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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"Rald was suddenly aware of his own smallness."

The Goddess Awakes

By CLIFFORD BALL

A striking weird novelette about a roving soldier of fortune, a sinister, evil stone idol in the form of a black panther, and a race of women warriors

TWILIGHT faded rapidly into night as the two fugitives gained the ragged summit of the mountain ridge. They paused there for a moment's rest as the full moon swept over

the black crags and illuminated the valley below. Great clefts and crevices, shadowed by broken ground and projecting boulders, presented a treacherous path for night travelers; it was difficult to deter-

mine solid objects from the unsubstantial in the misleading network of black and silver. The two halted to gaze at the apparent desolation of empty pits and jagged peaks, then at each other and, finally, at the plain behind them, over which they had so recently painfully struggled.

"If this be refuge," said Rald, "then hell at least would be brighter!"

"Refuge, like gold, is where you find it," replied the weary Thwaine, shifting his wiry frame to rest a blood-stained thigh on a convenient boulder. "Perhaps the valley is a trifle forbidding, but when I recall the thirsty steel of those devils back there on the battlefield I welcome these concealing cliffs with a thankful heart."

"Always the orator!" grunted Rald. "Make a propitiating address to the demons, who no doubt await us below, before we descend to them—will you?"

With the aid of his teeth and a begrimed right hand Rald succeeded in replacing a blood-stained bandage about his left wrist.

Although wounded and bleeding, the two comrades realized they had been extraordinarily lucky; for all but a few scattered fragments of the Livian army lay stark in death, food for the buzzards and the crawling things of the desert. The fugitives had fought desperately, but Hagar's hosts had pierced and smashed their last crimson line; the banners had fallen, and Rald saw his king transfixed with the same spear that had just emerged from the vitals of his prince. The Livians were crushed beyond hope of recovery. Thwaine, ever alert, read the decision in his companion's eyes and joined him in flight over the bloody sands where buzzards already hovered above torn and mangled forms that had been men; they both knew that unless they placed a comfortable distance between themselves and

their pursuers the swords of the soldiers whose task it was to eliminate all survivors would wipe out their lives. These same lives they had dedicated for a paltry sum (only a portion of which had been received) to Livia in her war against Hagar.

"So ends Livia!" commented Thwaine. "Why do we always pick the losing side to fight on? Once in a while we should be victors!"

"Mercenary's fortune! I am inclined to return to thievery!" exclaimed Rald.

"What difference? Stealing for a king or for yourself? At least, when you claim the spoils of war you can boast of them without fearing a rope or the executioner's blade! Or," asked Thwaine, slyly, "are your inclinations leading you back to Forthe and a certain lady?"

"Faith!" swore the ex-chief. "What spoils have we beyond our sores?" He ignored the last remark completely. "Let's get below somewhere; the night-winds are beginning to chill."

Both men were in rags. The generals bought hired mercenaries a breechclout, sword, plenty of weak wine—and little else. These necessities were about all expected or demanded. Weary bones and blood-caked wounds were habitual to them, a state to be accepted as natural; so except for an occasionally deeper breath or muttered imprecation they disregarded their condition and proceeded to descend the twisting trail of the mountain pass.

RALD led the way, his huge form, so well sheathed in its envelope of sinewy muscles, completely shadowing the smaller and wiry body of his boon companion. In spite, however, of the difference in their sizes and the contrast of Rald's gray eyes, long limbs and light skin to his fellow mercenary's dark, ferret-like, suspicious eyes, small stature and swarthy complexion, the twain were a

dangerous combination and held reputations of note in many widely scattered countries. Their swords were for sale in war against any land but that of Forthe, their native kingdom. Perhaps Rald's vagabond allegiance was a trifle stronger than Thwaine's, as the former owed homage not only to his kingdom but also to a certain lady of the realm, a member of the royal family.

"Any food I can get must be taken as charity," announced the slighter warrior. "That dancing-girl got every last coin of mine two nights ago."

"A lot of use they'll be to her!" laughed Rand. "They were not of gold. Livia is no more, and her currency is not worth the stupid heads imprinted on it!"

"By the Seven, it's so! What a joke on her!"

Sliding, stumbling, limping in pain and weariness over rough boulders and treacherous shale, the two refugees came at last to where the canyon narrowed into a twisting defile barely wide enough to permit them to walk side by side. A thin trickle of water flowed now on one side of their path, then on the other; from somewhere ahead came the dull roar of an unseen waterfall. As they halted to slake their raging thirsts, the moon, now high overhead, flooded the rocky passage with such brilliance that twin shadows flickered and skipped above the reflecting waterflow.

"Wish I was back in Zan's wine-shop," grumbled Thwaine, "with stout ale and a cozy wench! This is a place for ghosts and demons!"

Rald, who constantly sought to contradict his comrade's moods, being gloomy when Thwaine was boisterous and merry when he was despondent, laughed cheerfully. Echoes shattered the far-flung vibrations in a hundred rocky corners and the smaller man grasped his sword-hilt in startled apprehension as the distorted

notes conjured up an invisible and surrounding host. But Rald was amused.

"You 'welcomed these concealing cliffs' a short while back," he reminded. "Show me a fleshy demon, if you can, and I'll carve a steak or two for the appetites gnawing our stomachs! I like your phantoms no better than any other man, but, since I forsook thievery for the so-called glory of warfare, it's the ghosts of hunger that plague me most."

"'Always the orator!'" mimicked Thwaine in his turn.

Suddenly, swiftly serious, Rald snatched his companion's arm, shoved him headlong into the shadow of a protecting boulder and leaped to concealment behind an adjoining projection.

"Look!"

Several yards ahead a slight elevation led to a low wall or mound of rock. Above and behind this natural rampart, boldly outlined in moonlight, was the torso of a human being. From their lower position the fugitives observed the silent menace wearing fighting-girdle and breastplates, with shoulder-length hair bound by a metal clasp behind the ears to keep stray locks from interfering with eyesight at perhaps a crucial moment, and the easily held and naked sword. The newcomer stood alone and bore a confident air, suggesting that other allies were near at hand. The mercenaries saw that, while possibly a foe, here was no minion of Hagar's; for the well-known scarlet emblem of the conquering king was absent from the chest. It was obvious, too, their presence had been discovered already, perhaps detected after Rald's betraying merriment.

Thwaine, with his quick perception, noticed certain distinctive curves and swore: "By the Seven, a woman in fighting-mail!"

"Hold!" came the regulation challenge. Indubitably, it *was* a woman, but her tone

was stern and war-like. "Throw down your arms and advance!"

Astonished, Thwaine whispered hastily: "Maybe a demon in woman's form . . . succubus——"

"I'll talk!" warned Rald. "Slip along the shadows there and strike the steel from her hand. Quick! There may be more, and we can use a hostage." Then aloud: "Ho, woman, why do you accost peaceful travelers with such inhospitable manners? We seek only rest and comfort, we but——"

Thwaine had taken but two cautious steps forward when a noose slithered from above and wound itself about his crouched form. Choking, he staggered backward, clawing at his throat. With a sweep of his sword Rald severed the strangling cord. Glancing upward, he had a brief glimpse of a well-rounded female figure poised on the rocks above and clad, like their accoster, in burnished mail; in uplifted hands she held a jagged stone. For the space of two heart-beats he saw her; then the boulder struck the base of his neck with stunning force and consciousness left his body before it touched the ground.

RALD awoke in semi-darkness. Bit by bit, very slowly, he became aware of things about him. Somewhere water was falling—whether stream or rainfall he did not know or care. Above he saw a seamed stone ceiling and he was conscious the object supporting his reclining form was some kind of a couch. The room, he could tell by the ceiling, was small, and he observed no windows within the restricted limits of his view. Gentle hands—female, it seemed—were engaged in applying a soothing massage to his various abrasions. There was a heavy, dull ache in his head and his neck was too stiff to turn. Vaguely he thought of Thwaine, but his debilitated limbs re-

fused to obey the dim commands he sought to impart to an exhausted brain; he lay still and drifted back into a dream-racked sleep wherein he dwelt once more in beloved Forthe to carouse in the native taverns and drink the red wines of Ygoth's slopes. Throughout his dream the memory of a lady stirred his pulse's strength and a slight smile rested on the hitherto pain-racked lips.

When he awoke again it was night, or at least he so surmised after seeing blank darkness beyond and through the iron network of a doorway and a sputtering torch thrust into a hanging bracket on the wall. From a tousled couch on the opposite side of the prison cell his fellow mercenary regarded him gravely.

One of Thwaine's wrists was encircled by a ringlet of steel attached to an accompanying chain which was, in turn, secured to another ring imbedded in the wall. An ankle was fastened likewise to a circlet in the floor; so the prisoner could move into restricted positions without taking leave of his bed. When Rald attempted to swing himself erect he discovered that he too was confined in a similar fashion.

"Well," he demanded of the solemn Thwaine, "who has us, and why are we chained like captured white apes from Sorjoon?"

"Succubi, I think! And the reason must be because we are men!"

"What do they welcome here—apes?"

"Listen. For two days and nights I've lain——"

"Two—days and nights?"

