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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Within this ring the Arab stood upright. His voice boomed out like a great metal gong."



Werewolf of the Sahara

By G. G. PENDARVES

A tremendous tale, depicted against the background of the great desert, about the evil Arab sheykh El Shabur, and dreadful occult forces that were unleashed in a desperate struggle for the soul of a beautiful girl

THE three of them were unusually silent that night over their after-dinner coffee. They were camping outside the little town of Sollum on the Libyan coast of North Africa. For three weeks they had been delayed here en route for the Siwa oasis. Two men and a girl.

"So we really start tomorrow." Merle Anthony blew a cloud of smoke toward the glittering night sky. "I'm almost sorry. Sollum's been fun. And I've done two of the best pictures I ever made here."

"Was that why you burned them up yesterday?" her cousin, Dale Fleming, inquired in his comfortable pleasant voice.

The girl's clear pallor slowly crimsoned. "Dale! What a——"

"It's all right, Merle," Gunnar Sven interrupted her. "Dale's quite right. Why pretend this delay has done you any good? And it's altogether my fault. I found that out today in the market. Overheard some Arabs discussing our expedition to Siwa."

"Your fault!" Merle's beautiful face, and eyes gray as a gull's wing, turned to him. "Why, you've simply slaved to get the caravan ready."

Gunnar got to his feet and walked out to the verge of the headland on which they were camped. Tall, straight as a pine he stood.

The cousins watched him; the girl with trouble and perplexity, the man more searchingly. His eyes, under straight upper lids, flatly contradicted the rest of his appearance. He was very fat, with fair hair and smooth unlined face despite his forty years. A sort of Pickwickian good humor radiated from him. Dale Fleming's really great intellectual power showed only in those three-cornered heavily-lidded eyes of his.

"Why did you give me away?" Merle demanded.

His round moon face beamed on her. "Why bluff?" he responded.

"Snooping about as usual. Why don't you go and be a real detective?" she retorted crossly.

He gave a comfortable chuckle, but his eyes were sad. It was devilishly hard to watch her falling for this Iclander. Ever since his parents had adopted her—an

orphan of six—she had come first in Dale's affections. His love was far from Platonic. Gunnar Sven was a fine creature, but there was something wrong. Some mystery shadowed his life. What it was, Dale was determined to discover.

"Truth will out, my child! The natives are in terror of him. You know it as well as I do! They're all against helping you and me because he's our friend."

"Stop being an idiot. No one could be afraid of Gunnar. And he's particularly good with natives."

"Yes. He handles them well. I've never seen a young 'un do it better."

"Well, then?"

"There's something queer about him. These Arabs know it. We know it. It's about two months now since he joined forces with us. Just after my mother decamped and left us in Cairo. The cable summoning her home to Aunt Sue's death-bed arrived Wednesday, May 3rd. She sailed May 5th. Gunnar Sven turned up May 6th."

"All right. I'm not contradicting you. It's never any use."

"You refused to wait for Mother's return in Cairo, according to her schedule."

"Well! Cairo! Everyone paints Cairo and the Nile. I wanted subjects that every five-cent tourist hadn't raved over."

"You wanted Siwa Oasis. Of all God-forsaken dangerous filthy places! And in the summer——"

"You know you're dying to see the oasis too," she accused. "Just trying to save your face as my guardian and protector. Hypocrite!"

He roared with laughter. The Arab cook and several other servants stopped singing round their cooking-pots to grin at the infectious sound.

"*Touche!* I'd sacrifice my flowing raven locks to go to Siwa. But"—his face grew surprisingly stern—"about Gunnar. Why

does he take such enormous pains not to tell us the name of the man he's been working for?"

"I've never asked him."

"I haven't in so many words, of course. But I've led him up to the fence over and over again. He's steadily refused it. With good reason."

"Well?"

"He works for an Arab. A sheykh. A man notorious from Morocco to Cairo. His nickname's Sheykh El Afrit. The Magician! His real name is Sheykh Zura El Shabur."

"And what's so earth-shaking about that?" asked Merle, patting a dark curl into place behind her ear.

"He's a very—bad—hat! Black Magic's no joke in this country. This Sheykh El Shabur's gone far. Too far."

"I'm going to talk to Gunnar. He'll tell me. It's fantastic. Gunnar and Black Magic indeed!"

Dale watched her, amused and touched. How she loathed subtleties and mysteries and tangled situations!

"She'd waltz up to a lion and pull its whiskers if anyone told her they were false. As good at concealment as a searchlight."

GUNNAR turned from the sea as Merle walked purposefully in his direction. He stood beside her—mountain pine overshadowing a little silver birch.

"H-m-m!" Dale threw away a freshly lighted cigarette and took another. "Merle and I wouldn't suggest that. More like Friar Tuck and Maid Marian."

He was startled to see Gunnar suddenly leap and turn. The man looked as if he'd had a tremendous shock. He stood peering across the wastelands stretching eastward, frozen into an attitude of utmost horror.

Dale ran across to Merle. She broke

from his detaining hand and rushed to Gunnar's side.

"What is it? What do you see? Gunnar! Answer me, Gunnar!"

His tense muscles relaxed. He sighed, and brushed a hand across his eyes and wet forehead.

"He's found me. He's coming. I had hoped never——"

"Who? What are you talking about?"

She shook his arm in terror at his wild look and words.

"He said I was free! Free! I wouldn't have come near you if I'd known he lied. Now I've brought him into *your* life. Merle! Forgive me!"

He took her hands, kissed them frantically, then turned to Dale with burning haste and fairly pushed him away.

"Go! Go! Go! Now—before he comes. Leave everything! Ride for your lives. He'll force me to . . . go! Go!"

"*Ma yarudd!* What means this, Gunnar—my servant?"

The deep guttural voice seemed to come up from the bowels of the earth. The three turned as if a bomb had exploded. A figure loomed up not ten feet away. Merle stared with wide startled eyes. A minute ago the level wasteland had shown bare, deserted. How had this tall Arab approached unseen?

Gunnar seemed to shrink and wither. His face was tragic. The newcomer fixed him for a long moment in silence, staring him down.

"What means this, Gunnar, my servant?" Once more the words vibrated through the still night.

The Icelder made a broken ineffectual movement of his hands, and began to speak. His voice died away into low, vague murmurings.

"For this you shall account to me later," promised the tall Arab.

He strode forward. His black bur-noose rippled and swayed about him. Its

peaked hood was drawn close. A long face with pointed black beard, proud curving nose, and eyes dark and secret as forest pools gleamed beneath the hood.

Merle shrank back. Her fingers clutched Gunnar's. They were cold and limp in her grasp.

Dale leaned forward, peering into the Arab's face as a connoisseur examines an etching of rare interest.

"You speak very good English, my friend. Or is it enemy?"

The whole demeanor of the Arab changed. His white teeth flashed. He held out welcoming hands, clasped Dale's in his own, and bowed low to the girl. He turned last to the Iclander.

"Present me!" he ordered.

GUNNAR performed the small ceremony with white lips. His voice sounded as if he'd been running hard.

"Zura El Shabur. Zura of the Mist," translated the sheykh. "I am your friend. I have many friends of your Western world. The language! All languages are one to me!"

Dale beamed. "Ah! Good linguist and all that! Jolly good name yours, what! Gave us quite a scare, popping up out of the atmosphere like Aladdin's *djinnee*!"

El Shabur's thin lips again showed his teeth.

