

Weird Tales

JULY, 1953

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... One and all they turned their dead eyes on me with a curious fixity.

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

*... one and all they turned their
long dead eyes upon me with
a curious fixity. . . .*

The Sea Witch

BY NICTZIN DYALIS

HELDRA HELSTROM entered my life in a manner peculiarly her own. And while she was the most utterly damnable woman in all the world, at the same time, in my opinion, she was the sweetest and the most superbly lovely woman who ever lived.

A three-day northeast gale was hammering at the coast. It was late in the fall of the year, and cold as only our North Atlantic coast can very well be, but in the very midst of the tempest I became afflicted with a mild form of claustrophobia. So I donned sea-boots, oilskins and sou'wester hat, and sallied forth for a walk along the shore.

My little cottage stood at the top of a high cliff. There was a broad, safe path running down to the beach, and down it I hurried. The short winter day was even then drawing to a close, and after I'd trudged a quarter of a mile along the shore, I decided I'd best return to my comfortable fireside. The walk had at least given me a good appetite.

There was none of the usual lingering twilight of a clear winter evening. Darkness fell so abruptly I was glad I'd brought along a powerful flashlight. I'd almost reached the foot of my path up the cliff when I halted, incredulous, yet desiring to make sure.

I turned the ray of the flashlight on the great comber just curling to break on the



Heading by Jon Arfstrom

shore, and held the light steady, my breath gasping in my throat. Such a thing as I thought I'd seen couldn't be—yet it was!

I started to run to the rescue, and could not move a foot. A power stronger than my own will held me immovable. I could only watch, spellbound. And even as I stared, that gigantic comber gently subsided, depositing its precious living burden on

the sands as softly as any nurse laying a babe into a cradle.

Waist-deep in a smother of foam she stood for a brief second, then calmly waded ashore and walked with free swinging stride straight up the beam of my flashlight to where I stood.

Regardless of the hellish din and turmoil of the tempest, I thrilled, old as I am, at the superb loveliness of this most amazing specimen of flotsam ever a raging sea cast ashore within memory of man.

Never a shred of clothing masked her matchless body, yet her flesh glowed rosy-white, when by all natural laws it should have been blue-white from the icy chill of wintry seas.

"Well!" I exclaimed. "Where did you come from? Are you real—or am I seeing that which is not?"

"I am real," replied a clear, silvery voice. "And I came from out there." An exquisitely molded arm flung a gesture toward the raging ocean. "The ship I was on was sinking, so I stripped off my garb, flung myself on Ran's bosom, and Ran's horses gave me a most magnificent ride! But well for you that you stood still as I bade you, while I walked ashore. Ran is an angry god, and seldom well disposed toward mortals."

"Ran?" The sea-god of the old Norse vikings! What strange woman was this who talked of "Ran and his horses," the white-maned waves of old ocean? But then I bethought me of her naked state in that unholy tempest.

"Surely you must be Ran's daughter," I said. "That reef is ten miles off land! Come—I have a house near by, and comforts—you cannot stand here."

"Lead, and I will follow," she replied simply.

She went up that path with greater ease than I, and walked companionably beside me from path-top of house, although she made no talk. Oddly, I felt that she was reading me, and that what she read gave her comfort.

When I opened the door, it seemed as if she held back for a merest moment.

"Enter," I bade her, a bit testily. "I should think you'd had enough of this weather by now!"

She bowed her head with a natural stateliness which convinced me that she was no common person, and murmured something too low for me to catch, but the accents had a distinct Scandinavian trend.

"What did you say?" I queried, for I supposed she'd spoken to me.

"I invoked the favor of the old gods on the hospitable of heart, and on the sheltering roottree," she replied. Then she crossed my threshold, but she reached out her arm and rested her shapely white hand lightly yet firmly on my left forearm as she stepped within.

She went direct to the big stove, which was glowing dull-red, and stood there, smiling slightly, calm, serene, wholly ignoring her nakedness, obviously enjoying the warmth, and not by a single shiver betraying that she had any chill as result of exposure.

"I think you need this," I said, proffering a glass of brandy. "There's time enough for exchanging names and giving explanations, later," I added. "But right now, I'll try and find something for you to put on. I have no woman's things in the house, as I live alone, but will do the best I can."

I passed into by bedroom, laid out a suit of pajamas and a heavily quilted bathrobe, and returned to the living room where she stood.

"You are a most disconcertingly beautiful young woman," I stated bluntly; "which you know quite well without being told. But doubtless you will feel more at ease if you go in there and don some things I've laid out for you. When you come out, I'll get some supper ready."

She was back instantly, still unclad. I stared, wonderingly.

"Those things did not fit," she shrugged. "And that heavy robe—in this warm house?"

"But—" I began.

"But—this," she smiled, catching up a crimson silk spread embroidered in gold, which covered a sandalwood table I'd brought from the orient many years before. A couple of swift motions and the gorgeous thing became a wondrous robe adorning her lovely figure, clinging, and in some subtle manner hinting at the flawless splen-

dor of her incomparable body. A long narrow scarf of black silk whereon twisted a silver dragon was whipped from its place on a shelf and transposed into a sash from her swelling breasts to her sloping hips, bringing out more fully every exquisite curve of her slender waist and torso—and she smiled again.

"Now," she laughed softly, "am I still a picture for your eyes? I hope so, for you have befriended me this night—I who sorely need a friend; and it is such a little thing I can do—making myself pleasing in your sight.

"And because you have holpen me"—I stared at the archaic form she used—"and will continue to aid and befriend (for so my spirit tells me), I will love you always, love you as Ragnar Wave-Flame loved Jarl Wulf Red-Brand . . . as a younger sister, or a dutiful niece."

"Yet of her it is told," I interrupted, deliberately speaking Swedish and watching keenly to see the effect, "that the love given by the foam-born Sea-Witch brought old Earl Wulf of the Red-Sword but little luck, and that not of a sort desired by most men!"

"That is ill said," she retorted. "His fate was from the Norns, as is the fate of all. Not hers the fault of his doom, and when his carles within the hour captured his three slayers, she took red vengeance. With her own foam-white hands she flayed them alive, and covered their twitching bodies with salt ere she placed the old Jarl in his long-ship and set it afire. And she sailed with that old man on his last seafaring, steering his blazing dragon-ship out of the stead, singing of his great deeds in life, that the heroes in Valhalla might know who honored them by his coming."

She paused, her superb bosom heaving tumultuously. Then with a visible effort she calmed herself.

"But you speak my tongue, and know the old tales of the Skalds. Are you, then, a Swede?"

"I speak the tongue, and the old tales of the Skalds, the ancient minstrels, I learned from my grandmother, who was of your race."

"Of my race?" her tone held a curious

inflection. "Ah, yes! All women are of one race . . . perhaps."

"But I spoke of supper," I said, moving toward the kitchen.

"But—no!" She barred my progress with one of her lovely hands laid flat against my chest. "It is not meet and fitting, Jarl Wulf, that you should cook for me, like any common house-carle! Rather, let your niece, Heldra, prepare for you a repast."

"Heldra? That, then, is your name?"

"Heldra Helstrom, and your loving niece," she nodded.

"But why call me Jarl Wulf?" I demanded, curious to understand. She had bestowed the name seriously, rather than in playful banter.

"Jarl Wulf you were, in a former life," she asserted flatly. "I knew you on the shore, even before Ran's horse stood me on my feet!"

"Surely, then, you must be Ragnar Wave-Flame born again," I countered.

"How may that be?" she retorted. "Ragnar Wave-Flame never died; and surely I do not look that old! The seaborn witch returned to the sea-caves whence she came, when the dragon-ship burned out. . . . But ask me not of myself, now."

