

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

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THIEVES' HOUSE

By Fritz Leiber, Jr.

● Fafurd and the Gray Mouser were caught in the house that was headquarters for the guild of thieves and murderers—but it was not those men that caused their deepest fear. There were other beings in that place.

Illustrated by Kramer

"What's the use of knowing the *name* of a skull? One would never have occasion to talk to it," said the fat thief, smirking. "What interests *me* is that it has rubies for eyes."

"Yet it is written here that its name is Ohmphal," replied the black-bearded thief, who was in authority.

"Let me see," said the red-haired wench, leaning over his shoulder. Together the three of them read the cryptic runes:

Item: the skull Ohmphal, of the Master Thief Ohmphal, with great ruby eyes; and one pair of jeweled hands. *History of item:* the skull Ohmphal was stolen

from the Thieves' Guild by the priests of Votishal and placed by them in the crypt of their accursed temple. *Instructions:* the skull Ohmphal is to be recovered at the earliest opportunity, that it may be given proper veneration in the Thieves' Sepulcher. *Difficulties:* the lock of the door leading to the crypt is reputed to be beyond the cunning of any thief to pick. *Warnings:* within the crypt is rumored to be a guardian beast of terrible ferocity.

"Those crabbed letters are devilish hard to read," said the red-haired wench, frowning.

"And no wonder, for they were written centuries ago," said the black-bearded thief.

"Where did you find this parchment?" she asked.

"Beneath the false bottom of a moldering chest in our storerooms," he replied.

"By the gods who are not!" chuckled the fat thief, still pouring over the parchment, "but the Thieves' Guild must have been superstitious in those ancient days! To think of wasting jewels on a mere skull. If we ever get hold of Master Ohmphal, we'll venerate him—by changing his ruby eyes into good hard money!"

"Aye!" said the black-bearded thief, "And it was just that matter I wanted to talk to you about, Fissif—the getting hold of Ohmphal."

"Oh, but there are—difficulties, as you, Krovas our master, must surely know," said the fat thief, quickly singing another tune. "Even today, after the passage of centuries, men still shudder when they speak of the crypt of Votishal, with its lock and its beast. There is no one in the Thieves' Guild who can—"

"No one in the Thieves' Guild, that's true!" interrupted the black-bearded thief sharply. "But—" and here his voice began to go low—"there are those *outside* the Thieves' Guild who can. Have you heard that there is recently returned here to Lankmar a certain rogue and picklock known as the Gray Mouser? And with him a huge barbarian who goes by the name of Fafhrd, but is sometimes called The Beast-Slayer? That pair commonly hunts alone—yet if you were to approach them with this tempting suggestion—"

"But Master," interposed the fat thief, "in that case, they would demand at least two thirds of the profits."

"Exactly!" said the black-bearded thief, with a sudden flash of cold humor. The red-haired wench caught his meaning, and laughed aloud. "Exactly! And that is just the reason why I have chosen you, Fissif, the smoothest of double-crossers, to undertake this business."

The ten remaining days of the Month of the Serpent had passed, and the first fifteen days of the Month of the Owl, since those three had conferred. And the fifteenth day had darkened into night. Chill fog, like a shroud, hugged ancient stony Lankmar, chief city of an ancient barbaric world. This night the fog had come earlier than usual, flowing down the twisting streets and mazy alleyways. And it was getting thicker.

In one street rather narrower and more silent than the rest, a square of yellow torchlight shone from a wide doorway in a vast and rambling house of stone. There was something ominous in a single open door in a street where all other doors were barred against the darkness and the damp. People avoided this street at night. And there was reason for their fear. The house had a bad reputation. People said it was the den in which the thieves of Lankmar gathered to plot and palaver and settle their private bickerings, the

headquarters from which Krovas, the reputed Master Thief, issued his orders—in short, the meeting place of the formidable Thieves' Guild of Lankmar.

But now a man came hurrying along this street, every now and then looking apprehensively over his shoulder. He was a fat man, and he hobbled a little, as if he had recently ridden hard and far. He carried a tarnished and ancient-looking copper box of about the size to contain a human head. He paused in the doorway and uttered a certain password—seemingly to the empty air, for the long hall ahead of him was empty. But a voice from a point inside and *above* the doorway answered, "Pass, Fissif. Krovas awaits you in his room." And the fat one said, "They follow me close—you know the two I mean." And the voice replied, "We are ready for them." And the fat one hurried down the hall.

For a considerable time, then, there was nothing but silence and the thickening fog. Finally a faint warning whistle came from somewhere down the street. It was repeated closer by and answered from inside the doorway.

Then, from the same direction as the first whistle, came the tread of feet, growing louder. It sounded as if there were only one person, but the effulgence of the light from the door showed that there was also a little man, who walked softly, a little man clad in close-fitting garments of gray—tunic, jerkin, mouseskin cap and cloak.

His companion was rangy and copper-haired, obviously a northern barbarian from the distant lands of the Cold Waste. His tunic was rich brown, his cloak green. There was considerable leather about him—wristbands, headband, boots, and a wide tight-laced belt. Fog had wet the leather and misted the brass studding it. As they entered the square of light before the doorway, a frown furrowed his broad wide forehead. His green eyes glanced quickly from side to side. Putting his hand on the little man's shoulder, he whispered:

"I don't like the looks of this, Gray Mouser."

"*Tch!* The place always looks like this," retorted the Gray Mouser sharply, his mobile lips and pug nose sneering, and his dark eyes blazing. "They just do it to scare the populace. Come on, Fafhrd! We're not going to let that misbegotten, double-dealing Fissif escape after the way he cheated us."

"I know all that, my angry little weasel," the barbarian replied, tugging the Mouser back. "And the idea of Fissif escaping displeases me. But putting my bare neck in a trap displeases me more. Remember, they whistled."

"*Tch!* They always whistle. They like to be mysterious. I know these thieves, Fafhrd. I've known them all my life. Come on."

The big man shrugged his shoulders and started forward.

"On second thought," whispered the Mouser, "there may be something to what you say." And he slipped a dirk from his belt.

Fafhrd showed white teeth in a grin and slowly pulled a big-pommeled longsword from its well-oiled scabbard.

"A rotten weapon for infighting," murmured the Mouser sardonically.

Warily now they approached the door, each taking a side and sticking close to the wall. Holding the grip of his sword low, the point high, ready to strike in any direction, Fafhrd entered. The Mouser was a little ahead of him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something snakelike dropping down at the Mouser's head from above, and struck at it quickly with his sword. This flipped it toward him and he caught it with his free hand. It was a strangler's noose. He gave it a sudden sidewise heave and the man gripping the other end toppled out from a ledge above. For an instant he seemed to hang suspended in the air, a dark-skinned rogue with long black hair and a greasy tunic of red leather worked with gold thread. As Fafhrd deliberately raised his sword, he saw that the Mouser was lunging across the corridor at him, dirk in hand. For a moment he thought the Mouser had gone mad. But the Mouser's dirk missed him by a hairbreadth and another blade whipped by him from behind.

