

« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

Strange STORIES

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CONTENTS

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THE SEAL OF SIN

A Complete Novelet of Evil Powers

By **HENRY KUTTNER**

Both Blessed and Cursed is the Hand that Wears the Ancient Seal of Solomon, Until a Twisted Soul is Drawn into Its Sinister Bondage and Reaps a Ghastly Harvest 14

THE DEAD KNOW ALL **Norman A. Daniels**
A Would-be Murderer Meets His Nemesis! 31

THE HOUSE OF STANLEY **George J. Rawlins**
A Knight in Armor Rides from the Past to Preserve His Noble Name 37

THE TAPESTRY GATE **Leigh Brackett**
Mortal Greed Was the Force that Drew Souls into the Devil's Cloth 46

SATAN'S SIDESHOW **Carson Judson**
Between Two Men Joined by a Strange Law of God Comes a Flame of Searing Hate to Rip the Bonds—and Wreak Vengeance! [A Complete Novelet] 54

BIRKETT'S TWELFTH CORPSE **August W. Derleth**
Darkly Swirling Waters Covered All that Remained of a Hideous Secret 67

I AM GOING TO CRACOW! **Maria Moravsky**
A Swamp Witch Shows Jacob Wolski the Road to His Heart's Desire 70

THE DEAD SHALL RISE UP **Will Garth**
A Prophecy Defeats a Merciless Ghoul 79

DESIGN FOR DOOM **Eli Colter**
An Ancient Bronze Tool Evokes Weird Visions of Violence 81

THE BLACK ARTS (A Department) **Lucifer**
Join THE BLACK ARTS CLUB—Coupon on Page 96 90

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THE HOUSE OF STANLEY

By GEORGE J. RAWLINS

Author of "The Thirteenth Boat," "Hound of the Haunted Trail," etc.

WHEN I came to England from America in the summer of 1939, I had never before seen the ruins of Kenmere Castle. I knew nothing of the eerie legends shrouding its grim walls frowning out upon a gray North Sea from their Essex cliffs.

Neither had I met the charming Marguerite de Lesdrenier—nor had Hitler invaded Poland.

I still believed the ancient dead were content to dream on through eternity, oblivious to the march of time, uncon-

A Knight in Armor Rides from the Limbo of the Forgotten Past to Preserve the Proud Lineage of His Noble Name



Under its shelter Marguerite crouched on the floor

cerned with the fate of living mortals.

Entering the castle for the first time, I had a vague feeling I had been there before.

"Stories I read as a kid!" I told myself. "Half-forgotten memories of picture-book tales of knighthood!"

I had no sentimental interest in the place. I, Edgar Stanley, proud of my old-American stock—my pioneering ancestors were stalwart, blond, blue-eyed men, rugged and aquiline of countenance, and I'm proud to be one of such a line.

Today, I am its sole surviving member.

I acquired Kenmere quite by accident, in settlement of foreign holdings inherited from my father. Now that I owned the castle I intended to investigate it, for tales of ancient chivalry still intrigue me.

ALONE in the echoing solitude of those ghostly halls, imagination carried me back through the years. I heard ribald laughter and the clang of armor from the guard-room, the fancied thud of hoofs as some phantom courier galloped across the draw-bridge.

I smelled the aroma of roasting venison from the kitchens. A pigeon cooing on the parapet became a winged bearer of love missives from errant knight to his demoiselle!

Day-dreaming, I came to what had been the chapel. Its roof gone, peaked arches marked the windows in its tottering walls. Behind the grass-grown alter-dais an opening led down into the crypt. Somehow, I knew I would find that opening there. I descended the stone stairs into the dank darkness that shrouded Kenmere's ancient dead.

Along the vault's subterranean walls, tiers of recesses housed their long-dead occupants. In the light of my flashlight I tried to read the inscriptions, but effacing time had done its work. Here, a date, there a barely decipherable "Lord of Kenmere", a cross, a crest, a "*Requiescat in pace.*"

Engrossed by chill enchantment, I did not notice the closing-in of evening. My flashlight had grown dim. Then, through deathlike stillness,

there came a stealthy thumping—distant, regular, scarcely audible, but steadily approaching.

I listened. My pulses raced, and the heartbeat in my ears confused my hearing. It might be footsteps on hollow tile, it might be the thud of clods falling upon a coffin!

I hurried along the crypt, the cold of empty darkness grasping at my back, and rushed headlong up the stairs to collide with the caretaker.