"Yet one thing more I will say: The warp and woof of this strange pattern wherein we both are depicted was woven of the Norns ere the world began. We have met before—we meet again, here and now—we shall meet yet again; but how, and when, and where, I may not say."

"Of a truth, you are 'fey,'" I muttered.

"At times—I am," she assented. Then her wondrous sapphire eyes gleamed softly into my own hard gray eyes, her smile was tender, wistful, womanly, and my doubts were dissipated like wisps of smoke. Yet I shook an admonitory forefinger at her:

"Witch at least I know you to be," I said in mock harshness. "Casting glamyr on an old man."

"No need for witchery," she laughed. "All women possess that power!"

DURING the "repast" she spread before me, I told her that regardless of who I might have been in a dim and remote past of which I had no memory, in this

present life I was plain John Craig, retired professor of anthropology, ethnology and archeology, and living on a very modest income. I explained that while I personally admired her, and she was welcome to remain in my home for ever, yet in the village near by were curious minds, and gossiping tongues, and evil thoughts a-plenty, as if I were to tell the truth of her arrival—

"But I have nowhere to go, and none save you to befriend me; all I loved or owned is out there." Again she indicated the general direction of the reef. "And you say that I may remain here, indefinitely? I will be known as your niece, Heldra, no? Surely, considering the differences in our age and appearance, there can be no slander."

Her eyes said a thousand things no words could convey. There was eagerness, sadness, and a strange tenderness. . . . I came to an abrupt decision. After all, whose business was it?

"I am alone in the world, as you are," I said gravely. "As my niece, Heldra, you shall remain. If you will write out a list of a woman's total requirements in wearing apparel, I will send away as soon as possible and have them shipped here in haste. I am old, as all can see, and I do not think any sensible persons will suspect aught untoward in your making your home with me. And I will think up a plausible story which will satisfy the minds of fools without telling, in reality, anything."

Our repast ended, we arose from the table and returned to the living room. I filled and lighted a nargilyeh, a three-stemmed water-pipe, and settled myself in my armchair. She helped herself to a cigarette from a box on the table, then stretched her long, slender body at full length on my divan, in full relaxation of comfort.

I told her enough of myself and my forebears to insure her being able to carry out the fiction of being my niece. And in return I learned mighty little about her. But what she did tell me was sufficient. I never was unduly curious about other people's business.

Unexpectedly, and most impolitely, I yawned. Yet it was natural enough, and it struck me that she herself needed a rest, if

anyone ever did. But before I could speak, she forestalled me.

With a single graceful movement she rose from her reclining posture and came and stood before me within easy arm's-reach. Two swift motions, and her superb body flashed rosy-white, as nude as when she waded ashore.

The crimson silken spread she'd worn as regally as any robe was laid at my feet with a single gesture, the black scarf went across my knees, and the glorious creature was kneeling before me in attitude of absolute humility. Before I could remonstrate or bid her arise, her silvery voice rang softly, solemnly, like a muted trumpet:

"Thus, naked and with empty hands, out of the wintry seas in a twilight gray and cold, on a night of storm I came. And you lighted a beacon for my tired eyes, that I might see my way ashore. You led me up the cliff and to your hospitable hearth, and in your kindly heart you had already given the homeless a home.

"And now, kneeling naked before you, as I came, I place my hands between your hands—thus—and all that I am, and such service as I can render, are yours, hand-gasted."

I stared, well-nigh incredulous. In effect, in the old Norse manner, she was declaring herself to all intents and purposes my slave! But her silvery voice went on:

"And now, I rise and cover myself again with the mantle of your bounty, that you may know me, indeed your niece, as Jarl Wulf knew Ragnar Wave-Flame!"

"Truly," I gasped in amazement when I could catch my breath, "you are a strange mixture of the ancient days and this modern period. I have known you but for a few hours, yet I feel toward you as that old Jarl must have felt toward that other sea-witch, unless indeed you and she are one!"

"Almost," she replied a trifle somberly. "At least, she was my ancestress!" Then she added swiftly: "Do not misunderstand. Leman to the old Jarl she never was. But later, after he went to Valhalla, in the sea-girt isle where she dwelt she mated with a young viking whom Ran had cast ashore sorely wounded and insensible. She nursed

him back to life for sake of his beauty, and he made love to her.

"But he soon tired of her and her witch ways; wherefore, in wrath she gave him back to Ran—and he was seen no more. Of that mating was born a daughter, also given to Ran, who pitied her and bore her to an old man and his wife whose steading was nigh to the mouth of a fjord; and they, being childless, called her Ranhild, and reared her as their daughter. In course of time, she wed, and bore three tall sons and a daughter. . . .

"That was long and long ago—yet I have dived into Ragnar's hidden sea-cave and talked with Ragnar Wave-Flame face to face. All one night I lay in her arms, and in the dawning she breathed her breath on my brow, lips, and bosom; and all that following day she talked and I listened, and much I learned of the wisdom that an elder world termed witchcraft."

For a moment she lapsed into silence. Then she leaned forward, laid her shapely, cool hands on my temples and kissed me on my furrowed old forehead, very solemnly, yet with ineffable gentleness.

"And now," she murmured, "ask me never again aught concerning myself, I pray you; for I have told all I may, and further questioning will drive me back to the sea. And I would not have that happen—yet!"

WITHOUT another word she turned, flung herself at full length again on the divan, and, like any tired child, went instantly to sleep. Decidedly, I thought, this "niece" of mine was not as are other women; and later I found that she possessed certain abilities it is well for the world that few indeed can wield.

She gave me another proof of that belief, by demonstrating her unholy powers, on the night of the next full moon after her arrival.

It was her custom of an evening to array herself as she had done on her first night—in crimson robe and black sash and naught else, despite the fact that her wardrobe which I had ordered from the great city forty miles away contained all any woman's heart could wish for. But I admit I enjoyed seeing her in that semibarbaric attire.

At times she would sit on the arm of my chair, often with her smooth cool cheek laid against my rough old face, and her exquisitely modeled arm curved about my leathery old neck. The first time she had done that, I had demanded ironically:

"Witch, are you making love to me?"

But her sighing, wistful reply had disarmed me, and likewise had brought a lump into my throat.

"Nay! Not that, O Jarl from of old! But—I never knew a father."

"Nor I a fair daughter," I choked. And thereafter, when that mood was upon her I indulged in no more ironies, and we'd sit for hours, neither speaking, engrossed in thoughts for which there are no words. But on the night whereof I write, she pressed her scarlet lips to my cheek, and I asked jestingly:

"Is there something you want, Heldra?"

"There is," she replied gravely. "Will you get a boat—one with oars and a sail, but no engine? Ran hates those."

"But surely you do not want it now, tonight, do you?"

"Yes, if you will be so kind to me."

"You must have a very good reason, or you'd not ask," I said. "I'll go and get a centerboard dory and bring it to the beach at the foot of the cliff path. It's clear moderate breeze blowing; yet it is colder on the water than you imagine, so you'd best bundle up warmly."

"You will hasten," she implored anxiously.

"Surely," I nodded.

I went out and down to the wharves in the village, where I kept the boat I said I'd get. But when I beached the dory at foot of the path I stared, swearing softly under my breath. Not one stitch of apparel did that witch have on, save the crimson silk robe and black sash she'd worn when I left the cottage!

"Do you want to freeze?" I was provoked, I admit. "The very sight of you dressed like that gives me the shivers!"

"Neither you nor I will be cold this night," she laughed. "Isn't it glorious? And this is a good boat you brought. Please, let me sail it, and ask me no questions."

