

Erdis Cliff

By Richard S. Shaver

*Time is like a book, and its leaves are worlds very close to each other;
and yet...distant beyond imagination.*

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

SLOWLY the clouds came, dawn rose above the jagged outline of Erdis' cliff-edge. The eye fled down the sheer, clean, rock face of the cliff, to come softly to rest among the drifting, rising morning mists in the small, sweet valley at the foot.

Ancient and virgin those gigantic trees, unknowing mortal man. Clean and happy those small laughing streams, meeting there beneath the glittering arc of the iridescent bridge of glass that swept in one long material rainbow of poetry made into actual mass, but mass without essential solidity, shimmering and fragile as air, sweeping up and up from the misted green floor of the valley to plunge into the mid-face of the cliff.

There where the rainbow bridge met the raw face of the rock, a great stone beast-face leered, and into the dark mouth of that giant sculpture the glassy shimmer thrust, stopped at last by the great bronze halves of a circular doorway.

One of those halves of heavy ancient metal hung open, and in the gloomy opening a tiny figure stood, the morning breeze stirring timidly about the smooth curves of her body.

Nearer the eye of view, and nearer, and that figure by some magic becomes intense.

The darkling sweep of her hair above the wide white brow, the deep thoughtful eyes black mystery below, the strong cheekbones balancing the raven's-wing touch of her upsweeping eyebrows, cheeks tapering down to a sweetly pointed chin centered by a dimple. That dimple beneath the wide generous red lips incongruous upon the almost stern, thoughtful face, contradicting all the will and majesty of it with the impish impression of humor held inwardly on a tight rein.

Feronia of Erdis, she. Erdis the cliff's name, and her home's name. That home, whether constructed by magic in the forgotten past, or by her own witch-wisdom, this eye of view could not at present say. Nor could you, seeing the dark wisdom of her presence, the sweet classic magic of her breasts' soft thrust, the small-waisted suppleness of her eternal youth, the masterful curves of her hips, the strong-joined stance of the witch who was first a woman and second the mistress of a dark art.

Her clothing was a white length of soft fabric, bordered about with the Greek wave in gold thread, caught about the swell of her hips and looped over itself, ample folds falling in clean soft lines clear to the high arched feet in laced antique sandals, of golden leather without jewels or decoration.

Above the softly clasping purity of the fabric her waist outshone its purity with the satin sheen of flesh, narrowing and then arching out to frame the glory of her breasts, full and adult, two poems framed with golden arabesques clasping a white soft fabric beneath their weight and about her fine wide shoulders.

On one shoulder a great black bird sat, something like a raven but with long legs like a heron, big as a hawk but mild and solemn of eye. She paid it little heed, only stroking it once with her long, acid-stained fingers along the arched neck. Suddenly it lifted, arrowed down into the mists below.

Feronia sighed, as one lonesome and weary of self. She turned, a soft sweet grace in the knee-lift of the kirtle, in the sway of the arching hip, in the line of her arm as she gestured to someone invisible, and disappeared within the dark opening of the stone beast's mouth.

Now about the still open metal valve of the door small chittering shadows moved, bunched, exhorted with shriller cheeping, and the door swung slowly closed after her step had died in the echoing distance.

At the closing of the door, some magic faded out over that hidden valley, the whole vista of its majesty and ancient untouched beauty slid down some subtle scale of values, hung at the bottom to present a face of utter desolation and malignant unwelcome to the chance of any life happening that way. The mists grew thicker, even as the day advanced, shutting out the sun, clinging concealingly about the still shimmering magic of that impossible bridge, making the whole valley and awful face of the cliff into one ugly, haunted wasteland.

IN AN ARCHAIC mountain stronghold, far-off, this eye sees now: A woman, flame-haired and lovely, who turns slowly the pages of an ancient book. Lua, Mistress of Vole, reads:

There is a planet that is ultra-simultane with the vast rotunditie of TIME, which you probably know. Our own world is but a slice called *now* of this planet, and upon that planet, though it partakes of our own, the part we take is but as the part a page takes to a book.

Within the ultra-simultane sits a figure called by various names. On our *now* he is called the Devil; but in this world we speak of, he is called the Red Dwarf, which is more politic, and they are wiser there.

Now the Red Dwarf turns the pages of this book of time, reading it in the simultane, and as he reads he takes painfully written notes upon the many planes of all the *nows*, for he is a student who means quite intensely to surpass the other simultanes, but this eye-of-view has had opportunity to inspect the writings of the Red Dwarf, and I can assure you that even in your thin slice called *now*, you have as good a chance as he.

However, though he is an untalented student, he is a most thorough recorder of the doings on certain of the planes of *now*. But as he is old and absent-minded, he sometimes mislays his notes, and even his vast notebooks, upon the planes of time which he leafs through. That is how this came to get hold of the records from which I have translated these events. He left them in my *now* for an instant, and I seized them, though not without trepidation.

So we come to the beginning of this tale of Erdis Cliff, and I have pictured to you Feronia, the witch of Erdis Cliff, as well as I could.

Now the Dwarf's eye-of-view swung away from the valley, an around to the northward and westward, and settled downward, and I read on;

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THIS VALLEY lies open and unmisted under the green-bright rays of the bizarre sun.

Through the center of the wide, flowered valley meanders a river of vivid pink liquid, wide and placid and many-curved.

The sands that line the river are purple and poisonous to life.

Above the purple ribbons of treacherous poison sand are the grassy banks of the river, with strange

flowered plants among the grasses. Beyond the grass the trees move their limbs slowly, rhythmically, waiting, waiting, for what is to come to them.

High on the ridge of the grassy bank lies an old forgotten stone God. His limbs are half imbedded in the blue soil; it has been an age since he has had an impulse to move those strange, mottled, sculptural limbs. Stonily the God stares out at the lazy pink river, over the slowly groping limbs of the far hungry trees, toward the distant hills that are the unsuckled breasts of the Zoogyte, the planet-being which allows these things to exist upon her roundness.

Nothing moves in that valley except the slow-streaming river and the rhythmic limbs of the hungry ancient trees.

Time moves, though, invisibly, trying to set her grip upon this valley that waits, regarding her not.

