

SPICY 'ADVENTURE' STORIES



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By
C. A. M. DONNE



**Slim and white, she was, all
shining like a statue in ivory,
and beautiful as a dream.**

White Man's MAGIC

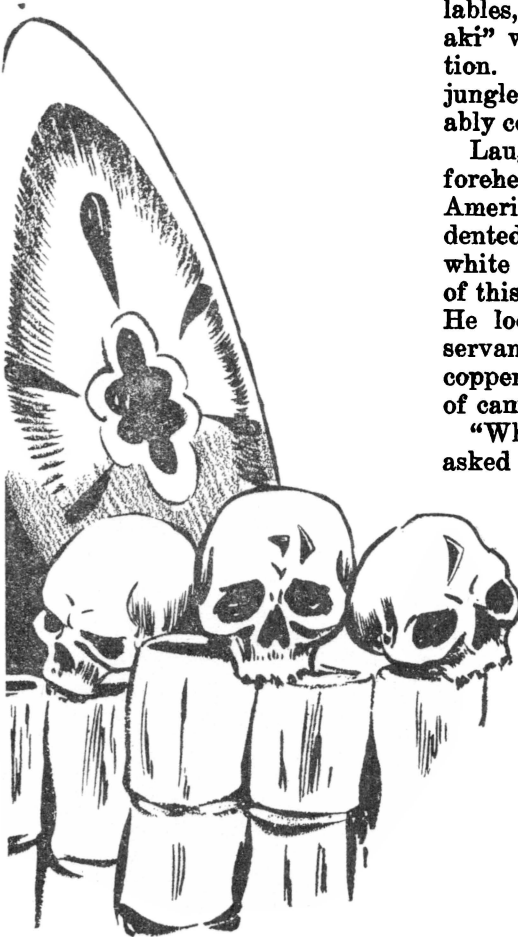
TERROR made a quaking caricature of the Kaffir scout. His eyes rolled whitely in their sockets, his thick nostrils flared like a water buffalo's, the shaft of his shovel-bladed assegai

rattled against the five-foot length of his bullhide shield.

Hearing the gibberish pouring from the gray lips, without understanding it, Rex Laughlin muttered, "Wadis!" But he shook his head when, out of the guttural syllables, the words "tabu" and "Berlaki" were made plain by reiteration. Not Wadis, then. Magic—jungle voodoo. The scout had probably come across a skull on a stick.

Laughlin wiped sweat from his forehead. He was a lean young American in tattered khaki and a dented sun helmet, and the only white man within a hundred miles of this point in the Belgian Congo. He looked at Tumba, his Masai servant, standing straight as a copper statue beneath the weight of cameras and rifles.

"What says the fool?" Laughlin asked in the Bantu dialect.



He had heard of the Sign of the White Witch, the Mark of the Death That Lives, and he determined to learn the truth. He didn't dream that, deep in the jungle, he was destined to find both love and fortune

Tumba regarded the Kaffir with the contemptuous superiority of a jungle-born tribesman who has lived much among whites. Yet his manner was grave and not untinged with awe.

"Bwana, he has seen the sign of the White Witch, the mark of the Death That Lives. He has put fear into the craven ones."

Laughlin looked at the four porters, who had unslung their heavy packs and were leaning on their spears. They were Kaffirs all—nearly nude black men with bone ornaments thrust through their ear lobes and noses. They stared at the ground or into the gloomy shadows of the forest, refusing to meet his eyes.

Laughlin said loudly, "It is false magic. Mine is stronger."

They fidgeted, unimpressed.

The explorer turned, hiding the excitement he felt at the mention of Berl-aki, the White Witch, the Wadi goddess who was said to dwell in an ivory temple in a secret kraal. The Wadis had made ivory sacred to her, so ran the legend, and had gathered a fortune in elephant tusks to insure her favor.

