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Vol. 1

November, 1940

No. 3

Complete Book-Length Novel

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A RED STAR Magazine

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, NEW YORK, N. Y.
WILLIAM T. DEWART, *President & Treasurer* WILLIAM T. DEWART, JR., *Secretary*

PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE, 111 Rue Réaumur
LONDON: THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS, LTD., 3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C. 4
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The Snake Mother

By A. MERRITT

Into the monster-ridden barrier mountains of the forbidden valley plunges Graydon, drawn by a lure and a mystery toward the mystic kingdom of a mighty race

PROLOGUE

MUCH time has passed since I nursed Nicholas Graydon back to life in the little Andean village of Chupan from which, weeks later, I watched him set forth to find again the path to the haunted wilderness of the Cordillera de Carabaya, where death in strangest guise had nearly overtaken him. And hardly a day has passed without some memory of him springing up.

It was as though Graydon were bent upon not letting me forget him; as though from wherever he might be, he shot forth continually a spark of thought that unerringly found my mind, commanded remembrance, and forged each day a new link in some finely drawn-out chain that joined us. I waited, always expectant, for a more definite summons.

Then events occurred which, beside the world-wide regret they aroused, set up in that section of my brain peculiarly devoted to Graydon, a restlessness growing nigh unbearable.

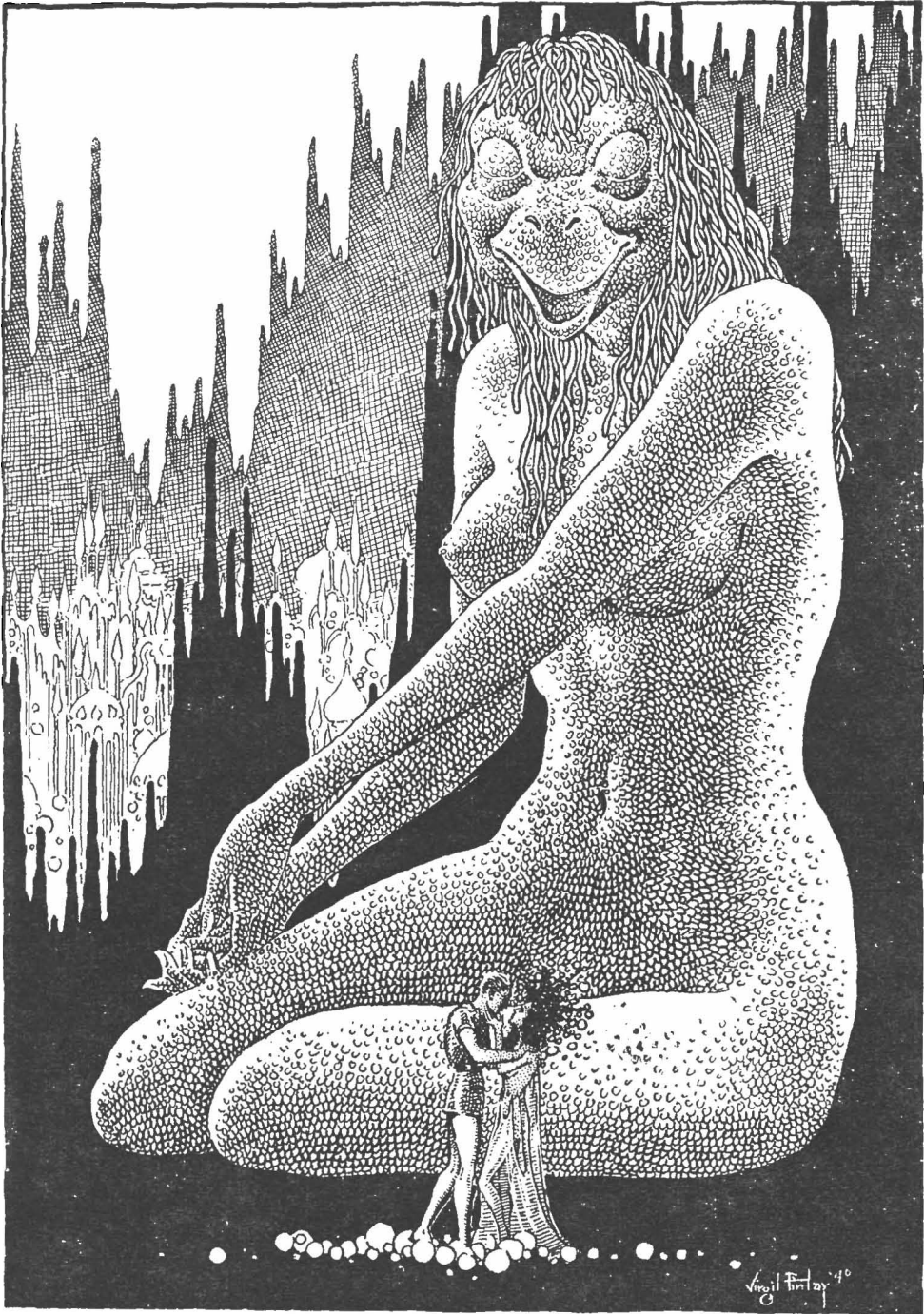
The recent brief newspaper accounts of the flight of the Spanish aviator Pedro Narillo from Lima, in Peru, to Cuzco, will be recalled. A straight line between the two places is only about three hundred and fifty miles, but the Andes thrust

themselves up twenty thousand feet along the route. Narillo passed over Cuzco on the wings of a northwest gale. His engines were heard, his lights were seen. The newspapers carried much longer accounts when day after day went by and he was not heard from. All they could say was—he had not been heard from. Nor was he again, ever.

A month later the Englishman, Charteris, with his mechanic, soared out of Lima. He was bound on a more ambitious journey, hopping over to Sucre in Bolivia—Choquisaca, as the old Indian name goes. He never landed at Sucre. He landed somewhere, certainly. Wherever it was, neither Charteris nor his mechanic came back from it.

I had read of Narillo's flight and his vanishment idly, incuriously. That of Charteris seemed to tug at reluctant memories, without awakening them.

Next came the aerial expedition of which J. Kenton Walters, almost as well known in the United States as a flyer, was the chief. He flew in a four-seated quite new Ford plane. With him were Professor James Theron, of the Smithsonian Institution's Ethnological Department, Henry K. Timmerman, the adventurous oil millionaire who had financed the trip, and Walters' mechanic-assistant. Their plan was to loop it from New



"Beloved, you did come back to me!" Suarra murmured as Graydon took her in his arms. And the grotesque statue shining weirdly green in the moonlight, seemed to regard the lovers with tolerant amusement

York by way of Colon, Lima and Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Colon again, Havana and New York.

A gigantic swing. They made it as far as Lima. They left Lima.

After that—silence.

It was not until the Walters disappearance that I realized a curious fact. This was that each of the three expeditions had the Cordillera de Carabaya on its route. At least, two of them had. Charters and Walters must cross it to reach their destination. Narillo probably had been blown over it by the tempest.

The Walters disappearance made a great stir, naturally, considering the eminence and wealth of the members of the party. At the request of Washington, Peru sent out a squadron of six planes to search for it. Bolivia sent from La Paz a squadron of five on the same errand. And those eleven planes vanished as utterly as the others! Not one of them returned to report.

I lay long awake that night when I read about the vanished squadrons. I thought over the chain of disappearances which in some fashion seemed to be linked to the haunted Cordillera. And suddenly the thought came to me that I must go back to Peru—and at the same time I was aware of a stubborn subconscious resistance against the impulse.

I tossed about on my bed for hours, fighting the growing urge to return. I realized, vaguely, that the pull was in some way connected with the lost planes. But what had I to do with them? And what could my going back to the Andean highlands accomplish for them?

At last I managed to get to sleep. That sleep was disturbed by a singularly vivid dream. I thought that I had been awakened by the sound of a golden bell tolling a note of extraordinary sweetness. I raised myself upon my elbow, and looked about my room. There was a curious flickering reflection on the south wall—at least I supposed it to be a reflection. It sharpened into a small luminous ring. This abruptly expanded from ceiling to floor. Within it was something like a luminous circular curtain. This curtain quivered and dissolved.

I seemed to be looking straight into the room of the little *posada*, the inn at Chupan where I had nursed Graydon back to life. There it was, apparently as solid and real as though it had been plucked up from the Andes and set against the side of my apartment with the intervening walls melted away. It was as plain as that.

The door of the *posada* room opened. Graydon came through it!

He walked to where my wall should have been, and stood grinning at me as though enjoying my amazement. He waved a hand to me. I heard his voice; it was at one and the same time within the room and distances upon unknown distances outside of it.

"Greetings, old man," he said, "I wish you could see your face! Well, I suppose I'd be startled myself if I were you."

I seemed to lie there, gaping at him.

"You're looking very fit, though," he went on. "Good thing, for I'm inviting you on a long trip."

"Down to your damned Carabaya to shake hands with your dinosaurs, I suppose? No, thanks!" I thought that I replied; and made a determined effort to awaken.

"You think this is a dream?" he said. "Well, in a way it is—and in another way it isn't! And I certainly don't want you to come to the Carabaya. I *do* want you to promise to start as quick as you can, travel as fast as you can, and meet me at the *posada* down here in Chupan as soon as you can."

"Anything to do with those disappearing airplanes?" I thought I asked.

"Everything!" he answered. "I don't want any more slaughter. But there are much worse possibilities. Please come."

Despite his apparent calm, I read desperate urgency in his appeal. My opposition melted away.

"All right," I said. "I'll come. I'll probably curse myself for all kinds of a fool when I wake up. But I'll come."

His lips opened, to speak I thought—but instead of speech, out of them came the appalling howl of a siren!

I sat bolt upright in my bed. The room was in pitch darkness. The wall of the siren still filled it, fading away into the distance. I was muttering, "It's all right. Graydon. I'll come—sure, I'll come—"

I LEAPED out of bed and turned on the electric; went over to the south wall and felt of it. It was, of course, perfectly solid. I went to the window and looked out over the roofs of New York. They were real enough, too.

I wrestled with myself for hours. Even as I had predicted, however, the dawn found me calling myself all kinds of a fool, pretty well packed and ready for the journey; and before noon I was on a train to New Orleans.

Having settled myself comfortably for the tiresome journey, my mind went back to that little village, high on the eastern slopes of the Andes, where I had first set eyes upon Nicholas Graydon.

I had then been collecting ancient tex-

tiles for the Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation, in New York, and was on the last leg of my tour. I had stopped at Chupan for supplies. At once, the keeper of the *posada* had told me of another Americano who was ill there, an Americano who had come from that accursed place of devils, the Cordillera de Carabaya and so dreadful were his ravings that, in truth, at least one of the devils must have entered him. How dreadful they were I would realize when they made even the good priest, who was under the direct protection of God, hesitate to approach him!

I took charge of the sick man. Papers on him showed him to be Nicholas Graydon, a mining engineer, graduate of the Harvard School of Mines, his birthplace Philadelphia. He was about thirty, I judged, tall and rangy, his scrub of beard not hiding the clean cut, half Indian aquilinity that is the mark of the modern college-bred American.

My first shock of surprise came when I examined his wound. It seemed to me more like the stab of some immense bird's beak than the work of arrow or spear. It was a puncture clear through the muscles of the back, left shoulder and base of the neck. It had missed the arteries of the neck by the narrowest of margins.

After I had dressed it I went through the saddle bags. Among the duffel were two parcels, each wrapped with greatest care. Opening the first, I found a long black feather, oddly marked with white. Its shaft was inlaid with little bands of gold, a curiously delicate bit of work.

But the contents of the second package brought me up on my feet. It was a golden bracelet, clearly exceedingly ancient, the band an inch wide, expanding into an oval disk some three by two inches. This disk held in high relief the most extraordinary carving I had ever seen. It showed four monsters holding up, on lifted fore legs, a bowl in which lay coiled a serpent with a woman's face and woman's breasts. Its eyes were two jewels, of a curiously luminous purple—like deepest amethysts blended with black rubies.

The four monsters were dinosaurs! The gigantic saurians that were the dominant life of earth millions of years before man appeared; that, if science is right, had been extinct for at least another million before man developed to the point of using fire.

Therein lay the full measure of my wonder. For this carving was certainly the work of human hands, and the five figures were quite as certainly portraits!

As every one knows, there are certain

pictures and sculptures which carry to their beholders conviction that they are accurate copies of something actually seen by those who made them. These did just that, and overwhelmingly so.

The Snake Woman's tiny face, with all its unhuman wisdom and weirdness, was a portrait. I knew that somewhere, some time, there had been such a creature, and that the eyes of the maker of the bracelet had looked upon her. There could be no doubt about that.

So, too, it was of the dinosaurs. There had been living models. The marvelous scientific reproductions of Knight in the Field Museum of Chicago were crude compared to the impression of photographic accuracy the ancient goldsmith had wrought.

It was six weeks before Graydon was able to tell me of that well-nigh incredible adventure of his in the Cordillera de Carabaya, stitching together and giving coherence to the things I had heard him rave about in his delirium. Things so utterly strange that I knew not even his fevered brain could have invented them. And which had so aroused my wonder and my curiosity that I could not have abandoned him, even had I so desired, until death had ended his speaking or life returned in full strength to make them plain to me.

CHAPTER I

GRAYDON'S STORY

IN QUITO, he said, he had met three West Coast adventurers—Sterritt, a hard-drinking, giant Englishman with none too good a reputation, an American named Soames, and Dancre, a Frenchman. They had persuaded him to join them on a hunt for the lost treasure of the Inca Atahualpa, the ransom which was to deliver him from Pizarro but which never reached the rapacious hands of the Spaniards. This because its guardians, learning of Atahualpa's murder while conveying it, had turned back and buried it somewhere in the wilderness.

There was no doubt that there had been such a treasure. It had taken three hundred llamas to carry, legend said, the gold and jewels that made it up. Nor had it ever been found.

It was a will-o'-the-wisp, Graydon knew, that for scores of years had lured men to black despair, ruin, torment and death. So at first he had laughed at Sterritt.

But in the end he had been convinced; convinced at least that there was something more tangible than usual in the story, something that might be worth

looking into. Graydon was at a loose end; he could well afford the cost of a holiday. Certainly there would be adventure, even if they found no treasure.

Sterritt had got hold of an ancient parchment on which was an alleged map of the trail taken by the treasure hidiers, and carefully drawn signs which purported to be copies of those cut along that trail by them. Graydon greatly doubted that they were anything of the sort, but there was no manner of doubt as to the antiquity of the document itself.

To his real amazement, they did begin to find signs cut in the rocks exactly as the parchment promised. Steadily these led them into the uncharted Andean wilderness.

At last their bearers began to murmur. They were approaching the Cordillera de Carabaya, they said, an accursed region where only demons dwelt. Threats and promises made them go on for a day or two.

The four of them awoke one morning to find their *arrieros* missing; and the muleteers had taken with them most of the burros and the supplies. Nevertheless they pushed along, still led by the signs. Suddenly these failed. They found themselves in a silent country devoid apparently even of bird and animal life. One night they pitched their camp in a clump of immense *algarroba* trees standing upon a high mound overlooking a park-like plain. To the south and not many miles away towered the precipitous scarps of snow-topped mountains.

Graydon, Dancre and Soames had set out next morning to hunt for the lost signs, leaving Sterritt in the camp. The situation was not a comfortable one for Graydon. That day, the day of the coming of Suarra, he had written in his diary:

Two weeks since the *arrieros* deserted, and we seem to be pretty thoroughly lost. Effect upon the three is curious. Sterritt manages to keep himself evenly drunk all the time. That spare burro of his must be loaded with nothing but *Quicha* hell-brew. Dancre is moody and sullen. Soames seems to have developed a morbid suspicion of all of us. All three seem to hold me in some way responsible for the disappearance of the guiding signs. In Quito none of the three was half bad. But now—well, the luckiest thing for me will be for us to find no treasure. If we do, my throat will probably be the first to be cut.

Graydon, coming back to camp, heard a girl scream. He ran up the mound, through the oddly parklike grove. He had warned Sterritt to be more than

careful of his treatment of any Indian women they might meet. What was the drunken fool doing? He caught a glimpse of him holding a struggling girl in his arms. He broke Sterritt's grip upon her. The Englishman reached for his pistol. Graydon's fist caught him on the point of the jaw, knocking him out.

He turned to reassure the Indian girl.

There was no Indian girl! He saw Suarra!

Graydon forgot the brute at his feet, the others, his quest, forgot all—drinking in her loveliness. Her great black eyes, Egyptian in the wide midnight of their irises, regarded him curiously. Her skin gleamed like translucent ivory through the rents that Sterritt's hands had made in the soft amber fabric, like thick silk, which swathed her.

She spoke to him, in the Aymara tongue—yet Graydon knew that she was no Aymara, no Indian, no woman of any tribe or race he had ever seen. Her voice was low and sweet, bird-sweet, with a chime as of little silver bells running through it.

"How you slipped by the Watchers I do not understand," she said. "Nor how you could come so far within this forbidden land. Tell me"—her voice was imperious—"why came you here at all?"

Briefly, he told her. It never occurred to him to lie to her. She nodded.

"Atahualpa?" she said. "Yes, his people did come here. We took them—and their treasure. The treasure was nothing to us! In Yu-Atlanchi it was but a grain of sand among many. But Atahualpa's people were welcome—since we needed new folk to care for the *Xinli* and for other things. and the Snake Mother ordered it."

"The Snake Mother!" he exclaimed.

She touched a bracelet upon her arm, the bracelet I have described. And, for the first time, Graydon saw that strange being in whose tiny hands lay his destiny.

Sterritt stirred, and groaned. Conscience was returning to him. And Soames and Dancre might be back at any minute. They must not find this girl there.

"Go," he told her. "Go quickly. There is danger for you here."

"Ah," she answered tranquilly, "but I am—Death."

A CHILL passed through Graydon. Suddenly, he realized the unfamiliar, the alien, beauty of her. Was there truth after all in those legends of the haunted Cordillera? He had never doubted that there was some sound reason behind the terror of the Indians,

the desertion of the *arrieros*. Was she one of its spirits, its—demons? Then reason returned to him. He laughed. She frowned at his laughter.

"Do not laugh!" she said. "The death I mean is not such as you, who live behind the high rim of our land, know. Yet since you came to my aid, I would not have this death come to you. Listen! Abandon these men! Go from here! Now! I promise you safe conduct out of this place—if you go at once."

He shook his head, ruefully.

"I can't," he said, simply.

She pointed to a tree behind her. Against its trunk leaned three slender shining spears. Their shafts were of gold, the heads of two of them of fine opal, the head of the third a flawless emerald all of six inches long, a priceless gem.

"Sometimes we hunt here with the Xinli," she told him, "and with—" she hesitated, glancing at him oddly, nor did she finish that sentence, but went on swiftly: "So it was that he who lies there caught me. I was hunting. I had slipped away from my—my followers," again she hesitated, as oddly as before, "for sometimes I like to hunt alone—wander alone. I came through these trees and saw your lodge. I came face to face with him. And I was amazed—too amazed to strike. And before I could conquer my amaze, he had seized me. And then you came. Wait—"

She stripped the bracelets from her arms, and held them out to him.

"You came for treasure," she said. "Take these and the spears—and go!"

Again smiling, he shook his head.

He heard the sound of a horn blown by some elf, far away and high in the air it seemed. It was answered by others closer; mellow, questing notes—yet with a weird beat in them that checked the pulse of Graydon's heart. He thought he heard the beating of many wings—

"Too late!" whispered Suarra. "My followers! Light your fire to-night. Do not wander beyond these trees. You—I will save if I can!"

The mellow horns sounded closer. The girl darted through the *algarrobas*. He heard her voice in one ringing, summoning cry; a louder, closer, tumult of the elfin horns; another tumult of wings, beating the air. Silence!

So Graydon first met Suarra.

She came back to him a little after the dawn. The night had been one long ordeal. Dancre and Soames had returned; Sterritt had told them of the girl, of the treasure she had carried, and of Graydon's connivance at her escape. They had bound him, had beaten and

choked him, had threatened him with death.

And now, with the gold lust hot in the hearts of the three, here she was—carrying with her that which could only fan that lust to hotter flame!

A cloak of green swathed her. In her misty hair gleamed a coronal of emeralds set in red gold; bracelets of gold studded with the same gems circled her wrists and ankles. Behind her paced a white llama, harnessed with gold and ropes of jewels, golden panniers at its sides.

Graydon had warned her of these men. Why, then, had she returned decked with a queen's ransom? Almost, it seemed to him, she had come so deliberately; that she was bent on arousing to the full the very passions from which she had most to fear!

Why?

And she had brought no followers. With her were only two hooded figures, one draped in blue carrying an ebon staff; the other in red and yellow with staff of vermilion. The first stalked along somberly; the second with mincing little backward and forward steps that carried the grotesque suggestion that its robes covered not a man but some huge bird. No protection these for her against the three, burning now with avarice!

"Suarra!" Graydon cried despairingly. "Why did you return?"

For answer she leaned over him and cut his bonds. And then, her two hooded and cloaked followers standing, silent, she made her bargain with the three, promising to lead them to a place where gems like those in her hair grew "like flowers in a garden," and gold "came streaming forth like water."

"You may bathe in it," she had told them. "Drink from it if you will. Carry away all that you can bear. And if it causes you too much sorrow to leave it, you may stay with it forever; nay, become a part of it even! Men of gold! Yea, golden men!"

And she had laughed; the figure in red and yellow whom Graydon was to know later as the Lord of Fools, had shaken his staff, and fluttered like a great parrot; but the blue-clad figure whom he was to know as the Lord of Fate stood immobile, something definitely terrifying in his aloofness.

From over Suarra's head had come a muted chorus of the faëry horns, and a rustling of unseen wings.

She had unpacked the panniers, setting before them cups of gold and deep, boat-shaped golden dishes, and tall ewers whose handles were slender carved winged serpents wrought in lacquers of

emeralds and rubies; she had given them food and poured them wine. After they had eaten, they had set out for that treasure she had promised them, Graydon oppressed by forebodings, the others watchful, suspicious, yet driven onward by their greed as irresistibly as ever Orestes by the Furies.

They had traveled along a high ledge that ridged a flat and oval plain strewn with immense, isolated rocks rising from it like menhirs of the Druids. Straight across that plain, five miles away, were the smooth scarps of a gigantic mountain, its perpendicular precipices rising twenty thousand feet or more in air. These cliffs formed the arc of a vast circle.

Behind them, Graydon knew, lay hidden that place of mystery she had called Yu-Atlanchi!

IT WAS over this plain that the Scarlet Weaver, the spider man had scuttled. After it, the hissing pack of green-and-blue-scaled monsters Suarra had called the Xinli, dinosaurs dwarfed to the size of Great Danes. He had watched them urged on by that golden-haired rider she had named, with old hatred in her own eyes, Lantlu. There he had seen the Scarlet Weaver, scrambling up the edge of the bowl to the ledge on which they were hid, fall back into the jaws of the pack, paralyzed by the black staff of the Lord of Fate.

While they had passed on unseen, by luck—or by sorcery!

She had told him, as they went, a little of her strange race.

"I am weary of Yu-Atlanchi," she had said, somberly. "Yes, weary of its ancient wisdom, and of its treasures, and its deathless people! I would go into the new world, where there are babes, and many of them, and the laughter of children, and life streams swiftly, passionately—even though it is through the opened doors of Death that it flows. In Yu-Atlanchi the doors of both Life and Death are closed except to those who choose to open them. And life is a still stream. And there are few babes, and of the laughter of children—little."

"What are your people, Suarra?" he asked.

"The ancient people," she told him. "The most ancient. Ages upon ages ago they came down from the north where they had dwelt for other ages still. They were driven away by the great cold. One day the earth rocked and swung. It was then the great cold came, and the darkness and icy tempests, and even the warm seas began to freeze. Their cities,

so the legends run, are hidden now under mountains of ice. They journeyed south in their ships, bearing with them the serpent-people who had taught them most of their wisdom—and the Snake Mother is the last daughter of that people!

"They came to rest here. At that time the sea was close and the mountains had not yet been born. They found hordes of the Xinli. They were larger, far larger than now. My people destroyed most of them and tamed and bred those they spared to their use. And here for another age they dwelt, as they had in the north.

"Then there were great earth shakings and the mountains began to lift. Although all their wisdom was not great enough to keep the mountains from being born, it could control their growth around their ancient city. Slowly, steadily through another age the mountains rose. Until at last they girdled Yu-Atlanchi like a vast wall—a wall which could not be scaled. Nor did my people care; indeed, it gladdened them, since by then they had closed the Door of Death and cared no more to go into the outer world. And so they have dwelt for other ages more."

"If your people were so wise," he had said, "why did they not come forth and rule this world?"

"But why should they have?" she asked in turn. "They have nothing more to learn! If they had come forth, what could they have done but shape the rest of earth into likeness of that part in which they dwelt? What use in that, Graydon? None!

"And many let the years stream by while they dream. For dream they also have conquered. Through dream they create their own worlds; do therein as they will; live life upon life as they will it. Why should they go out into the one world when they can create myriads of their own at will?"

They had come at last to that vast cavern which was the home of the Face. Over its threshold they had been led—and left.

That cavern, Graydon had said was like a gigantic hollow globe of black rock which had been cut in two, and one-half cast away. Glittering rays, tempests of luminous atoms, streamed out of its curving walls, polished like mirrors. On those walls, hanging like grapes, grew clustered gems.

Rubies glowing with every rubrous tint, from that clear scarlet which is like sunlight streaming through the fingers of delicate maids, to deepest sullen reds of bruised hearts; sapphires that shone with blues as rare as those under the

bluebird's wings, and blues as deep as those which darken beneath the creamy crest of the Gulf Stream's crisping waves; huge emeralds with the peacock verdancies of tropic shallows and the deep green of jungle glades; diamonds glittering with irised fires; great burning opals; flaming unknown jewels.

From where they stood, a flight of Cyclopean steps ran down a hundred feet or more into the heart of the cavern. At the left of this was the semi-globe of the wall.

At its right was an abyss which fell sheer away into bottomless depth upon depth.

Before them was—the Face!

Bodiless, its chin rested upon the floor of the cavern a little beyond the lowest step. Its eyes of pale blue crystals were level with their own. The Face was carved out of the same black rock, but within it was no faintest sparkle of the streaming luminescence, the storm of firefly atoms.

It was Luciferean, arrogant and ruthless. Upon its broad brows power was throned, an evil and imperious power. And those pale blue eyes were alive—No! The eyes were not alive, but behind them *something* was alive, something tremendously alive—and as tremendously evil. Something caged! Some evil prisoned thing, that peered through the eyes of jewel as though they were windows!

Now he saw that all the darting rays, all the flashing atoms, were concentrated upon that Face, and that there was a great circlet of gold over its brow, like a crown. From that crown, like drops of yellow sweat, globules of gold dripped. They crept sluggishly down its cheeks. From the eyes dropped other golden drops—like tears. And out of each corner of the drooping mouth the golden globules rolled like spittle. Golden sweat, golden tears and golden slaver crawled and joined a river of gold that oozed out from behind the Face, thence to the verge of the abyss and over its lip.

"Look into my eyes! Look into my eyes!"

It seemed to Graydon that the Face had spoken, imperiously, not to be disobeyed. He looked into its eyes. From them there poured into him visions of what gold, gold without end, could do for him. The eyes promised him power over men and nations, power unlimited and ruthless. They poured a fire into his blood, a Satanic ecstasy, a flaming recklessness.

He tensed himself to leap down the steps, straight to that gigantic mask of black rock that sweated, wept and slav-

ered gold, to take from it what it offered—to pay it whatever it should demand of him in return—

He was thrust aside; he reeled, and caught himself on the very edge of the stairway. Past him rushed the three—gaunt Soames, giant Sterritt, Dancre.

By God, they couldn't get away with that!

Earth and the dominion of earth were his own for the taking. The Face had promised them to him first!

He leaped after them.

Something caught his ankles, pinioned them, wrapped itself around his knees, brought him to an abrupt halt. Raging, cursing, he looked down. He was in the coils of a white serpent. It bound him tightly like a rope, its head was level with his heart. The white serpent's head swayed, then turned, its gaze fastened upon something beyond him. Graydon's gaze followed it.

He saw—the Snake Mother!

HER shimmering length half-collared, she lay within the radiant air directly between him and the Face. He saw her, and yet plainly through her he could see the weird cavern and all that it held. Her purple eyes were intent upon his.

And instantly rage and all that fiery poison of golden lust that had poured into him vanished. He stared fearlessly into the eyes of the Face. Their spell upon him was broken.

He looked down the stairway. The three were at its end. They began to climb the cliffed chin of the Face. And now they were in the full focus of the driving rays. For a moment they stood out like three men cut from cardboard a little darker than the black stone. Then they grayed, their outlines grew misty. They ceased their climbing. They writhed as though in some intolerable agony—They faded out!

Where they had been there hovered for a breath something like three wisps of stained cloud. The wisps dissolved.

In their place were three great drops of gold. Sluggishly the three globules began to roll down the Face. They became one. It dripped slowly down to the crawling golden stream, was merged into it, and was carried to the lip of the abyss—

And over it!

From high over the gulf came a burst of the elfin horns. And Graydon saw at last what it was that sent forth those strange notes. Their bodies were serpents, silver-scaled. But they were winged. They dipped and drifted and eddied on snowy, long feathered wings

like the plumage of ghostly birds of paradise.

Large and small, some of the size of the great python and some no longer than the asp, they writhed and coiled and spun through the sparkling air, trumpeting, calling to each other with their voices like elfin horns; fencing joyously with each other with bills that were like thin, straight swords.

Winged serpents, paradise-plumed, whose bills were sharp rapiers. Winged serpents sending forth their paeans of faery trumpets while that crawling golden stream of which Soames, Dancre and Sterritt were now a part dripped slowly down into the unfathomable void!

Graydon dropped upon the step, consciousness suddenly blotted out.

When his senses returned, he was in a forest. Beside him his burro nibbled the grass.

"Suarra! Beloved!" he whispered—and then loudly, a panic of loneliness sweeping him—"Suarra!"

A figure stirred in the shadow. It was an Indian of a type familiar to him, tall with clean-cut features, in corselet and kilt of padded blue silk. He handed Graydon a package wrapped also in silk. He opened it. Within it was Suarra's bracelet of the Snake Mother and the *caraquenque* feather she had worn when first he saw her.

Graydon restored the feather to its coverings, and thrust it into the pocket over his heart. The bracelet—and why he did it he did not know—he slipped over his own wrist. All that day they traveled, and most of the next. Then the Indian told him that he must go on alone.

They stood upon the edge of a cliff some two hundred feet high. Graydon saw at its base a faintly marked trail. There was a fairly easy descent to it, zig-zagging down. The Indian pointed the way he must take.

With his burro he climbed down the slope. The Indian stood watching him. As Graydon reached a turn in that trail, he waved his hand in farewell, and slipped back into the forest. Graydon plodded on for about a mile. Then he turned back, retraced his way to the cliff and, driving his burro ahead of him, re-climbed it.

He slipped over the edge of the hill and stood there listening. He heard nothing. He pushed ahead of the burro and strode forward.

Instantly, close above his head, he heard an angry bugle note, and with it a whirring of great wings. Instinctively, he threw up an arm. By chance it was

the one on which he had placed Suarra's bracelet. The purple stones flashed in the sun. Graydon heard the bugling again—startled, protesting.

There was a whistling flurry close beside him, as of some invisible, winged creature striving to check its flight. He felt a sharp blow against his shoulder, a searing pang. The blood gushed from his shoulder and neck. He fell, rolling over the crest of the hill and down its side.

When he recovered his senses it was to find the burro standing over him at the foot of the scarp. He was badly wounded, that he knew.

And he knew, too, that what had wounded him was one of the feathered serpents of the abyss!

One of those Watchers, whose vigilance by some strange chance he and the three who now were slowly dribbling down the abyss had evaded when they had crossed the frontier into the forbidden land. And finally he knew it was useless, wounded as he was, to try to go on. That night the fever took him. The next day he met some friendly Indians. With their aid he managed to make Chupan, on the last reserves of his strength.

A PLEASANT prospect for me, and without the expectation of a Suarra to spur me on! Nevertheless, at New Orleans, with seconds to spare, I made the fast boat to Colon. Less than two days after that I was taking the thirty-five minute flight across the Isthmus of Panama. And four days later I was in Lima. Which, I reflected, was pretty quick work; and if Graydon had any means of keeping check on my movements, ought to satisfy him, no matter how pressing the emergency that had made him call upon me—if he really had—in such unusual fashion.

At Lima I had no difficulty in getting a plane to take me to Cuzco. I could save about five days by landing there instead of proceeding to Chupan direct from Lima. We took off at seven that morning. With any kind of luck we should land at Cuzco about two that afternoon. A most engaging little chap, one Pedro de Aguilles, was the plane's owner and pilot.

We had flown about two hundred miles when the storm struck us. There had been no warning whatever. At the touch of the first gust the air around us thickened and grew dense with mist. De Aguilles tried to drive the plane up, but the gale had us and drove us forward. I have a vague recollection of an inferno of wind that twirled and tossed, pitched

and swirled us and hurtled us on for hours.

And then the tempest began to subside. The pilot looked back and nodded at me reassuringly. We shot out of the mists into a calm and sunlit space. Giddily, I looked over the side. We were flying low, not more than five hundred feet above a broad expanse of park-like territory that might have been some vast and ordered estate in Westchester or Long Island. A few miles ahead of us loomed the scarps of a mighty mountain range. It was curiously regular—like the arc of an immense circle. Like — what was it like?

Recognition struck me with the force of an actual blow! What we were flying over was the outskirts of the hidden city, the forbidden land! We had crossed its frontiers masked in the veils of the storm. . . .

Like those others who had vanished?

Before I could coordinate my thoughts I heard far ahead of us a fanfaronade of hunting horns. The chorus spiraled, and suddenly was all about us. I saw the fuselage of our plane ripped as though by a score of swords—saw de Aguilles rise in his seat, twist toward me—and then sink back with blood spurting from throat and breast!

I knew, ah, indeed but I knew, what it was that had wrecked the plane and slain him! The Watchers, the rapier beaked and invisible winged sergeants of Graydon's tale! And as the plane hurtled crazily downward, I threw myself forward under the protection of DeAguilles' body, now hanging limp.

I felt a pang like the thrust of a knife through my right shoulder. And then the plane settled into a tail spin, recovered and turned over. After that I was aware of nothing whatever.

When I opened my eyes, I was looking into a face that seemed extraordinarily familiar. Somewhere I had known some one like that!

"Graydon!" I cried, and tried to rise.

"Steady, old man!" said Graydon. "Now why in the world didn't you meet me at Chupan as I told you? Instead of taking that damned airplane? I never thought you'd do that."

I tried to answer, and fainted again. When I came to myself, there was a girl sitting beside me. Her cool hands were on my temples, and she was singing softly some queer little soothing song.

It was Suarra!

After I had looked at her a long, long time from under craftily half-closed lids, I wondered no more why Graydon had dared dinosaurs and worse to return.

This story that follows is Graydon's. It holds his reasons for summoning me. I have constructed it from what he told me, putting much of it, for the better understanding, into our own idiom.*

Much of it I wrote during my recovery. In my tent on the border of the Forbidden Land, knowing why they would not let me advance further into it; set it down often during the long nights, while outside the tent I heard, high overhead, the elfin horns of the winged Watchers, guarding me.

CHAPTER II

RAMPARTS OF YU-ATLANCHI

GRAYDON trudged along the scarcely discernible trail, the burro plodding along placidly before him. Almost two weeks had passed since he had left Chupan, his wound healed. Could it have taken him as long as that, he wondered, to reach the *posada* after the winged serpent had pierced him? It might have; might have taken even longer. How could he know, delirious most of the time as he had been?

Since leaving Chupan he had borne steadily toward the haunted Sierra, avoided the Quicha villages, except when it had been necessary to replenish his supplies. He had seen few Indians, the last few days none at all. Something whispered to him to be cautious.

Cautious? He grinned at the thought. It was hardly the word for this Quixotic adventure—one man headed deliberately into the grip of the power Suarra had named Yu-Atlanchi. He had seen something of that power when the Scarlet Weaver had raced across the plain pursued by the rider of the great black thunder lizard—the fleeing Spider-man, warped wickedly before birth into weird semblance of the spinning *Arachnidæ*.

How had Suarra named that rider? Lantlar—no, Lantlu! Lantlu, a man astride a scaled monster which modern science taught had been wiped off earth these million years and more; a man built in the semblance of some antique and ice-eyed demigod who had bridled a dragon!

And Suarra had hinted of other

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: The custom of translating the speech of an archaic or unknown people into stilted phraseology has never appealed to me. In the first place, it is not the way they talked, and, in the second, human thought everywhere hasn't changed much for thousands of years, even if the languages have. Why not then translate that thought into the terms of to-day? The Snake Mother, of course, never used the word "bored," but there undoubtedly must have been some exact equivalent for it in her own vocabulary. A. M.

horrors of misshapen things besides the Spider-men, things whose shapes had also been evilly changed in the very crucible of birth.

Cautious! Graydon laughed outright. Yet, he reflected, one probably could exercise caution even in invading hell. And Suarra's land seemed rather close to some such place of the damned, if not over its borders. Lingerling upon this interesting idea, he took stock of his assets for its invasion.

He had two serviceable automatics, one tucked in a holster under his left armpit, a high-powered rifle, and plenty of ammunition. He had seen to that before leaving Chupan. Good enough—but Yu-Atlanchi might have, and probably did have, weapons that would make a rifle look like a bushman's bow and arrow. And what use would automatics and rifle be against the scaly armor of the dinosaurs? Well, he thought, with any luck at all they could at least account for Lantlu.

What else had he? A flicker of purple light from his wrist answered him—the gleam of the jeweled eyes in the bracelet of the Snake Mother. That might be worth a thousand guns and pistols, that bracelet! It would be if, as he hoped, it were a talisman to protect him against the Watchers.

And Graydon half believed that he might count on the favor of that weird being, part woman and part serpent, whose phantom he had seen stretched between him and the summoning Face in the Abyss.

But those two other equally enigmatic beings whom Suarra had called the Lords of Fate and Fools? The parrot-motley Lord of Fools might be on his side. Nay, in the eternal fitness of things he ought, indeed, to look upon him as a favorite son, Graydon thought, grinning again. The black-staffed Lord of Fate would probably be neutral—and why not? reflected Graydon, since if he kept the books of Destiny for the region, he naturally must know the outcome of the matter.

"Come back to me! Oh—Graydon, come back to me!" Suarra had whispered. Back to her he would try to go, since never, he knew, could there be peace for him if he did not.

By afternoon the trail had faded away or he had lost it. He hoped that it had ended, since that would be an indication that he was closing in upon his goal.

And once that day he thought he had heard an elfin bugle, faint and far away—the faëry trumpeting which was the cry of the plumed and flying serpents!

When dusk fell he was in a little valley between sparsely wooded, close-lying ranges. A friendly stream gurgled and chuckled close to him. Graydon pitched camp beside the brook, stripped the burro, hobbled it, and turned it loose to graze. Then he built his fire, boiled his tea, prepared his supper. He measured with his eyes the southern range of hills.

Till now he had been lucky in being able to follow the valleys, with few climbs and none of them a stiff one. Here, a mountain lay directly in his path. About two thousand feet high, he reckoned it; not difficult to get over. The trees marched all the way up to its summit, singly and in platoons, always with a curious suggestion of careful planting.

He lay for a while, thinking. His right arm was stretched outside his blanket. In the light of his dying fire the purple gems that were the eyes of the serpent-woman on the bracelet gleamed as though alive. Larger they seemed to grow—and larger. Sleep swept over Graydon like a wave.

He slept, and he knew that he slept: yet even in that deep sleep he was conscious of those eyes. He dreamed, and they guided his dream! It seemed to him that he passed swiftly over the moonlit waste. Ahead of him frowned a black barrier, shrouded him, and was gone. He had a glimpse of an immense circular valley rimmed by sky-piercing peaks. There was the silver glint of a lake, the liquid silver of a mighty torrent pouring out of the heart of a precipice. He caught wheeling sight of colossi, gigantic shapes of stone bathed in the milky flood of the moon, and each guarding the black mouth of a cavern. A city rushed up to meet him, ruby-roofed and opal-turreted and fantastic as though built by jinn from the stuff of dreams.

And it seemed to him that he came to rest within a vast and columned hall from whose high roof fell beams of soft azure light. High arose the columns, unfolding far above into wondrous petalings of opal and of emerald, and of turquoise flecked by gold.

There, coiled upon a cushioned throne that stood just above the lip of a high wide alcove, was—the Snake Mother!

THE Snake Mother! Last daughter of another lost race which had ruled an earth on which humanity, except for Suarra's people, had not yet reached the dawn of the Age of Stone. So far distant was that time! The Snake Mother—memory of whom, or of her sisters, may

have given birth to those legends of the Naga Princesses whose wisdom reared the cities of the vanished Khmers in the Cambodian jungles. Yes, and may be the source of those persistent stories of serpent-women in the folk-lore of every land. May even be the germ of truth in that strange legend of Lillith, first wife of Adam, whom Eve ousted!

Her ageless face was human—and yet far from human. Her eyes, set far apart, were like living jewels filled with purple fires. Her forehead was wide and low. Her nose was delicate, the nostrils dilated. Her chin was small and pointed. Her mouth, too, was small, heart-shaped, and the lips a scarlet flame.

Down her narrow, childish shoulders flowed hair that gleamed like spun silver. It arrow-shaped into a point upon her forehead; it gave her face that same heart shape in which her lips were formed, a heart of which the pointed chin was the tip. She had little high breasts, tilted. Face, neck, shoulders and breasts were the hue of pearls suffused faintly with rose; and like rosy pearls they glistened.

Her coils began just beneath her breasts! They were half-buried in the nest of silken cushions; thick coils and many; circle upon circle of them, covered with glimmering, heart-shaped scales, each scale as exquisitely wrought as by the hand of some elfin carver of gems; and each of them a jewel indeed—opaline, nacreous, suffused with palest rose.

Her hands were tiny as a child's. Like a child's, too, were her slender arms. Upon her face, that was neither woman's nor serpent's, but subtly both and, still more subtly, neither, was the stamp of an awesome wisdom, and a weariness and sadness that checked his heartbeat.

He thrilled to the beauty of that heart-shaped little face, the glistening glory of hair, the exquisiteness of childish shoulders and hands. He felt a strange pity for her. He gave no heed to her coils, her unhuman shape, her monstrosity; it was as though she reached down into his heart and plucked like a harp some deep string silent since birth. All his consciousness was centered in reverence and this new, strange love. So greatly centered indeed that for the moment he forgot Suarra!

And in that dream, still if dream it was, he knew that she was aware of all this; and well pleased. Her purple eyes softened, and brooded upon him, luminously tender. The rose-pearl column of her body reared up; she nodded to him. She raised her tiny hands to her fore-

head and cupped them, and then with a curiously hieratic gesture lowered them, tipping them as she did so, as though she poured from them.

Now he saw that there were other thrones within the alcove. High above all was one as though carved from the heart of a colossal sapphire, oval and set upon a pedestal of milky crystal. It was empty, although around it clung, he thought, a faint radiance. At its base were six lesser thrones. One was red as though carved from ruby; one was black as though cut from jet; the thrones between the two were yellow gold.

Black throne and three of the golden thrones were tenantless. In the red throne sat the Lord of Fools, and beside him the Lord of Fate, regarding him like the Snake Mother with unwinking bright eyes.

The scarlet mouth of the Snake Mother opened, a slender, pointed, scarlet tongue flicked out and touched her red lips. Whether she spoke or did not, Graydon read her thought.

"I will hold up the hands of this man! Suarra loves him! He pleases *me*! Except for her, it has been long since I took interest in the lives of any who dwell in Yu-Atlanchi. Her desire flies to him, and his to her. So let it be! I grow weary of Lantlu and his crew. For one thing, Lantlu draws closer than I like to that shadow of Nimir they call the Dark One. Also, he would take Suarra. He shall not!"

"By the ancient compact," the Lord of Fate spoke, "by that compact, Adana, you may not use your secret wisdom against any of the Old Race. Your people, you of the Oldest Race, swore it. It was sworn to long, long ago, before the ice drove us from the ancient homeland. It has never been broken. Even you, Adana, last of the Oldest Race, cannot break that oath."

"S-s-s-s!" the Snake Mother's scarlet tongue flickered wrathfully. "Say you so, Malik! There was another side to that compact. Did not the Old Race also swear never to plot against any of us, the Serpent-people, nor consciously to work us harm? Yet Lantlu and his followers plot with the Dark One, the shadow of Nimir. They plot to free him from the fetters which long ago we forged for him. Free, he will seek to destroy us . . . and why should he not? . . . and perhaps he may! Heed that, Malik, and you, Tyddo—I say he may! Lantlu plots with Nimir; therefore he plots against me, the last of the Oldest Race! Very well—the ancient compact is broken. By him—not by me!"

The serpent-woman swayed forward on her gleaming coils, purple eyes glittering.

"Suppose we three abandon Yu-Atlanchi! Pass from it as did my ancestors and the Lords who were your peers? Leave it to its rot?"

There was a short silence, which the Lord of Fate broke.

"I cannot go, Adana. Until the last page of the book of the Old Race is turned I cannot go."

"And where there is nothing but folly, you of course must stay." The serpent-woman swayed her childish head toward the Lord of Fools. "But what is there to keep *me*? By the wisdom of my people! Here was a race of gray hairless apes that we took from their trees! Took them and taught them, and turned them into men! And what have they become? Dwellers in dream, paramours of phantoms, slaves of illusion! The others—swinging ever toward the darkness, lovers of cruelty; retainers of beauty, outwardly — and within their masks, hideous. I sicken of them! They are loathsome to me! Yu-Atlanchi rots—nay, it is rotten! Let it die!"

"There is Suarra," said the Lord of Fools softly. "And there are others who are still sound. Will you abandon them?"

The Snake Mother's face softened. "There is Suarra," she whispered, "and there are—the others. But so few! By my ancestors, so few!"

"If it were their fault alone!" said the Lord of Fools. "But it is not, Adana. Better for them had we razed this barrier that has protected them; better for them had we let them make their own way against the wilderness, and what of enemies it held. Better for them had we never closed the Door of Death."

"Peace, Tyddo!" answered the serpent-woman sadly. "No more than Malik nor you would I abandon them. It was my woman's tongue talking. Yet there is a deeper reason why we may not. This Shadow of Nimir seeks a body. How strong Nimir may be, what he has forgotten of his old arts or what new arts he has learned through the ages, we do not know. My wisdom tells me he is far weaker than of old. But once again incarnate, freed from the stone, his old strength may swiftly return. We must prepare for battle, Old Ones. For should Nimir conquer, he will sit upon the throne of the Lord of Lords—and we must go! Nor will our going be orderly and as we may desire! And in time he will spread his dominion over all the world, as, other ages ago, he planned to do. And that must not be!"

THE Lord of Fools stirred upon his throne, flapping about like a great red and yellow bird.

"Open your Book, Malik," he said. "Read us from the pages not yet turned."

"You know I cannot," the Lord of Fate answered him. "I am but the keeper of the Book. I did not write it, nor may I, more than any other, read beyond the moment—"

"And what good would it do if he did read it?" interrupted the Snake Mother practically. "If it is to be war, as war I think it surely is to be, I, for one, have no desire to be weakened by knowing I am going to lose! Nor to be bored by knowing I am going to win! If one must exert one's self to such a degree as such a war promises, one is surely entitled to the interest of uncertainty."

Graydon, for all the incredible weirdness of what he seemed to be seeing and hearing, chuckled involuntarily at this, it was so amazingly feminine. The serpent-woman looked at him as though she had heard, and there was a half malicious twinkle in her glowing eyes.

"And as for this man who seeks Suarra," she said, "let him come and find me! There is much in what you have said of our error in making life too easy for Yu-Atlanchi, Tyddo. Let us not repeat it. When this man, by his own wit and courage, has found the way to me, and stands before me in body as he now stands in thought, I will arm him with power. If we win, Suarra shall be his reward. In the meantime, for sign, I shall send my winged Messengers to him, that they may know him—and also that he may know he need fear them no more!"

The temple faded and disappeared. Graydon seemed to hear around and above him a storm of elfin buglings. He thought that he opened his eyes, threw off the blanket and arose.

And that all round him, glimmering with pale silver fires, were circles upon circles of the feathered serpents! They whirled or wheeled in countless spirals; hundreds upon hundreds of them, great and small, their paradisaical plumes gleaming like pale witchfires, fencing gayly with long rapier beaks—the Watchers, the winged serpents that were the servants of the Snake Mother.

And abruptly were gone.

It was dawn when he awakened. Clearly from the southern mountains he heard a chorus of horn notes. He threw together a hasty breakfast, caught the burro and adjusted the packs upon it.

Whistling, he set forth up the mountain. The ascent was not difficult. In an hour he had reached the summit.

At his feet the ground sloped down to a level plain, dotted strangely with huge standing stones. Up from this plain and not five miles from where he stood arose the scarps of a great mountain. Its precipices marched in the arc of an immense circle, on and on beyond sight—
The ramparts of Yu-Atlanchi!

CHAPTER III

THE LIZARD MEN

THERE could be no doubt about it. Behind the barrier upon which he looked lay Yu-Atlanchi—and Suarra! The smooth plain studded with the giant stone menhirs was that over which the Scarlet Weaver, the spider-man, had scuttled on his grotesque stillt-like legs. The path along which Graydon had trodden on his way to the Face in the Abyss must be just below him.

As though to confirm his recognition, he heard high overhead a mellow bugle-call. Thrice the note sounded, then thrice again—once from the base of the slope whose top he trod, once from far out on the plain, and then, faintly, from close to the distant mountain wall itself—as though directing Graydon's way.

