

U N K N O W N W O R L D S

Contents for February, 1942, Vol. V, No. 5

John W. Campbell, Jr., Editor, Catherine Tarrant, Asst. Ed.

Novel

- THE UNDESIRE PRINCESS** **L. Sprague de Camp 7**
Being a fable of a world where things were so, or not so—and never,
never merely mostly so.

Novelette

- DESIGN FOR DREAMING** **Henry Kuttner 113**
The Hollywood script writer wanted a vacation in the Elysian Fields
—but the magician was a sloppy workman. He landed in the world
where dreams were designed—

Short Stories

- ETAOIN SHRDLU** **Fredric Brown 67**
The Little Man With The Pimple wanted to set a formula on a Lino-
type. Thereafter the Linotype machine had a life—and a will!—of
its own.

- THE SHOES** **Robert Bloch 78**
Concerning a gentleman who got into the bad habit of cutting his
own throat and getting people to murder him—

- HE DIDN'T LIKE CATS** **L. Ron Hubbard 83**
To be killed in a dream is harmless, of course. To be killed by a
cat in a dream is harmless. But the real thing may be preferable—

- THE REFUGEES** **Frank Belknap Long 92**
Some of the refugees that leave Europe's turmoil don't need pass-
ports—and can prove it!

- THE SUNKEN LAND** **Fritz Leiber, Jr. 97**
The Sunken Land was an old myth even in that long-forgotten world.
But a madman insisted on visiting it—which was madder even than
such as he might conceive—


- IN HIS OWN IMAGE** **Malcolm Jameson 106**
The idol was stolen, beyond doubt. But no natives pursued, no
priests tracked down the captain. They knew their godling—

Readers' Department

- Book Review** 112

Illustrations by: Cartier, M. Isip, Kramer and Orban

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THE SUNKEN LAND

By Fritz Leiber, Jr.

● The Sunken Land had been a myth of horror in that forgotten world of long ago for generations. But when Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser stumbled on it, they found reason and more than reason for that—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

"I was born with luck as a twin!" roared Fafhrd the Northerner jovially, leaping up so swiftly that the cranky, none-too-seaworthy sloop rocked a little in spite of its outriggers. "I catch a fish in the middle of the ocean. I rip up its belly. And look, little man, what I find. Look!"

The Gray Mouser drew back from the fish-bloodied hand thrust almost into his face, wrinkled his nose with sneering fastidiousness, raised his left eyebrow and peered. The object did not seem very small even on Fafhrd's broad palm, and although slimed-over a little, was indubitably gold.

It was both a ring and a key, the key part set at a right angle, so that it would lie along the finger when worn. There were carvings of some sort. Instinctively the Gray Mouser did not like the object. It, somehow, focused the vague uneasiness he had felt now for several days.

To begin with, he did not like the huge, salty ocean, and only Fafhrd's bold enthusiasm and his own longing for the land of Lankmar had impelled him to embark on this long, admittedly risky voyage homeward across uncharted deeps. He did not like the fact that a school of fish was

making the water boil at such a great distance from any land. It seemed unnatural. Even the uniformly stormless weather and favorable winds disturbed him, seeming to indicate correspondingly great misfortunes held in store, like a growing thundercloud in quiet air. Too much good luck was always dangerous. And now this ring, acquired without effort by an astonishingly lucky chance—

They peered at it more closely, Fafhrd slowly turning it round. The carving on the ring part, as far as one could make out, represented a sea monster dragging down a ship. It was highly stylized, however, and there was little detail. One might be mistaken. What puzzled the Mouser most, since he had traveled to far places and knew much of the world, was that he did not recognize the style.

But in Fafhrd the Northerner, it had roused strange memories. Recollections of certain legends told round the flickering driftwood fires through the long Northern nights; tales of great seafarings and distant raids made in ancient days; firelight glimpses of certain bits of loot taken by some uncountably distant ancestor and considered too traditionally significant to barter or sell or even give away; ominously vague warnings used to frighten little boys who were inclined to swim or sail too far out. For a moment his green eyes clouded and his windburned face became serious, but only for a moment.

"A pretty enough thing, you'll agree," he said, laughing. "Whose door do you think it unlocks? Some king's mistress', I'd say. It's big enough for a king's finger." He tossed it up, caught it, and wiped it on the rough cloth of his tunic.

"I wouldn't wear it," said the Mouser. "It's a bad omen, as is plain to see. It was probably eaten from a drowned man's hand and has sucked poison from the sea ooze. Throw it back."

