

Weird Tales



SEPTEMBER, 1951

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

NOVELETTES

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Pete Larsen knew well enough that air personnel had often been forced to land on remote tropical islands. But he hadn't thought to ask if any of them were haunted.

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D. MCILWRAITH, Editor

The Ring of Bastet



Heading by Fred Humiston

IT HAD snowed earlier, then rained until the snow had melted into muddy slush; now a shrewish wind came scolding up from the Bay, and the sad black puddles that were the dregs of the storm

began to glaze and shine with a thin film of ice beneath the street lamps' glare. Walking became hazardous, with the outcome of each step in doubt.

"Parbleu, mon ami," Jules de Grandin

By Seabury Quinn

muttered as he dug his pointed chin two inches deeper into the fur collar of his coat, "I do not like this weather. *Nom d'un poisson!*" his feet slipped on the icy pavement and he caromed into me. "Let us seek the shelter. I do not wish to nurse a broken arm; also I am villainously hungry."

I nodded agreement. I'd treated half a dozen fractures due to falls on ice-glazed streets that winter, and had no wish to spend the next six weeks or so encased in splints and bandages. "Here's the Squire Grill. They have good steaks, if you'd care to try—"

"*Morbleu*, I would attack a dead raw horse without seasoning!" he interjected. "My friend, it is that I am hungry like a lady-wolf with sixteen pups."

The Squire Grill was warm and cozy. Windsor chairs of dark oak were drawn up to the tables, shaded lamplight fell on red-checked tablecloths, behind the bar a man in a white jacket polished glasses and at the far end of the room there blazed an open fire quite large enough to have burnt a Medieval heretic.

"*Une eau-de-vie, pour l'amour de Dieu*," de Grandin told the waitress, then as she looked blank, "A brandy, if you please, and bring her with the speed of an antelope, Mademoiselle."

The girl gave him a friendly smile—women always smiled at Jules de Grandin—then, to me, "And yours, sir?"

"Oh, an old fashioned without too much fruit, if you please, then two steaks, medium, French fries, lettuce and tomato salad—"

"And mugs of beer and apple tart and copious pots of coffee, *s'il vous plaît*," the little Frenchman completed the order.

The look of pleased anticipation on his face became an expression of ecstasy as he cut into his steak, black as charcoal on the

outside, and pale watermelon pink within. He raised his eyes and seemed to contemplate some vision of supernal joy. "*Ah*," he murmured, "*Ah, mon Dieu—*"

The door swung open and a blast of frigid air came rowdying in, and with it came a party of young folks, healthy, obviously ravenously hungry, riotous with gaiety. They made a noisy entrance, moved with more than necessary noise to the long table set before the fireplace, and began calling loudly for service. Evidently they were expected, for a waitress hurried up with a tray of Martinis, and was back with another before the first round was finished.

A young man who had plainly had more than a modest quantum of pot-valiency all ready rose and held his glass up. "Lad-eez an' gen'men," he announced a bit unsteadily, "to—to th' bride'n groom; may all their troubles be little ones, an'—"

"Hold on, there, Freddy, hold it!" warned a blonde girl whose pink cheeks glowed with something more than the cold. "They aren't married yet—"

The young man seemed to take this under advisement. "U'm," he drew his hand across his face. "Tha's so, they ain't. Very well, then: Lad-eez an' gen'men, *les fiancés*. May they live long an' prosper!"

"Speech! Speech!" the youngsters chorused, pounding on the table with their cutlery. "You tell 'em, Scotty!"

A tall young man in a crew cut, tweed jacket and tan slacks rose in response to the demand. He was a good-looking youngster, blond, high-colored, with a casual not-long-out-of-college look that labeled him a junior executive in some advertising agency or slickpaper magazine's editorial staff. "My friends," he began, but:

"The ring, Scott—put your brand on her!" his tablemates clamored. "Stand up, Bina, it won't hurt—much!"

THE laughing girl who rose in response to the summons was small and delicate and looked as if she had been molded in fragile, daintily tinted porcelain. Her nose and brow and chin were aquiline but delicately proportioned, her skin exquisite. Framed by hair of almost startling blackness that fell to her shoulders and was cut across the forehead in straight bangs, her face had the look of one of those stylized pictures of a Renaissance saint. Coupled with the blush that washed up her pale cheeks her smile gave her a look of almost pious embarrassment. Demurely as a nun about to take the veil or a bride at her wedding ceremony, she held out a slim, fragile hand and the young man slipped a heavy ring on its third finger.