He began to descend. Soon he was at the edge of the plain and making his way across it. The monoliths were mightier than he had judged, and their regularity, like that of the trees behind him, hinted of human agency in their placing. He halted at one, his interest caught by what appeared to be carvings. But if carvings, they were so ancient and time-worn that they were like ghosts, fading and vanishing under closer gaze.

Mostly he hurried across the plain, urging on the indignant burro with lusty slaps whenever it loitered to graze upon the high grass. He had no mind to be caught in the open there as the spider-man had been. And ever as he went he listened with taut nerves for that hissing chorus which was the hunting-cry of Lantlu's hellish pack.

It was early afternoon when he reached the mountain. The rock was basaltic, black and adamant hard. The scarps thrust themselves up almost perpendicularly from the plain, at their base remarkably little débris or broken-away fragments. They were unscalable. At least, that part before him was. Which way should he go? As though answering his question, he heard once more the mellow horn note southward.

"South it is," said Graydon cheerfully, and resumed his march. An hour slipped by, and another. Still the dark barrier remained unbroken.

It was not until the second hour before sunset that he found the crevice. From far away his eye had caught a verdancy, a green banner streaming down the face of the escarpment a hundred feet or more above its base. As he drew near he saw that there had been a shattering of the rock at this point. Rubble studded with immense boulders lay piled against the cliff. Bushes and small trees had found foot-hold and had climbed to the very top of the breast.

Graydon, studying the breast to determine its cause, saw what looked like a narrow crack in the rock wall above the mound. Curiosity drove him to examine it. The burro watched him until he was halfway up the hill, and then with a protesting bray scrambled after him.

"So you don't like being left alone here, Sancho Panza," laughed Graydon. "Well, I don't blame you."

The little beast nuzzled his hand. There was something moving about its trustfulness. He had a sharp realization of his own precarious position.

"Stick close, old chap," he told the burro. "I'll do the best I can for you. But I'm afraid we're not what the insurance companies would call a good risk."

He pressed on to the top. The crevice was wider than it had seemed from the plain. He pushed through the last of the bushes. Here he found the end of the fissure was about four feet wide. It was very dark within it. He knelt and shot around the rays of his search light. Rocks littered the floor, but the place was dry. He saw also that it extended back beyond the reach of the light, and that it widened as it retreated. He looked at the sky. There was still an hour before sundown. Graydon began to collect his firewood. The burro had found the leaves of some of the bushes much to its liking and was already having its supper.

He threw down the last armload of faggots. Then he walked farther back along the fissure. A hundred paces and his light fell upon a rock wall; the end of it, he supposed. But he found when he reached it that the cleft made an abrupt turn at this point and continued, apparently indefinitely. He heard water dripping. At his left drops were exuding from the stone, were caught in a small natural basin, then flowed away in a thin stream. Was it a fissure? It was more like a crypt—perhaps a tunnel! He turned his flash upward. He could see no roof, but neither could he see the sky.

Well, he would do some exploring next morning. There was no use bothering about it now, besides he was tired. He

hauled the burro away from its feast, into the shelter, tethered it to a spur of rock, and, after he had eaten, rolled himself up in his blanket and promptly went to sleep. That night he did not dream.

He awakened early, the desire hot within him to see where the fissure led. Could it be a breach in Yu-Atlanchi's walls? Or would it turn out to be an impasse, a blind alley? Without bothering to breakfast he swung down it. When he had gone about three hundred paces past the tiny spring the passage turned sharply, this time resuming its original direction. Not far ahead of him was something like a gray, palely luminous curtain stretched across it. He snapped off his flash and crept forward.

It was not a curtain. It was daylight!

Graydon looked down a deep rift in the mountain, a hundred feet wide, with walls as smoothly precipitous as though cleft by the single stroke of a Titan's sword. It ran due east, facing the sun. There was no other way to account for the volume of light that filtered down into the narrow cañon. Its floor was level and smooth. Along one side of it ran the trickle of the spring. There was no vegetation. Not even the hardy, rock-loving lichens.

Where it might lead, what its perils, Graydon had no means of knowing. He gave the latter slight thought; time enough for that when they materialized. The cañon might be blind or—a gate to Suarra! There was only one way to determine which. He must follow it.

He went back to his shelter, watered the burro and tethered it among the bushes.

"Eat hearty, Sancho," he bade it. "God alone knows when you get your next meal."

He made a fire and broke his own fast. He waited until the burro had adequately filled itself, fastened on the packs, and finally with considerable difficulty got the little brute to the cañon door. After that it ambled along ahead of him, apparently quite contented with its lot.

FOR a mile the cañon ran as straight as though laid out by a surveyor's level. Then it began to turn and twist, widen and narrow, dip and climb. Small rocks and boulders appeared in ever-growing numbers on its floor.

The tiny trickle, augmented by other seepages from the cliffs, had grown into a small brook. The rocky walls had changed from black to a reddish yellow. A stunted, pallid vegetation grew sparsely beside the flowing water and among the broken stones.

From time to time he caught glimpses of roughly rounded holes high up the cliffs, apertures that seemed to be the mouths of tunnels or caves. They stared at him from the ochreous rock like huge pupilless eyes. With that sharpening of the faculties the wilderness effects, Graydon sensed that something deadly lurked there. He watched them warily, rifle ready. There was a faint taint in the air, a faintly acrid, musky odor vaguely familiar. It was like—now what was it like? It was like the reek of alligators in some infested, sluggish jungle creek!

The taint grew stronger, the number of the cave mouths increased. The burro began to show nervousness, halting and sniffing, then reluctantly plodding on as Graydon reassured it with encouraging words and pats.

Ahead of him about a hundred feet the cañon made another of its abrupt almost right-angled turns. And suddenly from beyond the buttress that hid the way from him there came an appalling outburst of hissings and gruntings. At the same time a gust of the musky stench smote his nostrils, nauseating him. The burro halted, stood stock-still, apparently paralyzed by terror.

Punctuating the hissing clamor he heard the cries of men. Graydon sprang forward. He turned the corner. Just ahead of him were three tall Indians, clad like the one who had led him to the frontier of the forbidden land, but in yellow instead of blue. Like that Indian, they wore around their foreheads bands of gold. Circling them, tearing at them with fangs and claws, were a score or more of creatures which at first glance he took for giant lizards, and at second realized were, if not men, at least semi-human!

The things stood a little over four feet high. Their leathery skins were a dirty yellow. They balanced themselves upon squat, stocky legs whose feet were like paws and flat and taloned. Their arms were short and powerful, their hands were pads, duplicates almost of their feet, but with longer claws.

It was their faces that chilled Graydon's blood. Over their slender, narrow, pointed foreheads their heads were covered with scarlet scales which stood upright like multiple coxcombs. Their eyes were red, round and unwinking. Their noses were flat, but under them their jaws extended in a broad six-inch snout armed with yellow fangs, strong and cruel as a crocodile's. They had no chins, and only rudiments of ears.

But there was no mistaking the human

element in them. Man and lizard inextricably mingled! Around their loins were filthy strips of cloth.

The three Indians stood back to back in a triangle, battering at these lizard-men with maul-tipped clubs of some shining metal. That they had given good account of themselves a half dozen of the creatures, heads crushed in but bodies still squirming, gave proof. But now in rapid succession first one Indian and then a second was pulled to the ground and hidden by loathsome bodies.

Graydon threw off his paralysis and shouted to the remaining Indian. He raised his rifle, took rapid and careful aim, and fired. The lizard-man he had picked out staggered under the impact of the bullet, then dropped. At the report, echoing like a miniature peal of thunder from the rocky walls, the pack turned as one toward him, fanged mouths open and staring, their bodies crouched, glaring at him with the un-winking red eyes.

The Indian stooped, lifted the body of one of his comrades, and sprang clear. Freed from fear of hitting him, Graydon emptied his rifle into the beasts.

He rapidly reloaded his magazine. Then, as he began dropping them, they broke from their stupor, leaped for the walls, and like true lizards swarmed up the sheer faces of the cliffs. Hissing and screeching, they darted into the black mouths of the caves. They vanished into their dark depths.

The Indian stood with his wounded comrade in his arms. There was amazement and stark awe on his finely featured brown face. Graydon threw the rifle thong around his neck, held out both hands in the universal gesture of peace. The Indian gently lowered the other to the ground and bowed low, the backs of his hands to his forehead.

Graydon jumped; something had touched his back. He turned. It was the soft nose of the burro nudging him. He laughed, and walked toward the Indian. He stopped for a moment to look more closely at the creatures his bullets had dropped. He saw that only those whose skulls had been pierced by the high-powered bullets lay there. And the limbs of these drew up and down spasmodically as though they still lived.

One of them had been shot straight through the heart as well as the head. But still that heart beat on. He could see the leathery yellow chest throb with its pulsations. Only those whose skulls had been crushed by the clubs seemed quite dead.

And again the perverted humanness

of these things shook him. They, or their ancestors, had once been men! Taken at the saurian stage of the human embryo's evolution, and by some accursed art diverted there into blend of man and lizard!

One of them lay face down. The stained breech-clout had slipped off. At the base of its spine was a blunt, scaled tail.

He was aware of the first Indian beside him. He saluted again, and methodically began to crush with his club the heads of those that Graydon had shot.

"This," he said in the Aymara, "so they cannot live again. It is the only way."

Graydon walked over to the second Indian. He was unconscious and badly mauled, but not necessarily fatally, so he thought, going carefully over the wounds. He took his emergency kit out of the saddlebag, treated and bandaged the worst of them. He looked up to see the other Indian standing over him, watching with eyes in which the awe was stronger.

"If we can get him to some place where those brutes can't interrupt, I can do more for him," said Graydon, also in the Aymara tongue, rising to his feet.

"A little way," answered the Indian, "and we will be safe from them, O Mighty Lord!"

"Let's go," said Graydon in English, grinning at the title.

He bent down and lifted the wounded man's shoulders. The Indian took his feet. Burro once more in the lead, they made their way down the cañon. The staring openings of the caves watched them. Within them nothing stirred, but Graydon felt upon him the gaze of malignant eyes—the devil eyes of the lizard-men hidden in the shadow of their lairs!

CHAPTER IV

IN THE LAIR OF HUON

THEY marched along in silence, Graydon absorbed in watching the cliff burrows of the lizard-men. These thinned out more and more rapidly until at last the precipices were clean of them. The Indian had given them no attention whatever, satisfied apparently of his ability to handle any fresh assault by the monsters.

After a while the man they were carrying groaned, opened his eyes, and spoke. His comrade nodded, and set his feet on the ground. He stood upright, stared at Graydon with the same amazement his fellow had shown, then as his gaze fell

upon the bracelet of the Snake Mother, with the same awe. The first Indian spoke rapidly, too rapidly for him to understand. When he had finished, the second took Graydon's hand, laid it first upon his heart and then upon his forehead.

"Lord," he said, "my life is yours."

At the risk of weakening the impression he had made upon them, Graydon put a question or two.

"Where is it that you go?" he asked. "Is it into Yu-Atlanchi?"

"Lord, we go to our own place," answered one at last, uncomfortably.

"I suppose you do," said Graydon, impatiently. "But is that place Yu-Atlanchi?"

Again they looked at each other, then back at him, and their eyes now held fear.

"We do not go into the city, Lord," answered the first Indian at last, evasively, Graydon thought.

He considered, wondering how far he might trust their gratitude, and their manifest awe of him. They had asked him no questions whence he had come, or why, or who or what he was. But that reticence had been due to courtesy or some other potent reason; not to any lack of curiosity, for clearly that burned white-hot in each.

Graydon knew he could expect no such consideration from others he might meet once he was inside the Hidden Band. He could look for no help, at least not yet, from the Snake Mother. Deep in his mind was conviction that what he had seen and heard in his dream had been no illusion of sleep, but reality. The guiding buglings of the flying serpents, and his immunity from those Watchers, gave him proof enough of that. And the Snake Mother had said that he must win to her by his own wit and courage before she would aid him.

How *could* he win to her? Not by blundering into Yu-Atlanchi like any reckless fool, unknowing and unprepared for whatever he might meet!

No, he must not enter Yu-Atlanchi openly.

"You," he turned to the wounded man, decision made for good or bad, "have said your life is mine."

The Indian again took his hand, and touched it to heart and forehead.

"I would enter Yu-Atlanchi," said Graydon, "but for a time I would not be seen by others there. Can you guide me, give me safe shelter, none but you knowing of my presence, until such time as I choose to go my own way?"

"Do you jest with us, Mighty Lord?"

asked the first Indian. "What does one who wears this," he pointed to the bracelet, "and wields this," he pointed to the gun, "need of guidance into Yu-Atlanchi? Are you not a messenger for . . . her. . . ." Again he pointed to the bracelet, and he and his comrade bowed low, "And did not the Watchers who are her servants let you pass? Lord, why jest with us?"

"I do not jest," said Graydon, and, watching them narrowly, he added, "Know you the Lord Lantlu?"

He saw their faces harden, their eyes become suspicious, knew suddenly that the two hated the master of the dinosaur pack. He would tell them something of what he felt to be the truth.

"I seek the Snake Mother," he said. "If not a messenger of hers, I at least am her servant. The Lord Lantlu stands between her and me, and there are reasons why I must cope with him without her help. Therefore I must have time to plan, and he must know nothing of me until I have made those plans."

He saw relief in their faces, and a curious elation. They whispered.

"Lord," said the first, "will you swear by the Snake Mother?" Again they made the reverence to the bracelet. "Raise her to your lips and swear by her that what you have said is truth; that you are no friend nor—spy—of Lantlu?"

Graydon raised the bracelet.

"I do swear it," he said. "I swear it by her, the Snake Mother, and may she destroy me utterly, body and spirit, if what I have told you is not truth."

He kissed the tiny coiled figure.

"Come with us, Lord," said the one who had vowed himself to Graydon. "We take you to the Lord Huon. Until we come to him, we pray you that you ask us no more questions. All that you wish to know he shall answer you if he so wills. You have asked us for shelter against the Lord Lantlu. We guide you to the only shelter against him. And you shall have it—if the Lord Huon wills it. If he does not will it—we will go with you or die with you. Can we do more?"

"No," cried Graydon, touched to the heart, "neither you nor any man could do more for another. But I do not think that your Lord Huon, whoever he may be, will hold grudge against you for bringing me to him."

RAPIDLY he went again over the wounded man; the tears and gashes were bad enough, but no arteries had been cut and no vital organs touched.

"You have lost much blood," Graydon told him. "I think we should carry you."

But he would not have it so.

"It is but a little way now," he said. "There is poison in the fangs and claws of the Urd, the lizard-men, and the water of flame which the Mighty Lord poured into my wounds burned most of it away, but not all. I feel it, and it is better that I walk if I can."

"The Urd poison carries sleep," explained the first Indian. "The sleep ends in death. It was the Mighty Lord's water of flame that conquered that sleep and made him awaken. Now he fears if he is carried he may again sleep, since, he says, the flame water has ceased to burn."

Graydon smiled a little at the description of the iodine that he had used on the wounds. Nevertheless, the reasoning was sound enough. If the venom of the lizard-men had a narcotic action, then in the absence of any neutralizing agent the exercise of walking would be beneficial in throwing off the poison. He lifted the bandages from the deepest gashes and poured more iodine into them. By the tightening of the Indian's muscles he knew that the stuff bit.

"It is good," said the Indian, "the water of flame burns again."

"It burns the poison," said Graydon cheerfully. "If you have any other medicine, it will be well to use it."

"There is such where we go," said the first Indian. "But had it not been for yours, Lord, he would now be well advanced in the Urd sleep—and that is no peaceful one. Now let us go as quickly as we can."

They resumed their way along the cañon. They had traveled, Graydon estimated, probably two miles when it began to narrow. The wounded Indian was decidedly better. The cleansing of his wounds and the treatment with the iodine must have checked the poisoning before it had progressed very far.

The two walls of the cliffs swung abruptly toward each other. Separating them was a fissure some twenty feet wide, clean-cut as though chiseled out of the rocks, and black as a starless night.

"Wait here," said the first Indian, and walked to the fissure's mouth. As he reached it he drew from the pouch at his side an object that, in the swift glimpse Graydon had of it, seemed to be a globe of rock crystal about as big as a tennis ball, its back cased in a cone of metal. The Indian raised the globe above his head. A light sprayed from it into the tunnel. It was not a ray; it was like a swiftly moving, luminous ball of cloud. The Indian dropped the globe back into his pouch, and beckoned.

They entered the fissure. It was no

longer dark. It was filled with a pale luminosity, as though the cloud from the globe had disseminated a phosphorescent mist. They walked on a thousand feet or more. The Indian did not use the globe again, yet the light persisted.

He halted. Graydon saw that the fissure had ended. Outside was blackness. Far below was the sound of rushing water. The Indian raised the cone. Again the luminous cloud sprayed out.

And Graydon gasped. The luminous vapor was speeding over an abyss. The floor of the fissure ended where he stood. Beyond was sheer space. Suddenly the face of a cliff sprang out of that space a hundred yards away. The cloud of light had impinged upon it. Instantly a part of the cliff raised like an immense curtain. Out of the revealed portal shot a metal tongue, flat and twenty feet wide. It flashed over the abyss, following the path of the light. It licked over the depths, and halted at their feet.

The Indians smiled at Graydon, reassuringly.

"Follow me, Lord," one said. "There is no danger."

Graydon stepped upon the span, the burro at his heels. The roar of the torrent, hundreds of feet below, came to him. They reached the end of that strange bridge.

The Indians drew up beside him. They marched on for fifty paces. Looking back, he saw the entrance to the passage like a great gate of twilight. He heard a soft sighing behind him, turned, and saw the rectangle of twilight blotted out. The rocky curtain had fallen.

Light was all around him, soft and suffused as though it were a quality of the air itself. He stood in a chamber that was like a hollow cube perhaps a hundred feet square. Walls and roof were of polished black stone, and in the stone were tiny, swiftly moving luminous corpuscles like those he had watched stream out of the ebon walls of the cavern of the Face. They were the source of the light.

The place was empty, no sign on the passage through which they had come, nor of the openers of the rock nor the machinery that controlled its opening; nor was there sign of door; nor was there trace of doors within the other walls. Yet Graydon heard a murmuring as of many people whispering within the chamber, and then a curt sentence, too rapidly spoken for him to grasp.

The unwounded Indian saluted, and walked forward a few paces. He answered the challenger in the same rapid speech. But Graydon had no difficulty in

getting his meaning. The Indian was telling of the battle with the lizard-men and his part in it. He finished; there was a brief silence and then from the unseen speaker came another quick command. The first Indian beckoned.

"Lord, hold up the bracelet," he said when Graydon had joined him.

BY NOW, of course, Graydon realized that the unseen speaker was not really in the rock chamber, but was behind the wall. His voice was carried through by some tube device, no doubt, and there were probably peepholes. Still, he could see no sign of either; the shining black surface seemed unpierced, smooth as unbroken glass.

Wondering, he lifted the wrist on which was the golden image of the Snake-Mother. The purple eyes gleamed. There was a louder burst of the murmurings, exclamations; another command.

"Lay down your weapon, Lord," said the Indian; "and go forward to the wall."

And then as Graydon hesitated:

"Do not fear. We will stand beside you—"

The voice interrupted, sternly. But the Indian shook his head, and took his stand beside Graydon, his fellow at the other hand. And Graydon, knowing they had been ordered to remain behind while he went on alone, laid the rifle upon the floor, and whispered to them to obey. He walked forward, cautiously loosening the pistol in his armpit holster. And as he walked, the light blinked out.

Only for a moment did the darkness hold. When the radiance returned, a third of the wall had vanished. Where it had been there stretched a corridor, wide and well-lighted. On each side of it was a file of a dozen or more of the Indians. Another file stood between him and the pair with the burro.

They carried spears tipped with some shining black metal, and bore small round shields of the same substance. Their straight black hair was held by narrow fillets of gold. They were naked save for short kilts of quilted yellow silk. All this Graydon saw in one swift glance before his gaze came to rest upon the figure beside him and scrutinizing him.

He was a giant of a man, his face that of a pure-blood of Suarra's and Lantlu's race; or had been, before some catastrophic fight had marred it. He stood a good eight inches over Graydon's six-foot height. His hair was silver white, cut to the nape of his neck and held by a fillet of amber lacquer. From right temple to pugnacious chin ran four

parallel lines of livid scars. His nose had been broken and flattened.

From his shoulders fell a coat of mail of the black metal, linked like those the Crusaders wore. It was gathered in at his waist by a belt. Chain mail breeches covered his thighs and legs to the knees, baggily. The lower legs were protected by greaves from knees to the ankles of the sandaled feet.

His right arm had been cut off at the elbow, and attached to that elbow by a band of gold and held by a shoulder harness was a murderous three-foot metal bar. In his belt was a short double ax, twin to those which were the symbols of ancient Crete.

Formidable enough he was, and made doubly so by his retinue of silent, staring, kilted soldiers. But Graydon, looking into his eyes, drew from them reassurance. Deep-set, somewhat small, reddish-brown, and shrewd, there were wrinkles of laughter at their corners, and humor and toleration that even his present suspicion and puzzlement could not entirely efface. Nor, despite his silver hair, was he old: forty at most, perhaps several years younger than that, Graydon judged.

He spoke in the Aymara, and with a gusty, huskily roaring bass.

"And so you want to see Huon! Well, so you shall. And do not think us lacking in gratitude that I kept you waiting so long, and took from you your weapon. But the Dark One is subtle; and Lantlu—may his Xinli shred him—is like him! Nor would this be the first time that he has tried to foist spies upon us in the guise of those who would do us service. Regor is my name, Black Regor some call me. My blackness is not that of the Dark One, yet I, too, am subtle. But it may be that you know nothing of this Dark One—eh, lad?"

He paused, eyes twinkling shrewdly.

"Some little I have heard of him," answered Graydon, cautiously.

"Eh, some little you have heard of him! Well, and what did that little make you think of him? Consider your answer, lad. I am subtle."

"Nothing," answered Graydon, quoting an Aymara proverb that holds certain obscurely improper implications, "nothing that would make me want to sit cheek by jowl and break eggs with him."

"Ho! Ho!" roared the giant, and swung his bar dangerously close to Graydon's head. "But that is good! I must tell Huon that—"

"And besides," said Graydon, "is he not the enemy of—her?" And he lifted the bracelet.

Black Regor checked his laughter. He roared an order to the guard.

"Walk beside me," he told Graydon. The latter, looking back before obeying, saw one of his two Indians pick up his rifle gingerly, and both of them take up the march on each side of the undisturbed burro. He wondered uneasily, as he tried to match Regor's strides, whether he had locked the gun before dropping it, decided that he had, and then forgot about it listening to the great man beside him.

To Graydon, the giant seemed about as subtle as an earthquake. And apparently he had the habit of talking to himself, certainly a bad one for a subtle man. But, he began to reflect as they went along, there might be some purpose behind Regor's mumbled sentences.

Regor would probably consider that a subtle way to prime him with essential information. If the mutterings were not purposeful, why did he use the Aymara instead of relapsing into his own native tongue, as those who carry on solo conversations almost invariably do? Certainly there was much meat in the apparently absent-minded musings.

"Doesn't seem like a bad lad. . . ." he was muttering. "Wouldn't break eggs with the Dark One! . . . Hope he does nothing to rouse Huon's cursed temper . . . a good man, jealousy his only fault. . . . Hope Dorina likes him, but not too much . . . he'd have no chance with Huon if that happened . . . still, he musn't make an enemy of Dorina . . . but what do I know of him yet, nothing but that he had the bracelet? . . . yet he passed the Watchers . . . couldn't do that without the Snake Mother's good will . . . By Zarrah of the Seven Tails! If he should be what we need to overthrow Lantlu . . . and the Dark One . . . well, that for later . . . only let him win Huon now . . . be subtle . . . not rouse Huon's cursed temper . . . nor Dorina's enmity, nor too great liking . . ."

OVER and over again came the hints of Huon's temper, and the danger from Dorina. Who was Dorina—and what? Once he surprised Regor in a sly sidewise look at him that made him more than ever suspicious of the genuineness of his preoccupation.

Another doubt began to grow in his mind. Unconsciously, he realized, he had been building up a fabric of hope based on the idea that Huon, whoever he might be, was a bitter enemy of Lantlu, would welcome his aid and help him in return for it. And he had intended to tell him the whole story of his encounter with

Suarra, and that which had followed.

Now this seemed too naïve. The situation was not so simple as all that. After all, what did he know of this alien people with their sinister arts—their spider-folk and lizard-folk and God alone knew what other monstrosities?

And what after all did he really know of that utterly weird creature—the Snake Mother?

Graydon felt a momentary despair. He resolutely put it aside. He would have to recast his ideas, that was all. And he had few enough minutes in which to do it. Better make no plans at all until he had seen this Huon, and had had a chance to gauge him.

Occupied by these thoughts, he had taken no account of how far they had gone. They had passed openings into other chambers, and there had been challenges and countersigns. Evidently the place was a fortress, well guarded and under rigid discipline.

A sharper challenge brought him back to alertness. Before him the corridor was barred by immense doors of the black metal. Guarding them was a double file of the yellow-kilted soldiers, the first rank made up of spears, and the second of archers bearing long metal bows. They were captained by a thick-set, dwarfish Indian whose double ax almost dropped from his hand as he caught sight of Graydon.

To him Regor whispered. The captain nodded, and stamped upon the floor. Instantly the halves of the great door separated, folds of filmy curtains like a waterfall of cobwebs through which an amber sun was shining billowing out between them.

"I go to tell Huon of you," rumbled Regor. "Wait patiently." He melted within the webs. The doors closed silently behind him.

And silently Graydon waited; silently the yellow-kilted guards stared at him, and long minutes passed by. A bell sounded; again the great doors parted. He heard a murmur from beyond the webs. The captain beckoned to the two Indians he had saved from the lizard-men. Driving the burro before them they passed into the hidden room. A still longer time, and then once more the signaling bell and the opened door. Through it appeared the face of Regor. He beckoned. And Graydon moved forward and through the webs.

His eyes were dazzled by what seemed sunlight flooding through amber glass. Details sharpened. He had a vague impression of walls covered with tapestries of shifting hues. He blinked up, and

saw that the roof of the chamber was of the same polished stone of the corridors, amber-colored instead of black, and that the intenser light came from far denser spirals of the radiant swirling corpuscles.

He heard the laughter of a woman, coldly sweet and faintly derisive. He looked toward the laughter—and involuntarily leaped forward, the name of Suarra on his lips. Some one caught him by the arm and held him back.

And suddenly he knew that this laughing woman was not Suarra!

She lay stretched upon a low couch, head raised and resting upon one long white hand. Her face was older, but still it was the exquisite twin of Suarra's, and like Suarra's was her cloudy midnight hair. There the resemblance ended.

Upon that lovely face was a mockery alien to the sweetness of the girl. There was a touch of cruelty upon the perfect lips, and something, rather, of what he had seen on the face of Lantlu when the dinosaur pack had sighted the Scarlet Weaver. A slender white foot swung over the edge of the couch, negligently balancing upon a toe a silken sandal.

"Our unbidden guest seems impetuous, Dorina," came the man's voice, speaking the Aymara. "If simple tribute to your beauty, I applaud. Yet to me it seemed to savor something of—recognition!"

The speaker had risen from a chair at the head of the couch. His face was of that extraordinary beauty which seemed the heritage of all this strange race. It was sensitive, and in some odd way akin to Suarra's—as Dorina's, for all her disconcerting resemblance to Graydon's love, was akin to Lantlu's. The eyes were the deep blue that usually promises friendliness, but there was none of it in them now. Like Regor, his ruddy hair was filleted with amber. Under the white, toga-like robe that covered him, Graydon sensed the body of an athlete.

So this was Dorina, in whom he must be careful not to rouse hatred, not too much liking! And this was Huon, of whose temper and jealousy he must beware! His introduction to them, he thought grimly, had not been too lucky.

"You know I am no Dream-maker, Huon," drawled the woman. "I am a realist. Where but in dream could I have met him? But although no Dreamer—perhaps—had I known—"

Her voice was faintly languishing, but there was malicious mockery in the glance she gave Graydon. Huon's face flushed, his eyes grew bleak; he spoke one sharp word. Immediately Graydon's chest was encircled as though by a vise,

crushing his ribs, stifling him. His hands flew up to break that grip, and closed on a thin, stringy arm that seemed less flesh than leather. He twisted his head. Two feet above him was a chinless, half-human face. Long red elf locks fell over its sharply sloping forehead. Its eyes were round and golden, filled with melancholy, filled, too, with intelligence.

A spider-man!

Another stringy arm covered with scarlet hair circled his throat. A third caught him under the knees and lifted him on high.

He heard a roar of protest from Regor. Blindly, he struck out at the chinless face now close to his, and as he struck, the purple stones that were the eyes of the Snake Mother in the golden bracelet flashed like a tiny streak of fire. He heard a grunt from the spider-man, followed by a sharp cry from Huon.

He felt himself falling, falling ever faster through blackness—then felt and heard no more!

CHAPTER V

OUTLAWS OF YU-ATLANCHI

GRAYDON'S senses were struggling back. He heard a gusty voice roaring over his head.

"He wears the ancient symbol of the Mother. He passes the Watchers who are her messengers. He routs the stinking Urd who serve the Dark One, spittle on his name! Each alone enough to win a hearing! I tell you again, Huon, here was a man to be received with courtesy; one who had a tale to tell and that tale a matter of concern not only to you but all the Fellowship. Yet you toss him to Kon, unheard! What of Adana when she learns of it? By every jeweled scale of her colis, we have yearned lustily enough for her, and never broken through her indifference! This man might have won her to us!"

"Enough, Regor, enough!" It was Huon's voice, depression in it.

"It is not enough," stormed the giant. "Was it the Dark One bade you do this? By the Lord of Lords, the Fellowship must deal with you!"

"You are right, of course, Regor," the voice of Huon was wearier still. "It is your right to summon the Fellowship, if you think best. And it may well be that these fits of fury of mine do come from the Dark One—yet you know, old comrade, that I loathe him, and would willingly have no traffic with him. I am sorry and I am ashamed. When the stranger awakens from his swoon, and indeed I am sure it is no worse, I will

make amends to him. And the Fellowship, not I, shall decide what is to be done with him."

"All of which does not seem to flatter me," thus Dorina, sweetly suave, and too sweetly. "Do you hint, Regor, that I am an agent of the Dark One, for clearly it was I who have the impulse to Huon's rage?"

"I hint nothing—" began the giant, and was interrupted by Huon.

"Dorina, I'll answer that. And I say to you that it is no unfamiliar doubt to me. Be careful that some time you do not change that doubt to certainty. For then I will kill you, Dorina, and there is no power in Yu-Atlanchi, nor above it nor below it, that may save you."

It was said calmly enough, but with a cold implacability.

"You dare to say that, Huon!" It was Dorina, furious.

Graydon knew that more of truth often enters ears thought to be closed than those believed open. Therefore he had kept quiet, listening, and mustering his strength. Nothing further could be gained, a quarrel among these three could not help him. He groaned, and opened his eyes, and thereby silenced whatever had been on the woman's tongue to say. He looked up into Huon's face, in which was nothing but concern; at Dorina, black eyes blazing, long white hands clenched to her breast in effort to control her rage.

As though it were a flame to draw them, his eyes fell upon a scarlet figure beyond them both. It was Kon, the spider-man, and Graydon forgot his danger and all else, contemplating him.

Kon was something that might have stepped out of one of Albrecht Dürer's nightmare fantasies of the Witches' Sabbath, stealing from the picture into reality through a scarlet bath. And yet there was nothing demoniac, nothing of the Black Evil, about him. Indeed, he was touched with a grotesque charm, as though created by a master in whom the spirit of beauty was so vital that even in shaping a monster it could not be wholly lost.

The spider-man's head hung three feet above Huon's. The torso, the body, was globular, and little bigger than a half-grown lad's. The round body was supported on four slender stilt-like legs; from the center of it stretched out two more, longer by half than the others and terminating in hands or claws whose fingers, delicately slender and needle-pointed, were a foot in length.

He had no neck. Where head joined body there was a pair of small arms

whose terminations were like the hands of a child. And over these hands was the face, chinless and earless, framed in matted red locks. The mouth was human, the nose a slender beak. Except for face and hands and feet, which were slate-gray, he was covered with a vivid scarlet down.

But the eyes, the great, lidless, lashless eyes of phosphorescent gold, were wholly human in expression, sorrowful, wondering and apologetic, too—as though Huon's present mood were reflected in them. Such was Kon, highest of all his kind in Yu-Atlanchi, whom Graydon was destined to know much more intimately.

Graydon staggered up, Regor's arm supporting him. There was craft in his first utterance; he ignored Huon, looked straight at the woman.

"I thought," he muttered, "I thought—you were—Suarra!"

The anger fled from Dorina's face; it sharpened, as though with fear; Huon's grew intent; Regor grunted.

"Suarra!" breathed the woman, and loosed her clenched hands.

If Suarra's name brought fear to her, and Graydon felt a fleeting wonder at that, it carried no such burden to Regor.

"I told you, Huon, that this was no ordinary matter," he cried jubilantly, "and here is still another proof. Suarra whom the Mother loves—and he is a friend of Suarra! Ha—there is purpose here, a path begins to open—"

"You go a little too fast along it," broke in Huon warningly, yet with a certain eagerness, a repressed excitement. He spoke to Graydon.

"For what has occurred, I am sorry. Even if you are an enemy—still I am sorry. Our welcome to strangers is never too cordial, but this ought not to have happened. I can say no more."

"No need," answered Graydon, a bit grimly. "If not too cordial, at least the welcome was warm enough. It is forgotten."

"Good!" There was a flash of approval in Huon's eyes.

"Whatever you may be," he went on, "*we* are hunted men. Those who would destroy us are strong and cunning, and we must ever be alert against their snares. If you come from them, there is no harm in telling you this, since you already know it. But if you seek the Snake Mother and—Suarra—it is well for you to know we are outlaws of Yu-Atlanchi, although we are no enemies of those two.

"Convince us of your honesty, and you shall go from us unharmed, to follow your fortune as you choose; or if you

should ask our aid, remembering that we are outlaws, we will give you aid to the limit of our means. If you fail to convince us, you die as all the baits sent to trap us have died. It will be no pleasant death; we do not delight in suffering, but it is wisdom to discourage others from following your example."

"Fair enough," said Graydon.

"You are not of our race," Huon said. "You may be a prisoner of Lantlu, sent to betray us, your life and liberty the promised rewards. The bracelet you wear may have been given you to blind us. We do not really know that you passed the Watchers. You may have been guided through the lairs of the Urd, and set down where you met the men who brought you here. That you slew the Urd proves little. They are many, and their lives are less than nothing to Lantlu and the Dark One whose slaves they are. I tell you all this," he added with a touch of apology, "that you may know the doubts you must dissipate to live."

"And fair enough," said Graydon.

HUON turned to the woman, who had been studying Graydon with a wholly absorbed, puzzled intentness ever since he had named Suarra.

"You will stay with us and help us judge?" he asked.

"As if," drawled Dorina, and stretched herself once more upon the couch, "as if, Huon, I had the slightest intention of doing anything else!"

Huon spoke to the spider-man; a red arm stretched out and brought a stool to Graydon's feet. Regor lowered his bulk upon another; Huon dropped into his chair. The eyes of that strange quartet upon him, Graydon began his story.

A little he told them of the world from which he had come, and his trek into the forbidden land with the three adventurers; and of his meeting with Suarra. He heard Regor growl approval as he sketched his battle with Sterritt, saw Huon's eyes warm. He told of Suarra's return next morning. And as he spoke of the Lords of Fate and Fools he saw conviction of his truth begin to steal into their faces, and deepen as he told of his glimpse of Lantlu among his hissing pack. But he was amazed to see it turn to such awed and absolute belief as it did when his story led them into the cavern of the Face in the Abyss.

And as he described that visage of ultimate evil, and the transmutation upon it of the three men into globules of golden sweat, Dorina covered her face with shaking hands, and the blood was drained from Huon's own, and Regor

muttered curses; only Kon, the spider-man, stood unmoved, regarding him with his sorrowful, shining golden eyes.

Here they checked him, asking question after question about that cavern of dreadful beauty, and the evil thing of which it was the shrine. Soon he realized that it was not through disbelief that they did this, but through too great belief; they are like children who having been told some nightmare legend thought myth, were suddenly brought face to face with its reality.

At this Graydon wondered again, since it could only mean that none of them had ever seen the Face—and therefore there were in Yu-Atlanchi secrets hidden even from its dwellers. Yet how and why could that be?

He remembered a word of the Snake Mother's in that strange excursion of his to her Temple, and a glimmering of what might be the truth came to him. He put it aside with the other puzzles to answer Huon's next question:

"And after that?"

Here, some obscure impulse bade him be cautious. So he said nothing of his vision of the Temple, but told them of his awakening, of the Indian he had found beside him as guide, and of his impulsive return. He showed them the scar of the wound that had been its penalty.

"As for what it was that summoned me back," he said, "I cannot tell you—at least not now. This I can say—it was a summons I could not disobey." And that was true enough, he thought, as the face of Suarra came before his inner sight, and her appeal echoed in his heart.

"It is all I can say," he repeated. "And all I have said is truth. How the summons came to me has no bearing upon the matter, since because of it I am here. Stay—there is something else—"

He took from his pocket the packet that held Suarra's *caraquenque* plume, opened it and held it toward them.

"Suarra's," breathed Dorina, and Huon nodded.

There was no question of their belief now. It might be well to put a spur to their own self-interest.

"And now there is one more thing," he said slowly. "Regor has spoken of some purpose. Of that purpose, it may be I know as little as you. But this happened—"

He told them of the elfin bugles that had led him across the plain of the monoliths, and finally to the cleft in the ramparts. Huon drew a deep breath and stood erect, hope blazing upon his face, and Regor leaped to his feet roaring

gustily, and swinging his clubbed arm in a whistling circle.

Huon strode to him and clasped his shoulders.

"I believe!" he said, voice shaking. He turned to Dorina: "And you?"

"Of course it is truth, Huon!" she answered; but some swift calculation narrowed her lids and clouded her face, and Graydon thought for an instant she looked speculatively and menacingly at him.

"You are our guest," said Huon. "In the morning you shall meet the Fellowship, and repeat to them what you have told us to-night. And then you shall decide whether to call upon us for help, or go on alone. All that is ours is yours for the asking. And—Graydon"—he hesitated, and then with abrupt wistfulness—"by the Mother, I hope you throw your lot with ours. But no more of that now—let the morrow decide. Regor, see to it that the little beast"—he pointed to the burro, half asleep in a corner—"is properly cared for.

"Take this, Graydon." He stooped and picked up the rifle. "Tomorrow you shall show us what it is. I will take you to your quarters. Wait for me, Dorina."

He took Graydon by the arm, and led him toward the wall of the room opposite that which he had entered. He parted the webs.

"Follow," he bade, and strode forward at once.

Graydon looked back as he passed after him. Dorina was standing, staring at him with that strange speculation stronger on her face. The golden eyes of Kon were regarding him unwinkingly. Regor was passing out of the other door with the burro trotting in front of him.

Suddenly he saw the cloud pass from Dorina's face. Her eyes cleared, as though with some decision. She smiled, waved a slim white hand at him in gay half-malicious, and, he thought, half contemptuous, adieu.

Graydon passed through the webs, and followed Huon's broad back into another faintly sparkling, black-walled corridor.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEATHLESS PEOPLE

"UP, LAD, bathe and break your fast. The Fellowship will soon be gathering, and I am here to take you to them."

Graydon opened his eyes. His sleep had been deep and dreamless, and for a moment he blinked uncomprehendingly at his awakener. Regor stood at the foot of his couch, on his scarred face a broad

smile that his scars turned into the grin of a benevolent gargoyle.

He was not clad in the chain armor, but in the close-fitting garments that seemed to be the fashion of Yu-Atlan-chi's men. Black Regor he was still, however, for these were black, and black was the coat that hung from his immense shoulders.

Recollection flooded back on Graydon. He looked around that chamber to which Huon had led him, at the thick rugs which were like spun silk of silver, the walls covered by the web-like curtains of shadowy silver through which ran strange patterns of a deeper argent. Webs which were drawn aside at one end of the room to reveal a wide alcove in which a sunken pool of pale golden water sparkled under the faintly coruscant light. Rapidly his mind drew together the threads of memory.

Huon had watched and talked while two silent brown men had bathed and massaged away his weariness and the marks of Kon's talons. And then had sat with him while he had eaten unfamiliar meats which two Indian girls, with wide, wondering eyes, had set before him in dishes of crystal.

Huon had himself poured his wine, asking many questions about the people who dwelt outside the Hidden Land. He had not seemed much interested in their arts or sciences or governments; but avidly so upon how death came to them, and what was done with the old, the customs of mating, whether there were many children and their upbringing.

Ever and ever he had returned to the subject of death and the forms in which it came, as though it held for him some overpowering fascination. Nor would he join Graydon either in food or drink.

And, at last, he had sat silent, thinking; then, sighing, had said as though to himself:

"So it was in the old days—and which is the better way?"

He had risen abruptly, and bade him rest, the lights had dimmed, and Graydon had thrown himself upon the couch to sink into deep slumber. Now why had Huon dwelt so persistently upon death? There was something about that which vaguely troubled Graydon. Suddenly he recalled that Suarra had said her people had closed the Door of Death. He realized that he had not taken that literally. But might it be truth?

Graydon roused himself from his reverie, to find Regor's eyes twinkling upon him, as though he had been following his thoughts. He shook himself impatiently, and rising, walked over to the pool,

splashed about and dried himself upon silken cloths there plainly for that purpose.

He returned to his chamber to find a table set with fruits, and what seemed like wheaten cakes, and milk. He dressed quickly, and sat down to it. Not till then did Regor speak.

"Lad," he said, "I told you that I am a subtle one. Now my subtlety tells me that so are you, and that very subtly you held back much from your story last night. Notably, about that command from the Mother."

"Good Lord," exclaimed Graydon, in the Aymara equivalent. "There's nothing subtle in that discovery. I warned you I couldn't tell you how—"

He stopped, afraid that he had hurt the giant's feelings. But Regor only smiled broadly.

"I'm not referring to that," he said. "What you didn't mention was the reward the Mother promised you if you obeyed her summons—and managed to reach her."

Graydon jumped, choking in his astonishment on a bite of the wheaten cake.

"Ho! Ho!" roared Regor, and gave him a resounding whack upon the back. "So I'm not a subtle one, eh? . . . Dorina is not here now," he muttered slyly, looking up at the ceiling, "nor am I bound to tell Huon all I hear."

Graydon swung around on his stool and stared at him. Regor stared back quizzically, yet with such real friendship in his deep-set eyes that he felt his resolve waver. There was something about Huon, as there had been about Lantlu, that made him feel lonely; something alien, something unhuman. Whether it was their beauty, so far beyond any dream of classic antique sculpture, or whether it lay deeper, he did not know. But he felt none of it about this man. Regor seemed of his own earth. And certainly he had demonstrated his kindness; and it was he who had sensed what Graydon's advent might actually mean to them.

"You can trust me, lad," Regor answered his thought. "You were wise last night, but what was wisdom then may not be so now. Would this help you to decide—that I know Suarra, and love her as my own child?"

It turned the scale in Graydon's undecided mind.

"A bargain, Regor," he said. "Question for question. Answer mine, and I'll answer yours."

"Done!" grunted Regor. "And if we keep them waiting, let the Fellowship chew their thumbs."

GRAYDON sprang straight to the matter that was troubling him.

"Huon asked me many questions last night. And the most of them were about death in my own land, its shapes, how it came to us; and how long men lived there. One would have thought he knew nothing of death except that which comes by killing. Why is Huon so curious about—death?"

"Because," said Regor, tranquilly, "Huon is deathless!"

"Deathless," repeated Graydon, incredulously, but a little chill went along his spine.

"Deathless," repeated Regor, "unless, of course, some one kills him, or he should choose to exercise a certain—choice which all of us have."

"Which all of you have!" echoed Graydon again. "You, too, Regor?"

"Even I," answered the giant, bowing urbanely.

"But surely not the Indians," cried Graydon.

"No, not they," Regor replied patiently.

"Then they die." Graydon was struggling desperately to find some flaw in what seemed to him a monstrous condition. "They die, like my people. Then why have they not taught Huon all that death can be? Why ask me?"

"There are two answers to that," said Regor with quite a professorial air. "First, you—and therefore your race—are much closer to us than are the Emer, or as you call them, the Aymara. Therefore, Huon argues, he might learn from you what would probably come out of the Door of Death for us if it should be decided to reopen that door upon Yu-Atlanchi—all Yu-Atlanchi. It is, by the way, one of the matters that have made us outlaws.

"The second answer is, however, all-embracing. It is that, except in the rarest of cases, the Emer do not live long enough for any one to find out how they might possibly die except in the distressingly similar manner in which they do. I mean, they are killed before they have opportunity to die otherwise! It is another of the matters that have made us outlaws."

Graydon felt a nightmarish creep. A sweet people this, he reflected somewhat bitterly, and surely that enigmatic Lord of Fools had been right when he had mockingly asked who, if not Graydon, should be the first for him to protect!

"How old are you, Regor?" he asked, abruptly.

"How old are you, lad?" rumbled the big man.

"About thirty-five."

"Well," Regor cocked a calculating eye, "Well—that would be, I suppose about one year in my life!"

Graydon mulled this amazing statement dizzily. Was Suarra, too—deathless? And if so, then in the name of God how old was she? The thought was definitely unpleasant. They *were* unhuman, these hidden people; abnormal! Surely Suarra, with all her sweetness, was not one of these—monsters! He did not dare ask; approached the question obliquely.

"Dorina, too, I suppose?" he asked.

"Naturally," said Regor placidly.

"She looks very like Suarra," hazarded Graydon. "She might be her sister."

"Oh, no," said Regor. "Let me see—she was, I believe, the sister of Suarra's grandmother—yes, or her great-grandmother. Something like that, at any rate."

Graydon glared at him suspiciously. Was Regor after all making game of him?

"A sort of an aunt," he observed sarcastically.

"You might say so," agreed Regor.

"Damnation!" shouted Graydon in exasperation, and brought down his fist on the table with a crash. Regor looked startled, then chuckled.

"What does it matter?" he asked. "One of your day-old babes, if it had the brain to think, would probably consider you as ancient as you do me. But it would accept it as natural. All these things are comparative. And if our ages offend you," he added jovially, "be thankful that it is Dorina who is Suarra's great-grandmother's sister, and not the other way about."

Graydon laughed; this was comforting common sense after all. And yet—Suarra centuries old, perhaps! Not the fresh young Springtide maid he had thought her! It was so, or it wasn't. And if it were so—still she was Suarra. He thrust the whole matter aside.

"One more question, and I'm ready for yours. None of you thoroughly believed me until I told you of the Face, and what I told you shook the three of you to your very souls. Why?"

Now it was Regor who was troubled, and more, far more, than had been Graydon. His face whitened, the scars standing out lividly. When he spoke it was more gravely than Graydon had ever heard him.

"Look you, lad; suppose that your people had once been governed by seven Lords, and that of them one was exceedingly strong and cunning and very evil. So that the other six combined, and fought him, and though six to one, al-

most lost, so strong was he. But finally did conquer, and since they could not slay him they thrust him into a hidden dungeon there to remain as long as the land—or he—endured. And centuries went by, and that struggle was half forgotten, and became at last a tale to frighten children.

"Now look you again; suppose that suddenly in your land should run the rumor that another evil one like this imprisoned Lord has appeared. A shadow of him, rather, not to be seen nor touched; a darkness that whispered; bodiless, but seeking a body; promising all things to those who followed him and obeyed his councils; whispering that he was in reality that Lord who had been cast into the dungeon. You would not believe? Was not that ancient tale merely one to frighten children? Who had ever seen that dungeon? None! There was something afoot, of course. So you would think. But that old story? Nonsense!

"And then a man had come to you saying: 'I have seen this dungeon! I have been within it! I have seen this evil Lord!' And had told you a tale so circumstantial, so self-evidently truth, that no doubt could exist. What would you say then?"

"I WOULD say that the whispers of that shadow were in all probability far from true," answered Graydon. "And unless I had a taste for thoroughly bad company, I would be inclined to move rapidly far away. At any rate, I would be rather badly scared."

"Exactly," nodded Regor. "Only I do not think that you would run away. But you have answered your own question. Once Yu-Atlanchi was ruled by seven Lords. One of them became master of dreadful powers. They turned him into a being of evil—made of him evil incarnate. He lusted to stretch the walls of Yu-Atlanchi to the limits of earth, making of it a spinning globe of evil, all living things upon it his slaves, himself enthroned.

"Then the six Lords grappled with him. Without the wisdom of Adana, the Snake Mother, he would have conquered them, and had his will. They were not entirely human, these Lords. They came to this land with the Snake Mother and her people many ages ago. The body of the Lord of Evil they could destroy, but not what dwelt within that body, since that essence was one with theirs, or so the legend ran.

"So by their arts they created that great Face upon which you gazed in the Cavern of the Abyss, shaping it into

likeness of his own. They destroyed his body, and imprisoned its dweller within the Face—forever, so they thought. They garlanded the cavern with flowers of living jewel, beautiful and scentless as the flowers of evil. And they set flowing the stream of gold, evil's strongest weapon, and sent it wasting into the abyss, that his eyes might look upon it forever, and its waste be torment to him.

"All this being done, the six Lords and Adana, the Snake Mother, returned to Yu-Atlanchi, after closing all ways to that accursed place. And for long the old peace reigned here.

