

## BLACK GOD'S SHADOW

Through Jirel's dreams a faraway voice went wailing. She opened yellow eyes upon darkness and lay still for a while, wondering what had waked her and staring into the gloom of her tower chamber, listening to the familiar night sounds of the sentry on the battlements close overhead, the rattle of armor and the soft shuffle of feet in the straw laid down to muffle the sound so that Joiry's lady might sleep in peace.

And as she lay there in the dark, quite suddenly the old illusion came over her again. She felt the pressure of strong mailed arms and the weight of a bearded mouth insolently upon hers, and she closed her red lips on an oath at her own weakness and knew again the sting of helpless tears behind her eyelids.

She lay quiet, remembering. Guillaume-so hatefully magnificent in his armor, grinning down upon her from her own dais in her own castle hall where her own dead soldiers lay scattered about upon the bloody flags. Guillaume -his arms hard about her, his mouth heavy upon her own. Even now anger swept like a flame across her memory

in answer to the arrogance and scorn of that conqueror's kiss. Yet was it anger?-was it hatred? And how had she to know, until he lay dead at last at her vengeful feet, that it was not hate which bubbled up so hotly whenever she remembered the insolence of his arms, or that he had defeated her men and conquered unconquerable Joiry? For she had been the commander of the strongest fortress in the kingdom, and called no man master, and it was her proudest boast that Joiry would never fall, and that no lover dared lay hands upon her save in answer to her smile.

No, it had not been hatred which answered Guillaume's overwhelming arrogance. Not hate, though the fire and fury of it had gone stemming like madness through her. So many loves had blown lightly through her life before- how was she to know this surge of heady violence for what it was, until too late? Well, it was ended now.

She had gone down the secret way that she and one other knew, down into that dark and nameless hell which none who wore a cross might enter, where God's dominion ended at the portals, and who could tell what strange and terrible gods held sway instead? She remembered the starry darkness of it, and the voices that cried along the wind, and the brooding perils she could not understand. No other thing than the flame of her-hatred?-could have driven her down, and nothing but its violence could have sustained her along the dark ways she went seeking a weapon worthy to slay Guillaume.

Well, she had found it. She had taken the black god's kiss. Heavy and cold upon her soul she had carried it back, feeling the terrible weight bearing down upon some intangible part of her that shuddered and shrank from the touch. She had fouled her very soul with that burden, but she had not guessed what terrible potentialities it bore within it, like some egg of hell's spawning to slay the man she loved.

Her weapon was a worthy one. She smiled grimly, remembering that-remembering her return, and how triumphantly he had accepted that kiss from hell, not understanding. . . . Again she saw the awful fruition of her vengeance, as the chill of her soul's burden shifted, through

the meeting of their mouths, from her soul to his. Again she saw the spreading of that nameless emotion from Beyond through his shuddering body, an iron despair which no flesh and blood could endure.

Yes, a worthy weapon. She had periled her soul in the seeking of it, and slain him with a god-cursed kiss, and known too late that she would never love another man. Guillaume-tall and splendid in his armor, the little black beard split by the whiteness of his grin, and arrogance sneering from his scarred and scornful face. Guillaume- whose kiss would haunt her all the nights of her life. Guillaume-who was dead. In the dark she hid her face upon her bent arm, and the red hair fell forward to smother her sobs.

When sleep came again she did not know. But presently she was alone in a dim,

formless place through whose mists the faraway voice wailed fretfully. It was a familiar voice with strange, plaintive overtones—a sad little lost voice wailing through the dark.

"Oh, Jirel," it moaned reedily, the tiniest thread of sound. "Oh, Jirel—my murderess. . . ."

And in the dream her heart stood still, and—though she had killed more men than one—she thought she knew that voice, tiny and thin though it was in the bodiless dark of her sleep. And she held her breath, listening. It came again, "Oh, Jirel! It is Guillaume calling—Guillaume, whom you slew. Is there no end to your vengeance? Have mercy, oh my murderess! Release my soul from the dark god's torment. Oh Jirel—Jirel—I pray your mercy!"

Jirel awoke wet-eyed and lay there staring into the dark, recalling that pitiful little reedy wail which had once been Guillaume's rich, full-throated voice. And wondering. The dark god? True, Guillaume had died unshriven, with all his sins upon him, and because of this she had supposed that his soul plunged straight downward to the gates of hell.

Yet—could it be? By the power of that infernal kiss which she had braved the strange dark place underground to get as a weapon against him—by the utter strangeness of it, and the unhuman death he died, it must be that now his naked soul wandered, lost and lonely, through that nameless hell lit by strange stars, where ghosts moved in curious forms through the dark. And he asked her mercy—Guillaume, who in life had asked mercy of no living creature.

She heard the watch changing on the battlements above, and dropped again into an uneasy slumber, and once more entered the dim place where the little voice cried through the mist, wailing piteously for mercy from her vengeance.

Guillaume—the proud Guillaume, with his deep voice and scornful eyes.

Guillaume's lost soul wailing through her dreams . . . "Have mere/ upon me, oh my murderess!" . . . and again she woke with wet eyes and started up, staring wildly around her in the gloom and thinking that surely she heard yet the echo of the little lost voice crying. And as the sound faded from her ears she knew that she must go down again.

For a while she lay there, shivering a little and forcing herself into the knowledge. Jirel was a brave woman and a savage warrior, and the most reckless soldier of all her men-at-arms. There was not a man for miles about who did not fear and respect Joiry's commander—her sword-keen beauty and her reckless courage and her skill at arms. But at the thought of what she must do to save Guillaume's soul the coldness of terror blew over her and her heart contracted forebodingly. To go down again—down into the perilous, star-lit dark among dangers more dreadful than she could put words to—dared she? Dared she go? She rose at last, cursing her own weakness. The stars through the narrow windows watched her pull on her doeskin shirt and the brief tunic of linked mail over it. She buckled the greaves of a long-dead Roman legionary on her slim, strong legs, and, as on that unforgettable night not long since when she had dressed for this same journey, she took her two-edged sword unsheathed in her hand.

