The Picture

By Francis Flagg

We are all familiar with the Faust theme—the story of a man who makes a pact with the devil at the price of his soul, and usually gets a fiendish legalistic double-cross besides. Here is the story of a man who made a pact, though not with the devil, with Something Else. There was also a price, a price that encompassed one of the two great driving forces of life. In drawing his unusual and vivid tale of a hobo they called "Crazy Jim," Francis Flagg has also drawn a lesson in human motives.

THE ROOM was in complete darkness. "O Liam Maroo," chanted the man. The blackness was like a thick velvet against his face. He spoke the words that for twenty thousand years no human voice had uttered. Far off, in an infinity of night, grew a red spot, lurid, uncanny to behold. The man shuddered. Almost he dashed to pieces the fragile contrivance that for three weeks, night after night, in this miserable room, he had brought to completion. But his will conquered. In a voice almost inaudible he said the seven necessary words and made the seven unspeakable motions. The red spot grew, expanded. In the center of the red spot formed a face, a terrible face, an *unhuman* face, the face of Liam Maroo, the World Ancient. "I am here," said the face.

The man fought the faintness that threatened to engulf his senses. "O Liam Maroo," he whispered, "the deed has been done, the altar raised. For seven nights I have conjured you by the seven necessary words, and the seven unspeakable motions. Speak, have I not fulfilled the ancient bargain?"

"You have fulfilled," said the face.

"Then by the Book of Him Who First Conjured, I call upon you to fulfill yours."

"It is well," said the face. "What is your wish?"

"Power," answered the man. "Power. I who have been weak, would be strong. I who have been poor and lowly, would be high and mighty. I who have known the contempt of men, would know their envy and servility. I who have known poverty and hunger, would know riches and plenty. Give me power."

His voice at last rang like a trumpet, growing stronger with every word

uttered, and he leaned forward in his eagerness until in front of him the invisible contrivance creaked and swayed.

"Power," said the face thoughtfully. "Would it not be better to do as Suliman, and ask nothing but wisdom?"

"Nay," said the man. "Suliman was already a king, and rich. Wisdom added to power and riches made him greater. But without power even Wisdom can die in the gutter."

"True," said the face; "and by the choice you make you prove yourself already wise. You would have power, power to sway men, power to create and hold riches. It is well. Such power is yours, such power I endow you with—but at a price."

"My soul?" said the man. "It is yours; take it."

"Soul!" echoed the face. "Whom do you take me for—Mephistopheles? Only the Antagonist could barter for your soul. To me it is worthless. Not your soul."

"Not my soul," echoed the man. "Then name what you will."

The unhuman face of Liam Maroo regarded the man intently. "Power, riches, the magnetism that sways men, all these I give you, and in return you shall pay to me the woman you love."

"The woman I love! But I love no woman," said the man.

"You will," said the face. "If you accept my offer you are fated to meet her. This, then, is the price I ask, that at the time I choose you shall sacrifice to me her brain, and her heart, and——"

The man listened to the last horrid detail of the sacrificial rite and shuddered. In the deep darkness his cheeks blanched, and for a moment he hesitated. But the overwhelming ambition that had driven him to master the secret of the Book of Him Who First Conjured, that had nerved him, in spite of superstitious fears, to raise the altar, practise the awful and uncanny ritual, would not now let him retreat. What! to forego his heart's desire for a woman he did not as yet know and for whom he cared nothing? "I accept," he said hoarsely. "The woman is yours."

Was it pity that flitted across the remote, unhuman countenance of Liam Maroo?

"Think well," said the face warningly.

"I have thought," said the man.

"Let the pact be signed," said the face.

Then followed a ceremony that can never be described in words. The red spot grew until it filled the room with its lurid glow. The troglodytes came, and the three things of which Radge Oep speaks in that book which no one now understands. The man was bound with the serpents, one of which knew Eve. He was scourged with seven whips fashioned of scorpions. Then came The Horns and pierced him in a secret spot. After that . . .

But it is well to be silent. In time the red light went as it had come. The room was dark. Dawn came, and the sun shone over the roof-tops and through the single window of the room and revealed its squalid meagerness. There was nothing to see, save a soap-box on end, even pieces of shaving,

a chalked diagram on the floor, and the body of a man lying heavy in sleep across a sagging bed.