"Time upon time passed. One by one those whose eyes had beheld the Lord of Evil grew weary, and opened the Door of Death. Or opened the Door of Life, brought babes through it, and then passed through the dark portal, that being the price of children in Yu-Atlanchi! So there came a day when in all this hidden land there was none left who knew the truth except a handful among the Dream Makers, and who would believe a Dream Maker?

"That one whose stakes had been a world, faded into a legend, a parable. Therefore when first we heard the rumor of the Dark One and his whisperings that he was the Lord of Evil, we laughed. A Dream Maker has awakened, we said, and some one has believed him. But as the Shadow's following grew, we laughed not so loudly. For cruelty and wickedness grew swiftly, and we realized that whether Lord of Evil or a shadow of him, there was poison at the roots of the immemorial tree of Yu-Atlanchi.

"Of all the six Lords there remained only those two you know, and they had long withdrawn from us. We sought audience with the Mother, and she was indifferent. She loves only Suarra, whose mother was also as a beloved daughter to her.

"Then Lantlu seized power, and life in the ancient city became insupportable to many of us. Following Huon, we found refuge in these caverns. Me did Lantlu hunt with his Xinli dinosaur-pack, as you saw him hunt the Weaver. That is how I got these scars, and why I wear a bar instead of an arm. And ever thicker through the long years grew the Dark One's webs over Yu-Atlanchi. But still we said, 'He is not the ancient Lord of Evil!'

"And then—you come. And you tell us, 'I have seen that cavern of the Face! I have seen its flowers of jewel, and its stream of ever-flowing gold! I have looked into the eyes of the Lord of Evil himself!'

Regor arose abruptly and paced the

room; there was sweat on his forehead, and his lips trembled.

"And behold, you tear the veil from our eyes and show us our feet on the edge of the pit. For now we *know* that the Shadow has not lied, and that it and the Lord of Evil are one. Or, at best, if still fettered to the Face, he has found some means of partial escape, and once again embodied, as he seeks to be, would have power to break all his bonds, find full release, and rule here and in time over earth, as long ages ago he was balked from doing."

Again he took up his restless pacing, and again halted facing Graydon.

"We fear, but it is not death we fear," he said, and it was like an echo of Suarra's own warning, "it is something infinitely worse than any death could ever be. We fear to *live*—in such shapes and ways as this Lord of Evil and Lantlu could devise. And would devise for us, be sure of that."

He covered his face with his cloak. When he uncovered it, he had himself in hand once more.

"Well, lad, courage," he rumbled. "Neither Lantlu nor the Dark One has us yet! Your turn now. What was it the Mother promised you?"

And Graydon, with a dull horror knocking at his own mind, told him fully all that he had heard and seen in that vision of his. Regor listened, silent. But steadily the flame of hope grew in his eyes; and when Graydon had repeated the serpent-woman's threat against Lantlu, he leaped to his feet with an oath of joy. When he had finished the giant sat for a time deep in thought.

"Win to her you must and shall, lad!" he said at last. "I am not saying it will be easy. Yet there are ways—yes, there are ways. And you shall bear a message to the Mother from us—that we stand ready to join her and fight as best we can beside her. And that there are perhaps more in Yu-Atlanchi worth the saving than she thinks," he added a little bitterly. "Say to her that at least we, each and all of us, will gladly lay down our lives if by doing so we can help her conquer this evil."

From somewhere far away came the mellow golden note of a bell.

"The Fellowship has gathered," said Regor. "It is the signal. When you come before them say nothing of what you have just told me. Repeat only your story of last night. Dorina will be there. And I have told you nothing. You understand, lad?"

"Right," answered Graydon.

"And if you're a good lad," said Regor,

pausing at the curtained door and poking a long finger into Graydon's ribs, "if you're a really good lad, I'll tell you something else."

"Yes, what?" said Graydon, intent.

"I'll tell you how old Suarra really is!" answered Regor, and then roaring with laughter, marched through the doorway.

CHAPTER VII

THE SECRET ANCIENT CITY

GRAYDON decided that he would have to revise his estimate of Black Regor. He had laughed inwardly at his boasts of subtlety, considering him as transparent as air. He knew now that he had been wrong. The sly reference to Suarra's years showed how accurately Regor had read him.

That, however, was only one egg of the omelette. More significant had been Regor's perception that Graydon had held out the most vital part of his story.

There was, besides, his independence of thought, manifest both in word and action; Huon's man he might be, but master of his own judgment. His distrust of Dorina was proof of that. And certainly the way in which last night Regor had infected Huon with that sinister doubt of her had been subtle enough. Also he had a sense of humor, and somehow Graydon was quite sure Huon had little. Too, there had been that curious change in him when telling of the fettering of the Lord of Evil; all gusty, blustering geniality dropped like a mask. Was it a mask? If so, why worn?

The corridor along which they were passing was not long. It ended against a huge door of the black metal, guarded by the yellow-kilted Indians.

"Remember!" warned Regor. The door slid aside, revealing webs of curtains. He parted them, and Graydon followed him through.

He stood at the threshold of an immense chamber from whose high ceiling poured light, golden and dazzling as though from full sun. He heard the murmur of many voices. His vision clearing, he saw curving across the wide floor a double semicircle of seats that appeared cut from rose coral. Occupying them were a hundred or more of Huon's people, the men in yellow, the women dressed in vivid colors; and each and all of them, his swift glance told him, possessed of that disturbing beauty which was the heritage of this unknown race. Graydon, studying them, trembled again at the touch of a strange loneliness.

There was a low dais facing the semicircle, on it a wide and cushioned bench

of the rose coral, and in front of it a pedestal, like a speaker's rostrum. Dorina sat there, and rising from her side was Huon.

He came swiftly down, greeted Graydon most courteously, and taking him by the hand led him up to the dais where Dorina acknowledged his bow by a negligent lifting of black lashes and a careless word. He saw Regor drop down beside her, then Huon turned him toward the others, raising the wrist that held the bracelet high in air, at sight of which there was another murmuring and hands lifted in salutation.

"This," began Huon, "is the Fellowship, outlaws of Yu-Atlanchi, haters of and hated by Lantlu and the Dark One; loyal children of the Mother, and ready to serve her if she will so allow. Something I have told them of your story, and that we three believe you. Yet, though they call me leader, still am I only one of them. It is their right to judge you. Speak—they listen."

He walked back, and sank between Regor and Dorina. There was a brief silence as Graydon mustered his words; then launched his tale. Even more tensely they listened as that tale progressed, and it came to Graydon that, so far as judgment of him was concerned, this hearing was only a formality; that they had been convinced of his genuineness by Huon before he had entered. With that thought came a greater assurance, and as he sensed their growing sympathy and approval, a greater ease, so that his speech flowed more readily.

And when at last he had led them to the cavern of the Face, all doubt as to this was ended, for now they leaned forward in rigid attention, pallid, with whitened lips, and in their eyes was horror. They were like seraphs, Graydon thought, hearing suddenly that Satan and his legions had broken through a gate of Heaven.

But if there was horror, there was no sign of panic, nor of despair, and no weakening of spirit apparent upon those masks of beauty that stared at him so raptly. When he had ended, a long sigh went up, and a silence fell.

Huon broke that silence.

"You have heard," he said. "Now let any who doubts this man rise and question him."

A murmur ran through the Fellowship as one turned to the other; little groups formed and whispered. Then came a voice from among them.

"Huon, we believe. And quickly must he reach the Mother. Remains now to decide how to do it."

"Graydon," Huon turned to him, "last night I promised you that if we believed, you should go your own way, as your own wit might guide you—or you could throw in your lot with us, and call upon our wits to help you. And now you must decide. Stay!" he said as Graydon was about to speak. "We trick no one with fair promises that we know are doubtful of performance. And it may well be that our help would be more harmful to you than otherwise. Before you decide how you will play this game, see the board upon which it must be played."

Graydon beside him, he strode down from the dais and over to the farther end of the chamber. He thrust aside the thick hangings which, as in all the other caves Graydon had seen in this outlaw citadel, covered its walls. Behind them was the gleaming black stone. Huon rested his hand upon it, and slowly a circular aperture opened. A little gust of fragrant air came dancing in.

Graydon looked out upon hidden Yu-Atlanchi!

FAR beneath him sparkled the blue waters of a long lake. Huon's lair was at one narrowed end of it. Beaches of golden sand and flowering marshes bordered it. Beyond the marshes was thick forest, marching mile upon mile away, to be thrust back at last like a green wave by cliffs, sheer and gray and thousands of feet high. He looked down the lake, following its ever widening southward course.

There was a faint haze over the landscape, but far away he saw a great splotch of color, as though a gigantic jewel box had been spilled there. Opposite it, the cliffs marched forward and out into the water, narrowing the lake once more. And set in these cliffs was a row of huge black ovals, like windows opening into darkness. Beside each of them was seated what seemed to be a gigantic figure!

Of course! That splotch of spilled jewels was the secret ancient city. The oval shadows were those caverns he had glimpsed when summoned by the serpent-woman; the guarding shapes were the colossi—and there at the left where a precipice made a mighty buttress, leaning against its green and ebon breast was a rod of shining silver. It was the mighty cataract of his vision!

Huon handed him a mask of crystal, and he set it over his eyes. The splotch of color leaped forward, swam in front of him and resolved itself into a towered and turreted city, a city built by Jinn with blocks and scales of red-glowing

gold and gleaming silver, and roofed with tiles of turquoise and sapphire, smoldering ruby and flashing diamond.

He could see the spume of the cataract waving like signaling veils. Saw that no two of the colossi were alike; some were shaped like women, and like the gods of ancient Egypt many bore the heads of animals and birds; a hundred feet in height he judged them. His eyes lingered long on one, a naked woman's body, heroically proportioned, yet exquisite. Her face a grinning frog's.

Behind the city was a long low hill. Crowning it was a building whose proportions dwarfed even the columned immensity of ancient Karnak. It was of white marble, and it brooded over the jeweled city like a white-robed vestal priestess. Its front was pillared, but the enormous columns were without ornament. It was of Cyclopean simplicity, aloof; and like the colossi, it seemed to watch. A mighty flight of steps marched up the hill to it, cutting at the top through three broad terraces.

He saw no streets; there were leafy lanes on which was sparse movement. West, south and east, his gaze was checked by the sky-reaching ramparts of the mountains. The hidden land was a vast circular bowl some thirty miles in diameter, he estimated.

"There," Huon was pointing at the temple, "is your goal. There dwells the Mother. And Suarra."

The aperture closed, Huon let the curtains drop, led Graydon back to the dais.

"You have seen," he said. "What you could not see were the obstacles that lie between you and that temple, the way to which seems so near and open. The city is well guarded, Graydon, and all its guards are Lantlu's men. You could not get to the Temple without being caught a score of times. Therefore dismiss from your mind all hope that you can reach the Mother by stealth, unaided. Inevitably you would be taken before Lantlu. By the ancient law, your life would be forfeit.

"But it might be that if you went boldly into the city, showing your bracelet as passport, and demanding in its name audience with the Mother—it might be that thus simply you could gain your end. It might be that Lantlu, mazed by the mystery of how you passed by the Watchers, of how you were guided to Yu-Atlanchi and from thence, would not dare slay you nor hold you back from the Mother."

"The best he would do," growled Regor, "since whatever Lantlu may be he is no fool, would be to greet you fairly,

find out all he could from you, put you off on the pretext that the Mother must be prepared for your visit. Probably he would slip some drug into your wine, and while you slept take council with his advisors and with the Dark One as to what was to be done with you. I do not think you will ever reach the Mother by that route."

There was a murmur of assent from the Fellowship, and Huon himself nodded agreement.

"Still, he should weigh the chance," he said. "Now, if you reject that plan, there is the matter of our aid. Frankly, Graydon, it can be none too great. Those of the Old Race who still live are not many. There are in all perhaps two thousand of us. Of those within the city, some three hundred more are with us in thought, and serve us better by being there than here. Of those remaining, the Dream Makers number half a thousand. They are not concerned with anything of earth. The others are with Lantlu, one with him in his amusements and aims, and followers, more or less, of the Dark One himself.

"We are in no position to take issue in the open with Lantlu. He controls the Urd, the lizard-men. Against all these we have for weapons sword and lance, bow and arrow and battle mace. Once we had weapons of a different kind—sounds that went forth like swift sparks, flaming, and slew all upon whom they fell; shadows that fitted where they were willed to go, and turned to ice all upon which they rested; and other strange devices of death. But, so our legends run, after a great war against one of the ancient rulers, these were taken and hidden away in one of the caverns, so that never might we use them upon each other. Or it may be they were destroyed. At any rate, we have them not.

"I tell you this, Graydon," added Huon a trifle bitterly, "to show you why it is we do not take you by the hand and go marching up to the white Temple with you. If we had but one of those weapons of the old ones—"

"If we had but one, we would march with you so," said Regor. "The Mother knows where they are, if they still exist, and therefore you must get to her to let us have them. By all the hells, if the Dark One is the Lord of Eil—then Adana had better be looking out for her own safety!

"Maybe he, too, knows where those weapons are hidden!"

"THIS we can do, Graydon," went on Huon. "We can arrange to hide you with friends in the city, if we can get you

there undiscovered. After that we must plot to get you into the Temple. That done, if Lantlu tries to take you it will be open war between the Mother and him. And that, frankly, is what interests us. The danger is in your discovery before you can reach her. Yet I do believe you have better chance to win to her with our help than unaided!"

"I, too," answered Graydon. "But whether so or not, Huon, something tells me that our fortunes are interwoven. That if I win, there is hope for you, and for all those who would see life changed in Yu-Atlanchi. At any rate, if you will accept me, I throw in my lot with you!"

Huon's face lightened and he caught Graydon's hands, while Regor muttered and struck him on the shoulder; and from the Fellowship arose a hum of relief. And suddenly through it struck the voice of Dorina, sweetly languid.

"But it seems to me that you have missed the simplest solution of all this. Clearly it was Suarra as much as the Mother who brought Graydon here. And clearly Suarra is, to say the least, interested in him. And Suarra is the Mother's favorite. Well, then—let word be sent secretly to Suarra that Graydon has returned; let her say where she will meet him; then, having met, let her tell him how best he can reach Adana."

Graydon saw Regor look at her suspiciously, but Huon hailed the suggestion, and after a little discussion the Fellowship approved it. And so it was decided that a messenger be sent at once to Suarra to tell her of Graydon's presence, and as proof that this was so he wrote, at Regor's suggestion, one brief line—"by your *caraquenque* feather on my heart, this is truth"—that, and no more.

Also at Regor's suggestion, the place of meeting was set at the first of the caverns of the colossi, which was close to the great cataract and almost at the lake's level. The change of meeting place puzzled Graydon.

"There is none to stop her or question her going there," urged Regor. "She can say she is sent by the Mother, for a purpose of her own. None will dare interfere—and why should they? She has visited the caverns before. It should be well after dusk, say the fifth hour. I and a half dozen of us will be sufficient guard for Graydon. I know a way that has few dangers of discovery."

So it was settled. The message was prepared for Suarra, and its carrier, one of the Indians, departed. Graydon did not have a clear idea how it was to be gotten to her. Vaguely, he gathered that it would be passed along through other

Indians not known to be enemies of the rulers, until it reached the Emers who were the servants and bodyguard of the Temple, owing no allegiance to any except the Snake Mother and the Lords of Fools and of Fate. They would see that Suarra got the message.

That day Graydon spent with Huon and the Fellowship and found them gay, witty, and delightful companions, the women of perilous charm. He dined with them. Dorina, oddly, paid him marked attention, but Huon's jealousy slept. Like Huon, she was curious about death, and that part of his evening he spent at her side Graydon did not find so gay. At last she was silent for many minutes, then said:

"If Huon wins this fight and comes to rule Yu-Atlanchi, he threatens to open the Door of Death for all of us! Why should we not have the right to choose?"

Without giving him time to answer, she stared at him through narrowed lids and said, with utmost finality:

"Well, I for one do not intend to die! You can tell the Mother so—if you ever reach her!"

And abruptly turned away and left him.

Later on, as he was turning in, Regor had come and sat and talked with him.

"Lad," he said, "I have forebodings. It was in my own mind to suggest that meeting with Suarra, nevertheless I like it ill coming from Dorina. So Suarra is to meet us not at the fifth hour, but the third. Also, the place will not be the first cavern, but the cavern of the Frog-Woman."

"But the message has gone," said Graydon. "How is Suarra to know?"

"Don't worry about that," reported the giant. "In my subtle fashion, I sent a message of my own with that other. Even the messenger who bore it did not know what it was. If we get a *caraquenque* feather back from Suarra, it means she understands. If we don't—why, then, we'll have to go to the first cavern."

He nodded gloomily.

"I repeat, I don't like that idea coming from Dorina. Oh, well—"

He grumbled a good night and stalked out.

CHAPTER VIII

CAVERN OF THE FROG-WOMAN

IT WAS not until the morning of the third day that Graydon, with fast beating heart, heard from Regor that Suarra had got his message, and had set that very night for their meeting. With it was a plume of the *caraquenque* to show

she had understood Regor's secret-message and would be at the cavern of the Frog-Woman.

"Not even Huon knows it is there we go," said Regor. "If he knew, Dorina would wheedle it out of him. And two nights' sleep have not diminished my distrust of her motives in making that entirely sensible suggestion which she did. My subtlety tells me she had something more in mind than making easy for you the way to Adana, or in gratifying your desire to see the young woman whose aunt, in a manner of speaking, she is." he added with a grin.

Graydon had given considerable thought to that matter himself; and now he repeated to Regor his curious conversation with Dorina.

"She may," he said, "plan a trap to deliver me into Lantlu's hands. She may reason that if I get to the Mother, the issue will be joined at once. Then, if Lantlu is conquered, Huon will rule and open the Door of Death, whatever that may be, which she so greatly dreads. Whereas, if I am put out of the way definitely, things will probably go on much as now, which would give her more time to persuade Huon from his resolve. That is the only basis I can think of for your suspicions, if there is any basis for them."

"It is basis enough," he said. "It is no secret that Dorina opposes Huon in that matter. There has always been conflict between them about it. His desire for children is as strong as hers for deathlessness. Before we came here, he urged her to join him in opening the doors for both of them. She would not. There are other women who would. But the trouble is, Huon is a one-woman man. He would kill Dorina if he found her in treachery, but he will be the father of no other woman's child."

He paced the room, grumbling.

"You have given my thoughts words, true enough." He stopped his pacing. "Yet there is another side to the matter which I do not think Dorina would overlook. If you are trapped, so in all probability will be Suarra. She runs great risk in meeting you. Enough to secure her condemnation by the Council, which Lantlu controls—it would mean at the very best her outlawry. The Council would be within their rights in so dealing with her. But if I know anything of women—and remember the Snake Mother is a woman—she would not allow that fosterchild of hers to suffer. And then the issue would be joined indeed, and in a way that only the destruction of Lantlu or Adana herself could end. And that, if you are right, is exactly

what Dorina does not want to happen.

"Good God, Regor!" exclaimed Graydon, aghast. "Why didn't you tell me all that before I told them of how Suarra came back to me? Surely that puts her in Lantlu's power if that hell-cat Dorina sends the information to him."

"No," answered the giant, "no, it doesn't. You see, lad, then she had with her the two Lords. She was but obeying their bidding."

"Perhaps they'll come with her to-night," said Graydon, hopefully.

"No," Regor shook his head, "no, I don't believe they will. This is a bit different. Then there were four of you, going to punishment. And if it had not been for the Mother, you would have gone rolling down the Abyss, a bit of golden sweat with the others. The Mother interfered there, and I think she would again—for Suarra. But she might not for you. Also, you told me she said you must win to her by your own wit and courage. So, under all the circumstances, I hardly think that we can count on any protection tonight beyond what we ourselves devise."

Again he grumbled, inarticulately.

"Furthermore," he pointed his great bar at Graydon like a finger, "Adana is woman, and therefore changeable. She might decide that after all you are not essential to Suarra's welfare, or she might grow momentarily weary of the whole matter, and that brief abstraction might occur at a most unfortunate time for you—"

"Hell!" cried Graydon, springing up. "You are certainly a cheerful companion!"

"Well," chuckled Regor, "if it's cheerful thought you want, here is one. The Mother is woman true enough—but certainly not human woman. Therefore neither of us can possibly know what she may or may not do!"

And, laughing, he left Graydon to wrestle with the depressing conviction that Regor was completely right.

The balance of the day Graydon spent with Huon and certain of the Fellowship, as he had the day before, all of them eager to know more of that world which had grown up outside the Hidden Land. Dorina did not appear. They were interested in his rifle and pistols, but plainly skeptical as to their effect upon the dinosaurs; like children, they were more interested in the explosions than the work of the bullets. The Xinli, they explained, were vulnerable only in a certain unprotected place in their necks under the jaw, and an upward thrust from a lance into this spot was about the one way to kill them.

There were some two hundred in the hunting packs, and not more than a score of the huge monsters used for riding. They bred scantily, and their numbers were slowly but steadily lessened by fights among themselves. The greater creatures were tractable as horses, he learned, and could be ridden by anyone, but the packs were ravening devils over which only Lantlu had complete control.

There was an amphitheater where races of the great dinosaurs were regularly held; and it was also the arena of bloody combats between selected fighters of the hunting packs and small bands of the Urd lizard-men, raids upon whom were periodically made to keep down their numbers. And now Graydon discovered why none of the Indians died in ways that would have given Huon the enlightenment he sought as to the varied guises of death. When they began to age they were fed to the packs!

Then, too, it appeared, Lantlu had a passion for hunting human game. Offenders against the law, and offenders against him, were often taken—openly in the case of the first and secretly as to the others—beyond the barriers, given a start and then chased down.

That, Graydon also discovered, was how Regor had got his scars and lost his arm. Daring to oppose Lantlu in one of his cruelties, he had been trapped, loosed and hunted. He had managed to evade the pursuers, all except one questing dinosaur, had fought and killed it. Fearfully wounded, he had by some miracle of vitality reached Huon's lair, and there been nursed back to life. Lantlu's promised reward for his capture was only a little less than that for Huon's.

RAPIDLY Graydon's understanding of this lost people clarified. Scant remnants of what must have been a race more advanced than any following it on earth, a race that had reached a peak of scientific attainment never afterward touched by man, they were but a little pool, all that was left of a mighty wave of prehistoric civilization, and that pool fast becoming stagnant.

Over-sheltered, over-protected, made immune from all attack and necessity for effort, they had retained their perfected beauty, the beauty of their bodies; but initiative, urge to advance, impulse to regain the lost knowledge of their ancestors had atrophied, or at best was comatose to the point of extinction. Except for that beauty—and the disquieting thought of their ages—those about him seemed normal people, charmingly courteous.

Apparently there had been a sharp line of cleavage among them. These were avarers, throwbacks to a more humane period of the race. Lantlu and his followers had been carried in the opposite direction, toward cruelty, indifference to suffering or, rather, pleasure in its infliction, dropping steadily to the black nadir of evil which made them fit tools for the Dark One, the Shadow of Nimir. Those whom they called the Dream Makers were entirely withdrawn from all that was human, static—or so he thought them.

Graydon believed that he could understand why Huon so desired to open those mysterious Doors which would, so far as span of years was concerned, rid them of that deathlessness which had been the curse of the race; a vague conviction that by doing so he would get back to the well-springs of the youth of his people, recover from them their olden strength.

For by now Graydon accepted that deathlessness as fact. Studying the gaunt and scarlet body of Kon, he could not doubt that the science which had effected that monstrous blend of man and spider was entirely capable of performing the lesser miracle of indefinitely prolonging life. The lizard-folk were other proof of it. And above all was the serpent-woman, Adana, the Snake Mother, monstrous to his human way of thinking, yet exquisite and certainly no illusion, and by her indubitable reality saying to him: "When such as I can be, and where such as I am, all things are possible!"

The day wore on, dusk began to fall within the vast mountain-rimmed bowl of the Hidden Land. A little before the time set to start, Regor brought him one of the suits of black chain mail, and he and Huon fastened it upon him. It was oddly light and flexible.

Greaves and the ankle-high, tanned footwear he rejected, preferring his own stout, leather boots. He girded himself with his own belt, and thrust into it one of his automatics and some extra clips of cartridges. Although he could not get at it, he left the second automatic in its holster under his left armpit—why he did not know, except that the familiar feel of it seemed to give him more confidence.

He saw that they had not much confidence in his own weapons, so to satisfy them he let Regor fasten to his belt a scabbard holding a short, stabbing sword of the black metal, and took from him one of the curiously shaped maces like those the Indians had used when he had first come upon them in the defile of the lizard-men.

If there were to be any fighting, said Regor, it would be at close quarters Graydon reflected that the giant knew what he was talking about, and that the strange weapons might be useful. Silently, however, he told himself that he would put his first trust in the automatic.

His rifle was a problem. Since there was a chance that Suarra might have some plan for his reaching the Snake Mother which would prevent his return to the lair, he did not want to leave it behind. If the possible fighting were to be of the hand-to-hand variety Regor predicted, the rifle would not only be secondary to pistol and mace or sword, but a handicap; he compromised by asking that one of the Indian soldiers be allowed to carry it, and march close behind him or at his side when possible. They agreed to this.

Then Huon placed upon his head a cap of mail, padded, close-fitting, covering his ears and falling down upon his shoulders.

And when this had all been done, he placed his hands on Graydon's shoulders, searching with a singular intentness his face.

"Graydon," he said, at last, "something tells me that with your coming the balances of Yu-Atlanchi's fate, so long motionless, begin to stir. You are the new weight that disturbs them, and whether for good or for the evil—who knows? Whether, when they come to rest again, Nimir, the Lord of Evil, will have outweighed those who oppose him, or whether he will be outweighed—who knows?"

"But it comes to me that now change sweeps swiftly down on Yu-Atlanchi—that in one way or the other the old order is close to its end. And that you and I, Graydon, will never again meet here—will meet but once more, and briefly . . . and part under a crimson sky . . . from which shadows drop . . . slaying shadows that clash with shapes of flame . . . and then . . . meet never again. . . ."

He closed his eyes, his face white.

"Till then—fare you well, my friend Graydon!"

He turned abruptly, and strode out of the room.

Graydon stared at Regor silently, and the giant as voicelessly at him.

"Now I wonder—" muttered Graydon, and shivered, as though two hands of ice had rested fleetingly on his shoulders where Huon's had been.

"I wonder, too," said Regor, brusquely. "But at least you two are to meet again. Therefore Death does not stalk you tonight."

THEY passed from that room into a guard chamber where a dozen of the kilted Aymara awaited them. They were sturdy men, armed with maces and spears, in their girdles the short stabbing swords. To one, Regor handed the rifle, and explained what he was to do.

The Indian looked at it doubtfully enough, until Graydon, smiling, had snapped the safety lock back and forth a few times, showing him that the trigger could not move with the catch on. Reassured, he threw the thong over his head, and took his place, the rifle dangling at his side.

Regor led the way. They marched at first along a wide, well-lighted tunnel from which ran many smaller passages. As they waded along Graydon reflected that the barrier walls must be honeycombed with these corridors and caverns, both great and little; wondered whether they had been shaped by nature or cut out by the ancient Yu-Atlanchans, and if the latter, for what purpose.

He had also given much thought to the luminous properties of the walls, but without discovering their secret. Either the rock had been covered with some vitreous substance possessing radioactive qualities unknown to modern science, or the ancients had found some way to treat the atomic structure of the stone so that luminous centers were created at the intersection of certain of the crystalline planes. There was no warmth to the light, which had in it much of the soft brilliance of the firefly. It cast no shadows.

They had gone well over a mile when the tunnel widened into a crypt and ended there against a solid wall.

"And here," said Regor, speaking for the first time, "our danger begins."

He stood for a moment close to the wall as though listening, then took from his belt one of the cone-shaped objects. He pressed it against a carved symbol at the level of his shoulder. Instantly a six-foot section of the wall began to rise slowly like a curtain. When it was a few inches from the floor, two of the Indians dropped upon their bellies and peered intently through the opening. The curtain rose a foot higher, and they wriggled under it and disappeared.

Regor's hand fell, and the stone's motion ceased. Perhaps five minutes went by, and then the pair wriggled back, and nodded to the giant. Again he pressed the cone to the symbol. The rock rose swiftly, this time, leaving a squat portal through which the Emers, bending, streamed, with Regor and Graydon at their heels.

A few yards of this crouching progress,

and Graydon straightened. He looked out into a vast cavern filled with a faint reddish light, so faint indeed that it was barely removed from darkness. He turned to Regor, and saw that he was thrusting the cone into his girdle. The wall through which they had come was absolutely unbroken, with no trace of the portal.

The Indians formed a circle around the two of them, and, noiselessly as ghosts, began a quick march. Graydon, about to speak, caught Regor's warning gesture, and walked along as silently. The reddish darkness closed about them; looking back he could now see nothing of the wall. Through this dim and strangely oppressive light they sped over a floor of yellow sand. How the Indians guided themselves he could not tell, but there was no uncertainty in their movement and their swift pace never slackened.

Suddenly they closed around him, touching him, and at that instant they passed out of the murk into absolute blackness. They did not lessen their speed. Then there came a grunt from Regor, like a long-held breath, and a whispered command. The Indians halted.

A ball of the cloudy luminescence flashed out and raced with the speed of light ahead of them. Behind it a pallid light grew, as though it had clothed the particles of air with a misty spray of phosphorescence. The cloud, whatever it was, had been shot from the cone in Regor's hand, one like the two Aymara had used to summon the bridge over which Graydon had passed into Huon's lair.

Regor's manner forbade questioning, and on they went down the sharply sloping passage which the light had revealed, a thousand feet, two thousand feet, before the glow began to dim, to be revived by another of the enigmatic flashes.

Five times more the luminous ball shot ahead of them, lighting their way through the unbroken tunnel. Four miles and more they must have gone since they had left the lair, and the pace was beginning to tell on Graydon. Again the faint light was dimming, but far ahead was an oval opening behind which seemed a flood of moonbeams. Now they were out of the passage and through that portal. And there Graydon paused, transfixed with amazement and awe.

IT WAS another vast caverned space whose walls and roof he could not see. It was filled with a gentle silvery light like the woven rays of full moons of spring. Under that light, upon low

couches, lay cushioned the bodies of score upon score of women and men, each of their faces stamped with the unearthly beauty of Yu-Atlanchi, and as though asleep. Across the cavern, and back into the mountains far as his vision could go, they lay.

At first he thought that they were sleeping, until he saw that no breath raised their breasts. Staring at silken hair, golden and black and ruddy bronze, at red lips and blossoms of fair bosoms, he thought them exquisitely tinted statues—then heard Regor close beside him say gravely:

"Yu-Atlanchi's dead! The ancient ones who passed before the Gate of Death was closed! And those who since that time opened of their own will that Gate, so new life might stream among us! The dead—the happy dead."

And reverently touching the hair, the cheek of one close to him, Graydon realized that these were no effigies, but bodies once instinct with life transmuted now by some alchemy of this mysterious land not into stone, but into imperishable substance that retained not alone the coloring of the body when it had been living flesh, but its very texture.

Here the Indians were uneasy, plainly eager to be going. So, quickly they left that silent place of the dead, and even Regor seemed to shake off a deep depression as they passed into another passage through the rock.

"A few steps more, lad," he rumbled, "and we are out. And here the way is not beset with such dangers as those we have traversed. We have passed beneath five of the great caverns, the place of the dead was the sixth; we skirt the entrances of of three more and then we are at the Frog-Woman's. And by every scale of the Mother—I will be glad to get once more into the open."

And shortly they passed cautiously out of that passage, and Graydon felt the fresh air upon his face, and looked up into the sky where a half-moon dipped in and out of scurrying clouds.

They dropped down upon a narrow trail. Here the Aymara re-formed, half going ahead of them, the others following. At the left, the verdure rose high, masking the lake. Looking upward and back, he saw the colossal figure of a woman, in pure white stone, with arms raised to the heavens—the guardian of that Cavern of the Dead through which they had just passed. Then the vegetation closed round him.

The trail was easy to follow, not dark even when the clouds covered the moon. Louder, and ever louder came the roar of

the torrent. Now, through gaps in the trees and bushes, he began to catch glimpses of the monstrous figure of the Frog-Woman, on watch at the entrance of the black oval that was the mouth of her cavern. With each step, his heart beat faster, his impatience grew.

The path began to rise. It passed behind a high ledge, and became a steep flight of narrow steps. He climbed these. He stood in the shadows close to the opening of the Frog-Woman's cavern. He looked up at that colossal figure, a squatting woman, unclothed, and carved of some green stone that glistened beneath the moon as though its rays were falling spray. Her grotesque face above the exquisite shoulders and breasts seemed to regard him with a tolerant amusement. Beside her gaped the cavern's mouth, inky black.

He was at the inner edge of an immense platform of smooth stone. Directly opposite him, a half-mile across the lake, was the secret city.

More than ever, under the moon, did it seem a city built by jinn. It was larger, far larger, than he had thought it. Its palaces thrust up their fantastic turrets and domes; their gay colorings as of lacquer of jewels were changed and softened into a faëry tapestry that spread for mile upon mile, an immense rug each of whose irised patterns were surrounded by arabesques of dark green, and black, and white, the foliage and flowers of the trees that circled the dwellings.

From minaret and tower and dome sprang tiny arches of light, spanning them like bridges, delicate moon-bows. In the air, above the green and black, and spreading them, tiny dancing lights flashed and vanished and flashed out again—fireflies, he thought, playing among the trees. At the right, looking down upon the city was the temple, vestal white, majestic, serene.

Somewhere within it might be—Suarra! Perhaps she would not be able to meet him here after all. With half his mind he hoped that she would not, for Huon's farewell still echoed in his heart, and he feared for her. And half his mind willed fiercely that she should come—let the perils be what they may.

There was a rustle close beside him. A little hand caught his. He looked down into soft midnight eyes, a tress of cloudy hair kissed his cheek, rocking him with its fragrance.

"Suarra!" he whispered, and again—"Suarra!"

"Graydon!" her sweet voice murmured. "You *did* come back to me—beloved!"

Her arms were around his neck, her



"Lend me your body, Graydon!" the Shadow whispered. "You are young and strong, and when I enter you with my power and wisdom—"

Graydon felt an oddly unpleasant lethargy stealing over him . . . his will power melted, but he fought the weariness back. The Shadow must not win . . .

lips were close to his, and slowly, slowly, they drew closer. They met, and clung—and for a time there were no such things in all the world as peril or suffering, sorrow or death.

CHAPTER IX

SHADOW OF THE LIZARD MASK

THEY stood at the feet of the Frog-Woman with Regor, who had joined them when Suarra had at last released herself from Graydon's arms. The shadow of the Frog-Woman, sharply outlined by the now unclouded moonlight, lay in fantastic profile from side to side of the great platform.

Behind them was the blackness of the

cavern, and between them and the city the lake shone like a vast silver mirror, waveless, no sign of life upon it. Below the platform, the Indians watched. The Frog-Woman's head seemed to stoop, listening to them.

"Graydon! Graydon!" Suarra was half-weeping. "You should not have returned. Oh, it was wicked of me to call you back!"

"Nonsense!" rumbled Regor. "You love each other, don't you? Well, then, what else was there for him to do? Besides, he had made strong friends—Huon and Black Regor, and one stronger than all of us, or by Riza the Lightning-Eater he wouldn't be here! I mean the Mother herself. Say, child," he said slyly, "has

she instructed you how to take him back to her?"

"Ah, Regor," sighed Suarra, "far from it. That is what weighs so upon my heart. For when I received your message I told her straightway of it, and asked her aid, but told her also that with it or without it, still I must go. She only nodded, and said: 'Naturally—since you are woman.' Then after a little silence she spoke again: 'Go, Suarra—no harm shall come to you.'

"I ask protection for him, mother," I said, and she did not answer. And I asked: 'Mother Adana, will you not summon him to you through me, so that none will dare harm him?' The Mother shook her head: 'If he loves you he will find his own way to me, knowing that then he shall have you. And how do you know that he loves you so greatly, daughter?' I said: 'Because he dared to return to Yu-Atlanchi for me! And because his love for me is so strong that it held firm even against the power of the Face!' And at that she smiled so strangely—why do you groan, Graydon?"

Now Graydon had indeed groaned remorsefully, realizing for the first time that it had not been his love, but the direct interposition of the Mother herself that had plucked him from the Golden Death. As clearly, she had not revealed this to Suarra. Why, he did not know, but he could sail under no false colors there. So he confessed that lust which had burned from him even memory of herself as he gazed into the evil eyes of the Face, and told her of the serpent that had coiled about him and held him back, and of the vision of the serpent-woman that had broken the power of those eyes.

"But never again could it have sway over me, heart of mine," he ended, and waited miserably for her verdict upon him. It seemed uncomfortably long in coming, and there was a nervous quality in Regor's grunts.

"Well," Suarra said at last, "at any rate, I'm glad you told me. But I'm not so sure you wouldn't have thought of me before you had gone very far. And at all events, you *did* return because of me—and not because of the Mother!"

Before Graydon could answer, he felt an unmistakable kick of warning from Regor; he decided that since the Snake Mother had said nothing about his remarkable visit to her in the Temple, neither would he. In a measure it *had* guided his return. After all, there was such a thing as too much frankness. So he drew Suarra closer to him, and kissed her—which after all was the best possi-

ble answer there was to her question.

"Now I see why she smiled," she took up her story. "And then she bade me go to you, and to tell you again that you must win to her through your own wit and courage. Now why did she say 'again,' I wonder, Graydon? Well, no matter. Thus it was. And so I slipped away, with some of my Indians, and—here I am."

"No one saw you? No one followed you?" questioned Regor.

"No," said Suarra, "no, I'm quite sure they didn't. We passed through the Hall of the Weavers, and into the secret way that leads beneath the cataract, thence out and by the hidden path along the shore."

"You came silently? You heard nothing, saw nothing, as you passed the first cavern?" asked Regor again.

"Very silently," she answered. "And as for the cavern, the path dips far below it so that one can neither see it nor be seen from it. And I heard nothing—nothing but the voice of the torrent."

"Where was Lantlu?" Regor still did not seem satisfied.

"They feed the Xinli tonight!" she said, and Graydon felt her shudder.

"Then," said Regor with satisfaction, "we know at least where *he* is."

"Well," Graydon spoke, "the upshot of the matter seems to be that much depends upon my doing obeisance in person to the Mother. And she has put it severely up to me to accomplish that—"

"Graydon," Suarra interrupted softly, "there is another way for us. If you wish it—I will go with you to Huon! I love the Mother, love her as if she were my mother. But if you wish it, I will not return to her. I will go with you to the Fellowship. This will I do for you, beloved. I would not have you meet any of the deaths of Yu-Atlanchi, and I think they throng thickly about your path to Adana. With Huon, we can live and be happy—for a time at least."

Now Graydon heard Regor gasp at this, and felt that the man waited with anxiety for his answer, although he said nothing. Graydon was tempted. After all, there was a way out for them from Huon's lair. And once beyond the barrier, it was probable that the Snake Mother would hold back her hand, not loose the winged Watchers upon them—for Suarra's sake. And if he could get Suarra safely away, what did he care about Yu-Atlanchi or any who dwelt within it?

SWIFTLY, other thoughts came. The Mother had aided him, not once but twice. She had saved him from the Face!

She had bade her Messengers protect and guide him. She had challenged his loyalty and his courage. And she had shown that she trusted him.

No, he could not turn his back on all that and run! Not even with Suarra!

Besides—there was that strange fascination the serpent-woman had for him. As though she reached down and plucked some long sleeping string deep within his heart. Fragments of legends of the lure of Naga Princesses, serpent-women they, too, floated through his mind—to be swiftly banished. That unfamiliar, sharp rhythm of love that he had felt for her was not that kind of sorcery.

And then there was—the Dark One! The Shadow of Nimir, Lord of Evil, menacing her, and Huon and the Fellowship, who had trusted him, and Regor. All of them, banded against Lantlu and the Dark One, and pinning their hopes upon his meeting with the serpent-woman to rid their land of evil and deliver them from outlawry.

No, he could not run from all this, not even for Suarra!

He told her so. And why.

He felt Regor relax. He had the curious feeling that in some way that weirdly beautiful unhuman creature named Adana had been following his thoughts, approved his decision, and because of it had come to some final determination of her own which till now had hung in the balance.

Nor did Suarra seem much surprised.

"Well," she said philosophically, "I thought perhaps you wouldn't. Nevertheless, I would have gone with you, Graydon, my dear one. Now we must make some other plan. And I have thought of one. Listen, carefully, Regor. In seven days the moon is full and on that night is the Ladnophaxi—the Feast of the Dream Makers. On that night all will be at the amphitheater. There will be few guards in the city. Take Graydon back to Huon. On the fifth night from this, slip out of the lair and around the head of the lake and through the marshes. Let Graydon be dressed as one of the Emers, stain his face and body, make him a black wig cut as the Emers wear hair. His gray eyes we cannot change, and so must risk.

"You know the palace of Cadok. He is secret foe of Lantlu and friend of Huon, and of you—but that I need not tell you. Get Graydon there. Cadok will hide him until the night of the Ladnophaxi. I must be at the Feast, but I will send a guide to be trusted. That guide will lead him to the Temple—and so he shall find his way to the Mother. And it shall be by

his courage and wit. For it will take courage. And was it not his wit that rejected my proposal to him, meant from the heart as it was? So shall the terms of the Mother be fulfilled."

"It is a good plan!" rumbled Regor. "By the Mother, it is as good a plan as though it came from her! Thus shall it be. And now, Suarra, prepare to go. You have been here long—and every heart-beat fear creeps closer to me, and I am little used to fear."

"It is a good plan," said Graydon. "And, heart of hearts, go now as Regor bids. For I, too, fear for you."

Her soft arms were round his neck, her lips on his, he felt her cheeks wet with tears.

"Beloved!" she whispered, and again—"Beloved!"

And she was gone.

"Hr-r-r-mp!" Regor drew a great sigh of relief. "Well, thanks to the Lord of Lords, the path grows clearer. Now there is nothing for us to do but return and await the fifth night. And begin to stain you up," he chuckled.

"Wait!" Graydon was listening with all his nerves. "Wait, Regor! There might be danger . . . she might be waylaid. Listen."

For several minutes they stood quiet, and heard no sound.

"She's safe enough," grumbled Regor at last. "You heard her say the Mother promised her. But we're not, lad. Our path back is just as dangerous as it was coming. Let's start."

He gave a soft whistle to the watching guards. They came gliding back upon the platform.

Graydon, deep in thought, followed abstractedly with his eyes the fantastic profile of the Frog-Woman's shadow. The moon had moved higher in the heavens, and now cast a sharp shadow of the colossus' head upon the smooth face of rock that was the beginning of the cavern's farther wall. He stared at it, wakened from his abstraction, fascinated by its grotesqueness.

And as he stared he saw appear beside it another shadow—the shadow of a gigantic lizard head that crept closer and closer to it. He turned to trace it. Out from the cliff at the level of the Frog-Woman's shoulder peered the head of a lizard-man—an immense head at least twice the size of any he had seen. Its red eyes glared down at him, its great jaws opened.

"Regor!" he cried, and reached to his belt for his automatic. "Regor! Look!"

Before he could grip the weapon there was a sickening reek of musk. Claws gripped his ankles and threw him to the

rock. As he fell, he saw the thing whose head had cast the shadow slide down the face of the stone—and saw as it came that its body was that of a man! Knew that it was a man, and the head but a mask!

He grappled with the creature that had thrown him, and heard Regor bellow. His fingers clutched at the leathery skin and slipped from it. The jaws were so close that he sickened at the fetid breath. And while he fought, he wondered why it did not tear him with its fangs. His hand touched the hilt of the short sword in his belt. He drew it, and thrust the point haphazard upward. The lizard-man screeched, and rolled from him.

As he struggled to his feet, he saw that he had been drawn yards back into the cavern. On the platform was Regor, the deadly bar that was half his right arm smiting up and down and around, mowing down a hissing pack of the lizard-folk milling about him. Beside the giant were but two of Huon's Indians, fighting as desperately as he.

At the edge of the platform was the man in the lizard mask. Around him guarding him, was a ring of Indians dressed in green. He was laughing and that sound of human laughter coming through the fanged jaws was hideous!

"Caught!" shouted the lizard mask. "Trapped, old fox! Kill—but you'll not be killed! Not here, Regor! Not here!"

"Graydon!" bellowed Regor. "To me, Graydon!"

"Coming!" he cried, and leaped forward.

There was a rain of bodies upon him, leathery bodies. Clawed hands gripped him. He fought desperately to keep his feet.

There was only one Indian now beside Regor, the one who bore his rifle. As Graydon struggled, he saw this soldier's spear wrested from him, saw him throw the rifle thong over his head and raise the gun like a club. And as he did so there came a flash from the barrel and a report that echoed in the cavern mouth like thunder—and another and another in quick succession.

Now Graydon was down and could see no more, smothered under the lizard men.

And now thongs were all about him, trussing his arms to his sides, binding together his legs. He was carried swiftly back into the dense darkness.

One glimpse he had of the cavern mouth before it was blotted from his sight.

It was empty! Regor and his Indian,

the man in the lizard mask and his soldiers—lizard-men—all were gone!

CHAPTER X

THE SHADOW OF THE BLACK THRONE

THE lizard-men carried Graydon along gently enough. There was a considerable body of them, he could hear them hissing and squealing all around him, and the musky saurian stench was almost overpowering.

So far as he could tell he had sustained no wounds of any kind. The armor accounted for part of this, but not for all, since it had not protected his hands and face, and he had lost his cap of mail in the scramble. He recalled that the creatures had made no attempt to use talons or fangs, that they had overcome him by sheer swarming weight—as though they had been ordered to capture but not harm him.

Ordered? But that would mean whoever had issued the order had known he would be at the cavern of the frog-woman that night! And in turn that meant they had been betrayed despite all Regor's precautions.

Dorina! Her name seemed to leap out at him.

Or had it been the Dark One who by some infernal art had spied upon them?

Another thought came to him that rocked him. If his coming had been foreknown, then the reason for it must also have been. Then—had Suarra been taken after all? How long had the lizard mask been crouching behind the shoulder of the colossus? And what had he heard?

He writhed in his bonds. Memory came to his aid—she had said the Mother had promised her safety. Well, he could trust the Mother, banish fear for Suarra.

Regor! Was he prisoner of the man in the lizard mask? God, what a battle the giant had put up! What had been the meaning of the swift emptying of the cavern platform? He thought he understood the shots—the Indian in handling the rifle had probably happened to snap off the safety lever. But what had become of them all so quickly after that? It was not like Regor to abandon him if he had won the fight. If he had been captured, then why had they been separated?

There had been a deliberate attempt to cut him away from Regor, that was certain. It had begun with the first stealthy attack which had drawn him back into the cavern; its second phase had been the irresistible rush of the hidden lizard-men upon him and the wave

that had surged up around Regor forming between them a ringed barrier.

Yes, without doubt it had been planned to separate them. But why? It was Graydon's one bit of fortune just then that he could not know why.

And ever and ever as the hissing pack carried him on through the blackness his mind came back to Dorina—Dorina, who would not open the Door of Life with Huon; Dorina, who did not want him to meet the Mother until she had persuaded Huon to keep shut the Door of Death; Dorina, who did not want to die!

He wondered how far they had gone through this blackness within which the lizard people moved as in broad daylight. He could not tell how fast was their pace. Yet it seemed to him they must have gone several miles. Were they still in the frog-woman's cavern? What did the colossus guard in this vast lightless space. If hers it was?

Wondering thus he passed out of that blackness, without warning, as though he had been carried through an impalpable curtain.

Red light beat upon his eyes, brighter than the dim rubrous haze through which he had gone so cautiously with Regor when they had left the lair, but of the same disturbing quality of darkness shot through with crimson rust. All around him were the lizard-men, a hundred or more. He was being borne upon the heads of eight of the creatures, raised high on their forearms.

Under that weird light their leathery skins were dull orange; the coxcombs of scarlet scales that crested their reptilian skulls were turned by it into a poisonous purple. They padded, hissing to each other, over the yellow sand.

He was lying upon his back, and the effort of turning his head was painful. He stared up. He could see no roof above him, nothing but the rubrous haze. Steadily the light grew less dim, though never losing its suggestion of inherent darkness. Suddenly the lizard-men set up a louder and prolonged hissing. From somewhere far ahead came an answering sibilation. Their pace grew more rapid.

Abruptly, the red light lost much of its haziness. His bearers halted, and lowered him carefully to his feet. Hooked talons were thrust under his bonds and stripped them from him. Graydon stretched cramped arms and legs, looked about him.

A hundred feet in front was an immense screen of black stone. It was semi-circular in shape, and curved like a shallow shell. Its base was all of another

hundred feet between the ends of its arc; its entire surface was pierced and cut through in delicate designs through which ran strange patterns, unknown symbols.

Close to its center was a throne of jet, oddly familiar. With a prickling of his scalp he was suddenly aware that it was the exact duplicate of the sapphire throne of the Lord of Lords in the Temple. Screen and throne were upon a dais raised a few feet above the floor, and up to it ran a broad ramp.

Between the throne and the head of the ramp was an immense bowl of the same ebon stone, its base imbedded in the rock. It was, he thought, like an oversized baptismal font, one designed for giant's children. At the end of each wing of the curved screen was what, at the distance, seemed to be a low stone bench.

Empty was the black throne, empty the dais—were they empty? He searched them with his eyes. Of course they were empty! Then whence came his feeling that from every inch of that raised place within the screen something—some one—was regarding him, measuring him, weighing him, reading him with a cold malignant amusement . . . something evil . . . something incredibly evil . . . like the force that streamed out upon him from—yes, from the Face in the Abyss!