The Mouser had seen a trapdoor open in the floor beside Fafhrd and a bald-headed thief shoot up, sword in hand. After deflecting the blow aimed at his companion, the Mouser slammed the trapdoor back and had the satisfaction of catching with it the blade of the sword and two lefthand fingers of the ducking thief. All three were broken and the muted yowl from below was impressive. Fafhrd's man, spitted on the longsword, was quite dead.

From the street came several whistles and the sound of men moving in.

"They've cut us off!" snapped the Mouser. "Our best chance lies ahead. We'll make for Krovas' room. Fissif may be there. Follow me!"

And he darted down the corridor and up a winding stair, Fafhrd following him close at heel. At the fourth level they left the stair, made right and left turns at spots where dimly-lit corridors intersected, then raced for a doorway from which yellow light shone.

It puzzled the Mouser that they had met with no interference. His sharp ears no longer caught sounds of pursuit. On the threshold he pulled up quickly, so that Fafhrd collided with him.

It was a large room with several alcoves. Like the rest of the building, the floor and walls were of smooth dark stone, unembellished. It was lit by four earthenware lamps set at random on a heavy cyprus table. Behind the table sat a richly-

robed, black-bearded man, seemingly staring down in extreme astonishment at a copper box and a litter of smaller objects, his hands gripping the table edge. But they had no time to consider his odd motionlessness and still odder complexion, for their attention was immediately riveted on the red-haired wench who stood beside him.

As she sprang back like a startled cat, Fafhrd pointed at what she held under one arm and cried, "Look Mouser, the skull! The skull and the hands!"

Clasped in her slim arm was indeed a brownish, ancient-looking skull, curiously banded with gold, from whose eye sockets great rubies sparkled and whose teeth were diamonds and blackened pearls. And in her white hand were gripped two neat packets of bones, tipped with a golden gleam and reddish sparkle. Even as Fafhrd spoke she turned and ran toward the largest alcove, her lithe legs outlined against silken garments. Fafhrd and the Mouser rushed after her. They saw she was heading for a small low doorway. Entering the alcove her free hand shot out and gripped a cord hanging from the ceiling. Not pausing, swinging lithely at the hips, she gave it a tug. Folds of thick, weighted velvet fell down behind her. The Mouser and Fafhrd plunged into them and floundered. It was the Mouser who got through first, wriggling under. He saw an oblong of faint light narrowing ahead of him, sprang for it, grabbed at the block of stone sinking into the low doorway, then jerked his hand back with a curse and sucked at bruised fingers. The stone panel closed with a slight grating noise.

Fafhrd lifted the thick folds of velvet on his broad shoulders as if they were a great cloak. Light from the main room flooded into the alcove and revealed a closely mortised stone wall of uniform appearance. The Mouser started to dig the point of his dirk into a crack, then desisted.

"Pah! I know these doors! They're either worked from the other side or else by distant levers. She's gotten clear away and the skull with her."

He continued to suck the fingers that had come so near to being crushed, wondering superstitiously if his breaking of the thief's fingers had been a kind of warning or omen.

"We forget Krovas," said Fafhrd suddenly, lifting the drapes with his hand and looking back over his shoulder.

But the black-bearded man had not moved or taken any notice of the commotion. As they approached him slowly they saw that his face was bluish-purple under the swarthy skin, and that his eyes bulged not from astonishment, but from strangulation. Fafhrd lifted the oily, well-combed beard and saw cruel indentations on the throat, seeming more like those of claws than

fingers. The Mouser examined the things on the table. There were a number of jeweler's instruments, their ivory handles stained deep yellow from long use. He scooped up some small objects.

"Krovas had already pried three of the finger-jewels loose and several of the teeth," he remarked, showing Fafhrd three rubies, and a number of pearls and diamonds, which glittered on his palm.

Fafhrd nodded and again lifted Krovas' beard, frowning at the indentations, which were beginning to deepen in color.

"I wonder who the woman was?" said the Mouser. "No thief is permitted to bring a woman here on pain of death. Krovas' mistress, likely. The Master Thief has special powers and can take chances."

"The Master Thief is dead," muttered Fafhrd.

Then the Mouser awoke to their situation. He had half-formulated a plan of effecting an escape from the Thieves' House by capturing and threatening Krovas. But a dead man could not be effectively intimidated. As he started to speak to Fafhrd they caught the murmur of several voices and the sound of approaching footsteps. Without deliberation they retired into the alcove, the Mouser cutting a small slit in the drapes at eye level and Fafhrd doing the same.

They heard someone say, "Yes, the two of them got clean away, damn their luck! We found the alley door open."

The first thief to enter was paunchy, white-faced, and obviously frightened. The Gray Mouser and Fafhrd immediately recognized him as Fissif. Pushing him along roughly was a tall, expressionless fellow with heavy arms and big hands. The Mouser knew him, too—Slevyas, the Tight-lipped, Krovas' chief lieutenant. About a dozen others filed into the room and took up positions near the walls. Veteran thieves all, with a considerable sprinkling of scars, pockmarks, and other mutilations, including two black-patched eye sockets. They were somewhat wary and ill at ease, held daggers and shortwords ready, and all stared intently at the strangled man.

"So Krovas is truly dead," said Slevyas, shoving Fissif forward. "At least that much of your story is true."

"Dead as a fish," echoed a thief who had moved closer to the table. "Now we've got us a better master. We'll have no more of black-beard and his red-haired wench."

"Shut your teeth, rat, before I break them!" Slevyas whipped out the words coldly and in a level tone.

"But you are our master now," replied the thief in a surprised voice.

"Yes, I'm the master of all of you, unquestioned master, and my first piece of advice is this: to

criticize a dead thief is not only irreverent—it is also a waste of time. Now, Fissif, where's the jeweled skull? We all know it's more valuable than a year's pickpocketing, and that the Thieves' Guild needs gold. So, no nonsense!"

The Mouser peering cautiously from his slit, grinned at the look of piteous fear on Fissif's fat-jowled face.

"The skull, master?" said Fissif in a quavering sepulchral tone. "Why it's gone back to the grave from which we three filched it. It has flown back by supernatural powers, and the hands with it. Surely if those bony hands could strangle Krovas, as I saw with my own eyes, there would be no difficulty about the other thing."

The Mouser could hardly repress a gasp of amazement. Slevyas slapped Fissif across the face.

"You lie! you quaking bag of mush! I will tell you what happened. You plotted with those two rogues, the Gray Mouser and Fafhrd. You thought no one would suspect you because you double-crossed them according to instructions. But you planned a double-double-cross. You helped them escape the trap we had set, let them kill Krovas, and then assured their escape by starting a panic with your tale of dead fingers killing Krovas. You thought you could brzen it out."

"But master," Fissif pleaded, "with my own eyes I saw the skeletal fingers leap to his throat. They were angry with him because he had pried forth some of the jewels that were their nails and—"

Another slap changed his statement to a whining grunt.

"A fool's story," sneered a scrawny thief. "How could the bones hold together?"

"They were laced on brass wires," returned Fissif in meek tones.

"Nah! And I suppose the hands, after strangling Krovas, picked up the skull and carried it away with them?" suggested another thief. Several sniggered. Slevyas silenced them with a look, then indicated Fissif with his thumb.

"Pinion him," he ordered.

Two thieves sidled up to Fissif, who offered no resistance. They twisted his arms behind his back.