Again she went down through the dark of the sleeping castle. Joiry's dungeons are deep, and she descended a long way through the oozing, dank corridors underground, past cells—where the bones of Joiry's enemies rotted in forgotten chains. And she, who feared no living man, was frightened in that haunted dark, and gripped her sword closer and clutched the cross at her neck with nervous fingers. The silence hurt her ears with its weight, and the dark was like a bandage over her straining eyes. At the end of the last oozing passage, far underground, she came to a wall. With her free hand she set to work pulling the unmortared stones from their places, making an opening to squeeze through—trying not to remember that upon this spot that dreadful night tall Guillaume had died, with the black god's kiss burning upon his mouth and un-namable torment in his eyes. Here upon these stones. Against the darkness vividly she could see that torch-lit scene, and Guillaume's long, mailed body sprawled across the floor. She would never

forget that. Perhaps even after she died she would remember the smoky, acrid smell of the torches, and the coldness of the stones under her bare knees as she knelt beside the body of the man she had killed; the choke in her throat, and the brush of the red hair against her cheek, falling forward to mask her tears from the stolid men-at-arms. And Guillaume, Guillaume ...

She took her lip between her teeth resolutely, and turned her mind to the pulling out of stones. Presently there was a hole big enough for her slim height, and she pushed through into the solid dark beyond. Her feet were upon a ramp, and she went down cautiously, feeling her way with exploring toes. When the floor leveled she dropped to her knees and felt for the remembered circle in the pavement. She found that, and the curious cold ring in its center, of some nameless metal which daylight had never shone upon, metal so smooth and cold and strange that her fingers shuddered as she gripped it and heaved. That lid was heavy. As before, she had to take her sword in her teeth, for she dared not lay it down, and use both hands to lift the stone circle. It rose with an odd little sighing sound, as if some suction from below had gripped it and were released.

She sat on the edge for a moment, swinging her feet in the opening and gathered all her courage for the plunge. When she dared hesitate no longer, for fear she would never descend if she delayed another instant, she caught her breath and gripped her sword hard and plunged.

It must have been the strangest descent that the world has known-not a shaft but a spiral twisting down in smooth, corkscrew loops, a spiral made for no human creature to travel, yet into whose sides in some forgotten era a nameless human had cut notches for hands and feet, so that Jirel went down more slowly than if she had had to take an unbroken plunge. She slipped smoothly along down the spirals, barely braking her passage now and again by grasping at the notches in the wall when she felt herself sliding too fast. Presently the familiar sickness came over her-that strange, inner dizziness as if the spiral were taking her not only through space but through dimensions, and the very structure of her body were altering and shifting with the shifting spirals. And it seemed, too, that down any other shaft she would have fallen more swiftly. This was not a free glide downward-she scarcely seemed to be falling at all. In the spiral there was neither up nor down, and the sickness intensified until in the whirling loops and the whirling dizziness she lost all count of time and distance, and slid through the dark in a stupor of her own misery.

At long last the spiral straightened and began to incline less steeply, and she knew that she approached the end. It was hard work then, levering herself along the gentle slope on hands and knees, and when she came out at last into open darkness she scrambled to her feet and stood panting, sword in hand, straining her eyes against the impenetrable dark of this place that must be without counterpart anywhere in the world, or outside it. There were perils here, but she scarcely thought of them as she set out through the dark, for remembering those greater perils beyond.

She went forward warily for all that, swinging her sword in cautious arcs before her that she might not run full-tilt into some invisible horror. It was an unpleasant feeling, this groping through blackness, knowing eyes upon her, feeling presences near her, watching. Twice she heard hoarse breathing, and once the splat of great wet feet upon stone, but nothing touched her or tried to bar her passage.

Nevertheless she was shaking with tension and terror when at last she reached the end of the passage. There was no visible sign to tell her that it was ended, but as before, suddenly she sensed that the oppression of those vast weights of earth on all sides had lifted. She was standing at the threshold of some mighty void. The very darkness had a different quality-and at her throat something constricted.

Jirel gripped her sword a little more firmly and felt for the crucifix at her neck-found it-lifted the chain over her head.

Instantly a burst of blinding radiance smote her dark-accustomed eyes more

violently than a blow. She stood at a cave mouth, high on the side of a hill, staring out over the most blazing day she had ever seen. Heat and light shimmered in the dazzle: strangely colored light, heat that danced and shook. Day, over a dreadful land.

Jirel cried out inarticulately and clapped a hand over her outraged eyes, groping backward step by step into the sheltering dark of the cave. Night in this land was terrible enough, but day-no, she dared not look upon the strange hell save when darkness veiled it. She remembered that other journey, when she had raced the dawn up the hillside, shuddering, averting her eyes from the terror of her own misshapen shadow forming upon the stones. No, she must wait, how long she could not guess; for though it had been night above ground when she left, here was broad day, and it might be that day in this land was of a different duration from that she knew.

She drew back farther into the cave, until that dreadful day was no more than a blur upon the darkness, and sat down with her back to the rock and the sword across her bare knees, waiting. That blurred light upon the walls had a curious tinge of color such as she had never seen in any earthly daylight. It seemed to her that it shimmered- paled and deepened and brightened again as if the illumination were not steady. It had almost the quality of firelight in its fluctuations.

Several times something seemed to pass across the cave-mouth, blotting out the light for an instant, and once she saw a great, stooping shadow limned upon the wall, as if something had paused to peer within the cave. And at the thought of what might rove this land by day Jirel shivered as if in a chill wind, and groped for her crucifix before she remembered that she no longer wore it.

She waited for a long while, clasping cold hands about her knees, watching that blur upon the wall in fascinated anticipation. After a time she may have dozed a little, with the light, unresting sleep of one poised to wake at the tiniest sound or motion. It seemed to her that eternities went by before the light began to pale upon the cave wall.