2

The rise of Jim James to wealth and power was phenomenal, even for that traditional land of opportunity and of startling financial successes, America. Carnegie rose from poor boy to steel magnate; Rockefeller from obscure clerk to millionaire oil baron; Henry Ford developed the cheap automobile industry and became one of the uncrowned kings of business. But sensational as were the financial successes of these men there was nothing mysterious about them. One could follow the process of their emergence from comparative poverty to money masters, over a period of years. But at thirty-five Jim James was working as a dishwasher in the kitchen of O Come Inn restaurant on Congress Avenue, Tucson, Arizona, for twelve dollars a week. This was in the spring of 1930. He was then a thin-faced, slender, dried-up wisp of a man weighing no more than a hundred and twenty pounds. His chin habitually showed a stubble of dirty-black beard and he went clad in a shapeless pair of trousers, frayed at the bottoms, and in a khaki shirt, shiny on the bosom and far from clean. Before that he had been a tramp, a bindlestiff, a laborer in the oil fields, an insignificant migratory worker whom people spoke of—if they ever spoke of him at all—as slightly cracked. He was queer, in those days something of a butt. He never resented an insult, a sneer. He went his way, silent, almost furtive. Only his eyes showed any force, any vitality; but as he never looked anyone directly in the face, few noticed them. With him he always carried a book. It was the same book; an odd yellow-looking volume he had picked up God knows where. Always, in camps, in jungles, by the side of the roads, he was reading in this book. When he thought himself alone he would singsong certain unintelligible sentences in an alien gibberish. Also he would build strange little contrivances of sticks and stones and draw diagrams in the dust. Naturally this aroused the curiosity of his fellow hoboes. Several times men took the volume away from him and examined it, only to find the printing fine and in unintelligible characters, with weird drawings and designs on alternate pages that suggested nothing to them save that he who could be interested in such truck must be daffy. So they threw the book back to him with good-natured oaths and gibes. Seemingly, Jim James never resented these outrages. He surrendered the book without struggle, received it back with no audible comment, and in time men ceased bothering him. So much of his life is authentic. But before that, who he was, where he came from, is shrouded in mystery. Then came the spring of 1930, the dish-washing job, and the first of the mysterious happenings which in a few weeks was to lift this vagabond, this insignificant menial and reputed daft person out of poverty and squalor and make him one of the most envied and talked-of persons in America, in time of the world.

He was late for work that morning. Usually he was at the dishpan by seven. But it was nine when he came through the café door. Matt Dowden, the stout, big-stomached proprietor, intended to bawl him out. But the irate

words died in his throat. Even Matt Dowden could see that there was some magical change in his erstwhile dish-washer. For the first time he experienced the sensation of having Jim James look at him levelly with those strange vital eyes of his.

"I'm quitting the job, Matt," he said in soft, easy tones.

This was another surprise. Jim James had seldom spoken, but when he did he had addressed his employer haltingly, and always as "sir" or "mister." If the dog lying at the door had raised up and bellowed, "Hello, Matt," Matt Dowden couldn't have been more thunderstruck.

"You see," said Jim James conversationally, "I've struck it rich. Yes, gold. Up the street a ways. I'm on my way now to file my claim at the courthouse. What do you think of that for a nugget, Matt?"

He threw on the counter a dull glittering mass the size of a large cobblestone. Matt Dowden could scarcely believe his eyes. He picked it up. The thing was surprisingly heavy.

"Keep it," said Jim James indifferently and walked out.

By noon everyone in Tucson knew that Jim James had discovered and filed on a gold mine in a downtown lot back of his lodging-house. At first there was nothing but laughter. Who ever heard of gold in the heart of town? Undoubtedly the man was crazy. But when he began to flood the local assay offices with fabulously rich nuggets, with canvas bags of almost pure gold-dust, opinion changed. In a few days one of the big mining companies had its men on the claim making tests, analyzing the soil, judging the richness of the find. Their reports were breath-taking. The mine was a regular bonanza, incredibly rich. There were millions in it—millions! The newspapers ran screaming headlines:

"GOLD STRIKE IN TUCSON!"

Business men forgot their business. A rush was made to file on any and everything. From all over the West foot-loose adventurers stampeded into Tucson in one of the most remarkable gold-rushes in history. The big mining company made a cash offer of two hundred thousand dollars to Jim James. Jim James said he wasn't interested. They made it a million. He laughed. "Two million," he said, "not a cent less." So inside of two weeks they bought him out, and the erstwhile bum and dish-washer was now twice a millionaire.

But no sooner was the mine sold than a strange thing happened. Gold ceased to be found on the fabulously rich claim. True, mining engineers had sunk their shafts twenty feet into the soil, through sand and quartz almost solid gold. They had assayed this gold at staggering figures to the ton. But the day after the deal was consummated with Jim James the mine proved to contain nothing but worthless sand and rock. The gold had vanished. The experts could hardly believe their senses. A cry was raised that Jim James had deliberately salted the claim, that he defrauded the mining company out of its purchase price. But there were reports of the chemists and engineers

to disprove such charges. How could a poor dish-washer salt a claim for twenty feet into the earth? The gold taken from the claim and still existent ran into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. No, there had been gold in the claim, a small fortune in gold, but the mining experts had overestimated its extent and the lead had petered out. This became the consensus. The mining company finally pocketed its loss, the gold-seekers left town, the business men returned to their businesses. Only the newspapers were heralding the appearance, on the financial stage of the country, of the unique and even mysterious figure of one, Jim James, ex-dishwasher and migratory worker.

