

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES MAGAZINE

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the TRYST

BY MIKE LEWIS

Jose knew he was committing a terrible crime —knew that some day he would have to face a time of justice. But there was no way of escaping the terrible attraction of the dreams.

He crouched in the firelight, listening to the hiss and the drip of the jungle, while he waited for the ship to come in the night. The fog-clouds boiled low over the treetops, low enough for the flickering fire to tint a yellow underbelly upon the floating mist. Soon the fog would settle into the trees, where the jaguar walked, and the python slumbered in the brush—where the man shivered, and hitched himself a little closer to the fire. He knew not by what cunning the ship could find him in the fog, but only that it would surely come, and with it the thing called *Mahgrikydrük*.

A mocking hoot pierced the jungle — *Ooooo-ahahaha hahaha*—a night bird's cry, followed by a host of smaller

restless sounds in chirping answer. Then, dripping silence, and the chill wet drift of the fog.

A small bundle lay beside him on a nest of dry grass and leaves. Once it kicked and quivered slightly, and the man felt its dirty blanket-wrappings with his hand. Gently, he turned its other side toward the fire so that it would not be scorched. It whimpered a little, and fell silent. *Mahgrikydrük* should be pleased with this one, he thought. Its skin was healthy pink, and the fur of its scalp was yellow as the bright breath of the flame. Where had the old Indian woman stolen it?

"*Jose will cure you of your plague of warts, Small One,*" he whispered to the bundle. "Jose—



hal smith

and the Lord Mahgríkydrük." He smiled with restrained eagerness. "And your Mamá shall pay me with many yams, and Mahgríkydrük shall pay me with a wonderdream—and you, Small One—you shall pay Mahgríkydrük—and never miss the price, nor ever know you paid it."

Jose's scrawny wrinkled hands opened their palms to the flame, and he stared between their silhouettes at the licking tongues of brightness, letting his mind grow dull, trying to recapture the substance of a wonderdream. If only his poor worn brain could dream the dreams without help from the thing that lived in the ship. If only he could stop the weekly treks into the jungle, carrying some squealing infant into the night—for a tryst with the power of Mahgri. Jose was tired, and the ache of age was in his bones. But it was necessary to continue, else he would lose the dream. For fourteen rains, he had lived for nothing but this weekly taste of paradise. And now, he could scarcely imagine a life without it.

It was true that he had won respect among his people, as a blessed healer of the young. Cleverly, he had preserved the mystery of his jungle retreats, allowing no one to accompany him when, hearkening to the pleas of a worried mother, he

stole alone into the night, carrying the stricken child. He had won respect—and now he could retire in peace and tribal wealth, if only he could command the dream.

The fog was settling now, creeping stealthily through the jungle, writhing away where the smoke rose up from his fire. Again came the nightbird's sarcastic cry, and the distant wail of the jaguar. A scant distance to the north, rolled the deadly silent Mother—Amazon, with serpents coiled in her bosom, with rending jaws awaiting the quiet fawn who suckled there. She tore the flesh of her jungle children with a thousand needle-fangs.

Jose inched back the edge of the blanket to peer at the flame-haired infant. Its chubby jaw moved briefly in a dreamlike nursing movement, but it did not wake. From what world did it come—this pale one? To the east—a week's journey by the river—lay villages to which the pale ones often came. But it was not their world. Their world was a place of magic—far to east perhaps, where the waters were reputed to be even wider than Mother Amazon. Mahgríkydrük had always wanted him to bring one of the pale ones. He was a being of strange, ferocious appetites.

The jungle was suddenly stiller than before. There was only the drip and the hiss as it listened; and Jose listened with it. From high above the curtaining fog came the faintest of hummings, a tight-stretched grass blade whistling in the wind. A high pitched ringing in the ears it was, scarcely discernable at first, then growing in strength—not loud, but stinging the ears with its highness.

The child awoke and began to wail in the night. Jose shivered with the usual fright that possessed him when Mahgri came. He made the magic sign with his right hand, touching first his forehead, then his breast and shoulders, as a black-clad shaman of the pale ones had taught his grandmother to do when evil threatened. It was a cross that sealed in the breath of the soul.

Then it was directly above him, wrapped in mist—the ship. He felt its presence as a faint tingling of his skin, as an aura of heat from its furnaces, as the burning pain in his ears. It hung there motionless for a time, above the trees; and Jose was trembling violently as he peered up at the black blanket—and waited.

The metal tendril came down slowly, inching into view out of the vapor, descending like the slithering head and neck of a

silvery python hanging from some invisible limb. At the lower end of the arm-thick tentacle hung the globe, dripping wet, blackly transparent. Out of the heart of the dripping sphere, looked the eye of Mahgri—a ball of green luminescence, shimmering and crawling with phantom lights. In the center of a pale violet iris, an inky pupil sought the figure of the man cringing on the ground by the fire. Lower came the tendril, until it hung a few feet above him in the smoky light. No word passed between them, no thought. For a long time it simply hung and watched him. Then the thought seared into his brain, too loud for comfort:

You have brought me a pale one.

