

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

# FANTASTIC

JANUARY

50¢



Fafhrd and the Mouser  
Dare the Cavern World of  
THE LORDS  
OF QUARMALL

A Novel by  
Fritz Leiber



# FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

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Illustrating *The Lords of Quarmall*

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OLD friends of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser may be surprised to see a byline on their story in this issue that reads—"By Fritz Leiber and Harry Fischer." "Who," you are saying, "is Harry Fischer? Some Johnny-come-lately trying to horn in on Leiber's master-characters?"

Well, hardly. According to Fritz himself, Harry Fischer is the inventor of Fafhrd and the Mouser. And this is indeed a tale in itself, and one with which we shall acquaint you here and now, in the words of Leiber himself:

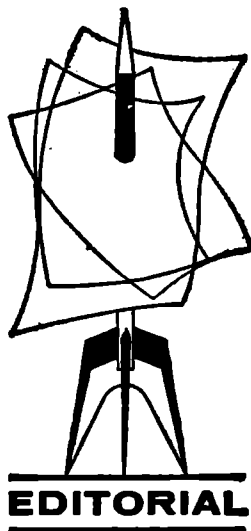
"Harry and I met in 1930 at the University of Chicago, became fast friends, and have been friends ever since. We had in common enthusiasms for fencing, chess, bridge, drama, and fantasy literature. In our correspondence we often extemporized fragments of fantasy. One day I got a letter from Harry inventing two characters. He wrote: 'All do fear the one known as the Gray Mouser. He walks with swagger 'mongst the bravos, though he's but the stature of a child. His costume is all of grey. His weapons [are called] Cat's Claw and Scalpel . . . Fafhrd was full seven feet of height. His wrist . . . was thick as a hero's ankle. . . . His mouth smiled as he fingered the ponderous hilt of a huge longsword.'"

From this beginning, Fischer and Leiber utilized Fafhrd and the Mouser in their dreams and fantasy fragments. In 1937 Fischer wrote about 10,000 words of a novel to be called *The Lords of Quarmall*, a subterranean kingdom Leiber had invented as part of the land of Nehwon. But the fragment languished for 25 years. During this time Leiber wrote other sagas of Lankhmar, and Fischer put aside the fantasy world to become a successful businessman (the corrugated-box business). He now lives in Clarksburg, W. Va., with his wife and two sons.

A year ago, however, Leiber visited Fischer and suggested that he (Leiber) finish Quarmall. So Fritz took the original 10,000 words, plotted and wrote over twice as many more, and—lo! the result begins on page 6.

"Over the years," Leiber has said, "the Mouser and Fafhrd have become such good friends to me, teasing or bullying me out of my

(Continued on page 126)



**EDITORIAL**

**EDITORIAL** (*continued from page 5*)

discouraged moods when no one else could, that I have no doubt I will continue to solicit adventures from them." And no wonder they were such good friends. For, Fritz writes to us: "Authors put much of themselves into their characters. So, of course, Harry is to a degree the Gray Mouser, and I am Fafhrd."

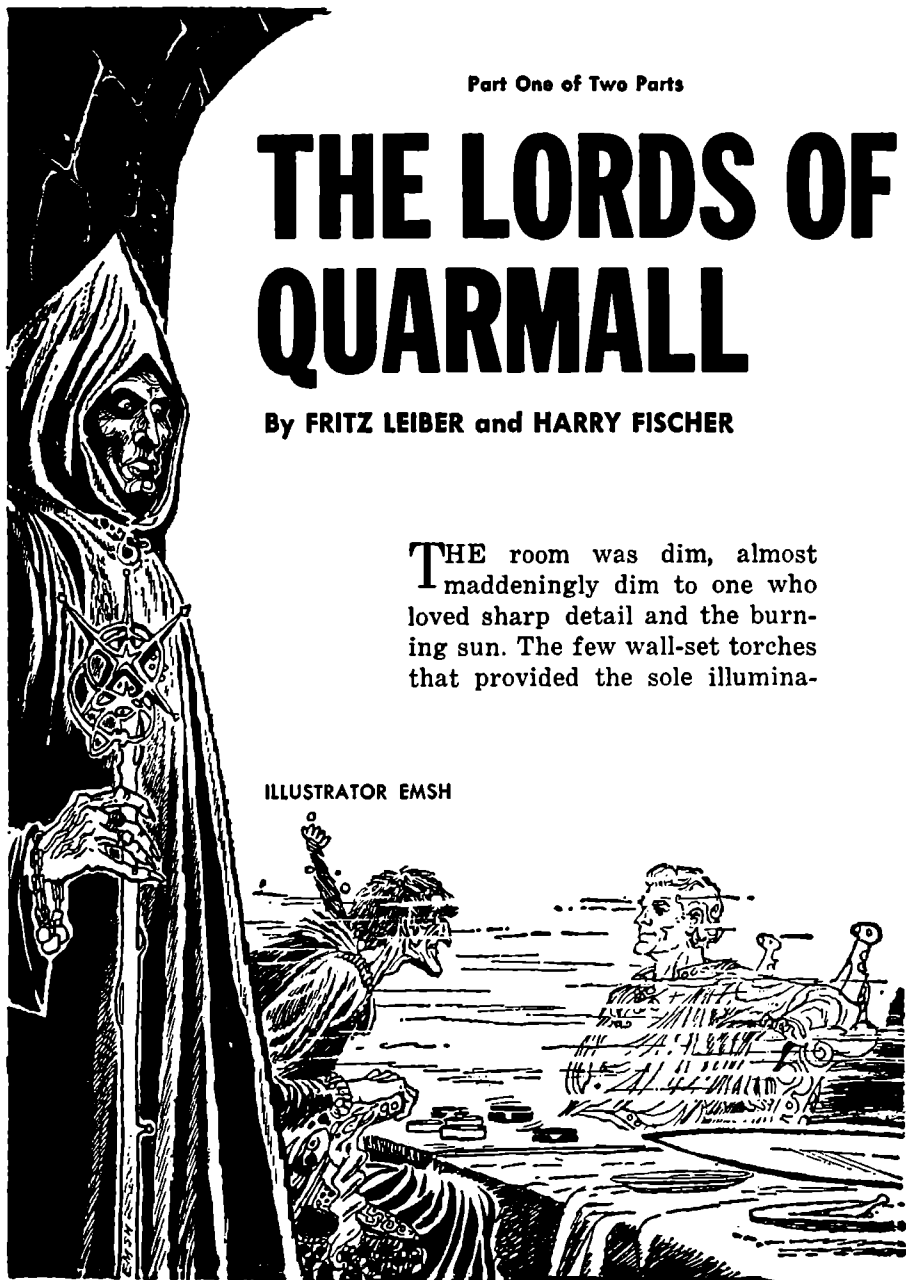
Part One of Two Parts

# THE LORDS OF QUARMALL

By FRITZ LEIBER and HARRY FISCHER

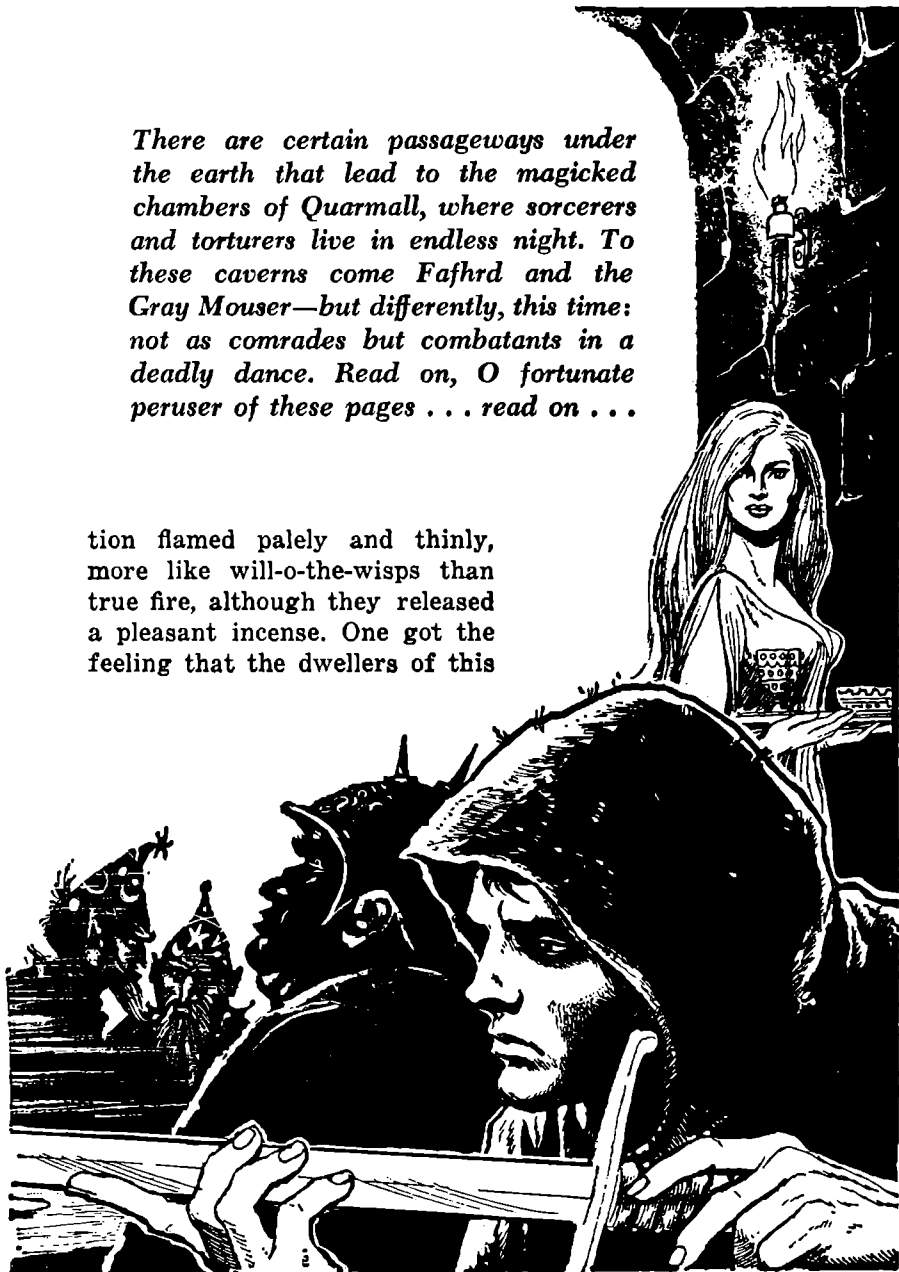
THE room was dim, almost maddeningly dim to one who loved sharp detail and the burning sun. The few wall-set torches that provided the sole illumina-

ILLUSTRATOR EMSH



*There are certain passageways under the earth that lead to the magicked chambers of Quarmall, where sorcerers and torturers live in endless night. To these caverns come Fashrd and the Gray Mouser—but differently, this time: not as comrades but combatants in a deadly dance. Read on, O fortunate peruser of these pages . . . read on . . .*

tion flamed palely and thinly, more like will-o-the-wisps than true fire, although they released a pleasant incense. One got the feeling that the dwellers of this



region resented light and only tolerated a thin mist of it for the benefit of strangers.

Despite its vast size, the room was carved all in somber solid rock—smooth floor, polished curving walls, and domed ceiling—either a natural cave finished by man or else chipped out and burnished entirely by human effort, although the thought of that latter amount of work was near intolerable. From numerous deep niches between the torches, metal statuettes and masks and jeweled objects gleamed darkly.

Through the room, bending the feeble bluish flames, came a perpetual cool draft bringing acid odors of damp ground and moist rock which the sweet spicy scent of the torches never quite masked.

The only sounds were the occasional rutch of rock on wood from the other end of the long table, where a game was being played with black and white stone counters—that and from beyond the room the ponderous sighing of the great fans that sucked down the fresh air on its last stage of passage from the distant world above and drove it through this region . . . and the perpetual soft thudding of the naked feet of the slaves on the heavy leather tread-belts that drove those great wooden fans . . . and the very faint mechanic gasping of those slaves.

After one had been in this region for a few days, or only a few hours, the sighing of the fans and the soft thudding of the feet and the faint gaspings of the tortured lungs seemed to drone out only the name of this region, over and over.

“Quarmall . . .” they seemed to chant. “Quarmall . . . Quarmall is all . . .”

The Gray Mouser, upon whose senses and through whose mind these sensations and fancies had been flooding and fitting, was a small man strongly muscled. Clad in gray silks irregularly woven, with tiny thread-tufts here and there, he looked restless as a lynx and as dangerous.

FROM a great tray of strangely hued and shaped mushrooms set before him like sweetmeats, the Mouser now disdainfully selected and nibbled cautiously at the most normal looking, a gray one. Its perfumy savor masking bitterness offended him and he spat it surreptitiously into his palm and dropped that hand under the table and flicked the wet chewed fragments to the floor. Then while he sucked his cheeks sourly, the fingers of both his hands began to play as slowly and nervously with the hilts of his sword Scalpel and his dagger Cat's Claw as his mind played with his boredoms and murky wonderings.

Along each side of the long narrow table, in great high-backed chairs widely spaced, sat six scrawny old men, bald or shaven of dome and chin and chicken-fluted jowl, and each clad only in a neat white loin-cloth. Eleven of these stared intently at nothing and perpetually tensed their meager muscles until even their ears seemed to stiffen, as though concentrating mightily in realms unseen. The twelfth had his chair half turned and was playing across a far corner of the table the board-game that made the occasional tiny rutching noises. He was playing it with the Mouser's employer Gwaay, ruler of the Lower Levels of Quarmall and younger son to Quarmal, Lord of Quarmall.

Although the Mouser had been three days in Quarmall's depths, he had come no closer to Gwaay than he was now, so that he knew him only as a pallid handsome soft-spoken youth, no realer to the Mouser, because of the eternal dimness and the invariable distance between them, than a ghost.

The game was one the Mouser had never seen before and quite tricky in several respects.

The board looked green, though it was impossible to be certain of colors in the unending twilight of the torches, and it had no perceptible squares or

tracks on it, except for a phosphorescent line midway between the opponents dividing the board into two equal fields.

Each contestant started the game with twelve flat circular counters set along his edge of the board. Gwaay's counters were obsidian-black, his ancient opponent's marble-white, so the Mouser was able to distinguish them despite the dimness.

The object of the game seemed to be to move the pieces randomly forward over uneven distances and get at least seven of them into your opponent's field first.

Here the trickiness was that one moved the pieces not with the fingers but only by looking at them intently. Apparently if one gazed only at a single piece, one could move it quite swiftly. If one gazed at several, one could move them all together in a line or cluster, but more sluggishly.

The Mouser was not yet wholly convinced that he was witnessing a display of thought-power. He still suspected threads, soundless air-puffings, surreptitious joggings of the board from below, powerful beetles under the counters, and hidden magnets!—for Gwaay's pieces at least could by their color be some sort of loadstone.

AT the present moment Gwaay's black counters and



the ancient's white ones were massed at the central line, shifting only a little now and then as the push-of-war went first a nail's-breadth one way, then the other. Suddenly Gwaay's rear-most counter circled swiftly back and darted toward an open space at the board's edge. Two of the ancient's counters moved to block it. Six of Gwaay's other counters formed a wedge and thrust across the mid-line through the weak point thus created. As the ancient's two detached counters returned to oppose them, Gwaay's end-running counter sped across. The game was over—Gwaay gave no sign of this, but the ancient began fumblingly to return the pieces to their starting positions with his fingers.

"Ho, Gwaay, that was easily won!" the Mouser called out cockily. "Why not take on two of them together? The oldster must be a sorcerer of the Second Rank to play so weakly—or even a doddering apprentice of the Third."

The ancient shot the Mouser a venomous gaze. "We are, all twelve of us, sorcerers of the First Rank and have been from our youth," he proclaimed portentously. "As you should swiftly learn were one of us to point but a little finger against you."

"You have heard what he says," Gwaay called softly to the Mouser without looking at him.

The Mouser, daunted no whit, at least outwardly, called back, "I still think you could beat two of them together, or seven—or the whole decrepit dozen! If they are of First Rank, you must be of Zero or Negative Magnitude."

The ancient's lips worked speechlessly and bubbled with froth at that affront, but Gwaay only called pleasantly, "Were but three of my faithful mages to cease their sorcerous concentrations, my brother Hasjarl's sendings would burst through from the Upper Levels and I would be stricken with all the diseases in the evil compendium, and a few others that exist in Hasjarl's putrescent imagination alone—or perchance I should be erased entire from this life."

"If nine out of twelve must be forever a-guarding you, they can't get much sleep," the Mouser observed, calling back.

"Times are not always so troublous," Gwaay replied tranquilly. "Sometimes custom or my father enjoins a truce. Sometimes the dark inward sea quiets. But today I know by certain signs that a major assault is being made on the liver and lights and blood and bones and rest of me. Dear Hasjarl has a double coven of sorcerers hardly inferior to my own—Second Rank, but High Second—and he whips them on. And I am as distasteful to Hasjarl, oh Gray Mouser, as the sim-

ple fruits of our manure beds are to your lips. Tonight, furthermore, my father Quarmal casts his Horoscope in the tower of the Keep, high above Hasjarl's Upper Levels, so it befits I keep all rat-holes closely watched."

**I**F it's magical helpings you lack," the Mouser retorted boldly, "I have a spell or two would frizzle your elder brother's witches and warlocks!" And truth to tell the Mouser had parchment-crackling in his pouch one spell—though one spell only—which he dearly wanted to test. It had been given him by his own wizardly mentor and master, Sheelba of the Eyeless Face.

Gwaay replied, softlier than ever, so that the Mouser felt that if there had been a yard more between them he would not have heard, "It is your work to ward from my physical body Hasjarl's sword-sendings, in particular those of this great champion he is reputed to have hired. My sorcerers of the First Rank will shield off Hasjarl's sorcerous billets-doux. Each to his proper occupation." He lightly clapped his hands together. A slim slave girl appeared noiselessly in the dark archway beyond him. Without looking once over-shoulder at her, Gwaay softly commanded, "Strong wine for our warrior." She vanished.

The ancient had at last laboriously shuffled the black and white counters into their starting positions and Gwaay regarded his thoughtfully. But before making a move, he called to the Mouser, "If time still hangs heavy on your hands, devote some of it to selecting the reward you will take when your work is done. And in your search overlook not the maiden who brings you the wine. Her name is Ivis."

At that the Mouser shut up. He had already chosen more than a dozen expensive be-charming objects from Gwaay's drawers and niches and locked them in a disused closet he had discovered two levels down. If this should be discovered, he would explain that he was merely making an innocent pre-selection pending final choice, but Gwaay might not view it that way and Gwaay was sharp, judging from the way he'd noted the rejected mushroom and other things.

It had not occurred to the Mouser to pre-empt a girl or two by locking her in the closet also, though it was admittedly an attractive idea.

The ancient cleared his throat and said chucklingly across the board, "Lord Gwaay, let this ambitious sworder try his sorcerous tricks. Let him try them on me!"

The Mouser's spirits rose, but Gwaay only raised palm and

shook his head slightly and pointed a finger at the board and the ancient began obediently to think a piece forward.

The Mouser's spirits fell. He was beginning to feel very much alone in this dim underworld where all spoke and moved in whispers. True, when Gwaay's emissary had approached him in Lankhmar, the Mouser had been happy to take on this solo job. His huge sword-mate Fafhrd had become overweening of late, claiming too much of the credit for their shared exploits, or at least so the Mouser had felt. It was time he proved he could do very well without the big chap. It would teach the loud-voiced Northerner a lesson if his small gray comrade (and brain!) should disappear one night without a word . . . and then return perchance a year later with a brimful treasure chest and a mocking smile.

THE Mouser had even been happy all the long caravan trip from Lankhmar south to Quarmall, along the Hlal River and past the Lakes of Pleea and through the Mountains of Hunger. It had been a positive pleasure to loll on a swaying camel beyond reach of Fafhrd's hugeness and disputatious talk and boisterous ways, while the nights grew ever bluer and warmer and strange jewel-fiery

stars came peering over the southern horizon.

But now he had been three nights in Quarmall since his secret coming to the Lower Levels—three nights and days, or rather one hundred and forty-four interminable demi-hours of buried twilight—and he was already beginning in his secretest mind to wish that Fafhrd were here, instead of half a continent away in Lankhmar—or even farther than that if he'd carried out his misty plans to revisit his northern homeland. Someone to drink with, at any rate!—and even a roaring quarrel would be positively refreshing after seventy-two hours of nothing but silent servitors, tranced sorcerers, stewed mushrooms, and Gwaay's unbreakable soft-tongued equanimity.

Besides, it appeared that all Gwaay wanted was a mighty sworder to nullify the threat of this champion Hasjarl was supposed to have hired as secretly as Gwaay had smuggled in the Mouser. If Fafhrd were here, he could be Gwaay's sworder, while the Mouser would have better opportunity to peddle Gwaay his magical talents. The one spell he had in his pouch—he had got it from Sheelba in return for the tale of the Perversions of Clutho—would forever establish his reputation as an archimage of deadly might he was sure.

The Mouser came out of his musings to realize that the slave girl Ivivis was kneeling before him—for how long she had been there he could not say—and proffering an ebony tray on which stood a squat stone jug and a copper cup.

Her slim body was most supple—she held the difficult pose effortlessly. Her fine straight hair was pale as her skin—both a sort of ghost color. It occurred to the Mouser that she would look very well in his closet, perhaps cherishing against her bosom the necklace of large black pearls he had discovered piled behind a pewter statuette in one of Gwaay's niches.

However, she was kneeling as far away from him as she could and still stretch him the tray and her eyes were most modestly downcast, nor would she even flicker up their lids to his gracious murmurings—which were all the approach he thought suitable at this moment.

He seized the jug and cup. Ivivis drooped her head still lower in acknowledgement, then flitted silently away.

The Mouser poured a finger of blood-red blood-thick wine and sipped. Its flavor was darkly sweet, but with a bitter undertaste. He wondered if it were fermented from scarlet toadstools.