"Those that dwell in the desert's solitude and silence learn to reflect its qualities."

"Quite! Quite!" Dale gurgled happy agreement. "Neat little accomplishment. Very convenient—for you!"

"Convenient on this occasion for you also, since my coming prevented the inhospitality of my servant from driving you away."

"No! You're wrong there. Gunnar's been our guardian angel for weeks past. Given us a wonderful time."

"Nevertheless, I heard that he urged you to go—to go quickly from Sollum."

Dale burst into laughter; long, low gurgles that relieved tension all around. "I'm one of those fools that'd rather lose a pot of gold than alter my plans. One of the camel-drivers has made off with a few bits of loot. You heard the thrifty Gunnar imploring me to follow him."

Merle backed up the tale with quick wit. "Nothing of vast importance. My silver toilet things, a leather bag, and a camera. Annoying, but hardly worth wasting hours to retrieve."

She came forward, all anxiety to give Gunnar time to pull himself together.

El Shabur made her a second low obeisance and stared down into her upturned vivid face. "Such youth and beauty must be served. Shall I send Gunnar after the thief?"

The idea of separation gave her a shock. Intuition warned her to keep the Iclander at her side for his sake, and for her own. Together there seemed less danger.

Danger! From what? Why did the word drum through her brain like an S.O.S. signal? She glanced at Gunnar. His face was downbent.

"No." She met the Arab's eyes with effort and gave a valiant little smile. "No. Indeed not. We can't spare him. He's promised to come with us, to be our guide to the Siwa Oasis."

"Hope this won't clash with your plans for him. We've got so dependent on his help now." Dale's cherubic face registered anxiety.

"So." The Arab put a hand on Gunnar's shoulder. "It is good. You have done well."

The young man shivered. His eyes met Merle's in warning.

El Shabur turned to reassure her and Dale.

"Now all goes well. I, too, will join
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your caravan. It is necessary for my—my work—that I should visit Siwa very soon. I go also."

Dale took the outstretched hand. "Fine! Fine! We'll make a record trip now."

IN HIS tent, Dale slept after many hours of hard, concentrated thought and intellectual work—very pink, very tired, younger-looking than ever in his profound repose.

In her tent, Merle lay quiet too.

Native servants snored, shapeless cocoons in their blankets. Even the camels had stopped moaning and complaining, and couched peacefully, barracked in a semicircle. Great mounds of baggage within its wide curve lay ready for loading.

Moonlight silvered long miles of grass and rushes. Leagues of shining water swung in almost tideless rhythm half a mile from camp.

Gunnar looked out on the scene from his tent. What had roused him from sleep? Why was his heart thumping, and the blood drumming in his ears? He peered out into the hushed world.

Tents, men, camels and baggage showed still as things on a painted canvas. He left his tent, made a noiseless detour about the sleeping camp, then frowned and stared about in all directions.

A bird, rising on startled wing, made him look sharply at an old Turkish fort. It stood, grim and battered sentinel, on a near-by promontory of Sollum Bay. Through its gaping ruined walls he caught a glint of fire—green, livid, wicked flames that stained the night most evilly.

"El Shabur! Already! The Pentacle of Fire!"

His whisper was harsh as the faint drag of pebbles on the shore. For several minutes he stood as if chained. Fear and

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anger warred with dawning resolution and a wild anxiety. Then he stumbled over to Merle's tent and tore open its flap. Flashlight in hand, he went in and stared down at the sleeping girl. She lay white and rigid as if in a trance. Gunnar touched her forehead, took up a limp hand in his own. She gave no sign of life.

He stood looking down at the still, waxen features. The rather square, resolute little face was uniformly white, even to the curved, just-parted lips. The hair seemed wrought in metal, so black and heavy and lifeless did it wave above the broad, intelligent brow. Gunnar looked in awe. The girl's animated, sparkling face was changed to something remote and strange and exquisite. Half child, half priestess.

"And in a few short weeks or months," he muttered, "El Shabur will initiate her. This is the first step. She will rot—perish—as I am doing!"

He bent, in passionate horror, over the still face.

"No! No! Not for you! Dear lovely child!"

He clenched his hands. "But if I disturb him now!"

For minutes he stood irresolute. Fear took him by the throat. He could not—he *could* not interfere! At last his will steadied. He mastered the sick terror that made him tremble and shiver like a beaten dog. As he left the tent, he glanced back once more.

"Good-bye! I'll do all I can," he promised softly. "I'd give my soul to save you—if I still had one."

He ran to the headland where the old fort stood. If El Shabur's occupation was what he feared, he would neither hear nor see. Intensely concentrating on his rites, nothing in the visible world would reach him.

Gunnar's calculations were justified.

He went boldly in through the arched entrance to an inner court where green fires burned in a great ring, five points of two interlacing triangles which showed black upon the gray dust of the floor. In the center of this cabalistic symbol stood El Shabur, clothed in black. The rod he held was of black ebony.

Gunnar drew breath. He listened to the toneless continuous muttering of the sheykh. What point had El Shabur reached in his conjurations? How long since he had drawn Merle's soul from the lovely quiet body lying in her tent? It was of vital importance to know. If the devilish business was only begun, he might free her. If El Shabur had reached the last stage, closed the door behind the soul he was luring from its habitation, then it was fatally late.

He listened, head thrust forward, trying to distinguish the rapidly muttered words.

"Shekinah! Aralim! Ophanim! Assist me in the name of Melek Taos, Ruler of wind and stars and sea, who commands the four elements in the might of Adonai and the Ancient Ones!"

"A-h-h-h!" Gunnar gave a deep gasping sigh of relief. He was not too late. Sheykh El Shabur called on his allies. Merle's spirit was not yet cut off from its home. Her will resisted the Arab's compulsion.

HE LEAPED forward, oversetting all five braziers. Their fire spilled and died out instantly. In the cold clear moonlight, El Shabur loomed tall, menacing. He stood glaring across the courtyard at the intruder. His black-clad figure overshadowed the Icelander's by many inches, like a cloud, like a bird of prey. Malignant, implacable he towered.

Gunnar's golden head sank. His strong, straight body seemed to shrink and crumple. Inch by inch he retreated, until

he reached the wall. He tried to meet the Arab's unblinking stare and failed. Again his bright head sank. His eyes sought the dusty earth. But his whole frame trembled with a wild, fanatical excitement. He had succeeded so far—had brought El Shabur back from that void where Merle's spirit had so perilously wandered. She was free. Free to go back to that still white body lying in her tent.

"So! You love this girl. You would save her from me. You—who cannot save yourself!"

"You're right." The young man's voice shook. "Right as far as I'm concerned. But Miss Anthony's on a different plane. You're not going to play your filthy tricks on her."

"So! It would seem that, in spite of my teaching, you are not yet well disciplined. Have you forgotten your vow? Have you forgotten that a cabalist may *never* retreat one inch of the road he treads? Have you forgotten the punishment that overtakes the renegade?"

"I would die to save her from you."

The other showed white teeth in a mirthless sardonic grin.

"Die!" echoed his deep, mocking voice. "Death is not for us. Are you not initiated and under protection? What can bring death to such as you?"

"There must be a way of escape for me—and for her. I will defeat you yet, El Shabur!"

The Icelander's voice rose. His eyes were blazing. He stepped forward. Moonlight touched his shining hair, his passion-contorted features, his angry, bloodshot eyes. Control slipped from him. He strove in vain to recapture it, to use his reason. He knew that anger was delivering him bound and helpless into his enemy's hands. It had been so from their first encounter. Emotion *versus* reason. He knew his fatal weakness, and strove against it now—in vain. Long

habit ruled. Anger made his will a thing of straw.