She took the tiller, hauled in on the

sheet; the sail filled, and she began singing, with a queer, wild strain running through her song. That dory fairly flew—and I swear there was not enough wind to drive us to such speed.

Finally I saw something I didn't admire. No one does, who dwells on that part of the coast.

"Are you crazy, girl?" I demanded sharply. "That reef is dead ahead! Can't you see the breakers?"

"Why, so it is—the reef! And am I to be affrighted by a few puny breakers? Nay, it is in the heart of those breakers that I wish to be! But you—have you fear, O Jarl Wulf?"

I suspected from her tone that the witch was laughing at me; so I subsided, but fervently wished that I'd not been so indulgent of her whim for a moonlight sail on a cold winter's night.

THEN we hit those breakers—or rather, T we didn't! For they seemed to part as the racing dory sped into them, making a smooth clear lane of silvery glinting water over which we glided as easily as if on a calm inland mill-pond!

"Drop the sail and unstep the mast," she called suddenly.

I was beyond argument, and obeyed dumbly, like any boat-carle of the olden days.

"Now, take to the oars," she directed, "and hold the boat just hereabouts for a while," and even as I slid the oars into the oarlocks she made that swift movement of hers and stood nude, the loveliest sight that grim, ship-shattering, life-destroying reef had ever beheld.

Suddenly she flung up both shapely white arms with a shrill, piercing cry, thrice repeated. Then without a word she went overside in a long clean dive, with never a splash to show where she'd hit the water.

"Hold the boat about here for a while," she'd bidden me! All I'd ever loved in this world was somewhere down below, in the hellish cross-currents of that icy water! I'd hold that boat there, if need were, in the teeth of a worse tempest than raged the night she came to me. She'd find me waiting. And if she never came up, I'd hold

that boat there till its planks rotted and I joined her in the frigid depths.

It seemed an eternity, and I know that it was an hour ere a glimmer of white appeared beneath the surface. Then her shapely arm emerged and her hand grasped the gunwale, her regal head broke water, she blew like a porpoise; then she laughed in clear ringing triumph.

"You old dearling!" she cried in her archaic Norse. "Did I seem long gone? The boat has not moved a foot from where I dove. Come, bear a hand and lift my burden; it is heavy, and I am near spent. There are handles by which to grasp it."

The burden proved to be a greenish metal coffer—bronze, I judged—which I estimated to measure some twenty inches long by twelve wide and nine inches deep. And how she rose to the surface weighted with that, passes my understanding. But how she knew it was down there passes my comprehension, too. But then, Heldra Helstrom herself was an enigma.

She re-wrapped herself in her flimsy silken robe of crimson and smiled happily, when she should have been shivering almost to pieces.

"If you'll ship the mast and spread the sail again, Uncle John," she said, surprisingly matter-of-fact now that her errand was successfully accomplished, "we'll go home. I'd like a glass of brandy and a smoke, myself; and I read in your mind that such is your chief desire, at present."

Back at the cottage again, and comfortable once more, Heldra requested me to bear the coffer into her room, which I did. For over an hour she remained in there, then returned to the living room where I sat, and I stared at the picture she presented. If she had always been beautiful, now she was surpassingly glorious.

Instead of the usual crimson robe, her lovely body was sheathed in a sleeveless, sheer, tightly fitting silken slip, cut at the throat in a long sloping V reaching nearly to her waist. The garment was palest sea-green, so flimsy in texture that it might as well have been compounded of mingled moon-mist and cobwebs. Her rosy-pearl flesh gleamed through the fabric with an alluring shimmer which thrilled anew my

jaded old senses at the artistic wonder of her.

A gold collar, gem-studded, unmistakably of ancient Egyptian workmanship, was resting on her superb shoulders—loot of some viking foray into the far Southlands, doubtless. A broad girdle of gold plates, squared, and also gem-studded, was about her sloping hips, and was clasped in front by a broader plate with a sun-emblem in jeweled sets; from which plate or buckle it fell in two broad bands nearly to her white slender feet.

Broad torques of gold on upper arms and about her wrists, and an intricately wrought golden tiara with disks of engraved gold pendent by chains and hanging over her ears, set off her loveliness as never before. Even her red-gold hair, braided in two thick ropes, falling over her breasts to below her waist, were clasped by gem-set brooches of gold.

"Ragnar Wave-Flame's gift to me, O Jarl Wulf," she breathed softly. "Do you like your niece thus arrayed?"

Norse princess out of an elder day, or Norse witch from an even older and wickeder period of the world—whichever this Heldra Helstrom was, of one thing I was certain, no lovelier woman ever lived than this superb being who styled herself my "niece."

And so I told her, and was amply rewarded by the radiance of her smile, and the ecstatic kiss she implanted on my cheek.

Despite her splendid array, she perched on the arm of my chair, and began toying with my left hand. Presently she lifted it to the level of my eyes, laughing softly. I'd felt nothing, yet she'd slipped a broad tarnished silver ring of antique design on my third finger.

"It was yours in the ancient days, O Jarl Wulf," she whispered in her favorite tongue—the archaic form of the Norse language. "Yours again is the ancient ring, now! Ragnar herself carved the mystic runes upon it. Shall I read them, O Jarl, or will you?"

"They are beyond my skill," I confessed. "The words are in the 'secret' language that only the 'Rime-Kanaars' understood. Nor

was it well for others than witches and warlocks to seek to understand them."

"Ragnar took that ring from Jarl Wulf's finger ere she set fire to the dragon-ship," Heldra murmured. "Had those runes been on the ring when your foes set upon you—they, not you, would have perished in the sword-play, Jarl Red-Sword!"

"But the sea-born witch knew that you would weary of Valhalla in a day to come, and would return to this world of strife and slaying, of loss and grief, of hate and the glutting of vengeance—and, knowing, she carved runes, that in time the charmed ring would return to its proper owner.

"It is her express command that I read them to you, for knowing the runes, never shall water drown or fire burn; nor sword or spear or ax ever wound you, so be it that in time of danger you speak the weird words!"

"And for my sake—you who are my 'Uncle John' to all the rest of the world, but to me are dearer than old Jarl Wulf was to Ragnar the sea-witch—I implore you to learn the runic charm, and use it if ever danger menaces. Promise me! Promise me, I say!"

Her silvery voice was vibrant with fierce intensity. She caught my right hand and pressed it against her palpitant body, just beneath her proudly swelling left breast.

"Promise!" she reiterated. "I beg your promise! With your right hand on my heart I adjure you to learn the rune."

"No fool like an old fool," I grumbled, adding a trifle maliciously, "particularly when in the hands of a lovely woman. But such a fuss you make over a few words of outlandish gibberish! Read me the rune, then, witch-maid! I'd learn words worse than those can be to please you and set your mind at rest."

WITH her scarlet lips close to my ear, with bated breath, and in a tone so low I could barely catch her carefully enunciated syllables, she whispered the words. And although her whisper was softer than the sighing of gentlest summer breeze, the tones rang on my inner hearing like strokes of a great war-hammer smiting on a shield of bronze. There was no need to repeat

them—either on her part or mine. There was no likelihood of my ever forgetting that runic charm. I could not, even if I would.

"Surely," I muttered, "you are an adept in the ancient magic. Well for me that you love me, else your witcheries might—"

Most amazingly she laughed a clear, ringing merriment with no trace of the mystic about it.

"Let me show you something—a game, a play; one that will amuse me and entertain you."

She fairly danced across the room and into her own room, emerging with an antique mirror of some burnished, silver-like metal. This she held out to me. I grasped it by its handle obediently enough, humoring this new whim.