"You've been unconscious that long. The woman who smote you with the rock almost made a thorough job of it. But, it seems, it was intended that we be taken as captives and not as corpses. The woman we first saw, the one commanding the party, told me so; nothing else, though—for a female she has a very re-

strained tongue! The woman who comes thrice a day to minister to your wounds and the other who guards the corridor without—and is probably listening to our conversation——”

“Women! Women!” exclaimed Rald, clutching an aching skull. “Why all these women? Isn’t it enough that I, who fought and conquered the strongest adversaries Hagar’s gladiator pits could furnish, should be knocked cold by a woman with a pebble, without waking up to hear you bellowing of more females, over and over, like a chattering monkey? Who is king or chief of this place? Name me the lord and master of this superfluity of women and we’ll sell him our swords—or stick them through him!”

“We have no swords,” reminded Thwaine, quietly. Always, one of the two remained exasperatingly serene while the other indulged in emotional tantrums. Thwaine could excel in the former role. “And as far as I can determine, the ruler or master here is Cene—a woman.”

“Faith!” Rald rattled his chains in disgust. Then another thought caused his expression to change to more cheerful lines. “A country without men, eh? What opportunities, comrade! We won’t stay imprisoned for long!”

“Don’t be misled. I was also inspired with the same idea. There was a very comely wench who served my food as you lay unconscious. When I attempted an embrace, she——” Wordlessly, he turned his face and exposed three parallel and jagged wounds below an ear. “Like a tiger! And entirely without feelings, for she came afterward and shaved both of us as unconcerned as if we had been wooden.”

Rald felt of his smooth cheeks. “I wish I had awaked then!”

“Your jugular was safer as you slept!”

THERE was the sound of a scraping sandal from the darkness of the passage without, and a pointed, elfin face appeared and surveyed the prison through one of the iron-framed apertures. The features were those of a girl in her teens, fresh with vitality and youth, but she wore a soldier’s livery and the accompanying fighting circlet bound her dark curls. Her mien was serious and there was a sense of responsibility in her carriage.

“You are feeling better, man?” she inquired of Rald.

“I am *not*, my goddess!”

Humor was wasted on the girl-soldier. Her eyes became sympathetic.

“I had better, perhaps, report to my captain?”

“You may inform your captain our condition would improve remarkably—yes, instantaneously—if we were given back our swords!”

The guard’s face expressed a mixture of emotions that rapidly became involved as her sense of duty struggled with her awe of this giant with such commanding tones. She took a backward step and observed the strength of the iron bars. They had not seemed so great a barrier between her and these powerful creatures when her head was between them.

“You are—*men!* You have not the right to bear arms!”

Thwaine and Rald stared at each other in amazement.

“My dear lady!” said Thwaine, finally, in his most suave manner. “We have earned the right to bear arms——”

“I am not a lady!”

“By Nargarth’s devils!” swore Rald, choking.

“I am a soldier of the Guards!”

“Of course,” agreed Thwaine, soothingly. The corner of his mouth, the side which could not be observed by their captor, snarled ferociously at Rald, and the *ex-thief* subsided. “It is obvious. But

this country of yours is strange to us and we do not fully understand your customs; so pray forgive us our questions and our apparent lack of intelligence. We mean no offense. Could you tell us *why* we are prisoners and what crime we may have unknowingly committed?"

"Why—you are men!"

Rald, the irrepressible, roared his mirth. The girl, believing that in some way these barbarians were making sport of her, grew white with anger.

"Faith! It's the first time a woman judge ever condemned me for that!" chuckled the mercenary, his wounds forgotten and his chains rattling a vigorous accompaniment. "Wait until I tell *this* in the taverns!"

"You may never live to tell it if you are not quiet!" growled Thwaine savagely as he saw that his oily persuasion had been a straw cast to the wind.

"It is against orders to converse with prisoners," stated their guard between set teeth. Her voice had become the flat monotone so frequently employed by officers on the drilling-grounds.

"But wait, please!" begged Thwaine. "Whose orders?"

The girl hesitated, half turned to depart, and paused to regard them thoughtfully. These strange creatures, despite their attitudes toward her, *were* fascinating, she concluded. And the smaller one spoke respectfully even if the brutish captive did act like a forest beast.

She surrendered a technical point.

"Throal's orders."

"And who is Throal?"

"Don't you know?" Her voice expressed extreme astonishment. "Why, everyone knows Throal!" Her eyes bespoke her summation of their intelligence. Of course, they were only *men!* "Throal is God, the Ancient One, and he and his daughter, Hess, rule all the world!"

Thwaine stared at Rald, "Do you

know of this god who appears to have become interested in us?"

"No! I have never fought for him or stolen for him, but if his sacred orders were to shackle me in this underground cage, then I will admit that we must be acquainted."

"You deride Throal?" gasped the horrified guard.

"Better than that!" shouted Rald, "We'll dethrone him!"

Wide-eyed, amazed at the boldness of the barbarians, the girl fled to the post she had abandoned in the corridor.

"You loud-mouthed fool!" cursed Thwaine. "Why did you not allow me to find out something about this place?"

"You haven't made much progress during the two days I lay unconscious!"

The ex-thief began to rub his arm-chains against an edge of the iron cot in an effort to test their strength.

"Ho! Guard! Guard!" shouted Thwaine.

Almost instantly the elfin face reappeared in the doorway, registering both alarm and curiosity.

"Inform your captain, please," requested the smaller man calmly, "that my fellow prisoner is attempting to burst his chains and that I do not wish to anger Throal by permitting him to succeed in his outrageous endeavor—even by remaining silent!"

FROZEN in limb and face, Rald gazed at his comrade while their guard ran for aid. Three nerve-shattering notes sounded from a set of alarm cymbals stationed somewhere outside in the passage, and soon a rapid patter of footwear announced the approach of reinforcements. Still the ex-thief stared his amazement.

Thwaine whispered softly: "Pretend to be angered at me! We will be taken to this god or his representative and have a chance to find a way out of these dun-

geons—perhaps! At least they will have to remove these chains to move us. Understand?"

As Rald nodded his appreciation of his comrade's strategy, the shuffling of sandals, mingled with the clinking of light mail and a murmur of feminine voices, drew near. A stalwart brunette commanded an abrupt halt in front of their cell. Behind her the interested prisoners saw a line consisting of six similarly attired females all armed in the full panoply of the battlefield.

"Why the alarm, Ating?" queried the leader of their summoner.

"I thought, my captain, it was best. The little one, called Thwaine, warned me that the great one, Rald, was bursting his chains. He said he did not wish to witness such a defiance of Throal's commands!"

The captain's eyes swung to Thwaine, who bowed as abjectly as his chains would permit. "Commendable! I shall recommend him to Cene; perhaps he may be spared to join the other men in the slave-pits. Meanwhile, I have received orders to escort both prisoners to an audience with the queen as soon as the larger one regained consciousness. Ating, unlock the cell!"

Ating was not gifted with the stout caliber possessed by the majority of the soldiers, for her hands shook as she detached the prison's keys from her belt and she obviously experienced difficulty both in unlocking the door and loosening the inmate's chains. So as to discourage any idea of possible escape, the leg-cuff was left fastened and its mate, which had been attached to a ring in the wall, was coupled onto the other ankle. Rald, accustomed to lengthy strides, became indignant, but three sword-points hovering about his breast and throat subdued him to coherency.

"Thwaine, my friend," he said, "it may

be that these are only women; by their curves and voices it would seem so, but I think this is an evil place and I detect an unearthly odor!"

"Now who speaks of demons?"

"The prisoners will be quiet!" ordered the captain of the Guards, not even blushing when Rald winked at her.

With two women before them and the rest, including Ating, their former guard, bringing up the rear and warily fingering drawn weapons, the two mercenaries were led out into the corridor.

To their right stretched a low-roofed passage lit at frequent intervals by the ironwood torches that burned for days, the material of which could be found in nearly every land and the usefulness of its lighting facilities being virtually indispensable to many peoples. The flickering flames cast a multitude of shadows, now before and now behind, as the captives and their guards passed the evenly spaced niches in which they were suspended. Rald stumbled occasionally as his long limbs sought to increase the distance between his encumbering shackles, and swore when he staggered; but Thwaine, whose shorter legs did not hinder him so much, strode confidently, wearing a thoughtful air and darting a glance now and then to where Ating formed part of the rear guard.

Rald noted that the corridor sloped gradually upward, and he breathed a sigh; he would be glad to see the sky and feel fresh air again. There was an abrupt twist in the passage; as they rounded it the ex-thief, straining his eyes through the mixture of shadows and light to see what lay before him, perceived a figure advancing along the corridor. As the figure drew near he gasped in amazement. Indubitably, it was a man, the first they had seen. But what a man! Naked except for a short cloth suspended about his loins, with every rib prominent through

his emaciated flesh, with uncombed hair and huge, staring, vacant eyes, the creature was only a living caricature of a man. His eyeballs were filmed like those of one who walked in his sleep, and his mouth was twisted as meaninglessly as an imbecile's. He cringed against the rocky wall to avoid the party as they passed. None of the female soldiers paid the least attention to him; they passed as if his humble figure was invisible to them, and turned another corner. Rald and Thwaine gazed at each other with dawning comprehension.

"If they are all like *that*—" said Rald.

"I begin to see!" exclaimed his comrade.

"Silence!" intoned the captain of the Guards, emphasizing her command by prodding Rald in the posterior with her sword. The captive grunted and swore—beneath his breath.