THE EYE-OF-VIEW moves then, and the records is that of another side of the strange planet that is as our own, but several times removed by that thin repeating slice called *now*, as the pages of a book are separated, yet the same in one basic way. Focusing again, it is the slowly descending darkness and a city named Maneon.

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Lua, flame-haired young widow of Faustis, Master of Vole, the ancient fortress he had made his stronghold against his many enemies. Lua, Mistress of Vole, reading there in the great-beamed antique room, the carved and huge old furniture weird in the firelight, leaning back and closing the Mystic Book.

That word *Maneon*, in this ancient book! That city must be very old, to have been spoken of then as a great city. This was written hundreds of years ago, this worm-eaten tome she held in her hand. Centuries, or spaces ago?

Maneon, that was where she had last had word of Ruy Egan! If only he were here, now that Faustis was gone from her life, now that his will was no longer the tune she must dance to!

Perhaps the old glass in the tower would show him...*you could at least try, Lua*...it has been so many years not to even have seen his face.

Eagerly she ascended the tower stairs, winding, and unlocked the door of the south chamber. There was many strange contrivances here, produce of Faustis' looting. He had found always an excuse to fare off on an expedition against some rich holding or other. Bandit he was, and looter he had died, leaving her this ancient keep stuffed with his treasures, most of which he could never use—they were not negotiable values—not such things as this great solid glass globe. Who would know how to use it but herself or its former owner? No one who had not read the book of Mors, which Faustis had brought home to her for its beautiful gold binding trimmed with red leaves. She picked the book from the shelf, laden and dusty there beside the globe of glass, and leafed through, looking for the formula. Slowly she chanted the dread words, and made the sign of Tee upon her breast, and bent to peer into the green depths of the sphere murky as a stagnant pond.

Maneon slowly appeared, a city of low roofs, many of them stretched beside the muddy river, and the temple there beside the water, squat and ugly and huge. She knew the city well, had seen it from the hills where she had waited for Faustis more than once when he was picking up some gold from the highway caravans.

The eye-of-view lowered, focused, and the young widow made out a line of slaves, with chains about their necks, loading sacks with the black rich soil near the river bank, and loading the bags into carts. She

started, bent lower, watching the slow weary movements of one of the slaves. Ah, Mors, it was *her own heart's love* wearing out his life on that chain of endless work!

Lua, Mistress of Vole, turned away from the globe, and an anger flamed in her against fate that had brought her only those things she had no wish to own—and denied her always those things she most wanted. Ruy Egan, a slave! Not that bold young spirit, not that youth from these, her own hills!

SHE TURNED, went swiftly down the tower stairs, and there in the weapon room, no longer visited except by the old men-at-arms to reminisce, since Faustis' death, she chose two swords from the wall. From the chests she lifted a suit of small-link mail—oiled and waiting it was, she noted—smiling a little at the work of greying warriors who still looked at her with a little hope that she would take up the old ways and give them yet a little excitement. Five years it had been since Faustis had faced the wrong man at swords point and gone to his well-earned death. Ten, since Egan had fled from the wrath of his lord, Denis of Castle Lehar. What was it he had done? Stolen some trinket or other, they had said! False, on the face of it! He was above such a petty crime.

She tried on the coat of mail, slipped on the leg plates, and belted on the lighter of the two swords. This was the same outfit she had worn last five years ago when she had waited in the forest above Caer Elar and they had brought him back to her on a litter, dying. He had been sorry he had left her alone! Sorry! and she glad inside to be from under his will at last. Yet he was not evil to her, she had still a sadness at her passing. But...to be free!

To the stable, and old Lon Harrick to help her wrap the horses feet, saddle the two young horses he had trained himself for her riding, and whom she almost forced down on his face to keep him from mounting and riding with her.

“I'll be gone a week, Lon. Take care of things, you old goat, and I'll get you something special.”

Then she had remembered, and gone back and got the long-handled steel cutters from the smithy, and food from the kitchen stores. She had to stay away from people, this trip, just like old times.

Then she had ridden into the night, and her heart had been light. She understood now why the few who still remained to her of Faustis' men always looked at her, sadly and hopefully, waiting for orders that never came. Did one never outgrow the need for action? Never get too old to want the night wind, and the freedom, and the thrill of danger? Perhaps that was why Faustis could not leave the raiding alone. It was the thrill of it, not the booty, he wanted most.

For an instant she knew she was mad, to believe the silly visions her mind had conjured from the gloomy green depths of that old chunk of glass. Stupid of her, to ride off after something she had missed ten years and more ago. You can't turn back on time like that! Love, once lost, can never be gotten back, not the young fresh love that had lived in her for Egan! Never had either of them even touched hands, or been closer than a score of feet! Never did she know whether what burned in her young heart burned in him. Never could she get away from Faustis long enough, never was there any way to get Egan alone and find out if this was love in her or only madness from her lone fancies, and her loveless bed with Faustis. Well, at least, now she would *know*. He *had* noticed her, he *had* felt the wind of her passing, it *had* burnt him as herself, this strange thing that still possessed her! Or he had never even seen her except as part of the scenery.

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THE GREEN-BRIGHT sun sinks below the dark hills, low and round and many hills far off, and the

slave leaves off work, clanking his chains back to the sleeping shed.

Lying there among the hundred-odd weary hulks of things that would be men if freedom were added, waiting for the evening bowl of boiled flesh and black bread, Ruy Egan wondered about the endless home of Night, and about the strange life said to inhabit the night, far off. Off where the mocking stars winked, fortunate in aloof freedom.

Lower, by the river, he could see the river mist rising, slowly sliding up through the streets, making all the little lights of the city get dimmer and dimmer.

Farther on, he could see the bigger, yellower lights of the temple, and he thought of all the women prisoned there with their brazen "god", thought with desire and revulsion and pity strangely mingled. And he turned to shake off the thought, and his chains rattled and tugged where they had been fastened to the wall bolts for the night, and the rage rose in him, choking, at those chains and the shame of it.

Then he lay still and watched the mist-ghosts, now gliding by the wide shed door, more and more of them and thicker and bigger, then the mist closed down solid and foggy. The mocking stars disappeared, and only the vague white face of the enigmatic mist remained.