"Look into it and say if it is a good mirror," she bade, her sapphire eyes a-dance with elfin mirth.

I looked. All I could see was my same old face, tanned and wrinkled, which I daily saw whenever I shaved or combed my hair, and I told her so. She perched again on the arm of my chair, laid her cheek against mine, and curved her cool arm about my neck.

"Now look again!"

Again the mirror told truth. I saw my face the same as ever, and hers as well, "Like a rose beside a granite boulder," as I assured her.

"You do but see yourself as you think of yourself," she murmured softly, "and me you behold as you believe me to be."

She brought her lips close to the mirror and breathed upon its surface with her warm breath. It clouded over, then cleared. Her voice came, more murmurous than before, but with a definite note of sadness:

"Once more, look! Behold yourself as I see you always; and behold me as I know myself to be! And when I am gone beyond your ken, remember the witch-maid, Heldra, as one woman who loved you, so truly that she showed you herself as she actually was!"

The man's face was still my own, but mine as it was in the days of early manhood, ere life's thunders had graven their scars on brow and cheeks and lips, and before

the snows of many winters had whitened my hair.

Her features were no less beautiful, but in her reflected eyes I saw ages and ages of life, and bitter experience, and terrible wisdom that was far more wicked than holy; and it came to me with conviction irrefutable that beside this young-appearing girl, maid, or woman, all my years were but as the span of a puny babe compared to the ageless age of an immortal.

"That, at least, is no *glamyr*," her voice sighed drearily, heavy with the burden of her own knowledge of herself.

I laid my thick, heavy old arm across her smooth satiny white shoulders, and I turned her head until her sapphire eyes met mine fairly. Very gently I kissed her on her brow.

"Heldra Helstrom," I said, and my voice sounded husky with emotion, "you may be all you have just shown me, or worse! You may be Ragnar Wave-Flame herself, the sea-witch who never dies. You may be even what I sometimes suspect, the empress of Hell, come amongst mortals for no good purpose! But be you what you may, old or young, maid or woman, good or evil, witch, spirit, angel or she-devil, such as you are, you are you and I am I, and for some weird reason we seem to love each other in our own way; so let there be an end to what you are or have been, or who I was in other lives, and content ourselves with what is!"

Were those bright glitters in her sapphire eyes tear-drops ready to fall? If so, I was not sure, for with a cry like that of a lost soul who had found sanctuary, she buried her face on my shoulder. . . .

After a long silence, she slipped from the arm of my chair, and wordlessly, her face averted, she passed into her room. After an hour or so, I went to my own room—but I could not sleep. . . .

Time passed, and I dwelt in a fool's paradise, dreaming that it would last for ever.

THE summer colony began to arrive. There were cottages all along the shore, but there were likewise big estates, whose owners were rated as "somebodies," to put it mildly.

A governor of a great and sovereign

state; an ex-president of our nation; several foreign diplomats and some of their legation attaches—but why enumerate, when one man only concerns this narrative?

Michael Commnenus, tall, slight, dapper, inclined to swarthiness, with black eyes under crescent-curved black eyebrows; with supercilious smiling lips, a trifle too red for a man; with suave Old World manners, and a most amazingly conceited opinion of himself as a Ladycharmer.

It was not his first summer in our midst; and although when he was in Washington at his legation I never gave him a thought, when I saw his too handsome face on the beach, I felt a trifle sick! I knew, positively, that the minute he set eyes on Heldra. . . . Of course I knew, too, that my witch-niece could take care of herself; but just the same, I sensed annoyance, and perhaps, tragedy.

Well, I was in nowise mistaken.

Heldra and I were just about to shove off in my dory for a sail. It was about her chief delight, and mine too, for that matter.

Casually, along strolled Michael Commnenus, twirling a slender stick, caressing a slender black thread he styled a mustache, smiling his approbation of himself. I'd seen that variety of casual approach before. As our flippant young moderns say, it was old stuff.

Out of the corner of my eye I watched. The Don Juan smirk faded when his calculating, appraising eyes met her sapphire orbs, now shining like the never-melting polar ice. An expression of bewilderment spread over his features. His swarthy skin went a sickly greenish-bronze. Involuntarily he crossed himself and passed on. The man was afraid, actually fear-struck!

"Ever see him before, Heldra?" I queried. "He looked at you as if the devil would be a pleasanter sight. That's one man who failed to fall for your vivid beauty, you sea-witch!"

"Who is he?" she asked in a peculiar tone. "I liked his looks even less than he liked mine."

"Michael Commnenus," I informed her, and was about to give her his pedigree as we local people knew him, but was interrupted by her violently explosive:

"Who?"

"Michael Commnenus," I stated again, a trifle testily. "And you needn't shout! What had he done—" but again she interrupted, speaking her archaic Norsk:

"Ho! Varang Chiefs of the Guard Imperial! Thorfinn! Arvid! Sven! And ye who followed them—Gudrun! Randvar! Haakon! Smid! And all ye Varangs in Valhalla, give ear! And ye, O fiends, witches, warlocks, trolls, vampyrs, and all the dark gods who dwell in Hel's halls where the eternal frozen fires blaze without heat, give ear to my voice, and cherish my words, for I give ye all joyous tidings.

"He lives! After all these long centuries Michael Commnenus dwells again on the bosom of fair Earth! In a body of flesh and blood and bone, of nerve and tissue and muscle he lives! He lives, I say! And I have found him!

"Oh, now I know why the Norns who rule all fate sent me to this place. And I shall not fail ye, heroes! Content ye, one and all, I shall not fail!"

Was this the gorgeous beauty I'd learned to love for her gentleness? Hers was the face of a furious female demon for a moment; but then her normal expression returned and she sighed heavily.

"Heed me not, Uncle John," she said drearily. "I did but recall an ancient tale of foul treachery perpetrated on sundry Norsemen in the Varangian Guard of a Byzantine emperor ages agone.

"The niddering—worse than 'coward'—who wrought the bane of some thirty-odd vikings, was a Commnenus, nephew to the Emperor Alexander Commnenus. . . . I live too much in memories of the past, I fear, and for the moment somewhat forgot myself in the hate all good Norse maids should hold toward any who bear the accursed name of the Commneni.

"Still even as I know you to be old Jarl Wulf Red-Brand returned to this world through the gateway of birth—it would be nothing surprising if this spawn of the Commneni were in truth that same Michael Commnenus of whom the tale is told."

"The belief in reincarnation is age-old," I said reflectively. "And in several parts of the world it is a fundamental tenet of religion. If there be truth in the idea, there is,

as you say, nothing surprising if anybody now living should have been anybody else in some former life. . . . And that sample of the Commneni appears quite capable of any treachery that might serve a purpose at the moment! But, Heldra," I implored her, struck by a sudden intuition, "I beg of you not to indulge in any of your deviltries, witcheries, or Norse magic. If this Michael is that other Michael, yet that was long ago; and if he has not already atoned for his sin, you may be very sure that somewhere, sometime, somehow he will atone; so do not worry your regal head about him."

"Spoken like a right Saga-man," she smiled as I finished my brief homily. "I thank you for your words of wisdom. And now, Jarl Wulf Red-Brand, I know you to be fey as well as I am. 'Surely he will atone for his sin' . . . oh! a most comforting thought! So let us think no more about the matter."

I glanced sharply at her. Her too instant acquiescence was suspicious. But her sapphire eyes met mine fairly, smilingly, sending as always a warm glow of contentment through me. So I accepted her assurance as it sounded, and gave myself up to the enjoyment of the sail and the sound of her silvery voice as she sang an old English love ballad I'd known as a young man. And under the spell of her magnetic personality gradually the episode of Michael Commnenus faded into nothingness—for a while.