She watched it fading. It did not move across the wall as sunlight would have done. The blur remained motionless, dimming slowly, losing its tinge of unearthly color, taking on the blueness of evening. Jirel stood up and paced back and forth to limber her stiffened body. But not until that blur had faded so far that no more than the dimmest glimmer of radiance lay upon the stone did she venture out again toward the cave mouth.

Once more she stood upon the hilltop, looking out over a land lighted by strange constellations that sprawled across the sky in pictures whose outlines she could not quite trace, though there was about them a dreadful familiarity. And, looking up upon the spreading patterns in the sky, she realized afresh that this land, whatever it might be, was no underground cavern of whatever vast dimensions. It was open ah" she breathed, and stars in a celestial void she gazed upon, and however she had come here, she was no longer under the earth.

Below her the dim country spread. And it was not the same landscape she had seen on that other journey. No mighty column of shadowless light swept skyward in the distance. She caught the glimmer of a broad river where no river had flowed before, and the ground here and there was patched and checkered with pale radiance, like luminous fields laid out orderly upon the darkness.

She stepped down the hill delicately, poised for the attack of those tiny, yelping horrors that had raved about her knees once before. They did not come. Surprised, hoping against hope that she was to be spared that nauseating struggle, she went on. The way down was longer than she remembered. Stones turned under her feet, and coarse grass slashed at her knees. She was wondering as she descended where her search was to begin, for in all the dark, shifting land she saw nothing to guide her, and Guillaume's voice was no more than a fading memory from her dream. She could not even find her way back to the lake where the black god crouched, for the whole landscape was changed unrecognizably.

So when, unmolested, she reached the foot of the hill, she set off at random over the dark earth, running as before with that queer dancing lightness, as if the gravity pull of this place were less than that to which she was accustomed, so that the ground seemed to skim past under her flying feet. It was like a dream, this effortless glide through the darkness, fleet as the wind.

Presently she began to near one of those luminous patches that resembled fields, and saw now that they were indeed a sort of garden. The luminosity rose from myriads of tiny, darting lights planted in even rows, and when she came near enough she saw that the lights were small insects, larger than fireflies, and with luminous wings which they beat vainly upon the air, darting from side to side in a futile effort to be free. For each was attached to its little stem, as if they had sprung living from the soil. Row upon row of them stretched into the dark.

She did not even speculate upon who had sowed such seed here, or toward what strange purpose. Her course led her across a corner of the field, and as she ran she broke several of the stems, releasing the shining prisoners. They buzzed up around her instantly, angrily as bees, and wherever a luminous wing brushed her a hot pain stabbed. She beat them off after a while and ran on, skirting other fields with new wariness.

She crossed a brook that spoke to itself in the dark with a queer, whispering sound so near to speech that she paused for an instant to listen, then thought she had caught a word or two of such dreadful meaning that she ran on again, wondering if it could have been only an illusion.

Then a breeze sprang up and brushed the red hair from her ears, and it seemed to her that she caught the faintest, far wailing. She stopped dead-still, listening, and the breeze stopped too. But she was almost certain she had heard that voice again, and after an instant's hesitation she turned in the direction from which the breeze had blown.

It led toward the river. The ground grew rougher, and she began to hear water running with a subdued, rushing noise, and presently again the breeze brushed her face. Once more she thought she could hear the dimmest' echo of the voice that had cried in her dreams.

When she came to the brink of the water she paused for a moment, looking down to where the river rushed between steep banks. The water had a subtle difference in appearance from water in the rivers she knew-somehow thicker, for all its swift flowing. When she leaned out to look, her face was mirrored monstrosly upon the broken surface, in a way that no earthly water would reflect, and as the image fell upon its torrent the water broke there violently, leaping upward and splashing as if some hidden rock had suddenly risen in its bed. There was a hideous eagerness about it, as if the water were ravening for her, rising in long, hungry leaps against the rocky walls to splash noisily and run back into the river. But each leap came higher against the wall, and Jirel started back in something like alarm, a vague unease rising within her at the thought of what might happen if she waited until the striving water reached high enough.

At her withdrawal the tumult lessened instantly, and after a moment or so she knew by the sound that the river had smoothed over its broken place and was flowing on undisturbed. Shivering a little, she went on upstream whence the fitful breeze seemed to blow.

Once she stumbled into a patch of utter darkness and fought through in panic fear of walking into the river in her blindness, but she won free of the curious air-pocket without mishap. And once the ground under her skimming feet quaked like jelly, so that she could scarcely keep her balance as she fled on over the unstable section. But ever the little breeze blew and died away and blew again, and she thought the faint echo of a cry was becoming clearer. Almost she caught the far-away sound of "Jirel-" moaning upon the wind, and quickened her pace.

For some while now she had been noticing a growing pallor upon the horizon, and wondering uneasily if night could be so short here, and day already about

to dawn. But no-for she remembered that upon that other terrible dawn which she had fled so fast to escape, the pallor had ringed the whole horizon equally, as if day rose in one vast circle clear around the nameless land. Now it was only one spot on the edge of the sky which showed that unpleasant, dawning light. It was faintly tinged with green that strengthened as she watched, and presently above the hills in the distance rose the rim of a vast green moon. The stars paled around it. A cloud floated across its face, writhed for an instant as if in some skyey agony, then puffed into a mist and vanished, leaving the green face clear again.

And it was a mottled face across which dim things moved very slowly. Almost it might have had an atmosphere of its own, and dark clouds floating sluggishly; and if that were so it must have been self-luminous, for these slow masses dimmed its surface and it cast little light despite its hugeness. But there was light enough so that hi the land through which Jirel ran great shadows took shape upon the ground, writhing and shifting as the moon-clouds obscured and revealed the green surface, and the whole night scene was more baffling and unreal than a dream. And there was something about the green luminance that made her eyes ache.

