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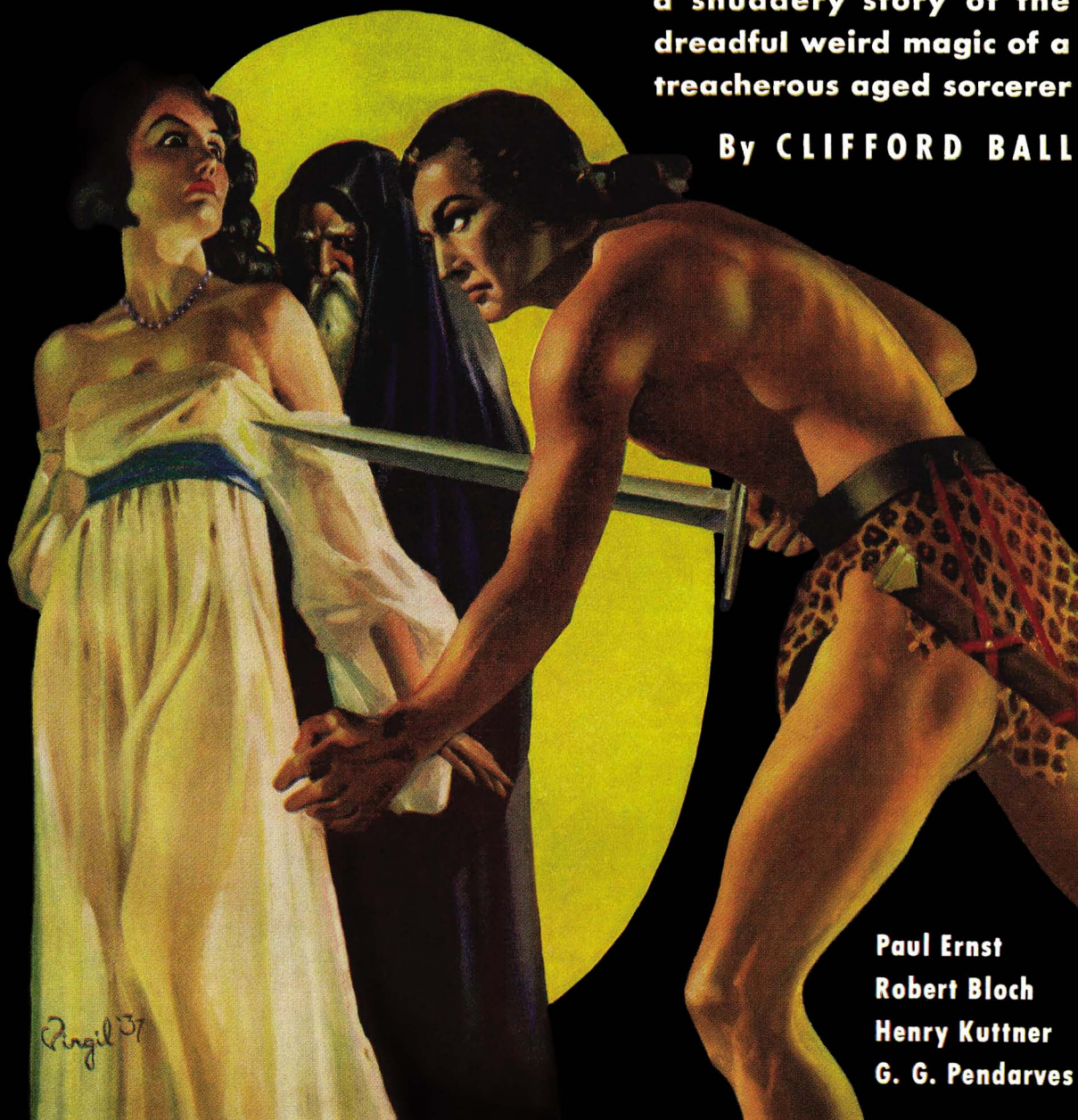
# Weird Tales

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## THE THIEF of FORTHE

a shuddery story of the  
dreadful weird magic of a  
treacherous aged sorcerer

By CLIFFORD BALL



Paul Ernst  
Robert Bloch  
Henry Kuttner  
G. G. Pendarves

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

# Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Thief of Forthe

By CLIFFORD BALL

*A swift-moving, romantic story of a thief who coveted a kingdom, and the appalling secret of an old magician*

THE crude stone chamber was lighted only by the flickering flame of a single torch thrust into a crevice in the wall. Wrenched by the drafts of the dank underground dungeon, it cast fitful gleams over the features of the two figures seated at opposite sides of the low rock table occupying the exact center of the small enclosure. This article, with the two chairs supporting the men, alone graced the bareness of this sunken hole that had, in a bygone age, echoed with the groans of tortured and dying men. The walls were damp with the moisture of eons.

"I grant you," argued Karlk, the magician, stroking his long beard with the slender fingers of a woman, "that Thrall has been a fair king. Yes. But not a good one."

"Good enough for me!" grumbled the other, more powerful man. He struck a clenched fist on the stone of the table to emphasize his insistence, at the same time eyeing the black-cowled figure of Karlk with tiny fires of suspicion in the depths of his long-lashed gray eyes.

In all the kingdom of Forthe there could hardly have been found two men of such different types. The magician was of slender frame, of small features, and delicate hands and feet. He had never appeared in any other costume than the one he now wore—a long robe of ebon silk almost touching the ground as he walked, held by a twisted cord at the waist. A black cowl covered his head; the heavy beard and hirsute growth before the ears left only the flashing, malignant

eyes and the thin nostrils visible. There were many whispers to the effect that Karlk was not really of the race of men and that if anyone would have the unthinkable courage to uncover his person, he would discover, not a human form, but some monstrosity impossible for the mind of mankind to imagine.