HE TURNED his back to the dais, with conscious effort. He faced a horde of the lizard-people. There were hundreds of them, grouped in orderly ranks at about the same distance away from him as the black throne. They stood silent, flaming red eyes intent upon him. They were so close together that their scarlet crests seemed to form a huge, fantastically tufted carpet. Among them were lizard-women and children. He stared at them—small things like baby demons, little needled yellow fangs glistening between the pointed jaws, small eyes glittering upon him like sparks of hell-flame.

Plucked from nightmare as the scene was, he knew it held but a fraction of the same nightmare oppression he had when facing the black throne.

He looked to right and left. The cavern was distinguishable in a circle perhaps half a mile in diameter. At that distance the clearer light in which he stood ended, bounded by the red rust murk. To his right, the smooth yellow sand stretched to the boundary of that murk.

At his left was a garden! A garden of evil!

There, a narrow stream ran over the

floor of the cavern in curves and intricate loops. It was crimson, like a stream of sluggishly running blood. Upon its banks were great red lilies, tainted and splotted with venomous greens, orchid blooms of sullen purple veined with unclean scarlets, debauched roses, obscene thickets of what seemed to be shoots of young bamboo stained with verdigris, crouching trees from whose branches hung heart-shaped fruits of leprous white, patches of fleshy-leaved plants from whose mauve centers protruded thick ochereous spikes shaped like hooded adders, whose sides slowly dribbled glistening drops of some dreadful nectar.

A little breeze eddied about him. It brought the mingled scents of that strange garden, and these were the very essence of it, distillation of its wickedness. They rocked him with blasphemous imaginings, steeped him with evil longings. The breeze lingered for a breath, seemed to laugh, then fled back to the garden and left him trembling.

He feared that garden! Yes, the fear of it was as strong as the fear of the black throne. Why did he fear it so? Evil—unknown, undreamed evil—was in it. It was living evil—ah, that was it! Vital evil! A flood of evil life pulsed and ran through every bloom, every plant and tree . . . evil vitality . . . they drew it from that stream of blood . . . but, ah, how strong one who fed upon their life might grow!

As that sinister thought crept into Graydon's mind, something deep within him seemed to awaken to repulse it with a cold stern control of his brain. His assurances and all his old courage returned to him. He faced the black throne fearlessly.

He felt the dark power within it thrust out at him, search for some loophole in his defense, withdraw as though puzzled, drive against him viciously as if to break him down, and then withdraw again.

Immediately, as in obedience to a command, the lizard-people surged forward, driving him toward the ramp. At its foot he hesitated, but a half dozen of the creatures padded from the ranks, closed round him, and pushed him upward. They pressed him to the stone bench at the right of the screen, and down upon it. As he tried to break from those who were holding his arms, he felt the others at his feet. Something circled his ankles. He heard two sharp clicks. The lizard-men padded away from him.

Graydon arose from the bench and looked down at his feet. There was a metal ring around each ankle, attached

to thin chains running back under the bench. He wondered how long the chains were. He took a step, and another and another, and still the chains did not check him. He reached down and pulled one of them to him until it grew taut. Measuring it, he estimated that it was precisely long enough to enable him to mount to the seat of the black throne. Having thus verified an unpleasant suspicion, Graydon rather hastily returned to the stone bench.

He heard a subdued hissing, the padding of many feet. The lizard-folk were going! Close-packed, they poured away, a tawny flood of leathery waves crested with leaping tongues of scarlet. None looked back at him. They reached the encircling murk and vanished within it.

Graydon was alone, in the silence—alone with the evil garden and the throne of jet!

Slowly the red radiance that fell upon the dais began to dim and thicken, as though an atomic spray of black light were sifting through it.

Denser it grew about the throne of jet, and upon the throne a deeper shadow formed. Shapeless, wavering at first, slowly but inexorably it condensed, ceased wavering, took outline—

Within the throne sat the *shadow* of a man. Faceless, featureless, cloudy hands gripping the arms of the throne, woven of the black atoms within the crepuscular rust—a man's shadow!

The faceless head leaned forward. It had no eyes, yet Graydon felt its eyes upon him. It had no lips, yet its lips began to whisper.

He heard the voice of the Shadow of Nimir, Lord of Evil.

CHAPTER XI

"LEND ME YOUR BODY, GRAYDON!"

THE voice of the Shadow was sweet, liquid as a flute heard from a forest at dusk. It lulled his fears, relaxed his guard.

"I know you, Graydon!" ran the whisper. "Know why you came to Yu-Atlanchi. Know how hopeless is your quest—without me. I brought you here, Graydon, commanding no harm to be done you. Else would you have been slain at the cavern. Do not fear me! You do not fear me, Graydon?"

He felt an oddly pleasant lethargy creeping over him as he listened to the melodious whisper.

"No," he said, half-drowsily. "No, I do not fear you, Nimir."

"Ah," the Shadow drew itself up from the throne, something of the lulling

sweetness left its voice, something of menace took its place. "So you know me!"

The spell upon Graydon loosened, his mind leaped to alertness. The Shadow saw it, and all the dulcet, soothing lure flowed back into its whisper.

"But that is well! It is very well, Graydon. You have been told many lies about me, without doubt. You have seen these people, these inhabitants of Yu-Atlanchi.

"They are in decadence. They rot. But had they in the olden days followed my counsel, they would now be a great people, strong, vital, rulers of the world. And the old wisdom would not have perished. It would have shaped a new and better world.

"You have seen these people, Graydon, and I think you have weighed them. Do you believe that they have reason to thank those who banished me and so condemned them to this end? I would not have abandoned them as did their Lord of Lords and his callous ministers, leaving them to a charlatan, a slave of a book, and a serpent-woman who, not being human, cannot therefore understand the human need. I would have led them onward and upward to greater strength and greater wisdom. I would have placed them on the heights, Graydon, only the stars above them—not left in the swamp, there to stagnate and decay. You believe me, Graydon?"

Graydon considered. It was a little difficult to think with this pleasant, lazy feeling holding one; there was a curious exhilaration in it, too. But yes, yes, it was all very true. It was clear, cold logic. He had thought the same thing himself, in a way. Certainly it was a damnable thing for the Lord of Lords, whoever he might have been, to have gone calmly off as though he had no responsibility for his people! Absentee landlordship—funny, that comparison, but true. Always a rotten thing!

Who was the charlatan? Why, the Lord of Fools, of course. And the Lord of Fate had admitted he was bound by his Book; so he was a slave. And the Mother? Half a snake! Damned apt descriptions, all of them. He quite agreed.

"Right, Nimir—you're right!" he said, nodding solemnly.

A ghost of perfume from the garden stole to him. He drank it greedily. Funny he had thought it evil! It wasn't. He felt damned good, and the scent made him feel even better. What was evil, anyway? Only a point of view. Not a bad sort this Shadow. Quite logical—very reasonable. . . .

"You are strong, Graydon." The

Shadow's whisper was sweeter still. "Very strong! You are stronger than any man of Yu-Atlanchi. Strong of body and strong of mind. You are like those of the Old Race whom I would have raised to the skies had it not been for trickery. It was not strength that defeated me, but the wiles of the snake-woman who cares nothing for man—remember that, Graydon, the Snake who cares nothing for man! It was not to harm you but to test your strength that I wrestled with you. You were strong enough to resist me. I was glad of that, Graydon, for then I knew that at last I had found the man I need!"

So he was the man Nimir needed, eh? Well, he *was* a good man, a hell of a good man. He had got this far without help from anybody, hadn't he? No, wait a minute—somebody had helped him. Who was it? No matter—he was a good man. But somebody *had* helped him . . . somebody. . . .

The whisper of the Shadow broke smoothly into his groping thought.

"I need you, Graydon! It is not yet too late to remake this world as it ought to be; not yet too late to right the wrong to humanity wreaked by the ancient treachery to me. But I must have a body to do it, Graydon. A strong body to hold me. Lend me your body, Graydon! It will be but for a time. And during that time you shall share it with me; you shall see as I see, enjoy as I shall enjoy, share my power and drink half the wine of my victories. And when I have grown to my old strength, then, Graydon, I will leave you in full possession, and I will make it immortal—aye, deathless as long as the sun endures! Let me share your body, Graydon—strong Graydon!"

Now the whispering ceased. Strong wine surged through Graydon's veins, a rich, heady, reckless flood of life. He heard the blast of conquering trumpets! He was Genghis Khan, sweeping over cities with his broom of Tartar horsemen: dragging captive kingdoms at their horses' tails; he was Attila lifted upon the shields of his roaring Huns; Macedonian Alexander trampling the world under his feet, Sennacherib holding all Asia like a goblet! He drank deep of power! He was drunk with power!

Was drunk! Was drunk! Who dared say that he, Nicholas Graydon, Master of the World, could be drunk? Well, all right—he was drunk then. That was another funny ideal—who wanted to be master of the world if all you got out of it was a drunk? Anybody could get drunk—therefore anybody who was drunk was master of the world! That *was* a funny idea . . .

logical . . . have to tell that logical Shadow that funny idea. . . .

He found himself wide awake and roaring with laughter. He stared stupidly about him, and no longer felt desire for laughter. For he was halfway to the throne of jet—and the Shadow was bending, bending over it, beckoning him, urging him on, and whispering—

The spell that had held him, the lure that had played him, as a fish is played, half into the Shadow's creel, dropped from him. Loathing for that cloudy shape on the black throne, loathing for himself, bitter anger, swept him as he staggered back to the stone bench and dropped upon it, face hidden in shaking hands.

WHAT had saved him? Not his consciousness, that thing he called himself. Something deep within his subconsciousness, something unalterably sane which had neutralized by ironic humor the poison his ears had been drinking. And now Graydon was very much afraid! So afraid that in sheer desperation he forced himself to lift his head and look straight at the Shadow.

It was staring at him, faceless head resting upon one misty hand. He sensed within it that same perplexity as when at first, unseen, it had striven to beat down his defenses—sensed, too, an infernal rage. Abruptly both were cut off; in their place flowed to him a current of calmness, deep peace. He strove to resist it, recognizing it for the trap it was; but it would not be repulsed; it lapped round him like little waves, caressing him, soothing him.

"Graydon!" came the whisper. "I am pleased with you, Graydon! But you are wrong to deny me. You are stronger than I thought, and that is why I am pleased with you. The body I share must be strong, very strong. Share your body with me, Graydon!"

"No! No! By God, no!" groaned Graydon, hating himself for the desire he felt to rush to this shadowy thing and let it merge itself with him.

"You are wrong! I will not harm you, Graydon. I do not want to weaken that strong body which is to be my home. If you had come to me our feet would have been set by now upon the first step to mastery. What is it you fear, Graydon? What is it you hope? Is it help from Huon? His days are few. Dorina has delivered him to Lantlu, even as she delivered you to me. Before the Feast of the Dream Makers his lair will be taken, and Huon and all left alive will feed the Xlnli, or me—or pray that they had!"

The whisper died, as though the Shadow had paused to watch the effect of this bitter announcement. If it was to test the lethargy that steeped Graydon, it was satisfied. For Graydon made no motion, nor did his face change from its fixed, fascinated stare.

"Lend me your body, Graydon! The Snake cannot help you. Whether you lend or not, soon shall I be incarnate. I would have your body rather than a weaker one—only to share, Graydon, only to share—and that for a little while. Power, immortality, wisdom beyond all other except mine! These shall be yours! Lend me your body, Graydon! You desire one woman? What is one woman to those you may possess? Look, Graydon, look—"

Graydon's dazed eyes followed the pointing cloudy hand. He saw the evil blooms of the garden dipping and nodding to each other as though alive. He heard a witch song, a lilting choral woven with arpeggios of lutes and tinkling sistrums which was the garden given voice.

A gust swept up from it and embraced him. As he breathed its fragrance wild-fire touched his blood. The nodding flowers vanished; the corroding red stream vanished; the corroding light of rusted black atoms became lucent. Close to his feet was a rippling, laughing little brook, beyond it a copse of beech and birch. And from the copse women came streaming, women of wondrous beauty, white nymphs and brown; full-breasted Bacchantes; slender virginal dryads!

They held out to him desirous arms. Their eyes promised him undreamed delights. They came to the verge of the rill, beckoning him, calling him to them with voices that fanned the fire in his blood to flaming ecstasy of desire.

What women! That one with the coronal of bronze tresses might have been High Priestess of Tanith in the secret garden of her temple in old Carthage! And that one with the flood of golden hair might be white Aphrodite herself! Why, any one of them would make the fairest of houris in Mohammed's Paradise look like a kitchen maid!

Fiercer grew the fire in his veins—he leaped forward . . .

Stop! That girl who has stepped out from the others—who is she? She has midnight misty hair, and it covers her face. She's weeping! Why is she weeping when all her sisters are singing and laughing? He knew a girl whose hair was that same mist of midnight—who was she? No matter . . . whoever it was, none who resembled her must weep! She herself must never weep . . . what was her name?

Suarra!

A wave of pity swept through him, quenching the witchfires in his blood.

"Suarra!" he cried. "Suarra! You must not weep!"

And with that cry he felt a tingling shock. The wave of beckoning women vanished. The girl of the misty hair vanished. Gone was laughing brook, and copse of birch and beech. The evil garden swayed before him.

He stood more than halfway to the throne of jet! From it the Shadow was leaning far out, quivering with eagerness, and whispering—whispering—

"Lend me your body, Graydon! All these you shall have if you will but lend me your body! Lend me your body, Graydon!"

Graydon groaned, and then: "No, you devil! No!"

The Shadow stood erect. The pulse of rage that drove from it struck Graydon like a material blow. He reeled under it, stumbled back to the safety of his bench. The Shadow spoke, and gone was all sweetness from its tones; its whisper was malignant, purposeful.

"You fool!" it said. "Now hear me. I shall have your body, Graydon! Deny me as you will, still shall I have it. Sleep, and I who do not sleep will enter it. Fight sleep, and when weariness saps that strength of yours I will enter it. For a time you shall dwell within it along with me, like a slave condemned, so tortured by what you see that again and again you will pray me to blot you out! And, because your body pleases me so, I will be merciful and give you this hope to dwell upon. After I am wearied of you, I *will* blot you out! Now, for the last time, will you submit to me? Lend me your body, share its tenancy with me, not as a slave but as master of all I have promised you?"

"No!" said Graydon steadily.

There was a swirling upon the jet throne. It was empty of the Shadow. But still through the light upon the dais sifted the black atoms, and although that throne seemed empty, Graydon knew that it was not. And that the dark power was still there, watching, watching him.

Waiting to strike!

CHAPTER XII

REFRESHMENT OF THE DARK ONE

GRAYDON sat upon his bench, motionless as a man of stone. How many hours had passed since the whispering of the Shadow had ceased, he did not know. His body was numb, but his mind

was awake, brilliantly awake. He could not feel his body at all. His mind was like a tireless sentinel upon a sleeping tower. It was like light in a darkened castle.

All his being was in that serene concentration of consciousness. He felt neither hunger nor thirst. He did not even think. That which was, he endured, withdrawn wholly into itself, unconquerable in a timeless world.

At first it had not been so. He had been sleepy, and he had fought sleep. He had dozed, and had felt the Shadow reach forth, touching him, testing his resistance. With what had seemed the last of his strength he had fought it back. He had striven to shut his mind from his surroundings, replace them with memory pictures of sane scenes. Sleep had again stolen upon him. He had awakened to find himself away from the bench, creeping toward the black throne. He had fled back in panic, thrown himself down, holding to the sides of the bench like a shipwrecked sailor to a spar.

He realized that the Shadow had its limitations, that it could not possess him unless it could draw him to its throne or he mounted it of his own volition. As long as he remained upon the bench he was safe. Thereafter he did not dare close his eyes.

He wondered if by fixing his mind on her he could get in touch with the Snake Mother. If he could reach the bracelet on his arm, concentrate his gaze upon the purple stones, he might reach her. The sleeve of the coat-of-mail covered it too tightly; he could not get at it. And suppose she should summon him as she had before! Would not the Shadow leap into his unguarded body? The sweat dropped from his cold forehead. Frantically he shut the serpent-woman from his thoughts.

He remembered the automatic beneath his armpit. If he could only get at that, it would give him a chance. At any rate, he could prevent the Shadow from getting his body in any shape to use it. It wouldn't be much good to that devil with its brains blown out. But there was no opening in the suit through which he could reach it. He wondered whether by some device he could persuade the lizard-men, if they came back, to strip him. There would be time enough for him to use the gun before they could take it from him.

And then slowly his consciousness had withdrawn to this impregnable fortress. He no longer feared sleep; sleep was of another world. He feared nothing. When that sentinel which was his very essence abandoned its post, it would leave his

body dead. Of no value to the Dark One as a habitation. He knew that, and was content that it should be so.

The rusted light about the black throne began to thicken, as it had when first the Shadow appeared to him. Shapeless, wavering at the beginning as then, the thing took form, condensed into sharp outline. He watched with the detached interest of a casual spectator.

The Shadow took no notice of him, did not even turn its faceless head to him. It sat upon the throne, motionless as Graydon himself, gazing toward the farther wall of murk through which the lizard-people had gone. It raised a hand, as though in summons.

There was a far-away thudding of padding feet, scores of them; a faint chorus of hissings that grew quickly louder. He did not turn his head to look, could not if he had had the desire. The padding feet came close and stopped, the hissing ceased, the musky fetor of the lizard-folk crept around him.

Up the ramp strode the man in the lizard mask!

The hideous head rested upon broad shoulders, the body was powerful, graceful, clad in close-fitting green. In his hand was a heavy, thonged whip. He paid no attention to Graydon. He walked to the foot of the jet throne and bowed low to the thing upon it.

"Master! Hall, Dark Master!" The voice that issued from the fanged jaws was melodious and faintly mocking, its arrogance thinly covered. "I have brought you another vessel into which it may please you to pour the wine of your spirit."

Now it seemed to Graydon that the Shadow looked upon the man in the lizard mask with a malice greatly to be dreaded, but if so it went unnoticed by him, and the Shadow's whisper held all its sweetness as it answered: "I thank you, Lantlu—"

Lantlu! Graydon's serenity was shaken. On the instant it regained its poise, and none too soon—for the Shadow had turned its face swiftly toward him, as a fisherman twitches his line when he feels the fish nibble at his bait.

"I thank you, Lantlu," it repeated, "but I have found, I believe, the perfect vessel. It is now being reshaped somewhat upon the wheel, since it thinks itself designed for other purposes."

Lantlu turned the red eyes of his mask at Graydon and walked over to him.

"Ah, yes," he said, "the hopeful fool from beyond who is to deliver Yu-Atlanchi from you and me, Master! Who conspires with Huon, the weakling, to

shake our power. Who slinks through the night to meet his love. His love! You dog, even to look at one upon whom I had set my seal! And Suarra—to give her lips to such as you! Faugh! She shall sooner mate with the Urd! Well, after I take her, she shall."

Now, at this Graydon's citadel was shaken indeed; he felt his body again tensed to spring at Lantlu's throat.

But with almost audible clang the opening gates of his mind closed, that aloof consciousness resumed its sway, secure once more from attack.

Lantlu raised his whip, poised it to bring it slashing down across Graydon's face.

"What?" he sneered. "So even that does not arouse you! Well, this may!"

The whip whistled down—

"Stop!" The whisper from the throne was thick with menace.

Lantlu's arm was jerked back as though a stronger hand had gripped his wrist, the whip fell to the stone.

"You shall not touch this man! I, the Shadow of Nimir, tell you so!" The whispering was venom made articulate. "That is *my* body you would have dared to strike! *My* body you would have dared deface! Sometimes you annoy me, Lantlu. Beware that you do not do it once too often!"

Lantlu stooped, and as he picked up the whip his hand was shaking.

"Every one to his taste, Dark Master," he said boldly, "And since you approve of his body, I suppose there is excuse for Suarra. But it is *not* one I should choose, with all Yu-Atlanchi to pick from until I found one strong enough."

"There is something more to a body than its shape, Lantlu," whispered the Shadow sardonically. "Precisely as there is something more to a head than a skull. It is why he beat you just now, although you are free and he in chains. I had supposed you knew this. You disappoint me!"

LANTLU quivered with rage, his hand clenched again about the whip. But he mastered himself. "Well," he said, "he shall see the fruit of his folly. The vessel I bring you, Dark Master, is from the city that was to shelter your chosen one."

He whistled. Up the ramp, arms held by two of the lizard-men, stumbled a Yu-Atlanchan tall as Lantlu himself. All the beauty of his face was wiped away by the fear that distorted it. His yellow hair dripped with the sweat of terror. He glared at the cloudy shape within the throne with eyes of nightmare. And as

he glared, foam puffed from his lips in tiny bubbles.

"Come, Cadok, come!" jeered Lantlu. "You do not appreciate the honor shown you. Why, in a breath you will be no longer Cadok! You will be the Dark One! An apotheosis, Cadok—the only living man-god in all Yu-Atlanchi! Smile, man, smile!"

At this sinister jesting Graydon again thought that the Shadow's unseen gaze rested upon the lizard mask darkly, but as before there was nothing of threat in its voice when it spoke.

"I am sure this vessel is too weak to hold me . . ." The Shadow leaned forward, studying the trembling noble impersonally. "Indeed, were I not sure, I would not pour myself into him, Lantlu, since there upon the bench is the body I desire. But I will enter him—I think that I am a little weary, and at the least he will refresh me!"

Lantlu laughed cruelly. He signaled the lizard-men. They ripped from Cadok his clothing, stripped him mother-naked. The Shadow bent, beckoning. Lantlu gave him a quick push forward.

"On to your high reward, Cadok!"

And suddenly the face of Cadok was wiped clean of its nightmare terror. It became the face of a child. Like a child's face it wrinkled and great tears poured down his cheeks. Eyes fixed upon the beckoning Shadow, he walked to the throne of jet and mounted it.

The Shadow enveloped him!

For an instant Graydon could see nothing but a lurid mist in which Cadok writhed. The mist wrapped him closer, forcing itself within him. The Yu-Atlanchan's great chest swelled, his muscles knotted in agony, convulsions shook him.

And now his whole body seemed to expand as though rushing out to cover that part of the mist which still clung around him, unable to enter. The outline

of his naked body became nebulous, cloudy, as though flesh and mist had merged into something less material than flesh, more material than the avid vapor.

The face of Cadok seemed to melt, the features to run together, then reassemble—

Upon the straining, tortured body was the face of the Abyss!

No longer stone!

Alive!

The pale, sparkling blue eyes looked out over the cavern, at the lizard-folk, now prostrate, groveling upon their bellies, heads hidden; upon Lantlu, with Satanic amusement, upon Graydon with a glint of triumph.

Abruptly, what had been the body of Cadok shriveled and collapsed! It twisted and rolled down from the throne to the dais. It lay there, twitching and strangely shrunken to half the size it had been!

Upon the throne sat only the Shadow.

But now the Shadow was less tenuous, closer knit, as though that which had gone from the body of Cadok, leaving it so shrunken, had been absorbed by it. It seemed to breathe. The Lucifer face was still visible within it, the pale blue eyes still glittered.

Again Lantlu laughed and whistled. The two Urd upon the dais hopped to their feet, picked up the shriveled body, carried it to the garden, and threw it into the red stream.

Lantlu raised his hand in careless salute to the jet throne, turned on his heel with never a glance at Graydon, and marched away swinging his whip, the Urd pack at his heels.

"Not you but he is the fool, Graydon!" whispered the Shadow. "He serves my purpose now, but when I . . . Better lend me your body, Graydon, than have me take it! I will not treat you as I did Cadok. Lend me your body and your

brain, Graydon! I will not torture you. I will not blot you out, as I threatened. We shall dwell together, side by side, in your body and your brain. I will teach you. And soon you will look back upon the man you now are, and wonder why you ever thought to resist me. For never have you lived as you shall live, Graydon. No man on earth has ever lived as you shall live! Lend me your body, Graydon!"

But Graydon was silent.

There came from the Shadow a whispering laugh. It wavered—and was gone!

Graydon waited, like a hare which has heard the fox trot from its burrow but lingers to be sure. After a time he knew definitely that the Shadow had departed. There was nothing of it left; no unseen crouching power awaiting its chance to strike.

He relaxed, stood upon numb and uncertain feet, fighting a violent nausea.

And as he stood he felt a touch upon his ankle, looked down, and saw reaching from behind the edge of the cavern screen a long and sinewy arm covered with scarlet hair. The needle-pointed fingers felt carefully around the metal link that fettered him, snapped it open, crept to the other and released it, while Graydon stood staring stupidly, unbelievingly, at it.

A face peered round the screen's edge. chinless, scarlet elf locks falling over a sloping forehead, golden eyes filled with melancholy staring at him. The face of Kon, the Spider-man!

CHAPTER XIII

THE PAINTED CHAMBER

THE spider-man's caricature of a human face was distorted by what was undoubtedly intended for a reassuring smile. Graydon, limp with reaction from the sustained strain of his ordeal, dropped to his hands and knees.

Kon reached over the side of the dais and lifted him up with a spider-like arm as easily as though he had been a puppy. Grotesque as the spider-man was, Graydon saw him then as more beautiful than any of those phantom women who had almost lured him into the Shadow's net. He put his arms around the hairy shoulders and clung tightly to them. The spider-man patted him on the back with his little upper hands, making odd comforting clicking sounds.

From the garden came a shrill humming as of thousands of bees in swarm. Its flowers and trees were bending and twisting as though blown by a strong wind.

Kon's huge eyes scanned it doubtfully,

then, with Graydon still held close, he slipped around the edge of the screen. The humming in the garden arose octaves higher in pitch, threatening and—summoning!

As they turned its edge, Graydon saw that the screen was not detached as he had supposed. A smooth cliff of black rock angled back from it. It was in reality a sculptured alcove, cut from the front of a buttress which thrust into the red cavern like the prow of a ship. It came to him that within this jutting mass might be a passage leading to that other cavern where the great Face looked out over the Abyss—the road of the Shadow to the dungeon of Nimir.

Crouched at the base of the cliff, their scarlet covering making them barely discernible in the rubrous haze, were two other spider-men. They arose as Kon swung toward them. Graydon had a sense of weird duplication as they regarded him with their sorrowful golden eyes, as though not one Kon had come for him, but three. Clutched in the terminations of their four middle arms, or feet, were long metal bars like that which Regor wore, but unlike his the tips ended in spiked knobs and had hand-grips.

Two of these bars they passed to Kon. Mingled now with the insistent, raging humming was a faint hissing undertone, far away, rapidly growing louder. It came from the direction faced by the jet throne. It was the clamor of the Urd horde, the lizard-men answering the summons of the garden of evil.

He wriggled in Kon's arms, and motioned to be set down. The spider-man shook his head. He clicked to the others, tightened his grasp upon Graydon, gripped his two bars in the opposite hand, and dropping upon four of his stilts turned sharply from the wall of rock, and began to scuttle toward the wall of murk half a mile away. His comrades ranged on each side of him.

They ran bent almost double, with the speed of a racing horse. They entered the rusty murk. They became to Graydon's eyes little more than speeding shadows. The humming and hissing lessened to a faint drone, and were swallowed by the silence.

For what must have been three miles or more they kept the pace, effortlessly it seemed. Ahead, a barrier of reddist rock sprang out of the haze, vanishing in the heights above. At its base were great boulders, fallen from the cliff, and among them hundreds of smaller ones, smooth and ocherous, and shaped with a queer regularity. The spider-men

slowed to a walk, scanning the face of the precipice cautiously. Suddenly Graydon smelled the reek of the lizard-folk, and knew those oddly similar bowlders for what they were.

"Kon!" he cried, pointing. "The Urd!"

At his cry the bowlders moved, sprang up, rushed upon them—a horde of the lizard-men, hissing, slaver dripping from fanged jaws, red eyes glowing like goblin lanterns from hell.

Before they could turn, the pack was all around them.

Kon made of himself a tripod upon three stilts; out swung two other stilts whirling the great bars. The two Weavers rose upright on their hind legs, a bar gripped in each of their four free hands.

They flailed through the first ranks of the encircling pack, mowing them down, then re-formed into a triangle, back to back. Into the center of this triangle Kon set Graydon with an admonitory click. Out swung the bars again, cracking the pointed skulls of the Urd, who were unable with their stumpy arms to strike under that deadly ring or to break through it.

The three Weavers retreated slowly along the base of the cliff, cutting their way as they went. Graydon could no longer watch the fight, intent upon keeping his feet as he walked over the writhing bodies which paved the way. He heard a sharp clicking from Kon, felt the spider-man's arm embrace and lift him once more to his hairy breast. There was a quick rush forward. They had waded through the waves of the Urd. Down upon four stilts dropped the three, and raced away, clicking triumphantly as they sped along. The hissing of the pack and the pad of their pursuing feet died away.

Their pace decreased, they went more and more slowly, studying the scarp. Kon halted, set Graydon down, and pointed to the cliff. Above an immense bowlder which had dropped and shattered, and eight feet above the floor of the cavern, was an oval black stone, polished and set in the red rock face plainly by intent. The spider-man scuttled up to it, raised his long arms, and began feeling delicately around it. He gave a satisfied click, and keeping his talons upon a spot at the side of the stone, turned and beckoned to Graydon.

Kon took his hand and placed it against the cliff with the fingers spread wide and the heel of the hand pressing hard against the rock. Thrice he did this, and then lifting him, carefully placed his fingers where his own claws had rested. Graydon understood. He was showing

him where some mechanism was located, but which Kon's sharp-pointed digits could not motivate. Graydon pressed.

A stone moved slowly upward like a curtain, revealing a dark tunnel. Kon clicked to his comrades. The pair passed warily through the black opening, bars ready. Soon they reappeared, and conferred. The spider-man patted Graydon on the back, and pointing to the tunnel, followed him into it. Here Kon again felt along the inner edge of the opening until he had found what he sought, and again he pressed Graydon's hand upon a spot which seemed to the touch precisely the same as the surrounding surface, as had indeed the outer lock. But the curtain of rock dropped, leaving him in utter blackness. As it fell he heard the distant hissing of the pursuing horde.

DARKNESS evidently meant no more to the spider-people than it did to the lizard-folk, for he heard them moving on ahead of him. Momentary panic seized Graydon that they might not be able to understand his limitations and would leave him behind. Before he could cry out to Kon, his arm was around him, had lifted him up and carried him away.

On they went, and on, through the darkness. Graydon felt rise around him a fine, impalpable dust, so fine that it could have been ground to such tenuity only by the millstones of the ages. It told him that this passage was one unused by the lizard-folk or any other, and evidently it told the spider-men the same thing, for they went on confidently, with increased speed.

The darkness began to gray; now he could see the walls of the tunnel; and now they passed out of it into an immense chamber cut in the living rock.

Dim within it as the light might be, it seemed glaring daylight to Graydon after the rust haze of the Shadow's cavern and the blackness of the passage. It came through fissures in the far side of the place.

The impalpable dust was thick upon its floor.

In the center was a huge oval pool in which glimmered water, and around whose raised rim squatted a score of figures like gray gnomes. They were motionless, rigid. The spider-men drew together and clicked busily to each other, looking about them with obvious perplexity. Graydon walked over to the pool and touched one of the squatting gnomes.

It was stone, and he looked at the figures more closely. They were carven effigies of hairless, tailless gray apes, an-

thropoid in their characteristics. Their long upper lips dropped to mouths beneath which were well defined chins. The sinewy hands of their long arms knuckled the stone on which they sat. Their foreheads, though retreating, were half human. In the stone sockets of their eyes were gems resembling smoky topazes. With these topaz eyes they stared at the pool with something of that same puzzled melancholy which filled the golden eyes of Kon and his mates.

Walking around them, Graydon saw that they were both male and female, and that each wore a crown. He bent closer. The crowns were miniature sculptures of serpent-people—serpent-men and serpent-women, their coils twisted round the heads of the gray apes like the sun-snakes upon the Ureus crown of the Pharaohs.

Down into the still pool a flight of yellow marble steps fell, vanishing in its depths.

Wondering, he walked over to a fissure, and as he drew near he saw that this whole face of the chamber had been broken away by the same force—earthquakes or subsidences perhaps, which had opened up the fissures. He peered out. He looked over the plain of the monolithic stones beyond the barrier. The chamber was at the very edge of the sky-reaching wall.

The sun was low—was it rising? If so, the time he had spent with the Shadow had been but a night. He had thought it much longer. He watched for a while—the sun was setting. His ordeal had lasted a night and a day.

He turned back to Kon, suddenly aware that he was both thirsty and hungry. Under the direct light from the fissures, the wall through which they had come stood out clearly. Looking at it, he halted, forgetting both hunger and thirst.

Along all its thousand-foot length it was covered with paintings. Paintings by lost masters, rich in detail as Michelangelo's "Last Judgment," landscapes as mystically beautiful as those of El Greco or Davies, portraiture as true as Holbein's or Sargent's, colorful as Botticelli, fantastic—but only so, he knew, because they pictured an unknown world; nothing in them of the fantasy of the unreal. He ran back to examine them.

Here was a city of rose-coral domes whose streets were bordered by scaled trees, red and green, with foliage like immense ferns. Among them serpent-people were borne in litters upon the heads of the hairless gray apes. And here was a night scene with the con-

stellations looking serenely down upon smooth fields covered with rings of pale green radiance through which the serpent-people moved in strange ritual.

There was something peculiar about those constellations—he studied them. Of course, the outline of the Dipper, the Great Bear, was not the same shape as now. The four stars of its bowl were closer for one thing, a perfect square. And there was Scorpio—its claws not an arc, but a straight bar of stars!

Why, if that picture of them were true, it showed the heavens as they must have been hundreds of thousands of years ago. How many ages before those distant orbs could shift to the position they seem to occupy today? It dizzied him.

He paced slowly by the painted wall. And in the pictures he saw the gray apes growing more and more like men. He saw them become men!

HE LOOKED long at the painting of a vast swamp in which monstrous bodies floundered; from its mud hideous heads peered and over its mud great winged lizards flapped on leathery bat-like wings. He stared even longer at the next. It was the same swamp; in the foreground was a group of the serpent-people. They lay coiled behind what appeared to be an immense crystal disk. The disk seemed to be swiftly revolving. And all over the morass were winged shapes of flame battling with the monsters. They held a core of brilliant incandescence from which sprang two nebulously radiant wings like those of the sun's corona seen during some eclipses. These winged shapes appeared to pulse abruptly out of empty air, dart upon the monsters and fold their lambent wings about them, and when they unfolded them, the spot where that primeval chimera had been was clean of it.

And there was another city. . . . The city across the lake from the cavern of the Frog-woman was a miniature of it, nor were there any mountains around it. It came to him that this was the Yu-Atlanchi of the immemorial past, from which the snake-people and those they had fostered had fled before the ice whose creeping progress all their arts could not check. He saw a fleet of strange ships; one of them fighting off the attack of a group of gigantic sea-saurians whose snakelike necks reared high above its masts!

The history of a whole lost world was within that painted cavern. It held the pictured record of a lost era of earth's history.

He saw that at one time the paintings had covered all four walls. They were almost obliterated on two sides, completely so on that of the fissures. Only where the passage had opened were the pictures complete.

What had this chamber been? Why abandoned?

He was again aware of thirst. He walked back to the pool. He heard a warning click from Kon. Graydon pointed to the pool and to his throat. For full measure, he rubbed his belly and made the motions of chewing. The spider-man nodded, scuttled to the yellow steps and down them. He dipped a hand in the water, smelled of it, cautiously tasted it. He nodded approvingly, bent down and sucked in a huge draft. Graydon knelt and scooped up handfuls. It was cold and sweet.

Kon clicked to his comrades. They went searching about the fissures, and presently returned with large pieces of brown fungi. Kon took a bit, dipped it into water, bit off a corner, and handed the balance of it to Graydon. He accepted it doubtfully, but tasting it found that it absorbed the water like a sponge and was somewhat like bread with a pleasant yeasty flavor. He took another piece and dipped it. The three Weavers squatted beside him. All solemnly sopped their fungi in the pool and chewed it.

And suddenly Graydon began to laugh. Surely no man had ever dined as he was dining—squatting there beside the weird pool with the three scarlet grotesques, dipping mushrooms in the water with topaz-eyed, hairless, gray apes looking on, and the history of a lost epoch spread out before him for his entertainment. He laughed and laughed, with swiftly growing hysteria.

Kon looked at him, clicking inquiringly. Graydon could not stop his laughing, nor the sobbing hiccoughs that now began to punctuate it. Kon took him up in his long arms, and swung him to and fro like a baby.

Graydon clung to him; the hysteria passed away. And in passing it took with it all the taint of the Shadow's whispers, all the hateful lure of the evil garden. The film of evil which lay upon his mind passed away like scum on water under a strong cleansing wind!

He was sleepy, ah, but he was sleepy! Now he could sleep without fear of the Shadow creeping into him! Kon wouldn't let anything like that happen! The light was dimming fast . . . sun must be almost down . . . he'd sleep for a few minutes. . . .

Cradled in the arms of the spider-

man, Graydon dropped into deepest, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XIV

THE TAKING OF HUON'S LAIR

DAWN came filtering into the painted cavern. Graydon yawned sleepily, sat up and looked uncomprehendingly about him. He was upon a bed of moss. A spider-man squatted close to him, studying him with puzzled sad eyes. There was no sign of the other two Weavers.

"Where's Kon?" he asked. The spider-man answered him with a string of rapid clicks.

"Kon! Hey, Kon!" called Graydon.

The Weaver sensed his anxiety, and its reason; it sidled to him, patted him with its small upper hands, nodding and softly clicking. Graydon gathered he was being told there was nothing to worry about. He smiled and patted the Weaver upon a shoulder. The spider-man seemed much pleased. He scuttled over to the crevices, returning with the bread-like fungi.

The two went down to the pool, and breakfasted, the Weaver keeping up an amiable succession of clicks between bites; Graydon companionably answering him with a totally unrelated monologue. He felt refreshed, ready to cope with anything, he thought with a deep recoil, but another ordeal with the Shadow.

There was a movement in one of the large crevices. Through it came the scarlet body of Kon, and following him the second Weaver. The trio clicked busily. Kon waited until Graydon had finished his last piece of fungi, beckoned him and moved over to the crevice through which he had entered. The other spider-men crawled through it, vanishing, so it seemed to Graydon, into thin air.

Kon followed, and disappeared. Immediately his long red arms stole back into the fissures, talons signaling. Graydon crept into the slit, and looked out. Far below was the plain of the monoliths.

Kon's arm crooked around him, and drew him out. Graydon's head swam, for he looked down a sheer half-mile drop. The spider-man was hanging to the face of the cliff, his supple fingers gripping cracks and projections which only they could have made use of. He tucked Graydon under his arm, and began to crawl along the precipice. Graydon looked down just once more, and was convinced he would feel better if he kept his eyes on the rock. They swung along for about two thousand

feet. Another crevice appeared. Kon thrust him through it, and scrambled after him.

They were in a wide passage which had probably once run into the painted cavern. Here the same destructive agency had been at work. The end had been blocked by a rock fall, and its wall pierced by scores of holes and fissures. Its floor was littered with fallen stone. Kon looked doubtfully at him, and stretched out his arm. Graydon shook his head violently, tired of being carried around like a baby.

They set off down the corridor, but his progress was comparatively slow; so slow that Kon shortly picked him up with a conciliatory click. The three Weavers set off at a fast pace over the débris. He resigned himself. After all, as well ride a spider-man as a camel or an elephant; if one had never seen a camel or an elephant they would seem just as unusual as Kon and his kind.

The passage finally curved into caverned space filled with a dim twilight. There were no fissures. The light was the same as that which streamed from the walls in Huon's lair, but here it seemed to be dying, old and outworn, as though the force which produced it were almost spent.

The place seemed to be a vast storehouse; he caught glimpses of enigmatic mechanisms of crystal and black metal, among them huge globes of silver; once he saw something which appeared to be the hull of a ship, and once he passed by what was certainly one of the crystal disks painted in the battle in the primeval swamp. They loomed all around him, these vague, shrouded shapes of mystery. The three Weavers paid no attention to them whatever, threading their way rapidly.

They entered another black tunnel. They had gone along this for a mile or more when Kon gave a click of warning. He set Graydon down, and the four stood listening. There was the sound of men, walking slowly and cautiously, and not far away. A cloudy light abruptly impinged upon the wall of the tunnel, as though a little luminous ball of cloud had been thrown against it. It came from a transverse passage only a few yards ahead. The spider-men gripped their bars, stole softly forward.

Before they could reach the opening, a man's head projected gingerly around the side—a head whose hair was a silvery-white over a stained bandage, whose small brown eyes twinkled alertly, who bore the scars of claws upon his cheek.

"Regor!" shouted Graydon, and rushed by the spider-men.

The giant bounded into the tunnel below, amazed joy, embracing him, roaring strange curses and invocations to the Seven-tailed Zarrah and other unusually formed personages. The three Weavers came forward, clicking like castanets. From the transverse passage emerged five of the Fellowship men, clothing torn, carrying swords and maces and small round shields. All showed the marks of heavy fighting; after them a dozen of the Emers with spears and swords and the same small shields, kilts tattered and none of them without some wound.

One of these grinned at him out of a battered face and held up to him—his rifle!

"How the devil did you know where to look for me?" demanded Graydon when at last Regor had grown coherent.

"I wasn't looking for you, lad," he answered somberly. "I was looking for a way into the Temple to tell Suarra of your capture, hoping she would raise such a storm about it that the Mother could not refuse to aid you—if you were still alive. Also I admit hoping this would involve protection for myself and these with me. And on second thought, I'm not so sure I am glad I did find you. That was our only hope, and now I have no excuse to appeal to Adana." He grinned.

"Protection!" exclaimed Graydon. "I don't understand you, Regor. You must have got back to the lair safely."

"The lair is sacked!" said Regor. "Ripped open. Huon is prisoner of Lantlu! The Fellowship, what's left of it, is dispersed, wandering like us about these burrows."

Graydon was aghast. "What happened?"

"Dorina did it," said the giant, and there was a murmur of hatred from the others. "Something told me to kill her, when I managed to get back to the lair after you had disappeared. But I wasn't sure she had betrayed us, and so I didn't kill her—more's the pity! Last night, while we were asleep, she opened a secret door to Lantlu and a few of his friends. They stole in and killed quietly and quickly the guards at the great door. Dorina lifted it, and let in more of his supporters and a pack of the Urd. There was no time for us to gather. Many were slaughtered in their beds. After that it was group fighting all over the place. I saw the lizard-men drag Huon down and truss him. Some of our Emers managed to escape—how much of the

Fellowship, I don't know. Not many, I fear. We were fortunate. They added a few more scars to my decorations," he touched the bandage, "but they paid for it!"

"Dorina!" whispered Graydon. "Dorina! Then the Shadow did not lie!"

Regor started, looked at him keenly. "Lad—you've seen the Shadow? The Dark One?"

"I'll say I have!" said Graydon, grimly, in his own tongue. Then in the Aymara: "I was his guest for a night and a day. You see—he wants my body!"

REGOR drew back a step, scrutinizing him. He clicked to Kon, and the spider-man replied at some length in that, to Graydon, incomprehensible tongue which evidently was no mystery to Regor. When he ended, the giant extended his bar and touched the Weaver on the shoulder, as though it were an accolade.

Regor stationed the Indians at guard at the opening through which they had come, and seated himself on a block of fallen stone.

"Now tell me, lad," he bade Graydon, "and this time—keep nothing back."

And tell him all Graydon did, from the first stealthy onslaught of the hidden lizard-men down to the moment. Regor and the five Yu-Atlanchans listened, silent, fascinated. Their faces whitened as he related his long struggle against the Shadow. When he told the fate of Cadok Regor groaned, his face livid, and beat his breast with clenched fist.

"Good lad! Good lad!" he muttered brokenly, when Graydon had ended, and sat for a time in thought.

"That cavern where you thought you saw a ship," Regor broke his silence. "If you are right—it was a ship! One of those upon which our ancestors came to the Hidden Land with the serpent-people; it is preserved there with many other precious things. So long has that cavern been locked away, unentered, that it was thought to be but a legend, a wonder tale for children, like that of the imprisoning of Nimir. None but the Snake Mother and the two Lords of Fate and Fools remember the way into it, unless it be known to the Dark One. And if he does, it is plain he has not given the secret to Lantlu. Perhaps he fears what may be there. . . ."

"The cavern of the Lost Wisdom!" There was awe in Regor's voice. "And it exists! By the Mother, what we have forgotten! How we have fallen from the ancient strength! Once, Graydon, so the story runs, there was a wide entrance to

it opening upon the lake. This was blocked with rocks, and the rocks melted, by some device the Old Ones knew, after the war that ended in the prisoning of Nimir. So cunningly was it done that none now can tell that sealed place from the surrounding stone. Yet I have heard a way was left to it from the Temple, through which the Lords and the Snake Mother passed from time to time when desire came to them to look again upon its ancient treasures. Once in, I think we can find its door; and if we do I have that which will open it."

He drew Graydon aside from the others.

"Did you think I had abandoned you, lad?" he whispered huskily. "I didn't. The Urd were too thick around me to break through, although I fought as never before. Then by lucky chance that Emer over there who held your noisy weapon, set it going. The Urd scattered squealing and even Lantlu dropped from the platform. But you had been carried off. The Emers and I were away before Lantlu could gather his pack together.

"When I reached the lair, we took council. It was Huon's idea to send Kon after you. Huon was strange—strange as when he bade you farewell. There was a cavern of red-rust light, he said. There Kon and his Weavers must search. They must start, he said, from the opening through which we passed when we left the lair. Always have we known that there was danger of meeting the Urd in that place—but never dreamed that it was a way to the den of the Dark One. Back, far back you must go, Huon told Kon. And then—his face became drawn and white as when he spoke of the vision of slaying shadows dropping from the red sky—and he told of a black precipice ending in a black shrine beside a garden. There they would find you!

"I opened that door and let them out. I watched them merge at once into the murk, and realized how wisely Huon had picked the red Weavers. Kon says they made their way swiftly far, far back, seeing no Urd, until at last the black cliff sprang up before them. Now which way to follow that wall, he did not know; by chance decided upon the left. On they went and on until he heard the sound of many Urd, and a man's voice, and a voice which Kon says 'spoke without a man to hold it.' That must have been when the Shadow poured itself into Cadok. They waited until the Urd had gone away—and until the bodiless voice had gone—and there you were, in the black shrine beside the garden! Strange . . . strange that Huon. . . ."

He paused, shaking his head perplexedly.

"That little beast of yours is done for, I fear," he said, referring to Graydon's burro. "But just before the raid I took from its pack some of your weapon's food. I tried to make the noisy thing eat," he laughed, "but for me it would not."

He called the Indian who held the rifle. Graydon took it, rejoicing in the feel of it. The Emer thrust a pouch out to him. Within it he found about a hundred cartridges and several clips for his automatics. He looked the rifle over, found it unharmed. He loaded it.

"Put your hand through the slit of this damned armor, Regor," he said. "Reach up under my arm and give me what you find there."

Regor obeyed, drew out the automatic. Graydon thrust it into his belt. He felt much better; swords and maces were all right in their way, but every man knew his own weapons best.

"Let's go," he said.

Regor whistled to the guard, and touched Kon. The spider-man beside him, he led the way up the black passage, retracing Graydon's journey. The other two Weavers fell in behind them, Graydon and the Fellowship men followed, the Indians brought up the rear. Regor did not depend upon Kon's eyes for guidance. Now and again he cast ahead of him the vaporous, light-stimulating ball.

They came to that place Regor had called the Cavern of Lost Wisdom. As he crossed its threshold, he dropped upon his knees and kissed the floor. The Yu-Atlanchans whispered among themselves, but did not imitate him. They threaded their way through it in the crepuscular dusk of the dying atoms; past the dim vague shapes of the mysterious machines, past immense coffered of metals red and gray that held, Graydon wondered, what relics of the lost world! By the huge silvery globes they went, and he saw that upon them were traced enigmatic symbolings in lacquers of gold and blue. They came to the shadowy hull of the great ship, and here again Regor bent his knee. On and on they went, through the dusk, past the science, the art, the treasures of the serpent-people and the mighty forefathers of the Yu-Atlanchans. They came to their end, and looked out over an empty space whose farther side they could not see.

"We must cross there," Regor said, "until we come to the rock that seals the ancient entrance. The corridor of the

Lords, so said he who told me of this, is at its edge and in the direction of the cataract, which is at the right. The tunnel runs under the lake and skirts the amphitheater of the Xinli.

"There we must go softly, for I do not know whether other passages may not open into the one we travel. If so, it seems to me they must be sealed; indeed, must be, since the Old Ones planned to shut this cavern off for all time. Still, we will take no chances. And somewhere near there is an entrance into the tunnel which Suarra traveled from the Hall of the Weavers that night she met us."

THEY set off across the empty space. They came at length to a wall of rock which appeared to be formed of bowlders fused by volcanic heat. Regor grunted complacently. They skirted the wall to the right until Regor saw, set within the rock, an oval black stone like that for which Kon had searched in the red cavern.

Regor clicked to the spider-man. Kon felt carefully around the stone as he had the other, turned and shook his head. Regor took from his belt the cone he had used to open the door from the lair. Light sprayed from it as the Weaver began to press it methodically over the face of the barrier. The rock began slowly to open, like the two valves of a sliding door. They peered into a corridor, much more brilliantly lighted, dropping at an easy decline. After they had entered, Kon pressed the cone to the inner sides. The rock portal closed. Look closely as he might, Graydon could see no traces of it; the rock was smooth and unlined.

They went through that passage for a mile or more. Straight at first, it soon began to twist tortuously, as though it had been cut from some soft, meandering vein.

"We have passed beneath the lake, I know that if nothing else," whispered Regor.

Abruptly the corridor terminated in a small crypt. Two of its walls bore each a black oval. Regor looked at them, and scratched his head.

"By Durdan the Hairy!" he grumbled. "There were so many turns that I know not which side is toward the Temple and which away from it."

Nor could the others help him solve the mystery.

"Well," he decided, "we go to the right."