AT LENGTH they emerged from underground into what at first appeared to be a great chamber cut from the solid rock but which might have been the crater of an ancient, long extinct volcano, as Rald believed it to be after he had gazed upward and seen the midday sun glaring fiercely above the immense hollow in the mountain. Sunlight was reflected from a million crystals embedded in the quartz composing the great walls, and the eyes of all were momentarily blinded until their optic nerves had readjusted themselves to the transition. At the point where the group halted, after emerging from the lower darkness, the wall of rock descended perpendicularly for a sheer thirty feet to the level sands of the crater's bottom, an area some hundred and fifty feet in diameter. Stout ropes had been wound about pillars, seemingly carved from living rock, to half the height of an average body, apparently as a safeguard

for any incautious persons who might wander too close to the edge.

"Look!" exclaimed Thwaine. "There are seats cut into the stone walls all around this bowl! Do you know what this is? It's an amphitheater, a gladiator pit! Rald, my friend, we are gladiators again!"

"And I presume we will fight—women?"

"Do they not appear capable? There's *something* out there on the sands—there in the center of the pit. I can't make out just what it is—this brazen sunlight blinds me!"

Rald peered with no greater success. "An image or something of the kind, I think."

"Quiet!" admonished the captain as she again pressed a painful point against the larger mercenary's rear.

Some signal not perceived by the captives was evidently received, for suddenly the guard came to life again and the helpless two were prodded forward along a pathway that encircled the lip of the pit. After proceeding probably a quarter of the way around its circumference they arrived at a point where the rock had been cut away from the wall, an area comprising perhaps thirty square feet. Against the farther end of this break in the mountain's otherwise perfect oval stood an ornate, bejeweled throne and on it sat a woman garbed in glittering mail. Her poise was regal.

"Cene! The queen!" growled Thwaine. "Be diplomatic!"

"How can I be diplomatic while this cursed female is gouging me in the rear with a sword?" roared Rald in ear-shattering tones.

The ex-thief was rapidly reaching a state wherein he could not control himself as he recalled his capture and imprisonment, and observed the indignity of his present position. All of these occurrences

had served as pointed tools that delved beneath his skin to the inner nerves. Now he became berserk. Disregarding the swords at his back he dived onto the shoulders of one of the unsuspecting guards before him and in an instant wrenched her sword from her hand. Half falling because of the clumsiness of the chains about his ankles, he managed nevertheless to gain the rocky wall. Once there, he turned and fixed all enemies with a tigerish, defiant eye as he assumed a protective crouch.

"Women or not, I'll kill the first one to move!"

"Rald!" exclaimed Thwaine, his voice low but desperate.

The smaller captive had not moved an inch when Rald made his daring bid for freedom; amazed at this lack of co-operation, the rebellious one noted that neither had the women—not even the one whose sword he had confiscated. Then his eyes swung, before Thwaine's pleading guidance, to the opposite wall of the blind gulch, and he saw the reason. Ten female warriors stood along the cliff holding poised spears, all of which were pointed at him as they awaited the order to throw. Escape was impossible. Should he take but one step, he would be impaled by a series of shafts—if these women's ability to throw straight upheld the confident bearing implied by their postures.

"Hold!" ordered the figure on the throne. "Do not kill him—now."

"You are—Queen Cene?" asked Rald.

GRAVELY, the woman nodded her head in assent. Even in this tense moment the mercenary observed and inwardly complimented her attractiveness—the raven-black curls, the long-lashed eyes, the curves of cheek and chin and crimson lips. Her corset of mail failed to conceal her femininity; its shining surface merely enhanced the smoothness and

transparency of the skin on the throat and face. There was an air of regality about her person, some trick of mannerism or posture that plainly made evident her right to sit upon the throne. She had inherited royal blood along with the invisible purple mantle bestowed by the Seven Gods on men or women who were rulers among their kind, the mantle so often stained crimson by the blood of both fools and heroes.

"I am Cene," she said, "Queen of Ceipe and Priestess of the Temple of Bast."

"Bast!" cried Thwaine with horror in his voice.

Rald made no sound, but his eyes widened as he studied the queen's face. Echoes of gossip garnered from the streets and taverns of Ygoth flooded his brain—tales told above the flowing of the wine; of a lost, virtually inaccessible kingdom in the mountains beyond the Livian plains where women were of warrior stock. It was said that the people there bowed to a dreadful goddess, called Bubaste, the same that ruled in a far-off land known to few, in a strange country by a sluggish river named the Nile. A cat-goddess! Bubaste, or Bast, as this goddess was sometimes known, was not as harmless as many of the other gods men worshipped, according to the tales; for gruesome stories abounded of half-devoured bodies left by her after frequent repasts, and how shrieking, insane, cruelly clawed men had staggered out of the desert at night, babbling deliriously, before they died, of a great black panther. Always their stories were the same. Gradually men began to believe, knowing such repetition must be based on fact. The huge cat they described had spoken to them with a human voice, so they declared, and had addressed them by name. Some of these men had been criminals with prices on their heads, some escaping slaves, and others honest

travelers of the wastelands. Many of them owned birth-names unknown to their immediate companions, but the monster cat never failed in selecting their rightful and given appellation as it stalked them down. Once a man dying of inch-wide furrows clawed the length of his spine swore the giant beast had mocked him as he fled, reminding him that it had devoured his father many years before. The truth that Bubaste, or Bast, was a living goddess capable of wanton death and destruction had long been impressed upon the minds of the dwellers of the neighboring kingdoms of Forthe, Livia and Ygoth, also among vagabond desert tribes whose members had been stricken by the living scourge; and throughout the land there arose a fear that swept like a tidal wave even to the far-away mountains of Fuvia. A living, slaying goddess walked the earth, and the unfortunates whose ill luck it was to encounter her died.

The mercenary remembered all he had heard of this foreign goddess in the space of a second, but being essentially human and possessed with natural impulses, Rald eyed the supple form of the woman who claimed the throne of Ceipe and reflected on the inconsistency of idols, immortals and goddesses. Not being devout, he seldom concerned himself with the future and remained happily content with the present.

"By the Seven!" he swore. "You're no panther—unless my eyes are bewitched!"

A rosy tide suffused Quçen Cene's cheeks. Whether its source was embarrassment or anger the ex-thief could not decide; for at that moment his attention was drawn to a new figure which had appeared in the entrance to the fissure in the mountain wall. There was a sudden hush among the warriors; a respectful silence fell like a fog-laden cloud, and

Cene, half risen from her throne because of Rald's threatening demeanor, shrank back with a low gasp of breath that might have expressed dismay. A tall and extremely thin man, clad in the thick folds of a long, black robe which extended from neck to heel, stood in the gap's entrance. His head was absolutely bare of any hirsute growth; combined with his deep-set and gleaming eyes it resembled the bald skull of a vulture of the desert wastes. His features themselves suggested the likeness; for they were thin, bony, and sharply pointed at the chin and nostrils. He was clad as simply as a priest; apparently the flowing robe was his only garment and the thick staff he leaned upon his only ornament. Nor did he carry a visible weapon, which was indeed strange for a grown man in the lands wherein even small children carried protective daggers in their belts.

It was evident to Rald that here was a personage to respect, for he saw the warrior-women flinch when they beheld him, and the tremulous lines of fear and repulsion could be detected on the countenances of many. Ating, their former guard, stifled an outcry only by placing her own hand over her mouth.

THE QUEEN was the first of all the women to regain her poise. In an even tone she said: "You have slept long, O Throal!"

"Yes, my queen," answered the newcomer. His voice was a harsh croak, and again Rald thought of vultures. "And well, too. In my dreams many things presented themselves to me. I sometimes travel afar in my sleep, as you know. There came to me recently a vision of two strangers, mercenaries of a lost cause. I awoke. Behold—they are here!"

"We captured them beyond the waterfall, O Throal. I do not believe they intended harm or were aware of crossing

our boundaries; obviously, they were lost. I have already reprimanded the captain who brought them here."

"You were mistaken, but can be forgiven, of course; for mistakes are the right of royalty."

Rald could see that the queen was uneasy and that something unknown to him was preying on her mind. He had closely observed every mannerism and inflection of voice between these two that appeared to direct the decisions of the kingdom of Ceipe. Now he saw Cene's face pale, growing almost ashen in hue as her eyes gleamed with unmistakable terror at the thought of something he was unable to comprehend.

"The captain did well, my queen," announced Throal as he inspected the two captives from a distance beyond the reach of Rald's sword. "I have slept sixty days. My daughter has rested likewise; no doubt by now she is hungry."

Rald stared at the unwavering line of spears presented before him and, reluctantly, relinquished his grasp on the weapon he had stolen and allowed it to drop, clattering, on the rock at his feet. His stand was hopeless. Angered, he felt he must protest in some way against the inhospitality with which he had been received into this kingdom, and as he was attracted least of all to the priest-like figure of the man called Throal, he chose to vent his spite in the robed one's direction.

"To Nargarth's pits with you, goat-face—and your daughter also!" he said. "By the Seven, I trust you both starve! Captive or not, I will not serve your meals!"