The other man was virtually naked. Beyond the breech-clout he wore and the sandals on his feet his only article of adornment was the slender sword dangling by his side. To this his right hand frequently strayed; obviously the weapon was almost part of the man. He had known the clash of steel in combat; convincing proofs of this were the great scars that crossed one another over many parts of his naked flesh. Unlike the magician he was clean-shaven, his hair bound in the back by a thin gold chain. The well-shaped skull gave proof that brain backed his brawn. Relaxed, as an animal of the wild rests, he still gave the impression of a creature ready to spring into snarling, ferocious battle. He had cause for alertness, for he was Rald, prince among thieves.

"Good enough!" repeated the thief. "What cause have you against Thrall? Didn't he save your accursed skin the time that missing guardsman was found outside these walls crawling on all fours and barking like a dog? And didn't I see the poor devil myself before they mercifully cut off his head—a head with long, pointed, furry ears on it? Thrall covered your deviltry, didn't he?"

"An unfortunate experiment. One of

my servants neglected his watch over the—man. He wandered outside." Karik fingered his beard reminiscently. "The king had my 'experiment' destroyed, so my stupid servant reluctantly took its place."

Rald spat on the stones of the floor.

"I have encountered murderers I liked better!"

"You do not fear me, Rald?" inquired the magician, gently.

"When I learn how to fear, I'll seek another profession, oh frightener of children!"

"Even brave men can be taught."

There was a note of menace in the low tones.

Rald shrugged. "Don't threaten me. I am no housewife screaming at shadows in the streets. I came here tonight to learn why you desired a member of my profession. If you pull any of your filthy tricks I'll pull that crusty beard of yours and maybe see more of your face."

The eyes of the magician gleamed red. "Look, Rald," he said, "and see how men have died!"

He extended his left hand with outspread fingers pointing at the blackness of the damp walls. A second, two sec-



"On one terrible day a princess of Forthe became a captive."

onds, and still Karlk remained immobile. Then a pale light appeared to spread over the skin of the hand, the digits became phosphorescent and tiny blue sparks emerged suddenly at the fingertips. Five streaks of blue light ran from the outstretched arm to the wall. Portions of the age-old solid stones broke into slivers and rattled to the floor.

RALD'S eyes opened a trifle wider, but he grinned and spat again. "Before you could have gotten that devilish power—whatever it is—as far as your elbow I'd have cut your arm off right there had you pointed it at me! You'll get no allegiance from me with threats, oh wizard! Better offer me wine; these accursed dungeons chill me more than they do you. What do you want of me, Karlk?"

"Not to disagree, my friend."

"I am not your friend. You have none."

"For which I am grateful. Friends mean compromises. I deal in bargains—and get better results."

"What bargain do you seek with me?" Rald's eyes were as watchful as the beasts of the jungles, and now his hand stayed on the sword-hilt.

"I wish you to steal something for me."

Rald expelled a mouthful of air derisively. "Then why all this talk of kings and magic? Of course you want me to steal! For what other purpose would you summon Rald? What seek you, wizard, that your magic cannot obtain? Some of Thrall's jewels?—a stone or two from the Inner Temple? No women, mind you! I don't deal in them. What is the bargain and what my reward?"

Rald expanded his chest; he was proud with the pride of an expert in his profession.

Karlk laughed shortly, wickedly. "Jewels? The prizes of the temples? Ha! From the playgrounds for children un-

learnt in the mysteries of the skies! I seek a greater prize, something so earthly my *unearthly* hands cannot touch it without the aid of your nimble fingers, oh Rald! *I seek the kingdom of Forthe!*"

Shocked, the notorious thief started upright in the stone chair. Bewilderment strained his countenance; incredulity stamped horror on his features as he sought to comprehend blasphemy.

"Forthe!" he exclaimed. "Forthe! Why—none but the Seven Gods could steal Forthe from King Thrall of the Ebon Dynasty!"

"Except Karlk," amended the magician.

"Steal Forthe!" muttered Rald. "Rebellion—treachery—millions to bribe—for what? A powerful kingdom—aye! But who shall rule it, granting you gain it? You with the blood of its peoples on your hands and the terror of yourself in their hearts?"

The magician's voice became a whisper. "King Rald!" he said.

A silent moment passed before the agile brain of the thief encompassed the significance of Karlk's intentions, so utterly bizarre the idea of stealing Forthe appeared, but abruptly the outlaw was himself again as his natural daring and coolness won over the startled instincts of generations.

"I see," he said slowly. "The bargain, eh? And your share?"

"A trifling matter, oh my king!" the magician mocked. "Merely the—shall we say?—voice behind the throne. A whisper now and then. No interference with your politics, understand. I am a scientist. Just a little more freedom for—experiments, a condescension in——"

"For deviltry, which I like not! To Nargarth's pits with you, Karlk!"

The magician's face remained unaltered; one would have thought the dark beard below the piercing eyes only a

mask. He began to whisper, insinuatingly:

"Jewels of the empire, viands and wines from the slopes of Ygoth, dancing-girls from Ynema—perhaps even the Lady Thrine for yourself, oh father of a new dynasty!"

The thief's head lowered an inch or so as he contemplated a vision. His hand slipped from the hilt of his sword. Rald dreamed a dream of empire, as many powerful men had done before, as many more would do in ages yet unborn.

**B**ELOW the golden shafts of the low-riding moon that was suspended in magnificent splendor far out over the desert sands leading to the neighboring kingdom of Ygoth, the black towers of King Thrall's palace raised forbidding fingers into the midnight sky. An omniscience of the past hovered over those ragged skylines; a susceptible observer might have imagined the flickering spirits of bygone kings floating to and fro among the crumbling turrets, guarding the castle walls and casting watchful eyes over the mansions and huts of the surrounding countryside; ghosts watching over Thrall, the last king of the Ebon Dynasty—a king with no heir to carry on the ancient line.