A COUPLE of days later, just about dark, Heldra came down the stairs from the attic, where she'd been rummaging. In her hand she carried an old violin-case. I looked and grinned ruefully.

"You are a bad old Uncle John," she scolded. "Why did you not tell me you played the 'fidel,' even as Jarl Wulf played one in his time? Think of all the sweet music you might have made in the past winter nights, and think of the dances I might have danced for your delight while you played—even as Ragnar danced for her old Jarl."

"But I did not tell you that I played a fiddle—because I don't," I stated flatly.

"That is a memento of an absurd ambition I once cherished, but which died a-borning. I tried to learn the thing, but the noises I extracted were so abominable that I quit before I'd fairly got started."

"You are teasing," she retorted, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "But I am not to be put off thus easily. Tonight you will play, and I will dance—such a dance as you have never beheld even when you were Jarl Wulf."

"If I try to play that thing," I assured her seriously, "you'll have a time dancing to my discords, you gorgeous tease!"

"We'll see," she nodded. "But even as my magic revealed to me the whereabouts of the 'fidel' so my spirit tells me that you play splendidly."

"Your 'magic' may be all right, but your 'spirit' has certainly misinformed you," I growled.

"My spirit has never yet lied to me—nor has it done so this time." Her tone was grave, yet therein was a lurking mockery; and I became a trifle provoked.

"All right," I assented grumpily. "Whenever you feel like hearing me 'play,' I'll do it. And you'll never want to listen to such noises again."

She went into her room laughing sweetly, and took the fiddle with her.

AFTER supper she said nothing about me playing that old fiddle, and I fatuously thought she'd let the matter drop. But about ten o'clock she went to her room without a word. She emerged after a bit, wearing naught but a sheer loose palest blue silk robe, held at the waist only by a tiny jeweled gold filligree clasp. Loose as the robe was, it clung lovingly to her every curve as if caressing the beauteous, statuesque body it could not and would not conceal.

She was totally devoid of all ornament save that tiny brooch, and her wondrous fiery-gold hair was wholly unconfined, falling below her waist in a cascade of shimmering sunset hues, against which her rose-pearl body gleamed through the filmy gossamer-like robe.

Again she sat and talked for a while. But along toward midnight she broke a short silence with:

"I'll be back in a minute. I wish to prepare for my dancing."

From her room she brought four antique bronze lamps and a strangely shaped urn of oil. She filled the lamps and placed one at each corner of the living room, on the floor.

Back into her room she went, and out again with an octagonal-shaped stone, flat on both sides, about an inch thick, and some four inches across. This she placed on the low taboret whereon I usually kept my nargilyeh. She propped up that slab of stone as if placing a mirror—which I decided it couldn't very well be, as it did not even reflect light but seemed as dull as a slab of slate.

As a final touch, she brought out that confounded old fiddle! And on her scarlet lips was a smile that a seraph might have envied, so innocent and devoid of guile it seemed.

"What's this?" I demanded—as if I didn't know!

"Your little 'fidel' with which you will make for your Heldra such a rapturous music," she smiled caressingly.

"Um-m-m-m!" I grunted. "And what are those lamps for—and that ugly slab of black rock?"

"That black slab is a 'Hel-stone,' having the property of reflecting whatever is directly before it, if illumined by those four lamps placed at certain angles; and later it will give off those same reflections—even as the stuff called luminous calcium sulfide absorbs light-rays until surcharged, and then emits them, when properly exposed. So, you see, we can preserve the picture of my dance."

"Heldra," I demanded sharply, "are you up to some devilishness? All this looks amazingly like the stage-setting for witch-working!"

"I have sung for you, on different nights," she replied in gentlest reproach, "and have told old tales, and have attired myself again and again for your pleasure in beholding me. Have all these things ever bewitched you, or harmed anyone? How, then, can the fact of my dancing for my own satisfaction, before the mystic Hel-stone, do any harm?"

As ever, she won. Her sapphire orbs did queer things to me whenever they looked into my own gray, faded old eyes—trembling me to understand and approve whatever she did, simply because she was she and I was I.

"All right," I said. "But you're making a fool of me—insisting that I play this old fiddle. Well—I'll teach you a lesson!" And I drew the bow over the strings with a most appalling wail.

AND with the unexpected swiftness of a steel trap closing on its victim, icy fingers locked about my wrist, and I knew very definitely that another and alien personality was guiding my arm and fingers! But there came likewise a swift certitude that if I behaved, no harm would ensue—to me, at least. So I let the thing have its way—and listened to such music as I had not believed could be played on any instrument devised by a mortal.

I wish that I could describe that music, but I do not know the right words. I doubt if they have been invented. It was wild, barbaric, savage, but likewise it was alluring, seductive, stealing away all inhibitions—too much of it would have corrupted the angels in heaven. I was almost in a stupor, intoxicated, like a hasheesh-eater in a drugged dream, spellbound, unable to break from the thrallhold holding my will, drowning in rapture well-nigh unbearable.

Heldra suddenly blew out the big kerosene lamp standing on the table, leaving as sole illumination the rays from those four bronze lights, standing in the corners.

Her superb body moved gracefully, slowly at first, then faster, into the intricate figure and pattern of a dance that was old when the world was young. . . .

With inward horror I knew the why and wherefore of that entire ceremonial; knew I'd been be-cozened and be-japed; yet knew, likewise, that it was too late for interference. I could not even speak. I could but watch, while some personality alien to my body played maddeningly on my fiddle, and the "niece" I loved danced a dance deliberately planned to seduce a man who hated and feared the dancer—and for what devilish purpose I could well guess!

I saw the light-rays converge on her alluring, statuesque body, saw them apparently pass through her and impinge on the surface of that black, sullen, octagonal Hel-stone, and be greedily swallowed up, until the dull, black surface glowed like a rare black Australian opal; and ever the dancing of the witch-girl grew more alluring, more seductive, more abandoned. And I knew why Heldra was thus shamefully—shamelessly, rather—conducting! She had read Michael Commnenus his character very accurately; knew that his soul had recognized her hatred for him, and feared her—and that her one chance to get him in her clutches lay in inflaming his senses . . . and she'd even told me the properties of that most damnable Hel-stone!

Wilder and faster came the music, and swifter and still more alluring grew the rhythmic response as Heldra's lovely body swayed and spun and swooped and postured; until ultimately her waving arms brought her fluttering hands, in the briefest of touches, into contact with the tiny brooch at her waist and the filmy robe was swept away in a single gesture that was faithfully recorded on the sullen surface of the Hel-stone.

Instantly the dancer stopped as if petrified, her arms outstretched as in invitation, her regal head thrown back, showing the long smooth white column of her throat, her clear, half-closed, sapphireblue eyes agleam with subtle challenge. . . .

The uncanny music died in a single sighing, sobbing whisper, poisonsweet . . . the clutching, icy fingers were gone from my wrist . . . my first coherent thought was: Had that spell been directed at me, the old adage anent "oid fools" would have been swiftly justified!

And I knew that to all intents and purposes, Michael Commnenus was sunk!

Just the same, I was furious. Heldra had gone too far, and I told her so, flatly. I pointed out in terms unmistakable that what she planned was murder, or worse, and that this was modern America wherein witchcraft had neither place nor sanction, and that I'd be no accessory to any such devilishness as she was contriving. Oh, oh, I made myself and my meaning plain.

Her voice genuinely regretful, in her eyes was a light of sincere love. She came to me and wrapped her white arms about my neck, murmuring terms of affectionate consolation.

