

FEB.—25c

# Weird Tales



## THE SAPPHIRE GODDESS

By NICTZIN DYALHIS

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# Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Sapphire Goddess

By NICTZIN DYALHIS

*A wholly unusual and thrilling weird story of terrific adventures and another dimension of space—by the author of "When the Green Star Waned."*



*"Strange, terrible faces stared at him."*

**S**UICIDE as a means of escaping trouble never appealed to me. I had studied the occult, and knew what consequences that course involved, afterward.

But I was fed up on life. I was destitute, and had no friends who might help, even were I to appeal to them. At forty-eight, one does not easily regain solvency. And, gradually, I'd lost all ambition. Not even hope remained.

If only there were some other road out

—a door, for example, into the hypothetical region of four dimensions . . . it certainly couldn't be worse there than what I'd borne in the last three years. Well, I could try. . . .

I seated myself cross-legged on the floor. If I concentrated hard enough, perhaps the miracle might occur . . . at least I should have tried . . . a last resort. . . . Gradually a vague state ensued wherein I was not unconscious, for I still knew that I was *I*; yet a queer detach-

ment was mine—there was a world, but of it I was no longer a part. . . .

*Click!*

Like a movable panel a section of the wall opened, revealing a most peculiar corridor—a strange Being stood smiling at me. It did not speak, yet I caught the challenge: "Dare you?"

With a single movement I rose and stepped into the opening. . . .

Oh, the agonizing, excruciating torment of that transition! Every nerve, tissue and fiber flamed and froze simultaneously. My brain seethed like a superheated cauldron. My blood turned to corrosive, searing acid. Tears suffused my aching eyes. I choked, unable to utter the groans my sufferings constrained me to emit. . . .

Had I landed in Hell? It certainly seemed so! . . . Then abruptly it was all over. I was still *I*, yet vastly different. I was *free*—and with senses above the dull senses of Earth, with power beyond Earth's muscular strength. I realized that I was in a different realm where the Laws were strange to me, and that I must be careful lest I be caught in some trap from whence escape might not be so easily achieved. But where, I wondered, was the Being who had dared me? . . .

"*Here!*"

"But—you seem not the same . . . there was a vague, misty, red haze—now you are distinct. . . ."

"Many high-speed light-waves formed a veil through which earthly eyes can not see clearly."

"Hence—the agony during transition?"

"Precisely! The vibrations altered your atomic structure. But you are still your true self."

"Perhaps," I assented. "But who are you, and why did you make it possible for me to come?"

"I am Zarf; and your subjects need you, to say naught of——"

We were interrupted by a most discordant howling, and abruptly some two dozen hideous dwarfs surrounded us. They bore long straight swords, were clad in iridescent scale armor, stood about five feet in height, and had the ugliest faces I ever saw.

"King Karan of Octolan—and the commander of his bodyguard, Zarf!" Their voices were shrill with maniacal glee. Evidently they considered our capture a big event.

I did not like their looks. I did not approve of their air of insolent triumph. Back on Earth I had lost all material ambitions, but suddenly I regained one, and proceeded to realize it.

With all my new strength, I drove my clenched right fist into the face of a particularly burly dwarf standing about two feet away. His head snapped back, he went limp; I snatched his sword from him and set to work. Once and again I struck, caught the true balance of the weapon and saw a head leave its body—shouted:

"A sword for you, Zarf!"

Before the blade touched ground he caught it, then set his back against mine. . . . A wild delight filled me, yet through it I felt a vague wonder—where had *I* learned swordsmanship? For never on Earth had I held one in my hand!

Those dwarfs fought like fiends from Hell. More than once I felt the stinging kiss of dwarf steel. Once I heard Zarf gasp as a sword bit deep, and once he groaned in agony. It was a wild *mêlée* while it lasted; and never did I enjoy myself more. . . . Through a red haze of slaughter I saw that only two dwarfmen remained facing my blade. Lunge—slash—parry—slash and lunge again—but one left—I gathered myself—dimly saw

another blade than mine pass through that last dwarf—heard Zarf as from a far distance crying exultantly:

“Lord King, you fight even better than in the other days! It is well—for you will have many a fight ere you sit once more on the Chrysolite Throne of your race.”

Then I slid to a limp heap on the ground, exhausted from loss of blood—I could not speak—heard Zarf cursing furiously, virulently; then all consciousness flickered out. . . .

I REGAINED my senses slowly. I lay on a pallet, a hand's breadth off a hard-packed earthen floor. A feeble lamp barely showed walls of stone chinked with moss and mud. Obviously a hut—but where? Then I saw Zarf. He sat on a low stool, chin on fist, elbow on knee, head bandaged, and his left arm in a sling. Looking at myself, I saw I was swathed worse than he in bandages.

“Zarf,” I said weakly. “We look as if we'd been in a fight!”

“We have been,” he nodded at cost of a twinge of pain. “But none of those Vulmins will ever take part in another—while we were just getting a little practise!”

“Zarf,” I demanded, insistent. “Who are you, and why did you call me ‘Master’? Surely there is some mistake. You know that I am but an Earthman upon whom you took pity and opened for him a door into this realm of Space. . . .”

Somberly he stared at me; then:

“King Karan, what pity was in the hearts of those Vulmin dwarf-devils when they strove to cut us into gobbets for their cook-pots? Yet they knew you and named you ‘Karan of Octolan, Zarf's royal Master’. Is it possible you have no memory of the past—no knowledge of who and what you are? Do you not remember the

rebel sorcerer, Djl Grm, who blasted your body and drove your self through a bent corridor down to the Earth, where you acquired a new body as an Earth-babe? Have you no recollection of your Imperial Consort? Shall that regal lady—so loved by all in your far-flung realm that she was deemed a goddess—be un-avenged?

“What disposal that accursed sorcerer made of her, none knows. It is known that he sought to seduce her, and when she withstood him in that, she vanished! Yet sure I am he did not force her to the Earth, for then you twain might have found each other, and so defeated his major purpose. Nay, King Karan, she is *here!* In the nights her spirit whispers to mine:

“‘Zarf, I am still your Queen. Find my lord, wheresoever he be . . . watch over him . . . whenever possible, open for him a door. He will find me—free me—out of his love. . . .’

“King Karan, must that regal lady's spirit wait in vain, believing Zarf a traitor, and you a recreant spouse?”

“*I can not remember,*” I groaned. I was convinced—believed Zarf fully; and oh! the anguish that was mine in that moment! Amnesia, it is called back on Earth, this inability to remember, with its concomitant of lost identity. . . . Then in the gloom of my mind, one insurmountable objection reared its ugly head, “If this sorcerer blasted my body, and drove my self down to the Earth, where through the medium of birth I regained a body and grew to my present stature—how shall any here recognize me as Karan the King of Octolan? Zarf, I still say you must be mistaken.”

“My King,” he replied pityingly, “you *are* sore bemazed! On Earth your body was shapen by parental influence; but *here*—when the agony shook you, the

body reassembled about the self in its true semblance and substance. Nay! Karan of Octolan you are, and none who ever saw you during your reign would deny your identity, albeit there be many would gladly slay you to prevent you from regaining your throne.

"Lord, evil rules where once was good—and a fair, happy land has become a veritable antechamber of Hell. Vampyr and ghoulish prey on the bodies of your people. Foes assail them from without, and devils plague them from within the borders. Your subjects, afraid, disheartened, hopeless, have fallen from their allegiance to the Karanate Dynasty. Scarce may we find a hundred loyal souls in all the eight provinces of Octolan. I myself am but a fugitive; and rich is the reward Djl Grm would pay for the head of Zarf the Proscribed! And as for our gracious Queen, Mehul-Ira——"

He groaned in heaviness of spirit; and I felt two scalding tears run adown my cheeks.

