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EDITORS

Ray Palmer

Bea Mahaffey

ART DIRECTOR

Malcolm H. Smith

Front Cover:

Malcolm H. Smith

Back Cover:

Robert Gibson Jones

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The SEVEN BLACK PRIESTS

By Fritz Leiber

Who shall dig up the mysteries buried in time? For the little creatures, such as mice and men and behemoths, cannot live long enough to find the maps, while the larger creatures, such as mountains and worlds and stars, will not speak and do not seem to care.

— Sheelba of the Eyeless Face

Illustrated by Michael Becker





EYES like red lava peered from a face black as dead lava down the sheer mountainside at the snowy ledge that narrowed off into chilly darkness barely touched by dawn. The black priest's heart pounded its rib-cage. Never in his life or his priest-father's before him had intruders come by this narrow way that led from the Outer Sea across the mountains known as The Bones of the Old Ones. Never in three long returns of the Year of Monsters, never in four sailings of the ship to tropic Klesh to get them wives, had any but he and his fellow-priests trod the way below. Yet he had always guarded it as faithfully and warily as if it were the nightly assault-route of blasphemy-bent spearmen and bowmen.

There it came again, and unmistakably! — the rumble of singing. To judge from the tone, the man must have a chest like a bear's. As if he had drilled for this nightly (and he had) the black priest laid aside his conical hat and stepped out of his fur-lined shoes and slipped off his fur-lined robe, revealing his skinny-limbed, sag-bellied, well-greased frame.

Moving back in the stony niche, he selected a narrow stick from a closely-shielded fire and laid it across a pit in the rock. Its unsputtering flame revealed that the pit was filled to a hand's-breadth of the top with a powder that glittered like smashed jewels. He judged it would take some thirty slow breaths for the stick to burn through at the middle.

He silently returned to the edge of the niche, which was the height of three tall men—seven times his own height—above the snowy ledge. And now, far along that ledge, he could dimly distinguish a figure—no, two. He drew a long knife from a tuck in his loin-cloth and, crouching forward, poised himself on hands and toes. He breathed a prayer to his strange and improbable god. Somewhere above, ice or rocks creaked and snapped faintly, as if the mountain too were flexing its muscles in murderous anticipation.

GIVE US the next verse, Fafhrd," merrily called the foremost of the two snow-treaders. "You've had thirty paces to compose it, and our adventure took no longer. Or is the hoot-owl of bardic inspiration frozen at last in your throat?"

The one who thus called looked kina to the night, supple yet strong, a short man with a long easy gait. He was clad all in close garments of gray, even to the hood which shadowed his swart features but could not conceal their pug-nosed impudence. A thin sword, slightly curved, hung at his side and his hand looked deft to wield it. This sword was affectionately known to its owner as Scalpel, since it could let the heart's blood out as deftly as a surgeon. The owner of the sword was known as the Gray Mouser, because he hunted men as skillfully and as silently as a cat.

He whom the Gray Mouser named Fafhrd was rather taller than the

Mouser was short—a huge man with wrists thick as a hero's ankles, yet lithe withal. His garments were of wools and furs. A great golden clasp gleamed dully on his chest and a golden band, tilted awry, confined his snarled reddish hair. His white-skinned face, with gray eyes wide set, had a calm bold look to it, though the brow was furrowed in thought. From over his right shoulder protruded a bow, while from over his left shoulder gleamed the sapphire eyes of a brazen dragon-head that was the pommel of a longsword slung on his back.

This one's brow cleared, and as if some more genial mountain than the frozen one they traveled along had given tongue, he sang:

*"Oh, Lavas Laerk
Had a face like a dirk
And of swordsmen twenty-and-
three. . ."*

Fafhrd was referring to the villain of their last adventure, which had led them to a strange sunken treasure-rich land popped for a few hours above the cold waves of the Outer Sea, and which had left them treasureless and with their sloop wrecked on the chilly coast from which rose the forbidding crags of The Bones of the Old Ones. He continued:

*"And his greased black ship
Through the waves did slip—
'Twas the sleekest craft at sea;
Yet all helped him nought
When he was caught
By magic, the Mouser, and me.*

*And now he feeds fishes
The daintiest dishes,
But—"*

The words broke off and the Gray Mouser heard the hissing scuff of leather on snow. Whirling around, he saw Fafhrd hurtle over the side of the cliff, and the Mouser had a moment to wonder whether the huge Northerner, maddened by his own doggerel, had decided to illustrate dramatically Lavas Laerk's plunge to the bottomless deeps.

The next moment Fafhrd caught himself with elbows and hands on the margin of the ledge. Simultaneously, a black and gleaming form hit the spot he had just desperately vacated, broke its fall with bent arms and hunched shoulders, spun over in a somersault, and lunged at the Mouser with a knife that flashed like a splinter of the moon. The knife was about to take the Mouser in the belly when Fafhrd, supporting his weight on one forearm, twitched the attacker back by an ankle. At this the small black one hissed low and horribly, turned again, and lunged at Fafhrd. But now the Mouser was roused at last from the shocked daze that he assured himself could never grip him in a less hatefully cold country. He dove forward at the small black one, diverting his thrust—there were sparks as the weapon struck stone within a finger's-width of Fafhrd's arm—and skidding his greased form off the ledge beyond Fafhrd. The small black one swooped out of sight as silently as a bat.

Fafhrd, dangling his great frame over the abyss, finished his verse:

"But the daintiest dish is he."

"Hush, Fafhrd," the Mouser hissed, stooping as he listened intently. "I think I heard him hit."

Fafhrd absentmindedly eased himself up to a seat. "Not if that chasm is half as deep as the last time we saw its bottom, you didn't," he assured his comrade.

"But what was he?" the Mouser asked frowningly. "He looked like a man of Klesh."

"Yes, with the jungle of Klesh as far from here as the moon," Fafhrd reminded him with a chuckle. "Some maddened hermit frostbitten black, no doubt. There are strange skulkers in these little hills, they say."

