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WHEN THE SEA-KING'S AWAY . . .

. . . *The Gray Mouser and his love-sick friend, Fafhrd, risk their lives for a bit of—well, play.*

By FRITZ LEIBER

ILLUSTRATED by GRAYAM

STRIPPED to his loincloth, underbelt, and with amulet pouch a-dangle under his chin, the Gray Mouser stretched lizardlike along the bowsprit of the sloop *Black Treasurer* and stared straight down into the hole in the sea. Sunlight unstrained by slightest wisp of cloud beat hotly on his deep-tanned back, but his belly was cold with the magic of the thing.

All round about the Inner Sea lay calm as a lake of mercury in the cellar of a wizard's castle. No ripple came from the unbounded horizon to south, east and north, nor rebounded from the endless vertically-fluted curtain of creamy rock that rose a bowshot to the west and was a good three bowshots high, which the Mouser and Fafhrd

had only yesterday climbed and atop which they had made a frightening discovery. The Mouser could have thought of those matters, or of the dismal fact that they were becalmed with little food and less water (and a tabooed cask of brandy) a weary sail west from Ool Hrusp, the last civilized port on this coast—or uncivilized either. He could have wondered about the seductive singing that had seemed to come from the sea last night, as of female voices softly improvising on the themes of waves hissing against sand, gurgling melodiously among rocks, and screaming wind-driven against icy coasts. Or he could perhaps best have pondered on Fafhrd's madness of yesterday afternoon, when the large



In this subterranean cavern the Mouser and Fafhrd found themselves taunted by beauty and surrounded by obstacles.

Northerner had suddenly started to babble dogmatically about finding for himself and the Mouser "girls under the sea" and had even begun to trim his beard and brush out his brown otterskin tunic and polish his best male costume jewelry so as to be properly attired to receive the submarine girls and arouse their desires. There was an old Simorgyan legend, Fafhrd had insisted, according to which on the seventh day of the seventh moon of the seventh year of the Sevens-Cycle the king of the sea journeyed to the other end of the earth, leaving his opalescently beautiful green wives and faintly silver-scaled slim concubines free to find them lovers if they could . . . and this, Fafhrd had stridently asserted he knew by the spectral calm and other occult tokens, was the place of the sea king's home and the eve of the day!

In vain had the Mouser pointed out to him that they had not sighted an even faintly feminine-looking fish in days, that there were absolutely no islets or beaches in view suitable for commerce with mermaids or for the sun-bathing and primping of lore-leis, that there were no black hulks whatever of wrecked pirate ships drifting about

that might conceivably have fair captives imprisoned below decks and so technically "under the sea," that the region beyond the deceptive curtain-wall of creamy rock was the last from which one could expect girls to come, that—to sum it up—the *Black Treasurer* had not fetched the faintest sort of girl-blink either to starboard or larboard for weeks. Fafhrd had simply replied with crushing conviction that the sea king's girls were there down below, that they were now preparing a magic channel or passageway whereby air-breathers might visit them, and that the Mouser had better be ready like himself to hasten when the summons came.

The Mouser had thought that the heat and dazzle of the unremitting sun—together with the sudden intense yearnings normal to all sailormen long at sea—must have deranged Fafhrd and he had dug up from the hold and unsuccessfully coaxed the Northerner to wear a wide-brimmed hat and slitted ice-goggles. It had been a great relief to the Mouser when Fafhrd had fallen into a profound sleep with the coming of night, though then the illusion—or reality—of the sweet siren-

singing had come to trouble his own tranquility.

Yes, the Mouser might well have thought of any of these matters, Fafhrd's prophetic utterances in particular, while he lay poised but unsweating in the hot sun along the stout bowsprit of the *Black Treasurer*, yet the fact is that he had mind only for the jade marvel so close that he could almost reach down a hand and touch the beginning of it.

It is well to approach all miracles and wonders by gradual stages or degrees and we can do this by examining another aspect of the glassy seascape of which the Mouser also might well have been thinking—but wasn't.

Although untroubled by swell, wavelet, or faintest ripple or quiver, the Inner Sea around the sloop was not perfectly flat. Here and there, scatteredly, it was dimpled with small depressions about the size and shape of shallow saucers, as if giant invisible featherweight water-beetles were standing about on it—though the dimples were not arranged in any six-legged or four-legged or even tripod patterns. Moreover, a slim stalk of air seemed to go down from the center of each dimple for an indefinite distance into the water, quite

like the tiny whirlpool that sometimes forms when the turquoise plug is pulled in the brimful golden bathtub of the Queen of the East (or the drain unstoppered in a bathtub of any humbler material belonging to any lowlier person)—except that there was no whirling of water in this case and the air-stalks were not twisted and knotted but straight, as though scores of slim-bladed rapiers with guards like shallow saucers but all as invisible as air had been plunged at random into the motionless waters around the *Black Treasurer*. Or as though a sparse forest of invisible lily pads with straight invisible stems had sprung up around the sloop.

Imagine such an air-stalked dimple magnified so that the saucer was not a palm's breadth but a good spearcast across and the rodlike sword-straight stalk not a fingernail's width but a good four feet, imagine the sloop slid prow-foremost down into that shallow depression but stopping just short of the center and floating motionless there, imagine the bowsprit of the slightly tilted ship projecting over the exact center of the central tube or well of air, imagine a small, stalwart,

nutbrown man in a gray loin-cloth lying along the bowsprit, his feet braced against the foredeck rails, and looking straight down the tube . . . and you have the Gray Mouser's situation exactly!