Now through that vagueness came a figure, silent as the mist itself, closer and taller, and seemed to Egan to be the sinuous soft body of a woman as she came graceful and tall through the ugly timbered opening of the shed.

Then she came close and stood over him, and a chill and a dread ran through Egan's cold limbs, for he or she glimmered everywhere over her strange womanish body with steel mail. And the links chinked softly as she moved, holding out to him a long-handled pair of heavy cutters, such as sword-makers use to cut half-tempered steel.

But Ruy Egan was not one to fear any weird ghost out of the fog. He took the great snips, with the handles of heavy oak and a yard long, and flipped them quickly from chain to chain, throwing his weight on the handles hard, and one by one his chains parted, but yard-long pieces of chain still dangled from his big red wrists and from his thick neck collar.

Then Ruy, not even glancing at his deliverer, passed the great cutters to the next man, and stood up. Beneath the masking helm he could see only the chin and mouth, the curling lips half smiling, half-scornful of the stink of the place, and the long chin, square-ended and strong, yet somehow soft like a woman's.

Into his hand she pressed a sword. On the hilt glittered emeralds and gold, and the blade shimmered all along its length with an inner fire of its own.

RUY HEFTED it, a good weighty blade, light in the tip, weighty in the handle, made for swift work and heary strokes, too. And even as she turned, and that thrill that was somehow like fear ran through him at the long beautiful line of her hip and leg in movement, a dark burly figure came out of the mist and stood in the doorway. Ruy's heart sank, they had posted a guard here because of the fog; at each slave shed he knew another was taking his stand, and that moving outside there were a score of men. But they too stood there, still as stone, until the movements outside quieted, then she moved on ahead, leading him.

A curved scimitar in her hand, she paused for the barest instant to spin it up and hard around toward the face of the guard standing there agaze, looking out toward the far dim glow of the city below, pining for some of the fun he knew was there, perhaps.

But Egan didn't wait for the unknown savior to do his own job entirely. He thrust his newly acquired

weapon hard against the belly of the man even as her weapon slashed across his face, biting deep, both of them, and the man fell with a sound like gushing water in his throat, a moan and a cry and blood in his mouth.

Then the stranger led on into the fog, fast and dim in the night to Egan's eyes, so that he hurried after, and his dangling chains clanked and rang with his hurry, and he wished she would move slower.

Over the low wall of the slave compound. Across the hard rutted soil of the road, and into the bushes where stood two horses tethered. Still she spoke not. They mounted together and she led on, away from the road, across the fields, and on into the trees of the hill-side, and up, scrambling along some trail no other eyes could have found. And still the awe of her silence, her man-woman appearance, the strong capable way of her, was with Egan, and he made to speak, but the words stuck in his throat.

Now they could hear afar the noise and the cries and see the faint glimmer of torches rush back and forth, and hear the hoof-beats of horses setting out along the hard road, and for the first time she made a sound—a low rich laugh which marked her surely. A woman, a rich woman! For only a well-fed woman ever made a sound so replete with the cloying sound of rich food, which a slave learns to hate in his owners. Yet it was a good laugh, gallant and thrilling in the dark, and the slave-thought that made him hate the richness of it died away in admiration.

NOW EGAN noted the horses they rode stepped silent on wrapped hooves, and he knew there were no tracks left behind to betray them. At last he raised his voice, ashamed when he heard it of the weary quavering in his own harsh tones, and said:

“Who are you, to come to me, Ruy Egan, for this is strange work for a woman?”

“Later, friend! Have patience, you will learn why I want you.” That voice was low and husky, and pitched with an under-ring as of hidden metal under velvet, thrilling as her laugh, and it spoke of culture and long years among high-bred people. Ruy knew the sound of it from old; it was home to hear such a voice in his own tongue.

All that night she pressed on, leading ever deeper into the increasing hills toward the far mountains, and ever the trees rose greater about them. Still she did not talk, or tell him who or what she was, or where she led. And Egan, weary from the day's work and the long starving, followed in a dull silence, a little warm glow of gratitude in his breast toward this stranger, and half slept, his head bobbing.

When he was awake, he pondered a little, for Ruy Egan was a thief, and he was a thief well known. His enemies had made sure of that! That he was not as black as he was painted by the magistrates who had sentenced him, and the people of Maneon who had talked about him, and the innkeepers who had worried about him, and the travelers who had hired guards to protect them from himself—was known to few. How could this woman whom he was sure he knew not at all—know that?

Did she know that he had deserved the life of hard labor he had been sentenced to, or did she think he was some other prisoner—some brother or lover, perhaps, whom she mistook him for in the fog? But he had said his name, and she had not seemed to notice that it was not the right name. So indeed, she must be a thief or a bandit, and that was very strange, for who else would come to him? Unless she was someone from his own youth, from his home, whom he could not remember! And when he could stay awake, he puzzled through his memories of the days in Castle Lehar, long ago, before he had had to run away from the wrath of...but better not to think of that, the memory was too painful to blight the sensing of the sweetness of this night of his deliverance, who had never expected any such thing for him. Not in Maneon, where they hated his name with a hate born of fear.

HAVING RIDDEN hard all night, the rim of the sun found them toiling over a hill, and the light went with them down into the copse in the hollow, where his guide dismounted. Ruy Egan nearly fell from his horse, and she caught his arm. He looked for an instant into the eyes still hidden behind the masklike visor, and a sense of fear struck into him from his eyes, but he surmised it was weakness in him.

She tied the horses beneath the trees, and for a time they both rested on the soft grass by the stream. Then she sat up, removed the helmet, and bent to the stream to drink

As she turned back to Egan, his mouth dropped in astonishment, for he knew her! That sleek she-leopard look; the bold, eager face, the luxurious, pampered mouth of her—this was the the Mistress of Vole, the woman who in his youth had filled so many mouths with gossip, set all the tongues to wagging with her doings, so that she was said to be a warlock, a werewolf, a sorceress, and worse things darkly whispered, but none openly for fear of her power.