On the rugged rocks below the outer walls of the palace grounds, his naked body immersed to the waist in green foliage, his brain seething with plans for the most daring, wildest attempt of his adventurous career, stood Rald, the cunning and intrepid thief of Forthe. His heart, for all his outward calm, pounded a little harder beneath his ribs; there was a tingling in his blood not born of wine. Bodily he responded to all the oft-known thrills of the prowl; only in his clever brain (now somewhat benumbed by the magnitude of his enterprise) dwelt the shadowy doubts engendered by the past prescience of the magician, Karlk.

He was too far removed from the patrolled gateways for guards to spy him in the desert moonlight, yet he slunk toward the walls more like an animal than a man. Desert winds and the erosion of time had emptied many crevices between the rocks comprising the stone barrier. Cat-like, his fingers and toes found purchase in these gaps, and in less time than he had expected he attained the summit of the wall. Here he paused to reach with cautious fingers so as to ascertain the positions of certain ragged sword-blades, spear-heads, cracked glass and other obstacles embedded in the ledge to dissuade an intruder. Having located these, he pulled himself upward, pushing several of the rusty defenses aside as he progressed, and glided across the few exposed feet of stone in a crouching position. The inner wall was even more eroded than the outer side; he experienced little difficulty in negotiating a descent. Easily he stood within the palace grounds. Without a sense of sacrilege, he reflected, many a thief would have been before him.

The kitchens of the palace were his first objective. At this hour he knew they would be deserted by cooks and staff. Accordingly, he proceeded in a semicircular direction toward the rear of the massive structure of the king's dwelling-place. He threaded his way through underbrush and gardens of flowers. Once he spied a carved statue so like the figure of a living man that he half drew his sword before discovering his mistake. Cursing, he set a foot in a shallow pool evidently intended for fish. This incident inflamed his temper, and he continued toward the palace with little nerves twitching in his throat and wrists. The discomfort of a soaked and dripping sandal did not decrease his anger.

A thin piece of steel, a thieves' implement expertly applied, soon forced the small kitchen door opening onto the ref-

use pits. Closing the violated barrier quietly behind him, he traversed three deserted cellars fragrant with the odors of cold meats and rich wines. A series of stone steps, moonlit through narrow apertures in the castle walls, led him to the upper floors and the long corridors and high arches of the palace halls.

Rald, like many others born in the huts that clustered the hillsides under the protection of their kingdom's castle, knew practically the entire plan of the structure's architecture through generations of village people who had rendered service within its massive walls, servants that would have gasped, terror-stricken, if they could have observed the practical use to which their idle gossip and hearsay comments were being put this night.

But the thief did not know the posts of the palace guards, so he trod carefully, dodging the thin streaks of moonlight from the narrow slits in the walls. Beyond his suppressed breathing all was quiet as the grave. If guarding spirits wished to clamor in warning alarms, they were powerless to do so, though Thrall's throne was in greater danger than it had ever been before and the fate of the Ebon Dynasty was balancing in the palms of the Seven Gods, all because of a slim, powerful, half-naked figure stealing with drawn sword through the empty corridors of Forthe's ancient palace.

**A**T A turning in the hall the intruder suddenly halted and, in animal fashion, hunched his shoulder muscles. The sword quivered in his hand like an animate thing about to make its kill. Before him a dim shadow resolved itself into the figure of a man stretched outright upon the flagging of the paved floor. He wore the uniform of a member of the palace guards. His hands were raised far above his head, far from his sword-hilt, in close

proximity to a thin-necked earthenware bottle. He breathed stertorously.

"Drunk!" exulted the thief. "Oh my king! My royal fool!" The bottle gurgled momentarily in Rald's hand. "Fair," he opined, judiciously. "Much better than some I've stolen, King Thrall!"

His eyes fell upon the carved door before which the stupefied guard lay inert. "Perhaps," he whispered softly, "perhaps *this* is the room!"

A delicate twitch of the door's lever, with an eye on the unconscious form at his feet, and he was peering into the chamber. A beam of moonlight flowed through draped tapestries to illuminate a lengthy couch holding a form undoubtedly female; the outlines were unmistakable. The shape was obvious, but the head of the figure was averted and only a smooth white cheek could be seen among the tumbled confusion of robes and cushions. Rald closed the door as silently as he had opened it.

"A mistress, perhaps. Or a wench. No—a mistress. Or why the guard?"

As noiseless as ever, his lean shadow sped down the corridor; only the appreciatively lowered liquid line of the wine-container testified that the thief of Forthe had ever come or gone.

At length he paused where two huge doors of semicircular design formed an oval indentation in the wall. The portals were plain and unmarked by even the royal heraldry; but a single bar, fitted into protruding slots on either side of the entrance, was covered by a tiny network of cabalistic writings. Rald, stooping to peer at the engraving in the dim moonlight, made out enough of its meaning to comprehend a warning bestowing the curses of the Seven Gods upon the mortal who would dare to lift the bar from its niche unless bidden to do so directly by

Thrall of the Ebon Dynasty, Keeper of the Necklace and rightful King of Forthe.

"Faith!" exclaimed Rald to himself; "if ever *my* name is written there instead of Thrall's (and *that* is a question!) there'll be a pair of six-foot guardsmen standing on either side of this door to lend the gods a hand—or a sword-arm!"

He slipped his sword into its scabbard, cautiously so that it would not rasp, and lifted both hands to the bar. Although a confirmed atheist, he felt a tingle in his nerve centers for his own daring in thus grasping a thing forbidden by the gods to human hands, and a slight chill raced down his spine as his fingers encountered the cold metal. For a moment the shadows appeared to be dancing on the stones of the wall—or was it that the walls themselves were quivering like sentient organisms?

"King Rald!" he asserted, reassuringly, and wrenched the bar from its sockets.