"Poor dear Uncle John! Heldra was thoughtless—wicked me! And I might have involved you in serious trouble? I am ashamed! But the fate laid upon me by the Norms is heavy, and I may not evade it, even for you, whom I love. Tell me," she demanded suddenly, "if I should destroy the vile earthworm without any suspicion attaching to you, or to me, would you love me as before, even knowing what I had done?"

"No!" I fairly snarled the denial. I wanted it to be emphatic.

She smiled serenely, and kissed me full on my lips.

"I never thought to thank a mortal for lying to me, but now I do! Deep in your heart I can read your true feeling, and I am glad! But now"—and her tone took on a sadness most desolate—"I regret to say that on the morrow I leave you. The lovely garments you gave me, and the trunks containing them I take with me, as you would not wish that I go emptyhanded. Nor will I insult you, O Jarl Wulf, by talk of payment.

"When I am gone, you will just casually mention that I have returned to my home, and the local gossips will not suspect aught untoward. And soon I shall be forgotten, and no one will suspect, or possibly connect you, or me, with what inevitably must happen to that spawn of the Commneni.

"But of this be very sure: Somewhere, sometime, you and I shall be together again . . ." Her voice broke, she kissed me fiercely on the lip, then tenderly on both cheeks, then lastly, with a queer reverence, on my furrowed old brow. Then she turned, went straight to her room, shut the door, and I heard the click of the key as she locked herself in, for the first time during the stay in my house. . . .

NEXT morning, as she'd planned, she departed on the first train cityward. I given her money enough for all her requirements—more, indeed, than she was

willing to take at first, declaring that she intended selling some few of her jewels.

And with her departure went all which made life worth living. . . .

Heavily I dragged my reluctant feet back to the empty shell of a cottage which until then had been an earthly paradise to an old man—and the very first thing I laid eyes on was that accursed Hel-stone, lying on the living room table.

I picked it up, half minded to shatter it to fragments, but an idea seized me. I bore it down-cellar, where semi-darkness prevailed, and the Hel-stone glowed softly with its witch-light, showing me the loveliness of her who had departed from me. And I pressed the cold octagon to my lips, thankful that she'd left me the thing as a feeble substitute for her presence. Then I turned and went back upstairs, found an old ivory box of Chinese workmanship, and placed the Hel-stone therein, very carefully, as a thing—priceless.

I went to bed early that night. There was no reason to sit up. But I could not sleep. I lay there in my bed, cursing the entire line of Commneni, root, trunk and branch, from the first of that ilk whom history records to this latest scion, or "spawn," as Heldra had termed him.

Around midnight, being still wakeful, I arose, got the Hel-stone and sat in the darkness—and gradually became aware that I was not alone! Looking up, I saw her I'd lost standing in a witch-glow of phosphorescent light. I knew at once that it was not Heldra in person, but her "scin-lacca" or "shining double," a "sending," and that it was another of her witcheries.

"But even this is welcome," I thought. Then I felt her thought expressed through that phantasmal semblance of her own gorgeous self—and promptly strove, angrily, to resist her command. Much good it did me!

Utterly helpless, yet fully cognizant of my actions, but oddly assured that about me was a cloak of invisibility—the "glamyr" of the ancient Alrunas—I dressed, took the Hel-stone, and pressed out into the night.

Straight to the cottage of Commnenus I went, pawed about under the doorstep,

and planted there the Hel-stone then; still secure in the mystic glamor, I returned to my own abode.

And no sooner had I seated myself in my chair for a smoke, than I realized fully the utter devilishness of that witch from out the wintry seas whom I had taken into my home and had sponsored as my "niece" in the eyes of the world.

Right then I decided to go back and get that Hel-stone, and smash it—and couldn't do it! I got sleepy so suddenly that I awoke to find that it was broad daylight, and nine-thirty a.m. And from then on, as regularly as twilight came, I could only stay awake so long as I kept my thoughts away from that accursed Hel-stone; wherefore I determined that the thing could stay where it was until it rotted, for all me!

Then Commnenus came along the beach late one afternoon. He raised his hat in his Old World, courtly fashion, and tried to make some small talk. I grunted churlishly and ignored him. But finally he came out bluntly with:

"Professor Craig, I know your opinion of me, and admit it is to some extent justifiable. I seem to have acquired the reputation of being a Don Juan. But I ask you to believe that I bitterly regret that—now! Yet, despite that reputation, I'd like to ask you a most natural question, if I may."

I nodded assent, unprepared for what was coming, yet somehow assured it would concern Heldra. Nor was I at all disappointed, for he fairly blurted out:

"When do you expect Miss Helstrom to return, if at all?"

I was flabbergasted! That is the only word adequate. I glared at him in a black fury. When I could catch my breath I demanded:

"How did even you summon up the infernal gall to ask me that?"

His reply finished flattening me out.

"Because I love her! Wait"—he begged—"and hear me out, please! Even a criminal is allowed that courtesy." Then as I nodded grudgingly, he resumed:

"The first time I saw her, something deep within me shrank away from her with repulsion. Still, I admired her matchless beauty. But of late, since her departure,

there is not a night I do not see her in my mind's eye, and I know that I love her, and hope that she will return; hence my query.

"I will be frank—I even hope that she noticed me and read my admiration without dislike. Perhaps two minds can reach each other—sometimes. For invariably I see her with head thrown back, her eyes half closed, and her arms held out as if calling me to come to her. And if I knew her whereabouts I'd most certainly go, nor would I be 'trifling,' where she is concerned. I want to win her, if possible, as my wife; and an emperor should be proud to call her that—"

"Very romantic," I sneered. "But, Mr. Woman-Chaser, I cut my eye-teeth a long while before you were born, and I'm not so easily taken in. The whereabouts of my niece is no concern of yours. So get away from me before I lose my temper, or I'll not be answerable for my actions. Get!"

He went! The expression of my face and the rage in my eyes must have warned him that I was in a killing humor. Well, I was. But likewise, I was sick with fear. What he'd just told me was sufficient to sicken me—the Hel-stone had gotten in its damnable work. My very soul was aghast as it envisioned the inevitable consequences. . . .

An idea obsessed me, and I needed the shades of night to cloak my purpose.

AIMLESSLY I wandered from room to room in my cottage, and finally drifted into the room which had been Heldra's. Still aimlessly I pulled open drawer after drawer in the dresser, and in the lowest one I heard a faint metallic clink.

The four antique bronze lamps were there. I shrewdly suspected she had left them there as means of establishing contact with her, should need arise. I examined them, and found, as I'd hoped, that they were filled.

Around ten o'clock I placed those lamps in the four corners of the living room, and lighted them, precisely as I'd seen Heldra do. Then I tried my talents at making an invocation.

"Heldra! Heldra! Heldra!" I called. "I, John Craig, who gave you shelter at your

need, call to you now, wheresoever you be, to come to me at my need!"

The four lights went out, yet not a breath of air stirred in the room. A faintly luminous glow, the witch-light, ensued; and there she stood, or rather, the scin-laecca, her shining double! But I knew that anything I might say to it would be the same as if she were there in the flesh.

"Heldra," I beseeched that witchlighted simulacrum, "by the love you gave me, as Ragnar loved Jarl Wulf Red-Sword, I ask that you again enshroud me with the mantle of invisibility, the 'glamyr,' and allow me to lift that accursed Hel-stone from where you compelled me to conceal it. Let me return it to you, at any place you may appoint, so that it can do no more harm.

"Already that poor bewitched fool is madly in love with you, because the radiations of that enchanted stone have saturated him every time he put foot on the doorstep beneath which I buried it!