There were men who suspected that a black witch doctor had invented Berl-aki out of mercenary motives, planning to sell her sacred ivory hoard to the white traders when it had grown large enough. But for two years the natives had shivered at the mention of the goddess, and Laughlin could not believe she was altogether mythical.

He reflected that if she were real, and if he should find her and live to tell the story, his fortune would be made. The book he would write about her, the lectures he would

give, would capture the public's fancy beyond anything he had ever produced. Then he could satisfy his hunger for adventure and discovery fully and add worthwhile contributions to civilized man's scanty knowledge of primitive outposts. There would be no more shoestring expeditions like this one, financed out of skimpy advances from magazines and scientific foundations in anticipation of articles and photographs and relics.

His blue eyes shone with the brightness of the thought. He said to Tumba, "We'll have a look up ahead. The Kaffirs won't budge till we do." He loosened his revolver in its holster and started along the path by which the scout had retreated so precipitately.

THE way led through bush luxuriant enough to cut off sunlight completely. Thorns tore at Laughlin's clothes, insects swarmed around him in clouds, brightly-colored birds screeched and darted. The ground was pocked with little hollows.

He watched for a tabu sign—a skull or a pair of ceremonial spears crossed over the path—but he was utterly unprepared for what awaited him.

An almost naked girl cowered at the bottom of one of the hollows, so nearly the color of the gray litter of decaying vegetation that Laughlin all but stepped on her before her moan sent him leaping back. She was a Wadi girl in the first bloom of womanhood, slim and dark-skinned, with pointed breasts and supple limbs. She had been a magnificent creature.

Had been—for now she groveled beneath the mark of the Death That Lives, and Laughlin felt deep pity for her as he understood for the first time what that strange phrase meant. He stared in horror at the silver-gray patches on the girl's body.

Tumba had halted in his tracks. He stammered in Bantu, "It is not well to go nearer, Bwana. The White Witch has long arms."

"The White Witch," Laughlin said grimly, "must be a leper goddess. Being sick, she can make others sick, like this girl. But in that case she will die, too."

Tumba shook his head. "She will not die. She is not sick. Her hair is silver as the belly of a serpent, yet she grows younger each day. I have not seen her, but I have been told."

Laughlin scowled. "We shall see. Meanwhile, since you know her language, ask this child how far she has wandered from her kraal. Tell her we will take her back there and make her last hours comfortable. And if the White Witch is there, we will find her and make pictures of her with the magic boxes you carry."

Tumba's lips and tongue made clucking noises. The girl's hopeless face took on a glimmer of intelligence. She raised herself laboriously, panting with weakness. Except for the poisonous patches of leprosy upon her skin and the despair of approaching death in her eyes, she was a creature of wild, graceful beauty.

She replied to Tumba in tones so subdued that he had to lean close to hear. He did so unwillingly. He translated, "She says, Bwa-

na, that the kraal of her tribe is—"

A darting, whispering thing of death cut across the sentence. A choked sob was wrenched from the girl's throat. Tumba sprang for the shelter of a clump of thorn bushes and Laughlin whipped the revolver from the holster.

The girl struggled almost erect, then fell upon her back, her bare legs thrashing. Blood gushed in a crimson torrent from her breast, where the blade of a spear had driven deep. The blade moved, weighted down by its feather-decked shaft, and the wound widened horribly.

Beside a mimosa tree, a hundred feet away, a brown shadow melted into deeper shadows. Laughlin aimed the revolver, fired, and bark flew from the side of the mimosa.

SUDDENLY shrill yells rent the air. Out of the jungle danced warriors, more than a score of them, their black faces and bodies streaked hideously with white, their braceleted arms brandishing shields and assegais.

Laughlin cried in Bantu, hoping to be understood, "I come as a friend!"

Beady eyes glared at him without comprehension. A spearhead thudded into the earth at his feet.

He crouched beside the dead girl and triggered the revolver. A warrior leaped high in the air and fell dead, the bridge of his nose smashed by a .45 lead slug. Another screamed and clasped a torn thigh. But the twisted, running figures made poor targets and he emptied the gun without discouraging more than those two.