She waded through shadows as she ran now, monstrous shadows with a hideous dissimilarity to the things that cast them, and no two alike, however identical the bodies which gave them shape. Her own shadow, keeping pace with her along the ground, she did not look at after one shuddering glance. There was something so unnatural about it, and yet-yet it was like her, too, with a dreadful likeness she could not fathom. And more than once she saw great shadows drifting across the ground without any visible thing to cast them-nothing but the queerly shaped blurs moving soundlessly past her and melting into the farther dark. And that was the worst of all.

She ran on upwind, ears straining for a repetition of the far crying, skirting the shadows as well as she could and shuddering whenever a great dark blot drifted noiselessly across her path. The moon rose slowly up the sky, tinting the night with a livid greenness, bringing it dreadfully to life with moving shadows. Sometimes the sluggishly moving darkneses across its face clotted together and obscured the whole great disk, and she ran on a few steps thankfully through the unlighted dark before the moon-clouds parted again and the dead green face looked blankly down once more, the cloud-masses crawling across it like corruption across a corpse's face.

During one of these darkneses something slashed viciously at her leg, and she heard the grate of teeth on the greave she wore. When the moon unveiled again she saw a long bright scar along the metal, and a drip of phosphorescent venom trickling down. She gathered a handful of grass to wipe it off before it reached her unprotected foot, and the grass withered in her hand when the poison touched it.

All this while the river had been rushing past her and away, and as she ran it began to narrow and diminish; so she knew she must be approaching its head. When the wind blew she was sure now that she heard her own name upon it, in the small wail which had once been Guillaume's scornful voice. Then the ground began to rise, and down the hillside she mounted, the river fell tinkling, a little thread of water no larger than a brook.

The tinkling was all but articulate now. The river's rush had been no more than a roaring threat, but the voice of the brook was deliberately clear, a series of small, bright notes like syllables, saying evil things. She tried not to listen, for fear of understanding.

The hill rose steeper, and the brook's voice sharpened and clarified and sang delicately in its silvery poisonous tones, and above her against the stars she presently began to discern something looming on the very height of the hill, something like a hulking figure motionless as the hill it crowned. She gripped her sword and slackened her pace a little, skirting the dark thing warily. But when she came near enough to make it out in the green moonlight she saw that it was no more than an image crouching there, black as darkness, giving back a dull gleam from its

surface where the lividness of the moon struck it. Its shadow moved uneasily upon the ground.

The guiding wind had fallen utterly still now. She stood in a breathless silence before the image, and the stars sprawled their queer patterns across the sky and the sullen moonlight poured down upon her and nothing moved anywhere but those quivering shadows that were never still.

The image had the shape of a black, shambling thing with shallow head sunk between its shoulders and great arms dragging forward on the ground. But something about it, something indefinable and obscene, reminded her of Guillaume. Some aptness of line and angle parodied in the ugly hulk the long, clean lines of Guillaume, the poise of his high head, the scornful tilt of his chin. She could not put a finger on any definite likeness, but it was unmistakably there. And it was all the ugliness of Guillaume -she saw it as she stared. All his cruelty and arrogance and brutish force. The image might have been a picture of Guillaume's sins, with just enough of his virtues left in to point its dreadfulness.

For an instant she thought she could see behind the black parody, rising from it and irrevocably part of it, a nebulous outline of the Guillaume she had never known, the scornful face twisted in despair, the splendid body writhing futilely away from that obscene thing which was himself-Guillaume's soul, rooted in the ugliness which the image personified. And she knew his punishment- so just, yet so infinitely unjust.

And what subtle torment the black god's kiss had wrought upon him! To dwell in the full, frightful realization of his own sins, chained to the actual manifestation, suffering eternally in the obscene shape that was so undeniably himself-his worst and lowest self. It was just, in a way. He had been a harsh and cruel man in life. But the very fact that such punishment was agony to him proved a higher self within his complex soul-something noble and line which writhed away from the unspeakable thing- himself. So the very fineness of him was a weapon to torture his soul, turned against him even as his sins were turned.

She understood all this in the timeless while she stood there with eyes fixed motionless upon the hulking shape of the image, wringing from it the knowledge of what its ugliness meant. And something in her throat swelled and swelled, and behind her eyelids burnt the sting of tears. Fiercely she fought back the weakness, desperately cast about for some way in which she might undo what she had unwittingly inflicted upon him.

And then all about her something intangible and grim began to form. Some iron presence that manifested itself only by the dark power she felt pressing upon her, stronger and stronger. Something coldly inimical to all things human. The black god's presence. The black god, come to defend his victim against one who was so alien to all his darkness-one who wept and trembled, and was warm with love and sorrow and desperate with despair.

She felt the inexorable force tightening around her, freezing her tears, turning the warmth and tenderness of her into gray ice, rooting her into a frigid immobility. The air dimmed about her, gray with cold, still with the utter deadness of the black god's unhuman presence. She had a glimpse of the dark place into which he was drawing her -a moveless, twilight place, deathlessly still. And an immense weight was pressing her down. The ice formed upon her soul, and the awful, iron despair which has no place among human emotions crept slowly through the fibers of her innermost self.

She felt herself turning into something cold and dark and rigid-a black image of herself-a black, hulking image to prison the spark of consciousness that still burned.

Then, as from a long way off in another time and world, came the memory of Guillaume's arms about her and the scornful press of his mouth over hers. It had not happened to her. It had happened to someone else, someone human and alive, in a far-away place. But the memory of it shot like fire through the rigidness of the body she had almost forgotten was hers, so cold and still it was-the memory of that curious, raging fever which was both

hate and love. It broke the ice that bound her, for a moment only, and in that moment she fell to her knees at the dark statue's feet and burst into shuddering sobs, and the hot tears flowing were like fire to thaw her soul. Slowly that thawing took place. Slowly the ice melted and the rigidity gave way, and the awful weight of the despair which was no human emotion lifted by degrees. The tears ran hotly between her fingers. But all about her she could feel, as tangibly as a touch, the imminence of the black god, waiting. And she knew her humanity, her weakness and transience, and the eternal, passionless waiting she could never hope to outlast. Her tears must run dry- and then- She sobbed on, knowing herself in hopeless conflict with the vastness of death and oblivion, a tiny spark of warmth and life fighting vainly against the dark engulfing it; the perishable spark, struggling against inevitable extinction. For the black god was all death and nothingness, and the powers he drew upon were without limit-and all she had to fight him with was the flicker within her called life.