"Lor', sir, but you scairt me!" gasped the astonished Rand. "I don't come about 'ere much at this hour, Sir. It's a bit uncanny—but I thought you might 'ave got lost!"

So it was Rand's footsteps I had heard resounding on the flagstones above the crypt! Chagrined at my momentary panic, a wild thought seized me.

"Rand," I said, "where can I get workmen? There are rooms in the donjon-keep I want fixed up for my quarters."

"You don't expect to live there, Sir? Lor', Sir, I wouldn't advise it!" Rand was quite serious. "It 'as been tried, even in my time, Sir. They do say the place is haunted!"

"Good!" I forced a laugh. "Maybe some ancient ghost will give me his autobiography!"

IN AUGUST I moved into a modern apartment with its own light-plant and water-system, built into Kenmere Castle. Within its confines I lived in the twentieth century. Across my threshold lay the dim and musty past where medieval ghosts were supposed to stalk by night.

Perversely, I encouraged those ghosts. Alone in total darkness in the moldering crypt I awaited the witching hour of midnight, but naught disturbed the slumbers of the dead!

"Evidently," I decided, "the ghosts of Kenmere aren't concerned with me!" Yet Rand insisted no one else had been able to spend a night within the Castle walls.

It never occurred to me, and I would have scoffed at the idea, that perhaps those other occupants were not true masters of Kenmere, and therefore not acceptable to its eerie

guardians. It never occurred to me that since the dead belong to eternity, they can afford to bide their time—Today, I do not scoff!

Constructing my apartment, the workmen unearthed a very old manuscript. Defaced by the seeping rains of centuries, I could decipher only fragments of its imperfect Latin. Written by an ancient Dowager of Kenmere, it lamented a wayward son of the noble House who had disappeared and had been disinherited. The other son and only heir had gone to the wars in Normandy. Concerned for his welfare, the writer consulted a famous witch. Strangely, the witch's prophecy recorded in the script, stood out in bold clear letters still untouched by time:

"No further generations shall arise in Kenmere Castle until the young Lord shall bring home the Pearl of Palestine. And through the Pearl of Palestine shall the lineage of his House be rebuilt."

The venerable writer then records deep mystification, for she knew naught of the Pearl of Palestine. And she grieved that so noble a line must perish from the earth, for the young Lord of Kenmere came home—a corpse.

September. *Blitzkrieg* in Poland. In England, a State of War—and I caught the war fever. Training camps—a Subaltern's commission. Crossing the Channel in darkness, a French port at dawn, trains waiting at the pier sidings.

Through France, cheering crowds saluted us. At Laon, I stepped from the troop train to try my French on the pretty girls distributing cigarettes and chocolate bars. One charming mademoiselle, whose dark silken hair framed a face from such exquisite cameo, replied to me in perfect English.

In those few minutes we learned much of each other. When I swung aboard the moving train I had the address of Marguerite de Lesdrenier in my pocket—and her picture in my heart.

Deep in the earth below the Maginot Line I wondered what that ancient young Lord of Kenmere might think of modern warfare. Had his charger's hoofs ever spurned the ground above

me? Then the skirmishing east of the Sierck Forts, and the night of September 16th, in striking distance of Merzig on the east bank of the Saar.

WE ATTACKED at dawn. Advance positions of the Siegfried Line dropped a curtain of fire along the outskirts of the city. Moving up along the railroad, my platoon entered the factory district.

As I crawled up beside a large warehouse, a big H.E. shell ploughed into the building. I saw flying fragments shoot skyward, and the massive masonry wall bulge outward above me. Little puffs of white dust spurted from the widening cracks, and the shattered wall seemed to hang in air like something in a slow-motion picture.

As I ran, the wall collapsed. Tons of debris roared down about me, and a stunning blow on my steel helmet sent me sprawling. In that brief moment of remaining consciousness before the wall buried me, I saw a man running in my direction. He came swiftly, too swiftly, it seemed! Not a Tommy, not a *poilu*, nor a German soldier—but an incongruously noble figure clad in full medieval armor. A powerful mailed arm went about me. A gauntleted hand grasped my shoulder. His vizor was open, and as he knelt beside me I caught a fleeting glimpse of his face. He flung up his shield, covering my body and protecting me from falling fragments. I heard the clang of them on its metal surface. Then—blackness!

When I regained consciousness, Hospital Corps men were digging me out. The field hospital, suspecting internal injuries, routed me back to the Base.

There, while they probed and X-rayed, I kept thinking of that man-in-armor. A vision? A fantastic hallucination? It didn't seem logical my imagination could play such a trick after refusing, under ideal conditions, to raise the ghosts of Kenmere!