“Y-yes.”

From the culture to the north.

“I—I—”

Well done.

“The dream, Lord—”

First give me the child.

Quivering in fright, Jose stooped and lifted the tiny girl from the bundle of blankets. The baby was shrieking in spasms as he held it out toward the compelling eye. Slowly, the wirelike fingers unfolded from the neck of the tendril, just above the globe—triple jointed fingers, spiny as the legs of a giant spider. They wrapped about the

child in careful embrace, pressing slightly into the soft pink flesh. Then the eye winked shut, its light faded. Rapidly, and with a piercing hum from above, the tentacle snaked upward into the invisible ship, bearing its small human cargo. The hum became monotonous boredom.

Jose sat down to wait. Gradually his trembling subsided, leaving a fright-stricken emptiness, full of disjointed thoughts. It was always thus—when Mahgrikydrük came, and pierced his mind with the knife of thought.

If Mahgri wanted the pale ones, with their mighty magic, why had he not gone to them—rather than by stealth to a poor jungle sorcerer who was ignorant of the magic? He thought the question to himself, but like a spear flung unexpectedly out of the darkness came Mahgrikydrük's answer:

They would guess my aims, dull one.

Jose fell into shivering silence. Not so bold as to question Mahgri, he tried to strip his mind of wonderings, but the question came. What *was* the aim of the demon healer from out the sky? Jose felt its evilness, but so was the jungle evil, and the lurking creatures of the night. Life, was it not a constant bickering with evil, a buying of

time, an appeasement wherein something was sacrificed to the bloody appetites of the Darkness—in exchange for a little more of life?

A rattle of thought answered him from above, not words, but the faint pulses of a feeling—hunger and amusement blended into one. Then an image swam before his mind, a serpent with its tail in its mouth, a giant boa slowly devouring itself in straining gulps, that brought its circle ever tighter, its body ever fatter—until it became one writhing ball of scaly pain. Its beady eyes sought Jose's. They watched him in a trancelike stare.

Then the whole began to digest itself. He shrieked and clawed at his eyes. The image vanished.

Again the hungry amusement from above.

At last Mahgrikydrük was finished with the child. Slowly the damp metal tendril snaked downward, bearing the small body in its wiry grasp. The golden head lolled back, and the limbs dangled limply, glistening-wet in the firelight. The infant slept the deep slumber of one who had eaten too much coca leaf. It was water-drenched, as if Mahgri had kept it immersed in a tank of liquid. Jose took the child and dried it in the blankets. The warts were gone,

leaving only faint pink scars—and the two other scars that Mahgri always left, no matter what the sickness: a thin bright welt at the base of the skull, and another across the abdomen.

The luminescent eye with its violet iris came piercing alive again, to stare at the wizened little man.

"The dream—plant the dream-seed—" he pleaded, but the eye of Mahgri continued the unwinking gaze without responding.

Then a sudden gale of thought: *My first child is about to mate.*

Jose's glance flickered nervously about the clearing. It was true. Marguerita, the first child he had brought to Mahgri's embrace, was about to be wed. She was now fourteen. The dowry was fixed, and the gifts exchanged. In a few days she would belong to a young man of the village. Jose recalled with consternation that Mahgrikydrük, a dozen rains ago, had promised to return four times every moon—until the first child was of an age to mate. And then—?

I shall not come again. My work is done.

"No! The wonderdreams! I must have—"

The hungry amusement interrupted him. The swarming luminescence of the eye grew brighter. The jet-black pupil

expanded and contracted in a slow pulsation. *You shall have them, Trader. You shall have them weekly until you die, until all my daughters are wed and you are dead. Until my Tryst with Man.*

"But the dreamseed—"

I shall plant it now.

The pulsing of the pupil grew wider, blacker, now swelling to a black blot, now contracting to a pinpoint. It detached itself from the eye and became an inky heart, beating with the slow cadence of a death-drum. Jose closed his eyes, but his lids were transparent as the membranous wing of a plump young bat, and he still saw the swelling and contracting. Soon he saw nothing else.

Pendulumlike, the tentacle began to sway, toward him and away, in slow stately strokes. He slumped into a daze. The steely python paused, swang lower, found his head. The wiry fingers crawled about his temples—exploring, encircling, digging deep—

He awoke in an icy sweat. Mahgrikydrük was gone. The first gray of dawn was in the fog, soaking it in a faint ghostly light. The infant was awake and whimpering hungrily. Jose climbed shakily to his feet, looked wildly about him, then gathered the child in his arms and

fled along the jungle trail toward the village.