"*I can not remember,*" I wailed. "Karan I may be, but I have not his memory! A great King would I be, and a wondrous leader—with Karan's body and an Earthman's mind!" And I sank back on my bed all atremble from sheer, impotent fury at myself.

Zarf pondered for an interminable while; then:

"Lord, it would seem that Djl Grm, ere he drove your self to the Earth, laid an inhibition on your memory-coil. And if so, we may be sure he will never release it. But, Lord, it comes to my mind that afar from here dwells another magician—Agnor Halit—fully as evil as Djl Grm, and also fully as powerful. It may well be that he can restore your memory—but it remains to be seen if he will. It is said that they hate each other as only two sorcerers can hate. And in that lies our hope.

I think we would do well to start as soon as we are fit to travel, seek out this Agnor Halit, and try to enlist his aid."

"So be it," I assented. "Only, we start at dawn. Are we women, that we should lie at ease because of a few scratches?"

"But you are weak from your wounds," he objected.

"No more so than are you," I retorted. "As I say, we start at dawn. If I am indeed your King, it is for me to command—yours to obey! But for tonight, we sleep—if it be safe to sleep here."

"You will never be safe," he replied, "waking or sleeping, until you are once again on the Chrysolite Throne, surrounded by your own bodyguards. Still, we can take some small precautions to prevent a complete surprize."

He picked up a metal basin and two sticks, with which he rigged a device against the door, which would fall and make a noise were the door tampered with.

"There," he grunted. "Now we can sleep—and we need it!"

**T**HE clatter of the falling basin awoke me. I came erect, sword in hand, although I was wavering on my feet. Zarf looked at me in pity, but said naught. Slowly the door swung open, and a most grotesque visage peered in. Zarf audibly sighed his relief.

"Come in, good Koto," he invited soothingly, as one might speak to a timid child. "King Karan will do you no harm. Nor will I." And out of the corner of his mouth Zarf muttered—"Koto owns this hovel. He is a Hybrid, born of a lost woman of the Rodar race and an Elemental of the Red Wilderness. Yet Koto is very gentle and timid. Nor is he such a fool as he looks, for when I told him your identity, the poor creature wept because his hovel was no fit abode for royalty,

even in distress. All his life long, Koto will be proud——”

“These ‘Rodars?’” I asked, softly. “And this ‘Red Wilderness?’”

“The Rodars? Gigantic savages, running naked. Gentle enough, and with child-like brains; and the Red Wilderness is a vast and dreary desert, all yours, but totally worthless.”

“Enter, good Koto,” I commanded. “I, Karan, King of Octolan, bid you enter and kneel before me.”

With a snivelling howl the poor wretch of a Hybrid blundered in awkwardly and flopped asprawl before me. He grasped his head in both ape-like paws, looked at Zarf out of terror-filled eyes, opened his ugly gash of a mouth, and emitted a raucous howl. In a perfect paroxysm of fright he gabbled :

*“I knew it! I knew it! This hut is unfit for King Karan the Splendid! And now he will cut off Koto’s head with his sword—cut off Zarf’s head, too, King Karan! He made me take you in——”*

“But you are mistaken, good Koto,” I assured the poor fellow. “I have no intent to cut off your head—nor Zarf’s.”

Then I tapped him on the shoulder with the flat of my blade.

“Rise, Baron Koto, Lord of the Red Wilderness and of all the Rodar-folk that therein dwell. Thus I, Karan, reward your service in giving us succor in our need!”

Zarf became angry at the audacity of my act. To him it was nigh to an insult to the entire order of knighthood. Then, abruptly, he laughed.

“Lord,” he gasped, “had another than yourself wrought thus, I’d slay him with my own hand. But such pranks were ever your wont in the other days. Mad as is this one, still it may yet serve you well. You are too weak to travel, despite your bold heart, and we needs must wait in

this castle of Baron Koto’s until strength returns to us both. Perchance by then Koto may be able to secure for us riding-beasts on which we may travel faster than on our own legs.”

At that last argument I capitulated. It was a good reason for waiting. But then I began to question Zarf about our intended journey.

“What manner of territory must we traverse, once we start? What sort of inhabitants dwell along our ways? Savage, or civilized? Wild, tame? Hostile or friendly? And will our swords be sufficient for our protection?”

“It will be a long and dangerous trip,” he replied soberly. “Our way lies across this same Red Wilderness you just presented to Koto; thence across the Sea of the Dead, where evil ghosts arise from the foul waters; then over the Hills of Flint to the Mountains of Horror, where demons and vampyrs abound; and thence onward again to a city of devils who adore the lord of all devils. There, if we are fortunate, we may hope to find the sorcerer we seek.”

“Cheerful prospect!” I commented acridly. “But are these assorted Hell-spawn sufficiently solid to be cut with good steel, or are they immune to injury?”

“Some are solid enough, while others are intangible, yet dangerous for all that. And there be various tribes of savages, none friendly to strangers. Oh, we may anticipate a most enjoyable trip!”

“Zarf,” I demanded abruptly, thinking longingly of the guns and pistols of Earth—“Can you return me to Earth for a brief visit, and then bring me back here, together with certain heavy bundles? Also, can you provide me with gold or gems in quantity?”

“Lord,” he mourned, “naught have I to give you saving my life and my love. Nor gold nor gems do I possess, or you

should have all with no need of asking. Nor can I return you to Earth—but why do you so suddenly wish to go?"

I explained, and he understood, but reiterated his inability to do as I requested.

"Those '*ghunz*,'" he marveled, enviously—"What a pity we have them not. Throwing-spears and knives are our nearest approach."

"Koto," I interrupted Zarf, a new idea arising in my mind. "Do you have a wood that will do like this, when seasoned?" I drew my sword, bent it in an arc, and let it spring swiftly back.

Koto nodded, then shambled from the hut. I heard sounds of wood being split, and presently Koto was back with a long strip of hard wood which he handed me deprecatingly. I was overjoyed, for it was precisely what I needed.

"Bows and arrows," I exulted. "Now I feel better! Zarf, we have reason to remain here for a while."

Rapidly I explained, using a pointed stick to make clear my meaning, by drawing in the dirt of the floor. I had been an archery enthusiast on Earth, and knew my subject, even if I had never handled a sword.

**D**ESPITE my earlier urgency, it was three weeks before we three men set forth from Koto's castle on the edge of the Red Wilderness. Three men, because Koto had protested with lugubrious howls that he wasn't going to be left behind. I'd made him a Baron, he claimed, and it was his right to ride with me when I went forth to war! Zarf chuckled in grim approval, and I, too, endorsed Koto's claim.

We rode the queerest steeds imaginable. Huge birds they were, more like enormous game-cocks than aught else I can compare them to; with longer, thicker spurs and bigger beaks. Ugly-tempered, too. Zarf said they'd fight viciously

whenever it came to close quarters. And how those big birds could run!

I asked Koto where he got them, and he replied that he'd gone out one dark night and taken them from a flock kept by a petty lordling some distance away. When I laughed and called him a thief, he said seriously he was no such thing:

"Was not Karan the King in need of them? And did not the kingdom and all that therein was belong to the King?"