3

The startling change in the fortunes of Jim James was no more startling than the change in the man himself. Even during the two weeks of the gold rush people noticed this sudden metamorphosis in the insignificant dish-washer. He did not, of course, grow in height, but the straightening of his stooped shoulders, the erect way in which he now carried himself, gave the impression of increased stature. He was almost as self-contained, as silent as ever, but from him exuded a force, a dynamic strength, that was a revelation to those who had known him previously. "It is incredible," muttered Matt Dowden, "incredible!"

When Jim James had need to speak he spoke softly, without hesitation, his dark eyes fixed unswervingly on those of the people with whom he spoke. When addressing persons in front of him he gave the uncanny impression of looking directly into the face of each individual at one and the same moment. Yet he made no attempt to change his manner of living, wore the same shapeless trousers and greasy shirt. There were men who had met him on the road, shifty-eyed yeggs and gay-cats who, remembering him as he had been, thought they would blow into town and relieve the old fool of the proceeds of his lucky strike. But they departed after a few days, thoroughly mystified and no richer than when they had come. One or two old-timers he staked with a few dollars. A Mexican who had fed him from time to time was presented with a deed to the small ranch he rented. A few kindnesses of this sort Jim James performed; then one day, still clad in his disreputable clothes, but bearing on his person certain papers of value, he swung aboard an east-bound train and was gone from his old haunts.

Chicago heard of him next. In fact it was in the windy city, the metropolis on the Great Lakes, that he performed the second feat which electrified the world. This was nothing less than to discover a diamond mine in the great dumps which lie in the stockyards section of the city. Now everyone knows that the diamond is a mineral of great hardness, consisting of crystallized carbon, and found only in certain favorable soils. But in vain diamond experts protested that it was preposterous to talk of mining the precious stone anywhere in Illinois. Jim James was now a wealthy man. He purchased most of the dumps, including the mineral rights, surrounded his land with armed guards, and proceeded to take out diamonds in spite of the verdict of the experts. Diamonds began to appear on the local markets by

the bucketful; they circulated to New York, Boston. Dealers in precious stones were dumfounded. The charge was made that the jewels were paste. But Jim James smiled at this. By every test imaginable the gems were proved genuine. Then it was asserted that they were being manufactured by a chemical process. Diamonds have been so produced, but only through extreme heat and pressure, small in size and far from perfect, and at prohibitive cost. Jim James exploded this theory by inviting chemists and jewelers to his lot and showing them the crude stones. The experts were astounded. The soil was of the kind in which diamonds had never been found, the geological conditions were all unfavorable, yet in spite of these self-evident facts stones were there in profusion, stones in such quantities as to stagger belief. Jim James was flooding the market with them. People whose fortunes were tied up in these precious gems became panic-stricken.

As is well known, diamonds are plentiful enough, but their output is regulated to maintain the price. The International Diamond Trust, the Beers of Africa, became alarmed. All over the civilized world Jim James and his wonderful find were headline news. The price of diamonds began to drop. There was only one thing for the diamond trust to do. They dared not have an inexhaustible supply of precious gems in the hands of irresponsible people. Jim James must be brought into the syndicate or his mine purchased. The latter was what was done. The sum paid to Jim James was never made public but the newspapers placed it anywhere from ten million to fifty. Then came another sensation. No sooner was the deal with Jim James consummated than the diamond mine petered out! The trust found itself in possession of a lot, a hole in the ground, and so much worthless rubble. Having more stones than they knew what to do with from their African and other mines, this did not altogether displease the trust officials. They were angry, of course; they figured that Jim James in some clever and incomprehensible way had bilked them; they decided it was wise to be philosophical and say little. But the newspapers went wild. They connected up the gold-mine incident of Arizona with that of Chicago and turned out sensational story after story. "Jim James the Man of Mystery." "The Dish-washer with the Midas Touch." So the captions ran. And while the national and international press was broadcasting wilder and wilder news to an avid reading public, turning out lurid Sunday supplement articles by the carload, there happened a third incident which never reached the papers.