There was no time to reload.

Laughlin stood tensely while the keen blades circled him, waiting for the agony of them in his chest and stomach. No use saying anything; they could not understand him, and Tumba, the interpreter, had faded into the green mystery of the forest. In another minute, he thought, his lifeless body would be sprawled beside that of the naked black girl, food for the prowling carnivores and swarming ants, and thus would end his adventuresome career before it had fairly begun. . . .

But the Wadis did not intend to kill him immediately. They bent his arms behind him and bound them with strips of flexible bark. They prodded him with spears, forcing him along an all but invisible trail, scolding him harshly when he tripped over vines and gnarled roots.

He had little hope of mercy, rescue or escape. His Kaffir porters were dead or fleeing in terror. Tumba might have survived, but more likely a Wadi spear had brought him down. The nearest white settlement was a hundred miles away.

These days the Wadis were careful about killing white men. The Belgians had taught them bitter lessons, slaughtering a hundred natives and burning a dozen villages to avenge the death of one white. But the Wadis would protect the secret of their cache of sacred ivory, if such a thing actually existed — and when they wanted to kill, they knew cunning ways. . . .

They knew how to tie a stripped man over an anthill so that the giant emmets would pick his bones

clean of flesh. They knew of deep beds of quicksand. There was always fire; and it was said that at certain seasons there were still cannibalistic feasts. . . .

The jungle began to thin out. Sunlight came between the branches and now and then there were glimpses of hot blue sky. The trail was plainer and at intervals grisly markers hung upon bushes. Here a mummified human hand swung beneath a twig; there a thighbone dangled. The conical tops of thatched huts could be seen in a clearing ahead.

Carved posts, weirdly symbolic, made a gateway at one side of the trail. They were topped by white skulls, indicating that the region beyond was tabu, not to be entered except by the sanctified. Laughlin looked between the posts and halted with an exclamation, unmindful of the pricking spears behind him.

He stared along a lane curbed with glistening human skeletons. It led to a stake fence surrounding a lofty hut. Ghost-white guards with plumed headdresses stood around the fence, holding ceremonial spears. They were warriors daubed from head to toe with clay.

Framed in an opening in the fence, with crossed elephant tusks above her, stood a slim, shining girl, like an exquisitely carved statue in ivory, nude except for a scanty binding for her breasts and a brief kirtle that clung to her tapered thighs. Long hair, white as milk, cascaded over her shoulders and caressed the curves of her youthful bosom. In all her lithe figure was no color—only shadows



A darting, whispering thing of death cut through the air.

where her eyes and mouth were and where the muscles and curves of her body shaped entrancing contours.

THE White Witch, whose cult had spread creeping fear all along the sluggish course of the Congo—and she was as beautiful as a dream!

With the spears prodding him, Laughlin moved on into the kraal, which lay a hundred yards past this fantastic stockaded hut and

its mysterious mistress, like a dazed man. . . .

The ancient witch doctor of the Wadis squatted on a stool in front of his juju hut and glared at the white man through the eyeholes of a wooden mask carved with hideous grotesqueries. His scrawny neck supported a necklace of infants' skulls and the bony structure of a skeleton was sketched on his skinny limbs and torso.

Within the circle of the huts, warriors made a tighter circle about Laughlin. Behind the warriors stood the women—shriveled crones, plump-breasted mothers with children clinging to their bare legs, sleek-hipped maidens.

The sun was a dull red fire over the jungle in the west. The smoke of a smaller fire at the feet of the witch doctor gave off the foul stench of magic powders. The old priest held his hands in the smoke, went through the motions of washing them, and croaked a command.

Warriors leveled their spears and closed in on Laughlin, signing him to move. The crowd divided to let him pass through, thick lips grinning cruelly, voices muttering the name of Berl-aki.