The black and white counters

skittered rutchingly in obedience to Gwaay's and the ancient's peerings. The pale torch flames bent to the unceasing cool breeze. While the fan-slaves and their splayed bare feet on the leathern belts and the great unseen fans themselves on their ponderous axles muttered unendingly, "Quarmall . . . Quarmall is downwards tall . . . Quarmall . . . Quarmall is all. . . ."

\* \* \*

IN an equally vast room many levels higher yet still underground—a windowless room where torches flared redder and brighter, but their brightness nullified by an acrid haze of incense smoke, so that here too the final effect was exasperating dimness—Fafhrd sat at table-foot.

Fafhrd was a very big man, clad in wolf-fur and rough-beaten bronze, and ordinarily he was a monstrously calm man, but now he was restlessly drumming fist on thumb-root, on the verge of admitting to himself that he wished the Gray Mouser were here, instead of back in Lankmar or perchance off on some ramble in the desert-patched Eastern Lands.

The Mouser, Fafhrd thought, might have more patience to unriddle the mystifications and

crooked behavior-ways of these burrowing Quarmallians. The Mouser might find it easier to endure Hasjarl's loathsome taste for torture, and at least the little gray fool would be someone human to drink with!

Fafhrd had been very glad to be parted from the Mouser and from his vanities and tricksiness and chatter when Hasjarl's agent had contacted him in Lankmar, proffering large pay in return for Fafhrd's instant, secret, and solitary coming. Fafhrd had even dropped a hint to the small fellow that he might take ship with some of his Northern countrymen who had sailed down across the Inner Sea.

What he had not explained to the Mouser was that, as soon as Fafhrd was aboard her, the longship had sailed not north but south, coasting through the vasty Outer Sea along Lankmar's western seaboard.

It had been an idyllic journey, that—pirating a little now and then, battling great storms and also the giant cuttlefish, rays, and serpents which swarmed ever thicker in the Outer Sea as one sailed south. At the recollection Fafhrd's fist slowed its drumming and his lips almost formed a long smile.

But now this Quarmall! This endless stinking sorcery! This torture-besotted Hasjarl! Fafhrd's fist drummed fiercely again.

*Rules!*—he mustn't explore downward, for that led to the Lower Levels and the enemy. Nor must he explore upward—that way were father Quarmal's apartments, sacrosanct. None must know of Fafhrd's presence. He must satisfy himself with such drink and inferior wenches as were available in Hasjarl's limited Upper Levels. (They called these dim labyrinths and crypts *upper!*)

*Delays!*—they mustn't muster their forces and march down and smash brother-enemy Gwaay, that was unthinkable rashness. They mustn't even shut off the huge treadmill-driven fans whose perpetual creaking troubled Fafhrd's ears and which sent the life-giving air on the first stages of its journey to Gwaay's underworld, and through other rock-driven wells sucked out the stale—no, those fans must never be stopped, for father Quarmall would frown on any battle-tactic which suffocated valuable slaves; and anything father Quarmall frowned on, his sons shrank shuddering from.

Instead, Hasjarl's war-council must plot years-long campaigns weaponed chiefly with sorcery and envisioning the conquest of Gwaay's Lower Levels a quarter-tunnel—or a quarter mushroom field!—at a time.

*Mystifications!* — Mushrooms must be served at all meals but

never eaten or so much as tasted. Roast rat, on the other hand, was a delicacy to be crowed over. Tonight father Quarml would cast his own Horoscope and for some reason that superstitious star-sighting and scribbling would be of incalculable cryptic consequence. All maids must scream loudly twice when familiarities were suggested to them, no matter what their subsequent behavior. Fafhrd must never get closer to Hasjarl than a long dagger's-cast—a rule which gave Fafhrd no chance to discover how Hasjarl managed never to miss a detail of what went on around him while keeping his eyes fully closed almost all the time.

Perhaps Hasjarl had a sort of short-range second sight, or perhaps the slave nearest him ceaselessly whispered an account of all that transpired, or perhaps—well, Fafhrd had no way of knowing.

But somehow Hasjarl could see things with his eyes shut.

**T**HIS paltry trick of Hasjarl's evidently saved his eyes from the irritation of the incense smoke, which kept those of Hasjarl's sorcerers and of Fafhrd himself red and watering. However, since Hasjarl was otherwise a most energetic and restless prince—his bandy-legged misshapen body and mismatched

arms forever a-twitch, his ugly face always a-grimacing—the detail of eyes tranquilly shut was peculiarly jarring and shiversome.

All in all, Fafhrd was heartily sick of the Upper Levels of Quarml though scarcely a week in them. He had even toyed with the notion of double-crossing Hasjarl and hiring out to his brother or turning informer for his father—although they might, as employers, be no improvement whatever.

But mostly he simply wanted to meet in combat this champion of Gwaay's he kept hearing so much of—meet him and slay him and then shoulder his reward (preferably a shapely maiden with a bag of gold in her either hand) and turn his back forever on the accursed dim-tunneled whisper-haunted hill of Quarml!

In an excess of exasperation he clapped his hand to the hilt of his longsword Graywand.

Hasjarl saw that, although Hasjarl's eyes were closed, for he quickly pointed his gnarly face down the long table at Fafhrd, between the ranks of the twenty-four heavily-robed thickly-bearded sorcerers crowded shoulder to shoulder. Then, his eyelids still shut, Hasjarl commenced to twitch his mouth as a preamble to speech and with a twitter-tremble as overture

called, "Ha, hot for battle, eh, Fafhrd boy? Keep him in the sheath! Yet tell me, what manner of man do you think this warrior—the one you protect me against—Gwaay's grim manslayer? He is said to be mightier than an elephant in strength, and more guileful than the very Zobolds," and with a final spasm Hasjarl managed, still without opening his eyes, to look expectantly at Fafhrd.

Fafhrd had heard all this sort of worrying time and time again during the past week, so he merely answered with a snort:

"Zutt! They all say that about anybody. I know. But unless you get me some action and keep these old flea-bitten beards out of my sight—"

Catching himself up short, Fafhrd tossed off his wine and beat with his pewter mug on table for more. For although Hasjarl might have the demeanor of an idiot and the disposition of an ocelot, he served excellent ferment of grape ripened on the hot brown southern slopes of Quar-mall hill . . . and there was no profit in goading him.

**N**OR did Hasjarl appear to take offense—or if he did, he took it out on his bearded sorcerers, for he instantly began to instruct one to enunciate his runes more clearly, question another as to whether his herbs were suffi-

ciently pounded, remind a third that it was time to tinkle a certain silver bell thrice, and in general treat the whole two dozen as if they were a roomful of schoolboys and he their eagle-eyed pedagogue—though Fafhrd had been given to understand that they were all mages of the First Rank.

The double coven of sorcerers in turn began to bustle more nervously each with his particular spell—touch off more stinks, jiggle black drops out of more dirty vials, wave more wands, pin-stab more figurines, finger-trace eldritch symbols more swiftly in the air, mound up each in front of him from his bag more noisome fetishes, and so on.

From his hours of sitting at table-foot, Fafhrd had learned that most of the spells were designed to inflict a noisome disease upon Gwaay: the Black Plague, the Red Plague, the Boneless Death, the Hairless Decline, the Slow Rot, the Fast Rot, the Green Rot, the Bloody Cough, the Belly Melts, the Ague, the Runs, and even the footling Nose Drip. Gwaay's own sorcerers, he gathered, kept warding off these malefic spells with counter-charms, but the idea was to keep on sending them in hopes that the opposition would some day drop their guard, if only for a few moments.

Fafhrd rather wished Gwaay's gang were able to reflect back the disease-spells on their dark-robed senders. He had become weary even of the abstruse astrologic signs stitched in gold and silver on those robes, and of the ribbons and precious wires knotted cabalistically in their heavy beards.

Hasjarl, his magicians disciplined into a state of furious busyness, opened wide his eyes for a change and with only a preliminary lipwrithe called to Fafhrd, "So you want action, eh, Fafhrd boy?"

Fafhrd, mightily irked at the last epithet, planted an elbow on the table and wagged that hand at Hasjarl and called back, "I do. My muscles cry to bulge. You've strong-looking arms, Hasjarl lord. What say you we play the wrist game?"

Hasjarl tittered evilly and cried, "I go but now to play another sort of wrist game with a maid suspected of commerce with one of Gwaay's pages. She never screamed even once . . . then. Wouldst accompany me and watch the action, Fafhrd?" And he suddenly shut his eyes again with the effect of putting on two tiny masks of skin—yet shut them so firmly there could be no question of his peering through the lashes.

Fafhrd shrank back in his chair, flushing a little. Hasjarl

had divined Fafhrd's distaste for torture on the Northerner's first night in Quarmall's Upper Levels and since then had never missed an opportunity to play on what Hasjarl must view as Fafhrd's weakness.

TO cover his embarrassment, Fafhrd drew from under his tunic a tiny book of stitched parchment pages. The Northerner would have sworn that Hasjarl's eyelids had not flickered once since closing, yet now the villain cried, "The stgil on the cover of that packet tells me it is something of Ningauble of the Seven Eyes. What is it, Fafhrd?"

"Private matters," the latter retorted firmly. Truth to tell, he was somewhat alarmed. The contents of the packet were such as he dared not permit Hasjarl see. And just as the villain somehow knew, there was indeed on the top parchment the bold black figure of a seven-fingered hand, each finger bearing an eye for a nail—one of the many signs of Fafhrd's wizardly patron.

Hasjarl coughed hackingly. "No servant of Hasjarl has private matters," he pronounced "However, we will speak of that at another time. Duty calls me." He bounded up from his chair and fiercely eyeing his sorcerers cried at them barkingly, "If I find one of you dozing over his spells when I return, it were bet-



ter for him—aye and for his mother too—had he been born with slave's chains on his ankles!"

He paused turning to go and pointing his face at Fafhrd again, called rapidly yet cajolingly, "The girl is named Friska. She's but seventeen. I doubt not she will play the wrist game most adroitly and with many a charming exclamation. Sure you won't come?" And trailing an evil titter behind him, Hasjarl strode rapidly from the room, red torches in the archway outlining his monstrous bandy-legged form in blood.

Fafhrd ground his teeth. There was nothing he could do at the moment. Hasjarl's torture chamber was also his guard barrack. Yet the Northerner chalked up in his mind an intention, or perhaps an obligation.

To keep his mind from nasty unmanning imaginings, he began carefully to reread the tiny parchment book which Ningauble had given him as a sort of reward for past services, or an assurance for future ones, on the night of the Northerner's departure from Lankhmar.

Fafhrd did not worry about Hasjarl's sorcerers overlooking what he read. After their master's last threat, they were all as furiously and elbow-jostlingly busy with their spells as so many bearded black ants.

QUARMALL was first brought to my attention [*Fafhrd read in Ningauble's little handwritten, or tentacle-writ book*] by the report that certain passageways beneath it ran deep under the Sea and extended to certain caverns wherein might dwell some remnant of the Elder Ones. Naturally I dispatched agents to probe the truth of the report: two well-trained and valuable spies were sent (also two others to watch them) to find the facts and accumulate gossip. Neither pair returned, nor did they send messages or tokens in explanation, or indeed word of any sort. I was interested; but being unable, at that time, to spare valuable material on so uncertain and dangerous a quest, I bided my time until information should be placed at my disposal (as it usually is).

After twenty years my discretion was rewarded. [*So went the crabbed script as Fafhrd continued to read.*] An old man, horribly scarred and peculiarly pallid, was fetched me. His name was Tamorg, and his tale interesting in spite of the teller's incoherence. He claimed to have been captured from a passing caravan when yet a small lad and carried into captivity within Quarmall. There he served as a slave on the Lower Levels, far below the ground. Here there was no natural light, and the

only air was sucked down into the mazy caverns by means of large fans, treadmill-driven; hence his pallor and otherwise unusual appearance.

Tamorg was quite bitter about these fans, for he had been chained at one of those endless belts for a longer time than he cared to think about. (He really did not know exactly how long, since there was by his own statement, no measure of time in the Lower Levels.) Finally he was released from his onerous walking, as nearly as I could glean from his garbled tale, by the invention or breeding of a specialized type of slave who better served the purpose.

From this I postulate that the Masters of Quarmall are sufficiently interested in the economics of their holdings to improve them: a rarity among Overlords. Moreover if these specialized slaves were bred, the life-span of these Overlords must perforce be longer than ordinary; or else the cooperation between father and son is more perfect than any filial relationship I have yet noted.

**T**AMORG further related that he was put to more work digging, along with eight other slaves likewise taken from the treadmills. They were forced to enlarge and extend certain pas-

sages and chambers; so for another space of time he mined and buttressed. This time must have been long, for by close cross-questioning I found that Tamorg digged and walled, single-handed, a passage a thousand and twenty paces long. These slaves were not chained, unless maniacal, nor was it necessary to bind them so; for these Lower Levels seem to be a maze within a maze, and an unlucky slave once strayed from familiar paths stood small chance of retracing his steps. However, rumor has it, Tamorg said, that the Lords of Quarmall keep certain slaves who have memorized each a portion of the ever-extending labyrinth. By this means they are able to traverse with safety and communicate one level to the other.

Tamorg finally escaped by the simple expedient of accidentally breaking through the wall whereat he dug. He enlarged the opening with his mattock and stooped to peer. At that moment a fellow workman pushed against him and Tamorg was thrust head-foremost into the opening he had made. Fortunately it led into a chasm at the bottom of which ran a swift but deep underground stream, into which Tamorg fell. As swimming is an art not easily forgotten, he managed to keep afloat until he reached the outer world. For sev-

eral days he was blinded by the sun's rays and felt comfortable only by dim torchlight.

I questioned him in detail about the many interesting phenomena which must have been before him constantly but he was very unsatisfactory, being ignorant of all observational methods. However I placed him as gatekeeper in the palace of D . . . , whose coming and going I desired to check upon. So much for that source of information.

My interest in Quarmall was aroused [*Ninguable's book went on*] and my appetite whetted by this scanty meal of facts, so I applied myself toward getting more information. Through my connexion with Sheelba I made contact with Eeack, the Overlord of Rats; by holding out the lure of secret passages to the granaries of Lankhmar, he was persuaded to visit me. His visit proved both barren and embarrassing. Barren because it turned out that rats are eaten as a delicacy in Quarmall and hunted for culinary purposes by well trained weasels. Naturally under such circumstances any rat within the walls of Quarmall stood little chance of doing liaison work except from the uncertain vantage of a pot. Eeack's personal cohort of countless rats, evil-smelling and famished, consumed all edibles within reach of their sharp teeth; and out of pity for the

plight in which I was left Eeack favored me, by cajoling Scraa to wake and speak with me.

SCRAA [*Ninguable's notes continued*] is one of those eon-old roaches who existed contemporaneously with those monstrous reptiles which once ruled the world, and whose racial memories go back into the mistiness of time before the Elder Ones retreated from the surface. Scraa presented me the following short history of Quarmall neatly inscribed on a peculiar parchment composed of cleverly welded wing-cases flattened and smoothed most subtly. I append his document and apologize for his somewhat dry and prosy style.

"The city-state of Quarmall houses a civilization almost unheard of in the sphere of anthropoid organization. Perhaps the closest analogy which might be made is to that of the slave-making ants. The domain of Quarmall is at the present day limited to the small mountain, or large hill, on which it stands; but like a radish the main portion of it lies buried beneath the surface. This was not always so.

"Once the Lords of Quarmall ruled over broad meadows and vasty seas; their ships swam between all known ports and their caravans marched the routes from sea to sea. Slowly from the fertile valleys and barren cliffs, from

the desert spots and the open sea the grip of Quarmall loosened; not willingly but ever forced did the Lords of Quarmall retreat. Inexorably they were driven, year by year, generation by generation from all their possessions and rights; until finally they were confined to that last and staunchest stronghold, the impregnable castle of Quarmall. The cause of this driving is lost in the dimness of fable; but it was probably due to those most gruesome practices which even to this day persuade the surrounding countryside that Quarmall is unclean and cursed.

"As the Lords of Quarmall were pushed back, driven in spite of their sorceries and valor, they burrowed under that last, vast stronghold ever deeper and ever broader. Each succeeding Lord dug more deeply into the bowels of the small mount on which sate the Keep of Quarmall. Eventually the memory of past glories faded and was forgot, and the Lords of Quarmall concentrated on their mazy tunneling to the exclusion of the outer world. They would have forgotten the outer world entirely but for their constant and ever increasing need of slaves and of sustenance for those slaves.

"The Lords of Quarmall are magicians of great repute and Adepts in the practice of the Art. It is said that by their skill

they can charm men into bondage both of body and of soul."

So much did Scraa write. All in all it is a very unsatisfactory bit of gossip: hardly a word about those intriguing passages which first aroused my interest; nothing about the conformation of the Land or its inhabitants; not even a map! But then poor ancient Scraa lives almost entirely in the past—the present will not become important to him for another eon or so.

However I believe I know two fellows who might be persuaded to undertake a mission there . . . [*Here Ninguable's notes ended, much to Fafhrd's irritation and suspicious puzzlement—and carking shamed discomfort too, for now he must think again of the unknown girl Hasjarl was torturing.*]

\* \* \*

OUTSIDE the mount of Quarmall the sun was past meridian and shadows had begun to grow. The great white oxen threw their weight against the yoke. It was not the first time nor would it be the last, they knew. Each month as they approached this mucky stretch of road the Master whipped and slashed them frantically; attempting to goad them into a speed which they, by nature, were unable to attain. Straining until the harness creaked, they

obliged as best they could: for they knew that when this spot was pulled the Master would reward them with a bit of salt, a rough caress, and a brief respite from work. It was unfortunate that this particular piece of road stayed mucky long after the rains had ceased; almost from one season to the next. Unfortunate that it took a longer time to pass.

Their master had reason to lash them so. This spot was accounted accursed among his people. From this curved eminence the towers of Quarmall could be spied on; and more important these towers looked down upon the road, even as one looking up could see them. It was not healthy to look on the towers of Quarmall, or to be looked upon by them. There was sufficient reason for this feeling. The Master of the oxen spat surreptitiously, made an obvious gesture with his fingers, and glanced fearfully over his shoulder at the sky-thrusting lacy-topped towers he feared as the last mud-hole was traversed. Even in this fleeting glance he caught the glimpse of a flash, a brilliant scintillation, from the tallest keep. Shuddering he leaped into the welcome covert of the trees and thanked the gods he worshipped for his escape.

Tonight he would have much to speak of in the tavern. Men

would buy him bowls of wine to swill; and bitter beer of herbs. He could lord it for an evening. Ah! but for his quickness he might even now be plodding soulless to the mighty gates of Quarmall; there to serve until his body was no more and even after. For tales were told of such charmings, and of other things, amongst the elders of the village: tales that bore no moral but which all men did heed. Was it not only last Serpent Eve that young Twelm went from the ken of men? Had he not jeered at these very tales and, drunken, braved the terraces of Quarmall? Sure, and this was so! And it was also true that his less brave companion had seen him swagger with bravado to the last, the highest terrace almost to the moat; then when Twelm alarmed at some unknown cause, turned to run, his body twisted-arched was pulled willy-nilly back into the darkness. Not even a scream was heard to mark the passing of Twelm from this earth and the ken of his fellow-men. Juln, that less brave or less foolhardy companion of Twelm, had spent his time thenceforth in a continual drunken stupor. Nor would he stir from under roofs at night.

All the way to the village the Master of the oxen pondered. He tried to formulate in his dim peasant intellect a method by which he might present himself

as a hero. But even as he painfully constructed a simple, self-aggrandizing tale, he bethought himself of the fate of that one who had dared to brag of robbing Quarmalls' vinyards; the one whose name was spoken only in a hushed whisper, secretly. So the driver decided to confine himself to facts, simple as they were, and trust to the atmosphere of horror that he knew any manifestation of activity in Quarmall would arouse.

**W**HILE the driver was still whipping his oxen, and the Mouser watching two shadow-men play a thought-game, and Fafhrd swilling wine to drown the thought of an unknown girl in pain—at that same time Quarmal, Lord of Quarmall, was casting his own Horoscope for the coming year. In the highest tower of the Keep he labored; putting in order the huge astrolabe and the other massive instruments necessary for his accurate observations.

Through curtains of broidery the afternoon sun beat hotly into the small chamber; beams glanced from the polished surfaces and scintillated into rainbow hues as they reflected askew. It was warm, even for an old man lightly gowned, and Quarmal stepped to the windows opposite the sun and drew the broidery aside, letting the cool

moor-breeze blow through his observatory.

He glanced idly out the deep-cut wide embrasures. In the distance down past the terraced slopes he could see the little, curved brown thread of road which led eventually to the village.

Like ants the small figures on it appeared: ants struggling through some sticky trap; and like ants, even as Quarmal watched, they persisted and finally disappeared. Quarmal sighed as he turned away from the windows. Sighed in a slight disappointment because he regretted not having looked a moment sooner. Slaves were always needed. Besides it would have been an opportunity for trying out a recently invented instrument or two.

Yet it was never Quarmal's way to regret the past, so with a shrug he turned away.

For an old man Quarmal was not particularly hideous until his eyes were noticed. They were peculiar in their shape and the ball was a rich ruby-red. The dead-white iris had that nauseous sheen of pearly iridescence found only in the sea dwellers among living creatures; this character he inherited from his mother, a mer-woman. The pupils, like specks of black crystal, sparkled with malevolent intelligence incredible. His baldness

was accentuated by the long tufts of coarse black hair which grew symmetrically over each ear. Pale pitted skin hung loosely on his jowls, but was tightly drawn over the high cheek-bones. Thin as a sharpened blade, his long jutting nose gave him the appearance of an old hawk or kestrel.

**I**F Quarmal's eyes were the most arresting feature in his countenance, his mouth was the most beautiful. The lips were full and ruddy, remarkable in so aged a man, and they had that peculiar mobility found in some elocutionists and orators and actors. Had it been possible for Quarmal to have known vanity, he might have been vain about the beauty of his mouth; as it was this perfectly moulded mouth served only to accentuate the horror of his eyes.

He looked up veiledly now through the iron rondures of the astrolabe at the twin of his own face pushing forth from a windowless square of the opposite wall: it was his own waxen life-mask, taken within the year and most realistically tinted and blackly hair-tufted by his finest artist, save that the white-irised eyes were of necessity closed—though the mask still gave a feeling of peering. The mask was the last in several rows of such, each a little more age-darkened

than the succeeding one. Though some were ugly and many were elderly-handsome, there was a strong family resemblance between the shut-eyed faces, for there had been few if any intrusions into the male lineage of Quarmall.