"You would defy me—the Power I serve—the Power that serves me?"

Gunnar felt the blood rushing to his head. His ears sang. Red mist obscured his sight.

"You are a devil! And you serve devils!" he shouted. "But you won't always win the game! Curse you, El Shabur! Curse you! Curse you!"

The Arab looked long into his angry eyes, and came closer. With an incredibly swift movement he clasped the shak-ing, furious figure.

Gunnar felt dry lips touch his ears and mouth and brow, heard a low quick mutter. Then El Shabur released him suddenly, and stood back.

"Ignorant and beast-like! *Be* what you are—slave to your own passion! You, yourself, create the devil that haunts you. Therefore are you mine—for all devils are subject to me. *Be* what you are! Out, beast! Howl and snarl with your own kind until the dawn."

For a moment something dark scuffled in the dust at El Shabur's feet. The courtyard rang with a long, desolate howl. A shadow, lean and swift, fled from the camp, far, far out across the empty wasteland.

AT SUNSET, the next day, Dale Fleming and his caravan reached Bir Augerin, the first well on their march. They had delayed their start some hours. Merle had insisted in waiting for Gunnar, but he had not turned up.

"He will join us *en route*," the sheykh had assured her. "He is well used to desert travel, *Mademoiselle*!"

"But his camel?"

"We will take it. He can easily hire another."

"Have you no idea why he went off

and left us without warning? It's so unlike him."

El Shabur gave his dark unmirthful smile.

"He is young. Young and careless and—undisciplined. He has—friends. Oh, he is popular! That golden hair of his—it has a fascination. . . ."

Merle's face crimsoned and grew pale. Dale's round face concealed his thoughts. He glanced at the Arab's lean hands that twisted a stiff length of wire rope with such slow and vicious strength. He had learned how betraying hands may be.

Merle made no more objections, and at 3:30 p. m. the caravan set out. The natives were superstitious about a journey's start. Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays were fortunate; and Saturday the luckiest of the week.

At Bir Augerin, camp was quickly made. The servants drew up water from the large rectangular tank in leather buckets. Merle sat disconsolate to watch, and smoke, and think of Gunnar. Dale joined her, leaving the sheykh to direct the men.

"I don't believe it!" Merle burst out.

"About our absent friend?"

"Gunnar's not that sort. I think they've had a quarrel. Dale!" She put a beseeching hand on his arm. "You don't think—he wouldn't kill Gunnar!"

"My prophetic bones tell me not." He patted the hand in brisk, business-like fashion. "He'll turn up and explain himself. Don't worry. This Sheykh of the Mist's a queer old jossier. About as trustworthy as a black panther, but the boy's too useful to be killed off in a hurry. All the same—look here, Merle: keep this handy at night."

He put a small snub-nosed automatic in her hand.

"It's loaded. And I've taught you to use it. Listen! There are wolves on this trail. Heard 'em last night about the camp."

"Wolves? In the desert? Jackals, you mean."

"Don't speak out of turn. Wolves. You know—things that go off like this."

He threw back his head and gave a blood-curdling howl that electrified the camp. El Shabur spun on his heel, long knife drawn. The servants groveled, then ran to pluck brands from the fire.

Dale gave a rich, infectious gurgle. "Splendid! Must have done that jolly well. Now perhaps you'll recognize a wolf when you hear it. If you do—shoot!"

SOON after four a. m. the caravan set out again in the chill clear moonlight. In spite of grilling days, the nights remained cool and made travel easy. They reached their next halt, Bir Hamed, about eight o'clock. This cistern was the last before real desert began. They decided to give the camels a good day's grazing and watering and push off again in the small hours before dawn.

Cooking-pots were slung over crackling fires. Fragrance of wood smoke mingled with odor of frying sausages and onions. Dale went over and implored the cook to refrain from using last night's dish-water to brew coffee. El Shabur approached Merle and pointed to the east.

"He comes."

She dropped a camera and roll of films and jumped to her feet.

"Who? Gunnar? I see no one."

"He comes riding from over there."

Low rolling dunes to the east showed bare and smooth and empty of life. She stared, and frowned at the speaker. "I see nothing. Dale!" she called out. "The sheykh says Gunnar's coming from over there. Can you see him?"

Dale scrutinized the empty eastern horizon, then turned to El Shabur with a bland wide smile. "Ah, you wonderful Arabs! Putting one over on us, aren't you?

You people have extra valve sets. Pick up things from the ether. It's enough to give me an inferiority complex."

He thrust an arm through Merle's. "If he says so, it is so! I'll tell cook to fry a few more sausages.

"Servants are all in a state of jim-jams this morning," he said as he returned from his hospitable errand. "Ilbrahim's been handing out samples from the *Thousand and One Nights' Entertainments*. What d'you suppose he's started now?"

"They talk much," the sheykh's deep scornful voice replied. "And they say nothing."

"Ilbrahim is a chatty little fellow. Be invaluable at a funeral, wouldn't he? Distract the mourners and all that! Unless he got on to vampires and ghouls. He's keen on cabalistic beliefs."

"Such things are childish; they have no interest for a cabalist."

"No — really! Well, you probably know. Is there a place called *Bilad El Kelab*?"

El Shabur's eyes glinted. His chin went up in a gesture of assent.

"There is? Ah, then Ilbrahim tells the truth now and then. His brother went to this place. *Country of the Dogs* — suggestive name! The yarn is that all the men there turn to dogs at sunset. Like werewolves, you know."

"*Bilad El Kelab* is far away. South — far south in the Sudan. Ilbrahim has no brother, moreover."

"No?"

"No. There are many foolish legends from the Sudan."

"Not so foolish. I'm interested in folklore and legend and primitive beliefs. That's why I'm going to Siwa, apart from looking after my little cousin here."

El Shabur's eyes smoldered. "It is unwise to be too curious about such things,

That which feeds an eagle is no meat for a fish."

"Quite! Quite! Good that, isn't it, Merle? Meaning we Westerners are fish! Oh, definitely good! 'This Ilbrahim, though—he swears our camp's being haunted. He thinks a weredog, or werewolf, has attached itself to us. Says he woke and saw it prowling about last night.'"

"A long trail from the *Bilad El Kelab*!"

"You're right, El Shabur. Still, what's a few hundred miles to a werewolf? And I suppose it travels on camel-back by day, if it's got its man's body in good repair. Have to be a new camel each morning—eh? Not likely a self-respecting *mehari* would trot hoof in paw with a wolf each night."

"Dale! Is it the same wolf you said was——"

A cousinly kick on the ankle, as Dale moved to replace a blazing branch on the fire, warned her.

"Is it the wolf-tale they talked about in Alexandria?" she switched off quickly.

"Dear child!" Dale beamed approval. "How your little wits *do* work! No! That wolf was a jackal that haunted the Valley of the Kings in Egypt."

El Shabur turned his head sharply. "The lost one arrives," he remarked.

In the distance, magnified and distorted by the hot desert air, a vast camel and rider loomed. Merle lighted a cigarette with slow, unsteady hands.

"It may be anyone. Impossible to tell yet."

The sheykh spread his hands. "*Mademoiselle* will soon discover."