So we rode forth, all three mounted and armed with short, thick, powerful bows and thick, heavy arrows. Zarf and I had the swords we had taken from the Vulmins, and Koto bore a ponderous war-club fashioned from a young tree having a natural bulge at the big end. Into this bulge he had driven a dozen bronze spikes all greenish with verdigris—a most efficient and terrible weapon, if he had the courage to use it in hand-to-hand fighting. Zarf maintained that Koto would be so anxious to please me that he'd fight like a maniacal fiend, should the opportunity present.

The crossing of that Red Wilderness was no pleasure jaunt. There were dust storms and blistering heat by day, and an icy wind o' nights that howled like all the devils of Hell let loose. But in time we came to the shore of the Sea of the Dead; and a most fitting name it was for that desolate body of putrescent water.

Dull grayish-greenish water, sullenly heaving and surging to and fro sluggishly and greasily; beaches of dull grayish-brownish sands; and huge dull grayish-blackish boulders and rocks—oh! a most nightmarish picture, taken all in all.

"Zarf," I shuddered, "may it not be possible to ride around this Sea?"

"Perhaps," he returned, dubiously. "But we can cross it in one quarter of the time it would take to ride around."

"But," I queried skeptically, "how



shall we cross? I see no boats, nor any way of making any."

"I have heard of a tribe hereabouts," he replied slowly, "and it may be that we can barter for, seize, or compel them to make for us a craft that will bear us over this pestilential sea. But now we had best think about making camp for the night."

We rode back from the beach until the sea was lost to view—and smell. A pleased cry from Koto finally caused us to halt. Where a mass of boulders had been piled up by some ancient cataclysm, there was a cave-like recess sufficiently large to afford safe refuge for all three of us and our mounts.

What had pleased Koto particularly was the presence of a lot of lumps resembling amber, but of a queer red color. After he had collected sufficient to satisfy his ideas, he laid a line of the stuff across the entrance, and set fire to them. They burned like coal or gum, and gave off a clear pale white flame, and a most pleasant odor, with no smoke.

"This region is infested with devils at night," Koto said seriously. "But no devil will ever dare pass that line of fire."

He was right. No devil did pass, but after darkness came, a lot of them tried. Failing in that laudable attempt, they drew anigh the opening, and stared in avidly at us. . . .

**W**E DIVIDED the night into three watches. Zarf and I wrapped ourselves in our cloaks and slept, nor did aught disturb our rest. But Koto, when he wakened me, said he had seen plenty of devils moving about beyond the line of fire. Then he rolled himself up, and so became immovable. But I, hearing no snores, grew suspicious of such somnolence, considering that he had snored like a thunderstorm incarnate since we started

from his castle. Finally I tricked him into betraying himself. With a jerk of my head I summoned him to my side.

"Koto, do you think your King unfit to keep guard, that you lie awake?"

"Lord," he replied, "there be many devils about, and some be very dangerous—tricky, too. I know their ways better than you do, and can better cope with them. Also, I await the greatest one of all, for I would talk with him on a certain matter."

"Your father, Koto?"

"Yes, my King. Koto sent him word by a lesser devil, and he will surely come."

"Koto," I demanded sternly, "would you betray your King?"

"Nay, I seek to serve my Master." He stared at me in hurt surprize. Ashamed of my suspicion, I made amends.

"I thank my Baron! Koto, have I your permission to see this father of yours?"

"So be it," he assented, after pondering the matter for a while. "But first I must tell him, or he will be angry."

A long interval passed. Out of the blackness beyond the fire two enormous crimson eyes glared balefully. Koto calmly arose, stepped across the glowing line of the Fire of Safety, and walked off in the darkness toward those glowing orbs. A thousand misgivings assailed me. I strained my eyes, but could see naught. Even the crimson eyes had vanished. Only one comfort did I have—if harm came to Koto, his howls would surely apprise me of his danger. So I strained my ears, but no faintest whisper came. Then, after an eon of suspense, Koto calmly returned, and muttered:

"Now if King Karan wishes to see Koto's father—come! He is very terrible to behold, but he has promised Koto that King Karan shall be unharmed. But do not awaken Zarf—yet!"

**I**T TOOK all the hardihood I could muster to step across the line of fire and walk out into that fiend-infested dark. Koto minded it far less than I. There was evil in the very air. Strange, terrible faces stared at me, half-heard voices moaned and gibbered in my ears, clammy hands grasped at my arms and clothing, yet could not hold. Once a pair of icy cold lips kissed me full on my mouth; and oh! the foul effluvium of that breath! . . . Abruptly, Koto halted. A huge mass of black seen against the murky blackness of the night barred further progress. We stood immovable, waiting—for what? After a bit I grew impatient, weary of standing like a rock, and reached for my sword.

"Well," I demanded of Koto. "What is this holding us here? And where is this mighty father of yours? I am minded to try my sword on this black barrier and find out if it be impassable."

Before he could reply—the black barrier was not! Only, two eyes that were crimson fires of hellishness were staring into mine from a distance of mere inches . . . no face, no form . . . just vacant air—and two eyes. With a snort of disgust, I turned my back to the phenomenon.

"Koto," I said severely, "I am Karan, rightful King of Octolan. I am not interested in child's play, nor am I to be frightened by any Elemental, devil, goblin, or fiend in all my realm. I am *their* King as well as yours! Let this father of yours show respect, or we return to our shelter. . . ."

A Being stood facing me! It was taller than Koto or I, albeit no giant. Yet I knew that an Elemental was capable of assuming, at will, any form it might choose. Its features were wholly non-human; at the same time its expression was in nowise repulsive, nor was it fear-inspiring. But there were unmistakable

power and mastery stamped thereon and shining in its great, glowing eyes.

It was staring at me coldly, impersonally, with no sign of hostility, friendliness, or even curiosity; and I stared back at it with precisely the same attitude. If it sought to overawe me, it was badly mistaken. Then I realized it was telepathically reading my soul. And strangely, I began to grasp some insight into its nature, likewise.

"Truly, you are King Karan of Octolan, returned to regain your own. And I, to whom past, present and future are one and the same, tell you that you will succeed in all you undertake. Aye! And more than you now dream. And because you have treated Koto as a man, and will eventually make of him one of whom I may yet be proud, I will transport you, Koto, that grim Zarf of yours, and your mounts as well, across the Sea of the Dead, and beyond the Hills of Flint. But across the Mountains of Horror you three must fight your own way. Certain powers of Nature I control, and naught do I fear; but there is an ancient pact between that magician whom you seek, and me. Therefore I will not anger him by taking you into his realms, uninvited.

"Yet this I tell you for your further guidance—he will demand of you a service. Give it, and all shall go well with your plans. Refuse it, and all the days of your life you will regret that refusal. At dawn, be in readiness, and I will carry out my promise. Fear not, whatever happens, for my ways are none that you can understand, even were I to explain them. And now, farewell till dawn!"

And with that—I stood, facing nothing! Koto's father had simply vanished.

Returning to the cave, we found a badly worried Zarf awake and cursing luridly. But he became considerably mollified when I explained, although he shook his

head dubiously regarding Koto's father and his proffered assistance.

"His aid will more likely get us in trouble than help us out of it," he grumbled. "Still, as no better course presents, I suppose we will have to accept and run all chances."

**A**T THE first flush of dawn we were mounted and waiting. We noted that the air held a peculiar quality, indescribable, yet familiar, somewhat like the odor caused by a levin-bolt striking too close for comfort. Also, there came a strange, murky tinge in the air—a faint moan—icy winds—a howling, shrieking, roaring fury like all the tormented souls in Hell voicing their agonies—sand, dust and small pebbles tore past us—the world abruptly vanished, together with my companions, so far as I knew—naught remained—I was choked by dust and my eyes were blinded—I was dizzy and bemazed—I knew not for certain if I were alive or dead and buried—acute misery was the sole thing I was conscious of.