To be *in* the Mouser's situation and peering down the tube was very fascinating indeed, an experience calculated to drive other thoughts out of any man's mind—or even any woman's! The water here, a bowshot from the creamy rock-wall, was green, remarkably clear, but too deep to allow a view of the bottom—soundings taken yesterday had shown it to vary between six score and seven score feet. Through this water the well-size tube went down as perfectly circular and as smooth as if it were walled with glass; and indeed the Mouser would have believed that it was so walled—that the water immediately around it had been somehow frozen or hardened without altering in transparency—except that at the slightest noise, such as the Mouser's coughing, little quiverings would run up and down it in the form of series of ring-shaped waves.

What power prevented the tremendous weight of the sea from collapsing the tube in

an instant, the Mouser could not begin to imagine.

Yet it was endlessly fascinating to peer down it. Sunlight transmitted through the sea water illuminated it to a considerable depth brightly if greenishly and the circular wall played odd tricks with distance. For instance, at this moment the Mouser, peering down slantwise through the side of the tube, saw a thick fish as long as his arm swimming around it and nosing up to it. The shape of the fish was very familiar yet he could not at once name it. Then, thrusting his head out to one side and peering down at the same fish through the clear water alongside the tube, he saw that the fish was three times the length of his body—in fact, a shark. The Mouser shivered and told himself that the curved wall of the tube must act like the reducing lenses used by a few artists in Lankhmar.

On the whole, though, the Mouser might well have decided in the end that the vertical tunnel in the water was an illusion born of sun-glare and suggestion and have put on the ice-goggles and stuffed his ears with wax against any more siren-singing and then perhaps swigged at the forbidden brandy and gone to

sleep, except for certain other circumstances footing the whole affair much more firmly in reality. For instance, there was a knotted rope securely tied to the bowsprit and hanging down the center of the tube and this rope creaked from time to time with the weight on it, and also there were threads of black smoke coming out of the watery hole (these were what made the Mouser cough), and last but not least there was a torch burning redly far down in the hole—so far down its flame looked no bigger than a candle's—and just beside the flame, somewhat obscured by its smoke and much tinied by distance, was the upward-peering face of Fafhrd!

The Mouser was inclined to take on faith the reality of anything Fafhrd got mixed up with, certainly anything that Fafhrd got physically into—the near-seven-foot Northerner was much too huge a hulk of solid matter to be picturable as strolling arm-in-arm with illusions.

The events leading up to the reality-footing facts of the rope, the smoke, and Fafhrd down the air-well had been quite simple. At dawn the sloop had begun to drift mysteriously among the water

dimples, there being no perceptible wind or current. Shortly afterwards it had bumped over the lip of the large saucer-shaped depression and slid to its present position with a little rush and then frozen there, as though the sloop's bowsprit and the hole were mutually desirous magnetic pole coupling together. Thereafter, while the Mouser had watched with eyes goggling and teeth a-chatter, Fafhrd had sighted down the hole, grunted with stolid satisfaction, slung the knotted rope down it, and then proceeded to array himself, seemingly with both war and love in mind—pomading his hair and beard, perfuming his hairy chest and armpits, putting on a blue silk tunic under the gleaming one of otterskin and all his silver-plated necklaces, arm-bands, brooches and rings as well, but also strapping long-sword and axe to his sides and lacing on his spiked boots. Then he had lit a long thin torch of resinous pine in the galley firebox and when it was flaming bravely he had, despite the Mouser's solicitous cries and tugging protests, gone out on the bowsprit and lowered himself into the hole, using thumb and forefinger of his right hand to grip the

torch and the other three fingers of that hand, along with his left hand, to grip the rope. Only then had he spoken, calling on the Mouser to make ready and follow him if the Mouser were more hot-blooded man than cold-blooded lizard.

The Mouser had made ready to the extent of stripping off most of his clothing—it had occurred to him it would be necessary to dive for Fafhrd when the hole became aware of its own impossibility and collapsed—and he had fetched to the foredeck his own sword Scalpel and dagger Cat's Claw in their case of oiled sealskin with the notion they might be needed against sharks. Thereafter he had simply poised on the bowsprit, as we have seen, observing Fafhrd's slow descent and letting the fascination of it all take hold of him.

At last he dipped his head and called softly down the hole, "Fafhrd, have you reached bottom yet?" frowning at the ring-shaped ripples even this gentle calling sent traveling down the hole and up again by reflection.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

Fafhrd's answering bellow, concentrated by the tube and coming out of it like a solid projectile, almost blasted the

Mouser off the bowsprit. Far more terrifying, the ring-ripples accompanying the bellow were so huge they almost seemed to close off the tube—narrowing it from four to two or three feet at any rate and dashing a spray of drops up into the Mouser's face as they reached the surface, lifting the rim upward as if the water were elastic, and then were reflected down the tube again.

The Mouser closed his eyes in a wince of horror, but when he opened them the hole was still there and the giant ring-ripples were beginning to abate.

Only a shade more loudly than the first time, but much more poignantly, the Mouser called down, "Fafhrd, don't do that again!"

"WHAT?"

This time the Mouser was prepared for it—just the same it was most horrid to watch those huge rings traveling up and down the tube in an arrow-swift green peristalsis. He firmly resolved to do no more calling, but just then Fafhrd started to speak up the tube in a voice of more rational volume—the rings produced were hardly thicker than a man's wrist.

"Come on, Mouser! It's

easy! You only have to drop the last six feet!"

"Don't drop it, Fafhrd!" the Mouser instantly replied. "Climb back up!"

"I already have! Dropped, I mean. I'm on the bottom. Oh, Mouser . . . !"

The last part of Fafhrd's call was in a voice so infused with a mingled awe and excitement that the Mouser immediately asked back down, "What? 'Oh, Mouser' — what?"

"It's wonderful, it's amazing, it's fantastic!" the reply came back from below—but this time very faintly all of a sudden, as if Fafhrd had somehow gone around an impossible bend or two in the tube.

"What is, Fafhrd?" the Mouser demanded—and this time his own voice raised moderate rings. "Don't go away, Fafhrd. But what is down there?"