"Lord Mahgri has left us! Lord Mahgri has left us! No more can I heal your young ones!"

As the scrawny sorcerer burst clamoring into the village at dawn, dusky faces blinked sleepily from the doorways of the huts, and old Pedro came out to scold. Carmela, the foster mother, waddled quickly after him, bleating plaintively until Jose relinquished the child into her arms.

"The marks of Mahgri are upon her!" she shrilled, seeing the red welts of the scars. "The marks!"

"Hush, Woman," growled Pedro, "let the rest of us return to our huts."

When he reached his own shanty near the center of the village, Jose turned in, and sat grinning to himself upon a mat of straw. Now he was through with the distasteful business, and, if Mahgri's words were really true, he would still have the wonderdreams—that made his life worthwhile. At high noon, Pedro and two elders came to call. Their faces were grave as they sat in a circle on the floor of his hut, but they exchanged pleasantries for a time before coming to business, as was considered proper.

"Is it true, Jose," Pedro murmured at last, "that El Señor Mahgri will no longer appear to assist you in curing our innocents?"

Jose inclined his head in a sadness he did not feel. "It is true. He will not come again until all his adopted children are wed."

A murmur of puzzlement travelled about the circle.

"To heal the next generation, no doubt?" asked Pedro.

"Who knows. El Señor failed to say."

There was no further discussion of the matter. They sat in silence for a time, then arose and filed wordlessly out the door. Jose, smiling to himself, watched them move up the trail and enter the council hut, where they remained a long time. Then—before sundown—Pedro came, and set a sack of yams before Jose's door. He moved away without speaking. Jose the sorcerer had retired.

That night, came the first of the promised dreams—

An orange-colored beach under a slate-gray sky. Low upon the horizon hung the red dwarf sun-star, burning an ugly hole in the dull canopy—while from the zenith, blazed its binary mate, a blue-white sun of dazzling brilliance, so distant as to be a burning gem of light. The slow

roll of the waves complained in a bass rumble, and the clouds of spray fell slowly in the faint gravity. On the beach, walked a proud biped, head held high. The black mane that grew along its spine fluttered in the wind. Its eyes watched the dun-colored water ravenously.

It was feeding time.

Out of the depths came the kydrük, rising majestically to the surface and riding on the waves. Its metallodermic tendril reared itself high over the water, arching like the neck of a swan, its eye seeking the biped. The blue-green lace of its gills spread about it gracefully, like the tail of a peacock. Its plump thinking-organ, lodged deep in the sleek white underbelly, swelled with longing for the pretty biped, and slowly it lifted its tulip-like mouth to the surface, opened it wide as a pink lily-pad atop the absorbing-tube. Its gill-fins stroking the waves, it moved gracefully toward the shore. The biped, stopped, turned slowly to face it, and waited with a faint dreamy smile as their eyes locked in intimate rapport.

It was feeding time. Generously, lovingly, the kydrük opened its mighty intellect to the famished mind of the land-creature, let it see the dark ways of the universe, taught it in a moment the ways of the heavens, and let

it feel the longings of desire in the kydrük heart.

The biped sank slowly to its knees in tottering ecstasy. Burning with irresistible hunger, it crawled slowly into the shallow, lacelike waves, mounted to the top of the pink lily pad, and lay moaning softly as the mouth-pad—set with tiny needle-fangs—closed slowly about its body. There was only one word to describe the biped's expression: rapture. The kydrük bore its bundle lovingly to the bottom.

Jose awoke as always in a pink sweat of ecstasy, with the warm taste of flesh in his mouth. But it faded, as it always faded, and with it the memory of the dream. He sat up panting in the darkness, and shaking his head. The incidents escaped him, and after a few moments he could remember nothing. What had happened? He knew he had dreamt, and he still felt the emotion of it—but it was a detached emotion now, linked to nothing. It too soon fled, leaving him empty and shivering. If only he could recall the dream!

Then came the aftermath, and he lay back upon his mat of straw, his spindly old body quivering in a wave of deep depression, guilt, and loathing. The emotion being spent, it was replaced by a deep remorse which seemed to have no cause. He

longed to steal away into the jungle and hide from his fellow man in shame, to bury himself in the mud and die. The face of his elders loomed up to accuse him. But why?—why? What had he done in the dream? He rolled on his face, and lay groaning, and pulling the straw up over his head.

The wedding of Marguerita, first child saved by the magic of Mahgri, to Lazaro, eldest son of a respected leader, was a festive occasion, but Jose took no part in it. He was uneasy about the marriage. It marked the end of his practice as sorcerer, but it also seemed to portend the beginning of a dark era. Jose, in his fifty years, had gained much wisdom—the wisdom of the jungle. In dealing with Mahgríkydrük, he knew that he had been dealing with a creature of evil, and in bargaining with Darkness, Man must pay a price. What price had he paid? Mahgri had taken nothing in return for the healing and the blessing of hundreds of stricken infants. Jose was led to the inescapable conclusion that the price was yet to be paid. He could somehow not look his savelings in the face, for fear their dull eyes would begin to accuse him.