It felt inordinately heavy in his hands, surprizingly heavy for a piece of metal hardly thicker than the sword he swung so lightly; his heart, which had been pulsing in faster tempo for the moment, only regained its normal rate when he stood the forbidden barrier softly against the farther wall. A faint dew moistened his forehead. It was easy enough to shock the wenches of the taverns with blasphemy against the Seven, but here in the dim and time-hallowed halls of ancient Castle Forthe their dark and secret powers seemed very menacing indeed.

"*King Rald!*" he repeated, and paused, startled. Unconsciously he had spoken aloud, and the sound of his voice tearing asunder the stillness within the aged and sacred corridors caused him to crouch and quiver like a wild thing. An instant; then, superstition forgotten, he became the cynical thief again. He amended his late boast in a whisper: "*Fool Rald!*"

THE oval doorway was no longer an obstacle. Before a gentle push of a hand the double doors swung inward. Rald was amazed to see the room beyond lit by three great torches stuck at intervals along the walls; so closely had the portals been fitted that not a single ray of light escaped their edges, and his abrupt transition from moonbeams to firelight left him momentarily in blinking uncertainty. Recovering, he saw that the chamber was unguarded and promptly closed the doors to prevent any unexpected gleams from alarming a chance guard.

The room was not large; it contained none of the great statues or scarred armor of long-deceased kings that obstructed so many of the public halls to remind a properly awe-stricken populace of the might of the dead. The walls were covered with fold upon fold of black velvet tapestries; bare stones appeared only where niches held the huge ironwood torches that would burn, untended, for weeks without replacement. Opposite the entrance stood a low dais supporting the carved seats of the double throne of King Thrall and his royal sister, the Lady Thrine. Here was the Inner Council chamber where foreign emissaries were interviewed, where treaties involving peace and war and politics were signed, where only the great were welcome and death was the penalty for the unbidden.

Hanging high between the cushions of the double throne and outlined in stark simplicity against the background of black velvet, its thousand facets pouring a brilliance of colors in great cascades under the flickering beams from the torches, gleamed the legendary Necklace of the Ebon Dynasty.

It was the objective of Rald's quest.

The Necklace was composed of a string of fifty diamonds, each one itself worthy of the ransom of a king, and the lot, in



their magnificent entirety, of fabulous value. But the chief virtue of the heirloom lay not in its marketable worth, but in the legendary credits supposedly bestowed upon it by the multiple blessings of the Seven Gods when, eons ago, they granted the rights of kingship to the Ancient One who had been the first King of Forthe and the subsequent founder of the dynasty. When the reigning king held serious council, or signed a treaty with a neighboring power, or on rare occasions was called upon to dispense justice upon an important trial or disagreement, he solemnly and reverently took down the gold-clasped chain of matchless diamonds and with his own hands placed them about his neck. From the decision he then rendered there could be no appeal; it became immutable and final. It was the Necklace, apparently, that gave verdict, not the man or even the king.

Hence the reasoning of Karlk, the magician: Many kings had worn the Necklace in judicial omnipotence, until the people of Forthe saw the *wearer* as a representative of the Seven Gods; if a man wore it, whether or not he bore the mark of a crown, would not that man, by the very right of his having procured the sacred authority from a lackadaisical monarch, claim the right of kingship? And what man in all Forthe possessed the daring, initiative, cunning and combined fearlessness and resourcefulness, accomplishments so necessary to the undertaking of the theft, but Rald, prince of thieves? A barbarous type, perhaps, but one who, drunk with power and recently acquired authority, should be easy handling. A magician could never be a king, he knew, over people already in fear of evil enchantments; but a clever fighting-man could hold both the throne and the loyalty of its subjects while he, Karlk, pulled strings to make the puppet dance.

A beautiful dream come true, reasoned Karlk, because of flawless logic.

The thief gazed upon destiny in the shape of diamonds and dreamed a dream of magnificence, forgetting he stood sacrilegiously on forbidden ground in a castle holding torture and death for a captured criminal. The sparkle of the jewels fascinated him and he crept nearer to their dazzling beauty as a hypnotized bird approaches the maw of a deadly snake. For a moment he forgot Karlk and kingship and power. Primarily, he was a thief born and bred—and here were jewels!

**T**HE cool voice from behind fell upon his ears as if the speaker had wielded a club.

"Greetings, oh prowler of the night! You must be either a very brave or a very foolish man to come here!"

Rald leaped instinctively, twisting in midair, and came down on his toes a full six feet from where he had been standing. When he left the floor his back had been presented to the doorway; now he confronted the intruder with drawn sword and breath hissing from between clenched teeth. No cat of the jungles could have reacted more animal-like.

"By the rump of Nargarth!" swore the newcomer with feeling. "Quit jumping like an ape!"

"Faith!" exclaimed Rald. His hand had stayed his sword-point within scant inches of a woman's breast. "Faith!"

"By the hounds of——"

"Easy!" he grinned, regaining natural composure. "Easy, or I blush!"

For a pair of seconds they surveyed each other in silence.

Rald looked upon a bravely held figure in night attire. Even the formless garment, loosely clasped about the waist by a gold-threaded belt, could not disguise the curving beauty of a flawless shape. The long white robe fell in revealing

lines to tiny feet incased in leather sandals. Her raven-black hair, unbound, framed patrician features before it cascaded in luxurious curls to the slender waist. The level eyes, serene brow and aristocratic lips cried denial to any station of servitude; here was no castle wench.

With a suddenly inspired comprehension Rald knew her, knew also a gleam in his eyes had betrayed his recognition by the lift of her firm chin. On previous occasions he had been permitted to view her stately figure from a distance as the parade of royalty passed in the streets, but now, for the first time in his checkered career, he held private audience with one of the mighty so often described to him as "his betters." But, even as realization brought a twinge of the old awe of royalty to penetrate his unlawful impulses, the thought came to Rald that, after all, this was a woman, a beautiful and brave woman, and one to be desired even if she was the Lady Thrine, sister to the King of Forthe.