"Everything!" the answer came back, not quite so faint this time.

"Are there girls?" the Mouser queried.

"A whole world!"

The Mouser sighed. The moment had come, he knew, as it always did, when outward circumstances and inner urges commanded an act, when curiosity and fascina-

tion tipped the scale of caution, when the lure of a vision and an adventure became so great and deep-hooking that he must respond to it or have his inmost self-respect eaten away.

Besides, he knew from long experience that the only way to extricate Fafhrd from the predicaments into which he got himself was to go fetch the perfumed and be-sworded lout!

So the Mouser sprang up lightly, clipped to his under-belt his sealskin-cased weapons, hung beside them in loops a short length of knotted line with a slip-noose tied in one end, made sure that the sloop's hatches were securely covered and even that the galley fire was tightly boxed, rattled off a short scornful prayer to the Gods of Lankhmar, and lowered himself off the bowsprit and down into the green hole.

The hole was chilly and it smelt of fish, smoke, and Fafhrd's pomade. The Mouser's main concern as soon as he got in it, he discovered to his surprise, was not to touch its glassy sides. He had the feeling that if he so much as lightly brushed it, the water's miraculous "skin" would rupture and he would be engulf-

ed—rather as an oiled needle floating on a bowl of water in its tiny hammock of “water skin” is engulfed and sinks when one pinks it. He descended rapidly knot by knot, supporting himself by his hands, barely touching his toes to the rope below, praying there would be no sway and that he would be able to check it if it started. It occurred to him he should have told Fafhrd to guy the rope at the bottom if he possibly could and above all have warned him not to shout up the tube while the Mouser descended—the thought of being squeezed by those dread water-rings was almost too much to bear. Too late now!—any word now would only too surely bring a bellow from the Northerner in reply.

First fears having been thus inspected though by no means banished, the Mouser began to take some note of his surroundings. The luminous green world was not just one emerald blank as it had seemed at first. There was life in it, though not in the greatest abundance: thin strands of scalloped maroon seaweed, near-invisible jellyfish trailing their opalescent fringes, tiny dark skates hovering like bats, small silvery backboned fish

gliding and darting—some of them, a blue-and-yellow-ringed and black-spotted school, even contesting lazily over the *Black Treasurer's* morning garbage, which the Mouser recognized by a large pallid beef-bone Fafhrd had gnawed briefly before tossing over-side.

Looking up, he was hard put not to gasp in horror. The hull of the sloop, pressing down darkly though pearled with bubbles, looked seven times higher above him than the distance he had descended by his count of the knots. Looking straight up the tube, however, he saw that the circle of deep blue sky had not shrunk correspondingly while the bowsprit bisecting it was still reassuringly thick. The curve of the tube had shrunk the sloop as it had the shark. The illusion was most weird and foreboding, nonetheless.

And now as the Mouser continued his swift descent, the circle overhead did grow smaller and more deeply blue, becoming a cobalt platter, a peacock saucer, and finally no more than a strange ultramarine coin that was the converging point of the tube and rope and in which the Mouser thought he saw a star flash. The Gray One puffed a few rapid kisses toward it, think-

ing how like they were to a drowning man's last bubbles. The light dimmed. The colors around him faded, the maroon seaweed turned gray, the fish lost their yellow rings, and the Mouser's own hands became blue as those of a corpse. And now he began to make out dimly the sea bottom, at the same extravagant distance below as the sloop was above, though immediately under him the bottom was oddly veiled or blanketed and only far off could he make out rocks and ridged stretches of sand.

His arms and shoulders ached. His palms burned. A monstrously fat grouper swam up to the tube and followed him down it, circling. The Mouser glared at it menacingly and it turned on its side and opened an impossibly large moon-crescent of mouth. The Mouser saw the razor teeth and realized it was the shark he'd seen or another like it, tinied by the lens of the tube. The teeth clashed, some of them inside the tube, only inches from his side. The water's "skin" did not rupture disastrously, although the Mouser got the eerie impression that the "bite" was bleeding a little water into the tube. The shark swam off

to continue its circling at a moderate distance and the Mouser refrained from any more menacing looks.

Meanwhile the fishy smell had grown stronger and the smoke must have been getting thicker too, for now the Mouser coughed in spite of himself, setting the water rings shooting up and down. He fought to suppress an anguished curse—and at that moment his toes no longer touched rope. He unloosed the extra coil from his belt, went down three more knots, tightened the slip-noose above the second knot from the bottom, and continued on his way.

Five handholds later his feet found a footing in cold muck. He gratefully unclenched his hands, working his cramped fingers, at the same time calling "Fafhrd!" softly but angrily. Then he looked around.

He was standing in the center of a large low tent of air, which was floored by the velvety sea-muck in which he had sunk to his ankles and roofed by the leadenly gleaming undersurface of the water—not evenly though, but in swells and hollows with ominous downward bulges here and there. The air-tent was about ten feet high at the foot of the tube. Its diameter

seemed at least twenty times that, though exactly how far the edges extended it was impossible to judge for several reasons: the great irregularity of the tent's roof, the difficulty of even guessing at the extent of some outer areas where the distance between water-roof and muck-floor was measurable in inches, the fact that the gray light transmitted from above hardly permitted decent vision for more than two dozen yards, and finally the circumstance that there was considerable torch-smoke in the way here and there, writhing in thick coils along the ceiling, collecting in topsy-turvy pockets, though eventually gliding sluggishly up the tube.

What fabulous invisible "tent-poles" propped up the oceans-heavy roof the Mouser could no more conceive than the force that kept the tube open.