“Yes, Egan, you know me, but it has been long since we crossed trails. If you had come to me when they ran you out of Lehar, you would not have had to leave your home-country. Didn’t you know that men who get on the wrong side of the fence always run to Vole?”

“Such things I have thought over many times, since, but I had no time for thought then. But, even so, what are you doing here, and why bother with me?”

She shook out the tightly bound flame-red hair of hers, and sat combing it, her heavy brows slightly tilted in an odd frown, as if taking stock of him, her eyes quizzical and deep-set beneath. He had never been close to the woman who laired in Vole’s old fortress and defied all men to drive her out or molest her, even. He saw that it had been the ignorance of youth that had kept him from her.

“You have heard that I dabbled in magic, Ruy Egan?”

“Of course. But I take little stock in such tales now that I have seen somewhat of the world.”

“Well, it is not exactly a lie, Egan. And I heard, even back in Vole, that you had become a most skillful thief.”

“I can’t get the connection? What do these two tales about our private affairs have to do with us and why we are here together?”

“A witch has need of many things not easily gotten in this world. Egan, I rescued you to do a bit of thieving for me. I knew enough of your youth to know that gratitude would hold you to my will long enough for that.”

Egan leaned back, the sharp edge taken from his curiosity, and his eyes narrowed to perceive the greed that underlay her deed. This talk of magic was but a red herring to distract his mind from that greed and from the danger of what she wanted, and had somehow heard of his plight in far-off Maneon. Well, she had figured it out all right.

“YOU DO not need to becloud the issue with talk of witchcraft. I’ll steal your baubles, and be glad of the chance to pay for your night’s work. You who lair in Vole’s old walls could be there but for one reason, anyway. Sometime in the past, you got yourself into the same fix I did in Maneon.”

“You know very little of me or of Vole, Egan!”

“True enough, but it has been ten years since I was a beardless youth worshipping you from afar as you rode by in the hunt, too. Those ten years have not touched you, Lua of Vole. Does big black-beard still ride by your side? What did men call him, Faustus or something? No one could ever get you all

figured out, hidden away there in the cliffs of Vole mountain, and it bothered them no end.”

“Faustis was killed in a battle. They couldn’t figure us out, because they lived by farming, and we by looting in far places, riding into the fastnesses of the mountains and by secret ways back to Vole. We took great care no one really knew our business, Egan.”

Egan laughed. “I have often wondered, lying nights and thinking back over it all, if he was not a robber baron, that Faustis, and those who knew afraid to talk.”

She laughed too, a polite laugh to make him at ease, and began to plait her hair tightly again and bind it up small about her head in order to get the helmet on again.

“After he died, the best of our men went their way, and the rest of us, those who loved me well, remained. We have lived well enough, but not trying to upset the world or anything like Faustis. He was over-ambitious, I always privately held. If he had lived, he would have become king in time, but he overreached himself. Without his ambition, he would not have been Faustis, but he would have been alive.”

“So you hold title to many a holding taken by force, Baroness?”

“Never mind the titles or salutations, Egan. To you I can be Lua when no one is about.” Her eyes were suddenly soft upon his, the strong chin somehow sweet, the lips smiling reminiscently.

Egan pondered his memories of her. Somehow her eyes had always sought him out when their troop had joined his own lords for the hunt, and had seemed to enjoy what they saw. He had been a handsome sprig, at that. And now she was a widow, and had rescued him from a slave prison. There was meat for thought in that. But he was being a fool. There was more to it than that!

“This thing I am to steal for you, you who have helped to steal so many things, by your own tale, that it is strange you would need my experience?” Egan’s eyes were narrow on hers, and his suspicions awake.

“The best of our men are left Vole these five years, Ruy. I have no men skillful at the job I want done. Besides, I want a man not known as connected to me, so if he is caught, I will still be safe. You would not betray me, even if they racked you. I remember all about you.”

“I don’t know how you could know that! I don’t know it myself.”

“Once you saved a little girl of a peasant’s family from a flaming cottage, when everyone else sat their horses to enjoy the blaze. Once you dived headlong into Moray Falls, where the great whirlpool below the falls is feared by all swimmers, just to pull out a dog, a mere hunting dog. Do you remember that, Egan?”

Her voice was very thrilling and reminiscent of much quiet thought up there in her stronghold in the mountains. Egan saw that here was a deeper fish than he was familiar with. Could such things tell her he would not betray her? But then, she was a woman.

“I had forgotten, long ago,” murmured Egan.

“To you, such things are nothing. You do not have time from living to weigh them against others’ actions and get the answer that they hold. To a woman, with time to sit and ponder, such things tell a great deal.”

THERE WAS a warmth in Egan’s breast, and it was not the sun, higher overhead. That anyone should have remembered him then when he was young and wholly clean, and that such things should have

brought freedom, was a warming thought. The suspicion died in his breast. She could get plenty of dupes, if that was what she wanted. He fell asleep, a little smile on his over bony face. And it seemed that Lua of Vole bent over him in his sleep, looking into his face for a long time, her eyes wet and shining. But that must be a dream. For she was not known as a sentimental woman, but as a kind of Amazon hard-riding, of hard hands and high, proud ways; ruthless in her dealings, and possessing wealth because of her hard, harsh way of life. Or so he remembered.

The day wore on, the copse was utter still, the horses' feet still muffled and themselves hid in deep leafy shade, and all that day Lua of Vole did not sleep, but sat guard. The little stream babbled very pleasantly and drowsily, and Lua propped her sword so the point would waken her nodding head, and her eyes remained open. It was not the first time she had watched over her sleeping men.

The day died at last, and she woke Egan. They mounted and rode on northward and westward, toward the ever greater mountains wherein lay his old home and hers. Riding through the night was an eerie thing, silent as they both were and stranger one to the other, and Egan wanted very much to know this woman creature who had done what no man would have done for him.

"This must be a very valuable thing you want stolen, Lua, for you to go to so much trouble?"

"It is, Egan, it is. It is a thing hard to believe. I had better tell you all about it. You see, among the loot my husband collected from various places were many books, some of them old, some of them strange beyond the half-wisdom we call learning today. After he was gone, and time hung on my hands, I read some of those books, and I learned of some curious places on this round globe. Curious places, and wonderful things I had not known true at all, or that they could exist. I want some of those things, and the ones I want cannot be come by with the work of just ordinary men. Heard you ever of Erdis Cliff, Egan?"

