



# THE LION GODDESS

BY JOHN WIGGIN



**Bel-Hanno—a lost city sunk in Africa's gleaming Jungle. Until the coming of Red Nunan, he of the wild Irish smile and the mad Irish heart, no White Man had ever spied its brooding battlements. None ever mocked the milk-skinned goddess Yashtar whose kiss meant death.**

**I**T was a very little noise—the merest tiny rattle of a pebble rolling down a rock—but the Red Nunan was awake on the instant.

His great hard torso reared swiftly and silently, and his thick hands closed auto-

matically on the Italian Army rifle that lay beside him. He cocked his head alertly this way and that while his experienced eyes strained to pierce the blanket of smoky darkness about him. He could feel that darkness lying wet and clammy on his

leathery face, but he could not see a thing, not even the fine gun cradled in his lap.

No more pebbles rattled to break the fearsome brooding silence. What was it disturbed that pebble? the Red Nunan asked himself. Pebbles don't get up and roll around of their own accord. Something has to give it a push. It couldn't have been a leprechaun, because the Red Nunan well knew there were no leprechauns in Africa.

Then there came another sound, and the Red Nunan's nerves tingled. It was a faint sort of sound, barely to be heard, and yet unmistakable. It took the Red Nunan back to parade days in London when he was in the Irish Guards, and the Eleventh Hussars would clatter past, their band at their head. And the mounted kettle-drummer would flick his drumheads softly as he screwed them up to the right pitch.

It was just such a soft drumming sound that the Red Nunan heard now, out on the African waste. Not the drumming of horses' hoofs, but something much less clear and much more muffled. Some heavy creature with great padded feet was trotting off in that fearful darkness. It might be a lion, the Red Nunan reflected, if it were not for the fact that as far as he knew he was in the middle of the Sahara Desert. But if it were not a lion, what in the devil was it?

The Red Nunan cursed silently. He cursed the lack of a camp-fire, or rather the lack of wood of any kind to build one. He cursed the six-day rainstorm. He cursed the lack of a compass to tell him what direction to go. And he cursed the day he had taken young Charles Roderick Ormond Bracy under his protection.

Saints! but it seemed a century ago that the Red Nunan had swaggered back to his Wicklow hills, a time expired man of the Irish Guards. The days of that summer poaching trout and rabbits were so sweet and so dull. Young Bracy, the younger son at the Manor, had caught him but agreed to keep mum. The price was that the Red Nunan must be the haughty young boye'en's guide.

Then the happy months in the Spanish Foreign Legion, fighting Riffs. And the unhappy day when Franco took the Legion to Madrid to shoot down poor devils who had never had a gun in their hands be-

fore, and they white men in the bargain. And there was young Bracy again, fresh from the University of Salamanca, charging about in his haughty ignorance in an infantry officer's uniform. He would have been killed sure, if the Red Nunan had not pulled strings and had both Bracy and himself transferred to the Staff of the newly arrived Italian Army. Twelve years in the Guards had taught Red Nunan how to get around in army politics.

So the pair had gone back to Italy, and then they had been shipped to Libya, and the Red Nunan thought it was high time the likes of them should be clearing out of the Italian Army. The wily politician in him, equipped as it was with merry blue eyes, honest red hair, and the charmed tongue, had wangled the job of driving an armored car across the Desert to Gat on the French border. Only the Red Nunan had no intention of reaching Gat. At a safe place, he was going to turn due west, cross the border and keep going until he struck the Trans-Saharan Railway, and pretty soon the French would be greeting two more deserters from the Italian Army.

THE Red Nunan had equipped that armored car with everything. He had seen to food, ammunition, petrol supply. The only thing he forgot was a compass to tell him what way to go. Then came the sandstorm which quickly changed to pelting rain.

And for the last six days Charley Bracy had alternately raged and sneered at him, as they drove through pelting rain. Having no compass, the Red Nunan had driven by guesswork. There was no sun, either, and he had guessed his direction by the wind. The prevailing wind in North Africa is north or northeast. The Red Nunan had kept that wind on his right cheek which should mean he was going westward.

But six days had gone by and they still had not hit the Trans-Saharan, and they should have hit it in two. Fine green grass was showing in the rain-soaked clay and gravel of the Desert, and the Red Nunan had not the faintest idea where he and his young companion were. A half day's march behind them was their fine armored motor car, hopelessly bogged and low in petrol to boot.

A shattering roar broke in on the Red Nunan's meditations. He sprang to his feet. Another answering roar clamored through the darkness. Saints! It couldn't be but it was! Lions, and no mistake!

"Mother of God, Nunan!" came a querulous voice. "What was that?"

The Red Nunan sighed. He wished that Bracy had stayed asleep.

"You mean the roaring sound?" he asked politely.

"I do," said Bracy. "What's making it?"

"It might be a lion or two," said the Red Nunan.

"Don't be idiotic," said Bracy petulantly. "There are no lions on the Desert."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"Well, then, where the devil are we, Nunan?"

"The Lord knows where we are."

There followed now the inevitable tongue-lashing which the Red Nunan endured patiently. Why had he done this? Why had he not done that? What was the reason for doing the other thing? He called himself a soldier. Any Clontarf gardener would have known enough to fetch along a compass.

While young Bracy sneered and snarled a cold gray light crept over the world. Through the light ground-mist, the Red Nunan could see Bracy's long, aristocratic face twisted with rage. The dark, passionate, handsome inbred face with its sensitive nose and its weak mouth mocked the huge, silent man. The Red Nunan winced and stared off in the direction he thought was west.

THEN Nunan's soldier's brain began to tickle. The day was breaking fast, and through the steam rising from the ground, the Red Nunan could see one thing clearly. That was that the bright part of the horizon which betokened the dawning sun was not behind him as it should be. It was in front of him. He thought he was looking west, but instead he was looking east. Holy Saints! but he was turned around altogether!

An hour later the blood-red sun lifted its bottom edge clear of the horizon and showed the two travelers exactly where they stood on the rain-drenched Desert. The Red Nunan stared to the southward

and wondered if he were seeing a mirage itself.

Not half a mile away a great dark green forest began and stretched away for miles.

"Small wonder it is that we heard lions," young Bracy said bitterly. "Now where is your precious French railway, Nunan? Can you see it anyway?"

"I cannot," said the Red Nunan truthfully, "but I can see a lion as big as Satan."

"Where?" young Bracy whirled and plucked his rifle off the ground.

"No, no!" Nunan cried. "Don't shoot. He'll not hurt us if we don't provoke him. We must save our ammunition for game along the edge of the forest. Besides, there still might be some Tuaregs around, and the noise of your gun would attract them."

"I'd as lief be killed by a Tuareg as by a lion," said Bracy and sighted along his gun-barrel at the magnificent lion which watched them from a knoll four hundred yards away.

The Red Nunan was tempted to wrench the gun out of the young aristocrat's hands, but he could not quite bring himself to it. He had meant what he said about Tuaregs. All the way across the Desert he had kept a wary eye out for those Veiled Terrors of the Sahara, those desert raiders who killed and plundered pitilessly all strangers who could not put up a strong defense.

So far, no Tuaregs had been sighted, although the Red Nunan thanked the six-day rain for that. However, he and his rash young companion were still out in the open. On foot they were, too, with no cover of any kind.

"You've nothing to fear from that lion—"

"He's coming toward us," Bracy interrupted, "but I've got a bead on him. Stand by with your gun in case I don't kill him straight off."

Bracy's rifle cracked. Almost at the same moment the lion bellowed in agony and bent its great head and bit at a front paw like a dog after a flea.

"Look sharp, Nunan!" Bracy yelled, pulling back the bolt with shaking fingers, "I only winged him!"

He rammed the bolt home and fired again. The lion sprang to one side, shaking its mane and pealing roar after roar.

Then it started to bound toward the two men, in a horrible crippled lope. Bracy shouted incoherently and the Red Nunan aimed coolly at the lion's chest, and fired deliberately.

The great beast sprang into the air with a strangled cough and crashed to the earth, twitching.

Bracy shouted in triumph and would have run forward, but the Red Nunan's red hand gripped his arm.

"There's more than one lion. Keep a grip of yourself and don't be losing your head."

**T**HREE were two more lions running swiftly, belly to the ground, toward their dying fellow. They were fully two hundred yards away, but young Bracy went into a panic. He wrenched himself away from Nunan's grasp with a cry and fired wildly at the two new lions. None of the shots went home, but the lions roared a challenge at the sound of the rifle.

The Red Nunan carefully picked off each of the huge cats with breast shots and felt like a villain for doing so. They were the noble creatures to be shooting down in cold blood, but he had to do it. That fool of a Bracy had aroused them and it would not be safe on the open ground to have angry lions on their trail.

"Ah, but they're the fine big brutes!" young Bracy exulted, as if he had been the one to kill them, but the Red Nunan paid him no attention. He was anxiously scanning the horizon in all directions. Eight shots had been fired in that still morning air, and who else might have heard them?