The Mouser peered up the dizzy mile-high cliff and spotted the nearby niche. "I wonder if there are more of him?" he questioned uneasily.

"Madmen commonly go alone," Fafhrd asserted, getting up. "Come, small nagger, we'd best be on our way if you want a hot breakfast. If the old tales are true, we should be reaching the Cold Waste by sun-up—and there we'll find a little wood at least."

At that instant a great glow sprang from the niche from which the small attacker had dropped. It pulsed, turning from violet to green to yellow to red.

"What makes that?" Fafhrd mused, his interest roused at last. "The old tales say nothing of fire-

vents in the Bones of the Old Ones. Now if I were to give you a boost, Mouser, I think you could reach that knob and then make your own way—"

"Oh no," the Mouser interrupted, tugging at the big man and silently cursing himself for starting the question-asking. "I want my breakfast cooked over more wholesome flames. And I would be well away from here before other eyes see the glow."

"None will see it now, small dodger of mysteries," Fafhrd said chucklingly, letting himself be urged away along the path. "Look, even now it dies."

But at least one other eye had seen the pulsing glow—an eye as large as a squid's and bright as the Dog Star.

"**H**A, Fafhrd!" cried the Gray Mouser gaily in the full-broken dawn, "There's an omen to warm our frozen hearts! A green hill winks at us frosty men—gives us the glad eye like a malachite-smearing dusky courtesan of Klesh!"

"She's as hot as a courtesan of Klesh, too," the huge Northerner supplemented, rounding the brown crag's bulging shoulder in his turn, "for she's melted all the snow."

It was true. Although the far horizon shone white and green with the snows and glacial ice of the Cold Waste, the saucer-like depression in the foreground held a small unfrozen lake. And while the air was still chill around them, so that their breath drifted away in small white clouds, the brown ledge they trod was bare.

Up from the nearer shore of the lake rose the hill to which the Mouser had referred, the hill from one star-small point on which the new-risen sun's rays still glittered at them blindingly.

"That is, if it is a hill," Fafhrd added softly. "And in any case, whether a courtesan of Klesh or hill, she has several faces."

The point was well taken. The hill's green flanks were formed of crags and hummocks which the imagination could shape into monstrous faces—all the eyes closed save the one that twinkled at them. The faces melted downward like wax into huge stony rivulets—or might they be elephantine trunks?—that plunged into the unruffled acid-seeming water. Here and there, among the green were patches of dark red rock that might be blood, or mouths. Clashing nastily in color, the hill's rounded summit seemed to be composed of a fleshily pink marble. It too persisted in resembling a face—that of a sleeping ogre. It was crossed by a stretch of vividly red rock that might be the ogre's lips. From a slit in the red rock, a faint vapor rose.

The hill had more than a volcanic look. It seemed like an upwelling from a more savage, primal, fiercer consciousness than any that even Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser knew, an upwelling frozen in the act of invading a younger, weaker world—frozen yet eternally watchful, and waiting, and yearning.

And then the illusion was gone— or four-faces-out-of-five gone and the



The Gray Mouser

fifth wavering. The hill was just a hill again—an odd volcanic freak of the Cold Waste—a green hill with a glitter.

Fafhrd let out a gusty sigh. He surveyed the farther shore of the lake. It was hillocky, and matted with a dark vegetation that unpleasantly resembled fur. At one point there rose from it a stubby pillar of rock almost like an altar. Beyond the hairy bushes, which were here and there flecked with red-leaved ones, stretched the ice and snow, broken only occasionally by great rocks and rare culmps of dwarfed trees.

But something else was foremost in the Mouser's thoughts.

"The eye, Fafhrd. The glad, glittering eye!" he whispered, dropping his voice as though they were in a crowded street and some informer or rival thief might overhear. "Only once before have I seen such a gleam,

and that was by moonlight, across a king's treasure chamber. That time I did not come away with a huge diamond. A guardian serpent prevented. I killed the wriggler, but its hiss brought other guards.

"But this time there's only a little hill to climb. And if at this distance the gem gleams so bright, Fafhrd. . ." his hand dropped and gripped his companion's leg, at the sensitive point just above the knee, for emphasis. ". . . think how big!"

The Northerner, frowning faintly at the violent squeeze as well as at his doubts and misgivings, nevertheless sucked an icy breath in appreciative greed.

"And we poor shipwrecked marauders," continued the Mouser raptly "will be able to tell the gaping and envious thieves of Lankhmar that we not only crossed the Bones of the Old Ones, but looted them on the way."

And he went skipping gaily down the skimpy ledge that merged into the narrow, lake-edged, rocky saddle that joined this greater mountain with the green one. Fafhrd followed more slowly, gazing steadily at the green hill, waiting for it to turn back into faces again, or to turn to no faces at all. It did neither. It occurred to him that it might have been partly shaped by human hands, and after that, the notion of a diamond-eyed idol seemed less implausible. At the far end of the saddle, just at the base of the green hill, he caught up with the Mouser, who was studying a flat, dark rock covered with gashes

which a moment's glance told Fafhrd must be artificial.

"The ruins of tropic Klesh!" the Northerner muttered. "What should such hieroglyphs be doing so far from their jungle?"

"Chiseled, no doubt, by some hermit frostbitten black, whose madness taught him the Kleshic language," the Mouser observed sardonically. "Or have you already forgotten last night's knifer?"

Fafhrd shook his head curtly. Together they pored over the deep-chopped letters, bringing to bear knowledge gained from the perusing of ancient treasure-maps and the deciphering of code-messages carried by intercepted spies.

"The seven black. . ." Fafhrd read laboriously.

". . . priests," the Mouser finished for him. "They're in it, whoever they may be. And a god or beast or devil — that writhing hieroglyph means any one of the three, depending on the surrounding words, which I don't understand. It's very ancient, writing. And the seven black priests are to serve the writhing hieroglyph, or to bind it—again either might be meant, or both."