"We'll do this thing decently," said Slevyas, seating himself on the table. "Thieves' Trial. Everything in order. Briefly this is a matter for the Thieves' Jury to consider. Fissif, cut-purse of the first rank, was commissioned to loot the sacred grave at the temple of Votishal of one skull and one pair of hands. Because of certain unusual difficulties involved, Fissif was ordered to league himself with two outsiders of special

talent, to wit, the northern barbarian Fafhrd and the notorious Gray Mouser."

The Mouser made a courteous and formal bow behind the drapes, then glued his eye once more to the slit.

"The loot obtained, Fissif was to steal it from the two others—and at the earliest possible moment, to avoid their stealing it from him."

The Mouser thought he heard Fafhrd smother a curse and grit his teeth.

"If possible, Fissif was to slay them," concluded Slevyas. "In any case he was to bring the loot direct to Krovas. So much for Fissif's instructions, as detailed to me by Krovas. Now tell your story, Fissif, but—mind you—no old-wives' tales."

"Brother thieves," began Fissif in a heavy mournful voice. This was greeted by several derisive cries. Slevyas rapped carelessly for order.

"I followed out those instructions just as they were given me," continued Fissif. "I sought out Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, and interested them in the plan. I agreed to share the loot equally with them, a third to each man."

Fafhrd, squinting at Fissif through the drape, nodded his head solemnly. Fissif then made several uncomplimentary remarks about Fafhrd and the Mouser, evidently hoping thereby to convince his listeners that he had not plotted with them. The other thieves only smiled grimly.

"And when it came to the actual filching of the loot from the temple," Fissif went on, gaining confidence from the sound of his own voice, "it turned out I had little need of their help."

Again Fafhrd smothered a curse. He could hardly endure listening in silence to such outrageous lies. But the Mouser enjoyed it after a fashion.

"This is an unwise time to brag," interjected Slevyas. "You know very well that the Mouser's cunning was needed in picking the great triple lock, and that the guardian beast could not easily have been slain but for the Northerner."

Fafhrd was somewhat mollified by this. Fissif became humble again and bowed his head in assent. The thieves began gradually to close in on him.

"And so," he finished in a kind of panic, "I took up the loot while they slept, and spurred on to Lankhmar. I dared not slay them, for fear the killing of one would awaken the other. I brought the loot direct to Krovas, who complimented me and began to pry out the gems. There lies the copper box which held the skull and hands." He pointed at the table. "And as for what happened afterwards,"—he paused, wet his lips, looked around fearfully, then added in a small despairing voice—"it happened just as I told you before."

The thieves, snarling disbelief, closed in, but

Slevyas halted them with a peremptory rap. He seemed to be considering something.

Another thief darted into the room, saluted Slevyas. "Master," he panted, "Moolsh, stationed on the roof opposite the alley door, has just reported that, though open all night, no one either entered or left. The two intruders may still be here!"

Slevyas' start as he received the news was almost imperceptible. He stared at his informant. Then slowly and as if drawn by instinct, his impassive face turned until his pale, small eyes rested upon the heavy drapes curtaining the alcove. As he was about to give an order, the drapes bellied out as if with a great gust of wind. They swung forward and up until almost level with the ceiling, and he glimpsed two figures racing forward. The tall, copper-haired barbarian was aiming a blow at him.

With a suppleness which belied his large frame, Slevyas half-ducked, half-dropped, and the great longsword bit deep into the table against which he had been resting. From the floor he saw his underlings springing back in confusion, one staggered by a blow. Fissif, quicker-nerved than the rest because he knew his life was at stake in more ways than one, snatched and hurled a dagger. It was an imperfect throw, traveling pommel-forward. But it was accurate. Slevyas saw it take the tall barbarian on the side of the head as he rushed through the doorway, seeming to stagger him. Then Slevyas was on his feet, sword drawn and organizing pursuit. In a few moments the room was empty, save for dead Krovas staring at an empty copper box in a cruel mockery of astonishment.

The Gray Mouser knew the layout of the Thieves' House—not as well as the palm of his hand, but well enough—and he led Fafhrd along a bewildering route. They careened around stony angles, sprang up and down small sets of steps, two or three each, which made it difficult to determine which level they were on. The Mouser had drawn his slim sword Scalpel for the first time and used it to knock over the candles they passed, and to make swipes at the wall torches, hoping thereby to confuse the pursuit, whose whistles sounded sharply from behind them. Twice Fafhrd stumbled and recovered himself.

Two half-dressed apprentice thieves stuck their heads out of a door. The Mouser slammed it in their inquiring, excited faces, then sprang down a curving stairway. He was heading for a third exit he surmised would be poorly guarded.

"If we are separated, let our rendezvous be the Silver Eel," he said in a quick aside to Fafhrd, mentioning a tavern they frequented.

The Northern nodded. His head was beginning to feel less dizzy now, though it still pained him



considerably. He did not, however, gauge accurately the height of the low arch under which the Mouser sped after descending the equivalent of two levels, and it gave his head as hard a clip as had the dagger. Everything went darkish and whirling before his eyes. He heard the Mouser saying, "This way now! We follow the left-hand wall," and trying to keep a tight hold on his consciousness, he plunged into the narrow corridor down which the Mouser was pointing. He thought the Mouser was following him.

But the Mouser had waited a moment too long. True, the main pursuit was still out of sight, but a watchman whose duty it was to patrol this passage, hearing the whistles, had returned hurriedly from a friendly game of dice. The Mouser ducked as the artfully-cast noose settled around his neck, but not quite soon enough. It tightened cruelly against ear, cheek, and jawbone, and brought him down. In the next instant Scalpel severed the cord, but that gave the watchman time to get out his sword. For a few perilous moments the Mouser fought him from the floor, warding off a

flashing point that came close enough to his nose to make him cross-eyed. Watching his chance, he scrambled to his feet, rushed his man back a dozen paces with a whirlwind attack in which Scalpel seemed to become three or four swords, and ended the man's cries for help with a slicing thrust through the neck.

The delay was sufficient. As the Mouser wrenched away the noose from his cheek and mouth, where it had half gagged him during the fight, he saw the first of Slevyas' crowd dart out under the archway. Abruptly the Mouser made off down the main corridor, away from the path of escape Fafhrd had taken. A half dozen plans flashed through his mind. There came a triumphant outcry as Slevyas' crowd sighted him, then a number of whistles from ahead. He decided his best chance was to make for the roof, and whirled into a cross corridor. He was certain Fafhrd had escaped, though the Northerner's behavior bothered him vaguely. He was supremely confident that he, the Gray Mouser, could elude ten times as many thieves as now careened and skidded

through the mazy corridors of the Thieves' House. He lengthened his skipping stride, and his soft-shod feet fairly flew over the well-worn stone.