There is in the city of New York a world-famous street. It is the financial center of the nation, some claim of the world. And in this street is a magnificent office building housing the offices of the most powerful banking institution ever organized. The head of the house of Dorgan was the third of this line and was called Peter—a tall, thick-set, heavy-jowled man with iron-gray hair and despotic eyes. He had been born to a kingship more powerful and real than that of any six monarchs of Europe. His simple name was the awe of princes. His signature on pieces of paper swayed the destinies of nations. Millions of working-men, their happiness and jobs, lay

under the soft but ruthless hand of this lord of banking. Wars were made, armies came and went, as his interest dictated. From the cradle up he had been educated and molded with but one purpose in view—the wielding of the autocratic power his money conferred. He was proud with the pride of an aristocrat; strong, with the strength of an especially tempered blade; pitiless, with the cool indifference of one who had never suffered poverty or want. This gentleman, then, this Peter Dorgan, this scion of a great banking family, was seated in his private office, thoughtfully pulling on a fragrant and very expensive cigar manufactured for his exclusive consumption, when his secretary, without previous warning, ushered into his presence a man, a visitor, a personage upon whom Peter Dorgan had never before set eyes.

To understand the sheer miracle of such a thing happening, one must be made to realize the utter inaccessibility of the king of bankers. Easier would it be for a poor London cockney to win to the person of England's king in Buckingham Palace than for an ordinary man to have an audience with Peter Dorgan in his office. Even fellow bankers, men of importance in their way, governors, senators, found it next to impossible to arrange interviews with the money king. Between him and the importunities of the world stood a whole array of henchmen; only they were called doormen, clerks, office-boys, managers, presidents, and vice-presidents. But on the morning in question there had appeared in the general offices a soft-voiced, slender man who asked to see Peter Dorgan. He was moderately well-dressed in a dark sack suit. The hat, a brown velour, he carried in one hand. But it was his smile that was remarkable; that, and his eyes. Stony-faced and remote-appearing clerks found themselves unconsciously warming toward him under the influence of both. Crusty managers forgot to repel him in their usually chilly manner. So the stranger progressed from one clerk to another, from business manager to vice-president, always coming nearer his objective, until at last he stood in the anteroom of the great magnate's sanctum confronting one last obstacle—the money king's secretary.

"It is impossible," said the secretary. "Mr. Dorgan sees few people, and then only by special appointment. I can't understand how you have reached me. Someone will be sorry for this."

He stood up crisply and for the first time looked at the person addressed. The stranger smiled gravely. "I apologize for troubling you."

"Oh, it's no trouble, I assure you," returned the secretary quickly. He found himself liking this man. "Only Mr. Dorgan has made it an invariable rule——"

"A rule," said the stranger quietly, "that doesn't apply to me."

Like one under the influence of a hypnotic spell the secretary did an unprecedented thing. Without knocking at the door or first learning the will of his employer, he ushered the stranger into the presence of the latter. Peter Dorgan was astounded. Never had such conduct occurred before. "Bentley," he cried sharply "what does this mean? Who is this man?"

"A gentleman to see you, sir."

"But I have no appointment with any gentleman this morning," frowned Peter Dorgan. "Certainly not with this one."

"But nevertheless, you are pleased to see me," said the stranger softly.

Peter Dorgan's imperious eyes met the level, vital ones of the stranger. At what he seemed to see in them his hard expression altered. Perhaps the cool assurance of the visitor's remark awoke his interest. Be the explanation what it may, he in turn did an unprecedented thing. He waved the secretary from the room and questioned abruptly, "What is your name?"

"Jim James," answered the stranger.

"Jim James," murmured the banker. "I have never——"

Then he gave a little start and his eyes narrowed.

"Ah," said the other quietly, "I see that you have heard of me."

"Could I help doing so when I read the papers?" smiled Peter Dorgan. "You are the man from the West, the dish-washer with the Midas touch."

"Yes," said Jim James, almost dreamily, yet with a suggestion of power that did not escape the magnate. "I have made two fortunes and can make a third and a fourth. Money? It is mine to command. Wealth? I can find it where I please. Power? I intend to have it—through you."

"Through me!"

"Yes, it is the easiest way. Without you I could still be powerful. If I wished I could wrest from you the financial supremacy of the world. Believe me, it is far better to have me with you than against you."

"You are very confident," said Peter Dorgan.

"With the consciousness of strength," answered Jim James.

The imperious eyes of one, the level, vital eyes of the other, clashed. Peter Dorgan knew men. It was his one outstanding talent. Besides, for the first time in his hard, self-contained life he felt himself under the sway of another's personality. He who usually dominated was being dominated; he who usually compelled others was himself being compelled. He was conscious of this sudden weakness in himself and yet felt impotent to combat it. As if he sensed the psychological moment, Jim James leaned forward and said: "Gold—it is everywhere. Look! under your hand the desk is solid gold; the walls of the room are gold; and the inkwell is a blood-red ruby!"