Furthermore, because of the bride's father, Jose was not wel-

come at the wedding feast. Old Francisco—although he paid lip-service to tribal gods and customs of his people—had lived many years in one of the villages to the east, and he had adopted many of the pale one's strange ways. He had erected a small altar in his hut, and sometimes he was heard praying to strange gods that he called Jesu, and Maria, and El Trinidad. He even insisted that Marguerita and Lazaro go in a canoe to a village in the east, and be remarried by a shaman of the pale ones, before an altar of their gods. Francisco disapproved of Jose's sorcery, and would not invite him to the feast.

When the marriage was over, and the couple gone, Jose's spirits arose again. He settled back to enjoy his retirement, occasionally participating in village ceremony, sitting-in upon the council of elders, accompanying the young men on their hunts, and acting as diviner in disputes. The wonderdreams came weekly, followed by the usual remorse which passed before dawn, leaving him hungry for more.

His complete peace of mind was short lived however. Others of Mahgri's children were coming of marriagable age—in his own village, and in neighboring communities which had also

availed themselves of his services. Nearly every week, nuptial drums throbbed in the jungle, reminding him of Mahgrí-kydrük's promise of return, reminding him of the python devouring itself.

Frequently he wondered about the meaning of that brief vision. Could it be that the man who reaped good from evil was really only feeding himself upon his own flesh? Jose shuddered at the thought of what Mahgri's return might bring.

He had always noticed a certain *difference* about the children Mahgri had healed, not pronounced, but certainly observable. They seemed to move more slowly, to play their games with a note of apathy, or detachment. There was a dullness in their faces, and sometimes he came upon one of them sitting alone on the edge of the cliff overlooking the small river which led past the village and into the Amazon. They stared silently out across the water, dreaming. Sometimes a group of them would sit together on the narrow beach at the foot of the cliff, watching the water together, saying nothing to one another, but seeming to share a common thought.

Once he approached a group of them, and asked almost irritably, "Why aren't you work-

ing in your father's gardens? What are you doing here, lazy ones?"

Three small faces turned toward him expressionlessly. The thin red welts had long since disappeared, but he knew they were Mahgri's children. They were slow to answer.

"What are you doing loafers?" he demanded.

One of them groped with his mouth, and finally said, "Waiting."

"Waiting for what?" Jose snapped.

They glanced at one another curiously for a moment, and shook their heads. "Who knows?" the speaker murmured.

Jose sent them scurrying back to the village with a switch, but the encounter troubled him.

Marguerita and Lazaro came to the village shortly before the coming of the rainy season. They came bringing many wonderful things from the east—beads, and fine fabrics, and silver earrings, and small statues of strange deities that simpered and wore long robes. The villagers—all save Jose—crowded about to welcome them, to inspect their souveniers, and to peer in awe at the imposing tatoo which Lazaro had acquired—and proudly displayed—upon his red-bronze chest. It was the image of

a big blue heart, wrapped in thorn-vines, crowned by a cup of flame, and pierced by a point-ed machete.

On the day following the return of the lovers, a tall bony figure appeared in the doorway of Jose's hut, and stood there blocking the sunlight while he clutched a small wooden cross in one hand—as he always did when passing near the house of the sorcerer. They stared at one another sullenly for a time.

"Francisco!"

The father of the bride remained silent for a time, his jet eyes narrowed, staring into the sorcerer's.

"My daughter is possessed."

It was a cold, toneless voice, but full of suppressed hatred. Jose flinched in his heart, but donned an impassive face.

"Why come to me?"

Again Francisco observed an ominous silence.

"What are the symptoms of her possession?"

"Only two moons have passed since her wedding, and already she grows great with child."

Jose snickered. "Many people would not consider that as a symptom of possession."

Francisco's hand dropped the tiny cross and slid to the hilt of his machete. He advanced a step into the hut.

Jose added hastily, "But per-

haps as a bloated condition of the liver."

"The child stirs."

The sorcerer said nothing, but watched the angry quiver of the elder's arm as he gripped the knife.

"She is subject to sleep-walking, and she goes alone to the river in the night."

"But why come to me?"

"She is cursed by the devil you serve."

Again Jose winced. He denied it with an emphatic shaking of his head. "No devil is the Lord Mahgrskydrük."

The arrogant figure of Francisco straightened. He spat contemptuously into the dust of the hut. "You will come remove this curse, or I shall kill you."

"Are not your gods—"

"Do not speak the name of my gods, you shivering excrement!" The blade of the machete slid halfway from its sheath.