Fafhrd, lost in pitch darkness for he didn't know how long, steadied himself against what felt like a table and tried to remember how he had gotten so grievously far astray. But his skull throbbed and kept tightening with pain, and the incidents he recalled were jumbled up, with gaps in between. There was a matter of sprawling down a stair and of pushing against a wall of carven stone which had given way silently and let him tumble through. At one point he had been violently sick and at another he must have been unconscious for some time, for he recalled pushing himself up from a prone position and crawling for some distance on hands and knees through a jumble of casks and bales of rotten cloth. That he had banged his head at least once more he was certain; pushing his fingers through his tangled, sweaty locks he could detect as many as three distinct lumps in his scalp. His chief emotion was a dull and persistent anger directed at the heavy masses of stone around him. His primitive imagination half-invested them with a conscious intent to oppose him and block him off whichever way he moved. He knew that he had somehow confused the Mouser's simple directions. Just which wall was it the little gray man had told him to follow? The right? And just where was the Mouser? In some fearful mix-up likely.

If only the air weren't so hot and dry, he felt he'd be able to think things out better. Nothing seemed to agree. Even the quality of the air didn't fit with his impression that he had been descending most of the way, as if into a deep cellar. It should have been cold, and damp with fog, but it wasn't. He slid his hand along the wooden surface on which it was resting, and soft dust piled up between his fingers. That, along with the impenetrable darkness and total silence, would seem to indicate he was in a region of the Thieves' House long disused. He brooded for a moment over his memories of the stone crypt from which he and the Mouser and Fissif had filched the jeweled skull. The fine dust, rising to his nostrils, made him sneeze, and that started him moving again. His groping hand found a wall. He tried to recall the direction from which he had originally approached the table, but was unable to, and so started out at random toward the right. He moved along slowly, feeling his way, hand and foot.

His caution saved him. One of the stones seemed to give slightly under his exploring foot and he stopped dead. Abruptly there came a rasping sound followed by a clank and two muffled thuds. The air in front of his face was disturbed. He waited a moment, then groped forward cau-

tiously through the blackness. His hand encountered a strip of rusty metal at shoulder level. Feeling along it gingerly he found it protruded from a crevice in the left wall, and ended in a point a few inches from a wall he now discovered to be on his right. Further groping revealed a similar blade a little ways below the first. He now realized that the thudding sounds had been caused by counterweights, which, released by pressure on the stone, had automatically propelled the blades through the crevice. Another step forward and he would have been transfixed, like a roast on a spit. He reached for his longsword, found it was not in the scabbard, so took the scabbard instead and with it broke off the two blades close to the wall. Then he turned and retraced his steps to the dust-covered table.

But a slow tracing of the wall beyond the table led him back to the corridor of the sword blades. He shook his aching head and cursed angrily because he had no light nor way of making fire. How then? Had he originally entered this blind alley by way of the corridor, missing the deadly stone by pure luck? That seemed to be the only answer, so with a growl he started off again down the corridor of the sword blades, arms outstretched and hands brushing the two walls, so that he might know when he came to an intersection. After a little it occurred to him that he might have fallen into the chamber behind from some entrance part way up the wall, but stubbornness kept him from turning back a second time.

The next thing his exploring foot encountered was an emptiness, which turned out to be the beginning of a flight of stone steps leading down. At that point he gave up trying to remember just how he had gotten where he was. About twenty steps down his nostrils caught a musty, arid odor welling up from below. Another twenty steps and he began comparing it to the odor he found in certain ancient desert sepulchers of the Eastern Lands. There was an almost imperceptible spiciness to it, a dead spiciness. His skin felt hot and dry. He drew his long knife from his belt and moved silently, slowly.

At the fifty-third step the stair ended and the side walls retreated. From the feel of the air, he thought he must be in a large chamber. He advanced a little way, his boots scuffing a thick carpet of fine dust. There was a dry flapping and faint rattling in the air above his head. Twice something small and hard brushed his cheek. He remembered bat-infested caves into which he had previously ventured. But these tiny noises, though in many ways similar, were not quite like those of bats. The short hairs prickled on the back of his neck. He strained his eyes, but saw only the meaningless pattern of points of light that comes with inky darkness.

Again one of the things brushed his face and this time he was ready for it. His big hands grabbed swiftly—and then nearly dropped what they clutched, for it was dry and weightless, a mere framework of tiny brittle bones which cracked under his fingers. His finger and thumb encountered a minute animal skull.

His mind fought down the idea of bats which were skeletons and yet flapped to and fro in a great tomblike chamber. Surely this creature must have died hanging to the roof above his head, and his entrance dislodged it! But he did not grasp again at the faint rattling noises in the air.

Then he began to sense sounds of another sort—diminutive shrill squeaks almost too high for the ear to catch. Whatever they were, real or imagined, there was that about them which bred panic, and Fafhrd found himself shouting: "Speak to me! What are you whining and tittering about? Reveal yourselves!"

At this, echoes cried faintly back to him, and he knew for certain he was in a large chamber. Then there was silence, even the sounds in the air receding. And after the silence had endured for twenty or more beats of Fafhrd's pounding heart, it was broken in a way Fafhrd did not like.

A faint, high, listless voice came from somewhere ahead of him, saying, "The man is a northerner, brothers, a long-haired, uncouth barbarian from the Cold Waste."

From a spot a little ways to one side a similar voice responded, "In our days we met many of his breed at the docks. We soused them with drink, and stole gold dust from their pouches. We were mighty thieves in our day, matchless in craft and cunning."

And a third—"See, he has lost his sword, and look, brothers, he has crushed a bat and holds it in his hand."

Fafhrd's shout to the effect that this was all nonsense and mummery died before it reached his lips, for it suddenly occurred to him to wonder how these creatures could tell his appearance and even see what he held in his hand, when it was pitch dark. Fafhrd knew well that even the cat and the owl are blind in complete darkness. A crawling terror took hold of him.

"But the skull of a bat is not the skull of a man," came what seemed to be the first voice. "He is one of the three who stole back our brother's skull from the temple of Votishal. Yet he has not brought the skull with him."

"For centuries our brother's jeweled head has languished lonely under the accursed fane of Votishal," spoke a fourth. "And now that those above have stolen him back, they do not mean to return him to us. They would tear out his glit-

tering eyes and sell them for greasy coins. They are puny thieves, godless and greedy. They have forgotten us, their ancient brothers, and are evil entirely."

There was something horribly dead and faraway about the voices, as if they formed in a void. Something emotionless and yet strangely sad and strangely menacing, halfway between a faint, hopeless sigh and a fainter, icy laugh. Fafhrd clenched his hands tight, so that the tiny skeleton cracked to fragments. He tried to rally his courage and move forward, but could not.

"It is not fitting that such ignoble fate befall our brother," came the first voice, which held the barest suggestion of authority over the others. "Hearken now, Northerner, to our words, and hearken well."

"See, brothers," broke in the second, "the Northerner is afraid, and wipes his mouth with his great hand, and gnaws his knuckle in uncertainty and fear."

Fafhrd began to tremble at hearing his actions so minutely described. Long-buried terrors rose in his mind. He remembered his earliest thoughts of death, how as a boy he had first witnessed the terrible funeral rites of the Cold Waste, and joined in muted prayers to Kos and the nameless god of doom. Then, for the first time, he thought he could distinguish something in the darkness. It might only have been a peculiar formation of the meaningless pattern of light, but he seemed to distinguish a number of sparkling points on a level with his own head, all in pairs about a thumb's-length apart. Some seemed deep red, and some green, and some pale-blue like sapphires. He vividly recalled the ruby eyes of the skull stolen from Votishal, the skull Fissif averred had strangled Krovas with bony hands. The points of light seemed to be gathering together and moving toward him, very slowly.