"Hush," he commanded, and dropping to his knees, laid an ear to the ground. He rose quickly, an expression of concern on his craggy face.

"What's the matter, Nunan? D'you hear something?"

"Horses," Nunan replied briefly. "A whole troop of them. They're galloping somewhere, and it might as well be toward ourselves. You young fool, I told you not to be shooting off your rifle. Now, come on. We'll run for them woods and pray we make it."

"What are you running from?" Bracy whimpered. "A pounding in your ears?"

"There's no time for argument," the Red

Nunan growled. "Are you coming at all? Down this little dip, now, the way we won't be showing ourselves along a skyline. It may be Tuaregs, and it may not, but, anyway, *run!*"

It was Tuaregs.

The two deserters had scarcely run a hundred and fifty feet when a veiled horseman appeared, galloping on their left. The horseman shouted and waved an arm, and in a moment another horseman appeared galloping on their right.

"Stop!" the Red Nunan shouted at his companion. "Load in a fresh clip!"

A wave of furious disgust swept over Nunan. It was a stupid way to leave this life—to be shot down and then cut up in little pieces by the heathen. He reloaded his gun expertly and lifted the muzzle to bear on three veiled horsemen that trotted toward them two hundred feet away and above them on the little incline.

"Down on your belly," Nunan commanded, "and guard that side. I'll guard this. And for the love of Heaven, make every bullet count. Our only chance of getting out of this is to kill off a half dozen the way it would discourage the rest of them devils. They'll fire back; but they'll overshoot firing down hill like that. Keep calm now, here they come."

The Tuaregs came down in a rush. From three sides they came at full gallop, and they looked like an entire brigade.

The Red Nunan sighted on the foremost and methodically killed him. Behind him, Bracy was panic-stricken and shooting wildly. Nunan deftly killed three more of the Veiled Terrors, but he knew it was no use. The horsemen were on them before he could reload. He rose to his feet and clubbed the rifle.

He stepped nimbly out of the path of the nearest onrushing horse and brought the gun butt crashing down on its nose. Bracy was screaming in terror, and Nunan cursed as he swung the rifle to the other side. Why don't the devils shoot us and be done with it? he grunted. He was the center now of a scrambling, screeching mêlée of men and horses.

Again and again the terrible rifle crashed against veiled faces, momentarily clearing a space about him, that instantly closed in again. What was the matter with these Tuaregs? They had guns and swords—

cruel curved ones—but they were not using them.

"Arragh! Ye swine!" Nunan bellowed and snapped a skinny forearm like a matchstick. Then something hit him behind the left ear and everything went black.

PRESENTLY a soft twittering and chattering of voices came to the Red Nunan. They sounded at first from a distance but grew steadily louder the way a radio set does when it is first turned on.

He opened his eyes and blinked. His head ached like the devil. He tried to raise a hand to rub behind his left ear, but found he was tightly trussed up. Beside him lay Charles Roderick Ormond Bracy, also well bound. The boy's dark face was white and drawn with terror.

The Red Nunan turned his attention to the chattering Tuaregs. Evidently there was an argument going on. Not far from the captives, a tall figure, possibly the leader of the band, harangued the rest. But the other veiled figures kept on talking, and the tall man's voice rose to a scream and his hand clawed the air in violent gestures.

Nunan had once known a Berber girl in Ceuta and had in the course of his acquaintance learned a good many words of her Atlas Mountain dialect. He thought he recognized some of those words in this Tuareg's oration, now. The word "kill," for instance, he thought he caught. "Kill the Nasranis," was the phrase. That's us, the Red Nunan told himself grimly. But there was a negative in there—"not kill." Nunan concentrated hard. He heard a word which might mean "captive," or "prisoner." His little Berber friend had once taught him the phrase, "prisoner of love."

Just then one of the Tuaregs turned and glared at Nunan and shouted. The tall orator ran over and stared down at the captives. From the slit in the Tuareg's veil, a pair of eyes as blue as Nunan's own glinted down.

"Faith and would you happen to be an Irishman, at all?" Nunan said jocosely.

The blue eyes stared down frostily, and a torrent of Tuareg rolled out from behind the veil too fast altogether for Nunan to catch a single word. The Tuareg finished with a ringing enunciation of two syllables

which meant nothing at all to Nunan.

"*Yash Tar! Yash Tar!*" the Tuareg screamed, and pointed a bony forefinger at young Bracy.

The rest of the band took up the cry, "*Yash Tar! Yash Tar!*" and swarming around the two captives, jerked them to their feet and hustled them, babbling, toward the horses.

"Holy Saints! Nunan, whatever are they going to do to us?" Bracy whimpered.

"I don't know at all," the Red Nunan replied, "but anyhow they haven't done it yet."

Truth to tell, Nunan was completely baffled by the actions of the Tuaregs. His past experiences with Berbers had taught him that they ordinarily did not take prisoners. But these fellows hoisted him and Bracy on horses and then set off. Nunan could not make it out, especially when the band headed straight for the jungle!

What part of the world is this, anyhow? Nunan asked himself. Here is a regular jungle fully equipped with lions. But it is square in the middle of a Sahara Desert fully equipped with Tuaregs. And the Tuaregs take prisoners, which they do not ordinarily do, and then proceed straight into the jungle as if they owned the place!

They went along a sort of bridle-path broad enough for four horses at a time. In the lead was the blue-eyed leader. Then came the two captives, flanked on either side by a villainous-looking horseman. Behind came the rest of the party, which Nunan now judged to be not more than fifty riders.

A sinister quiet hung over the jungle as the little column wound along the path at a walking pace. The Tuaregs said not a word. Their veiled, inscrutable faces lent them an aspect of cold ferocity which would have chilled the heart of a braver man than Nunan. And Nunan was braver than ordinary. Bracy, beside him, was obviously half-dead from terror, eyes bulging and jaw slack.

But the Red Nunan was not one to let a terrifying situation get the best of him. His arms were bound, but he was not gagged nor was he blindfolded, and he used his eyes for all they were worth, observing the way they were going through the jungle. Now and then he stole a glance

at the Tuaregs around him. Already his crafty brain was at work figuring and conjecturing and turning over this possibility and that as to what was going to happen.

## II

ONE thing the Red Nunan had learned in the course of his life, and that was that professional soldiers could always become friendly with one another, even though they might be officially enemies. After all, they had a common profession even if they did happen to be practicing it against each other.

The politician in Nunan began to consider ways and means of making friends out of these Tuaregs, who were certainly professional soldiers, though primitive ones. He racked his brains to recall some of those Berber words the little girl in Ceuta taught him. If he could only remember a few, he might be able to start a line of shop-talk with the grim horseman beside him.

"Horse"—that was one word. Horse, horse, Nunan pondered, now what was another word? "Good"—he remembered how to say that. Here was a start. He turned to the Tuareg beside him, and turned on a good-natured grin.

"Hi, Johnny," he said in the friendliest tone he was capable of, and then jerked his head at the warrior's horse. "Good—horse"—the two Berber words.

The blue-eyed leader up ahead looked back over his shoulder but said nothing. The Tuareg beside Nunan said nothing either, but his fierce eyes glinted over the veil.

"Aye, that it is," the Red Nunan went on unabashed, still looking at his captor's horse and nodding as if with satisfaction. Then he repeated the Berber words for "Good horse." He smiled affably as if he were well pleased that two strong men—two professional soldiers—were well-agreed on at least one point. Then he looked around unconcernedly and began to hum "Londonderry Air," not loudly, but not particularly softly.

The Tuareg's eyes still glinted above the veil, but somehow or other, Nunan sensed a relaxation in the man. Bracy turned his pale, frightened face.

"Nunan!" he whispered. "Stop that

caterwauling or they'll kill us out of hand!"

"They will not," Nunan retorted, and suddenly recalled two more Berber words—"Brave man."

"Tuareg," he announced confidently for anyone to hear, "Tuareg brave man."

The leader looked back again and some of the men in the ranks behind chuckled. The Red Nunan felt that he had at least made a beginning. Not fifteen minutes later, he changed his mind.

They came out on a fair-sized clearing, and the leader immediately pulled over to one side. Nunan at once saw what was standing on the far side of the clearing. It was a huge lion.

Bracy began to whimper again, but Nunan silenced him quickly. After all, he reasoned, there were some Tuaregs about, all armed to the teeth. One lion could not do any harm.

Then the leader rode up to Nunan and addressed him. He said three Berber words, and then laughed mockingly. The words were, "Christian—brave man." But to Nunan, it sounded as if there were a question mark at the end. But he replied with a nod, "Christian brave man."

The whole troop of Tuaregs sent up a roar of laughter, and Nunan did not like the sound. It did not sound so very friendly after all.

Before he realized what was happening, he was being unbound. Then, while he thafed his arms, a Tuareg led his horse across the clearing. And while Nunan was still trying to figure out what was up, he received a furious buffet on the shoulder which sent him sprawling off the horse onto the ground. Quick as a flash, the Tuareg rode off, leading his horse, and Nunan was left standing alone fifty yards from the troop of warriors.