Jose cringed away, his face apologetic. "Of course I shall come, Francisco."

The elder let the blade slide back with a quick flick of the wrist. He turned half way. "Be certain you come at once," he snapped, then strode rapidly away in the sunlight.

Breathing relief, Jose wasted no time in making his preparations. Spreading a blanket on the floor, he set out the tiny pots

of paints and filled the black-bottomed mirror-bowl with water. He plaited anklets, armbands, and a headpiece of straw, then painted his face and torso with the designs his father had taught him long ago. He doubted that the magic of his father would prevail against the power of Mahgri, but it might at least protect him from Francisco's surly temper.

In an earthen bowl, he ground brittle-dry coca leaves into a fine powder and poured it into a snake-skin pouch. Having armed himself with rattling bead-sticks and a drum, he trotted through the village toward Francisco's house. A fat and sullen-faced woman met him at the door.

"Have the girl placed on a pallet in the center of the hut," he told her. "All others must leave. I would be alone with her."

The woman hissed at him, but went to do his bidding. Jose recalled irritably that she had been less scornful that night a dozen years ago when a tiny Marguerita was bloated with dysentery and burning with fever, the night he had taken her to Mahgríkydrük and brought her back in a serene sleep.

The preparations were made. The relatives, and the husband, stood in a semicircle a dozen yards from the hut, watching

him ominously. A nervous Jose stepped into the doorway and struck a commanding pose. The girl lay at his feet, looking up without interest, gazing at him through listless eyes. Jose began the slow, jerky dance, pacing rhythmically about the pallet and chanting in a thin high voice.

In Amazon's waters

The crocodile lurks.

She is his mother,

And she has made his home.

In Brazil-tree branches,

Spider-monkey climbs.

She is his mother,

And she has made his home.

*Crocodile falls from the
tree!*

*Spider-monkey drowns in
the river!*

*They go home to their
mother.*

*They run quickly to the hut
of their mother.*

Having thus offered a hint to the devil, Jose let out a piercing shriek and leaped high in the air, to come down straddling Marguerita's pallet. He flung handful after handful of coca-dust in her face, until she closed the dull eyes and muttered protestingly. He filled the air with clouds of the dust.

Then she began to sneeze in violent spasms, and Jose bent low over her face, holding a thin peg of polished mahogany and a pair of coca beans. As soon as

she finished a sneeze, he quickly slid the peg between her teeth and pressed the beans into her nostrils.

"Bite the stick," he ordered.

She sneezed again, feebly, but the plugs remained in place.

"Keep them there."

Having seen that the devil was sneezed out of her body, and having insured against its return, Jose began the exorcism of the hut, then chased the spirit out of the village with a bundle of fronds. The villagers paused to watch imassively, but soon returned to their tasks. He came back panting to face the sullen Francisco.

"Are you done, sorcerer?"

"I am done. See that she gets a strong purgative however."

"The devil is gone?"

"It is gone indeed."

Francisco frowned uncertainly and glanced into the doorway of the hut. "But the swelling remains."

Jose grumbled irritably. "I am a sorcerer, not a midwife."

Hot temper flared briefly in the elder's eyes, and faded into sullenness. "We shall see," he grunted.

A week passed, during which Jose saw nothing of the newly-weds, nor of the threatening elder. But a new note of uneasiness came to haunt him, a feeling of quiet desperation that

grew stronger as time went by. At first it was only a vague suspicion, a tightening of the nerves when darkness fell, a sudden glancing into empty shadows with frightened eyes. But gradually it became a silent conviction, inescapable. For he knew his state of mind too well—and knew its origin.

The Kydrük was hovering somewhere near.

Perhaps in the jungle, or the river, or passing by night over the village—but wherever it might be, he felt it watching. And its effects were present in his weekly dreams. No longer were the dreams completely pleasant. Sometimes he awoke, not tasting ecstasy, but feeling the gaunt hunger unappeased. And—perhaps because of the Kydrük's nearness—the fantasies were becoming careless about erasing themselves from his mind after the awakening. He remembered vague images, and they terrified him during the day.

The sea was hot under the twin suns, hotter than was pleasant upon the delicate gills. He broke surface beyond the slow breakers and stared ravenously at the orange-colored beach. It was feeding time. But the beach was empty, shimmering with heat waves, devoid of life. They were all dead—he

knew that they were dead, but he came only to look, and to wish.

The cause of death blazed ever brighter in the slate-colored sky. The blue-white star stared a hissing glow of burning death as it grew ever bluer, ever hotter in the heavens. It roasted the earth, and heated the waters of the sea. Gathering greater mass as it swept up great quantities of the thin interstellar dust, its internal pressures were increasing. The weight of the greater mass was causing it to collapse still smaller, to fuse its helium ash into heavier elements, to cram them into an ever tighter core. Soon it would fade into violet, and begin emitting a blast of X-rays to sear the small planet and boil the oceans. Then it would burst into a nova.