My mount stumbled and fell asprawl. I lurched to my feet, gasped, retched violently, and presently felt better. I stared about me, bewildered. Zarf and Koto were just scrambling to their feet, and facing us was Koto's father. And the great Elemental had a smile on his lips, and in his eyes a light of actual friendliness.

"Lord Karan, back of you are the Sea of the Dead and the Hills of Flint; and before you lie the Mountains of Horror. I have kept my promise to the King my son follows and honors. Farewell."

And before I could voice my gratitude, he was gone—as seemed a habit with him. One instant visible, then—vacancy!

"I know much about my father," Koto said slowly. "But I never knew he could do this."

**A** FAINT trail ran down into a wide valley, on the far side of which loomed the mighty ramparts of the Mountains of Horror. And they merited the appellation. They were evil, and evil dwelt in them.

Soon the dim trail became a wide road, albeit ancient and in dire need of repair. I do not believe it had been traveled for ages, until we came; the natural conclusion being that whatever race built it had passed into oblivion, leaving their handiwork to mark their passing.

As the day drew to its close, the road led us into the ruins of an ancient city. Not one stone stood atop of another. We decided to camp there for the night, and while Koto pitched camp and prepared a meal, I strolled about the ruins.

Everywhere I looked were slabs that were covered with petroglyphs. Whatever the race, they had had a written language, and moreover, they had been prone to embellishment. They must have been, like the old Egyptians, dominated by a priesthood, to judge by the character of the many pictures illustrating the graven text. But if those same pictures were aught to go by, their gods must have been born from a union of a nightmare and a homicidal maniac's frenzy! It gave me the chill creeps just to look at those pictures, so foul and unholy were the rites and acts depicted.

**I**T WAS during my watch. My companions snored in a most inharmonious concert; and while I was in nowise asleep, I had drifted into a sort of reverie. Slowly I became aware of a pair of eyes gleaming with opalescent lights, staring across the fire at me. Thinking it might be Koto's father, I spoke low-voiced in greeting. But as no reply came, I grew angry and asked who it was and what it wanted. Again no reply, so I snatched up my short

bow and drove an arrow beneath those glowing orbs.

A silvery laugh was my only reward. A hard-driven arrow is no laughing matter, but anything could happen in this accursed land, I decided.

"The little death-wand has no power to harm me," a voice asserted in those same silvery tones. "Nay, O Stranger; how may you slay one who died ages ago—but who still lives—and rules?"

"So that little 'death-wand' may not slay you," I snarled. "Well, we'll see what this will do!" And my sword leaped in a whistling cut across the tiny fire. Had there been a head and body there, they must have parted company! But the blade encountered—air!

Across the fire, smiling indulgently, as might one tolerantly amused by the tantrums of an otherwise interesting child, there sat a resplendently beautiful woman, a vivid, gorgeous brunette, with a slightly greenish tinge shimmering over her slender gold-bronze hued body. Her attire, a merest wisp of some pearly glimmering gossamer fabric, accentuated every personal charm of her exquisite form.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"A Princess of Hell I am, yet having dominance here on this region, likewise. Ages ago I ruled in this city when it was in its height and glory. But there arose among the priests a mighty magician whose power became greater than mine. Quakes and fire and flood he loosed upon me and my people—and we became that which no more is—yet destroy us wholly he could not.

"So it is but a city of ruins you now behold, wherein, as ghosts, my people dwell; and I, a ghost, too, abide with them part of my time, and rule over a ghostly people and a wrecked city."

"If you are a ghost, you look like an extremely tangible one," I stated bluntly.

"Yes?" and she laughed in derision. "Was it an 'extremely tangible' ghost against which you tried two different death-wands? Still you are correct, in part. I am tangible enough now, as you may prove for yourself, should you care to do so. I build my body as I need it, or revert it to vapor when its use is over. Child's play, to my magic, O Stranger. . . . You disbelieve? See!"

She arose, a vision of alluring loveliness, passed deliberately through the fire, and seated herself at my side so closely that I could sense the magnetic radiations of her.

"You may touch me, take me in your arms if you will, kiss my lips till your blood is aflame, and cool your ardor in my embrace, nor shall you find me unresponsive!"

Her rounded arms stole about my neck like soft, satiny serpents.

"So," she murmured. "Am I not tangible? Desirable, too? Take me, and I will be to you as no other, woman, or spirit, or ghost, fiend, devil, or angel in all the universe can ever be! Power and wisdom and rulership will I place at your command . . . love and passion undreamed hitherto——"

I had sat immovable, silent up to that point—but suddenly I made up for lost time. A violent shove sent her asprawl, squarely into the fire; and from my lips came a word so descriptive that Earth's vilest would have blushed in outraged modesty had that epithet been applied.

But the seductively lovely Princess of Hell evidently took the word as a compliment. And if she were angry at being shoved into the fire, she showed no sign thereof. Out from the flames she glided, more alluring than ever; not a hair of her dusky tresses disturbed; with never a blemish on her gold-bronze skin;

and with a provocative smile on her curving lips.

"What you have called me—I would be even that, for you," she sighed languorously. "You and I were meant for each other since ever Eternity began——"

But at that, I exploded! Meant for that she-devil? *I?* My hand shot out, seizing her slender throat in a vise-like grip, mercilessly.

"You——!" The word was even worse than the first epithet I had used. "Since arrow and sword fail, let's see what choking will do!"

I tightened my clutch, putting forth all my strength. For good measure, I drove my fist into her face—and nearly dislocated my arm! For the Princess of Hell, she-fiend—ghost—woman—or whatsoever she really was, or had been, simply wasn't there! In fact, I wondered if she'd ever been there, or had I dozed, and dreamed? . . .

**"IT WAS no dream, King Karan!"** The voice was full, sonorous, pleasant. Glancing up, I saw a tall, stately old man, bareheaded, smiling in amity.

"Zarf! Koto! *Up!*" I shouted, leaping to my feet, sword in hand. The old man raised his hand in protest.

"Nay, King Karan, they will sleep unless *I* release them from their slumber. That she-fiend put them into a trance from which only someone with power greater than hers can arouse them. Nor will I do so until after you and I confer on a matter of mutual benefit."

"Who are you?" I demanded. "And what devilment do you plan against me and my comrades?"

"Yon sleeper—Zarf—told you of a magician; and you set forth to seek that one, did you not? Well, I am he whom you seek, and your journey is at an end,

King Karan. Knowing of your coming, I was prepared to greet you as soon as you entered my domains—and this ruined city marks my borderline. So, I am here!

"King Karan, you are naught to me, nor I to you. But we have a common enemy—Djl Grm! Between him and me there lies an ancient feud. You he has wronged. There is a service—I get that from your mind—which you hope I can and will render you.

"Karan, King afar from your crown, throne, and kingdom, you are a bold and resourceful man, and your two companions are worth an army of ordinary folk. Render me one service, faithfully, without evasion or quibble, and I will release your locked memory! Well?"

"Arouse Zarf and Koto," I commanded. "If you be the one I seek, they will identify you, nor will they harm you. I, Karan, give you protection!"

He actually laughed at that, although there was more of admiration than derision in his laugh.

"Bold as ever, King Karan," he complimented. "As you have said, so will I do." He made a slight gesture, murmuring something I could not catch. "Now, speak, in a whisper if you will, and see if they be asleep."