"And fish for a bigger one?" asked Fafhrd, grinning. "No, I'm content with this." He thrust it down on the middle finger of his left hand, doubled up his fist, and surveyed it critically. "Good for bashing people with, too," he remarked.

Then, feeling restless and seeing a big fish flash out of the water and almost flop into the cockpit, Fafhrd snatched up his bow, fitted to the string a featherless arrow whose head was barbed and heavily weighted, and stared down over the side, one foot extended along the outrigger. A light, waxed line was attached to the arrow.

The Mouser watched him, not without envy, Fafhrd, big, rangy man that he was, seemed to acquire an altogether new litheness and sureness of movement whenever they were on shipboard. He became as nimble as the Mouser was on shore. The Mouser was no landlubber and could swim as well as Fafhrd, but he always felt a trifle un-

easy when there was only water in sight, day in and day out, just as Fafhrd felt uneasy in cities, though relishing taverns and street fights. On shipboard the Mouser became cautious and apprehensive; he made a point of watching for slow leaks, creeping fires, tainted food and rotten cordage. He disapproved of Fafhrd's constant trying out of new rigs and waiting until the last moment before reefing sail. It irked him a little that he couldn't quite call it foolhardy.

Fafhrd continued to scan intently the swelling, sliding waters. His long, copper-red hair was shoved back over his ears and knotted securely with a bit of thong. He was clothed in rough, brownish tunic and trousers. Light leather slippers, easily kicked off, were on his feet. Belt, longsword, and other weapons were, of course, absent, wrapped away in oiled cloth against the rust. And there were no jewels or ornaments, save for the ring.

The Mouser's gaze shifted past him to where clouds were piling up a little on the horizon off the bow to starboard. He wondered, almost with relief, whether this mightn't be the dirty weather due them. He pulled his thin gray tunic closer at his throat, and shifted the tiller a little. The sun, near setting, projected his crouching shadow against the brownish sail.

Fafhrd's bow twanged and the arrow plummeted down. Line hissed from the reel he held in his arrow hand. He checked it with his thumb. It slackened a trifle, then jerked off toward the stern. Fafhrd's foot slipped, and slid along the outrigger until it stopped against the pontoon, a good three arm's lengths from the side. He let the other foot slide after it and lay there effortlessly braced, sea drenching his legs, playing the fish carefully so the line would not break, laughing and grunting satisfiedly.

"And what was your luck this time?" the Mouser asked afterward, as Fafhrd served them smoking-hot, white, tender flesh broiled over the firebox in the snug cabin forward. "Did you get a bracelet and necklace to match the ring?"

Fafhrd grinned with his mouth full, and did not answer, as if there were nothing in the world to do but eat. But when they stretched themselves out later in the starry, cloud-broken darkness alive with a racing wind from starboard that drove their craft along at an increasing speed, he began to talk.

"I think they called the land Simorgya. It sank under the sea ages ago. Yet even then my people had gone raiding against it, though it was a long sail out and a weary beat homeward. My memory's uncertain. I only heard scraps of talk about it when I was a little child. But I did see a few trinkets carved somewhat like this ring; just a very few. The legends, I think, told that the men of far Simorgya were mighty magicians, claiming

power over wind and wave. Yet the sea gulped them down for all that. Now they're there." He rotated his hand until his thumb pointed at the bottom of the boat. "My people, the legends say, went raiding against them one summer, and none of the boats returned, save one, which came back after hope had been lost, its men almost dead with thirst. They told of sailing on and on, and never reaching Simorgya, never sighting its rocky coast and squat, many-windowed towers. Only the empty sea. More raiders went out the next summer and the next, yet none ever found Simorgya."

"But in that case," questioned the Mouser sharply, "may we not even now be sailing over that sunken land? May not that very fish you caught have swum in and out the windows of those towers?"

"Who can say?" answered Fafhrd a little dreamily. "The ocean's big. If we're where we think we are—that is, halfway home—it might be the case. Or not. I do not know if there ever really was a Simorgya. The legend makers are great liars. In any case, that fish could hardly have been so ancient as to have eaten the flesh of a man of Simorgya."

"Nevertheless," said the Mouser in a small, flat voice, "I'd throw the ring away."