The kydrük understood. His hunger unappeased, he sank again beneath the tepid waters. He must get away. Quickly he must build ships and leave his world—to find another world where bipeds walked the beaches—

Jose remembered some of the dream, and it frightened him, plagued him constantly with vague wonderings, with dismal flashes of insight. He could feel the aura of the kydrük's mind, hanging close about the village. Driven by suspicion, he visited

the jungle clearing of the weekly trysts, but instead of growing stronger, the aura weakened, and he knew that its source was closer to the settlement.

The children of Mahgri seemed also to feel it, and their behavior became peculiar. Once each day they visited the neighboring river, pacing restlessly along the narrow beach, and sometimes wading out to stand in shallow water, braving the menace of the crocodile.

Marguerita was still prowling through the village by night, eyes half-open but unseeing. Behind her came Lazaro, lighting her way with a torch, but fearful of waking her lest her soul should depart instead of the devil. Always when she prowled in the night, the other children of Mahgri came awake, and gathered to follow expressionlessly at a distance. The sight set Jose shivering in his hut.

Other villagers were noticing, and wondering. Whisperers congregated in small groups, and stared toward the sorcerer's house, their ugly temper showing plainly in their faces. Jose made himself scarce by day and slept warily by night. But the whisperers made no overt move to harm him. They seemed to feel that the privilege belonged to Francisco or to Lazaro. Strange however, the menfolk of

Marguerita's family failed to approach him again. Since the day he had performed the ineffective exorcism, no word passed between them. It was rumored that Francisco was doing penance before his gods, out of remorse for his seeking Jose's services. His gods, it seemed, resented any dealings with the darker forces of the jungle. The rumor gave Jose new heart.

But then the news came stealing through the village one late afternoon when the sun slanted down through the limp foliage to make eerie shafts of gold in the dusted air. The news was frightening; Marguerita was in labor. And Francisco refused to admit that she had been with child more than the four months since the marriage. And indeed, other villagers came to his support, for more of Mahgri's children were wed, and awaiting childbirth.

Jose sat gloomily in the shadows of his hut, watching across the clearing toward Francisco's hut where the menfolk sat outside, leaning against the wall. Birth was a business for women.

The shadows grew longer, and twilight came. Other rumors filtered through the village: the child refused to come; Marguerita refused to have it; Marguerita begged to be carried

down by the river. And at last, with the coming of inky night; the labor stopped; the child would not come. The menfolk re-entered; the midwives went back to their huts.

But Jose, glum and miserable sorcerer, still sat in the jet-black shadows, watching with doubtful eyes. He was coming to hate Mahgrikydrük, and coming to hate himself for the long years of posing as a healer, and as a dealer with Dark Forces. A dealer? What had he sold? Perhaps he had sold to a snake its tail.

Weary of sitting, but fearful of retiring, he dozed, slumped in the shadows. But a little later, he was awakened by a shout from across the clearing.

"Marguerita! She is gone! She is gone into the jungle. Who will help us search? Help us! Before the jaguar takes her along the way!"

It was Lazaro. There were sounds of stirring in the village. Jose arose quickly and retreated to the rear of his hut, not lighting the oilpot, but crouching low in the darkness with his machete across his knees. In time of excitement, the afflicted family might decide in haste to wreak some vengeance upon him.

He heard searching parties form and go stalking into the jungle. When they were gone,

the hush returned—except for a distant sobbing from the hut across the way. Then, like a sudden spectre, a black shadow appeared to block his entrance-way—a man stood motionless there. Jose came softly to his feet, gripping his machete in nervous hands, knowing the shadow could not see him.

"Francisco," he whispered softly.

The shadow stopped in the doorway, and a hand rattled in a pouch. There were several clinking sounds. Then the shadow went away, trotting quickly across the clearing.

What had he left there in the doorway? Jose shivered. Fearing the magic of strange gods, he would not approach it, but remained huddling against the back wall. Tomorrow he would run away, go to a far village—perhaps to the east.

The searching parties were returning. He heard the mutter of their voices through the thatched wall, and—they had found her! They had found her alive! He listened.

There was no child. The child was gone. Vanished. They had found her standing in shallow water at the river, standing and staring at the blackness. And all that she could say was: "He swam away. He left me."

Jose shook his head in be-

wilderment. Torchlight gathered in the clearing as the searchers returned, and by its glow he saw three small objects in the doorway. He crept toward them for a closer look and the breath caught in his throat with a choking sound.

Three stacks of coins, silver coins, as they used for barter in the east, three equal stacks of—*two, four, six, eight*—ten coins each. *Why?* A hint to leave the village? To take the coins and go? Jose was willing, more than willing. His hand snaked toward them hungrily, and then—a ghost of memory flickered in his mind. The hand stopped. He backed away in horror.