"Northerner," continued the first voice, "know that we are the ancient master thieves of Lankhmar, and that we needs must have the lost skull of our brother Ohmphal. You must bring it to us before the stars of midnight next shine overhead. Else you will be sought out and your life drawn from you."

The pairs of colored light were still closing in, and now Fafhrd thought he could hear the sound of dry, grating footsteps in the dust. He recalled the deep, purple indentations on the throat of Krovas.

"You must bring the skull without fail," echoed the second voice.

"Before next midnight," came another.

"The jewels must be in the skull; not one must be held back from us."

"Ohmphal our brother shall return."

"If you fail us," whispered the first voice, "we shall come for you."

And then they seemed to be all around him, crying out "Ohmphal—Ohmphal," in those detestable voices which were still not one whit louder or less faraway. Fafhrd thrust out his hands convulsively, touched something hard and smooth and dry. And with that he shook and started like a frightened horse, turned and ran off at full speed, came to a painful, stumbling stop against the stone steps, and raced up them three at a time, stumbling, and bruising his elbows against the walls.

The fat thief Fissif wandered about disconsolately in a large low cellar-chamber, dimly lighted, littered with odds and ends and piled with empty casks and bales of rotten cloth. He chewed a mildly soporific nut which stained his lips blue and dribbled down his flabby jaws; at regular intervals he sighed in self-pity. He realized his prospects in the Thieves' Guild were rather dubious, even though Slevyas had granted him a kind of reprieve. He recalled the fishy look in Slevyas' eye, and shivered. He did not like the loneliness of the cellar-chamber, but anything was preferable to the contemptuous, threatening glances of his brother thieves.

The sound of dragging footsteps caused him to swallow one of his monotonous sighs—his chew along with it—and duck behind a bale. There appeared from the shadows a startling apparition. Fissif recognized it as the Northerner, Fafhrd, but it was a very sorry-looking Fafhrd, face pale and grimy, clothes and hair bedraggled and smeared with a grayish dust. He moved like a man bewildered or deep in thought. Fissif, realizing that here indeed was a golden opportunity, picked up a sizable tapestry-weight that was lying at hand, and stole softly after the brooding figure.

Fafhrd had just about convinced himself that the strange voices from which he had fled were only the figments of his brain, fostered by fever and headache. After all, he reasoned, a blow on the head often made a person see colored lights and hear high ringing noises; he must have been almost witless to get lost in the dark so readily—the ease with which he'd retraced his path this time proved that. The thing to do now was to concentrate on escaping from this musty den. He mustn't dream. There was a houseful of thieves on the lookout for him, and he might expect to meet one at any turn.

As he shook his head to clear it, and gazed up alertly, there descended on his thick skull the sixth blow it had received that night. But this one was harder.

Slevyas' reaction to the news of Fafhrd's capture was not exactly what Fissif had expected. He did not smile. He did not look up from the platter of cold meats set before him. He merely

took a small swallow of pale-yellow wine and went on eating.

"The jeweled skull?" he questioned curtly, between mouthfuls.

Fissif explained that it was possible the Northerner had hidden or lost it somewhere in the lower reaches of the cellars. A careful search would answer the question. "Perhaps the Gray Mouser was carrying it—"

"You killed the Northerner?" asked Slevyas after a pause.

"Not quite," answered Fissif proudly. "But I joggled his brains for him."

Fissif expected a compliment at this, or at least a friendly nod, but received instead a cold, appraising stare, the import of which was difficult to determine. Slevyas thoroughly masticated a mouthful of meat, swallowed it, then took a deliberate swallow of wine. All the while his eyes did not leave Fissif.

Finally he said, "Had you killed him, you would at this instant be put to torture. Understand, fat-belly, that I do not trust you. Too many things point to your complicity. If you had plotted with him, you would have killed him to prevent your treason being revealed. Perhaps you did try to kill him. Fortunate for you his skull is thick."

The matter-of-fact tone stifed Fissif's protest. Slevyas drained the last of his cup, leaned back, and signed for the apprentices to take the dishes away.

"Has the Northerner regained his senses?" he asked abruptly.

Fissif nodded, and added, "He seemed to be in a fever. Struggled against his bonds and muttered words. Something about 'Next Midnight.' He repeated that three times. The rest was in an outlandish tongue."

A scrawny, rat-eared thief entered. "Master," he said bowing obsequiously, "we have found the Gray Mouser. He sits at the Silver Eel Tavern. Several of ours watch the place. Shall he be captured or slain?"

"Had he the skull with him? Or a box that might hide it?"

"No, master," responded the thief lugubriously, bowing even lower than before.

Slevyas sat for a moment in thought, then mentioned an apprentice to bring writing materials. He wrote a few lines, then threw a question to Fissif.

"What were the words the Northerner muttered?"

"'Next Midnight', master," answered Fissif, becoming obsequious himself.

"They will fit nicely," said Slevyas, smiling thinly as if at an irony only he could perceive. His pen moved on over the stiff parchment.

The Gray Mouser sat with his back to the wall behind a tankard-dented, wine-stained table at the Silver Eel, nervously rolling between finger and thumb one of the rubies he had taken from under the eyes of dead Krovas. His small cup of wine of bitter herbs was still half full. He suffered from the unpleasant sensation that he was being watched. His glance flitted restlessly around the almost empty room and back and forth between the four small window spaces, high in the wall, that let in the chill fog. He gazed narrowly at the fat, leather-aproned innkeeper who snored dismally on a stool beside the short stair leading up to the door. He listened with half an ear to the disjointed, somnolent mumbling of the two soldiers across the room, who clutched large tankards and, heads leaned together in drunken confidentialness, tried to tell each other of ancient strategems and mighty marches.

Why didn't Fafhrd come? This was no time for the huge fellow to be late, yet since the Mouser's arrival at the Silver Eel, the candles had melted down half an inch. The Mouser no

of sparkling red which his other hand snatched back as it descended, like a lizard trapping a fly. Again he stared suspiciously at the slumped, open-mouthed innkeeper.

From the corner of his eye he saw the small steel messenger streaking down toward him from a fog-dim rectangle of window. Instinctively he jerked to one side. But there was no need. The dagger buried its point in the table top an arm's length to one side. For what seemed a long time the Mouser stood tense, poised, ready for anything. The hollow, smacking noise of the impact had not awakened the innkeeper nor disturbed the soldiers, one of whom now snored, too. Then the Mouser's left hand reached out and rocked the dagger loose. He slipped the small role of parchment from the blade, and, still keeping his gaze near the windows, read in snatches the harshly-drawn runes of Lankhmar.

Their import was this. "If you bring not the jeweled skull to what was Krovas' and is now Sievyas' chamber by next midnight, we will begin to kill the Northerner."



longer found pleasure in recalling the perilous stages of his escape from the Thieves' House—the dash up the stairs, the leaping from roof to roof, the short fight among the chimneys. By the Gods of Trouble! Would he have to go back to that den, now filled with ready knives and open eyes, to begin search for his companion? He snapped his fingers so that the jewel between them shot high toward the sooty ceiling, a little track

Again next night the fog crept early into Lankhmar. Sounds were muffled and torches ringed with smoky halos. But it was not yet late, although midnight was nearing, and the streets were filled with hurrying shopkeepers and craftsmen, and drinkers happily laughing from their first cups, and sailors new on leave ogling the shopgirls.