He whirled quickly, heart pounding. His worst fears were realized. The lion was pacing toward him.

It was a cruel trick, played on him by cruel men, to leave him, unarmed and on foot, to face a gigantic lion. The brute kept on toward him with measured, majestic steps, and Nunan fought to control his breathing. What was he going to do? What could he do?

The lion came on and on. Twenty feet away he stopped and gave a short, guttural

cough, the huge mouth opening and biting a chunk out of the air. Nunan was sick with fright. Brave he was, but this—this was certain death, and a horrible death, too.

There was nothing he could do. If he tried to run, the lion could overtake him in one bound. One sweep of a fearful fore-paw could rake ten pounds of flesh off his back. Nunan stood his ground and stared at the brute. It was moving toward him again, leisurely, languidly. Nunan's muscles tensed, and he crouched slightly. He had not a chance in hell of saving his life, but he was going to try anyway. He would wait until the lion sprang, and then he'd leap to one side, and try and jump onto the creature's neck. Perhaps he could strangle the brute if he could hang on long enough, and he were not ripped to bloody shreds by the lion's hind-claws.

There was a frightful stillness in the clearing as the lion came on and on. Nunan could hardly breathe. But he kept a good grip of himself and watched the rippling muscles of the lion's powerful shoulders.

The brute was only six feet away when Nunan decided to jump anyway. Then a most extraordinary thing happened. The lion yawned.

And before Nunan's astounded eyes, the gigantic creature lowered its chin to the ground, stretched its neck out and rolled over on its back. There it wriggled and snorted and kicked its feet in the air like a puppy-dog. Just behind the tangled mane, Nunan caught sight of a narrow metal collar.

Great Saints! It was a tame lion!

**N**UNAN went weak all over and would have slumped to the ground if there had not come a roar of laughter from the Tuaregs. The lion scrambled to its feet, looked around, and then trotted away to one side. Nunan pulled himself together and staggered toward the Tuaregs. A frightful joke they had pulled on him! He forced a grin, and raised an arm with an effort at jauntiness.

"Christian—" he croaked, "brave man."

There was an admiring yell from the Tuaregs. The leader and a half dozen others rode toward him, bringing his horse.

Chattering excitedly, they helped him up. The journey resumed with Nunan riding beside the blue-eyed leader at the head of the column.

As soon as Nunan fully recovered himself he got the leader's attention and pointed back at Bracy, who was still trussed up.

"What about him?" said Nunan, in English. The leader evidently understood what Nunan meant, but he merely growled and shook his head.

"Yash Tar," the leader said, as if that should explain everything, and Nunan did not press the point.

The strange cavalcade pressed on through the jungle for another hour while Nunan watched the way keenly and revolved plans in his mind. He had not the faintest idea where he and Bracy were being taken, or why Bracy was still tied up, or what was going to happen to the both of them. But however cordial the Tuaregs had become toward himself, he could not believe that any good would come of being their prisoner. And just as soon as the opportunity presented itself, he intended to get hold of Bracy and escape from this extraordinary jungle.

One thing, Nunan thought to himself, there would be no difficulty finding one's way along this broad trail. An escape would simply be a matter of getting horses and outrunning pursuit. There might be those lions to contend with, he pondered, but, if they were tame, the danger should be small. He thought more about those lions. The ones he had shot must have been tame, because it was undoubtedly they who had been prowling about him and Bracy in the dark of night. They had had ample opportunity to molest the two helpless men sleeping without a fire, if they had felt like it.

But who, Nunan asked himself, would be taming lions?

Just then the cavalcade rounded a bend in the trail and burst out into the open. The Red Nunan gave up asking himself questions to stare at the astonishing sight before him now.

They had come out of the thick jungle into a beautiful open valley as green as the County Kildare. The greater part of it seemed to be cultivated and there were people laboring in the fields. Then there

were grassy slopes on which flocks of one kind and another were grazing. Little clumps and groves of trees were scattered about all over the valley, and Nunan had to pinch himself. So far as he knew, this fertile valley and the jungle that surrounded it was right in the middle of the Sahara Desert.

In the very center of the green basin a small hill rose a hundred feet or so above the valley floor, and on the slopes of that hill was a typical North African town of flat-roofed white buildings. On the crest of the hill, however, was a monstrous black edifice. As Nunan stared at it, he began to realize that it was a ruin of some kind. One half of it seemed to be roofed over with prodigious black stone slabs, while the other end showed rows of naked pillars, thick round columns reaching stubby fingers to the sky.

The Tuareg leader—Nunan had found out his name was Sidi Adrar—put his troop into a brisk hand-gallop along a hard-packed dirt road that led straight to the town on the hill. The people in the fields looked up and waved as the cavalcade swept past them.

“Yadoni!” Sidi Adrar shouted to them, and the rest of the Tuaregs took up the cry. “Yadoni! Yadoni!”

Immediately the people set up answering cries, and started running toward the hill. The movement spread until Nunan could see men and women all over the valley streaming across the fields up to the town.

“What name—people?” Nunan shouted to Sidi Adrar.

“Abu-Singha,” the Tuareg chieftain replied. He waved his hand, indicating the valley and said, “Wadi-Hanno.” Then he pointed to the town and said, “Bal-Hanno.”

Nunan had carefully studied his detailed Italian Army maps, but nowhere on them had he ever seen the name, “Bal-Hanno,” or a valley called, “Wadi-Hanno,” or a tribe called the Abu-Singha. And what did the “Yadoni” mean that they were all yelling?

**I**N no time at all, the Tuaregs and their two prisoners were clattering up the single cobble-stoned street of Bal-Hanno. The flat-roofed houses on either side erupted people, all shouting joyously and racing along beside the horseman. A hand-

some, dark people they were, too dark to be pure Tuaregs, and yet with no sign of Negro blood in their lean faces. Nunan decided they must be Arabs of some kind.

The street ended in an open square which was dominated by the huge ruin that Nunan had seen from across the valley. A menacing, black, ugly pile of stone it was, with a suggestion of an ancient Egyptian or Assyrian temple about it. The thick swollen pillars gave the edifice a squat crouching appearance. And yet as Nunan craned his neck upward to stare at the thick blocks of stone which still roofed over half the structure, he was amazed to see how really tall the building was.

The square was rapidly filling up with the people of Bal-Hanno. There were not really so many of them, but they seemed like a great deal more from the joyous clamor they set up. They ran about and laughed, men, women, and naked children, and shouted “Yadoni!” and “Yashtar!”

Nunan could not figure them out. They were happy and gay, but there was something a trace hysterical about their gayety, as if a great fear had just been removed from their hearts. And it certainly appeared to Nunan as if the arrival of the Tuareg horsemen with Bracy and himself had something to do with removing the fear from the hearts of the Abu-Singha.

He looked at the crowd and then back at the huge black ruin and shivered. The contrast was little frightening.

There was not a single sign of life from within the old temple or palace or whatever it was. Heaven knew what might be lurking in the abysmal shadows behind the pillars underneath the great monolithic roof, but nothing showed in the cold, grim facade. But lifeless as the ancient edifice appeared, there was a definite and active menace about it. A distinct atmosphere of unseen un-nameable horror seemed to come out in waves at the Red Nunan. A sensation of being on the scene of savage prehistoric religious rites brought the cold sweat out on the Irishman’s forehead. He turned his horse toward Sidi Adrar.

The Tuareg leader was shouting at his men, and Nunan looked quickly and saw that young Bracy was being freed of his bonds. A moment later a dismounted Tuareg led Bracy’s horse up beside

Nunan's. Then like one person, the Tuaregs, and the Abu-Singha all backed away from the two white men, and left them sitting their horses in the middle of the square.

The clamor in the square mounted in a high-pitched rhythmic chant.

"Yashtar! Yashtar! Benoth Yashtar!  
Yadon atha!"

Nunan felt Bracy's trembling fingers pluck at his sleeve. He turned his head and looked at the younger man. The fine stubble of his young beard showed startlingly black against the waxy whiteness of Bracy's face.

"Nunan, Nunan," Bracy moaned, "what are these mad people yelling about? And whatever is going to happen to us?"

"They're calling to Yashtar to come out, I should judge," Nunan replied, "—whoever Yashtar is. The Sultan, I suppose. But keep your chin up. We're not dead yet, and we still may get out of this. If we're not guarded too closely, and can get at some horses, we might make a break for it after dark. 'Twill be no trick at all to follow that bridle-path through the forest."

"Ah, we'll never get the chance," Bracy said despairingly, "If you'd only fetched along a compass, we'd never be in these straits."

"Aye, it's all my fault," Nunan said, faintly cynical, ignoring the business of shooting the lions which had attracted the Tuaregs that morning. "But never fear, I'll get us out of it. As soon as we find out a little bit more about where we are and what's going on, we'll find a way. We'll bribe or threaten or just cut our way out, if we can get hold of some weapons."