Kon manipulated the cone. Almost immediately a stone slid upward. They

were in a tunnel brighter still, and running at right angles.

"If this is right, then we go right again," said Regor. They stepped out of the tunnel without warning into a guard chamber in which were half a dozen Emer soldiers, not in yellow but in green kilted kirtles, and an officer, a noble clad also in Lantlu's distinctive green.

They stared at the motley intruders in silent amazement, like men of wood. Before they could recover, Regor signaled Kon. Instantly the three spider-men sprang upon the Indians and throttled them. Regor's strong fingers went round the officer's throat. And all so quickly that Graydon himself had had no time to move.

Regor loosened his grip upon the neck, raised his bar. Kon scuttled over, stood behind the Yu-Atlanchan, pinioned his arms.

"So right was wrong!" muttered Regor. "Speak softly, Ranena. Answer briefly. What place is this?"

Ranena glanced at the bodies of his guards at the feet of the two Weavers, and little beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"No need to treat me so, Regor," he said thickly. "I have never been your enemy."

"No?" asked Regor suavely. "And yet I thought I saw you in the lair of the Fellowship last night. Perhaps I was mistaken. However—answer quickly, Ranena!"

"It guards a way to the amphitheater," the answer came sullenly. As though to confirm him, there came a rumbling as of far-away thunder, and the sound of cheering. "They race the Xinli," he added.

"And Lantlu, of course, is there?" asked Regor.

A shade of malice crossed Ranena's fine face.

"And Dorina!" he said coolly.

Regor glanced at Kon, and the Weaver tightened his grip upon Ranena's arms.

"What have they done with Huon?"

"Listen, Regor"—Ranena's clear eyes darkened craftily—"if I tell you where Huon is and how to reach him, will you promise not to kill me, but merely truss me up and gag me before you go to him?"

"What have they done with Huon?" repeated Regor.

He clicked to the spider-man. One of Kon's hands covered Ranena's mouth, with the others he began slowly to lift his arms behind him and twist them. Ranena writhed, his face distorted with agony. He nodded.

Kon withdrew his hand, lowered his

arms. Little drops of blood ran down the cheek where the needled fingers had pierced it.

"After the next race—he fights the Xinli!" he groaned.

"So!" said Regor quietly. "So! And now do I see that though right was wrong, wrong has become right!"

He signaled Kon. The spider-man bent back Ranena's neck and snapped it.

"It was the only way!" Regor looked down into the glazing eyes, and turned to his Indians.

"You, and you"—he pointed in turn to six of them—"dress yourselves in their clothes. Notalu," he spoke to one of the Yu-Atlanchans, "strip Ranena, and change your yellow for his green. Then watch. Probably none will come, but if they do—slay them swiftly before they have chance to cry out. I will leave you two to the Weavers—you know how to command them. Kon goes with me. But first we must get rid of this carrion."

He clicked to Kon. The spider-man picked up the bodies and carried them into the corridor which Ranena had said led to the amphitheater. They laid the stiffening figures along its walls, out of sight of the guard room. They returned and two of them dropped behind the stone benches, hidden.

"Now let us see what can be done for Huon," said Regor. "Graydon, it may be that his life rests upon that loud-speaking weapon of yours!"

They stole down the corridor, past Ranena, glaring at them with dead eyes.

There was a blaze of sunlight, dazzling Graydon.

Squares of black danced in it. He heard the thunder of monstrous feet. His vision cleared. He stood before a door grated with heavy metal bars. He looked through it into the arena of the dinosaurs!

CHAPTER XV

THE ARENA OF THE DINOSAURS

THE floor of the arena was an immense oval about three hundred feet across, a half mile in length, and covered with smooth yellow sand. Around this oval ran a wall of polished, jade-green stone four times the height of a tall man. There were grated openings in it here and there, a few of them much larger than that through which Graydon peered. Beyond the wall, tier upon tier of stone seats stretched back to the amphitheater's rim a hundred and fifty feet high. Here gay banners streamed. Within the greater oval was a smaller one, made of a thick four-foot wall; the two made a track about fifty feet wide.

Almost directly opposite Graydon was a wide section thronged with the Yu-Atlanchans. Slender green-lacquered pillars arose from it, supporting silken awnings. It was like a gigantic flower garden with the gay and vivid hues of the women's garments blossoming out of the dominant green which evidently was Lantlu's chosen color.

Bordering this inclosure of the nobles was a double file of the green-kilted Emers bearing javelins and bows; then came a wide and empty area of the seats, another double file of the soldiers, and beyond them thousands of the Indians arrayed in holiday dress.

And beyond them stretched tier upon tier, untenanted—mute witnesses to the dwindling numbers of the ancient people.

In the curiously clear air, distances were foreshortened. At the very front he saw Lantlu, surrounded by a group of laughing nobles. Who was the woman beside him? Not Suarra—surely not Suarra!

Dorina!

Even as he recognized her, he heard Regor cursing, knew he, too, had seen her.

But Dorina was not laughing with the others. She sat, chin on clenched hands, looking somberly across the arena, staring straight at where they hid, as though—as though she watched them! Graydon drew back in hasty confusion.

"Will that weapon of yours reach her?" Regor's face was black with hate.

"Easily—but I'd rather try it on Lantlu," answered Graydon.

"No—neither of them. Not now." He shook his head, recovering his control. "It would bring us no closer to Huon. But that rotting daughter of a carrion eater, that *buala*—to come to watch him die!"

"Well, she doesn't seem very happy about it," said Graydon.

Regor groaned, began searching around the sides of the grating for its fastenings. "We must get this open," he grumbled. "Get Huon to us when they let him out. . . . Where's the cursed lock? Then we can run back to the tunnel and get away by that other door. . . . Better send Kon to carry him back. . . . No, Kon can run faster than any of us, but not faster than the arrows. . . . they'd fill him with them before he was halfway there. . . . No, we'll have to wait. . . . by the Seven. . . . ah, there it is!"

There was the sound of bolts slipping. He tried the door. It was open. Twice they locked and unlocked it, and to make further sure no time would be wasted on

it when the moment came, Graydon marked the pressure spots with the end of a cartridge.

There was a fanfare of trumpets. A grating below Lantlu swung open. Out of it hopped six of the riding Xinli. Tyrannosaurs, thunder-lizards dwarfed like those of the hunting packs, but not so greatly. Monstrous black shapes shining as though covered with armor of finely cut jet, their bodies were a little larger than heaviest draft horses, resembling overgrown Percherons.

Their thick tails, twice as long as their bodies, tapered to a point; the tails curved up, twitching restlessly. Their small reptilian heads turned nervously upon long, slender, snakelike necks. They bent forward upon hind legs heavy and cylindrical as those of an elephant. They held their small forelegs close to their breasts, like kangaroos—whose attitude when at rest that of these dinosaurs, in face, almost precisely simulated.

Where the slender neck ran into the sloping shoulders a rider sat. Each was clad in a different color, like a jockey. They were of the nobles, and despite their height they appeared small against the bulk of their steeds. They squatted upon little saddles, stirrups, holding reins which manipulated a massive bit. The monsters champed at these bits, hissing and grumbling, striking at each other with their absurdly small heads like spirited racers at the starting post, chafing to be gone.

THERE was another fanfare of the trumpets, and immediately upon it the thundering of the huge feet. The Xinli did not hop, they ran as a man runs, legs pumping up and down like pistons. Necks stretched rigidly ahead of them, they swept round the oval course. They passed Graydon in a bunch and with the speed of an express train. The wind from that passing rushed through the grating like a whirlwind. He shuddered, visualizing what would happen to a file of men trying to oppose those projectiles of sinew and bone—as well try to check the flight of meteors!

They passed the inclosure of the nobles like a rushing black cloud. From Yu-Atlanchans and Indians came a storm of cheering. And now, as they neared him again, Graydon saw that there was another phase to this racing of the dinosaurs.

They were no longer grouped. Two were in the lead, a rider in green and one in red. The green rider was trying to force the red over against the inner wall of the course. The four thundering

close behind seemed to be in *mêlée*, each jockeying to force another against the same low buttress. The boa-like necks of the Xinli writhed and twisted, the small heads darting at each other like striking snakes.

The rider in green suddenly lurched his mount against that of the red. The red rider made desperate effort to lift his monster over the barricade. It stumbled, went crashing down into the island. The rider went flying from it like a red ball from a tennis racket, struck the sand, rolled over and over and lay still.

The green rider drew ahead of the ruck; a rider in purple drew out of it and came thundering down upon him, striving to keep the other between himself and the low wall. A burst of cheering drowned the thunder of the Xinli's flying feet.

Again they rushed past, the green rider now two lengths ahead of the purple, the three remaining riders spread out in line close behind them. They charged by the stand of the nobles and, sliding in a cloud of the yellow sand, came to halt. There was a wilder burst of cheering. They padded back and he saw Lantlu toss a glittering circlet down to the green rider.

The monsters filed through the opening and out of sight. Soldiers came through it when they had disappeared, picked up the limp body of the red rider, and carried him away. One of them took up carelessly the reins of the dinosaur he had ridden and which had stood stupidly, head lowered, since its fall. He led it off like a horse through the gate. The gratings clanged.

There was another loud fanfare of the trumpets. A silence fell upon the arena. Another grating opened, close by the other.

Out of it walked Huon!

He carried a short sword and a javelin. upon his left arm was one of the little shields. He stood there for a moment, blinking in the dazzling sun. His eyes rested upon Dorina. Graydon saw her shrink, and hide her face in her hands—then lift her head and meet Huon's gaze defiantly.

He began to raise his javelin, slowly, slowly! Whatever was his thought, he had no chance to carry it into action. A grating not a hundred feet from him had swung softly open. Out upon the yellow sand sprang one of the dwarfed dinosaurs of the hunting packs.

While it stood there, motionless, glaring around, Graydon learned how much can pass through the mind in the time it takes to draw a single breath. He saw

Lantlu lean forward with ironic salute to the man Dorina had betrayed. He saw the fighting Xinli in every detail—the burnished scales of sapphire blue and emerald green that covered it gleaming like jewels; its forelegs, short and powerfully thewed; its talons like long curved chisels protruding from the flat hands; the vicious flailing tail; its white-fanged jaws; its eyes of flaming red set wide apart like a bird's on each side of the visored head.

Graydon's rifle was at his shoulder, the sights upon Lantlu. He hesitated—should he drop Lantlu or try for the dinosaur? In only one place was it vulnerable to a bullet, through one of those little red eyes. Wavering, he turned the sights upon it, drawing finest bead . . . no, better not risk that tiny target . . . back again to Lantlu. But he was leaning, half hidden behind Dorina, talking to one beside her . . . steady, steady till he swings back . . . ah, that was it. . . Hell, Regor's hand moved the grating, spoiled the aim. . . .

All in a breath this went racing through Graydon's mind. And then the dinosaur was rushing upon Huon! Regor was shaking his arm, pointing at the charging monster, beseeching him to shoot! Hell, there was no use in a wild shot . . . the bullet would ricochet off those scales like armor plate . . . better try Lantlu . . . what use would that be now? . . . Better wait a chance at the devilish brute. . . .

Huon leaped backward, out of the path of the dinosaur's rush. It whirled within its own length, sprang back at him with talons upraised to smite. It leaped. Huon dropped upon one knee, thrust upward with the javelin at the unprotected spot in its throat. The javelin struck, but not deeply enough to slay. The shaft snapped close to the hilt.

The dinosaur hissed, pivoted in mid-leap, and dropped to its feet a few yards away. It felt of its throat with oddly human gesture, then began to circle Huon warily, flexing the muscles of its arms like a shadow-boxer. Huon kept facing it, broken javelin shifted to his left hand, sword in the other, shield on left arm and close to his breast.

"Huon! I'm coming! Hold fast!"

Shouting, Regor rushed by Graydon and out over the sand. His cry shattered the silence that, except for the hissing of the dinosaur, had hung over the arena. A deeper silence, one of sheer stupefaction, followed. Huon stared at the running figure. The dinosaur turned its head, scanning it. The sun fell straight upon one of the crimson eyes. It stood out

against the skull like a small bull's-eye of fire. Graydon drew sight on that red target and shot.

The crack of the rifle echoed over the arena. The dinosaur sprang high, somersaulted, and hopped staggering over the sand, clawing at its head. From the crowded tiers arose a great sigh like the first sigh of a tempest, a surging of bodies. Past Graydon, clicking violently, raced Kon in Regor's wake.

He raised the rifle upon Lantlu, and saw him drop behind the protecting wall as though something had whispered warning!

DORINA sat motionless, looking down at Huon. She was, thought Graydon, like one who knew her weird was upon her, and must be freed.

He saw that Regor was half across the arena, Kon scuttling beside him. Saw Huon, looking not once again behind him, eyes fixed on the woman, step a pace nearer the wall.

He hurled his broken javelin. There was a flash of light as it sped. The light was quenched in Dorina's breast!

Silence again for another long moment. And then the whole amphitheater roared. A shower of arrows sped past Regor, caught Huon in an arm, and came racing back. Graydon emptied his rifle into the line of archers, saw bodies fall, the storm of arrows abruptly cease.

The trumpets sounded, peremptorily. Through the opened gratings and down over the wall streamed the green-kilted Emers. Closer to them, from each side ran others emerging from the nearer openings. Kon was close, Regor drawing near. Graydon, burning with desire for just one machine gun, again emptied the rifle, into those who menaced them from the sides. They halted. The frenzied dinosaur raised its head, came charging with great leaps down upon the line of soldiers pursuing Regor. They broke, and scattered.

Now Kon and Huon were in, and now Regor. The giant swung shut the heavy doors and set the bars. The dinosaur hurled himself against them, tearing at them with its steel-like claws, dripping yellowish blood from a skull shattered by Graydon's bullet.

"You're damned hard to kill!" he muttered, and raised the rifle for another close, certain shot at the unhurt eye.

"No!" panted Regor, and caught his arm. "It will hold that door for us."

Huon, dropped upon his feet by the spider-man, stood like an automaton, head bent. And suddenly deep sobs shook him.

"It's all right now, Huon—it's all right now!" comforted the giant gruffly.

He said nothing to Graydon, only took his hands and squeezed them with paralyzing grip.

An arrow flew past the dinosaur, through the grating, barely missing Graydon, then another and another. He heard the blaring of many trumpets, angry, summoning.

"Best move quickly!" grunted Regor. Arm around Huon, he strode back through the corridor, Graydon at his heels, the little hands of Kon patting him approvingly as they went.

The others pressed close behind. They passed the dead Ranena, and came to the guard chamber. Huon, at sight of the green-clad garrison, became himself once more, drew sword and would have rushed on them had not Regor held him back, explaining they were loyal men in disguise.

They opened the secret door through which they had entered that place, and closed it with the clatter of pursuing feet already near. And in the little crypt, Kon sought and found the means of unlocking the passage beneath the left-hand oval stone.

Huon spoke to Graydon for the first time, took his hands.

"I thank you, Graydon—but less for my life than for the chance you gave me to deal justice on one whose treason betrayed also those who trusted me. I told you that not again would we meet within the lair. And now, I think, the night draws close to me—eternal night for me, Graydon—I do not care greatly. But it may be the dawn for you—and for Suarra."

They closed that last portal. They set off in silence down the corridor into which it had opened, toward the haven of the Temple—and the Snake Mother.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SNAKE MOTHER

THEY were not long within that corridor. They went silently. Regor's arm around Huon's shoulders. The five Fellowship men had passed the Weavers, and marched with drawn swords behind their chief. The Indians followed Graydon. Whenever he turned, he found their eyes upon him filled with awe-tinged respect—as though they now regarded him as their leader. Also, the one who had carried his rifle had plainly become a personage, stepping proudly ahead of his fellows almost on Graydon's heels. They came to the end of the passage, opened without difficulty its entrance.

They stepped out of it, not into the place of the Weavers, but into the columned hall of Graydon's dream!

The beams of dim azure light played down from its soaring, vaulted roof like the lanced rays of the aurora. Mistily radiant, they curtained a spacious alcove raised high above the tessellated, opaling pave. Behind their diaphanous veil Graydon saw a sapphire throne, and lesser thrones of red, golden and black at its base of milky crystal—the seats of the Seven Lords.

A girl stood there, just beyond the top of a broad flight of steps dropping from the alcove, a girl with white hands clasped tightly to her breast, red lips parted in wonder, soft black eyes staring at him, Graydon thought, incredulously—

"Graydon!" she cried, and took a swift step toward him.

"Suarra!" That warning voice was hissing, tinglingly pure, in it the trilling of birds. A pillar of shimmering mother-of-pearl shot up behind the girl; over her shoulder peered a face, heart-shaped, coiffed with hair like spun silver, purple-eyed—

The Snake Mother!

"Let us see who are these visitors who come so unceremoniously in the train of your man," she lisped, "and by a way I thought surely none now in Yu-Atlanchi knew!"

She raised a little hand, in it a sistrum within whose loop, instead of bars, a glistening globule danced like quick-silver.

Regor stifled an exclamation and dropped upon his knees, the others hastily following suit with the exception of the spider-men who stood quietly watching. Graydon hesitated, then also knelt.

"Ah, so you have remembered your manners!" There was faint mockery in the tinkling voice. "Come nearer! By my ancestors—it is Regor—and Huon... and since when did you don Lantlu's green, Notalu? It is long since *you* bent the knee to me, Regor!"

"That is not *my* fault, Mother!" roared Regor indignantly. "Now that is not just—"

A trilling of laughter silenced him.

"Hot-tempered as ever, Regor," laughed the Snake Mother. "Well, for a time at least, you shall have much practice in that neglected duty. You, too, Huon, and the balance of you—"

Graydon heard the giant groan with relief, saw his scarred face light up; his bellow interrupted her.

"Homage to Adana! We are her men

now!" He bent until his bandaged brow touched the floor.

"Yes!" said the Mother softly. "But for how long—ah, that even I cannot tell..."

She dropped the hand that held the quivering globe, bent farther over Suarra's shoulder, beckoned to Graydon: "Come up to me! And do you shut that door behind you, Regor."

Graydon walked to the alcove, mounted the steps, his fascinated eyes upon the purple ones fixed upon him so searchingly. And he drew close, the serpent-woman moved from behind the girl, interposing the shimmering pillar from which sprang her childish body between him and Suarra. And he felt again that curious, deepseated throb of love for this strange being—like a harpstring in his heart which none but she could pluck. He knelt once more and kissed the tiny hand held out to him. He looked up at her face, and it was tender, all age-old weariness gone, the eyes soft and languorous.

"You have been well brought up, child," she murmured. "Nay, daughter"—she glanced at Suarra, mischievously—"be not jealous! It is only my years to which he does reverence."

"Mother Adana!" began Suarra, indignantly as had Regor, her face burning.

"Oh, go over there and talk, you babes!" The scarlet, heart-shaped lips were smiling. "You have much to say to each other. Sit on one of the golden thrones, if you like, Graydon. Somewhere I think I have heard that to your people it is the symbol of journey's end. Suarra, child, I am well content with this man of yours! Now run away—Regor shall tell me what has happened."

She took their hands and joined them, bent and kissed them on their foreheads, gave them a little push with her tiny palms.

"Regor!" she called. "Come to me!"

SWINGING his bar, marching jauntily, Regor approached. Suarra drew Graydon back to a nest of cushions at the rear of the alcove. He watched the giant mount beside the serpent-woman, saw her sink back upon her cushions, bend her head to him, listening. Then he forgot them entirely, absorbed in Suarra, overflowing with concern for him, and curiosity.

"What did happen. Graydon?" Her soft arm slipped around his neck. "We had gone quickly, and were close to the cataract. It is very noisy, but I thought I heard your—r-r-rifle. I hesitated, thinking to return. But there was no further sound, so I went on. And Regor

and the others—how did they get their wounds?"

"Lantlu sacked the lair. Huon was betrayed by Dorina. Lantlu took Huon and matched him against one of his cursed Xinli. We rescued him. Huon killed Dorina," he told her, staccato.

"Dorina betrayed him? He killed her?" Her eyes widened.

"She was an aunt of yours, in some way, wasn't she?" he asked.

"Oh, I suppose so—in a way—long, long ago," she answered.

And suddenly he determined to settle once and for all that question which had been tormenting him—damn it, he'd find out if she was one of these "deathless ones," or just the normal girl she seemed! If she was like the rest of them, then he'd have to accept the fact that he loved a girl old enough to be his great-grandmother, maybe—if she wasn't, then he didn't give a damn about all the rest of the puzzles.

"See here, Suarra," he demanded, "how old are you?"

"Why, Graydon, I'm twenty," she answered wonderingly.

"I know," he said, "but do you mean you're twenty, or that you were twenty the Mother alone knows how many years ago when you closed those infernal Gates, whatever they may be, on yourself?"

"But, beloved," said Suarra, "why are you so disturbed? I've never gone into the Chamber of the Gates! Mother Adana would not have let me even if I had desired. I'm really twenty—I mean not *staying* twenty, but getting older every year."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Graydon fervently, a load rolling from his mind. "Now after the good news, comes the bad. Lantlu and most of Yu-Atlanchi, I gather, are out hunting for us at this very moment."

"Oh, but that doesn't matter," said Suarra, "now that the Mother had accepted you."

Graydon had his doubts about the accuracy of that, but he did not trouble her with them.

"Much happened between the Frog-woman's cavern and here, darling," he told her. "I'll begin at the beginning—"

"Graydon," interrupted Suarra, "tell me first what does 'darling' mean?"

"Easy," said Graydon, "it means this." He kissed her.

"It's a nice word," murmured Suarra, demurely. "I hope you say it often—no, no, tell me what happened!"

He began the tale of his adventures. He had not got far when he heard a

hissing exclamation from the serpent-woman. She had raised herself upon her coils until a foot above tall Regor's head. Her eyes were intent, as though she looked beyond the walls. She dropped back upon her coils, the rosy pearl of her body slowly deepening. She beckoned to Huon.

"To me, Huon! Your men with you—and the Emers. Kon, also, and the Weavers—take places there—" She pointed to the opposite side of the alcove.

"She is angry! She is very angry!" whispered Suarra.

"Graydon," the serpent-woman's eyes were glittering hard as jewels, "come—stand beside me, with Regor. Suarra—go to your rooms." Then, as the girl faltered: "Nay, come stand behind me, child. If he has dared this—best for you to be near me."

She was silent, listening; wonderingly they obeyed her. Huon and his motley band climbed the steps, ranked themselves where she had bade them.

Graydon heard a faint, far-away clamor, shouts and the ring of metal upon metal. The tumult drew close. Questing for its source, he saw at a distant end of the columned place a broad entrance over which the cobweb curtains fell. Abruptly these were torn apart, ripped away, and through the opening poured blue-kirtled Emer soldiers, fighting to check some inexorable pressure slowly forcing them back.

Then over them he saw the head of Lantlu, and behind and around him a hundred or more of his nobles.

They made their way through the portal. The Emers fought desperately, but gave way, step by step, before the push of long javelins in the hands of those who drove them. None fell, and Graydon realized that their assailants were deliberately holding back their hands from killing, striving only to break through

"Stop!" The cry of the Snake Mother had in it something of the elfin buglings of her winged Messengers, the flying, feathered serpents. It halted the struggling ranks.

"Dura!" she called, and an officer of the blue-kilted Emers faced her, saluting. "Let them through! Escort them to me!"

The guards drew aside, formed into two lines; between them Lantlu and his followers marched to the foot of the steps. He smiled evilly as he beheld Graydon, his eyes glinted triumphantly as they roved from Regor to Huon and his band.

"All here, Mural," he spoke to a noble beside him whose face was beautiful and

cruel as his. "I had not hoped for such luck!"

He made an ironic obeisance to the serpent-woman.

"Hail, Mother!" Rank insolence steeped the greeting. "We ask your pardon for our rough entrance, but your guards have evidently forgotten the right of the Old Race to do you homage—" Again he half-bent a mocking knee. "We knew that you would punish them for their forgetfulness, so we did them no harm. And it seems we have come barely in time to save you, Mother, since we find you beset by dangerous men, outlaws whom we have been seeking. Also that outlander whose life was forfeit when he entered Yu-Atlanchi. Evil men, Mother! We will lift their menace from you!"

HE WHISPERED to Bural, took a swaggering step up the stairway. Up came the javelins of the nobles, ready to hurl, as they followed him. Graydon threw his rifle to his shoulder, finger itching on the trigger. Under stress, he reverted unconsciously to his English.

"Stop! One step more and I'll blow your rotten heart out of you! Tell your companions to drop those javelins!"

"Silence!" the Mother touched his arm with the sistrum, a little numbing shock ran through it, and the gun fell at his feet.

"He said you would be safer where you are, Lantlu. Safer still with your javelins lowered. He is right, Lantlu—I, Adana, tell you so!" lisped the Snake Mother.

Her body shot up another foot, she raised the sistrum high. Lantlu stared at the quivering globe, a shade of doubt on his face. But he halted, spoke softly to Bural, and the javelins were lowered.

The body of the serpent-woman swayed slightly, rhythmically, to and fro, upon the upper pillar of her coils.

"By what right do you demand these men, Lantlu?"

"By what right! By what right?" he looked at her with malicious, assumed incredulity. "Mother Adana! Do you grow old—or forgetful like your guards? We demand them because they have broken the law of Yu-Atlanchi, because they have been condemned, because they are outlaws, wolf-heads, to be taken where and how it may be. By right of the old law, Mother, with which, by virtue of a certain pact between your ancestors and mine, you may not interfere. Or if you do—then, Mother, we must save your honor for you, and take them nevertheless. And if this be not right enough, then our javelins are! Bural—if the outlander stoops to pick up his weapon, skewer him! If one of those outlaws moves toward his, let the javelins loose! Are you answered, Mother?"

"You shall not have them," said the serpent-woman serenely, but the pillar of her body swayed in slowly widening arcs, her neck arched, thrusting her head forward—like—like a serpent poisoning to strike!

Suarra slipped from behind her, thrust her arm through Graydon's, looked at Lantlu with scornful, fearless eyes. His face blackened, his lips drew back over his teeth.

"So!" he said. "Suarra! With your lover! Your people howl for you, you wench of the Urd! Well—soon they shall have you!"

Red light flashed before Graydon's eyes, there was a singing in his ears. Hot hatred for this arrogant, beautiful devil—damned up since Lantlu had taunted him in the shrine of the Shadow, swept him. Before the Snake Mother could stay him, he had leaped down the steps, shot a hard fist squarely into the sneering face. He felt the nose crunch under the blow. Lantlu tottered, staggered back. He recovered his poise with cat-like quickness, made a silent, panther-like rush at Graydon, arms flexed to grip him.

Before his followers could move to help him, Graydon had ducked under the clutching arms, driven two upward blows into the bloody face, the second squarely upon the snarling mouth. And again he felt the bone give. Lantlu reeled back senseless into the arms of Bural.

"Graydon! Come to me!" The Snake Mother's cry was not to be disobeyed.

He walked slowly back up the steps, head turned on the watching nobles. They made no move to stop him. Half-way up, he saw Lantlu open his eyes, break away from Bural's hold, and glare uncomprehendingly about him. Graydon halted, fierce elation filling him, and again, unknowing, he spoke in his own language.

"That'll spoil some of your beauty, Lantlu!" he called.

The bloody mask of Lantlu glared up at him, vacantly; he wiped a hand over his mouth, looked at its scarlet wetness stupidly.

"He says your women will find it difficult to admire your face hereafter," trilled the serpent-woman. "Again he is right!"

Graydon looked at her. The little hand holding the sistrum was clenched so tightly that the knuckles shone white, her red forked tongue flickered upon her lips, her eyes were very bright—the Mother, he thought, might be angry with him, but she appeared to be uncommonly enjoying the sight of Lantlu's battered countenance. He had seen women at the prize ring watch with precisely that expression the successful mauling progress of their favorite. He drew up beside her nursing his bruised knuckles.

And now Lantlu was shrieking curses, trying to break from the hands of his men who were holding him. Graydon rather admired him at that moment . . . certainly the brute had courage . . . quite a hog for punishment. . . .

"Graydon!" murmured Suarra, caressing the swelling hand. "Beloved—you are wonderful!" She looked at him with eyes of adoration.

"Lantlu!" the Snake Mother raised herself until her head swayed a man's full height over them, her eyes were cold purple gems, her face like stone. "Lantlu—look at me!"

She lifted the sistrum. The globe stopped its quicksilver quivering, and out of it sprang a ray of silvery light that flashed on Lantlu's forehead. Instantly he ceased his struggling, grew rigid, raised his face to her. The silvery ray flashed upon the faces of his followers, and they, too, stiffened into men of wood, silent.

"Lantlu! Carrion carrier for Nimir! Listen to me! You have defiled the Temple, first of all the Old Race to do that Sacrilege! By violence you have forced your way to me, Adana, of the Older Race who fed your forefathers with the fruit of our wisdom! Who made you into men! You have mocked me! You have dared to raise armed hands against me! Now do I declare the ancient pact between my people and yours broken—broken by you, Lantlu! Now do I, Adana, declare you outlaw, and outlaws all those with you! And outlaws shall be all who hereafter throw their lot with yours! I cast you out!

"Go to your whispering Shadow, tell it what has befallen you! Go to your Dark Master, Lantlu, and beg him to make you whole again, restore your beauty!

"He cannot—not he, whose craft now has grown so weak that he cannot find himself a body! But let this comfort you, tempted as he may have been, he will not now try to hide behind that face of yours! And tell him that I, who worsted him long time ago, I, Adana, who prisoned him in the stone, am awake, and on guard, and will meet him once again when the hour has struck—aye, and worst him again! Aye, utterly destroy him! Go, you beast lower than the Urd—go!"

She pointed with the sistrum to the tattered curtains. And Lantlu, head swaying in weird mimicry of hers, turned stiffly, and paced away. Behind him, heads swaying like his, went his nobles. With the blue-kirtled soldiers herding them, they passed from sight.

THE Snake Mother's body ceased its movement, the pillared coil dropped, she rested her little pointed chin on Suarra's shoulder. Her purple eyes, no longer cold or glittering, weighed Graydon quizzically.

"As the brutes fight!" she mused. "I think there must be something human in me after all—so to enjoy those blows and the sight of Lantlu's face! Graydon, for the first time in ages, you have lifted all boredom and ennui from me!"

She paused, smiling at him.

"I should have slain him," she said. "It would have saved much trouble. And many lives—maybe. But then he would have had no time to mourn his vanished beauty—nor eat his vain heart out over it. No, oh no—I could not relinquish that, not even for many lives! Augh-h-h!" she yawned. "And for the first time in ages, I am sleepy! Suarra!"

Suarra leaned against the side of the

alcove. A golden bell sounded a mellow tone. A door opened and through it came four comely Indian women, carrying a cushioned litter. They set it beside the serpent-woman, stood waiting, arms crossed on brown breasts, heads bowed. Adana swayed toward it, stopped.

"Suarra," she said, "see that Regor and Huon and the others are shown to their quarters, and that they are properly cared for. Graydon, wait here with me."

They knelt to her once more, then followed Suarra through the opened portal.

Graydon stood there with the Mother, studying her. She did not speak, was deep in thought. At last she looked at him.

"That was a boasting message I sent to Nimlr," she said. "I am not so sure of the outcome, my Graydon, as I seemed to be. Still—it will give that creeping Evil something to think of besides his deviltries!"

She was silent until Suarra returned. Then she slipped off her nest, thrust her body into the litter and slowly drew her shimmering coils after her. She lay for a moment, chin cupped in her tiny hands, looking at them.

"Kiss him good night, daughter," she said. "He shall rest well, and safely."

Shyly, Suarra raised her lips to his.

"Come here, Graydon," laughed Adana, and when he was close, she put her hands on each side of his face, and kissed him, too.

"What abysses between us!" She shook her head. "And yet, bridged by three blows to a man I hate—yes, daughter, I have a woman's feelings, after all!"

The women picked up the litter, Suarra beside her, they moved away. From the entrance came two blue-kilted Emers, who with low bows, invited him to follow them. The Mother waved a tiny hand at him, Suarra blew a kiss. They were gone.

Graydon followed the Indians. As he passed the red throne he saw a figure within it—a shrunken figure all in tasseled robe of red and yellow.

The Lord of Fools looked at him with irresistibly twinkling, youthful eyes, reached out a long white hand and touched him on the forehead. At the touch, Graydon felt all perplexities leave him; in their place a careless gaiety, a comfortable feeling that despite appearances, things were always perfectly all right in a world that sometimes seemed perfectly all wrong. He laughed back into the twinkling eyes.

"Welcome—son!" chuckled the Lord of Fools.

One of the Indians touched him upon

the arm. When he glanced back at the red throne, it was empty—the Lord of Fools had gone as mysteriously as he had come.

He followed the Indians through the portal. They led him to a room, dimly lighted, cobweb curtained, a wide couch in its center. There was a small ivory table on which were bread and fruit and a pale mild wine. As he ate, the Indians took from him his suit-of-mail, stripped him to the skin. They brought in a huge basin of crystal, bathed him, and massaged him and rubbed him with oil. They drew a silken robe around him, and put him to bed.

"Welcome—son!" muttered Graydon, sleepily. "Son? Now what did he mean by that?"

Still wondering, he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVII

WISDOM OF THE SERPENT MOTHER

IT WAS mid-morning of the next day when an Emer came to Graydon with a summons from the Snake Mother. He had awakened to find Regor and Huon watching him from the doorway. Regor still wore his black, but Huon had traded the yellow of the Fellowship for the serpent woman's blue.

As Graydon arose he found on a settle beside the bed a similar costume. He put on the long, loose blouse, the somewhat tight hose and the heelless, half-length boots of soft leather. They fitted him so well that he wondered whether some one had come in during the night and measured him. There was a circlet of gold upon the settle, but he let it be.

After a moment's hesitation he thrust his automatic into the inner fold of his wide girdle. A blue silken cloak, fastened at the shoulders with loops of gold, completed his dress. He felt rather self-conscious in it, as though he were going to a costume party—something he had always loathed; but there was nothing else to wear, his suit-of-mail had vanished and his other clothing was in the ravished lair of Huon.

He breakfasted with the pair. Huon, he saw, was taking matters badly, his beauty grown haggard, his eyes unhappy. Also, much of Regor's buoyance had fled, whether through sympathy for Huon or for some other reason he did not know.

Neither of them made slightest reference to his flight with Lantlu, and that aroused in him a piqued curiosity. Once he had led the talk close to it, and Huon had glanced at him with a flash of irritated distaste; Regor had given him an admonitory kick under the table. He

wondered whether Huon resented the humiliation of one of his race by an outlander, despite Lantlu's villainy. Well, the serpent woman certainly hadn't—nor had Suarra!

He did not find it a very pleasant meal, but he had been enlightened as to Huon's manner. When it was ended, Regor and Huon had started to go out. Graydon would have accompanied them, but the giant told him gruffly that he would better stay where he was, that the Mother was sure to send for him, that she had turned over all her soldiery to Huon and himself and that they would be busy drilling them. But in a few moments he returned, alone.

"You did well, lad!" he grumbled, slapping Graydon's shoulder. "Don't mind Huon. You see, we don't fight each other in just the way you did. It's the way of the Urd. I told Huon that you're not supposed to know our customs, but—well, he didn't like it. Besides, he's heartbroken about the destruction of the Fellowship, and Dorina's treachery."

"You can tell Huon to go to the devil with his customs." Graydon was hurt and angry. "When it comes to a brute like Lantlu I fight tooth and nail, and no holds barred. Now I see why Lantlu beat him. He was on the job while Huon was probably considering how to say it to him with flowers!"

"So much of that was in your own tongue that I find it hard to understand," grinned Regor, "but I get your meaning. You may be right—but Huon is Huon! Don't worry. He'll be over it when you meet him again."

"I don't give a damn whether he is or not—" began Graydon, furiously. Regor gave him another friendly slap, and walked out.

Still hotly indignant, Graydon dropped upon a settle and prepared to await the expected summons. The walls of the room were covered with the filmy curtains, dropping from ceiling to floor. He got up and walked around them, feeling through the webs. At one spot his hand encountered no resistance. He parted them and stepped into another room, flooded with clear daylight from a balconied window. He walked out on the balcony. Beneath him lay Yu-Atlanchi.

The room was at the front of the Temple. It was high above the city, the ground falling away from it in a gentle slope. Between the lake and the Temple the slope was like a meadow, free of all trees, and blue as though carpeted with harebells. He thought that in the olden days that meadow had probably held thousands, gathered for ancient rites.

Up from the meadow the great stairs climbed, a hundred feet wide and full a thousand from bottom to top. He looked at the terraces. There were three of them, each as broad as the steps, their walls some twenty feet in height, and they were bordered by parapets, thick and about up to a tall man's breast.

The shore of the lake was nearer than he had judged, not more than half a mile wide at this point. He could see the spume of the cataract torn into tattered banners by the wind.

The caverns of the colossi were like immense eyes in the brown face of the precipice. The figure of the Frog-woman was plain, the green stone of which she was carved standing out in relief against the ochreous rock; and there was the white, exquisite shape which guarded the cavern of the dead. There was another colossus, cut, it seemed, from rose-quartz, shrouded to the feet, its face hidden behind an uplifted arm; and there was a cyclopean statue of one of the gray and hairless apes. These stood out clearly; the outlines of the others he could not distinguish, for their color merged into that of the cliffs. The caverns were spaced irregularly; he wondered where the entrance to that of the Lost Wisdom had been. There was no trace.

At his left, the meadow changed to a level plain, sparsely wooded, running for miles into the first wave of the forest, and checkered by the little farms of the Indians. At his right was the ancient city, and now seen so closely, less like a city than a park.

WHERE the city halted at the edge of the Temple's flowering meadow, and halfway to the lake, was a singular structure. It was all of three hundred feet in height, its length a little less than that of the arena of the dinosaurs. It was shaped like a shell whose base had been buried to hold it upright; its sides curved gracefully, drawing closer in two broad, descending arcs, then flaring out to form an entrance. It faced the Temple, and from where he stood Graydon could see practically all inside.

This shell-like building was made of some opaline stone. Here and there within it glowed patches of peacock fires of the Mexican opal's matrix, and here and there were starry points of blue like those which shine from the black opal. The reflected rays from them appeared to meet in the center of the structure, stretching across it like a nebulous curtain. And like a shell, its surface was fluted. The grooves were cut across by tier upon tier of seats.

He looked again over the city. If Lantlu were preparing attack, there was no evidence of it there. Along the broad avenue skirting the lakes was tranquil movement, Indians going about their business, the glint of jeweled litters borne on the shoulders of others; a small fleet of boats with gayly colored sails, resembling feluccas, skimmed over the water.

There was no marching of armed men, no sign of excitement. He watched laden llamas swinging along, and smaller deer-like animals grazing. The flowering trees and shrubs hid the lanes threading the grounds of the palaces.

Then he was summoned to the serpent-woman.

Graydon followed the messenger through a wide corridor sheathed with squares of silver each bearing a ten-pointed star of blue enamel. They paused before a curtained recess, the Indian touched a golden bell set in the wall. The hangings parted.

He was on the threshold of a roomy chamber through whose high, oval windows the sunlight streamed. Tapestries covered its walls, woven with scenes from the life of the serpent-people. Upon a low dais, her coils curled within a nest of many-colored cushions, was the Snake Mother.

Behind her was Suarra, brushing her hair.

The sun had made round it a halo of silver. At her side squatted the Lord of Fools in his cloak of red and yellow. Suarra's eyes brightened as he entered, dwelling upon him tenderly. He made obeisance to Adana, bowed low to the Lord in motley.

"You look well in my blue, Graydon," hissed the serpent-woman. "You haven't the beauty of the Old Race, naturally. But Suarra doesn't mind that." She glanced slyly at the girl.

"I think him very beautiful," said Suarra, quite shamelessly.

"Well, I myself find him interesting," trilled Adana. "After all these centuries, the men of Yu-Atlanchi have become a bit monotonous. Come and sit beside me, child." She motioned toward a long, low coffer close to her. "Take a pillow or two and be comfortable. Now tell me about your world. Don't bother about your wars or gods—they've been the same for a hundred thousand years. Tell me how you live, how you amuse yourselves, what your cities are like, how you get about, what you have learned."

Graydon felt this to be a rather large order, but he did his best. He ended almost an hour later, feeling that he had made a frightful jumble of sky-

scrapers and motion pictures, railroads and steamships, hospitals, radios, electricity and airplanes, newspapers and television, astronomy, art and telephones, germs, high explosives and arc lights. He tripped on the electronic theory, bogged hopelessly on relativity, gulped, and wiped a wet forehead. Also he had been unable to find Aymaran words to describe many things, had been forced to use the English terms.

But Adana had seemed to follow him easily, interrupting him seldom and then only with extremely pointed questions. Suarra, he was sure, had been left hopelessly behind; he was equally sure that the Lord of Fools had kept pace with him. The serpent-woman had seemed a little startled by the airplanes and television, much interested in the skyscrapers, telephones, high explosives and electric lighting.

"A very clear picture," she said. "And truly amazing progress for—a hundred years, I think you said, Graydon. Soon, I should think, you would do away with some of your crudities—learn to produce light from the stone, as we did, and by releasing it from air.

"I am truly concerned about your flying machines, much concerned. If Nimir wins, they may soar over Yu-Atlanchi and welcome! If he does not, then I shall have to devise means to discourage any such visits.

"Truly, I am not so enamored with your civilization as you describe it, to wish it extended here. For one thing, I think you are building too rapidly outside yourselves, and too slowly inside.

"Thought, my child, is quite a powerful a force as any you have named, and better controlled, since you generate it within yourself. You seem never to consider it objectively. Some day you will find yourselves so far buried within your machines that you will not be able to find a way out—or you will discover yourself being carried helplessly away by them. But then I suppose you believe you have within you an immortal something which, when the time comes, can float out of anything into a perfect other world?"

"Many do," he answered. "I never did. But I find my disbelief shaken since I came here—once by a certain dream I had while I slept beside a stream, and later found was no dream; but true vision; and again by a whispering shadow. If there is not something to man besides body, then what was it of me which was drawn from my body—to where was it drawn? And what is it of Nimir that still lives?"

"DID you think it was that immortal part of me which you saw in the Cavern of the Face—yes, child, Suarra told me you confessed to her; I never would have. Did you think that—really?" She leaned forward, smiling. "But that is too childish, Graydon. Surely my ethereal essence, if I have one, is not a mere shadowy duplication! Such a wonderful thing should be at least twice as beautiful! And different—oh, surely different! I am a woman, Graydon, and I would dearly like to try a few new fashions in appearance!"

She laughed, then grew grave.

"No, no! It was my *thought* that touched you beside the brook, my *thought* that narrowed the space between us—precisely as your harnessed force penetrates all obstacles and carries to you a distant picture. Nothing of you rushed from your body at my call, Graydon. I saw you there, but it pleased me to let you see me as well. So it was that I watched Lantlu march into the Temple. Once we of the Older Race could send the seeing thought around the world, even as you are doing with your machines. But I have used that power so little, for long and long and long again, that now I can barely send it beyond the frontiers of Yu-Atlanchi.

"And as for Nimir—he was master of strange arts. A pioneer, in a fashion. What it is that by those arts he kept alive, tenuous yet strongly knitted, bodiless yet himself—what it is, I can guess, but do not know. Nor how he has strengthened it into the Shadow they call the Dark One. But I do not believe it is his immortal—what do you name it. Graydon?—soul? Not his soul! Else by an equally curious art, which in truth was not calculation but mainly a fortunate chance, we would not have been able to have imprisoned it. Nor would it be so weak—for compared to that which was living Nimir, it is weak! Nor would it have forgotten so much.

"No, that which you saw as a whispering shadow is thought, an emanation coming from that disembodied intelligence fettered in the Face—as that image of myself which held you back from him came from me. I do not say, child, that there is not something within us more than blood and muscle, nerve and bone. There may be. I only say that *if* it exists, I, Adana, with all my ancient wisdom, do not know it."

She was silent for a moment; then: "But the seeing thought, I do know. I will show you, Graydon—will send my sight into that place where you saw the ship, and yours shall accompany it."

She pressed her palm against his forehead, held it there. He had the sensation of whirling across the lake and through the cliffs, the same vertiginous feeling he had experienced when he had thought he stood, bodiless, within the Temple. And now he seemed to halt beside the hull of the ship in the dim cavern. He looked over its enigmatic shapes. And as swiftly he was back in Adana's chamber.

"You see!" she said; "nothing of *you* went forth. Your sight was lengthened—that was all."

She picked up a silver mirror, gazed at herself complacently.

"That is fine, daughter!" she said. "Now coil it for me."

She preened herself before the mirror, set it down.

"Graydon, you have aroused old thoughts. Often I have asked, 'What is it that is I, Adana?' I never found the answer. None of my ancestors have ever returned to tell me, not any of the Old Race. Now is it not strange, if there be another life beyond this one, that not love nor sorrow, wit nor strength nor compassion has ever bridged the gap between them?

"Think of the countless millions who have died since man became man, among them seekers of far horizons who had challenged unknown perils to bring back tidings of distant shores, great adventurers, ingenious in artifice; and men of wisdom who had sought truth not selfishly but to spread it among their kind; men and women who have loved so greatly that surely it seems they could break through any barrier, return, and say: 'Behold, I am! Now grieve no more!'

"Fervent priests whose fires of faith had shone like beacons to their flocks—have they come back to say: 'See! It was truth I told you! Doubt no more!' Compassionate men, lighteners of burdens, prelates of pity—why have they not reappeared, crying: 'There is no death!' There has come no word from them! Why are they silent?

"Yet that proves nothing. Would that it did—for then we would be rid of sometimes troublesome thoughts. But it does not, for look you, Graydon, we march beside our sun among an army of other stars, many it must be with their own circling worlds. Beyond this universe are other armies of suns, marching like ours through space. Earth cannot be the only place in all these universes upon which is life. And if time exists—then it must stretch backward as well as forward into infinitude. Yet in all illimitable time no ship from any other world has

cast anchor upon ours, no argosy has sailed between the stars bearing tidings that life is elsewhere.

"What more real evidence have we that life exists among these visible universes than that it persists in some mysterious, invisible land whose only gateway is death? None! But your men of wisdom who deny the one because no one has returned from it will not deny the other, though no one has come to us from the star strands. They will say that they do not know—well, neither do they know the other!

"And yet—if there be what you name the soul, whence does it come, and when, how planted in these bodies of ours? Did the ape-like creatures from which you grew have them? Did the first of your ancestors who crawled on four pads out of the waters have them? When did the soul first appear? Is it man's alone?"

"Time streams like a mighty river, placid, unhurried," said the Lord of Fools. "Across it is a rift from which bubbles rise. It is life! Some float a little longer than the others. Some are large and some small. The bubbles rise and burst, rise and burst! Bursting, do they release some immortal essence? Who knows—who knows?"

The serpent-woman looked at herself

again admiringly in the silver mirror.

"Well, I do not, for one," she said practically. "Suarra, child, you've done my hair splendidly. And enough of speculation, Graydon. What we are chiefly concerned about, O Tyddo, Lord of Fools, is to keep Nimir and Lantlu from bursting those bubbles which are ourselves! Well, then—Lantlu will not move against me until after the Feast of the Dream Makers. For one thing, he nurses his hurts. For another, in his arrogance, he did not expect me to resist him as I did, certainly not to declare war upon him so soon. He must prepare, consult with the Shadow, muster his forces—all of which need time. Also Nimir is not eager to move upon me before he finds body. They think me too weak to take the offensive. Nor will I, unless forced, since it is my hope that by my message to him through Lantlu, Nimir now will make even stronger effort to incarnate. If he does, then what he thinks his strength will be his weakness. Embodied, he again becomes vulnerable to me.

"Graydon, this is the deadlock between us—as Shadow, Nimir cannot move at will where he desires nor strike at me save through his creatures, nor use without material hands to manipulate them certain things of power. He would not

dare trust Lantlu with them for fear he would use them for himself, wreck all Yu-Atlanchi, deprive Nimir of them forever! As for me—I cannot harm him while he remains Shadow! Nor can I oust him from the dungeon in which we sealed him. I can strike only at his creatures.

"So! Now there is one thing I fear—that Nimir will fasten his mind upon those things of power which are within the cavern of the ship; even though bodiless, that he will find in his desperation some way of entering it and getting them. Therefore, Graydon and Suarra, you shall go there tonight, taking with you fifty of the Emers to carry back to me what I want from it. After that, there is another thing you must do there, and then return speedily. Graydon, arise from that coffer."

HE OBEYED. The serpent-woman bent, snapped a spring and the top flew open. He caught a glimpse of the sistrum and other enigmatic objects. She drew out a thick, yard-long crystal bar, apparently hollow, its core filled with a thin pillar of pulsing violet fire.

"This, Graydon, I will give you when you start," she said. "Carry it carefully, for the lives of all of us may rest upon it. After the Emers are laden and in the passage, you must do with it what I shall shortly show you. Suarra, within the ship is a small chest—I will show you where it lies—you must bring me that. And before you set this bar in place, take whatsoever pleases you from the ancient treasures. But do not loiter." She frowned at the throbbing flame. "I am sorry. Truly! But now must great loss come, that far greater loss shall not follow! Suarra, child—follow my sight!"

The girl came forward, stood waiting with a tranquillity which indicated it was not the first time she had made such journey. The serpent-woman pressed her palm upon her forehead as she had on Graydon's. She kept it there for long minutes. Suarra's eyes were rapt, far-away, but, he reflected as he watched her calm, unhurried breathing, certainly nothing seemed "to have gone out of her," as Adana had put it. The serpent-woman took away her hand, Suarra smiled at her and nodded.

"You have seen! You know precisely what I want! You will remember!" These were not questions, they were commands.

"I have seen, I know, and I will remember," answered Suarra.