"And so long as the priesthood endures," Fafhrd took up, "that long will the god-beast-devil lie quietly . . . or sleep . . . or stay dead . . . or not come up. . ."

Abruptly the Mouser bounded straight into the air, fanning his feet. "This rock is *hot*," he complained.

Fafhrd understood. Even through the thick walrus-soles of his boots he

was beginning to feel the unnatural warmth.

"Hotter than the floor of hell," the Mouser observed, hopping first on one foot and then the other. "Well, what now, Fafhrd? Shall we go up, or not?"

Fafhrd answered him with a sudden shout of laughter. "You decided that, little man, long ago! Was it I who started to talk about huge diamonds?"

So up they went, choosing that point where a gigantic trunk, or tentacle, or melted chin strained from the encasing granite. It was not an easy climb, even at the beginning, for the green stone was everywhere rounded off, showing no marks of chisel or ax—which rather dampened Fafhrd's vague theory that this was a hill half-formed by human-wielded tools.

Upward the two of them edged and strained, their breath blowing out in bigger white clouds although the rock was uncomfortably hot under their hands. After an inch-by-inch climb up a slippery surface, where hands and feet and elbows and knees and even toasted chin must all help, they stood at last on the lower lip of one of the green hill's mouths. Here it seemed their ascent must end, for the great cheek above was smooth and sloped outward a spear's length above them.

But Fafhrd took from the Mouser's back a rope that had once guyed the mast of their shipwrecked sloop, made a noose in it, and cast it up toward the forehead above, where a

stubby horn or feeler projected. It caught and held. Fafhrd put his weight on it to test it, then looked inquiringly at his companion.

"What have you in mind?" the Mouser asked, clinging affectionately to the rock-face. "This whole climb begins to seem mere foolishness."

"But what of the jewel?" Fafhrd replied in pleasant mockery. "So big, Mouser, so big!"

"Likely just a bit of quartz," the Mouser said sourly. "I have lost my hunger for it."

"But as for me," Fafhrd cried, "I have only now worked up a good appetite."

And he swung out into emptiness, around the green cheek and into thin, brilliant sunlight.

It seemed to him as if the still lake and the green hill were rocking, instead of himself. He came to rest below the face's monstrously pouchy eyelid. He climbed up hand over hand, found good footing on the ledge that was the eyelid pouch, and twitched the end of the rope back to the Mouser, whom he could no longer see. On the third cast it did not swing back. He squatted on the ledge, bracing himself securely to guy the rope. It went tight in his hands. Very soon the Mouser stepped onto the ledge beside him.

The gayety was back in the small thief's face, but it was a fragile gayety, as though he wanted to get this done with quickly. They edged their way along the great eye-pouch until they were directly below the fancied pupil. It was rather above Fafhrd's

head, but the Mouser, nimbly hitching himself up on Fafhrd's shoulders, peered in readily.

Fafhrd, bracing himself against the green wall, waited impatiently. It seemed as if the Mouser would never speak. "Well?" he asked finally, when his shoulders had begun to ache from the Mouser's weight.

"Oh, it's a diamond, all right." The Mouser sounded oddly uninterested. "Yes, it's big. My fingers can just about span it. And it's cut like a smooth sphere—a sort of diamond eye. But I don't know about getting it out. It's set very deep. Should I try? Don't bellow so, Fafhrd, you'll blow us both off! I suppose we might as well take it, since we've come so far. But it won't be easy. My knife can't . . . yes, it can! I thought it was rock around the gem. But it's tarry stuff, Squidgy. There! I'm coming down."

Fafhrd had a glimpse of something smooth, globular and dazzling, with an ugly, ragged, tarry circling clinging to it. Then it seemed that someone flicked his elbow lightly. He looked down. Momentarily he had the strangest feeling of being in the green steamy jungle of Klesh. For protruding from the brown fur of his cloak was a wickedly barbed little dart, thickly smeared with a substance as black and tarry as that disfiguring the diamond eye.

He quickly dropped flat on the ledge, crying out to the Mouser to do the same. Then he carefully tugged loose the dart, finding to his relief that, although it had nicked the thick

hide of his cloak beneath the fur, it had not touched flesh.

"I think I see him," called the Mouser, peering down cautiously over the protected ledge. "A little fellow with a very long blowgun and dressed in furs and a conical hat. Crouching there in those dark bushes across the lake. Black, I think, like our knifer last night. A Kleshian, I'd say, unless he's one more of your frostbitten hermits. Now he lifts the gun to his lips. Watch yourself!"

A second dart pinged against the rock above them, then dropped down close by Fafhrd's hand. He jerked it away sharply.

There was a whirring sound, ending in a muted snap. The Mouser had decided to get a blow in. It is not easy to swing a sling while lying prone on a ledge, but the Mouser's missile crackled into the furry bushes close to the black blowgunner, who immediately ducked out of sight.

It was easy enough then to decide on a plan of action, for few were available. While the Mouser raked the bushes across the lake with sling shots, Fafhrd went down the rope. Despite the Mouser's protection, he fervently prayed that his cloak be thick enough. He knew from experience that the darts of Klesh are nasty things. At irregular intervals came the whirr of the Mouser's casts, cheering him on.

Reaching the green hill's base, he strung his bow and called up to the Mouser that he was ready in his turn to cover the retreat. His eyes searched the furry cliffs across the

lake, and twice when he saw movement he sent an arrow from his precious store of twenty. Then the Mouser was beside him and they were racing off along the hot mountain edge toward where the cryptically ancient glacial ice gleamed green. Often they looked back across the lake at the dubious furry bushes spotted here and there with blood-red ones, and twice or thrice they thought they saw movement in them—movement coming their way. Whenever this happened, they sent an arrow or a stone whirring, though with what effect they could not tell.

"The seven black priests—" Fafhrd muttered.

"The six," the Mouser corrected. "We killed one of them last night."

"Well, the six then," Fafhrd conceded. "They seem angry with us."

"As why shouldn't they be?" the Mouser demanded. "We stole their idol's only eye. Such an act annoys priests tremendously."