"Seal the bargain! Seal the bargain!" the demand rose like a rhythmed chant, and in obedience to it the girl lifted her face for his kiss. The flush deepened in her cheeks, and she sat down quickly as two waitresses came up with trays of steaming food and in their wake the *cellérier* with an ice bucket and a magnum of champagne.

De Grandin grinned delightedly at me above the rim of his beer mug. "*C'est très joli, n'est-ce-pas?*" he asked. "*Dites*, youth is marvelous, my friend; it is a pity that it must be wasted on those too young to appreciate it. If—"

A shout came from the merrymakers' table. "Look at Bina! She's passing out!"

I glanced across the room. The girl on whose hand we had seen the ring placed had fallen back in her chair, but the look on her face was not one of alcoholic stupor. Her scarlet lipstick—the sole makeup on her face—seemed suddenly to stand out, vivid as a fresh wound, as if what little color she possessed had retreated behind it, changing the whole aspect of her countenance. Her lips hung open slackly, tried to move and failed, and in her eyes was a look of fascination such as might have been there if she saw a viper crawling toward her. "That girl's ill!" I exclaimed.

"*Pardieu*, my friend, you are so right!" de Grandin agreed. "*C'est—*"

The girl rose slowly, like one who makes as little noise as possible before she takes

to panic flight, and walked toward the door of the restaurant. Her petella reflexes seemed to weaken as she stepped; her knees flexed and her feet kicked aimlessly, as if she suffered motor ataxia. Then suddenly her knees buckled and her legs twisted under her. She fell as limply, as flaccidly, as a filled sack from which the grain had run out, or a rag doll emptied of its sawdust. We saw the shape of total fear form on her face as we reached her. She turned wide, frightened eyes on us, and I noted that although her pupils were large and black they were rimmed by dark green irises. "My legs," she whimpered in a voice that seemed to shake with chill. "I can't move them—there's no feeling in them; but they're cold. Cold!"

"I am Dr. Jules de Grandin, this is Dr. Samuel Trowbridge," the little Frenchman introduced us as we knelt beside the fallen girl. Then, "You have no pain, *Made-moiselle*? No feeling of—"

"No feeling in my legs at all, sir. They're numb—and cold."

"U'm?" he raised the hem of her full, pleated brown wool-jersey dress and took the calf of one slim leg between his thumb and forefinger. "You do not feel?" he pinched the firm flesh till it showed white with the pressure.

"No, sir."

I noted that she wore no stockings and shook my head in disapproval.

De Grandin nodded. "Cold," he pronounced. "*Froid comme une grenouille.*"

"No wonder," I shot back. "You'd be cold as a frog, too, if you went traipsing out in sub-freezing weather with no more stockings than a—"

"*Ah bah*," he cut me off. "Do not let Madame Grundy sway your judgment, Friend Trowbridge. It may be cold outside, but it is warm in here, and she sat almost within arm's length of that great fire. She should not have the chill."

I knelt beside him and laid a hand on the girl's leg. It was cold as a dead woman's, though the skin was smooth and sleek, without a sign of goose-flesh.

"You're sure you have no pain, *Made-moiselle*?" de Grandin asked again, leaning

close to look into her eyes and nostrils. "No headache, no pains in back or sides or limbs—"

"No, sir. Nothing, till just now when my legs gave way under me."

He took his clinical thermometer from his waistcoat, shook it and thrust it into her mouth, then placed his fingers on her wrist. At length: "Pulse and temperature are normal," he reported. "It is not anterior polio-myelitis. Except for this localized chill and inability to walk—"

"Berger's paresthenia?" I hazarded.

He nodded doubtfully. "Perhaps. At any rate, she cannot lie here. Let us take her home and see what we can do."

JOBINA HOUSTON lived in one of those cubicles known as "efficiency apartments"—a single fairly large room with furnishings designed to lead a double life. The small round dining table could be made into a bench by tilting up its top, a minuscule kitchenette, complete with porcelain sink and electric grill, lay in ambush behind a mirrored door, the divan opened out to form a bed, the chest of drawers did duty both as china closet and clothes press.

With the help of the blonde girl who had been ringleader at the party we got our patient into bed with hot water bottles at her feet and an electric pad under her.