"Heldra, grant me this one kindness, and I will condone all sins you ever did in all your witch-life."

The shining wraith nodded slowly, unmistakably assenting to my request. As from a far distance I heard a faint whisper:

"Since it is your desire, get the Hel-stone, and bear it yourself to the sea-cave at the foot of the great cliff guarding the north passage into the harbor. Once you have borne it there, its work, and yours, are done.

"And I thank you for saying that you will condone all I have ever done, for the burden of the past is heavy, and your words have made it easier to bear."

The shining wraith vanished, and I went forth into the darkness. Straight to the house where I'd hidden the Hel-stone I betook myself, felt under the step, found what I sought, took it with an inward prayer of gratitude that because of Heldra's "glamyr" I had not been caught at something questionable in appearance, and started up the beach.

TH E tide was nearly out; so I walked rapidly, as I had some distance to go, and the sea-cave Heldra had designated

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THE SEA WITCH

(Continued from page 86)

could not be entered at high tide, although once within, one was safe enough and could leave when the entrance was once more exposed.

I entered the cave believing that I'd promptly be rid of the entire mess, once and for all. But there was no one there, and the interior of the cave was as dark as Erebus. I lit a match, and saw nothing. The match burned out. I fumbled for another—a dazzling ray from a flashlight blinded me for a moment, then left my face and swept the cave. A hated voice, suave yet menacing, said:

"Well, Professor Craig, you may now hand me whatever it was that you purloined from under my doorstep!"

An extremely business-like automatic pistol was aimed in the exact direction of my solar plexus—and the speaker was none other than Michael Commnenus!

Very evidently the mystic "glamyr" had failed to work that time. And I was in a rather nasty predicament.

Then, abruptly, Heldra came! She looked like an avenging fury, emerging out of nowhere, apparently, and the tables were turned. She wore a dark cloak or long mantle draped over her head and falling to her feet.

Her right hand was outstretched, and with her left hand she seized the Hel-stone from my grasp. She pointed one finger at Commnenus, and did not even touch him; yet had she smote with an ancient war-hammer the effect would have been the same.

"You dog, and son of a long line of dogs!" her icy voice rang with excoriating virulence. "Drop that silly pistol! Drop it, I say!"

A faint blue flicker snapped from her extended finger—the pistol fell from a flaccid hand. Commnenus seemed totally paralyzed. Heldra's magic held him completely in thrall. . . . I snapped into activity and scooped up the gun.

"Followed me, did you?" I snarled. "I'll—"

"Wait, Jarl Wulf!" Heldra's tone was frankly amused. "No need for you to do aught! Mine is the blood-feud, mine the blood-right! And ere I finish with you Michael Commnenus, an ancient hate will be surfeited, and an ancient vengeance, too long delayed, will be consummated."

"Heldra," I began, for dread seized me at the ominous quality of her words, "I will not stand for this affair going any farther! I—"

"Be silent! Seat yourself over there against the wall and watch and hear, but move not nor speak again, lest I silence you for ever!"

A force irresistible hurled me across the cave and set me down, hard, on a flat rock. I realized fully that I was obeying her mandate—I couldn't speak, couldn't even move my eyelids, so thoroughly had she inhibited any further interference on my part.

Paying no further attention to Commnenus for the moment, she crossed over to me, bent and kissed me on my lips, her sapphire eyes laughing into my own blazing, wrathful eyes.

"Poor dear! It is too bad, but you made me do it. I wanted you to help me all the way through this tangled coil—but you have been so difficult to manage! Yet in some ways you have played into my hands splendidly. Yes, even to bringing the Hel-stone back to me—and I would not care to lose that for a king's ransom. And I put it into yon fool's head to be wakeful tonight, and see you regain the Hel-stone, and follow you—and thus walk into my nice little trap.

"And now!"

She whirled and faced Commnenus. And for all that he was spellbound, in his eyes I read fear and a ghastly foreknowledge of some dreadful fate about to be meted out to him at her hands.

She picked up the flashlight he had dropped and extinguished it with the dry comment:

"We need a different light here—the Hel-light from Hela's halls!" And at her word, a most peculiar light pervaded the cave, and there was that about its luminance that actually affrighted. Again she spoke:

"Michael Commnenus, you utterly vile

worm of the earth! You know that your doom is upon you—but as yet you know not why. O beast lower than the swine! Harken and remember my words even after eternity is swallowed up in the Twilight of the Gods! You are a modern, and know not that the self, the soul, is eternal, undying, changing its body and name in every clime and period, yet ever the same, soul, responsible for the deeds of its bodies. You have even prated of your soul—when in fact, you are the property of the soul!

"Watch, now!" She pointed to the cave entrance. "Behold there the wisps of sea-fog gathering; and gradually will come the rising tide. And on the curtain of that cold, swirling mist, behold the pictures of the past—a past centuries old; a past wherein your craven, treacherous soul sinned beyond all pardon!

"Look you, too, Jarl Wulf Red-Brand, so that in all the days remaining to you upon Earth, you may know that his doom was just, and that Heldra is but executing a merited penalty!

"And while the shuttles of the Norns weave the tapestry of the sin of this Commnenus, I will tell all the tale of his crimes.

"In Byzantium reigned the emperor, Alexander Commnenus. Secure on his throne, guarded by the ponderous axes and the long swords of the Varangians, the splendid sons of the Norse-lands, who had gone a-viking. Trusted and loved were the Varangs by the emperor, and oft he boasted of their fidelity, swearing on the cross of Constantine that to the last man would his Varangs perish ere one would flinch a step from overwhelming foes, citing in proof their battle-cry:

"'Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!'

"Into the harbor of the Golden Horn sailed the viking long-ship, the *Grettir*. Three noble brothers owned her—Thorfinn, Arvid, Sven. With them sailed their sister . . . her fame as an Alruna-maid, prophetess and priestess, was sung throughout the Norse lands. No man so low but bore her reverence. Sin it was to cast eyes of desire on any Alruna, and the sister of the three brothers was held especially holy.

"Between the hands of the Emperor

Alexander Commnenus, the three brethren placed their hands, swearing fealty for a year and a day. Thirty fighting-men, their crew, followed wherever the three brothers led. And the great emperor, hearing of their war-fame from others of the Varangian guard, gave the brothers high place in his esteem, and held them nigh his own person.

"Their sister, the Alruna-maid, was treated as became her rank and holy repute. Aye! Even in Christian Byzantium respect and honor were shown her by the priests of an alien belief. But one man in Byzantium aspired more greatly than any other, Norseman or Byzantine, had ever dared.

"A Commnenus he, grand admiral of Byzantium's war fleet, nephew to the emperor, enjoying to the full the confidence and love of his imperial uncle. Notorious for his profligacy, he cast his libertine eyes on the Norse Alruna-maid, but with no thought of making her his wife. Nay! 'Twas only as his leman he desired her. . . . So, he plotted. . . .

"The three brothers, Thorfinn, Arvid, Sven, with their full crew, in the long ship *Grettir* were ordered to sea to cruise against certain pirates harrying a portion of the emperor's coasts.

"Every man of the *Grettir*'s crew died the deaths of rats—poison in the water-casks! . . . They died as no Norseman should die, brutes' deaths, unfit for Valhalla and the company of heroes who had passed in battle! And their splendid bodies, warped and distorted by pangs of the poison, were cast overside as prey for sharks, by two creatures of this grand admiral, whom he had sent with the three brothers as pilots knowing the coast. They placed the drug in the casks, they flung over the dead and dying, they ran the *Grettir* aground and set fire to her—but his was the command—and his the crime!"