In half an hour, Gunnar rode into camp. A sorry figure, disheveled, unshaven, he looked as if he'd been across Africa with a minimum of food and sleep. Merle had meant to be unrelenting at first, to await explanation, but her heart betrayed her at sight of this desper-

ately weary man. She ran to meet him as he dismounted, and tried to lead him over to where Dale and the Arab sat smoking.

He stood swaying on his feet. "No. Not now." His cracked, parched lips could scarcely frame the words. "I must sleep. I—I could not help it. I was prevented—I was prevented," he croaked.

"Gunnar—of course!" She beckoned to a servant. "Take care of him. I'll send Dale *effendi* to give him medicine. He is ill."

IN THE late afternoon the camp was in more or less of an uproar. The camels were driven in from pasturage to drink once again. They would have preferred to go on grazing, and, being camels, they expressed disapproval noisily, and gave much trouble to the cursing, sweating men.

Dale sauntered off from their vicinity. The sun was casting shadows that lengthened steadily. He stopped in the shadow of a huge boulder and stared thoughtfully out across the barren desert.

"Got his goat all right about that legend and the cabalists. Now, just why did that strike home? The pattern's there, but all in little moving bits. I can't get the confounded mosaic right. Cabalists! Werewolves! Gunnar and the Sheykh of the Mist! Haunted camp and all the rest of it! A very, very pretty little mix-up. I wonder now . . . I wonder . . ."

His eyes, fixed in abstracted non-seeing gaze, suddenly became wary. His big body grew taut. Then, with the lightness of movement for which fat men are often remarkable, he vanished into a cleft of the great rock. His hearing was acute and voices carried far in the desert stillness.

". . . until we reach Siwa. From sunrise to sunset I will be with her." Gunnar's bitterness was apparent. "If you interfere I will tell her *what you are!*"

"In return I will explain *what you*

are — after sunset!" El Shabur's voice mocked. "Will the knowledge make her turn to you for protection?"

"You devil!"

"You fool! Do not meddle with power you cannot control. Until Siwa, then."

They passed out of earshot. Dale watched them return to camp.

"More bits of mosaic, nice lurid color, too. Looks as though Siwa's going to be even more promising than I imagined. Evil old city, enough to make one write another Book of Revelations?"

THE sun cast long shadows, stretching grotesquely over pink-stained leagues of sand. Dale was anxious to watch Gunnar when the sun actually did set; he felt that phrase of the young Iclander's had been significant: *From sunrise to sunset I will be with her*. Rather an odd poetic reference to time! Taken in conjunction with his unexplained disappearance last night, it was specially odd.

Dale ambled slowly in the direction of camp, empty pipe between his teeth. He had stayed a long hour. From his rocky crevice, he had watched Gunnar and the Arab return, seen Gunnar start off again with Merle into the desert. The two were returning now—dark against the reddening sky.

He was curious to see how the young man was going to behave; what explanation, if any, he had given to Merle. He was overwhelmingly anxious to discover just how far she returned the love that burned so stedfastly in Gunnar's eyes. If it was serious—really serious—with her, the whole queer dangerous situation was going to be deadly.

She would go her own way. If her heart was given, it was given, for good or evil. It seemed entirely evil, in his judgment, if she had decided to link her fate with this Iclander.

And El Shabur! How dangerous was

this notorious Arab magician? Men of his practises fairly haunted desert cities and oases. Mostly they were harmless, sometimes genuinely gifted in the matter of prophecy. Rarely, they were men of inexplicable and very terrible power; who were dedicated, brain and body, to the cause of evil—evil quite beyond the comprehension of normal people.

Dale's eyes were cold and implacable as he recollected one or two such men he had known: his pleasant face looked unbelievably austere and grim.

One way or another, Merle stood in imminent and pressing danger; from Gunnar, no less than from El Shabur; from Gunnar, not because he was of himself evil, but because he was a channel through which the Arab could reach her. She was vulnerable in proportion to her love. There were infinite sources of danger ahead. El Shabur had a definite plan regarding her, something that would mature at Siwa. Three days remained to discover the nature of that plan.

Three days! Perhaps not even that. Gunnar's relations with the Arab seemed dangerously explosive; a crisis might work up at any moment. Merle would then be implicated, for she would defend Gunnar with blind partizanship. All the odds were on El Shabur. It was his country; he could queer the expedition easily without any supernatural agency. And, if he were the deadly poisonous creature Dale began to suspect, then the lonely desert made a superb background for murder . . . he called it murder to himself, unwilling to give a far more terrible name to what he suspected El Shabur might do.

The lovers, walking slowly, reluctantly back to camp, were completely absorbed in each other.

"If only I'd known you earlier!" The man's sunken eyes looked down on the

erect, slim, lovely girl beside him with immense regret.

"The only thing we can do about it is to make up for lost time, darling."

He stopped, faced her, took both firm, rather square hands in his own. "Merle, you're being a miracle. But it's impossible. I oughtn't to have told you how much I cared."

"Poor dear! You hadn't any choice, really. I did the leap year stunt before you could stop me; and, being a little gent, you simply had to say you loved me, too!"

She rattled away, hardly knowing what she said. "I've got to alter that look in his eyes," she told herself. "I thought it was because of me, conceited little beast that I am. But it isn't—it isn't!"

"Gunnar," she tackled him with characteristic impetuosity. "Is your fear of El Shabur the biggest thing in your life? Is it bigger than—than your love for me?"

The grip of his hands tightened. His face bent to hers. His haunted red-rimmed eyes looked into her candid gray ones, that shone with love and kindness and a steadfast unwavering trust that made him want to kiss her dusty shoes. Instead, he dropped her hands, pulled his hat down over his face, walked on with quickened stride toward the distant encampment.

"It's no use . . . I can't go on with it. I'm in a tangle that no one on earth can straighten out. It's revolting to think of you being caught up in such a beastly mess. I went into this thing because I was a young inquisitive fool! I'd no idea what it involved, no idea at all that there was something behind it stronger . . . stronger than death! I was blind, I was credulous, I was utterly ignorant; I walked into El Shabur's trap—and the door shut behind me!"

"Gunnar, darling, *can't* you explain? People don't have to go on serving masters they hate unless—unless——"

"Exactly! Unless they're slaves. Well, I am his slave."

"I don't understand you."

"Thank heaven for it, and don't try! It's because you must never, *never* understand such things that I wanted you and Dale to go away that night at Sollum."

"If you owe the sheykh your time, can't you buy him off? Surely any contract can be broken."

"Not the one that binds me to him. Listen, Merle, my own! I can't—I daren't say more than this. Think of him as a poison—as something that blackens and burns like vitriol. Will you do what may seem a very childish thing, will you do it to please me?"

"What is it?"

"Tie this across the entrance of your sleeping-tent at night." He held out a little colored plait, four threads of green, white, red, and black, from which a seal depended. "Once more, I daren't explain, but use it. Promise me!"

TAKEN aback by his tone and manner, she promised. What, she thought, had a bit of colored string to do with all this mystery about him and the sheykh? A fleeting doubt as to his sanity came to her.

"No," he answered the look. "I was never more sane than now—when it's too late. Too late for myself, at least. You—nothing *shall* happen to you!"

"Won't you talk to Dale? He's such a queer wise old thing, I'm sure he could help if only you'd explain things to him."

"No. Not yet, at any rate. Not until we get to Siwa. I'll explain everything then. Silence is the price I've paid to be with you on this trip."