Fafhrd chuckled. His imagination was stirred, so that he saw the fabled land of Simorgya, not lightless and covered with great drifts of sea ooze, but as it once might have been, alive with ancient industry and commerce, strong with alien wizardry. Then the picture changed and he saw a long, narrow, twenty-oared galley, such as his people made, driving ahead into a stormy sea. There was the glint of gold and steel about the captain on the poop, and the muscles of the steersman cracked as he strained at the steering oar. The faces of the warrior-rowers were exultantly eager, dominated by the urge to rape the unknown. The whole ship was like a thirsty spearhead. He marveled at the vividness of the picture. Old longings vibrated faintly in his flesh. He felt the ring, ran his finger over the carving of the ship and monster, and again chuckled.

The Mouser fetched a stubby, heavy-wicked candle from the cabin and fixed it in a small horn lantern that was proof against wind. Hanging at the stern it pushed back the darkness a little, not much. Until midnight was the Mouser's watch. After a while Fafhrd slumbered.

He awoke with the feeling that the weather had changed and quick work was wanted. The Mouser was just coming to rouse him. The sloop was heeled over so that the starboard pontoon rode the crests of the waves. There was chilly spray in the wind. The lantern swung wildly. Only astern were stars visible. The Mouser brought the sloop into the wind, and Fafhrd took a triple

reef in the sail, while waves hammered at the bow, an occasional light crest breaking over.

When they were on their course again, he did not immediately join the Mouser, but stood wondering, for almost the first time, how the sloop would stand heavy seas. It was not the sort of boat he would have built in his Northern homeland, but it was the best that could be gotten under the circumstances. He had caulked and tarred it meticulously, replaced any wood that looked too weak, substituted a triangular sail for the square one, and increased the height of the bow a trifle. To offset a tendency to capsize, he had added outriggers a little astern of the mast, getting the strongest, truest wood for the long cross pieces, carefully steaming them into the proper shape. It was a good job, he knew, but that didn't change the fact that the boat had a clumsy skeleton and many hidden weaknesses. He sniffed the raw, salt air and peered to windward through narrowed eyes, trying to gauge the weather. The Mouser was saying something, he realized, and he turned his head to listen.

"Throw it away before she blows a hurricane!"

He smiled and made a wide gesture that meant "No." Then he turned back to gaze at the wild, glimmering chaos of darkness and waves to windward. Thoughts of the boat and the weather dropped away, and he was content to drink in the awesome, age-old scene, swaying to keep balance, feeling each movement of the boat and at the same time sensing, almost as if it were something akin to himself, the godless force of the elements.

It was then the thing happened that took away his power to react and held him, as it were, in a spell. Out of the surging wall of darkness emerged the dragon-headed prow of a galley. He saw the black wood of the sides, the light wood of the oars, the glint of wet metal. It was so like the ship of his imaginings that he was struck dumb with wonder as to whether it was only another vision, or whether he had had a foreglimpse of it by second sight, or whether he had actually summoned it across the deeps by his thoughts. It loomed higher, higher, higher.

The Mouser cried out and pushed over the tiller, his body arched with the mighty effort. Almost too late the sloop came out of the path of the dragon-headed prow. And still Fafhrd stared as at an apparition. He did not hear the Mouser's warning shout as the sloop's sail filled from the other side and slammed across with a rush. The boom caught him in the back of the knees and hurled him outward, but not into the sea, for his feet found the narrow pontoon and he balanced there precariously. In that instant an oar of the galley swung down at him and he toppled sideways, instinctively grasping the blade as he fell. The sea drenched him and wrenched at him, but

he clung tightly and began to pull himself up the oar, hand over hand.

His legs were numb; he feared he would be unable to swim. And he was still bewitched by what he saw. For the moment he forgot the Mouser and the sloop entirely. He shook off the greedy waves, reached the side of the galley, caught hold of the oarhole. Then he looked back and saw, in a kind of stupid surprise, the disappearing stern of the sloop and the Mouser's gray-capped face, revealed by a close swing of the lantern, staring at him in blank helplessness.

What happened next ended whatever spell had held him. A hand that carried steel struck. He twisted to one side and caught the wrist, then grasped the side of the galley, got his foot in the oarhole, on top of the oar, and heaved. The man dropped the knife too late, clawed at the side, failed to get a secure hold, and was dragged overboard, spitting and snapping his jaws in futile panic. Fafhrd, instinctively taking the offensive, sprang down onto the oarbench, which was the last of ten and half under the poop deck. His questing eyes spied a rack of swords and he whirled one out, menacing the two shadowy figures hastening toward him, one from the forward oarbenches, one from the poop. They attacked with a rush, but silently, which was strange. The spray-wet weapons sparked as they clashed.