"It seemed to have more eyes than that one," Fafhrd asserted thoughtfully, "if only it had opened them."

"Thank Sheelba it didn't!" the Mouser hissed. "And 'ware that dart!"

Fafhrd hit the dirt—or rather the rock—instantly, and the black dart skirred on the ice ahead.

"I think they're unreasonably angry," Fafhrd asserted, scrambling to his feet.

"Priests always are," the Mouser said philosophically, with a sidewise shudder at the dart's black-crusted point.

"At any rate, we're rid of them," Fafhrd said with relief, as he and the Mouser loped onto the ice. The Mouser leered at him sardonically, but Fafhrd didn't notice.

All day they trudged rapidly across the green ice, seeking their way southward by the sun, which got hardly a hand's-breadth above the horizon. Toward night the Mouser brought down two low-winged arctic birds with three casts of his sling, while Fafhrd's long-seeing eyes spied a black cave-mouth in an outcropping of rock under a great snowy slope. Luckily there was a clump of dwarfed trees, uprooted and killed by moving ice, near the cave's mouth, and soon the two adventurers were gnawing tough, close-grained, brown bird and watching the flickering little fire in the cave's entrance.

Fafhrd stretched hugely and said, "Farewell to all black priests! That's another bother done with." He reached out a large, long-fingered hand. "Mouser, let me see that glass eye you dug from the green hill."

The Mouser without comment reached into his pouch and handed Fafhrd the brilliant tar-circletted globule. Fafhrd held it between his big hands and viewed it thoughtfully. The firelight shone through it and spread from it, highlighting the cave with red, baleful beams. Fafhrd stared unblinkingly at the gem, until the Mouser decided the big Northerner must be blinded. The Mouser became very conscious of the great silence around them, broken only by the tiny but frequent crackling of

the fire and the large but infrequent cracking of the ice outside. He felt weary to death, yet somehow couldn't consider sleep.

Finally Fafhrd said, in a faint unnatural voice, "The earth we walk on once lived—a great hot beast, breathing out fire and spewing molten rock. Its constant yearning was to spit red-hot stuff at the stars. This was before all men."

"What's that?" the Mouser queried, stirring from his half-trance.

"Now men have come, the earth has gone to sleep," Fafhrd continued in the same hollow voice, not looking at the Mouser. "But in its dream it thinks of life, and stirs, and tries to shape itself into the form of men."

"What's that, Fafhrd?" the Mouser repeated uneasily. But Fafhrd answered him with sudden snores. The Mouser carefully teased the gem from his comrade's fingers. Its tarry rim was soft and slippery—repugnant so, almost as if it were a kind of black tissue. The Mouser put the thing back in his pouch. A long time passed. Then the Mouser touched his companion's fur-clad shoulder. Fafhrd woke with a swift shudder. "What is it, Small One?" he demanded.

"Morning," the Mouser told him briefly, pointing over the ashes of the fire at the lightening sky.

As they stooped their way out of the cave, there was a faint roaring sound. Looking over the snow-rim and up the slope, Fafhrd saw hurtling down toward them a vast white

globe that grew in size in the very brief time while he watched. He and the Mouser barely managed to dive back into the cavern before the earth shook and the noise became ear-splitting and everything went momentarily dark as the huge snowball thundered over the cave mouth. They both smelled the cold sour ashes blown into their faces from the dead fire by the globe's passing, and the Mouser coughed.

But Fafhrd instantly lunged out of the cave, swiftly stringing his great bow and fitting to it an arrow long as his arm. He sighted up the slope. At the slope's summit, tiny as bugs beyond the wickedly-barbed arrowhead, were a half-dozen conical-hatted figures, sharply silhouetted against the yellow-purple dawn.

They seemed busy as bugs too, fussing furiously with a white globe as tall as themselves. *

Fafhrd let out half a breath, paused, and loosed his arrow. The tiny figures continued for several breaths to worry the stubborn globe. Then the one nearest it sprang convulsively and sprawled atop it. The globe began to roll down the slope, carrying the arrow-pierced black priest with it and gathering snow as it went. Soon he was hidden in the ever-thickening crust, but not before his flailing limbs had changed the globe's course, so that it missed the cave-mouth by a spear's length.

As the thundering died, the Mouser peered out cautiously.

"I shot the second avalanche aside," Fafhrd remarked casually.

"Let's be moving."

The Mouser would have led the way around the hill—a long and winding course looking treacherous with snow and slippery rock, but Fafhrd said, "No, straight over the top, where their snowballs have cleared a path for us. They're much too cunning to expect us to take that path."

However, he kept an arrow nocked to his bow as they made their way up the rocky slope, and moved quite cautiously as they surmounted the naked crest. A white landscape green-spotted with glacial ice opened before them, but no dark specks moved up it and there were hiding places nearby. Fafhrd unstrung his bow and laughed.

"They seemed to have scampered off," he said. "Doubtless they're running back to their little green hill to warm themselves. At any rate, we're rid of them."

"Yes, just as we were yesterday," the Mouser commented drily. "The fall of the knifer didn't seem to worry them at all, but doubtless they're scared witless because you put an arrow into another of their party."

"Well, at all events," Fafhrd said curtly, "Granting that there were seven black priests to begin with, there are now but five."

And he led the way down the other side of the hill, taking big reckless strides. The Mouser followed slowly, a stone rocking in his dangled sling and his gaze questing restlessly to every side. When they came

to snow, he studied it, but there were no tracks as far as he could see to either side. By the time he reached the foot of the hill, Fafhrd was a sling's cast ahead. To make up the distance, the Mouser began a soft-footed, easy, lope, yet he did not desist from his watchfulness. His attention was attracted by a squat hummock of snow just ahead of Fafhrd. Shadows might have told him whether there was anything crouched behind it, but the yellow-purple haze hid the sun, so he kept on watching the hummock, meanwhile speeding up his pace. He reached the hummock and saw there was no one behind it almost at the moment he caught up with Fafhrd.

