

"It can't be——" Gary started to mutter, then he shouted. "Yes, it is—a river of molten lava, that comes out of that volcanic valley of Koom and flows away through the mountains. By heaven, who'd have believed it—a flaming river, flowing through these icy peaks!"

His gaze swept swiftly back to the brooding, ring of volcanoes in the distance.

"If that's Koom, and the lava river comes from there, we can reach the valley by following the river back to it."

He started down the snowy slope into the valleys, Joan following. Forgotten now was the throbbing hurt of his leg, the cold and exhaustion he felt. Gary vibrated with excitement, with new hope.

The shrieking, hellish winds abated as they floundered down the snowy slopes in the light of the sunrise. In an hour, they

stood at the edge of the glowing lava river, staring at it, appalled.

It was like a river out of hell itself—a crimson-glowing snake that wound sluggishly through the valleys, a groaning, hissing, slow-moving mass of molten lava, thirty feet wide, flowing in a deep bed which it had carved out for itself in the snow and rock.

Dancing flames of lurid green and blue moved here and there on the cherry-red surface. From it there came to their nostrils whiffs of overpowering sulfurous vapors, drifting, strangling smokes.

"See there!" Gary exclaimed, pointing to footprints in the snow along the bank of the flaming river. "Okara and Borchoff have both followed this river inward—and Okara was ahead."

He started along the bank, tramping in the footprints of the Japanese and the Russian.

"It can't be ordinary lava, to flow so long like this without hardening," he muttered as they trudged on. "It must be some wholly different kind of molten rock."

The groaning and bubbling of the lava stream was loud in their ears as they moved beside it through the snowy valleys. For three hours they followed it, winding deeper and deeper into the mountains toward the ring of volcanoes. Finally they reached the point where the flaming river emerged from that great ring of towering fire-mountains.

They stopped short, Gary Martin's heart sinking. For now they saw that the lava river emerged from a tunnel in the great ring of peaks, a natural passage it had burned for itself out of the solid rock of the mountains. Coming closer, they found that the tunnel was about twenty feet in diameter, filled with choking vapors and illuminated by the lurid, dancing flames of the crawling lava.

"We can't go in there!" Joan panted.

"There must be some other way into this volcano valley."

"There isn't any other way, or the lava would flow out by it," Gary rasped. "Both Okara and Borchoff went into this tunnel—you can see their footprints leading to it. I'm going to follow."

He limped to the mouth of the tunnel, and peered into it. The sulfurous vapors that rushed out of it choked and almost blinded him, but by the lurid light, he discerned at each side of the tunnel a rough ledge a few feet wide, formed by the hardening of lava that had flowed higher in the passage in past time. It was a narrow, jagged, precarious shelf, a few feet above the glowing lava.

"There's the way," he gasped, gulping in clean air as he reeled back, "the only way into the valley Koom."

Gary tied his handkerchief around his nose and mouth, as a rough respirator, his cold-stiffened fingers fumbling. Joan followed his example, her brown eyes large and strained above the mask.

Then the American limped forward. There was just room enough to edge into the tunnel and onto the narrow ledge. He made it, but Joan slipped in following him, and he swiftly steadied her.

"I thought you weren't sentimental enough to help a rival spy," she said, her voice muffled by her rude respirator.

"It's the last help you'll get from me," he exclaimed, stung. "Once inside Koom, I'll kill you as quickly as I would Okara or Borchoff, to keep you from reaching this princess Shirani."

He had to raise his voice, for inside the tunnel the groaning, straining and crackling of the slow-flowing lava was very loud. They started forward along the narrow, uneven ledge.

It was a nightmare scene. The molten rock stream was only a foot or so below the ledge that Gary and Joan trod. The heat of the river was terrific in these con-

finied quarters, and the air was so filled with sulfurous fumes that it was hardly breathable. The cherry-red glow of the lava lit up the rough black rock sides and roof of the gloomy tunnel. Fierce blue and green flames burst incessantly along the lava stream.

Gary, limping forward, coughing and choking, had a vivid picture in his mind of what would happen if either of them stumbled and fell into the molten rock. Yet he pushed blindly on. Okara and Borchoff had gone this way, and where a Japanese and Russian had gone, an American could go.

The tunnel was not straight, but wound this way and that. Here and there were spots where the narrow ledge had crumbled away, and these had to be jumped. Each time he leaped, Gary felt agonizing pain as his injured leg hit the rough rock. Then a wider gap faced them.

"You can't jump *this!*" Joan cried, dismayed.

"I've got to," Gary gasped. "Stand back."

He threw himself forward in a stumbling run, and shot clumsily through the air. He knew as he did so that he had leaped short. His upper body hit the rock beyond the gap, but his legs dangled.

He heard Joan scream and at the same moment felt an agonizing burning in his left foot as his boot touched the molten lava below. With a convulsive effort, he drew his legs up onto the ledge.

Joan leaped, landed beside him. "Are you hurt?"

"No," choked Gary, staggering up. He added, "If—if you were a real spy, you'd have tripped me when I jumped. Women—no good as spies—"

THEIR progress was now a fantastic and torturing nightmare. The tunnel of the fire-river appeared to have no ending, and Gary knew his strength was fail-

ing fast. With the former injury to his left leg and the new burn on that foot, he could hardly hobble forward. His eyes were blinded by the fumes and glare of the groaning lava. He set his teeth, kept his mind fixed on one thing, the picture of Okara or Borchoff reaching Shirani before he did.

Shirani! The woman's name danced in his head like a mocking phantom. Whoever she really was, she was somewhere inside the volcano valley ahead. And the peace of the world depended upon his preventing the three other spies from gaining ascendancy over Shirani.

The infernal tunnel made still another turn. Gary felt that they had already come miles. Each step was a fresh agony to him now as he and Joan stumbled on. Then into his tortured lungs came a breath of fresher air. And he looked up to see a circle of bright sunlight far ahead. They were almost through.

Gary forced his crippled muscles, his unsteady steps quickening. He heard Joan retching behind him. But after a few more minutes that seemed eternities, he and the girl staggered out of the tunnel into bright sunshine and soft, warm air, onto a green, grassy bank.

Gary's bleared eyes blinked ahead, and then a numbing awe invaded his mind as he took in the scene before them.

"God!" he muttered thickly, stunnedly. "This—it's impossible——"

"The hidden valley of Koom!" whispered Joan.

Before them lay a green, warm valley, that was oval in shape and about twenty miles along its longer axis. Part of it was a fertile, grassy plain, but most of the valley floor was covered by a forest of green, leafy trees and bushes. The sunlight poured down on foliage and plain, and the airy breezes were soft and balmy.

This oval valley was walled all around by monstrous, ice-sheathed volcanoes, a

looming, surrounding barrier of smoking white peaks, towering thousands on thousands of feet from the valley floor. At the other end of the long valley from Gary and Joan, miles away, bulked the highest, biggest volcano, whose colossal, vertical white side closed that whole end of the valley, a sheer, stupendous buttress.

Half-way up the side of that mightiest volcano, there was a crevice from which jetted forth an unceasing stream of molten lava that fell sheer for hundreds of feet in a cataract of living fire. It fell into a great lake or sea of glowing crimson lava, a fire-sea from which the lava river flowed down through the valley and into the tunnel out of which Gary and Joan had just emerged.

"Koom!" Gary was saying hoarsely. "The valley of the hidden kingdom—but where here will we find its people and princess?"

"Gary, look!" cried Joan suddenly. "Okara!"

Not a hundred yards from them, near the green back of the glowing river, stood the Japanese. Okara had been dragging a senseless form toward the flaming river. The unconscious body of Borchoff!

But at Joan's cry, Okara looked up and saw them. Instantly he dropped the senseless Russian and came toward them. His flat, swart face and slant black eyes were fierce with excitement.

"Okara!" Gary exclaimed. "You got through, then!"

"Yes, I got through," said the Japanese, his voice high and pulsing. "The Russian followed me, but I was waiting for him and stunned him. He is going into the lava—as you two also are going."

Okara's voice rose shrill. "We have all four reached Koom, but only one of us is going on into this valley to find Shirani! It is Japan whose instrument that woman must become. You two and the Russian shall not interfere——"

Quick as a flash, with the words, the little Japanese launched himself at Gary. The American struck out with all his strength, but Okara had a hold upon him, was twisting his arm.

The ju-jitsu hold tore at Gary's muscles with claws of agony, sent him crashing to his back. Joan rushed forward, pounding the Japanese with furious little fists, but Okara knocked her back with a vicious sweep of his hand. The thumbs of the Japanese dug into Gary's throat in the death grip, his eyes glaring down.

Gary's exhausted muscles fought to break the scientific hold of the Japanese. He glimpsed Borchhoff reviving and rising drunkenly to his feet, reeling toward them. He heard a roaring in his ears and saw Okara's contorted face terribly outlined against the sunlit sky.

He heard Joan Laird crying, "Horsemen are coming!"

"All three of you—going to die," Okara was panting as he throttled Gary. "Japan's great chance——"

With a crazed, convulsive effort, Gary tore away the Japanese's hands and thrust him from him.

Okara came to his feet like a cat as Gary staggered erect. Borchhoff was stumbling half consciously toward them, but the spy of Nippon paid no attention. Crouched like a leopard, he started toward the American again. But suddenly he and Gary and the Russian all three froze rigid.

Joan was shouting and pointing wildly up the valley. A thunder of hoofbeats was loud on their ears. A troop of horsemen were galloping at top speed toward them along the bank of the fiery river.

They were white men, tall, fair-haired, garbed in silver helmets and woven chain armor of silver mesh. As they came on at a dead run they were shouting, waving glittering swords aloft in the sunshine. And Gary saw that at their head rode a

woman, a girl whose gold hair flashed like bright flame behind her, a slim figure in white silk. She was leading the charging troop right down upon the four half-frozen spies. Gary saw her leaning forward over her horse's neck, glimpsed a dynamically beautiful white face and electric blue eyes that seemed filled with lightnings.

Her pealing voice called an order, and the whole troop halted with a crash of hoofs a dozen feet from the frozen four. And amid the shouts of the armored men, Gary recognized one word.

"Shirani!"

Reckless of danger, the dazed young American staggered forward toward the mounted girl, his eyes on those imperious blue ones.

"Shirani!" he cried hoarsely. "Shirani!"

6. *The Kingdom of Koom*

SHIRANI stared challengingly down at them from the stamping black stallion she sat. The princess of the hidden kingdom looked like some warrior maid of archaic times, imperious as a tyrant, dangerous as a leopard, wild as a hawk poised for flight. Her small hand rested on the hilt of a heavy dagger that hung at her belt.

A high-necked tunic and loose trousers of fine white silk molded the perfect lines of her figure, the long, boyish legs and thighs, the proud shoulders and high little breasts. The flaming golden torrent of her hair fell down her back to her shoulders, confined only by a silver circlet around her brows. It glowed with dazzling tints of changing light, like burning gold.

Gary stared up into her face. He had never seen a face of such royal, vibrant young beauty. Her brow was high and white, nose small and straight, the sweet red mouth squared now to a merciless

line. Her electric blue eyes were clear as storm-washed skies, with a hidden pulse of wild force beating in them. But they were clouding and darkening, tiny lightnings flashing far back in them.

"Who are you, man from outside, that know my name?" she demanded of Gary, her dynamic blue gaze searching his face, her fine nostrils flaring, her silvery voice ringing like sweet, dangerous chimes.

Gary understood her words! For she spoke in a tongue very similar to the Tibetan and Mongol languages, though seemingly much older.

"I—I——" He reeled for a moment, unable to say more. With a little cry, Joan ran forward to him and supported him.

Okara stepped swiftly forward, slant black eyes burning with excitement as he looked up at the imperious girl on the black stallion.

"You *are* Shirani, then?" he cried in the Mongol.

"Yes, I am Shirani, princess and ruler of Koom," she flashed. "And my questions are not answered with questions, stranger!"

The wonderful eyes flashed down at the Japanese, the little menacing lightnings in them flaring forth threateningly.

"No people from outside are permitted to enter Koom and live!" she warned. "That is why a watch is always kept upon this tunnel, which is the only connection with the outside world. An hour ago," Shirani continued, "the watchers reported to me that a man had emerged from the tunnel. We rode here at once to investigate, and find that now, instead of one, there are four strangers here, seeking to kill each other. You had best explain, and quickly!"

Her fingers tightened threateningly around the hilt of her dagger. And the silver-armored horsemen behind her

urged forward ominously, their drawn swords glittering in the sunlight.

Foremost among those fair-haired horsemen, Gary noted a big, splendid figure of a man, with powerful limbs and an arrogant, handsome face. He was staring down with strong suspicion at the four spies.

Okara said hastily, "Princess Shirani, I am of the nomad peoples who dwell outside the mountains. There came word to us that you, princess, were coming out of hidden Koom to lead our tribes to conquest, so I came hither to be first to join your standard."

Gary Martin, swaying half dazed against Joan Laird, heard the lie of the Japanese but was too dizzy at that moment to contradict.

"It was I who sent that word out to the nomads by messengers through the tunnel!" Shirani exclaimed to Okara. "Are your peoples waiting now outside the mountains to follow me when I come forth?"

"They are, princess!" the Japanese replied quickly. "All our nomad tribes wait in wild excitement for your promised coming."

Gary saw something flare in Shirani's electric blue eyes, a wild, leaping eagerness.

"Who are these others?" Shirani asked imperiously, gesturing toward the American and Joan and the gaping Borchoff. Her blue eyes rested on Gary as she asked, "Why were you seeking to kill them?"

"Because they are my enemies—and enemies of you and your plans, too, princess!" Okara hastily asserted. "They came after me into this valley Koom, to prevent you from going forth as you plan."

"This man is lying!" Gary cried, stumbling forward desperately. "He is not of the nomad peoples, nor did he come to join you. He came to make you the tool

of his nation, and this other man and girl, who are of other nations, desired the same thing."

"And you—why came *you* here, tall one?" Shirani demanded of Gary, her imperious blue eyes searching his face.

Meeting that imperious, half-scornful gaze, Gary felt something hard and fiercely resentful rise in his mind to meet it. He straightened his exhausted body, his dark head jerked up squarely.

"I came to *stop* you from going forth to disturb the peace of the world!" he said savagely. "And by heaven, I'll do it."

Gary knew as he spoke the words that they were insane, that now above all was the time to use subterfuge and falsehood as Okara was doing. He glimpsed the swift satisfaction on the Japanese's face, the amazement on Borchoff's round, red countenance, and Joan Laird's dismay. But for the life of him, Gary had been unable to restrain the reckless words. The half-contemptuous gaze of Shirani had challenged something deep within him, something that could not resist flinging back challenge in her face.

The armored men behind the princess uttered a shout of anger as they heard Gary's savage avowal. They rode forward toward the American with swords raised, but a sharp cry from Shirani halted them.

"Kill him not!" the princess exclaimed.

The handsome, arrogant rider beside her exclaimed roughly, "And why not kill him, princess? Did you not hear the outland dog threaten *you*?"

"Who commands here, Jhulun?" Shirani flamed at the man. "You or I?"

"You do, of course," Jhulun answered angrily. "But why should you spare a dog who has shown his teeth at you?"

SHIRANI looked down at Gary's hard, defiant face, and something approving flickered in her stormy blue eyes.

"You are brave, outsider, to threaten

me to my face in my own kingdom," she said, and her silver laughter suddenly chimed. "How are you named, and of what people are you?"

"Gary Martin is my name," the American told her unbendingly. "And my people are the mightiest in the world."

"Proud, as well as brave," commented Shirani approvingly. "You carry your head high for one whose life is already forfeit—but I like you for it."

She turned to the lowering Jhulun and his fierce companions and said, "We take these four strangers to my palace in Koom."

Disapproval showed in the faces of the men, and fury in the handsome, heavy face of Jhulun.

"And why should we take them there, princess?" he demanded wrathfully. "They are liars, schemers who have penetrated here for no good purpose. Remember the law of the Ancient Ones—that should any from outside ever come into Koom, they must be killed."

Shirani threw back her head and laughed. "Do *you* quote the law of the Ancient Ones to me, Jhulun?" she exclaimed mockingly. "Why, man, you have no more respect for those moldering commandments of the long-dead Ancient Ones than have I."

"Nevertheless, I say these outsiders are a menace," Jhulun declared harshly. "What reason can you have for letting them live?"

His steely eyes, narrowed with hate, were on Gary Martin as he spoke. But Shirani answered him coolly.

"I wish to question them about the outside world. There is much we need to know, before we go forth on the great day."

"If you take them to the city," Jhulun persisted, "the high priest Dridim will demand their deaths according to the law of the Ancient Ones. Is it wise to an-

tagonize Dridim further, now of all times?"

"I care not what Dridim may demand," Shirani retorted contemptuously. Then suddenly she blazed: "Why do you continue to question my commands? I say they go to Koom. Four of you dismount and give them your horses!"

Even Jhulun recoiled a little from the lightning-like blaze of imperious force in her face and voice. Hastily four of the silver-armored warriors dismounted and led their horses forward.

Okara scrambled onto the back of one like a cat. The little Japanese had been watching and listening with intent alertness, apparently storing up in his mind everything he learned.

Gary clambered painfully into the saddle. His injured leg was almost throbbing. Joan and the Russian were already mounted. The four warriors who had given up their steeds climbed up behind some of their companions.

"Forward!" Shirani exclaimed.

The horses sprang ahead, the Koomian princess and Jhulun slightly in the lead, Gary riding on Shirani's other side. They headed straight up the valley, following beside the fiery lava river.

Gary felt a sudden surge of strange elation as he rode. He had penetrated to secret Koom, at least! Even if death was ahead, it was something to gallop up this unearthly valley before he died. He laughed aloud in sheer reckless excitement, his dark head high.

Shirani heard, and her blue eyes flashed at him. "Why do you laugh, stranger?" her silver voice called. "Are you so happy to be riding to an unknown fate?"

"Who ever knows his fate?" Gary replied. "Death lies at the end of every road; so if the road be but new and strange as this one is to me, a man should not complain."

"So have I always thought, too," Shirani exclaimed vibrantly. "I, too, mean to dare everything to seek new, strange roads."

Her nostrils expanded, her wonderful eyes flaring. And she added suddenly, "I like you, stranger!"

"Best not like me too much, princess," Gary laughed recklessly. "Your friend looks as though he's jealous."