There were perhaps fewer masks than might have been expected, for most Lords of Quarmall lived very long and had sons late. Yet there were also a considerable many, since Quarmall was such a most ancient rulership. The oldest masks were of a brown almost black and not wax at all but the cured and mummified face skins of those primeval autocrats. The arts of flaying and tanning had early been brought to an exquisite degree of perfection in Quarmall and were still practiced with jealously prideful skill.

Quarmal dropped his gaze from the mask to his lightly-robed body. He was a lean man, and his hips and shoulders still gave evidence that once he had hawked, hunted, and fenced with the best. His feet were high arched and his step was still light. Long and spatulate were his knob-knuckled fingers, while fleshy muscular palms gave witness to their dexterity and nimbleness; a necessary advantage to one of his calling. For Quarmal was a sorcerer, as were all the Lords of Quarmall from the

eon-misty past. From childhood up through manhood each male was trained into his calling; like some vines are coaxed to twist and thread a difficult terrace.

As Quarmal returned from the window to attend his duties he pondered on his training. It was unfortunate for the House of Quarmall that he possessed two instead of the usual single heir. Each of his sons was a creditable necromancer and well skilled in other sciences pertaining to the Art; both were exceeding ambitious and filled with hatred. Hatred not only for one another but for Quarmal their father.

QUARMAL pictured in his mind Hasjarl in his Upper Levels below the Keep and Gwaay below Hasjarl in his Lower Levels . . . Hasjarl cultivating his passions as if in some fiery circle of Hell, making energy and movement and logic carried to the ultimate the greatest goods, constantly threatening with whips and tortures and carrying through those threats, and now hiring a great brawling beast of a man to be his sworder . . . Gwaay nourishing restraint as if in Hell's frigidest circle, trying to reduce all life to art and intuitive thought, seeking by meditation to compel lifeless rock to do his bidding and constrain Death by the power of his will, and now hiring a small gray man like

Death's younger brother to be his knifer . . . Quarmal thought of Hasjarl and Gwaay and for a moment a strange smile of fatherly pride bent his lips and then he shook his head and his smile became stranger still and he shuddered very faintly.

It was well, thought Quarmal, that he was an old man, far past his prime, even as magicians counted years; for it would be unpleasant to cease living in the prime of life, or even in the twilight of life's day. And he knew that sooner or later, in spite of all protecting charms and precautions, Death would creep silently on him or spring suddenly from some unguarded moment. This very night his Horoscope might signal Death's instant escapeless approach; and though men lived by lies, treating truth's very self as lie to be exploited, the stars remained the stars.

Each day Quarmal's sons, he knew, grew more clever and more subtle in their usage of the Art which he had taught them. Nor could Quarmal protect himself by slaying them. Brother might murder brother, or the son his sire, but it was forbidden from ancient times for the father to slay his son. There were no very good reasons for this custom, nor were any needed. Custom in the House of Quarmall stood unchallenged, and it was not lightly defied.



Quarmal bethought him of the babe sprouting in the womb of Kewissa, the childlike favorite concubine of his age. So far as his precautions and watchfulness might have enforced, that babe was surely his own—and Quarmal was the most watchful and cynically realistic of men. If that babe lived and proved a boy—as omens foretold would be—and if Quarmal were given but twelve more years to train him, and if Hasjarl and Gwaay should be taken by the fates or each other . . .

Quarmal clipped off in his mind this line of speculation. To expect to live a dozen more years with Hasjarl and Gwaay growing daily more clever-subtle in their sorceries—or to hope for the dual extinguishment of two such cautious sprigs of his own flesh—were vanity and unrealistic indeed!

HE looked around him. The preliminaries for the casting were completed; the instruments prepared and aligned; now only the final observations and their interpretation were required. Lifting a small leaden hammer Quarmal lightly struck a brazen gong. Hardly had the resonance faded when the tall, richly appareled figure of a man appeared in the arched doorway.

Flindach was Master of the Magicians. His duties were many

but not easily apparent. His power carefully concealed was second only to that of Quarmal. A wearied cruelty sate upon his dark visage giving him an air of boredom which ill matched the consuming interest he took in the affairs of others. Flindach was not a comely man: a purple wine mark covered his left cheek, three large warts made an isosceles triangle on his right, while his nose and chin jutted like those of an old witch. Startlingly, with an effect of mocking irreverence, his eyes were ruby-whited and pearly-irised like those of his lord; he was a younger offspring of the same mer-woman who had birthed Quarmal—after Quarmal's father had done with her and following one of Quarmal's bizarre customs, given her to *his* Master of the Magicians.

Now those eyes of Flindach, large and hypnotically staring, shifted uneasily as Quarmal spoke: "Gwaay and Hasjarl, my sons, work today on their respective Levels. It would be well if they were called into the council room this night. For it is the night on which my doom is to be foretold. And I sense premonitorily that this casting will bear no good. Bid them dine together and permit them to amuse one another by plotting at my death—or by attempting each other's."

He shut his lips precisely as he finished, and looked more evil than a man expecting Death should look. Flindach, used to terrors in the line of business, could scarce repress a shudder at the glance bestowed on him; but remembering his position he made the sign of obeisance, and without a word or backward look departed.

**T**HE GRAY MOUSER did not once remove his gaze from Flindach as the latter strode across the domed dim sorcery-chamber of the Lower Levels until he reached Gwaay's side. The Mouser was mightily intrigued by the warts and wine mark on the cheeks of the richly-robed witchy-faced man, and by his eerie red-whited eyes, and he instantly gave this charming visage a place of honor in the large catalogue of freak-faces he stored in his memory vaults.

Although he strained his ears, he could not hear what Flindach said to Gwaay or what Gwaay answered.

Gwaay finished the telekinetic game he was playing by sending all his black counters across the midline in a great rutching surge that knocked half his opponent's white counters tumbling into his loin-clothed lap. Then he rose smoothly from his stool.

"I sup tonight with my beloved brother in my all-revered

father's apartments," he pronounced mellowly to all. "While I am there and in the escort of great Flindach here, no sorcerous spells may harm me. So you may rest for a space from your protective concentrations, oh my gracious mages of the First Rank." He turned to go.

The Mouser, inwardly leaping at the chance to glimpse the sky again, if only by chilly night, rose springily too from his chair and called out, "Ho, prince Gwaay! Though safe from spells, will you not want the warding of my blades at this dinner party? There's many a great prince never made king 'cause he was served cold iron 'twixt the ribs between the soup and the fish. I also juggle most prettily and do conjuring tricks."

Gwaay half turned back. "Nor may steel harm me while my sire's hand is stretched above," he called so softly that the Mouser felt the words were being lobbed like feather balls barely as far as his ear. "Stay here, Gray Mouser."

His tone was unmistakably re-buffing, nevertheless the Mouser dreading a dull evening persisted, "There is also the matter of that serious spell of mine of which I told you, Prince—a spell most effective against mages of the *Second Rank* and lower, such as a certain noxious brother employs. Now were a good time—"

"Let there be no sorcery tonight!" Gwaay cut him off sternly, though speaking hardly louder than before. "Twere an insult to my sire and to his great servant Flindach here, a Master of Magicians, even to think of such! Bide quietly, swordsman, keep peace, and speak no more." His voice took on a pious note. "There will be time enough for sorcery and swords, if slaying there must be."

Flindach nodded solemnly at that and they silently departed. The Mouser sat down. Rather to his surprise, he noted that the twelve aged sorcerer were already curled up like pillbugs on their sides on their great chairs and snoring away. He could not even while away time by challenging one of them to the thought-game, hoping to learn by playing, or to a bout at conventional chess. This promised to be a most glum evening indeed.

Then a thought brightened the Mouser's swarthy visage. He lifted his hands, cupping the palms, and clapped them lightly together as he had seen Gwaay do.

The slim slave girl Ivivis instantly appeared in the far archway. When she saw that Gwaay was gone and his sorcerers slumbering, her eyes became bright as a kitten's. She scampered to the Mouser, her slender legs flashing, seated herself with a

last bound on his lap, and clapped her lissome arms around him.

Fafhrd silently faded back into a dark side-passage as Hasjarl came hurrying along the torchlit corridor beside a richly robed official with hideously warted and mottled face and red eyeballs, on whose other side strode a pallid comely youth with strangely ancient eyes. Fafhrd had never before met Flindach or, of course, Gwaay.

Hasjarl was clearly in a pet, for he was grimacing insanely and twisting his hands together furiously as though pitting one in murderous battle against the other. His eyes however were tight shut. As he stamped swiftly past, Fafhrd thought he glimpsed a bit of tatooing on the nearest upper eyelid.

Fafhrd heard the red-eyed one say, "No need to run to your sire's banquet-board, Lord Hasjarl. We're in good time." Hasjarl answered only a snarl, but the pale youth said sweetly, "My brother is ever a baroque pearl of dutifulness."

Fafhrd moved forward, watched the three out of sight, then turned the other way and followed the scent of hot iron straight to Hasjarl's torture chamber.

It was a wide low-vaulted room and the brightest Fafhrd had yet

encountered in these murky mis-named Upper Levels.

To the right was a low table around which crouched five squat brawny men more bandy-legged than Hasjarl and masked each to the upper lip. They were noisily gnawing bones snatched from a huge platter of them, and swilling ale from leather jacks. Four of the masks were black, one red.

Beyond them was a fire of coals in a circular brick tower half as high as a man. The iron grill above it glowed redly. The coals brightened almost to white, then grew more deeply red again, as a twisted half-bald hag in tatters slowly worked a bellows.

Along the walls to either side, derk dire instruments hung thickly.

To the left a fair-haired pleasingly plump girl in white under-tunic lay bound to a rack. Her right hand in an iron half-glove stretched out tautly toward a machine with a crank. Although her face was tear-streaked, she did not seem to be in present pain.

Fafhrd strode toward her, hurriedly slipping out of his pouch and onto the middle finger of his right hand the massy ring Hasjarl's emissary had given him in Lankhmar as token from his master. It was of silver, holding a large black seal on which was Hasjarl's sign: a clenched fist.

The girl's eyes widened with new fears as she saw Fafhrd coming.

Hardly looking at her as he paused by the rack, Fafhrd turned toward the table of masked messy feasters, who were staring at him gape-mouthed by now, and stretching out toward them the back of his right hand, called harshly yet carelessly, "By authority of this sigil, release to me the girl Friska!" From mouth-corner he muttered to the girl, "Courage!"

THE black-masked creature who came hurrying toward him like a terrier appeared either not to recognize at once Hasjarl's sign or else not to reason out its import, for he said only, wagging a greasy finger, "Begone, barbarian. This dainty morsel is not for you. Think not here to quench your rough lusts. Our Master—"

Fafhrd cried out, "If you will not accept the authority of the Clenched Fist one way, then you must take it the other," and doubling up the hand with the ring on it, he smashed it against the torturer's suet-shining jaw so that he stretched himself out on the dark flags, skidded a foot, and lay quietly.

Fafhrd turned at once toward the half-risen feasters and slapping Graywand's hilt but not drawing it, he planted his



knuckles on his hips and addressing himself to the red mask, he barked out rather like Hasjarl, "Our Master of the Fist had an afterthought and ordered me fetch the girl Friska so that he might continue her entertainment at dinner for the amusement of those he goes dine with. Would you have a new servant like myself report to Hasjarl your derelictions and delays? Loose her quickly and I'll say nothing." He stabbed a finger at the hag by the bellows. "You!—fetch her outer dress."

The masked ones sprang to obey quickly enough at that, their tucked-up masks falling over their mouths and chins. There were mumblings of apology, which he ignored. Even the one he had slugged got groggily to his feet and tried to help.

The girl had been released from her wrist-twisting device, Fafhrd supervising, and she was sitting up on the side of the rack when the hag came with a dress and two slippers, the toe of one stuffed with oddments of ornament and such. The girl reached for them, but Fafhrd grabbed them instead and seizing her by the left arm dragged her roughly to her feet.

"No time for that now," he commanded. "We will let Hasjarl decide how he wants you trigged out for the sport," and without more ado he strode from the tor-

ture chamber, dragging her beside him, though again muttering from mouth-side, "Courage."

WHEN they were around the first bend in the corridor and had reached a dark branching, he stopped and looked at her frowningly. Her eyes grew wide with fright, she shrank from him, but then firming her features she said fearful-boldly, "If you rape me by the way, I'll tell Hasjarl."

"I don't mean to rape but rescue you, Friska," Fafhrd assured her rapidly. "That talk of Hasjarl sending to fetch you was but my trick. Where's a secret place I can hide you for a few days?—until we flee these musty crypts forever! I'll bring you food and drink."

At that Friska looked far more frightened. "You mean Hasjarl didn't order this? And that you dream of escaping from Quarmall? Oh stranger, Hasjarl would only have twisted my wrist a while longer, perhaps not maimed me much, only heaped a few more indignities, certainly spared my life. But if he so much as suspected that I had sought to escape from Quarmall . . . Take me back to the torture chamber!"

"That I will not," Fafhrd said irkedly, his gaze darting up and down the empty corridor. "Take heart, girl. Quarmall's not the

wide world. Quarmall's not the stars and the sea. Where's a secret room?"

"Oh it's hopeless," she faltered. "We could never escape. The stars are a myth. Take me back."

"And make myself out a fool? No," Fafhrd retorted harshly. "We're rescuing you from Hasjarl and from Quarmall too. Make up your mind to it, Friska, for I won't be budged. If you try to scream I'll stop your mouth. *Where's a secret room?*" In his exasperation he almost twisted her wrist, but remembered in time and only brought his face close to hers and rasped, "*Think!*" She had a scent like heather underlying the odor of sweat and tears.

Her eyes went distant then and she said in a small voice, almost dreamlike, "Between the Upper and the Lower Levels there is a great hall with many small rooms adjoining. When I was a babe it was chief banquet hall but now debated ground between Hasjarl and Gwaay. Both claim it, neither will maintain it, not even sweep its dust. It is called the Ghost Hall." Her voice went smaller still. "Gwaay's page once begged me meet him there, but I did not dare."

"Ha, that's the very place," Fafhrd said with a grin. "Lead us to it."

"But I don't remember the

way," Friska protested. "Gwaay's page told me, but I tried to forget . . ."

Fafhrd had spotted a spiral stair in the dark branchway. Now he strode instantly toward it, drawing Friska along beside him.

"We know we have to start by going down," he said with rough cheer. "Your memory will improve with motion, Friska."

\* \* \*

THE GRAY MOUSER stretched luxuriously on the silver-tipped bearskin he'd thrown on the floor of his closet. Then he lifted on an elbow and finding the black pearls he'd pilfered, tried them against Ivivis' bosom in the pale cool light of a single torch above. Just as he'd imagined, the pearls looked very well there. He started to fasten them around her neck.

"No, Mouser," she objected lazily. "It awakens an unpleasant memory."

He did not persist, but lying back again, said unguardedly, "Ah, but I'm a lucky man, Ivivis. I have you and I have an employer who, though somewhat boresome with his sorceries and his endless mild speaking, seems a harmless enough chap and certainly more endurable than his brother Hasjarl, if but half of what I hear of that one be true."

The voice of Ivivis briskened.

"You think Gwaay harmless?— and kinder than Hasjarl? La, that's a quaint conceit. Why, but a week ago he summoned my late dearest friend, Divis, then his favorite concubine, and telling her it was a necklace of the same stones, hung round her neck an emerald adder, the sting of which is infallibly deadly."

The Mouser turned his head and stared at Ivivis. "Why did Gwaay do that?" he asked.

She stared back at him blankly. "Why, for nothing at all, to be sure," she said wonderingly. "As everyone knows, that is Gwaay's way."

\* \* \*

Fafhrd started to brush aside the cobwebs joining the two dust-filmed sides of the half-open high nail-studded door, then checked himself and bending very low ducked under them.

"Do you stoop too," he told Friska. "It were best we leave no signs of our entry. Later I'll attend to our footprints in the dust, if that be needful."

They advanced a few paces, then stood hand in hand, waiting for their eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness. Fafhrd still clutched in his other hand Friska's dress and slippers. It had been a hurrying nervous trip, with many peerings around

corners and dartings back into dark alcoves while someone passed, and a longer trip vertically downward than Fafhrd had anticipated. If they had now only reached the top of the Lower Levels, this Quarmall must be bottomless! Yet Friska's spirits had improved considerably.

"This is the Ghost Hall?" Fafhrd asked.

"Aye," Friska whispered, beginning to sound fearful again. "Some say that Gwaay and Hasjarl send their dead to battle here. Some say that demons owing allegiance to neither—"

"No more of that, girl," Fafhrd ordered gruffly. "If I must battle devils or liches, leave me my ears and my courage."

They were silent a space then while the flame of the last torch twenty paces beyond the half-shut door slowly revealed to them a vast chamber low-domed with huge rough blocks pale-mortared for a ceiling. It was set out with a few tatter-shrouded furnishings and showed many small closed doorways. To either side were wide rostra set a few feet above floor level, and toward the center there was, surprisingly, what looked like a dried-up fountain pool.

Friska whispered, "Some say the Ghost Hall was once the haem of the father lords of Quarmall during some centuries when



they dwelt underground between Levels, ere this Quarmaal's father coaxed by his sea-wife returned to the Keep."

Fafhrd distrusted the unpilared ceiling of the room and thought the whole place looked far more primitive than Hasjarl's polished and leather-hung chambers. That gave him a thought.

"Tell me, Friska," he said, "how is it that Hasjarl can see with his eyes closed? Is it that —"

"Why, do you not know that?" she interrupted in surprise. "Do you not know even the secret of his horrible peeping? He simply—"

A dim velvet shape that chittered almost inaudibly shrill swooped past their faces and with a little shriek Friska hid her face in Fafhrd's chest and clung to him tightly.

In combing his fingers through her heather-scented hair to show her no flying mouse had found lodgement there and in smoothing his palms over her bare shoulders and back to demonstrate that no bat had landed there either, Fafhrd began to forget all about Hasjarl and the puzzle of his second sight—and his worries about the ceiling falling in on them too.

**G**WAAY languidly clapped his white perfectly groomed hands and with a slight nod mo-

tioned for the waiting slaves to remove the platters from the low table. He leaned lazily into the deep-cushioned chair and through half-closed lids looked momentarily at his companion before he spoke. His brother across the table was not in a good humor. But then it was rare for Hasjarl to be other than in a pet, a temper, or more often merely sullen and vicious. This may have been due to the fact that Hasjarl was a very ugly man, and his nature had grown to conform to his body; or perhaps it was the other way around. Gwaay was indifferent to both theories; he merely knew that in one glance all his memory had told him of Hasjarl was verified; and he again realized the bitter magnitude of his hatred for his brother. However Gwaay spoke gently in a low, pleasant voice:

"Well, how now, Brother, shall we play at chess, that demon game they say exists in every world? 'Twill give you a chance to lord it over me again. You always win at chess you know, except when you resign. Shall I have the board set before us?" and then cajolingly, "I'll give you a pawn!" and he raised one hand slightly as if to clap again in order that his suggestion might be carried out.

With the lash he carried slung to his wrist Hasjarl slashed the

face of the slave nearest him, and silently pointed at the massive and ornate chess-board across the room. This was quite characteristic of Hasjarl. He was a man of action and given to few words, at least away from his home territory.

Besides, Hasjarl was in a nasty humor. Flindach had torn him from his most interesting and exciting amusement: torture! And for what? thought Hasjarl: to play at chess with his priggish brother; to sit and look at his pretty brother's face; to eat food that would surely disagree with him; to wait the answer to the casting, which he already knew—had known for years; and finally to be forced to smile into the horrible blood-whited eyes of his father, unique in Quarmall save for those of Flindach, and to toast the House of Quarmall for the ensuing year. All this was most distasteful to Hasjarl and he showed it plainly.

The slave, a bloody welt swift-swelling across his face, carefully slid the chess-board between the two. Gwaay smiled as another slave arranged the chessmen precisely on their squares; he had thought of a scheme to annoy his brother. He had chosen the black as usual and he planned a gambit which he knew his avaricious opponent couldn't refuse; one Hasjarl would accept to his own undoing.

HASJARL sat grimly back in his chair, arms folded. "I should have made you take white," he complained. "I know the paltry tricks you can do with black pebbles—I've seen you as a girl-pale child darting them through the air to startle the slaves' brats. How am I to know you will not cheat by fingerless shifting your pieces while I deep ponder?"

Gwaay answered gently, "My paltry powers, as you most justly appraise them, Brother, extend only to bits of basalt, trifles of obsidian and other volcanic rocks conformable to my nether level. While these chess pieces are jet, Brother, which in your great scholarship you surely know is only a kind of coal, vegetable stuff pressed black, not even in the same realm as the very few materials subject to my small magickings. Moreover, for you to miss slightest trick with those quaint slave-surgeried eyes of yours, Brother, were matter for mighty wonder."

Hasjarl growled. Not until all was ready did he stir; then, like an adder's strike, he plucked a black rook's pawn from the board and with a sputtering giggle, snarled:

"Remember, Brother? It was a pawn you promised! Move!"

Gwaay motioned the waiting slave to advance his King's Pawn. In like manner Hasjarl

replied. A moment's pause and Gwaay offered his gambit: Pawn to King-Bishop's fourth! Eagerly Hasjarl snatched the apparent advantage and the game began in earnest. Gwaay, his face easy-smiling in repose, seeming to be less interested in the game than in the shadow-play of the flickering lamps on the figured leather upholsterings of calfskin, lambskin, snakeskin, and even slaveskin and nobler human hide; seeming to move off-hand, without plan, yet confidently. Hasjarl his lips compressed in concentration, eyes intent on the board; each move a planned action both mental and physical. His concentration made him for the moment oblivious of his brother; oblivious of all but the problem before him; for Hasjarl loved to win beyond all computation.

It had always been this way; even as children the contrast was apparent. Hasjarl was the elder; older by only a few months which his appearance and demeanor lengthened to years. His long, misshapen torso was ill-borne on short bandy legs. His left arm was perceptibly longer than the right; and his fingers, peculiarly webbed to the first knuckle, were gnarled and stubby with brittle striated nails. It was as if Hasjarl were a poorly reconstructed puzzle put together in such fashion that all the

pieces were mismated and awry.