But suddenly in the depths of her despair she felt something stirring. A long, confused blurring passed over her, and another, and another, and the strangest emotions tumbled through her mind and vanished. Laughter and mirth, sorrow and tears and despair, love, envy, hate. She felt somehow a lessening in the oppressive peril about her, and she lifted her face from her hands.

Around the dark image a mist was swirling. It was tenuous and real by turns, but gradually she began to make out a ring of figures-girls' figures, more unreal than a vision-dancing girls who circled the crouching statue with flying feet and tossing hair-girls who turned to Jirel her own face in as many moods as there were girls. Jirel laugh-

ing, Jirel weeping, Jirel convulsed with fury, Jirel honey-sweet with love. Faster they swirled, a riot of flashing limbs, a chaos of tears and mirth and all humanity's moods. The air danced with them in shimmering waves, so that the land was blurred behind them and the image seemed to shiver within itself. And she felt those waves of warmth and humanity beating insistently against the hovering chill which was the black god's presence. Life and warmth, fighting back the dark nothingness she had thought unconquerable. She felt it wavering about her as a canopy wavers in the wind. And slowly she felt it melting. Very gradually it lifted and dissipated, while the wild figures of gayety and grief and all kindred emotions whirled about the image and the beat of their aliveness pulsed through the air in heatwaves against the grayness of the god's cold.

And something in Jirel knew warmly that the image of life as a tiny spark flickering out in limitless black was a false one-that without light there can be no darkness- that death and life are interdependent, one upon the other. And that she, armored in the warmth of her aliveness, was the black god's equal, and a worthy foe. It was an even struggle. She called up the forces of life within her, feeling them hurled against the darkness, beating strongly upon the cold and silence of oblivion. Strength flowed through her, and she knew herself immortal in the power of life.

How long this went on she never knew. But she felt victory pulsing like wine through her veins even before the cold pall lifted. And it lifted quite suddenly. In a breath, without warning, the black god's presence was not. In that breath the swirling dancers vanished, and the night was empty about her, and the singing of triumph ran warmly through her body.

But the image-the image! The queerest change was coming over it. The black, obscene outlines were unstable as mist. They quavered and shook, and ran together and somehow melted. . . . The green moon veiled its face again with clouds, and when the light returned the image was

no more than a black shadow running fluidly upon the ground; a shadow which bore the outlines of Guillaume- or what might have been Guillaume. . . .

The moon-shadows moved across the livid disk, and the shadow on the ground moved too, a monstrous shadow latent with a terrible implication of the horrors dormant within the being which cast the shadow, dreadful things that Guillaume might have been and done. She knew then why the misshapen shadows



were so monstrous. They were a dim, leering hinting at what might have been-what might yet be-frightful suggestions of the dreadfuls dormant within every living being. And the insane suggestions they made were the more terrible because, impossible beyond nightmares though they seemed, yet the mind intuitively recognized their truth. . . .

A little breeze sprang up fitfully, and the shadow moved, slipping over the stones without a sound. She found herself staggering after it on legs that shook, for the effort of that battle with the god had drained her of all strength. But the shadow was gliding faster now, and she dared not lose it. It floated on without a sound, now fast, now slow, its monstrous outlines shifting continually into patterns each more terribly significant than the last. She stumbled after it, the sword a dead weight in her hand, her red head hanging.

In five minutes she had lost all sense of direction. Beyond the hilltop the river ceased. The moving moonlight confused her and the stars traced queer pictures across the sky, from which she could get no bearings. The moon was overhead by now, and in those intervals when its clouds obscured the surface and the night was black around her, Guillaume's misshapen shadow vanished with the rest, and she suffered agonies of apprehension before the light came out again and she took up the chase anew.

The dark blot was moving now over a rolling meadow-land dotted with queerly shaped trees. The grass over which she ran was velvet-soft, and she caught whiffs of perfume now and again from some tree that billowed with pale bloom in the moonlight. The shadow wavering ahead of her moved forward to pass one tall tree a little apart

from the rest, its branches hanging in long, shaking streamers from its central crown. She saw the dark shape upon the ground pause as it neared the tree, and shiver a little, and then melt imperceptibly into the shadow cast by its branches. That tree-shadow, until Guillaume's touched it, had borne the shape of a monster with crawling tentacles and flattened, thrusting head, but at the moment of conjunction the two melted into one-all the tentacles leaped forward to embrace the newcomer, and the two merged into an unnamably evil thing that lay upon the ground and heaved with a frightful aliveness of its own.

Jirel paused at its edge, looking down helplessly. She disliked to set her foot even upon the edge of that hideous black shape, though she knew intuitively that it could not harm her. The joined shadows were alive with menace and evil, but only to things in their own plane. She hesitated under the tree, wondering vainly how to part her lover's shade from the thing that gripped it. She felt somehow that his shadow had not joined the other altogether willingly. It was rather as if the evil instinct in the tree-shape had reached out to the evil in Guillaume, and by that evil held him, though the fineness that was still his revolted to the touch.

Then something brushed her shoulder gently, and lapped around her arm, and she leaped backward in a panic, too late. The tree's swinging branches had writhed round toward her, and one already was wrapped about her body. That shadow upon the ground had been a clear warning of the danger dormant within the growth, had she only realized it before-a tentacled monster, lying in wait. Up swung her sword in a flash of green-tinged moonlight, and she felt the gripping branch yield like rubber under the blow. It gave amazingly and sprang back again, jerking her almost off her feet. She turned the blade against it, hewing desperately as she saw other branches curling around toward her. One had almost come within reach of her sword-arm, and was poising for the attack, when she felt her blade bite into the rubbery surface at last. Then with a root-deep shudder through all its members the tree loosed its hold and the severed limb fell writhing to the ground.