Peter Dorgan could scarcely credit the evidence of his eyesight. The dark, heavy-grained desk glittered yellow, the walls reflected the light in red-gold excrescences. And the inkwell? He picked it up. It lay on the palm of his hand like a great drop of blood.

"This is witchcraft," he muttered dazedly.

Jim James said softly: "Think what would happen to the world standard of wealth if gold were to be found as plentiful as sand; if gems and precious jewels became as common as pebbles. The bottom would fall out of the world market, the great financial lords would go down to ruin. What then of the House of Dorgan?" He said softly, "It would be smashed—like that."

There was silence. Peter Dorgan closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again the desk was nothing but a desk of heavy-grained wood, the walls their normal selves, and the inkwell that and nothing else.

"I suppose you know that I could have you declared insane, that——" He wavered to a stop. "What is it you desire?" he asked hoarsely. Jim James told him.

And that is how Jim James made his debut in the financial and social life of the country.

4

The advent of Jim James on Wall Street created another sensation. Everywhere Peter Dorgan introduced him as his partner. He sat on the boards of powerful directorates, not alone as a member, but as a dictator of policies to whom even Peter Dorgan deferred. Men realized that in the person of the ex-hobo and dish-washer, had arisen another great money lord, a titan of business. His wealth grew to be immense, his power practically unbounded. Through it all his quietness, his simplicity of manner never changed. Then suddenly within two years, he quit active business and began to travel. He travelled like an emperor. Paris knew him, and Berlin. In his personal attire he was, alternately, the form of fashion or the picture of poverty. If it pleased him to dress in the correct attire of a gentleman today, it also pleased him to go clad as a navvy tomorrow. But in any costume his manner never varied. That strange personality of his had the same effect whether he was clothed in broadcloth or rags. At Monte Carlo he twelve times broke the bank, playing any and every game, and then purchased the ruined casino for the price of his winnings. For three months he ran the place, taking the gamblers' money six days of the week and distributing it among the losers on the seventh. At the expiration of that time he sold the casino for a song and went on a hunting-trip to Africa. . . .

Jim James was now forty-one, slender, dynamic. Women, of course, he had known. A famous Polish actress had been his mistress for a few months and then shot herself when his fancy wandered. A noted Italian singer had loved him in vain. More than one beautiful woman of high birth and social position had yielded him her caresses. With a ruthlessness which promised nothing, asked for nothing but the pleasure of the moment, he had sated himself with soft arms and warm lips. But never had anything but his passing fancy been engaged. He would, he had sworn to himself, love no woman too much. Something having to do with the love of woman haunted him. It was related to that vague, terrifying dream of his; the dream he had had six years before in a desert city; the dream from which he had awakened conscious of latent forces stirring within himself. And before the dream there had been the book, the strange book over which he had pondered for years.

But he wasn't even sure of that. The book had vanished. And the dream was a recurring nightmare whose salient points ever eluded him. He was sure of only one thing: that he had been reborn in some miraculous fashion; that the timid, weak, spiritless creature who had been Jim James had given place to a dynamic, forceful one; that he who had tramped the roads, had mucked it in ditches, had servilely cringed to others and washed dishes for the right to live, was now a man of destiny; that whatever he willed would be his. Wealth, power, position—they were his for the asking, the finding.

He felt it, he knew it. An inner voice spoke to him and he harkened to its counsel. The discovery of the gold mine did not surprise him; the incident of the diamond mine only made him more sure of his rapidly developing powers. At times fear of himself and his uncanny ability assailed him. That was at first. Then he began to enjoy its use. Under the dynamic drive of his will he went up and up. Men were swayed by his personality. He became a financial power. Great men were proud of his nod of recognition. Only within himself was the saving grace of something of the old Jim James, hobo, dish-washer. He remembered that old Jim James as if he had been a well-beloved but not over-respected brother. He recalled the futile dreams and wild longings of that early Jim James for wealth and position. He used to lie on the roadside with his dirty bundle of bedding and watch the sleek motor-cars of the rich glide by. And what was it that old Jim James used to do? He used to build strange contrivances of sticks and stones and mumble queer sentences. Those sentences came from the book. But there was no book. Jim James shook his head. It was useless trying to separate fact from fiction. No wonder people in those days had thought him daft. But those days were past. He was a power now. Only he did not wish to love a woman. Book or no book, danger lay in loving a woman. He swore he would never love a woman. Then at a formal function in Paris he met Margaret, Countess of Walgrave, a great English beauty with the blood, so it was said, of the unhappy Stuarts in her veins, and all his resolutions were dust.