"Erdis Cliff? I heard a silly tale of it as a place of witchcraft that no man can enter, something like that. Why?"

"That's where you are going to get the first of the things I want. And what that thing is you will have to learn there, for She, the witch who hides there, has a map and other information of places and things not on any map, that you must get for me."

"I don't see why you think I can get it, if others can't."

"Egan, I never loved a man, I married young. He was rich, not knowing what love was, till riding out with the hounds and the whole herd of us from Vole, I saw you among the youths from Lehar Castle, one among many, but standing out to my eyes like a brand in the darkness. Love has no reason or rhyme, it comes and goes, or stays. You stayed in my heart, since that day, and you knew it not, and I did nothing but wonder when the pain would stop. It did not stop, it is still with me."

NOW IT came clearer to Ruy Egan. Her heart reached for him, had longed for him steadily, and at last she had mixed up in her reason so many idle tales with the image of him she could not separate them! Magic, and witches, and the foolish tale of Erdis Cliff where the immortal Feronia waits always for the man who never comes... Yet his heart bounded within him to know this woman loved him, however strangely or madly or with what unreason. His pulse beat faster, and something came into the emptiness inside him and filled it warmly.

"What has that to do with Erdis Cliff, and jewels or what-have-you? What to do with the witch of Erdis Cliff?"

"I have read in a book that was not written on this world, of other worlds like our own, separated

from us only by a little slice of thing called multi-time, or space-time, or some other word meaning dimensions unknown, all called *Simultane* . . . That “magic” is the crossing and mingling of these worlds’ planes of like, and the bringing of the knowledge of one into the other. And the way of this is known to the Witch of Erdis Cliff!”

“Why do you want such a thing as that knowledge? It sounds like madness!”

“It *is* like madness, till you see such things and understand, Egan. Many of those worlds are but halfway houses of civilization, and ours is one of them. Others have immense wisdom, and they have conquered the secret of life, have put off death and age, and have pleasures beyond pleasure, have immortal love.”

“I am a simple man, Lua. I have fought in a war, I have stolen, I have been many strange places and wild ways I have followed, evil men I have known and women too. Yet these things you say sound like madness to me. *Are you mad, Lua?* For you have said you loved me all these weary years . . . it would be terrible to learn that you were mad!”

“I meant not to tell you anything, until I could show you, Ruy Egan. Not another word will I say, until we have reached Vole, and you have slept and eaten and rested. Then together we will go over these things in the old books, and you can decide whether I am mad or whether there is not a way for you and I to win more, much more than this life around us ever has. This place of Erdis Cliff contains the way and the wisdom, but she is against all men, against women especially, a bitter soul hurt by time and circumstances and forces we do not even know exist. To get into her heart I wanted you, I thought that as you entered mine, you might enter hers . . . which is reason enough for a woman. Now no more will I say until I can show you the proof that wisdom is not even imagined among the people we call civilized today.”

“Have you talked with no one else of these things? It seems odd that another than me should never have been interested.”

“My mind and my heart turned always to you, wanting you; and around me are only rude, untutored men, the folk of Vole, who serve me, but are not wise in any way that I need.”

THEY RODE on through the night and the increasing dark hills, and the moon rode serene overhead, and Ruy Egan pondered the mind of this woman, so strangely different was it from what he imagined. Mad she undoubtedly was, yet that madness had saved him from a lifetime of toil and starvation and misery, and he would humor it to the bitter end, whatever that end might be. He could do no less! He owed her that.

Toward morning they entered the lower reaches of Vole pass, and ascended now through the forest as the morning brightened. The smell and the scent of things here were familiar and nostalgic, bringing back his boyhood when he hunted nuts under these trees, and shot squirrels with a crossbow, and swam in the cold pools of the rapids of Moray river, or hid himself away for wild days in the dark caves of the cliffs above.

Aye, and glimpsed Lua of Thorny Ridge in her father’s house, a lonesome little girl peering out at the world from behind the black skirts of her mother’s maids. Spied upon the maids of the castle when they went maying in the woods for flowers, and sometimes removed their burdensome clothes for a dip in the stream where they were sure no one could see. But he had seen, from the rocky outcrops above the stream. Wondered why maids hid that white beauty behind all the ugly petticoats, too.

“It were better if the folk here do not know who you are, the tale might get back, and we are not so bold with others’ rights as we used to be. So do not speak of your name, your face is too changed for

them to remember you, I think.”

Toward noon they came into her home, the old worn stone walls of Vole fortress, where Faustis of Hanemar from the north had made his hideaway, and had his wife, and fretted over the children she had not borne him between forays to the southward and west among the rich landowners for gold and other things needful. For such was his way, and it was an old way indeed.

Smoky old beams and great hanging figured cloths and smoke wraiths from the ancient fireplace, the rude faces of shepherds and worn-out men-at-arms, not a young man among them. The faces of women, too, but not young. It was a household stricken by the years, he saw, withering and fading, and only the fair face of Lua to make it seem anything more than a forgotten place of rude people who care naught for the world and all its works. Among them all was only Lua with her deep-set eyes and fair skin and flaming hair braided in a coronet of red-gold about her balanced head, the strong woman-lines of her, the ruler here of all things, he saw, the reason for its being.

They did not question him or her, they remembered that much from the old days of banditry. And at the little sparks in her eyes, Egan saw they knew better than to question her about anything. They set food before them, and poked up the fire in the big room of the carven chairs, which smelled already of the few days it had been empty and cold with her absence.

And she spoke no more of her mysterious purposes and her old books and her magic, and Egan wondered if he had dreamed it, riding along in the night. Eut her eyes were often on him, soft and warm, a warmth almost incongruous in such a woman, so capable and so strongly made. A gentleness she had not exercised enough for it to be natural was growing in her now on his account, he saw. She must have been very young when she married, for time to have touched her not when everything else about showed the blight of it so deeply.