Thick black sap dripped from the wound. And all the branches hung motionless, but upon the ground the shadow flung wildly agonized tentacles wide, and from the released grip Guillaume's shadow sprang free and glided away over the grass. Shaking with reaction, Jirel followed.

She gave more attention to the trees they passed now. There was one little shrub whose leaves blew constantly in shivering ripples, even when there was no wind, and its shadow was the shadow of a small leaping thing that hurled itself time and again against some invisible barrier and fell back, only to leap once more in panic terror. And one slim, leafless tree writhed against the stars with a slow, unceasing motion. It made no sound, but its branches twisted together and shuddered and strained in an agony more eloquent than speech. It seemed to wring its limbs together, agonized, dumb, with a slow anguish that never abated. And its shadow, dimly, was the shadow of a writhing woman.

And one tree, a miracle of bloom in the moonlight, swayed its ruffled branches seductively, sending out wave upon wave of intoxicating perfume and making a low, delightful humming, somehow like the melody of bees. Its shadow upon the ground was the shadow of a coiled serpent, lifting to strike.

Jirel was glad when they left the region of the trees and curved to the left down a long hill slope across which other shadows, without form, blew unceasingly with nothing to cast them. They raced noiselessly by, like wind-driven clouds. Among them she lost and found and lost again the shape she followed, until she grew dizzy from trying to keep her footing upon a ground that quavered with the blowing shadows so that she never knew upon what her feet were stepping, and the dim thing she followed was a nothingness that threaded its way in and out of the cloud-shapes bafflingly.

She had the idea now that the shadow of her lover was heading toward some definite goal. There was purpose in its dim gliding, and she looked ahead for some sign of the place it aimed toward. Below the hill the land stretched away featurelessly, cloud-mottled in the livid moonlight. Drifts of mist obscured it, and there were formless dark patches and pale blotches upon the night, and here and there a brook crawled across the blackness. She was completely lost now, for the river had long since vanished and she saw no hill which might have been the one upon which she had emerged.

They crossed another belt of quaking land, and the shadow gained upon her as she staggered over the jelly-like surface. They came to a pale brook across which the shadow glided without a pause. It was a narrow, swift brook whose water chuckled thickly to itself in the dark. One stepping-stone broke the surface in the center of the stream, and she held her breath and leaped for it, not daring to slacken her pace. The stone gave under her foot like living flesh, and she thought she heard a groan, but she had gained the farther bank and did not pause to listen.

Then they were hurrying down another slope, the shadow gliding faster now, and more purposefully. And the slope went down and down, steeply, until it became the side of a ravine and the rocks began to roll under her stumbling feet. She saw the fleeting shadow slip over a ledge and down a steep bank and then plunge into the darkness which lay like water along the bottom of the gully, and she gave a little sob of despair, for she knew now that she had lost it. But she struggled on into the dark that swallowed her up.

It was like wading deeper and deeper into a tangible oblivion. The blackness closed over her head, and she was groping through solid night. It filled the hollow in a thick flood, and in the depths of it she could not even see the stars overhead. There was a moment of this blindness and groping, and then the moon rose.

Like a great leprous face it swung over the ravine's edge, the moon-clouds crawling across its surface. And that green light was an agony to her eyes, obscurely, achingly. It was like no mortal moonlight. It seemed endowed with a poisonous quality that was essentially a part of the radiance, and that unearthly, inexplicable light had an effect upon the liquid dark in the gully's bottom which no

earthly moonlight could have had. It penetrated the blackness, broke it up into myriad struggling shadows that did not lie flat upon the ground, as all shadows should, but stood upright and three-dimensional and danced about her in a dizzy riot of nothingness taken shape. They brushed by her and through

her without meeting obstruction, because for all their seeming solidity they were no more than shadows, without substance.

Among them danced the shape of Guillaume, and the outlines of it made her faint with terror, they were so like -and so dreadfully unlike-the Guillaume she had known, so leeringly suggestive of all the evil in him, and all the potential evil of mankind. The other shapes were ugly too, but they were the shapes of things whose real form she did not know, so that the implications latent in them she did not understand. But she missed no subtle half-tone of the full dreadfulness which was Guillaume, and her mind staggered with the suggestions the shadow-form made.

"Guillaume-" she heard herself sobbing, "Guillaume!" and realized that it was the first articulate sound which had passed her lips since she entered here. At her voice the reeling shadow slowed a little and hesitated, and then very reluctantly began to drift toward her through the spinning shades. And then without warning something immeasurably cold and still closed down around her once more. The black god's presence. Again she felt herself congealing, through and through, as the ice of eternal nothingness thickened upon her soul and the gray, dim, formless place she remembered took shape about her and the immense weight of that iron despair descended again upon her shuddering spirit. If she had had warning she could have struggled, but it came so suddenly that before she could marshal her forces for the attack she was frigid to the core with the chill of unhumanity, and her body did not belong to her, and she was turning slowly into a black shadow that reeled among shadows in a dreadful, colorless void. . . .

Sharply through this stabbed the fire-hot memory that had wakened her before-the weight of a man's bearded mouth upon hers, the grip of his mailed arms. And again she knew the flash of violence that might have been hate or love, and warmth flowed through her again in a sustaining tide.

And she fought. All the deeps of warmth and humanity in her she drew upon to fight the cold, all the violence of emotion to combat the terrible apathy which had gripped her once and was stretching out again for her soul. It was not an easy victory. There were moments when the chill all but conquered, and moments when she felt herself drawn tenuously out of the congealing body which was hers to reel among the other shadows-a dim thing whose shape hinted at unspeakable possibilities, a shadow with form and depth and no reality. She caught remote beats of the insane harmony they danced to, and though her soul was fainting, her unreal shade went whirling on with the rest. She shared their torment for long minutes together. But always she pulled herself free again. Always she fought back somehow into the ice-fettered body and shook off the frigid apathy that bound it, and hurled her weapons of life and vitality against the dark god's frosty presence.