"But, really Dale is——"

"If you don't want him to die sudden-

ly, say nothing to him. Anyone that interferes with El Shabur gets rubbed out like this!"

Gunnar stamped a small pebble deep into the sand.

"All right," she promised with a shiver. That quick vicious little movement had given her a sudden horrid fear of the sheykh—more than all Gunnar's words. "I'll say nothing. But Dale is pretty hard to deceive. There never seems any need to tell him things; he just knows them. I expect he's burrowing away underground about El Shabur already, just like an old ferret! I happen to know he loathes him."

"Nobody'd think so to see them chin-wagging."

"He behaves like a garrulous moron when he's putting salt on anyone's tail, and I've seldom seen him wallowing quite so idiotically as now."

"Much more likely the sheykh's putting salt on *his* tail by pretending to believe Dale's a fool."

"You don't know Dale."

"You don't know El Shabur." Gunnar had the last word—it proved to be accurate.

They found the two in camp and deep in talk.

"Arguing about our pet werewolf." Dale was bland. "Will you sit up with me and try a pot shot at the beast, Gunnar?"

The tall Icelfander stood in silence. His face was a gray mask, his sunken eyes stared hard and long into the other's blank smooth face. He turned to the sheykh at length.

"You suggested this?"

Merle shivered at his voice.

The Arab shrugged. "On the contrary. It would be wisdom to sleep before tomorrow's march. If the *effendi* desires to hunt it would be well to wait until we reach the hills of Siwa."

"Well," Dale seemed determined to prolong the discussion, "what do you vote for, old man? The werewolf tonight, or the Siwa hills later?"

"The hills—definitely, the hills," the young man's voice cracked on a laugh. "According to legend, you can't kill a werewolf. No use wasting our shots and a night's sleep too."

"Thwarted!" moaned Dale. "The hills of Siwa, then. You can promise good hunting there, Sheykh?"

"By my sacred *wasm*."

"*Wasm*?" Dale lighted a cigarette with casual air.

"My mark, my insignia, my tribal sign. It is like heraldry in your land."

"Heavens above! I must remember to call my little label a *wasm* in future. Intriguing word, that! And what is your mark?"

El Shabur leaned forward and traced it in the sand. Dale regarded it with a smile that masked deep uneasiness. He recognized the ghastly little sign; he was one of the very few who had the peculiar knowledge to do so. A smoke-screen from his eternal pipe shielded his face from the watchful Arab. Was El Shabur trying to trick him into exposing his very special and intimate knowledge of the occult; or did he make that deadly mark feeling sure that only an initiate would recognize it?

El Shabur was a Yezidee, a Satanist, and worshipped Melek Taos. The symbol was unmistakably the outspread tail of the Angel-Peacock. Dale recoiled inwardly at having his darkest fears confirmed; he knew of no tribe on earth more vicious and powerful than the Yezidees. Their name and their fame went back into mists of time. Seldom did one of them leave his hills and rock-dwelling up beyond Damascus. Once in a century or so, throughout the ages, a priest of the Yezidees would stalk the earth like a black

destroying god to acquaint himself with the world and its conditions. He would return to teach his tribe. So they remained, a nucleus of evil power that never seemed to die out.

"Nice little design; looks like half a ray-fish," he commented. Impossible to fathom what was going on behind the sheykh's carven, immobile features. "*Wasm*—did you say? Wait, I must write that down."

The whites of the Arab's eyes glinted as he glanced at Merle. "Are you like your cousin in this—do you also suffer from loss of memory?"

"I—we—what do you mean?"

"You have a saying in your Book of Wisdom, 'Thy much learning doth turn thee to madness.' The *effendi* is like to that man, Paul. For who, after years and years of study, could forget so simple a thing as a *wasm*?"

Dale didn't move a muscle. His bluff was called. All right! On with the next dance! Too late he realized why the Arab had started the absorbing *wasm* topic. It had been intended to shock and distract his own thoughts from Gunnar—to prevent his keeping an eye on him.

The Iclander had got up and gone over to his tent a minute ago with a murmur about tobacco. He had not returned. Dale was on his feet and peering into Gunnar's tent in a flash. No one there. He looked at the western horizon—the sun had dipped beyond it. He scanned the desert. It offered no shelter for Gunnar's six feet of height. He looked into every tent; saw that only the servants crouched before their fires, that only baggage lay heaped upon the ground.

Shadows were melting into dusk. But one long shadow seemed to move over there among the dunes not far away! Were his own dark thoughts inventing the thing that fled across the desert?

The darkest thought of all came as he

went back to Merle and the silent watchful Arab. Was he a match for this man?

"YOU needn't worry about Gunnar. The Arab's at the back of these nightly disappearances, I'm quite certain, although the reasons he gave were of his own invention."

"Then you think he'll come back?" Merle looked tired and anxious in the light of her small lamp.

"He'll come back," asserted the man. "Good night, old lady. If you feel nervous or want anything, just give a yelp. I'll be awake—got to finish a bit of research work."

She caught a look that belied his cheerful voice. "Why d'you look round my tent like that? Is there any special danger—that wolf?"

"Well, I don't mind telling you there is a spot of danger. You're not the sort that goes off like a repeating-rifle at being warned. But—have you got your doodah handy?"

She showed the automatic underneath her pillow. "Perhaps I ought to tell you that Gunnar warned me too. No. Not about the wolf, but El Shabur."

"Worse than a whole pack of wolves," he agreed. "Know where you are with those noisy brutes, but the sheykh's another cup of tea, entirely."

"He gave me this. Told me to tie up my tent with it. Queer, don't you think?"

He examined the plait of colored string with profound interest.

"Jerusalem the Golden! If we ever reach dry land again, this will be an heirloom for you to hand on. That is, unless you're hard up and want to sell it to some Croesus for a sack of diamonds. This, my dear Black-eyed Susan, is a relic dating back thousands of years. The seal, of course, not the threads. It's an emerald. And that's the Eye of Horus cut in it."

"Emerald! It must be fearfully valu-

able. How on earth d'you think Gunnar got it?"

"From his master the sheykh. It's the sort of thing he'd need, poor fellow! It's a safeguard—oh, quite infallible."

"I never know when you're serious or when you're just being idiotic. Protection from what? What does it mean?"

"It means that El Shabur's a cabalist. And that Gunnar is an initiate and pretty far advanced too, to be in possession of this very significant thing. He's gone a long, long way on the road—poor lad!"

"He's in danger?"

"Extreme and imminent danger; there's scarcely a chance to cut him free now. Better face the thing, dear. Gunnar's not in a position to love or marry any woman; he's tied body and soul to El Shabur. It's a hideous, deplorable, ghastly mess, the whole affair." He sat down beside her on the little truckle bed and took her hand. "This is my fault. I knew well enough even at Sollum that there was something abnormal about Gunnar."

"I love him," she answered very quietly, "and nothing can ever alter that. Whatever he's done, or is—I love him."

He stared at her a long minute. "And that's the damndest part of the whole show," he remarked with immense gravity.

He turned back at the tent opening. "About that thing Gunnar gave you. Fasten the tent-flap with it if you value your soul; wear it under your dress by day, never let the sheykh catch a glimpse of it. We reach Siwa the day after tomorrow. Try not to let El Shabur know we suspect anything, meantime. Sure you're all right—not afraid?"

"Not for myself. I don't understand what it's all about. But I'm afraid for my poor Gunnar. He's the sort that can't stand alone. Not like you and me, we're too hard-headed old things!"