De Grandin looked more puzzled than alarmed. "When did you first begin to notice this sensation of numbness, Mademoiselle?" he asked when we had made the girl as comfortable as possible.

She wrinkled her smooth brow. "I—I don't quite know," she answered. "It must have been—oh, no, that's silly!"

"Permit me to be judge of silliness and sense, if you please," he returned. "When was it that you first began to feel this chilly numbness?"

"We-ell, I *think* I first felt it just as Scott put the ring on my finger. You see," she hurried on, as if an autobiographical sketch would help us, "Scott Driggs and I both work at Bartlett, Babson, Butler and Breckenridge's advertising agency. He's in copy, I'm in production."

"Of course," he agreed as if he under-

stood her perfectly. "And then, if you please?"

"Well, we sort of drifted together, and—and suddenly we both realized *this is it*, and so decided to get married, and—" One hand crept from the shrouding blankets as she spoke, and began to smooth the bed-clothes gently. "So tonight we gave an engagement party, and—"

"Mademoiselle, where did that ring come from, if you please?" he interrupted.

"Why, from Scott, of course. He gave it to me tonight—"

"*Bien oui*, one understands all that, but what I most desire to know is where did he get it—where did it come from originally?"

"Why, I really don't know, sir. Scott and I don't really know much about each other. All we know is we're in love—that's plenty, isn't it?"

He nodded, but I noticed that his eyes were on the ring with a long, speculative stare. "You do not know who was his father?" he asked at length.

"Not really, sir. I understand he was some sort of scientist, an explorer or something; but he's been dead a long time. Scott hasn't any family. He finished college on his G. I. money and came to work at B. B. B. & B. about the same time I did. So, as I said, our work threw us together, and we—"

A small frown of annoyance gathered between de Grandin's brows as he stared in fascination at the ring. It was a heavy golden circlet, heavy as a man's seal ring, and set with some sort of green stone which might have been peridot or zircon, or even a ceramic cartouche. Certainly it could not have been more than semi-precious, for it had no luster, although its color was peculiarly lovely. The gem was deeply incised with what appeared to be a human figure swathed like an Egyptian mummy, but having a peculiarly malformed head. "You recognize him?" he asked as I completed my inspection. I shook my head. To the best of my knowledge I had never seen such a figure before.

"Tell me, Mademoiselle," he demanded, "just what did you mean when you said you began to feel this so strange numbness at

the moment your fiancé put this ring on your hand?"

"I don't quite know how to put it, sir, but I'll try. Scott had just put the ring on my finger when the dinner came, and as I took the cover off my *coq au vin* I happened to look toward the fireplace and saw—" she halted with a little shudder of revulsion.

"Yeah, what was it you saw?" he prompted.

"A cat."

"A cat? *Grand Dieu des porcs*, you mean a puss? Why not? Most restaurants have one."

"Ye-es, sir; I know. That's why I chose the Squire Grill for our party. They haven't one."

He raised his slim black brows. "*Qu'est-ce que c'est, Mademoiselle?*"

"You see, I'm one of those people who can't abide the sight of a cat. It terrifies me just to have one in the same room with me. There's a technical name for it. I forget—"

"Aelurophobia," he supplied. "*Bien*, my little, you are one of those who cannot stand the sight of a puss-cat. What next?"

"At first I thought I must have been mistaken, but there it was, coming right at me, snarling, and getting bigger with each step it took. When I first saw it, it was just an ordinary-sized cat, but by the time it had advanced three feet it was big as a large dog, and by the time it almost reached the table it seemed big as a lion."

"U'm? That is what terrified you?"

"Oh, you noticed how frightened I was?"

"But naturally. And then?"

"Then I began to feel all funny inside—as if everything had come loose, you know—and at the same time I felt my feet growing numb and cold, then my ankles, then my legs. I knew that if I didn't get away that awful thing would pounce on me as if I were a mouse, so I got up and started for the door, and then—" Her narrow shoulders moved in the suggestion of a shrug. "That's where you came in, sir."

He tweaked the needle points of his small blond mustache. "One sees." Turning to the girl who had come with us from the

restaurant, he asked, "Will you be kind enough to stay with her tonight? She has sustained a shock, but seems to be progressing well. I do not think that you will need do more than keep her covered, but if by any chance you should need us—" He scribbled our 'phone number on a card and handed it to her.

"O.K., sir," the girl answered. "I'll ring you if I need you, but I don't expect I shall."