Jhulun was frowning past Shirani at the American, as they rode up the valley, his eyes slitted in dislike. Shirani laughed at him in sheer, mocking deviltry, a gay, taunting chime, as she spurred on.

They were following the smoldering red lava river right up the middle of the oval valley. On either side of the terrible stream stretched park-like green plain and forest, to the bases of the titanic, snow-crowned volcanoes that walled the valley. Miles ahead, the hugest volcano at the valley's head frowned like a thundercloud over the fiery sea.

Joan urged her horse to Gary's side as they galloped. The English girl's stubborn little face was pale with emotion.

"Gary, what does it all mean? This warm green valley in the icy mountains—these white people—that girl? *She* is the Shirani we were all seeking?"

"She is, yes," Gary replied, his lean face strange. "Those legends of Koom and its people had more truth than we realized. Of course, this valley is warm because of its shelteredness and volcanic heat. But these people——"

"Gary, I don't like this Shirani—she's beautiful as a lightning-flash, but as dangerous!" Joan exclaimed. She added almost fiercely, "She looks at me as though I were an insect under her feet!"

"She can't be as bad as all that," Gary defended stiffly, "or she'd not have spared our lives."

"Spared *your* life, you mean!" Joan flashed. "You were the only one of us she was interested in."

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They were nearing the head of the valley, galloping now through cultivated fields and pastures of grazing horses and cattle. The source of the crawling lava river they followed lay just ahead.

"Shade of Lenin!" gasped Boris Borchoff, his stupefaction almost toppling him from his horse.

"The sea of fire!" hissed Okara, staring.

Gary felt his senses reeling at the terrible spectacle before them. He heard Joan cry out in awe.

There stretched before them the fiery sea they had already glimpsed from afar, the source of the flaming river. It was a huge lake of crimson, molten lava that was all of two miles across, an evilly glowing red-hot lake upon whose sluggish rippling surface danced lurid flames, and whose superheated, sulfurous breath beat in their faces.

Far across the fire-sea loomed the sheer rock side of the huge, snow-crowned volcano that headed the valley. Four hundred feet up its side was the crevice out of which gushed the cataract of molten lava they had glimpsed, a terrible Niagara of fire that tumbled down, down, with a dull, distant thunder, into the molten sea.

"God!" muttered Gary shakely. "It's like a scene from hell itself."

"The glare in the sky at night comes from *that!*" Borchoff exclaimed, staring stupefiedly.

Shirani was now leading their galloping troop along the shore of the fire sea, leaving the lava river behind them. And now Gary perceived that ahead was a great mass of black buildings close to the molten lake.

"The city Koom—*my* city!" called Shirani, as, still shaken by sight of the burning sea, they rode into the black town.

KOOM was like no other city on earth. It brooded here little more than a mile from the edge of the lava sea. Yet, though the air here was slightly sulfurous and very warm, it was not too hot—the heat of the near-by molten sea was counteracted by the natural cold of these icy altitudes. And the black city was belted and laced with green gardens blooming luxuriantly in this unvarying warmth.

It had an archaic, oriental look, like some eastern city of ancient times. Its flat-roofed buildings of black stone were mostly of one or two stories, pierced by unglazed windows, the dwellings and open shops and stalls stretching along narrow, black-paved streets.

Men, women and children crowded the streets, all of them white-skinned and fair-haired. They looked a handsome, high-bred race, but one in an archaic state of civilization. The soldiers wore the silver chain-armor, the lower classes, both men and women, wore tunics and trousers of blue silk, while the nobles or upper classes wore white silk.

"Princess Shirani!" ran a cry along the crowd as they saw her vibrant figure at the head of the troop. She acknowledged the enthusiastic shouts with upraised hand. As they saw the strangers, the people of Koom fell silent in wonder.

"How many are your people in number, princess?" Okara asked keenly as they rode through the crowded black city.

Shirani looked at the little Japanese with open dislike, but she answered, "No more than five-score thousand. All of them dwell here in the city, and the lower classes work the fields and watch the herds."

Her eyes flashed suddenly. "But do not think because of that that I am weak! There are powers here you will learn of——"

She broke off. They were riding out into a great triangular plaza, paved with

black blocks like the streets. At the apex of the triangle rose a squat, black, octagonal tower, massive and immeasurably ancient in appearance. A few men in somber black garments and cowl-like hoods stood outside it, watching them.

The whole base-line of the triangular plaza was occupied by an enormous, long structure of a half-dozen stories, a vast ebon stone pile with rows of high windows and many jutting balconies and stairs. It reminded Gary of the great Potala in Lhasa. Guards in silver armor stood at the foot of its steps.

"The palace of the kings of Koom," Shirani told Gary as she rode up with the clattering troop to this vast black pile.

"And that other building?" he asked, glancing back at the somber, massive tower at the apex of the plaza's triangle.

"That is the temple in which skulk the priests of the Ancient Ones, muttering their outworn creeds," Shirani answered contemptuously.

The guards outside the palace flashed their swords in salute as Shirani went up the steps into the building, Jhulun and the troopers following with the four prisoners. Her boyish figure moved with a lithe, free swing, her gold head proudly high.

They went through small vestibules into a huge, dusky stone room, its walls pierced with high windows that admitted the sunlight in long, slanting shafts. It was an audience hall, its only furniture a raised dais bearing a silver chair. Several dozen Koomian nobles, in silver armor or white silk, had gathered here and now moved aside from their princess' path.

Shirani suddenly stopped, and Gary saw her face stiffen, her blue eyes darken. Three men in the somber black cowls and

robes of priests were advancing through the slanting sun-shafts, across the middle of the hall.

"What do you here, Dridim?" Shirani demanded imperiously of the foremost. "The place for a high priest is in his musty temple, and not in my palace."

"The high priest of the Ancient Ones," answered the man calmly, "goes where his duty calls him."

Gary saw that the speaker, Dridim, was past middle age. But under the black cowl, his face was as cold and ageless and passionless as that of a statue. His skin had the unnatural pallor of a recluse, and his frame was slight. But in his pale, grayish eyes there burned a fanatic flame.

Shirani's head jerked up scornfully. As she stood in the slanting shaft of sunlight, all the lights in her gold hair blazing out, her white figure was in strong contrast to the somber priests. The two priests behind Dridim seemed to shrink a little from the imperious princess, to avert their eyes. But the dark form of the high priest was rigid and unbending.

"And what duty is it that brings you here now?" Shirani demanded of him, her silver voice rising in repressed wrath.

"Shirani, but a little time ago I was informed that you and Jhulun had gone with warriors to seize strangers from outside, who were reported to have entered the valley Koom," said Dridim calmly, his icy eyes on hers. "And now I see that you have brought the strangers here."

"And what has that to do with you?" Shirani retorted insolently. "I brought them here, yes. What of it, priest?"

"This," answered the high priest Dridim, unfalteringly. "It is the law left us by the Ancient Ones when they passed to death, as well you know, that whenever any strangers entered Koom they must be

put to death by the priests of the law, lest they learn of the Place of Power. Therefore, Shirani, you must hand these four strangers over to us of the temple, so

that we may put them to death and the law be fulfilled."

You cannot afford to miss the next installment of this story, which tells of the descent of Gary and Shirani into the weird Place of Power where sleep the Ancient Ones.

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Weird Tales

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Volume 32

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"She leaped with the swiftness of a tigress, drawing her own dagger from her belt."

The Fire Princess

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A thrill-tale of intrigue and weird horror in the terrible valley of Koom, the hidden city—a story of the Place of Power that was the tomb of the Ancient Ones

The Story Thus Far

GARY MARTIN, secret agent of the United States, has been sent on a perilous mission on which depends the peace of the world. He has gone into the mountains of mysterious

Tibet, seeking the legended, forbidden kingdom of Koom in which dwells a sacred white race. The superstitious peoples of Asia believe that a princess of that hidden race is coming forth soon to lead them to world conquest. Gary's mis-

sion is to prevent her from coming forth and plunging the world into war.

But other nations have also sent secret agents to that weird, hidden land, each with orders to get control of this princess for their own country, so that she can be used as a tool to dominate the fanatical peoples of Asia. Japan has sent its famed ace spy, Major Okara. Russia has sent its chief agent, Boris Borchoff, and Britain has sent a steel-nerved girl spy, Joan Laird. These three spies plot against each other and against Gary Martin, as they penetrate into the mountains where lies the hidden kingdom.

Gary Martin and his three spy-rivals succeed in entering Koom, which lies in a valley completely surrounded by towering volcanoes. The city of this hidden kingdom is situated beside a fiery sea of molten lava, from which a lava river runs through a natural tunnel out of the valley. The four enemy spies are seized by the soldiers of Koom, white men in silver armor, by command of Shirani, their princess and ruler.

Shirani shows interest in Gary Martin—and thereby arouses the jealousy of Jhulun, one of the nobles of Koom. Gary learns that Shirani does mean to go forth into the outside world and lead the superstitious nomad peoples to conquest. He learns also that in this valley, ages ago, lived a strange race of mighty, unhuman beings, the Ancient Ones, who possessed vast powers. Then Dridim, the high priest of the Ancient Ones, demands that Shirani hand over to him the four strangers so that they may be put to death according to the ancient law.

The story continues:

7. *Jhulun's Jealousy*

FOR a moment after the high priest's demand, Shirani seemed unable to speak. A red tide of blood surged up in

her clear brow, her breasts heaved under the silken tunic, and her blue eyes darkened with anger until the tiny lightnings in them blazed forth almost destroyingly at the man before her.

Yet Dridim flinched no whit from the white passion of the princess. The pale, cold face of the high priest might have been chiseled from marble, and his inflexible gaze never flickered when finally the silver voice of the princess rang out in the great hall.

"I *must* hand over the strangers to you?" Shirani repeated burningly. "Why, Dridim, you have forgotten yourself, I think. You are not speaking now to one of your creeping, black-robed underlings. You are speaking to the princess of Koom!"

Her voice flared. "If you were any but a priest, I'd show you what it means to say *must* to me! I'd have you whipped around my palace until you begged for pardon upon your knees!"

A tense silence was on everyone in the group and on the listening Koomian nobles, as Shirani's blazing outburst of anger ended. The hush in the dusky palace hall was strained and taut.

Gary saw Jhulun step forward, his arrogant face now as worried as those of the other Koomians, and seek to calm Shirani.

"Best not give way to wrath," Gary heard Jhulun whisper anxiously to the princess. "Dridim still holds that which we must have, the key to the Place of Power."

Dridim heard that whisper! For Gary saw a strange flash in the high priest's icy eyes.

"Aye, Jhulun, I still hold the key to the Place of Power, which you and Shirani and your sacrilegious followers seek," said Dridim biting. "And you shall not obtain it from me, for I hold it in sacred trust from the Ancient Ones of long ago.

The Ancient Ones, the mighty ones who were before man was, passed long ago to death, but before they did so they decreed that the people of Koom should remain in this valley for ever to guard the Place of Power. And they decreed also that the key to that sacred Place should be held by the high priest of their law, so that no wicked ones should secure it. And I shall never give up that key to you for your evil purposes, no matter how long you beg for it."

Dridim's voice rang forth with compelling, fanatic power. Gary Martin, uncomprehending, yet felt a cold thrill down his back. He saw a touch of awe on the faces of the Koomians, even of Jhulun. But Shirani's slim figure stiffened, and her blazing blue eyes clashed with visible shock against the icy gaze of the high priest.

"No matter how long we beg for it?" she repeated ominously. "Dridim, I tell you now, that I am tired of begging you for the key. Yes," she flared, "I weary of begging you for it, and I and all the people of Koom weary of spending our lives imprisoned in this narrow valley, when outside lies a world which we could conquer easily, once we had that key."

Shirani swung about, and her silver voice called like a challenging bugle to the tense, watching Koomians in the great hall.

"Do I not speak truth, nobles of Koom?"

"The princess speaks truth!" roared back scores of voices, faces suddenly flaming fierce. "The Ancient Ones have been dead for ages—their law is dead also. Give your princess the key to the Place of Power, that we may win lordship of the outer world!"

"You hear, Dridim?" cried Shirani, eyes flaming as she swung back to the high priest. "What say you to *that*?"

Dridim's pale eyes were bitter as they

looked out from the shadow of his cowl at the fierce, excited men of Koom.

"I say that your desire is evil, and that this princess who inflamed you with that desire is more evil still," he said harshly. "The Ancient Ones have been long dead, yes—but the law they left us is not dead. It still remains, and while it remains you shall never procure that key which would only bring doom upon you."

He turned to Shirani, and pointed a bony finger at Gary Martin and Joan, and Okara and the Russian, who had been standing bewildered spectators of this tense scene.

"Shirani, for the last time I demand you yield up these strangers to me, according to the law," he declared.

"And for the last time, I refuse!" flamed Shirani. "That law is as dusty dead as they who spoke it. And I warn *you* that I mean to have the key to the Place of Power, if not by one way, then by another."

Dridim started a little, for the first time, at her words. Then he said darkly, "You have gone far, I see, along the road of mad and unholy ambition, to make such a threat to me. But I tell you again that your ambition will never bear fruit, for never shall you obtain the power that you lust for."

And the high priest moved silently through the crowd, the Koomians involuntarily making way for him and the two nervous priests behind him. The three black-robed figures passed out of the hall.

SHIRANI'S beautiful face throbbed with hate as she looked after them. Her eyes flashed as she raised her voice.

"Men of Koom, you have heard the superstitious warnings of that fanatic priest. Speak, do you wish to heed him and wear out your lives here, or do you still desire to follow me to the conquest of the outer world?"

"We follow you, princess!" rang a crashing shout, and dozens of swords flashed glittering in the air in wild salute.

"I see that you are still men, and not children afraid of old sayings," commended Shirani, her brilliant eyes approving them. "Now you may go. Soon Dridim must give up the key to us, and then will come the great day when we shall make the whole world easy prey for our conquest."

With another enthusiastic shout, the nobles of Koom streamed out of the hall. But Gary observed that the silver-armored guards remained, alertly watching the four prisoners.

Jhulun stepped forward to Shirani, a frown upon the Koomian noble's handsome, arrogant face.

"Was it wise to threaten Dridim?" he asked. "He will never give up the key to you now, after those threats."

"Then I'll take it from him!" Shirani exclaimed passionately. "I'll raise my people to break into that moldering temple and tear the key away from Dridim, even if we must kill him."

Jhulun shook his head. "No, princess—the people of Koom would not dare to touch a priest of the Ancient Ones, even now. No matter how much the people detest the priests, the old law is so strong in their blood that they would fear to take the key to the Place of Power by force."

"There are other ways than by force, then," Shirani said darkly. "I'll get the key from Dridim, by one way or another."

Her eyes fell on the four prisoners, and rested on Gary Martin's lean, puzzled face. The mocking smile came back to her face.

"You should be grateful to me, stranger, that I did not give you up to Dridim," she told Gary. "He and his priests would have tossed all four of you into

the fiery sea, according to the ancient law."

"And we should do the same to these strangers, now!" Jhulun declared angrily. "They are as much your enemies as Dridim. What good can it do to keep them living?"

"Did I not say I meant to question them about the outside world?" Shirani retorted imperiously. "There is very much about that world that we need to know before we go forth to conquer it."

Boris Borchhoff chuckled. And instantly the princess turned upon the Russian, her expression dangerous.

"You laugh, red-faced one?" she questioned. "It seems amusing to you that we few people of Koom plan to conquer all the world?"

She laughed softly herself. "It will not seem so amusing to you, when the day comes that we act. Yes, upon that day when the power of all the outside nations is broken and destroyed in one day, then you will not feel mirth—if you are still living then!"

The last words flashed out in an open threat. Borchhoff hastily attempted apology, but Shirani ignored him and called the captain of the silver-armored guards, a tall, stalwart man with a hard, lined face.

"Grauh, you will take these strangers to an apartment here in the palace, and keep them guarded," she ordered. "I'll send you my orders concerning them."

Grauh, the captain of guards, nodded and told Gary and his companions curtly, "Come with me."

But Okara had been whispering rapidly in the last few moments to Jhulun. Gary had noticed that Jhulun's face had become surprized as he listened. Now Jhulun stepped hastily forward.

"Princess, I would like to take this one of the strangers with me, for the time being," he said, indicating Okara. "As you

know, he claims to be one of the nomad peoples who await your coming outside the mountains. I will investigate his claim, to see if it be true."

"Take him if you wish," Shirani replied indifferently. "I do not like his crafty yellow face. You are responsible for him."

She strode away across the audience hall, a slim white figure swinging through the shafts of sunlight in the dusky room.

The captain, Grauh, indicated to Gary and Joan and Borchhoff to follow him in a different direction. There was nothing but to obey, since Grauh's silver guards were behind with drawn swords. But as they went, Gary looked back worriedly at Jhulun and Okara.

"That cursed little Jap is plotting something," muttered Borchhoff, looking back also. The Russian's red face was worried.

"This way, strangers," ordered Grauh. The hard-faced Koomian captain led them into a dusky corridor and then up a stone stair.

THE guards conducted them up to the third floor of the vast black palace. It was a gloomy, dusky labyrinth of stone stairs and rooms and passages, high windows here and there admitting slanting sunlight. They saw guard-rooms, arsenals of swords and spears, dwelling-rooms of Koomian nobles. Serving-men and girls in blue silk passed in the corridors.

Grauh finally showed the three into the apartment assigned them, and then left after posting guards outside the door. They had been given two large rooms, barbaric, black stone chambers with high ceilings and woven white wool rugs. There were a few chairs and tables of carved wood and two padded couches in each room. Gary went over to the big window that admitted the afternoon sunlight. Borchhoff and Joan followed.

The three spies looked out. The sheer

walls of the great palace rose above and sank below the window. Sixty feet beneath lay the triangular black plaza, narrowing to the distant apex at which stood the massive, octagonal temple of the Ancient Ones. Beyond it lay the massed flat rooms of Koom, and beyond the black city glowed the evil vermilion fire sea, burning beneath the thundercloud volcano from which the lava cataract fell.

"This city—incredible!" exclaimed Boris Borchhoff. "And that princess—she is like a flame! When she goes forth from this valley, all the nomads of Central Asia will flock wildly to her standard."

"She's not going forth, to bring war on Asia and the world," Gary said grimly. "That's why I'm here, to stop her, and I'm going to do it."