EGAN slept away three days, eating his fill of mutton and cheese and bread and fruit and other simple but wonderful things he was not used to having as a slave. The weariness left his limbs and the pains left his belly, and when he began to pace restlessly in the morning, she put up her needlework and led him up into the round tower in one corner of the ancient stronghold.

There were several chambers there, with great metal-bound doors locked and bolted, and Egan guessed that within there was riches enough to last a man for several lives. But the door she opened showed only bookshelves, and worn volumes in strange outlandish script of the past, and she closed and locked the door after they entered.

That was a weird day in Egan's life. When they came down again, he knew that Lua of Vole was not mad, but that he himself might be soon, if his brain did not stop spinning from the strange things she had shown him. A book that can tell you how to bring a man from another world alive before you, in all his gear and otherworldly trappings, talk to him and then send him back a-packing—a book that can open doors into strange sights beyond believing, of chimera worlds where monsters swarm over each other forever warring and growing fat upon it—of other times and places seen in a glass by the means of a few drops of some strange liquid; and a tube which shows the life beneath the range of the eye, little monsters grown suddenly big under the eye to frighten a man out of his wits—and a tube to point up at the moon and bring it down close enough to touch it with your hand, it seemed!

When darkness came, she led him down again, locking the door after her carefully.

“So you see, Egan, we do not know anything surely about anything, And some people *do* know, in other places, and some on other worlds, quite close to us but once removed by some strange barrier we cannot see or cross unless we know the way. And they have things we can use to great advantage, to

make our life rich and worth having, and we must win those things or die unloving and unloved—as we have both lived so far.”

“Lua, I thought you mad, I take it back. You are sane, and this is an ignorant world, a savage world of foolish people. If you can win some of; that wisdom of life you want by my help, I’ll give it you gladly.”

The two strangers sat and ate, facing each other, and the joy of good food was palling on his no longer starved appetite, so that Egan began to look on Lua more than before, and when he looked he saw much that was wonderful to the eyes, and he stared too long and too often. Lua flushed at last under his regard, and turned her head away, and Egan asked:

“Give me forgiveness, I have so much to learn! Remember I am a slave who did not expect life again. Now that I have life again, it is all centered in you. I cannot take my eyes away for fear it will prove untrue, and wake up again in the chains on the bare ground.”

“I have thought of you for years, Ruy Egan. Yet now you are here where I desired you so long, I feel strange with you, and it hurts me that we are strangers to each other.”

“I never knew a good woman, Lua. I never knew a woman who had brains and had learned to read and write and was beautiful too, who had lived a civilized life as you have.”

“Me! Hah, it was not a civilized life, being the wife of Faustis. He was a murdering scoundrel, and I aided and abetted him. I am no better. Yet it was that or die by his hand and he get another better suited to his ways.”

“Well, but you were brought up gently, I remember seeing you when you were little, in your fathers house.”

“I saw you too, more than once.”

“Once I loved a girl, Lua, as you say you have me. When I was fourteen years old I saw her. I could not get nearer than twenty feet. It seemed some devilish barrier froze my limbs at that distance I hung around her house, waiting for a glimpse of her. Then later, she married, and my love disappeared like a ghost in the sunlight.”

LUA GOT to her feet, sleek and lovely in the firelight, and moved languidly to a great harp, running her fingers across the strings, thrilling the room with sudden humming sound.

“Who was that girl, Egan?”

“Your older sister, Sabrina!”

“You fool! Sabrina is the younger sister, I am the oldest! It must have been me you sought.”

Lua sat down on the double bench beside the fireplace, the fire lighting her hair and the lines of her neck and back. Egan got up and went to her, standing beside her and looking down upon her bare shoulders, white as cream, smooth and beautiful and strong and yet so alien to him. The embroidered hem of her gown touched his feet. Green it was, with little fleur-de-lis in gold on it, and the green and gold ran up intricately along the fine lines of her leg and thigh and waist, ending in two points below her full breasts’ thrust. A soft white waist, sleeveless and neckless, was held by a drawstring around the shoulders, and the exposed upper breasts drew his eyes as women intend them to do. His were eyes which for years had beheld no women but from a distance, and this glory of her beside him warm in the flickering firelight was strong magic in itself, making him quake inwardly with her nearness.

Egan dropped to his knees, there beside her, putting one lean black-haired hand on her knee, and

drawing her face into the light with brother hand.

“Woman, I am a rude man too, and it is hard for me to show what I feel toward you who have done this deed no man dared to do for me. I owe you my life. I give it to you, since you set such store by it, to do with what you will. Your will shall be mine, and your orders my task-book. I have no more words such as I said riding here for you to hear. If you are mad, then I will be madder, and outdo you in insanity. If you want marriage, that is good, I am willing. If not, still I am yours, to do with what you want.”

Her eyes, sleepy-lidded, rested on his, burning deeply. And Egan looked into them, and saw there stranger depths than he expected, but nothing to be afrighted of at all. After a time she put her hand on his where it rested on her knee.

“Later on, I will know. Meanwhile, be a friend, and study those writings said to be from the Red Dwarf’s notes. They tell of many things beside Erdis Cliff that we are headed toward. It were better to know it all. *In a week, we ride, Egan!* Later, when I have what is needful, you will know why I wait to talk seriously of love.”

So Egan rose again to his feet, and after a while she went and left him, and he slept alone that night, as always. Which was strange to him, after her words. But she was deeper than an ordinary woman; he would be patient. Perhaps, knowing him close like this, she no longer wanted him? But her eyes had not said that, thank the Dead God. For Egan knew that if he did not win this woman, he would never want another.

CHAPTER TWO

FERONIA of Erdis, she. There, where the rainbow bridge met the face of the cliff, thrust into the dark mouth of that impossible stone beast face, she stood, looking down upon her valley, waiting.

The dark wisdom of her presence, the sweep of her hair above the wide brows, the thoughtful eyes black with mystery...

Something moved over there, coming painfully down the slopes, into her valley where no thing ever came!

Feronia shaded her eyes with her hand, peering. Two figures on horseback, steadily nearing. For an instant she hesitated, turning, beginning that gesture to her invisibles which would have hidden her home from these interlopers. Then she turned back, the waiting on her face turning into a hope, a more keen suspense of waiting. Perhaps they bore some word, they seemed to know where they were going, and this was their destination? They were but two.