Fafhrd fought warily, on guard for a blow from above, timing his lunges to the roll of the galley. He dodged a swashing blow and parried an unexpected backhanded slash from the same weapon. Stale, sour wine fumes puffed into his face. Someone dragged out an oar, and thrust it like a huge lance; it came between Fafhrd and the two swordsmen, crashing heavily into the sword rack. Fafhrd glimpsed a ratlike, beady-eyed, toothy face peering up at him from the deeper darkness back under the poop. One the swordsmen lunged wildly, slipped and fell. The other gave ground, then gathered himself for a rush. But he paused with his sword in midair, looking over Fafhrd's head as if at a new adversary. The crest of a great wave struck him in the chest, obscuring him.

Fafhrd felt the weight of water on his shoulders and clutched at the poop for support. The deck was at a perilous tilt. Water gushed up through the opposite oarholes. In the confusion, he realized, the galley had gotten into the troughs and was beginning to take the seas broadside. She wasn't built to stand that. He vaulted up out of another breaking wave onto the poop and added his strength to that of the lone struggling steersman. Together they strained at the great oar, which seemed to be set in stone instead of water. Inch by inch they fought they way across the narrow deck. None the less, the galley seemed doomed.

Then something—a momentary lessening of the wind and waves or perhaps a lucky pull by a forward oarsman—decided the issue. As slowly and laboriously as a waterlogged hulk the galley lifted and began to edge back into the proper course. Fafhrd and the steersman strained prodigiously to hold each foot gained. Only when the galley was riding safe before the wind did they look up. Fafhrd saw two swords leveled steadily at his chest. He calculated his chances and did not move.

It was not easy to believe that fire had been preserved through that tremendous wetting, but one of them nevertheless carried a sputtering tarry torch. By its light Fafhrd saw that they were Northerners akin to himself. Big, rawboned fellows, so blond they seemed almost to lack eyebrows. They wore metal-studded war gear and close-fitting bronze helmets. Their expressions were frozen halfway between a glare and a grin. Again he smelled stale wine. His glance strayed forward. Three oarsmen were bailing with bucket and hand crane.

Somebody was striding toward the poop—the leader, if one could guess from the gold and jewels and the air of assurance. He sprang up the short ladder, his limbs supple as a cat's. He seemed younger than the rest, and his features were almost delicate. Fine, silky, blond hair was plastered wetly against his cheeks. But there was feline rapacity in his tight, smiling lips, and there was craziness in his jewel-blue eyes. Fafhrd hardened his own face against their inspection. One question kept nagging him. Why, even at the height of the confusion, had there been no cries, no shouts, no bellowed orders? Since he had come aboard, there had not been a word uttered.

The young leader seemed to come to a conclusion about Fafhrd, for his thin smile widened a trifle and he motioned toward the oar deck. Then Fafhrd broke silence and said in a voice that sounded unnatural and hoarse, "What do you intend? Weigh well the fact that I saved your ship."

He tensed himself, noting with some satisfaction that the steersman stayed close beside him, as if recognizing that their shared task had forged a bond between them. The smile left the leader's face. He laid his finger to his lips and then impatiently repeated his first gesture. This time Fafhrd understood. He was to replace the oarsman he had pulled overboard. He could not but admit there was a certain ironic justice to the idea. It was borne in on him that swift death would be his lot if he renewed the fight at such a disadvantage; slow death, if he leaped overboard in the mad hope of finding the sloop in the howling, heaving darkness. The arms holding the swords

became taut. He curtly nodded his head in submission. At least they were his own people.

With the first feel of the heavy, rebellious water against the blade of his oar, a new feeling took hold of Fafhrd—a feeling with which he was not unfamiliar. He seemed to become part of the ship, to share its purposes, whatever they might be. It was the age-old spirit of the oarbench. When his muscles had warmed to the task and his nerves become accustomed to the rhythm, he found himself stealing glances at the men around him, as if he had known them before; trying to penetrate and share the eager, set look on their faces.

Something huddled in many folds of ragged cloth shuffled out from the little cabin far back under the poop, and held a leather flash to the lips of the opposite oarsman. The creature looked absurdly squat among such tall men. When it turned, Fafhrd recognized the beady eyes he had glimpsed before, and, as it came nearer, distinguished under the heavy cowl the wrinkled, subtle, ochre face of an aged Mingol.