The hummock exploded into a scatter of snow-chunks and a black sag-bellied figure erupted out of it at Fafhrd, ebon arm extended for a knife-slash at the Northerner's neck. Almost simultaneously the Mouser lunged forward, whirling his sling backhanded. The stone, still in the leather loop, caught the slasher high in the face. The curved knife missed by inches. The slasher fell. Fafhrd looked around with mild interest.

The attacker's forehead was so deeply indented that there could be no question of his condition, yet the Mouser stared down at him for a long time. "A man of Klesh, all right," he said broodingly, "but fatter. Armored against the cold. Strange they should have come so far to serve their god." He looked up and without raising his arm from his side, sharply twirled his sling—

much as a bravo might in some alley as a warning to skulkers.

"Four to go," he said and Fafhrd nodded slowly and soberly.

All day they trod across the Cold Waste—watchfully, but without further incident. A wind came up and the cold bit. The Mouser pulled in his hood so that it covered his mouth and nose, while even Fafhrd hugged his cloak closer around him.

As the sky was darkening to umber and indigo, Fafhrd suddenly stopped and strung his bow and let fly. For a moment the Mouser, who was a bit bothered by his comrade's bemused air, thought that the Northerner was shooting at mere snow. Then the snow leaped, kicking four grey hoofs, and the Mouser realized Fafhrd had brought down white-furred meat. He licked his numb lips greedily as Fafhrd swiftly bled and gutted the animal and slung it over his shoulder.

A little way ahead was an outcropping of black rock. Fafhrd studied it for a moment, then took an ax from belt and struck the rock a careful blow with the back of the head. The Mouser eagerly gathered in the corner of his cloak the large and small chunks that flaked off. He could feel their oiliness and he felt warmed by the mere thought of the rich flame they would make.

Just beyond the outcropping was a low cliff and at its base a cave-mouth slightly sheltered by a tall rock perhaps two spears' lengths in front of it. The Mouser felt a great glow of anticipated content as he followed Fafhrd toward the inviting dark ori-

fice. He had greatly feared, being numb with cold, aching with fatigue, famished, that they might have to camp out and content themselves with the bones of yesternight's birds. Now in an astonishingly short space they had found food, fuel, shelter. So wonderfully convenient. . . .

And then, as Fafhrd rounded the sheltering rock and strode toward the cave-mouth, the thought came to the Mouser: "Much too convenient." Without further thought, he dropped the coal and sprang at his comrade, hurling the huge fellow flat on his face.

A dart hissed close over him and clicked faintly against the sheltering rock. Again without pause the Mouser darted into the cave-mouth, whipping his sword Scalpel from its sheath. As he entered the cave he zigged a bit to the left, then zagged suddenly to the right and flattened himself against the rocky wall there, slashing prudently at the darkness as he tried to pierce it with his gaze.

Across from him, on the other side of the mouth, the cave bent back in an elbow, the end of which, to the Mouser's amazement, was not dark but dimly lit by a pulsing light that seemed neither that of fire or the outer twilight. If anything, it resembled the unnatural glow they had seen back in the Bones of the Old Ones.

But unnatural or not, it had the advantage of silhouetting the Mouser's antagonist. The squat fellow was now gripping a curved knife rather than a blowgun. As the Mouser

sprang at him, he scuttled back along the elbow and dodged around the corner from behind which the pulsing glow came. To the Mouser's further amazement, he felt not only a growing warmth as he pursued but also moistness in the air. He rounded the corner. The black priest, who'd stopped just beyond it, lunged at him. But the Mouser was prepared for this and Scalpel took his adversary neatly in the chest, just off center, transfixing him, while the curved knife slashed only steamy air.

For a moment the fanatic priest tried to work his way up along the thin blade and so get within striking distance of the Mouser. Then the nefarious glare died in the priest's eyes and he slumped, while the Mouser distastefully whipped out the blade.

The priest tottered back into the steamy glow, which the Mouser now saw came from a small pit just beyond. With a blood-choked gargling moan the black one stepped back into the pit and vanished. There was a scuff of flesh against rock, a pause, and then a faint splash, and then no sound at all, except for the soft, distant bubbling and seething that the Mouser now realized came steadily from the pit—that is, until Fafhrd came clumping up belatedly.

"Three to go," the Mouser informed him casually. "The fourth is cooking at the bottom of that pit. But I want broiled dinner tonight, not boiled, and besides I haven't a long enough fork. So fetch in the black stones I dropped."

Fafhrd objected at first, eyeing the steam-and-fire vent almost superstitiously, and urged that they seek other lodging. But the Mouser argued that to spend the night in the now-empty, easily scanned cave was far better than to risk ambush in the outer dark. To the Mouser's relief Fafhrd agreed after peering down the pit for possible handholds that might help a live or boiled attacker. The small man had no desire to leave this pleasantly steamy spot.

The fire was built against the outer wall of the cave and near the mouth, so that no one could creep in without being revealed by its flames. After they had polished off some grilled liver and a number of tough, seared chops and had tossed the bones into the hot fire, where they sputtered merrily, Fafhrd settled back against the rocky wall and asked the Mouser to let him look at the diamond eye.

The Mouser complied with some reluctance, once again experiencing repugnance for the frostily-gleaming stone's tarry circlet. He had the feeling that Fafhrd was going to do something unwise with the stone—what, he didn't know. But the Northerner merely glanced at it for a moment, almost puzzledly, and then thrust it away in his pouch. The Mouser started to object, but Fafhrd curtly replied that it was their common property. The Mouser could not but agree.

They had decided to stand watch by turns, Fafhrd first. The Mouser snuggled his cloak around him, and

tucked under his head a pillow made of pouch and folded hood. The coal fire flamed, the strange glow from the pit pulsed wanly. The Mouser found it decidedly pleasant to be between the dry heat of the former and the moist warmth of the latter, both spiced by the chill air from outside. He watched the play of shadows through half-closed eyes. Fafhrd sitting between the Mouser and the flames, bulked reassuringly large, wide-eyed, and alert. The Mouser's last thought as he drowsed off was that he was rather glad that Fafhrd had the diamond. It made his own pillow that much less bummy.