Writhing his nostrils distastefully, both at the smoke and the augmented fishy smell, the Mouser squinted fiercely around the tent's full circumference. Eventually he saw a dull red glow in the black smudge where it was thickest and a little later Fafhrd emerged. The reeking flame of the pine torch, which was

still no more than half consumed, showed the Northerner bemired with seamuck to his thighs and hugging gently to his side with his bent left arm a dripping mess of variously gleaming objects. He was stooped over somewhat, for the roof bulged down where he stood.

"Blubber brain!" the Mouser greeted him. "Put out that torch before we smother! We can see better without it. Oh oaf, to blind yourself with smoke for the sake of light!"

To the Mouser there was obviously only one sane way to extinguish the torch—jab it in the wet muck underfoot—but Fafhrd, though evidently most agreeable to the Mouser's suggestion in a vacantly smiling way, had another idea. Despite the Mouser's anguished cry of warning, he casually thrust the flaming stick into the watery roof.

There was a loud hissing and a large downward puff of steam and for a moment the Mouser thought his worst dreads had been realized, for an angry squirt of water from the quenching point struck Fafhrd in the neck. But when the steam cleared it became evident that the rest of the sea was not going to follow the squirt, at least not at once, though now there was an omi-

nous lump, like a rounded tumor, in the roof where Fafhrd had thrust the torch and from it water ran steadily in a stream thick as a quill, digging a tiny crater where it struck the muck below.

"Don't do that!" the Mouser commanded in unwise fury.

"This?" Fafhrd asked gently, poking a finger through the ceiling next to the dripping bulge. Again came the angry squirt, diminishing at once to a trickle, and now there were two bulges closely side by side, quite like breasts.

"Yes, *that*—not again," the Mouser managed to reply, his voice distant and high because of the self-control it took him not to rage at Fafhrd and so perhaps provoke even more reckless probings.

"Very well, I won't," the Northerner assured him. "Though," he added, gazing thoughtfully at the twin streams, "it would take those dribblings years to fill up this cavity."

"Who speaks of years down here?" the Mouser snarled at him. "Dolt! Iron Skull! What made you lie to me? 'Everything' was down here, you said—'a whole world.' And what do I find? Nothing! A miserable little cramp-roofed field of stinking mud!" And the Mouser stamped a foot in

rage, which only splashed him foully, while a puffed, phosphorescent-whiskered fish expiring on the mire looked up at him reproachfully.

"That rude treading," Fafhrd said softly, "may have burst the silver-filigreed skull of a princess. 'Nothing,' say you? Look you then, Mouser, what treasure I have dugged from your stinking field."

And as he came toward the Mouser, his big feet gliding gently through the top of the muck for all the spikes on his boots, he gently rocked the gleaming things cradled in his left arm and let the fingers of his right hand drift gently among them.

"Aye," he said, "jewels and gauds undreamed by those who sail above, yet all teased by me from the ooze while I sought another thing."

"What other thing, Gristle Dome?" the Mouser demanded harshly, though eyeing the gleaming things hungrily.

"The path," Fafhrd said a little querulously, as if the Mouser must know what he meant. "The path that leads from some corner or fold of this tent of air to the sea-king's girls. These things are a sure promise of it. Look you, here, Mouser." And he opened his bent left arm a little and lifted out most delicately with

thumb and finger-tips a life-size metallic mask.

Impossible to tell in that drained gray light whether the metal were gold or silver or tin or even bronze and whether the wide wavy streaks down it, like the tracks of blue-green sweat and tears, were verdigris or slime. Yet it was clear that it was female, patrician, all-knowing yet alluring, loving yet cruel, hauntingly beautiful. The Mouser snatched it eagerly yet angrily and the whole lower face crumpled in his hand, leaving only the proud forehead and the eyeholes staring at him more tragically than eyes.

The Mouser flinched back, expecting Fafhrd to strike him, but in the same instant he saw the Northerner turning away and lifting his straight right arm, index finger a-point, like a slow semaphore.

"You were right, oh Mouser!" Fafhrd cried joyously. "Not only my torch's smoke but its very light blinded me. See! See the path!"

The Mouser's gaze followed Fafhrd's pointing. Now that the smoke was somewhat abated and the torch-flame no longer shot out its orange rays, the patchy phosphorescence of the muck and of the dying sea-

things scattered about had become clearly visible despite the muted light filtering from above.

The phosphorescence was not altogether patchy, however. Beginning at the hole from which the knotted rope hung, a path of unbroken greenish-yellow witch-fire a long stride in width led across the muck toward an unpromising-looking corner of the tent of air where it seemed to disappear.

"Don't follow it, Fafhrd," the Mouser automatically enjoined, but the Northerner was already moving past him, taking long dreamlike strides. By degrees his cradling arm unbent and one by one his ooze-won treasures began to slip from it into the muck. He reached the path and started along it, placing his spike-soled feet in the very center.

"Don't follow it, Fafhrd," the Mouser repeated—a little hopelessly, almost whiningly, it must be admitted. "Don't follow it, I say. It leads only to squidgy death. We can still go back up the rope, aye, and take your loot with us . . ."

But meanwhile he himself was following Fafhrd and snatching up, though more cautiously than he had the mask, the objects his comrade let slip. It was not worth the

effort, the Mouser told himself as he continued to do it: though they gleamed enticingly, the various necklaces, tiaras, filigreed breast-cups and great-pinned brooches weighed no more and were no thicker than plaitings of dead ferns. He could not seem to equal Fafhrd's delicacy and they fell apart at his touch.

Fafhrd turned back to him a face radiant as one who dreams sleeping of ultimate ecstasies. As the last ghost-gaud slipped from his arm, he said, "They are nothing—no more than the mask—mere sea-gnawed wraiths of treasure. But oh, the promise of them, Mouser! Oh, the promise!"

And with that he turned forward again and stooped under a large downward bulge in the low leaden-hued roof.