"Now, Graydon, you, too—so there may be no mistake, and that you work quickly together."

She touched his forehead. With the speed of thought he was once more within the cavern. One by one those things she wanted flashed out of the vagueness — he knew precisely where each was, how to go to it.

Now he was in the ship, within a richly furnished cabin, saw there the little chest Suarra was to take. And now he was beside a curious contrivance built of crystal and silver metal, the bulk of it shaped like an immense thick-bottomed bowl around whose rim were globes like that of the sistrum, ten times larger, and with none of its quicksilver quivering; quiescent.

Within the crystal which formed the bulk of the bowl was a pool of the violet flame, quiescent, too, not pulsing like that within the rod. Looking more closely, he saw that the top of the bowl was covered with some transparent substance, clear as air, and that the pool was prisoned within it. Set at exact center, and vanishing in the flame, was a hollow cylinder of metal. Before him there appeared the misty shape of the rod. He saw it thrust sharply into the cylinder. He heard the voice of Adana, whispering, "This must you do."

He thought that even at the spectral touch, the globes began to quiver, the violet flame to pulse. The rod vanished—

And suddenly he felt a touch of that horror he had known when bound to the bench before the jet throne! He began the whirling flight back toward the Temple—was halted in mid-flight!

Red light beat upon him, rusted black atoms drifted round him—he was in the cavern of the Shadow, and on its throne, featureless face intent upon him, sat the Shadow!

He was rigid while the dreadful gaze sifted him! He felt the grip relax, heard a whispering laugh—

He was back in the room of the Snake Mother, trembling, breathing like a man spent from running. Suarra was beside him, his hands clutched in hers, staring at him with frightened eyes. The serpent-woman was erect on a pillared coil, upon her face the first amazement he had ever seen there. The Lord of Fools was on his feet.

"God!" sobbed Graydon, and caught at Suarra for support. "The Shadow! It caught me!"

All at once he realized what had happened—that in the brief instant the Dark One had gripped him, it had read his mind like an open page, knew exactly what it was that he had looked upon in the Cavern of the Lost Wisdom, knew precisely what the Mother wanted, knew

what she planned to do there—and was now making swift preparation to check-mate her!

He told the serpent-woman this.

She listened to him, eyes glittering, head flattening like a snake's; she hissed!

"If Nimir read his mind, as he thinks, then he must also have read that it was to-night he was to go," said the Lord of Fools quietly. "Therefore, they must go now, Adana."

"You are right, Tyddo." Her voice became calm. "Nimir cannot enter the Cavern—at least not as he is. What he will do I do not know. But he has some plan—he laughed, you say, Graydon? Well, whatever it be, it will take time. He must summon others to help him. We have good chance to outrace him. Suarra, Graydon—you go at once. You with them, Tyddo."

The Lord of Fools nodded.

"I would like to test Nimir's strength once again, Adana," he said.

"And Kon—Kon must go with you. Suarra, child—summon Regor."

And when Suarra had gone for Regor, the Snake Mother handed the crystal bar to the Lord of Fools.

"Nimir is stronger than I had believed," she said gravely. "That whispering Shadow left its mark upon you, Graydon. You are too sensitive to it to risk the carrying of this key. Tyddo will use it. And take my bracelet from beneath your sleeve. Wear it openly, and should you feel the Shadow reach out to you—look quickly into the purple stones and think of me. Give it to me—"

She took the bracelet from him, breathed upon its gems, pressed them to her forehead, and returned it to him.

In half an hour they were off. Regor had begged to go with them, argued and blustered and almost wept; but the Snake Mother had forbade him. The Lord of Fools, leading and bearing both crystal staff and his red rod, Suarra and Kon on each side of Graydon, half a hundred picked Emers of the Temple guard behind him, he was on his way to the Cavern of the Lost Wisdom.

CHAPTER XVIII

CAVERN OF THE LOST WISDOM

THEY went by another passage than that by which they had entered the Temple, high-roofed and wider. The Lord of Fools, for once, did not flutter like a huge bird; he walked purposefully, as though eager for some rendezvous. They entered the Cavern of the Lost Wisdom by a door which opened to the touch

of Tyddo's red rod; the new corridor had cut off all that empty space they had traversed before. The sealed treasures of the Serpent-people and most ancient Yu-Atlanchi lay before them.

There was no sign of the Dark One, nor of any of his followers, either man or lizard-people. The storehouse seemed untouched, crystal shimmering palely, metals gleaming and jewels glinting fugitively, the puzzling shapes designed for uses unguessable, shadowy in the dim light.

They first took two of the crystal disks. At close range, Graydon saw details not perceptible in the painting of the primeval swamp. They were twenty feet high, lens-shaped, a yard in thickness at their centers. They were hollow. Within the center was a foot-wide disk, milky as curdled moonlight. From its edges ran countless filaments, each fine as a hair on the serpent-woman's head, and as silvery. They were crossed by other filaments, making them resemble immense, finely spun cobwebs.

Spaced regularly around the rim of the larger disk were a dozen little lenses of the moon-ray material. Where the radiating strands passed from the last encircling one, they were gathered into these lenses, like minute reins. The disks rested upon bases of gray metal fitted with runners, like a sled. Their bottom edges dropped into deep grooves. Whatever held them upright was hidden in their bases.

The Indians produced long thongs, tied them to the runners, the Lord of Fools directing; then still under his eye they drew them away and into the passage. When they were safely there he drew what seemed to Graydon a breath of relief, clicked at Kon, and the spiderman followed on the trail of the Emers.

"Best to make sure of those," said the Lord of Fools. "They are our strongest weapons. I bade Kon see they are taken straight to Adana. Now do you two gather those other things she wants. I go to mount guard."

He walked away into the dark cavern.

They went quickly about their business, dividing the remaining Indians between them. Mainly the objects were coffers, some so small that one man could carry them, others under whose weight four strained. There were seven of the symbolized silver globes in the serpent-woman's inventory, and he was amazed to find them light as bubbles, rolling over the floor before the push of a hand. They came at last to the end, and with the last of their men. Remained only to get the chest from the ship.

The ship rested upon a metal cradle. A ladder dropped from its side, and as Graydon clambered up it, Suarra at his heels, he wondered how the ancient people had managed to get this Ark of theirs over land and through the barrier of mountains into this place!

He remembered that Suarra had told him the mountains had not then arisen, and that in those far gone days the ocean had been close—he recalled the evidence that what is now the basin of the Amazon was once an immense arm of the sea, a gulf large as that of Mexico.

Still—to carry this ship, and it was all of three hundred feet long, into the cavern, implied engines of amazing power. And how had it been preserved during the ages preceding the upthrust of the barrier? It was hard wood, almost metallic; schooner rigged, its masts thick and squat, and, curiously enough, yardless. He caught at its stern a gleam of blue, saw there one of the great disks, deep cerulean, not transparent like the others.

He wondered whether it had furnished the propulsive power for the craft, and if so, then why the masts? Except for disk and squat masts the deck was clear. He remembered now that the ships upon the wall of the Painted Cavern had shown tall masts, he had not seen among them any boat such as this. Well, it might have been among the pictures on the ruined walls.

He looked out over the cavern. The Lord of Fools, a patch of red and yellow, was beside that strange contrivance in whose bowl lay the pool of violet flame. He stood, motionless, listening, the crystal rod poised over the hollow cylinder.

"Graydon!" called Suarra, beckoning from an open hatchway. "Make haste!"

He went to her; a creaked ramp dropped down into dark depths; Suarra was tripping down it with the sure feet of a fawn; gingerly he followed her. From a light-cone in her hand spurted one of the luminous spheres. Under his feet was a silken carpet, deep and lush as a June meadow; in front of him a row of low oval doors, tightly shut. Suarra counted them, sped to one and thrust it open. The sparkling light streamed through after them.

It was a wide cabin, tapestry-hung, and clearly a woman's. What Princess of most ancient Yu-Atlanchi, flying uncounted centuries ago through racked seas from the ice flood had preened herself before that silver mirror? He glimpsed a nest of silken cushions, and knew.

Suarra was beside it, lifting the little chest. He saw another coffer near by; opened it. Within was a long strand of gems blue as deepest sapphire, unknown radiant jewels gleaming with their own imprisoned light. He drew it out, wound it within Suarra's midnight hair; it glittered there like captured stars.

There was a book! A book whose pages of metal, thin and pliable as papyrus, were like those of some ancient missal, rich in pictures and margined with unknown symbols, letterings of the serpent-people. He thrust it into his tunic, drew his girdle tighter to hold it.

The purple gems of the bracelet caught his gaze. They were shining—warning him! Suarra, admiring herself in the silver mirror, saw them.

"Quick!" she cried, "the deck, Graydon!"

THEY ran up the ramp. They were just in time to see the Lord of Fools thrust the crystal rod down into the pool of violet flame! Instantly, a pillar of amethyst fire shot up from it, reaching toward the roof of the cavern. It was smoothly round as though carved by sculptor's chisel, and as it drove up there came from it a sustained sighing like the first breath of a tempest. It illuminated the cavern with a radiance stronger than sunlight; it destroyed all perspective, so that every object seemed to press forward, standing out in its own proportions as though rid of special trammels, freed from the diminishing effects of distance.

The Lord of Fools, far away as they knew him to be, seemed in that strange light to be close enough to touch. The quicksilver globes around the rim of the great bowl beside which he stood had begun to quiver like that in the sistrum of the serpent-woman.

They saw him look at them, lift his rod and point to the passage. They could not move, staring at that radiant column, fascinated!

A pulse shook the pillar; a ring of violet incandescence throbbled out of it, like the first ring in a still pool into which a stone has been thrown. It passed through the Lord of Fools, obscuring him in a mist of lavender. It swelled outward a score of feet—and vanished. Of all it had touched, except that figure, there remained—nothing! And from the Lord of Fools, the motley had vanished. He stood there, a withered old man, entirely naked!

Around the pillar for a circle twice twenty feet wide was emptiness!

The sighing pillar pulsed again. A

thicker ring widened slowly from it. Ahead of it hopped the Lord of Fools, shaking his staff at them, gesticulating, urging them to go. They leaped for the ladder.

High over the sighing of the pillar sounded a hideous hissing. From the rear of the cavern poured a horde of the lizard-men. They vomited forth by hundreds, leaping down upon the withered figure standing there so quietly. And now the second ring of lambent violet touched the Lord of Fools, passed through him as had the other and went widening outward. It reached the first of the on-rushing Urd, lapped them up, and died away. And now within a circle twice forty feet the cavern floor stood empty!

But into that circle swept more lizard-men, pressed onward by the horde behind them. The Lord of Fools stepped back, back into a third flaming ripple from the pillar. It widened on, tranquilly; and like the others, left behind it—nothing!

"Suarra! Down the ladder! Get to the passage!" gasped Graydon. "The rings are coming faster! They'll reach us! Tyddo knows what he's about! If that hell-spawn sees you—"

He stopped, both speech and motion frozen. Above the hissing of the horde, the louder sighing of the pillar, had risen a screaming like that of a mad-dened horse. The lizard-men scuttered back. Out through them, halting at the edge of emptiness left by the last ring of flame, came—Nimir!

And dreadful as he had been as the Shadow, dreadful when as Shadow he had poured himself into Cadok, they had been pleasant pictures to what now he was!

For the Dark One had got himself a body! It had been a Yu-Atlanchan, one, no doubt, of Lantlu's enemies, provided hastily for his Dark Master's needs. It was swollen, twice the size it had been when tenanted by its unlucky owner. Its outlines wavered, as though the Shadow found it difficult to remain within, was holding its cloak of flesh together by sheer force of will. Its head lolled forward, and suddenly up from behind it shot the face of the Lord of Evil, pale eyes glaring upon the Lord of Fools. And Graydon's heart beat chokingly in a throat as dry as dust as he looked upon that bloated, cloudy body, its corpse-face and the face of living evil springing from it!

Another ring of flame came circling. The Dark One retreated from it, stumbling back on dead feet. Whatever Tyddo's immunity from that noose of

flame, it was clearly not shared by Nimir.

And as he went, the Lord of Fools pointed his rod toward him and laughed.

"Fie upon you, Nimir!" he jeered, "to greet me after all these years in such ill-fitting garments! Draw your tattered cloak more tightly round you, Great One—or better still, go naked to the flame like me! But, I forgot, 'Master of the World,' you cannot!"

Now it seemed to Graydon, his mind swimming up from the wave of horror that had covered it, that the Lord of Fools was deliberately baiting Nimir, whether playing for time or from some other motive Graydon could not tell. But the Dark One took the bait, rushed at him, howling out of the dead throat—and barely saw the hook in time; barely could stagger beyond the reach of the next obliterating ring before it had died, all that had been in its path eaten.

He stumbled back, into the halted horde. At once there was motion among it. Graydon, dropping down the ladder behind Suarra, saw the lizard-men scurrying beyond the widening circle of emptiness, tugging, pulling, hauling away this and that while the Shadow, holding tight around him his borrowed body, urged them on.

Louder and ever louder grew the susurration of the flaming pillar, faster and faster its pulse, and swifter and wider the flaming rings flung out from it.

He ran, Suarra gripping his hand, head turned, unable to take his eyes from that incredible scene. A ring enveloped the ship—and the ship was gone! He heard the howling of Nimir—

Suarra drew him, the Lord of Fools pushed him into the passage. Its opening dropped. He went with them, unseeing, unhearing, as powerless to tear his mind away from what he had just beheld as he had been to tear his gaze from it.

They found the Snake Mother in a room so cluttered with her salvaged treasures that there was little room to move. She had been opening the coffers, rummaging through them like a child. Her hair was threaded with sparkling jewels, there was a wide belt of glass around her waist, and others fell between her little breasts. She was admiring herself in her mirror.

"I am rather beautiful in my way," she said, airily. "At least I have this satisfaction—that there is no one more beautiful *in* my way! Suarra, child. I'm so glad you found those jewels. I always meant to get them for you. Tyddo—" She raised her hands in mock astonishment. "Where are your clothes!"

"By your ancestors, Adana, I had quite forgotten!" The Lord of Fools hastily snatched up a piece of silk, wrapped it round his withered frame.

"Is it done?" The serpent-woman's face had lost all laughter, was sorrowful.

"It is done, Adana," answered the Lord of Fools, "and none too soon!"

She listened, with no lightening of that sorrow, as he told her what had happened in the cavern.

"So much lost!" she whispered. "So much that never can be replaced, never duplicated though the world last forever! My people—oh, my people! And the ship— Well," she brightened, "we got the better of Nimir! But again I say it, he is stronger than I believed. Dearly would I like to know what he saved. I hope he found something that will give him a permanent costume! I wonder whose body he was wearing? Now go away, children—Tyddo and I have work to do."

She dismissed them with a wave of her hand. But as Graydon turned to go, he saw the sorrow creep again over her face, her eyes fill with tears.

CHAPTER XIX

THE AMPHITHEATER OF OPAL

FOR the next two days, Graydon saw nothing of the Snake Mother; little of Regor and Huon. He spent most of his time with Suarra, and glad enough were both to be left alone. He wandered with her through the vast place at will, beholding strange and sometimes disquieting things, experiments of the serpent-people and the ancient Yu-Atlanchans in the reshaping of life, experiments such as those from which the spider-folk and the lizard-folk had been results; grotesque and terrifying shapes, androgynous monstrosities, hybrid prodigies—some of them of bizarre beauty. There was a great library, filled with the metallic paged and pictured books, their glyphs understandable now only by the Mother and the two Lords.

Once, going alone into the chamber of the thrones, he had seen the Lord of Fate, brooding beside the empty shrine of the Lord of Lords; Malik had raised his staff to Graydon in greeting.

He had felt no desire to converse with that aloof personage, had instead beat rather hasty retreat. He had looked into the Hall of the Weavers with Suarra, and had lingered long, fascinated by the scarlet spider-people clicking at their immense looms along whose sides they ran, weaving designs which through the ages had become as instinctive to them

as the pattern of the spider-webs to their makers. There were not more than a hundred of them left, he found, and in their immense workshop most of the looms swung empty.

Beneath the Temple, Suarra told him, were other immense chambers and crypts, and she herself did not know what was in them. There was that mysterious place whose two doors, one of Life and one of Death, were opened for those who desired children and were willing to pay the price—the canceling of their deathlessness.

As the serpent-woman had predicted, neither the Dark One nor Lantlu had made any open move. From Graydon's aerie in the Temple the city seemed quiet, untroubled. But Regor said his spies had reported there was much unrest and uneasiness, for the story of Lantlu's humiliation had been whispered about. It had shaken the confidence of some of his followers; and the giant had added that he had been surprised to find that Graydon's method of fighting had not alienated any of their own friends; indeed, they had rather approved of it.

This had irritated Graydon afresh, but when he had met Huon, the former master of the lair had been so friendly that he had forgotten it. Huon's melancholy had vanished, in its place was some fixed idea, some inflexible purpose which, stamping itself on his face, made it less man's than some beautiful statue's.

Lantlu, so Regor had told him that morning, had dropped from sight, whether plotting with his Dark Master or nursing his hurts he could not discover. There was one thing that might have some significance: the hunting Xinli were being fed half-rations, and their hellishness was on the increase with their hunger.

Regor's emissaries had been at work among the Indians; they could count, he thought, upon about half of them. Graydon had asked how many that was, and had been told that those with soldierly training numbered some four thousand. Of the remainder, he thought that many would take to the forest and await the outcome of the conflict; in fact some were already filtering away.

Regor did not believe those who remained with Lantlu would be formidable—for one thing, they were held to him mainly by fear; for another, they hated the lizard-men and would not relish fighting at their side. Far more than the hordes of the Urd, Graydon dreaded the dinosaur pack and the charge of the



Up the straight cliffside climbed Kon, the scarlet spiderman, holding Graydon in one bent arm. The man's head swam—for he looked down a sheer half mile drop

riding monsters; he felt that against them the whole four thousand of the Emers could put up feeble defense, would go down before them like stubble before fire. Regor seemed not to think so, hinted of other resources.

He had other news—some twenty of the Fellowship had survived the raid and probably a hundred of their Emers, all of them soldiers of the first class and devoted to Huon.

This night was the Ladnophaxi, the Feast of the Dream Makers. It would drain the city of the nobles. The Emers were rigidly excluded, forbidden even to watch from vantage-points outside the shell-like structure which Graydon had learned was dedicated to this yearly fête; they held their own moon festival far away at the verge of the forest.

Of all the nights, therefore, it was the best to smuggle into the city the remnants of the Fellowship, since Yu-Atlanchi would be deserted, its guard negligible. Huon and Regor were to lead a little force which would meet his men at a certain point on the lake, and guide them to sanctuary.

Now Graydon's curiosity about this Feast of the Dream Makers was avid. He was on fire to witness it. He determined that by hook or crook he would do so. He could say nothing to Suarra about it, fearing that she would either put her little foot inflexibly down, or that she would insist upon going with him—something clearly not to be thought of since Lantlu's threats and the Snake Mother's declaration of war.

He wondered whether he could cajole

the serpent-woman into devising means of getting into the place, came to the speedy conclusion that she would devise instead some sure means of keeping him under lock and key.

The Lord of Fools? It was a fool-hardy enough idea to appeal to him! No, since the affair in the Cavern of the Lost Wisdom, Graydon had realized that whatever kinds of folly that able person was lord of, it wasn't just this kind. Nevertheless, he was not going to miss the Ladrnophaxi!

WHILE he was turning the matter over, the Mother sent for him. He found her alone in her tapestried room. The great disks were gone, as were most of the other things they had brought her. Her eyes were bright; her neck undulated, her gleaming coils stirred restlessly. She was, he thought with a suddenly sharpened perception of her unhumanness, very like a serpent poisoning to strike!

Oddly enough, her first words were a reflection of his own thought, but reversed.

"You are so different from anything I have seen so long," she said, "that you take my mind out of its old ruts, freshen it. I know how unutterably strange Yu-Atlanchi must seem to you—myself, perhaps, strangest of all. Although from the first, my alien shape has never swayed you from deeper, truer recognition of me. It is why I have held my hand over you, Graydon, and will never withdraw it. Yet all this which seems so strange to you, is too familiar to me. And what is everyday matter to you would be to these people quite as fantastic—yes, much of it even to me. I would like to draw away from my closeness which is both a strength and a weakness; look through your eyes a little, Graydon; think as you, the outlander, think. How do you sum up this situation into which you have been thrust? Speak freely, child, without thought of offending me."

As freely as she had bade him, he spoke; of the stagnation of the Old Race, of its decline into cruelty and inhuman indifference, and what he believed the cause—the closing of the Door of Death; what he felt to be the monstrous wickedness in the creation of such creatures as the lizard-people, and the cynical perversion of scientific knowledge that had gone into the making of the scarlet Weavers; and that though the Urd, at least, should be exterminated, still the fault lay not with them, nor even with Lantlu and his kind, but with

those who at the beginning had set working the relentless processes of evolution whose helpless fruits they were. At last, of his fear of the fighting dinosaurs, and of the smashing comber of the Xinli steeds and in their wake the fanged and tearing waves of the Urd.

"But you have said nothing of Nimir—why?" she asked curiously, when he had ended.

"Neither have I said anything of you, Mother," he answered. "I have spoken only of the things I know—and I know nothing of what weapons or powers you two may command. But I think that in the end it will be only you and Nimir—that all other things, the Urd and the Xinli, Lantlu and Huon, and myself are pawns, negligible. The issue lies between you two."

"That is true," nodded the Snake Mother, "and I do wish I knew what Nimir managed to take away with him from the cavern! There was one thing there I hope he found," her eyes glinted maliciously, "and I hope still more that, finding, he will use. I would give him that body he desires, Graydon. Yet he might not like the result. As for the others—do not fear too much the Xinli and the Urd. My winged Messengers will cope with them! Nor are the rest of you as negligible as you think. I may rest upon that quick eye and steady hand of yours at the last! But in essence you are right. It does lie between me and Nimir!"

She was silent for a time, regarding him.

"As for the rest—does not nature herself constantly experiment with the coverings of life? How many models has she made far more monstrous than anything you have seen here, and then, as cynically as you charge against us, has stamped them out—or left them to destroy themselves? As we did the Urd. What shapes, loathsome, ravening, has not Nature turned from her laboratory? Why should not we, who are a part of her, have followed the example she set us?"

"As for the Old Race and what they have become—well, if you save another man's life, and nurse him through sickness, are you thereafter responsible for what he does? If he slays, tortures—are you the slayer, the torturer? My ancestors released this people from Death, under a certain necessary condition. If we had not made that condition, then at the rate men breed there would soon have been no place to stand on all the crowded globe! We ridded them not alone of death, but of sickness. We placed in their hands great knowledge.

Is it our fault that they have proved not worthy of it?"

"And then built a barrier around them so they could not use their knowledge," said Graydon. "Men develop through overcoming obstacles, not by being hot-housed."

"Ah, but was not that an obstacle?" asked the Snake Mother shrewdly. "If they had been worthy would they not have surmounted the barrier?"

He had no answer for that.

"But one matter you have clarified," she said. "If I win from Nimir, I will destroy the Urd. And I will leave only a few of the Old Race. Those errors shall be wiped out—as Nature at times wipes out hers! The swamp shall be completely cleansed—"

She picked up her mirror, caressed her hair; put the mirror down.

"The crisis is close. Perhaps it comes tonight. Lantlu appeared in the city a few hours ago, swaggering, strangely confident, more arrogant than ever, boasting of what is to be done to—me! His face is even as you said, no thing of beauty, but none dare show by so much as a glance that they find it marred! Is it bravado? I do not think so. He knows something of a broth the Dark One is cooking. Well, let him. Yet I do wish I know what Nimir took away—I have tried to see, but I cannot—he blocks me . . . he has found something . . . I wonder if I dare . . ."

She leaned forward, put her hand upon his forehead. He felt the swift vertigo, was swirled across the lake, into the cavern. He was in the red cavern of the Shadow! But what was the matter with it? The rusted light was thick, impenetrable! Go where he would, it closed around him like a mist of iron. He could not see—

He was back beside the Snake Mother. He shook his head.

"I know," she said. "I sent your sight with mine on the chance that sensitivity to the Shadow would let your gaze penetrate where mine cannot. But you saw no more than I. Well"—she smiled at him with one of her abrupt changes of mood—"I'm sorry you can't go to the Feast of the Dream Makers, child. You would enjoy it. I could send your sight there, with mine. But not long enough to let you see anything. It would be too great a strain for you. A little—and it does no harm; but for any length of time, no. It would blind you."

Not long after that she dismissed him. He went from her with a bad conscience, but with his determination entirely unchanged.

HE WAS back in his own quarters when an idea came to him.

Kon!

There might lie the solution! Since Graydon's fight with Lantlu, the spider-man had apparently tucked him under his heart as tightly as he had under his arm during the scramble across the precipice; never passed him without clicking affectionately and giving him a pat or two with his little paws.

Could he persuade Kon to scale the walls of the great shell with him, so that the pair could stow away where he could see but not be seen? How the devil could he cajole Kon when he didn't know how to talk to him? He turned the matter over and over, then laughed. Well, his idea might work. He could only try it.

The full moon arose over the barrier of peaks three hours after the sunset in Yu-Atlanchi, which by virtue of those same peaks, was dark when it was still twilight outside. The Ladnophaxi would not begin until the moon shone full upon the amphitheater. That much he had gathered from Suarra. And even now dusk was gathering in the bowl of the Hidden Land. He would have to work quickly.

He dined with Suarra, and the others. She told him that the Mother wanted her attendance that night, gathered that the serpent-woman intended to miss nothing of what went on at the Feast, and that Suarra had certain duties of her own in that far surveillance. To his relief, he found that he was not asked to accompany her.

Guiltily, he told her he was tired, would take some of the pictured books to his room, read awhile and sleep. Her solicitude made him feel guiltier, but did not shake his determination. Casually, he asked her where Kon kept himself. She said he had taken a fancy to the chamber of the thrones, was usually there when not scuttling around after Huon.

After she had gone, he stole away to the throne chamber. There, sure enough, was Kon, sitting, of all places, in the throne of the Lord of Fools. Graydon, taking it as a happy augury, grinned widely. He seated himself beside him, drew out a stick of red pigment he had gotten from one of the Emers, and a piece of white silken stuff. Kon clicked, interestedly.

Graydon drew on the silk the outline of the amphitheater. Kon nodded. Then Graydon pointed to the entrance and to himself. The spider-man shook his head, clicking vigorously. Graydon drew a picture of the back of the shell as he

thought it might be, and an outline of himself climbing up it.

Kon looked at the picture scornfully, took the stick from him, and proceeded to make an excellent picture of what clearly was the actuality. He made it curved outward, instead of flat, as in Graydon's drawing, covered its face with scrolls which were evidently carvings upon it, and then, with that extraordinary facial contortion meant for a grin, drew on it a sketchy outline of himself with Graydon under his arm! This done, he patted him on the back and broke into a weird burst of sounds plainly intended for a laugh.

Graydon knew what he meant. Kon had told him as clearly as by words—"The only way you can get up there is to have me carry you, and I know damned well you won't want that."

Didn't he? It was exactly what he did want!

He patted the spider-man on the shoulder approvingly, pointed to the sketch and nodded violently. The grin faded from Kon's face, he seemed surprised and somewhat disconcerted. He clicked warningly, even angrily. Kon, he reflected, was undoubtedly giving him hell—but Graydon kept his finger on the drawing, still nodding.

Kon seemed to have an idea. He caught up the stick and drew a picture of Lantlu, recognizable mainly because it showed a face with a fist planted on its nose. Then he drew Graydon again with his rifle pointing at the face. Graydon shook his head. The spider-man looked puzzled. His next picture showed him crawling down the Temple wall with Graydon apparently held by a foot, head first, in Kon's hand. Graydon nodded cheerfully.

If clicks could swear, Kon was swearing. He drew another picture of himself swinging through the branches of the trees with Graydon hanging on behind. Graydon clapped him on the shoulder delightedly, nodding complete acquiescence. Kon swore again, stood for a moment in thought, then rapidly sketched himself bringing down four bars on Lantlu's head. Graydon shrugged indifferently. Kon emitted one despairing click, and surrendered.

Kon stalked out of the throne chamber with a gesture to Graydon to follow. He led him to a balcony at the end of a corridor, and stationed him there with a click of admonition, then scuttled away. Graydon looked out.

The bowl of Yu-Atlanchi was filled with darkness, the sun had set even behind the barrier. He saw lights like trains

of fireflies making their way to the amphitheater of the shell. There was a touch on his arm, Kon was beside him, carrying two of the mace-headed bars. Without a single click, the spider-man took him under his arm, swung over the edge of the balcony and seemed to scuttle down the sheer face of the Temple. Graydon noted with amusement that Kon did not hold him upside down as he had threatened.

They stood close to the edge of the mighty flight of steps leading down to the meadow. They passed cautiously along them, and reached the bordering fringe of trees. There Kon again lifted him, but not to swing him behind him through the branches. The spider-man kept to their cover, flitting from trunk to trunk.

There was a murmur of voices, rapidly growing louder. The fireflies became flambeaux—pale, motionless lights like frozen moonbeams. Faintly by them Graydon saw Yu-Atlanchi's nobles, men and women, streaming through the narrow entrance. Here and there among them were the jeweled litters. The flambeaux were pallid ghost-lights, gave out no glow, intensified the darkness beyond them.

Kon detoured and scuttled silently through the trees to the back of the amphitheater. He passed the two bars to Graydon, took a firmer grip on him, and began to climb it, making, no doubt, a ladder of those carvings he had sketched, but which Graydon could not see in the pitch blackness. It did not seem a minute before they were at the top.

Here was a broad parapet. Kon straddled it, set Graydon upon it with a bump, and disappeared. Soon he was back, clicked softly, picked him up and slid with him into the dark void beneath. Graydon gasped, then their flight was ended so abruptly that his teeth shook. Around him was the faintest of light, starshine reflected from the opaline wall towering behind and above him. Kon, he saw, had slid down one of the furrows. He wondered how in the devil the Weaver was going to slide back it with him under his arm!

He looked around him. They were in the topmost tier of the stone seats. In front of the seats was a three-foot parapet, protecting it. Not far below him he heard rustlings, whisperings, soft laughter.

Kon took his shoulder, slid him off the seat, forced him down behind the parapet; crouched there beside him, peeping over it.

Above the western mountains a faint glow of silver appeared. It grew brighter. The whisperings below him ceased. Between two of the towering peaks a shimmering argent point sprang out. It became a rill of silver fire.

A man's voice, a vibrant baritone, began a chant. He was answered with strophe and antistrophe by the unseen throng below.

Steadily as that chant arose, so arose the moon.

Behind him, at first in fugitive sparklings, then in steadily rising rhythms of opal radiance, the great shell began to glow—brighter and ever brighter, as steadily the moon swung out of the stone fingers of the peaks.

The Feast of the Dream Makers had begun!

CHAPTER XX

FEAST OF THE DREAM MAKERS

THE chanting ended. The light of the risen moon fell within the amphitheater and full upon the conch-shaped walls. Their radiance quickened, the shell became a luminous opal. Rays streamed from the starry points of blue and the peacock patches. They met and crossed at the center of the amphitheater, weaving a web that stretched from side to side. Steadily this ray-woven web grew denser; against it Graydon saw silhouetted the heads of the nobles, many empty tiers below.

Another chant began. A point of silver light appeared within the opposite wall, high up and close to the opening of the shell-like valves which formed the structure's entrance. It expanded into a little moon, a replica of the orb swimming across the sky. Three more shone softly into sight beside it. Their rays crept out, touched the luminous web, spread over it. The web held now the quality of a curtain, transparent but material.

And suddenly, through that curtain, high up on the other side of the shell, a larger moon swelled out of the semi-darkness, since there the moonlight did not fall full upon the walls. Within the glowing disk was a woman's head. She was one of the Old Race, and aureoled by that silver nimbus, her face was transformed into truly unearthly beauty. Her eyes were closed, she seemed asleep.

A Maker of Dreams!

She was, he thought, within a wide niche or alcove, but whether she sat or stood he could not tell. Her body was indistinguishable. The orb behind that exquisite head throbbed, swelled, became still. The Dream Maker seemed to merge

with its luminescence, become only a mist against it. The chant soared into a shouting chorus, and died.

Something sped from the orb, something without shape or form, realized by another sense than sight. It struck the web. Under the impact the curtain trembled. And suddenly—there was no web, no ray-woven curtain! Graydon looked out into space, into the void beyond this universe. He saw the shapeless thing racing through it with a speed millions of times that of light. Knew it for a thought from the Maker of Dreams. Following it, he felt probing into his brain something like a numbing finger, cold with the cold of outer space through which the thought moved. On and on, into unfathomable infinitude it went.

It stopped. It became a vast nebula, spiralling like Andromeda's starry whirl. The nebula came rushing back with the same prodigious speed, a cosmic pinwheel of suns, threatening annihilation!

It resolved itself into its component stars, huge spinning spheres of incandescence, of every color. One sun came rolling out from its fellows, an immense orb of incandescent sapphire. Beside it appeared a world, fit child of that luminary in size. The sun drew away, the world drew nearer—

It was a world of flame! He looked into jungles of flame through which moved monstrous shapes of fire; at forests built of flames over which flew other shapes whose plumage was fire of emeralds, of rubies and of diamonds, at oceans which were seas of molten jewels and through whose iridescent spray swam leviathans of fire!

Back whirled fire world and sapphire sun among their fellows.

Striding through the void came gigantic men, godlike, laughing! They stooped and plucked the whirling suns. They tossed them to each other. They hurled them into the outer void, streaming like comets. They sent them crashing into each other with storms of coruscant meteors, cascades of sparkling star dust!

The laughing gods strode off, over where had lain the gardens of suns they had uprooted. For an instant the void hung, empty.

Then Graydon, gasping, looked again upon the curtain of woven rays. How real it had all seemed! He shivered with more than a touch of panic. Had it been real? What he had seen had seemed no two-dimensional picture thrown upon that strange screen. No, it had been in three dimensions—and as actual as anything he had ever beheld. Had the thought of the Dream Maker created

that wrecked universe? And the playful gods—were they, too, born of her thought? Or had they been other realities, happening upon that galaxy, stopping to destroy it, then carelessly passing on?

A murmuring arose among the nobles, a faint applause. The orb behind the head of the Dream Maker dimmed. When it pulsed out, it held within it the head of a man, eyes closed as had been the woman's.

Again the thought sped, and the ray curtain quivered under its impact. Graydon looked upon a desert. Its sands began to sparkle, to stir and grow. Up from the waste a city built itself—but no such city as Earth had ever borne. Vast structures of an architecture alien and unknown to man! And peopled with chimeras; Their hideousness struck his eyes like a blow. He closed them. When he opened them, the city was crumbling.

In its place grew a broad landscape illumined by two suns, one saffron and one green, which swiftly circled each round the other. Under their mingled light were trees, shaped like hydras, like polyps, with fleshy, writhing reptilian limbs to which clung great pulpy flowers of a loathsome beauty. The flowers opened, and out of them sprang amorphous things which fought among the dreadful growths like obscene demons, torturing, mating—

He closed his eyes, sickened. A wave of applause told him the Dream Maker was finished. He felt a deeper hate for these people who could find delectable such horror as he had seen.

AND now Dream Maker followed after Dream Maker, and dream upon dream unfolded in the web of rays. Some Graydon watched, fascinated, unable to draw his eyes from them; and others sent him shuddering into the shelter of the spider-man's arms, sick of soul.

A few were of surpassing beauty, jinn-worlds straight out of the Arabian Nights; there was a world of pure colors, unpeopled, colors that built of themselves gigantic symphonies, vast vistas of harmonies. Such drew little applause from these men and women whose chant was interlude between the dreams. It was carnage and cruelty which stirred them; *diablerie*, defiled planets, monstrous matings, Witches' Sabbaths, hideous fantasies to which Dante's blackest hell was Paradise itself. And more and more Graydon's hate for them increased.

He heard a louder whispering, over it the voice of Lantlu, arrogant, vibrant with gloating anticipation.

Within the silver orb was a woman's head. The beauty of her face was tainted, subtly debased, as though through her veins ran sweet corruption. As her head merged into misty outline on the disk, he thought he saw the closed lids open for an instant, disclose deep violet eyes that were wells of evil, and which sent some swift message toward where Lantlu boasted; they closed. For the first time an absolute silence fell over the amphitheater; a silence of expectation.

For the curtain shook with the speeding thought of the woman. The web did not vanish as heretofore. Instead, a film crept over it; a crawling film of shifting hues, like oil spreading over the surface of a clear pool. Rapidly the film became more dense, the motion of its shifting colors swifter.

Dark shadows began to flit through the film, one on the skirts of the other, converging toward, settling at, the edge of the ray web. Faster they flitted, one by one, from all parts of it, gathering there, growing steadily denser—assuming shape!

Not only taking shape—taking substance!

Graydon clutched the stone balustrade with stiff fingers. There upon the web was the shape of a man, a giant all of ten feet tall, tenebrous, framed by the crawling colors—and no shadow! No—something material—

Over the rim of the amphitheater shot a vivid ray of red. It came from the direction of the caverns. It struck the sombrous shape, spread fanwise over it, changing it to a rusty black.

The red ray began to feed it, to build it up! Through the beam streamed a storm of black atoms, the shape sucked them in, took substance from them—it was no longer tenebrous. It was a body; featureless, but still a body, caught high in the web, held there by the force of the red ray!

Borne in the wake of the black atoms came the Shadow of Nimir! It did not come swiftly. It floated through the beam cautiously, as though none too sure of its progress. It crept, faceless head outstretched, unseen eyes intent upon its goal. It covered the last few yards between it and the hanging shape with a lightning leap. There was a cloudy swirl where the black body had hung, a churning mist shot through with darting crimson corpuscles.

Something like a spark of dazzling white incandescence touched the churning mist, was swallowed by it. To Graydon it had seemed to stab it, to come from outside opposite the source of the

red ray to come from the Temple!

The mist condensed, vanished. The body hung for a breath, then slithered through the web down to the ground. No longer the body of a man! A crouching thing, misshapen, deformed—

Something like a great frog—and on its shoulders—the head of Nimir!

Graydon thought he heard the laughter of the serpent-woman!

But Nimir's pale blue eyes were alive with triumph—the triumph of Satan bursting his chains, strong to assail Heaven once more!

The red ray blinked out. A flare of crimson light shot up into the skies from beyond the lake.

The hideous hopping figure grew rigid, its face of a fallen angel stared at that flare. Its gaze dropped from it to its body! Graydon, every nerve at breaking point, watched shocked incredulity change to truly demoniac rage. The eyes glared like blue hell-flames, the proud mouth became an open square from which slaver dripped, the whole face writhed into a Gorgon mask!

Slowly Nimir turned his gaze to where was that evil Maker of Dreams who had been his tool and Lantlu's. She was standing, awake enough now, in the niche of the silver orb; eyes black holes in a face which was a white mask of mazed horror.

The monstrous arms of Nimir swung wide as he leaped toward her. The woman screamed, swayed, and fell forward from the niche. On the floor of the amphitheater, far below where she had stood, a white heap stirred feebly for an instant and was still.

Slowly the mad eyes of Nimir drew from her, searched the empty tiers, drew closer—closer to Graydon!

Graydon dropped flat behind the parapet, cowered there, hiding his face, terror such as he had never known—no, not even in the red cavern—numbing him. He waited with dying heart for the sound of hopping pads—coming for him—coming to take him—

What had the Snake Mother bade him do when he felt the menace of the Shadow? The bracelet! Would it help him now the Shadow had found a body?

He raised his head, fixed his eyes upon the purple stones of the bracelet. Their glitter steadied him. Desperately he thrust from his mind everything but the image of the serpent-woman—clung to that image as a falling climber clings to a projecting root that has stayed his drop into some abyss; filled his mind with that image; closed his ears, closed his mind to all but that!

How long he crouched there he never knew. He was aroused by the patting of Kon's little hands. Trembling, sick, he raised his head, stared.

He was in semidarkness. The moon had traveled past its zenith, was descending. Its rays no longer shone upon the shell behind him. The opaline glow was dim, the web of rays vanished.

The amphitheater was empty!

And after a little time Graydon mastered his weakness, crept with the spider-man, hugging the shadow, down the wide aisle that led to the pave; slipped without challenge through the valves of the entrance and into the shelter of the trees.

He reached the Temple; was lifted by Kon up to that balcony from which they had set forth.

He stared from it at the city. The city was ablaze with lights! Astir! Roaring!

CHAPTER XXI

THE TAKING OF SUARRA

GRAYDON stood there on the Temple balcony, hesitating, uncertain what to do. Should he go at once to the Snake Mother, ask pardon for his truancy, tell her what he had beheld at the Feast of the Dream Makers? Whether she knew of his adventure he was not certain; but he was certain that she had seen all that he had, that nothing had happened in the arena of the Dream Makers of which she had not been fully aware. And that whatever had gone awry in the plans of Nimir at the last moment had been her doing.

What had caused the glare from the caverns when the red ray over which the Shadow crept had blinked out? Had that been her work, too? Another blow against Nimir? Plainly it had not been in his calculations; had caught him by surprise, halting his grotesque dance of triumph, awakening him to his deformity!

And where was Nimir now? Had he squattered back to his cavern to gather together his dark powers? Or was he with Lantlu in the shouting city? Wherever he was, Graydon knew that not long could crisis be delayed. A few hours—and battle must be joined!

A hundred doubts raced through his mind. What after all had been really done to fortify the Temple? It was a vast pile, a fortress, capable of holding hundreds of defenders. The immense doors at the head of the steps were of the black metal, a yard thick, impregnable to anything but a high-explosive shell. It should be able to stand a prolonged siege, of course.

But might there not have been weapons in the Cavern of the Lost Wisdom capable of crumpling those doors like paper? If so, had Nimir retrieved them before the Cavern's destruction? The Mother herself had seemed concerned about that! And the openings of the tunnels and the secret corridors—like that one through which he and Regor had come when they had rescued Huon! Surely that Temple could have no secrets for Nimir, once one of its Lords! Damn it, the place was honeycombed with passages! What had Regor done about guarding them?

Suddenly it seemed to Graydon that the defense of the Temple had been treated far too casually; that all had been depending too much upon the wit and wisdom of the Snake Mother; that he himself—he bit his lips and groaned—had fallen into the slovenly ways of Yu-Atlanchi!

Happy in the moment with Suarra, he had let matters slide, leaning on the serpent-woman. Wrapped up in his own world—like a damned Dream Maker! He should have entered actively into the defense, planned and anticipated, thrown all his brain and energy into making the place secure against invasion, fit for siege.

Suppose it was stormed tonight! Did any one believe its ancient sanctity could save it? No aura of holiness had deterred Lantlu or his followers that day they had threatened the Mother with their javelins in the very shadow of the throne of the Lord of Lords! How much less would it now, with the Lord of Evil, thirsting for revenge, leading the attack?

He determined to run back to his quarters, get his guns; then if Regor and Huon had not returned, to go straight to the serpent-woman and to Suarra. He placed Kon at the window, directing him by gestures to watch.

He turned to go. The curtains parted. Into the chamber marched Regor at the head of a score of Emers armed with bows and spears. His face was haggard, his eyes cold, stony—and deadly.

Without a word to Graydon, he stationed the Indians at the opening. He clicked to Kon, and for a minute or two a rapid conversation went on between them. Regor gave some command; with more than his usual melancholy, the spider-man looked at Graydon and sidled out.

"Come," Regor touched him on the shoulder, "the Mother wants you."

The bleakness was gone from his eyes, but there was something about his manner that sent a chill of apprehension

through Graydon. If his conscience had not been so troubled, he would have burst into immediate questions. As it was, he followed the giant without speaking. He saw that the outer corridor was filled with Indians, among them a sprinkling of the nobles. A few he recognized as of the Fellowship—some of Huon's rescued remnant. These saluted him, with he thought, pity in their gaze.

"Regor," he said, "something's wrong. What is it?"

The giant mumbled inarticulately, shook his head, and hurried on. Graydon, fighting an increasing dread, kept step with him. They were mounting, he saw, toward the top of the Temple, not going to the room where always heretofore he had been summoned to the Mother. And everywhere were companies of the Emers, threaded by the nobles. Many of the latter were clothed in Lantlu's green.

The defection from the dinosaur master must have been more considerable than Regor had reckoned. Plenty of women among them, too—and armed like the men with the short swords and javelins and small round shields. Plenty here for defense. Why had he doubted Regor's ability? All of them seemed to know exactly what they were doing, under perfect discipline . . .

He realized that after all he didn't give a damn whether they were or not; that he was deliberately marking time, desperately taking note of exterior things to check a fear he had not dared put into words. He could do it no longer! He had to know!

"Regor," he said, "is it—Suarra?"

The giant's arm went round his shoulders.

"They've taken her, lad," he answered. "Lantlu has her!"

"Taken her! But she was with the Mother! How could they take her?"

"Quick—every moment counts!" The giant hurried him onward. "It happened in the confusion when the Feast ended. Huon and I had got back an hour before that. The Indians were filtering in to us here by the hundred. There was much to do. And five score and more of the Old Race upon whom we had not counted had come, swearing allegiance to the Mother, demanding entrance by their ancient right. They could not stomach Nimir in that new shape of his. Besides—they knew by whose cunning it had been fitted to him. Therefore, they reasoned, she, rather than he, was to be followed. The Mother, you will remember, had decreed outlawry from the Temple only upon those who stood by Lantlu. They knew this—and that she

could not break her word. Well, they had eschewed Lantlu. They swore by Adana. Nothing to do but let them in.

"Suarra had left the Mother long before. Some say she went seeking you. And, not finding you, sought Kon. And that while she was seeking there came to her a message—from you!"

Graydon halted abruptly.

"From me! Good God—no!" he groaned. "How could I send her a message? I was at that cursed feast—forced Kon to take me. I'd only got back when you appeared—"

"Ah, yes, lad." Regor shrugged his broad shoulders, helplessly. "But it is now the hour after midnight. The Ladinophaxi ended an hour before midnight. What, lad, of the two hours between?"

NOW Graydon felt his senses whirl. Could it be that he had crouched behind the parapet for two whole hours? Impossible! But even so, surely Regor could not think that he was traitor, that he had used that time to decoy Suarra from the Temple into the grip of the Dark One, and Lantlu! Why—it was damnable!

He thrust out his hand, struck the giant such a blow on his breast that he reeled back.

"Damn you, Regor!" he cried, furiously. "Do you even hint I had anything to do with it—"

Regor showed no resentment to the blow.

"Don't be foolish, lad," he grumbled again, pushing Graydon forward. "Of course I know you sent no message. But this much is certain—had you been here, Suarra would have fallen into no such trap. And it seems just as certain that those who decoyed her must have known you were not here! How did they know it? Why did they not try to intercept you on your return? Maybe the Mother knows all that by now. She was raging . . . the one she loved best snatched from under her eyes—"

He stopped where the corridor ended in a rounded buttress of wall. He touched it, and a door slid open, revealing a small circular vault or well, its sides sheathed with polished amber metal. Regor stepped into it, drawing Graydon beside him. As the door closed, he had the sensation of swift upward flight. The floor came to rest. He stood upon the roof of the Temple, under the stars; he caught the shimmer of the serpent-woman's coils, heard her voice, vibrant with anxiety but without reproach or anger:

"Come to me, Graydon. Go you back,

Regor, and get for him the clothing of one of those who abandoned Lantlu. A green cloak with it—and the emerald fillet. Do not tarry!"

"You will not be hard on the lad, Mother," muttered Regor.

"Nonsense! What blame may be, is mine! On with you, Old Bear, and return quickly," she answered, briskly, and when he had gone she beckoned Graydon to her side, cupped his face with her little hands, and kissed him.

"If I had it in my heart to scold you, child, I could not—seeing into your heart with its load of self-reproach and misery. The fault is mine. Had I not yielded to impulse, had I let Nimir take the shape woven upon the web instead of malforming it, he would not have struck back at me through Suarra. I wanted to shake his will, weaken him at the outset— Oh, why justify myself? It was woman's vanity—I wanted to show him my power! I invited reprisal in kind—and it was not long coming. The fault is mine—and so enough of that!"

A thought which had been knocking at Graydon's mind, a thought so terrible that he had fought its shaping, found utterance.

"Mother," he said, "you know that, disobeying you, I slipped away to the Feast of the Dream Makers. When the change came upon Nimir, and after the evil maker of dreams had fallen to her death, his gaze began searching the tiers as though for some one. And I think he suspected I was there. I set my thought on you, hiding from him in you! And Regor tells me almost two hours passed while time went by me, unknown. During that time, even though Kon was with me and knows I did not move, could Nimir have stolen my thought, used my mind by some infernal art, to lure Suarra from the Temple? A week ago, Mother, I would have held such a thought sheer madness. But now—after what I beheld at the Feast—"

"No," she shook her head, but her eyes narrowed, studying him. "It was not done in that way. I knew you were there—yes. Shielded you as best I could. Yet if Nimir had known your presence—I could not have saved you from him, Graydon. Had he been Shadow—yes; but not incarnate. I could have avenged you, yes, but that is all."

"He did know I was there." Conviction came to Graydon and with it full vision of his dreadful thought. "He left me there, like a bird on a limed twig. Nor did he molest me on my way back. And that was after Suarra had been taken. This is what I believe is in Nimir's mind,

Mother—that he will exchange Suarra for—me! He wanted my body. He has—what you gave him. Now he wants me again. He knows I would not surrender to him to save myself from torment or death. But to save Suarra—ah, he believes I would! So he binds me to helplessness, snares her and will offer to return her—for what he wants from me!”

“And if he makes that offer—will you give it to him?” The serpent-woman leaned forward, purple eyes deep in his.

“I will!” he answered, and although horror tugged at the very roots of his soul, he knew he spoke truth.