"THE trouble with today's young folks is that they don't know how to drink," I complained as we left Jobina's apartment. "That gang of kids had been pub crawling—stopping at every bar between their office and the Squire, probably—and Jobina thought she had to match Scott glass for glass. No wonder she thought she saw a monstrous cat. The only wonder is she didn't see a pink elephant or crocodile."

De Grandin chuckled. "*La, la*, to hear you talk one might suspect you wear long underwear and drive a horse instead of a car. Friend Trowbridge. I fear, however"—he sobered abruptly—"that her trouble stems from something more than too much *gaieté*—"

"D'ye mean to tell me that you think she saw that great cat?" I demanded.

"I think perhaps she did," he answered levelly.

"Nobody else did—"

"Notwithstanding that, it is entirely possible she saw what she claimed—"

"Humpf, when people see things that aren't there—"

"Perhaps it was there, spiritually, if not corporeally."

"Spiritually? What the devil—"

"Something not so far from that, my old," he agreed. "Suppose we call on young Driggs. He may be able to tell us something."

I expelled a long, annoyed breath. When he was in one of these secretive moods it was useless to question him, I knew from experience.

"How's Bina?" young Driggs greeted as he let us into his apartment something like a quarter-hour later.

"She seems recovering," the Frenchman answered noncommittally. "Meanwhile—"

"What was it? What was wrong with her?"

"One cannot say with certainty at this time. Perhaps you can enlighten us."

"I?"

"*Précisément*. You can, by example, tell us something of the history of the ring you put upon her finger just before her seizure."

The young man looked at him blankly. "I don't see what connection there could be between the ring and Bina's illness."

"Neither do I?" de Grandin confessed, "but if there is, what you can tell us may prove helpful. Where did it come from, if you know?"

"It belonged to my father, Dad was assistant curator of Egyptology at the Adelphi Museum in Brooklyn."

"Ah?" de Grandin bent a little forward in his chair. "It may be you can help us, after all, Monsieur. What of your father, if you please?"

"In 1898 or '99 the Museum sent him to Egypt, and while there he went up the Nile to Tel Basta, where—"

"Where the worship of Ubasti and Pasht, the cat-headed goddesses, was centered in the olden days," de Grandin interjected.

"Just so, sir. While Dad was poking round the old ruins he unearthed several little balls of what seemed like amber, except that it was much clearer, almost transparent. The Egyptian government had begun to clamp down on the exportation of relics, but Dad managed to smuggle three of the small spheres out with him. Two he gave to the Museum, the other one he kept."

"That little amber ball is among my earliest recollections. I used to look at it in awe, for buried in it was a gold ring with a green set, and when you held it to the light the stone seemed almost alive, as if it were an eye—a big green cat's eye—that looked at you."

"I don't know much about Egyptian antiquities, my tastes all ran to other things, but I remember Dad once told me the ring had once belonged to a priest of Bastet, the cat-headed goddess who personified the beneficent principle of fire."

De Grandin nodded eagerly. "Quite yes, Monsieur. And then?"

"My father died while I was still in the Army, and Mother left the old house in Gates Avenue and went to live with some cousins out at Patchogue, and when she died that little amber envelope containing the old priest's ring was about all she left me."

He grinned a little self-consciously. "Any man can give his girl a diamond—if he has the price—but nobody but I could give Jobina such a ring as that I put on her finger tonight."

De Grandin tugged at his mustache until I feared that he would wrench it loose from his lip. "How did you get the ring from its envelope, Monsieur?" he asked.

"I had a jeweler cut it out. He had the devil of a time doing it, too. I'd always thought the capsule that enclosed it was amber, or perhaps resin, but it proved so hard that he broke several drills before he could succeed in cutting it away from the ring."

The Frenchman rose and held out his hand. "Thank you, my friend," he told our host. "I think that you have been most helpful."

"You're sure Jobina'll be all right?" the young man asked.

"Her progress has been satisfactory so far," de Grandin took refuge in that vagueness which physicians have used since the days of Hippocrates. "I see no reason why she should not make a quick, complete recovery."

"What's it all about?" I demanded as we reached the street. "You seem to see some connection between that ring and Jobina Houston's seizure, but—"

"Your guess is good as mine, perhaps a little better," he admitted as he held his stick up to signal a taxi. "My recollections of the cults of Bastet and Pasht are somewhat hazy. I must put on the *toque de pensée*—the how do you call him—thinking-hat?—before I can give you an opinion. At present I am stumbling in the dark like a blind man in a strange neighborhood."