As I complied, they came abruptly to their feet, fully alert . . . they took one look . . . on Koto's ugly face came such an expression of ghastly fear that I hastened to assure him he was in no danger. Zarf bowed in respect, albeit he showed no fear. Our visitor spoke, in a courteous manner:

"You know me, Zarf? You, too, Baron Koto?"

"You are Agnor Halit, the mighty magician I persuaded my King to seek," Zarf responded gravely.

Koto nodded vehemently. "My father

says you have more power than the devil himself, O Agnor Halit."

"Is King Karan satisfied?"

"I am," I confirmed. "But why do you meet me here, rather than making me journey all the way to your abode?"

"For this reason—the service I ask, if I am to release your inhibited memory, will take you back on your path, even to the near shore of the Sea of the Dead. And so, I save you many long, weary days of travel, hardship, and danger."

"And this service?"

"Give heed, then, and I will explain. There is a treasure I would fain possess. There be good reasons why I may not go after it myself, yet those reasons would not affect you. Truth to tell, it is hidden in the territory ruled by another magician who knows not it is there. The one who hid this treasure is another magician . . . long ago he hid the priceless thing for some dire reason of his own. It is the statue of a naked, beautiful female; yet it is an enormous jewel—a flawless sapphire, a trifle over half life-size——"

"No sapphire in all the worlds was ever that big," I objected. But Agnor Halit merely smiled as he assented:

"True! But magic works wonders, King Karan. Your throne is made of a huge chrysolite, albeit not in all the worlds was a chrysolite ever that big! Still are you 'King Karan of the Chrysolite Throne.' Magic made your throne from certain substances, yet a trader in gems would tell you it is genuine chrysolite! . . .

"This sapphire statue was made from flesh and blood by enchantment. It is the actual body of a witch who dared withstand a great magician, long ago, until he conquered her by treachery. For punishment he transmuted her to sapphire, reducing her size to that of a half-

grown child, and so left her a beautiful image in which her soul is still prisoned. But once I have that image in my possession, I will have a hold upon him. . . .

"He hated her so greatly that after turning her to crystal, he could in nowise abide to look upon her constantly; wherefore he hid her in a submerged cavern near this shore of the Sea of the Dead. But that cavern can be entered—at times."

"And if I bring to you this statue——"

"Then will I release the bonds that hold your memory in abeyance. So be it that you release the Sapphire Image to me, without any reservation or quibble—your memories of all the past will be perfect. I, Agnor Halit, magician, do pledge you this, Karan of Octolan. And my pledges I do keep to the last atom. I have wrought every known sin, and many nameless evils—but of one thing is Agnor Halit thus far guiltless—a broken promise!"

"It is well," I answered. And not to be outdone by him, a dealer in all unholiness, I gave pledge in return: "I, Karan, will deliver to you that treasure if I succeed in carrying out my venture, nor will I claim part or parcel in it. For aught I care, you may shatter it to blue slivers the moment I deliver it to you."

A demoniacal light flickered momentarily in that dark sorcerer's eyes as he said vindictively:

"I may do an even stranger thing than that, once the thing is in my possession!"

"I am not concerned with your mysteries," I shrugged. "All I need to know about you is that you and I have an agreement which we both intend to keep. Now, tell me all you can, that I may surely find that place where the Sapphire Image is hidden."

So for the rest of the night we three sat listening while that gentle-seeming old

man told us in detail all he knew about our course—while at the same time he warned us frankly that we were going direct into the worst antechamber of Hell when we reached the entrance to the cavern. And, as we later found out for ourselves, he understated. . . .

**“LORD KARAN,”** Koto said, pointing—  
“unless Agnor Halit lied, yon place is the entrance to the cavern we seek.”

We dismounted after one glance, for the marks were unmistakable. Five huge boulders indicated the angles of a pentagon; in the center, a pool, evidently filled with water from the Sea of the Dead through some underground channel. To substantiate this supposition, the surface of the pool heaved with the heaving of the surges along the beach some few hundred yards distant.

Even as we watched, the surface became violently agitated; a vortex formed, became a miniature whirlpool, making queer sucking noises, strange gurglings and whistling moans. This lasted for upward of an hour. After that, the surface became level and still.

Then abruptly came a change. In the very center a huge bubble rose and burst, polluting the atmosphere with a most unholy stench. More bubbles rose and the stench grew worse. Bubbles came continually, and the pool boiled like a cauldron, filling the air with horrible odor. Then again the surface stilled.

Now my courage well-nigh forsook me, and without shame I admit it. For I knew I'd have to dive into that loathly pool while the vortex pulled downward; and come up—if ever I did come up—while the bubbles arose! And it was in nowise a pleasing prospect. After we'd been studying the pool for some time, Zarf evidently came to the same conclusion I had reached, for he said bluntly:

“My King, that old devil, Agnor Halit, laid a trap for you! It is well known that King Karan does not lightly break his word. But if I, Zarf, have aught to say about this matter, here is once Karan of Octolan breaks a pledge, nor gives it a second thought. To plunge into that pool is the act of a madman. If that damned sorcerer wants that image so badly, let him come and dive for it himself. He will only go to Hell a little sooner, through a most befitting gateway, and this region of space will be that much improved because of his absence!”

“But my memory, Zarf?”

“Once you've gone into that filthy hole, you'll have no need for it, as you'll not come up to use it! Nay, let us rather go back to Koto's hut and plot to regain your kingdom. If successful, we can then force Djl Grm to undo his foul sorcery——”

“Not so fast, Zarf,” Koto interrupted. “My father warned our King to comply with Agnor Halit's request, and said that if he did, all would go well with his plans. But my father said, too, that if our King refused, he'd regret it all his life long.”

Now Zarf and I looked at each other blankly, for there was truth in what Koto had just said.

“I wonder if there is any other way to regain that statue,” I suggested tentatively.

“I know a good way,” Koto said simply. “It is just this: Koto goes down, and comes up with the image, or stays down there with it. And if aught goes wrong, Koto can well be spared——”

“Nay, my Koto,” I said huskily, for I was deeply moved by the faithful fellow's loyal and courageous proffer—“I can ill spare——”

A gurgling noise from the pool. Koto rose abruptly, said no word and gave no

sign, but dived like a frog, head first, into the center of the rapidly forming whirlpool. Neither Zarf nor I had been alert enough to prevent him, for he had moved too quickly. We stared at each other, open-mouthed in amazement.

"King Karan," Zarf's voice rang like a clarion—"when you regain your kingdom remember that brave fool, Baron Koto of the Red Wilderness, and sometimes think of—Zarf!"

*Splash!*

I stood alone, gaping stupidly at the spot where two splendid, loyal noblemen had disappeared. The vortex was growing weaker—it would cease ere long—then an eternity of waiting, hoping—perhaps they would never come up—I'd be alone—never see them again—I, a King minus crown, throne, realm, memory, wife, subjects—why! the only *subjects* I knew or cared about. . . .

I took a deep full breath, and dived.

That vile fluid that stank so abominably hurt worse than it smelt. It was actually corrosive. It *bit!* Raw potash lye is its nearest comparison. . . . I was still head down and going deeper. I was spinning with the swirling until I grew dizzy. My eyeballs felt as if burning out of their sockets from that acrid solution—down, down, and down! A faint, dimly seen blue light struck horizontally through the whirlpool—two vague, shadowy figures barely seen as I whirled in that mad headlong dance—a powerful grip clamped fast on one of my ankles and I thought I was being rent apart—the vortex hated to let go—but that mighty pull at my leg would not be denied—I looked up into Koto's ugly face—then Zarf's voice, heavy with reproach:

"King Karan, is this well? Go back, I pray you, as soon as the bubbles rise!"