"Wait!" Bracy hissed, clutching Nunan's arm, "What's going to happen, now?"

Suddenly, the crowd had stopped shouting. In three seconds, the shrill clamor had been wiped out, and now an electric, expectant silence hung over the square.

Nunan's nerves jumped just a little bit as he saw a lion come forth from the shadows of the ruin. The beast posed majestically on the portico for a moment and gazed impersonally out at the crowd. Then he took a dozen measured paces to one side, stopped, and uttered a short roar.

A second later, another lion came forth, posed momentarily, and went to the opposite side of the portico.

Nunan could almost hear the crowd behind him holding its breath.

Then she appeared.

### III

AND from the people massed around the edges of the square, there broke out an insane, concerted yell. But she paid no attention to the bedlam and stood motionless gazing down at the two white men.

The Red Nunan had never seen such a beautiful woman in his life.

She was tall and magnificently proportioned and her skin was the color of rich cream. Her regal form was revealed rather than hidden by her clothes, which consisted of a narrow breast-band of snow-white linen and a white linen loin-cloth drawn tightly around her hips and upper thighs, with a flaring apron-end hanging down to her knees in front in the style of the ancient Egyptians. Suspended on a gold chain around the stately column of her neck was a single ornament. It was an enormous blood-red ruby that glowed barbarically on her tawny bosom.

But her face was the most beautiful thing of all. Dense black hair framed its oval perfection, the straight nose, the chiseled mouth, the strong pointed chin. And what eyes she had! Huge gray eyes swimming with a mysterious sadness in them. The Red Nunan could not help remembering a beautiful phrase out of the Song of Solomon—"Thy eyes are like twin gray doves bathed in milk—."

She turned those eyes full on him, and Nunan felt a suffocating emotion close over him. Hard-boiled soldier of fortune though he was, and veteran campaigner in other fields than battle-fields, Nunan knew that here was a woman who was more of a goddess than a woman. And Nunan wanted to be her chiefest worshiper.

The crowd was still screaming, "Yashtar! Yashtar!" but Nunan no longer heard them. He was gazing into these mysterious eyes, trying to penetrate their fathomless depths. Then a burning Irish impulse seized him, and he flung himself off his horse. He could hardly believe it was himself striding up the steps of the portico toward her. The crowd hushed as he reached the top step and halted three paces

from her. He swept off his helmet, and bowed low.

"Your obedient servant, Ma'am," he announced in ringing tones, "Terence Nunan."

She looked not so much startled as frightened. Not of Nunan, but of something Nunan knew nothing about. She turned her head and looked at the ground for a moment, broodingly. Then she lifted those ineffable eyes again, and a sweet helpless smile appeared on her face. Nunan's chest swelled. He was half-minded to go down on one knee. That was the way this strange, other-world sort of woman affected him.

But she made a sudden circular motion of her right hand, a gesture that had something of renunciation about it. Then she pointed at young Charles Bracy, sitting hunched in terror on the horse in the middle of the square. The Red Nunan cleared his throat.

"If you'll dismount, Bracy," he said, "I think it would be a good idea. I think the lady's intentions are peaceful. Come up here and present yourself."

"I will not, Nunan," Bracy quavered, "and I think you're daft. We're captured by savages, dragged to their stronghold, faced with an unearthly woman with two man-eating lions—"

"It's no good your carrying on like that," Nunan interrupted sharply, "We're here at all events, and our best chance to survive is to appear bold. And don't mind the lions. They're as tame as the one back in the jungle. I'll show you."

Nunan marched across the portico toward one of the recumbent lions. There was not a sound except the clicking of his boot-heels on the ancient stone slabs. The lion rose to its feet as Nunan approached, and the Irishman's stout heart almost misgave him. But he kept on to within ten feet of the brute and then halted. The lion opened its mouth and uttered a frightful roar.

Nunan held his breath. The lion glared at him but did not move except to twitch its tail. Nunan was gambling. He wanted to shame young Bracy out of his cowardice. And perhaps he wanted to show off a little, too, in front of the beautiful woman who was staring at him so incredulously. He turned his back full on the

lion and posed for a moment. The skin of his back was crawling in anticipation of a raking blow from the lion's great paw, but Nunan's face was defiant. It was the bold gesture, and an admiring gasp came from the still crowd.

"You see," Nunan said, and coolly walked back across the portico. "Come up here! We can't show fright, we've got to make out like we're perfectly at home here. Come now, play the game."

Bracy thought a moment, then slid off his horse.

"Chin up, now," Nunan said, with a wary glance at the crowd, "I think we've got 'em."

Charley Bracy straightened his long, slender form and came slowly across the square and up the steps.

Nunan turned to the woman and bowed again.

"Ma'am, may I present Mister Charles Roderick Ormond Bracy, younger son of the Baron Ballymore?"

The huge gray eyes sent one last piercing hungry look at Nunan. Then, before he realized quite what was happening, the goddess-like creature moved toward young Bracy and suddenly went down on her knees before him. A singing moan went over the crowd.

FROM the shadows of the temple there came then three young girls in short white tunics. One carried a golden goblet, another carried a tray of dates, and the third carried a green wreath. As they stepped up beside the prostrate woman, she rose up. She put a hand on each of young Bracy's shoulders, and then kissed him full on the mouth.

Nunan was so astounded he could hardly contain himself. But he stood stock still and watched the three young girls offer Bracy the goblet, and the tray of dates.

Bracy, eyes wide with astonishment, ate one of the dates and touched his lips to the goblet. Then the Queen or the goddess or whatever she was, took one of the dates, and drank from the goblet.

Finally she took the green wreath from the third girl with both hands, raised it up above her head and paused for an electric moment. Then she spoke in a rich beautiful voice:

"Yadoni atha!"

And she placed the wreath like a crown on young Bracy's head.

Instantly, bedlam broke out in the square. As if by a signal, a frenzied yell went up from the Abu-Singha, and they rushed forward to the foot of the portico steps. Two Tuaregs galloped in front of them, seized the reins of the two riderless horses, and dragged them prancing and snorting to one side, but the people of Bal-Hanno hardly seemed aware of the Tuaregs. With arms upraised, and tears streaming down their faces, they chanted hysterically, endlessly:

"Yashtar! Yadoni! Yashtar! Yadoni!"

The Red Nunan blinked. Undoubtedly the beautiful woman was Yashtar, and from the adoration of the Abu-Singha, she must be some sort of queen, or even goddess. But "Yadoni?" It was as if the Abu-Singha had been expecting the arrival of Bracy. Did Yadoni mean "King," or some sort of god, or what? At any rate, Bracy's abject fright would seem to have been without foundation, and from the look of him, the young man realized it, too. His tall figure was straightening, and a surprised smile began to appear on his proud face.

The Red Nunan could not help but feel a tiny twinge of jealousy. What would he not have given to be kissed on the mouth by Yashtar! It was only too typical that he, Nunan, would put up the battle, and that Bracy should walk off with the spoils.

And yet was it all so simple as that? Nunan asked himself. What if Bracy were being tricked into some unknown danger? Nunan made up his mind he would not let the young man out of his sight.

At that moment, Yashtar took Bracy's hand in hers and started to lead him back across the portico toward the shadows of the temple. The clamor of the crowd mounted in a blood-curdling cacophony. The Red Nunan glanced swiftly around, hitched at his belt, and moved along with Yashtar and Bracy—easily, and unobtrusively.

But out of the corner of his eye, he had seen Sidi Adrar and a half dozen of his Tuaregs dismounting and running up the steps after him.

Very apparently, he was not to be allowed to go along with Bracy.

For a second, the Red Nunan weighed the idea of suddenly attacking the Tuareg guards with his fists, and dashing into the temple. But he quickly decided against that move. He was far outnumbered, besides being unarmed, and if he bided his time he might better be able to find another way out of his predicament.

He smiled affably at Sidi Adrar, hiding his envy at seeing his army automatic around the Tuareg captain's waist, and stood still as Yashtar disappeared behind the thick black pillars, leading young Bracy.

The tumult of the Abu-Singha died out quickly, and they began to disperse from the square. Sidi Adrar gestured to Nunan to follow him, and the baffled Irishman went down the portico steps surrounded by the Tuaregs.

A moment later, Sidi Adrar led him through the narrow doorway of a house half way down Bal-Hanno's single street. They went through a dim corridor into a large carpeted room, where a white-bearded man in a long dark robe was seated on a pile of cushions smoking a water-pipe. The old man looked up and raised one hand in a grave gesture. Then he spoke. And the Red Nunan's heart skipped a beat, because he spoke in English!

**“W**ELCOME, Nasrani," the old man said, "Do you speak English?"

"That I do," Nunan replied heartily, "and a pleasant surprise it is to be hearing it from your Honor's mouth."

"I have not spoken it since I left Cairo many years ago," the old man said. His diction was slow but precise.

"Sure, you speak it better than my mother, herself," Nunan said admiringly. "Who have I the honor of addressing?"

"I am Moussa Moukrab, Wazir of this place."