Thrine saw a half-naked barbarian, powerfully built and of challenging demeanor, who had broken into the most sacred chamber of the monarchy, and her rage was boundless. She forgot any probable need of assistance from the palace retinue. Sacrilege had been performed.

"What seek you here?" she demanded, imperiously.

The sword-point poised so few inches from her breast had not wavered, she noticed, and a tiny tremor of doubt as to the wisdom of her adventure began to seep into her mind. Had it been really so delightfully intriguing—or wise—not to have alarmed the castle when she discovered the presence of an intruder? Would the temporary thrill derived from tracking the unknown through the black corridors, without summoning her brother's minions, compensate her for the eternity

of death? Nerve stimulation of any kind, she decided, was so rare in Castle Forthe that perhaps the exception was worthy of the risk.

"What seek you?" she repeated, and if her voice had become a little choked it was no doubt due to the night drafts of the long passageways.

"Fame, My Lady Thrine! And fortune, too!" His sword wavered a trifle as its circling tip encompassed the Necklace on the wall, but returned almost immediately to its former threatening position.

"You would dare!" gasped Thrine. "The Necklace! No one has ever dared to think of stealing the Necklace!"

"Therefore—fame!" smiled Rald. Receiving the lady's inspired awe, he felt, was the same as if an accolade had been conferred upon him for professional skill.

"You must be an unusual thief," surmised Thrine, with half-closed eyes. "I have heard of one of great dexterity called——"

"Rald."

"Men call you Rald?"

"That—and other things!"

"You—you"—a wave of anger became again obvious in the lady's tones—"you dared, too, to enter my bedchamber?"

"Faith! Was that you?" The sword lowered an inch or two. "I understand the guard now. But I thought you a——"

"Yes?"

"A very beautiful woman, my Lady! And the suggested aspiration is beyond your humble subject; rare jewels, perhaps, but—the first Lady of Forthe!" Rald rolled his eyeballs skyward in condemnation.

"What a perfect rogue!" commented Thrine as if speaking to an non-existent third person. She was no longer afraid and her tones were smooth again.

FOR a minute there was silence in the chamber, a silence broken only by the slight hissing of the burning torches.

"It appears, my Lady Thrine, we have approached checkmate in both our enterprises," Rald declared presently. "I have the Necklace; you have me."

"You have also a sword."

"And you a beauty I cannot impair. And a voice with which to scream."

"You propose that I—scream?"

"You may decide. There may be dead men before I gain the city streets again, friends of yours you would not care to endanger——"

"If I promise you safe-conduct and freedom?"

"Pardon, my Lady! Even you could not promise safety to one who has committed the unspeakable crime of coveting the Necklace. I came for it; I shall leave with it or rest these bones for ever here."

"I will relieve her of the responsibility, King Rald," said Karlk from the semi-darkness of the doorway.

"Karlk!" exclaimed the thief.

Thrine uttered a low cry.

"King?"

"If you come through the corridors and the guards so easily, why did you seek my services?" asked Rald.

"My powers can blind the guards at the gates and still the watchdogs in their kennels. I can cause a mist over the torches and heavy sleep to the guarding spirits. But I could not raise the bar to this chamber, as I saw you do in my glass. That was the obstacle, Rald. The mere lifting of that bar made you king of Forthe!"

"And thief and traitor, too!" sneered Thrine.

Somehow her words and tone struck Rald to the heart. He looked into her icy eyes and the chill of them entered his soul.

"We can spare the lady now," said Karlk, ominously.

His slender fingers rose to the level of the woman's neck. Thrine guessed at his intent. Her fear vanished; in the face of certain death the dynasty's blood would not permit her to cringe, so she stood unafraid and defiant. There was no glint of admiration in the magician's eyes, but only intense cruelty and pleasant satisfaction. Rald, watching him, knew that the blue sparks would writhe and twist that beauteous form in another second.

"Wait!" he cried, and was surprized at the intensity, the noisy recklessness, of his own voice.

"Hold!" commanded sterner tones. From the shadows beyond the black-robed figure of Karlk, where the forgotten portals swung wide, a slender sword-tip flickered through the air to rest at the magician's throat.

"By the Seven!" swore Rald. "Does none sleep in this cursed palace?"

"Only my precious guardsmen, it seems!" declared the latest arrival in deep and bitter tones.

The man moved into the torchlight as he spoke, and the sudden wild glitterings of a thousand steel corners on his fighting-mail danced on the black tapestries. His head was bare and proudly borne. The hawk-like features, level gray eyes, thin nostrils and dominant chin were familiar to the thief, whose own countenance paled.

"King Thrall!"

"By your leave, my unknown and unannounced guest!" The king's sword did not wander from its threatening position behind Karlk's head. "Or rather: guests! What do you desire now, my infamous magician?"

**D**ESPITE his surprize the black-robed figure held himself quietly. He did not attempt to face the king; a sword-

prick that stung the skin had warned him, wordlessly. One thin-fingered hand absently stroked the tangled beard, and the heavy-rimmed eyelids were discreetly lowered. Even the watchful gaze of Rald could discern nothing dangerous in the wizard's attitude.

From beyond the king's menacing figure two burly guardsmen, eyes still bloodshot from deep slumber, cautiously approached the tense body of the thief. He had never been forcibly disarmed before; he shrank a little as the sword and small dagger in his belt were appropriated. Thrine smiled maliciously and, partly to his own astonishment, he smiled back. He admired the Lady Thrine, her calm air and the coolness of her tongue, and was glad the death sparks had not had a chance to shatter her lovely body.