But at that, I flatly refused, standing

on my royal dignity; and I made them yield the point, maugre their stubborn insistence.

A tunnel stretched away into the dim distance, and up that tunnel we started—toward what? Steadily the blue light became stronger, and in my mind arose the certitude that it emanated from the Blue Image. Demon faces peered at us from cracks and crevices, but none of the devils of the place found hardihood to attack us.

The tunnel debouched into a great cavern. In the exact center, on a mound of bleached skulls stood the source of the blue radiance—the Sapphire Witch herself. I gasped in awed admiration at the flawless perfection of her beauty—and suddenly, how I did hate that sorcerer Agnor Halit, to whom I'd promised to deliver that exquisite Image of Incomparable Loveliness! Cheerfully would I have bartered the empires of the universe for its possession—did I but own those empires—nor would I have considered the price exorbitant. *I wanted it—I wanted it!* And I'd pledged—

Around that mound, in a ring on the floor of the cavern, lay many stones. Half the size of human heads they were, round as balls, and no two were of the same color. Every one was aglow, softly, with inward lights, as if each were afire deep inside—dark reds there were; dull orange; dusky blues, garish greens and sinister purples. We knew they were sentient, malignant, resenting our intrusion! Koto responded by kicking one stone that was apparently sneering at him and radiating contempt. At the impact of Koto's foot, the smoldering stone gave forth a metallic clang like a smitten gong, rose straight in the air to the level of Koto's face—then hurtled straight at him with a speed that would have cracked his skull, had not Zarf struck at the Flying Stone with his sword and deflected its course.



A dozen of them promptly left the floor and flew at Zarf—who as promptly turned and fled. But he was actuated by discretion rather than fear. I saw him race headlong into a crack in the tunnel wall—and shortly, the devil who dwelt therein came tumbling out, well-nigh sheared in two by Zarf's sword. Evidently Zarf preferred coping with devils, to the Flying Stones. Koto, having the same idea, hastily retreated to the tunnel mouth—and I went with Koto. In another moment Zarf rejoined us there, grinning sheepishly. The Flying Stones did not follow us that far from the Blue Statue. . . .

We stood disconsolate, wondering how we were to pass their formidable menace—and as if to show us how futile was our quest, of a sudden the entire ring of Flying Stones levitated to the height of a man's shoulders and head, and commenced to swirl about the Sapphire Witch who stood so serene on her altar of skulls. Truly a strange goddess, and guarded by even stranger acolytes!

Fast and faster swirled the Flying Stones, their colored lights glowing more and more brightly—faster yet, until we could no longer distinguish any single stone—they were merely a beautiful, gleaming blur of fire—gradually a humming sound became audible, swelling in volume till it became a roar like the diapason of a mighty organ—soon it became distinguishable as a chant of warning! . . .

And at that, a sort of madness came upon me. I had come for that image—to bear it away—not to stand and look at it from a distance. And that image I meant to take, forthwith! In my rage, all else faded—kingdom, wife, subjects, memory, Agnor Halit, Djl Grm, Zarf, Koto, even my own welfare mattered not. I ran forward, shouting:

"Fools! I am Karan of Octolan! I have come for that image! It shall be mine! Down and lie still, I say!"

Now who was I, after all, that those Flying Stones should obey me? Yet so it was! The fiery band settled down instantly. I walked confidently forward, picked up the image, and so, back to where Zarf and Koto stood staring in amazed incredulity.

"Somewhat of magic my King knows, it appears!" gasped Koto shakily. I myself could hardly believe it. But the fact remained that I held the statue in my arms. And we three walked down that tunnel, nor did aught bother us all the way to the upper world!

ONCE at the surface, we wiped the foulness of the pool from the lovely image, and stood actually adoring the matchless treasure in the clear light . . . looked suddenly up, and saw Koto's father, and with him that utterly damned sorcerer, Djl Grm.

The sorcerer clutched swiftly for the image, but as swiftly Zarf spun his sword in a glittering wheel of defense in front of it—and the magician flinched back. Then he pointed a finger—and Zarf became temporarily paralyzed. Koto snatched up the image, and tucking it beneath his left arm, he waggled his formidable bludgeon under the sorcerer's nose with a meaning gesture.

"Try that trick on me!" he invited grimly. But the magician, for some reason, declined Koto's urgent invitation. Instead, I became aware of rapid interchange of telepathic speech between Koto's father and Djl Grm. The great Elemental turned to Koto.

"Are you my son?"

"That, you should know best," Koto responded with a grim smile. He seemed to know what was coming next.

"Then," his father commanded—"give the Blue Image to its proper owner!"

"No!" and Koto shook his head defiantly. "It is not seemly that my King should carry burdens while I, his follower, go empty-handed. I carry it for him. His it is by right of power—for he made the Flying Stones yield to him their trust, and he bore it away from the Altar of Skulls, unmolested!"

The Elemental grew black with rage. His eyes flamed crimson, and their awful glare frightened Zarf and me. Koto looked perturbed, but a faint reddish spark began flickering in his eyes, too.

"Give that Image to Djl Grm, I said!" The Elemental's voice held a note of awful finality.

Koto's arm flew back and swept forward again, and his bludgeon smashed full in his father's face.

"My father you are," Koto howled in fury—"but Karan is my King!"

Unharméd by the impact, the Elemental gravely handed Koto his great club. But it was to me he spoke:

"King Karan, I said I might yet be proud of Koto—I am!" Then to the sorcerer, sternly:

"Djl Grm, I know your power—and I know its limitations. And I know, likewise, what you have in mind. Summon your legions if you dare and I will summon mine. And what that will mean to us both ere all be ended, you know, as do I! To a certain extent, I aided you in this affair, for I wished to see how big my son had grown in the service of his King—and I am proud of his loyalty. So long as my son shall cleave to him, Karan of Octolan is my ally and friend. *Djl Grm, is it peace—or war?*"

The magician seemed like to explode with impotent fury. Suddenly he vanished with a scream of baffled, venomous rage. Then came a terrific sensation, com-

parable only to the emotion an arrow must feel as it leaves the string of a powerful bow.

Koto, still holding the Sapphire Image under his left arm and his great club clenched in his right fist—Zarf and I, still holding our drawn swords—and Koto's father, smiling as if pleased that he had broken openly with Djl Grm—stood looking at each other, hardly knowing what to say. But one thing we three realized—Koto's father had once again displayed his control of the forces of Nature, and we were in the city of ghosts, where I had promised to meet Agnor Halit. The Elemental said something to Koto that made him grin from ear to ear; then it vanished.

NIGHT. And we three sat by a brightly burning campfire. Not one of us cared to sleep. We were taking no chances on some unexpected treachery assailing us at the last moment. Again and again I had tried to reach Agnor Halit mentally, bidding him come get his Blue Image and give me my price, that I might be done with a distasteful business; because I wanted that statue for myself, and also because I liked old Agnor Halit not one whit better than his fellow sorcerer, Djl Grm. And the sooner I was quit of further doings with either or both of those two, the more pleased I'd be. . . . But Agnor Halit came not. A hope dawned in my mind—perhaps he had met with some disaster. Then Koto caught my mind and spoiled that idea.

"Nay! He lives. He will come whenever it pleases him to come—till then—we—can—but—wait."