The Mouser took one look back along the glowing path to the small circular patch of sky-light with the knotted rope falling in the center of it. The twin streams of water coming from the two "wounds" in the ceiling seemed to be running more strongly—where they hit, the muck was splashing. Then he followed Fafhrd.

On the other side of the bulge the ceiling rose again to

more than head-height, but the walls of the tent narrowed in sharply. Soon they were treading along a veritable tunnel in the water, a leaden arch-roofed passageway no wider than the phosphorescently yellow-green path that floored it. The tunnel curved just enough now to left, now to right, so that there was no seeing any long distance ahead. From time to time the Mouser thought he heard faint whistlings and moanings echoing along it. He stepped over a large crab that was backing feebly and saw beside it a dead man's hand emerging from the glowing muck, one shred-fleshed finger pointing the way they were taking.

Fafhrd half turned his head and muttered gravely, "Mark me, Mouser, there's magic in this somewhere!"

The Mouser thought he had never in his life heard a less necessary remark. He felt considerably depressed. He had long given up his puerile pleadings with Fafhrd to turn back—he knew there was no way of stopping Fafhrd short of grappling with him, and a tussle that would invariably send them crashing through one of the watery walls of the tunnel was by no means to his liking. Of course, he could always turn back alone. Still . . .

With the monotony of the tunnel and of just putting one foot after the other into the clinging muck and withdrawing it with a soft *plop*, the Mouser found time to become oppressed too with the thought of the weight of the water overhead. It was as though he walked with all the ships of the world on his back. His imagination would picture nothing but the tunnel's instant collapse. He hunched his head into his shoulders and it was all he could do not to drop to his elbows and knees and then stretch himself face down in the muck with the mere anticipation of the event.

The sea seemed to grow a little whiter ahead and the Mouser realized the tunnel was approaching the under-reaches of the curtain-wall of creamy rock he and Fafhrd had climbed yesterday. The memory of that climb let his imagination escape at last, perhaps because it fitted with the urge that he and Fafhrd somehow lift themselves out of their present predicament.

It had been a difficult ascent, although the pale rock had proved hard and reliable, for footholds and ledges had been few and they had had to rope up and go by way of a branching chimney, often driving pitons into cracks to cre-

ate a support where none was—but they had had high hopes of finding fresh water and game, too, likely enough, so far west of Ool Hrusp and its hunters. At last they had reached the top, aching and a little blown from their climb and quite ready to throw themselves down and rest while they surveyed the landscape of grassland and stunted trees that they knew to be characteristic of other parts of this most lonely peninsula stretching southwestward between the Inner and Outer Seas.

Instead they had found . . . nothing. Worse than nothing, in a way, if that were possible. The longed-for top proved to be the merest edge of rock, three feet wide at the most and narrower some places, while on the other side the rock descended even more precipitously than on the side which they had climbed—indeed it was deeply undercut in large areas—and for an equal or rather somewhat greater distance. From the foot of this dizzying drop a wilderness of waves, foam and rocks extended to the horizon.

They had found themselves clinging a-straddle to a veritable rock curtain, paper-thin in respect to its height and hori-

zontal extent, between the Inner and what they realized must be the Outer Sea, which had eaten its way across the unexplored peninsula in this region but not yet quite broken through. As far as eye could see in either direction the same situation obtained, though the Mouser fancied he could make out a thickening of the wall in the direction of Ool Hrusp.

Fafhrd had laughed at the surprise of the thing—gargantuan bellows of mirth that had made the Mouser curse him silently for fear the mere vibrations of his voice might shatter and tumble down the knife-edged saddle on which they perched. Indeed the Mouser had grown so angry with Fafhrd's laughter that he had sprung up and nimbly danced a jig of rage on the rock-ribbon, thinking meanwhile of wise Sheelba's saying: "Know it or not, man treads between twin abysses a tightrope that has neither beginning nor end."

Having thus expressed their feelings of horrified shock, each in his way, they had surveyed the yeasty sea below more rationally. The amount of surf and the numbers of emergent rocks showed it to be more shallow for some distance out—even likely, Fa-

fhrd had opined, to drain itself at low tide, for his moon-lore told him that tides in this region of the world must at the moment be near high. Of the emergent rocks, one in particular stood out: a thick pillar two bowshot from the curtain wall and as high as a four-story house. The pillar was spiraled by ledges that looked as if they were in part of human cutting, while set in its thicker base and emerging from the foam there appeared an oddly criss-crossed weed-fringed rectangle that looked mightily like a large stout door—though where such a door might lead and who would use it were perplexing questions indeed.

Then, since there was no answering that question or others and since there was clearly no fresh water or game to be had from this literal shell of a coast, they had descended back to the Inner Sea and the *Black Treasurer*, though now each time they had driven a piton it had been with the fear that the whole wall might split and collapse . . .

"'Ware rocks!"

Fafhrd's warning cry pulled the Mouser out of his waking memory-dream—dropped him in a split instant as if it were, from the upper reaches of the

creamy curtain-wall to a spot almost an equal distance below its sea-gnawed base. Just ahead of him three thick lumpy daggers of rock thrust down inexplicably through the gray watery ceiling of the tunnel. The Mouser shudderingly wove his head past them, as Fafhrd must have, and then looking beyond his comrade he saw more rocky protuberances encroaching on the tunnel from all sides—saw, in fact, as he strode on, that the tunnel was changing from one of water and muck to one roofed, walled and floored with solid rock. The water-born light faded away behind them, but the increasing phosphorescence natural to the animal life of a sea cavern almost compensated for it, boldly outlining their wet stony way and here and there glowing with especial brilliance and variety of color from the bands, portholes, feelers and eye-rings of many a dying fish and crawler.