He woke hearing an odd soft voice. The fire had burned low. For a frightening moment he thought that a stranger had somehow come into the cave—perhaps muttering hypnotic words to put a sleepspell on his comrade. Then he realized that the voice was the one Fafhrd had used last night, and that the Northerner was staring into the diamond eye as if he were seeing limitless visions there, and rocking it slowly to and fro. The rocking made the glittering beams from the gem synchronize with the pulsing glow in a way the Mouser didn't like.

"Earth's blood," Fafhrd was murmuring, his voice almost a chant, "still pulses strongly under its wrinkled rocky skin, and still bleeds hot and raw from wounds in the mountains. But it needs the blood of heroes before it can shape itself into the form of men."

The Mouser jumped up, grabbed

Fafhrd by the shoulder and shook him gently.

"Those who truly worship the earth," Fafhrd went on entrancedly, as if nothing had happened, "guard its mountain-wounds and wait and pray for the great day of fulfillment when the earth shall wake again, this time in man's form, and rid itself of the vermin called men."

The Mouser's shaking became violent and Fafhrd work with a start—only to assert that he had been awake all the time and that the Mouser had been having a nightmare. He laughed at the Mouser's counterassertions and would not budge from his own. Nor would he give up the diamond, but tucked it deep in his pouch, gave two huge yawns and fell asleep while the Mouser was still expostulating.

The Mouser did not find his watch a pleasant one. In place of his former trust in this rocky nook, he now scented danger in every direction and peered as often at the steamy pit as at the black entrance beyond the glowing coals, entertaining himself with vivid visions of a cooked priest somehow writhing his way up. Meanwhile the more logical part of his mind dwelled on an unpleasantly consistent theory that the hot inner earth was indeed jealous of man, and that the green hill was one of those spots where inner earth was seeking to escape its rocky jacket and form itself into all-conquering man-shaped giants of living stone. The black Kleshite priests would be earth-worshippers eager for the destruction of all other men. And the diamond

eye, far from being a bit of valuable and harmless loot, was somehow alive and seeking to enchant Fafhrd with its glittering gaze, and lead him to an obscure doom.

Three times the Mouser tried to get the gem away from his comrade, the third time by slitting the bottom of the Northerner's pouch. But though the Mouser knew himself the most cunning cutpurse in Lankmar, though perhaps a trifle out of practice, Fafhrd each time hugged the pouch tighter to him and muttered peevishly in his sleep and unerringly brushed away the Mouser's questing hand. The Mouser thought of taking the diamond eye by force, but was stopped by the unreasoning conviction that this would touch off murderous resistance in the Northerner. Indeed, he had strong misgivings as to the state in which his comrade would awake.

But when the cave-mouth finally lightened, Fafhrd roused himself with a shake and a morning yawn-and-growl as stentorious and genial as any the Mouser had ever winced at. Fafhrd acted with such chipper, clear-headed enthusiasm that the Mouser's fears were quite blown away, or at least driven deep into the back of his mind. The two adventurers had a cold-meat breakfast, and carefully wrapped up and packed away the legs and shoulders that had been roasted during the night.

Then while Fafhrd covered him with arrow nocked to taut bowstring, the Mouser darted out and sprang to cover behind the outside of the stone

sheltering the entrance. Bobbing up here and there for quick glances over its top, he scanned the cliff above the cave for any sign of ambushers. Holding his sling at the ready, he covered Fafhrd while the latter rushed forth. After a bit they satisfied themselves that there were at least no nearby lurkers in the pale dawn, and Fafhrd led off with a swinging stride. The Mouser followed briskly enough, but after a little while became possessed with a doubt. It seemed to him that Fafhrd was not leading them straight along their course, but swinging rather sharply off toward the left. It was hard to be at all sure, for the sun had still not broken through and the sky was filled with purplish and yellowish scarflike clouds, while the Mouser could not tell for certain just which way they had come yesterday, since things are very different looking back than looking forward.

Nevertheless he voiced his doubts after a while, but Fafhrd replied with such good-humored assurance. "The Cold Waste was my childhood playground, as familiar to me as Lankmar's mazy alleys or the swampways of Sheelba to you," that the Mouser was almost completely satisfied. Besides, the day was windless, which pleased the Mouser no end, because of his worship of warmth.

After a good half-day's trudging they mounted a snowy rise and the Mouser's eyebrows rose incredulously at the landscape ahead: a titled plain of green ice smooth as glass. Its upper edge, which lay somewhat to

their right, was broken by jagged pinacles, like the crest of a great smooth wave. Its lower slope stretched down for a vast distance to their left, finally losing itself in what looked like a white mist, while straight ahead there seemed to be no end.

The plain was so green that it looked like a giddily enchanted ocean, tilted at the command of some mighty magician. The Mouser felt sure it would reflect the stars on a clear night.

He was somewhat horrified, though hardly surprised, when his comrade coolly proposed that they walk straight across it. The Northerner's shrewd gaze had spotted a section just ahead of them where the slope leveled off briefly before sweeping down again. Along this level ribbon, Fafhrd asserted, they could walk with ease—and then the Northerner set out without waiting for a reply.

With a fatalistic shrug the Mouser followed, walking at first as if on eggs and with many an uneasy glance at the great downward slope. He wished he had bronze-cleated boots—even ones worn flat like Fafhrd's—or some sort of spurs to fix to his own slippery shoes, so that he'd have a better chance of stopping himself if he did start to slide. After a while he grew more confident and took longer and swifter, if still most gingerly steps, and the gap Fafhrd had put between them was closed.

They had walked for perhaps three bowshots across the plain, and still had no sight of an end to it, when a flicker of movement in the corner

of his right eye made the Mouser look around.