Borchhoff's round, red face was worried. He grunted, "We are all four playing the great game for our nations, even here. Okara is plotting now with Jhulun, to make Shirani an instrument of Japan. And if he succeeds——"

"He won't succeed," Gary predicted, "any more than you or Joan could succeed in making her a tool of Russia or Britain. What does Shirani care for our politics? She is obsessed with her mad scheme of leading the superstitious nomad hordes to world conquest." He muttered thoughtfully, "She could set all interior Asia on fire, all right, a warrior-girl like that. And her people are with her on the plan to emerge from the valley. But obviously those priests oppose the plan, because it would break the law of the Ancient Ones."

"Who *were* the Ancient Ones, I wonder?" Joan said, puzzled. "And what is this Place of Power they were arguing about?"

Gary shrugged. "Every race like this has legends of super-beings or gods of the remote past. The Place of Power is probably some queer shrine to which

these people attach superstitious importance." He added, "Shirani seems to think she must have the key to this Place of Power before she can conquer the world. And the high priest won't give her the key, and she won't go forth to conquest until she has it, for some reason. She'll never go forth, if I can stop her!"

Borchhoff grinned at Gary. "You will have the advantage over the rest of us in this game, now — you have taken the fancy of the princess."

"That's damned nonsense," Gary declared harshly.

"Not a bit of it," the Russian declared. "Shirani has—what do you call it?—fallen for you. You're a stranger, a man of the outer world she longs for, and you're handsomer than Okara or myself."

Joan told Gary stingingly, with scorn in her brown eyes, "A little discreet love-making, and Shirani will do anything you ask."

He was about to retort angrily when the door opened and a serving-man came in past the guards outside. He laid down in front of each of them silken tunics and trousers such as the Koomians wore.

"From the princess," he said softly, and retired.

"Didn't I say Shirani had fallen for you, comrade?" exclaimed Borchhoff, looking at the garments and laughing. "See, she sends you the white dress of a noble, and us two the blue dress of plebeians."

Joan bit her lip, then picked up her garments and went into the next room. She closed the door with a slam.

"I believe she's jealous," Borchhoff chuckled. "You are a great man with the ladies, Comrade Martin. And a quick worker, eh?"

"Shut your dirty mouth, Boris," Gary ordered angrily. The big Russian only laughed.

They found a big pottery bath-bowl and tank of water in the corner of the

room, and Gary had his razor in his pocket. After bathing and shaving he donned the white silk tunic and trousers, buckling the silver belts that confined them. The garments felt cool to his tired body.

The room was beginning to darken, the sun setting behind the western wall of the valley. Borchhoff had donned his blue silk garments, his huge frame almost bursting them, and now Joan came in from the other room in the same garb, looking like a belligerent small boy.

"Ought I to bow before you, now that you're a noble and I'm one of the proletariat?" she asked Gary ironically.

"Don't be a fool," he said roughly.

Now into the darkening rooms came Grauh, the captain of guards, with two serving-men. One of them brought sputtering silver lamps, and the other some bowls of fruits and cooked vegetables and meats.

"Your supper," Grauh told Joan and Borchhoff laconically, and then told Gary, "You sup with the princess tonight. I am to take you."

"It seems I was not wrong, comrade," Borchhoff grinned at the American. Joan stared at Gary, a scorn in her eyes that stung him.

Defiantly, he followed Grauh out of the room. Two guardsmen fell in behind them as they went through the dusky corridors, now lit by infrequent hanging lamps. They passed down to the second story of the palace, and through an ante-room in which two silver guards were posted.

GARY found himself in the apartments of the princess, great rooms whose black stone walls bore hangings of vivid silk. Grauh conducted him through them, out onto a small balcony, and there the captain left him. A small table was set on the balcony, but there was no one else

there, and no light but the weird red glow from the distant fire-lake.

The sea of fire beyond the city had been appalling by day, but now, by night, it was stupefying—a burning, smoldering lake of red fire that threw up into the dark heavens a shaking glare that dimmed the stars, that painted the huge snow-slopes of the surrounding volcanoes wild scarlet, that shot banners and rays of unholy, trembling radiance across the flat, black roofs of nighted Koom.

And the fire cataract that fell into that sea! It was a wild glory that blazed supernaturally in the darkness, the living lava stream leaping sheer from that crevice high in the side of the vast volcano, and tumbling in flaming red splendor down into the burning sea. It dazzled the eyes, a wall of living fire that dominated the whole dark city and valley.

Gary was staring at it fascinatedly when the silver voice of Shirani behind him made him turn, startled.

"Is there aught like that in the outside world?" she asked, waving toward the terrible fire sea and cataract.

Shirani wore other and slightly different white silk tunic and trousers now, he noted. In the weird red glow, her beautiful face was curious in expression as she looked up at him.

"Never have I seen anything like that in the outer world, princess," Gary told her.

"*You* may call me Shirani," she said sweetly. "You said your name was what—Gary? I like it. Sit now, Gary, and we shall eat."

Gary felt a little bewildered as he sat down at the small table opposite her. For now Shirani seemed but a soft, tender young girl, instead of the mocking witch who had teased Jhulun with such deviltry, or that imperious, passionate princess who had fiercely threatened Dridim.

Comely, silken serving-maids softly changed the silver dishes and poured thick black wine from the flagons. Gary found himself amazingly hungry. The warm food drove back his exhaustion, and the potent wine warmed his brain. Shirani watched him in silent, almost shy curiosity, as they ate. They rose finally and stood looking out from the balcony rail at the dark city and the fiery sea. Gary spoke suddenly to her.

"Shirani, this kingdom of yours is wonderful, beautiful. Why do you desire so greatly to leave it?"

Her slight figure stiffened and he saw her gold head jerk up in a dynamic gesture.

"Because I want to live!" she exclaimed. "It is not living to rust away in ignoble security. To act, to dare, to take the most dangerous adventure that offers, *that* is living. Do you not believe that?"

"Yes, I do," he said impulsively.

"I knew you did," Shirani said eagerly. "Otherwise you would never have dared such great hazards to reach this secret land."

"Still," said Gary earnestly, "war and death are not the purpose of living. And if you go forth into the outer world to lead the nomad races who await you, you take war and death to millions of men."

"And what of that?" Shirani demanded. "I am not afraid of death, Gary—and I am not afraid to deal it to others. Those millions would die anyway, in time. And I will not remain the petty princess of this little valley, who might be a conquering queen of the outer world."

"But power does not always bring happiness," Gary protested. "Indeed, a power wrung out of blood and tears never brings it."

"Do you think then it is common happiness, a smug, safe content, that I

seek?" Shirani exclaimed. "Gary, Gary, I thought you had read me better than that. It is the adventure, the wild gamble and struggle, that enthral me. *They* are the happiness I seek!"

Her white face seemed blazing in the light of the crimson, shaking glare from the distant fire sea.

"But, Shirani," Gary persisted, "this dream of conquest of yours is mad. Even with the nomad hordes, you cannot hope to conquer the outside world. You may cause much conflict and chaos for a time, but soon the great nations will easily destroy you and your savage hordes."

"No, Gary, they will not," Shirani said firmly. "For before ever I go forth from Koom, I shall hold the key to powers which will break the might of those nations like a reed."

Gary looked at her skeptically. He guessed she was thinking of the superstitious shrine these people called the Place of Power.

He was about to voice his skepticism, when Shirani suddenly pressed her warm fingers against his lips, laughing up at him with one of her quick changes of mood.

"Let us talk no more now of these things, Gary. I am tired of them tonight—yes, tired to the soul of everything in Koom. That is why I like you, who bring the breath of the outer world into this valley."

She looked up at him, her teasing eyes examining his face with pretended naïveté. "You are not handsome, Gary—not nearly so handsome as Jhulun. Did you know that I have half promised myself to Jhulun in marriage?"

"I didn't know—and I don't care," Gary said curtly.

Her silver laughter chimed. Gary was strongly aware that she was very close to him, the faint perfume of her hair stirring his blood, her very proximity seem-

ing to send an electric current through him.

"I think you must be afraid of Jhulun," Shirani mocked tauntingly. "Or afraid of me, because I am princess of Koom."

No man living could have ignored such a gay taunt. He grasped her silken arm.

"Afraid of you?" he repeated, then laughed harshly. "You flatter yourself, Shirani. You may have these tow-haired lads here afraid of you, but to me you're just a damned handsome barbarian wench."

"You dare say that!" she flamed, eyes blazing up at him instantly. "Loose my arm!"

Gary laughed aloud. His lean arm swept her silken, vibrant figure against him, and as her imperious face blazed up at him with lips parted to exclaim something, he bent and kissed her hard on the mouth.

The feel of Shirani's soft, parted lips against his own stabbed a dizzying high-voltage shock to Gary's brain. It was like holding a bundle of high-tension force to have her silken body in his arms. He was quivering a little when he drew his dark head back.

"Now call your guards and tell them that you met one man who wasn't frightened of you," Gary rasped.

Shirani's blue eyes were dark and strange in her white face. Then they suddenly widened—she was now looking *past* him.

"Behind you, Gary!" she cried sharply.

Gary spun around. In the doorway of the balcony stood Jhulun, glaring at them. The Koomian noble's handsome face was dreadful in the weird red glare, contorted with wild jealousy.

JHULUN ripped out his sword. Then with an inarticulate cry of fury, he raised the blade and rushed toward Gary with deadly purpose. There was murder

in his eyes, blinding hate and jealousy in every line of his distorted, handsome face.

Gary thrust Shirani swiftly away from him, even as Jhulun stabbed. A lightning last-minute twist of the body barely took the American out of line of the thrusting sword. As it was, he felt the blade tear through the sleeve of his white silk tunic.

Jhulun whirled for another thrust, but before he could make it, Gary leaped desperately in past his weapon. With all the force he possessed, Gary swung with his clenched right fist for the other's jaw. The smashing blow sent Jhulun reeling backward, and he fell heavily, his silver helmet and armor clanging on the balcony's stone floor.

Gary swiftly stooped and snatched up the sword that Jhulun had dropped as he fell. And the American gripped it, his face wrathful.

"Guards!" Shirani's silver voice was pealing. There was a running of hasty feet.

"I ought to kill this murderous hound, now!" Gary exclaimed furiously, staring down at Jhulun with slitted eyes. "He would have killed me."

"No, Gary!" Shirani exclaimed urgently. "Jhulun was mad with jealousy to see me in your arms, that is all. Do not harm him."

The guards came bursting out onto the balcony with the hard-faced captain Grauh in the lead. Grauh's sword was drawn and as he glimpsed Gary standing with a sword over the fallen Jhulun, he sprang forward.

"No, Grauh—the stranger has done no wrong," Shirani cried quickly. "It was the lord Jhulun who—lost his temper."

Jhulun picked himself up, and stood, breathing hard, choking with his rage, glaring at the American, his eyes pools of hot hate.

"Princess, will you allow this outland

dog to strike a noble of Koom and live?" he cried ragingly.

Shirani eyed him coldly. "It was your own fault he struck you, Jhulun. You attacked him without reason."

"Without reason?" cried Jhulun. "Is it not reason enough that I find him embracing our princess against her will?"

"How know you that it was against my will?" Shirani asked him coolly.

Jhulun looked thunderstruck. His stunned gaze moved from her cold face to Gary Martin. Then his rage burst forth, intensified.

"Are you implying that you were in this outlander's arms *willingly*?" he cried to Shirani. "You, who promised yourself to me——"

"That promise was never definite, Jhulun!" flared Shirani. "I am not bound by whatever ambitious hopes you may have had."

In the weird red light, Jhulun's handsome face became black as a thundercloud. His steely eyes slitted, his voice was grating.

"I apologize, princess," he said thickly. "I will go now, if I may have my sword."

Shirani signed to Gary to give it to him. The Koomian noble thrust it back into his sheath and strode jerkily away.

"Wait in the anteroom as before, Grauh," Shirani told the captain of guards. And when they had gone, she looked at Gary with a curiously quizzical look in her eyes. "You have made an enemy, Gary. He would kill you if he could—yes, and Grauh also would have killed you had I told them that it was against my will you kissed me."

"Shirani, *was* it against your will?" Gary asked boldly. "It did not seem so to me!"

He half expected her imperious anger to flare up again. But instead Shirani laughed up at him like a teasing child.

"You are too audacious, Gary. Daring men never live to old age."

One of the silken serving-maids came out onto the balcony and softly whispered something into her ear. Shirani started a little, and Gary saw the excited flash of her blue eyes.

"Tell Bator to wait a moment," she ordered the maid. And then she told the American, "It grows late—you must go now, Gary. Grauh will take you back to your apartment."

"Still going to keep me guarded, eh?" said Gary ironically. "You still don't trust me?"

"Not entirely," Shirani said frankly. "I sense a ruthless and determined will in you, Gary. I think you would do much to save that outer world of yours from my conquest."

"Shirani, can't you give up that mad plan of conquest?" Gary asked her with deep earnestness. "For I repeat, it is a mad and impossible dream."

"It is *not* impossible, though you think so!" she declared forcefully. "I tell you, once I gain the key to the Place of Power, I hold your nations in the hollow of my hand. Even now, the priest Bator——"

She stopped, as though unwilling to say more. Gary perceived that he was dismissed, and bowed and turned. Her voice halted him when he reached the door.

"Gary, that pale girl who entered Koom with you and the others—is she really your enemy as you said? Or are you her lover?"

"Joan?" said Gary surprisedly. Then he said ruefully, "She is my enemy and rival. She tricked me, and hates me now."

"I am glad!" Shirani said suddenly, smiling at him.

Grauh and the guards were waiting for Gary in the anteroom. Someone else was waiting there too—one of the black

priests from the temple of the Ancient Ones. The scrawny, sallow, nervous little man looked almost fearfully at the American. Gary guessed this was Bator.

As Gary went out into the dusky corridor and back to his own apartment with Grauh and the guards, he wondered about Bator. If Dridim and his priests hated Shirani as much as they had seemed to, why was one of them visiting the princess secretly tonight? He puzzled over it until he fell asleep.

8. *Plotters in the Palace*

WHEN Gary awoke, sunlight was streaming in. On the couch in the opposite corner of the stone room, Borchoff was snoring loudly. Sitting silently on the floor, watching him, was a small, Buddha-like figure.

"Okara!" Gary exclaimed surprisedly, getting to his feet. Then he said harshly, "What are you doing here? I thought you were plotting with Jhulun."

"I was," Okara admitted. The Japanese spy's voice and yellow face were quite calm. "But my plotting did not succeed."

Borchhoff had awakened and was sitting up, rubbing his eyes. And Joan Laird, roused by their voices, came out of the connecting room, looking like a sleepy, tousled youth in her boyish, silken attire.

"We four," Okara continued calmly, "have been rivals until now, struggling against each other for our separate countries. We must not be rivals any longer. We must work together, for a common end."

"Ho! ho!" guffawed Borchhoff. "You must think we are very simple, Okara, to be taken in by such a proposal. You have failed with this Jhulun, and now you think *we* will help you further the cause of Japan."

They all three looked at the little Japanese with hostility and suspicion. But his mask-like face did not change.

"You have reason to mistrust me," he said quietly, "but this is not a trick. We all now have the same purpose to achieve, whether you believe it or not.

"Each of us," Okara continued, "came here to seek out Shirani, each hoping to make her, and the superstitious nomad hordes awaiting her, a tool of his own country; each of us except you, Martin, who came for America to stop her from going forth at all. You alone of us were right, Martin. Shirani cannot be made a tool of any of our intriguing nations, I know now. And if she goes forth as she plans, it means a nomad scourge sweeping over Asia, threatening the interests of all our countries. Therefore we must stop Shirani's plan!"

"This is a mighty sudden change of outlook on your part, Okara," Gary said suspiciously. "Twenty-four hours ago you were doing everything you could to ingratiate yourself with Jhulun and Shirani."

"I was," Okara admitted coolly. "But since then I have learned enough from Jhulun to see that this wildcat princess could never be made subservient to Japan.

"When we arrived here yesterday," he added, "I got Jhulun to keep me with him by whispering to him that I could tell him all about the inimical intentions of you three toward his princess."

"Your usual double-cross, eh?" Gary rasped. "Go ahead, Okara."

"Jhulun seized at that," the little Japanese continued calmly, "and took me to his apartments, where we talked. I assured him that my nation was one of the greatest of the outside world, and I suggested strongly that when Shirani went forth and assumed leadership of the nomad peoples, she should ally herself to my nation, Japan. But Jhulun simply

laughed at my suggestion. He said it was impossible, because by the time Shirani went forth from Koom, my nation and all the other nations of earth would lie wrecked and prostrate! He, and everyone else here, believes that if Shirani can gain access to their mysterious Place of Power, she can cause some great catastrophe that will shake all the nations of the outer world to ruins."

"Do you remember the Tibetan lama?" Joan exclaimed suddenly. "The one who prophesied in the nomad camp that before Shirani came forth from Koom, she would bring about an awful destruction that would shatter all the unbelieving nations?"

Gary nodded. "Shirani is firmly convinced that she can do something of the kind if she can gain entrance to the Place of Power. She told me so when I tried vainly to talk her out of her scheme of conquest, last night."

"What the devil is this Place of Power they talk about?" demanded Borchhoff, perplexed.

"Jhulun didn't tell me much about it," Okara said thoughtfully. "I gather that it's a sacred shrine of some kind deep under that big volcano beside the fire sea. He said that the Place of Power is the 'great keystone of the world's structure,' whatever that may mean. The Ancient Ones, he said, once long ago used the place to work vast changes in the earth's surface, and the instruments or forces they used are still there."

"And who were the Ancient Ones?" Borchhoff demanded in turn. "These cursed people talk in riddles."

"The Ancient Ones," Okara explained, "are supposed to be an alien, pre-human race of great power and wisdom, who inhabited this valley ages ago. Jhulun said they chose this place for their home because here lies the 'keystone of the world,' their Place of Power."

"We've got more to worry about than the superstitions of these Koomians," Gary rasped. "You say, Okara, that you are now convinced that Shirani won't become an ally or tool of any nation?"

"I am certain she won't," the Japanese asserted, "since she has this superstitious belief that she can use the powers of the Ancient Ones to cast down all the nations. Shirani will go through some kind of magical ceremony in their Place of Power, once she gets the key to it. And then, superstitiously confident that the nations can no longer resist her, she will go out and lead those millions of Mongols and Tibetans and all the other nomads, in a wave of war across Asia!