The countess was sitting in one of the chambers opening off the ballroom surrounded by a large circle of her admirers. She had just heard an incident regarding Jim James and his eccentricities of dress and conduct. An aristocrat by birth, a stickler for all the formality and dignity of her class, she gave her opinion of him in no uncertain terms.

"The man has proved himself a boor, an ignoramus, socially impossible."

"I believe," said one of the gentlemen, "that he is expected here tonight."

"Indeed! Then I trust no one presents him to me. I haven't any desire to make the acquaintance of such canaille no matter how wealthy. Why, it is common report that not so long ago the man was nothing but a navvy!"

"Yes, madam," said a quiet voice, "and a dish-washer, too. Surely you heard of the dish-washing?"

Jim James bowed in front of her, his slim figure correctly garbed in evening dress, continental style, his dark, vital eyes fixed on the countess' face.

"You know," he said in soft conversational tones, "I once blacked shoes a whole year in the city of Los Angeles for fifteen dollars a week and tips. Tips," he said dreamily, "nickels and dimes. How servile I could be for those tips!" He smiled reminiscently.

"And there was the time," he said, "when I was scullion in the kitchen of a California millionaire. But pardon me, I am forgetting my manners, talking of myself. Don't you dance, countess? Then may I have the pleasure——"

To no one's surprise more than her own the countess rose and put her

small hand on his arm. They danced. The man danced divinely. Afterward they sat in a secluded part of the conservatory and talked. She didn't like Jim James, no; but neither was he the boor she had visualized him as being. Besides that, he fascinated her.

"So you think it unpardonable of me to dress now and then as I please? But consider: have I not the right to remind myself of the depths from which I have come? As for the rest, it is the humbler, weaker part of myself paying homage to the stronger—that is all." He dismissed the subject with a shrug of his shoulders. "But let us talk of something more pleasing, of yourself. Your hair in this light, how wonderful it looks; and your eyes. . . ."

Jim James went home that evening (or rather early morning) definitely in love, and with a gnawing pain in some secret place of his body. For the first time since his metamorphosis he felt despondent. "I will never see that woman again," he vowed. The pain bothered him, and in his sleep he dreamed, a nightmarish dream. Or had it been a dream? He drank his late morning coffee. After that he felt better. What nonsense was this about love being dangerous? When and where had he picked up such a superstition? How beautiful the countess was! Danger or no danger, he loved her. The thought of her was like a heady drink. Oh damn that dream! His nerves actually felt jumpy. But with an effort of his powerful will he calmed them.

That afternoon he called at the countess' Parisian home only to be informed she had hastily left Paris on the morning train, en route to England. For the countess herself had passed a disturbed night. The thought of Jim James haunted her. She was afraid of the man and the look of desire she had seen in his eyes. At the same time she felt herself swayed by his personality. Whatever this man wanted he would take. If he wanted her he would take her. He was ruthlessly strong and without mercy. All this she sensed intuitively. But she sensed more than this. He would take, not by force or violence, but with her consent. That was the terrifying reality. Better not to see him again, to flee to safety. So she passed over to England on the afternoon boat, little dreaming that the great white airplane which flew over the steamer in midchannel was the private plane of Jim James bearing him to London.

The countess hadn't been in her town house twenty-four hours, when a slim man in English tweeds rang the entrance bell.

"My lady is in the morning room," said the butler. "If you will please wait until I announce you——"

But the visitor brushed past him with a pleasant smile.

"The morning room, yes. Right ahead? Do not bother, I can find it myself."

The countess looked up, startled, to see Jim James walk into the room. His coming coincided with certain thoughts of hers, for she had been thinking of him. He wasted no time on explanations. With both arms about her, his lips against her cheek (she was somewhat taller than himself), he said chidingly: "Margaret, Margaret, what is the use of running away from me?"

There was no use; she had probably always subconsciously been aware of the fact; yet she struggled in his imprisoning arms.

"You mustn't! It's impossible!"

He held her closer. "Say you love me."

"No—yes—oh, I don't know; I'm not sure. . . ."

Six weeks later they were married.

It was a notable wedding. The groom's gift to the bride was a necklace of emeralds, each stone unrivalled for size and flawless splendor. The event revived all the dormant stories concerning Jim James. The tale of his miraculous rise to wealth and power was retold on two continents and in a thousand newspapers. Conservative estimates placed his fortune at well over a billion dollars. The richest man in the world, he was called, and Jim James alone knew for certain how true were the words.