The face I had seen in the open helmet seemed uncannily familiar. A face I knew, and knew well, yet I could not place its owner.

As I lay on my hospital cot, a subtle

fragrance like a spring zephyr seemed to enter the ward. I'm sure I felt it before I turned to look.

Marguerite de Lesdrenier was coming down the aisle.

Distributing magazines, she stopped to talk a moment with each patient. My pulse raced faster as she approached. At first she did not recognize me because of my head bandages.

She got no farther with her magazines; I wouldn't let her. She sat beside me and we talked until visiting hours were over—there are compensations to being wounded.

MMARGUERITE'S father was in the French diplomatic service. She had lived in several countries, and in England learned the language. Now, she was organizing English-speaking war-welfare units near British stations.

She would be in the vicinity a week. I told her I thought I could make my disabilities last that long—if she'd visit the hospital every day, and she promised.

In the endless hours until her return, my mind went back again to my phantom rescuer. Had that first blow rung the curtain on my conscious mind, leaving the sub-conscious to direct the show and register a scene on my memory cells? Was the man-in-armor a manifestation of suppressed desires developed in childhood, desires born of hero-worship of mighty men of yore? No, if that were the case, my inner self would have striven to fulfill a frustrated wish and would have made me hero of the play.

None of it made sense. But neither did my vivid experience, my miraculous escape. Not with the twentieth century four-tenths gone. My head throbbed with the twisted riddle when Marguerite came—and the world was right again!

When I was able to hobble about, the medicos let me out in Marguerite's care, and by the end of the week I was fit for duty. Marguerite expected to leave for points nearer the Swiss border.

Our last night together—blackouts aren't so bad—seated in a little park, I slipped an engagement solitaire on

her slim finger. I begged her to marry me that night, but she insisted I must ask her father. Old French families are like that.

We sat there close together, not talking much, and then she drew from her right hand a heavy emerald ring. Around its square-cut stone, heraldic designs wove an intricate pattern.

"Edgar," said Marguerite, pressing the ring into my hand, "I want you to wear this and bring it back to me. I feel that it's part of me, it's been in my family beyond memory."

I kissed her hands as she fitted it on my finger.

"It's a pledge of my love," she continued. "You don't mind me being a little romantic, do you? I like to think my gallant Knight carries my gage in battle! Carry it to glorious victory, or—or glorious—" Her voice failed her.

I knew what she meant, but this line of talk wouldn't do.

"Tell me about the ring," I said.

"It's the last remaining piece of a very old set. It dates back to the days of the Kings. It is always worn by the eldest daughter of the House. By tradition, when she plights her troth she must give her Knight a love token from the set, as I am doing now. A pledge redeemable only by herself in marriage."

I couldn't help but wonder, then what went with the other pieces? Evidently some of the Sir Knights didn't come back—

To my chagrin she seemed to guess my thoughts.

"The ring must be lucky," she reassured, "since it has survived so long. Are you superstitious, Edgar?"

"No," I lied, thinking of the man-in-armor.

On my way back to the Front, the man-in-armor clung to my thoughts. I had ceased trying to solve the riddle. I refused to think of him as a ghost, or consider myself haunted. Both words carried implications far too dire. I reasoned he existed only in imagination, but felt him to be a real person, a friendly person. Or, if he were a spirit, he was a guardian angel—a comforting thought to carry into the trenches.

Toying with the emerald ring on my finger, I wondered how often it had been drenched in the blood of battle. According to Marguerite it always came back to claim the hand of a maiden. No wearer of it had ever died in battle. With two such protectors, the ring and the man-in-armor, I felt well-nigh invulnerable. But what amulets did the adventuring Lord of Kenmere use on his ill-starred search for the Pearl of Palestine? Were mine more potent than his?

On September 25th, the Nazis made a determined drive under fire from their Mittlebach Forts. On the 26th we began closing in, and my outfit took an enemy casemate by assault. A nasty job, calling for grenades and flame-throwers, but the position was vital to our main movement. In the moment of confusion following the assault, the Nazis counter-attacked before we could reorganize or bring up our machine guns.

I rallied my scattered men around the casemate, returned the Nazi fire with a few hasty shots and received them on the bayonet.