"I say it is the duty of all four of us to stop her," Okara continued solemnly. "And I give you the word of a samurai, in which even you will believe, that this is no trick on my part."

Borchoff scratched his head, his round, rubicund face thoughtful. "Okara is talking sense," he admitted. "None of us can make this princess subservient to our countries, so we ought to throw in together and keep her from leading a scourge of nomads across the continent."

"I'm with you," Joan said instantly, her stubborn chin firm with determination.

They looked expectantly at Gary, who had a frown on his lean, tanned face.

"Shirani's plans must be thwarted," he agreed thoughtfully. "That's the very mission on which I was sent here, and I am willing to join forces with the rest of you to accomplish it. But I don't see *how* we can accomplish it. We are just three men and a girl, unarmed and practically imprisoned."

OKARA'S face set hard. "There is one way, and only one way, by which we can keep Shirani from ever going forth. We must kill her."

"Kill Shirani?" Gary exclaimed, stiffening. "Why, that would be murder—we couldn't—"

"Would it not be murder that would take place if Shirani led the nomad hordes across Asia?" Okara demanded fiercely. "Is it not murder she plans—murder of everyone in the outside world who resists her?"

"I know, but to kill her—ourselves," Gary said, aghast. "No, there must be some other way."

"There is no other way!" Okara said inflexibly. "Can we four hope to halt her by force, she who has thousands of warriors around her? Can we talk her out of the thing she has been planning for so long? You know we can't, Martin—you just admitted you couldn't dissuade her from her scheme of conquest. You *know* we can stop her only by killing her.

"Once Shirani is dead," the Japanese went on rapidly, "the danger will be gone. For it is only Shirani who has inflamed these people of Koom with a desire to emerge from the valley, against the warnings of their priests. It is only Shirani whom the fierce nomad millions of Central Asia are now awaiting. When Shirani dies, the danger dies with her."

"But you're talking about *murder!*" Gary exclaimed. "Princess or no princess, she is still just a girl."

"You're in love with her—that's why you defend her!" Joan cried angrily, her brown eyes hot with accusation.

"I'm not!" Gary denied. "But I'm not willing to murder her."

"And you are the spy who had no use for chivalry or sentiment!" Joan taunted. "Why, this Shirani whom you're defending believes that she can shake and shatter all Earth's nations, if she can gain access to their Place of Power, and she would do that, if such a power really existed!"

Gary Martin could find no answer to

the English girl's indictment. He stared miserably past them.

Okara's slant eyes bored into Gary's face. The little Japanese spoke solemnly.

"Martin, you were sent here by America, for the sake of your country, were you not? To save America and the world from the war and chaos that would ensue if this princess became the leader of the wild nomad hordes? Tell me, then, what is your duty to *America* in this situation? What would your superior officers tell you to do, if they could speak to you now?"

Gary's heart went cold. For Okara's words brought back with terrible vividness those last instructions William Cray had given him in sending him on the mission to secret Koom.

"You've got to stop this woman from disrupting the peace of the world, Gary. You've got to *kill* her, if necessary."

Cray's words were ringing in his ears, now. He knew only too well what Cray would tell him to do if he were here, what his duty was.

Yet to murder Shirani of the sun-bright hair, to strike down for ever that gay, fearless, flaming life—

"Isn't there any other way we can stop Shirani than by killing her?" Gary asked desperately.

"You know there is no other way," Okara declared inflexibly.

Gary went to the window, resting his burning face against the cold stone wall, looking out with haggard, unseeing eyes at the sunlit black city. But it was not Koom he saw, but the colorless face of William Cray, pale, steady eyes staring into his own. He could still hear Cray's high, desperate voice, just as he had heard it that night.

"I'm depending on you, Gary. America is depending on you, to save the peace of the world!"

Gary turned. His lean face was drawn,

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his eyes tortured, and his voice seemed to his own ears to come from far away.

"I will help you to kill Shirani," he said, his voice low. "It has to be done."

"Now you are talking!" approved Borchhoff jovially, patting him on the shoulder. Gary fiercely flung away the Russian's hand.

"Don't praise me for it, damn you!" he exclaimed savagely.

Joan was watching him, her brown eyes aching with sudden emotion. But Gary turned harshly to Okara.

"I don't see how we're going to accomplish it, anyway. How can we get out of here, and into Shirani's guarded apartment, without weapons?"

"We have these for weapons," Okara said quickly, taking two daggers from inside his tunic. He added coolly, "Jhulun gave me these when he transferred me here this morning—to kill you three with."

"I'll be damned!" Borchhoff exploded. "This Japanese is the devil himself."

Okara continued rapidly, "We can make a rope of strips from these rugs, and late tonight we can slide down the rope to the window of the rooms below these. From them, we can get to Shirani's apartments, overcome the guards outside them in a surprize attack, and penetrate inside and kill the princess."

"And then?" Gary asked.

Okara shrugged. "Then our work will be done. We will try to steal horses and escape down the valley and out the tunnel by which we came here. Whether we escape or not, the danger of Shirani will be gone."

The little Japanese looked at Joan. "You had better stay here while we three make the attempt," he told the English girl. "You would only lessen our chances by accompanying us. If we succeed, we will come back below and signal you to come down the rope and escape with us."

Joan nodded, her eyes wistfully watching Gary. His tanned face was a bitter, brooding mask.

NIGHT's blackness came down on Koom, that evening, after what to Gary seemed endless eternities of waiting. He had paced the rooms restlessly all that day, trying to keep his mind on what he knew was his stern duty. But Shirani's laughing eyes constantly intruded. He was strangely thankful that she had sent word that morning that she would be too occupied to see him again until the next day.

Now as the night hours wore away, with the trembling glow from the stupendous fire sea painting the wall of their dark room, the palace and the city became gradually silent in sleep. At last there was no sound but the restless movements of the guards posted outside their door.

Okara rose soundlessly, signaling to them. They went to the open window with the rough rope they had knotted of strips torn from the woolen rugs. After tying its end to a heavy table, they threw out the rope. It dangled down in the darkness along the vast black wall.

The little Japanese went down the rope first, nimbly as a monkey, clutching one of the daggers. Gary followed, the other knife in his hand. As he slid silently down the red-lit black wall, he looked up and saw Joan's white face looking down after him, pale and taut.

Hand over hand, Gary descended until he was abreast of the open window of the room below. He swung easily into the dark chamber and stood beside Okara. The room was unoccupied, as they had expected after hearing no sound from it through the day. They waited in the darkness until Borchhoff's huge form slid clumsily down and joined them.

"You know the way to Shirani's apart-

ment," Okara whispered to Gary in the dark. "You must lead us."

"All right—keep close to me," Gary rasped. His pulses were hammering like pounding sledges.

He opened the door that led into the corridor, a narrow hall dimly lit by a few silver hanging lamps. It was deserted.

"Come on," Gary muttered.

The daggers of Okara and himself gleamed wickedly in the lamplight as they stole through the dim black corridors. Borchhoff stalked behind them, his huge hands balled into mighty fists, his small, twinkling eyes very alert in his red face.

The vast palace slept. They went through shadowy corridors and halls without meeting a soul, until they approached the entrance to Shirani's apartments. There, in the anteroom to her suite, they saw the two silver-armored guards habitually posted there. The two Koomians were chatting idly, one with his back turned to the corridor.

"Now!" whispered Gary, and he and his two companions leaped into the dimly lit anteroom.

Okara's dagger flashed like striking lightning as he jumped. The guard with his back to them sank down, stabbed in the neck. The other guard, who had faced them and had a second's more warning, ripped out his sword and stabbed wildly at Gary and Borchhoff.

"Hell!" grunted the Russian as the glittering blade tore into his side.

Before the Koomian could withdraw it, before either Gary or Okara could spring to help their comrade, Borchhoff had seized the neck of the guard in his huge hands. The Russian squeezed with terrible strength, his round face flaming with the convulsive effort. There was a dull, snapping sound. The guard sank lifeless to the floor, his neck broken.

Borchhoff staggered, his flaming red

face suddenly drained of color, his little eyes filming.

"Got me," he grunted, tugging out the sword from his side. A rush of blood followed it. "Got——"

He collapsed heavily to the floor, blood pouring from his side. Gary and Okara stooped over him. His small eyes cleared for a moment as he looked up at the two, and a faint grin flickered in them.

"My—my last round of the great game," he whispered thickly. "You two—carry on——"

His head rolled heavily to one side.

"Dead!" the Japanese whispered, his slant eyes glittering. He straightened. "One of us must watch here, while the other goes in and kills the princess. Martin, you know your way in her apartments and I don't, so——"

"So I'm elected?" Gary said hoarsely. He stared shakily at Borchhoff's unmoving body, then straightened, gripping his dagger. "All right, Okara, I'll do it. And you needn't fear now that I'll back out."

"One quick stab will be enough," Okara said. "Be swift!"

Gary pushed silently into the chambers beyond the anteroom. The high-ceilinged, silk-hung stone rooms of Shirani were dark, except for the shaking red fire-glow from the windows. There was no sound.

Gary's nerves were strung to harp-like pitch as he stole softly through the rooms. A fierce, unshakable resolve possessed him now, an iron determination to complete the mission in which Borchhoff had given his life. Shirani had to die, this night, for the peace of the world!

He entered a room where a sputtering silver lamp cast soft white light. The brilliant silken rugs and the dainty, carved furniture breathed femininity. An exquisite, intangible perfume haunted this chamber. And then he saw Shirani.

She lay sleeping on a couch beyond the lamp, a slim huddled figure in white silk,

looking as though she had fallen asleep waiting for someone. Gary tiptoed over to her side and bent over her, gripping the dagger.

Shirani was beautiful in sleep. Her gold hair was spread carelessly on the pillow, her face relaxed in tender, childish lines, her red lips a little parted. One hand was unconsciously doubled into a little fist. The loosened collar of her silk tunic revealed warm, white, shapely shoulders, and one high, rosy little breast.

Gary's hand was quivering violently as he raised the gleaming dagger.

"God forgive me—I've got to do it," he whispered.

Shirani opened her eyes.

Gary knew instantly that his unconscious whisper had awakened her. He saw her stare up at him with sleep-clouded eyes.

"Has Bator come yet to——" she started to ask sleepily. Then her clearing gaze recognized Gary, saw his uplifted dagger. He was ready to drive it down into her breast before she could cry out. But Shirani did not attempt any cry. She lay looking up at him, her blue eyes wide, amazed, but fearless.

"Gary!" she whispered. "You have come to kill me!"

"Yes!" he rasped. Sweat was standing out on his brow, his lean face was terrible in the lamplight. "I've got to, Shirani—my duty to the world,—the world you'll plunge into war and chaos if you live!"

Still there was not a shadow of fear in her wonderful eyes. It seemed to Gary that her soul looked up out of them into his.

"Gary, you cannot kill me," she said steadily. "You love me—I know it. And I have loved you, from the first."

"A trick," he muttered savagely.

"Do I deal in tricks?" she flamed. "Do you think I would lie and cringe to save

my life? Gary, you *know* me better than that."

Shirani's eyes, completely ignoring the menace of the uplifted dagger, clung with wistful tenderness to his dark face.

"Gary, if you can say truthfully that you have no love for me, then you may drive that dagger home without further word from me."

And Shirani looked up at him with calm confidence, smiling as fearlessly as a child. Gary felt his whole being shaken wildly.

"I do love you, Shirani!" he said thickly. "Whether it's real love, or wild infatuation, or what, it's there in me. But I've *got* to think of the hell you'll start in the world, if you're left living."

A FAINT new hope flickered up suddenly in his haggard gray eyes.

"Shirani, if I do not kill you, will you promise to give up your mad scheme of conquest, and remain here in Koom?"

"No!" Shirani answered swiftly, her beautiful face inflexible. "Gary, no one, not even you, whom I love, can make me change my plans through fear. If I die now, I die, but while I live, I'll follow the road of adventure and conquest on which I have set my feet. I shall lead the nomad hosts to conquest of the broken, shattered world, if I live! Yes, for the world *will* be shattered by my hand, before ever I leave this valley, once I have won to the Place of Power. You do not believe that, Gary, but it is true, and I speak the whole truth to you even now when you threaten me with death."

"Then if nothing will alter your wild plans, you've—you've got to die," Gary said hoarsely, his eyes dilated.

And the dagger in his hand came down toward her. Shirani made no move to stay it, her eyes fixed on his. The keen point touched the soft, warm skin between her breasts—and hesitated there.

Gary's whole frame was trembling, as he sought for the power to drive the blade into her body. He couldn't do it! His fingers gripped the dagger hilt until his knuckles showed white, and yet his arm *couldn't* move!

And then Shirani softly reached up with outspread arms and clasped his shoulders, her beautiful face throbbing with tender, clinging passion.

"Gary, my love," she whispered.

The dagger clattered on the floor. And Gary held her silken, pulsing body in his arms. Her lips were living flame against his, the exquisite perfume of her hair in his nostrils, her breasts throbbing wildly against his heart.

"God help me!" he whispered, as his dark head drew back.

Shirani cupped his face between her hands, gazing into it with yearning tenderness.

"Gary," she said vibrantly, "when first I saw you, I knew this was fated."

"I'm a traitor," he muttered thickly. "To my companions, to my country. I've betrayed them all——"

"Yes, you are a traitor!" said a harsh, guttural voice. "But your treachery shall not save this woman."

Gary spun. It was Okara, his slant eyes flaming accusingly at the American, glittering hate at the Koomian princess.

"I should have known you were too enamored of the woman to kill her," Okara muttered. "But *I* am not!"

The Japanese started forward, a bloody sword he had taken from the dead guard gleaming terribly in his hand.

"Wait, Okara!" Gary cried desperately. "We can't kill Shirani—I thought we could, but we can't! We'll escape as we planned and warn our countries—baffle her plans in that way——"

Okara was not even listening, but coming forward with grim purpose in every line of his mask-like yellow face.

There was suddenly a wild, terrified yell from the doorway. The scrawny, nervous little black-robed priest Bator, who had visited Shirani the preceding night, stood in that door, his eyes bulging.

He yelled again, even as Okara whirled toward him. The Japanese, seeing he was too late to silence the priest, spun back to rush toward Shirani and Gary.

But there was a rush of feet and shouting of alarmed voices. A javelin flashed into the room and through Okara's sword-arm, and a half-dozen silver-armed guards poured in.

9. *The Tomb of the Ancient Ones*

THE guards rushed forward with drawn swords upon Okara and Gary. The little black priest Bator had shrunk fearfully into a corner of the chamber.

"Stop!" pealed Shirani's voice.

It brought the fierce silver warriors to a halt with swords uplifted.

"Shall we not slay these strangers?" their captain demanded. "They have killed the two guards outside, and surely they came hither to murder you, princess!"

"This one," said Shirani, indicating Okara, "would have killed me, yes. But this other saved me." Her hand rested on Gary's arm.

"Take the slant-eyed one back to his quarters and see that he does not escape again," she ordered rapidly. "I will give judgment on him later."

Okara's yellow face was a mask of bitterness as he looked at Gary's torn countenance.

"We have failed, Martin," said the little Japanese burningly, "because of you and your passion. I hope that passion comforts you for your betrayal of your country, when this evil witch plunges the world into war."

He went out with the guards. But every word had sunk into Gary's soul.

"Heed not the slant-eyed one," Shirani said quickly.

"He's right," Gary said hoarsely. "I did betray him and Borchoff. But I couldn't kill you, Shirani—couldn't murder you this way. I'd give my own life to keep you from destroying the peace of the world, but I couldn't take yours. I'm a spy, but not an assassin."

"Princess!" whispered a fearful, husky voice.

Shirani wheeled. It was the nervous little priest Bator, who had come out of the corner when the guards left.

"So you have finally come, Bator!" Shirani exclaimed, her eyes lighting. "For hours tonight I have been awaiting you—so long that I fell asleep."

She leaned eagerly, tensely toward him. "Have you brought it, Bator?"

"Yes, princess." Bator's voice was thick with emotion, and his eyes were rolling in almost overpowering fear. "Yes, I have committed the greatest sin in this world, and have stolen the thing you desire. I, a priest of the Ancient Ones, have committed that ultimate sacrilege."

"Where is it, then?" Shirani cried with almost unbearable eagerness.

The little priest drew something out of his robe. His face was paper-white, his hand shaking violently, as he handed it to her.

Gary saw that the object was a small golden tube, with a lens of quartz at one end. It looked like a modern flashlight, but had been worn smooth by many hands in immeasurable ages of time.

"The key to the Place of Power!" cried Shirani, her eyes blazing up in exultation as she grasped it.

"Yes, it is the sacred key that unlocks the way to the Place of Power," gasped Bator. "I stole it from Dridim tonight, while he slept. Yes, I, a priest of the

temple, dared do that, and now I almost wish that I had died before I sinned thus against the law of the Ancient Ones."

"Did I not promise you limitless riches and power if you stole the key for me?" exclaimed Shirani. "You have naught to fear, man. This very night, now, I shall go to the Place of Power to see if this is truly the key, and if it is, if you have not tried to trick me, you shall be second to none in the great empire which this key will win for me."

"Better had it been for me had I never listened to your honeyed promises of power, princess," moaned Bator. "If Dridim suspects——"

"He will not suspect, if you return at once to the temple and pretend ignorance when he discovers his loss," Shirani said impatiently. "Go now, and be sure that my promises will be fulfilled."

The little priest left, a conscience-stricken, pitiful figure who seemed hardly able to stand.

Shirani's face flared with intense emotion as she gripped the golden tube with fiercely possessive fingers.

"I *told* Dridim I should get the key, one way or another!" she exclaimed. "Unless Bator has tricked me, unless this is but a counterfeit, the power to shake and shatter the whole earth is in my grasp!"

Her eyes flashed at Gary's bewildered face. "Gary, we go now to the Place of Power, to make sure that this is indeed the key. Once I am sure of that, my plans vault quickly to their climax."

She added, "The way is perilous. You need not come unless you wish."

"I'll go with you, Shirani," he said quickly. For strong hope was surging up again in Gary's mind. Once Shirani had at last penetrated the superstitiously revered shrine of these people, the mysterious Place of Power, once she had discovered that the legended, world-shaking powers it was supposed to contain had

no existence, *then* she could be dissuaded from her mad plan of world conquest, Gary thought.