5

And now Jim James was at the very pinnacle of his stupendous career. Wealth, power, love, all were his. From the woman he loved he compelled love by the sheer force of his dynamic personality. But this compulsion of affection troubled the countess. She was not unhappy. She would have maintained—and with truth—that she loved her husband. But there were times when certain acts of his appalled her. Jim James could be uncouth in his manner. Sometimes his speech was far from grammatical. In his presence those things became negligible; but when she sat by herself she recalled them and they troubled her. As for Jim James, in spite of the fullness of his love, he was not happy. Since the first night of meeting the countess he had been conscious of a dull gnawing pain in some secret part of his body. With the pain came a tendency to dream. Night after night he dreamed, and from those dreams wakened with the fearful impression that some unimaginable horror threatened the woman he loved. The great doctors he consulted could give him no relief. In a certain part of his body was found a curiously shaped scar. How had it gotten there? Jim James could not remember. He strove to recollect when he had incurred it. In vain. As for the dreams, he only knew that they were hideous, that they related to his past. Something sinister came when he slept and it whispered, whispered . . . what did it whisper? The name of his wife. Beads of perspiration stood out on his brow. It was madness! What in the name of God could threaten his wife? He stared at his face in the glass. Was he, the great Jim James, going mad? With an effort he schooled himself to be his quiet, assured self. But more frequently, when alone, the mask slipped and he gave himself over to fits of terrible depression.

At first Jim James did not understand the exact nature of what he feared. In an unostentatious way he surrounded his wife with a thousand safeguards. Trustworthy attendants went with her everywhere. Keepers with loaded rifles kept the walks and the woods of his country mansion under constant surveillance. His own secret-service men watched over his party when they travelled. Such precautions did not irk the countess nor surprise her. After all, Jim James, in his way, was a king, a powerful ruler, and she

was his consort. Great personages always had armed retainers, and she was pleased with the sense of power and importance they conveyed. So things went for the first year of married life. Then happened that which helped to bring all the vague dreams and terrors of months to a weird climax.

Toward the last of that year Jim James had grown afraid of things that glowed. He had to steel himself against the sight of flame in open fireplaces, of illumination in electric bulbs. They reminded him of a far-off spot he had once seen. Something terrible, menacing, lurked behind a red spot. Almost, at times, he could see it.

He went to bed that night in complete darkness. Even in his sleep he was conscious of the dull gnawing pain in his body. He dreamed—or was it a dream? He wakened from it as usual, sitting up in bed, his forehead beaded with perspiration. Through the window at the end of the room a yellow fragment of moon shone. Thank God, he had only been dreaming! What was it in the nightmare that had tendered him a book? But there was no book. He switched on the nightlight at the head of his bed and went to rise. Even as he did so he saw the thing which lay on the coverlet. It was a strange volume, yellow as if with time, and opened at a certain page. Like one petrified in a half-rising position he glared at the book, and as he glared a few sentences of the finely printed and hieroglyphic-like characters leapt out at him like a blow.

For he whose body has been pierced in a secret spot by the horns of Om Nam, lo, from henceforth is he an altar, a gateway from the past to the future, for the coming of the World Ancient.

(A half-witted tramp crouching by the roadside reading a book and making strange contrivances out of sticks and stones. A dish-washer brooding over a steaming sink and washing greasy dishes. A room in a cheap lodging-house and a man raising up a strange altar. Velvet blackness against a white, terrified face, and a shaking voice intoning, "O Liam Maroo. . . .")

It all came back. The vague, terrifying dream was a dream no longer. *And in return you shall pay . . . the woman you love.*

"Margaret! Margaret!" screamed the man.

What fiend had ever driven him to such a bargain? For wealth, for power, whispered a voice. But weighed in the scales against the life and safety of the woman he loved, how infinitesimal were wealth and power! Before a hair of her head were injured he would die!

Die . . . yes, that was the solution. Even the World Ancient would be powerless to make a dead man fulfil the dread pact. *He* was the altar, *he* was the gateway, and without him——

The gleaming steel paper-knife lay on the writing-desk. He picked it up. Its sinuous length shone. With steady hand he placed the pointed metal against his heart. One steady push, one powerful thrust. . . . But the blade curled; it was so much paper. With a curse he flung the useless weapon to the floor and sought for the revolver in a drawer of the dresser. That would

do the trick. Thank God, Margaret slept soundly. Two heavy doors were closed between him and her. The revolver was but a toy automatic in size but no less deadly at short range. Its discharge made little noise. The sound would not alarm her. He thought of the slim whiteness of her neck and the proud pale beauty of her face. The barrel of the revolver lay cold against the spot between his eyes. One pressure of the finger. . . .

Perhaps twenty seconds elapsed after he had pulled the trigger before he became conscious of the fact that the weapon held pressed against his forehead was an impotent thing.

Again he pulled the trigger—again—a half-dozen times. Was that laughter he heard?