"No, you will not serve them, Rald," answered Throal in a quiet tone, and the ex-thief wondered how this man who had slept for the period of sixty days could know his name. "You *shall not serve!*" A circle of women with drawn swords, commanded by a single glance from

Throal's piercing eyes, surrounded the rebellious prisoner. An order was given by the robed dictator: "Return them to the pits!"

Queen Cene sat upon her throne in a frozen attitude, giving neither commands nor gestures, but watching Throal like a hypnotized bird before a serpent. Her subjects led the two mercenaries back over the ground they had so recently followed, to the tunnel's mouth. Before the group had rounded the edge of the rocky fissure to traverse the ledge surrounding the amphitheater, Rald heard the man who was garbed in black say: "Tonight will do, my queen; the moon will be full. Hess will be delighted—and we, ourselves, will be provided with entertainment."

There was an undercurrent of suppressed savagery, mingled with a note of fierce exultation, in his voice.

"That thing out there on the sand is a stone image of a cat, I think," said Thwaine; "perhaps a statue of their goddess. I can see it plainer now. I wonder—by Nargarth, Rald! Do you imagine we are to be sacrifices?"

"Cene is not without beauty, is she?" inquired Rald, irrelevantly, and his fellow gave him a disgusted stare that silently spoke his mind.

WITH their wrists and ankles refastened, the mercenaries gloomily slumped on their cots and meditated upon their state. Above Rald's head a torch hissed annoyingly from its niche in the wall, and he could hear the distant and muffled roar of falling water. From the corner of an eye he observed a movement behind the bars of the doorway; he hissed at Thwaine, who lay, disconsolate, on his back. The latter sprang into an erect position, as far as his chains permitted.

The elfin features of Ating were pressed between the parallel bars.

"Woman," asked Thwaine, "have you returned to aid us or to mock us?"

"I grieve," said the guard soberly, "and I am sorry for you because of the fate that is to be yours."

"Then open this door; break these chains and we'll pick a fate for ourselves!" sneered Rald. "Sympathy is worse than poor company."

He was about to say more but hesitated at the sight of the girl's twisted countenance. She really felt sorry for them, he realized. The fact that she knew more of the destiny intended for them than they did themselves was obviously the reason for her worried attitude.

"Quiet!" whispered Ating. "I want to tell you—I want——"

"You want *what*?" asked Thwaine, sharply.

"To tell you—warn you. Cene would have allowed you to go, or perhaps have sent you to slave with the other men in the mines below, had Throal not awakened. Always it is like this! He sleeps and sleeps like one of the dead and then, suddenly, he becomes alive again and stalks the halls and the hills in quest of living food for the *thing* he calls his daughter!"

"Thing?"

"Bubaste—in the arena where our ancestors held their games. Long years ago Throal came to our country, coming in the night from some land that lies far to the east, beyond the great mountains where the white apes dwell, and with him he brought Hess. She is the animal-goddess who sleeps upon the sands. She is also known as Bubaste. Throal told the people, upon his arrival, that in the kingdom from which he had come the majority of the gods, the strongest ones, were female divinities. He said there were many more gods and goddesses in

his land than the Seven we recognize and that great benefits could be reaped by us if we would but acknowledge these deities of his. Perhaps I speak sacrilege—but I have seen no benefits. We understand, of course, that women are supreme among the human race. But to some of us it seems strange that men should be treated so—fed with Throal's drugs until they become poor, half-witted creatures while they are yet children. And that all visitors must be slain if they are men. Of course, *they are men*, but still—they are not animals."

Rald snorted, and Thwaine threw him a warning glance.

"Cene does not believe in sacrifices, but there is little she can do," continued Ating in a nervous manner. "She is a queen in title only; Throal is the true ruler of Ceipe. We all fear him—not only because of Hess but also because of his orgies in the underground chambers where he sleeps or speaks with his strange gods and where we have no permission to go. Sometimes a comrade disappears. We guess who will be the next."

"Then why obey him?" demanded the truculent Rald. "If you don't like his rule, stick him full of those spears that were aimed at me."

"He is a god. We cannot."

"Bah!" exclaimed Rald, eloquently adding several more potent adjectives as he lay back on his cot.

"Give us the keys," begged Thwaine. "We promise to remedy the situation if you only free us!"

"I no longer have them. Throal keeps them until the moon arises, when he will release you both in the pit with his daughter. She must be fed. I am only a guard. Even now I have erred, for I have forsaken my post to tell you of the things you do not understand. I am supposed to be standing forty feet from this door. I must go—now!"

Thwaine asked in gentle tones calculated not to alarm the nervous woman; "Ating, what danger threatens us in the arena!"

"Hess . . . Bubaste . . . Bast, the cat-goddess. She lives only when the moon is full. When its first rays touch her image she awakes to stalk whatever prey is convenient, and no man has ever come forth alive from the arena. If Throat chances to be asleep when the moon blooms, Hess will wander out over the desert and slay any unfortunate she may encounter. After killing a victim, she devours the body. I have seen her kill; the screaming is terrible, for she stalks her prey as a cat pursues a mouse. There is no escape from the arena, for the walls are sheer and often slippery with the evening dew."

"Where do your people keep this cat-goddess?" inquired Thwaine, while Rald lay silent on his cot and lent an anxious ear to her tremulous reply.

"Did not you see it out on the sands? In the center?"

"That was a stone image!" grunted Rald. "A sphinx—or some other Eastern idiosyncrasy. Do you seek to make fools of us, woman?"

"In the daytime it is stone," explained the girl, "but at night, when the sun is down, it quivers with life. And when the full moon illuminates the heavens it stalks the earth—and those that meet it die!"

"Listen!" yelled Rald in an angry tone. "I've had enough of this! Women who are warriors! A queen who is not a queen! Magicians that hypnotize a kingdom but sleep for sixty days! A goddess in the shape of a cat that lopes about for her dinner in the moonlight and becomes stone in the sunlight! By the Seven, Thwaine, if you must rant and rave, at least have the courtesy to do it more quietly so I can get some rest."

TWISTING sideways on his uncomfortable cot, Rald promptly went to sleep, ignoring them both. Occasionally he emitted rude snorts as he slept that may have been subconscious remarks directed at the ignominy of his incarceration.

"My regrets," apologized the ever-tactful Thwaine to their wide-eyed guard. "My associate, while always the truest comrade and the bravest friend, is inclined to be suspicious of new acquaintances and somewhat dubious of magical forces. You will observe what I mean when we are placed, as you have told us we shall be, in the den of this cat-goddess."

With a stifled cry Ating abruptly fled from the bars of the cell. Whether she was possessed with solicitude for the mercenaries or filled with anger at Rald's incivility Thwaine could not determine. He mused while his companion snored. If only, he thought, he had a sword-hilt with which to soundly thwack Rald's scarred brow! Now and then some slight sound, such as the movement of a sandaled foot when its wearer changes position, told him Ating was still at her post in the corridor. But she did not come to the bars again, nor did he attempt to summon her. Disconsolately he sought to relax as best he could amid his hampering chains, and wooed Morpheus—without success.

He was still awake when tramping feet announced the return of the guard; softly he called to the sleeping Rald, but with such a note of urgency in his voice that the dazed ex-thief strove to spring to his feet, bewildered and reaching in vain for a sword he no longer wore.

"They come for us, Rald!"

"Is *that* all? I was just about to skewer King Hagar on a very excellent Livian spear—and then these cursed women come to stumble around my bedchamber!" He yawned. "Well, it will be bet-

ter to chance death in the open than to depart this world to Nargarth's pits because of foul drafts or indigestion caused by those measly portions of meat and the rank wine they left us."

There were a dozen members of the guards forming the escort; evidently either Throal or Cene, remembering Rald's desperate bid for freedom just a few hours ago, felt respect for their captive's prowess. The same woman who had acted as captain on the previous trip, her face as grim as ever, ordered the wall shackles to be refastened in their former fashion. Surrounded by a dozen ready blades the mercenaries once again followed the long passage upward toward the amphitheater.

"That waterfall you hear masks the path in and out of this mountain," whispered Thwaine to Rald. "I became conscious when the water fell on my face as they brought us beneath it the night we were taken. I believe it is the only exit! If we could reach it——"

"Perhaps we can ride out on the back of Bubaste after we have tied Throal to her tail!" sneered the other. "Don't you see, *fool*, we are closer to hell just now than to that waterfall we hear?"

THWAINÉ relapsed into silence but his cunning eyes continued to rove about, often touching on Ating. The latter was relieved from her station and accompanied the other guards, wearing a curious expression he could not quite define. Was the dancing, impish gleam he saw in her eyes pity for Rald and himself, or was it a smoldering but rapidly growing flame of rage, a rebellion of her spirit against whatever precedent demanded their deaths? She was young and probably had never looked upon able-bodied men of her own race, had seen only the drugged, half-witted males kept under the iron hand of the creature who

claimed he had sired a goddess. At intervals, as they passed the brighter of the torches, he endeavored to attract her attention by slight movements of his imprisoned hands, but she continued to pace onward, with a lithe motion the mercenary admired; and if she sensed his efforts, she gave no sign in return.

The thought came to Thwaine's mind, as such things sometimes do with sudden and surprizing clarity, that here was a woman capable of love and loyalty, quite different from the tavern wenches to which he was accustomed. He began to turn over various impressions, as he always did before arriving at a satisfactory conclusion, and remained oblivious of the fact that his life was in jeopardy.