I now had no control over my men except by personal example. This, I thought irrelevantly, is not unlike the way the man-in-armor would fight. Perhaps that ring on my finger had swung to the rise and fall of battle-ax as it now followed thrust and parry—

A sort of frenzy comes with bayonet fighting, a delirium of animal exhilaration at the shock of personal combat. My howling Tommies fought like madmen. Sweat streamed in my eyes. Unconscious of minor wounds, I began to taste blood. A courageous little recruit beside me was beaten to the knee.

I swung up a wide butt stroke to save him and, momentarily uncovered, a Nazi bayonet raked my ribs. Inch by inch we were forced to yield under sheer weight of numbers—What was delaying our supporting troops? Could we hold the casemate until they came?

No shouting now. Only heavy breathing, the thud of clubbed rifles, the clash of steel. An occasional shot, a groan, bitter curses between clenched teeth—

BEHIND the line of fighters the enemy was packed in a solid mass, unable to fire because of their own men. My back came up against the casemate. I sprang to the top, and with a cry plunged bayonet-first over the heads of the fighters into the massed enemy behind.

Probably I went a little insane. Once I went down, and it was then I realized someone was fighting beside me. A whirling arc of steel cut down an opponent poised for a death thrust. A powerful hand jerked me to my feet, but I did not see the face of my ally. This time, the vizor of his plumed helmet was closed.

I recall that I was not even surprised that the man-in-armor should be there with me. Had I not heard of the Angels of Mons? Back-to-back we fought, and in my blood-blind fury I seemed to acquire superhuman strength. My own rifle shattered in blocking a head stroke. Barehanded, I disarmed my adversary and spitted him on his own bayonet.

My knightly ally's broadsword mowed down all before it. The astonished Nazis did not seem to see him until his death blows fell! Together we cut a swath through our shaken opponents, piling corpse on corpse.

Behind us, a yelling grew into a mighty shout. My Tommies were coming! My Tommies were following me! My mad adventure with the man-in-armor had rallied them. On they swept, in spite of numbers, driving all before them back into the woods.

Too exhausted to carry on, I stood leaning on my captured rifle. I looked back. Supporting French troops were coming at the double! We had held the casemate.

I looked for the man-in-armor. He was gone. The ground under me began to reel, my knees trembled, I staggered—and fell.

That strange trip to the rear, and days that followed, form a confused memory. French Hospital Corps men administered first-aid, rushed me back into the woods. The trees were huge gnarled oaks. The stretcher-bearers became English archers in leather jerkins, crossbows slung from their shoulders. They carried me, not on a

modern litter, but on a medieval shield!

The dressing station medico examined my bandages. His uniform blurred, as everything does when one's eyes are crossing from loss of sleep. Blouse buttons changed to a string of beads, the buckle on his field-belt turned into a cross. A cassocked priest of the middle ages gave me a hypodermic.

Between blanks in my memory, I lived in two worlds. White hospital wards alternated with castle chambers of gray granite. Trim, starched nurses changed before my eyes to pious nuns of some ancient nursing order. Perhaps the English term "sister," applied to nurses, heightened my confusion.

ONE kindly nun bore a striking likeness to Marguerite. Yet I knew she was not Marguerite, at least, not my Marguerite, even in that other world. Then she would modernize into my competent special nurse, with no slight resemblance to Marguerite.

Medieval men-at-arms wheeled me into a modern operating room. A black-garmented man they called Leech worked over me.

"Some day, we can save a man with wounds like these," he said, as he straightened up and turned to the others.

My eyes cleared, and instead of Leech, a doctor in an operating gown looked down at me. He gazed intently into my eyes and his face relaxed. He straightened up and turned to the others.

"A few years ago we could not save a man with wounds like these," he said.

I did not slip into that other-world again. The nurse told me I had a visitor—and Marguerite was with me.

"They wouldn't let me see you," she said, after our first greeting, "so I went to the Corps Surgeon. He knows my father, and remembered me as a baby when we were stationed in the Near East. The blessed old man gave me a letter to your Chief Surgeon."

"Is it your father's diplomatic influence," I queried, "or have you inherited his diplomacy?"

"I've inherited his determination—and love of bravery!" She kissed the emerald ring on my finger.

"I knew you would bring it back to me, Edgar!" She was laughing through her tears. "Bring it back covered with blood and glory!"

"Blood, all right," I agreed, gazing at the ring.

"And glory, too! You are my Knight, Edgar! The fight at the casemate is already legend. Your British officers throw out their chests at mention of it!"

I wanted to say, "There were two of us," but didn't know how to explain the man-in-armor.

I recuperated rapidly in the crisp October air of the Vosges. Then followed an ordeal. Two colonels, British and French, came to pin decorations on my bandaged chest, and I was kissed on the cheek by the Frenchman. What price glory.