In the street next that on which stood the

Thieves' House—the Street of the Silk Merchants, it was called—the crowd was thinning. The merchants were shutting shop. Occasionally they exchanged the noisy greetings of business rivals and plied shrewd questions pertaining to the state of trade. Several of them looked curiously at a narrow stone building, overshadowed by the dark mass of the Thieves' House, and from whose slitlike upper windows warm light shone. There dwelt, with servants and hired bodyguard, one Ivlis, a handsome red-haired wench who sometimes danced for the overlords, and who was treated with respect, not so much for that reason, but because it was said that she was the mistress of the Master of the Thieves' Guild, to whom the silk merchants paid tribute. But that very day rumor had whispered that the old master was dead and a new one taken his place. There was speculation among the silk merchants as to whether Ivlis was now out of favor and had shut herself up in fear.

A little old woman came hobbling along, her crooked cane feeling for the cracks between the slick cobblestones. Because she had a black cloak huddled around her and a black, cowllike bonnet on her head, one of the merchants almost collided with her in the shadows. He helped her around a slimy puddle and grinned commiseratingly when she complained in a quavering voice about the condition of the street and the manifold dangers to which an old woman was exposed. She went off mumbling to herself in a rather senile fashion, "Come on now, it's just a little farther, just a little farther. Old bones are brittle, brittle."

A loutish apprentice dyer came ambling along, bumped into her rudely, and walked on without looking back to see whether she had fallen. But he had not taken two steps before a well-planted kick jarred his spine. He whirled around clumsily but saw only the bent old form tottering off, cane tapping uncertainly. Eyes and mouth wide open, he moved back several steps, scratching his head in utter bewilderment not unmixed with superstitious wonder. Later that night he gave half his wages to his old mother.

The old woman paused before the house of Ivlis, peered up at the lighted windows several times as if she were in doubt and her eyesight bad, then climbed up laboriously to the door and feebly waggled her cane against it. After a pause she rapped again, and cried out in a fretful, high voice: "Let me in. Let me in. I bear news from the gods to the dweller in this house. You inside there, let me in!"

Finally a wicket opened and a gruff, deep voice said, "Go on your way, old witch. None enters here tonight."

But the old woman took no notice of this and repeated stubbornly, "Let me in, I say. I read the future. It's cold in the street and the fog

freezes my old throat. Let me in. This noon a bat came flapping and told me of portentous events impending over the dweller in this house. My old eyes can see the shadows of things which are not yet. Let me in, I say."

The slim figure of a woman was silhouetted in the window above the door. After a little it moved away.

The interchange of words between the old woman and the guard went on for some time. Then a soft, husky voice called down the stairwell, "Let the wise woman in. She's alone, isn't she? Then I will talk with her."

The door opened, though not very wide, and the black-cloaked form tottered in. The door was immediately closed and barred.

The Gray Mouser looked around at the three bodyguards standing in the darkened hall, strapping fellows with two shortwords each. They were certainly not of the Thieves' Guild. They seemed ill at ease. He did not forget to wheeze asthmatically, holding his bent side, and thank with a smirking, senile leer the one who opened the door.

The guard drew back with an ill-concealed expression of disgust. The Mouser was not a pretty sight, his face covered with cunningly blended grease and gray ashes, studded with hideous warts of putty, and half covered with wispy gray hair straggling down from the dried scalp of a real witch—so Laavyan the wig seller had averred—that covered his plate.

Slowly the Mouser began to ascend the stair, leaning heavily on the cane and stopping every few steps as if to recover his breath. It was not easy for him to go at such a snaillike pace, what with midnight so near. But he had already failed three times in attempts to enter this well-guarded house, and he knew that the slightest unnatural action might betray him. Before he was halfway up, the husky voice gave a command and a dark-haired serving woman, in a black silk tunic, hurried down, her bare feet making little noise on the stone.

"You're very kind to an old woman," he wheezed, patting the smooth hand which gripped his elbow. They began to move up a little faster. The Mouser's inner core of thought was concentrated on the jeweled skull. He could almost see it wavering in the darkness of the stairwell, a brown ovoid. That skull was the key to the Thieves' House and Fafhrd's safety. Not that Slevyas would be likely to release Fafhrd, even if the skull were brought. But having the skull, the Mouser knew he would be in a position to bargain. Without it, he would have to storm Slevyas' lair with every thief forewarned and ready for him. Last night luck and circumstance had fought on his side. It would not happen again. As these

thoughts were passing through the Mouser's mind he grumbled and whined vaguely about the height of the stair and the stiffness of old joints.

The maid led him into a room strewn with thick-piled rugs and hung with silken tapestry. From the ceiling depended on heavy brass chains a large-bowled copper lamp, intricately engraved, unlit. A soft illumination and a pleasant aromatic odor came from pale-green candles set here and there on little tables which also held tightly-stoppered jars of perfume, small fat-bellied pots of unguent, and the like.

Standing in the center of the room was the re-haired wench he had seen take the skull from Krovas' chamber. Her robe was of white silk. Her gleaming hair, redder than auburn, was held high with golden-headed pins. He had time now to study her face, noting the hardness of her yellow-green eyes and tight jaw, contrasted with her full soft lips and pale creamy skin. He recognized anxiety in the tense lines of her body.

"You read the future, hag?" Her question was more like a command.

"By hand and hair I read it," replied the Mouser, putting an eerie note into his quavering falsetto. "By palm and heart and eye." He tottered toward her. "Yes, and small creatures talk to me and tell me secrets." With that he suddenly drew from under his cloak a small black kitten and almost thrust it into her face. She recoiled in surprise and cried out, but he could see that the action had, in her estimation, established him as a genuine witch.

Ivlis dismissed the maid and the Mouser hastened to follow up his advantage before Ivlis' mood of awe vanished. He spoke of doom and destiny, of omens and portents, of money and love and voyages over water. He played upon the superstitions he knew to be current among the dancing girls of Lankhmar. He impressed her by speaking of "a dark man with a black beard, either recently dead or at death's door," not mentioning the name of Krovas for fear too much accuracy would awaken her suspicion. He wove facts, guesses, and impressive generalities into a web of intricate texture.

The morbid fascination of staring into the forbidden future took hold of her and she leaned forward, breathing rapidly, twisting her slim fingers together, sucking her under lip. Her hurried questions mainly concerned "a cruel, cold-faced, large man," in whom the Mouser recognized Slevyas, and whether or not she should leave Lankhmar.

The Mouser kept up a steady stream of words, only pausing occasionally to cough, wheeze, or cackle for added realism. At times he almost believed that he was indeed a witch and that the things he spoke were dark unholy truths.

But thoughts of Fafhrd and the skull were uppermost in his mind, and he knew that midnight was close at hand. He learned much of Ivlis—for one thing, that she hated Slevyas almost more than she feared him. But the information he most wanted eluded him.