So he meant to be with her when she learned that her superstitious beliefs had no foundation, that there were no such vast powers as she hoped to control. In her disappointment, Gary knew, Shirani might at last be turned from her warlike purposes.

SHIRANI hung a small silver lamp to her belt and then tugged Gary excitedly toward the door. They found the anteroom empty, the bodies of Borchoff and the slain guards having been removed. Shirani had thrust the golden tube into her belt beside her dagger, and her hand clung pulsingly to Gary's as they went down through the sleeping palace.

They emerged into the dark courts behind it, where watchful guards instantly challenged them, and then saluted as they recognized Shirani. Horses were quickly brought at her order. They mounted and rode out around the palace, Shirani leading the way at a quick gallop.

Koom brooded darkly in sleep about them, under the shaking red rays of the fire lake and the paler radiance of the moon. The palace behind them was a vast, lightless pile, and far across the plaza, the massive octagonal temple of the Ancient Ones loomed dark and strange.

"There sleeps Dridim, dreaming that he has baffled me!" laughed Shirani. "It is a rude awakening he will have."

They clattered quickly through almost deserted dark streets. Then they were out of the city, riding toward the fiery sea.

Gary's eyes were almost dazzled by the evil vermilion splendor of the restless molten sea, seen this close in the darkness. Its heavy waves of liquid lava stretched in sullen brilliance to the dark,

frowning mass of the volcano from which fell the wonderful fire cataract.

Shirani led the way at a quick gallop along the shore of the burning lake, heading around its curve toward the volcano behind it. The fierce heat and sulfurous smokes from the living lava made Gary gasp. The horses, accustomed to the fiery sea, moved without apparent fear.

Soon they had curved far around the shore of the lava sea, and now beside them the sheer, vertical wall of the immense volcano rose abruptly, separated from the fiery sea only by a narrow rock ledge. Over this ledge, which was barely wide enough for the two of them to ride abreast, Shirani led intrepidly.

Gary saw ahead of them now the awful cataract of the fiery niagara, that tumbled down from high above and fell into the burning lake, a score of yards out from the ledge. The dim thunder of that awful torrent of falling lava had increased, as they advanced, into a nerve-racking, rumbling roar.

"Do we go under the cataract itself?" he cried to Shirani.

Shirani nodded as she spurred forward. "There is no danger, Gary," she shouted. "None of the lava will fall upon us."

Yet Gary felt a quaking of his soul as they rode forward. The horses were going unwillingly now. The crash of those thousands of tons of molten rock each moment, pouring out of the crevice high above and overshooting the ledge below, was stupefying.

Shirani spurred boldly on, and Gary set his teeth and followed. The horses were plunging perilously in panic as they neared the thundering lava cataract. Then they rode right under the falling niagara of lava. The roar of it was terrible, dazing. The whole world about them seemed belching fire. Gary's cheeks

burned from fine fire-spray as he tried to control his rearing, panicky steed.

"This way, Gary!" pealed Shirani's voice through the stunning roar.

Gary perceived that she had ridden her horse right into an opening in the sheer rock wall of the volcano. He followed blindly.

He dimly saw a high, square doorway carved in the rock, bordered by strange designs crumbling from incalculable age. He urged his frightened horse through it, and found himself suddenly out of the full blast of the roar, and in a large, firelit tunnel.

"Dismount, Gary; we leave our horses here," came Shirani's voice beside him. He saw she had already climbed down.

"I wouldn't want to come *that* way every day!" gasped Gary as he dismounted. He stared with bewildered curiosity around him.

The tunnel was twenty feet square in cross-section. Its sides were smoothed with more than human exactitude from the volcano's rock. There was no light except the flare from the falling fire cataract outside its mouth. The great passageway led downward, curving sharply a few dozen yards away.

"This way was hollowed out by the Ancient Ones, long ages ago," Shirani told him. "It leads down through many caverns to the place which is the hidden keystone of the earth, the Place of Power."

She added, "The Ancient Ones, when the last of them wearied finally of living, trooped down into these caverns to die. Yes, I have seen and you shall soon see the great cavern that is the Tomb of the Ancient Ones, and in which they lay down ages ago and passed calmly out of life."

Gary felt dazed. The awful way they had come, this tunnel that gave evidence of having been hollowed in past eons by

unhuman hands—these things had started strange doubts in his soul.

What if there really *was* a Place of Power, a keystone of the earth's crustal structure, where forces could be applied that would shake and shatter all earth's surface? His mind recoiled from that fearful suggestion, and he told himself fiercely that his imagination was getting the best of him. It couldn't be possible, such a thing!

Shirani had lit the silver lamp she had brought with her. "We shall have no other light in some of these passages," she told him. "Now keep close beside me, Gary, for this way is not without peril. Yes, even I have no love for it, though more than once in the past I have come down here as far as the Tomb of the Ancient Ones."

"Lead on, Shirani," he told her, determinedly. She flashed a warm smile at him, and then started.

The tunnel, curving to the right and downward, soon became pitch-dark as the glow of the cataract was left behind. The roar of it faded from their ears as they went.

But Gary heard other sounds, dim, ominous ones, as they went on, a murmuring and rustling and quivering, of the mighty forces at work in the volcano around them. And the air was stifling hot and close.

For half an hour they followed the winding tunnel downward, their only light the feeble glow of Shirani's lamp. Then the tunnel emerged as a gallery hewn from the side of a narrow, terrible chasm. In that chasm was a thing appalling to Gary's unprepared eyes.

A colossal fountain of fire! A huge jet of molten lava spurting straight up from far below, driving up through the chasm close beside them into the shadowy, unguessable spaces above, casting wild light

over the sheer, rocky walls. And none of that fountaining lava fell back!

"It is what feeds the cataract that falls from high above, outside," Shirani cried over the dull thunder of the thing.

"Lead on," Gary shouted, a little thickly.

THE passage left the side of that chasm of the fire fountain, and again became a downward-winding tunnel cut from solid rock. Gary's mind reeled as he followed Shirani. The suffocating heat, the sulfurous air, the constant ominous whispering and rustling and creaking of the vast volcano, were overpowering.

They came to a great crack across the tunnel, crossed by a massive stone bridge. Looking down from it, Gary saw a blazing current of lava rushing with unbelievable speed ten feet underneath. As they went on, he guessed that by now they must be far down in these flame-shot spaces, well beneath the level of the fiery sea. They were now again traversing a dark, unbroken stretch of the tunnel.

"The cavern in which lie the dead Ancient Ones is close ahead, Gary," Shirani told him eagerly. "And in their cavern-tomb is the door that leads to the Place of Power—the door this key will open!"

The tunnel leveled, ran straight as a spear for a hundred yards. Then it debouched into a vast, black cavern utterly without light. The feeble glow of Shirani's silver lamp illuminated only the nearer parts of that dark, enormous fane.

Gary looked into the somber place in awe. He saw that the floor of the cavern had been smoothed to exact flatness. And as Shirani held up the lamp, he saw that the walls also of this great cave, towering a hundred feet at least, had been smoothed into great planes and facets of mathematical regularity.

"The Tomb of the Ancient Ones!" exclaimed Shirani, involuntary awe in her voice. "See, there they lie, each in his place, just as they long ago lay wearily down to die."

"God!" whispered Gary, staring. "Those creatures—unhuman——"

This weird cavern was a vast mortuary. Ranged in it were rows on rows of enormous, rectangular blocks of black stone, each of them perfectly squared and over six feet in height. And upon the flat top of each great block lay stretched a motionless body. They were not human bodies—glimpsed imperfectly as they were by the feeble glow of the little lamp, Gary could see that these dead creatures had never been remotely akin to humanity. Their bodies were dimly like the human in shape, with two long lower limbs, two folded arms, and a bulbous head. But they were of huge size, must have stood ten feet in height, in life. And they appeared to be of dark *mineral* flesh.

Their flesh had the dark mineral gleam of stone, though apparently it had been flexible in life. The eyes he could vaguely perceive in their heads were glassy, hard ones like faceted crystals. Dimly into Gary's mind came apprehension that these creatures had been of a wholly different line of life from any that man knew, that the basis of their strange life must have been one, not of carbon, but of silicon. They had lived in the remote past of Earth.

"The Ancient Ones—the great ones who were before man was, and who had wisdom and power that man has never attained," Shirani was whispering. "Yet were they friendly to man, and taught him much, until the human peoples became so wicked that the Ancient Ones destroyed their civilizations, by using the Place of Power to shake and shatter the earth. Here, Gary, you see the last hun-

dreds of their great race, the final generation of them that in the end became so weary of long life and power that they died by choice, here in this cavern they had prepared to be their tomb."

Then Shirani started eagerly forward, and her voice rose silvery with excitement into the gloomy cavern.

"Come, Gary! At the end of this cavern-tomb lies the door that this key will open—the door to the Place of Power!"

"The Place of Power?" Gary repeated as he followed her forward. Sudden, shocking realization swept over him.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "If these Ancient Ones existed, as I see now they did, then the Place of Power you told of must exist also—the powers over Earth you told me of must be real——"

The tremendous implications of that thought staggered his lips to silence. All his mental bearings had been overturned.

For the first time, now, Gary began to *believe*—to believe that down here there was a keystone of Earth's structure in which forces could be loosed to rock the whole surface of Earth. And if that were so, if Shirani really was about to take possession of such a power—his mind rioted with the wild picture of what would happen if she used it as she planned. The whole earth quaking, the cities of the nations falling to wreck, modern civilization shattered in an hour! And then the sweep outward of Shirani and the savage nomad millions who were even now awaiting her.

"Come, Gary!" Shirani's voice throbbed with eagerness. "I have waited long for this hour!"

She was hurrying down the length of the colossal mortuary cavern. He followed her, stumbling dazedly between the long rows of somber blocks upon which the stony, unhuman bodies of the Ancient Ones lay.

Shirani stopped, a dozen feet from the

farther end of the cavern. And Gary stopped too, shaken by new shock of surprize. Shirani had set the lamp down, and clutching the golden tube in her hand, was pointing forward with wild eagerness.

"The door to the Place of Power!" she cried, her eyes blazing in the dim lamp-light.

"The door?" Gary repeated stupidly, staring wildly.

In the rock end-wall of the cavern was set a huge double door of gleaming silvery metal. Fifty feet high towered the great leaves of it, and they were twenty feet across.

There was no knob or hold of any kind upon the blank silvery surface of the doors. The only aperture in them was a tiny, needle-like hole six feet from the floor.

"At last," Shirani's voice flared, "I stand before these doors with the key to them in my hand! No force on Earth could break through those doors, Gary—only this key can open them."

"You shall never open them, blasphemers!"

That wild, fierce cry came from behind them. They whirled around, were rooted by sheer amazement. Running toward them from the entrance of the cavern, stumbling in panting haste between the solemn funeral-piers of the Ancient Ones, a lamp in his hand, came the black-robed man who had shouted.

"Dridim!" cried Shirani, lightnings blazing up in her eyes.

"Yes, it is Dridim, the high priest of the Ancient Ones whose law you seek to break!" cried the priest, panting with haste and hate as he came toward them.

He stopped and raised his hands in an imprecatory, awful gesture. His white face was terrible in its hate.

"You have committed the ultimate sin!" he thundered at Shirani. "You have

stolen the sacred key you now hold in your hand! Yes, when I awoke and found the key gone, I knew you had taken it and I knew that I would find you here."

His hand dipped into his black robe and a dagger flashed forth. "Now, blaspheming princess, you die for your awful sacrilege! And your outland lover dies with you!"

Dridim started forward. But Shirani, blue eyes flaring lightnings of rage, moved first.

She leaped with the swiftness of a white tigress, drawing her own dagger from her belt. Gary cried out hoarsely—then saw Dridim reel backward, clutching his breast.

The high priest swayed, stupefied for the moment by the swiftness of that mortal wound, staring down unbelievably at his bleeding breast. Then, swaying and tottering, he raised awful eyes to Shirani.

"You have added sin to sin," he choked to the quivering princess. "You have slain the high priest of the Ancient Ones in their very presence, to further your mad ambition."

His body stiffened for a moment, his pale eyes flamed, his voice swelled to almost superhuman intensity.

"Hear me, Shirani!" he cried. "You have sought to ride to power through death and sin—I prophesy that for your sin you shall reap but dreadful death yourself."

His terrible eyes widened. "Yes, I seem to see an awful death creep upon you—out of this very tomb——"

DRIDIM tottered sidewise and crashed to the stone floor, dead. But his empty eyes still seemed to glare up at them.

Shirani pressed close to Gary, her whole figure trembling violently. She flung her bloody dagger away.

"Gary!" she gasped. "For a moment I too seemed to see what Dridim saw—a dark peril coming out of this cavern upon me——"

Then she stiffened, raised her head royally. "He would have slain me—and you, too!" she exclaimed. "I gave him only what he sought to deal to us."

"Shirani, let's get out of this hellish place!" urged Gary wildly. "I feel something terrible brooding here——"

"We shall go, Gary—but first I will open the doors and enter the Place of Power!" Shirani insisted. "I will make sure that the forces used by the Ancient Ones to shake the earth are still here, ready to be used soon by me."

She stepped over Dridim's prone body toward the huge silvery doors, grasping the golden tube. Gary followed her. And then, as Shirani reached the great doors, a thing happened that was more terrible to Gary than anything that had gone before.

A deep, mighty voice, strange and alien in its heavy accents, spoke from the rock wall somewhere above the doors. It was no human voice, yet it spoke an ancient form of the language of Koom.

"Oh ye who seek to open these doors—*beware!*"

Wildly they looked at each other, as the mighty voice rolled into silence in which a whispering echo reverberated faintly.

"Beware—beware——" whispered that echo.

Shirani suddenly pointed up. "See, the voice comes from that opening! It is a device set here by the Ancient Ones, to dissuade any who might seek without reason to open these doors!"

Gary looked up and saw the round opening in the rock above the doors, and realized that she was right, that it was merely a mechanical warning installed here ages ago by the Ancient Ones. Yet his nerves thrilled like harp-strings to that whispering, fading echo all around them.

"Beware——"

Shirani was undauntedly pointing the golden tube at the tiny needle-hole in the doors. She touched a stud upon the tube. A thin thread of white light leaped out of it and into the tiny hole. Then it ceased. There was no visible change for five heart-beats. Then:

"The doors open, Gary!"

Softly, silently, as though upon hinges oiled but yesterday, the mighty doors were swinging inward. And from beyond those doors, a terrific blaze of awful firelight struck blindingly upon their eyes, wildly illuminating all the dark cavern-tomb.

Their dazzled eyes looked through the open doors into a raging hell of glowing light. And upon their ears, shattering the solemn silence, beat a thunderous, unceasing din and roar as of the crashing and creating of worlds. It hammered louder, louder, on their stupefied senses as they started unsteadily through the doors into the Place of Power.

The stupendous events which threatened the world with weird destruction will be told in the thrilling chapters that bring this story to its end in next month's WEIRD

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A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

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Volume 32

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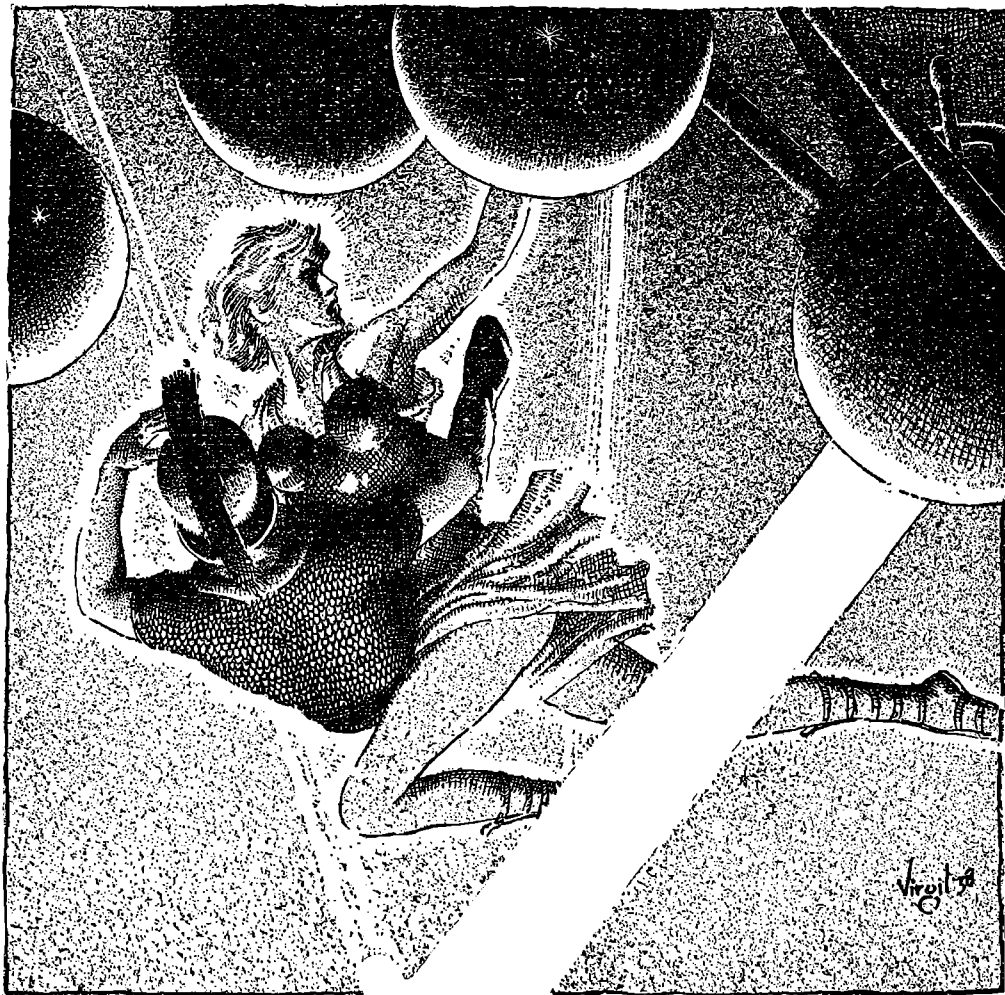
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"Jhulun leaped, with Shirani in his arms, into the fiery depths."