At last the party reached the end of the corridor and again beheld the amphitheater, where shadows gathered now as the light of the burning planet sank with its source beyond the mountain's rim. Darkness fell quickly within the hollow crater with the departure of the sun; twilight writhed in a losing struggle with the lengthening shadows and only survived momentarily because of the thin, reflected rays piercing the skies above.

The captives could see the glitter of armor on the guards standing at equal distances around the entire circle of the enclosure. As they strode through the dusk toward the place of the throne they passed two wooden-faced male slaves who carried iron pots containing live coals. At each of the warriors one of the emaciated figures would halt while the woman thrust an ironwood limb into the pot to ignite it; once the torch burned freely the slave would passively continue to the next guard and duplicate the service. Already half of the pathway was brilliant with flames held by women stationed only ten feet apart, and now the mountain's reflecting quartz began to glitter as if a million fire-flies flickered there. The

lights revealed that many of the stone seats contained occupants; apparently the entire population of Ceipe had gathered this night to witness whatever bizarre festival or entertainment was intended to take place.

There was a weirdness, an atmosphere of approaching horror, about the silent throng, and a chill not caused by the night wind rippled along the spines of the two men.

QUEEN CENE was not occupying the throne but stood at the foot of the dais supporting the great seat supposed to be a symbol of the ruling dynasty. In spite of her mail she was a beautiful figure, undisputably graceful and vibrant with life and charm. The lift of her proudly held head and the visible tenseness of her carriage seemed to proclaim that she was engaged in asserting authority of some sort. Her attitude, and the hush of the assemblage, was not lost on Rald's perceptive senses. Intuitively he knew Thwaine and he were the cause of the dispute.

Vulturous and malevolent as he had appeared in the light of day, Throal seemed even more menacing as he stood among the shifting gleams of the many torches held by the queen's personal guards, conscious of his powers and fully aware of the awe of those about him and Cene's repugnance.

Cene did not look toward the captives as they were brought to a halt just a few paces from the throne, but she must have known they had arrived; neither did she gaze at the wizard, though it was evident her remarks were addressed to him. Her pellucid eyes were fixed in an unwavering stare upon one of the many stars dotting the desert's sky about the ragged cliffs. The warriors were still as Death's angel and breathlessly awaiting the outcome of what must be, on the part of

their queen, defiance to age-old custom and a dreaded overlord.

The captain of the escort stood directly in front of Rald. With a deft twist of his supple wrists he struck her across the buttocks with his chains. She leaped, involuntarily, but immediately regained her poise, bestowing upon the grinning prisoner a murderous glare holding unspoken threats.

The slight disturbance broke the tension.

"I will not condone your decision, O Throal!" declared Cene, finality in her voice. "I do not believe in this useless slaughter of men who have done us no harm. Since I was a child, I have dreaded the days when the goddess awakened; I have longed to end them for ever. We have become, under your tutelage, not a civilized, cultured country with decent inhabitants such as we once were, but a nest of cruel and vicious barbarians akin to the monstrous white apes of Sorjoon's cliffs, preying on unfortunate wanderers of the desert, cursed"—the concentrated gasps of the guards were plainly audible—"yes, *cursed* by a goddess who never bestowed anything upon the land of Ceipe but unholy terror!"

"You speak strongly, my queen," purred Throal, his countenance as suave and untroubled as his manner. The wizard's beady eyes roved over the bodies of the prisoners as if he were purchasing steaks in the market-place. They came to rest on the calm features and sturdy form of Rald, observing the latter's broad shoulders and depth of chest with a detached interest. "Could it be? No—certainly not! No queen of Ceipe would deign to descend from her throne to the level of a common mercenary!"

Even the flaring torches with all their deceptive lighting could not disguise the wave of crimson that spread over the

queen's cheeks at this impertinence. With clenched hands she faced her female warriors, but woman-like, could not resist a fleeting glance at Rald. The tall captive's head and shoulders protruded above the throng, higher than the helmets of her tallest guards; in that passing part of a second he stared straight into her eyes and the pleased smile of a child slid across his lips and was gone. She knew he was unafraid, but the pain in her breast grew greater. He did not *know!*

Her tones were calm and collected when she spoke again, but there was a desperate pleading in her words.

"My guards, my subjects, my *friends!* The rule of Hess is no more; Throal is but a name and his demons shall not plague us after this night! Somehow I know this to be true; I cannot say why, but I *know!* I am still, by right of ancestral lineage, queen of Ceipe!"

There was a murmur of approbation from the ranks before her next words struck them dumb.

"I renounce my title of priestess of Bubaste! I want no more of her black blood to stain my dynasty's mantle! I trust that all of you, even as I have done, will come to realize your immortal souls are of more value than the blind worship of a sadistic goddess and the rantings of an evil, degenerate wizard!"

The guards stood transfixed, frozen by uncertainty and the dramatic suddenness of the fierce dispute for power between their goddess' representative and their queen.

"Ha, Cene!" muttered Throal in tones so low that only the nearest could hear his words; "you were always difficult, even as a child. Perhaps . . . I should have . . . initiated you in the rites held in my private chambers, as I have others that questioned the rights of Bubaste; it is remarkable how swiftly they renounce

their false gods and become devout worshippers of Hess!"

The queen paled but continued to ignore him. "Strike off the prisoner's chains!"

"Wait!" growled Throal, his voice suddenly harsh with command. The women advancing to free the mercenaries became motionless statues of indecision. "Hess, the sacred blood-relative of Bubaste, of Bast, daughter of Isis, *has already spoken their names!* You know what *that* means! It is too late. Or do you want an unforgetting goddess spreading destruction among the people of Ceipe, slaying wantonly and horribly, clawing your vitals, devouring with justifiable vengeance the ones from whom she expects reverence and homage? True, she has never harmed you before; but you have always obeyed her commands issued through myself, her priest. Now I warn you—*forget to obey the descendant of Isis and the penalty will be frightful!*"

THE women's faces grew pale beneath the torchlight and some trembled so that the flames sputtered more than ever as they swayed in the night air.

"Listen!" commanded the wizard, and even Cene was silenced by the majestic power expressed on his hairless features.

For a minute they heard only the slight sigh of the desert wind as it lifted above the mountain barrier and swept down to cleanse the odors of the crater before it rose again to pursue its wayward course, the light crackling of fire devouring ironwood, the tense breathing of someone at their side—nothing else. Then from somewhere below, where the sands of the arena were becoming faintly visible under the first lunar rays of the night, came the thin echoes of a call.

The voice held undercurrents of volume reminiscent of the great winds of the

higher mountain passes; it rose and fell with a horrible regularity, and the listeners knew they were hearing something that came not from the earth of mankind but from among the dwellers of the unknown, from the deep caverns into which no human could descend, or from the outer spaces, beyond the skies, which they could not attain. It held a feminine quality but remained inhuman; it possessed an indescribable suggestion of evilness beyond normal comprehension, playing on the nerves of even the least sensitive among them as a musician strikes a rending chord to vibrate the innermost brain-centers of his audience. Perhaps the most soul-freezing attribute of all was the distinctness of the enunciation, the realization of something unearthly pronouncing earthly syllables. The sounds, not the words themselves, pierced the ears with such insidious, mocking, *animal-like* suggestiveness that in the thoughts of all were born obscene and lewd impulses hitherto unknown by most of them. In the quality and the fluctuation of the *tone* lay the hidden horrors.

"Rald! Thwaine!" It called as sweetly as a mistress summoning her lover. "Rald! Thwaine! I am waiting!"

One of the guards uttered a low moan and fell on her knees. Others covered their eyes as if fearful of what the increasing flood of moonlight might reveal. Cene, white of face, stood motionless; the two captives looked at each other. It was rarely indeed that they saw fear in a comrade's eyes. But this was no battlefield whereon a clean death could be met honorably; it was a place where helpless, chained sacrifices were offered to some unknown, and therefore more terrifying, elemental born outside of man's knowledge. By a supreme effort Thwaine avoided duplicating the action of the prone guard. Rald felt something drip into one

eye and recognized it to be a bead of perspiration.

Only Throal was untouched by the general fear. He moved forward through the ring of guards surrounding the captives, his bald head glistening beneath the lights, and assumed command while the queen was still paralyzed with superstitious awe of tradition.

"Yes, strike the chains from the prisoners—on the edge of the arena! My daughter is silent now. Do not let her grow impatient."

Part of Throal's power was based on the study of the effect of psychology on a mass; he knew when to assume leadership. There was no hesitation among the women now. Rald and Thwaine were hastily jostled to the stone lip of the arena while Cene, powerless in the face of ancient wizardry, followed her guards with uncertain steps and strained features. She had lost.

A SCORE of unsheathed swords poised at the victims' backs as their shackles were loosened and removed; Rald saw that one of the women working on Thwaine's ankles was the ashen-faced Ating and he silently cursed her under his breath. Thwaine had hopes of aid from her!

"Rald! Thwaine!" The eery cry was repeated.

Straining their eyes, the mercenaries strove to detect a moving object on the sands, which were now palely illuminated by the rising moon, but no other form was visible on the gray expanse save the bulky rock, altar, or whatever it was supposed to represent, standing in the center of the amphitheater.

"They come, daughter!" croaked Throal from the background. "They come, O Hess!"