It must have been sometime past midnight, for the moon which had come out

with the cessation of the storm had nearly set, when the ringing of the bedside telephone woke me. "Dr. Trowbridge speaking," I announced as I lifted the instrument.

The voice that answered me was high and thin with incipient hysteria. "This is Hazel Armstrong, Doctor—the girl you left with Jobina Houston, you know."

"Oh?"

"I'll say it's, Oh! She's gone."

"Eh? How's that?"

"She's gone, I tell you. Walked right out in her nightgown, and in this cold, too." Her voice broke like a smashing cup, and I could hear the sound of high-pitched sobbing over the wire.

"Stop crying!" I commanded sharply. "Stop it at once and tell me just what happened."

"I—I don't know, sir. I think she's gone crazy, and I'm scared. I did just as you told me, kept her covered up and kept the water bottles hot, but after a while I fell asleep. About ten minutes ago—maybe fifteen—I heard a noise and when I woke up I saw her standing by the door, about to go out. She'd pulled her nightgown down off the shoulders, and had a perfectly *terrible* look on her face. I said, 'Jobina, what in the world are you doing?' and then I stopped talking, for she looked at me and growled—growled like an animal, sir. I thought she was going to spring at me, and held a pillow up for a shield, but finally she turned away and went out the door. I didn't try to stop her—I was afraid!"

"Do not be frightened, Mademoiselle," de Grandin's voice came soothingly over the extension. "We shall go seeking her at once. Be good enough to leave the door unlocked."

"Unlocked? With a crazy woman on the rampage? Not me, sir. If you find her you knock three times on the door like this"—three sharp taps sounded as she struck the telephone with her nail—"and I'll let you in, but—"

"Very well," he agreed. "Have it that way, if you wish, Mademoiselle. We go in search of her at once."

"She can't have gone far in her nightclothes in such weather as this," I volun-

teered as we set out. "I only hope she doesn't develop pneumonia—"

"I greatly doubt she will," he comforted. "The inward fire—"

"The what—"

"No matter, I was only thinking aloud. To the right, if you please."

"But she lives in Raleigh Street, down that way—"

"We shall not find her there, my friend. She will be at Monsieur Driggs's unless I am far more mistaken than I think. When the cat goes mousing one goes to the mousehole to find her, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

I shook my head. This talk of cats and mice seemed utterly irrelevant.

THE automatic elevator took us up to the floor where Scott Driggs lived, and the heavy carpets on the hall floor made our footsteps noiseless as we hurried down the corridor. "*Ab?*" de Grandin murmured as we turned the corner and came in view of his apartment entrance. "*Ab-ha?*" The door hung open and a little stream of pallid lamplight dribbled out into the corridor.

Through the door leading to Scott's bedroom, which stood ajar, we saw them like the figures in a tableau. Scott lay motionless upon the bed, and standing by him, seeming more a phantom than a person, stood Jobina Houston.

But how changed! She wore a nightgown of sheer silver-blue crêpe, knife-pleated from the bosom, and flaring like an inverted lily-cup from the waist, but she had torn the bodice of the robe, or turned it down, so bust and shoulders were exposed, and she was clothed only from waist to insteps. Her straight-cut uncurled black hair hung about her face like that of some Egyptian woman pictured on the frescoes of a Pharaoh's tomb, and as we stepped across the sill she turned her face toward us.

Involuntarily I shrank back, for never on a human countenance had I seen such a look of savage hatred. Although her lids were lowered it seemed her eyes glared through the palpebrae, and the muscles round her mouth had stretched until the very contours of her face were altered. There was something feline—bestial—about it, and bestial

was the humming, growling sound that issued from her throat through tight-closed lips.

The glance—if you could call it that—she threw in our direction lasted but a second, then she turned toward the man on the bed. She moved with a peculiar gliding step, so silently, so furtively that it seemed that she hardly stepped at all, but rather as if she were drawn along by some force outside herself. I'd seen a cat move that way as it rushed in for the kill when it had finished stalking a bird.

I opened my mouth to shout a warning—or a protest, I don't know which—and de Grandin clapped his hand across my lips. "Be silent, species of an elephant!" he hissed, then stepped across the room as silently as the form moving toward the bed.