Her smile faded. A strange shadow crossed her expressive features. Was it sympathy?

"I have endured you a long time, oh Karlk!" Thrall was saying. "The meaning of tonight's entry is not quite clear to me. I mean to discover it. We will see what magic can prevail against the steel and wooden posts of my so seldom used torture rooms beneath us. Unless you wish to speak now?"

"My king," said Karlk in respectful tones, "I have ever been misunderstood."

"You have. Human minds cannot comprehend men changed into half-beasts or men with beast-like habits. Because of the powers you wielded I forbore a long time, but now, for some as yet incomprehensible reason, you have invaded a very private chamber of Castle Forthe, wherein you have no rights, and the time has come for a definite easing of my mind. You will keep those wizard-hands of yours in plain sight and you will not speak or sign to this underling of yours, or I cut off your hands and his head without benefit of trial!"

"I am no underling!" spat Rald, wrathfully.

"Without a head, who could tell?" observed a guardsman.

"Ho! And who might you be, appearing as you are, clad as a new-born babe?" demanded Thrall.

"I am Rald!" Even before the king the pride of the thief was stronger than the fear of punishment.

Thrine watched him as he stood between his captors, half naked, weaponless, but erect in defense of his own integrity, and marveled.

"Rald!" exclaimed Thrall. "I've heard of you. So have my guards." His eyes flickered over the two abashed men guarding the captive, both of whom were now wide awake and intently watching the least movement made by the man between them. "Hitherto they never seem to have been so close to your person. My guards, you understand, have such strenuous tasks to perform, their minds, as well as their bodies, become fatigued with the passing of the day. From the drinking of wines and the entertainment of the kitchen maids they must seek their much-deserved repose."

With flame-colored cheeks the two guards stood at attention. Rald grinned at each of them, and the fires mounted even higher beneath their skins.

"Truly enterprising fellows, my king! You can perhaps perceive why I follow my less exhausting profession?"

"I beg a private audience, oh king!" broke in Karlk in a humble voice.

"Later, wizard," said Thrall, curtly. "Frake," he commanded, "see that my two guests are bound tightly to prevent their roving inclinations from leading them astray within my walls."

Hasty footsteps were heard as three more men in the livery of the king's guardsmen entered, with eyes wide before

the tableau. Speechless, they waited for orders.

"I wish to extend my hospitality in greater measure," continued the king, "when I have returned from my duties as temporary captain of the guard. My former captain appears to have obtained a stronger wine than any of you—by the circumstantial evidence of his absence. I, myself, will make the rounds this night, before a handful of beggars from the city's gutters decide to take Forthe!"

**S**PURRED by the king's anger and shamed before his sarcasm, the guardsman Frake, with hastily procured twine, venomously bound Rald's wrists so tightly that the thief was forced to set his teeth to abstain from wincing. The magician was tied likewise, hand and foot, but handled in a respectful manner not accorded to the other prisoner. In the opinion of the guardsmen the slight figure of Karlk was far more dangerous than the formidable bulk of the fighting-man; it was evident by the clumsy efforts they made to bind the former without touching his person.

"Go, my sister, to your rooms," ordered Thrall. "I will leave these miscreants here until I discover what other sacrileges they may have committed, or if there be accomplices in the gardens. Perhaps I may even be so presumptuous as to awaken a few of my guards and inquire if there is a pilgrimage being made through the palace grounds!"

As Thrine passed through the doorway in the wake of the wrathful king, she glanced hurriedly over her shoulder at the supine figure of the thief. Rald, tightly secured, lay with the manner of a man reposing on his honestly earned couch, his head pillowed against the velvet of the wall. Outrageously, he winked. With a strange mixture of emotions Lady Thrine swept in royal dignity to her

rooms, pausing only to break the wine bottle by her door over the slumbering guard's head.

In the chamber of the double throne the two prisoners looked at each other and then at the gleaming jewels upon the wall that were to have given one power and the other a kingdom.

"We are both to blame," Karlk announced presently, in his curiously effeminate tones. "I should have sensed Thrall behind me before his weapon touched my neck. You should have run your sword through the woman's body at once, and seized the Necklace, before you condescended to argue."

"I am a thief!" protested Rald, angrily, "not a murderer!"

"Many have died for a throne before," said Karlk softly. His beady eyes were searching the thief's features, penetrating, it seemed to Rald, his very thoughts. "Many—and quite a number were women!"

For the first time in his careless career Rald was stung by a feeling of patriotism, a sense of dutiful homage to the crown that protected the city and countryside, including himself, from the depredations of mountain bandits and greedy rulers of neighboring domains.

"I am of Forthe! I could not slay the sister of our king!"

"Ha!" The magician shrugged weary shoulders. "I must learn, in dealing with men, that they are prone to sentimentality. I have studied so far above mankind that my thoughts are in the clouds while insects destroy my sandals. Even a thief has scruples!"

"If I had a sword I'd have your ears, also!" murmured Rald, thoughtfully.

The next instant he sustained a shock such as he had never experienced before in all his varied existence—which had been wide, indeed. Karlk had been lying, as motionless as himself, against the

opposite wall where he had been placed after being bound by the guards. His hands were tied behind his back, even as Rald's, in a most uncomfortable manner. Now the wizard squirmed, moving into a more upright position, and from the folds on either side of his black robes, from the spaces below his armpits, appeared two tiny, white-furred arms. The extraordinary appendages were only a foot and a half in length and terminated in small, child-like hands with short nails and pinkish palms. Except for the white hirsute growth they might have been the paws of a monkey. With nimble digits they began to pick on Karlk's bonds.

Rald swore fiercely in amazed horror. It was one of the few times in his life he was to feel the numbing cold of stark fear in his veins.