"You're a wonder. Any other girl

stranded here with a half-mad native sorcerer would go right up the pole. Tie up your tent, though, d'you hear?"

"The moment you've gone. Cross my heart!"

NIGHT wore swiftly on. Dale sat smoking in his own tent, fully dressed, alert and expectant. He felt convinced that something was in the wind to-night. The sound of shots far off across the desert took him outside, rifle in hand. Sleep held the camp; not a man had stirred. The black Bedouin tent in which the sheykh slept was closed. No one seemed to have been disturbed except himself. Again came that queer little tug of his senses—a warning of danger near.

His grip tightened on his weapon. He went on more slowly. A shadow seemed to move round the great mass of rock which had sheltered him a few hours ago. He halted half-way between rock and camp. Should he go back and rouse the men? Or should he go closer and inspect for himself? He walked on.

A high, piping wind blew clouds across the sky. A black mass obscured the moon. He halted once more, turned back to camp in a sudden certainty of peril. Too late. A rush. A scuffle. An arm of steel clasped him from behind, a hand like a vise was clamped across his lips before he could call out. His big body was enormously muscular and he fought like a tiger, threw off his assailant, shouted loudly. The strong wind shouted louder, tore his voice to shreds. It swept the black cloud from the moon too, and he saw a small band of natives, their faces veiled, knives glinting, burnouses bellying out like sails as they shouted and ran at him.

They were too close to take aim. He made for the rock. Unencumbered, and a good sprinter, he reached it safely, stood with his back to it and coolly picked out one after another of his enemies. It was

only a momentary advantage; they were too many for him, and ran in again with savage yells.

To his amazement, a dark long swift body flung itself upon his attackers. A great wolf, huge, shaggy, thin and sudden as a torpedo. In vain the men plunged their knives into its rough pelt. Again and again Dale saw the wicked twisted blades drop as the brute caught the wrists of the raiders in its teeth.

The fight was short. Not a man was killed, but none escaped a wound. Some had faces slashed so that blood ran down and blinded them; some dragged a maimed foot; some a mangled arm. In terror of the swift, silent punishing creature that stood between them and their victim, the raiders turned and fled.

The wolf itself had been damaged in the savage encounter; an ear was torn, and it limped as it ran at the heels of the raiders, chasing them to their camels behind the huge rock pile.

The great panting beast looked full at Dale as it passed by. The man felt his heart beat, beat, beat in slow painful thuds against his chest. The creature's yellow, bloodshot eyes turned on him with a glance that cut deeper than any raider's knife. He leaned back. He felt very sick. The vast desert seemed to heave.

Slowly, soberly he made his way back to camp. He did not so much as glance back at the wolf. He knew now. He *knew!*

SWAI Actually Siwa at last! The strange fort-like city loomed before the thin line of camels and their dusty weary riders. Like a vast house of cards Siwa had risen up and up from the plain. On its foundation of rock, one generation after another had built; father for son, father for son again; one story on another, the sun-baked mud and salt of its walls al-

most indistinguishable from the rock itself.

Tiny windows flecked the massive precipitous piles. Vast hives of life, these buildings. Layer upon layer, narrowing from their rocky base into turrets and towers and minarets.

Dale's eyes were for Merle, however. She rode beside him, her face so white and strained, her eyes so anxious that he was torn with doubt. Ought he to have told her Gunnar's secret? He had not turned up since the desert fight. Merle was sick with anxiety. Sheykh El Shabur smiled in his beard as he saw her quivering underlip, her glance that looked about with ever increasing fear.

"Where is he? Where is he?" She turned upon the sheykh. "You said he would be here at Siwa, waiting for us. Where is he?" she demanded.

Dale could have laughed had the situation been less grave and horrible. She loved as she hated, with her whole strong vigorous soul and body. She tackled the sinister, haughty Arab, demanding of him the man she loved, with the fearlessness of untried youth.

She was worth dying for, his little Merle! And it looked as though he, and she too, would make a finish here in this old barbaric city. If he had to go, he would see to it that she was not left behind, to be a sacrifice on some blood-stained ancient altar hewn in the rock beneath the city, to die slowly and horribly that the lust of Melek Taos should be appeased, to die in body—to live on in soul, slave to Sheykh Zura El Shabur.

And Gunnar? It was unnerving to think what might be happening to him. Dale knew that Gunnar had saved his life as surely as that El Shabur had plotted to kill him two nights ago. It was not nice to consider how the cabalist might punish this second interference of his young disciple.

They rode on through an endless warren of twisting dark lanes. Dale dropped behind Merle and the Arab when only two could ride abreast; he liked to have El Shabur before his eyes when possible. He could see Merle talking earnestly. Her companion seemed interested, his hands moved in quick eloquent gesture, he seemed reassuring her on some point. Gunnar, surely! No other subject in common could exist between those two.

Past the date-markets, under the shadow of the square white tomb of Sidi Suliman, past palm-shaded gardens, until they reached a hill shaped like a sugar-loaf and honeycombed with tombs.

"The Hill of the Dead!" El Shabur waved a lean dark hand.

"Quite," replied Dale. "It looks like it."

The Arab pointed to the white Rest-House built on a level terrace cut in the hillside. "It is there that travelers stay—such as come to Siwa."

"Very appropriate. One does associate rest with tombs, after all."

Merle looked up at the remarkable hill with blank, uninterested gaze.

"Ilbrahaim will take your camels. If you will dismount here! The *fonduk* is on the other side of the city."

The sheykh dismounted as he spoke. He sent the servant off with the weary beasts, and left the cousins with a *salaam* to Dale and a deep mocking obeisance to the girl. They watched him out of sight. The hood of his black burnoose obscured head and face; its wide folds, dark and ominous as the sable wings of a bird of prey, swung to his proud free walk. They sighed with relief as the tall figure vanished in Siwa's gloomy narrow streets.

"What were you two chinning about on the way here?" Dale steered the exhausted girl up the steep rocky path. "You seemed to goad our friend to unusual eloquence."

"I was asking about Gunnar. What else is there to say to him? Oh, do look at that!"

Below stretched rolling sandy dunes, palm groves, distant ranges of rugged peaks, the silver glint of a salt lake, and a far-off village on the crest of a rocky summit in the east.

He looked, not at the extraordinary beauty of desert, hill and lake, but at Merle. She had switched the conversation abruptly. Also, she was gazing out over the desert with eyes that saw nothing before them. He was certain of that. She was keyed up—thinking, planning, anticipating something. What? He knew she'd made up her mind to action, and guessed it was concerned with Gunnar. Long experience had taught him the futility of questioning her.

THEY found the Rest-House surprisingly clean and cool. Ilbrahaim presently returned to look after them. No other guests were there.

It was getting on toward evening when Dale was summoned to appear before the Egyptian authorities and report on his visit. He knew the easily offended, touchy character of local rulers and authorities, and that it was wise to obey the summons. But about Merle!

He glanced at her over the top of a map he was pretending to study.

"Would you care to come along with me across the city? Or will you stay here with Ilbrahaim and watch the sunset? Famous here, I've read."

"Yes," she replied, her eyes on a pencil sketch she was making of the huddled roofs seen from an open window where she sat.

"My fault, I'll start again! A—Will you come with me? B—Will you stay with Ilbrahaim?"

"B." She looked up for a moment, then returned to her sketch.

He got the impression of peculiar and sudden relief in her eyes, as if the problem had solved itself.

"Wants to get me off the scene!" he told himself.