"Jobina Houston," he called softly, yet in a voice so cold and distinct it might have been the tinkle of a breaking icicle. "Jobina Houston, attend me! Do not be deceived, Jobina, God is not mocked. The Lord God overcame Osiris, threw down Memnon's altars and made desolate the temples of Bastet and Sechmet. Those Olden Ones, they have no being; they are but myths. The fires upon their altars have been cold a thousand years and more; no worshippers bow at their shrines, their priests and priestesses have shuddered into dust—"

The woman faltered, half turned toward him, seemed uncertain of her next step, and he walked quickly up to her, holding out his hand imperatively. "The ring!" he ordered sharply. "Give me the ring thou wearest without right, O maiden of the latter world!"

Slowly, like a subject under hypnosis, or a sleep-walker making an unconscious gesture, she raised her left hand, and I could have sworn the green stone of her ring glowed in the lamplight as if it were the living eye of a cat.

He drew the heavy circlet from the girl's slim finger and dropped it into his pocket. "Quick, Friend Trowbridge," he ordered, "take a blanket from the bed, envelope her in it as in a *camisole de force*—what you call the strait-jacket! Quickly, while her indecision lasts!"

I obeyed him mechanically, expecting every moment she would resist me ferociously, but to my astonishment she stood quiescent as a well trained horse when the groom puts the harness on it.

"*Bien*," he ordered, "let us take her home and see that she is rendered docile with an opiate."

Half an hour later Jobina lay tucked in bed, sleeping under an injection of a half-grain of morphine. Hazel Armstrong had gone home, the city's noises had sunk to a low, muted hum, and in the east the stars were paling in the light of coming day.

"NOW maybe you'll condescend to tell me what it's all about?" I asked sarcastically as we drove home after turning Jobina over to the nurse for whom we'd telephoned the agency.

He raised his narrow shoulders in the sort of shrug that no one but a Frenchman can achieve and made one of those half-grunting, half-whinnying noises no one but a Frenchman can make. "To tell the plain, ungilded truth, I am not sure I know, myself," he confessed.

"But you must have had some idea—some relevant clue to it all," I protested.

"Yes and no. When Mademoiselle Jobina first showed signs of being overcome last night I thought as you did, that she had been taken ill, but the more I examined her the farther from a diagnosis I found myself. The sudden onset of her symptoms did not seem to match any disease I knew. Then when she told us about seeing the cat-thing almost at the moment Monsieur Scott put the ring on her finger I was still more puzzled. As you were at such pains to point out, no one else had seen the thing; the vision, if it may be called such, had been entirely subjective, something visible to her alone. It did not seem to me that she had drunk enough to see nonexistent animals, yet. . . . Then I observed the ring, and suddenly, something clicked in my memory. 'Where have you seen a ring like that, Jules de Grandin?' I asked me, and, 'At *Le Musée des Antiques* in Cairo,' I replied to me.

"*Bien*, and what about that ring, Jules de Grandin?" I asked me.

"I searched my memory, trying to recall all that I knew about it as one struggles to recall the tune of a forgotten song.

"*Eh*, then I had it! It had been a priest's ring from Bubastis, the city of Ubasti or Bastet, the cat-headed goddess!

"Now Bastet, or Ubasti, was the sister and the wife of Ptah, who shaped the world and had his shrine at Memphis. She typified the benign influence of heat, the warming sun that made the grain to grow, the fire that gave men comfort. She was a mild and rather playful goddess, and therefore was depicted as a woman with a cat's head—the kind, affectionate and gentle pussy-cat we like to have about the house.

"*Eh bien*, she had a sister variously known as Sechmet and Merienptha who was her antithesis. That one represented the cruel principle of heat—the blazing sun that parched the fields and threw men down with sunstroke, the fire that ravaged and consumed, more, the blazing heat of savage, maddened passion. Now, strangely, though they represented bane and blessing to be had from the same thing, the sisters were depicted exactly alike—a woman swathed in mummy-clothes with a cat's head and wearing an uraeus topped by the sun's disc. Their temples stood nearby each other in the city of Bubastis, on the site of which the modern mud-village of Tel Basta stands.

"Good. When the Persians under Cambyses swarmed over Egypt in 525 B.C., the city of Bubastis was among the first they took. *Parbleu*, they were the *boches* of their day, those Persians; all that they could not steal they destroyed. So when the priests of Bastet and Sechmet heard they were about to come they hid their temples' treasures. Some they sunk in the Nile, some they buried, some few they took with them.