Laughlin divined that, in some manner, he was to be sacrificed to the White Witch. A chill crawled along his spine, but stronger than his fear was his sense of disappointment. To carry cameras and notebooks hundreds of miles through the haunted rivers and forests of the Congo, to find the most mysterious being in all that land of mys-

tery, and not to be able to take back pictures and knowledge of her to the outer world—that was the height of irony!

She would be an albino native, he guessed; perhaps a leper, although it might only be that her coloring—or lack of it—appealed to the superstitious minds of the natives and made them think her responsible for the white plague of leprosy among them. He shuddered, wondering if leprosy were the fate decreed for him.

They came to the skull-tipped gateposts and the guards halted. Four temple guards, ghastly in their white paint, came forward. They escorted Laughlin beneath the crossed tusks and within the staked fence. Before the door of the temple-hut—which was not of ivory, as the tales had said, but still was more elaborate than most—they thrust him against a thick post, bound him securely and withdrew beyond the fence.

The White Witch was nowhere in sight.

Laughlin tugged at the strips of bark and realized that he could never break them. It came to him that even if he succeeded in freeing himself, the guards would kill him before he could escape from the tabu area. And if he gained the jungle, what chance had he of reaching safety, alone and without food or weapons?

He waited, his nerves straining in the eerie silence, for whatever might come next. Shadows lengthened, dusk began to gather, and from a swamp nearby a sickly mist crept into the fenced space. . . .

THE dusk was so deep that he did not see the White Witch when first she appeared in the doorway of the hut. Lost in his own dismal thoughts, he was unaware of her until she spoke, hardly above a whisper, but in a language that cleared his brain instantly of all the horrid pictures that had tormented it.

"Are you English?" she asked.

His startled eyes could barely make out her figure within the doorway. She leaned toward him, holding her hands over her bosom modestly, and a warm feeling of excitement stirred within him.

"I'm an American, like you," he said, keeping his voice low. "I'm Rex Laughlin from Boston, a would-be explorer." He knew by her accent that she came from somewhere in the States, and strained against his bonds to get a better look at her.

"Don't struggle." He could see her head turning as her eyes made certain that none of the guards was inside the enclosure. "When it's darker I'll loosen the strips and make you as comfortable as possible. I'm afraid that's all I can do for you."

"You can tell me who you really are. I've heard many stories about you. The blacks say you're a witch."

"I'm a prisoner like yourself." In her voice was a note of mournfulness that made him long to comfort her.

"But the natives worship you. You're a goddess to them. They make sacrifices to you—ivory and human lives—"

Something very like a sob silenced him. She murmured, after

a long pause, "I know what the natives say. It isn't true, but it has kept them from killing me. Their name for me, Berl-aki, is as near as they can come to my real name. If you're an explorer, you may have heard of Pearl Akin."

He gasped in his astonishment. "Heard of her! The whole world heard of her a couple of years ago. She—you—and your father, Bruce Akin, were lost while mapping the White Nile. The English sent out searching parties. But that was in the Egyptian Sudan, five or six hundred miles from here!"

"Not that far. We traveled south of the border of the Congo, looking for the source of the river, and the Wadis attacked us. They killed Dad and the blacks—everyone but me—and only my hair saved me. It's natural color is platinum. The natives had never seen anything like it.

"They brought me here, and as soon as I arrived an epidemic of leprosy broke out. A dozen men and women had it. They thought I was responsible, because my skin is almost as white as the skin of a leper. They began to worship me and built this temple and brought me elephant tusks, and almost immediately the leprosy disappeared. They drove the sufferers into the jungle to die, and no one else caught it.

"The chief's son, a boy of five or six, was sick, and they brought him to me. I know something about nursing. I bathed him and fed him the proper food, and he recovered.

"Now they're afraid to come too near me, but they bring me food

and ivory. When a member of the tribe gets leprosy they think he has displeased me and send him into the jungle to die. Two or three days ago they drove out a sick girl. If they wish to condemn anyone to death, they send him here."

"What happens then?"