I told Marguerite of my strange adventures with the man-in-armor, of my life in two worlds and the kindly nun who looked like her.

"You were very near to death, Edgar," she whispered. "They say you were delirious most of the time. I wonder—"

But when we figured it out in cold logic, everything could be explained naturally. There was nothing tangible. All the apparently supernatural lay within my subjective self. Thus reason dictates—and reason can be a deceiver.

SICK-LEAVE to Paris, where Marguerite's father gave his consent.

"Father, do you think I should go to England with Edgar? Or does France need me here?" Marguerite asked him, after the two-fold French wedding.

The kindly gentleman patted her shoulder.

"*Ma chère*," he said, "go to England with your invalided soldier and nurse him back to health. France will need him again!"

My bachelor quarters at Kenmere proved quite ample for two. In this rural quiet only a patrol plane cruising the coast or a prowling destroyer in ghostly camouflage reminded us of war. I gained strength rapidly in

those idyllic days as we explored Kenmere's faded majesty and planned its rehabilitation.

Basking in winter sunshine in the roofless chapel above the crypt, we read together the ancient manuscript my workmen had discovered. We discussed the witch's prophecy. Then Marguerite read it over again, half to herself.

"No further generations shall arise in Kenmere Castle until the young Lord shall bring home the Pearl of Palestine. And through the Pearl of Palestine shall the lineage of his House be rebuilt."

She paused. A strange expression on her beautiful face, a new light in her deep dark eyes. I believe she was on the verge of a vast, if vague, understanding.

"Don't think me silly, Edgar, but—I believe the prophecy is coming true!"

Before I could answer, her face changed and her gaze turned seaward. Suddenly, I too heard it—the steady rhythmic drone of motors. Then we saw them. A full squadron of bombers with escort. An air raid!

We sat still and watched, feeling safe enough, knowing that a ruined castle offers no objective. Then from behind us came the whine of small fighting planes. Almost before we realized it, the two fleets joined in combat high above us.

Air fights are short. A plane wobbled off crazily toward the rear. Another plunged into the sea in flames. Then came the banshee shriek of falling bombs. Shattering detonations as columns of earth rose high in the air. Those bombs were not meant for any target. Some hard-pressed bomber was lightening her load to make a getaway.

"Quick! The crypt!" Marguerite pulled me to my feet. Even as she spoke, a bomb struck close outside the chapel. The very earth heaved. An inverted cone of flying débris blotted out the sun. The chapel floor swayed, cracked, fell—plunging us into the crypt below.

The fall separated us. Marguerite disappeared. Fighting frantically to extricate myself, I heard her scream. Inexorably, the rain of earth and rocks flung up by the blast, continued.

A projecting slab of masonry protected me. In utter horror I thought of Marguerite, caught in this hail of death—

THE shower of earth ceased just as I wrenched myself free. In cold panic, I clambered over the rubbish in search of her. At the far end of the crypt, a part of the roof still stood. Under its shelter Marguerite crouched on the floor, staring blankly in my direction. I rushed to her. She recoiled at my touch, her face white, as one who has talked with death!

For a moment she gazed, as if not sure she recognized me, then she threw her arms about me and burst into hysterical sobbing.

It was minutes before I could quiet her and ascertain she was not injured.

"Oh, Edgar!" she sobbed. "I'm not the helpless coward I seem! It wasn't the bombs or the fall that made me lose my head. It was he, Edgar! I saw him!"

My dumbfounded expression must have asked a question.

"He saved me!" she went on. "Your man-in-armor! I was half stunned when I struck the floor. Someone, of course, I thought it was you, picked me up and ran with me down the crypt to the shelter of this roof. I looked into his face, and Edgar, it was you! Then he set me down and I saw he was clad in armor, just as you described him. I screamed and hid my face. When I looked up again he was gone. The rain of rocks had ceased and you were coming— Oh, Edgar, I don't understand!"

The sound of the air-fight died in the distance, while I held my trembling bride in my arms, at a loss for any explanation. So the man-in-armor was not a figment of my imagination. A minor mystery seemed cleared, only to make the whole more complicated. I had seen his face just once. It was the face of one I knew, and knew well, yet I could not identify it. Now Marguerite had seen him, and the face in the armor was mine!

We crawled over the débris, seeking egress from the now roofless crypt. The tombs were still intact, but the shattering detonations had cracked

the masonry. Assisting Marguerite, I braced my hand against a slab that closed a burial niche. The mortar gave way and the slab fell outward. Sunlight poured into the long-dark recess revealing a figure lying there, fully clad in a suit of mail.

