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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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Contents for July, 1930

Cover Design.....	C. C. Senf	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Bride of Dewer"</i>		
The Eyrie		4
<i>A chat with the readers</i>		
The Bride of Dewer.....	Seabury Quinn	14
<i>This story of the goblin huntsman of the North is the weirdest story yet written about Jules de Grandin</i>		
The Bagheeta.....	Val Lewton	32
<i>A fascinating tale of the Caucasus Mountains and a curious superstition about a were-leopard</i>		
The Haunted Wood of Adoure.....	Elliot O'Donnell	41
<i>It was the ghost of the living and not of the dead that tormented the French executioner</i>		

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

[CONTINUED FROM PRECEDING PAGE]

- The Green Flame**-----**Donald Wandrei** 47
A brief story about a living jewel that glowed with a bright green flame
- Earthworms of Karma (Part 1)**-----**Lon Dexter** 49
A three-part serial story of a trip to Mars and strange adventures on that planet
- The Black Druid**-----**Frank Belknap Long, Jr.** 77
A short tale that compresses a world of cosmic horror in its few pages
- The Death Lord**-----**Edmond Hamilton** 83
All life in Chicago was blotted out by a virulent plague—a story of a bacteriologist's lust for power
- The Moon of Skulls (Conclusion)**-----**Robert E. Howard** 107
An adventurous story of mystery and horror in the nightmare valley of Negari—a tale of a mad people
- The Ruling Passion**-----**C. Henry** 120
The head master of the school insisted that his orders be obeyed even in death
- The Man Who Walked Upon the Air** -- **Charles Hilan Craig** 124
The aviator had a weird experience, and on its heels followed realization of the truth
- Dead Man's Fingers**-----**Harold Simpson** 126
As the woman fled through the night, she knew that her husband would hold her in death as he had done in life
- Sadastor**-----**Clark Ashton Smith** 133
A prose poem of unutterable beauty—an interplanetary story that is different from any you have ever read
- Weird Story Reprint:**
- A Child's Dream of a Star**-----**Charles Dickens** 135
At night the child dreamed of the star, and the vision comforted him all through life
- Night Terror**-----**Sarah Henderson Hay** 137
Verse

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SADASTOR

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

LISTEN, for this is the tale that was told to a fair lamia by the demon Charnadis as they sat together on the top of Mophi, above the sources of the Nile, in those years when the sphinx was young. Now the lamia was vexed, for her beauty was grown an evil legend in both Thebais and Elephantine; so that men were become fearful of her lips and cautious of her embrace, and she had no lover for almost a fortnight. She lashed her serpentine tail on the ground, and moaned softly, and wept those mythical tears which a serpent weeps. And the demon told this tale for her comforting:

Long, long ago, in the red cycles of my youth [said Charnadis], I was like all young demons, and was prone to use the agility of my wings in fantastic flights; to hover and poise like a gier-eagle above Tartarus and the pits of Python; or to lift the broad blackness of my vans on the orbit of stars. I have followed the moon from evening twilight to morning twilight; and I have gazed on the secrets of that Medusean face which she averts eternally from the earth. I have read through filming ice the ithyphallic runes on columns yet extant in her deserts; and I know the hieroglyphs which solve forgotten riddles, or hint eonian histories, on the walls of her cities taken by ineluctable snow. I have flown through the triple ring of Saturn, and have mated with lovely basilisks, on isles towering league-high from stupendous oceans where each wave is like the rise and fall of

Himalayas. I have dared the clouds of Jupiter, and the black and freezing abysses of Neptune, which are crowned with eternal starlight; and I have sailed beyond to incommensurable suns, compared with which the sun that thou knowest is a corpse-candle in a stunted vault. There, in tremendous planets, I have furled my flight on the terraced mountains, large as fallen asteroids, where, with a thousand names and a thousand images, undreamt-of Evil is served and worshipt in unsurmisable ways. Or, perched in the flesh-colored lips of columnar blossoms, whose perfume was an ecstasy of incommunicable dreams, I have mocked the wiving monsters, and have lured their females, that sang and fawned at the base of my hiding-place.