"I don't harm him," she said bitterly, "but I might as well. When a person has spent a night here, bound as you are, he is supposed to have contracted leprosy. They send him into the bush and warriors follow and watch to be sure he eats nothing. In a few days he dies of sickness or starvation."

"That's what will happen to me?"

Her head bent. "I'm afraid so. I don't know how to prevent it. They keep their distance from me and won't let me outside the fence, and I don't know their language. I have no weapons. You couldn't ever return to civilization, because they would watch you."

LAUGHLIN grinned sardonically. Under such circumstances murder became almost a perfect crime. Even if his body should be found by a jungle patrol, the authorities could not punish the Wadis because an American explorer had died of starvation.

"Wouldn't you like to escape, Berl-aki?"

She exhaled breath in a long sigh. "Escape! I've dreamed of it for five hundred nights. You're the first white person I've seen in that long. I was eighteen when I left New York—just old enough

to have begun to live—and now I'm worse than dead. If I thought there was a chance in a million of getting away. . . ."

"We can try," he said. "We have nothing to lose, Pearl. It's dark now; untie me and I'll try to make a plan."

She crept toward him. "Don't make any sudden movements. The guards' eyes are sharp. They'll know I'm not a goodess, after all, and kill us both if they find out I've set you free."

Her hands fumbled with the knots. Her fingers were gentle and her cool, shadowed skin was as pale as flower petals and as fragrant. From the soft shining of her eyes he judged that they were hazel. The bark fell away, blood flowed into his wrists again and it was good to be able to swing his arms.

"Come into the hut," Pearl whispered. "The moon will rise soon and the guards will see us if we stay here."

He followed her cautiously into the dark structure. By straining his eyes he could just make out the objects it contained. There were rush mats and furs and blankets for sleeping. In a corner was an enormous pile of elephant tusks worth many thousands of dollars.

"Wealth," he said, "but not much luxury."

"You can't think how horrible it has been! No one to talk to, nothing to read, nothing to do . . . sometimes I've been sure I was going mad. I've dreamed of being rescued." She was crying and, he thought, laughing at the same time. "My rescuer was always

The impact of the shot
hurled the witch doctor
back into the flames.



tall and young and American, like you. But now that you're here, they'll kill you. . . ."

"Stop it," he said firmly. "I've been in some tough scrapes and come through them all right. None was as bad as this, but then, each of them was worse than anything that had happened before. . . ."

He stopped talking because her weeping was almost hysterical. He put out his hand and touched the smooth skin of her shoulder. A thrill went through him—not the casual thrill of a man who has been a long time away from women, but the sharp electrical tingle that comes when a man meets a woman capable of stirring him as few other women have or will. He drew her gently toward him and she lay passively against his chest, quivering from head to foot like a frightened child.

"Hush," he whispered, leading her to the pile of mats and furs, making her sit there, and sitting close beside her. "It's all right, Pearl. You've been alone all this time, but now there are two of us to fight against them."

"I'm only crying—because I'm happier—than I've ever been," she sobbed. "And I'm only afraid—because I don't want—anything to happen to you."

The fragrance of her hair was in his nostrils and the warmth of her nearly nude body was all through him. He cupped her chin in his hand, raised her face and kissed her parted lips. Her mouth clung tenaciously, sweetly, for a long moment of perfect bliss—and then, like a thunderstorm breaking, emotion broke in irresistible waves over them.

Her bare arms went around him, fierce and tight, her soft breasts flattening against his chest. Her lips, moist and kiss-swollen, murmured against his cheek. Her cool flesh was palpitant and eager for caresses. Holding her close, with his blood turned to liquid fire in his veins, he forgot the danger that encircled them, forgot all but the magic of their love. . . .

THE soft sound came minutes later. Laughlin had so completely lost the memory of the threat that hung over him that he felt no instant alarm as he raised his head and glanced toward the door of the hut.

For a fractional second he had the shocked impression that the skeletons bordering the avenue outside had come to life. Then the true identity of the spectral white figures grouped at the door burst upon him and he lunged erect, clenching his fists.