"Ah, but I'm the lucky man to be in such distinguished hands," Nunan declaimed, "Perhaps you'd be good enough to tell me just where this place is, and how my young friend and I will be getting to the French railway."

"This is Bal-Hanno," the old man replied, "It is not on any maps."

"Faith, so it isn't," Nunan agreed, "At least, it isn't on mine. But no doubt your Excellency could point out its approximate position, so that when my young friend

and I take leave of your fine hospitality, we'll know what way to go."

"Why do you talk of leaving Bal-Hanno?" the old man said gently, "You have only just arrived."

The Red Nunan did not like the sound of that one bit, but he smiled genially, anyway.

"It's the grand place, all right, your Excellency, and if we weren't in the devil's own hurry, we would like to stop for a while—"

"You may as well know, Nasrani," the old man interrupted gently, "that you will never leave Bal-Hanno."

"Never leave?" The Red Nunan's eyes narrowed.

"You will be very happy here," Moussa Moukhrab went on serenely, "if you will but resign yourself to the workings of Fate. Sidi Adrar, here, has advised me that he holds you in great esteem. He would like you to join his troop of horse, and he offers you the post of second in command."

The Red Nunan glanced at Sidi Adrar's veiled inscrutable face, then he chewed his lip.

"Your friend," the Wazir continued, "has already achieved the highest honor that can be bestowed by the Abu-Singha. He has been selected as the Yadoni, beloved consort of Yashtar."

"Why was he?" Nunan suddenly demanded. "Why wasn't a man chosen from the Abu-Singha themselves?"

"On some years it *is* one of us who is chosen," said Moussa Moukhrab.

"Some years?" Nunan murmured questioningly.

"A new Yadoni is chosen every year."

"And what happens to the old Yadoni?"

Moussa Moukhrab said nothing for a moment, but appeared to be studying his visitor.

"Look here, your Excellency," Nunan's voice rose, "What's the catch? Why is it the Abu-Singha only select one of their own to be the Yadoni, if there are no captives around to be given the honor? The Abu-Singha seemed mightily relieved to see us this morning, and they all seemed to know what was going to happen. Your Excellency, *what happens to the Yadoni?*"

"As long as he lives," Moussa Moukhrab intoned, "the Yadoni will be the

happiest of men, the Beloved of Yashtar."

"How long will he live?" Nunan said softly.

"Ten days."

There was an appalling silence. Then Nunan found his voice again.

"What happens to him?"

THE Wazir lifted his eyes to the ceiling.

"For hundreds and hundreds of years—before the days of the Prophet Mohammed, whose Name be blessed, before the Prophet Jesus, even before the Prophet Moses—there was Yashtar. And Yashtar loved Yadoni. And Yadoni was killed by a wild beast, just at harvest time."

"A wild beast!" Nunan echoed aghast.

"We Abu-Singha," the Wazir said, "are Moslems. But long before the Arabs brought Islam to us, Bal-Hanno was here, with its Temple of Yashtar. In the great days of Ancient Carthage, she sent out many colonies. Bal-Hanno was one of them, and it has survived, two thousand years after Carthage was destroyed. Now we are Moslems, and Yashtar is our Sultana. But we cannot forget earlier days when it was written that Yashtar was our Goddess. And it was written that every year at harvest time, Yashtar should love Yadoni, and Yadoni must die a victim of a wild beast."

"Great Saints!" Nunan shouted, "You mean the lions?"

"The lions," Moussa Moukhrab repeated, with an inclination of his turbaned head.

"No wonder the Abu-Singha were glad to see us!" Nunan said bitterly. "Ah, surely now, your Excellency, you won't allow this heathenish thing to happen! My friend is a nobleman, a young man in the prime of his youth. Surely, you couldn't throw him to the lions!"

"Where Fate is concerned," said Moussa Moukhrab, "It is useless to protest or regret. Long before your friend was born, it was written that he could come here at this time to be Yashtar's consort. He came on the very day the new Yadoni was to be chosen. And unless you tell him what happens later, he will have ten days of delirious happiness."

"Ten days!" Nunan muttered.

"There is nothing you can do. Sidi

Adrar and his Tuaregs will prevent you from escaping—if you were so foolish as to try to. And Yashtar's lions are trained to her voice. She has only to command and they will tear you to pieces if you come too near her. There is nothing you can do about your friend. So why do you not bow to Fate, and settle down peacefully among us? You will never be in any danger yourself—you are too old ever to be chosen as Yadoni."

The Red Nunan's brain was whirling. He heard the old man, but he discounted what he said about there being nothing to be done. There was always *some* way out of any difficulty. Well, he had ten days to work some kind of a miracle.

The first thing to do was to appear to be convinced by old Moussa Moukhrab's words.

"Your Excellency," he said soberly, "This is a terrible tale you've told me, and a dreadful fate that you've indicated for my young friend. But as you say, no one can go against Fate. As for myself, I suppose I might as well resign myself and settle down amongst you. It's a pleasant place, your Bal-Hanno, and I might do a lot worse. You can tell Sidi Adrar I'll take that job in his cavalry."

"It is good," said Moussa Moukhrab, with an air of relief, "Go with him now. You will not be permitted to carry arms until—until after the tenth day from now. But you may ride with the Tuaregs and begin to learn the language."

That was a blow. And yet, Nunan reflected, he could hardly have expected Sidi Adrar to have armed him so soon after he was captured, and while there was time to rescue Bracy from his doom.

"Very well," Nunan said out loud, "but may I not have a word with my young friend, so he won't be afther worrying about me?"

"He will be told about you," Moussa Moukhrab replied, "I will tell him. Hereafter, you will see him only from a distance."

Most evidently, Moussa Moukhrab was taking no chances of any kind. Nunan nodded gloomily, and a minute later followed Sidi Adrar out onto the street. There he paused and looked thoughtfully up at the black, forbidding pile at the top of the hill. The Tuareg plucked at his sleeve,

and Nunan obediently turned and went down the street with him.

They came presently to a sort of barracks at the foot of the hill and beyond the outskirts of the town. There were rows of striped tents with Tuaregs lolling about among them, and beyond, a level field where the horses of the troop were grazing. The Tuaregs crowded around Sidi Adrar and Nunan, and evidently he told them that Nunan was to become one of them, because there was a great deal of chatter. The tone of the Tuaregs, however, did not seem unfriendly.

Nunan put on his best soldier's manner, and was jovial and hearty, and he employed the few Berber words he knew to good advantage. For one thing, although he could not get back his automatic or rifle, he did manage to retrieve his Sam Browne with its pouch full of clips for the automatic. Underneath his joviality, he was turning over one plan after another which might get his young companion and himself out of the clutches of the Abu-Singha. Each idea he considered was more desperate than the one before, and all of them had the same drawback, and that was that if he could not talk to Bracy, he could hardly work out any set course of action. In the end, he decided to keep alert and look for an opportunity to strike suddenly and strike hard.

THE opportunity, such as it was, came sooner than he expected.

In the middle of the afternoon, Sidi Adrar shouted some commands, and the Tuaregs swarmed out excitedly and picked mounts from the herd of grazing horses. A tall gray stallion, bigger than the rest, was brought around for Nunan. He swung his great weight up with satisfaction and rode up beside Sidi Adrar. The reason for calling out the Tuaregs soon became apparent.

Down the street from the temple came two figures on horseback. They were Yashtar and Bracy. The Tuaregs with Sidi Adrar and Nunan at their head drew to one side of the road to let the couple pass.

Nunan marveled at the change in Bracy. Not only was he washed and shaved and combed, but he was dressed in a pure white tunic, loose trousers, soft boots with silver

spurs, and he looked like a prince, itself. Nunan tried to catch his eyes as he went past, but Bracy merely tossed a cool glance at his old comrade and then looked ahead again, head lifted proudly.

He's being extra-cautious, Nunan thought, and a good thing, too. Nunan shifted his gaze to Yashtar, and saw that she was looking straight at him with those beautiful sad eyes. Nunan's mouth settled in a straight line. To look at Yashtar, you could hardly believe she was the blood-thirsty creature who, year after year, could throw her lover to the lions.

The couple passed in front of the Tuaregs at a walking pace and kept on going down the road out among the green fields of the valley. Then, Sidi Adrar raised his scimitar, shouted a command and pulled out into the road behind them, the Tuaregs following him. An imperious gesture from Sidi Adrar brought Nunan up beside him on his right hand side. Nunan flicked a glance at the precious automatic strapped in the open holster within easy reach of his left hand. And right away, a mad idea began to form in Nunan's fertile brain.

He turned it over and over in his mind as the cavalcade plodded along the winding road, he and Sidi Adrar less than fifteen feet behind Yashtar and Bracy, and the Tuaregs out behind in column of twos. It was a mad idea but it might work. At least, he and Bracy were out in the open, now, away from that gloomy temple and its lions. But how in the devil could he communicate with Bracy up ahead. If he said anything in English, the Tuaregs would instantly become suspicious. And the only way this idea could succeed would be by its complete unexpectedness. Nunan, lost in thought, began to hum "Londonderry Air."