Swiftly and silently sliding down toward them from some hiding place in the ragged crest, came the remaining black priests, three abreast. They kept their footing like expert skiers—and indeed they seemed to be wearing skis of some sort. Two of them carried spears improvised by thrusting dagger grips into the muzzles of their long blowguns, while the midmost had as lance a narrow, needle-sharp icicle or ice-shard at least eight feet long.

No time now for slings and arrows, and of what use to sword-skewer one who has already spear-skewered you? Besides, an icy slope is no place for dainty near-stationary maneuvering. Without a word to Fafhrd, so certain he was that the Northerner would do the same, the Mouser took off down the dreaded leftward slope.

It was as if he had cast himself into the arms of a demon of speed. Ice whirred softly under his boots, quiet air became cold wind whipping his garments and chilling his cheeks.

But not enough speed. The skiing black priests had a headstart. The Mouser hoped the level stretch would wreck them, but they merely sailed out from it with squat majesty and came down without losing footing—and hardly two spears' length behind. Daggers and ice-lance gleamed wickedly.

The Mouser drew Scalpel and after trying fruitlessly to pole himself along with it to greater velocity, squatted down so as to offer the least

resistance to the air. Still the black priests gained. Fafhrd beside him dug in his cleated boots so that ice-dust spouted up fountain-wise, and shot off in a great swing sideways. The priest bearing the ice-lance swerved after him.

Meanwhile the two other priests caught up with the Mouser. He arched his hurtling body away from the spearthrust of the first and knocked that of the second aside with Scalpel, and for the next few moments there was fought the strangest sort of duel—almost as if they weren't moving at all, since they were all moving at the same speed. At one point the Mouser was sliding down backwards, parrying the nasty blowgun-spears with his shorter weapon.

But two against one always helps, and this time might have proved fatal, if Fafhrd had not just then caromed back from his great sideways swing full of speed from some slope he alone had seen, and whirled his dragon-pommeled longsword. He passed just behind the two priests and then their heads were skidding along separately from their bodies, though all at the same speed.

Yet it would have been all up with Fafhrd, for the last black priest, perhaps helped by the weight of his ice-lance, came hurtling after Fafhrd at even greater speed and would have skewered him except the Mouser deflected the ice-lance upward, with Scalpel held in two hands, and the icy point merely ruffled Fafhrd's streaming red hair.

The next moment they all plunged into the white, icy mist. The last glimpse the Mouser had of Fafhrd was of his speeding head alone, cutting a wake in the neck-high mist. Then the Mouser's eyes were beneath the mist's surface.

It was most strange to the Mouser to skim swiftly through milky stuff, ice-crystals stinging his cheeks, not knowing each instant if an unknown barrier might wreck him. He heard a grunt that sounded like Fafhrd's, and on top of that a tingling crash, which might have been the ice-spear shattering, followed by a sighing, tortured moan. Next came the feeling of reaching bottom, followed by an upward swoop, and then the Mouser broke out of the mist into the purple-yellow day and skidded into a soft snow-bank and began to laugh wildly with relief. It was some moments before he noticed that Fafhrd, also shaking with laughter, was likewise half buried in the snow beside him.

When Fafhrd looked at the Mouser, the latter shrugged inquiringly at the mist behind them. The Northerner nodded confirmingly.

"The last priest dead. None to go!" the Mouser proclaimed happily, stretching in the snow as if it were a featherbed. His chief idea was to find the nearest cave—he was sure there would be one—and enjoy a great rest.

But Fafhrd turned out to be full of other ideas and a seething energy. Nothing must do but they must press on swiftly until dusk, and he presented to the Mouser such alluring

pictures of getting out of the Cold Waste by tomorrow, or even night-fall, that the small man soon found himself trotting along after the big one, though he couldn't help wondering from time to time how Fafhrd could be so supremely sure of his direction in this chaos of ice, snow, and churning unpleasantly-tinted clouds. The *whole* Cold Waste couldn't have been his playground, surely, the Mouser asked himself, with an inward shudder at Fafhrd's notion of proper places to play.

Twilight overtook them before they reached the forests Fafhrd had promised, and at the Mouser's urgent insistence they began to hunt for a place to pass the night. This time a cave wasn't so easily come by. It was quite dark before Fafhrd spotting a rocky notch with a clump of stunted trees growing in front of it that promised at least fuel and passable shelter.

However, it appeared that the wood would hardly be needed, for just short of the tree-clump was a black rock outcropping resembling the one that had given them coal last night.

But just as Fafhrd joyfully lifted his ax, the outcropping came to life and lunged at his belly with a dagger.

Only Fafhrd's exuberant and undiminished energy saved his life. He arched his belly aside with a supple swiftness that amazed even the Mouser, and drove the ax deep into his attacker's head. The squat black body thrashed its limbs convulsively and swiftly grew stiff. Fafhrd's deep laughter rumbled like thunder. "Shall

we call him the none black priest, Mouser?" he inquired.

But the Mouser saw no cause for amusement. All his uneasiness returned. If they had missed their count on one of the black priests—say the one who had spun down in the snowball or the one supposedly slain in the mist—why mightn't they have missed their count on another? Besides, how could they have been so convinced, simply from an ancient inscription, that there had been only seven black priests? And once you admitted there might have been eight, why mightn't there be nine, or ten, or twenty?

However, Fafhrd merely chuckled at these worries and chopped wood and built a roaring fire in the rocky notch. And although the Mouser knew the fire would advertise their presence for miles around, he was so grateful for its warmth that he found himself unable to criticize Fafhrd at all severely. And when they had warmed and eaten their roast meat from the morning, such a delicious tiredness came over the Mouser that he tucked his cloak around him and headed straight for sleep. However, Fafhrd chose that moment to drag out and inspect by firelight the diamond eye, which made the Mouser open his own a slit.

This time Fafhrd did not seem inclined to go into a trance. He grinned in a lively and greedy fashion as he turned the gem this way and that, as though to admire the beams flashing from it while mentally appraising its value in square Lank-

hmarian goldpieces.