This was particularly true of his features. He possessed his sire's nose, though thickened and coarse-pored; but this was contradicted by the thin-lipped tightly compressed mouth continually pursed until it had assumed a perpetual sphincter-like appearance. Hair, lank and lusterless, grew low on his forehead; and low flattened cheekbones added yet another contradiction.

AS a lad, led by some perverse whim, Hasjarl had bribed, coaxed, or more probably brow-beaten one of the slaves versed in surgery to perform a slight operation on his upper eyelids. It was a small enough thing in itself, yet its implications and results had affected the lives of many men unpleasantly, and never ceased to delight Hasjarl.

That merely the piercing of two small holes, centered over the pupil when the eyes were closed, could produce such qualms in other people was incredible; but it was so. Featherweight grommets of sleekest gold, jade or—as now—ivory—kept the holes from growing shut.

When Hasjarl peered through these tiny apertures it gave the effect of an ambush and made the object of his gaze feel spied upon; but this was the least annoy-

ing of his many irritating habits.

Hasjarl did nothing easily but he did all things well. Even in swordplay his constant practice and overly long left arm made him the equal of the athletic Gwaay. His administration of the Upper Levels over which he ruled, was above all things economical and smooth; for woe betide the slave who failed in the slightest detail of his duties. Hasjarl saw and punished.

Hasjarl was well nigh the equal of his teacher in the practice of the Art; and he had gathered about him a band of magicians almost the calibre of Flindach himself. But he was not happy in his prowess so hardly won, for between the absolute power which he desired and the realization of that desire stood two obstacles: the Lord of Quarmall whom he feared above all things; and his brother Gwaay whom he hated with a hatred nourished on envy and fed by his own thwarted desires.

Gwaay, antithetically, was supple of limb, well-formed and good to look upon. His eyes, wide-set and pale, were deceptively gentle and kindly; for they masked a will as strong and capable of action as coiled spring-steel. His continual residence in the Lower Levels over which he ruled gave to his pallid smooth skin a peculiar waxy luster.

Gwaay possessed that enviable ability to do all things well, with little exertion and less practice. In a way he was much worse than his brother; for while Hasjarl slew with tortures and slow pain and an obvious personal satisfaction, he at least attached some importance to life because he was so meticulous in its taking; whereas Gwaay smiling gently would slay, without reason, as if jesting. Even the group of sorcerers which he had gathered about him for protection and amusement was not safe from his fatal and swift humors.

Some thought that Gwaay was a stranger to fear; but this was not so. He feared the Lord of Quarmall and he feared his brother; or rather he feared that he would be slain by his brother before he could slay him. Yet so well were his fear and hatred concealed that he could sit relaxed, not two yards from Hasjarl, and smile amusedly enjoying every moment of the evening. Gwaay flattered himself on his perfect control over all emotion.

**T**HE chess game had developed beyond the opening stage, the moves coming slower, and now Hasjarl rapped down a Rook on the seventh rank.

Gwaay observed gently, "Your turreted warrior rushes deep into my territory, Brother. Rumor has it you've hired a brawny

champion out of the north. With what purpose, I wonder, in our peace-wrapped cavern world? Could he be a sort of living Rook?" He poised hand unmoving over one of his Knights.

Hasjarl giggled, "And if his purpose be to slash pretty throats, what's that to you? I know naught of this Rook-warrior, but 'tis said—slaves' chat, no doubt—that you yourself have had fetch a skilled sworder from Lankhmar. Should I call him a Knight?"

"Aye, two can play at a game," Gwaay remarked with prosy philosophy and lifting his Knight, softly but firmly planted it at his King's Sixth.

"I'll not be drawn," Hasjarl snarled. "You shall not win by making my mind wander." And arching his head over the board, he cloaked himself again with his all-consuming calculations.

In the background slaves moved silently tending the lamps and replenishing the founts with oil. Many lamps were needed to light the council-room, for it was low-ceiled and massively beamed, and the walls arras-hung reflected little of the yellow rays and the mosaic floor was worn to a dull richness by countless footsteps in the past. From the living rock this room had been carved; long forgotten hands had set the huge cypress beams and inlaid the floor so cunningly. Those

gay, time-faded tapestries had been hung by the slaves of some ancient Lord of Quarmall, who had pilfered them from a passing caravan; and so with all the rich adornments. The chessmen and the chairs, the chased lamp-sconces and the oil which fed the wicks, and the slaves which tended them; all was loot. Loot from generations back when the Lords of Quarmall plundered far and wide and took their toll from every passing caravan.

**H**IGH ABOVE that warm, luxuriously furnished chamber where Gwaay and Hasjarl played at chess, the Lord of Quarmall finished the final calculations which would complete his Horoscope. Heavy leather hangings shut out the stars that had but now twinkled down their benisons and dooms. The only light in that instrument-filled room was the tiny flare of a single taper. By such scant illumination did custom bid the final casting be read, and Quarmal strained even his keen vision to see the Signs and Houses rightly.

As he rechecked the final results his supple lips writhed in a sneer, a grimace of displeasure. *Tonight or tomorrow*, he thought with an inward chill. *At most, late on the morrow. Truly, he had little time.*

Then, as if pleased by some subtle jests, he smiled and nod-

ded, making his skinny shadow perform monstrous gyrations on the curtains and brasured wall.

Finally Quarmal laid aside his crayon, and taking the single candle lighted by its flame seven larger tapers. With the aid of this better light he read once more the Horoscope. This time he made no sign of pleasure or any other emotion. Slowly he rolled the intricately diagrammed and inscribed parchment into a slender tube, which he thrust in his belt; then rubbing together his lean hands he smiled again. At a nearby table were the ingredients which he needed for his scheme's success: powders, oils tiny knives, and other materials and instruments.

The time was short. Swiftly he worked, his spatulate fingers performing miracles of dexterity. Once he went on an errand to the wall. The Lord of Quarmal made no mistakes, nor could he afford them.

It was not long before the task was completed to his satisfaction. After extinguishing the last-lit candles Quarmal, Lord of Quarmal, relaxed into his chair and by the dim light of a single taper summoned Flindach, in order that his Horoscope might be announced to those below.

As was his wont, Flindach appeared almost at once. He presented himself confronting his master with arms folded across

his chest, and head bowed submissively. Flindach never presumed. His figure was illuminated only to the waist, above that shadow concealed whatever expression of interest or boredom his warted and wine-marked face might show. In like manner the pitted yet sleeker countenance of Quarmal was obscured, only his pale eyes gleamed phosphorescent from the shadows like two minute moons in a dark bloody sky.

AS IF he were measuring Flindach, or as if he saw him for the first time, Quarmal slowly raised his glance from foot to forehead of the figure before him, and looking direct into the shaded eyes of Flindach so like his own, he spoke: "O Master of Magicians, it is within your power to grant me a boon this night."

He raised a hand as Flindach would have spoken and swiftly continued: "I have watched you grow from boy to youth and from youth to man; I have nurtured your knowledge of the Art until it is only second to my own. The same mother carried us, though I her firstborn and you the child of her last fertile year—that kinship helped. Your influence within Quarmal is almost equal to mine. So I feel that some reward is due your diligence and faithfulness."

Again Flindach would have spoken, but was dissuaded by a gesture. Quarml spoke more slowly now, and accompanied his words with staccato taps on the parchment roll. "We both well know, from hearsay and direct knowledge, that my sons plot my death. And it is also true that in some manner they must be thwarted, for neither of the twain is fit to become the Lord of Quarmall; nor does it seem probable that either will ever reach such wisdom. Under their warring, Quarmall would die of inanition and neglect, as has died the Ghost Hall. Furthermore, each of them, to buttress his sorceries, has secretly hired a sworded champion from afar—you've seen Gwaay's—and this is the beginning of the bringing of free mercenaries into Quarmall and the sure doom of our power." He stretched a hand toward the dark close-crowded rows of mummied and waxen masks and he asked rhetorically, "Did the Lords of Quarmall guard and preserve our hidden realm that its councils might be entered crowded, and at last captured by foreign captains?"

"Now a far secreter matter," he continued, his voice sinking. "The concubine Kewissa carries my seed: male-growing, by all omens and oracles—though this is known only to Kewissa and myself, and now to you, Flin-

dach. Should this unborn sprout reach but boyhood brotherless, I might die content, leaving to you his tutelage in all confidence and trust."

Quarml paused and sat impassive as an effigy. "Yet to forestall Hasjarl and Gwaay becomes more difficult each day, for they increase in power and in scope. Their own innate wickedness gives them access to regions and demons heretofore but imagined by their predecessors. Even I, well versed in necromancy, am oftentimes appalled." He paused and quizzically looked at Flindach.

FOR the first time since he had entered Flindach spoke. His voice was that of one trained in the recitation of incantations, deep and resonant: "Master, what you speak is true. Yet how will you encompass their plots? You know, as well as I, the custom that forbids what is perhaps the only means of thwarting them."

Flindach paused as if he would say more, but Quarml quickly intervened: "I have concocted a scheme, which may or may not succeed. The success of it depends almost entirely upon your cooperation." He lowered his voice almost to a whisper, beckoning for Flindach to step closer. "The very stones may carry tales, O Flindach, and I would

that this plan were kept entirely secret." Quarmal beckoned again, and Flindach stepped still nearer until he was within arm's reach of his master. Half stooping he placed himself in such a position that his ear was close to Quarmal's mouth. This was closer than ever he remembered approaching Quarmal, and strange qualms filled his mind, recrudescences of childish old wives' tales. This ancient ageless man with eyes pearl-irised as his own seemed to Flindach not like half-brother at all, but like some strange merciless half-father. His burgeoning terror was intensified when he felt the sinewy fingers of Quarmal close on his wrist and gently urge him closer, almost to his knees, beside the chair.

Quarmal's lips moved swiftly, and Flindach controlled his urge to rise and flee as the plan was unfolded to him. With a sibilant phrase, the final phrase, Quarmal finished, and Flindach realized the full enormity of that plan. Even as he comprehended it, the single taper guttered and was extinguished. There was darkness absolute.

**T**HE CHESS GAME progressed swiftly; the only sounds, except the ceaseless shuffle of naked feet and the hiss of lamp-wicks, were the dull click of the chessmen and the staccato

cough of Hasjarl. The low table off which the twain had eaten was placed opposite to the broad arched door which was the only apparent entrance to the council chamber.

There was another entrance. It led to the Keep of Quarmall; and it was towards this arras-concealed door that Gwaay glanced most often. He was positive that the news of the casting would be as usual, but a certain curiosity whelmed him this evening; he felt a faint foreshadowing of some untoward event, even as wind blows gusty before a storm.

An omen had been vouchsafed Gwaay by the gods today; an omen that neither his necromancers nor his own skill could interpret to his complete satisfaction. So he felt that it would be wise to await the development of events prepared and expectant.

Even as he watched the tapestry behind which he knew was the door whence would step Flindach to announce the consequences of the casting, that hanging belied and trembled as if some breeze blew on it, or some hand pushed against it lightly.

Hasjarl abruptly threw himself back in his chair and cried in his high-pitched voice, "Check with my Rook to your King, and mate in three!" He drooped one eyelid evilly and peered triumphantly at Gwaay.



Gwaay, without removing his eyes from the still swaying tapestry, said in precise mellow words, "The Knight interposes, Brother, discovering check. I mate in two. You are wrong again, my comrade."

But even as Hasjarl swept the men with a crash to the floor, the arras was more violently disturbed. It was parted by two slaves and the harsh gong-note, announcing the entrance of some high official, sounded.

Silently from betwixt the hangings stepped the tall lean form of Flindach. His shadowed face, despite the disfiguring wine-mark and the treble mole, had a great and solemn dignity. And in its somber expressionlessness—an expressionlessness curiously mocked by a knowing glitter deep in the black pupils of the pearl-irised crimson-balled eyes—it seemed to forebode some evil tidings.

All motion ceased in that long low hall as Flindach, standing in the archway framed in rich tapestries, raised one arm in a gesticulation demanding silence. The attendant slaves well-trained stood at their posts, heads bowed submissively; Gwaay remained as he was, looking directly at Flindach; and Hasjarl, who had half-turned at the gong note, likewise awaited the announcement. In a moment, they knew, Quarmal their father would step

from behind Flindach and evilly smiling announce his Horoscope. Always this had been the procedure; and always, since each could remember, Gwaay and Hasjarl had at this moment wished for Quarmal's death.

**F**LINDACH, arm lifted in dramatic gesture, began to speak:

"The casting of the Horoscope has been completed and the finding has been made. Even as the Heavens foretell is the fate of man fulfilled. I bring this news to Hasjarl and Gwaay, the sons of Quarmal."

With a swift motion Flindach plucked a slender parchment tube from his belt, and breaking it with his hands dropped it crumpled at his feet. In almost the same gesture he reached behind his left shoulder and stepping from the shadow of the arch drew a peaked cowl over his head.

Throwing wide both arms Flindach spoke, his voice seeming to come from afar:

"Quarmal, Lord of Quarmal, rules no more. The casting is fulfilled. Let all within the walls of Quarmal mourn. For three days the place of the Lord of Quarmal will be vacant. So custom demands and so shall it be. On the morrow, when the sun enters his courtyard, that which remains of what was once a great

and puissant lord will be given to the flames. Now I got to mourn my Master and oversee the obsequies and prepare myself with fasting and with prayer for his passing. Do you likewise."

Flindach slowly turned and disappeared into the darkness from which he had come.

For the space of full ten heartbeats Gwaay and Hasjarl sat motionless. The announcement came as a thunderclap to both. Gwaay for a second felt an impulse to giggle and smirk like a child who has unexpectedly escaped punishment and is instead rewarded; but in the back of his mind he was half-convinced that he had known all along the outcome of the casting. However he controlled his childish glee and sat silent, staring.

On the other hand Hasjarl reacted as might be expected of him. He went through a series of outlandish grimaces and ended with an obscene half-smothered titter. Then he frowned, and turning said to Gwaay, "Heard you not what said Flindach? I must go and prepare myself!" and he lurched to his feet and paced silently across the room, out the broad-arched door.

Gwaay remained sitting for another few moments, frowning eyes narrowed in concentration, as if he were puzzling over some abstruse problem which required all his powers to solve. Suddenly

he snapped his fingers and motioning for his slaves to proceed him made ready for his return to the Lower Levels, whence he had come.

\* \* \*

FAFHRD had barely left the Ghost Hall when he heard the rattle and clink of armed men moving over-cautiously. His bemusement with Friska's charms vanished as if he had been doused with ice water. He shrank into the deeper darkness and eavesdropped long enough to learn that these were pickets of Hasjarl, guarding against an invasion from Gwaay's Lower Levels—and not tracking down Friska and himself as he'd first feared. Then he made off swiftly for Hasjarl's Hall of Sorcery, grimly pleased that his memory for landmarks and turnings seemed to work as well for mazy tunnels as for forest trails and steep zig-zag mountain escalades.

The bizarre sight that greeted him when he reached his goal stopped him on the stony threshold. Standing sin-deep and stark naked in a steaming marble tub shaped like a ridgy seashell, Hasjarl was berating and haranguing the great roomful around him. And every man jack of them—sorcerers, officers, overseers, pages bearing great

fringy towels and dark red robes and other apparel—was standing quakingly still with cringing eyes, except for the three slaves soaping and laving their Lord with tremulous dexterity.

Fafhrd had to admit that Hasjarl naked was somehow more consistent—ugly everywhere—a kobold birthed from a hot-spring. And although his grotesque child-pink torso and mismatched arms were a-writhe and a-twitch in a frenzy of apprehension, he had dignity of a sort.

He was snarling, "Speak, all of you, is there a precaution I have forgot, a rite omitted, a rathole overlooked that Gwaay might creep through? Oh that on this night when demons lurk and I must mind a thousand things and dress me for my father's obsequies, I should be served by wittols! Are you all deaf and dumb? Where's my great champion, who should ward me now? Where are my scarlet grommets? Less soap there, you—take that! You, Essem, are we guarded well above?—I don't trust Flindach. And Yissim, have we guards enough below?—Gwaay is a snake who'll strike through any gap. Dark Gods, defend me! Go to the barracks, Yissim, get more men, and reinforce our downward guards—and while you're there, I mind me now, bid them continue Fris-

ka's torture. Wring the truth from her! She's in Gwaay's plots—this night has made me certain. Gwaay knew my father's death was imminent and laid invasion plans long weeks ago. Any of you may be his purchased spies! Oh where's my champion? *Where are my scarlet grommets?*"

Fafhrd, who'd been striding forward, quickened his pace at mention of Friska. A simple inquiry at the torture chamber would reveal her escape and his part in it. He must create diversions. So he halted close in front of pink wet steaming Hasjarl and said boldly,

"Here is your champion, Lord. And he counsels not sluggish defence, but some swift stroke at Gwaay! Surely your mighty mind has fashioned many a shrewd attacking stratagem. Launch you a thunderbolt!"

**I**T WAS all Fafhrd could do to keep speaking forcefully to the end and not let his voice trail off as his attention became engrossed in the strange operation now going on. While Hasjarl crouched stockstill with head a-twist, an ashen-faced bath-slave had drawn out Hasjarl's left upper eyelid by its lashes and was inserting into the hole in it a tiny flanged scarlet ring or grommet no bigger than a lentil. The grommet was carried on the tip

of an ivory wand thin as a straw and the whole deed was being done by the slave with the anxiety of a man refilling the poison pouches of a unthethered rattlesnake—if such an action might be imagined for purposes of comparison.

However, the operation was quickly completed, and then on the right eye too—and evidently with perfect satisfaction, since Hasjarl did not slash the slave with the soapy wet lash still a-dangle from his wrist—and when Hasjarl straightened up he was grinning broadly at Fafhrd.

“You counsel me well, champion,” he cried. “These other fools could do nothing but shake. There is a stroke long-planned that I’ll try now, one that won’t violate the obsequies. Essem, take slaves and fetch the dust—you know the stuff I mean—and meet me at the vents! Boy, give me my slippers and my toweling robe!—those other clothes can wait. Follow me, Fafhrd!”

But just then his red-grommeted gaze lit on his four-and-twenty bearded and hooded sorcerers standing apprehensive by their chairs.

“Back to your charms at once, you ignoramuses!” he roared at them. “I did not tell you stop because I bathed! Back to your charms and send your plagues at Gwaay—red, black and green, nose-drip and bloody rot—or I

will burn your beards off to the eyelashes as prelude to more dire torturings! Haste, Essem! Come, Fafhrd!”

\* \* \*

THE GREY MOUSER at that same moment was returning from his closet with Ivivis when Gwaay, velvet-shod and followed by barefoot slaves, came around a turn in the dim corridor so swiftly there was no evading him.

The young Lord of the Lower Levels seemed preternaturally calm and controlled, yet with the impression that under the calm was naught but quivering excitement and darting thought—so much so that it would hardly have surprised the Mouser if there had shone forth from Gwaay an aura of Blue Essence of Thunderbolt. Indeed, the Mouser felt his skin begin to prickle and sting, as if just such an influence were invisibly streaming from his employer.

Gwaay scanned the Mouser and the pretty slave-girl in a flicker and spoke, his voice dancing-rapid and gaysome.

“Well, Mouser, I can see you’ve sampled your reward ahead of time. Ah, youth and dim retreats and pillowed dreams and amorous hostessings—what else gilds life or makes it worth the guttering sooty candle? Was

the girl skillful? Good! Ivivis, dear, I must reward your zeal. I gave Divis a necklace—would you one? Or I've a brooch shaped like a scorpion, ruby-eyed—"

The Mouser felt the girl's hand quiver and chill in his and he cut in quickly with, "My demon speaks to me, Lord Gwaay, and tells me it's a night when the Fates walk."

Gwaay laughed. "Your demon has been listening behind the arras. He's heard tales of my father's swift departure." As he spoke a drop formed at the end of his nose, between his nostrils. Fascinated, the Mouser watched it grow. Gwaay started to lift the back of his hand to it, then shook it off instead. For an instant he frowned, then laughed again.

"Aye, the Fates trod on Quar-mall Keep tonight," Gwaay said, only now his gay rapid voice was a shade hoarse.

"My demon whispers me further that there are dangerous powers abroad this night," the Mouser continued.

"Aye, brother love and such," Gwaay quipped in reply, but now his voice was a corak. A look of great startlement widened his eyes. He shivered as with a chill and drops pattered from his nose. Three hairs fell across his eyes. His slaves shrank back from him.

"My demon warns me we'd

best use my Great Spell quickly against those powers," the Mouser went on, his mind returning as always to Sheelba's untested rune. "It destroys only sorcerers of the Second Rank and lower. Yours, being of the First Rank, will be untouched. But Hasjarl's will perish."

Gwaay opened his mouth to reply, but no words came forth, only a moaning nightmarish groan like that of a mute. Hectic spots shone forth high on his checks, and now it seemed to the Mouser that a reddish blotch was crawling up the right side of his chin, while on the left black spots were forming. A hideous stench became apparent. Gwaay staggered and his eyes brimmed with a greenish ichor. He lifted his hand to them and its back was yellowish crusted and red-cracked. His slave ran.

"Hasjarl's sendings!" the Mouser hissed. "Gwaay's sorcerers still sleep! I'll rouse 'em! Support him, Ivivis!" And turning he sped like the wind down corridor and up ramp until he reached Gwaay's Hall of Sorcery. He entered it clapping and whistling harsh between his teeth, for true enough the twelve scrawny loin-clothed mages were still curled snoring on their wide high-backed chairs. The Mouser darted to each in turn, righting and shaking him with no gentle hands and shouting in his ear,

"To your work! Anti-venom! Guard Gwaay!"

**E**LEVEN of the sorcerers roused quickly enough and were soon staring wide-eyed at nothingness, though with their bodies rocking and their heads bobbing for a while from the Mouser's shaking—like eleven small ships just overpassed by a squall.

He was having a little more trouble with the twelfth, though this one was coming awake, soon would be doing his share, when Gwaay appeared of a sudden in the archway with Ivivis at his side, though not supporting him. The young Lord's face gleamed as silver clear in the dimness as the massy silver mask of him that hung in the niche above the arch.