The Fire Princess

By EDMOND HAMILTON

A thrill-tale of intrigue and weird horror in the terrible valley of Koom, the hidden city—a story of the Place of Power that was the tomb of the Ancient Ones

The Story Thus Far

GARY MARTIN, secret agent of the United States, has been sent on a perilous mission on which depends the peace of the world. He has gone into the mountains of mysterious Ti-

bet, seeking the legended, forbidden kingdom of Koom in which dwells a sacred white race. The superstitious peoples of Asia believe that a princess of that hidden race is coming forth soon to lead them to world conquest. Gary's mission is to pre-

vent her from coming forth and plunging the world into war. Three spies of other countries, Major Okara of Japan, Boris Borchhoff of Russia, and Joan Laird of Britain, also seek to enter the hidden land.

Gary Martin and his three spy-rivals succeed in entering Koom, which lies in a valley completely surrounded by towering volcanoes. The city of the weird hidden kingdom is situated beside a fiery sea of molten lava, from which a lava river runs through a natural tunnel out of the valley. They are all four seized by the soldiers of Koom, under command of Shirani, the princess and ruler of this hidden white race.

Gary learns that Shirani does mean to go forth into the outside world and lead the nomad races to conquest. But before she goes forth, she means to bring about a world cataclysm that will shatter all the civilized nations of earth. In this valley ages ago lived a strange race of unhuman beings, the Ancient Ones, who had the power to alter the whole surface of earth by tampering with the keystone of earth's structure, a fiery abyss deep under the volcanoes, which is called the Place of Power. Shirani means to utilize this ancient power to wreck earth, then conquer it.

Despite himself, Gary has fallen in love with the fiery, beautiful princess, and she with him. This has aroused the jealousy and hate of Jhulun, a noble of Koom. But when he hears of the catastrophe that Shirani means to cause, Gary joins forces with the other three spies to prevent her. The others decide that the only way to stop Shirani is to kill her, and reluctantly Gary, torn between love and duty, agrees to the plan. He and Okara and Borchhoff make their way to her apartment in the palace, by night. Borchhoff is killed by her guards. But Gary has a chance to kill Shirani—and finds that he is unable to do it.

Shirani tells Gary that when she has

wrecked and conquered the earth, he shall rule it by her side. She leads him down into the fiery caverns under the volcanoes. They pass through the great cavern-tomb of the Ancient Ones, where those unhuman, mineral-fleshed creatures of the far past lie in their sepulchers. Then they enter the Place of Power, where exist the forces that Shirani means to use soon to bring destruction to the nations of earth.

The story continues:

10. *The Place of Power*

GARY felt as though he and Shirani were walking into a raging inferno of light and sound. The stunning blaze that nearly blinded their dazzled eyes, the thunderous, unceasing roar as of a cosmic forge beating out new planets, these things smote his brain into reeling impotence. He stumbled forward like a man in a dream, his tall form rigid, his tanned, lean face aghast in the terrific light.

But Shirani, her strong little fingers locking his, was advancing eagerly beside him. The gold head of the princess was erect, her silken, slender form straining forward, her beautiful face and wide blue eyes throbbing with tense expectation. She seemed drawn irresistibly forward like a flame sucked by wind.

They took six steps forward, through the huge, open doors, and their feet rooted. Gary took one long look ahead, with wild, dilated eyes. Then he swayed, tottered. He felt his brain darkening dizzily, from the shock of the incredible and awful vista into which he looked.

"The Place of Power!" Shirani's voice shrilled silver over the thunderous roar, awe on even her wild face now. "The keystone to the whole earth's structure!"

"God!" Gary's hoarse exclamation was almost a prayer. "This—it's hell itself."

They stood on the rock brink of an im-

measurable flaming abyss. Before them and under them stretched a vast, fiery space—a colossal hollow in the rock crust of the earth.

This space was miles and miles across, Gary's reeling gaze apprehended. The rocky roof of it was but a few hundred feet higher than the narrow shelf on which they stood. From that roof so close above them, the titanic abyss dropped downward. Peering down, Gary felt a sick vertigo.

He looked down into an enormous fiery space shaped like a seven-pointed star. The center of that vast hollow, *miles* beneath him, was an awful fire-world of red-hot rock and boiling lava streams and seas, swept by winds of flame, shaken by bellowing thunder-sounds.

From that terrible central space, seven giant chasms radiated into the hot crust of earth. Their star-like structure was almost mathematical in its exactness. Seven terrific fissures, extending into the fiery rock farther than his dazed eyes could follow—

"Gary, you are falling!"

Shirani's cry in his ear, her little hands clutching his arm, recalled Gary from the reeling giddiness overcoming him.

"This place—it's incredible!" he shouted over the thunderous, unceasing roar that came up from the fiery depths.

Shirani pointed, her eyes blazing with excitement. "It is the keystone of Earth—see where the great cracks of Earth's crust converge here upon each other. And see, there are the instruments which the Ancient Ones long ago used to shake and rive the whole surface of the earth!"

Gary's eyes followed her pointing hand. A little along the shelf on which they stood, a slender spur of rock stabbed outward like a huge finger, projecting out above the fiery abyss.

The rock spur was a hundred yards long, and its end had been hollowed into

a small, railed platform. His half-dazzled eyes described, projecting from that platform, a dark, looming mechanism.

"Come, Gary!" Shirani was crying. She led eagerly along the precariously narrow rock shelf, toward the spur.

He followed, his steps clumsy and unsteady. The terrible, crashing roar from the abyss beneath, the hot winds and sulphurous breath that came up from it, added to the benumbment of his mind.

They reached the spur. Shirani still held his hand tightly as she started out on that slender tongue of rock. Its top side had been smoothed but was only a few yards wide, and without protective rail of any kind. A misstep to either side meant a tumble into the abyss. Yet Shirani moved as lightly and fearlessly as though she walked in the palace of Koom. In this thunderous, fiery underworld, she herself looked like a thing of flame and force, gold hair blown back by the hot winds, blue eyes burning with eager excitement.

The rock spur trembled and vibrated unceasingly under them, and to Gary, it was like walking a narrow plank out over the mouth of hell. His knees buckled as they stepped down into the slightly sunken platform at the end of the spur.

This place was ten feet square, sunken a yard into the solid rock. It quivered like an aspen leaf under their feet, vibrating to the wild rush of roaring winds from the flaming spaces below. But Shirani ran with eager cry toward the looming mechanism or instrument that projected out beyond the end of the spur itself.

"At last!" she cried. "The power over all Earth which I have desired so long—in my hands!"

"But what is the thing?" Gary asked dazedly.

Eight metal hemispheres like great searchlights were mounted so that their

translucent lenses pointed down into the abyss. The largest hemisphere pointed its lens straight down into the central fiery space far below, and the other seven lenses were directed each at one of the seven tremendous chasms that radiated star-like into the crust of the earth.

Behind this weird mechanism stood a massive metal cube that appeared the container of whatever power the searchlight-things were meant to project. Atop the case were eight levers, movable in graduated slots. And there also rested a thin flat book of metal leaves bearing clear diagrams of the machine and of Earth's crustal structure.

"See, these are the instructions left by the Ancient Ones for operating this instrument of theirs to change Earth's surface!" Shirani exclaimed. "They left them here so that if ever man needed this mighty power to preserve himself, it would be available."

"But that's impossible!" Gary cried, his razed mind wildly clinging to the shreds of his disbelief. "This machine couldn't have the power to shake or change Earth's surface——"

SHIRANI grasped up the metal book, her whole body quivering in wild triumph. She cried to him, "We must return now, Gary!"

Stunned, incapable of clear thought, Gary went back with her along the quivering spur to the narrow rock shelf. He stumbled with her through the open doors, back into the gloomy cavern-tomb of the Ancient Ones.

The high priest Dridim's body still lay just in front of the open doors to the Place of Power, blood still seeping from the wound in his breast that Shirani's dagger had made. And in the blazing light, his dead eyes still seemed to stare at them in hollow hate.

"Let us rid this place of Dridim's

body," Shirani said. "His eyes, even in death, trouble me—I still seem to hear him prophesying to me of the doom that would come upon me from this tomb." She added, "We will cast him into the Place of Power, Gary."

Numbly Gary lifted the body of the black-robed priest and carried it back through the doors to the edge of the rock shelf. With a staggering thrust, he shoved it over into the abyss. Looking down after it, a violent sickness shook him as he saw that black body tumbling, dropping with awful speed, down, down, into the fiery world far beneath, down until it was but a falling speck.

It seemed to Gary for a moment that *he* was falling, screaming down into that roaring hell of flame and thunder. Then, far below, the falling speck of Dridim's body vanished.

"So end Dridim and his dark prophecies of doom!" Shirani exclaimed fiercely. "He should be well content, since he has had burial in the very heart of the Place of Power which he sought to guard."

"Shirani, let's get out of here," Gary muttered thickly. "I—I can't stand much more of this."

They went back again through the doors into the Tomb of the Ancient Ones, and started forward. When they had taken a dozen steps forward, the great double doors of the Place of Power closed softly behind them, actuated by some delicate, hidden mechanism.

Instantly the roaring blaze and thunder of that awful place vanished, and the great cavern-tomb was dark and silent once more. Only the feeble glow of Shirani's silver lamp, still burning on the floor where she had left it, dispelled the solemn gloom.

Shirani picked up the lamp, and they went on back through the cavern. As they passed between the rows of high stone blocks upon which lay the huge,

dead, man-like forms of the Ancient Ones, Gary hardly spared a glance at those alien, unearthly bodies of mineral flesh. His brain was too dazed by his glimpse of the Place of Power.

But as they reached the tunnel that led to the upper world, and followed that dark passage upward through the solid rock and on through the awful chasm of the spurting fire-fountain, Gary's numbed mind began slowly to function again. A cold, shuddering fear began to invade him as he realized the terrible meaning of what he had seen.

They reached the mouth of the tunnel, where their horses were nervously stamping, and mounted. Gary rode after Shirani out of the tunnel into the night. Before them stretched the burning lava sea and from high above them leaped down the thundering lava cataract. But these things, which had so appalled Gary on the inward journey, he did not even see now in the appalling fear that possessed his mind.

His dazed brain was just beginning to realize that it was all *real*. Yes, the secret Place of Power which he had thought was mere superstition was real, and real too was the power to shake and shatter the whole surface of Earth which lay in the great instrument he had seen there. And that terrible power was now in Shirani's relentless hands!

They were galloping around the burning lava sea toward the black city of Koom, Shirani leading eagerly.

As they rode into the dark, sleeping city, Gary spurred his horse to her side and cried to her.

"Shirani, I never believed until now that you *could* do this thing you've planned—that you could shake Earth and shatter the nations. But—my God—I believe now! And you must not do it!"

"Gary, not anyone in the world can keep me from attainment of my great am-

bition now!" her silver voice pealed. "This book of the Ancient Ones will teach me how to operate their instrument in the Place of Power, and with it I shall cause the earth to shudder and quake and wreck those nations which you thought so mighty. And when Earth lies prostrate and ready to be conquered easily, then I and my people go forth from Koom and gather the nomad millions who wait outside the mountains, and sweep forth to conquest of the broken world. And you ride by my side in that conquest, Gary."

"Shirani, I want no part of such a hellish plan!" Gary cried wildly. "This unholy, ruthless ambition of yours will kill whole peoples—will shatter civilization itself. Even if I myself can't prevent you, someone or something surely will."

"Now you begin to talk like Dridim, and his dire predictions of the doom that would overtake me!" flared Shirani. "No, Gary, nothing can stop me now."

THEIR horses were clattering now into the dark stone streets of Koom. The city still lay wrapped in slumber, brooding blackly beneath the wild, horizontal rays of the glowing fire sea.

Shirani rode her horse up to the vast black palace on the side that fronted the great plaza. She dismounted, and with Gary behind her, swung swiftly up the steps. The silver-armored guards in front of the palace flashed their swords in quick salute to their princess.

"Wake all Koom, at once!" Shirani commanded. "Summon my people here!"

There was a hasty running of guards, a calling of voices, and then a score of warriors with long silver trumpets hurried out of the palace and ranged themselves in a row. They raised the trumpets to their lips and blew a silver-stabbing blast. The snarling blast reverberated across the city, and was repeated, again and again.

Shirani waited, eyes glowing with ex-

citement, her back to the trumpeters. She stood facing the plaza, Gary beside her. Koom was awaking, as the trumpet-blasts shook the night. Lamps and torches flared in the black stone buildings, and people were pouring into the plaza. Soldiers in silver armor, plebeians in blue silk, nobles in white—a great, torchlit crowd soon faced Shirani.

"People of Koom," cried her silver voice clearly, "I have long promised you that soon would come a day when I should lead you out of this prisoning valley to a conquest of the wide world. Now I tell you—*that day has come!*"

A dead silence of amazement held the great throng. Gary saw their faces, white and stupefied in the torchlight. Then a vast, thunderous cheer went up from them, splitting the night, a shout of fanatical enthusiasm.

"Yes, that day has come," Shirani repeated, her slim, imperious white figure riveting their attention. "The high priest Dridim, who so long thwarted our will and refused us the key to the Place of Power, is dead. And I hold that key, and I have been tonight in the Place of Power. And tomorrow night I go there again, to loose the forces that will shatter the nations of the outer world, that shall crash their cities and their pride to ruins. And when that is done, we ride forth from Koom, and with the peoples who await our coming, we shall gallop to world conquest. The hooves of our horses shall drum upon the wrecked empires of the world!"

"Shirani! Shirani!" rose the frantic shout of approval as swords flashed wildly in the torchlight. "We will follow you, princess!"

"Then make you ready tomorrow for our going forth," Shirani ordered them. "And one thing more I have to tell you."

She turned to Gary and took his arm.

"This stranger lord rides by my side

when we go forth," Shirani declared. "Honor him, my people, for he is the husband chosen by the princess of Koom."

There was a moment's hesitation, and then from the crowd rose another cry.

"We honor your husband, princess!"

But as that shout died, a hoarse, loud voice cried out, and a big, powerful figure in silver armor forced out of the crowd and came running up the steps.

It was Jhulun. The Koomian noble's handsome, arrogant face was mad with jealousy and hate. He pointed with a quivering finger at Gary, and cried out loudly to the crowd below.

"Are you of Koom to be ruled by an outland stranger?" he cried fiercely. "Yes, and a stranger who came to this land to kill your princess! I heard him say it."

"Jhulun, be silent!" blazed Shirani, lightning flashing from her stormy blue eyes.

The Koomian turned upon her a distorted, jealousy-maddened face, and laughed fiercely. "No, Shirani—since you prefer this outland dog to me, who was promised your hand, I shall see that you never wed him."

A great muttering, an angry, swelling murmur, was rising from the crowd. The words of Jhulun had sown sudden doubts.

Shirani heard, and raised her hand in imperious command for silence. Her voice flared forth wrathfully.

"My people, listen not to Jhulun, who is crazed with jealousy. This stranger lord I have chosen for mate does not desire to kill me—Jhulun but seeks to stir you up against him."

"But why should you wed any stranger, princess?" cried an angry voice from the crowd. "Why not mate with one of the ancient blood of Koom?"

There were cries of agreement. Jhulun's sullen face took on a smile of fierce satisfaction.

Shirani stiffened. And then she seemed

to flame out tangible force. She had never been so terribly, so utterly beautiful, Gary thought numbly, as now when her will had been challenged by the crowd.

"Am I or am I not your ruler?" she cried passionately. "Mutter longer against my will, and I will withhold from you the world-empire I have promised you!"

Her flaming threat silenced them. And then a warrior's strong, deep voice spoke from the crowd.

"Your will is our will, princess! If you choose this stranger for husband, we do not protest."

And a loud shout of agreement went up quickly from the great crowd that a moment before had been murmuring in dissatisfaction.

"It is well!" Shirani exclaimed. "Go back to your homes now, and tomorrow prepare your horses and swords and spears. And fear nothing, my people—though the whole world shall shake and creak tomorrow night when I loose the forces in the Place of Power, naught shall be felt here in Koom."

With a final wild roar of enthusiasm, the excited crowd began to disperse. Shirani turned to Jhulun, triumph in her face.

"You see now, Jhulun," she declared, "how fruitless was your attempt to turn my people against me. Now I have found out how venomous is your secret soul, and I warn you that if you try once more to thwart my will, you shall not long remain living."

Jhulun did not recoil from that fierce threat of the princess. The Koomian's handsome face was ghastly in its passion.

"So this," he said thickly, "is my reward for long service to you—to be cast aside for a nameless stranger."

His steely eyes seemed to dart devouring hate-flames at Gary. "So be it, then, Shirani," he grated, and strode away.

Shirani looked after him darkly. "Al-

most I think it would be wiser to order Jhulun's death now," she declared to Gary. "Yes, and I would order it this moment were it not that I cannot give cause for dissension to rise among my people on the eve of our great destiny."

She looked up into Gary's face with a gaze that was almost wistful.

"I know what you are thinking, Gary," she said. "You are still filled with horror at what I plan to do."

"Yes, I am," Gary said hoarsely. "Shirani, you cannot bring this great catastrophe on Earth. The very thought of it is evil, evil—and I tell you now, that though I love you, that love will turn to bitter hate and loathing if you succeed in your unholy intentions."

"No, Gary," she said confidently. "You will *always* love me—that I am sure of. And once this thing is done and the cataclysm has passed and is beyond mending, you will no longer feel such horror. Until the thing is done, you must remain under guard, Gary. You would give your life, I know, to thwart me and save your peoples. And while I am sure that you could never again try to kill me, yet you might do something that would hamper my plans."

She called the guards waiting watchfully a little distance away, and ordered them to return Gary to his apartment in the palace.

"Tomorrow night," she told him, "I shall come for you, for I wish you to be at my side in the Place of Power when I loose the forces there. Until then, I shall not see you, for I have much to learn from this book of the Ancient Ones, of the control of those forces."

GARY could find nothing more to say, in his present mental and physical exhaustion. He stumbled with the guards into the palace, and up to the guarded door of the apartment which he had left

with Okara and Borchhoff hours before—eternities before, it seemed now!

He staggered into the lamplit rooms and sank upon a chair. The guards outside had closed the door. Okara and Joan had been at the window, but they turned at Gary's entrance. They stared tensely at his huddled figure.

There was an aching pity, a strange, blind yearning in Joan Laird's brown eyes, as the English girl stared at Gary. But there was none of this in the yellow face of the little Japanese spy—nothing but bitter contempt and hate.

"So, Martin, you are to be Shirani's husband, her partner in the war and conquest she will carry outside this valley?" Okara hissed.