The Mouser realized they must be passing far under the curtain-wall he and Fafhrd had climbed yesterday and that the tunnel ahead must be leading under the Outer Sea they had seen tossing with billows. There was no longer that immediate oppressive sense of a crushing weight of

ocean overhead or of brushing elbows with magic. Yet the thought that if the tube, tent and tunnel behind them should collapse, then a great gush of solid water would rush into the rock-tunnel and engulf them, was in some ways even worse. Back under the water roof he'd had the feeling that even if it should collapse he might reach the surface alive by bold swimming and conceivably drag the cumbered Fafhrd up with him. But here they'd be hopelessly trapped.

True, the tunnel seemed to be ascending, but not enough or swiftly enough to please the Mouser. Moreover, if it did finally emerge, it would be to that shattering welter of foam they'd peered down at yesterday. Truly, the Mouser found it hard to pick between his druthers, or even to have any druthers at all. His feelings of depression and doom gradually sank to a new and perhaps ultimate nadir, and in a desperate effort to wrench them up he deliberately imagined to himself the zestiest tavern he knew in Lankhmar—a great gray cellar all a-flare with torches, wine streaming and spilling, tankards and coins a-clink, voices braying and roaring, poppy fumes a-twirl, naked girls writhing in lascivious dances . . .

"Oh, Mouser . . . !"

Fafhrd's deep and feelingful whisper and the Northerner's large hand against his chest halted the Mouser's plodding, but whether it fetched his spirit back below the Outer Sea or simply produced a fantastic alteration in its escapist imagining, the Gray One could not at once be sure.

They were standing in the entrance to a vast submarine grotto that rose in multiple steps and terraces toward an indefinite ceiling from which cascaded down like silver mist a glow about thrice the strength of moonlight. The grotto reeked of the sea like the tunnel behind them; it was likewise scattered with expiring fish and eels and small octopuses; molluscs tiny and huge clustered on its walls and corners between weedy draperies and silver-green veils; while its various niches and dark circular doorways and even the stepped and terraced floor seemed shaped in part at least by the action of rushing waters and grinding sand.

The silver mist did not fall evenly but concentrated itself in swirls and waves of light on three terraces. The first of these was placed centrally and only a level stretch and then a few low ledges separated it from the tunnel's mouth. Upon

this terrace was set a great stone table with weed-fringed sides and mollusc-crusts legs but level top of grained and spotted marble polished to what looked an exquisite smoothness. A great golden basin stood on one end of this table and two golden goblets beside the basin.

Beyond the first terrace rose a second uneven flight of steps with areas of menacing shadow pressing upon it from either side. Behind the areas of darkness were a second and third terrace that the silvery light favored. The one on the right—Fafhrd's side, to call it that, for he stood to the right in the tunnel mouth—was walled and arched with mother-of-pearl, almost as if it were one gigantic shell, and pearly swells rose from its floor like heaped satin pillows. The one on the Mouser's side, slightly below, was backed by an arras of maroon seaweed that fell in wide scalloped strands and billowed on the floor. From between these twin terraces the flight of irregular steps or ledges continued upward into a third area of darkness.

Shifting shadows and dark wavings and odd gleamings hinted that the three areas of darkness might be occupied;

there was no doubt that the three bright terraces were. On the upper terrace on Fafhrd's side stood a tall and opulently beautiful woman whose golden hair rose in spiral masses like a shell and whose dress of golden fishnet clung to her pale greenish flesh. Her fingers showed greenish webs between them and on the side of her neck as she turned were faint scorings like a fish's gills.

On the Mouser's side was a slimmer yet exquisitely feminine creature whose silver flesh seemed to merge into silver scales on shoulders, back and flanks under her robe of filmy violet and whose short dark hair was split back from her low forehead's center by a scalloped silver crest a hand's breadth high. She too showed the faint neck-scorings and finger webs.

The third figure, standing a-crouch behind the table, was sexlessly scrawny, with an effect of wiry old age, and either gowned or clad closely in jet black. A shock of rope-thick hairs dark red as iron rust covered her head while her gills and finger webs were starkly apparent.

Each of these women wore a metal mask resembling in form and expression the eaten-away one Fafhrd had found

in the muck. That of the first figure was gold; of the second, silver; of the third, green-splotched sea-darkened bronze.

The first two women were still, not as if they were part of a show but as though they were observing one. The scrawny black sea-witch was vibrantly active, although she hardly moved on her black-webbed toes except to shift position abruptly and ever so slightly now and then. She held a short whip in either hand, the webs folded outside her bent knuckles, and with these whips she maintained and directed the swift spinning of a half dozen objects on the polished table top. What these objects were it was impossible to say, except that they were roughly oval. Some by their semi-transparency as they spun might have been large rings or saucers, others actual tops by their opacity. They gleamed silver and green and golden and they spun so swiftly and moved in such swift-intersecting orbits as they spun that they seemed to leave gleaming wakes of spin in the misty air behind them. Whenever one would flag in its spinning and its true form begin to blink into visibility, she'd bring it back up to speed again with two or three rapid

whip-flips; or should one veer too close to the table's edge or the golden basin, or threaten to collide with another, she'd redirect its orbit with deft lashings; now and again, with incredible skill, she'd flick one so that it jumped high in the air and then flick it again at landing so that it went on spinning without a break, leaving above it an evanescent loop of silvery air-spin.

These whirring objects made the pulsing moans and whistles the Mouser had heard along the tunnel.

As he watched them now and listened to them, the Gray One became convinced—partly because the silvery curving tubes of spin made him think of the air shaft he'd rope-climbed and the air-tunnel he'd plodded—that these spinning things were a crucial part of the magic that had created and held open the path through the Inner Sea behind them, and that once they should cease whirring then the shaft and tent and tunnel would collapse and the waters of the Inner Sea speed through the rock-tunnel into this grotto.

And indeed the scrawny black sea-witch looked to the Mouser as though she'd been whipping her tops for hours and—more to the point—

would be able to keep on whipping them for hours more. She showed no signs of her exertion save the rhythmic rise and fall of her breastless chest and the extra whistle of breath through the mouth-slit of her mask and the gape and close of her gills.