"Stand aside, Gray Mouser, I'll jog the sluggard," he cried in a rippingly bright voice and snatching up a small obsidian jar tossed it toward the drowsy sorcerer.

It should have fallen no more than half-way between them. Did he mean to wake the ancient by its shattering? the Mouser wondered. But then Gwaay stared at it in the air and it quickened its speed fearfully. It was as if he had tossed up a ball, then batted it. Shooting forward like a bolt fired point-blank from a sinewy catapult it shattered the an-

cient's skull and spattered the chair and the Mouser with his brains.

Gwaay laughed, a shade high-pitched, and cried lightly, "I must curb my excitement! I must! I must! Sudden recovery from two dozen deaths—or twenty-three and the Nose Drip—is no reason for a philosopher to lose control. Oh I'm a giddy fellow!"

Ivivis cried suddenly, "The room swims! I see silver fish!"

The Mouser felt dizzy himself then and saw a phosphorescent green hand reach through the archway toward Gwaay—reach out on a thin arm that lengthened to yards. He blinked hard and the hand was gone—but now there were swimmings of purple vapor.

He looked at Gwaay and that one, frowny-eyed now, was sniffing hard and then sniffing again, though no new drop could be seen to have formed on his nose-end.

\* \* \*

**F**AFHRD stood three paces behind Hasjarl, who looked in his bunched and high-collared robe of earth-brown toweling rather like an ape.

Beyond Hasjarl on the right there trotted on a thick wide roller-riding leather belt three slaves of monstrous aspect:

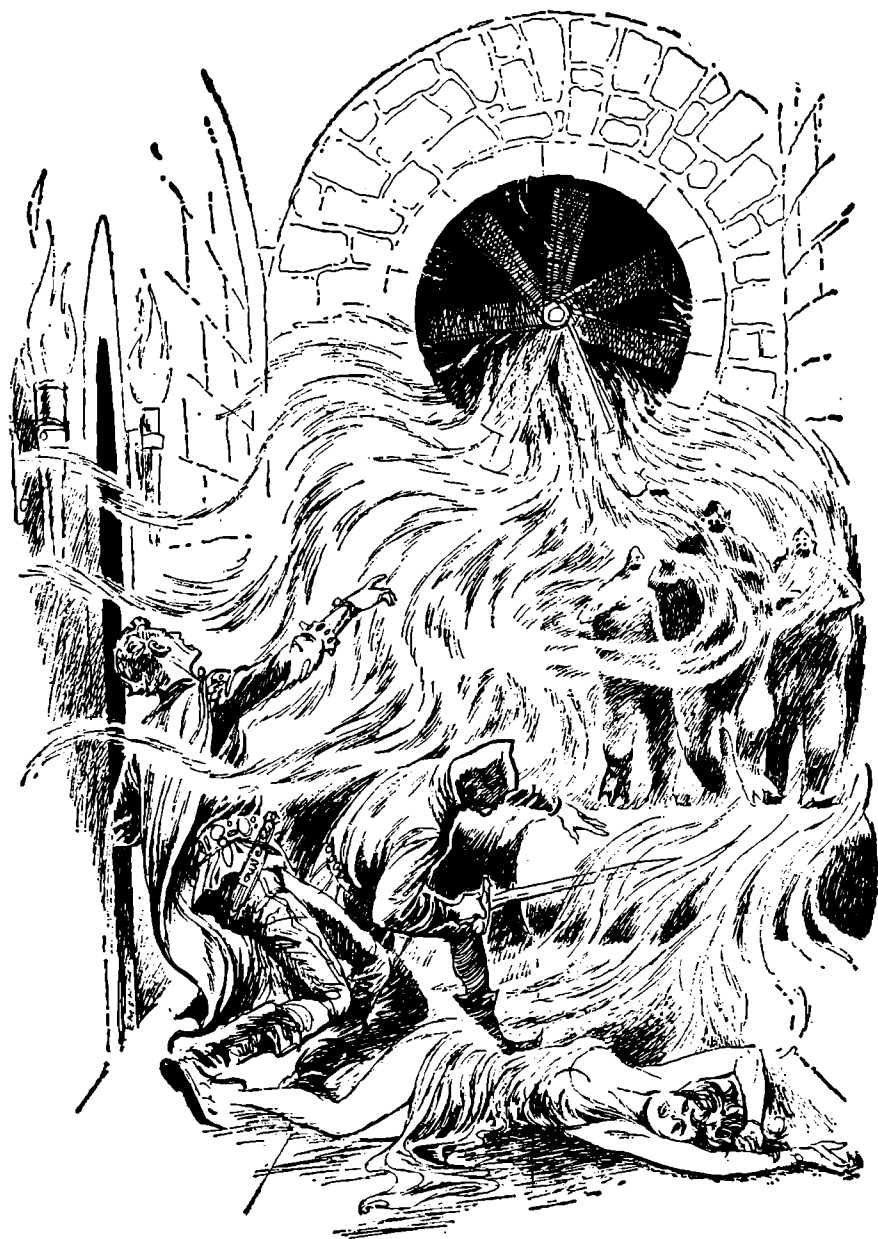
great splayed feet, legs like an elephant's, huge furnace-bellows chests, dwarfy arms, pinheads with wide toothy mouths and with nostrils bigger than their eyes or ears—creatures bred to run ponderously and nothing else. The moving belt disappeared with a half twist into a vertical cylinder of masonry five yards across and re-emerged just below itself, but moving in the opposite direction, to pass under the rollers and complete its loop. From within the cylinder came the groaning of the great wooden fan which the belt whirled and which drove life-sustaining air downward to the Lower Levels.

Beyond Hasjarl on the left was a small door set high as Fafhrd's head in the cylinder. To it there mounted one by one, up four narrow masonry steps, a line of dusky great-headed dwarfs. Each bore on his shoulder a dark bag which when he reached the window he untied and emptied into the clamorous shaft, shaking it out most thoroughly while he held it inside, then folding it and leaping down to give place to the next bag-bearer.

Hasjarl leered over his shoulder at Fafhrd. "A nose-gay for Gwaay!" he cried. " 'Tis a king's ransom I strew on the downward gale: powder of poppy, dust of lotus and mandragora, crumble of hemp. A million lewdly pleas-

ant dreams, and all for Gwaay! Three ways this conquers him: he'll sleep a day and miss my father's funeral, then Quarmall's mine by right of sole appearance yet with no blood shed which would mar the rites; his sorcerers will sleep and my infectious spells burst through and strike him down in stinking jellied death; his realm will sleep, each slave and cursed page, we'll conquer all merely by marching down after the business of the funeral. Ho, swifter there!" And seizing a long whip from an overseer, he began to crack it over the squat cones of the tread-slaves' heads and sting their broad backs with it. Their trot changed to a ponderous gallop, the moan of the fan rose in pitch, and Fafhrd waited to hear it shatter crackingly, or see the belt snap, or the rollers break on their axles.

The dwarf at the shaft-window took advantage of Hasjarl's attention being elsewhere to snatch a pinch of powder from his bag and bring it to his nostrils and sniff it down, leering ecstatically. But Hasjarl saw and whipped him about the legs most cruelly. The dwarf dutifully emptied his bag and shook it out while making little hops of agony. However he did not seem much chastened or troubled by his whipping, for as he left the chamber Fafhrd saw him pull





his empty bag down over his head and waddle off breathing deeply through it.

Hasjarl went on whip-cracking and calling, "Swifter, I say! For Gwaay a drugged hurricane!"

The officer Yissim raced into the room and darted to his master.

"The girl Friska's escaped!" he cried. "Your torturers say your champion came with your seal, telling them you had ordered her release—and snatched her off! All this occurred a quarter day ago."

"Guards!" Hasjarl squealed. "Seize the Northerner! Disarm and bind the traitor!"

But Fafhrd was gone.

\* \* \*

**T**HE MOUSER, in company with Ivivis, Gwaay and a colorful rabble of drug-induced hallucinations, reeled into a chamber similar to the one from which Fafhrd had just disappeared. Here the great cylindrical shaft ended in a half turn. The fan that sucked down the air and blew it out to refresh the Lower Levels was set vertically in the mouth of the shaft and was visible as it whirled.

By the shaft-mouth hung a large cage of white birds, all lying on its floor with their feet in the air. Besides these tell-tales, there was stretched on the floor

of the chamber its overseer, also overcome by the drugs whirling from Hasjarl.

By contrast, the three pillar-legged slaves ponderously trotting their belt seemed not affected at all. Presumably their tiny brains and monstrous bodies were beyond the reach of any drug, short of its lethal dose.

Gwaay staggered up to them, slapped each in turn, and commanded, "Stop!" Then he himself dropped to the floor.

The groaning of the fan died away, its seven wooden vanes became clearly visible as it stopped (though for the Mouser they were interwoven with scaly hallucinations), and the only real sound was the slow gasping of the tread-slaves.

Gwaay smiled weirdly at them from where he sprawled and he raised an arm drunkenly and cried, "Reverse! About face!" Slowly the tread-slaves turned, taking a dozen tiny steps to do it, until they all three faced the opposite direction on the belt.

"Trot!" Gwaay commanded them quickly. Slowly they obeyed and slowly the fan took up again its groaning, but now it was blowing air up the shaft against Hasjarl's downward fanning.

Gwaay and Ivivis rested on the floor for a space, until their brains began to clear and the last hallucinations were chased from view. To the Mouser they

seemed to be sucked up the shaft through the fan blades: a filmy horde of blue and purple wraiths armed with transparent saw-toothed spears and cutlasses.

Then Gwaay, smiling in highest excitement with his eyes, said softly and still a bit breathlessly, "My sorcerers . . . were not overcome . . . I think. Else I'd be dying . . . Hasjarl's two-dozen deaths. Another moment . . . and I'll send across the level . . . to reverse the exhaust fan. We'll get fresh air through it. And put more slaves on this belt here—perhance I'll blow my brother's nightmares back to him. Then lave and robe me for my father's fiery funeral and mount to give Hasjarl a nasty shock.

He reached across the floor and grasped the Mouser strongly at the elbow. "You, Gray One," he whispered, "prepare to work this mighty rune of yours which will smite down Hasjarl's warlocks. Gather your simples, pray your demonic prayers—consulting first with my twelve arch-images . . . if you can rouse the twelfth from his dark hell. As soon as Quarmal's lich is in the flames, I'll send you word to speak your deadly spell." He paused and his eyes gleamed with a witchy glare in the dimness. "The time has come for sorcery and swords!"

*To Be Concluded*

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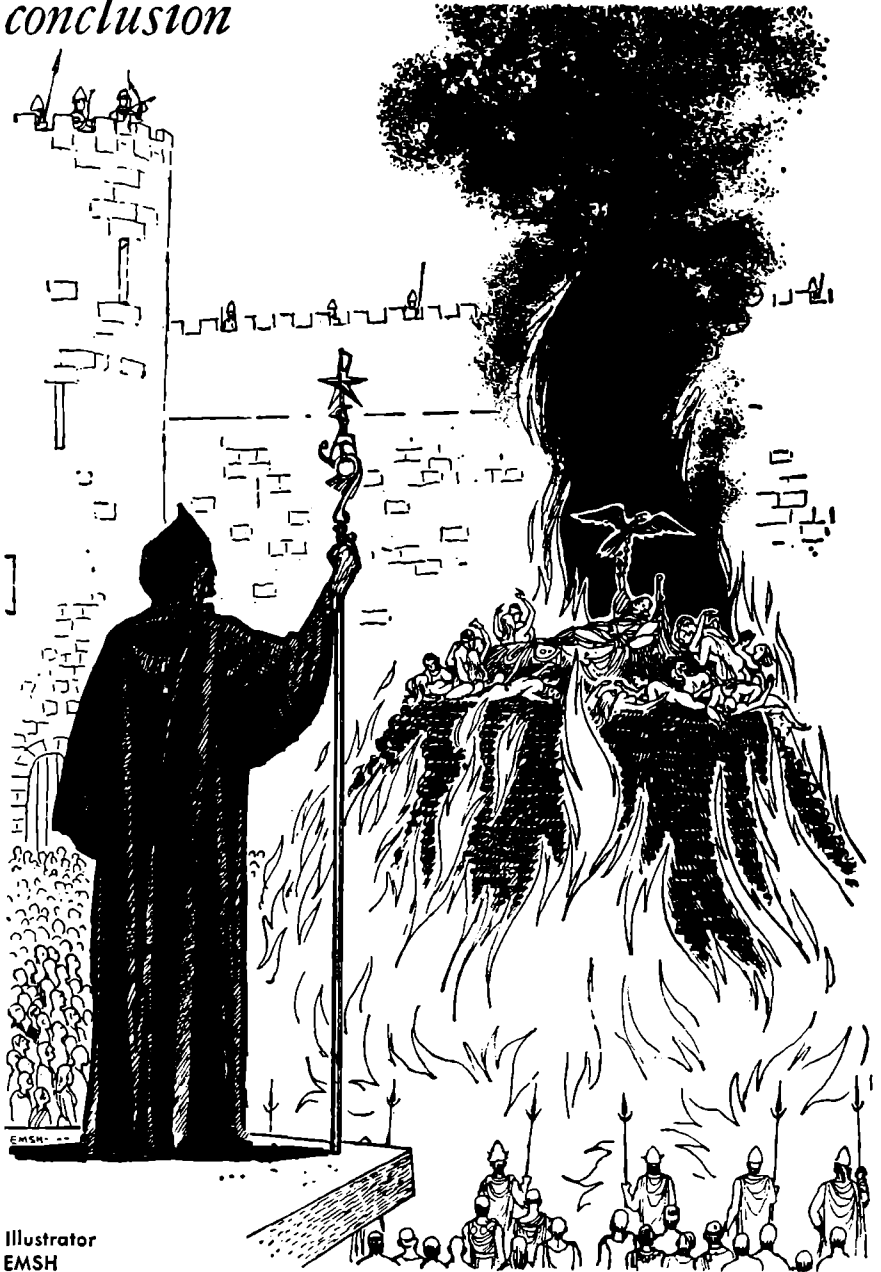
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*conclusion*



Illustrator  
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# *the Lords of Quarmall*

By FRITZ LEIBER and HARRY FISCHER

## Synopsis of Part One

*The Gray Mouser, that adventuresome swordsman, is hired as bodyguard by Prince Gwaay, ruler of the Lower Levels of Quarmall, a secret underground kingdom supplied with air by great fans which are treadmill-driven by slaves.*

*At the same time Fafhrd, the Mouser's closest friend and swordmate, is hired as bodyguard and champion by Prince Hasjarl, who is Gwaay's elder brother and rules the Upper Levels of subterranean Quarmall.*

*Neither the Mouser nor Fafhrd knows that the other is fighting on the opposite side. Each thinks his friend is thousands of miles away.*

*The brothers Hasjarl and Gwaay are bitterest enemies. Each would happily commit murders innumerable to become next Lord of all Quarmall. Gwaay is handsome and cultivates thought-power: he can move black volcanic rocks merely by looking at them. Hasjarl is ugly and addicted to torture; he has tiny*

*holes in his upper eyelids through which he spies on his enemies while he pretends to sleep.*

*Hasjarl has two dozen sorcerers whom he uses mostly to send spells at Gwaay which will afflict him with loathesome diseases. Gwaay has eleven sorcerers—in a fit of excitement he brained the twelfth with a thought-driven black jar—and he employs them chiefly to ward off Hasjarl's disease spells. Gwaay sickens alarmingly when these spells break through while Gwaay's elderly sorcerers sleep, but the Mouser rouses the ancients in time.*

*Hasjarl and Gwaay are held in check by their father Quarmal, Lord of all Quarmall. Quarmal, a vigorous old man, dwells with his soldiers and magicians in the Keep, a fortified hill which is the only part of Quarmall above ground. Quarmal, who has red eyeballs and white irises and is hardly a pleasant parent, distrusts his sons and would be very happy to see them both dead, when his*

heir might be an unborn third child presently carried in the womb of Kewissa, his favorite concubine. But a most strict custom of Quarmall absolutely forbids a father to kill his sons, and Quarmal is a stickler for custom.

Quarmal casts his Horoscope, which foretells the immediate death of the Lord of Quarmall. The old man knows the stars never lie. He summons Flindach, his half-brother and Master of Magicians, and they confer together. Somewhat later Flindach announces to Hasjarl and Gwaay that their father rules no longer and that the body will be cremated next morning in a great ceremony, which by custom both sons must attend.

Aided and abetted by Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, Hasjarl and Gwaay at once begin to war together more openly. Hasjarl has powdered opium and other sleep-inducing drugs dumped into the chutes supplying the Lower Levels with fresh air, but this attack is thwarted when Gwaay reverses the fans.

Fafhrd becomes enamoured of the pretty maid Friska whom he rescues by a trick from Hasjarl's torturers. He hides her in the Ghost Hall, a huge disused room between the Upper and Lower Levels. Hasjarl learns of the trick and turns on Fafhrd, who evades pursuit—for the time-being—in the mazelike tunnels.

Similarly the Mouser finds comfort in the saucy slave-girl Ivivis, whose life Gwaay has threatened.

The Mouser has a magical formula given him by his father-in-sorcery, Sheelba of the Eyeless Face. This formula will blast all sorcerers of Second Rank or lower for an indefinite radius about the casting point. Since all Gwaay's sorcerers claim to be of First Rank and so immune to the formula, it seems a good idea to use it with the idea of striking down Hasjarl's magicians, who are supposed to be of Second Rank, and Gwaay orders the Mouser to go ahead and cast his Great Spell. Gwaay cries, "The time has come for sorcery and swords!"

But first Gwaay and Hasjarl must attend the cremation ceremony.

THE huge pyre was finally completed, and Brilla heaved a sigh of relief and contentment with the knowledge of work well done. He relaxed his fat massive frame onto a bench against the wall and spoke to one of his companions in a high-pitched feminine voice:

"Such short notice, and at such a time, but the gods are not to be denied and no man can cheat his stars. It is shameful, though, to think that Quarmal will go so poorly attended: only a half dozen Lankhmarts, and Ilthmarix,

and three Mingols—and one of those blemished. I always told him he should keep a better har-em. However the male slaves are in fine fettle and will perhaps make up for the rest. Ah! but it's a fine flame the Lord will have to light his way!" Brilla wagged his head dolefully and snuffing blinked a tear from his piggy eye; he was one of the few who really regretted the passing of Quarmal.

As High Eunuch to the Lord, Brilla's position was a sinecure and besides he had always been fond of Quarmal since he could remember. Once when a small chubby boy Brilla had been rescued from the torments of a group of larger more virile slaves who had freed him at the mere passing-by of Quarmal. It was this small incident, unwotted or long forgot by Quarmal, which had provoked a lifelong devotion in Brilla.

Now only the gods knew what the future held. Today the body of Quarmal would be burnt and what would happen after was better left unpondered, even in the innermost thoughts of a man. Brilla looked once more at his handiwork, the funeral pyre. Achieving it in six short hours, even with hosts of slaves at his command, had taxed his powers. It towered, in the center of the courtyard, even higher than the arch of the great gate thrice the stature of a tall man. It was built

in the form of a square pyramid, truncated midway; and the inflammable woods that composed it were completely hid by somber-hued drapes.

A runway was built from the ground across the vasty courtyard to the topmost tier on each of the four sides; and at the top was a sizable square platform. It was here that the litter containing the body of Quarmal would be placed, and here the sacrificial victims be immolated. Only those slaves of proper age and talents were permitted to accompany their Lord on his long journey beyond the stars.

Brilla approved of what he saw and, rubbing his hands, looked about him curiously. It was only on such occasions as this that one realized the immensity of Quarmal, and these occasions were rare; perhaps once in his life a man would see such an event. As far as Brilla could see small bands of slaves were lined, rank on rank, against the walls of the courtyard; even as was his own band of eunuchs and carpenters. There were the craftsmen from the Upper Levels, skilled workmen all in metal and in wood; there were the workers from the fields and vineyards all brown and gnarled from their labors; there were the slaves from the Lower Levels, blinking in the unaccustomed daylight, pallid and curiously deformed; and all



the rest who served in the bowels of Quarmall, a representative group from each level.

THE size of the turn-out seemed to contradict the dawn's frightening rumors of secret war last night between the Levels, and Brilla felt reassured.

Most important and best placed were the two bands of henchmen of Hasjarl and Gwaay, one group on each side of the pyre. Only the sorcerers of the twin were absent, Brilla noted with a pang of unease, though refusing to speculate why.

High above all this mass of mixed humanity, atop the towering walls, were the ever silent, ever alert guards; standing quietly at their posts, slings dangling ready to hand. Never yet had the walls of Qarmall been stormed and never had a slave once within those close-watched walls passed into the outer world alive.

Brilla was admirably placed to observe all that occurred. To his right, projecting from the wall of the courtyard, was the balcony from which Hasjarl and Gwaay would watch the consuming of their father's body; to his left, likewise projecting, was the platform from which Flindach would direct the rituals. Brilla sat almost next to the door whence the prepared and purified body of Quarmal would be borne for its final fiery cleansing. He wiped

the sweat from his flabby jowls with the hem of his under-tunic and wondered how much longer it would be before things started. The sun could not be far from the top of the wall now, and with its first beams the rites began.

Even as he wondered there came the tremendous, muffled vibration of the huge gong. There was a craning of necks and a rustling as many bodies shifted; then silence. On the left balcony the figure of Flindach appeared.

Flindach was cowed with the Cowl of Death and his garments were of heavy woven brocades, somber and dull. At his waist glittered the circular fan-bladed Golden Symbol of Power, which whilst the Chair of Quarmal was vacant, Flindach as High Steward must keep inviolate.

He lifted his arms towards the place where the sun would in a moment appear and intoned the Hymn of Greeting; even as he chanted, the first tawny rays struck into the eyes of those across the courtyard. Again that muffled vibration, which shook the very bones of those closest it, and opposite Flindach, on the other balcony, appeared Gwaay and Hasjarl. Both were garbed alike but for their diadems and scepters. Hasjarl wore a sapphire-jeweled silvern band on his forehead and in his hand was the scepter of the Upper Levels, crested with a clenched fist;

Gwaay likewise wore the diadem inlaid with rubies and in his hand was his scepter surmounted by a worm, dagger-transfixed. Otherwise the twain were dressed identical in ceremonial robes of darkest red, belted with broad leathern girdles of black; they wore no weapons nor were any other ornaments permissible.