Gary raised his dark head, and stared haggardly at the Japanese.

"You heard her speak just now to the people?" he said hoarsely.

"Yes, we watched and heard from the window," said Okara burningly. "We heard you receive your reward for betraying Borchhoff and myself."

"I didn't mean to fail you," Gary said thickly. "But—I love Shirani, and when the moment came for me to kill her, I couldn't do it. I couldn't! And now I wish to God I had! For by letting her live, I've condemned our world to ruin and death."

"What do you mean?" Okara hissed, slant eyes narrowing.

Gary stared at him and at Joan's pale face, somberly, almost drunkenly, before he answered.

"The Place of Power—I've been there with Shirani. And it's *real*—the forces *do* exist there by which she can cause the whole surface of Earth to quake, and shatter every country on Earth."

"Gods of Nippon!" cried Okara, in sudden, terrible agony of comprehension. "My country—every country—smitten

down! And we have no way now to stop Shirani from doing it——"

Joan's stubborn face was white as death. "The whole world," she whispered, her eyes dilated. "People everywhere dying by millions, as the earth quakes and cracks under them——"

The Japanese's black eyes flamed up with mad passion and he pointed a shaking finger at Gary.

"*You* will bear the guilt of that cataclysm, Martin. If you had not betrayed us, if you had killed Shirani as we planned, there would be no danger now."

He started toward Gary, his slant eyes burning with terrible anger, his hands opening and closing convulsively.

"I am going to kill you, Martin," choked his passion-strangled voice in deadly accents. "You are going to die here and now for your betrayal of the world."

Gary looked dully at him as he advanced, but made no move to rise or defend himself. He sat like a sagging statue.

But Joan sprang in front of the Japanese and held him back.

"No, Okara!" she cried. "It's not Gary's fault. He didn't know, when he spared Shirani's life, that she would really have the power to bring on this catastrophe. We must think now of stopping this thing," Joan continued desperately. "There must be some way."

"There is no way, now," Okara hissed. "We had a chance, and Martin threw it away when he failed to kill that fire-witch. Now he is going to pay for her life—with his own!"

And Okara thrust the English girl aside and came on, murder flaming in his slant eyes.

He stopped three paces from Gary. There had been a sudden muffled clash of arms out in the corridor, a smothered cry,

the thud of falling bodies. Then the door burst sharply open.

Jhulun and a half-dozen other men in silver armor burst into the room. The Koomian noble's handsome face was terrible.

Okara spun around with a snarl, and Gary leaped to his feet. Too late! Before they could do more than that, Jhulun's followers overwhelmed them, leaping and crushing them to the floor.

"Bind and gag them!" Jhulun exclaimed with fierce urgency. "Be quick!"

Gary struggled wildly, all his lethargy gone, but weight of superior numbers held him crushed, and a great hand over his mouth prevented any outcry. Rapidly the three spies were bound and gagged. There had been no alarm.

"Why not kill them here?" one of the Koomians exclaimed.

"No!" Jhulun cried. "If we slay them here, Shirani will know it is my work. We will take them out of the palace by the secret stair and throw them into the flaming river. Then Shirani, and everyone else, will think they killed their guards and escaped. Be quick, before we are discovered!"

11. *The Hour of Decision*

TRUSSED up like animals about to be slaughtered, Gary and Joan and the little Japanese were hastily carried out of the room into the lamplit corridor, past the dead bodies of the guards whom Jhulun and his followers had slaughtered in a surprise attack. Gary wildly cursed himself for not foreseeing that this might happen. He might have known that Jhulun, in his raging jealousy and hate, would try to make away with the stranger who had supplanted him in Shirani's regard. And now whatever chance they might have to halt Shirani's terrible plan

was gone, for now they were going to their deaths.

"Quick!" Jhulun exclaimed. "To the secret stair!"

The three were half dragged and half carried along the dim, lamplit corridor to a spot where Jhulun touched a point in the wall. A whole section of the wall slid open, a secret door that disclosed a narrow stone stair winding downward. They were hastily hauled into it, and the door closed behind them.

Absolute darkness reigned as they were carried rapidly down the stair, and silence except for the clank of armor and swords. Then Gary heard the throbbing voice of Jhulun, beside him.

"It is dangerous to aspire to the love of princesses, stranger! You are about to learn that."

Wildly Gary sought to break the bonds around his wrists, but the cords would not give. And the gag over his mouth effectually prevented any outcry. Jhulun had prepared well.

They stopped in the darkness at the foot of the narrow stair. There was a grating sound, and a door slid open. They looked out into one of the dark courtyards behind the palace. Two men were waiting nervously with horses.

"All goes well," Jhulun whispered triumphantly. "Bring them on."

The Koomian noble led the way out into the courtyard, and the others followed carrying Gary's helpless form, and then Joan, and finally Okara. But as Okara was carried out through the narrow door, the little Japanese twisted his head so that his face scraped cruelly along the stone edge of the doorway. It scraped aside the gag over his mouth—and instantly Okara uttered a fierce, wild yell.

"Guards! Guards!"

"The slant-eyed one—kill him!" yelled Jhulun frantically.

Okara's bound form was dropped, and

the swords of Jhulun and two of his followers tore into the little spy's body. Yet he still yelled chokingly.

"Guards!"

The Koomians carrying Gary and Joan had dropped the two to help silence Okara. Lying helpless on the stone paving of the dark court, Gary heard shouts of alarm, the running feet of Shirani's guards.

"All is discovered—we must flee!" cried one of the Koomians wildly.

"At least I'll make sure this upstart dies!" cried Jhulun fiercely, and he came running back toward Gary with his bloody sword upraised.

Gary rolled desperately aside as the sword flashed down at him. The blade shattered on the stone. Jhulun, foaming with rage, sprang upon him and gripped his throat with strangling hands, throttling him. But one of his companions pulled him away, screaming a warning.

"Jhulun, the guards come! Save yourself!"

With a hoarse cry of baffled fury, Jhulun stumbled away, fleeing after his companions toward the horses.

Torches were bobbing and alarmed voices were shouting as a score of silver guards came running with drawn swords. Gary heard the clash of blades as they intercepted some of Jhulun's fleeing followers. Then through the running guards and confusion of darkness came flying a slim white figure from the palace. It was Shirani, her white face alarmed as she saw Gary's prone figure.

"Gary!" she cried with wild anxiety, bending over him and drawing her dagger to slash his bonds. "Are you hurt?"

"No," he gasped. "It was Jhulun and his men——"

"Jhulun!" Shirani's electric eyes flashed wild passion and she sprang to her feet. Her silver voice soared ragingly as she cried to the gathering guards. "Hunt

down Jhulun! Kill him and all who were with him!"

Lightning of terrible anger flared in her face. "To think that Jhulun dared do this in his jealousy! To think he dared!"

GARY had stumbled to untie Joan, and then ran to Okara's side. The little Japanese lay, his breast a bloody mess from the sword wounds he had received. Okara's yellow face was grayish, death stamped upon it. He looked up with strange fixedness as Gary loosened his bonds.

"Is the slant-eyed one killed?" Shirani exclaimed.

Terrible, burning hate came into Okara's slant black eyes as he saw Shirani bending over him. He spat feebly up at her, with dying hate.

"Witch from hell!" he croaked.

Then his burning eyes held on Gary Martin's face, and his gasping voice came in almost indistinguishable words.

"Martin, this leaves—only you—to prevent that witch from wrecking the earth. You must—must——"

He could not finish. His eyes dimmed, and a strange expression of peace settled upon his fierce face.

"*Sayonara*," he whispered faintly.

And with that whisper of farewell, Okara's body relaxed gently in death.

Gary stared down at the dead, proud face, shaken and trembling. He heard Joan sobbing.

"He was brave, this slant-eyed one," Shirani said in wonder. "Yes, even as he died, he still voiced his hate for me."

"It was he who thwarted Jhulun's plan, by giving the alarm at the cost of his own life," Gary said dully.

Dawn was breaking, a pale gray light growing around the palace. A captain of guards came running excitedly through the courts.

"Jhulun escaped, princess!" the captain reported. "We caught and killed all his companions, but Jhulun himself got away in the darkness and rode out through the city like mad."

"Search the whole valley for him!" Shirani cried, her nostrils expanding, her slim form quivering with anger. "He must be hiding somewhere in the forests of the lower valley—beat those forests until you find him. His life is forfeit—and I will richly reward the man who kills him."

Guards mounted and rode clanging out of the palace courts into the dawn-lit city, in obedience to her order.

Shirani clasped Gary's arm with her hands, her stormy blue eyes looking at him with fiercely possessive tenderness.

"You might have been killed, Gary," she exclaimed. "Oh, the great destiny that becomes mine tonight when I loose the forces in the Place of Power, would have been bitter dust and ashes to me if you had been slain."

"Dust and ashes is all you will reap from your dreadful plan, Shirani," Gary said in hoarse, desperate appeal. "These dead men around us are but the first of countless ones who will die if you continue in your mad ambition."

"Must you be always against me, my love?" Shirani cried with troubled passion, her blue eyes yearningly searching his face. Then she smiled confidently.

"You will feel differently after the thing is done tonight. You still have in you the milky sentiment of the outer world, but I will drive it from your soul with the fire of power. Yes, when we ride out knee to knee to conquest of the ruined earth, you will forget your nagging conscience and be truly my mate."

Joan was watching her. Fierce hatred shone in the brown eyes of the English girl. But Shirani, unheeding, called Grauh, the hard-faced captain of guards

who with a group of armored men awaited her orders.

"Grauh, the few soldiers you posted to guard the strangers' rooms were easily slain," she said sternly. "See that this time you put many there."

"I will watch there myself, princess," Grauh replied curtly.

"Tonight I shall come for you before I go to the Place of Power, Gary," Shirani promised again, and added fiercely, "And I shall make sure that Jhulun is caught and slain, before then."

Gary went dully with Joan and the guards back up into the black palace. When they had re-entered their quarters, he went over to the window and looked out haggardly.

The sun was rising above the volcanoes that walled the eastern edge of the valley. In the bright light, all Koom was astir, a hurrying bustle of preparations beginning everywhere. The whole black city throbbed with a pulse of unwonted excitement.

Joan spoke slowly, breaking the hush in the room.

"Borchhoff dead—and now Okara too. Just the two of us left, Gary, to stop this thing Shirani means to do."

"How *can* we stop her?" Gary cried out of the depths of his chaotic, despairing mind. "There's nothing we can do now."

"Gary, Shirani must die," Joan said solemnly. "If she does not, then tonight the countries and civilization of our world will die."

She came to his side and grasped his shoulders fiercely with her strong little hands, turning him about so that his desperate eyes looked down into hers.

"You started once to kill Shirani, Gary," she said vibrantly. "You couldn't do it, then. But you didn't realize then what an awful menace to our world she represents. Now you do realize it. And

now you must do that which you couldn't do before. Shirani must die before she unchains that terrible catastrophe tonight."

Gary groaned. "I know—I know. But Joan, I love her. And I'm not sure that I could bring myself to kill her, even now."

"Even when you know that only her death will save our civilization from ruin?" Joan cried incredulously.

"Joan, I'm not sure," he repeated, wildly agitated. "I can resolve now to kill her, for I know that that is what I should do. But when I stand face to face with her, knowing that she loves me and that I love her — I'm afraid that I wouldn't be able to do it."

"If you don't, you are the traitor that Okara called you!" Joan flamed. "A traitor to your country and to the world!"

Gary felt the fierce indictment strike home into his throbbing brain.

Desperately he exclaimed, "But even if I could bring myself to do it, Joan, there will be no opportunity. For Shirani knows that I may try something desperate to stop her. She means to keep guards close to me until she has accomplished what she plans to do tonight."

"You must *make* an opportunity!" Joan exclaimed fiercely. "She is taking you down with her into the Place of Power tonight, to be with her when she looses the forces there. Then will be your chance—when the attention of her and the guards is distracted, you can snatch her dagger out and strike her down before she can begin her work of ruin."

"There would be a chance then, yes," Gary muttered. "But I wouldn't be able to do it—I know I wouldn't."

"You must!" Joan insisted desperately. "Think of your country, Gary—think of the whole world, its people lying down tonight to sleep in peace, men and women, mothers and children. Think of

the dreadful waking when the earth shudders and reels under them!

"All those millions—their lives in the hollow of your hand! Civilization itself hanging in the balance, poised to crash into ruin tonight unless you take Shirani's life!"

And Joan's brown eyes suddenly filled with hot tears, her pale face working. She put strong, warm arms around him, her tear-stained cheek against his haggard face.

"Gary, I know that you love Shirani. But I love you, too—I have, from the first. You mustn't take upon your soul the black guilt of having ruined our world, when you could have prevented that ruin. You must kill Shirani tonight."

SHE was sobbing, her tear-smearred face pressed against him, her shoulders shaking. His arms tightened around her and a strange, cold calm invaded his fevered mind. All the mad chaos of his thoughts fell away, and an icy, inflexible determination was born in his soul.

He knew, now! He knew that all his irresolution was gone at last, that in this terrible hour when Earth was rushing toward awful destiny, his hand must not and would not fail. He loved Shirani—yes. He alone knew the throbbing strength of that love. But she was going to die at his hands, this night. He knew it.

"Don't cry, Joan," he said softly. "Everything is going to be all right."

She looked up, her brimming brown eyes and stained face unbelieving. "You mean——"

"I mean that Shirani will die in the Place of Power tonight," Gary said steadily. "I promise it."

He saw the aching doubt that persisted in Joan's torn face, the doubt that she did not need to voice.

"I couldn't kill her, before," he went

on, his voice calm and passionless. "But I will, tonight. You need not fear that I shall break my promise."

Joan believed, now. But a strange horror dawned slowly in her eyes.

"Gary, I know what you mean to do! You are going to kill her—and then take your own life!"

He said somberly, "I could not continue to live, knowing that I had her blood upon my hands."

"No," Joan wailed. "No, Gary——"

He patted her shoulder with protective, big-brother tenderness. "Do not think of it any longer, Joan. It's all going to be all right. You must rest now."

He led her to the couch by the window, made her lie down upon it. Her sobbing gradually quieted as she lay, clinging tightly to his hand. He saw in a little while that her exhausted, tear-smudged face had relaxed in sleep.

Gary sat, brooding as he looked past her sleeping form, out over the black city toward the fiery sea. He saw the Koomians hurrying excitedly back and forth in the streets, saw horses and armor and swords and spears being gathered, all the preparations that Shirani had commanded. Hour after hour those excited preparations continued.

A strange smile touched Gary's face as he watched. It was a queer place, he was thinking, to come to his end. And a queer way. Well, he had had a great run for his money—he had had adventure, and excitement, and he had Shirani's love, until he and she both died tonight.

The sun wheeled slowly down behind the towering volcano wall, as he brooded. Night stalked somberly upon tense, waiting Koom. Torches flared out in the plaza, where a great throng was expectantly gathering. The very air seemed stung with suspense. Only then did Joan awake.

She looked at him breathlessly through the dusk of the room, and whispered, "Gary, is it time?"

He heard the approach of feet along the corridor outside, and he nodded calmly.

"Yes, Joan. I hear Shirani coming now."

He touched her shoulder awkwardly. "So long, Joan. You've been a swell kid."

"Good-bye, Gary," she whispered, eyes winking brightly.

The door opened. And against a background of silver-armored guards, Shirani stood on the threshold.

"Gary, the great hour has come!" she cried vibrantly. "We go now to the Place of Power."

Shirani blazed. Her beautiful face was afire with excitement and determination, her wonderful eyes dazzling as blue lightning. The very air about her slim white figure seemed to crackle with force.

Yet her gaze upon Gary was wonderfully eager and soft, a clean, burning blue flame of love. She did not even look to where Joan stood rigid.

"I'm ready, Shirani," Gary said calmly.

Grauh and his guards had stepped watchfully to the American's side, were keeping close, observing his every motion.

"You have changed somehow, Gary," Shirani said troubledly, her eager eyes clouding. "There is something cold and strange about you——"

Then she smiled dazzlingly. "I grow nervous, I think, to be imagining such things. Come, Gary——"

Shirani led the way back out of the room and down the corridor. Grauh and his men kept close to Gary as he followed the princess out of the room.

Gary turned and looked back at Joan

as he went out. He nodded slightly to her. And that calm little nod had a terrible meaning that she read clearly:

"I will keep my promise!"

12. *The Loosing of the Forces*

THEY went down through the dusky corridors of the great palace, the armored guards keeping always close to Gary. He realized that they must have had their orders from Shirani. He had no chance of reaching her at present, but it did not trouble his cold, fixed mind. His chance would come, in the Place of Power.

They passed across the great audience hall in which a few brief days ago—so long ago, it seemed now!—the high priest Dridim had confronted Shirani. A captain of soldiers met them in this shadowy hall, saluting to Shirani a little apprehensively.

"Princess, we have not been able to find Jhulun," he reported. "And we have searched the forests of the valley all day."

Shirani's eyes flashed. "He must be hiding there somewhere. Keep searching, and be sure that when you find Jhulun, you kill him at once."

The captain stood respectfully aside, and as they went on, Shirani called passionately back to Gary, "Oh, if I had only given order to kill Jhulun last night when I thought of it! But he cannot escape death long."

They passed out of the palace into the night, and Shirani halted for a moment on the palace steps above the plaza.

Tens of thousands of people, the whole population of Koom, was jammed into the triangular plaza before them, torches waving wild above a sea of white, taut faces. As their princess emerged, a tremendous roar of voices went up, beating

on Gary's ears in waves of stunning sound.

It was a scene to make the blood race. The vast, shouting throng before them, the shaking red rays that glared from the distant fire sea across the black roofs of Koom, the mighty volcanoes that towered all around the valley with snowy slopes tinged with bloody light. Yet Gary's pulse did not even heighten, in the strange, cold calm of terrible purpose that possessed him.

"Shirani! Shirani!" crashed the frantic shout of the crowd.

Shirani flung her hand high in greeting. "Now has the great hour come, my people!" she cried clearly. "I go to the Place of Power, to win for us the lordship of the world."

Horses were waiting at the foot of the palace steps. Lightly Shirani sprang to the back of her stamping black stallion.

Gary and the guards mounted. The crowd that packed the plaza gave back to make an avenue through their midst. And through that solid mass of humanity, Shirani and her companions galloped. Thousands on thousands of voices yelled wildly in Gary's ears from either side, a hoarse, tremendous acclaim:

"Shirani!"