“But why did he let you return?” she asked. “Why, if you are right, did he not take you after Suarra had been trapped and while you were on your way back to the Temple?”

“That answer is easy.” Graydon laughed bitterly. “He feared that in the fight that I would certainly have made, this body he covets might be injured, marred, perhaps by accident even destroyed. I heard Nimir express himself very clearly on that point when I was his captive. Why should he run that risk—if he could make me come to him of my own volition, entirely intact?”

One of the Mother’s childish arms went round his neck, drew his head to her shoulder.

“How far you have marched, you children of the tailless gray apes!” she whispered. “And I can offer you little comfort, Graydon, if what you think the truth be that. But this is true also—Nimir will think long before he shakes off the body he now has. The mechanism which sent the feeding ray that built up into substance the thought-shape on the web, is destroyed. I sent back along the ray the force which annihilated it. So not again may Nimir weave clothing for himself in that manner, even though he may be able to shed what he wears.

“It may be that he can become Shadow once more, an intelligence disembodied—and enter you! If you throw open your gates to him. But would he dare take the chance at this moment? Not now, when I am ready to strike. If he could but be *sure* he could enter you—ah, yes! But he cannot be sure! If such bargain is in his mind, he would hold you beside him until the issue between us is settled. And then, if he won, put on your strong clean body—if he could!”

“THERE’S a large flaw in his reasoning, if that’s his idea,” said Graydon, grimly. “If he destroys you, Mother,

it is not likely Suarra would survive. And then I would very speedily put this body of mine in such condition he could not occupy it—as once before, when captive to him, I had planned to do.”

“But I don’t want to be destroyed, not Suarra, nor you, child,” replied the Mother, practically. “And I don’t intend we shall be. Nevertheless, whether you are right or wrong as to Nimir’s motives, it amounts to the same thing. You are the only one who can save Suarra—if she can be saved. It may be that I play into Nimir’s hands by what I have decided. I cannot see, though, how we are any worse off by taking the aggressive. If you fail, you only anticipate by a few hours what you fear. . . .”

She rose high upon her coils, all bird-trills gone from the lispng voice, upon her face no trace of the human; relentless.

“Alone, as soon as may be, you must go to the house of Lantlu, face that spawn of evil and his Dark Master, take Suarra from them! If you fail, then this I promise you—you shall not become the habitation of Nimir! For I, Adana, will blast Yu-Atlanchi and every living thing within it from earth’s face—though in doing this I, too, must pass with them!”

She sank down, red tongue flickering. “You would have it so, Graydon?”

“I would, Mother,” he answered steadily. “If in that annihilation Nimir is surely included.”

“Ease your mind of any doubt on that score,” she answered dryly.

“Then the sooner I go the better,” he said. “What is it that delays Regor?”

“He comes,” she answered, now tranquilly. “Look around you, Graydon, while you wait.”

For the first time, he took conscious note of the place. He was upon a circular platform raised high upon the roof of the Temple. Above him were the stars and in the west the sinking moon. At the right and far below was the City with its agitated lights appearing like a panic among fireflies; its clamor came faintly to him. Before him, across the lake, the caverns of the colossal were black mouths in the moon-glow on the cliffs. At his left was the shadowy plain.

And now he saw that this platform was a circle some two hundred feet wide, rimmed with a high curb of the amber metal. At its edge, facing the caverns, was one of the great crystal disks; a second disk looked down upon the City. The metal bases upon which they rested were open; within them were

oblong coffers of crystal filled with the quicksilver stuff of the Mother's sistrum. From these coffers protruded rods of crystal filled with the purple flame of the pillar that destroyed the Cavern of the Lost Wisdom.

Close by where the serpent-woman lay was a curious contrivance resembling somewhat the bowl from which the pillar of violet light had ascended, but much smaller, and tipped as though it were a light which could be swung upward or around in any direction. This, too, bristled with the crystal rods. There were other things whose uses he could not guess, the contents he supposed of those mysterious chests they had carried to her. And set here and there within the circle of the platform were a half dozen of the huge silver globes with their unknown symbolings.

"Adana in her arsenal!" The serpent-woman smiled for the first time. "And if you only knew, my Graydon, what weapons these are you would not have doubted so greatly the defenses of the Temple! Nay, child," she laughed, "it took no magic to read that! Yet"—again she sobered—"I wish that we could have destroyed all in the Cavern before Nimir came to it. Yes, and especially that feeding ray by which in ancient times my ancestors built up many strange beings for use—and for amusement—but always destroyed when their uses were done. Aye, much do I wish it now—who a little time ago hoped as earnestly that Nimir had found it! Ah, well—Look, go to the curb and pass your hand over it."

Wonderingly, he obeyed, stretched out his hand over the amber curb—felt nothing but air.

"And now—" She leaned over, touched a rod in the bowl beside her.

There flashed from the curb a ring of atomically tiny sparks of violet light. It rushed up, a hundred feet into the

air, contracted there into a globe of violet fire, and vanished.

"Now stretch forth your hand," she said.

He reached out. His fingers touched substance. He pressed his palm against it: it was slightly warm, glass-like and subtly conveyed a sense of impenetrability. He noted that the noise of the city was stilled—that there was absolute silence about him. He pressed against the obstacle, beat his closed fist on it—he could see nothing, yet there was a wall. The serpent-woman touched the lever again. His hand went out into the air so abruptly that he almost fell.

"Not even the strongest of your weapons could break that, Graydon," she said. "Nor has Nimir anything that can penetrate it. If I could extend that wall around the Temple, as I can around myself here, there would be no need for guards. Yet there is no magic in it. You have told me that your wise men are steadily coming to the conclusion that what you call matter is nothing but force, energy, in a certain form—they are right. All that this is, is energy somewhat more abruptly made matter, and a most stubborn matter, child! Oh, most stubborn Regor, you surely took your time!"

The opening in the platform through which they had risen had abruptly disgorged the giant, with a little pile of clothing over his arm.

"Not the easiest thing to find anything to fit him," he rumbled.

"Take off your clothes," the Mother nodded to Graydon, "and put those on. Nay, child, don't be disconcerted. Remember—I am a very old, old woman!" Her eyes danced mischievously at his involuntary movement of embarrassment. "And while you dress, listen to me."

He began to strip.

"Now thus it is," she said. "I could

loose destruction upon the City, or loose it upon the palace of Lantlu alone. But such weapons as I handle make no distinction between friend or foe. Suarra would be slain with the others. Therefore that is barred—at least”—she looked at Graydon, a message in her eyes—“at least for the moment. Nor can we send out any force to rescue her, since that would mean open fighting, and before they could reach her she would be spirited away where we could not find her. It is a matter of stealth and cunning, courage and ready resource—and one man! One man can pass unnoticed where many could not. It cannot be you, Regor, for you bear too many distinctive marks for successful disguise. Nor Huon, since his strength is not in cunning nor resourcefulness. Nor would I trust any other Yu-Atlanchan.

“It must be *you*, Graydon, and you must go alone. Also, it will be the last thing they will expect—or at least, I hope so. You shall carry your own weapons.”

Graydon, half dressed, nodded approvingly at that.

“She is in the house of Lantlu. Whether Nimir is there or not, I do not know. But just as he obscured my sight when I tried to find him in his den, so has he there. Where she is, in what plight, I cannot see—always the veiling red-black balks me. Ah, but I told you the Dark One is more cunning than I had thought! I wish I knew how he does that, for it is a thing I cannot do. But I can send your sight as far as that place, Graydon, so you will know how to go to it. And another thing I can do to help you, but that you shall know later. Bend to me.”

SHE pressed her hand against his forehead as when she sent his sight to the Cavern that time Nimir had noosed him. He seemed to float from the roof, pass as fast as a man could run away from the Temple, along this lane and that, pausing now here and now there to note a landmark, until he came to a great palace of turquoise and opal set around with trees from which dropped long pannicles of fragrant flowers all red and silver.

There were immense windows, case-mented, latticed with fretted metal delicate as lacework, set in halls and turrets, and behind them light and the movement of many people. Light and movement he sensed, rather than saw, for ever as he strove to look within, his sight was met by what seemed a fine dark mist that was impenetrable.

Back he returned, at the same pace, pausing again at the landmarks that were his clues in this labyrinth of lanes. He stood, swaying a little, beside the serpent-woman.

“You know the way? You will remember?” As before, they were less questions than commands. And as before, he answered:

“I know! I will remember!” And realized that every inch between the Temple and the palace of Lantlu was etched into his memory as though he had traversed the way ten thousand times.

She took the fillet of emerald and pressed it down upon his forehead; threw the cloak of green over his shoulders, drew a fold of it up over his mouth. She pushed him away—regarded him doubtfully.

“For the first time, child, I’m sorry you haven’t the beauty of which I am so weary. You look somewhat like some one half between the Emers and the Old Race! By my ancestors, why weren’t you born with blue eyes instead of gray! Well—it can’t be helped. I know of nothing that can change their color, or turn that black hair of yours to yellow.”

Graydon looked at her for a moment, startled; a picture of the multitudinous beauty parlors of America flashed before him, with black-haired clients by the thousands being changed into blondes, and almost as many blondes for one reason or another being changed as easily into brunettes. It was like a cold shower—it washed away all the webs of weirdness in which he had been struggling. His feet were once more on familiar ground. He chuckled, began to laugh, louder and louder. They stared at him in wonder.

“I have seen—miracles!” he gasped at last. “And I have heard you, Mother, greatest miracle of all to me, confess that something which is a commonplace to any woman of my land is to you—a miracle! Mother, any one of them could turn my black hair to yellow in less than an hour! Forgive me, Adana, for my laughter—but by the gods of all my ancestors since they were tailless gray apes—I am glad you spoke of changing the color of my hair! That disguise will be worth more to me than a guard of a thousand Emers!”

Regor looked at him askance, but the serpent-woman with frank approval.

“You please me more and more, child,” she said. “When you can laugh at your gods you have raised yourself above them! Laugh Fate in the face, and it cannot hurt you! And now—you must go. Somehow you must slip unseen into

Lantlu's home; somehow find your way to Suarra; somehow then, by craft or strength, find your way out. I cannot guide you. Only your own wit can tell you what to do.

"It is my hope that you will not encounter Nimir. If you do, remember this—your weapon will be of no avail against him. That shape you saw built up on the web is not vulnerable to any weapon except one which I alone can use. I changed its outlines, but its quality I could not change. The tide of things is with you—there is great confusion, and they will not expect attack; certainly not attack from you, single-handed. And if you fail—I will avenge you as I have promised!"

He bowed over her hand, turned to go.

"Wait!" She drew up her body, beckoned into the shadows, sent out a soft call like a faint echo of the elfin bugles. And now he realized that if those winged serpents she called her Messengers were invisible to him, they were not so to her. Forth from the shadows came a beating of strong pinions. The air about him eddied with the sweep of unseen wings.

She reached out her arms, seemed to gather something within each, drew them close, looking, with eyes that plainly saw, into eyes none else could see. She began a low, sweet trilling. Weird enough it was to hear those birdlike notes answered by others out of empty air close beside her lips. She dropped her arms.

Graydon heard the wings close over his own head. Something touched his shoulder, wrapped itself gently about his upper arm and sent a coil around his waist; something pressed his cheek carressingly—

Involuntarily Graydon thrust up a hand and gripped it. It was a serpent shape, yet contact with it brought no shrinking nor repugnance. It was cool, but not cold; he drew tentative fingers around it. The coil, he thought, must be all of eight inches through. It puzzled him that the creature had so little weight. There was a rapid pulsation above him like the whirring of an enormous humming bird; he knew that it was holding its weight off him—that it meant its embrace to be reassuring!

He laughed and patted it, as he would have a favorite dog. Again he felt the pressure against his cheek. The coils slipped away. The whirring continued. Listening, he thought that there were two there.

"It's a pity you cannot talk to them," trilled the Snake Mother. "And I must

say, my child, that you have a certain way with you. My Messenger who paid you such an unusual attention just now is the wife of the one who did not. Or is it"—her purple eyes grew mischievous—"or is that the male is, after all, really the shy one—"

She stopped abruptly. Her neck thrust forward. Her gaze withdrew from him, seemed to center upon something far, far away; returned.

"Go now, Graydon," she whispered. "Go quickly. I cannot see—but I know you must hasten. These two shall attend you. You cannot talk to them. Point to those you would have slain—and they will slay them! Trust them! They have intelligence, Graydon. You cannot understand, but they have it. Trust them. Go—"

She pushed him away from her. Regor wheeled him round; marched him to the edge of the Temple's roof. There he stopped and drew forth a stout rope at whose end was a grappling hook. He fastened the hook to the cornice, threw the rope over.

"There's your path, lad," he said huskily. "The Mother wants none to see you leave." He clasped him in his arms for a moment, tenderly as a woman. "This heart of mine will be dead till you return—over with you! And take this—"

He thrust his long poniard into Graydon's girdle. Rifle slung over his shoulders, he caught the rope, slipped over the parapet. He slid down, the whirring of the winged serpents accompanying him. He reached the end of the rope, stood for an instant in the darkness, wondering which way to go.

He felt the touch of one of the Messengers, urging him on. And suddenly, in his brain, he saw the way to Lantlu's palace sharply outlined as a map.

The winged serpents close above his head, Graydon began to run along those lanes his sight had followed when the Mother had touched him. Over him, matching his pace, beat the great wings of the feathered serpents.

CHAPTER XXII

BRIDE OF THE LIZARD-MAN

IT WAS a luminously clear night, the moon still high. He found his way easily, as though his feet had been long trained to every turn and curve of it. After a little he stopped running; for one thing, to conserve his strength for what was to come; for another, lest it draw attention to him from those who might also be traveling his path. But for a time he met no one.

He was close to the palace of Lantlu when he had his first encounter. It proved to him the deadly mettle of those animate rapier blades the Mother had assigned to him for servants. From a shrubbery concealed lane there suddenly emerged a couple of Emers carrying javelins and flambeaux in which, instead of flames, were globes gleaming with a golden light. Behind them came a litter carried by four Indians. In it was a noble clad in green. He was followed by another pair of guards.

Graydon had no chance to retreat, nor to slip into the shadow. The occupant of the litter waved his hand, greeted him. Graydon, holding his cloak to hide his face as much as possible, returned the greeting briefly, tried to pass on. Such brusque behavior was apparently not the custom, for the noble raised himself, gave a sharp command to his men, then leaped out and advanced toward him with drawn sword.

There was but one thing to do, and Graydon did it. He pointed at the Emers, and hurled himself upon the Yu-Atlanchan. He ducked beneath a vicious thrust of the sword, and the next instant had caught the noble's right wrist in one hand while the other throttled him.

It was no time for niceties. Up came his knee, and caught his opponent in the groin. Under the agony of that blow the Yu-Atlanchan relaxed, his sword dropped. Promptly Graydon pinned him through the heart with Regor's dagger.

He did not dare use his rifle, so bent swiftly, picked up the dead man's sword, turned to face the Emers.

They, too, were dead!

They lay there, the eight of them, blood spouting from necks and staining their breasts. Pierced by the rapier bills of the winged serpents before they could make outcry, lift a single javelin. Slain by the invisible deaths in that brief moment it had taken him to kill the Yu-Atlanchan!

He looked down at their bodies, with a touch of terror. It seemed incredible that those eight lives could have been wiped out in such little time. He heard the wings of the creatures whirring close over his head, stared up toward the sound. Above him, as though an unseen finger had traced them in the air, were two slender crimson lines. They shook, and a little shower of crimson drops fell from them—

The winged serpents cleansing their beaks of the blood of the eight Emers!

He turned his back on those still figures, resolutely; went on with a ruthless elation in his heart, his pulses singing

victory. All sense of aloneness had fled, he felt as though he had an army at his back. He sped on, boldly. Now the lane entered a dense coppice of flowering trees. He had not gone far along it before there came a tap upon his shoulder, and a coil of one of his weird escort ringed his body, checking him. He heard at his ear a muted bugle note, like a warning whisper.

Graydon understood. Here was need for caution. He crept softly along through the copse. The lane angled abruptly. He halted, in the deepest shadow. Not a hundred yards away was the palace of Lantlu.

He halted, studying it. This was the first time he had been close to one of the dwellings of the Yu-Atlanchans.

Fantastic enough was its architecture to his eyes, but it was clear that its builders had given no thought whatever to defense; nor, he reflected, was there any reason why they should have in this hidden land, sheltered from invasion, and free from civil strife since that war of the Lords countless ages ago against the Lord of Evil.

The structure covered, he estimated, a little more than an acre. It seemed to be octagonal, not lofty, the bulk of it composed of two high-vaulted floors. From its center arose a dome, shimmering sapphire and opal under the moon rays; a dome pointed and shaped like that which Tamerlane the Conqueror brought back from ravished Damascus to grace his beloved Samarkand. Up to its swelling base pushed clusters of small jeweled turrets, like little bowers built by gnomes for their women.

The octagonal walls were sheathed with tiles glimmering as though lacquered with molten pale rubies, sun-yellowed topazes, water-green emeralds. They contained, or at least those he could see were pierced by windows, both rectangular and oval, casemented and latticed by fretwork of stone and metal delicate as lace. Out from their base extended a tessellated pave, thirty feet wide, of black and white polished stone. Slender pillars of gold were ranged at its edge, bearing silken canopies. Soft light streamed from every window through webbed curtainings. There was no door.

Graydon crept forward to the edge of the copse. Between him and the pave was a smooth stretch of sward, open, and impossible to cross without being detected by any one on watch. He saw no one, but from the whole hundred feet or more to his right the flowering trees pressed closer to the walls. He flitted

along the rim of the boskage until he reached this verdant tongue. Working cautious way to its tip, he found he was within fifty feet of the pillars.

He faced another side of the palace. On the ground floor was a trio of wide oval windows, almost touching, through which came a brighter glow than from the others. And now voices came to him plainly, voices of the nobles both men and women. They came from this chamber wherein shone the brighter lights.

Here beside the pillars was a guard of a dozen Indians armed with both javelins and bows.

As he stood there hesitating, wondering what was best to do, he heard from the roof a tumult of shouts and laughter, and the sound of pipes playing a curious jigg'ing tune. Then above all, stilling both clamor and music, the jeering voice of Lantlu:

"Welcome, Suarra! Welcome to the bride! Ho, there—bring forth the bride-room!"

And then the beginning of another tumult of applause and laughter.

Graydon leaped out of the protecting shadow of the trees, and pointed to the Emer guard. He heard the swish of great pinions. He ran toward the palace, unslinging his rifle as he went! Before he could take his second step he saw two of the Indians go down, then another pair, while the others stood frozen, paralyzed by this invisible death striking among them.

Here was swordplay swifter than he had ever beheld in any salon of French or Italian master of fence. For he had not covered half that fifty-foot strip before all that guard lay stretched at the edge of the pave, hearts pierced, throats torn. Precise, unerringly, with the speed of a spray of machine gun bullets, the rapier beaks of the flying serpents had reached their marks. Silently they had struck—and silently those Emers had died.

HE STRODE over a still quivering body, and to the curtained windows. Whether there were other guards close by he neither knew nor cared, gave indeed no thought to it. The ovals were grilled like those he had first noted. He tried the first, but it was immovable. The second swung quietly under his hands. He snapped open the safety lock of his rifle, gripped the gun in his left hand, softly parted the curtain webs with his right, and looked into the chamber.

His gaze flew straight to Suarra—took in her, and for the moment nothing else.

She stood upon a dais in the center of the great room beside a flower-decked couch. She was clad in a filmy robe of green through which her white body gleamed. Around her head was a wreath of crimson flowers. Her feet were bare. Her hands were crossed over her breasts, and around their wrists he saw the glitter of golden manacles.

Her mouth had been painted, her cheeks rouged, and these spots of color stood out against the waxen pallor of her face like those upon a doll's. And like a waxen doll she seemed, lifeless, eyes closed, scarcely breathing. And even as he gazed, she shuddered, swayed, and dropped upon the edge of the couch.

"The bride is becomingly disturbed at the approach of the bridegroom," spoke Lantlu, suavely, sonorously, like a mocking showman. "It is fitting. It is the traditional attitude. Her virginity is alarmed! Shyness overcomes her! But soon—ah, soon. . . . Ho, ho, ho!" laughed Lantlu. From all the room a chorus of malicious laughter answered him. Suarra's head drooped lower.

There were red lights dancing before Graydon's eyes. Rage so great it half strangled him, beat through him. He mastered himself, vision clearing. He saw now that all around the dais was a circle of low couches, and upon these were a score of the Yu-Atlanchans. So far as beauty went, they might have been angels, but through those masks of perfection peered devils of cruelty and cold lusts. There was no pity in the eyes that sparkled upon Suarra. Lantlu's familiars and the most evil of them, it came to him.

At the far end of the room, half-risen, one knee upon the couch, a hand caressing the hair of a woman lying there, was Lantlu. With a satisfaction that for a moment overrode his red wrath, Graydon noted the flattening of the once perfect nose, the still disfigured mouth—the signatures of his fist stamped on Lantlu's face in the Temple. He looked away from him, quickly examining the chamber for its entrances and guards.

There was only one doorway, draped like the windows; and no guards, at least not within the room. Well, that was good. . . . Lantlu was an easy target . . . the best plan would be to step in, put a bullet through his head, shoot a couple more, get Suarra and escape with her before the others could recover from the surprise of Graydon's sudden attack.

He hated to let that mocking devil get off as easily as that . . . what he would prefer was the use of a fully equipped medieval torture chamber for a day or

two. However, one couldn't have everything! After all, he was playing in luck that the Dark Master was absent. Yes—that was the best way.

No! He was forgetting his best cards of all—the Mother's two Messengers! With them and his rifle he could clean up the whole devil's outfit! Where were they?

As though in answer to his thought, he felt the touch of feathers sweep his face, the pressure of a coil on each side of him; knew that, wings furled, the two creatures were poised, waiting to enter the window with him.

He gave a swift glance at Suarra before he tensed himself for the leap within. He saw then what he had not before noticed—that between her and the doorway the circle of couches was broken, leaving a wide passage straight from it to the dais.

As he looked, the webs were drawn aside, and through the opening walked two Emer women, naked, carrying great baskets filled with flowers from which, as they marched, they drew handfuls of blooms, strewing them on the floor.

Close behind them came four sturdy Emers, armed with maces.

"Behold!" chanted Lantlu. "The bridegroom!"

Through the portal shambled a lizard-man!

He was clothed, like Suarra, in a robe of filmy green through which his leathery yellow skin glistened, as though it had been oiled. His red eyes darted right and left, viciously, challenging. Around his scaly head was a wreath of white blossoms out of which his red comb protruded, hideously.

From some hidden place the jiggling music sounded again, loudly. The crimson eyes of the lizard-man fell upon the crouching figure of the girl upon the dais. His lips drew back along his snout, showing the yellow fangs. He leaped forward.

"No!" groaned Graydon—and shot through the curtains.

The leap of the lizard-man was checked as though by a sledge blow. He spun in mid-air, and squatted down with the top of his head blown off.

Graydon vaulted over the low sill of the oval window and was within the room. As he struck the floor he fired again, with half-raised rifle, at Lantlu. As the shot rang out the master of the dinosaurs dropped behind the couch, but Graydon knew that he had missed him! He'd get him later—now for the Emers. He raised his gun—the Emers were already down!

The winged serpents! Again he had

forgotten them. But this time they had not waited for his orders. The guards lay slain, as those who had barred their way lay upon the pave outside. Well, again the Mother had been right; they were intelligent. He heard their wings above him, knew that now they awaited command.

"Suarra!" he called. "Come to me!"

SHE stood, gazing at him incredulously; in her fair face something of the mazed rapture of a soul reprieved from hell! She took one tottering step.

Without a twinge of compunction he sent bullets through the heads of two nobles upon couches between them, breaking the circle. That would teach them a lesson . . . but better not kill any more now . . . better not turn the serpents upon them until Suarra was under his arm . . . keep 'em quiet till then . . . then send 'em all to hell where they belonged. . . .

"If one of you moves, you get the same," he cried. "Lie still in your hole, Lantlu! I have those with me who can dig you out!"

If he only knew how to talk to the Messengers! He'd send them after the dog! But you couldn't just say, "Go get him, Towser," to things like those.

"Suarra!" he called again. She had slipped over the edge of the dais, was speeding to him. . . . Better watch that doorway . . . those shots must have been heard . . . how about that open window at his back? Well, you couldn't look two ways at once. . . .

Suarra was beside him!

"Beloved! Oh, my beloved!" he heard her broken whisper, felt her lips press his shoulder.

"Buck up, darling! We're going to get out all right!" he said quietly, but did not turn to her, kept eyes and rifle steady on the ring of silent nobles and the doorway.

He wondered grimly whether they were going to get out. There was no evidence as yet that his shots had roused the palace. Yet discovery was certain, and must be soon.

His thoughts went racing—was Lantlu really in hiding there in the chamber, or had he crept through some secret way and was now marshaling his forces? He did not dare search for him. No—he'd better keep to that idea he had a moment ago . . . launch the winged serpents, get out the window and away with Suarra while the two Messengers were slaughtering, leave them to follow, catch up and cover their retreat. If Lantlu was there he'd have to leave him to them after

all . . . well, one couldn't have everything . . . but how to instruct the Messengers? Of course—Suarra could do it—
Too late!

In the open portal, abruptly as though he had stepped out of the air, was Nimir!

Too late now. No use now to loose the winged deaths, or try to flee. Graydon had clear conviction of that. The game lay between him and the Lord of Evil, as from the beginning of this adventure something deep within him had told him that it must. He had walked into Nimir's trap, and now must make his bargain. He lowered his gun, drew Suarra close to him.

A doubt assailed him. Had it been Nimir's trap? The Lord of Evil had moved a pace into the great room, was staring at him and Suarra, astonishment plain in his pale blue eyes. Up from beside him arose Lantlu, laughing—pointing derisively, gloating upon them.

Graydon threw up the rifle, covered him. Before he could press the trigger, one of Nimir's long, misshapen arms had circled Lantlu, had thrust him behind the shelter of his own body. The rifle spat. It seemed to Graydon that the bullet went through Nimir's breast. If so, it did not harm him—even as the serpent-woman had warned it would not!

Silent, unmoved, the Lord of Evil's puzzled gaze traveled from man and girl to the body of the Urd, the wreath of white blooms yellowed with his blood, his mockery of green wedding garment torn in his death agony; it passed along the path of flowers, over the dead Emers, to the blossom-strewn couch on the dais, and rested again upon Suarra.

Then Graydon saw comprehension come to him!

The crouching, frog-like body seemed to expand; it drew erect. The beautiful, Luciferian face above it became white and hard as stone, the pale eyes like ice. He wheeled, gripped Lantlu, lifted him, and held him high over his head as though he meant to dash him to the floor. The master of the dinosaurs writhed and fought vainly against that grip.

For an instant the Lord of Evil held him thus, then mastered his passion, lowered him, and thrust him down prone at his feet.

"You fool!" he said, and there was a dreadful tonelessness in his voice: "to set your lusts and your hatreds against my will! Did I not tell you that this girl is to be held safe, inviolate? And did I not tell you why? How did you dare do this thing? Answer me, fool!"

"I promised her I would mate her with the Urd! I keep my promises. What difference would it have made? The outlander would have come at your summons. Nor ever have known—until too late! And no harm has been done, since you have him now. And somewhat sooner than you had planned—Dark Master!"

There was no fear in Lantlu's voice, and there was more than a trace of his mocking arrogance in his salutation. The Lord of Evil did not reply, looking down upon him inscrutably. Stubborn lad, Lantlu, thought Graydon. Thoroughly rotten—but hard to break.

Decidedly he was glad his bullets had not hit Lantlu—glad, that was, if there was any chance to treat that stubbornness of his in any Yu-Atlanchan equivalent of that medieval torture chamber. Wonder what Nimir would do to him? He, Graydon, had been right in that idea he'd had of the reason for Suarra's capture. Nimir had let the cat out of the bag himself.

He studied Nimir's monstrous body, with its face of a fallen angel, the noble head, the imperial power and Satanic beauty of it—he felt a pang of pity for the Lord of Evil! After all, why not have let him have a body which would have gone with that head? . . . Damned if he could see what was gained by saddling Nimir with that monstrosity. . . . Nimir had worked long enough for proper clothes . . . a woman's trick . . . it wasn't decent fighting. . . .

Suddenly he was aware that Nimir's eyes were upon him; that he had read his thoughts—

"You and I are not so far apart after all, Graydon," said the Lord of Evil, with all that old alluring sweetness which Graydon had fought against when battling against him as the Shadow of the Dark One on the jet throne.

It brought Graydon back with a jolt. After all, what business had he pitying Nimir? It was his business to get Suarra out of peril—save himself if he could!

If the Lord of Evil realized that he had made a mistake, he did not show it. The cold eyes were bluer, there was friendliness in them—real or assumed.

"I MUST talk with you, Graydon." The Lord of Evil's voice was gentle, placating.

"I know it," said Graydon grimly. "And it will be right here, Nimir; and now."

The Lord of Evil smiled, and the smile lightened the dark power throned upon his face, gave it something of that dangerous attraction which lived in the sweetness of his voice.

Graydon felt the spell, braced himself against it.

"Get up, Lantlu. Do not go from here until I permit you. See that you do nothing to interrupt us. I warn you—and for the last time!"

Lantlu arose leisurely, gave Graydon and Suarra an indifferent glance, sauntered over to his couch, dropped beside the woman there, and drew her arm around his neck. It was rather well done, Graydon thought somewhat grudgingly.

The Lord of Evil squattered toward him. He felt Suarra's uncontrollable shudder. And when Nimir was within a half dozen paces, Graydon drew Regor's poniard, set its point on the girl's breast, over her heart.

"Stop there, Nimir," he said. "That is close enough. And hear me first. I know what you want. I am willing to discuss it. If we cannot agree, and if I am convinced we cannot escape, I will kill Suarra. She would have it so. Is that not true, Suarra?"

"It is true, beloved," she answered tranquilly.

"I will then," continued Graydon. "loose my two Messengers upon these swine here while I do my best against you with this—" He touched the rifle. "If I find I can't stop you, I'll use my last bullet to blow my own head off. And that, I think, you won't like. But I'll do it. I mean it, Nimir."

The Lord of Evil smiled again.

"I believe you. And that is, as you surmise, the last thing I would like to see happen. Nor will it be necessary—if you are reasonable."

"My mind is wide open," said Graydon, "but only to your words. You understand me?"

The Lord of Evil bowed, then regarded him for a time without speaking. A feeling of unreality stole over Graydon. He felt as though he were in some play, a dream play in which he ran no real risks; that he could pick his own lines, mold his situations.

He lost entirely the sense of grimmest reality that had held every nerve and muscle taut as drawn bow strings. And, oddly, that feeling of the unreal buoyed him, filled him with a heady recklessness. Nor did it occur to him, then, that the Lord of Evil might be responsible for all that!

"Neither of you can escape—unless I let you," said Nimir. "You cannot harm me, nor can those servants of Adana whom I see hovering. That is absolute truth, Graydon. This shape of mine, built as it was, is not in any manner like yours. Material, yes—in a way. But with

no vital centers that can be destroyed. Send your missiles through it, plunge your poniard into it—and it closes behind them. If you do not believe me—try it, Graydon!"

He plucked open his cloak, revealed the distorted barrel of his chest, stood waiting.

Graydon raised the rifle, minded for the moment to accept the challenge. He dropped it—useless to waste the cartridge; Nimir spoke truth. . . .

"But you"—the Lord of Evil covered his monstrous torso—"you and Suarra I can destroy. Oh, very easily. Yet here once more we are at stalemate—since I want you, Graydon, let us say intact!"

"You made that quite clear once before," said Graydon curtly. "Well—then what?"

"A better bargain for you than if that willful fool there had not spoiled my plan," answered Nimir. "And now alone because he has put it in your power to make yourself—uninhabitable! No—quite as much because of a certain thought you had of me and the Snake-woman not so long ago. It has been so long since any one has thought kindly of me," said Nimir, and laughed. "I find it oddly pleasant."

"The bargain?" said Graydon impatiently.

"Quite so," went on the Lord of Evil gently. "Now I never intended this shape of mine to be—permanent. Even if it had not been marred, it would still have been but—temporary. No, Graydon, I much prefer good human flesh and blood, which, adequately treated, can be made to last forever. And as I have told you rather often, of these I much prefer yours. Therefore, I will send Suarra and you safely back to the Temple—yes, even with a guard of honor—if—"

"I was waiting for the 'if.'" said Graydon.

"If you will promise me, should I win the coming battle, that you will come to me of your own free will and, after, I have cast aside these present coverings, let me enter as permanent tenant of that body of yours—I mean, of course, as co-tenant!—I renew, in short, my offer of sharing your habitation with you without crowding or other molestation." smiled the Lord of Evil.

"Fair enough," said Graydon unhesitatingly. "I agree!"

"No, beloved, no!" cried Suarra, and clung to him. "Better death for both—"

"I don't think he will win, darling," said Graydon. The heady recklessness was stronger within him . . . it was a damned sight better dicker than he had

expected . . . rather a sporting proposition . . . he didn't believe Nimir could win. . . . Even if he did—well, he was strong . . . he could fight this companion once he was seated in his brain beside him . . . control him . . . make him sick of his bargain. . . . At the worst, life would be damned interesting—to put it mildly. . . . Hell, where were those ideas coming from? Why was he thinking like that? Weakening . . . no matter, he had to save Suarra . . . it was the only way!

"I KNOW I will win," said the Lord of Evil softly. "You know it, too, don't you, Graydon?"

"No!" said Graydon, and slipped away from that spell of helpless acquiescence which had stolen over him. He drew a deep breath, all recklessness and sense of the unreal gone, bitter anger and a fierce determination taking their place. "No, I don't know it, Nimir! And don't throw any more of that sorcery of yours around me—or I may decide to end things right here and now! Let it stand! I agree! Now let us go!"

"Good!" The Lord of Evil laughed, the sweetness that had laden the whisperings of the Shadow strong in that laughter. "Now would you make me even more determined to win, Graydon, did I not know that my victory is certain. There is just one more detail. I will not demand that you remain within the Temple during our little debate with the snake-woman. Indeed—I do not think you will be able to!" He looked at Graydon with a sparkle of malicious amusement in the pale eyes. "But now that I have such a personal interest in you, it is surely within my rights to insist that every precaution be taken to keep—well, to employ a polite phrase, to keep my stake in the contract in usable condition. Therefore, you shall wear—this."

He took from his girdle a broad collar of faintly gleaming red metal, stepped forward with it in his hand.

"What is it?" asked Graydon suspiciously.

"Something that will keep certain powerful servants of mine from killing you," answered the Lord of Evil, "if and when you are shaken out of the Temple. I don't mind your telling Adana that. She will be fully aware of what I mean when she sees it. Really, it gives you quite an advantage. I waive that, however—for broader considerations! Come"—into his voice crept implacable command—"it is necessary! It gives me no power over you, if that is what you fear. But until you wear it—Suarra cannot go!"

Graydon bent his head, felt the touch of the misshapen fingers on his throat, heard the click as they fastened the collar around his neck—heard Suarra sobbing!

"And now," said the Lord of Evil, "for your escort back to Adana, who is so anxiously trying to see what is happening to you, so furious because she cannot! Follow me!"

He turned, and shambled to the doorway. Hand in hand, they followed him, through the broken ring of the silent nobles, past the hideous body of the lizard-man and the Emers whom the winged serpents had slain.

As Graydon passed, he heard the pinions of those unseen guardians vibrating above their heads, felt the touch of their coils. He stifled an impulse to send them darting at Lantlu, watching him as indifferently as those others.

The Lord of Evil leading, they passed out of that chamber into a great hall filled with the Emer soldiers and with other nobles who shrank back as Nimir squattered by—shrank back and let them pass and kept lips closed and faces expressionless. Only, he noted, they looked furtively at the dully gleaming collar that fettered his throat—and over some of their faces he saw pallor spread.

They came at last to the entrance of the palace. And here the Lord of Evil beckoned a captain and gave swift orders. Quickly a double litter was brought, borne by eight strong green-kilted bearers. Into it, courteously, Nimir waved them. The bearers raised the litter, a score of the soldiers led by another Indian officer surrounded it. The doors swung open, and through them marched their escort.

"Until we meet again," smiled the Lord of Evil.

"May it be never!" answered Graydon whole-heartedly.

"I look forward to many pleasant centuries together!" said the Lord of Evil—and laughed.

That laughter still ringing in his ears, they entered the shadows of the trees. In the hands of the guards shone out flambeaux of clear white light. And suddenly Suarra thrust arms round his neck, drew his head down upon her soft breast.

"Graydon—oh, Graydon beloved—I am afraid I am greatly afraid! It was too great a price, beloved! Better, far better, had I slain myself before you came! But I did not know . . . I hoped . . . until it was too late, and they fettered me . . . and then I could not kill myself. . . ."

Well—so was he afraid. Bitterly afraid! He comforted her as best he could.

And so at last they came to the Temple. They halted while the officer and a squad of his men mounted the broad steps, signaling with their flambeaux as they went.

Graydon heard a challenge, the rumbling of Regor's voice. Then down the great stairway leaped the giant, to the side of their litter; lifted them out; embraced them as though they had been children returned from the dead.

The green-kilted guard saluted, stood at attention until they had come to the massive doors. Graydon heard the pinions of the winged serpents, darting upward to where the Snake Mother waited; turning, saw the escort beginning their return.

He felt an immense weariness; he swayed, was caught by Regor's strong arm, carried forward.

The doors of the Temple clanged shut behind him.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COLLAR OF NIMIR

SUARRA'S soft hands caressed him, she was murmuring broken words of pity, of endearment. He mastered his weakness, and broke away from Regor. The immense vestibule was filled with Indian soldiers in the Mother's blue, and some score of the nobles. Now these latter strode toward them eagerly, their customary poise banished by devouring curiosity. But Regor waved them aside, forbidding them to stay.

"To the Mother—and at once! Suarra, you are not harmed?"

She shook her head, and he hurried them onward. His eyes fell upon the metal collar around Graydon's neck, and he paused, staring at it perplexedly.

"The badge of Nimir!" laughed Graydon, mirthlessly. The giant reached out his hand, as though to tear it from him.

"No." Graydon pushed him away. "It's not so easy as all that, Regor."

The giant glared at the collar, uneasily, his brows knitted.

"It is a matter for the Mother," said Suarra. "Quickly, the night wanes."

She took Graydon's hand, sped on with him, leaving Regor to follow. On they went through wide corridors filled with the Emers and little knots of the Old Race, stopping not even for greeting, until they came to that curving buttress up through which ran the shaft to the serpent-woman's sanctuary. They stepped from it out onto the roof of the Temple.

"Mother!" cried Suarra.

There was a gleam of rosy-pearl, flash-

ing to her, the coils of Adana undulating over the platform. Her body uprose beside the girl, drawing her head down to her little tilted breasts. For the first time Graydon heard something suspiciously like a human sob in the serpent-woman's voice.

"My daughter! Suarra! My daughter!"

And Suarra clung to her, weeping, while the Mother's heart-shaped mouth caressed her misty hair.

The Snake Mother raised her head, thrust out a hand to Graydon. Her gaze fell upon the collar of the Lord of Evil. She stopped, grew rigid, her eyes dilated, her neck thrust forward, her pointed tongue flicked out—once, twice—like a snake's.

She dipped from Suarra, reached out and touched Graydon upon the heart, the forehead; then cupped his face in her tiny hands and stared deep, deep into his eyes. He felt that gaze searching his mind, his soul. And gradually into the purple pools came pity, regret—and a certain apprehension, or so it seemed to him.

"So!" she whispered, and dropped her hands. "So—that is what he plans!" Her gaze drew inward; it was as though she were talking to herself, unseeing, unaware of them. "But he will be loath to use *that* weapon—until the last! I can meet it, yes. But I, too, am loath to use that power—as reluctant as he! By my ancestors—had I but one of my own people to stand beside me! Yes, had I but another of the Lords to stand with Tyddo—I would not fear! But Malik I cannot call upon—the Lord of Fate may take no part in this! Well—there is no choice! And if between us Nimir and I unloose that which we cannot again leash, will not destruction spread like a swift pestilence over all this spinning globe . . . make of earth a desert indeed . . . bare of life? Ah—but then Nimir himself cannot escape destruction . . . and better an earth bare of mankind than mankind ruled by him!"

Her gaze came back to Graydon, was aware of him.

"There, child," she said, gently. "Don't despair. So you pitied Nimir, did you? And made his bargain! While he dropped his poison into your mind so cunningly—oh, so cunningly! Well, it was written, I suppose—and had to be. Nor was it your fault. It was I who baited that trap, though unknowingly, when I gave way to my woman's vanity and altered his clothing to my whim there at the Feast of the Dream Maker. What has happened is but the pattern I made. You could have done nothing else—and it might be

worse. We will let the dice lie as they have fallen. Oh, do not stare at me. It is no sorcery. I have read your thought, that is all. But I would hear the tale in words. Suarra—"

She turned to the girl. She saw, apparently for the first time, the bridal robe of green, the painted cheeks and lips. And at the sight, all her wrath against Nimir, all her hours of anxiety for Suarra, came to a focus and exploded. She threw out her hands, ripped the robe from the girl, leaving her revealed in all her white loveliness.

"Go over there and wash your face!" hissed the Snake Mother, as angrily as any old-fashioned mother might to a daughter she had caught surreptitiously dipping into the rouge pot.

The girl gasped, then fled, an ivory shadow, into the dimness around Adana's cushioned nest. And Graydon, despite all his weariness and trouble, chuckled; for it was one of the flashes of purely human character that took away from this entirely unhuman being any mind clogging awe or sense of terrifying strangeness.

The Mother looked at him angrily, raised her hand as though half inclined to slap him; then broke into a trill of laughter, and glided to Suarra. He heard her talking softly, repentantly, to the girl. Then she called him.

A globe of dim luminescence pulsed out beside her. By its light he saw that Suarra had thrown round herself a covering cloak, and that she had cleansed her face of paint. She glanced at him, and dropped her head. The serpent-woman laughed, brought their faces together, cheek by cheek.

"Don't mind, child," she said mischievously. "He knows women have bodies, I'm sure. Or should, by this time. And Regor is old enough to be your great-grandfather, at least. Come over, Old Bear. Now tell me, daughter, just what happened. Here, drink this."

She reached down into her coffer, took from it a small phial, filled a crystal goblet with water, put into it a drop from the phial. Suarra sipped, and handed it to Graydon. He drank, a tingling went through him, all weariness vanished; tenseness relaxed, his mind cleared, and he sank back beside Regor, listening to Suarra.

There was little of it, save how she had been trapped, that Graydon did not know already. An Emer officer, whom she had no reason to suppose anything but one of the Temple guard, had come to her after she had left the Mother and was watching the arrival of Huon's

refugees from the lair. He bore a message from the Lord Graydon, he told her, who was on the Temple terrace. The Lord Graydon had discovered something there he wanted her to see before they went to the Mother with news of it. The Lord Graydon had commanded the Speaker to find her and guide her to where he waited.

IT WAS the very boldness and simplicity of the ruse that had snared her. There was much confusion, what with the reinforcements of the Indians and others entering. She knew that the Temple terraces were guarded, and it never occurred to her to doubt the genuineness of the summons. She had slipped out with the officer, mentioning to one of the nobles she had encountered that she was going out to meet Graydon.

The Emer officer leading, she had gone along the lower terrace, passing several squads of guards and answering their challenges. She had just gone by one of these squads when a cloak was thrown over her head, and she was lifted up and borne away.

"They were Lantlu's men," said Regor, somberly. "They had killed our guards, and taken their places. They were clad in the Mother's colors. We found the bodies of our men where they had been hauled over the terrace."

When they had got into the shelter of the trees, Suarra continued, her wrists and ankles had been bound and she had been placed in a litter. She had been taken straight to Lantlu's palace. There, Indian women had rouged and wreathed her and before she could suspect what was intended, had stripped her, clothed her in the green robe and snapped the golden manacles. Then she had been led to the room where Graydon had found her—to learn from Lantlu's jeering lips what he had in store for her.

The serpent-woman listened, head swaying back and forth menacingly, eyes glittering; she asked no questions, did not interrupt.

"Regor," she said quietly, when Suarra was done, "go you now, and make sure there has been no chink left through which any rat of Nimir can creep. Take what sleep you can—for at dawn all within the Temple must be awake and at their posts. By another dawn, it comes to me, either I or the Lord of Evil will have conquered. Suarra, Graydon—you two sleep here beside me for what remains of this night."

And when Regor had gone, she took a hand of his in both of hers.

"Child," she said, softly, "do not fear.

You shall sleep deep, and without dream or fear of Nimir. There are still four hours before dawn. I will awaken you—and then we shall talk of what is to be done. About this, I mean”—she touched the sullenly glowing collar—“and other things. Now drink this—you too, Suarra.”

She dipped again into her coffer, drew forth another phial, dropped one colorless globule into the goblet. They drank of it. He saw Suarra yawn, sink down upon the cushions, smile at him sleepily; her eyes closed. He felt a delicious lethargy stealing over him, let his head fall upon his cushions.

He looked again at the serpent-woman. She had drawn forth her sistrum, was holding it on high. From it streamed a slender pencil of milky light. She pointed it to the zenith, began to trace within its depths an ever widening spiral.

She was signaling. Signaling, he wondered drowsily to whom—to what? He fell asleep.

The Mother's touch awakened him; he looked up into her face bending over him. Her purple eyes were dilated, phosphorescent, enormous in the heart of her childish face. He sprang to his feet.

At the edge of the platform was the Lord of Fools, peering over toward the lake. The scarlet figure of Kon the spider-man, and the black bulk of Regor were beside him. Suarra lay slumbering still, her cheek nestled in the crook of one white arm stretched from under a heap of silken coverings.

Graydon shivered, feeling suddenly oddly chill. For the first time since he had entered the Hidden Land, the sky was obscured. The clouds hung low, not more than three hundred feet above the Temple. They were less like clouds than like a solid steel gray ceiling. The mist was motionless.

Above him, and all around him, was a continuous soughing and whispering like the circling flight of countless and immense birds. Rhythmically they pulsed, this beating of unseen mighty pinions—

The winged serpents! The Messengers of the Snake Mother! It was they whom she had been summoning from beyond the barrier with her slender beam of enigmatic light!

She shook his hand, glided with him over to the platform's edge, gave him a lens similar to that he had used in Huon's lair, pointed a finger to the nearer shore of the lake. He looked through it—

The shore was incrustated with the lizard-men! They surged there by the hundreds, by the thousands, it seemed

to him, their ocherous ranks moving slowly forward as others joined them, wading up from the waters. And now he saw that the Urd horde was streaming across the lake from the caverns, that the surface was streaked from side to side with the swimming horde.

Along the front of those who had landed rode a half dozen of Lantlu's nobles upon the black dinosaurs, whipping them into order with huge lashes shaped like sjamboks. One of them leaned over the side of his monstrous steed—Graydon caught the dull glimmer of red metal around his throat, looked more closely.

It was a collar such as that which the Lord of Evil had snapped around his own!

Why—another of the riders bore this badge of Nimir—and another! He dropped the lens, turned to the serpent-woman. She nodded, answering his unspoken question.

“Yes,” she said, “Nimir has linked you to him! Part of what he told you was truth, Graydon—but part of it was lies.

“When he said that it would protect you, he spoke truth. But when he said it gave him no power over you—there he lied, indeed! For it does—by it he can draw you to him. By it, if he chooses, he fastens his thought upon you, yes, even directs you. Unless you are too strong for him!”

She was silent, while he stared at her, miserably.

“And that is why you may not stay here with me to help us as I had hoped. For Nimir is cunning and desperate—and I hope will soon be much more desperate—and it might be that in one unguarded moment of yours he could wreck, *through you*, all that I plan!”

“Not through me!” groaned Graydon. “No, no! He cannot shake my allegiance to you.”

“We cannot afford to run that risk,” answered the Mother. “Now I could rid you of his mark—but something whispers to me to let it be—that in doing this to you, Nimir has made a mistake—that if he had been wise he would have let the cards fall as I had disposed them for him, that he should have bent his mind solely upon this issue. But his eagerness to possess you may react upon him, even as my vanity has reacted upon me. How this advantage may come, I do not know—but it is there. . . .”

“The last Urd has reached the shore, Adana,” muttered Regor. “We should go. We must prepare our defenses against Nimir.”

“Go you then with Regor and Huon,”

said the Mother. "They have use for you. And of this be sure—I will win, or all shall die! Nimir shall not have you! This I have promised you. And I, Adana, tell you that thus it shall be!"

She held out a little hand! Graydon bent over it and kissed it. And suddenly she leaned forward and set her lips to his forehead.

"Awaken Suarra," she said. "Bid her good-by—then go swiftly. If we meet never again—remember, I loved you, child!"

Again she kissed him, then pushed him away. He bent over the sleeping girl. She opened drowsy eyes, looked up at him, dropped an arm around his neck and impulsively drew his lips down to hers.

"Oh, but I have slept," she murmured, but half-awake. "And is it already dawn?"

"It is well beyond dawn, heart of mine," he told her. "And I must go with Regor and Huon here down into the Temple—"

"Into the Temple!" She sat up, all awake. "But I thought you were to be here! With me! Mother—"

"Have no fear, darling." He laughed, and only Adana knew what that laugh cost him. "I'll soon come back to you."

He felt Regor tap his shoulder, gently withdrew the clinging arm, kissed her once more, strode swiftly away between the giant and Huon. His last glimpse of her as the three dropped down the shining shaft was her head against the breast of the serpent-woman, her hand raised to her lips to waft him a parting kiss—and doubt and distrust already beginning to darken her clear eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV

TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

NOW of the freight of those dread hours following his parting with Suarra, Graydon saw with his own eyes only a part. The complete picture he had to arrange from the stories of those who survived.