She stopped further uneasy speculation on his part by bringing her sketch across and plunging into technical details about it. He was a sound critic and was beguiled into an enthusiastic discourse on architecture. She listened and argued and discussed points with flattering deference, until the sun was low and vast and crimson in the west.

Then she casually remarked, "You needn't go now, surely?"

He started up. "I'd completely forgotten my little call. Sorry, dear, to leave you even for an hour. Etiquette's extremely stiff on these small formalities; better go, I think. 'Bye, old lady, don't go wandering about."

"Thank heaven, he's gone!" Merle thrust her drawings into a portfolio, put on a hat, scrutinized her pale face in her compact-mirror, applied lipstick and rouge with an artist's hand, and walked down the hill path.

At its junction with the dusty road, a tall black-clad figure joined her.

"You are punctual, *Mademoiselle*! That is well, for we must be there before sunset."

It seemed an interminable walk to her as they dived and twisted through a labyrinth of courtyards, flights of steps, and overshadowed narrow streets. She followed her silent guide closely. It would be unpleasant to lose even such a grim protector as El Shabur. She shrank from the filthy whining beggars with their rags and sores, from the bold evil faces of the young men who stood to stare at her. Even the children revolted her—pale unhealthy abnormal little creatures that they were.

The shaykh hurried on through the old

town with its towering fort-like houses to newer Siwa. Here the dwellings were only of two or three stories with open roofs that looked like great stone boxes shoved hastily together in irregular blocks.

EL SHABUR looked at the sun, then turned to his companion with such malice in his black eyes that she shrank from him.

"He is here."

She looked up at the house-front with its tiny windows and fought back the premonition of horror that made her throat dry and her heart beat heavily. She despised her weakness. Inside this sinister house, behind one of those dark slits of windows, Gunnar was waiting for her.

Why he'd not come to her, why she must visit him secretly with El Shabur, she refused to ask herself. She loved him. She was going to be with him. The rest did not count at all.

She followed her guide through a low entrance door, stumbled up a narrow dark stairway, caught glimpses of bare, untenanted, low-ceilinged rooms. El Shabur opened a door at the top of the house, drew back with a flash of white teeth. She stooped to enter the low doorway.

"Gunnar!"

There was no answer in words, but from the shadows a figure limped, his face and head cut and bleeding, so gaunt, so shadow-like too, that she cried out again.

"Oh! Oh, my dear!"

He took her in his arms. She clasped him, drew his head down to hers, kissed the gray tortured face with passionate love and pity.

"Gunnar, I am here with you! Look at me! What is it?—tell me, darling, let me help you!"

His eyes met hers in such bitter despair and longing that she clutched him to her again, pressing her face against his shoul-

der. With gentle touch he put her from him.

"Listen to me, Merle, my darling. My beloved! Listen carefully. This is the last time I shall see you—touch you—for ever. I am lost—lost and damned. In a moment you will see for yourself. That is why he brought you here. Remember that I love you more than the soul I have lost—always—always, Merle!"

He pushed her from him, retreated to the shadows, stood there with head flung up and back pressed to the gray mud wall. Even as she would have gone to him, he changed, swiftly, dreadfully! Down—down in the dust—torn rough head and yellow wolf's eyes at her feet.

MERLE sat up on the broad divan. Dale had returned to find her walking up and down, up and down the long main room of the Rest-House. For long he had been unable to distract her mind from the terrible inner picture that tormented her. She would answer his anxious questions with an impatient glance of wild distracted eyes, then begin her endless restless pacing again.

She had drunk the strong sedative he gave her as if her body were acting independently of her mind, but the drug had acted. She had slept. Now she was awake and turned to the man who watched beside her—large, protecting, compassionate. She tried to tell him, but her voice refused to put the thing into words.

"My dear child, don't! Don't! I know what you saw."

"You know! You've seen him when—you——" She covered her face, then slipped from the divan and stood erect before him.

"Dale! I'm all right now. It was so inhuman, such a monstrous unbelievable thing! But he has to bear it—live through it. And we *must* talk about it. We have

to help him. Dale! Dale! Surely there is a way to free him?"

He took her hands in his, swallowed hard before he could command his voice. "My chi——" He broke off abruptly.

There was nothing left of the child! It was a very resolute woman whose white face and anguished eyes confronted him. She looked, she was in effect, ten years older. He could not insult her by anything but the whole unvarnished truth now. She must make the final decision herself. He must not, he dare not withhold his knowledge. It would be a betrayal. Of her. Of Gunnar. Of himself. "Merle!"

At the tightening of his clasp, the new note in his voice, she looked up with a passion of renewed hope.

"There is—there is a way?"

He nodded, and drew her down beside him on the divan. He looked ill and shaken all at once. His tongue felt stiff, as if it would not frame words. It was like pushing her over a precipice, or into a blazing fire. How cruel love was! Hers for Gunnar. His for Merle. Love that counted—it was always a sharp sword in the heart.

"There is a way," his hoarse voice made effort. "It's a way that depends on your love and courage. Those two things alone—love and courage! It's a test of both, a most devilish test, so dangerous that the chances are you will not survive it. And if you don't——"

For a moment he bowed his head, put a hand up to shield his face from her wide eager gaze.

"Dear! It's a test, a trial of your will against that fiend, El Shabur. There are ancient records. It has been done. Only one or two survived the ordeal. The others perished—damned—lost as Gunnar is!"

"No." The low, softly breathed word

was more impressive than a defiant blare of trumpets. "He is not lost, for I shall save him. Tell me what to do."

EL SHABUR listened in silence, looked from Merle's white worn face to Dale's maddening smile. He had not expected resistance. He had not thought this lovesick girl would try to win back her lover. The man was at the back of it, of course. Had taught her the formula, no doubt. Should he stoop to take up the game to battle—with a woman?

"First time your bluff's ever been called, eh, Sheykh of the Mist? Are you meditating one of your famous disappearances? Am I trying you a peg too high? It is, of course, a perilous experiment—this trial of will between you and my little cousin!"

The Arab's white teeth gleamed in a mocking, mirthless smile. His eyes showed two dark flames that flared up hotly at the taunt.

"You cannot save him. He is mine, my creature, my slave."

"Not for long, Sheykh El Shabur," the girl spoke softly.

"For ever," he suavely corrected her. "And you also put yourself in my hands by this foolish test—which is no test!"

Dale stood watching near the door of the Rest-House. Could this be the child he had known so well, this resolute stern little figure, whose steadfast look never wavered from the Arab's face?—who spoke to him with authority on which his evil sneering contempt broke like waves on a rock?

"You think that you—a woman, can withstand me? A vain trifling woman, and one, moreover, who is overburdened by lust for my servant as a frail craft by heavy cargo. I will destroy you with your lover."

"I don't take your gloomy view of the situation," Dale interrupted. He

watched the other intently from under drooped eyelids, saw that Merle's fearlessness and his own refusal to be serious were piercing the man's colossal self-esteem, goading him to accept the challenge to his power. El Shabur felt himself a god on earth. In so far as he was master of himself, he was a god! Dale had never met so disciplined and powerful a will. Few could boast so controlled and obedient an intellect. But he was proud, as the fallen Lucifer was proud!

It was the ultimate weakness of all who dabbled in occult powers. They were forced to take themselves with such profound seriousness that in the end the fine balance of sanity was lost.

Dale continued as if they were discussing a trifling matter that began to bore him. His mouth was so dry that he found difficulty in speaking at all. It was like stroking an asp.