And though she knew she would win this time, a little creeping doubt had entered her mind and would not be ousted. She could beat the god off, but she could never destroy him. He would always return. She dared not destroy him-a vision of her thought-picture came back to her, of the tiny life-spark burning against eternal darkness. And though if there were no light there could be no dark, yet it was true in reverse too, and if the power upon which the black god drew were destroyed-if the dark were dissipated, then there would be no light. No life. Interdependence, and eternal struggle....

All this she was realizing with a remote part of herself as she fought. She realized it very vaguely, for her mind had not been trained to such abstractions. With her conscious self she was calling up the memories of love and hate and terror, the exultation of battle, the exaltation of joy.

Everything that was alive and pulsing and warm she flung against the black god's chill, feeling her thoughts rise up in a protecting wall about her, to shut out all menace.

Victory, as before, came very suddenly. Without warning a blaze of light sprang up around her. The dark presence melted into oblivion. In that abrupt

glare she closed her dazzled eyes, and when she opened them again familiar moonlight was flooding the glen. The fluid dark had vanished, the shadows no longer danced. That light had blasted them out of existence, and as it died she stared round the dim ravine with startled eyes, searching for the thing that was all she had seen of Guillaume. It was gone with the rest. The tangible dark which had brimmed the place was utterly gone. Not a shadow moved anywhere. But on the wind that was blowing down the ravine a small voice wailed.

And so again the weary chase went on. But she had less than ever to guide her now-only a fitful crying in the dark. "Jirel-" it wailed, "Jirel-Jirel-" and by that calling she followed. She could see nothing. Guillaume was no more than a voice now, and she could follow him by ear alone. Emptily the landscape stretched before her.

She had come out of the ravine's end upon a broad fan-shaped slope which tilted downward into darkness. Water was falling somewhere near, but she could not see it. She ran blindly, ears strained for the small wailing cry. It led out over the slope and skirted the foot of a hill and passed by the place where water fell in a thin cascade down a cliffside, and whispered evilly to itself as it fell.

The sound obscured the sound she followed, and when she had passed beyond the whisper of the falls she had to stop and listen for a long time, while her heart thudded and the land around her crept with small, inexplicable noises, before she caught the far-away wail, "Jirel- Jirel-"

She set off in the direction from which the sound came, and presently heard it again more clearly, "Jirel! Jirel, my murderess!"

It was a heart-breaking course she ran, with no more than a fitful wailing to guide her and unknown perils lurk-

ing all about in the dark, and her own body and soul so drained of all strength by that second struggle with the god that the misty darkness wavered before her eyes and the ground underfoot heaved up to meet her time after time.

Once she fell, and lay still for a second to catch her struggling breath. But it seemed to her that the ground against her body was too warm, somehow, and moving gently as if with leisured breathing. So she leaped up again in swift alarm, and went skimming on with that dreamlike speed over the dark grass.

It seemed to her that, as the shadow she had pursued had fled through shadowy places where she all but lost it time and again, now the fleeing voice led her through noisy places where she could scarcely hear it above the talking of brooks and the rush of falls and the blowing of the wind. She heard sounds she had never heard before -small, tenuous voices murmuring in the wind, the whispering of grass saying things in a murmurous language, the squeak of insects brushing past her face and somehow almost articulate. She had heard no birds here, though once a great, dark, shapeless thing flapped heavily through the air a little distance ahead. But there were frog voices from the swamps she skirted, and hearing these she remembered what she had met in another swamp on her first visit here, and a little chill went down her back.

In every sound she heard ran the thread of evil inextricably tangled with a thread of purest despair-a human despair even through the grasses' rustling and in the murmur of the wind-voices wailing so hopelessly that more than once tears started unbidden to her eyes, but so indistinctly that she could never be sure she had heard. And always through the wailing rippled the chuckle of dim evils without any names in human languages. And with all these sounds she heard many others that meant nothing to her and upon whose origins she dared not speculate.

Through this welter of incomprehensible noises she followed the one far crying that had meaning for her. It led in a long arc across rolling ground, over muttering brooks that talked morbidly in the dark. Presently she began to catch faint strains of the most curious music. It did not have the quality of composition, or even unity, but seemed to consist of single groups of notes, like sprays of music, each unrelated to the rest, as if thousands of invisible

creatures were piping tiny, primitive tunes, every one deaf to the songs of his fellows. The sound grew louder as she advanced, and she saw that she was coming to a luminous patch upon the dark ground. When she reached the edge she paused in wonder.

The music was rising from the earth, and it rose visibly. She could actually see the separate strains wavering upward through the still air. She could never have described what she saw, for the look of that visible music was beyond any human words. Palely the notes rose, each singing its tiny, simple tune. There seemed to be no discords, for all the non-unity of the sounds. She had the mad fancy that the music was growing—that if she wished she could wade through the ranks of it and gather great sheaves of sound—perhaps bouquets which, if they were carefully selected, would join together and play a single complex melody.

But it was not music she dared listen to long. There was in it the queerest little gibbering noise, and as she lingered that sound intensified and ran through her brain in small, giggling undernotes, and she caught herself laughing senselessly at nothing at all. Then she took fright, and listened for the voice that was Guillaume. And terrifyingly she heard it strongly in the very midst of the little mad jinglings. It deepened and grew, and drowned out the smaller sounds, and the whole field was one vast roar of insane laughter that thundered through her head in destroying waves—a jarring laughter that threatened to shake her very brain into a jelly, and shivered through her body irresistibly and wrung tears from her eyes even as she laughed.

"Guillaume!" she called again in the midst of her agony. "Oh Guillaume!" and at the sound of her voice all laughter ceased and a vast, breathless silence fell upon the whole dark world. Through that silence the tiniest wail threaded itself reedily, "Jirel-." Then other sounds came back to life, and the wind blew and the wail diminished in the distance. Again the chase went on.