"So you're the new one," the Mingol croaked jeeringly. "I liked your swordplay. Drink deep now, for Lavas Laerk my decide to sacrifice you to the sea gods before morning. But, mind you, don't dribble any."

Fafhrd sucked greedily, then almost coughed and spat when a gush of strong wine seared his throat. After a while the Mingol jerked the flask away.

"Now you know what Lavas Laerk feeds his oarsmen. There are few crews in this world or the next that row on wine." He chuckled humorlessly, but with a certain glee, then said, "But you're wondering why I talk aloud. Well, young Lavas Laerk may put a vow of silence on all his men, but he may not do the same to me, who am only a slave. For I tend the fire—how carefully you know—and serve out the wine and cook the meat, and recite incantations for the good of the ship. There are certain things that neither Lavas Laerk nor any other man, nor any other demon, may demand of me."

"But what does Lavas Laerk—"

The Mingol's leathery palm clapped down over Fafhrd's mouth and shut off the whispered question.

"*Sh!* Do you care so little for life? Remember, you are Lavas Laerk's henchman. But I will tell you, what you would know." He sat down on the wet bench beside Fafhrd, looking like a bundle of black rags someone had dropped there. "Lavas Laerk has sworn to raid far Simorgya, and he has put a vow of silence upon himself and his men until they sight the coast. *Sh! Sh!* I know they say Simorgya is under the waves, or that there never was such a place. But Lavas Laerk swore a great oath before his mother, whom he

hates worse than he hates his friends, and he killed a man who thought to question his decision. So it's Simorgya we seek, if only to steal pearls from the oysters and ravish the fishes. Lean down and row more easily for a space, and I will tell you a secret that's no secret and make a prophecy that's no prophecy." He crowded closer. "Lavas Laerk hates all men who are sober, for he believes—and rightly—that only drunken men are even a little like himself. Tonight the crew will row well, though it's a day since they've had meat. Tonight the wine will make them see at least the glow of the visions that Lavas Laerk sees. But next morning there will be aching backs and sick guts and pain-hammered skulls. And then there will be mutiny and even Lavas Laerk's madness will not save him."

Fafhrd wondered why the Mingol shuddered, coughed weakly and made a gargling sound. He reached over and a warm fluid drenched his naked hand. Then Lavas Laerk pulled his dirk from the back of the Mingol's neck and the Mingol rolled forward off the bench.

No word was spoken, but knowledge that some abominable deed had been committed passed from oarsman to oarsman through the stormy darkness until it reached the bench in the bow. Then gradually there began a kind of pent-up commotion, which increased markedly as there slowly percolated forward an awareness of the specially heinous nature of the deed—the murder of the slave who tended the fire and whose magical powers, though often scoffed at, were entwined with the destiny of the ship itself. Still no completely intelligible words, but low grunts and snarls and mutterings, the scrape of oars being drawn in and rested, a growing murmur in which consternation and fear and anger were mixed, and which washed back and forth between bow and poop like a wave in a tub. Half caught up by it, Fafhrd readied himself for a spring, though whether at the apprehensively motionless figure of Lavas Laerk or back toward the comparative safety of the poop cabin, he could not say. Certainly Lavas Laerk was doomed; or rather he would have been doomed, had not the steersman screamed from the poop in a great shaky voice, "Land ho! Simorgya! Simorgya!"

That wild cry, like a clawed skeletal hand, seized upon the agitation of the crew and wrenched it up to almost unbearable, because unexpected, climax. A shuddering inhalation of breath swept the ship. Then came shouts of wonder, cries of fear, foul curses that were half prayers. Two oarsmen started to fight together for no other reason than that the sudden, painful upgush of feeling demanded action of some sort, any sort. Another pushed wildly at his oar, screeching at the rest to follow his example and reverse the galley's

course and so escape. Fafhrd vaulted up on his bench and stared ahead.

It loomed up vast as a mountain and perilously close. A great black blot vaguely outlined by the lesser darkness of the night, partly obscured by trailings of mist and scud, yet showing in various places and at varying distances squares of dim light which by their regular arrangement could be nothing but windows. And with each pounding heartbeat the roar of the surf and the thunder of breaking waves grew louder.