Suddenly he flung the revolver from him with a stifled cry. He understood. Death was denied him. Between him and self-destruction lay a power that forbade. He was lost, lost! Margaret was doomed! For a moment he sank on the bed and surrendered to utter despair. Then summoning every last atom of his formidable strength he stood up to confront that which was coming.

For the room had darkened. Stygian gloom enwrapped him round. Even the moon had faded from the window, and the window gave no softer blackness against the prevailing gloom. Far off in the infinity of night grew a red spot, lurid, uncanny to behold. In the center of the red spot appeared a face, a terrible face, an *unhuman* face.

"I am here," said the face.

Jim James was on his knees, his hands outstretched.

"O Liam Maroo!" he cried, "mercy, mercy!"

The indescribable face regarded him without passion.

"The bargain was made, the pact sealed; I have come to demand of you the price."

"No, no!" cried Jim James wildly.

"The price," said the face inexorably.

Jim James threw himself on the floor. "Sacrifice me," he cried. "My life, my body, they are yours!"

"Nay," said the face, "I did not bargain for your life. Wealth, power, the ability to sway men, create riches, all these have you had, and have found them good. In return you promised to sacrifice the heart, the brain . . ."

"But I did not understand," cried Jim James.

"Understand!" said the face. "When have you mortals ever understood? Gladly you paid what you had still to possess. Speak! did you not deliberately, of your own accord, weigh power and wealth against love—and choose wealth?"

"Yes, yes! But I did not know what love could be. I had never loved. In my arrogance I thought never to love. Now I know."

The words echoed through the room. Did a shade of pity flash across that unhuman face? The lurid light grew greater. Jim James stared fearfully as massive limbs wavered in a mist of fire, as great curling claws reached out.

He was conscious of only one thing, that somehow, someway, he must save the woman he loved. He was shouting, screaming, "O Liam Maroo, is there no other way to pay the price?"

And the face looking down on him said, "There is a way."

Then he rose to his feet, courage pouring into his shivering body, and asked, "What is the way?"

"That your wealth and honors be stripped from you."

"They are yours."

"Nor is that all. That you sink into the depths from which you rose."

"You mean——"

"That you shall become again what you were when you sought my help. Men shall despise you. Again you shall know the bitter pangs of squalor and poverty. All your wealth and power, your palaces and servants, your mighty friends and sycophants, shall pass from you like a dream, be as if they had never been."

"And my wife?" murmured Jim James.

"Shall cease to love you. The thing in you that holds her now, that makes her real in your existence, will be gone for ever. Nothing will be left to you of the golden present—nothing but a few bitter memories. Think!" cried the face, "think well before you choose. Sacrifice the woman and all that you now have shall still be yours."

"All except the woman."

"But there are other women. Women as fair, women more complaisant."

"But not *the* woman."

"No, not *the* woman. But again I ask you to consider carefully. Sacrifice yourself, all that you are, and were the woman to meet you she would despise you. She will have another lover. While you are swining it in the ditch, she will be living for another, lost to you. Think! What is your choice?"

The face of Jim James looked agonizedly into the inscrutable, unhuman one of Liam Maroo. What! never to know the soft rapture of Margaret's arms again, never to feel the warm pressure of her lips? What! to live in poverty and want while she became the beloved of another? Never! All the burning jealousy of the man woke to life, struggled like serpents in his bosom, scored his face with debasing lines. Better to see her dead—dead!

"Ah," breathed Liam Maroo.

Jim James started as if from an evil spell. He saw the slim whiteness of his wife's neck and the pale proud beauty of her face. Then he straightened up against an oppressive weight and cried hoarsely but in a strong voice:

"All that I have of wealth and power, take them—only spare the woman!"

6

In the city of Nogales, in the Mexican portion of that town which lies on the very borderline between Arizona and Sonora, there stands the American Saloon. Tourists from all over the United States visit this saloon. Within a few feet of the dry territory of Uncle Sam they can put a foot on a

gleaming brass rail brought all the way from Forty-fifth Street, New York, and view themselves in a spotless expanse of mirror behind the bar. They can order small glasses of Scotch or big schooners of beer and listen to Big Pat Durfee bewail the carefree days when Manhattan was still wet and flowing over with licensed cheer. Also they can sometimes observe the person who is responsible for the gleaming polish on the brass rail and the spotlessness of the vast expanse of mirror. This is a slender, dried-up wisp of a man weighing no more than a hundred and twenty pounds. His chin habitually shows a stubble of dirty-black beard and he is clad in frayed, shapeless trousers and a khaki shirt far from clean. This individual goes his way, silently, furtively. Few notice him. If anyone does and makes inquiries, Big Pat answers, "Just an old bum that blew in. A bit cracked in the head, I guess. We call him Crazy Jim."