Then the Mouser saw something which stirred him on to greater efforts. Behind Ivlis a gap in the silken hangings showed the wall, and he noted that one of the large paneling stones seemed to be out of place. Suddenly he realized that the stone was of the same size, shape, and quality as that in Krovas' room. This, then, must be the other end of the passage down which Ivlis had escaped. He determined that it would be his means of entry to the Thieves' House, whether he brought the skull or not.

Fearing to waste more time, the Mouser sprang his trick. He paused abruptly, pinched the kitten's tail to make it mew queerly, then sniffed several times, made a hideous face, and said, "Bones! I smell a dead man's bones!"

Ivlis caught her breath and looked up quickly at the large lamp hanging from the ceiling, the lamp which was unlit. The Mouser knew what that glance meant.

But either his own satisfaction betrayed him or else Ivlis guessed she had been tricked into betraying herself, for she gazed at him sharply. The superstitious excitement drained from her face and the hardness came back into her eyes.

"You're a man!" she spat at him suddenly. Then with fury, "Slevyas sent you!"

With that she jerked one of the dagger-long pins from her hair and flung herself at him, striking at his eyes. The wicked instrument tore the flap of his ear as he dodged. He caught her wrist with his left hand, clapped his right over her mouth. The struggle was brief and almost completely noiseless because of the thick carpeting on which they rolled. When she had been carefully trussed and gagged with strips torn from the silken hangings, the Mouser first closed the door to the stair, then pulled open the stone panel, finding the narrow passageway he had expected. Ivlis glared at him, every look a vituperation, and struggled futilely. But he knew there was no time for explanations. Hitching up his incongruous garments he sprang nimbly for the lamp, caught the upper edge. The chains held and he raised himself until his eyes could see over the edge. Cradled inside were the gleaming, glittering skull and the jewel-tipped bones.

The upper bowl of the crystal water clock was almost empty. Fafhrd stolidly watching the twinkling drops form and fall into the lower bowl. He was on the floor with his back to the wall. His legs were tied from knee to ankle, his arms laced behind him with an equally unnecessary

amount of cordage, so that he felt quite numb. To either side of him squatted an armed thief.

When the upper bowl emptied it would be midnight.

Occasionally his gaze shifted to the dark, disfigured faces which ringed the table on which the clock and certain curious instruments of torture rested. These were the aristocrats of the Thieves' Guild, men with crafty eyes and lean cheeks, who vied with one another as to the richness and greasiness of their finery. Flickering torches threw highlights on soiled reds and purples, tarnished cloth of silver and gold. But behind their masklike expressions Fafhrd sensed uncertainty. Only Slevyas, sitting in the chair of dead Krovas, seemed truly calm and self-possessed. His voice was almost casual as he interrogated a lesser thief who knelt abjectly before him.

"Are you indeed as great a coward as you would make us think?" He asked. "Would you have us believe you were afraid of an empty cellar?"

"Master, I am no coward," pleaded the thief. "I followed the Northerner's footprints in the dust along the narrow corridor and almost to the bottom of the ancient stair. But no man alive could hear without terror those strange, high voices, those bony rattlings. The dry air choked my throat, a wind blew out my torch. Things tittered at me. Master, I would attempt to filch a jewel from inside a wakeful cobra's coil if you should command it. But down into that place of darkness I could not force myself."

Fafhrd saw Slevyas' lips tighten and waited for him to pronounce sentence on the miserable thief, but remarks by the notables sitting around the table interrupted.

"There may be some truth to his tale," said one. "After all, who knows what may be in these cellars the Northerner's blundering discovered?"

"Until last night we never knew they existed," echoed another. "In the trackless dust of centuries strange things may lurk."

"Last night," added a third, "we scoffed at Fissif's tale. Yet on the throat of Krovas we found the marks of bony claws."

It was as if a miasma of fear had welled up from the cellars far below. Voices were solemn. The lesser thieves who stood near the walls, bearing torches and weapons, were obviously gripped by superstitious dread. Again Slevyas hesitated, although unlike the others he seemed perplexed rather than frightened. In the hush the monotonous splashes of the falling drops sounded loudly. Fafhrd decided to fish in troubled waters.

"I will tell you myself of what I found in the cellars," he said in a deep voice. "But first tell me where you thieves bury your dead."

Appraising eyes turned upon him. This was the first time he had spoken since he came to his senses. His question was not answered, but he

was allowed to speak. Even Slevyas, although he frowned at Fafhrd and fingered a thumbscrew, did not object. And Fafhrd's words were something to hear. They had a cavernous quality which suggested the northland and the Cold Waste, a dramatic ring like that in the voice of a skald. He told in detail of his descent into the dark regions below. Indeed, he added new details for effect, and made the whole experience seem like some frightening epic. The lesser thieves, unused to this kind of talk, gaped at him. Those around the table sat very still. He spun out his story as long as he dared, playing for time.

During the pauses in his speech the dripping of the water clock was no longer to be heard. Then Fafhrd's ear caught a small grating sound, as of stone on stone. His listeners did not seem to notice it, but Fafhrd recognized it as the opening of the stone panel in the alcove, before which the black drapes still hung.

He had reached the climax of his revelations.

"There, in those forgotten cellars," his voice went a note deeper, "are the living bones of the ancient Thieves of Lankhmar. Long have they lain there, hating you who have forgotten them. The jeweled skull was that of their brother, Ohmphal. Did not Krovas tell you that the plans for stealing the skull were handed down from the dim past? It was intended that Ohmphal be restored to his brothers. Instead, Krovas desecrated the skull, tearing out the jewels. Because of that indignity, the bony hands found supernatural power with which to slay him. I know not where the skull is now. But if it has not already returned to them, those below will come for it even now, tonight. And they will not be merciful."

And then Fafhrd's words froze in his throat. His final argument, which had to do with his own release, remained unspoken. For, suspended in the air immediately in front of the black draperies of the alcove, was the skull of Ohmphal, its jeweled eyes glittering with an unnatural light that was more than reflection. The eyes of the thieves followed those of Fafhrd, and the air whistled with intaken breaths of fear, fear so intense that it momentarily precluded panic. A fear such as they felt toward their living master, but magnified many times. Moreover, they were sure that nothing living could be in the alcove. They had peered into it that very night and seen that it was empty. None knew of the panel.

And then a high wailing voice spoke from the skull, "Move not, oh you craven thieves of today! Tremble and be silent. It is your ancient master who speaks. Behold, I am Ohmphal!"

The effect of that voice was peculiar. Most of the thieves shrank back, gritting their teeth and clapping their hands to control trembling. But

the sweat of relief trickled down Fafhrd's forehead, for he recognized the Mouser. And in fat Fissif's face puzzlement mingled with fear, for he, too, thought of the Mouser and wondered.

"First," continued the voice from the skull, "I shall strangle the Northman as an example to you. Cut his bonds and bring him to me. Be quick, lest I and my brothers slay you all."

With twitching hands the thieves to the right and left of Fafhrd slit his lashings. He tensed his great muscles, trying to work out the paralyzing numbness. They pulled him to his feet and pushed him forward, stumbling, toward the skull.