Suddenly, his brain clicked. The song! It was the way to talk to Bracy without the Tuaregs or Yashtar knowing he was doing it! He cleared his throat, lifted his chin, and began singing "Londonderry Air" full voice. But he made up his own words.

"Oh! Charley boy," he sang, "I'm singing you this little song! Oh! Charley boy! Don't turn your head at all!"

The Tuaregs liked the melancholy old melody, judging from the attentive angles of their veiled heads. Nunan sang on.

"But just be ready—to spur your horse and ride like hell! There's just a slim chance—we'll get away—"

As he sang, Nunan's right hand gripped the cruel woven metal quirt Sidi Adrar had given him, and his left hand relaxed on the reins.

"Oh! Charley bo-oy!" Nunan sang now, passionately, "be ready now for anything—"

Bracy suddenly turned in the saddle and glared back.

"Nunan!" he exclaimed sharply, "Are you daft!"

The young idiot! Nunan gritted his teeth. He was ruining everything! Sidi Adrar and the Tuaregs were looking at him and Nunan with startled eyes. It was now or never!

"Sidi Adrar! Look!" Nunan shouted, and he pointed with his left hand straight across the Tuareg captain's saddle bow. Sidi Adrar turned his head away and stared.

As he did, Nunan's left hand snaked down to the open holster. He whipped the automatic out, and with his right hand brought the quirt down hard on the stallion's croup. There was a wild yell from the Tuaregs. The stallion reared and sprang forward.

"Ride, you fool!" Nunan shouted at Bracy.

Instead Bracy started to rein in. His mount backed uncertainly for a precious second, and Nunan's plunging stallion went in between Bracy and Yashtar. With a curse, Nunan slashed at Bracy's horse with his quirt. Then, quick as a wink, he leaned over to the left. His mighty left arm clamped around Yashtar's slender torso, just under the shoulders. He gave a prodigious heave and wrenched her out of her saddle. His stallion leaped forward again under the quirt.

And while the Tuaregs screamed with rage, he went thundering down the road after Bracy. Yashtar was balanced precariously on her stomach across the pommel of his saddle.

Bracy was sawing at his horse's mouth as Nunan came alongside.

"Don't pull him!" Nunan shouted, "Ride for your life!"

"No! You madman!"

"Ride, I say! They'll not dare shoot

as long as we've got the woman by us."

Again, Nunan quirked Bracy's horse, and the two fugitives shot down the road with their hostage. Behind them came the Tuaregs in full cry.

#### IV

**I**F we can only make it to the jungle before they catch up! Nunan told himself. He tightened his grip on Yashtar, leaned back and heaved. She flung an arm around his neck and twisted her body around into a sitting position on the stallion's tossing withers. Nunan nearly lost his balance, but he gripped with his knees, and forced his body forward. He let the quirk dangle loose from his right wrist, and passed the automatic around Yashtar's body to his right hand. Then his left hand groped for the reins.

For a breathless second his hold of her loosened and she started to slip. Then she threw her other arm about him and clung tight, Nunan gathered the flapping reins into his left hand, and pressed his left forearm against his captive's slender waist. Her tender body was taking a cruel pounding from the motion of the galloping stallion, Nunan reflected grimly, but why should he waste any sympathy on her? No pain she was suffering now could compare with the hideous fate she was preparing for Bracy. He threw a quick glance over his shoulder.

The Tuaregs were coming down the road after them four abreast. Once they recovered from their surprise, they set forth in reckless pursuit. The rear ranks had fanned out into the fields on either side, but the fields were much slower going than the road. And it was on the road that the Tuaregs were slowly overtaking Nunan's double-loaded stallion.

Nunan smothered a curse as he looked ahead and saw that Bracy again was slowing up. What was it about that young fool that made him so perverse? It was suicide right now for him not to do exactly as Nunan told him to. As he came alongside, he leveled the automatic at the young man.

"Keep ahead of me!" he snarled, "or I'll kill you, myself, for your own good!"

Rage and fear flashed alternately across Bracy's pale face, but he dug his spurs home and shot forward.

Again, Nunan looked back and saw that the Tuaregs had crept up within a few yards. He inched around in the saddle and aimed the automatic at Sidi Adrar's horse. The gun roared. There was the shrill scream of a horse in pain, and a yelp from Sidi Adrar. Then there was a thudding crash, as horse and rider went rolling headlong in the road.

Once more Nunan fired. Down went another horse, and a bedlam of angry shouts filled the air, as the galloping Tuaregs piled up on the narrow road. Nunan grunted with satisfaction at the sight of the milling mess of scrambling horses and men. Two more had gone down, and Nunan emptied his clip to make a thoroughly good job of it.

For the moment, the road was certainly blocked. And Nunan, urging on his gasping stallion, looked back a minute later, and saw that he gained at least a three hundred yard lead on his pursuers. Already the jungle was looming up less than that distance ahead of him. Once he got there, Nunan had a trick up his sleeve.

As young Bracy in front of him rode into the shadows of the forest, he reined up again. This time Nunan slowed up, too.

"Keep going," he shouted, "until you get to the other side of the first bend up there. I'm going to stop there, and give them a surprise as they come around."

Bracy's sullen face twisted into a snarl.

"Nunan, you've taken leave of your senses entirely! You're as good as dead this minute—"

"I am not!" Nunan retorted, "and do as I tell you, now!"

"Nunan, I command you to put the lady down and—"

"I'll do no such thing!" Nunan yelled, "now, be on with you! It's a desperate chance we're taking, but it's the only one we've got. And, at that, I think we may win out. Don't forget, we can shoot at them, and they dare not shoot back for fear they'll hit their goddess. Go on!"

Nunan raised his quirk, and Bracy with an ugly snarl urged his horse forward.

A minute later, the two horses were standing just the other side of the steep bend in the trail, while Nunan loaded a fresh clip into the automatic. The thunder of hoofs was growing louder down the trail. Nunan flicked a glance at the beau-

tiful creature sprawled across the pommel of his saddle. He suddenly realized that she had not made one sound of any kind from the time he had hauled her off her own horse. He tightened the grip of his left arm around her waist. The willowy softness of her began to burn itself into his consciousness. But the drumming hoof beats of the Tuaregs coming down the trail brought him back to his present predicament.

He edged the horse over to the trees, and turned to face the bend in the trail. He leveled the automatic.

Three Tuaregs burst into sight with a yell. Three times Nunan fired, as fast as he could squeeze the gun. And three more times, as more Tuaregs appeared. More of them came into sight, but their mounts were rearing as the riders reined them hard, with shouts of alarm. Nunan emptied the gun into the mass, and watched them turn in terror and disappear around the bend.

**N**UNAN reloaded with fumbling fingers. When he looked up, he saw that he had downed five of the Tuaregs. A riderless horse came trotting up the trail toward him. Nunan reached out and seized its bridle as it started to go past. The horse reared but Nunan held on and quieted it.

"Now then, Yashtar," he said, "You're going to slip over on to that horse, so that I won't have you hanging on my neck. Over you go, now."

Her gray eyes stared into his, and then followed his gestures. Apparently, she understood. Her grip on him relaxed and she reached a foot toward the nearest stirrup on the other horse. A moment later, she was astride the animal, and staring wonderingly at Nunan.

"Well, Nunan," said Bracy, "what's the rest of your mad scheme? What do you propose to do now?"

"Why," said Nunan, still holding on to the bridle of Yashtar's horse, "we'll just keep on the trail until we come out on the desert. The Tuaregs don't seem to be in any hurry to come around the bend again. We'll walk quietly for a little distance the way they'll be thinking we're still there waiting for them. Then we can put on some speed and make the end of the trail with a good lead on them."

"Once again, Nunan," Bracy began, in a voice full of exasperation, "I—."

"Quiet, now," Nunan hissed, "Not another word, or they can hear us go."

He flourished the automatic, and Bracy subsided with an ugly gleam in his dark eyes. The trouble it was, Nunan reflected, to get that young man to do something for his own good!

They walked the horses in dead silence for upward of a half a mile, Nunan stopping every now and then to listen for sounds of pursuit. He kept a watchful eye on Yashtar all the while in case she should take it into her head to shout or scream. But she showed not the slightest inclination to do anything like that, and Nunan concluded that she was too thoroughly frightened to do anything but keep very still and obey orders.

He had to admit, though, that she did not look especially frightened. For the most part, she looked straight at him. Those gray eyes in that beautiful face were sad, but they were not frightened.

When Nunan was finally convinced that they were out of earshot of the Tuaregs, he let go of the bridle of her horse and flicked its rump with his quirt. As the three horses started off at a hard gallop, Bracy looked back at Nunan.

"Well, Nunan!" he flung back, "where do you think you're going now?"

"I think," said Nunan, "that we can find our footprints out on the desert the way the rain has softened the ground, and we can retrace them to the armored car. I think it's no more than five or six miles off."