So it was that Lua of Vole and Ruy Egan found the home of Feronia, as they had expected to find it.

Now, as Feronia watched them approach, she saw by those aural signs known to immortals that these were mortals, and ignorant people, strangers to her and to all the world of things that mortals do not accept because they cannot understand.

She smiled a sad slow smile, thinking of the day that she had found Druga half dead by the pool, just as ignorant and full of wonder at her self.

The two dismounted at the foot of the shimmering bridge, and mounted toward her hand-in-hand, somewhat slowly for fear of the strangeness of transparence beneath their feet. It seemed to Egan that this bridge crossed some wider gulf than met the eye, some strange whirling invisibility passing beneath

the feet, as if time itself were turning there within the glass-like stuff, and themselves now outside of their common world. Which was true enough, but unbelievable to Egan, and he shook the feeling off, fixing his eyes instead upon the calm white figure waiting there by the great open metal door. On her shoulder the long-legged black bird had perched itself lifting its crest nervously at their approach, and ruffling its feathers.

For a long moment the two women faced each other there in front of Egan's eyes, and what it was that passed between them he did not know, except that it changed things. The flame of Lua's hair above the metal links of her mail, and beyond the dark deep eyes of this woman who was not woman as he knew them, the antique of her body, the impression of height she gave although Lua was taller, the strangeness of this great beast's face of stone upon the cliff and the doors that were his mouth—all gave Egan a fear that would not leave, but stayed, shuddering and cold in his bowels. But perhaps it was the shadows that moved when no thing was there to cause such movement, or the sensing of deep power, unheard but felt, behind and beyond this woman, that seemed to wait the movement of her hand.

"Lua of Vole, greetings," murmured Feronia, so low and soft Egan barely heard.

"Feronia of Erdis Cliff, I know you from the word-pictures that sent me to you. We seek what our life cannot give us, Feronia."

Feronia smiled wearily, shaking her head a little.

"Immortal love, you seek, I have it Lua, and every day my heart breaks for his absence. Could you bear an immortal life, waiting for him to come again?"

Feronia's eyes had turned to Egan, as if she knew completely that this man was the center of Lua's seeking.

"Ruy Egan, do you seek the same thing?"

"Her will is mine, strange lady of this mysterious place. What there is in her imaginings and studies I know not, nor care greatly. I serve her, only."

"I understand." For one eternal moment her eyes burned into Egan's, piercing and measuring, and Egan felt the flame of her, the little sparks flickering in those dark eyes like stars in a night sky, the cold sweep of mind weighing him, and he felt fear.

SHE TURNED again to Lua, and Egan did not know if that weighing had been favorable or not. She took Lua's hand in her own, looking at it, then leading her into the doorway, and Egan followed a step behind. And as the door swung to, with a chattering and movement of the shadows, Egan sprang back from the weight of the door fearfully, for no visible hand moved it. But the two women appeared not to notice his fear.

"There is a code among us, Lua of Vole, which is harsh and strict and ancient and somewhat unjust. But we live by it, and to give you what you seek, I must first test you, and the testing is not anything a mortal always lives through."

Lua only nodded, noting every tiny stitch of her clothing with her woman's appraising eye, noting the calm grave strength of her, the eternal beauty that her eyes could hardly look at, for the thing about her that was beauty was also something like a hidden pain to her eyes, like too much sunlight. And everything about her told Lua that she should have studied those strange captured books much more deeply, for this woman was very truly not the same as ordinary people. Which removed for her the last faint doubt of any of those awful words she had read, those terrible impossible pictures of worlds within worlds, and pain

within agony, and death within death, struggle withm struggle, on and on forever repeating in every dimension of like.

Egan did not note anything but a vague glory about him of impossible translucent walls beyond walls, and vague gliding life that he could not see, and golden gleamings that were tapestries, and eerie carvings that were chairs, glittering shinings that were jewels inset in strange pictures, or on their chair backs, or in the eyes of a statue. He felt like a man at a woman's tea party, and shuffled his feet, not daring to sit.

Across the cool splash of a little fountain, Egan watched the women, and listened to the words of the dark one, and wondered if he was not mad to think that this place was real and himself inside it.

“But if you two will do a service for me, we can avoid the most harsh phases of the testing, for we have that latitude, we can favor some applicants if they are able to do us a service. And certainly you can do me a service, and certainly I should repay you if you did, in spite of any code among us. Which is why we are allowed such latitude by those Elders who once enforced the laws.”

“We would do the service anyway, but to earn your favor, what could we do for such as you? I do not understand!” Lua had herself in hand, but her eyes betrayed her, following the shadows that should not be, sometimes, and other times flicking to Egan to test for an instant the substance of reality. For Egan was the only thing in those halls to her eyes familiar and existant beyond doubt.

“I am anchored to this plane in certain ways, I can not travel where and when I please, for none would remain to open the door back for me. That is how I lost my one man and my only son, you see. Waiting here for their return, to let them in again to me, was fatal for us both. Yet it could not be otherwise with us who are not of the Simultane.”

“You mean, they, your man and others, went into the other worlds that turn about us, passed on where none may go without losing life!”

“He went, and when I was peering after him in my doorway, our child went into that place, and I could not follow, for one must always hold the way, else there would be no fixed thing in all the universe for them. So I lost them both, my son and my lover, his father. So I wait, and hard it is with my heart crying, ‘*go to them!*’ Yet I cannot, for there would be no return, even if I found them.”

“You would send us after them? What makes you think we could return, if he cannot, who knows more how to cope with such things?” Lua was looking at Feronia's sad face searchingly, trying to sense what was for her too deep for understanding.

“I do not think it, it is a matter of chance only. And my heart is hard with waiting, and if you will not go for him who loves me, why I will not do for you those things you seek. That is my proposition.”

FERONIA waited, but on Lua's set face she already knew her answer. She would not stop for any threat of death or loss in those terrible planes between the life globes of variant *now*. But Lua did not know what she faced in truth, and Feronia did not intend to tell her, for she wanted one whose life was more by far than theirs, her son. These were but mortals, who unless fortunate, were ephemeral as midge flies. Let them then earn a less short life, was the ancient dictum. There was a wisdom in it, however harsh. Let them seek, and find. Let them strive, and conquer or die. Then at least those who lived would be worthy of life.

