

FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

FEBRUARY

1964

Volume 13

Number 2

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

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Cover: Emsb

Illustrating *The Lords of Quarmall*

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All subscription corre-
spondence should be addressed to FANTASTIC, Cir-
culation Department, 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chi-
cago, Illinois. Please allow at least six weeks for
change of address. Include your old address, as well as
new—enclosing if possible an address label from a
recent issue.

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*She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen . . .
so pliant . . . so yielding . . . so all-enfolding*

the soft woman

By THEODORE L. THOMAS

OWEN SARDULE brushed his fingertips against the silken drapery, and then cupped it in his hands and pressed it to his face. He felt the cloth grow hot under his breath, and he turned his cheek into the warm spot. He straightened reluctantly and continued his inspection of the suite. The rugs were satisfyingly deep beneath his feet. The bed was downy, the sofas yielding, and the chairs comfortably enfolded his big frame. The room was beautifully furnished, except for the picture near the French doors. It made a splash of bright colors, garish and harsh to Sardule's eye. He walked to it and read the name in the lower right-hand corner, "Matisse." He lifted the picture from the wall and dropped it in the waste-basket.

Sardule began to unpack, running his hands over the soft linens and cottons and silks as he put them away. He took maMal

from its case and placed the doll on the mantlepice, and then he took it down and rubbed it between his hands. He squeezed it to feel the familiar soft pliancy, and he rubbed it against his lips to smell the faint, bitter odor. He touched it with his tongue and felt the faint stirrings inside him. He placed maMal back on the mantlepice and stared at it, at the rounded contours of the nude, feminine body, all smooth and flowing and soft and sweet, and blending at the top into the head of a frog.

Sardule finished unpacking and went out on the balcony. The evening air was soft and warm and faintly scented, and for a moment Sardule almost knew why he had come back. The sheer beauty of the island, that must be it. But even as he thought of it he knew it wasn't true. There were other beautiful places in the world, places where a man was far more likely to find a beauti-

ful woman than here. Yet it had been here that he had found—what was her name?—Torre . . . or Tarra . . . something? Vaguely he remembered. With all the adolescent skirt-liftings behind him, she had been his first conquest in the name of love, the first citadel to yield, the first in a long line of sweet victories. How old had he been? Twenty? Yes, about that. And she had been the same, perhaps a little older, full of soft fire and murmurings and moans. She would be old now, disgusting to look at.

Sardule turned his face up into the soft wind and looked at the stars. There were no clouds, no mists, yet the stars appeared hazy and dim. Sardule shook his head and looked again, but there was no change. He looked down at the ground, and saw that the palm trees and ferns in the formal gardens seemed diffuse and misty. He was about to turn back to his room in annoyance when a flash of movement in the garden caught his eye. A woman walked along the path. He saw her clearly, saw the way her dress pressed against her body as she walked through the soft night air.

SARDULE stared down at her and felt his throat thicken. The roundness, the promise, the raw call of her reached up to him.

He stared, unable to breathe. Her full-fleshed body, clothed in clinging white, stood out ice-clear against the misty garden. Hers was not the lithe, athletic body that he despised, not the equally abhorrent big-boned, big-breasted kind. Hers was soft and full and round, and he knew that the sweet smell of her drifted toward him, and he found himself able to breath again.

She reached the far end of the garden. He raised his hand to call to her, but then his instinct took command. This was no way to do it. Here was a prize worthy of his best efforts, and he should run no risk of losing.

He turned and went out the door, almost running. The elevator was not at the floor, so he took the stairs and went through the lobby, ignoring the many "Good evening, Mr. Sardule" that followed him. When he reached the garden she was no longer in sight, but her odor was there, pungent and sweet, and he followed it to the path that led along the shore. He saw her then, walking along the beach, her head back, her black hair trailing softly in the evening breeze. Rapidly he caught up with her, planning his campaign with practiced ease. When he came to her side he said softly, "I have seen many beautiful women, but never anyone to equal the sight of you, walking through the garden."

She turned her face toward him, and he felt his heart wrench. Her eyes were great and black and far apart, and her lips were full and round and wet. She smiled, and it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. She said, "Thank you," and her voice was soft and husky.

With great effort he took his eyes from her face and walked silently by her side. This was the way to do it with this one. No talk needed here, merely the flat-tery of his silent adoration. He held himself straight, letting her know that he was acutely aware of her presence by walking slightly turned toward her. After awhile he took her hand and placed it on his arm. They came to where the path turned out to the little peninsula, and he led her into the dim restaurant and seated her at a table in a dark corner. They did not speak during dinner. She smiled her thanks when he helped her, and her breath came quick when he gently leaned against her. Toward the end of the dinner Sardule could no longer eat; they stared into each other's eyes, holding hands beneath the table. They left, and walked quickly back to the hotel and went in the side door and walked up the stairs.

Swiftly he put out the lights, save the dim one on the table by the French doors. His hands

shook uncontrollably when he began to undress her; They were no longer the hands of the learned expert. There were no buttons or hooks or straps or zippers, merely an intricate winding of a single piece of diaphanous cloth. He dropped to one knee to finish removing her gown, and she raised her arms and slowly pirouetted before him to help remove the last of the cloth from her hips. He finished, but she continued to turn, looking down at him when she faced him, looking up as her back turned toward him, wetting her lips and making soft moaning sounds deep in her throat.

Sardule stood up and tore off his own clothes. She watched him, no longer turning, but moving her hips slowly back and forth toward him. And just before he finished she ran lightly to the bed and flung herself on it and slowly turned over to him. He followed.

It was morning before the familiar, sweet, sickening smell brought in the others. Sardule lay on the bed, bulging eyes staring, throat choked on a scream forever silenced, hands buried to the wrists in a dripping softness that only vaguely resembled a woman. On the mantelpiece stood a small doll, swathed in a long, thin strip of rotted cloth flecked with black spots of rich, loamy earth.

THE END