AS they seated themselves upon the high stools provided, Flindach turned towards the gate nearest Brilla and began to chant. His sonorous voice was answered by a hidden chorus and reechoed by certain of the bands in the courtyard. For the third time the monstrous gong was sounded and as the last echoes faded the body of Quarmal, litter-borne, appeared. It was carried by the six Lankhmar slave-girls and followed by the Mingols; this small band were all that remained of the many who had slept in the bed of Quarmal.

But where, Brilla asked himself with a heart-bounding start, was Kewissa the Ilthmarix, the old Lord's favorite? Brilla had ordered the marshalling of the girls himself. She could not—

Slowly through a lane of prostrate bodies the litter progressed towards the pyre. The carcass of Quarmal was propped in a sitting posture, and it swayed in a manner horribly suggestive of life as

the slave women staggered under their unaccustomed load. He was garbed in robes of purple silk and his brow bore the golden bands of Quarmal's Lord. Those lean hands, once so active in the practice of necromancy and incantations, were folded stiffly over the Grammarie which had been his bible during life. On his wrist hooded and chained was a great gyrfalcon, and at the feet of its dead master lay his favorite coursing leopard, quiet in the quietness of death. Even as was the falcon hooded so with wax-like lids were the once awesome eyes of Quarmal covered; those eyes which had seen so much of death were now forever dead.

Although Brilla's mind was still agitated about Kewissa, he spoke a word of encouragement to the other girls as they passed, and one of them flung him a wistful smile; they all knew it was an honor to accompany their master into the future, but none of them desired it particularly; however there was little they could do about it except follow directions. Brilla felt sorry for them all; they were so young, had such luscious bodies and were capable of giving so much pleasure to a man, for he had trained them well. But custom must be fulfilled. Yet how then had Kewissa—? Brilla shut off that speculation.

The litter moved on up the ramp. The chanting grew in volume and tempo as the top of the pyre was reached, and the rays of the sun, now full shining into the dead countenance of Quarmal, as the litter turned toward it, reflected from the bright hair and the white skin of the Lankhmar slave-girls, who had with their companions thrown themselves at the feet of Quarmal.

Suddenly Flindach dropped his arms and there was silence.

A complete and total silence startling in its contrast to the measured chant and clashing gongs.

Gwaay and Hasjarl sat motionless staring intent at the figure that had once been the Lord of Quarmall.

Flindach again raised his arms and from the gate opposite to that from whence had come the body of Quarmal, there leapt eight men. Each bore a flambeau and was naked but for a purple



cowl which obscured his face. To the accompaniment of harsh gong notes they ran swiftly to the pyre, two on each side, and thrusting their torches into the prepared wood, cast themselves over the flames they created and clambering up the pyramid embraced the slave-girls wantonly.

Almost at once the flames ate into the resinous and oil-impregnated wood. For a moment through the thick smoke the interlocking writhing forms of the

slaves could be perceived, and the lean figure of dead Quarmal staring through closed lids direct into the face of the sun. Then incensed by the heat and acrid fumes the great falcon screamed in vicious anger and wing-flapping rose from the wrist of its master. The chains held fast; but all could see the arm of Quarmal lifted high in a gesture of sublime dismissal before the smoke obscured. The chanting reached crescendo and abruptly ended as



Flindach gave the sign that the rites were finished.

AS the eager flames swift consumed the pyre and the burden it bore, Hasjarl broke the silence which custom had enjoined. He turned toward Gwaay and fingering the knucky knob of his scepter and with an evil grin he spoke:

"Ha! Gwaay, it would have been a merry thing to have seen you leching in the flames. Almost as merry as to see our sire gesticulating after death. Go quickly Brother! There's yet a chance to immolate yourself and so win fame and immortality." And he giggled, slobbering.

Gwaay had just made an unapparent sign to a page nearby and the lad was hurrying away. The young Lord of the Lower Levels was in no manner amused by his brother's ill-timed jesting, but with a smile and shrug he replied sarcastically: "I choose to seek death in less painful paths. Yet the idea is a good one; I'll treasure it." Then suddenly in a deeper voice: "It had been better that we were both stillborn than to fritter our lives away in futile hatreds. I'll overlook your dream-dust and your poppy hurricanes, and e'en your noisome sorceries, and make a pact with you, O Hasjarl! By the somber gods who rule under Quarmall's Hill and by the Worm

which is my sign I swear that from my hand your life is sacrosanct; with neither spells nor steel nor venoms will I slay thee!" Gwaay rose to his feet as he finished and looked direct at Hasjarl.

Taken unawares, Hasjarl for a second sat in silence, a puzzled expression crossed his face; then a sneer distorted his thin lips and he spat at Gwaay:

"So! You fear me more than e'en I thought. Aye! And rightly so! Yet the blood of yon old cinder runs in both our bodies, and there is a tender spot within me for my brother. Yes, I'll pact with thee, Gwaay! By the Elder Ones who swim in lightless deeps and by the Fist that is my token, I'll swear your life is sacrosanct—until I crush it out!" And with a final evil titter Hasjarl, like a malformed stoat, slid from stool and out of sight.

Gwaay stood quietly listening, gazing at the space where Hasjarl had sat; then, sure his brother was well gone, he slapped his thighs mightily and convulsed with silent laughter gasped, to no one in particular: "Even the williest hares are caught in simple snares," and still smiling he turned to watch the dancing flames.

Slowly the variegated groups were herded into the passageways whence they had come and the courtyard was cleared once

again, except for those slaves and priests whose duties kept them there.

Gwaay remained watching for a time, then he too slipped off the balcony into the inner rooms. And a faint smile yet clung to his mouth-corners as if some jest were lingering in his mind pleasantly.

... AND by the blood of that one whom it is death to look upon . . ."

So sonorously invoked the Mouser, as with eyes closed and arms outstretched he cast the rune given him by Sheelba of the Eyeless Face which would destroy all sorcerers of less than First Rank for an undertermined distance around the casting point—surely for a few miles, one might hope, so smiting Hasjarl's warlocks to dust.

Whether his Great Spell worked or not—and in his inmost heart he strongly mistrusted that it would—the Mouser was very pleased with the performance he was giving. He doubted Sheelba himself could have done better. What magnificent deep chest tones!—even Fafhrd had never heard him declaim so.

He wished he could open his eyes for just a moment to note the effect his performance was having on Gwaay's magicians—they'd be staring open-mouthed for all their supercilious boast-

ing, he was sure—but on this point Sheelba's instructions had been adamant: eyes tightly shut while the last sentences of the rune were being recited and the great forbidden words spoken; even the tiniest blink would nullify the Great Spell. Evidently magicians were supposed to be without vanity or curiosity—what a bore!

When the last echoing notes of his voice had ceased to rebound between the domed ceiling and floor, the Mouser slit open one eye and glanced surreptitiously around him.

One glance and the other eye flew open to fullness. He was too surprised to speak.

And whom he would have spoken to, had he not been too surprised, was also a question.

The long table at the foot of which he stood was empty of occupants. Where but moments before had sat eleven of the very greatest magicians of Quarmall—sorcerers of the First Rank, each had sworn on his black Grammarie—was only space.

The Mouser called softly. It was possible that these provincial fellows had been frightened at the majesty of his dark Lankhmarian delivery and had crawled under the table. But there was no answer.

He spoke louder. Only the ceaseless groan of the fans could be sensed, though hardly more

noticeable after four days hearing them, than the coursing of his blood. With a shrug the Mouser relaxed into his chair. He murmured to himself, "If those slick-faced old fools run off, what next? Suppose all Gwaay's henchmen flee?"

As he began to plan out in his mind what strategy of airy nothing to adopt if that should come to pass, he glanced somberly at the wide high-backed chair nearest his place, where had sat the boldest-seeming of Gwaay's arch-images. There was only a loosely crumpled white loincloth—but in it was what gave the Mouser pause. A small pile of flocculent gray dust was all.

THE Mouser whistled softly between his teeth and raised himself the better to see the rest of the seats. On each of them was the same: a clean loincloth, somewhat crumpled as if it had been worn for a little while, and within the cloth that small heap of grayish powder.

At the other end of the long table, one of the black counters, which had been standing on its edge, slowly rolled off the board of the thought-game and struck the floor with a tiny *tick*. It sounded to the Mouser rather like the last noise in the world.

Very quietly he stood up and silently walked in his ratskin moccasins to the nearest arch-

way, across which he had drawn thick curtains for the Great Spell. He was wondering just what the range of the spell had been, *where* it had stopped, if it had stopped at all. Suppose, for instance, that Sheelba had underestimated its power and it disintegrated not only sorcerers, but . . .

He paused in front of the curtain and gave one last over-shoulder glance. Then he shrugged, adjusted his sword-belt, and grinning far more bravely than he felt, said to no one in particular, "But they assured me that they were the *very* greatest sorcerers."

As he reached toward the curtain, heavy with embroidery, it wavered and shook. He froze, his heart leaping wildly. Then the curtains parted a little and there was thrust in the saucy face of Ivivis, wide-eyed with excited curiosity.

"Did your Great Spell work, Mouser?" she asked him breathlessly.

He let out his own breath in a sigh of relief. "You survived it, at all events," he said and reaching out pulled her against him. Her slim body pressing his felt very good. True, the presence of almost any living being would have been welcome to the Mouser at this moment, but that it should be Ivivis was a bonus he could not help but appreciate.

DEAREST," he said sincerely, "I was feeling that I was per-chance the last man on Earth. But now—"

"And acting as if I were the last girl, lost a year," she re-torted tartly. "This is neither the place nor the time for amor-ous consolations and intimate pleasantries," she continued, half mistaking his motives and pushing back from him.

"Did you slay Hasjarl's wiz-ards?" she demanded, gazing up with some awe into his eyes.

"I slew *some* sorcerers," the Mouser admitted judiciously. "Just how many is a moot ques-tion."

"Where are Gwaay's?" she asked, looking past the Mouser at the empty chairs. "Did he take them all with him?"

"Isn't Gwaay back from his father's funeral yet?" the Mous-er countered, evading her ques-tion, but as she continued to look into his eyes, he added lightly, "His sorcerers are in some congenial spot . . . I hope."

Ivivi looked at him queerly, pushed past, hurried to the long table, and gazed up and down the chair seats.

"Oh, Mouser!" she said re-provingly, but there was real awe in the gaze she shot him.

He shrugged. "They swore to me they were of First Rank," he defended himself.

"Not even a fingerbone or skullshard left," Ivivi said sol-emnly, peering closely at the nearest tiny gray dust-pile and shaking her head.

"Not even a gallstone," the Mouser echoed harshly. "My rune was dire."

"Not even a tooth," Ivivi re-echoed, rubbing curiously if somewhat callously through the pile. "Nothing to send their mothers."

"Their mothers can have their diapers to fold away with their baby ones," the Mouser said irascibly though somewhat un-comfortably. "Oh Ivivi, sorcer-ers don't have mothers!"

"But what happens to our Lord Gwaay now his protectors are gone?" Ivivi demanded more practically. "You saw how Has-jarl's sendings struck him last night when they but dozed. And if anything happens to Gwaay, then what happens to us?"

Again the Mouser shrugged. "If my rune reached Hasjarl's twenty-four wizards and blasted them too, then no harm's been done—except to sorcerers, and they all take their chances, sign their death warrants when they speak their first spells—'tiz a dangerous trade.

"In fact," he went on with ar-gumentative enthusiasm, "we've gained. Twenty-four enemies slain at cost of but a dozen—no, eleven total casualties on our



side—why, that's a bargain any warlord would jump at! Then with the sorcerers all out of the way—except for the Brothers themselves, and Flindach—that warty blotchy one is someone to be reckoned with!—I'll meet and slay this champion of Hasjarl's and we'll carry all before us. And if . . .”

HIS voice trailed off. It had occurred to him to wonder why he himself hadn't been blasted by his own spell. He had never suspected, until now, that he might be a sorcerer of the First Rank—having despite a youthful training in country-sorceries only dabbled in magic since. Perhaps some metaphysical trick or logical fallacy was involved. . . . If a sorcerer casts a rune that midway of the casting blasts *all* sorcerers, *provided the casting be finished*, then does he blast himself, or . . . ? Or perhaps indeed, the Mouser began to think boastfully, he was unknown to himself a mage of the First Rank, or even higher, or—

In the silence of his thinking, he and Ivivis became aware of approaching footsteps, first a multitudinous patter but swiftly a tumult. The grayclad man and the slave-girl had hardly time to exchange a questioning apprehensive look when there burst through the draperies, tearing them down, eight or nine of

Gwaay's chiefest henchmen, their faces death-pale, their eyes staring like madmen's. They raced across the chamber and out the opposite archway almost before the Mouser could recover from where he'd dodged out of their way.

But that was not the end of the footsteps. There was a last pair coming down the black corridor and at a strange unequal gallop, like a cripple sprinting, and with a squishy slap at each tread. The Mouser crossed quickly to Ivivis and put an arm around her. He did not himself want to be standing alone at this moment.

Ivivis said, “If your Great Spell missed Hasjarl's sorcerers, and their disease-spells struck through to Gwaay, now undefended . . .”

Her whisper trailed off fearfully as a monstrous figure clad in dark scarlet robes lurched by swift convulsive stages into view. At first the Mouser thought it must be Hasjarl of the Mismatched Arms, from what he'd heard of that one. Then he saw that its neck was collared by gray fungus, its right cheek crimson, its left black, its eyes dripping green ichor and its nose spattering clear drops. As the loathy creature took a last great stride into the chamber, its left leg went boneless like a pillar of jelly and its right leg, striking

down stiffly though with a heel-splash, broke in midshin and the jagged bones thrust through the flesh. Its yellow-crustred red-cracked scurfy hands snatched futilely at the air for support and its right arm brushing its head carried away half the hair on that side.

Ivivi began to mewl and yelp faintly with horror and she clung to the Mouser, who himself felt as if a nightmare were lifting its hooves to trample him and he horror-frozen.

In such manner did Prince Gwaay, Lord of the Lower Levels of Quarmall, come home from his father's funeral, falling in a stenchful, scabrous, ichorous heap upon the torn-down richly-embroidered curtains immediately beneath the pristine-handsome silver statue of himself in the niche above the arch.

**T**HE funeral pyre smouldered for a long time, but of all the inhabitants in that huge and ramified castle-kingdom Brilla the High Eunuch was the only one who watched it out. Then he collected a few representative pinches of ashes to preserve; he kept them with some dim idea that they might perhaps act as some protection, now that the living protector was forever gone.

Yet the fluffy-gritty gray tokens did not much cheer Brilla as

he wandered desolately into the inner rooms. He was troubled and eunuchlike be-twittered by thoughts of the war between brothers that must now ensue before Quarmall had again a single master. Oh what a tragedy that Lord Quarmal should have been snatched so sudden by the Fates with no chance to make arrangement for the succession!—though what that arrangement might have been, considering custom's strictures in Quarmall, Brilla could not say. Still, Quarmal had always seemed able to achieve the impossible.

Brilla was troubled too, and rather more acutely, by his guilty-feeling knowledge that Quarmal's concubine Kewissa had evaded the flames. He might be blamed for that, though he could not see where he had omitted any customary precaution. And burning would have been small pain indeed to what the poor girl must suffer now for her transgression. He rather hoped she had slain herself by knife or poison, though that would doom her spirit to eternal wandering in the winds between the stars that make them twinkle.

Brilla realized his steps were taking him to the Harem and he halted a-quake. He might well find Kewissa there and he did not want to be the one to turn her in.

Yet if he stayed in this central

section of the Keep, he would momentarily run into Flindach and he knew he would hold back nothing when gimletted by that arch-sorcerer's stern witchy gaze. He would have to remind him of Kewissa's defection.

So Brilla bethought him of an errand that would take him to the nethermost sections of the Keep, just above Hasjarl's realm. There was a storeroom there, his responsibility, which he had not inventoried for a month. Brilla did not like the Dark Levels of Quarmall—it was his pride that he was one of the elite who worked in or at least near sunlight—but now, by reason of his anxieties, the Dark Levels began to seem attractive.

This decision made, Brilla felt slightly cheered. He set off at once, moving quite swiftly, with a eunuch's peculiar energy, despite his elephantine bulk.

HE reached the storeroom without incident. When he had kindled a torch there, the first thing he saw was a small girl-like woman cowering among the bales of drapery. She wore a lustrous loose yellow robe and had the winsome triangular face, moss-green hair, and bright blue eyes of an Ilthmarix.

"Kewissa," he whispered shudderingly yet with motherly warmth. "Sweet chick . . ."

She ran to him. "Oh Brilla,

I'm so frightened," she cried softly as she pressed against his paunch and hid herself in his great-sleeved arms.

"I know, I know," he murmured, making little clucking noises and he smoothed her hair and petted her. "You were always frightened of flames, I remember now. Never mind, Quarmal will forgive when you meet beyond the stars. Look you, little duck, it's a great risk I run, but because you were the old Lord's favorite I cherish you dearly. I carry a painless poison . . . Only a few drops on the tongue . . . then darkness and the windy gulfs . . . A long leap, true, but better far than what Flindach must order when he discovers—"

She pushed back from him. "It was Flindach who commanded me not to follow My Lord to his last hearth!" she revealed wide-eyed and reproachful. "He told me the stars directed otherwise and also that this was Quarmal's dying wish. I doubted and feared Flindach—he with face so hideous and eyes so horridly like My Dear Lord's—yet could not but obey . . . with some small thankfulness, I must confess, dear Brilla."

"But what reason earthly or unearthly . . . ?" Brilla stammered, his mind a-whirl.

Kewissa looked to either side. Then, "I bear Quarmal's quickening seed," she whispered.

For a bit this only increased Brilla's confusion. How could Quarmal have hoped to get a concubine's child accepted as Lord of All when there were two grown legitimate heirs? Or cared so little for the land's security as to leave alive a bastard? Then it occurred to him—and his heart shook at the thought—that Flindach might be seeking to seize supreme power, using Kewissa's babe and an invented death-wish of Quarmal as his pretext, along with those Quarmal-eyes of his. Palace revolutions were not entirely unknown in Quarmall. Indeed, there was a legend that the present line had generations ago clambered dagger-fisted to power by that route, though it was death to repeat the legend . . .

Kewissa continued, "I stayed hid in the Harem. Flindach said I'd be safe. But then Hasjarl's henchmen came searching, in Flindach's absence and in defiance of all customs and decencies. I fled here."

This continued to make a dreadful sort of sense, Brilla thought. If Hasjarl suspected Flindach's impious snatch at power, he would instinctively strike at him, turning the fraternal strife into a three-sided one involving even—woe of woes!—the sunlit apex of Quarmall, which until this moment had seemed so safe from war's alarms . . .

AT that very instant, as if Brilla's fears had conjured up their fruition, the door of the storeroom opened wide and there loomed in it an uncouth man who seemed the very embodiment of battle's barbarous horrors. He was so tall his head brushed the lintel, his face was handsome yet stern and searching-eyed, his red-gold hair hung tangledly to his shoulders, his garment was a bronze-studded wolfskin tunic; longsword and massy short-handled axe swung from his belt, and on the longest finger of his right hand Brilla's gaze—trained to miss no detail of decor and now fear-sharpened—noted a ring with Hasjarl's clenched-fist sigil.

The eunuch and the girl huddled against each other, quivering.

Having assured himself that these two were all he faced, the newcomer's countenance broke into a smile that might have been reassuring on a smaller man or one less fiercely accoutered. Then Fafhrd said, "Greetings . . . Grandfather. I require only that you and your chick help me find the sunlight and the stables of this benighted realm. Come, we'll plot it out so you may satisfy me with least danger to yourselves." And he swiftly stepped toward them, silently for all his size, his gaze returning with interest to Kew-

issa as he noted she was not child but woman.

Kewissa felt that and although her heart was a-flutter, piped up bravely, "You dare not rape me! I'm with child by a dead man!"

Fafhrd's smile soured somewhat. Perhaps, he told himself, he should feel complimented that girls started thinking about rape the instant they saw him, still he was a little irked. Did they deem him incapable of civilized seduction because he wore furs and was no dwarf? Oh well, they quickly learned. But what a horrid way to try to daunt him!

Meanwhile tubby-fat Grandfather, who Fafhrd now realized was hardly equipped to be that or father either, said fearful-mincing, "She speaks only the truth, oh Captain. But I will be o'erjoyed to aid you in any . . ."

There were rapid steps in the passage and the harsh slither of steel against stone. Fafhrd turned like a tiger. Two guards in the dark-linked hauberks of Hasjarl were pressing into the room. The fresh-drawn sword of one had scraped the door-side, while a third behind them cried sharply now, "Take the Northern turncoat! Slay him if he shows fight. I'll secure old Quarmal's concubine."

The two guards started to run at Fafhrd, but he counterfeting even more the tiger sprang at them twice as sudden. Gray-

wand coming out of his scabbard swept sideways up, fending off the sword of the foremost even as Fafhrd's foot came crushing down on that one's instep. Then Graywand's hilt crashed backhanded into his jaw, so that he lurched against his fellow. Meanwhile Fafhrd's axe had come into his left hand and at close quarters he stroked it one, two into their brains, then shouldering them off as they fell, he drew back the axe and cast it at the third, so that it lodged in his forehead between the eyes as he turned to see what was amiss, and he dropped down dead.

**B**UT the footsteps of a fourth and perhaps a fifth could be heard racing away. Fafhrd sprang toward the door with a growl, stopped with a footstamp and returned as swiftly, stabbing a bloody finger at Kewissa cowering into the great bulk of blanching Brilla.

"Old Quarmal's girl? With child by him?" he rapped out and when she nodded rapidly, swallowing hard, he continued, "Then you come with me. Now! The castrado too."

He sheathed Graywand, wrenched his axe from the sergent's skull, grabbed Kewissa by the upper arm and strode toward the door with a devilish snarling head-wave to Brilla to follow.

Kewissa cried, "Oh mercy, sir! You'll make me lose the child."