All at once it was upon them. Fafhrd saw a great overhanging crag slide by, so close that it snapped the last oar on the opposite side. As the galley lifted on a wave he looked awestruck into three windows in the crag—if it was a crag and not a half submerged tower—but saw nothing save a ghostly yellow luminescence. Then he heard Lavas Laerk belowing commands in a harsh, high-pitched voice. A few of the men worked frantically at the oars, but it was too late for that, although the galley seemed to have gotten behind some protecting wall of rock into slightly calmer waters. A terrible rasping noise went the length of the keel. Timbers groaned and cracked. A last wave lifted them and a great grinding crash sent men reeling and tumbling. Then the galley stopped moving altogether and the only sound was the roar of the surf, until Lavas Laerk cried exultantly, "Serve out weapons and wine! Make ready for a raid!"

The words seemed incredible in this more than dangerous situation, with the galley broken beyond repair, gutted by the rocks. Yet the men rallied and seemed even to catch something of the wild eagerness of their master, who had proven to them that the world was no more sane than he.

Fafhrd watched them fetch torch after torch from the poop cabin, until the whole stern of the wreck smoked and flared. He watched them snatch and suck at the wineskins and heft the swords and dirks given out, comparing them and cleaving at the air to get the feel. Then some of them grabbed hold of him and hustled him to the sword rack, saying, "Here, Red Hair, you must have a weapon, too." Fafhrd went along unresisting, yet he felt that something would prevent them from arming one who had so late been their enemy. And he was right in this, for Lavas Laerk stopped the lieutenant who was about to hand Fafhrd a sword, and stared with growing intentness at Fafhrd's left hand.

Puzzled, Fafhrd raised it, and Lavas Laerk cried, "Seize him!" and at the same instant darted his own hand forward snakelike and jerked something from Fafhrd's middle finger. Then Fafhrd remembered. It was the ring.

"There can be no doubt about the workmanship," said Lavas Laerk, peering cunningly at Fafhrd, his bright blue eyes giving the impression

of being out of focus or slightly crossed. "This man is a Simorgyan spy, or perhaps a Simorgyan demon who has taken the form of a Northerner to allay our suspicions. He climbed out of the sea in the teeth of a roaring storm, did he not? What man among you saw any boat?"

"I saw a boat," ventured the steersman hurriedly. "A queer sloop with triangular sail—" But Lavas Laerk shut him up with a sidewise glance.

Fafhrd felt the point of a dirk at his back and checked his tightening muscles.

"Shall we kill him?" The question came from close behind Fafhrd's ear.

Lavas Laerk smiled crookedly up at the darkness and paused, as if listening to the advice of some invisible storm wraith. Then he shook his head. "Let him live for the present. He can show us where loot is hid. Guard him with naked swords."

Whereupon they all left the galley, clambering down ropes hung from the prow, which was furthest ashore, on to rocks which the shallowing surf alternately covered and uncovered. One or two laughed, and jumped. A dropped torch hissed out in the brine. There was much shouting. Some one began to sing in a drunken voice that had an edge like a rusty knife. Then Lavas Laerk got them into a sort of order and they marched away, half of them carrying torches, a few still hugging wineskins, sliding and slipping, cursing the sharp rocks and barnacles which cut them when they fell, hurling exaggerated threats at the darkness ahead, where strange windows glowed. Behind them the long galley lay like a dead beetle, the oars sprawled out from the ports all askew.

They had marched for some little distance, and the sound of breakers was less thunderous, when their torchlight helped reveal a portal in a great wall of black rock that might or might not have been a castle rather than a caverned cliff. The portal was square, and high as an oar. Three worn stone steps drifted with wet sand led up to it. Dimly they could discern on the side pillars, and on the heavy lintel overhead, carvings partly obliterated by slime and incrustations of some sort, but unmistakably Simorgyan in their obscure symbolism.

The crew, staring silently now, drew closer together. The ragged procession became a tight knot. Then Lavas Laerk called mockingly, "Where are your guards, Simorgya? Where are your fighting men?" And walked straight up the stone steps. After a moment of uncertainty and drawing back, the knot broke and the men followed him.

On the massive threshold Fafhrd involuntarily halted, dumbstruck by realization of the source of the faint yellow light he had earlier noticed in the high windows. For the source was everywhere;

ceiling, walls, and slimy floor all glowed with a wavering phosphorescence. Even the carvings glimmered. Mixed awe and repugnance gripped him. But the men pressed around and against him, and carried him forward. Wine and leadership had dulled their sensibilities and as they strode down the long corridor they seemed little aware of the abysmal scene.