Then they were galloping on through the dark stone streets of Koom, Shirani's white figure leading, Grauh and his men still keeping their horses close beside the American.

"Oh, Gary, is not one such hour as this worth a hundred lifetimes of security?" cried Shirani's silver voice, her face glorious as she looked back at him.

Gary did not—could not—answer. For as they rode, his hungry eyes were drinking in her supernal loveliness for the last time. He knew that within the hour he would kill her.

They rode along the edge of the fire sea. Never had that lake of burning lava

seemed to bubble and ripple so evilly to Gary as tonight. And the fire cataract that tumbled and roared from high in the side of the frowning volcano seemed to gush with enhanced splendor.

Shirani rode with her golden head fearlessly high, under the niagara of fiery lava. As Gary followed with the guards, he saw that Grauh and his half-dozen men were pale with apprehension. Yet loyally they followed where their princess led. And now Shirani had ridden into the tunnel in the volcano side, and they followed thankfully out of the stunning roar into the comparative quiet of the passage.

Already Shirani had dismounted. In her belt beside her dagger was thrust the golden tube that was the key to the Place of Power. And she carried the flat metal book of the Ancient Ones, and also had brought a silver lamp, which she now lighted. Then she spoke reassuringly to Grauh and his men as they stood doubtfully beside Gary.

"Fear nothing, my men! The way we go is strange but nothing can harm you."

"We fear," Grauh said steadily, "but we will follow you, princess."

Shirani looked at Gary's strange, set face, as though trying to read his strained gray eyes.

"I know that you do not fear, Gary," she said, "for you walked this way with me but last night."

"No, Shirani," he said, almost gently, "I am not afraid of anything, any more."

Doubtfully her brilliant eyes clung to Gary's strange face. Then she turned and with the lighted lamp started ahead down the high, winding tunnel that the Ancient Ones had hollowed ages before.

GRAUH and his men followed closely, with Gary. And as they went on down the dark passage, into the bowels of the mighty volcano, they could hear all about them the whispering and creak-

ing and rustling of mighty, prisoned forces.

Gary saw the Koomians recoil a little as Shirani led out along the edge of that tremendous chasm in which the huge fountain of living lava shot ceaselessly upward. The men seemed to breathe easier when they were again in the dark, solid rock tunnel.

At last they were at the entrance to the tomb of the Ancient Ones. That great cavern stretched before them, dark and solemn and hushed, the little glow of Shirani's lamp only partially illuminating the countless rows of high stone blocks upon which the stony, semi-human bodies of the Ancient Ones lay in death and night.

"Gods!" whispered one of Grauh's men shakenly. "We look upon the mighty Ancient Ones, themselves."

"They are dead bodies only," Shirani's silver voice pealed. "For ages they have lain here in darkness and silence and death—they cannot harm you."

Yet it seemed to Gary Martin's strangely strained nerves that as they went forward through the great tomb, the atmosphere here was pregnant with dark menace, with a throbbing, pulsing hate.

Shirani seemed to feel it, too. For she stopped when they were but a dozen feet from the great silvery doors in the end-wall of the cavern-tomb. And her face was strangely pale in the light of her upheld lamp.

"Gary, I feel something *living* in this tomb tonight," she whispered. "A living, terrible hatred——"

"Then abandon your terrible plan, Shirani," pleaded Gary, a last hope flickering up in him. "Death waits for you if you go into the Place of Power—I tell you, I know it! If you love me, give up this intention of yours."

Shirani's golden head jerked up proudly. "No, Gary! I have won to the very

threshold of my great ambition, and I shall not draw back now. It is but eager imagination that makes me feel such things."

She stepped forward with fierce pride toward the huge, silvery double doors of the Place of Power. Grauh and his men followed with Gary. The faces of the Koomians were pale and fearful.

Shirani drew the golden tube from her belt. But as she did so, the thing that had so terribly startled her and Gary on their first visit to this place, happened now again. The mysterious, hidden mechanism installed here by the Ancient Ones operated again as they approached the doors.

Out of the aperture in the rock wall above the doors, there issued once more that deep, unhuman voice, speaking mechanically in rusty, alien accents.

"Oh ye who seek to open these doors—beware!"

As the deep voice rolled forth, Grauh and his soldiers started wildly.

"The Ancient Ones speak to us!" cried one of the Koomians in panic.

"It is but a machine hidden in the rock that speaks!" Shirani reassured them swiftly. "It spoke to us, before."

"But it is *still* warning us, princess," whispered the terrified man.

And in fact, Gary could hear the echo of those deep words reverberating through the great, gloomy cavern in a hollow whisper, just as it had done before.

"*Beware*——" warned that throbbing murmur, over and over.

"Do not fear!" Shirani told the Koomians. "And now prepare yourselves, for we are about to enter the Place of Power. You will find it a terrible place, but there is nothing there to harm you if you follow my orders in all things."

She leveled the golden tube at the silvery doors. The thread of white force

leaped from the tube into the tiny keyhole. And silently, ponderously, the great double doors swung inward.

Again on Gary's face beat the raging blaze of light from the Place of Power, and once more the ceaseless crashing thunder of the infernal fires smote upon his ears. Grauh and his soldiers trembled, their faces aghast in the wild light.

"Fear not, I say!" Shirani's voice rose commandingly. "And follow me."

She moved fearlessly through the doors, and Gary followed with the quivering Koomian guards. They reached again the narrow rock shelf, beyond and below which stretched the fiery abyss.

There were hoarse exclamations from the soldiers as they first looked into the awful depths. Far, far below, the vast hollow and the seven gigantic chasms that radiated star-like from it, still seethed with boiling fires.

Shirani was moving along the shelf, out onto the narrow rock spur that pointed like a finger into the abyss.

"Follow!" she cried over the roaring din.

Grauh and his men moved forward with Gary, keeping faithfully beside him even as they walked tremblingly out on the narrow spur. They gasped with relief when they reached the sunken platform at its end.

Shirani was already leaning tensely over the great mechanism of the Ancient Ones, inspecting the eight huge hemispherical lenses that pointed downward, and the eight levers that controlled them. She turned, her beautiful face triumphant.

"All is in readiness!" she exclaimed. "The book of the Ancient Ones has made all clear to me.

"First must I loose the great force that will stir the fires below into raging, greater life. And then the seven beams of force that will cause those seven

cracks in Earth's crust to widen, buckling the whole crust of Earth."

GARY drew himself tensely together. He knew that the moment was almost at hand, the time when he must kill Shirani.

He avoided her eyes, keeping his gaze fixed on the dagger that hung at her belt, and on the tender, silken curve of her left breast where he must sink the blade.

"Follow my orders, now," Shirani shouted to the guardsmen.

Instantly Grauh and the warriors seized Gary. Before the stunned American could resist, they had bound his hands and feet. They propped him up against the rail of the platform, helpless to move.

"Shirani, why do you do this?" Gary cried wildly.

Shirani came toward him, her glowing face inflexible. "Gary, I can take no chances with you," she shouted above the roar. "I felt that at the last moment you would try to wreck the mechanism, or do something else to stop me, so I warned Grauh and his men to bind you thus."

Terrible realization crashed into Gary's brain. His desperate plan had been thwarted. He could not kill Shirani, now. All the cold, somber resolution that had held him in icy calm dissolved now into wild emotion as he realized that.

"Shirani, for God's sake turn back from what you plan!" he cried wildly. "Don't do this thing—don't——"

She came closer to him, where he struggled vainly to break his bonds. Her silken arms went around him, and she pressed passionately close to him. She kissed him, with strangely fierce tenderness, her lips flaming against his own, her glorious eyes pools of glowing love. And she cupped his wild face between her hands as she spoke to him.

"Gary, in a few minutes all will be done. Then we begin our love and life together—not in ignoble security, but in high adventure and conquest."

Shirani turned commandingly then to Grauh and his men, who were shrinking, terrified, their eyes full of panic.

"You need not stay here now, Grauh. You and your men may wait in the Tomb of the Ancient Ones."

"Yes, princess!" Grauh's voice was a sob of relief. Tremblingly he and his soldiers moved back along the rocky spur, and back through the open doors into the dark cavern-tomb.

Shirani and Gary were left alone on the platform. Shirani turned tensely toward the great mechanism. Her flashing eyes glanced at a page of the metal book of diagrams, as though to make certain, and then she stretched forth her hand to one of the eight levers.

Gary watched, petrified. In that terrible moment, there rushed over his brain a vision of the whole outer world, of great cities gay with night pleasures, of peaceful hamlets slumbering under the stars, of ships moving upon the dark, heaving oceans. And he seemed to see the striking of the tremendous cataclysm, the towering cities shaken suddenly by the quaking earth into showers of wreckage that fell upon screaming throngs, the slumbering villages engulfed by awful cracks and chasms, the seas mounting above the tortured earth and crashing in vast waves of deluge and destruction.

Shirani drew the first lever two-thirds of the way back in its graduated slot, and a tremendous beam of pale white force lanced down from one of the eight hemispherical lenses, a ray of incalculable power driving right down into the center of the abyss of fire.

Instantly the roaring below swelled titanicly, terribly. Looking down, Gary's dazzled eyes saw a tumultuous change

taking place in the fiery depths, a piling up of lava masses, molten rock boiling slowly upward in the abyss like a rising tide of flaming destruction.

"See—the power of the Ancient Ones at work!" cried Shirani thinly over the awfully augmented thunder. "Now I loose their full forces upon Earth!"

She was reaching for the other seven levers, which controlled the lenses pointed at the seven great radiating chasms.

"Shirani, don't!" Gary cried, struggling wildly.

Then as he threshed madly, Gary's eyes perceived something that petrified him. A crouching form, creeping stealthily and swiftly from the Tomb of the Ancient Ones, into the Place of Power.

"Shirani!" he yelled wildly, and she turned her blazing face. And she too saw the advancing figure.

It was a man in silver armor, who now was running recklessly along the rock shelf toward the spur at whose end they were. And then the man was leaping out along the narrow spur toward them.

"*Jhulun!*" cried Shirani.

It was the Koomian noble. In the cosmic blaze and thunder of this terrible place, his distorted face was diabolical in hate.

"Yes, *Jhulun!*" he shouted hoarsely as he leaped down into the sunken platform. "The man you cast aside—the man you ordered killed! I hid in the Tomb of the Ancient Ones, when I fled," he cried. "I knew that when you came here, I would have my chance to take vengeance on you."

For a heart-beat, a terrible look came into Shirani's eyes.

"Dridim said that out of that tomb death would come——" her voice faltered. Then her silver tones raged up flaringly. "Guards! Come quickly, *Grauh!*" Out of the cavern-tomb, sum-

moned by that piercing cry *Grauh* and his men came running. They saw, and leaped forward with wild cries. The whole rock spur was trembling and shaking crazily in the shrieking, screaming winds that howled up from the abyss of rising fires.

Jhulun saw the guards coming, and he sprang forward upon Shirani. He grasped her dagger hand as she struck at him.

"You'll not escape me!" he screamed madly. "I am going to die, but you shall go with me, Shirani!"

"Shirani!" yelled Gary wildly, straining with superhuman strength to break his bonds.

Jhulun had grasped Shirani around the body, and was leaping up with her onto the rail above the abyss.

Gary's bonds snapped. He rushed forward, and as he did so, with an insane, terrible laugh, *Jhulun* leaped with Shirani in his arms, off the rail into the fiery depths.

"Gary——" a wild, silver cry stabbed up thinly from the thundering depths.

Gary rushed crazily forward, looked downward, saw two black specks falling, dropping, racing each other down into the dreadful deeps.

"Shirani! Shirani!" he screamed wildly.

The spur shook and threw him from his feet. He heard wild cries from *Grauh* and the soldiers, and saw them turning and fleeing. The whole cavern, the whole abyss, was trembling and quivering and boiling with rising fire as the white ray still stabbed down into it. Gary flung back the lever, and the ray ceased. But the boiling fires of the shaking abyss still surged upward with solemn world-chords of dead diastrophism.

Gary turned drunkenly, fled back along the spur to the rock shelf, and on through the open doors into the cavern-tomb. Weeping, almost mindlessly, he staggered on up through lightless, shuddering tun-

nels and caverns toward the surface. He came to himself only when he stumbled into the horses waiting in the mouth of the tunnel, whinnying in panic.

Then Gary found himself on the back of one, riding out under the fiery cataract, galloping wildly around the edge of the fire sea toward the city Koom. The lava sea was terribly agitated, its molten waves surging up and down in nightmare tides, and swirling in great maelstroms.

GARY looked up into the night sky and cried out hoarsely. From all the great ring of snowy volcanoes around the valley, fire was shooting into the air. Great showers of fiery ashes were bursting up, and glowing red streams of lava were already pouring from the craters and rolling down the snowy slopes into the valley.

The hot ashes were falling in choking clouds as he galloped into Koom. The ground was shaking under his feet, stone walls and roofs were crashing, and the people of Koom were running about in wild, insensate panic.

The horse he rode bore Gary Martin straight through the panic-maddened throng, toward the palace. And as he rode up to it, he saw a small figure in blue silk running out from it.

"Joan!" he cried wildly, riding up to her.

"Gary, what has happened?" she screamed. "Shirani——"

"Dead!" he cried. "Dead by an awful end! Jhulun did it, but before he did, she loosed one of the forces down there. It won't cause the great catastrophe to Earth—she didn't get that far. But it has stirred up the volcanic fires of the depths, and this village is going to be destroyed. Joan, we must ride for the tunnel!"

He rode after and caught another horse bolting past, and Joan mounted it. Then they galloped at reckless speed out of the

maddened city, and down the dark valley along the glowing red lava river.

The valley of Koom had by now become a terrible picture of doom. From all the giant volcanoes around it, continuous showers of blazing ashes were bursting and raining down like an incredible fall of meteors. And from the craters, greater and greater floods of red lava were pouring down the snowy slopes into the doomed valley.

Gary looked back as they rode wildly. The giant volcano at the head of the valley that stood over the Place of Power was a terrific sight. It was belching a vast cloud of flame and smoke and burning embers that were falling in a smothering death-rain on the black city. And the fire sea was bursting its banks, ravaging through the dying city.

"This lava river will be rising swiftly!" Gary cried hoarsely. "Unless we get through the tunnel before the rise catches us, we've no chance."

It seemed eternities before they rode up at last to the mouth of the tunnel through the mountains, at the end of the valley—the passage through which the fiery river flowed into the outside world.

Gary saw that the lava stream was already rising in the tunnel, nearly to the level of the narrow ledge that was the only pathway through the passage.

"We'll have to *ride* through the tunnel—we can never get through in time on foot!" he cried. "Ride hard, Joan!"

Gary looked back for a last glance as their horses entered the perilous passage. Almost all the valley of Koom was now being flooded by the molten lava pouring down from the surrounding flaming craters. All trace of the black city had vanished in the burning flood, and the whole valley was shuddering under the continuous rain of burning ashes.

Then he and Joan were riding on into the fearful tunnel, galloping recklessly

along the narrow ledge just above the rising river of molten rock. He jumped his bolting horse over the breaks in the ledge, and Joan followed his example. The lava was rising fast now, threatening to wash over the ledge they followed. The horses snorted wildly in the superheated, sulfurous air, raced forward crazily, maddened by it.

Then into Gary's reeling brain penetrated consciousness that they had burst out of the infernal tunnel, that the horses were bolting up a slope of deep snow, in the open air. And that air was suddenly icy, striking through their thin silk garments. Gary's mind was darkening now, but he clung to his steed until the lava river, roaring like a spring freshet of fire, was far down the snowy slope behind them.

He turned, and saw in the night sky the blood-red, shaking glare of the annihilation of the hidden valley. Then everything was dark to him, he was falling from his horse, and he heard Joan's frantic voice as from a great distance.

"Gary! Gary——"

13. *Epilog*

THE little mud-brick mission, squatting bravely on the drab, rolling plain somewhere upon the hazy borders of Tibet and China, had an English flag fluttering bravely in the chill sunlight. The colorful flag could be seen for a far greater distance across the plain than the mission itself, or the miserable village that lay near by.

Gary Martin and Joan Laird came riding slowly, wearily, toward it, from the direction of the high, blue-white mountains that loomed on the distant western skyline. They looked like nomad wanderers of the wastes, for they wore shapeless Tibetan sheep garments, and ragged fur caps.

Gary and Joan had found the garments and food in the abandoned camp of the nomads outside the mountains, once they had toilsomely made their way out through the snowy peaks and passes. It was evident that the vast volcanic eruption inside the mountains had caused the hordes of superstitiously waiting nomads to flee in panic haste.

They stopped their horses, by common consent, a half-mile from the mission, Gary pointed to the flag.

"They'll take care of you here, Joan—they're your own people."

"Gary, aren't you stopping here with me?" she asked, her brown eyes watching him achingly.

Gary's lean, tanned face was years older in appearance. Strange, deep lines were cut in it that would never be erased. And the hair at his temples was fringed with white.

He looked away from her, his unfathomable gray eyes sweeping the drab horizon.

"No, Joan, I'm going on to Chengtu. Cray, my superior, is still waiting for a report on my mission."

"Gary, don't go like this!" she begged, her eyes glimmering with fine tears. "I can't stand it.

"Do you remember," she continued swiftly, "that night in the palace, when I told you that I loved you? I meant it, Gary—I still mean it. Say the word, and I'll go anywhere in the world with you."

He smiled faintly. "No, Joan, you couldn't. The British secret service couldn't very well marry the American secret service."

"I'll resign!" she cried, but he shook his head.

"They wouldn't let you."

Joan winked back her tears and said steadily, "I understand, Gary. It's still Shirani, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's still Shirani," he said slowly,

his eyes on the far horizon. "Ruthless and terrible as her plans may have been, it will *always* be Shirani, with me."

"I hated her—I still hate her!" Joan cried fiercely.

Gary smiled, and reached out his hand. "Good-bye, Joan."

"No, not good-bye," Joan said, struggling to smile through her tears. "Maybe some day——"

"Yes—maybe some day," Gary said.

He leaned and kissed her, her warm quivering lips clinging to his. Then he urged his horse on.

Joan sat watching him, as he rode slowly eastward. His tired pony and shapeless figure diminished in the distance, growing smaller in her blurred vision until at last she could no longer even make out the dwindling speck that was disappearing in the immensity of the plain.

[THE END]