By now the moon's dead, crawling face had sunk nearly to the horizon, and the shadows lay in long patterns across the ground. It seemed to her that around the broad ring of the sky a pallor was rising. In her weariness and despair she did not greatly care now, knowing though she did that should day catch her here it meant a death more terrible than any man can die on earth, and an eternity, perhaps, of torment in one of the many shapes she had seen and recognized as the spirits of the damned. Perhaps a writhing tree—or imprisonment in an obscenely revelatory image, like Guillaume—or no more than a wailing along the wind for ever. She was too tired to care. She stumbled on hopelessly, hearing the voice that cried her name grow fainter and fainter in the distance.

The end of the chase came very suddenly. She reached a stream that flowed smoothly under the arch of a low, dark bridge, and crossed over it, seeing her face look up at her from the water with a wild mouthing of soundless cries, though her own lips were closed. She met her reflected eyes and read warning and despair and the acutest agony in their depths, and saw her own face writhing all out of familiarity with anguish and hopelessness. It was a frightful vision, but she scarcely saw it, and ran on without heeding the image in the water or the landscape around her or even the broadening dawn around the horizon.

Then close ahead of her sounded the thin small voice she followed, and she woke out of her stupor and stared around. That bridge had not ended upon the far side of the brook, but somehow had arched up its sides and broadened its floor and become a dark temple around whose walls ran a more bestial sculpture than anything imagined even in dreams. Here in this carved and columned building was the epitome of the whole dim hell through which she had been running. Here in these sculptures she read all the hideous things the shadows had hinted at, all the human sorrow and despair and hopelessness she had heard in the wind's crying, all the chuckling evil that the water spoke. In the carvings she could trace the prisoned souls of men and beasts, tormented in many ways, some of which she had already seen, but many that she

had not, and which she mercifully could not understand. It was not clear for what they were punished, save that the torture was tinged just enough with justice so that it seemed the more hideously unjust in its exaggerations. She closed her eyes and stood swaying a little, feeling the triumphant evil of the temple pulsing around her, too stunned and sick even to wonder what might come next.

Then the small voice was beating around her head. Almost she felt the desperate hammering of wings, as if some little, frantic bird were flying against her face. "Jirel!- Jirel!" it cried in the purest agony, over and over, a final, wild appeal. And she did not know what to do. Helplessly she stood there, feeling it beating round her head, feeling the temple's obscene triumph surging through her.

And without warning, for the third time the black god's presence folded like a cloak about her. Almost she welcomed it. Here was something she knew how to fight. As from a long distance away she heard the small voice crying in diminishing echoes, and the frigid twilight was forming about her, and the gray ice thickened upon her soul. She called up the memories of hate and love and anger to hurl against it, thinking as she did so that perhaps one who had lived less violently than herself and had lesser stores of passions to recall might never be able to combat the god's death-chill. She remembered laughter, and singing and gayety-she remembered slaughter and blood and the wild clang of mail-she remembered kisses in the dark, and the hard grip of men's arms about her body.

But she was weary, and the dawn was breaking terribly along the sky, and the dark god's power was rooted in a changeless oblivion that never faltered. And she began to realize failure. The memories she flung out had no power against the gray pall of that twilight place wherein he dwelt, and she knew the first seeping of the iron despair through her brain. Gradually the will to struggle congealed with her congealing body, until she was no longer a warm, vital thing of flesh and blood, but something rigid and icebound, dwelling bodilessly in the twilight.

There was one small spark of her that the god could not freeze. She felt him assailing it. She felt him driving it out of the cold thing that had been her body-drawing it forth irresistibly-she was a thin, small crying in the dark. . . . Helplessly she felt herself whirling to and fro upon currents she had never felt before, and dashing against unseen obstacles, wailing wordlessly. She had no substance, and the world had faded from around her. She was aware of other things-dim, vague, like beating pulses, that were whirling through the dark, small lost things like herself, bodiless and unprotected, buffeted by every current that blew; little wailing things, shrieking through the night.

Then one of the small vagueness blew against her and through her, and in the instant of its passage she caught the faint vibration of her name, and knew that this was the voice that had summoned her out of her dreams, the voice she had pursued: Guillaume. And with that instant's union something as sustaining as life itself flashed through her wonderfully, a bright spark that swelled and grew and blazed, and-

She was back again in her body amidst the bestial carvings of the temple-a thawing, warming body from which the shackles of icy silence were falling, and that hot blaze was swelling still, until all of her being was suffused and pulsing with it, and the frigid pall of dark melted away unresistingly before the hot, triumphant blaze that dwelt within her.

In her ecstasy of overwhelming warmth she scarcely realized her victory. She did not greatly care. Something very splendid was happening. . . .

Then the air trembled, and all about her small, thin sounds went shivering upward, as if ribbons of high screams were rippling past her across a background of silence. The blaze within her faded slowly, paled, imperceptibly died away, and the peace of utter emptiness flooded into her soul. She turned wearily backward across

the bridge. Behind her the temple stood in a death-like quiet. The evil that

had beat in long pulses through it was stilled for a while by something stunningly splendid which had no place in the starry hell; something human and alive, something compounded of love and longing, near-despair and sacrifice and triumph.

Jirel did not realize how great a silence she left behind, nor very clearly what she had done. Above her against the paling sky she saw a familiar hilltop, and dimly knew that in all her long night of running she had been circling round toward her starting-place. She was too numb to care. She was beyond relief or surprise.

She began the climb passionlessly, with no triumph in the victory she knew was hers at last. For she had driven Guillaume out of the image and into the shadow, and out of the shadow into the voice, and out of the voice into clean death, perhaps. She did not know. But he had found peace, for his insurances no longer beat upon her consciousness. And she was content.

Above her the cave mouth yawned. She toiled up the slope, dragging her sword listlessly, weary to the very soul, but quite calm now, with a peace beyond all understanding.