Abruptly the black draperies were shaken by a commotion behind them. There came a shrill animal scream of rage in an entirely different voice. The skull of Ohmphal slid down the black velvet and rolled out into the room, the thieves leaping out of its way and squealing as if for fear it came to bite their ankles with poisoned teeth. From the hole in its base fell a candle which flickered out. The draperies swung to one side and two struggling figures reeled into the room. For a moment even Fafhrd thought he was going mad at such an utterly unexpected sight as a fight between an old hag in black, with skirts tucked above her knees, and a red-haired wench with a dagger. Then the hag's cowl and wig were torn off and he recognized, under a complexion of grease and ashes, the Mouser's snub nose. Fissif sprang forward past Fafhrd, his dagger out. The Northerner, awakening to action, caught him by the shoulder, hurled him against the wall, then snatched a sword from the fingers of a nerveless thief and staggered forward himself, muscles still numb.

Meanwhile Ivlis, becoming aware of the assembled thieves, suddenly stopped trying to skewer the Mouser. Fafhrd and the Mouser turned toward the alcove, where escape lay, and were almost bowled over by the sudden outrush of Ivlis' three bodyguards, come to rescue their mistress. The bodyguards immediately attacked Fafhrd and the Mouser, since they were nearest, chasing them back across the room, striking also at the thieves with their short heavy swords.

This delay gave the thieves time to recover from their fear. Slevyas, sensing the essentials of the situation, fairly drove a group of underlings to block the alcove, galvanizing them into action with flat-edged thwacks of his sword blade. Then came chaos and pandemonium. Swords

clashed and skirled together. Daggers flashed. Men were knocked down by panicky, meaningless rushes. Heads were thumped and blood flowed. Torches were hurled like clubs, fell to the floor and singed the fallen, making them howl. Thief fought thief in the confusion, the notables who had sat at the table forming a unit for self-protection. Slevyas mustered a small body of followers and rushed Fafhrd. The Mouser tripped Slevyas, but the latter whirled around on his knees and ripped the black cloak with his longsword, almost skewering the small man. Fafhrd laid around him with a chair, bowling over those who opposed him, then spilled the table over on its side, the water clock crashing to splinters.

Gradually Slevyas regained control of the thieves. He knew they were at a disadvantage in the confusion, so his first move was to call them off, mustering them in two groups, one in the alcove, from which the drapes had been torn away, the other around the door. Fafhrd and the Mouser crouched behind the overturned table in the opposite angle of the room, its thick top serving as a barricade. The Mouser was somewhat surprised to find Ivlis crouching beside him.

"I saw you try to kill Slevyas," she whispered grimly. "In any case we are compelled to join forces."

With Ivlis was one of the bodyguards. The other two lay dead or insensible, along with the dozen thieves who were scattered around the floor among the fallen torches which cast a faint flickering eerie light on the scene. Wounded thieves moaned, and crawled or were dragged out into the corridor by their comrades. Slevyas was shouting for ropes and more torches.

"We'll have to make a rush," whispered Fafhrd through closed teeth with which he was knotting a bandage around a gash in his arm. And then he suddenly raised his head and sniffed. Somehow, through that confusion and the faint sweetish smell of blood had come an odor that made his flesh prickle and creep, an odor at once alien and familiar; a fainter odor, hot, dry and dusty. For a moment the thieves fell silent and Fafhrd thought he heard the sound of distant marching, the clicking tramp of bony feet.

Then a thief cried, "Master, master, the skull, the skull! It moves! It clamps its teeth!"

There was a confused sound of men drawing back, then Slevyas' curse. The Mouser, peering around the table top, saw Slevyas kick the jeweled

skull toward the center of the room.

"Fools! Cowards!" He cried to his cowering followers, "Do you still believe those lies, those old-wives' whispers? Do you think dead bones can walk? I and no other am your master! And may all dead thieves be damned eternally!"

With that he brought his sword down whistling. The skull of Ohmpthal shattered like an eggshell. A whining cry of fear came from the thieves. The room grew darker as though it were filling with dust.

"Now follow me!" cried Slevyas. "Death to the intruders!"

But the thieves shrank back, darker shadows in the gloom. Fafhrd, sensing opportunity and mastering his growing fear, rushed out at Slevyas. The Mouser followed him. Fafhrd intended to kill with his third blow. First a swipe at Slevyas' longer sword to deflect it, next a quick blow at the side to bring him off guard, then finally a backhanded slash at the head.

But Slevyas was a better swordsman than that. He parried the third cut so that it whistled harmlessly over his head, then thrust at the North-erner's throat. That thrust brought Fafhrd's supple muscles to full life; true, the blade grazed his neck, but his parry, striking Slevyas' sword near the hilt, numbed the Master Thief's hand. Fafhrd knew he had him then and drove him back with a mercilessly intense onslaught. He did not notice how the room was darkening. He did not wonder why Slevyas' desperate calls for assistance went unanswered; why the thieves were crowding toward the alcove, and why the wounded were crawling back into the room. Toward the doorway to the corridor he drove Slevyas, so that the man was silhouetted against it. Finally as Slevyas reached the doorway, he disarmed him with a blow which sent the thief's sword spinning, and put his own point to Slevyas' throat.

"Yield!" he cried.

Only then he realized the hateful dusty-odor was thick in his nostrils, that the room was in utter silence, that from the corridor came a hot wind and the sound of marching bones clicking against the stone pavement. He saw Slevyas look over his shoulder, and he saw a fear like death in Slevyas' face. Then came a sudden intense darkness, like a puff of inky smoke. But before

it came he saw bony arms clasp Slevyas' throat, and, as the Mouser dragged him back, he saw the doorway crowded with black skeletal forms whose eyes glittered green and red and sapphire. Then utter darkness, hideous with the screams of the thieves as they fought to crowd into the narrow tunnel in the alcove. And over and above the screams sounded thin high voices, like those of bats, cold as eternity. One phrase he heard clear.

"Slayer of Ohmpthal, this is the vengeance of Ohmpthal's brothers."

Then Fafhrd felt the Mouser dragging him forward again, toward the corridor door. When he could see properly, he found they were fleeing through an empty Thieves' House—he, the Mouser, Ivlis, and the lone bodyguard.

Ivlis' maidservant, having barred the other end of the corridor in terror at the approaching sounds, crouched trembling in the rugs on the other side, listening in unwilling, sick horror—unable to flee—to the muffled screams and pleas and to the faint moaning sounds which bore a note of terrible triumph. The small black kitten arched its back, hair on end, and spat and hissed. Presently all sounds ceased.

Thereafter it was noted in Lankhmar that thieves were fewer. And it was rumored that the Thieves' Guild conducted strange rites at full moon, descending into deep cellars, and worshipping some sort of ancient gods. It was even said that they gave these gods, whoever they were, one third of all they stole.

But Fafhrd, drinking with the Mouser and Ivlis and a black-eyed wench from Tovilyis in an upper room at the Silver Eel, complained that the fates were unfair.

"All that trouble and nothing to show for it! The gods have a lasting grudge against us."

The Mouser smiled, reached into his pouch, and laid three rubies on the table.

"Ohmpthal's fingertips," he said briefly.

"How can you dare keep them?" questioned Ivlis. "Think of what happened to all those other thieves!" She shuddered and eyed the Mouser with a certain solicitude.

"Ay, yes, that was unpleasant," replied the Mouser, "but since I am not an ordinary thief, I can afford to take chances."

THE END.