The moon had risen, its soft light penetrating the darkness and the mist. By its glow the temple guards had seen that their prisoner was no longer tied to the stake, and had come to investigate. They stood with leveled spears, threatening, surely convinced by what they saw that their goddess was only a mortal, after all.

Laughlin seized a small ivory tusk from the pile in the corner. It was all he could do to lift and swing it. He heard the girl scream as the figures converged upon him, and felt and heard a skull crack like an eggshell beneath his cudgel. One of the pallid

guards crumpled, a dark stain spreading over his headdress. But the others were upon Laughlin before he could swing the tusk again.

The butt of a spear punched into his stomach, driving the breath from him, doubling him up. Something heavier than a fist smashed against his temple, lighting fireworks within his brain. He went down, fighting to retain consciousness.

Thongs were whipped about his wrists and ankles. The pain of them came dully through the stupefaction that lay like a fog over him. He heard Pearl's frightened voice pleading with him.

"Try to save yourself, Rex! Don't try to save me! They're taking me to the village, and you could never get past the guards to reach me. If they send you into the jungle you may make your escape somehow. . . ."

He saw two of the warriors dragging her between them toward the trail. They gripped her white arms tightly, no longer afraid of her. Whatever hold of fear she had maintained over their superstitious minds was gone now, swept away by the fact of her submission to the kisses of the explorer, which proved that she was not divine. She was the White Witch no longer, but only a helpless girl of an alien race. . . .

THE dead warrior lay on the floor of the hut beside Laughlin and a single living one stood just within the door, resting on his spear. Laughlin was not to know what would happen to Ber-

aki; he was to lie here, under guard, while the witch doctor judged her. After that his turn would come.

He shouted curses at the impassive guard until his lungs gasped for air and his throat was raw. . . .

From the kraal came a hubbub of voices, a mutter of drums. The fallen goddess would be arraigned now before the ancient one with his necklace of babies' skulls, and the blacks would be pressing around her, grinning. They would be in awe of her at first, but the awe would go away when they saw how frightened she was. Then they could hate her for having imposed upon their credulity, never stopping to think that she was not at fault. They would demand her destruction, lusting for blood, and would gloat over her sufferings.

And he, who had tasted her loveliness and would carry the shining vision of her beauty to the grave with him if he lived for a million years, was powerless to help her. Tugging at the bonds, he realized despairingly that, were he twice as strong, he could not break them. . . .

He saw a tall white figure enter the gate and stride toward the hut, bearing a spear and something else. It was one of those who had dragged Pearl away, he thought, returning for him. He was glad. At least he would be near her; if he could not save her, he might comfort her a little.

If only he could borrow some of the storied magic of the voodoo priests and escape with Pearl

(Continued on page 92)

White Man's Magic

(Continued from 41)

from the Wadi kingdom to civilization and America!

The ghostly figure of the second warrior was almost at the doorway. The guard within nodded to him with grave dignity, then returned his regard to the bound prisoner. Behind the guard the newcomer halted and aimed his spear with deliberation.

Laughlin was spellbound. He suspected his mind of playing tricks on him. It seemed incredible that the newcomer should thrust his spear mightily into the back of the guard, and that the guard should fall upon his face silently while dark blood spurted over the white paint between his shoulder blades.

And then Laughlin knew that these things had actually happened, and he was not mad, but only unbelievably lucky. For Tumba, the Masai, was speaking through his mask of chalk, which cracked in a wide grin.

"Bwana, we can escape from

these wicked devils. I have hidden your magic boxes in a safe place and here is your big rifle. I can lead you back to your own people so swiftly that the Wadis will never overtake us."

Tumba was on his knees, tearing the bark from his master's wrists and ankles. In a matter of seconds Laughlin arose, flexing his limbs, feeling new hope swell within him.