AND as Heldra told the tale, in a voice whose dreary tones made the recital seem even worse—the watching Commnenus and I saw clearly depicted on the curtain of the mist, each separate incident. . . . Heldra turned to the wildly glaring Michael.

"There was but one person in all Byzan-

tium who knew the truth," she screamed in sudden frenzy. "I give back for a moment your power of speech. Say, O fool! Coward! Niddering! Who am I?"

Abruptly she tore off the somber cloak and stood in all her loveliness, enhanced by every ornament she once had worn for my pleasure of beholding her thus arrayed.

A cry of unearthly terror broke from the staring Commnenus. His voice was a strangled croak as he gasped:

"The Alruna-maid, Heldra! The red-haired sea-witch—sister to the three brothers, Thorfinn, Arvid, Sven!"

"Aye, you foul dog! And me you took at night, after they sailed away, and me you shut up where my cries for aid could not be heard; and me you would have despoiled —me, the Alruna-maid, sworn to chastity!"

"Yet I escaped from that last dreadful dungeon wherein you immured me—how?

"By that magic known to such as I, I called upon the empress of the Underworld, Hela herself, and pledged her my service in return for indefinitely continued life, until I could repay you and avenge the heroes denied the joys of Valhalla—by you!"

"And now—comes swiftly the doom I have planned for you . . . you who now remember!"

Heldra spoke truly. Swiftly it came! Sitting where I was, I saw it plainly, a great dragon-ship with round shields displayed along her gunwales, with a big square sail of crimson embroidered in gold, with long oars dipping and lifting in unison to the time-beat rowing-song of the ancient vikings!

Straight to the mouth of the cave came the ghost-ship, and its crew disembarked and entered. Heldra cried out in joyous welcome:

"Even from out of the deeps, ye heroes, one and all, have ye heard my silent summons, and obeyed the voice of your Alruna from old time! Now your waiting is at an end!"

"Yonder stands the Commnenus. That other concerns ye not—but mark him well, for in a former life he was Jarl Wulf Red-Brand! See, on his left hand is still the old silver ring with its runes of Ragnar Wave-Flame!"

The ghost-vikings turned their dead eyes on me with a curious fixity. One and all, they saluted. Evidently, Jarl Wulf must have been somebody, in his time. Then ignoring me, they turned to Heldra, awaiting her further commands. Commnenus they looked at, fiercely, avidly.

Heldra's voice came, heavily, solemnly, with a curious bell-like tone sounding the knell of doom incarnate:

"Michael Commnenus! This your body present has never wrought me harm, nor has it harmed any of these. It is not with your body that we hold our feud. Wherefore, your body shall go forth from this cave as it entered—as handsome as ever, bearing no mark of scathe.

"But your niddering soul, O most accursed, shall be drawn from out its earthly tenement this night and given over to these souls you wronged, who now await their victim and their vengeance! And I tell you, Michael Commnenus, that what they have in store for you will make the Hades of your religion seem as a devoutly-to-be-desired paradise!"

Heldra stepped directly before Commnenus. Her shapely white arms were outstretched, palms down, fingers stiffly extended. A queer, violet-tinged radiance streamed from her fingers, gradually enveloping Commnenus—he began to glow, as if he had been immersed and had absorbed all his body could take up. . . .

Heldra's voice took on the tone of finality:

"Michael Commnenus! Thou accursed soul, by the power I hold, given me by Hela's self, I call you forth from your hiding-place of flesh—come ye out!"

The living body never moved, but from out its mouth emerged a faint silvery-tinted vapor flowing toward the Altuna-maid, and as it came, the violet glow diminished. The accumulating silvery mist swirled and writhed, perceptibly taking on the semblance of the body from whence it was being extracted. There remained finally but a merest thread of silvery shimmer connecting soul and body. Heldra spoke beneath her breath:

"One of you hew that cord asunder!"

A double-bladed Norse battle-ax whirled

and a ghostly voice croaked: "Thor Hulfi!"

Thor, the old Norse war-god, must have helped, for the great ghost-ax evidently encountered a solid cable well-nigh as strong as tempered steal. Thrice the ax rose and fell, driven by the swelling thews of the towering giant wielding it, ere the silver cord was broken by the blade.

A tittering giggle burst from the lips of the present-day Michael Commnenus.

I realized with a sudden sickness at the pit of my stomach that an utterly mindless imbecile stood there, grinning vacuously!

"That Thing," Heldra said, coldly scornful as she pointed to the silvery shining soul, "is yours, heroes! Do with it as ye will!"

Two of the gigantic wraiths clamped their great hands on its shoulders. It turned a dull leaden-gray, the color of abject fear. Cringing and squirming, it was hustled aboard the ghostly dragon-ship. The other ghost-vikings went aboard, taking their places at the oars . . . yet they waited. Heldra turned to me.

"Be free of the spell I laid upon you!" Her tone was as gentle as it had been in her sweetest moment while she dwelt in my home as my niece.

I gasped, rose and stretched. I wanted to be angry—and dared not. I'd seen too much of her hellish powers to risk incurring her displeasure. And reading my mind, she laughed merrily.

THEN her cool, soft, white arms went about my neck, her wondrous sapphire eyes looked long and tenderly into mine—and I will not write the message I read in those softly shining orbs. Once again her silvery voice spoke:

"Jarl Wulf Red-Brand! John Craig! I am the grand-daughter of Ragnar Wave-Flame! And once I went a-viking with my three brothers, to far Byzantium. You know that tale. Now, once I said that Ragnar Wave-Flame never died. Also, I said that I had dived into her sea-cave and lain in her arm—and now I tell you the rest of that mystery: with her breath she entered this my body where ever since we have dwelt as one soul. I needed aid in seeking my vengeance, for it was after I'd escaped the

clutches of the Commnenus, and had passed through adventures incredible while making my way back to the Norse-lands—and my spirit was very bitter. And when I sought her council, Ragnar helped me. . . .

"This now do I ask of you: Do you, as I have sometimes thought, love me as a man loves a maid? Reflect well, ere you answer, and recall what I once showed you in a mirror—I am older than you! So, knowing that, despite my witcheries of the long, bitter past, and those of tonight, would you take me, were you and I young once more?"

"By all the gods in Valhalla, and by all the devils in Hela's halls: yes!" My reply was given without need of reflecting, or counting cost.

"Then, in a day to come, you shall take me—I swear it!"

FULL upon my mouth she pressed her scarlet lips, and a surging flame suffused my entire body. Yet it was life—not death. Against my chest I felt the pressure of her swelling breasts, and fires undreamable streamed from her heart to mine. Time itself stood still. After an eon or so she unwound her clinging arms from about my neck and turned away, and with never a backward glance she entered that waiting, ghostly dragon-ship. The oars dipped. . . .

I left the cave.

The driveling idiot who had been Michael Commnenus was already gone. Later, the gossip ran that he'd "lost his mind," and that his embassy had returned him to his own land. None ever suspected, or coupled me or my "niece" with his affliction. And he himself had absolutely no memory—had lost even his own name when his soul departed!

But within a month, I sold my cottage, packed and stored all my belongings until I could find a new location, where I'd be totally unknown; and then I went away from where I had dwelt for years—and with urgent reason.

The fire with which Heldra had imbued me from her breath and breast was renewing my youth! My hair was shades darker, my wrinkles almost gone; my step was brisker, I looked to be nearer forty than al-

most sixty. So marked was the change that the villagers stared openly at what seemed at least a miracle . . . tongues were wagging . . . old superstitions were being revived and dark hints were being bandied about.

. . . So I finally decided to leave, and go
where my altered appearance would cause
no comment.

I wonder if—