I stood aghast. Link for link, plate for plate, rivet for rivet, that was the armor worn by my phantom protector at Merzig, my valiant ally at the casemate, and by Marguerite's rescuer of a moment past. The man-in-armor!

When I recovered sufficiently to tell Marguerite, she stared fixedly at the helmet and closed visor and nodded affirmation.

"Edgar," she whispered in awed tones, "I tell you it was you I saw in that armor! You! Look, Edgar, there's a name-plate on the bier!"

REVERENTLY I came closer to the ancient dead, knelt to examine the strip of tarnished silver Marguerite indicated. Trembling, hardly daring to believe, I deciphered the age-old inscription:

"Sir Edgar,
Lord of Kenmere,
Last of the Line of Stanley.
Slain in battle in Normandy."

I could read no further. Edgar Stanley—my own name!

"You see," said Marguerite, her eyes shining with awe, "I said, he is you. Or you, he."

"You mean reincarnation?"

"Not exactly. I don't know. Heredity, perhaps. You, too, are Edgar Stanley."

"But, Marguerite, I know nothing of my ancestors before they went to America, and Sir Edgar had no heirs."

"The old manuscript tells of another son of the House. Remember? Sir Edgar's younger brother who disappeared. You may be descended from him."

"Who knows," was all I could manage to answer. My head was swimming.

I turned again to the ancient armor; I suppose it contained little but dust. I do not know. For then something caught my eye. From the plumed crest of the helmet, where a knight

wore his lady's gage, I lifted an object which glowed dully in the sun. I brushed off the dust of ages. There was a glint of gold, shot through with green fire. A heavy gold breastpin, and around its square-cut emerald, heraldic designs wove an intricate pattern.

My hands shook as I held it for Marguerite to see, held it beside the finger ring she had given me. The designs and stones were identical, obviously from the same original set.

I slipped my arm about Marguerite's trembling shoulders and together we knelt before the tomb. There, in brilliant sunlight I felt that the dead had spoken, invoking an age-old benediction on our union. For I remembered Marguerite's legend of the emeralds—and a great light was dawning.

"Marguerite," my voice was shaking, "I think I know the answer. I am not Sir Edgar Stanley, but I am of his blood. I am his physical and spiritual counterpart. As the flesh of the child is the flesh of the parent, so my soul partakes of his. Yet each has its own entity. I duplicate phases of his life in modern version. Listen to me, Marguerite! He thought himself the last of his line, as I am the last of mine. Believing the House of Stanley could survive only through him, his most vital interest lay in marriage. Lay in his love for a Lady of Normandy, a French Lady who gave him this pin even as you gave me the ring. And she, Marguerite, was of your own family, as this jewel indicates. She was your prototype, as he was mine."

YOU may be right, Edgar," she breathed.

"I know I'm right! That's why he protected me and fought for me, and rescued you. That's why the nun in my hallucinations, who looked like you, watched over me. She strove to keep my soul in my body, for you. She is to you as he is to me. They were to each other as we are to each other. Their unfulfilled love is being consummated in us, Marguerite, these hundreds of years after!"

I talked on rapidly, as things seemed clearer.

"Why, even the Leech in my other-world vision admitted my wounds were fatal. True, in his day, when my wounds were Sir Edgar's. But the modern surgeon could handle such wounds. Sir Edgar died. I lived."

"Thank God!" Marguerite smiled up at me, a vast understanding shining from her face. "And now, Edgar—what of the Pearl of Palestine?"

"I don't know. The prophecy said Sir Edgar must bring home the Pearl. Who knows, perhaps he found it but died before he could claim it."

"I think that also is true," she said, gravely. "Edgar, do you know where I was born?"

"France?"

"No. Of course, I'm French, but when I was born my parents were stationed in—in Palestine."

"Palestine!" I exclaimed, amazed at what she said.

"And Edgar," she hurried on, "do you know the meaning of the name, Marguerite?"

I shook my head.

"It comes from the Latin, for—pearl."

I could scarcely believe my ears. Then Marguerite really was the Pearl of Palestine.

"Just one thing more, Edgar, one thing to make the prophecy complete!" She toyed with the lapel of my coat. "I'm sure our ancient prototypes will be happy, will continue to give us of their blessings. Edgar, the House of Stanley *shall* be rebuilt!" She buried her face on my shoulder. "For—for the House of Stanley—is to have an heir!"