Thirty pieces of silver.

His grandmother, who had taught him the magic of the cross-sign, had taught him of the Betrayer and his price. He backed as far from them as he could and crouched there staring until the torchlight died.

Hours later he drowsed, and dreamed, but somehow the aura of the kydrük had weakened, and the dream was disjointed—brief glimpses of the world of two suns, of ships, of blackness between the stars, of blackness on a hilltop under the stars, where he walked as a man. Hot wind swept across a treeless plain, washed the hilltop, and passed on across a neat black

nest of trees that grew beyond. A faint gleam of firelight flickered there—among the trees. He stopped to wait, and the kydrük waited with him.

Out of the trees came a white shadow, climbing the hill, moving with stately tread. Even in blackness its face was visible, serene, expectant. It was—Francisco? No, more like Lazaro—or old Pepin. No, it was none of them—or rather, it was *all* of them. Its face was the face of Man.

It stopped before him, to accuse him with Its eyes, and he felt the hungry laughter of the kydrük.

"That which thou dost, do quickly," breathed the White Shadow.

When Jose awoke, he was already on his feet, and tottering about the hut. Nearly treading on the coins, he shrieked and flung himself away, falling heavily across the hard floor. Bruised, and sore from sleeping in a slumped heap, he crept whimpering to his mat, and lay watching the coins with frightened eyes as the gray of dawn crept into the clearing.

As morning climbed into its seat, ugly whispers were travelling about the village. Marquerita had given birth to a demon, they said. No baby had been lost in the river, they said,

but a thing that floated on the tide, and sank beneath the surface where it watched the shore. The crocodiles, they said, were slithering from their banks to move downstream in a nervous exodus. The reptiles were leaving the smaller river for the Amazon; and from what would a crocodile flee?

Jose knew, and his face became a graven mask, chiseled in black shadows of despair. He had sold his world to demons, given the children of men into the Hands of Evil. And the price lay in the door, blocking the entrance; he would not leave his hut. Memories of forgotten dreams crowded about him, goading him with horror. And when the village whispers said that the children of Mahgri were wandering to the river-front, the sorcerer knew the reason. But he gave no warning to the elders. It was not yet feeding time.

The villagers gave his hut a wide berth. He saw them avert their eyes in passing. Thirst and hunger oppressed him, but no one came, nor would he cross the threshhold where the silver lay.

One thought compelled his mind: there were as many children of Mahgri as there were weeks in the years of his sorcery. And there would be more. He

was certain of it. Soon many kydrük would haunt the river, and the tribes would be their slaves. And then the cities of the east, the lands of the pale ones.

The pale ones? Could their magic overcome the evil of the kydrük? Perhaps, if they learned the truth in time.

Francisco came. He came to stand in the clearing before Jose's hut. He came to hate in silence. They stared at each other across the triple stack of coins upon the threshhold.

"The pale ones," Jose croaked. "You must send a messenger to tell them—to seek their help—"

Francisco seemed not to hear him. Slowly, he turned his back upon the hut and paced away.

Night came, and dreams, but not the wonderdreams, for the tryst had come, and Mahgri's race was planted on the earth—through the ignorance of an old man. He dreamed of the hilltop again, and the White Shadow of Man coming out of the grove to be betrayed, to be led away in servitude. And in the dream, the thirty coins were with him, burning his flesh. He tried in vain to return them to the kydrük, but the creatures laughed. He tried to throw them away, but they clung to his skin—while he unwillingly watched the White Shadow carry a pair

of crossed beams upon another hill, in silence. The hammers rang loud in the clear air—

When he awoke, he was sitting erect. His hands were full of hemp, and he was plaiting a rope!

It was morning again, and he stared at the rope in shocked silence. While he slept, he had done it. He stared at the doorway. The magic of Francisco's gods? But he did not drop it. After a troubled quiet, his lean and bony fingers slowly twisted the strands, almost lovingly. He continued plaiting the rope, and his face was strangely relaxed.

But toward the middle of the morning, he shifted restlessly, and looked out through the doorway. The aura—it was slowly growing stronger, calling, luring.

The rope was finished. He knotted its end. He caught up his machete and made a few last preparations about the hut. Then he approached the door, and without hesitation, picked up the thirty silver coins and walked outside.

It was nearly feeding time.

After a short trot through the forest, he came to the cliff overlooking the river. A hundred feet below him, the children of Mahgri were sitting on the narrow strand, assembled in an orderly group of dreamers. All

but one. A slender girl stood ankle deep in water, on the long tongue of a sandbar. Her arms were outstretched toward the tide. It was Marguerita, and she was waiting for her "son." Jose knew not what ritual had elected her to be the first, but he knew that the others would wait quietly until it was over, then go back to their homes until the next feeding time.