Brilla obeyed, yet twittered as he did, "Kind Captain, we'll be no use to you, only encumber you in your—"

Fafhrd, turning sudden again, spared him one rapid speech, shaking the bloody axe for emphasis: "If you think I don't understand the bargaining value or hostage-worth of even an unborn claimant to a throne, then your skull is as empty of brains as your loins are of seed—and I doubt that's the case. As for you, girl," he added harshly to Kewissa, "if there's anything but bleat under your green ringlets, you know you're safer with a stranger than with Hasjarl's hellions and that better your child miscarry than fall into their hands. Come, I'll carry you." He swept her up. "Follow, eunuch, work those great thighs of yours if you love living."

And he made off down the corridor, Brilla trotting ponderously after and wisely taking great gasping breaths in anticipation of exertions to come. Kewissa laid her arms around Fafhrd's neck and glanced up at him with qualified admiration. He himself now gave vent to two remarks which he'd evidently been saving for an unoccupied moment.

The first, bitterly sarcastic: ". . . if he shows fight!"

The second, self-angry:

"Those cursed fans must be deafening me, that I didn't hear 'em coming!"

Forty loping paces down the corridor he passed a ramp leading upward and turned toward a narrower darker corridor.

From just behind, Brilla called softly yet rapidly, penurious of breath, "That ramp led to the stables. Where are you taking us, My Captain?"

"Down!" Fafhrd retorted without pausing in his lope. "Don't panic, I've a hidey-hole for the two of you—and even a girl-mate for little Prince-mother Greenilocks here." Then to Kewissa, gruffly, "You're not the only girl in Quarmall wants rescuing, nor yet the dearest."

THE Mouser, steeling himself for it, knelt and surveyed the noisome heap that was Prince Gwaay. The stench was abominably strong despite the perfumes the Mouser had sprinkled and the incense he had burnt but an hour ago. The Mouser had covered with silken sheets and fur robes all the loathsomeness of Gwaay except for his plagues-stricken pillowed-up face. The sole feature of this face that had escaped obvious extreme contagion was the narrow handsome nose, from the end of which there dripped clear fluid, drop by slow drop, like the ticking of a water clock, while from below the

nose proceeded a continual small nasty retching which was the only reasonably sure sign that Gwaay was not wholly moribund. For a while Gwaay had made faint straining moanings like the whispers of a mute, but now even those had ceased.

The Mouser reflected that it was very difficult indeed to serve a master who could neither speak, write, nor gesticulate—particularly when fighting enemies who now began to seem neither dull nor contemptible. By all counts Gwaay should have died hours since. Presumably only his steely sorcerous will and consuming hatred of Hasjarl kept his spirit from fleeing the horrid tenement that housed it.

The Mouser rose and turned with a questioning shrug toward Ivivis, who sat now at the long table hemming up two hooded black voluminous sorcerer's robes, which she had cut down at the Mouser's direction to fit him and herself. The Mouser had thought that since he now seemed to be Gwaay's sole remaining sorcerer as well as champion, he should be prepared to appear dressed as the former and to boast at least one acolyte.

In answer to the shrug, Ivivis merely wrinkled her nostrils, pinched them with two dainty fingertips, and shrugged back. True, the Mouser thought, the stench was growing stronger de-

spite all his attempts to mask it. He stepped to the table and poured himself a half cup of the thick blood-red wine, which he'd begun unwillingly to relish a little, although he'd learned it was indeed fermented from scarlet toadstools. He took a small swallow and summed up:

"Here's a pretty witch's kettle o' problems. Gwaay's sorcerers blasted—all right, yes, by me, I admit it. His henchmen and soldiery fled—to the lowest loathy dank dim tunnels, I think, or else gone over to Hasjarl. His girls vanished save for you. Even his doctors fearful to come nigh him—the one I dragged here fainting dead away. His slaves useless with dread—only the tread-beasts at the fans keep their heads, and they because they haven't any! No answer to our message to Flindach that we league against Hasjarl. No page to send another message by—and not even a single picket to warn us if Hasjarl assaults."

"You could go over to Hasjarl yourself," Ivivis pointed out.

THE Mouser considered that. "No," he decided, "there's something too fascinating about a forlorn hope like this. I've always wanted to command one. And it's only fun to betray the wealthy and victorious. Yet what strategy can I employ without even a skeleton army?"

Ivivi frowned. "Gwaay used to say that just as sword-war is but another means of carrying out diplomacy, so sorcery is but another means of carrying out sword-war. Spell-war. So you could try your Great Spell again," she concluded without vast conviction.

"Not I!" the Mouser repudiated. "It never touched Hasjarl's twenty-four or it would have stopped their disease-spells against Gwaay. Either they are of First Rank or else I'm doing the spell backwards—in which case the tunnels would probably collapse on me if I tried it again."

"Then use a different spell," Ivivi suggested brightly. "Raise an army of veritable skeletons. Drive Hasjarl mad, or put a hex on him he stubs his toe at every step. Or turn his soldiers' swords to cheese. Or vanish their bones. Or transmew all his maids to cats and set their tails afire. Or—"

"I'm sorry, Ivivi," the Mouser interposed hurriedly to her mounting enthusiasm. "I would not confess this to another, but . . . that was my only spell. We must depend on wit and weapons alone. Again I ask you, Ivivi, what strategy does a general employ when his left is o'erwhelmed, his right takes flight, and his center is ten times decimated?"

A slight sweet sound like a silver bell chinked once, or a silver string plucked high in the harp, interrupted him. Although so faint, it seemed for a moment to fill the chamber with auditory light. The Mouser and Ivivi gazed around wonderingly and then at the same moment looked up at the silver mask of Gwaay in the niche above the arch before which Gwaay's mortal remains festered silken-wrapped.

The shimmering metal lips of the statua smiled and parted—so far as one might tell in the gloom—and faintly there came Gwaay's brightest voice, saying:

"Your answer: he attacks!"

The Mouser blinked. Ivivi dropped her needle. The statua continued, its eyes seeming to twinkle, "Greetings, hostless captain mine! Greetings, dear girl. I'm sorry my stink offends you—yes, yes, Ivivi, I've observed you pinching your nose at my poor carcass this last hour through—but then the world teems with loathiness. Is that not a black death-adder gliding now through the black robe you stitch?"

With a gasp of horror Ivivi sprang catswift up and aside from the material and brushed frantically at her legs. The statua gave a naturally silver laugh, then quickly said, "Your pardon, gentle girl, I did but jest. My spirits are too high, too



high!—perchance because my body is so low. Plotting will curb my feyness. Hist now, hist!”

**I**N Hasjarl's Hall of Sorcery his four-and-twenty wizards stared desperately at a huge magic screen set up parallel to their long table, trying with all their might to make the picture on it come clear. Hasjarl himself, dire in his dark red funeral robes, gazing alternately with open eyes and through the grommeted holes in his upper lids, as if that perchance might make the picture sharper, stutteringly berated them for their clumsiness and at intervals conferred staccato with his military.

The screen was dark gray, the picture appearing on it in pale green witch-light. It stood twelve feet high and eighteen feet long. Each wizard was responsible for a particular square yard of it, projecting on it his share of the clairvoyant picture.

This picture was of Gwaay's Hall of Sorcery, but the best effect achieved so far was a generally blurred image showing the table, the empty chairs, a low mound on the floor, and two figures moving about—these last mere salamander-like blobs with arms and legs attached, so that not even the sex could be determined, if indeed they were human at all or even male and female.

Sometimes a yard of the picture would come clear as a flowerbed on a bright day, but it would always be a yard with neither of the figures in it or anything of more interest than an empty chair. Then Hasjarl would bark sudden for the other wizards to do likewise, or for the successful wizard to trade squares with someone whose square had a figure in it, and the picture would invariably get worse and Hasjarl would screech and spray spittle, and then the picture would go completely bad, swimming everywhere or with squares all jumbled and overlapping like an unsolved puzzle, and the twenty-four sorcerers would have to count off squares and start over again while Hasjarl disciplined them with fearful threats.

Interpretations of the picture by Hasjarl and his aides differed considerably. The absence of Gwaay's sorcerers seemed to be a good thing, until someone suggested they might have been sent to infiltrate Hasjarl's Upper Levels for a close-range thaumaturgic attack. One lieutenant got fearfully tongue-lashed for suggesting the two blob-figures might be demons seen unblurred in their true guise—though even after Hasjarl had discharged his anger, he seemed a little frightened by the idea. The hopeful notion that all Gwaay's sorcerers

had been wiped out was rejected when it was ascertained that no sorcerous spells had been directed at them recently by Hasjarl or any of his wizards.

ONE of the blob-figures now left the picture entirely and the point of silvery light faded. This touched off further speculation, which was interrupted by the entry of several of Hasjarl's torturers looking rather battered and a dozen of his guards. The guards were surrounding—with naked swords aimed at his chest and back—the figure of an unarmed man in a wolfskin tunic with arms bound tight behind him. He was masked with a red silk eye-holed sack pulled down over his head and hair, and a black robe trailed behind him.

"We've taken the Northerner, Lord Hasjarl!" the leader of the dozen guards reported joyously. "We cornered him in your torture room. He disguised himself as one of those and tried to lie his way through our lines, humped and going on his knees, but his height still betrayed him.

"Good, Yissim!—I'll reward you," Hasjarl approved. "But what of my father's treacherous concubine and the great castrado who were with him when he slew three of your fellows?"

"They were still with him when we glimpsed him near Gwaay's realm and gave chase. We lost 'em

when he doubled back to the torture room, but the hunt goes on."

"Find 'em, you wore best," Hasjarl ordered grimly, "or the sweets of my reward will be soured entire by the pains of my displeasure." Then to Fafhrd, "So, traitor! Now I will play with you the wrist game—aye, and a hundred others too, until you are wearied of sport."

Fafhrd answered loudly and clearly through his red mask, "I'm no traitor, Hasjarl. I was only tired of your twitching and of your torturing of girls."

There came a sibilant cry from the sorcerers. Turning, Hasjarl saw that one of them had made the low mound on the floor come clear, so that it was clearly seen as a stricken man covered to his pillowed head.

"Closer!" Hasjarl cried—all eagerness, no threat—and perhaps because they were neither startled nor threatened, each wizard did his work perfectly, so that there came green-pale onto the screen Gwaay's face, wide as an oxcart and team, the plagues visible by the huge pustules and crustings and fungoid growths if not by their colors, the eyes like great vats stewing with ichor, the mouth a quaking bog-hole, while each drop that fell from the nose-tip looked a gallon.

Hasjarl cried thickly, like a man choking with strong drink,

"Joy, oh joy! My heart will break!"

The screen went black, the room dead silent, and into it from the further archway there came gliding noiselessly through the air a tiny bone-gray shape. It soared on unflapping wings like a hawk searching its prey, high above the swords that struck at it. Then turning in a smooth silent curve, it stooped straight at Hasjarl and evading his hands that snatched at it too late, tapped him on the breast and fell to the floor at his feet.

It was a dart folded from parchment on which lines of characters showed at angles. Nothing more deadly than that.

Hasjarl snatched it up, pulled it cracklingly open, and read aloud:

"Dear Brother. Let us meet on the instant in the Ghost Hall to settle the succession. Bring your four-and-twenty sorcerers. I'll bring one. Bring your champion. I'll bring mine. Bring your henchmen and guards. Bring yourself. I'll be brought. Or perhaps you'd prefer to spend the evening torturing girls. Signed (by direction) Gwaay."

Hasjarl crumpled the parchment in his fist and peering over it thoughtful-evil, rapped out staccato: "We'll go! He means to play on my brotherly pity—that would be sweet. Or else to trap us, but I'll out-trick him!"

Fafhrd called boldly, "You may be able to best your death-rotten brother, oh Hasjarl, but what of his champion?—cunninger than Zobold, more battle-fierce than rogue elephant! Such an one can cut through your cheesy guards as easy as I bested 'em one-to-five in the Keep, and be at your noisy throat! You'll need me!"

Hasjarl thought for a heartbeat, then turning toward Fafhrd said, "I'm not mind-proud. I'll take advice from a dead dog. Bring him with us. Keep him bound, but bring his weapons."

**A** LONG a wide low tunnel that trended slowly upward and was lit by wall-set torches flaming no bluer-bright than marsh gas and as distant-seeming each from the next as coastal beacons, the Mouser striding swiftly yet most warily led a strange short cortege.

He wore a black robe with peaked black hood that thrown forward would hide his face entirely. Under it he carried at his belt his sword and dagger and also a skin of the tantalizingly bloodred toadstool wine, but in his fingers he bore a thin black wand tipped with a silver star, to remind him that his primary current role was Sorcerer Extraordinary to Gwaay.

Behind him trotted two-breast four of the great-legged tiny-

headed treadslaves, looking almost like dark walking cones, especially when silhouetted by a torch just passed. They bore between them, each clutching a pole-end in both dwarfish hands, a litter of bloodwood and ebony ornately carved, whereon rested matted and covered by furs and silks and richly embroidered fabrics the stenchful helpless flesh and dauntless spirit of the young Lord of the Lower Levels.

Close behind Gwaay's litter followed what seemed a slightly smaller version of the Mouser. It was Ivivis, masquerading as his acolyte. She held a fold of her hood as a sort of windbreak in front of her mouth and nose, and frequently she sniffed a handkerchief steeped in spirits of camphor and ammonia. Under her arm she carried a silver gong in a woolen sack and a strange thin wooden mask in another.

The splayed calloused feet of the treadslaves struck the stony floor with a faint *hrush*, over which came at long regular intervals Gwaay's gargly retching. Other sound there was none.

The walls and low ceiling teemed with pictures, mostly in yellow ocher, of demons, strange beasts, bat-winged girls, and other infernal beauties. Their slow looming and fading was nightmarish, yet gently so. All in all, it was one of the pleasantest journies the Mouser could recall,

equal of a trip he had once made by moonlight across the roofs of Lankmar to hang a wilting wreath on a forgotten tower-top statue of the God of Thieves, and light a small blue fire of brandy to him.

"Attack!" he murmured humorously and wholly to himself. "Forward, my big-foot phalanx! Forward, my terror-striking war-car! Forward, my dainty rear-guard! Forward, my host!"

**B**RILLA and Kewissa and Friska sat quiet as mice in the Ghost Hall beside the dried-up fountain pool yet near the open door of the chamber that was their appointed hiding place. The girls were whispering together, head leaned to head, yet that was no noisier than the squeaking of mice, nor was the occasional high sigh Brilla let slip.

Beyond the fountain was the great half-open door through which the sole faint light came questing and through which Fafhrd had brought them before doubling back to draw off the pursuit. Some of the cobwebs stretching across it had been torn away by Brilla's ponderous passage.

Taking that door and the one to their hiding place as two opposite corners of the room, the two remaining opposite corners were occupied by a wide black

archway and a narrow one, each opening on a large section of stony floor raised three steps above the still larger floor-section around the dried-up pool. Elsewhere in the wall were many small doors, all shut, doubtless leading to one-time bed chambers. Over all hung the pale mortared great black slabs of the shallowly domed ceiling. So much their eyes, long accustomed to the darkness, could readily distinguish.

Brilla, who recognized that this place had once housed a harem, was musing melancholically that now it had become a kind of tiniest harem again, with eunuch—himself—and pregnant girl—Kewissa—gossiping with restless high-spirited girl—Friska—who was fretting for the safety of her tall barbarian lover. He had wanted to sweep up a bit and find some draperies, even if rotten ones, to hang and spread, but Friska had pointed out that they mustn't leave clues to their presence.

There came a faint sound through the great door. The girls quit their whispering and Brilla his sighs and musings, and they listened with all their beings. Then more noises came—footsteps and the knock of a sheathed sword against the wall of a tunnel—and they sprang silently up and scurried back into their hiding chamber and silently shut

the door behind them, and the Ghost Hall was briefly alone with its ghosts once more.

A helmeted guard in the hauberk of Hasjarl appeared in the great door and stood peering about with arrow nocked to the taut string of a short bow he held crosswise. Then he motioned with his shoulder and came sneaking in followed by three of his fellows and by four slaves holding aloft yellowly flaming torches, which cast the monstrous shadows of the guardsmen across the dusty floor and the shadows of their heads against the curving far wall, as they spied about for signs of trap or ambush.

Some bats swooped about and fled the torchlight through the archways.

**T**HE first guardsman whistled then down the corridor behind him and waved an arm and there came two parties of slaves, who applied themselves each to a side of the great door, so that it groaned and creaked loudly at its hinges, and they pushed it open wide, though one of them leaped convulsively as a spider fell on him from the disturbed cobwebs, or he thought it did.

Then more guards came, each with a torch-slave, and moved about calling softly back and forth, and tried all the shut doors and peered long and suspiciously

into the black spaces beyond the narrow archway and the wide one, but all returned quite swiftly to form a protective semicircle around the great door and enclosing most of the floor space of the central section of the Ghost Hall.

Then into that shielded space Hasjarl came striding surrounded by his henchmen and followed at heel by his two dozen sorcerers closely ranked. With Hasjarl too came Fafhrd, still arm-bound and wearing his red bag-mask and menaced by the drawn swords of his guards. More torch-slaves came too, so that the Ghost Hall was flaringly lit around the great door, though elsewhere a mixture of glare and black shadow.

Since Hasjarl wasn't speaking, no one else was. Not that the Lord of the Upper Levels was altogether silent—he was coughing constantly, a hacking bark, and spitting gobbets of phlegm into a finely embroidered kerchief. After each small convulsion he would glare suspiciously around him, drooping evilly one pierced eyelid to emphasize his wariness.

Then there was a tiny scurrying and one called, "A rat!" and another loosed an arrow into the shadows around the pool, and Hasjarl demanded loudly why his ferrets had been forgot—and his great hounds too, for

that matter, and his owls to protect him against poison-toothed bats Gwaay might launch at him—and swore to flay the right hands of the neglectful ones.

It came again, that swift-traveling rattle of tiny claws on smooth stone, and more arrows were loosed futilely to skitter across the floor, and guards shifted position nervously, and in the midst of all that Fafhrd cried, "Up shields, some of you, and make walls to either side Hasjarl! Have you not thought an arrow might silently wing from either archway and drive through your dear lord's throat and stop his precious coughing forever?"

SEVERAL leaped guiltily to obey that order and Hasjarl did not wave them away and Fafhrd laughed and remarked, "Masking a champion makes him more dreadful, oh Hasjarl, but tying his hands behind him is not so apt to impress the enemy—and has other drawbacks. If there should come sudden a-rush now that one wilier than Zobold, weightier than mad elephant to tumble and hurl aside your panicky guards—"

"Cut his bonds!" Hasjarl barked and someone began to saw with a dagger behind Fafhrd's back. "But don't give him his sword or axe! Yet hold them ready for him!"

Fafhrd writhed his shoulders and flexed his great forearms and began to massage them and laughed again through his mask.

Hasjarl fumed and then ordered all the shut doors tried once more. Fafhrd readied himself for action as they came to the one behind which Friska and the two others were hid, for he knew it had no bolt or bar. But it held firm against all shoving. Fafhrd could imagine Brilla's great back braced against it, with the girls perhaps pushing at his stomach, and he smiled under the red silk.

Hasjarl fumed a while longer and cursed his brother for his delay and swore he had intended mercy to his brother's minions and girls, but now no longer. Then one of Hasjarl's henchmen suggested Gwaay's dart-message might have been a ruse to get them out of the way while an attack was launched from below through other tunnels or even by way of the air-shafts, and Hasjarl seized that henchman by the throat and shook him and demanded why, if he had suspected that, he hadn't spoken earlier.

At that moment a gong sounded, high and silver-sweet, and Hasjarl loosed his henchman and looked around wonderingly. Again the silvery gong-note, then through the wider black archway there slowly stepped two monstrous figures each bear-

ing a forward pole of an ornately carved black and red litter.

All of those in the Ghost Hall were familiar with the tread-slaves, but to see them anywhere except on their belts was almost as great and grotesque a wonder as to see them for the first time. It seemed to portend unsettling of custom and dire upheavals, and so there was much murmuring and some shrinking.

The tread-slaves continued to step ponderously forward and their mates came into view behind them. The four advanced almost to the edge of the raised section of floor and set the litter down and folded their dwarfed arms as well as they could, hooking fingers to fingers across their gigantic chests, and stood motionless.

Then through the same archway there swiftly paced the figure of a rather small sorcerer in black robe and hood that hid his features, and close behind him like his shadow a slightly smaller figure identically clad.

**T**HE Black Sorcerer took his stand to one side of the litter and a little ahead of it, his acolyte behind him to his right, and he lifted alongside his cowl and a wand tipped with glittering silver and said loudly and impressively, "I speak for Gwaay, Master of Demons and Lord of All Quarmall!—as we will prove!"

The Mouser was using his deepest thaumaturgic voice, which none but himself had ever heard, except for the occasion on which he had blasted Gwaay's sorcerers—and come to think of it that had ended with no one else having heard either. He was of course enjoying himself hugely, marveling greatly at his own audacity.

He paused just long enough, then slowly pointed his wand at the low mound on the litter, threw up his other arm in an imperious gesture, palm forward, and commanded, "On your knees, vermin, all of you, and do obeisance to your sole rightful ruler, Lord Gwaay, at whose name demons blench!"

A few of the foremost fools actually obeyed him—evidently Hasjarl had cowed them all too well. While most of the others in the front rank goggled apprehensively at the muffled figure in the litter—truly, it was an advantage having Gwaay motionless and supine, looking like Death's horrid self: it made him a more mysterious threat.

Searching over their heads from the cavern of his cowl, the Mouser spotted one he guessed to be Hasjarl's champion—gods, he was a whopper, big as Fafhrd!—and knowledgeable in psychology if that red silk bag-mask were his own idea. The Mouser didn't relish the idea of battling

such an one, but with luck it wouldn't come to that.

Then there burst through the ranks of the awed guards, whipping them aside with a short lash, a hunch-shouldered figure in dark scarlet robes—Hasjarl at last! and coming to the fore just as the plot demanded.