Now she seemed for the first time to see him and Fafhrd, for without leaving off her whipping she thrust her bronze mask toward them, red ropes a-spill across its green-blotched forehead, and glared at them—hungrily, it seemed. Yet she made them no other menace, but after a searching scrutiny jerked back her head twice, as if for a sign that they should go past her. At the same time the green and silver queens beckoned to them languorously.

This woke the Mouser and Fafhrd from their dazed watching and they complied eagerly enough, though in passing the table the Mouser sniffed wine and paused to take up the two golden goblets, handing one to his comrade. They drained them despite the green hue of the drink, for the stuff smelt right and was fiery sweet yet tart.

As he drank, the Mouser saw into the golden bowl. It held no store of green wine,

but was filled almost to the brim with a crystal fluid that might or might not have been water. On the fluid floated a model, hardly a finger long, of the hull of a black boat. A tiny tube of air seemed to go down from its prow.

But there was no time for closer looking, for Fafhrd was moving on. The Mouser stepped up into his area of shadow to the left as Fafhrd had done to the right . . . and as he so stepped, there sidled from the shadows before him two blue-pallid men armed each with a pair of wave-edged knives. They were sailors, he judged from their pigtails and shuffling gait, although they were both naked, and they were indisputably dead—by token of their unhealthy color, their carelessness of the thick slime streaking them, the way their bulging eyes showed only whites and the bottom crescent of the irises, and the fact that their hair, ears, and other portions of their anatomies looked somewhat fish-chewed. Behind them waddled a scimitar-wielding dwarf with short spindle legs and monstrous head and gills—a veritable walking embryo. His great saucer eyes too were the upturned ones of a dead thing, which did not make the Mouser feel any easier as he whisk-

ed Scalpel and Cat's Claw out of their sealskin case, for the three converged on him confidently where he stood and rapidly shifted to block his way as he sought to circle behind them.

It was probably just as well that the Mouser had at that moment no attention to spare for his comrade's predicament. Fafhrd's area of shadow was black as ink toward the wall, and as the Northerner strode through the margin of it past a ridged and man-sized knob of rock rising from the ledges and between him and the Mouser, there lifted from the further blackness—like eight giant serpents rearing from their lair—the thick, sinuous, crater-studded arms of a monstrous octopus. The sea-beast's movement must have struck internal sparks, for it simultaneously flashed into a yellow-streaked purplish iridescence, showing Fafhrd its baleful eyes large as plates, its cruel beak big as the prow of an overturned skiff, and the rather unlikely circumstance that the end of each mighty tentacle wrapped powerfully around the hilt of a gleaming broadsword.

Snatching at his own sword and axe, Fafhrd backed away from the be-weaponed squid against the ridged knob of

rock. Two of the ridges, being the vertical shell-edges of a mollusc four feet across, instantly closed on the slack of his otterskin tunic, firmly holding him there.

Greatly daunted but determined to live nevertheless, the Northerner swung his sword in a great figure eight, the lower loop of which almost nicked the floor, while the upper loop rose above his head like a tall arching shield. This double-petalled flower of steel baffled the four blades or so with which the octopus first came chopping at him rather cautiously, and as the sea monster drew back his arms for another volley of slashes, Fafhrd's left arm licked out with his axe and chopped through the nearest tentacle.

His adversary hooted loudly then and struck repeatedly with all his swords, and for a space it looked as though Fafhrd's universal parry must surely be pierced, but then the axe licked out again from the center of the sword-shield, once, twice, and two more tentacle tips fell and the swords they gripped with them. The octopus drew back then out of reach and sprayed a great mist-cloud of stinking black ink from its tube, under cover of which it might work its will unseen on the pinned North-

erner, but even as the blinding mist billowed toward him Fafhrd hurled his axe at the huge central head. And although the black fog hid the axe almost as soon as it left his hand, the heavy weapon must have reached a vital spot, for immediately the octopus hurled its remaining swords about the grotto at random (fortunately striking no one although they made a fine clatter) as its tentacles thrashed in dying convulsions.

Fafhrd drew a small knife, slashed his otterskin tunic down the front and across the shoulders, stepped out of it with a contemptuous wave to the mollusc as if to say, "Have it for supper if you will," and turned to see how his comrade fared. The Mouser, bleeding greenly from two trivial wounds in ribs and shoulder, had just finished severing the major tendons of his three hideous opponents—this having proved the only way to immobilize them when various mortal wounds had slowed them in no way at all nor caused them to bleed one drop of blood of any color.

He smiled sickishly at Fafhrd and turned with him toward the upper terraces. And now it became clear that the Green and Silver Ones were at

least in one respect true queens, for they had not fled the prodigious battles as lesser women might, but abided them and now waited with arms lightly outstretched. Their gold and silver masks could not smile, but their bodies did, and as the two adventurers mounted toward them from the shadow into the light (the Mouser's little wounds changing from green to red, but Fafhrd's blue tunic staying pretty inky) it seemed to them that veily finger-webs and light neck-scorings were the highest points of female beauty. The lights faded somewhat on the upper terraces, though not on the lower where the monotonous six-toned music of the tops kept reassuringly on, and the two heroes entered each into that dark lustrous realm where all thoughts of wounds are forgotten and all memories of even the zestiest Lankhmar wine-cellar grow flat, and the Sea, our cruel mother and loving mistress, repays all debts.