The kydrük had not yet appeared, but he felt the aura of its approach. He tried to close his mind to it, lest it detect his presence. It was still a young one, and perhaps incautious—while the sorcerer had been dealing with the one called Mahgri for many years, and he was skilled at detecting the thought-glow of the kydrük mind. Not a child of Mahgri by growth from infancy, he felt none of the compelling urge to join the thing.

Jose paused a moment on the cliff-top, looking down at the tide. Then he moved along it until he reached a crag that overhung a deep place, where the constant eddy of a whirlpool had eaten out a basin in the bottom. He drew his machete and crouched there to wait.

The wait was short. Rising majestically above the muddy surface came the tentacle of a small kydrük. It was far out in the center of the river, but

a murmur of awe arose from the congregation on the beach. Then a hush fell over them as the eye-stalk drifted slowly toward the shore. The girl waded a step deeper, then stooped a little to lift double handfuls of water which sparkled gemlike in the sun as they fell. Her dress slipped aside and floated northward, leaving her a gold-bronze statue in the noontide glare.

Jose closed his eyes and thought a jumble of nonsensical imagery, lest the kydrük become aware of his presence. When he opened them again, the rapport was established, and there was no further danger. The creature was absorbed with the mind of the victim, and the girl was on her hands and knees in the shallow tide.

Its blue-green gills undulating about it, the kydrük approached the deep-place on its way toward the girl. Jose gripped his machete and tensed his quivering body on the crag. The pink mouth-pad was already opening to the surface.

Now! He shot out and away from the clifftop in a silent plunge. He tried to paw at the air, to correct his plummeting dive for direct impact, holding the machete ahead of him in both hands. But he was old and clumsy, and he was going to miss. Somehow, he managed

to strike the water feet-first in a stinging crash that brought a moment of blackness to his brain. Still he gripped the machete with a tenacity of hatred.

The kydrük moved slowly. By the time Jose fought his way coughing to the surface, its swanlike neck was turning to look at the source of the watery thunder. Its eye gripped him compellingly.

But with the fury of a maddened bull, Jose found the edge of the bar and launched himself toward the thing with a high-pitched shriek. Fresh-snatched from rapport with its victim, the kydrük was dazed.

Jose's machete flailed in a wide arc, crunched through thin metallic exoderm, and bit blue flesh. The top of the eye-stalk sliced clean and skittered off to splash near shore. The small kydrük thrashed in agony. Jose's machete slashed, and slashed again. The mouth-pad wrapped stinkingly about his calves, but he cut it free.

At last the thing was still. He dragged it shoreward, past the dazed statue of Marguerita, past the uncomprehending crowd of Mahgri's children. Atop the cliff again, he looked back, and shuddered. He, Jose, would-be sorcerer, had made them so, given them into Mahgri's hands

that they might become mindless slaves of the demon race. He departed quickly from the cliff, dragging the blue-gilded kydrük.

A party of warriors waited in the clearing of the village, and among them were the elders, wearing the caps of judgment. He knew they were unaware of what had happened by the river, and he also knew that they were waiting for him. They spread out casually, drifted into a wide circle about him as he walked into the clearing. The circle tightened. The faces were dark with anger.

A murmur travelled among them as Jose tossed the killed kydrük on the ground. Shoulders hunched, head bbbbling slightly, he faced the elders resignedly. Among them stood Francisco, machete drawn and twitching in his hands. He looked down in horror at the thing on the ground, then back to Jose with added hate.

"We must have help," Jose panted. "Help from the pale ones. All the children of Mahgri will bring forth—such things as these."

A surly sound of rage rumbled through the group.

"You must see that the afflicted ones—are tied to stakes in their huts—when their time is come. Else they will go to the river."

The elders were glaring at him fixedly.

"Before you judge me, will you see to these things?"

There was a hesitant moment, but enough of the elders nodded to themselves to tell him that they would see it was done. Jose touched his pouch. The silver rattled in the soggy leather. He took it off and dropped it beside the carcass.

"It will buy food—for the messenger—in the villages of the pale ones."

No one spoke. The angry circle closed a little tighter, hands clenching and quivering in hunger for his throat. Jose was past fear.

"May I go to my house for a moment—before you kill me?"

All eyes turned toward Francisco. The elder wrestled with himself a moment, then grunted, "I will accompany you."

Together they walked across the clearing. But Francisco stopped just short of the door—for a yard beyond it hung the noose of handplaited rope, dangling from a rafter-pole, waiting. The top of the door cut off a view of it at the knot, so that it looked like a snake devouring its tail.

Francisco watched for a moment, his eyes thoughtful. Then he left the sorcerer alone and walked back to join the others. He heard the thatched door close softly behind him.

"The trial is over," he announced quietly.