"The point is that I have never seen our young friend take this extraordinary semblance of a—a werewolf. My cousin is, as you remark so emphatically, a woman. Not her fault, and all that, of course! But no doubt she was over-sensitive, imaginative, conjured up that peculiar vision of our absent Gunnar by reason of excessive anxiety."

"She saw my disobedient servant," the sheykh's deep voice rang like steel on an anvil, "undergoing punishment. It was no delusion of the senses."

"Ah! Good! Excellent! You mean she was not so weak, after all. That's one up to her, don't you think? I mean, seeing him as he really was. Rather penetrating, if you take me!"

"She saw what she saw, because it was my design that she should. She is no more than a woman because of it."

"Ah, I can't quite agree there," Dale was persuasive, anxious to prove his point politely. "I'll bet she didn't scream or

faint. Just trotted home a bit wobbly at the knees, perhaps?"

"She is obstinate, as all women are obstinate." The sheykh's lean hands were hidden by flowing sleeves, to Dale's disgust; but a muscle twitched above the high cheek-bone, and the dark fire of his eyes glowed red.

"Since you desire to sacrifice yourself," the Arab turned to Merle, "Ilbrahim shall bring you just before sundown to the house."

"Any objections to my coming along?" Dale spoke as if a supper-party were under discussion. "My interest in magic-ceremonial——"

El Shabur cut in. "You think to save her from me? Ah, do I not know of your learning, your researches, your study of occult mysteries! It will avail you nothing. No other cabalist has dared what I have dared. I—the High Priest of Melek Taos! Power is mine. No man clothed in flesh can stand against me."

He seemed, in the dim low-ceilinged room, to fill the place with wind and darkness and the sound of beating wings. Suddenly he was gone. Like a black cloud he was gone.

Dale looked after him for long tense minutes. "No man clothed in flesh," he quoted reflectively. "And there's quite a lot of clothing in my case, too."

ONCE more the grim stone house in the outskirts of the city. The cousins stood before it. Ilbrahim, who had guided them, put a hand before his face in terror.

"*Effendi*, I go! This is an evil place." The whites of his eyes glinted between outspread fingers. "An abode of the *shaitans*!"

He turned, scuttled under a low archway. They heard the agitated clap-clap of

his heelless slippers on hard-baked earth. Then silence closed round about them. They stood in the warm glow of approaching sunset.

Merle looked at the western sky and the great globe that was remorselessly bringing day to a close. Dale studied her grave, set face. He hoped against hope that she might even now turn back. Her eyes were on the round red sun as it sank.

He too stared as if hypnotized. If he could hold it—stop its slow fatal moving on . . . on . . . It was drawing Merle's life with it. It was vanishing into darkness and night. Merle too would vanish into darkness . . . into awful night. . . .

She turned and smiled at him. The glory of the sky touched her pale face with fire. Her eyes shone solemn and clear as altar lamps. He gave one last glance at the lovely earth and sky and glorious indifferent sun, then opened the low door for Merle to pass.

Gunnar, in the upper room, stood by the narrow slit of his solitary window, more gaunt, more shadowy than yesterday. He saw Merle, rushed across to her, pushed her violently back across the threshold.

"I will not have it! This monstrous sacrifice! Take her away—at once. Go! I refuse it. Take her away!"

He thrust her back into Dale's arms, tried to close the door in their faces. Once more a faint hope of rescuing Merle at the eleventh hour rose in Dale's mind. But the door was flung wide. El Shabur confronted them, led them into the room, imperiously motioned Gunnar aside.

"*Ya!* Now is it too late to turn back. My hour is come. My power is upon me. Let Melek Taos claim his own!"

Merle went over to Gunnar, took his hand in hers, looked up into his gray face with the same look of shining inner ex-

altation Dale had seen as they lingered at the outer door.

"Yes, it is too late now to turn back," she affirmed. "For this last time you must endure your agony. The last time, Gunnar—my beloved. It shall swiftly pass to me. Can I not bear for a brief moment what you have borne so long? Through my soul and body this devil that possesses you shall pass to El Shabur, who created it. Endure for my sake, as I for yours."

"No! No! You cannot guess the agony—the torture——"

Dale sprang forward at her gesture, and drew about them a circle with oil poured from a long-necked phial. Instantly the two were shut within a barrier of fire, blue as wood-hyacinths, that rose in curving, swaying, lovely pillars to the ceiling, transforming the gray salt mud to a night-sky lit with stars.

"*Ya gomany!* O mine enemy!" El Shabur's deep voice held sudden anguish. "Is it thou? Through all the years thy coming has been known to me, yet till now I knew thee not. Who taught thee such power as this?"

He strode to the fiery circle, put out a hand, drew it back scorched and blackened to the bone. He turned in savage menace. Dale's hand flashed, poured oil in a swift practised fling about El Shabur's feet and touched it to leaping flame.

Within this second ring the Arab stood upright. His voice boomed out like a great metal gong.

"Melek Taos! Melek Taos! Have I not served thee truly? Give aid—give aid! Ruler of Wind and Stars and Fire! I am held in chains!"

Dale breathed in suffocating gasps. He was cold to the marrow of his bones. He lost all sense of time—of space. He was hanging somewhere in the vast gulf of eternity. Hell battled for dominion in earth and sea and sky.

W. T.—5

"To me, Abeor! Aberer! Chavajoth! Aid—give aid!" Again the great voice called upon his demon-gods.

A sudden shock made the room quiver. Dale saw that the fires grew pale. "Was I too soon? Too soon?" he asked himself in agony. "If the oil burns out before sundown——"

There was a crash. On every hand the solid ancient walls were riven. Up—up leaped the blue fiery pillars.

A shout of awful appeal. "Melek Taos! Master! Give aid!"

With almost blinded eyes, Dale saw Gunnar drop at Merle's feet, saw in his stead a wolf-shape crouching, saw her stoop to it, kneel, kiss the great beast between the eyes, heard her clear, steady voice repeat the words of power, saw the flames sink and leap again.

The issue was joined. Now! Now! God or Demon! The Arab, devil-possessed, calling on his gods. Merle, fearless before the onrush of his malice. Hate, cruel as the grave. Love, stronger than death.

Dale's breath tore him. Cold! Cold! Cold to the blood in his veins! God! it was upon her!

Gunnar stood in his own body, staring with wild eyes at the beast which brushed against his knee. He collapsed beside it, blind and deaf to further agony.

And still El Shabur's will was undefeated. Still beside the unconscious Gunnar stood a wolf, its head flung up, its yellow lambent eyes fixed, remote, suffering.

Again Dale felt himself a tiny point of conscious life swung in the womb of time. Again the forces that bear up the earth, sun, moon, and stars were caught in chaos and destruction. Again he heard the roar of fire and flood and winds that drive the seas before them. Through all the tumult there rang a voice, rallying hell's legions, waking old dark

gods, calling from planet to planet, from star to star, calling for aid!

Dale knew himself on earth again. Stillness was about him. In a dim and dusty room he saw Merle and Gunnar, handfast, looking into each other's eyes. About their feet a little trail of fire ran—blue as a border of gentian.

Another circle showed, its fires dead, black ash upon the dusty ground. Across it sprawled a body, its burnoose charred and smoldering. Servant of Melek Taos. Victim of his own dark spells. El Shabur destroyed by the demon that had tormented Gunnar. Driven forth, homeless, it returned to him who had created it.