"You shall be repaid a thousand times, Tumba," he said in Bantu, striving to keep his voice at that impersonal pitch a white man must use to a Masai if he wishes to be respected. "But we cannot flee yet. There is a woman, she whom the Wadis call the White Witch, who is not a witch at all, but a girl of my own race. She will go with us."

Tumba's eyes stared from their chalky sockets. "But she is only a woman, Bwana! Why should you risk your life for her? The Wadis will put her to the fire test

to see whether she is really a goddess, and they are too many for us to attack. We could never hope to slay them."

Laughlin drew himself to his full height. "Do you doubt my power over them? Have you forgotten that I know how to make great magic?"

"No, Bwana." The Masai was distressed. "Tumba has not forgotten. You have only to speak the word and I shall do whatever you command." He added dismally, "Every man must die sometime, and tonight can be no worse than some other night."

LAUGHLIN'S brain raced at top speed, shaping daring plans. Magic—that was what he needed to paralyze the Wadis with fear. Guns could not prevail against them, but magic could. And in his pack, which Tumba had hidden in the bush, were the implements of magic!

He snatched the heavy express rifle from the servant. He snapped, "Hurry—bring the things which you have hidden. Make your feet like the wind, Tumba, and we will yet show the Wadis we are not the kind to flee!"

He turned to the couch, to which the fragrance of Pearl Akin still clung, and began to gather skins and mats in his arms. . . .

The drums in the village, which had been muttering for half an hour, commenced a sullen thundering. Laughlin heard shrieks of excitement, yells of hysterical laughter. The voodoo doctor, then, had decided upon a test of the White Witch's divinity that met

with the enthusiastic approval of the cruel natives.

Laughlin perched on the horizontal poles that strengthened the hut beneath its conical roof. He had broken out a part of the grass matting that shingled it and through the opening he had thrust a long tube made of the skins and mats, rolled around the shafts of the spears of the two dead warriors.

Through the tube, as through the barrel of a telescope without a lens, Laughlin could see the massed Wadis in the center of the circle of huts. He saw them move away from the spot where the wizened man of magic crouched on his stool and gather about a great fire that flamed redly. He saw the body of Pearl Akin gleaming in the firelight and heard the long murmur of anticipation rise from a hundred throats.

He dared not think of failure. If he could not save Pearl, he asked nothing more than to die, too. Otherwise his life would be a long nightmare in which he would witness her death over and over again.

The warriors hurled the platinum-haired girl to the earth beside the fire and other warriors drove four stakes above her shoulders and below her feet. She lay on her back, nude and helpless and lovely. Thongs were bound about her ankles and wrists separately and then lashed to the four stakes. She was spread-eagled, stretched taunt, unable to move before the gloating eyes of her tormentors.

A withering flame of anger swept through Laughlin as he understood what was intended. He

had heard of that savage test for divinity in which red hot coals were heaped upon the belly of the one who had posed as a god but was suspected of being mortal. If the fire ate through the soft flesh into the bowels, the screaming victim was no god—was, in fact, very quickly a charred corpse. But if the victim survived, unharmed by the fire. . . .

LAUGHLIN growled a mighty oath. He could not fail now, could not let the woman who had come so sweetly to his arms suffer that awful agony.

It was time for Tumba, who had already brought Laughlin's pack from the bush and had been dispatched to the farther side of the village, to act. The witch doctor was stooping over the fire, scooping up coals on the edge of a shield. . . .

What in God's name was delaying Tumba?

Laughlin had caught up the express rifle and thrust its barrel into the improvised tubing, levering a shell into the firing chamber, when the first lightning flashed. It came not from the heavens, but from the earth beyond the village—a towering column of blinding white fire. It hung in the air for a second, swallowing up the moon-glow and absorbing the glare of the bonfire, then vanished—and a heavy *boom!* rolled over the countryside.

The devil-drums faltered in their beat. Black hands went to bulging eyes, trying to rub out the blazing reflections of the flash. The excited voices faded and a pall of fear hung over the kraal,

heavy as the gray smoke that was billowing up in the moonlight where the pillar of fire had been.