Swords were pressed against the vic-

tims' skins, urging them to leap downward. To turn and fight would be suicide; they were weaponless and hopelessly outnumbered. There was no alternative except chancing the unknown fate below; here was certain death on cold steel. Perhaps if they rebelled their lifeless bodies would be cast down; perhaps merely crippled bodies, with less chance for defensive action against the mysterious goddess, would leave them anchored and praying for a merciful death. The two looked and read the decision in each other's eyes.

"If it be Nargarth the Devil, himself, who calls," said Rald, "at least we can spit in his face and not be skewered from behind like a pair of pigs!"

They leaped, landing in sprawling positions on soft and cushioning sand. Slowly and wordlessly they regained their feet, glancing everywhere for signs of imminent danger and perceiving none closer than the ring of torches above. Here, close to the sheer rock wall, neither the flares nor the moonlight could reveal them to the sight of the warriors, all of whom were peering down in vain efforts to view them. The mercenaries could see the women's silhouettes against the fires and the sky but remained themselves invisible. All were silent; even the weird voice was quiet now. Rald thought, uneasily, perhaps the thing knew of their arrival.

"Let us keep to the shadows of the wall and circle the pit," counseled Thwaine in a whisper. "Perhaps we can see *what* we have been presented to—and they will not know just where we are."

The advice was sound, but before the other could verbally agree there came a single, sharp cry from above and another body landed on the sand at their feet. Believing, with some reason, that all Ceipe held only their foes, Rald threw himself

instantly upon the prostrate form of the newcomer and prepared to strangle him or her without compunction or regard for sex. His objective was the bright blade he perceived beneath an out-flung hand. The instant he touched the body he recognized it to be that of a female (mercenaries being skilled in such matters sometimes more than court nobles), but nevertheless, he hooked a powerful forearm around her neck from behind and prepared to exert pressure. The guard uttered a low, choking cry and feebly attempted to elude his grasp. Thwaine began to tear at his arm for some reason he could not comprehend, and he was conscious of confusion above on the pathway dominated by the hoarse voice of Throal, but before him he saw a sword. He wanted it badly; his training as a thief told him to take it as simply as possible, even if he had to break this fool woman's neck.

"Rald!" snarled his friend, savagely. "Don't, you fool! It's Ating—and she has brought us weapons!"

DUMBLY, the ex-thief relaxed his strangling hold. Ating sat up on the sand and clutched her bruised throat, with her large eyes fixed on Thwaine. On the space of sand which had been covered by her prone body lay another sword.

"By the Seven!" swore Rald. "Two!" "I—snatched—one from another guard as I jumped," explained Ating, her voice still husky because of a compressed larynx, "so there would be one for each of you. But you die, anyway. I only thought perhaps you would die happier with swords in your hands."

She spoke to both men, but her eyes remained on Thwaine. Her voice betrayed hopelessness. With a curious catch in his own speech, Thwaine inquired: "And you—how can you get back? What will they do?"

"I cannot go back. I am a traitor, and would be sent to Throal's private chambers"—she shuddered—"and afterward, perhaps, to the goddess also. I prefer to die—as I am."

"Why have you done this—thrown your life away?"

The girl made no reply but sat caressing her injured throat, her elfin features slightly puckered, and staring at the mercenary. Something came into Thwaine's throat, too, so that he could not question her again.

"Curse it!" exclaimed Rald, who had been trying out his lately acquired weapon by attempting a quick series of parries and thrusts before an imaginary opponent; "now with a demon or goddess or something to combat, we are not satisfied, but must also acquire a woman to protect!"

"I will bother myself with the task," said Thwaine. His voice was low, but so earnest and strange, so devoid of his customary mocking tones, that Rald stared at him in a vain effort to decipher a hidden meaning. Was Thwaine being clever again? His words were almost a threat. "Do not disparage my—friend. She has brought me something besides a sword."

"Well, I do not want to seem churlish," said Rald. He smiled at the wide eyes of the girl-warrior. "A thousand thanks for the weapon, Ating; I dedicate it to you!"

Above the three, many faces hung over the cliff's edge as the women of Ceipe scrutinized the area of sand for a sign of their sacrifices. Throal was not visible, but his voice reached their ears as he issued commands, most of which pertained to the handling of the flares, and it seemed his hitherto calm demeanor had changed to a mood of fanatical frenzy.

He was worried because the victims could not be located. He cursed the warrior who had carried weapons to the arena, and threatened her with a terrible vengeance. Once Rald heard Cene's voice, and although he could not distinguish her words, it seemed to him her tones held a hint of suppressed hysteria.

Rald clutched his sword-hilt fondly and gazed upward, beyond the torches and helmets of the warrior host, to where the stars of the heavens had begun to twinkle about the yellow planet whose beams were distributed alike over friend and foe. Perhaps there was madness in the lunar rays, mused the ex-thief; perhaps the great orb possessed the power to change mortals into demonic shapes as the seers of so many lands proclaimed, but to him it seemed that a strength beyond the ken of physicians or the use of drugs flowed from those same beams to mingle with his blood-stream; he felt exultant beneath the rays, free like the desert winds, capable of confronting any difficulty he should chance to encounter. Perhaps—it was a wild fancy, but perhaps *he* was one of the chosen, a child of that great planet, waxing and waning in his impulses, his contrast of a life of thievery mingled with heroic and generous deeds, even as the dead world was accredited with forces both good and evil. Certainly, beneath its rays, he gained a confidence in his own ability and ultimate preservation he had never experienced beneath the light of day.

"I think," he said softly to his companions, who had drawn close together and had forgotten he was even present, "I think I will go out there and look at this goddess."

"Oh, no!" cried Ating, clutching Thwaine's arm. "By now she will be awakening! Soon she will be able to move—and then we die!"

RALD laughed so loudly and with such barbarous mirth that all the inhabitants of Ceipe above gazed at their neighbors in wonderment and a faint flush reappeared on the white cheeks of a queen who had forsaken her throne. Screams, curses, cries of terror were commonly heard from the arena, even the horrible gurgling of hysteria and the cackling utterances of madness, but never before in the bloody circumference of the pit had such easy, natural laughter rung from the depths. It had not the tone of madness.

"Since this Hess is so slow in coming to me, I will go to her!" said Rald aloud, careless of the ears above. "Who am I, to slight a goddess? I weary of this waiting—and she *called* me, did she not?"

Naked sword in hand, he trod boldly out across the sand into the glow of moonlight. Though a faint tremor of fear still lingered in his heart, he had decided that if he must die his should not be a craven's death; once within the circle of the full rays his courage was renewed. He waved his blade derisively at the gaping faces on the rim of the pit and hoped its swing included the section occupied by Throal; felt a little proud, too, that Cene should witness his swashbuckling.

"He is right," said Thwaine, relinquishing Ating's arms. "Wait here. We will see what is yonder on the sands."

He grasped his weapon and set forth to follow his comrade, who was already some distance ahead of him, and was immediately aware of a slim form at his side.

"Yes," said Ating sadly; "we will see!"

A low hum, a whisper of sound, arose from the galleries and relapsed into silence again as a thousand warriors beheld Thwaine and the woman who had chosen to die with him enter the circle of

revealing light. Rald looked quickly over his shoulder, scenting possible danger, and smiled when he saw the two. He did not lessen his stride; he intended to encounter whatever unknown danger threatened them within the arena—first.

As the intrepid three approached the bulky object resting upon the sands, they became aware of lines and contours impossible to perceive from a distance. The image was that of a great cat or black panther such as was to be encountered in the far eastern lands. It appeared to be a work of art, there beneath the soft rays of the moon, a magnificent conception by some sculptor of a forgotten eon; for the great curvature of the ebony back, the perfection of the outspread limbs, the superb poise of the upheld head, gave the impression to an onlooker that here a sleeping beast was just awakening to awareness of its surroundings. It was a monument to its creator, thought Rald, who had seen many varied forms of sculpture during his roving. Even the ridges in the flesh-like stone of its forepaws were plainly visible to the three, and the arch and structure of the entire form were so imitative of feline character that for a brief moment the mercenaries thought it alive. It rested as a cat does, with its forepaws stretched ahead of the body and the spine curved downward in the middle part of the sleek back. Thwaine saw a likeness to carvings made of the strange-headed idol known as the sphinx. The reclining body covered a full twenty-five feet of the sands, exceeding by ten any living and natural denizens of the forests in the lands infested by the black panthers. The image bore a regal air, possessed a certain calmness and royal bearing that held a hint of implacable omnipotence; Rald thought, inconsequently, of the face of a statue he had seen in his wanderings, an idol

named Buddha. Somehow the image of Ceipe's cat-goddess had assumed the same brooding attitude of detached immobility the dimly recalled features of the god of the yellow peoples expressed.

The mercenary cautiously approached the side of the image. Tall of stature as he was, he was still at too low a level to see over the ebony spine. He examined the figure, passing from one extremity to the other, as well as he could beneath the deceptive rays of moonlight. Once he thought the stone flanks were heaving like those of an animal drawing breath. When he struck lightly at the ribs of the figure with his sword, the metal rang against what appeared to be solid rock. Ruefully, he examined the blade to see if its edge was dulled.