"And after you get to the armored car," said Bracy, "then, what happens?"

"Well, there's food and water we left there, enough for five days for the three of us," Nunan said, "and there's also a couple of extra rifles and plenty of ammunition. We'll pick up all that stuff and head west on these horses. We'll keep the girl with us as a hostage against the Tuaregs. Come on, now. We've no time to be talking."

A half hour later, they emerged on to the desert, and an hour after that, they arrived at the armored car. It was just as they had left it, up to the hubs in mud which by now was rapidly drying.

The jungle was out of sight now behind

a low ridge and Nunan drew a sigh of relief. For the past hour and a half he had seen no sign of pursuit. If the Tuaregs were following they were keeping well behind.

"Well!" said Nunan triumphantly, as he reined in beside the car. "That's part of a good job done, anyhow. We'll get safely into French territory yet."

He slipped off his horse, the automatic still gripped in his right hand. He made a gesture with it to Yashtar, indicating that she should dismount. She did so with easy grace and stood looking at him with that tragic face.

"Good Lord," Nunan said fervently, "but she's the lovely creature!"

"Yes!" said Bracy in a strangled tone which should have warned Nunan, but did not.

"I'll go inside the car and start unloading those things," said Nunan, "while you watch Yashtar. It wouldn't do for her to give us the slip right now. She's our ticket to safety. Maybe you'd better take this gun, while I'm out of sight inside. Then we'll be doubly sure."

"Maybe I'd better," said Bracy and took the automatic.

THE minute Nunan let go of the gun, something told him he'd made a mistake. He tried to snatch it back, but it was too late. Bracy danced away from him. There was an insane glint in his eye, and he was pointing the automatic straight at Nunan's stomach.

"Hey—" Nunan whispered, "What's the meaning of this?"

"You stupid peasant!" Bracy snarled, "I think you're the one who owes me the explanations and not the other way around. As long as you had the gun there was nothing for me to do but go along with you in your mad career. Now, things are much better, and I'll thank you to answer me a few questions. Why, Mr. Red Nunan, did you ever get the idea of kidnapping Yashtar and me?"

"Why?" Nunan said blankly, "Why, indeed! I was making good our escape! We had to kidnap Yashtar to succeed at all!"

"Why should you want to escape? And whatever made you think I wanted to escape?"

"Ah! Wait'll I explain. There was a

dreadful fate in store for you just ten days from now."

"What dreadful fate?"

Nunan then related what the old Wazir, Moussa Moukrab had told him.

"—and so you see," he finished, "I couldn't let you suffer such a fearful destiny. There was no way I could warn you properly, or discuss plans for an escape. I just had to grab the desperate chance when it came along."

Bracy did not answer for a long time. Then a wolfish grin spread over his long face.

"You've the grand imagination, Nunan," he said finally, "and the glib tongue, but you can't come it over me. Now, I'll tell you something. I'll tell you the truth of why you attempted such a criminal thing. You're jealous of me, Nunan. Jealous of the man who is your natural master. You're jealous because I was picked and not you to be the husband of this beautiful creature, here. And, because at the same time, I was practically made Sultan of that sturdy little tribe back there."

Nunan shook his head sadly.

"That's not true!"

"It's too true!" Bracy retorted savagely. "Here I'm the royal husband living in a palace with the most gorgeous woman in the world, and she mad in love with me. I have several hundred fine subjects who after a time will adore me, too. And I have a bully little army of Tuaregs. And you, Nunan—without asking my consent at all—you snatch me and my wife away by brute force, kill my Tuaregs, and then come with a cock-and-bull story of how I'm to be chucked to the lions in ten days. Is it likely I'd be taken in by such a transparent story? I think I hear the Tuaregs coming now. Don't you move a muscle, Nunan, in any direction, or I'll shoot you like a dog."

Nunan, sick at heart, heard the Tuaregs, too. Desperately, he tried to think of something to do before they arrived. But the ugly snout of the automatic in Bracy's fist pointed unwaveringly at him. He looked helplessly at the still figure of Yashtar standing at one side. Her sublime face looked sadder than ever. All the sorrows of the world seemed concentrated in those huge eyes. Nunan asked himself

how such a perfect creature with such a beautiful, compassionate face, could be concerned in any way with the hideous annual sacrifice of a young man—a survival of dark, pre-historic rites. The setting sun sent a long beam straight to Yashtar's creamy bosom, and the great ruby glowed there like a gout of blood. Nunan sank his chin in his chest with resignation as the Tuaregs thundered up, shouting.

Sick with chagrin, he watched them dismount and approach cautiously as Bracy shouted and beckoned to them the while he kept the automatic pointing at Nunan. With dull eyes he watched Yashtar move forward with easy, magnificent strides and issue quiet orders in her low, musical voice. Sidi Adrar, one arm in a rough sling, rushed at him with raised scimitar, but halted at a sharp command from Yashtar.

Why was she showing him mercy? Nunan thought wonderingly. Her, of all people.

He made no resistance while the Tuaregs once again roped his arms to his sides. And after they pushed him up onto his horse, he closed his eyes, as the troop started back for the jungle. He did not know what was going to happen to him, and he did not care. He had been so close to making good his escape and Bracy's, and then to have it end like this. He knew he would never be given another opportunity to break away.

He could not even feel much resentment at Bracy. Poor devil! he'd soon find out the truth of the things he hadn't believed when Nunan told him. Poor spoiled young Bracy! It would have been hard for him to believe that story anyhow. And easy for him to believe that Nunan was jealous over Yashtar.

Nunan sighed. Perhaps, in one way, Bracy was not so far wrong, at that. Who wouldn't be jealous of the man who got Yashtar!

One other little question prickled at the back of Nunan's brain. Could it be possible that old Moussa Moukhrab had been just spinning a yarn about the sacrifice of Yadoni? Then Nunan thought of that grim black temple squatting like an evil thing on top of the hill, and he knew in his heart that Moussa Moukhrab had been spinning no yarn.

IT was long after dark when the Tuaregs returned to Bal-Hanno with their queen-goddess and her consort, and their huge red-headed captive. The street up the hill was alive with people and alight with smoky torches. In spite of his apathy, Nunan felt a little surprise when the Tuaregs halted his horse in front of the temple. His surprise increased when they took him off the horse and walked him up the steps to the portico. Then, with two of Yashtar's hand-maidens leading the way with torches, he was taken inside the temple, up a flight of incredibly old stairs and pushed into a room. There, his bonds were stripped from him and he was left by himself.

There was only one door to the room, a thick iron door, and he heard his captors after they went out, sliding a great bolt across the outside.

Nunan felt his way around the pitch-dark room and stumbled on a bed. He lay down on it gently, and it was soft and comfortable. He went quickly to sleep.

When he woke up, he guessed it was morning, but it was only a guess. The room was pervaded by a soft gray light, which he perceived came from the single window of the room. It was a narrow window opposite the door, and there were three thick iron bars imbedded in the sill at intervals of about a foot.

He looked out and saw that he was about twenty feet off the ground and far back under the great roof of the temple behind the row of pillars. Through the gap between the two pillars just opposite him, however, he had a clear view of the other half of the temple—the roofless, ruined half. He could look down into the enclosure within the quadrangle of stubby columns, over there, and saw that the center of the stone floor was a sunken rectangular pit. It looked almost like a dry swimming-pool.

However, as Nunan stared down, he saw that it was not a swimming-pool. There were three lions lolling in a shaft of sunlight on the floor of the pit.

Nunan shuddered in spite of himself. He realized that he might be looking at the very place that Yadoni, beloved of Yashtar, was annually killed by a wild

beast. Nunan left the window and walked around his prison room.

Besides the large and very comfortable bed, there were only a table and a single chair for furniture. Nunan went to the iron door, and tried it gently. It would not move under his hand, and he remembered then how the Tuaregs had bolted it on the outside the night before. He went back to the window.

He was testing the bars in the window, when he heard the bolt sliding behind him. He turned quickly as the door opened and a Tuareg with drawn sword stepped in the room.

Nunan stood transfixed. He was absolutely defenseless. The nearest thing to a weapon in the room was the chair, and the chair was closer to the Tuareg than it was to him.

Then one of Yashtar's handmaidens stepped into the room, and Nunan relaxed. She was carrying a tray of food and she set it down on the table. The Tuareg, Nunan, realized, was merely standing guard, while the door was open. The warrior backed out after the handmaiden, and the door clanged shut.

Nunan was hungry and the food was delicious. When he had finished, he banged on the door, and a moment later the handmaiden reappeared, still guarded by the Tuareg, and took the tray away. Nunan went back to the barred window.

It did not take him long to discover that the masonry in which the bars were set was old—incredibly old. He scratched at the base of one of the bars with a strong finger-nail, and in a very short time dug out a quarter of an inch of fine powder. Nunan pursed his lips thoughtfully. To a determined man, those bars presented only a small obstacle. It would be only a matter of time to dig those bars out with his bare hands. With a piece of metal, now, it would be that much quicker.