"There are many things about myself," explained the magician, placidly, "that no man has ever known. By force of circumstance, you are now perceiving one of my—ah—inhuman qualities. I do not like to revert frequently to these characteristics; the task becomes a strain on even my abnormal mentality. But you must agree that the situation demands a drastic remedy."

Nonplussed, Rald watched the unhuman fingers pluck apart the cords until Karlk's hands were freed. Once their task was completed they disappeared swiftly into the black garments and the magician's more natural fingers loosened the ropes about his ankles.

"I fear," he said, standing somberly before the thief, "I shall have to leave you here for the while. You obviously do not approve of the methods to which I have been restricted. Thrall must die—yes, and Thrine also! That the death of the reigning royalty was necessary to my project I knew from the beginning; no member of the Ebon Dynasty would voluntarily surrender the throne while

there was breath in his or her body. Neither kingdoms nor dynasties are founded without the spilling of blood. So they die. Later, I will return—so that you and I may talk. Meanwhile you will observe the Necklace and contemplate the power it can bequeath you."

With a swish of silken robes the Thing that was known as Karlk vanished through the doorway, leaving a stillness broken only by the slight hissing of the torches and the heavy breathing of a semi-stupefied thief beneath the double throne.

**R**ALD did not meditate long. His thoughts were already too jumbled to reach any definite decision. A single, blank glance was all the famous Necklace received; the knowledge of the Lady Thrine's peril submerged all thoughts of Thrall, the kingdom of Forthe, or the fabulous jewels. Diamonds, after all, were only stones, and Thrine was flesh and blood; therefore, far more perishable.

It took him fully ten minutes to hoist his tightly bound figure upright by clutching at the tapestries with benumbed fingers and digging his heels into the tiny crevices of the stone floor. Only an able-bodied man at the height of physical fitness could have accomplished the feat. At last he stood, panting and perspiring, beneath one of the hissing torches. Taking a deep breath, he flung his bowed head up and backward. The abrupt motion caused him to lose his hard-won balance, and he fell full-length and somewhat painfully back to the pavement. But the torch, knocked from its niche, fell also, and landed with a shower of sparks that singed off an eyelash before the thief could twist his head. Luckily, it did not go out. Rald murmured an almost forgotten prayer.

A short while later he cast the cords from his ankles and chafed a pair of

badly burned wrists. It had not been an easy matter to hold his hands, so awkwardly fastened behind him, over the sputtering flame. If his hand could only hold a sword!

Aye, a sword! The empty scabbard was a mockery. With supple tread and cautious ears he left the chamber of the Necklace with its treasure, still untouched, on the wall. Castle Forthe held plenty of swords; all he must do was find one without an arm behind it!

His wish was instantly, but ominously, granted. A few paces down the dim corridor, in a curiously crumpled position, lay the body of a guard. A shaft of moonlight from an interstice crossed features distorted in violent and horrible death-pangs. Rald shuddered as he remembered the blue sparks and their supernatural force. The dead man's blade was half drawn; the thief appropriated it in a single cat-like gesture. Somewhere in the dark halls of Forthe was a Thing without the need of a sword, but Rald felt courage flowing into his heart through the chilled steel in his hand. Despite the blisters on his palm he clutched the hilt as a drowning man grasps at a rescuing timber.

From somewhere, out of the darkness, came the half-muffled cry of a woman. The slender thread of alarm in Rald's spine flowered into a network of nerve pulsations spreading into his heart regions. Thrine! The voice was unmistakable. Blindly he blundered into stone walls as he encountered a sudden turn in the passageway; recovering, he realized his senses had been blurred by the inner urge driving him forward. He sought to conquer his impulses. A cool head and a strong sword-arm were needed in Forthe this night.

An unexpected twist of the corridor revealed to his eyes a high, unfortified archway of stone leading into the palace

gardens. Beyond, and converging toward the aperture, were the numerous torches carried by the guardsmen as they beat the foliage in vain for lurking assassins. Near by, at the very base of the short stairway leading up to the arch, King Thrall advanced before a picked dozen of his retinue. Evidently, the monarch of Forthe was returning to question the apprehended culprits.

But the king was in no position to see what was so clearly visible to the thief. Between Rald and the wavering gleams of the torches, just far enough within the castle archway to be concealed in the shadows from those without, crouched the figure of Karlk in an attitude unmistakably threatening. His face was toward the approaching soldiers led by Thrall; the thief knew a king was walking to his death. On the floor, at the wizard's feet, a bound figure attempted to warn the innocent victims with wild outcries that only ended in faint mewns behind the cloth thrust into her mouth. A dynasty neared its end under the thief's gaze.

An animal-like snarl was stifled in Rald's throat. With unreasonable inconsistency he ignored his own capture of Lady Thrine such a short while ago, when he had held his sword-tip to her breast; Karlk had dared to lay hands on this woman!

If the magician would have but glanced over his shoulder he would have seen the torchlight glittering on the naked steel, but his eyes were occupied with the advancing soldiery. Slowly his fingers rose to their chest levels.

**S**OME sixth-sense of premonition awakened in the king. He paused with one foot on the top step, a hand on his sword, and sought to peer into the obscurity of the passage. "Who is there?" he asked, as the guardsmen halted uncertainly behind him.

"Your destiny, oh Thrall!" laughed Karlk. "Can you die like a king?"

Thrilled with his supremacy, obsessed with revengeful hatred of the dynasty and its ruler, and seething with concealed fury over his recent treatment, the magician was oblivious to any possible danger from his rear until the swift patter of racing sandals warned him—too late. Even then, he half turned from his proposed victim before the bright steel, swung in a mighty arc, struck down to shear his right arm from his side and sheathe itself deep in the ribs. Shrieking, he fell, to writhe on the stone flags.

Rald looked at his sword. It was no longer bright. "Damaed wizard!" he said.

"Wait!" cried Thrall, as several guards converged about the thief with ready swords. "There is something here I do not understand! Surround him but do him no harm—yet!"