At first some held their weapons ready to meet a possible foray or ambush, but soon they lowered them negligently, and even sucked at the wineskins and jested. A hulking oarsman, whose blond beard was patched with yellow scud from the surf, struck up a chanty, and others joined in, until the dank walls roared. Deeper and deeper they penetrated into the cave or castle, along the wide, winding, ooze-carpeted corridor.

Fafhrd was carried along as by a current. When he moved too slowly, the others jostled him and he quickened his pace, but it was all involuntary. Only his eyes responded to his will, turning from side to side, drinking in details with fearful curiosity. The endless series of vague carvings, wherein sea monsters and unwholesome manlike figures and vaguely anthropomorphic giant skates or rays seemed to come alive and stir a little as the phosphorescence fluctuated. A group of high-set windows or openings of some sort, from which dark slippery weeds trailed down. The little pools of water here and there. The still-alive, gasping fish which the others trod or kicked aside. The clumps of bearded shells clinging to the corners. The impression of things scuttling out of the way ahead. Louder and louder the thought drummed in his skull: Surely the others must realize where they were. Surely they must know the phosphorescence was that of the sea. Surely they must know this was the retreat of the more secret creatures of the deep. Surely, surely they must know that Simorgya had indeed sunk under the sea and had only risen up yesterday—or yester-hour.

But on they marched after Lavas Laerk, and still they sang and shouted and swilled wine in quick gulps, throwing their heads back and lifting up the sacks as they strode. And Fafhrd could not speak. His shoulder muscles were contracted, as if the weight of the sea were already pressing down upon them. His mind was engulfed and oppressed by the ominous presence of sunken Simorgya. Memories of the legends. Thoughts of the black centuries during which sea life had slowly crept and wriggled and swam through the mazes of rooms and corridors until it had a lair in every crack and cranny, and Simorgya was one with the mysteries of ocean. In a deep grotto that opened on the corridor he made out a thick table of stone, with a great stone chair behind it; and, though he could not be sure, he thought he distinguished an octopus shape slouched there in a trav-

esty of a human occupant, tentacles coiling the chair, unblinking eyes staring glisteningly.

Gradually the flare of the smoky torches paled, as the phosphorescence grew stronger. And when the men broke off singing, the sound of the surf was no longer audible.

Then Lavas Laerk, from around a sharp turn in the corridor, uttered a triumphant cry. The others hastened after, stumbling, lurching, calling out eagerly.

"Oh, Simorgya!" cried Lavas Laerk, "we have found your treasure house!"

The room in which the corridor ended was square and—an odd thing—considerably lower-ceilinged than the corridor. Standing here and there were a number of black, soggy-looking, heavily bound chests. The stuff underfoot was muckier. There were more pools of water. The phosphorescence was stronger.

The blond-bearded oarsman leaped ahead as the others hesitated, and wrenched at the cover of the nearest chest. A corner came away in his hands, the wood soft as cheese, the seeming metal a black smeary ooze. He struck at it again and sheared off most of the top, revealing a layer of dully-gleaming gold and slime-misted gems. Over that jeweled surface a crablike creature scuttled, escaping through a hole in the back.

With a great, greedy shout, the others rushed at the chests, jerking, gouging, even smiting with their swords at the spongy wood. Two, fighting as to which one should break open a certain chest, fell against it; and it went to pieces under them, leaving them struggling together in jewels and muck.

All this while Lavas Laerk stood on the same spot from which he had uttered his first taunting cry. To Fafhrd, who stood forgotten beside him, it seemed that Lavas Laerk was distraught that his quest should come to any end, that Lavas Laerk was desperately searching for something further, something more than jewels and gold to sate his mad willfulness. Then he noted that Lavas Laerk was looking at something intently—a square, slime-filmed, but apparently golden door across the room from the mouth of the corridor; upon it was the carving of some strange, undulant blanketlike sea monster. He heard Lavas Laerk laugh throatily, and watched him stride unswervingly toward the door. He saw that Lavas Laerk had something in his hand. With a shock of surprise he recognized it as the ring Lavas Laerk had taken from him. He saw Lavas Laerk shove at the door without budging it. He saw Lavas Laerk fumble with the ring and fit the key part into the golden door and turn it. He saw the door give a little to Lavas Laerk's next push.

Then he realized—and the realization came with an impact like a rushing wall of water—that nothing had happened accidentally, that everything,

from the moment his arrow struck the fish, had been intended by someone or something—something that wanted a door unlocked—and he turned and fled down the corridor as if a tidal wave were sucking at his heels.