ROUNDING the image, seeking for a view of the face, he encountered Thwaine and Ating. The girl was clinging to the man's arm in sheer terror; why, Rald could not understand. Certainly, there seemed to be no danger in the image even if it did exude a baleful atmosphere, probably manufactured by the impressions made on their subconsciousness after the weird calling of their names. He must discover, he reasoned, the source of the voice, for there lay the threat to their safety. Obviously, he had to accomplish this task alone, for Thwaine showed no inclination to desert the side of his warrior-mistress.

"Look!" cried Ating suddenly. "Oh, look!"

Following with his eyes the direction of her pointed finger, Rald gazed upward at the great head. The sculpturing was excellent, he thought; if he had been looking upon a head of more proportionate size he could easily have been beguiled into believing the idol a living, breathing panther. The great ears were

correctly placed; tufts of hair sprouted from them, and though the upper lip was shadowed he believed he could detect traces of whiskers. The mouth was slightly open, and he could see a double row of fangs. Apparently the artist had taken pains to produce a masterpiece, for even the flat nostrils were tipped with vermilion at their extremities like those of a living beast.

And then he saw the eyes. . . .

A cold horror, spreading through his veins from the very marrow of his bones, paralyzed his body as his brain registered the fact that *the eyes were alive!*

Bubaste was no myth, but a living, slaying goddess! He recalled the tales of the mangled and lacerated victims found wandering, half crazed, over the desert wastes, their stories of the massacres of entire villages by a cat-like demon who descended without warning or mercy, calling the names of those it slew with a human tongue; and he knew that what he had listened to with derision around many a forgotten campfire was hideous truth. Malevolent, gleaming with unspeakable knowledge and savage ferocity, the great yellow eyes contemplated the puny humans between her paws; there was a trace of gloating in the depths of the fixed orbs suggestive of the brooding of a cat as it awaits with tense muscles for a captured mouse to make a futile effort to escape doom.

In the face of violent danger or threat of death Rald nearly always became infuriated, even with inanimate objects such as the rocks of an engulfing landslide or the swirling waters of a deep ford; perhaps he was an atavism, a reversion to instincts in character to ancestors who had fought with tooth and nail to maintain the breath of life in a treacherous and beast-ridden world. It was with difficulty that he restrained the impulse to slash at

the image, or goddess, with his sword. He realized that the weapon would shatter with the first blow struck against the adamantine ribs; steel was worthless before whatever element formed the living figure. Perhaps, he thought, when the thing fully recovered its powers it would be more susceptible to the influence of cold steel. There was a light in the mercenary's eyes not unlike the gleam in the baleful yellow pupils above him, except that his reflected rage and not cruelty.

Muttering an imprecation, he thrust his sword at a forepaw. The limb trembled, moved, lifted a full foot above the surface of the sand, and fell back limply. It scattered particles over their sandaled feet.

Hess was slowly coming to life!

THWAIN and Ating stood in frozen attitudes, fearful of their fates and watching Rald as he so carelessly prodded the recumbent monster. He turned toward them, still keeping a wary eye on the living mass of stone, and advised: "Suppose we place a little distance between this thing and us; I have an idea it would be safer. There seems to be no escape from the pit, and my blade is worthless against this solid hide; so let us play the defensive; perhaps Hess will more readily feel steel when she has fully awakened."

"Soundly reasoned!" declared Thwaine.

The three retreated toward the edge of the arena. They had almost regained the partial security of the shadows when the spectators above uttered low cries. Rald sensed the reason immediately and whirled in his tracks; Hess had arisen and, cat-fashion, was stretching the muscles of her back. Against the splendor of the full moon her powerful body was an impressive and terrifying sight; for the mammoth portions of her bulk, com-

bined within the sleek, graceful, undulative physique, appeared as a masterpiece formed by some unknown god in a mad mood of creation. Rald was suddenly aware of his own smallness before this creature who was not of the earth nor of the clay from which he himself was molded.

"Take the left," he advised Thwaine. "I'll turn to the right. Whichever way the beast attacks, the man opposite can engage her from behind." In spite of the seriousness of their plight Rald could not still his laughter; it rang rich and strong to astonished ears above. "I have never pricked a goddess in the rear; I assure you it will afford me immense satisfaction!"

They separated, Thwaine and Ating scurrying to the left; Rald, calm once more as he surveyed the face of Death, striding to the right. On the edge of the black shadow cast by the sheer wall he paused to gaze upward. Somewhere in the throng above was Cene, who had tried to save them from death; somewhere, too, was Throal, who had condemned them. He intended to settle with both.

The monster was still stretching. Something in its poise hinted that the interlude of exercise was about over; so his voice became urgent when he cried: "Cene, are you there?"

He was rewarded by the sight of the queen's face, illuminated by torchlight as it was thrust over the edge of the pit.

"Rald!" There was a note in her voice that caused his heart to leap. "Swords are useless! Take this!"

A burning ironwood brand fell, or was cast, handle downward so that its end was buried in the sand while the flare continued undiminished. It landed but a few feet from the mercenary.

Again the eery cry arose. This time the goddess called only one.

"Thwaine! Thwaine!"

Thwaine was silent, but Ating screamed, her cry shattering itself into a hundred fragmentary echoes against the enclosing cliffs. The fleeing pair had reached a point directly beneath the gap in the mountain wall where stood the throne of Ceipe; above them Throal's bald features were etched in torchlight as he eagerly observed the fugitives' progress.

Rald, perceiving he had not been chosen for the first victim, turned in his tracks. Helplessly, his grasp grew firm about the hilt of his futile sword. A warmth of emotion flooded his breast; it was the old, familiar feeling he had so often experienced before hopeless odds—the calm strength of desperation. The grim smile he had exhibited to Hagar's hosts played across his taut features. Even the sight of Hess, beginning to creep slowly across the sands in the manner of a cat stalking a mouse, did not erase his expression. Rald had ceased to be a worried, tormented thing of flesh and bone and was now somewhat god-like himself. His friends were endangered; he was willing to offer the last drop of his blood in their defense.

"Rald!" cried Cene's voice. "The torch! It fears fire! Take the torch!"

Without an upward glance the mercenary swept up the burning ironwood with his left hand. Carrying bare steel in his right hand, he raced across the arena.

THWAINÉ had halted at a spot where the ring of shadows drew a definite line about the moonlit area of the pit. He knew his destiny was hopeless, that death was near to both himself and his companion, she who crouched behind his squat shoulders. But he was prepared to sell their lives as dearly as possible. He

hoped his sword could penetrate the tough skin of the creeping monster, and hummed an old and half-forgotten battle-song as he watched Hess lounge nearer.

The animal-goddess took her time; there was no trace of haste in her strides.

"We die now, I think," said Ating over his shoulder. To Thwaine's surprize her voice was steady and without a tremor. "Good-bye, my dear."

"We are not yet dead!" insisted Thwaine, stubbornly.

Above them loomed the great bulk of Hess, stone-like and stolid no longer, but now a living, breathing, threatening death, fantastic and incredible beneath the moonbeams, but, nevertheless, a certain and horrible doom. She raised a great paw above the man's head, holding it there with the playfulness of a cat toying with a mouse, and regarded the desperate mercenary with immense, yellow, unblinking eyes. A shudder shook his very soul when the thing purred. He slashed at the forepaw with his blade; it moved negligently—and his sword lay twenty feet away while he nursed a sprained wrist. Armless and defenseless, Thwaine faced the death before him, became conscious of Ating at his side, and suddenly laughed into the poised face of the being that the people of Ceipe called a goddess.

"Curse you!" he cried. "Though you slay us, we remain your betters—*animal!*"

Hess snarled and lifted the crushing paw.

At that instant Rald arrived, unnoticed, at her right flank. He struck fiercely, trusting his blade would sink deep into the vitals; to his dismay it was shattered into fragments against the ribs of the giant cat. Hess felt the blow, for she turned her head to see the rash intruder who had interrupted her pleasantry, momentarily ignoring the selected sacrifices,

and swung a weighty paw in Rald's direction. Instinctively, he dodged, well aware of the death in those curving claws. Sand slipped beneath his feet. He fell toward the adamantine ribs of the goddess. In a last desperate effort to maintain his balance he extended his left hand, which still held the torch Cene had thrown to him. The flaming brand was pressed forcibly against the side of the goddess of Ceipe.

The next minute none of the three could ever clearly describe. All they ever remembered was the ear-splitting, anguished wail emitted by Hess, a momentary view of flame-shot heavens, and the impact of a mighty concussion that hurled them prone on the sands.

RALD was tossed a distance of ten feet or more. His first confused impression, as he struggled against an almost overwhelming desire to lapse into unconsciousness, was that Throal was present and had struck him with magical powers. Fighting nausea, he managed to control his weakened limbs to the extent of rising to his knees. A few yards away Thwaine and Ating, unconscious, lay side by side. Of Hess there remained no trace, except for a small pile of gray ashes that were loosely scattered over the area of sand upon which she had been standing. Slowly the realization seeped into Rald's brain that Hess had been destroyed, was gone for ever into whatever limbo the daughters of Isis returned—perhaps because he had touched her side with the flames. For some inexplicable reason, according to some mysterious chemistry, the goddess who defied spear and sword was not immune to fire. He had annihilated, by accident, the incarnation of Bubaste!