Grimly, the king slashed Thrine's bonds and extracted the cloth from her mouth. In a second her lithe form was upright and within the circle of menacing steel about the prisoner. Gaping in bewilderment, the men lowered their weapons.

"Rald saved your life, brother! All your lives, I think!"

"Aye!" groaned the dying magician through clenched teeth. "With his own sword the fool dethroned himself!"

"If ever I seek a throne again," growled the thief, "I'll do it with steel and not with magical death from accursed hands held on helpless men! You promised me a cleaner triumph, wizard! Why did you not let me fight as a man should?"

"Karlk is not a man!" exclaimed Lady Thrine.

"No—not as you know men," agreed Rald. He shuddered, thinking of the weird scene in the room where he had

been a prisoner. "Perhaps he never was."

"Of course he never was! Tear off the disguise!"

King and thief and awed guardsmen stared at the Thing weltering in its blood on the stone flags. No one made an effort to touch the dying form; the horror and chill of intense malignancy penetrated the nerves of the boldest. They stared in silence, but no man moved.

"Must I perform my own tasks?" demanded Thrine, imperiously.

Her answer came from Karlk alone: "No, my Lady! You discovered my secret when I seized you, did you not?"

Weakly, with fumbling fingers, the remaining hand grasped at the shaggy beard, and a cry of amazement arose from all save Thrine as the entire mass of hair came off to disclose the pale, oval features of a woman! The convulsive effort threw back the black hood, and long, raven-black ringlets fell forth to spread about the ashen cheeks.

"By the Seven!" swore Thrall. "A woman!"

"Partly," answered Karlk. The wizard's—or witch's—eyes were beginning to glaze. "And—partly—something else."

One of the slender, white-furred arms came from its concealment beneath the dark folds and dipped into the spreading pool of blood. The guardsmen cried out in amazed terror; one dropped his torch and fled. Thrine shrank against Rald's side; only the instinctive habits of royal self-control kept her on her feet.

"Be not so horrified, Thrall!" admonished the tortured lips. "Your own regal blood, from the veins of an Ebon princess, flows on the stones this night!"

"Blasphemer! What distorted brain in a disfigured body gives you such wild——"

"I have lived many times the life-period of man," interrupted Karlk. Her



voice was gentler now; more in keeping with the femininity of the patrician features. "I saw your grandfathers born, oh king, and I cursed them, one and all, as I prepared for this day, upon which I have so badly failed. Trusting, as I did, in a mortal man to lift the bar from the sacred chamber of the Necklace—I allowed my own tool to turn its edge upon me. Oh Nargarth, guardian Demon! To lie here helpless while the powers I hold drain out of me with my life-blood—strength it took centuries to garner!"

"Why? Why covet my kingdom?" asked Thrall. "There are many others."

"But I am of the Ebon blood! I belong, in part, to the double throne! Remember, in your legends, when the great white apes of Sorjoon were so numerous, before the outraged people hunted them down to death from the high crags whereon they dwelt—how at times they even dared to assault the city's walls and drag off screaming wretches to their ghastly feasts? On one terrible day a princess of Forthe became a captive. She did not immediately—participate in the cannibal orgies. She was—my mother."

**K**ARLK'S voice grew momentarily weaker; the stunned listeners bent to catch the low whispers as her choked breath struggled in the distorted form.

"The nether arms—are miniature replicas of my father's. You understand?"

Thrine moaned and clung to Rald's bare forearm, forgetting he was a thief and she a royal lady.

"I cursed all men—all human races! I was a monstrosity unfit for existence, of no class or race. I fled the apes as I fled mankind. I hated every living thing, for none was like me. I was alone. In my solitude I learned from the demons of the

forests—and the mountains—they did not shun my deformities! If you enter—my house—you will see the results of my well-learned lessons, oh Thrall! I hope they drive you mad!"

"No man shall enter the accursed walls," muttered the king. "Your house will be burned and the remaining stones ground to dust!"

"My — poor — experiments! I had planned—many more. Remember—the one that barked? Ha! And he with the pointed skull—who giggled?"

Thrall half raised his blade to smite the prone ape-woman, but malicious, rasping laughter held him transfixed.

"No need, oh king—and brother! My day is gone—the tide ebbs. Would that—I might—wreak some evil fate upon you—ere Nargarth's minions come for me!"

A cold wind burst forth suddenly amid the quiet night breezes, swirling through the passageway and tugging at the torch flares so hard that several were extinguished. Icy, unseen fingers appeared to wrench at their clothing. Thrine screamed. As abruptly as the chilling gust of air had come, it departed, leaving a numbed cluster of humans and a curiously shriveled and for ever silent Thing crumpled on the stones. Karlk and all her ambitions had passed to the Outer Void.

For a long minute the king and his guards remained in statuesque poses; then Thrall, his warrior spirits gaining ascendancy as they were freed of supernatural awe, uttered a mighty roar.

"Rald! My friend! My brother! I'll make you a baron! For this night's work you'll own the richest farms of Forthe! I'll—*where is Rald?*"

Thrine laughed, shakily, and pointed

to the shrubbery of the gardens. Clusters of foliage were still quivering from the hasty passage of some moving object.

"Rald!" shouted the king. There was no answer; the leafy tangles stilled and became motionless. "I meant him no harm—nor punishment, though he desired my throne. Why——"

"He chose to go," said Thrine, complacently, "so he went."

"Well, we need have no fear of his practising his profession in the castle,

henceforth. Paradoxically, though a thief he is still an honest one. Now that we are in his debt he will not take advantage of it. I know men!"

Thrine laughed.

"You may be wise in the manner of honor among kings and men, oh my brother, but how little you know of their hearts! Some day—Rald will be back!"

"After fleeing? Back? For what?"

"O king without eyes! For me, of course!"