Koto sagged where he sat, slumped over on his side—and snored! Zarf, a second later, did likewise. Amazed, I shouted at them. As well shout at two solid rocks! I grew afraid at that, for I saw what was toward—they, of their own

free wills, would never have acted thus! Some malign power had wrought a sleep-spell on them, and I was left to face whatever might happen.

And it started immediately!

The ruined city was materializing as it was before calamity fell upon it! Stone upon stone, tier upon tier, story upon story, tower and turret and pylon, pinnacle, spire and dome, it grew in might and beauty, albeit the might suggested cruelty and the beauty was wholly evil.

The streets filled with people—men, women, and little children; and on no face did I see aught written of good, but only all wickedness. Before I could decide what to do, of a sudden a detachment of soldiery bore down on me, surrounding me before I could rise to my feet. Again I shouted to Zarf and Koto; and deep as was the slumber-spell, Koto's brain must have caught, in part, my warning. For he moved uneasily, flinging out one arm restlessly. That arm fell across the image where it lay wrapped in my cloak.

Roughly I was yanked to my feet. The soldiers disregarded the two others, for some reason. Through the streets they led me, into a splendid edifice that proved to be a temple of the loathly devil-gods I had seen depicted on the various rock-faces among the ruins.

Seated on a resplendent throne was the seductively lovely Princess of Hell, looking more alluring than when first I saw her. Languidly smiling, she addressed me as if naught but utmost amity had marked our former brief acquaintance.

"All this I have wrought for your sake, O Stranger for whom I yearn. I did it that you might have proof it is no weakling wraith who seeks your love, but one truly great, powerful, and—if you will have it so—kindly disposed toward you."

"What do you really want of me?" I

demanded bluntly. "I'm not a total fool, to believe you're actually in love with me, a mere mortal nobody!"

"A mere mortal nobody?" The Princess smiled, highly amused. "Karan of Octolan, Lord of the Chrysolite Throne, is hardly a mere mortal nobody. You do yourself injustice, for you are very much a man. And not a maid in all my train but would be happy to be your mate—and myself most of all.

"Secretly, you regard me as a fiend. Well, I *am!* But I want you to know me fully. Between such as I, and your sort, exists an almost impassable barrier—unless one of your sort invites one of my order across the border. You have a different magnetism, highly beneficial to us, and we delight to bathe therein, returning in exchange a portion of our own powerful vibrations. Thus impregnated, new powers and capacities are yours for the wielding.

"We 'fiends' do not seek your souls! Most of your souls are not worth having, so weak, so embryonic are they. Not good enough to attain to celestial realms, nor wicked enough to be welcome in Hell, naught remains for most of your race but return, life after life, to some of the material planes. But within you, Karan, are great capacities for absolute Evil or absolute Good. Aye, a fit mate for even me——"

"You've said enough," I interrupted harshly. "Mate with *you?* Give you of my magnetic radiations—draw from *you* strength, power, and capacities? Why, you she-devil, sooner would I spend eternity adoring hopelessly——"

"That Blue Witch you stole," she hissed venomously. "O Fool ten thousand times accursed! You dare compare me to that icy cold crystal that can not move? I would have crowned you Lord of Hell itself in a century's time, had you

accepted my offer; but since you dare to refuse me—you shall pay! . . .”

And pay I did!

**I**N OBEDIENCE to some unspoken command from the infuriated she-fiend, a particularly malignant-appearing priest stepped forward from amidst a group of his kind. I had never before seen a face so utterly unhuman. His body was more ape-like than man-like.

The priest laid one prehensile paw on my shoulder—and received a smashing blow full in the face from my fist. The priest did not even change expression, but my fist felt as if I had hit a solid rock. Holding me at arm's length, he jabbed me lightly with one finger. He knew anatomy and neurology, that devil-priest, for that light touch wrung a gasp of agony from me, and brought the cold sweat from every pore of my body, while it sent a terrific thrill like commingled ice and fire along every fiber of my nervous system.

That was merely a preliminary. . . .

A vise-like grip on my temples with thumb and finger—what sort of uncanny powers did that devil-priest control? And throb after throb of lance-like twinges tore through my brain, each one a solid impact, each impact worse than the preceding one; until at each twinge bright sparks burst within my skull, rending and searing the tissues of my brain, and I, all fortitude lost, howled, moaned, shrieked and yelled like any madman in Bedlam as those awful pulsations continued into an eternity of anguish.

But that became monotonous. My howls were too much alike, and wearied the Princess. The devil-priest tried a new one. Releasing my temples, he lightly slapped me on the chest with the flat of his hand, meantime blowing his breath on my forehead. . . .

A most delightful sense of surcease from torture after anguish unbearable swept all through me, and I sighed my relief; but that devil-priest ran his thumb along my spine, once, and the terrific agony of that caress made all I had suffered previously seem but exquisite delight!

Stepping back a pace, the devil-priest levelled his arm, his stiffly extended fingers pointing straight at me, and I commenced to gyrate, at first slowly, then with ever accelerating speed; fast and faster, and faster yet, until the surroundings became a blur—and faster still, until the surroundings and the blur, too, disappeared, and naught remained but myself aspin on my own axis!

*Crash!*

The motion was instantaneously reversed, and what ghastly effect that simple action had upon me can never be imagined or described. It had to be undergone to be understood, and what little sense I'd still managed to retain thus far left me entirely. . . .

I awoke! I was stretched out on a couch, suffused with untellable fatigue, acutely conscious of agonies endured beyond all endurance. . . .

“O my beloved! Such sufferings! But never again! In my arms, O loved man, shall you regain strength and know bliss beyond all thinking.”

Hovering over me, holding me in her arms, shielding and protecting me from further harm, was a superbly beautiful woman. Azure was her hair, blue as the midsummer skies was her shimmering skin that shone with a clear luster surpassing any gem; yet in nowise was she a stone statue, but a living, breathing, loving, tender, soft-bodied woman of flesh and blood! I reached up feeble arms about her neck, drawing her down to me—almost had her lips touched mine—a lambent reddish light flickered mo-

mentarily in her wondrous blue eyes—

*"You infernal hag!"*

It was but a putrid corpse I held so lovingly within the circle of my arms—and in it the worms and maggots were acrawl! . . .

The Princess of Hell, on her gorgeous throne, gave utterance to a trill of merry laughter at the success of that final glamorous torment of the man who had dared refuse her proffered love. . . .

**T**HAT laugh changed to a shriek of fury ere the last silvery note of her mirth died out! Facing her where she sat surrounded by her guards and courtiers, stood a tall, robed figure, grimly eyeing her in a silence more fraught with menace than any words could have conveyed.

*"Agnor Halit!"* she screamed in a paroxysm of terror, as she recognized the mighty sorcerer.

"Even so, O Princess of Hell, Queen over a ghostly race and a ghost city that I shattered with my magic, ages ago. And now! For that you have not felt the weight of my hand in the last few centuries, you have grown overbold. You actually dared molest this man, knowing that he was at the time engaged in serving my purpose!"

Agnor Halit drew from the breast of his robe a most peculiar reptile, more like a short, extremely thick centipede than aught else. He held it up between thumb and finger. His words came slow, heavy, laden with doom:

"Into this vileness shalt thou go, nor ever come forth from it until I, Agnor Halit, am no more!"

He flung the small abhorrence on the dais, before the feet of the Princess. It remained there, immovable, its full eyes fixed on her face; and she stared back in awe-stricken, horrified fascination.