Although reassured, the Mouser was annoyed. "Put it away, Fafhrd," he snapped sleepily.

Fafhrd stopped turning the gem and one of its beams blinked directly at the Mouser. The latter shivered, for he had for a moment the sharp conviction that the gem was looking at him with evil intelligence.

But Fafhrd obediently tucked the gem away with a laugh-and-a-yawn and cloaked himself up for sleep. Gradually the Mouser's eerie feelings and realistic fears were both lulled as he watched the dancing flames, and he drowsed off.

The Mouser's next conscious sensations were of being tossed roughly down onto thick grass that felt unpleasantly like fur. His head ached splittingly and there was a pulsing yellow-purple glow, shot through with blinding gleams. It was a few moments before he realized that all these lights were outside his skull rather than inside it.

He lifted his head to look around, and agonizing pain shot through it. However, he persisted and shortly found out where he was.

He was lying on the hillocky, dark-vegetated shore across the acid-seeming lake from the green hill. The night sky was alive with Northern Lights, while from the mouthlike slit—now open wider—in the green hill's pinkish top, a red-litten smoke came in puffs like a man eagerly panting and heaving. All the hill's green flank-faces seemed monstrously alive in the mixed lights, their mouths

twitching and their eyes flashing—as if every one of them held an eye-diamond. While only a few feet away from the Mouser, Fafhrd stood stiffly behind the stubby pillar of rock, which was indeed a carved altar of some sort, topped by a great bowl. The Northerner was chanting something in a grunty language the Mouser didn't know and had never heard Fafhrd use.

The Mouser struggled to a sitting position. Gingerly feeling his skull, he found a large lump over his right ear. At the same time Fafhrd struck sparks—apparently with stone and steel—above the bowl, and a pillar of purple flame shot up from it, and the Mouser saw that Fafhrd's eyes were tight shut and that in his hand he held the diamond eye.

Then the Mouser realized that the diamond eye had been far wiser than the black priests, who had served its mountain-idol. They, like many priests, had been much too fanatical and not nearly as clever as the god they served. While they had sought to rescue the filched eye and destroy the blasphemous thieves who had stolen it, the eye had taken care of itself very nicely. It had enchanted Fafhrd and deceived him into taking a circling course that would lead him and the Mouser back to the vengeful green hill. It had even speeded up the last stage of the journey, forcing Fafhrd to move by night, carrying the Mouser with him after prudently stunning him in his sleep with a dangerously heavy blow.

Also, the diamond eye must have

been more foresighted and purposeful than its priests. It must have some important end in view, over and beyond that of getting itself returned to its mountain-idol. Otherwise, why should it have instructed Fafhrd to preserve the Mouser carefully and bring him along? The diamond eye must have some use for both of them. Through the Mouser's aching brain reverberated the phrase he remembered Fafhrd muttering two nights before: "But it needs the blood of heroes before it can shape itself into the form of man."

As all these thoughts were seething painfully in the Mouser's brain, he saw Fafhrd coming toward him with diamond eye in one hand and drawn longsword in the other, but a winning smile on his blind face.

"Come, Mouser," Fafhrd said gently, "It is time we crossed the lake and climbed the hill and received the kiss and sweet suck of the topmost lips and mingled our blood with the hot blood of earth. In that way we will live on in the stony rock-giants about to be born, and know with them the joy of crushing cities and trampling armies and stamping on all cultivated fields."

These mad phrases stung the Mouser into action, unintimidated by the pulsing lights of sky and hill. He jerked Scalpel from its scabbard and sprang at Fafhrd, engaging the longsword and making a particularly clever disarming thrust-and-twist guaranteed to send the longsword spinning from Fafhrd's hand—especially since the Northerner still had

his eyes closed tight.

Instead, Fafhrd's heavy blade evaded the Mouser's swift one as easily as one avoids a baby's slap, and, smiling sorrowfully, sent a rippling thrust at the Mouser's throat that the latter could escape only with the most fantastic and frantic of backward leaps.

The leap took him in the direction of the lake. Instantly Fafhrd closed in, attacking with scornful poise. His large face was a mask of blond contempt. His far heavier sword moved as deftly as Scalpel, eaving a gleaming arabesque of attack that forced the Mouser back, back, back.

And all the while Fafhrd's stayed tight shut. Only when driven to the brink of the lake did the Mouser realize the reason. The diamond eye in Fafhrd's left hand was doing all the seeing for the Northerner. It followed every movement of Scalpel with a snaky intentness.

So, as he danced on the slippery black rim above the wildly-reflecting lake, with the skies throbbing yellow-purple above him and the green hill panting behind, the Mouser suddenly ignored Fafhrd's threatening blade and ducked and slashed unexpectedly at the diamond eye.

Fafhrd's cut whistled a finger's breadth above the Mouser's head.

The diamond eye, struck by Scalpel, exploded in a white burst.

The black furry ground beneath their feet heaved as if in despairing torment.

The green hill erupted with a vindictive blast that sent the Mouser

staggering and that shot a gush of molten rock twice the hill's height toward the bruised night-sky.

The Mouser grabbed hold of his bewilderingly-staring companion and rushed him away from the green hill and the lake.

A dozen heart-beats after they left the spot, the column of molten rock drenched down on the altar and splashed wide. Some of the molten gouts came even as far as the Mouser and Fafhrd, shooting fiery darts over their shoulders as they scampered. One or two goutts hit and the Mouser had to beat out a small fire they

started in Fafhrd's cloak.

Looking back as he ran, the Mouser got a last glimpse of the green hill. Although still spouting fire, it seemed otherwise very solid and still, as though all its potentialities for life were vanished for a time, or forever.

When they finally stopped running, Fafhrd looked stupidly down at his left hand and said, "Mouser, I've cut my thumb. It's bleeding."

"So's the green hill," the Mouser commented, looking back. "And bleeding to death, I'm happy to say."

THE END



THE SEVEN BLACK PRIESTS Fritz Leiber