A great soundless jar, as of the rock-solid earth moving, recalled the Mouser to his surroundings. Almost simultaneously the whir of one of the tops mounted to a high-pitched whine ending in a tinkly crash. The silver light began to pulse and flicker wildly

throughout the grotto. Springing to his feet and looking down the steps, the Mouser saw a memory-etching sight: the rust-topped black sea witch whipping wildly at her rebellious tops, which leaped and bounded about the table like fierce silver weasels, while through the air around her from all sides but chiefly from the tunnel there converged an arrow-swift flight of flying fish, skates, and ribbon-edged eels, all inky black and with tiny jaws agape.

At that instant Fafhrd seized him by the shoulder and jerked him fully around, pointing up the ledges. A silver lightning flash showed a great cross-beamed, weed-fringed door at the head of the rocky stairs. The Mouser nodded violently—meaning he understood it resembled and must be the door they had yesterday seen from the ribbony cliff-summit — and Fafhrd, satisfied his comrade would follow him, dashed toward it up the ledges.

But the Mouser had a different thought and darted in the opposite direction in the face of an ominous wet reeking wind. Returning a dozen lightning-flashes later, he saw the green and silver queens disappearing into round black tunnel mouths in the rock to

either side of the terrace and then they were gone.

As he joined Fafhrd in the work of unsettling the cross-bars of the great weedy door and drawing its massive rusty bolts, it quivered under a portentous triple knocking as though someone had smote it thrice with a long-skirted cloak of chain mail. Water squirted under it and through the lower third of the central vertical crack. The Mouser looked behind him then, with the thought that they might yet have to seek another avenue of escape . . . and saw a great white-headed pillar of water jetting more than half the height of the grotto from the mouth of the tunnel connecting with the Inner Sea. Just then the silver cavern-light went out, but almost immediately other light spilled from above. Fafhrd had heaved open half of the great door. Green water foamed about their knees and subsided. They fought their way through and as the great door slammed behind them under a fresh surge of water, they found themselves sloshing about on a wild beach blown with foam, swimming with surf, and floored chiefly with large flat water-worn oval rocks like giants' skipping stones. The Mouser,

turned shoreward, squinted desperately at the creamy cliff two bowshot away, wondering if they could possibly reach it through the mounting tide and climb it if they did.

But Fafhrd was looking seaward. The Mouser again felt himself shoulder-grabbed, spun around, and this time dragged up a curving ledge of the great tower-rock in the base of which was set the door through which they had just emerged. He stumbled, cutting his knees, but was jerked ruthlessly on. He decided that Fafhrd must have some very good reason for so rudely enjoining haste and thereafter did his best to hurry without assistance at Fafhrd's heels up the spiraling ramplike ledge. On the second circling he stole a seaward look, gasped, and increased the speed of his mad dizzy scramble.

The stony beach below was drained and only here and there patched with huge gouts of spume, but roaring toward them from outer ocean was a giant wave that looked almost half as high as the pillar they were mounting—a great white wall of water flecked with green and brown and studded with rocks—a wave such as distant earthquakes send charging across the sea like a massed cavalry of monsters.

Behind that wave came a taller one, and behind that a third taller still.

The Mouser and Fafhrd were three gasping circles higher when the stout tower shuddered and shook to the crashing impact of the first giant wave. Simultaneously the landward door at its base burst open from within and the cavern-traveling water from the Inner Sea gushed out creamily to be instantly engulfed. The crest of the wave caught at Fafhrd's and the Mouser's ankles without quite tripping them or much slowing their progress. The second and third did likewise, although they had gained another circle before each impact. There was a fourth wave and a fifth, but no higher than the third. The two adventurers reached the stumpy summit and cast themselves down on it, clutching at the still-shaking rock and slewing around to watch the shore—Fafhrd noting the astonishing minor circumstance that the Mouser was gripping between his teeth in the corner of his mouth a small black cigar.

The creamy curtain wall shuddered at the impact of the first wave and great cracks ran across it. The second wave shattered it and it fell into the

third with an explosion of spray, displacing so much salt water that the return wave almost swamped the tower, its dirty crest tugging at the Mouser's and Fafhrd's fingers and licking along their sides. Again the tower shook and rocked beneath them but did not fall and that was the last of the great waves. Fafhrd and the Mouser circled down the spiraling ledges until they caught up with the declining sea, which still deeply covered the door at the tower's base. Then they looked landward again, where the mist raised by the catastrophe was dissipating.

A full half mile of the curtain wall had collapsed from base to crest, its shards vanishing totally beneath the waves, and through that gap the higher waters of the Inner Sea were pouring in a flat sullen tide that was swiftly obliterating the choppy aftermath of the earthquake waves from the Outer Sea.

On this wide river in the sea the *Black Treasurer* appeared from the mist riding straight toward their refuge rock.

Fafhrd cursed superstitiously. Sorcery working against him he could always accept, but magic operating in his favor he invariably found disturbing.

As the sloop drew near, they dove together into the sea, reached it with a few brisk strokes, scrambled aboard, steered it past the rock, and then lost no time in toweling and dressing their nakedness and preparing hot drink. Soon they were looking at each other over steaming mugs of grog.

"Now that we've changed oceans," Fafhrd said, "we'll raise No-ombrulsk in a day with this west wind."

The Mouser nodded and then smiled steadily at his comrade for a space. Finally he said, "Well, old friend, are you sure that is all you have to say?"

Fafhrd frowned. "Well, there's one thing," he replied somewhat uncomfortably after a bit. "Tell me, Mouser, did

your girl ever take off her mask?"

"Did yours?" the Mouser asked back, eyeing him quizzically.

Fafhrd frowned. "Well, more to the point," he said gruffly, "did any of it really happen? We lost our swords and duds but we have nothing to show for it."

The Mouser grinned and took the black cigar from the corner of his mouth and handed it to Fafhrd.

"This is what I went back for," he said, sipping his grog. "I thought we needed it to get our ship back, and perhaps we did."

It was a tiny replica, carved in jet with the Mouser's teeth marks deeply indenting it near the stern, of the *Black Treasurer*.

THE END