"As part of his ecclesiastical vesture the priest of Bastet and Sechmet wore a gold ring set with a green stone like a cat's eye. Many of these they enclosed in capsules of balsam resin, which was also an ingredient of their embalming. The rings thus held in their protective envelopes were buried in the earth—it was much easier to find a sphere larger than a golf ball than to hunt for a ring buried in the shifting sand.

"And then what happened I ask you? *Mordieu*, the Persians came, they pulled the city's walls down, razed the temples to the ground, killed all the people they could find, then went upon their way of conquest.

"The years went by, the Romans came, and after them the Arabs, and still those priestly rings lay buried in their envelopes of hardened balsam. Explorers delved among the ruins of the once great temple-city and dug these rings up and took them to museums. Young Driggs's father was one such. He brought back three rings of Bastet, two for his museum, one for himself, remember?"

"Yes," I nodded, "but what connection is there between the ring and Jobina's seizure, and—"

"Be patient, if you please," he interrupted. "I shall explain if you will give me time. Like priests of every cult and faith, the priests of ancient Egypt were a class apart. They were vowed to their gods, none others might serve at the altar, none others invoke divine aid, none others wear the priestly vestments. You comprehend?"

"I can't say that I do."

"*Eh*, then I must make the blueprint for you. As far as can be ascertained, such priestly rings as came to light were either melted down for their gold or taken to museums; none were ever worn. Jobina Houston seems to be the first one not initiated into the priesthood to wear a ring of Bastet on her finger.

"*Tiens*, those olden gods were jealous. They took offense at her wearing that ring. Bastet, or possibly Sechmet, appeared to her as in a vision, paralyzed her with fright, and finally took possession of her mind and body, driving her to make a makeshift imitation of an Egyptian priestess's costume and go to young Driggs's house to wreak vengeance on him for the sacrilege he had committed when he put the sacerdotal ring on a profane finger."

"Oh, pshaw!" I scoffed. "You really believe that?"

"I do, indeed, my friend. Jobina Houston had a morbid fear of cats, therefore she was doubly sensitive to the influence of the cat-headed goddess. In ancient days that ring

had soaked up influences of the old temples when it adorned the finger of some priest of Bastet or Sechmet; it had lain sealed in resin for a full thousand years and more. Those influences could not be dissipated because of the hermetic sealing of the balsam envelope that held them. Then when they had been released from their integument those forces—those psychic influences with which the ring was saturated—were released from it as water is released from a squeezed sponge. The malefic forces took possession of Jobina like a tangible mephitic vapor. She was helpless under their influence."

"U'm-h'm," I agreed doubtfully. "I've heard of such things, but how was it you managed to arrest their working? When you called to her in Scott Driggs's flat she seemed like a sleep-walker and made no effort to resist when you demanded the ring. How was that?"

"Ah, there I took the chance, my friend. I played the hunch, as you would say. I knew that girl had been brought up religiously. She believed firmly in the power of God—of good. She was like a person in light hypnosis, unable to control herself or her movements, but able to hear outside voices. So I called to her, reminding her of the great power of God—reminded her how He had overcome the heathen world and made a mock of all the pantheon of heathen gods and goddesses. In effect I said to her,

'What are you, a Christian woman, doing when you listen to the blandishments of heathen deities? Don't you know that they are powerless before the might of the Lord God?' A child may dread its shadow, but when its father tells it that the shadow has no substance, *pouf!* that fear is gone. I told her that the forces that enthralled her had no being, that they were but myths and memories—just the shadows of old dreams that vanished in the brightness of the face of God. And so it was. For just a little moment she rebelled against their malign power, and in that moment I took off the ring. Then *paf!* the charm was broken, the spell dissolved, the powerhouse of their influence put out of commission. *Voilà.*"

"What about the ring?" I asked. "Will you give it back to Scott?"

"Of course," he answered, "but only when he promises to give it to some museum. That thing is far too dangerous to be left where unwary young women may slip it on their fingers. Yes."

Dawn came, heralded by an ever-widening crimson glow, as we turned into the driveway. "*Tiens,*" he raised a hand to pat back a great yawn. "I am a tired old man, me. I think I need a tonic before I climb into bed. Yes, certainly; of course."

"A tonic?" I echoed.

"But yes. I prescribe him. Four ounces of brandy, the dose to be repeated at five-minute intervals for the next quarter-hour."