Now, in my indefatigable questing among the remoter galaxies, I came one day to that forgotten and dying planet which in the language of its unrecorded peoples was called Sadastor. Immense and drear and gray beneath a waning sun, far-fissured with enormous chasms, and covered from pole to pole with the never-ebbing tides of the desert sand, it hung in space without moon or satellite, an abomination and a token of doom to fairer and younger worlds. Checking the speed of my interstellar flight, I followed its equator with a poised and level wing, above the peaks of cyclopean volcanoes, and bare, terrific ridges of elder hills, and deserts pale with the ghastliness of salt, that

were manifestly the beds of former oceans.

In the very center of one of these ocean-beds, beyond sight of the mountains that formed its primeval shoreline, and leagues below their level, I found a vast and winding valley that plunged even deeper into the abysses of this dreadful world. It was walled with perpendicular cliffs and buttresses and pinnacles of a rusty-red stone, that were fretted into a million bizarrely sinister forms by the sinking of the olden seas. I flew slowly among these cliffs as they wound ever downward in tortuous spirals for mile on mile of utter and irredeemable desolation, and the light grew dimmer above me as ledge on ledge and battlement on battlement of that strange red stone upreared themselves between my wings and the heavens. Here, when I rounded a sudden turn of the precipice, in the profoundest depth where the rays of the sun fell only for a brief while at noon, and the rocks were purple with everlasting shadow, I found a pool of dark-green water—the last remnant of the former ocean, ebbing still amid steep, insuperable walls. And from this pool there cried a voice, in accents that were subtly sweet as the mortal wine of mandragora, and faint as the murmuring of shells. And the voice said:

“Pause and remain, I pray, and tell me who thou art, who comest thus to the accursed solitude wherein I die.”

Then, pausing on the brink of the pool, I peered into its gulf of shadow, and saw the pallid glimmering of a female form that upreared itself from the waters. And the form was that of a siren, with hair the color of ocean-kelp, and berylline eyes, and a dolphin-shapen tail. And I said to her:

“I am the demon Charnadis. But who art thou, who lingerest thus in this ultimate pit of abomination, in the depth of a dying world?”

She answered: “I am a siren, and my name is Lyspial. Of the seas

wherein I swam and sported at leisure many centuries ago, and whose gallant mariners I drew to an enchanted death on the shores of my disastrous isle, there remains only this fallen pool. Alas! For the pool dwindles daily, and when it is wholly gone I too must perish.”

She began to weep, and her briny tears fell down and were added to the briny waters.

Fain would I have comforted her, and I said:

“Weep not, for I will lift thee upon my wings and bear thee to some newer world, where the sky-blue waters of abounding seas are shattered to intricate wens of wannest foam, on low shores that are green and aureate with pristine spring. There, perchance for eons, thou shalt have thine abode, and galleys with painted oars and great barges purple-sailed shall be drawn upon thy rocks in the red light of sunsets domed with storm, and shall mingle the crash of their figured prows with the sweet sorcery of thy mortal singing.”

But still she wept, and would not be comforted, crying:

“Thou art kind, but this would avail me not, for I was born of the waters of this world, and with its waters I must die. Alas! my lovely seas, that ran in unbroken sapphire from shores of perennial blossoms to shores of everlasting snow! Alas! the sea-winds, with their mingled perfumes of brine and weed, and scents of ocean flowers and flowers of the land, and far-blown exotic balsams! Alas! the quinquiremes of cycle-ended wars, and the heavy-laden argosies with sails and cordage of byssus, that plied between barbaric isles with their cargoes of topaz or garnet-colored wines and jade and ivory idols, in the antique summers that now are less than legend! Alas! the dead captains, the beautiful dead sailors that were borne by the ebbing tide to my couches of amber seaweed,

in my caverns underneath a cedared promontory! Alas! the kisses that I laid on their cold and hueless lips, on their sealed marmorean eyelids!"

And sorrow and pity seized me at her words, for I knew that she spoke the lamentable truth, that her doom was in the lessening of the bitter waters. So, after many proffered condolences, no less vague than vain, I bade her a melancholy farewell and flew heavily away between the spiral cliffs where I had come, and clomb

the somber skies till the world Sadas-tor was only a darkling mote far down in space. But the tragic shadow of the siren's fate, and her sorrow, lay grievously upon me for hours, and only in the kisses of a beautiful fierce vampire, in a far-off and young and exuberant world, was I able to forget it. And I tell thee now the tale thereof, that haply thou mayest be consoled by the contemplation of a plight that was infinitely more dolorous and irremediable than thine own.