His eyes fell on the chair. The two front legs were shod with tapered metal. It was all he needed. He started toward the chair, when again he heard the door-bolt sliding back.

This time, the person behind the Tuareg was old Moussa Moukhrab.

"Peace to you, man of war," said the Wazir, grave-faced. "You have miraculously survived the consequences of your

folly. What a pity you did not truly resign yourself to Fate, as you pretended to me you were going to! You could have become an honored member of our community, strong in the friendship of a strong and honorable man, Sidi Adrar, and trusted by me and by our beloved Sultana, Yashtar."

THE old man paused. Nunan said nothing.

"As it is," Moussa Moukhrab went on with a sigh, "your life was saved only by the merciful intervention of Yashtar. The Tuaregs would have preferred to torture you to death."

"Merciful! Merciful, did you say!" Nunan's voice was loaded with scorn. "You call that bloodthirsty creature, that heathen goddess of yours, merciful!"

"You are wrong, Nasrani," said the old man gently. "She is not bloodthirsty. She is the instrument of Fate. It is her sorrowful destiny to cause the inevitable death of those whom she loves. Such a destiny could result only in the most profound sadness in a soul which is essentially gentle. A lesser person than Yashtar would go mad. But she cannot. She is Yashtar and she must carry out the inscrutable workings of Fate."

Nunan's face did not relax, but within himself he was startled. He saw Yashtar's face in his mind—the saddest face he had ever known. Could the old man be telling the truth?

"Since you and your friend came," Moussa Moukhrab continued, "I have watched her. At first, she was glad—glad that one of us, one of her own Abu-Singha, would not fall victim of her fatal love this year. Then she looked at you, and something came into her eyes that I never saw there before. Quickly she chose your companion. And then in a very short time you demonstrated your devotion to him. It was a cruel blow to her—because she—she would not want to hurt you."

Nunan gazed steadily at the Wazir for a minute. Then he said, "What do you mean?"

"This much I can see with my old eyes," was the reply, "Yashtar is—"

A muttered word from the Tuareg interrupted the Wazir, and a moment later Yashtar stepped into the room.

Nunan's heart began to swell up in his chest. Saints! but she was beautiful!

She stood motionless for a long moment, her tragic eyes fixed on him—hauntingly, broodingly. Then she made a slight gesture of her right hand. The Wazir and the Tuareg looked at each other and then left the room, closing the door behind them. And Nunan was alone with Yashtar.

She moved toward him as if in a trance, and Nunan's temples began to pound.

*What's the meaning of this?* Nunan asked himself. And then he realized he need not be told the answer—because he already knew the answer.

He loved Yashtar—he had loved her since the first moment he had looked at her. And she—well, possibly, she—

He strode forward, arms outstretched. As he did, a look of the wildest terror came into her eyes. She put her hands up defensively and shook her head violently. Nunan halted in the middle of the room.

The terror died out of her eyes when she saw that he was coming no farther, and her hands went up to her cheeks. Then a sad, tremulous smile appeared on her lovely lips. She took a step backward, extended one hand in an eloquent gesture, and with a swift motion, opened the door behind her and was gone from the room.

Nunan heard the bolt slip home, and he sat down on the bed. His heart was pounding madly, and his head was whirling. He felt unaccountably weak, and somehow drowsy. He fell back on the bed, feeling an unearthly dizziness.

From far away came the words of Moussa Moukhrab—"It is her sorrowful destiny to cause the inevitable death of those whom she loves." And Yashtar loved him!

He tried to raise his head, and could not. He could not even lift his heavy eyelids. Without a question the food was poisoned, the Red Nunan told himself, but the food was delicious! He sighed and sank into oblivion.

THE next thing the Red Nunan was conscious of was the shouting. It was a continuous high-pitched roar coming from not far away. Then he was conscious of a raging thirst, and a fearful gnawing at his belly. He pushed himself

up from the bed and staggered to his feet.

For a moment he had not the slightest idea where he was. It was almost pitch dark about him. Then he saw light faintly flickering on the wall of the room, and he turned and saw the three iron bars of the window silhouetted against a wavering yellow light. He lurched over to the window and stared down, and the blood congealed in his veins.

Great Saints! what was happening?

The ruined half of the temple was illuminated by a thousand torches, and people swarmed, shrieking, among the thick columns, and lined the sides of the rectangular pit. Two thrones were set up at the far end of the pit, and the two people sitting on those thrones were Yashtar and Bracy.

Nunan tried to collect his wits, although the clamor of the Abu-Singha below made it almost impossible to think.

He was drugged, he remembered that. He thought he'd been poisoned, but now he knew he'd been drugged. *But how long had he been asleep?*

The last he had known, there were nine days to go before the sacrifice of Yadoni. Had the hideous rites been moved up? Very likely not.

He must have been asleep for nine days. They had wanted him to sleep for ten days.

That would explain his hunger and his raging thirst—but then Nunan saw the lions come into the pit below, and he saw Bracy standing up, and that drove all the other thoughts from his mind.

Without any question, it was the Sacrifice, the Death of Yadoni.

Automatically, Nunan picked up the chair, and snapped off one of the front legs. He dug the pointed ferrule into the masonry at the base of one of the window bars. The ancient cement crumbled into dust under the repeated blows. In a moment, the bar was loose at the bottom and Nunan attacked the top.

Down below, Sidi Adrar and two Tuaregs were moving close to Bracy.

Frantically, Nunan went to work on the next window-bar. Oh, what are you after doing, Terence Nunan? he asked himself. You're not going to try and save Bracy, are you? He doesn't deserve to be saved, the treacherous young fool! You've been trying to save him from himself for five

years now, and you've had no thanks from him!

Terence Nunan, leave the young Bracy alone. You have an opportunity now to escape from this place, this bloody Bal-Hanno. You have only to knock out this other bar and you can squeeze through the opening! Just take those silken bed-covers and knot them together, tie one end around the remaining window-bar, and you can go down to the ground hand over hand, and never a soul to stop you.

Don't be a fool, now, Terence Nunan! Here's your chance! All the Abu-Singha and the Tuaregs are gathered around that lion-pit, screaming for blood. While their attention is taken up there, you have only to run down the hill, pick out a horse and gallop to the desert. Nobody will know you're gone till morning, and by that time you'll be far away!

Nunan's fingers were trembling over the bed-covers, knotting them strongly together. He cast another agonized glance out the window.

Yashtar was standing up now and facing Bracy. He was shrinking back from her, his body bent with horror. He was backing away from her—backing straight into the arms of the waiting Tuaregs.

Nunan frantically tied his improvised rope around the remaining window bar.

Then the crowd below sent up a frenzied, horrible roar. And topping it all came a dreadful, despairing falsetto shriek. Nunan saw the Tuaregs holding Bracy by both arms and pushing him relentlessly toward the edge of the pit.

"Nunan! Nunan! In the name of Heaven! Save me! *Nunan!*"

Bracy's body toppled off into the pit, and the sound of the crowd swept up in fearful waves and beat on Nunan's ear-drums.

He flipped the knotted sheets out the window, seized one of the three-foot iron bars, and put a leg over the sill.

Terence Nunan, escape now while you may! Don't waste your life on Bracy.

The falsetto shriek still rang out above the insane roar of the crowd. And now, another tone was added to the fearful clamor—the rasping roar of lions.

Nunan's hands burned as he slid down the silk rope, but he hardly felt them. He

hit the ground hard, staggered a couple of steps, and set off on a dead run toward the lion-pit.

"I'm coming, Bracy!" he bellowed.

The crowd at that end of the pit scattered under the crushing blows of the iron-bar, and Nunan plunged through to the edge. He could see only one thing Bracy, backed into the far corner, his body writhing, his face contorted. In front of crouched a lion.

Nunan leaped into the pit with a yell. At the same time, the lion sprang.

As Nunan hit the floor of the pit, he knew he was too late. He saw Bracy go down under the heavy blow of the lion's fore-paw, saw his face suddenly change to a red pulp, saw the blood spout from the severed carotid in his neck. But by that time, Nunan was upon the lion, whaling away at its shaggy head with his window-bar.

Just out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other lion charging at him. Then something heavy hit him, and he knew no more.

IT was just dawn when Nunan recovered consciousness. He groaned and rolled over. He felt stiff and sore. Gradually he noted that one arm was heavily bandaged. Then he sat up quickly and looked around him.

He was all by himself on a hilltop in the middle of a great desert. Ten feet away, a tall white horse nibbled at a patch of dry grass.

Nunan stood up uncertainly and searched the horizon in all directions with his eyes. As far as he could see, there was nothing but gray desert on all sides. A faint high-pitched scream reached his ears, and he spun around. And then he saw a plume of smoke far away, slanting up from the ground. And he saw the black worm crawling along underneath the smoke.

The French railway!

The Red Nunan took two steps toward the white horse. As he did, he felt something dangling around his neck. His hand went up to his chest and fingered the round object hanging there.

He stood for a long time gazing down at the huge blood-red ruby that glowed in the palm of his hand.