The sorcerer stretched out his arms, his

quivering fingers aimed at the beautiful, erotic fiend trembling in an ecstasy of fear there on her sumptuous seat. Over guards and courtiers, priests and populace an icy terror fell; they stood staring with incredulous eyes, immovable—I myself could scarce breathe from the suspense of that tense waiting. . . .

The Princess of Hell began to shrink. Small and smaller she became, dwindling visibly before our eyes—she became as tiny as the reptile—every exquisite feature of her loveliness remained intact, in miniature—a gray mist swirled between reptile and Princess—*they became one!*

Agnor Halit snapped finger and thumb, deliberately, insultingly contemptuous. At the *"Tshuk"* he made, the entire scene vanished!

I rubbed my eyes . . . I could not believe . . . a tiny reptile, most resembling a centipede, ran before my foot and around the corner of a boulder . . . but facing me was the sorcerer I sought. . . .

"King Karan, you had a narrow escape," he assured me, earnestly. "But she is harmless now. Not even her devil-friends can enable her to work further mischief. She will be naught but a venomous worm so long as I shall continue to live—and as I may perish only by one method which none knows save me, she is like to endure for ages! Her bite might prove dangerous, but the fear I inspired in her will prevent her from trying that, even."

While talking, we had drawn to where lay Zarf and Koto. At our arrival they sat up as if waking from a natural nap. Zarf stared at the magician with undisguised hostility. Koto, most surprisingly, gave the magician a wide grin of welcome; more, he threw back my cloak and permitted Agnor Halit to see that we actually had the image he so desired. But Koto kept nigh, with a wary eye on

the sorcerer's every move. Agnor Halit's eyes gleamed with a baleful light, his voice held a note of repressed, unholy exultation:

"King Karan, I am ready to fulfil my part of our pact. Once again, are you willing to renounce all claim to this Sapphire Image, yielding it to me to do with as may please my whim?"

"I am," I replied briefly. "Take the thing and give my price to me—the release of my memory. I grow weary of this magic and mystery-mongering, and would be about my own proper affairs."

"Not so fast," grinned Koto as the sorcerer turned eagerly to the statue. "King Karan has shown you his part of the bargain. Touch this image, ere you fulfil your part—which is not visible, but must be made evident to King Karan's satisfaction—and you have the father of Koto to reckon with—and, Agnor Halit, his power is greater than yours. If you doubt that—try conclusions with him! Shall I, his son, summon him?"

"King Karan," and Agnor Halit ignored Koto completely—"your word is inviolable, nor do I break promises. Yet Baron Koto is right. I can see your part—and you shall receive mine ere I take my payment. Is that satisfactory?"

"Magician," I exclaimed, impatient, "do more, and talk less! And you, Koto, let him have the thing as suits him best. I have taken his word, even as he accepts mine. Shall we quibble endlessly?"

"Yet will I do even as Baron Koto wishes," the sorcerer smiled. He laid his left hand on the back of my neck. The forefinger of his other hand he pressed tightly against my forehead just between the eyebrows.

A slight tingling flowed from that fingertip, through my brain, to the center of the palm against my neck. A tiny spark like a distant star lit in the center of my

brain. It grew and grew, filling my entire skull with a silvery-golden brilliance shot through with coruscations and sparkling, scintillant flashes. . . .

*CRASH!*

Insofar as I was aware of anything, my head had just exploded! . . . All the agonies I had ever experienced were as naught compared to that! I was so absolutely stunned I could not even fall down and die! Across immeasurable voids came a trumpet-like voice:

"King Karan, I have kept my promise!"

**I** BLINKED, and my dazed mind cleared. *Gods and Devils!* . . . In one terrific rush, I knew all! Not one trifling detail of all the long reign in Octolan as Karan of the Chrysolite Throne was lacking in my memory! And thereupon my soul descended into Hell even as I stood facing that damnable sorcerer who openly sneered in my very face, gloating over my mental anguish—for I knew one thing which wrecked all benefits I had hoped to gain by my memory's restoration. . . .

That Sapphire Image was the actual body of my wife and Queen, Mehul-Ira, transmuted by the hellish magic of that rebel sorcerer, Djl Grm, into a flawless jewel, with her pure soul imprisoned within the depths of the wondrous blue crystal—and I had renounced all claim to the image, thereby giving my royal spouse to another sorcerer quite as evil as the one I'd rescued her from! . . .

"Karan, becozened and bejaped King, I claim my price!"

"Take it—you—devil!" I managed to gasp finally, albeit my soul was dying within me, and my anguish was plainly visible to my followers. . . .

"Take the image, magician," Koto grinned.

Almost was I tempted to slay Koto for grinning like that when my very soul was suffering all the agonies of dissolution without the comfort of death's release.

Agnor Halit moved not from where he stood. Only he pointed his finger at the image. A pink mist enshrouded the statue, turned to a deep rose-red, then to scarlet, and finally became crimson like rich blood. Gradually it faded, and a living, breathing woman, radiantly lovely, arose from where she lay on the hard ground, stood erect, turned, smiling at me with an unmistakable light in her great softly shining eyes—she stretched out longing arms—Koto flung my cloak about her, concealing her exquisite perfection from the avid gaze of the sorcerer—she spoke, and the music of her voice tore my heart with its sweetness:

"Karan! *My* Karan! After all these dreary years! I am still all yours. . . ."

"Nay!" Agnor Halit interrupted harshly. "Karan has renounced all his claim to you! You are *mine!*"

That devilish magician, inspired by the malice common to all his ilk, had perpetrated upon me a treachery so utterly fiendish that even the demons in Hell must have shrieked and rocked in glee upon their white-hot brazen seats!

He opened his mouth to its fullest extent, and peals of gargantuan laughter bellowed forth. In a daze, I noted dimly that Koto had stooped and now held something in his hand—why! it looked like a short thick worm—or a centipede. . . .

"Agnor Halit!" Koto spoke with a sneer more bitter than aught the sorcerer knew how to use—"King Karan gave you the image, to do with as pleased your whim—but he gave not his wife! Upon her you have no claim! But I, Koto of the Red Wilderness, in her place give you—*this!*"

Flung with unerring accuracy, the tiny reptile, writhing and twisting, shot from Koto's hand, disappearing in the yawning cavity of the sorcerer's mouth.

Agnor Halit closed his mouth with a gulp of surprize. He staggered—his face turned to a ghastly greenish hue—the body that had so long defied the ravages of death dashed itself to the ground, rolling in hideous torture—convulsion after convulsion shook it—then slowly ceased—and a second later we were gazing, incredulous, at a carrion corpse that stank most outrageously and in which the worms and maggots were already at work.

"Somewhat of magic Koto knows," Koto grinned. "While my body lay still, my spirit went with my King and saw all; then, returning, I dreamed the secret Agnor Halit deemed that none knew save himself! The Princess of Hell crawled into my hand that I might use her, and so, she revenged herself! Agnor Halit is now in Hell, where she can deal with him according to her fancy!"

WE MOUNTED our great birds. My Queen sat before me, my arm steadying her. Before us, smiling pleasantly, was Koto's father. Koto grinned at him.

"Am I your son?"

"I myself could have wrought no better," responded the great Elemental, generously.

"Your son is sorry his father has lost his once mighty power." Koto's tone was lugubrious in the extreme.

"*Lost my power?*"

"Aye! My King would rest tonight within my castle on the far edge of the Red Wilderness, my Barony—yet here we sit on these ugly, slow birds. . . ."

Again the fury of the elements were loosed for my benefit. . . . We slept that night at Koto's castle!