The witch doctor went rigid, his scoop of embers spilling over his unshod feet. The pain reached his stunned brain abruptly, and he howled and danced. He issued angry orders, pointing to the smoke, and two warriors left the kraal and loped reluctantly toward the forest.

The old man stooped again for fire. He gathered a glowing heap of coals on the shield and stood with his back to the blaze, facing the staked girl—and Laughlin. This time Laughlin did not wait for the miraculous flare. He lined the sights of the big rifle carefully on the murderous priest of evil and squeezed the trigger.

The roar of the gun came back through the bulky tubing and deafened Laughlin, but he was quite sure no sound of the shot could reach the ears of the natives. The makeshift silencer might not be perfect, but it would muffle the explosion of a cartridge sufficiently to prevent its being heard above the thumping of the drums.

However, if no sound reached the village, the .475 bullet arrived there in a tiny fraction of a second and created havoc. Its full ton impact struck the witch doctor in the breastbone and hurled him off his scrawny legs, backward into the blazing fire. His body twitched just once as the flames enfolded it hungrily, and then the broad shield descended over it and a cloud of greasy smoke billowed upward.

An instant later two blinding pillars of fire leaped simultane-

ously at one side of the kraal and a double explosion shook the earth.

Now the noise of drums ceased altogether and the jungle echoed with wails and cries. There was no movement among the terror-ridden Wadis to rescue the voodoo priest from the flames which were consuming his wickedness. Instead every man, woman and child in the village fell forward, knees and forehead to the earth, in attitude of worship.

One warrior crawled fearfully toward Pearl, groveling in the dirt. He moved around her, keeping his face averted, slashing the thongs that bound her, one by one. She stood up, slim and defiant, settling the disordered kirtle around her slim thighs—a goddess one more. . . .

LAUGHLIN laughed exultantly. He dropped from the rafters to the ground, snatched a small can from his pack and sprinted toward the kraal. He slung the rifle over his shoulder as he neared the edge of the village, punched a hole in the can with the tongue of his belt buckle, inserted a length of fuse and lighted it. He hurled the can far in front of him.

The magnesium powder, intended for use in making night photographs, exploded with a deep-throated rumble. Laughlin shielded his eyes with his hands as the column of unbearably bright flame ascended, then walked through the thick smoke that was left in its wake.

The Wadis, he knew, would not be able to clear their eyes of the brilliance for many seconds after

it had vanished, even if their eyelids had been closed when it burst forth. It would appear to them that he had materialized magically out of the blinding brightness.

He walked swiftly to Pearl's side, placed his arm around her and smiled into her incredulous eyes. In his smile was more than triumph: there was promise of a greater and happier adventure to come, with the outcome never in doubt.

He saw Tumba peering from the shelter of a hut and beckoned him into the center of the kraal. He commanded Tumba, "Tell them the White Witch is angry and will leave them, but that she is also merciful and will spare their worthless lives."

Tumba translated the message into the Wadi dialect, and the blacks looked at one another, marveling that one so great should trouble to show mercy.

"Tell them," Laughlin continued, "that the goddess has called us from a great distance to take her to a far-away kraal. Tell them we must have many porters to carry the ivory tusks they have gathered for her, to repay her for sparing them."

The words were spoken, and the natives received them with grunts and nods of assent.

Laughlin took Pearl Akin's arm and led her through the circle of kneeling blacks, doubting whether it would be wise to hug and kiss her in front of them, even though her divinity had been proved to their complete satisfaction. With a lifetime ahead of them, they could afford to wait a few minutes longer. . . .

"You ought to believe in magic always," he murmured. "Because of it you're rescued, you're rich, and when we reach America you'll be famous."

She leaned against him, as if

impatient for the caresses he was withholding. "You don't mean me," she replied, and there was a catch of emotion in her voice. "You mean *us*, Rex—always."

He smiled and nodded.