The corridor, without torchlight, was pale and shifty as a nightmare. The phosphorescence seemed to crawl as if alive, revealing previously unspied creatures in every niche. Fafhrd stumbled, sprawled at full length, raced on. His fastest bursts of speed seemed slow as in a bad dream. He tried to look only ahead, but still glimpsed from the corners of his eyes every detail he had seen before; the trailing weeds, the monstrous carvings, the bearded shells, the sombrely staring octopus eyes. He noted without surprise that his feet and body glowed wherever the slime had splashed or smeared. He saw a small square of blackness in the omnipresent phosphorescence and sprinted toward it. It grew in size. It was the cavern's portal. He plunged across the threshold into the night. He heard a voice calling his name.

It was the Gray Mouser's voice. It came from the opposite direction to the wrecked galley. He ran toward it across uneven treacherous rock ledges. Starlight, now come back, showed a black gulf before his feet. He leaped out, landed with a shaking impact on another rock surface, dashed forward without falling. He saw the top of a mast above an edge of blackness, and almost bowled over the small figure coming toward him. He ignored the Mouser's questions, seized him by the shoulder, dragged him with him to the edge, pulled him over forcibly. They clove the water together and swam out to the sloop anchored in the rock-sheltered lee. The Mouser started to heave at the anchor but Fafhrd slashed the line with a knife snatched from the Mouser's belt, and jerked up the sail in swift, swishing rushes.

Slowly the sloop began to move. Gradually the ripples became wavelets, and the wavelets became smacking waves. Then they slipped past a black, foam-edged sword of rock and were in the open sea. Still Fafhrd did not speak, but crowded on all canvas and did all else possible to coax speed from the storm-battered sloop. Resigned to mystification, the Mouser helped him.

They had not been long underway when the blow fell. The Mouser looking sternward, gave a hoarse, incredulous cry. The wave swiftly overtaking them was higher than the mast. And something was sucking the sloop back. The Mouser raised his arms shieldingly over his head. Then the sloop began to climb; up, up, up until it reached the top, overbalanced, and plummeted down the opposite side. The first wave was followed by a second, and a third, and a fourth, each almost as high. A larger boat would have surely

been swamped. Finally the waves gave way to a choppy, foaming, unpredictable chaos, in which every ounce of effort and a thousand quick decisions were needed to keep the sloop afloat.

When the pale foredawn came, they were back on the homeward course again, a small improvised sail taking the place of the one ripped in the aftermath of the storm, enough water bailed from the hold to make the sloop seaworthy. Fafhrd, dazedly watching for the sunrise, felt weak as a woman. He only half heard the Mouser tell, in snatches, of how he had lost the galley in the storm, but followed what he guessed to be its general course until the storm cleared and he sighted the strange island and landed there, mistakenly believing it to be the galley's home port.

The Mouser then brought thin, bitter wine and salt fish, but Fafhrd pushed them away and said, "One thing I must know. I never looked back. But while we were getting out of the cove, I saw you stare long and earnestly at that accursed rock. What did you see?"

The Mouser shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. The distance was too great and the light was queer. What I thought I saw was rather foolish. I'd have given a good deal to have been closer." He frowned, shrugged his shoulders again. "Well, what I thought I saw was this. A crowd of men wearing big black cloaks—they looked like Northerners—came rushing out of an opening of some sort. There was something odd about them; the light by which I saw them didn't seem to have any source. Then they waved the big black cloaks around as if they were fighting with them or doing some sort of dance . . . I told you it was very foolish . . . and then they got down on their hands and knees and covered themselves up with the cloaks and crawled back into the place from which they had come. Now tell me I'm a liar."

Fafhrd shook his head. "Only those weren't cloaks," he said after a while in a small voice.

The Mouser began to sense that there was much more to it than he had even guessed. "What were they, then?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Fafhrd.

"But what was the place, then? I mean the island that almost sucked us down when it sank?"

"Simorgya," said Fafhrd, and lifted his head, and began to grin in a cruel, chilly, wild-eyed way that took the Mouser aback. "Simorgya," repeated Fafhrd, and pulled himself to the side of the boat and glared down at the rushing water. "Simorgya. And now it's sunk again. And, may it soak there forever, and rot in its own corruption, till all's muck!" He trembled spasmodically with the passion of his curse, then sank back. Along the rim of the east a ruddy smudge began to show.