During the short interval after the concussion there had been no sounds from

the galleries above them; now the stunned silence was abruptly broken by wild cries pitched in many keys. Only one voice rose in anger; the others expressed only bewilderment. The throng could not understand the meaning of the fiery blast and the consequent disappearance of Hess. Screaming high above the many feminine voices were the harsh tones of the wizard, Throal, who alone comprehended the happenings in the arena.

"Down! Go down to the arena!" he shrieked. "Recapture the men and the woman! *They shall pay—ho! How they shall pay!* O spirit of Bubaste, O soul of Isis! Grant me the power to devise a fitting torture for these three!"

Rope ladders were swung over the lip of the pit, but for a time they were empty, for the warriors hesitated as they recalled the fates of the many unfortunates that had preceded them.

"Down!" commanded Throal. He was not a pleasant sight; his thick lips were curled back, revealing a set of fangs not unlike a miniature duplicate of the deceased goddess', and flecks of foam were visible at the corners of his mouth. "Down, fools! There is nothing there to harm you; my daughter is slain and unless I can again raise her body from the ashes the wails of Ceipe will go undefended!"

Several of the more hardy warriors swarmed down the trailing ropes. Emboldened by their example, others followed. Throal, a trifle ridiculous in his long robe, also descended.

Rald had regained his feet and Thwaine had stirred feebly. Ating was still unconscious.

The ex-thief found a fragment of his sword, merely the hilt and a few inches of the blade that had been covered by the sand. Taking the shortened steel in a hand that still ached from the force of

his fall, he placed his body between the prostrate figures of his friends and the assemblage now advancing over the sands.

He did not intend to be recaptured. His weapon was but a puny defense against the many blades and throwing-spears of the warrior-women, but he was determined to die cleanly, before weapons he understood, rather than suffer unnamable atrocities in some underground place of torture.

Behind him he heard a movement; Thwaine was on his knees and searching for his sword.

"You had better kill the girl," advised Rald. "It would be kinder."

"No!"

The ejaculation of dissent came from one of the members of the approaching group; none other than the queen could so pronounce a single syllable with such astonishing emphasis. It was she who had cried out. She was walking swiftly, keeping to the front of the group; though her bearing was calm enough, the bright spots on her cheeks and the rapid rise and fall of her breasts beneath her mail betrayed an intense excitement. In one slender hand was a short throwing-spear and she carried it with the manner of one accustomed to its use.

THE group, led by Throal and Cene, halted just a few feet from the mercenaries.

This, thought Rald, was the last stand. Their death was assured; a single shaft thrown by one of the party might pierce the flesh of both Thwaine and himself. He clutched the hilt of his broken blade defiantly and wondered if he could slice Throal's throat before he died. He looked upon the flushed beauty of the queen and it occurred to him that since a man had

to die it was well to see beauty with the last look at life.

"Do not kill Ating!" pleaded Cene as she came near enough to make herself heard. "I promise you—no harm will come to her. Nor to you, either. The reign of Hess is over and our land is free of a great evil that has preyed upon it these many years."

"Queen!" shrieked the wizard, his features twisted like those of a madman. "You do not know what you say! Many years ago devout grandfathers of yours, descendants of your own royal blood-line, had the honor to receive in person the visitation of the Goddess Bubaste——"

"Weak tools of yours, O wizard!" interrupted Cene. "Weak grandparents of mine! Fools deserving the slavery to which you eventually subjected them! How many of my blood-relatives, male members of royalty, are laboring with drugged and vacant minds in the pits, or serving your mistresses in your unholy dwelling-quarters? Does it amuse you, Throal, to demean your betters?"

"Queen Cene!" cried Throal. "There lie the ashes of my daughter——"

"Yes. And it is well! At last we are delivered from this demon that ruled only by fear and the craze of blood-hunger! It is well that I discovered it feared fire—you, yourself, gave the secret away to me when you protested so strongly about the torches overhanging the arena. If such a thing as this was your child, as you have so often claimed, then you cannot be entirely human or fit to direct the destiny of Ceipe! *I will test your invulnerability!*"

The queen of Ceipe suddenly cast her spear at Throal's chest.

In the stillness surrounding the motionless group the impact of the shaft and the sound of riven flesh was plainly,

heard. It struck in the region of the heart, pierced the lean form and protruded several inches behind the wizard's shoulder blades. He did not fall at once, and his convulsive fury was horrible to see. Clutching at the handle of the spear in a vain effort to withdraw the shaft, he swayed on his feet while great drops of perspiration beaded his hairless face and brow. The lips curled like those of an enraged animal. Between the set teeth poured a stream of gibberish in some unknown language. The rise and fall of Throal's tones, interrupted as they were by his spasmodic breathing, was vaguely reminiscent of an incantation. At last, while all remained speechless with stupefaction, he fell as a tree of the forest falls—full-length and motionless after he struck the sands.

For once in his life Rald was incapable of swearing.

"Look!" he cried, as if all of them were not staring at the dead evil which they had once thought to be endowed with everlasting life and the essence of immortality in mind and body. "Look! He . . . *it* . . . changes!"

A curious transmutation was taking place. The smooth flesh of the head began to wither and crack as if subjected to intense heat; pieces of the skin became loose and curled like dry paper. In a few seconds the entire substance composing the head, excluding the skull itself, had fallen away in the form of dust. The ashes, curiously, resembled the remains of Hess. A fleshless skull, with empty eye-sockets wherein the magnetic orbs of the wizard had once rested, stared into eternity from its position on the sand. The black robe had collapsed also. Its crumpled outlines suggested that the same change had taken place in the body members. Throal was a naked skeleton; whatever witchcraft had preserved his shape

through the centuries had departed into the hellish depths from which he had extracted it. The only remaining proof of his existence was the yellow bones of the skeleton that had, only a short time before, supported the semblance of an active and living man.

"Throal is dead!" announced the queen. She strove for a stern tone, but a quaver crept into her voice. "We will have no more of goddess or wizardry in the kingdom of Ceipe!"

"How about *men*?" inquired Rald with a quiet satisfaction.

"The men will be cured of their drug habits. A year or two will perhaps bring them out of the stupor into which this evil wizard forced them. I knew it was not right to keep the men in slavery, but I could do nothing against Throal as long as his creature lived. For had we slain him, Hess would have destroyed us all. We are grateful to you for——"

"For nothing! Had you not cast me the torch, my friends and I would now be shapeless things with crushed bones. But I am thinking of the men, Cene. A 'year or two' is—a long time!"

"You forget yourself!" She could not misconstrue his meaning; there had been a faint suggestion of sarcasm in his voice. She became imperious. "I am Cene, queen of Ceipe, and——"

"Once a priestess of Bast," interposed Rald, gentle of tone and manner, "the goddess whose dust is now mingled with these common sands. Once dead, Cene, you too will become but coarse dust into which the careless footprints of a future generation will be unfeelingly imprinted; your beauty will be spoken of with a halting remembrance—or perhaps imparted to posterity in the form of a graven bust that could only retain a frozen likeness of yourself. You will be dead! And all

the pomp and splendor, all the homage and adulation which you have received, will dissolve into some casual observer of your image inquiring: 'Who *was* Cene?'

"**W**HAT is royalty, Cene? If you have the strength and the power to rule well, then you deserve credit, of course. But what of yourself? Have you no desires of your own? Is it necessary for you to sacrifice all the pleasures of a lifetime because of one little mountain kingdom? Perhaps you have the impression that you could not be replaced or that the order of your dynasty should not change? What say your subjects? As long as they possess a wise and untroublesome ruler, do you think they care what dynasty produced their figurehead? There are lights in your eyes that proclaim you to be too young for celibacy, Cene!"

"Are you proposing yourself as a fitting——"

"Why not? I could have been a king. I can fight better than most of them, I have found. But I discovered the life of a common mercenary is apt to last longer. I have fought in many wars and under many ensigns. I have slept in royal beds. Maybe the next night I slept in a gutter—but what of it? Once I was a thief in Forthe; once a slave under Hagar. But if I died this next moment I can still say that I have lived! Could you?"

"I—believe not," answered the queen. She thoughtfully prodded at the sand with her sword.

"Thwaine!" shouted Rald.

His comrade detached himself from the group of women gathered about the skeleton; that is, he detached himself from the ring of inquisitive females but not from Ating, who skipped happily along behind his squat figure like the rudder of a ship.

"Thwaine is a competent fellow," explained Rald to the queen. "A clever diplomat and a fierce fighting-man. On occasion, he can become even wiser than I, though I hate to endanger his complacency by admitting it."

"Indeed?" Cene's eyebrows were arched.

"Yes. Let Thwaine and Ating rule your precious kingdom of rock and sand for the space of a year. Then return to see if your former subjects are prepared to cast roses beneath your feet or are willing to stage a rebellion to place you—well, to reseate you on the throne!"

"And where would I be during this time?"

"With me," said Rald, simply. His features were eloquent.

Cene stared at him but could not manage a reply.

"Come," ordered Rald; "get these overwrought females off these polluted sands and back to their respective stations; find me a place to sleep for what remains of the night, and tomorrow you may guide me to the waterfall. Together we will breathe some purer air than the fetid atmosphere I detect here. No?"

"Yes," said Cene, and the smile on her crimson lips caused the mercenary's heart to skip its regular beat.