They passed on quickly, Regor, Huon, and he, stopping only to get his pound of cartridges. They came to the entrance of the chamber of the thrones. Here Regor halted.

"We have destroyed the opening mechanism of every tunnel entrance to the Temple except one," he began, abruptly. "That one cannot be forced. This was at command of the Mother. Unless she has miscalculated, we cannot therefore be taken by surprise from within. It will be Nimir's and Lantlu's

object to get us out of the Temple, where they can overwhelm us with the Xinli and the Urd. Ours to prevent it.

"We threw up during the night strong barricades across the great stairs. We have stationed regiments upon the three terraces all around the Temple. If the attack becomes too hot, they can swarm back into the Temple by means of scaling ladders from the windows and through the great doors. Every window and opening is manned by archers and javelins and mace-men.

"Huon commands the barricade. You, Graydon, are to fight beside him. If they charge with the riding Xinli, try to kill their riders with that weapon of yours. If you can sting the Xinli into turning back upon those who follow—it will be very good! At the worst, a Xinli with none to guide it is not of much use to Lantlu. We must beat them off—that is all. What Nimir has hidden in his girdle we don't know.

"Above us all fights the Mother—who probably does know; and who has weapons as deadly as any possessed by the Lord of Evil, be sure of that. I do not think this is farewell, lad," the giant's voice grew husky, "but if farewell it be—" He threw his sound arm around Graydon, hugged him mightily, gripped the hand of Huon, and strode away.

"You and I, Graydon!" Huon's voice was grim. "You remember what I told you that night you set out for the cavern of the Frog-Woman? You and I together—under a red sky from which icy shadows dropped and battled with shapes of flame! It is the hour—and I am glad. Look!"

He pointed to a high window out of which a dozen bowmen peered. Through it could be seen a little square of sky. The ceiling of cloud was no longer steely gray. It was becoming lurid, tinged with a sinister red which slowly deepened even as he looked.

"Come!" said Huon. Silently, they passed on into the vast vestibule into which the portals of the Temple opened. It was crowded with Emers armed with bows and crushing clubs, swords and javelins. Captaining them were some twenty of the Old Race.

Plainly they had been awaiting Huon, for as he approached, the massive metal valves of the doors swung back. The soldiers marching behind them, they passed out upon the broad platform which met the colossal flight of stone steps.

The parapets of the three terraces were lined with soldiers like the walls of some beleaguered city. A double barricade of stone blocks had been raised

across the stairway. These barricades were about six feet high, the first beginning at the lowest terrace, the second some fifty feet behind it. At the base of each were blocks upon which the defenders could stand.

He thought what an excellent trap that fifty-foot enclosure could be made into, wished heartily for just half a dozen machine guns to station at the top of the hither barricade. What a shambles they could make of it!

He checked himself—no use in thinking in terms of modern warfare in this game, where the opposing generals held powers neither their officers nor the rank and file knew anything of. He reached the farther wall, unslung his rifle, drew the little bag containing his store of cartridges in front of him, and felt through its contents. Not more than a couple of hundred, he reflected ruefully. Well, with careful shooting, that many could do a lot of damage. He charged his magazine, while Huon disposed of his force.

Graydon peered down toward the lake edge. It was a damned nasty color—that reddish light from the cloud canopy made it mighty hard to see anything at distance. Nimir was doing it, of course! Where was Nimir? Would he fight with his followers, or was he, like the serpent-woman, in some secret place directing his mysterious arts? Of course, he would be doing that. And what did he have?

Nimir seemed very certain of winning. He might have lied to Graydon about some things—but he hadn't been lying about that! He meant it! Wouldn't it be better after all to vault the barricade, get to the Lord of Evil, and—give himself to him? Force immediate trial of that infernal experiment?

It would hold Nimir back, force an armistice until the Dark Master was within him. After that, he could fight it out with Nimir! Why not? *That* would be worth the trying! If he won—he'd have saved Suarra—and the Mother—and Regor—fine old boy, Regor! Why have all this slaughter when he could stop it? The thought was like a whisper in his mind. A whisper!

Graydon pulled himself up, gasping. A whisper? Like the whisper of the Shadow!

The Serpent-Woman had been right. It was Nimir—whispering to his mind, luring him, tempting him, lying to him. Playing him! Thank God she hadn't let him stay up there on the roof! His hands flew up to the collar, tore at it—he seemed to hear the laughter of the Lord of Evil!

Huon gripped his arm. Graydon turned to him, trembling, the cold sweat pouring down his face. The outlaw scanned him intently, it seemed to him—suspiciously. What did Huon know?

"Huon," he said breathlessly, "if I start to run to the enemy, if I do one single thing that seems to you to be—not myself—then knock me on the head with your sword! Or put the sword through me, if it seems necessary!"

"Do not fear." Huon nodded, gravely. "I am watching, and you shall not be betrayed."

From the Temple came the blare of warning bugles. Far away, on the fringe of the meadow, there was movement, the glinting of black scales, the dull gleaming of yellow leathery skins.

"They come!" said Huon, and shouted to his men. The shout was echoed along the terraces. There was a whistling of bowstrings being tested. Then silence as the defenders watched the approach.

The attackers came slowly at first.

IN THE van were the great dinosaurs spread out some fifty feet apart. With chagrin, Graydon noted that the riders were clad in coats of mail, their faces visored. He had never tried a bullet against armor; wondered how pierceable it might be; took comfort in the thought that, at worst, the impact would probably knock them from their saddles.

Behind the dinosaurs padded the horde of lizard-men. And it was a real horde six deep and shoulder to shoulder over a thousand-foot line. If the Urd had leaders, then they were of their own kind and not to be distinguished from the mass. On they padded in the wake of the black saurians, their red eyes glittering, their heads thrust forward, talons outstretched. Like an army vomited out of hell.

A hundred yards behind the Urd marched ordered companies of green kilted Indians led by Lantlu's nobles. There were a thousand or more of them.

Graydon thought he recognized the plan of attack. It was to be a sledge blow—no subtle strategy. The great dinosaurs, impervious to arrows and, except for a skillful and lucky thrust, to swords and javelins, were to crush like a battering ram through the defense. Into the gaps would stream the Urd, hard to kill, fighting with poisonous fang and claw. The Emers would mop up after them, penetrating the Temple with Lantlu's nobles.

There was a tumult of trumpets as the oncoming ranks. The black dinosaurs stamped thunderously and broke into a

run. Like a long, yellow hissing comber the lizard-men rolled forward. They swept down upon the Temple.

A ray of milky light flashed up from the roof. Instantly all the air was filled with the buglings of the winged serpents!

And instantly the rush of the dinosaurs and the lizard-men was checked. From the saddles of a full third of the Xinli their riders were flung, as though torn off by unseen lariats. Caught, Graydon knew, in the invisible coils of the creatures and dragged to earth.

Among the lizard-men began a maelstrom milling. Squalling and hissing, they leaped and hopped, striking up at their unseen foes with their chisel-edged talons; bringing some of them down, tearing at them with fangs and claw, as movements here and there plainly showed. But the Urd themselves were falling by the score, pierced through heart and brain by the rapier beaks.

From the backs of the dinosaurs half the riders were now gone. And the monsters were faring badly. Graydon saw them whirling frantically upon their heavy hind legs, hissing in rage, hitting out with their absurdly small forelegs, striking viciously with their snake-like necks.

One pivoted, then another and another. They went crashing back through the lizard-men. The Indians had halted, and now as the saurians tore through the Urd they wavered, broke formation, fled out of their paths. Into those paths ran nobles, sprang up and snatched at dangling reins, struggled to bring the monsters into subjection. Many of them they did, but a dozen or more of the Yu-Atlanchans were trampled into the grass before it was done.

From the Temple came a summoning blare of the bugles. It was answered on the left by others. Over the meadow charged regiments of blue-kilted Emers led by mailed nobles from whose shoulders streamed blue cloaks, the livery of the Mother. They had lain hidden until now, and Graydon's blood sang victory as he watched them charge. Their front line dropped upon their knees. A cloud of arrows whistled into the broken ranks of Lantlu's soldiery. They arose, rushed on again, and struck against the green-clad Indians like a wave.

And now there were two battles upon the mead—winged serpents against Xinli and Urd, and behind them the locked lines of nobles and Emers.

From all the Temple rang out a wild shout of triumph!

OUT of the distance, from the direction of the caverns, came a vast humming, a drone arising to a shrieking wail that tortured the ears, then falling below the range of hearing; an unheard sound that shook the brain and every nerve to the verge of madness. Closer drew that droning, traveling with projectile speed. It paused overhead and came to rest directly above the Temple. Up rose the maddening note, then down—and up and down—

And suddenly all the space between earth and the lurid sky was shot through with rays of dull red light. They seemed rigid, those rays—striated. They tore at the eyes as the drone tore at brain.

But not then did Graydon know that. He felt nothing; the drone of madness was to him only a humming as of some gigantic top; the red rays spared him!

Uncomprehending, he watched Huon's sword drop from his hand, saw him reel, hands clasped over eyes—

And saw in that inexplicable, rigid light—the winged serpents! The Messengers of the Mother—no longer protected by their cloak of invisibility!

They were black shapes, caught in the rays. And they, too, were blinded! Whirling and tumbling, striking against each other, they fell. Little and great, the winged serpents dropped, coils lashing, into the talons of the Urd, the lizard-men, immune like Graydon himself to that intolerable vibration of linked light and sound.

Within the Temple sound and light brought full madness, as though there they were intensified. In tortured brains of one and all was but one thought—to get into the open; to run and run—away from drone and searing ray! The huge doors flung open. Out of them poured Emer and noble, men and women alike. They came dropping from the windows—

Shaken out of the Temple even as the Lord of Evil had promised!

Through the droning came a hideous susurration, a hellish hissing. He knew it for what it was before his eyes told him. The hunting packs of the dinosaurs! Emerald and sapphire scales glittering in the crimson light, crimson eyes flaming, they burst from the shelter of the trees that stretched between the Temple meadow and the City. Ahead of them rode Lantlu, alone, mounted upon his Xinli! Shouting like a demon he raced to the stairway.

Graydon broke the bonds of his paralysis, raised his rifle; cursing, he sent bullet after bullet at the master of the pack! Untouched, unarmed Lantlu drove on, the Xinli leaping at his heels.

Out from the serpent-woman's sanctuary upon the Temple roof shot one of the immense silver globes; swiftly in its wake soared the others. They halted, hovering in a thousand-foot circle high above the plain. They began to pulse with a brilliant white radiance; and as they pulsed, they expanded, became a coronet of little incandescent suns which sprayed their rays of white incandescence through the striating rays of sullen red.

Abruptly the drone ceased. The turmoil of the winged serpents ended. They faded back into invisibility. And the torment of brains and nerves and eyes were lifted.

Now it was Graydon's turn to feel agony. The white radiance seared his eyes, sent needles of torment through them into his brain. And in this torment he was again one with Urd and saurian and those of the Old Race who wore the collar of Nimir! From drone and red ray that collar had protected him—but to this weapon of the serpent-woman it had betrayed him!

Before the torment mastered him, sent him writhing, face to ground, hands clasped tightly over eyes, he saw Lantlu's monstrous mount rear, twitch its head from reins, tear its jaws from cruel bit and stagger blindly back, screeching. Saw Lantlu pitch from its saddle, regain his feet with his panther quickness and stagger, face covered by his arms—saw the lizard-men running this way and that, squalling and hissing and falling under the vengeful thrusts of the winged serpents!

Down upon Xinli and Urd the soldiery of the Temple surged like a conquering wave, striking the lizard-men to earth with their maces, hamstringing the monsters with their swords, thrusting up with their javelins at the vulnerable spot in their throats, slaughtering Lantlu's fiendish pack!

Intent upon his enemy, Huon had forgotten Graydon. He had leaped upon the barricade, was half over it, when he turned to look for him. Only for a breath did he hesitate between concern for him and hatred for Lantlu. He sprang back, lifted him in his arms, started to carry him up into the Temple—

A wind whose breath bore the cold of outer space sighed round them. And at its touch Graydon's agony ended. He writhed from Huon's grip. They stood, staring at the radiant globes. Their brilliance had dimmed. A film of darkness was gathering round them. Steadily that film grew denser. The globes went out!

Together they leaped the barricade. Close to the base of the stairway, sword dripping blood, the body of a blue-coated noble at his feet, was Lantlu, glaring up at them, freed like Graydon from the torture, his own evil self once more.

And over all the meadow noble and Emer and Urd were locked together in death struggle. Of the hunting pack not one was left. And the giant Xinli had vanished.

Graydon raised his rifle, took deliberate aim. Before he could press the trigger, Huon had struck it from his hands.

"Mine to kill! Not yours!" he cried, and ran down the steps sword in hand to where the master of the dinosaurs waited him, lips drawn back over his teeth, his own red sword ready.

The crimson sky pulsed—once, twice thrice—as though it were a giant heart. Down from it like enormous bats dropped black shadows! And bitter and ever more bitter grew the cold!

For a moment he watched that dread rain. The shadows appeared to form directly beneath the canopy of crimson mist. They were shapeless, formless, yet densely black as though torn from the cloak of densest night. They swirled down, spinning as they dropped. They fell with the swift dart of the swallow. They were falling over all the plain, on lizard-man and Emer and noble alike.

He heard the clash of sword on sword, saw Huon and Lantlu thrusting, beating at each other with their blades.

Between him and the pair swirled a knot of fighting Urd and Indians. A shadow dropped upon them, enveloped them, hid them, swirled upward again. He looked upon the little group it had covered. They were no longer fighting. They stood there, immobile. They swayed. They fell. He ran down the steps, stopped beside them. The grass was black as though burned. He touched them. They were stiff and icy cold. He touched the ground. It too, was frozen!

Shaken, dazed, he looked toward Huon. Huon's sword was sweeping down upon Lantlu's right wrist, struck and half severed it. The master of the dinosaurs howled, sprang back, catching his weapon in his left hand before it could fall. Heedless of the wound, he rushed upon Huon like a berserk.

And Huon avoided the rush, stepped aside, and as Lantlu twisted toward him thrust him through the belly and with swift upward lift ripped him to the breast!

The master of the dinosaurs dropped his sword, glared at his killer, his hands

at his middle, the blood spurting through his fingers. He sank to his knees. Fell forward—

A shadow came silently spinning down. It enveloped both quick and dead! Graydon heard the shrieking of a voice he did not know; realized it was his own; raced forward.

The shadow lifted, recoiled from him as though he had thrust it away, swirled skyward. Huon stood rigid, glaring down upon his enemy.

"Huon!" cried Graydon, and touched him upon the shoulder. It was icy cold.

And at the touch, Huon toppled, fell prone over the body of Lantlu. Graydon stooped, felt hesitantly of Lantlu's body. It was still warm!

GRAYDON stood up, staring around him stupidly, his finger clutched under the badge of Nimir that now he knew was protection against the freezing shadows.

What were those lights? Winged shapes of greenish flame with cores of incandescence—fitting out of the air, pulsing from it—grappling with the shadows. Shapes of flame that battled with slaying shadows—and Huon dead there at his feet beneath a crimson sky!

As Huon had foretold—when was it? Ages upon ages ago!

How numb his brain felt! And despair—black despair that slowed his heart, set him gasping for breath—was overwhelming him! Whence came that black tide—he'd never felt anything like that before! Hatred, too—cold hatred, cold and implacable as those slaying shadows—it was woven with the despair! Who was it he hated so—and why? If he could only shake that creeping numbness from his brain!

Those damned shapes of flame! They were everywhere! And look at them running—Emer and Urd and spawn of the Old Race! My men—running—conquered! *My* men—what did he mean—*my* men? What a deuce of a light—what a deuce of a night! Good rhyme that—it seemed to stop the spread of that cursed numbness. Try another—ashes to ashes and dust to dust, if the shadows don't get you the winged flames must! No—that didn't help any. What the deuce was the matter with his head! Poor Huon . . . wonder if Suarra knew he was down here . . . wonder where Nimir was . . . ah, now he knew whom he hated so . . . the snake-woman . . . damned monster. . . . Yes, Dark Master, I am coming!

Pshaw—what had made him say that? Brace up, Nick Graydon . . . Nick Gray-

don of Philadelphia, Harvard School of Mines, U. S. A. . . . brace up! . . .

Yes, yes, Dark Master . . . I . . . am coming!

An arm encircled him. He drew back, snarling. Why—it was Regor!

Regor! Something of the creeping deadness lifted from his brain.

"Head—Regor! Something wrong!"

"Yes, lad. It's all right! Come now—with Regor! To the—to Suarra."

Suarra? Yes, sure he'd go with Regor to Suarra. Not to that snake-woman though! No, no! Not to her . . . she wasn't human . . . no, not to her, Dark Master. . . .

Why, here he was back in the Temple! How the devil had he got there? Something was pulling at that collar! Pulling him by it! He would not go! That's where that numbness came from—up from the collar! Ah—but he had told Suarra about it all. Ah, there she was! Not the snake-woman though. . . . No, Dark Master, I'll not . . . it was good to have Suarra's arms around you . . . your head on her breast. . . .

"Hold him tight, Suarra," said the Mother, quietly. "Kiss him. Talk to him. Try to keep him aware of you. Kon!"

The spider-man drew from the shadows, looked down upon the muttering Graydon sorrowfully.

"Watch him closely, Gregor. Kon may have to help you hold him, his strength will be out of all bounds. If you must—bind him. But I would rather not—for my own reasons. Yet Nimir shall not have him! Ah—I feared it! Stand ready, Tyddo!"

A green glare, bright as daylight, flooded all the Hidden Land. The slaying shadows had vanished, the crimson light gone from the clouds. Up from the plain midway between Temple and lake arose an immense pillar of coruscant green flame. As it arose it roared. It pulsated with a slow regular rhythm. Around its girth of all a hundred feet, and around it, lightnings flashed, thunder crackled like torrents of shattering glass!

Beneath that terrifying glare the battling figures upon mead and plain stood motionless, then in shrieking panic raced for cover!

From every quarter the Mother's winged shapes of flame throbbled into being. They swept toward the pillar, emerged with it, fed it!

"His last play, Tyddo," whispered the serpent-woman. "His best!"

The Lord of Fools nodded, took station at the mechanism of crystal rods. The two great disks of moon-light radi-

ance and cobweb strands were whirling. The serpent-woman glided first to one, then the other, manipulating levers at their bases. Slowly their speed decreased.

"Now, my ancestors, aid me!" murmured the Snake Mother.

More slowly spun the disks. Fewer and fewer became the shapes of flame that fed the column. And now no more appeared.

The pulsing green column quivered, swayed, with a bellowing of thunders it leaped a hundred feet from the ground. It leaped upon the amphitheater of the Dream Makers. Bellowing, it leaped again—from where the amphitheater of the Dream Makers had been. For now there was no trace of it.

Higher it drove this time, came down among the trees of the City. Again the thunderous bellow—

The disks were still. The pillar of flame came rushing toward the Temple!

"Now!" cried the serpent-woman to the Lord of Fools. From the mechanism he was manipulating spread out a gigantic fan of violet radiance—straight toward the racing column. It met and held it. It mingled with it. The pillar bent, twisted, struggled like a living thing to escape.

There was a vast screaming like tortured worlds, a crash like mountains falling.

Then darkness and an appalling silence!

"That was well done," breathed the Mother. "And thanks be to all my ancestors that done it is!"

GRAYDON, who had heard nothing, seen nothing, raised his head from Suarra's breast. His face was white and drawn, the eyes turned upward so that the pupils were almost covered by the lids. He seemed to be listening.

The serpent-woman drew to him, watched him closely. His lips moved.

"Yes, Dark Master—I hear!"

"It is close! Take him, Regor! No—let Kon hold him!" She glided to her coffer, took from it the sistrum of the quick-silver globe, and another larger one threaded with many beads of the same gleaming substance; took from it also a blunt crystal tube in which glowed an imprisoned purple flame like that of the rod the Lord of Fools had used in the Cavern of the Lost Wisdom. The second sistrum she handed to that Lord.

The spider-man had taken Graydon in his arms. He lay there, inert, ap-

parently still listening. The Mother undulated to him.

"Regor," she whispered rapidly, "stay you here with Suarra. No, child, no use to plead nor weep! You cannot come. Be still!" she said sternly, as the girl lifted beseeching hands. "I go to save your lover. And to end Nimir! Regor—I take Kon with me. Quickly now—"

She clicked to the spider-man. Carrying Graydon, he stepped upon the movable platform which masked the shining shaft. She glided beside him, coiled herself, made room for the Lord of Fools. The platform dropped. They passed out into the corridor of the shaft.

Graydon's body bent into a bow. "I hear! I come!" he cried, and tore at the spider-man's arms. "Yes," hissed the serpent-woman. "But by my way—not Nimir's! Set him down, Kon. Let him go. For, Tyddo, he will lead us straight to Nimir! And then—the end!"

Graydon, eyes still strained sightlessly upward, was turning his head like a dog seeking scent. He began to run down the corridor, straight to the portals of the Temple.

Behind him, sistrum raised, in her other hand the tube of violet fire, swept the serpent-woman, matching effortlessly his pace. And behind her, as effortlessly, the Lord of Fools, with Kon. They came to the corridor that led to the corridor that led to the chamber of the thrones. From the sistrum shot a tiny ray. It touched Graydon's head. He swerved, turned into that great place. Again the ray flashed, over his head, striking against a wall. Up rolled one of the curtains of stone, unmasking the passage. Again the ray touched Graydon. He ran into that passage.

"Good!" breathed the Mother.

Twice more the ray of the sistrum opened a passage. Graydon sped on like an automaton, tirelessly. He never turned his head, never looked back, seemingly was unaware of the three who followed. Those three stalked him as tirelessly. And weird enough must have been that sight—the running man, and behind him the gleaming undulating rosy-pearl length of the serpent-woman bearing high her exquisite face and body; the scarlet, many armed shape of the spider-man; the ancient wise face of the Lord of Fools with its sparkling youthful eyes, above his cloak of motley.

On and on went Graydon, like a straw drawn to a whirlpool, a grain of iron to a lodestone!

"But, Adana, will not Nimir know we

follow?" the Lord of Fools spoke with unhurried breath.

"No," the Mother answered as tranquilly. "When Nimir hid himself from my seeing thought, he hid me from his as well. He can no more look through that veil at me than I can at him. He draws this man to him—but he does not know how he comes. Only that he is coming. Nimir has but one thought, and that to possess this man. He believes it would mean triumph over me. And I tell you, Tyddo, that it might truly mean that! For within Graydon, drawing new strength from his brain, he might well find wit to devise ways of escape. Evade me, grow stronger still, return—and conquer!"

"He goes more swiftly," said the Lord of Fools.

"He nears Nimir," said the serpent-woman, "who awaits him, I think, in the cavern of his throne. I do not guide this man, Tyddo, he guides me. All that I do is to open the shortest way for him to that which summons him— Ah, I thought so!"

Graydon had been running, blindly, straight toward a blank wall. At the touch of the sistrum ray, a stone had drawn up. Through the aperture streamed red rust of light. They passed into—the lair of the Shadow!

Faster sped Graydon, a racing shadow in the murk. He loomed up the black cliff. Along it he ran. It ended. He turned the edge. There was the carven screen, the dais, the throne of jet.

Stretched out on the cavern's floor, prone upon their bellies, lay hundreds of the lizard people, the females and young of the Urd, and those who, surviving the Armageddon of the Temple, had scuttered back to the red cavern. Mingled with the reek of their bodies was the obscene fragrance of the Shadow's garden.

And crouching upon the jet throne, his face a tragic mask of bitter hate, was the Lord of Evil!

"Dark Master—I am here!" Graydon's voice was toneless; he halted as though awaiting command.

The Lord of Evil's pale eyes lifted from the groveling remnants of the horde. His monstrous body expanded, lifted itself from the throne; his long, misshapen arms thrust out hungrily; the Luciferian face was filled with diabolic triumph.

"Come!" he whispered, and as though his muscles had been taut steel springs Graydon bounded up the side of the dais.

"NO!" The cry of the Snake Mother was shrill. From the sistrum in her hand the thin ray shot, touched Graydon's head. He spun and dropped, almost at Nimir's feet.

The gaze of the Lord of Evil fell upon her, abruptly became aware of her—as though some veil between them had been rent apart, revealing her; his eyes flashed from her to Lord of Fools and spider-man, and then blazed out with the fires of hell itself.

His hand darted to his girdle, darted out with something that glittered like frozen green flame. Before he could raise the object, the serpent-woman leveled the crystal tube in her left hand. A ray of intense violet darted from it. It struck the hand of Nimir and that which was clenched within it. There was a curious tinkling explosion, and a cloud of sparkling purple atoms swirled around him, hiding both the Lord of the Evil and his throne.

The serpent-woman snatched the larger sistrum from the Lord of Fools. Out of its innumerable tiny globes shot moonlight radiance, and condensed into a three-inch sphere of dazzling brilliance. It shot into the swirling purple mist at the level of Nimir's head—and passed on! It struck the carven screen of rock, and sprayed over its surface. From side to side and from top to bottom, the screen cracked and split, came crumbling down!

Where screen had been yawned the black opening of a tunnel.

At the touch of the sphere the purple mist had dissolved. Head bent low, squatting close to the floor of the dais, appeared Nimir, untouched by the Mother's missile. Before she could hurl another, he had snatched up Graydon's body, thrown it over his back like a cloak, arms over his shoulders, and had leaped into the darkness of the tunnel.

The serpent-woman hissed, furiously. High reared the coil that held her body. With a speed incredible, her gleaming length flowed over the edge of the dais and through the black opening. And in its wake sped Lord of Fools and Kon.

They needed no light to guide them, that weird trio, to whose eyes, like those of Nimir's, darkness and light were as one. And suddenly against the end of the passage was silhouetted the monstrous shape of the Lord of Evil—it blackened into outline, and vanished—

Then an instant later the shapes of the pursuing three were framed there.

And that hidden passage had opened, even as Graydon once had thought, into the **Cavern of the Face!** Despairing,

hunted, Nimir had doubled back to his dungeon!

Did he think to find sanctuary there? Did he think to creep back into that gigantic visage of stone in which for ages the strange arts of the Lords and of the Snake Mother had imprisoned him? Did he believe that the serpent-woman would withhold those deadly missiles of hers as long as between them he could interpose as a shield the body of the man Suarra loved? Were there weapons here he needed time to get? Or did he seek some vantage point behind which he could hide while he bargained with her? None now to know what was in the Lord of Evil's mind as extinction drove fast upon him.

The passage ended close to the top of that cyclopean stairway which was the path to the Face.

The Serpent-woman halted there. Half down the steps was plunging the Lord of Evil, holding tight to his shield of living flesh and blood. Through the storms of luminous atoms streaming from the cavern's walls the great Face brooded upon her. From the circlet around its brow the golden sweat still dropped; still from its eyes ran the tears of gold, and from the drooping corners of the mouth the golden slaver dribbled.

The Face's eyes of wan blue gems were lifeless. They glittered—but they were empty. No prisoned thing peered through them. Gone were all imperious summonings, all subtle promises of domination. The Face stared indifferently, unseeingly, over the head of Nimir—Nimir who for so long—so long—had dwelt behind them!

FROM the throat of the serpent-woman came a bugle note. It was answered from beyond where the cavern's floor edged the immeasurable depths. Out of the space that overhung the abyss arrowed a pair of the winged serpents.

One dropped upon the shoulders of the Lord of Evil, buffeting him with its pinions. The second twisted its coils around his legs.

The Lord of Evil staggered, dropped Graydon, struck out at the beating wings.

The coils about his legs drew closer. The Lord of Evil toppled.

He went rolling down the steps. Graydon's body lay, motionless, where it had fallen.

The serpent-woman clicked. The spider-man scuttled down the steps, grasped Graydon, rushed back with him, and dropped him beside the Mother.

Buffeting wings and clinging coils of the winged serpents withdrew from Nimir. He stumbled to his feet. He hopped to the Face.

He reached its chin. He turned, facing the serpent-woman. Two faces of the Lord of Evil were there—great face of stone, lifeless, indifferent—its miniature of dream-stuff and rusted atoms interwoven, instinct with life.

Against the cliffed chin pressed the Lord of Evil, arms outstretched, facing the serpent-woman. In living eyes that matched the dead ones far above them was neither fear nor appeal for mercy.

Only hate—and merciless threat. He spoke no word, nor did she.

The Lord of Evil turned. Like a great frog, he swarmed up the stone.

The serpent-woman raised her sistrum. Out shot a radiant sphere. After it another—and another. The first struck the Face squarely upon the brow, the other two, almost simultaneously, upon eyes and mouth.

They burst and sprayed. Tiny tongues of white lightning licked out. The Face seemed to grimace. It became contorted. Its stony mouth writhed.

Out sped a fourth sphere. It struck the climbing body of the Lord of Evil! And climbing figure and Face were hidden by tongues of lightning.

They vanished—those tongues!

There was no Face in the Abyss! Only a smooth smoking surface of black stone!

There was no Lord of Evil! Only a smear of rusted atoms against the blasted rock.

The smear quivered, seemed feebly, trying to cling.

Another of the brilliant spheres struck it. The white tongues licked it—

The rock was clean!

And now shining sphere upon sphere shot from the sistrum. They struck the walls of the cavern, and the tempests of shining atoms died. The gemmed flowers and fruits upon those walls dulled, and dropped.

Darker grew the cavern where the Face in the Abyss had been—darker and darker.

Densest darkness filled it.

The dungeon of the Lord of Evil had become his lightless tomb!

The serpent-woman's voice lifted into one long, wild, shrilling, clarion note of triumph.

She beckoned the scarlet spider-man and pointed to Graydon. She turned her back on the black tomb of the Lord of Evil. She glided into the passage.

Behind her followed the Lord of Fools

and Kon—the spider-man holding Graydon's body to his breast like a child—nuzzling him with his lips—crooning to his unhearing ears.

CHAPTER XXV

FAREWELL OF THE SNAKE MOTHER

IT WAS five days before Graydon opened his eyes to consciousness. During all that time he had lain in the bower of the Snake Mother, Suarra attending him. Nor would the serpent-woman take the collar of the Lord of Evil from his neck.

"I am not yet sure!" she told the girl and Regor when they begged her to open it, rid Graydon of it. "It will not hurt him. Or should it threaten him, then will I take it off quickly enough—I promise you. But it was a link, and a strong link, between him and Nimir, and may still be so. I am not yet sure that that which we knew as Nimir has been wholly absorbed into what sent him forth. If something of that strong intellect survives, it would be drawn by that symbol, try to enter him through it. Then I will see what measure of strength that something possesses. If nothing of Nimir survives, the collar can do no harm. But until I know—he wears it!"

That ended the matter. The first day Graydon was restless, muttering of the Dark Master, listening as though to spoken words, speaking now and then to one unseen. Whether to some beseeching wisp of Nimir or to some phantom of his sick mind only the serpent-woman knew. His unease increased until the second night, and so did his mutterings. The Mother came now and then and coiled herself beside him, lifting his lids, examining closely his eyes.

On that night when his restlessness reached its peak, she had Regor lay his naked body on her own nest of cushions. She took the smaller sistrum and held it over his head. A soft radiance began to stream from it. She moved the sistrum around him, bathing him from head to feet in its light. On the third day he was much quieter. That night she examined him intently, nodded as though satisfied, and sent a strong ray from the sistrum upon the collar. Graydon groaned feebly, began to raise trembling hands as though to protect it.

"Hold his hands, Regor," said the Mother impassively. A stronger ray sprang from the sistrum. The collar of the Lord of Evil lost its sullen gleaming; changed to a lifeless brown. She took it between her hands and broke it. It crumbled to a pinch of dust in her fin-

gers. Immediately Graydon relaxed and passed into deep, normal refreshing sleep.

On the morning of the fifth day he awakened. Suarra and Regor were beside him. He tried to rise, but his weakness was too great. He was drained of all strength. His mind, however, was crystal clear and his curiosity avid.

"I know everything you're going to say against it," he told them, grinning faintly and holding tight to Suarra. "But it's no good. I feel as though I've been shot through a dozen windmills. In fact, I feel rotten! Nevertheless I'm not going to close my eyes again until I'm brought up to date. First—what happened to Nimir?"

They told him of the pursuit of the Lord of Evil, and of his end in the cavern of the Face, as they themselves had been told it by the serpent-woman and those two who had been with her.

"And then," said Regor, "she blasted the tunnel through which Nimir had gone so that it is sealed forever. She blasted Nimir's throne and the dais. The strange garden she destroyed utterly. And it screamed and shrilled its agony as the tongues of the white lightnings licked it up!"

"Evil was that garden," said Suarra. "Evil beyond all imaginings, the Mother told me. And that for its creation Nimir alone deserved annihilation. But what sorcery he wrought there, to what uses he had put it or for what uses he intended it—she will not tell me!"

"The Urd had fled from the red cavern," Regor took up the tale. "Ran, what were left of them, to hide in their deepest dens. And so the three came back to the Temple, bearing you. The next day the Mother took stock of what remained in ancient Yu-Atlanchi. Of the Old Race who defended the Temple, there was a scant hundred left. Of those who had fought for Lantlu, some four score sent an ambassador to the Mother asking truce and pardon. She ordered them before her, slew a half dozen of them, and forgave the others. There are, I suppose, as many more who, knowing they can expect no mercy, have taken to the caves and forest—become outlaws, as we of the Fellowship were before you came, Graydon.

"She had the Dream Makers, over whom the battle had passed unheeded, awakened and brought to the chamber of the thrones. Or most of them—for there were some she commanded slain out of hand. She gave them the choice of abandoning their dreams and opening upon themselves the Doors of Life and Death, or—well, just plain death!"

Some fifth preferred to live. The others could find no attraction in it. They were allowed to go back to their homes, enter their favorite world of phantoms—and shortly thereafter they and their worlds ceased altogether to be!

"Of the winged serpents, the Messengers of the Mother, not more than a quarter survived red light and drone of madness and the embraces of the shadows and the Urd. Of the Emers there are about two thousand left—I mean men. Mostly, they are those who took no part in the battle. Our soldiers and those of Lantlu were rather thoroughly wiped out. Two days ago, at the command of Adana, the bulk of these were sent to the caverns to exterminate the remnants of the Urd. Oh, yes—about half a dozen of the hunting Xinli escaped, and an equal number of the riding Xinli. The first are to be hunted down and killed; the others we will keep.

"That seems to be about all. We start life in Yu-Atlanchi afresh with some three hundred of the Old Race, of whom considerably more than half are women.

"Each and all have, of necessity, put off our deathlessness. The Mother herself saw that the Two Doors were flung wide open. Having more than half of us women is better, however," said Regor thoughtfully, "than having more than half of us men!"

Graydon closed his eyes; lay thinking over what he had heard. The serpent-woman was certainly efficient once she became started! Ruthless! He visioned the Dream Makers blotted out in the midst of their mirages which were so real—so real! He hoped that one who had created on the web of dream that miraculous world of color had chosen life.

Drone and light of madness—how had Nimir created them? Some manipulation of the infra-red, he supposed. Light waves of the lower spectrum linked in some way, transmuted somewhere in their range, to sound vibration. That the two had been so linked, were a part of the same phenomenon, he felt sure. And the Mother's little diadem of suns? Manipulation of other light waves which had canceled Nimir's. Why had the collar saved him from one—delivered him over to the other? Some sort of receiver, probably . . . tuned up to Nimir's stuff . . . well, it was off his neck at last. He sank into deep sleep.

HE SAW nothing of the serpent-woman for several days. She had gone off to the caverns, Suarra said, with the Lord of Fools and Kon, borne by the

Indian women in her litter, only her Messengers guarding her. His strength returned slowly.

He was carried out in Suarra's own litter one day, the girl beside him. He saw that the once flowering plain between the Temple and the lake was all blackened and desolate, blasted by the icy shadows and the leaping pillar of flame.

A thin covering of impalpable dust marked where the amphitheater of the Dream Makers had stood. Many trees along the mead were dead or dying. And where the pillar had leaped upon the City there was a roughly circular place two thousand feet in width from which habitations and vegetations had been turned into that same thin ash.

He asked Suarra what had been done with the dead. The Emers had gathered them together in great heaps, she told him; then they, too, had been blasted into dust by contrivances the Mother had ordered set up. Huon lay with his ancestors in the Cavern of the Dead.

Depressed, he asked her to turn the bearers of the litter back to the silence of the chamber of the thrones.

The next day the Mother returned; and thereafter for a week Graydon was with her many hours each day; answering her countless questions, telling her in detail of the life of men beyond the barrier, their habits and aspirations, and this time, too, of their wars and gods, and all the long history of the race since the fires of the Cro-Magnons were quenched in their caves twenty-five thousand years ago. Of the aims and conditions of the races, white and yellow, black and brown, he spoke; and of Russia's drab experiment in communism, and the great unrest in Asia among the Chinese and Indians, and all that had happened recently.

Then for another time she ceased her questionings, told him in turn of that forgotten civilization of which her strange serpent-race was the head, and of how it had come into being; of other lost civilizations and races, buried beyond trace under the dust of time; gave him blinding glimpses of attainments in science as advanced over those he knew as Einstein's geometry over the Euclidean; conceptions of mind and matter and energy that dazed him.

"In nothing," she told him, "that you have seen is there touch of sorcery or magic. No, not even in that phantom of Nimir you knew as the Shadow, nor in his clothing of himself. All that you have beheld, each manifestation, was nothing but conscious manipulation of

purely natural forces, my Graydon. The slaying shadows?—A definite energy made obedient by purely mechanical means to Nimir's will. In words of your own to make it understandable—etheric vortices, power condensed from that universal ocean of energy about us from which all energy and mind and what you term matter comes. The shapes of flame I summoned to meet them? Another harnessed force which neutralized the shadows—and more.

"The pillar of flame? Nimir's last play, and one I truly feared. For by his swift shutting off of that which brought the shadows into being, he disturbed abruptly the interaction of the two forces, over-balanced me; hoped that before I could gain control of it the tremendous freed energy which shaped itself into that pillar would overwhelm me. And came within a hair of being right!"

She sat silently for a time; then seemed to have come to some decision; roused herself.

"Go you with Suarra, child," she said. "Amuse yourselves. Get strong quickly. For two days I shall have no need for either of you."

When those days had passed, summons came to him from her by way of Regor. He found her coiled upon her cushions in her bower, complacently gazing at herself in her mirror while Suarra coiled her hair. The bower seemed oddly empty; stripped. And Suarra's eyes were misty with unshed tears. With her were the Lord of Fools and the Lord of Fate. She laid down her mirror, gave him her hand to kiss.

"I am going to leave you, child," she began without preamble. "I am tired. I am going to sleep—oh, for a long, long time. Nay—do not look so startled and unhappy! I don't intend to die! I know of no other world to go to! But I *don't* intend to grow old." Her eyes sparkled amusedly at Graydon's uncontrollable expression of stupefied surprise at this statement, remarkable, considering her thousands of years. "I mean I do not intend to let myself *look* old! Therefore I shall sleep and renew myself—and my looks. It was the custom of my race.

"Now thus have I decided. There are not many of you left in Yu-Atlanchi, it is true. But shortly there will be more! Trust your race for that—if for nothing else! Let you and Regor govern here—with Tyddo to aid you. Nimir is gone forever! Those of his who still lurk, out-laws—destroy as speedily as you can. Let nothing of him nor of Lantlu remain. If any of the Makers of Dreams—relapse—slay them! Danger lurks in that. Suarra!

Stop your crying! You're pulling my hair!"

She frowned for a moment into the mirror.

"I have told you," said the Mother briskly, "that I do not intend to die. And I certainly do not intend to be made uncomfortable while I sleep. I don't think so highly of those people of yours about whom you've told me so much, Graydon. Oh, I have no doubt that they include any number of persons as estimable as yourself. But in any number, to put it mildly, they irritate me. I don't propose to have them digging around where I am sleeping, nor blowing up things with their explosives, nor building—what is your quaint word?—skyscrapers over me. Nor ransacking the caverns for their treasures, nor poking around trying to find out things they're much better off not knowing—and wouldn't know what to do with if they did find them. I will have no invasion of the Hidden Land by white or yellow, black or brown—and particularly not by the first two.

"Therefore, during the last two days I have seen to it that there shan't be! I have destroyed much of what Nimir recovered from the Cavern of the Lost Wisdom, including that which evoked the shadows. I have destroyed my two disks which summoned the shapes of flame. You will not need them—nor shall I, again.

"AND, Graydon, I have set my Messengers of guard beyond the barrier, and especially against those flying boats of yours which have done so much to make barriers negligible. They will bring them down without mercy! They will as mercilessly destroy those who may survive the fall! No eyes shall peer down on Yu-Atlanchi to bring back strong companies who would—destroy my slumber! I put it that way, child, not to hurt your feelings.

"That is definite. That is irrevocable. And thus shall it be," said the serpent-woman, implacably, and Graydon had no doubt at all that quite as ruthlessly as she promised it, so would it be carried out. "And if by any newly discovered wisdom they overcome my Messengers, Tyddo will awaken me. And me, Graydon, they will not overcome! That, too, I have made certain!"

"Children"—she twined her arm round Suarra's neck—"come with me. On my way I must seal that chamber on which open the Doors of Life and Death. You shall see it."

She nodded to Suarra. Under the girl's touch the wall opposite the doorway

swung open. The scarlet body of Kon swayed through, behind him four of his kind carrying the Snake Mother's litter. She gave one last look in her mirror, then drew her coils into the litter's cushions. Kon leading, Graydon and Regor on each side, Suarra lying beside her with head hidden in the serpent-woman's breast, the two Lords following, they passed into a great empty chamber, out through its farther wall, and down a wide ramp.

Down went the ramp, and down—below the foundations of the Temple, Graydon thought. They came to an alcove that curved shallowly into the wall of the passage. Here the Mother clicked to her bearers. They halted close beside it. She stretched out a hand, within it the smaller sistrum. A faint ray touched the wall. An oval opening appeared, as though the ray had melted the stone away. She beckoned Graydon, drew Suarra over her body so the girl could look within.

They peered down into a place that was like the half of a gigantic pearl. Its circled floor was some twenty yards in diameter. It was filled with a limpid rosy light as though a sun were shining behind its curved walls. The floor was like black obsidian, and set within it were two pools, oval, some twenty feet in length and half that in width. Between them was a couch of the same black glassy substance, and hollowed with the outlines of a human body—as though, indeed, some perfect body of woman or man had been pressed there while the material was still plastic, and, hardening it had retained the stamp.

In one pool the water, if water it was, was like pale rose wine, shot through with sparklings and eddies of deeper rose. The water in the second pool was utterly colorless, translucent, still—and in some curious fashion awesome in its tranquillity.

While they watched, this tranquillity was disturbed. Something came floating up from its depths. And as it approached the surface, the liquid in the rosy pool, too, became disturbed, its sparklings and its eddies dancing jubilantly.

Out of each pool a bubble arose, slowly expanding until they had domed them from edge to edge.

Rosy bubble and crystal-clear bubble broke. A rainbow mist filled the chamber, hiding pools and couch. It was shot through with tiny darting particles of irised light. It pulsed for no more than three heartbeats. It vanished.

The serpent-woman raised the sistrum. She sent from it a ray straight into the

still pool. The pool quivered as though it had been a living heart. Its translucency clouded. A cloud of little bubbles rushed up through it as if trying to escape the ray. They burst with a faint, mournful sighing. The pool again was still—but all awesome tranquillity had gone!

The sistrum's ray plunged into the rosy pool. There was a moment of frantic swirling in its depths. Again the bursting cloud of sighing bubbles. And it, too, lay still—and dead!

"It is done!" said the serpent-woman tonelessly. Her face was drawn, her lips pale, her eyes like stone.

She passed the sistrum over the aperture. The wall reappeared, seeming to form out of air as it came. She signaled to the spider-man. They resumed their journey in silence.

They came at last to another shallow niche. Here, under the sistrum, the wall drew away into a low and rounded portal. They entered. It was circular like that of the two pools, but not more than half its size. A faint blue radiance streamed from its walls, centering upon a huge nest of cushions. Around its walls were several coffers. Save for these, it was empty. Graydon was aware of a slightly pungent, curiously fresh fragrance.

The serpent-woman flowed out of her litter, coiled herself upon the cushions. She looked at them, tears now frankly in the purple eyes and rolling down cheeks. She gave the sistrum to the Lord of Fools, strained Suarra to her bosom. She beckoned Graydon, and gently brought the girl's lips and his together.

"Waken me to see your first-born!" she laughed.

She thrust them from her, settled down on her cushions, and yawned. Her eyes closed, her head nodded once or twice; moved to find better place.

The serpent-woman slept.

They passed out of the low door-way, Suarra clasped close to Graydon, weeping. The Lord of Fools raised the sistrum. The stone of the portal thickened into place. The hidden chamber where the Snake Mother slept was sealed upon her!

THAT night Graydon stood upon the Temple's roof, looking out over the City. His arm was around Suarra, pressed close to him. At his other side was Regor. Here and there through the flowering trees, lights shone; from some of the palaces came faint music.

He felt profoundly depressed.

As though in answer to his thought, Suarra stirred.

"Beloved!" she whispered. "Oh, but I miss her so! Beloved—you are all I have now! Love me, Graydon—best beloved!"

He shook the dark mood from him; drew her more tightly to him.

"There are—there are so few of us!" sighed Suarra.

"Well," said Graydon, cheerfully—and then without realizing it echoed the Snake Mother's own prophecy—"Well, it won't be long before there are more!"

And heard Regor's rumbling laughter.

EPILOGUE

"AND did you?" I asked Graydon, when he had finished telling me what had happened since that day I had last seen him, years before.

"Did I what?" he asked in turn.

"Wake the Snake Mother when you had your first-born?" I said.

"Oh," he grinned. "Yes. There happened to be two of them—boy and girl! She stayed with us, I rather think, twice as long as she had intended because of it. There's been another boy since then, by the way."

"And the outlaws?"

"All wiped out," he answered cheerfully. "Also the lizard folk, except a few who have pulled their yellow hides in after them into corners we don't know. But not enough of them to matter. A dozen or so of the Dream Makers backslid—Lord, how comforting it is to sling some of those old words! I had them killed right off!"

I looked at him, closely. Over the old Graydon was a new one—ruthless, somewhat terrifying.

"See here, Graydon," I said. "You sent for me. I assume, therefore, that you intend letting me get back to warn the flyers to keep away from here. Very well—how much of this story you have told me do you want me to repeat? I mean this: According to you, there is enough treasure in your caverns to draw

more adventurous rogues here than ever the fabled riches of the New World drew from the Europe of the Fifteenth Century. Once they know it is here—they will come. You know that as well as I. Besides that, you expose an archeological and other scientific paradise that will lure to its doors the finest minds beyond your barrier. They won't give a damn about your gold or jewels, but they will be much more formidable than the treasure seekers—"

"Tell it all!" he interrupted. "The more you tell, the more likely they are to believe. There are details I have given you which no one could possibly invent. I want them to believe—and to keep away. I tell you that if every stone in the barrier were pure gold, they couldn't get a grain of it! I tell you that if all the nations sent their forces against this Hidden Land, they could not enter it! In the years I have been here I myself have learned something of the wisdom of the Mother. Even if they could overcome the Messengers, still they would have to meet things they could not overcome. And as a last resource there would be—the Mother!

"So let them know it all. Then those who decide upon the venture will know exactly what to expect. And that is death—death, swift and sure, and so far as I can make it so, merciful. But death surely—without time for parley, argument or appeal!

"But I would not have them continue to come without knowing. Dying blindly, ignorant of whence or how and why death strikes them. It is too much like skulking assassination! Those who manned the most of the missing planes died instantly, painlessly, in midair under the beaks of the winged serpents.

"These had believed Walters dead, as they did you. He was not. I gave him that which eased his agony and let him sleep his way into death. It was more merciful.

Do not look surprised. We know when these things happen—the Messengers come to Suarra as they did to the Mother. The Bolivian squadron had tried to fight! How could they—against invisible slayers striking out of space! Two dropped and endeavored to escape. I found their bodies some fifty feet from their planes, riddled by the rapier bills. It was then I determined to summon you, that there might be no more slaughter.”

“It seems to me,” I said, somewhat ironically, “it seems to me that you are bent on repeating not only the errors of your serpent-woman and those rather incredible beings you call the Lords, but that you are following straight in the steps of your Lord of Evil. You are maintaining the barrier—and I seem to sense that some day you propose to break through it at the head of your super-race brandishing your weapons of super-science and subjugating the outer world.”

“Not quite that,” he answered gravely. “I see how you would come to think it, of course. But it’s not true. Listen: The Hidden Land is, geographically, a part of Peru. You know enough of the South American republics to realize what a crime that would be! Nor could we throw it open to the world without doing precisely that. Nor would we fare any better at the hands of any other nation.

“No,” said Graydon, “the Hidden Land remains hidden! There is the laughter of children in Yu-Atlanchi now, and the surge of new life. A fresh generation is growing up, and learning things the old had forgotten—or never knew. When they have grown—it shall be theirs to decide. Until then—I obey the Mother! And I will not let her slumber be disturbed!”

“All of which,” I said, “will be construed, if I tell it, as an open declaration of war against Peru. At any rate—a challenge to the world!”

“Let it,” he said. “We are ready!”

“Graydon,” I said, slowly. “It seems to me that you have become more a man of what you call the Old Race, than the man you were born. There will be many, Graydon, who will call you—renegade.”

“True enough! And what of it?” he answered, as indifferently. “Why should I remain slave to the accidents of birth and race if I desire to free myself of them? Others have changed their citizenship, and fought against their motherland. If I want to change my race—why not?”

“Very well,” I said, “I shall tell the whole story.”

“Tell it!” he repeated. “And tell them—to keep away!”

Well, I have told it.