Hasjarl's ugliness and frenzy surpassed the Mouser's expectations. The Lord of the Upper Levels drew himself up facing the litter and for a suspenseful moment did naught but twitch, stutter, and spray spittle like the veriest idiot. Then suddenly he got his voice and barked most impressively and surely louder than any of his great hounds:

"By right of death—suffered lately or soon—lately by my father, star-smitten and burnt to ash—soon by my impious brother, stricken by my sorceries—and who dare not speak for himself, but must fee charlatans—I, Hasjarl—do proclaim myself—sole Lord of Quarmall—and of all within it—demon or man!"

Then Hasjarl started to turn, most likely to order forward some of his guards to seize Gwaay's party, or perhaps to wave an order to his sorcerers to strike them down magically, but in that instant the Mouser clapped his hands together loudly. At that signal, Ivivis, who'd stepped between him and the lit-



ter, threw back her cowl and opened her robe and let them fall behind her almost in one continuous gesture—and the sight revealed held everyone spell-bound, even Hasjarl, as the Mouser had known it would.

**I**VIVIS was dressed in a transparent black silk tunic—the merest blackly opal gleaming over her pale flesh and slimly youthful figure—but on her face she wore the white mask of a hag, female yet with mouth agrin showing fangs and with fiercely staring eyes red-balled and white-irised, as the Mouser had swiftly repainted them at the direction of Gwaay, speaking from his silver statua. Long green hair mixed with white fell from the mask behind Ivivis and some thin strands of it before her shoulders. Upright before her in her right hand she held ritualistically a large pruning knife.

The Mouser pointed straight at Hasjarl, on who the eyes of the mask were already fixed, and he commanded in his deepest voice, "Bring that one here to me, oh Witch-Mother!" and Ivivis stepped swiftly forward.

Hasjarl took a backward step and stared horror-enchanted at his approaching nemesis, all motherly-cannibalistic above, all elfin-maidenly below, with his father's eyes to daunt him and

with the cruel knife to suggest judgement upon himself for the girls he had lustingly done to death or lifelong crippledness.

The Mouser knew he had success within his grasp and there remained only the closing of the fingers.

At that instant there sounded from the other end of the chamber a great muffled gong-note deep as Gwaay's had been silvery-high, shuddering the bones by its vibrancy. Then from either side of the narrow black archway at the opposite end of the hall from Gwaay's litter, there rose to the ceiling with a hollow roar twin pillars of white fire, commanding all eyes and shattering the Mouser's spell.

The Mouser's instantest reaction was inwardly to curse such superior stage-management.

Smoke billowed out against the great black squares of the ceiling, the pillars sank to white jets, man high, and there strode forward between them the figure of Flindach in his heavily embroidered robes and with the Golden Symbol of Power at his waist, but with the Cowl of Death thrown back to show his blotched warty face and his eyes like those in Ivivis' mask. The High Steward threw wide his arms in a proud imploring gesture and in his deep and resonant voice that filled the Ghost Hall recited thus:

"Oh Gwaay! Oh Hasjarl! In the name of your father burnt and beyond the stars, and in the name of your grandmother whose eyes I too bear, think of Quarmall! Think of the security of this your kingdom and of how your wars ravage her. Forego your enmities, abjure your brotherly hates, and cast your lots now to settle the succession—the winner to be Lord Paramount here, the loser instantly to depart with great escort and coffers of treasure and journey across the Mountains of Hunger and the desert and the Sea of the East and live out his life in the Eastern Lands in all comfort and high dignity. Or if not by customary lot, then let your champions battle to the death to decide it—all else to follow the same. Oh Hasjarl, oh Gwaay, I have spoken." And he folded his arms and stood there between the two pale flamy pillars still burning high as he.

**F**AFHRD had taken advantage of the shocks to seize his sword and axe from the ones holding them nervelessly, and to push forward by Hasjarl as if properly to ward him standing alone and unshielded in front of his men. Now Fafhrd, lightly nudged Hasjarl and whispered through his bag-mask, "Take him up on it, you were best. I'll win your stuffy loathy catacomb

kingdom for you—aye, and once rewarded depart from it swifter ever than Gwaay!"

Hasjarl grimaced angrily at him and turning toward Flindach shouted, "I am Lord Paramount here, and no need of lots to determine it! Yes, and I have my archimages to strike down any who sorcerously challenge me!—and my great champion to smite to mincemeat any who challenge me with swords!"

Fafhrd threw out his chest and glared about through red-ringed eyeholes to back him up.

The silence that followed Hasjarl's boast was cut as if by keenest knife when a voice came piercingly dulcet from the unstirring low mound on the litter, cornered by its four impassive tread-slaves, or from a point just above it:

"I, Gwaay of the Lower Levels, am Lord Paramount of Quarmall, and not my poor brother there, for whose damned soul I grieve. And I have sorceries have saved my life from the vilest of his sorceries and I have a champion will smite his champion to chaff!"

All were somewhat daunted at that seemingly magical speaking except Hasjarl, who giggled sputteringly, twitching a-main, and then as if he and his brother were children alone in a playroom, cried out, "Liar and squeaker of lies! Effeminate

boaster! Puny charlatan! *Where* is this great champion of yours? Call him forth! Bid him appear! Oh confess it now, he's but a figment of your dying thoughts! Oh, ho, ho, ho!"

All began to look around wonderingly at that, some thoughtful, some apprehensive. But as no figure appeared, certainly not a warlike one, some of Hasjarl's men began to snigger with him. Others of them took it up.

The Gray Mouser had no wish to risk his skin—not with Hasjarl's champion looking a meaner foe every moment, side-armed with axe like Fafhrd and now apparently even acting as counselor to his lord—perhaps a sort of captain-general behind the curtain, as he was behind Gwaay's—yet the Mouser was almost irresistibly tempted by this opportunity to cap all surprises with a master surprise.

And in that instant there sounded forth again Gwaay's eerie bell-voice, coming not from his vocal cords, for they were rotted away, but created by the force of his deathless will marshalling the unseen atomies of the air:

"From blackest depths, unseen by all, In very center of the Hall—Appear, my champion!"

**T**HAT was too much for the Mouser. Iivis had reassumed her hooded black robe while

Flindach had been speaking, knowing that the terror of her mag-mask and maiden-form was a fleeting thing, and she again stood beside the Mouser as his acolyte. He handed her his wand in one stiff gesture, not looking at her, and lifting his hands to the throat of his robe, he threw it back and his hood and dropped them behind him, and drawing Scalpel whistling from her sheath leaped forward with a heel-stamp to the top of the three steps and crouched glaring with sword raised above head, looking in his gray silks and silver a figure of menace, albeit a rather small one and carrying at his belt a wine-skin as well as a dagger.

Meanwhile Fafhrd, who had been facing Hasjarl to have a last word with him, now ripped off his red bag-mask, whipped Graywand screaming from his sheath, and leaped forward likewise with an intimidating stamp.

Then they saw and recognized each other.

The pause that ensued was to the spectators more testimony to the fearsomeness of each—the one so dreadful-tall, the other metamorphosed from sorcerer. Evidently they daunted each other greatly.

Fafhrd was the first to react, perhaps because there had been something hauntingly familiar to him all along about the man-

ner and speech of the Black Sorcerer. He started a gargantuan laugh and managed to change it in the nick into a screaming snarl of, "Trickster! Chatterer! Player at magic! Sniffer after spells. Wart! *Little Toad!*"

The Mouser, mayhap the more amazed because he had noted and discounted the resemblance of the masked champion to Fafhrd, now took his comrade's cue—and just in time, for he was about to laugh too—and boomed back, "Boaster! Bumptious brawler! Bumbling fumbler after girls! Oaf! Lout! *Big Feet!*"

The taut spectators thought these taunts a shade mild, but the spiritedness of their delivery more than made up for that.

Fafhrd advanced another stamp, crying, "Oh, I have dreamed of this moment. I will mince you from your thickening toenails to Hisvet's scar!"

The Mouser bounced for his stamp, so as not to lose height going down the steps, and skirled out the while, "All my rages find happy vent. I will gut you of each lie, especially those about your northern travels!"

Then Fafhrd cried, "Remember Ool Hrusp!" and the Mouser responded, "Remember Lithquill!" and they were at it.

**N**OW for all most of the Quar-mallians knew, Lithquill and Ool Hrusp might be and doubt-

less were places where the two heroes had earlier met in fight, or battlefields where they had warred on opposing sides, or even girls they had fought over. But in actuality Lithquill was the Mad Duke of the city of Ool Hrusp, to humor whom Fafhrd and the Mouser had once staged a most realistic and carefully rehearsed duel lasting a full half hour. So those Quar-mallians who anticipated a long and spectacular battle were in no wise disappointed.

First Fafhrd aimed three mighty slashing blows, any one enough to cleave the Mouser in twain, but the Mouser deflected each at the last moment strongly and cunningly with Scalpel, so that they whished an inch above his head, singing the harsh chromatic song of steel on steel.

Next the Mouser thrust thrice at Fafhrd, leaping skimmingly like a flying fish and disengaging his sword each time from Graywand's parry. But Fafhrd always managed to slip his body aside, with nearly incredible swiftness for one so big, and the thin blade would go hurtlessly by him.

This interchange of slash and thrust was but the merest prologue to the duel, which now carried into the area of the dried-up fountain pool and became very wild-seeming indeed, forcing the spectators back more



than once, while the Mouser improvised by gushing out some of his thick bloodred toadstool wine when they were momentarily pressed body-to-body in a fierce exchange, so that they both appeared sorely wounded.

There were three in the Ghost Hall who took no interest in this seeming masterpiece of duels and hardly watched it. Ivivis was not one of them—she soon threw back her hood, tore off her hag-mask, and came following the fight close, cheering on the Mouser. Nor were they Brilla, Kewissa and Friska—for at the sound of swords the two girls had insisted on opening their door a crack despite the eunuch's solicitous apprehensions and now they were all peering through, head above head, Friska in the midst agonizing at Fafhrd's perils.

Gwaay's eyes were clotted and the lids glued with ichor, and the tendons were dissolved whereby he might have lifted his head. Nor did he seek to explore with his sorcerous senses in the direction of the fight. He clung to existence solely by the thread of his great hatred for his brother, all else of life was to him less than a shadow-show; yet his hate held for him all of life's wonder and sweetness and high excitement—it was enough.

The mirror image of that hate in Hasjarl was at this moment

strong enough too to dominate wholly his healthy body's instincts and hungers and all the plots and images in his crackling thoughts. He saw the first stroke of the fight, he saw Gwaay's litter unguarded, and then as if he had seen entire a winning combination of chess and been hypnotized by it, he made his move without another cogitation.

**W**IDELY circling the fight and moving swiftly in the shadows like a weasel, he mounted the three steps by the wall and headed straight for the litter.

There were no ideas in his mind at all, but there were some shadowy images distortedly seen as from a great distance—one of himself as a tiny child toddling by night along a wall to Gwaay's crib, to scratch him with a pin.

He did not spare a glance for the tread-slaves and it is doubtful if they even saw, or at least took note of him, so rudimentary are their minds.

He leaned eagerly between two of them and curiously surveyed his brother. His nostrils drew in at the stench and his mouth contracted to its tightest sphincter yet still smiled.

He plucked a wide dagger of blued steel from a sheath at his belt and poised it above his brother's face, which by its

plagues was almost unrecognizable as such. The honed edges of the dagger were tiny hooks directed back from the point.

The sword-clashing below reached one of its climaxes, but Hasjarl did not mark it.

He said softly, "Open your eyes, Brother. I want you to speak once before I slay you."

There was no reply from Gwaay—not a motion, not a whisper, not a bubble of retching.

"Very well," Hasjarl said harshly, "then die a prim shut-mouth," and he drove down the dagger.

It stopped violently a hair's breadth above Gwaay's upper cheek and the muscles of Hasjarl's arm driving it were stabbingly numbed by the jolt they got.

Gwaay did open his eyes then, which was not very pleasant to behold since there was nothing in them but green ichor.

Hasjarl instantly closed his own eyes, but continued to peer down through the holes in his upper lids.

Then he heard Gwaay's voice like a silver mosquito by his ear saying, "You have made a slight oversight, dear brother. You have chosen the wrong weapon. After our father's burning you swore to me my life was sacrosanct—until you killed me by crushing. '—until I crush it

out,' you said. The gods hear only our words, Brother, not our intentions. Had you come lugging a boulder, like the curious gnome you are, you might have accomplished your aim."

"Then I'll have you crushed!" Hasjarl retorted angrily, leaning his face closer and almost shouting. "Aye, and I'll sit by and listen to your bones crunch!—what bones you have left! You're as great a fool as I, Gwaay, for you too after our father's funeral promised not to slay me. Aye, and you're a greater fool, for now you've spilled to me your little secret of how you may be slain."

"I swore not to slay you with spells or steel or venom or with my hand," the bright insect voice of Gwaay replied. "Unlike you, I said nothing at all of crushing."

Hasjarl felt a strange tingling in his flesh while in his nostrils there was an acrid odor like that of lightning mingling with the stink of corruption.

Suddenly Gwaay's hands thrust up to the palms out of his overly rich bedclothes. The flesh was shredding from the finger bones which pointed straight up, invokingly.

Hasjarl almost started back, but caught himself. He'd die, he told himself, before he'd cringe from his brother. He was aware of strong forces all about him.

There was a muffled grating noise and then an odd faintly pattering snowfall on the coverlet and on Hasjarl's neck . . . a thin snowfall of pale gritty stuff . . . grains of mortar . . .

"Yes, you will crush me, dear brother," Gwaay admitted tranquilly. "But if you would know *how* you will crush me, recall my small special powers . . . or else *look up!*"

Hasjarl turned his head, and there was the great black basalt slab big as the litter rushing down, and the one moment of life left Hasjarl was consumed in hearing Gwaay say, "You are wrong again my comrade."

**F**AFHRD stopped a sword-slash in mid-course when he heard the crash and the Mouser almost nicked him with his rehearsed parry. They lowered their blades and looked, as did all others in the central section of the Ghost Hall.

Where the litter had been was now only the thick basalt slab mortar-streaked with the litter-poles sticking out from under, and above in the ceiling the rectangular white hole whence the slab had been dislodged. The Mouser thought, *That's a larger thing to move by thinking than a checker or jar, yet the same black substance.*

Fafhrd thought, *Why not the*

*whole roof fall?—there's the strangeness.*

Perhaps the greatest wonder of the moment was the four tread-slaves still standing at the four corners, eyes forward, fingers locked across their chests, although the slab had missed them only by inches in its falling.

Then some of Hasjarl's henchmen and sorcerers who had seen their lord sneak to the litter now hurried up to it, but fell back when they beheld how closely the slab approached the floor and marked the tiny rivulet of blood that ran from under it. Their minds quailed at the thought of those brothers who had hated each other so dearly, and now their bodies locked in an obscene interpenetrating and commingling embrace.

Meanwhile Ivivis came running to the Mouser and Friska to Fafhrd to bind up their wounds, and were astonished and mayhap a shade irked to be told there were none. Kewissa and Brilla came too and Fafhrd with one arm around Friska reached out the wine-bloody hand of the other and softly closed it around Kewissa's wrist, smiling at her friendly.

Then the great muffled gong-note sounded again and the twin pillars of white flame briefly roared to the ceiling to either side of Flindach. They showed by



their glare that many men had entered by the narrow archway behind Flindach and now stood around him: stout guardsmen from the companies of the Keep with weapons at the ready, and several of his own sorcerers.

AS the flame-pillars swiftly shrank, Flindach imperiously raised hand and resonantly spoke:

"The stars which may not be cheated foretold the doom of the Lord of Quarmall. All of you heard those two—" (He pointed toward the shattered litter) "—proclaim himself Lord of Quarmall. So the stars are twice satisfied. And the gods, who hear our words to each tiniest whisper, and order our fates by them, are content. It remains that I reveal to you the next Lord of Quarmall."

He pointed at Kewiss and intoned, "*The next Lord of Quarmall but one* sleeps and waxes in the womb of her, wife of the Quarmal so lately honored with burnings and immolations and ceremonious rites."

Kewissa shrank and her blue eyes went wide. Then she began to beam.

Flindach continued, "It still remains that I reveal to you *the next Lord of Quarmall*, who shall tutor Queen Kewissa's babe until he arrives at manhood a perfect king and all-wise sorcerer, un-

der whom our buried realm will enjoy perpetual inward peace and outward-raiding prosperity."

Then Flindach reached behind his left shoulder. All thought he purposed to draw forward the Cowl of Death over his head and brows and hideous warty winey cheeks for some still more solemn speaking. But instead he grasped his neck by the short hairs of the nape and drew it upward and forward and his scalp and all his hair with it, and then the skin of his face came off with his scalp as he drew his hand down and to the side, and there was revealed, sweat-gleaming a little, the unblemished face and jutting nose and full mobile smiling lips of Quarmal, while his terrible bloodred white-irised eyes gazed at them all mildly.

"I was forced to visit Limbo for a space," he explained with a solemn yet genial fatherly familiarity, "while others were Lords of Quarmall in my stead and the stars sent down their spears. It was best so, though I lost two sons by it. Only so might our land be saved from ravenous self-war."

He held up for all to see the limp mask with empty lash-fringed eyeholes and purple-blotched left cheek and wart-triangled right. He said, "And now I bid you all honor great and puissant Flindach, the loy-

alest Master of Magicians king ever had, who lent me his face for a necessary deception and his body to be burned for mine with waxen mask of mine to cover his poor head-front which had sacrificed all. In solemnly supervising my own high flaming obsequies, I honored only Flindach. For him my women burned. This his face, well preserved by my own skills as flayer and swift tanner, will hang forever in place of honor in our halls, whilst the spirit of Flindach holds my chair for me in the Dark World beyond the stars, a lord paramount there until I come and eternally a Hero of Quarmall."

**B**EFORE any cheering or hailing could be started—which would have taken a little while, since all were much bemused—Fafhrd cried out, "Oh cunningest king, I honor you and your babe here. I' faith, I honor your babe so highly and the Queen who carries him in her womb that I will guard her moment by moment, not moving a pace from her, until I and my small comrade here are well outside Quarmall—say a mile—together with horses for our conveyance and with the treasures promised us by those two late kings." And he gestured as Quarmall had toward the crushed litter.

The Mouser had been about to

launch at Quarmall some subtly intimidating remarks about his own skills as a sorcerer in blasting Gwaay's eleven. But now he decided that Fafhrd's words were sufficient and well-spoken, save for the slighting reference to himself, and he held his peace.

Kewissa started to withdraw her hand from Fafhrd's, but he tightened his grip just a little and she looked at him with understanding. In fact, she called brightly to Quarmall, "Oh Lord Husband, this man saved my life and your son's from Hasjarl's fiends in a storeroom of the Keep. I trust him," while Brilla, dabbing tears of joy from his eyes with his undersleeve, seconded her with, "She speaks only nakedest truth, oh my very dear Lord, bare as a newborn babe or new-wed wife."

Quarmall raised his hand a little, reprovingly, as if such speaking were unnecessary and somewhat out of place, and smiling thinly at Fafhrd and the Mouser said, "It shall be as you have spoken. I am neither ungenerous nor unperceptive. Know that it was not altogether by chance that my late sons unbeknown to each other hired you two friends—also mutually unknowing—to be their champions. Furthermore know that I am not altogether unaware of the curiosities of Ningauble of the Seven Eyes or of the spells of Sheelba

of the Eyeless Face. We grand-master sorcerers have a— But to speak more were only to kindle the curiosity of the Gods and alert the Trolls and attract the attention of the restless hungry Fates. Enough is enough.”

Looking at Quarmal's slitted eyes, the Mouser was glad he had not boasted and even Fafhrd shivered a little.

**F**AFHRD cracked whip above the four-horse team to set them pulling the high-piled wagon more briskly through this black sticky stretch of road deeply marked with cart tracks and the hoofprints of oxen, a mile from Quarmall. Friska and Ivivis were turned round on the seat beside him to wave as long a farewell as they might to Kewissa and the eunuch Brilla, standing at the roadside with four impassive guardsmen of Quarmall, to whom they had but now been released.

The Gray Mouser, sprawled on his stomach atop the load, waved too, but only with his left hand—in his right he held a cocked crossbow while his eyes searched the trees about for sign of ambush.

Yet the Mouser was not truly apprehensive. He thought that Quarmal would hardly be apt to try any tricks against such a proven warrior and sorcerer as himself—or Fafhrd too, of

course. The old Lord had shown himself a most gracious host during the last few hours, plying them with rare wines and loading them with rich gifts beyond what they'd asked or what the Mouser had purloined in advance, and even offering them other girls in addition to Ivivis and Friska—a benison which they'd rejected, with some inward regrets, after noting the glares in the eyes of those two.

As the mucky road curved up a little, the towers of Quarmall came into view above the tree-tops. The Mouser's gaze drifted to them and he studied the lacy pinnacles thoughtfully, wondering whether he'd ever see them again. Suddenly the whim seized him to return to Quarmall straightway—yes, to slip off the back of the load and run there. What did the outer world hold half so fine as the wonders of that subterranean kingdom?—its mazy mural-pictured tunnelings a man might spend his life tracing . . . its buried delights . . . even its evils beautiful . . . its delicious infinitely varied blacks . . . its hidden fan-driven air. . . . Yes, suppose he dropped down soundlessly this very moment . . .

There was a flash, a brilliant scintillation from the tallest keep. It priced the Mouser like a goad and he loosed his hold and let himself slide backwards off

the load. But just at that instant the road turned and grew firm and the trees moved higher, masking the towers, and the Mouser came to himself and grabbed hold again before his feet touched the road and he hung there while the wheels creaked merrily and cold sweat drenched him.

Then the wagon stopped and the Mouser dropped down and took three deep breaths and then hastened forward to where Fafhrd had descended too and was busy with the harness of the horses and their traces.

"Up again, Fafhrd, and whip up!" he cried. "This Quarmal is

a cunninger witch than I guessed. If we waste time by the way, I fear for our freedom and our souls!"

"You're telling me?" Fafhrd retorted. "This road winds and there'll be more sticky stretches. Trust a wagon's speed?—pah! We'll uncouple the four horses and taking only simplest victuals and the smallest and most precious of the treasure, gallop across the moor away from Quarmal straight as the crow flies. That way we *should* dodge ambush and outrun ranging pursuit. Friska, Ivivis! Spring to it, all!"

**THE END**