“So it was, and is, and will be,” murmured Feronia, and Lua only looked at her with tragic eyes.

Egan heard, and almost understood that Lua was going to accept this death they were offered on the slim chance it was not a death, but something less terrible. Egan did not care greatly, since she had

refused herself to him, and he saw now nothing else in life worth having, even after all the things he had longed for as a slave.

“We will need instruction, witch of the cliff.” Lua’s voice was harsh, for she felt Feronia had a usurer’s heart, and was not dealing exactly fairly with them. “We will need to know many things, to go there where no thing goes and lives.”

“Of course, Lua. It is not as you think, but it is bad enough. I have no other way to get him back, else I should make such demands of you never. But for him, I must do this to you two.”

“There it can be years, and here but minutes to you.”

“There it can be minutes, and here long lifetimes. Which hope is what keeps me waiting and alive and the way open for him, *I do not know.*”

* * *

DAYS PASSED, and Egan wore now a permanent look of fixed astonishment, for all the world he knew had turned to insubstantial veils of gauze beside the realities he saw daily. And this day they were ready, and Feronia showed them the door that was not a door, but a flickering dread nothingness that went in and in forever into the rock, or into space, or where one could not see for the blue flames that licked always upward and across that tube of force.

Hand-in-hand they two walked into that tube, and along it, and the flames burned at them, the vibrant forces of it stung their feet, but something else from behind them exhilarated and protected them, and they walked on, courageous and with high heads.

Now through the walls they saw the naked anatomy of the simultane, and about it the immaterial tenuous whirling lacy curtains of repeated *Nows*, thin—separated by only Time, as the leaves of a book unleafing in the wind.

“On one of those painted windows that are worlds like our own, but different, is where our quarry is trapped.” Lua’s voice was strong in Egan’s ears, strong and brave, yet it wavered as if from very awe of the terrible repeated variance of the simultane, which mortal eyes never see.

“What would happen to us if that dark lovely witch of Erdis shut off the great machine that throws this flow of energy upon which we walk?” asked Egan, staring hard at Lua’s face, transparent now as tinted glass, a tall ghost of a life, wavering beside him as a thin wine glass shivers from repeated ringing blows.

“We would blink out like two lights the wind blew upon, and this fearful tube of force with us of course.” Lua did not look at Egan, but her eyes searched always the fearful complexities of the repeated planes of immaterial reality, separated by the dark nothings that she felt were just as much a something, but a something beyond her eyes’ search, or her mind’s grasp.

“We must travel to the end of this, no matter what may happen to stop us, for that is how this Druga of hers planned. Then he was to return, without delay. But he did not return.”

“And neither will we, without him, Egan. I could not bear her face, to come back without her little son.”

Egan fell to watching the endless shadow play of life and the cities and works and movements of the worlds that their strange vibrant walkway seemed to drive through as a spit through a fowl, or as a sword driven through the pages of a picture book—and each page was world-without-end to his eyes, stretching beyond sight. Tall towers, square and endlessly windowed, where little ships flew through the

air, and big ships plowed the oceans, and men lived and died there on that immaterial transparence that was to him but as tinted glass or the film of soap bubbles, and a child peering into the clustering walls of the bubbles. They passed on through the walls of this world of speeding planes and smoking ships and clanking machines and another world, and another, and many another still, each different and varied, yet monotonously the same in a weird repetition of shape and size and movement and meaning to his eyes.

Far off they could feel Feronia manipulating the terrible power that upheld them, and the tubes about them seemed to lower, and their stomachs felt the rush downward.

“The time she set for us has passed, and she is trying to set us exactly down where she sat her man down, and left him there. She has done exactly as she remembered it, and if she is right in her work, we will find some trace of him, and if not—why we had better just stay where chance leaves us.”

“We can try and try again, Egan. If we return to the tube of force, she will know, and will repeat the calculation differently.”

NOW IT seemed the tube lay open before them, and they walked out on the plane of the simultane, as Egan thought. But immediately they stepped upon that bare and awful rock of the ever-existent, it changed, and there was grass over soft earth, springy under their feet, and the frightening transparence of the inconsequential reality had gone, the simultane was gone from their eyes, hidden by the Now reality of the world they had set foot upon.

“Now blaze the trees, here, Egan. While you mark the circle of the trunks, I will make sure we *can* step back.”

Egan took out the sword she had given him that night in the slave pen, and hacked off the bark of one great trunk in a yard wide blaze, and then went on to another. The silence woke his mind from the work, and he spun about. His companion had done as she said, stepped back into that force tube! She was nowhere to be seen by his eyes!

Egan ran to the spot, three strides away—stepped up along that unseen plane that was to be there till they were ready to use it—and his foot struck earth. He tried again, and found it, scrambling, and at once solidity faded about him, far underneath the awful rock showed bare and blue and cold, many-sided and cliffy as a mountain range, himself poised above it like a bird on the wing.

Now that transparent veil of this sphere he saw the glade, and the blazes he had made on the trees, and standing there the form of Lua, turning about, her mouth open, shouting silently to him.

Egan darted to the mouth of the tube, and nearly fell to feel earth, rocking on his feet like a seaman coming off ship. The tube was gone, the glade about him silent and empty. He shouted:

“Lua, quit this play-acting and show yourself!”

The moments slid by terribly, each one heavier for him. Then he darted back into the tube, and there she was, transparent beside him, but not in the tube—in the glade. But the glade was different, subtly, the sun was not morning, but late afternoon.

Egan sat and wondered it out to himself that since they had failed to keep hand-in-hand as the witch had explained, they could not now get together till both entered the tube again. For the times were different in and out, and only hand-in-hand could the Nows coincide!

Now Egan reached out with his hands through the flickering blue flame of the end of the tube, and reached into the transparence of the fugitive Now where Lua sought him hopelessly, and waved his hand. Lua saw it, and came to him.

When she stepped in, an understanding of Feronia's agony of years came into Egan's mind, and he clasped Lua to his heart with a hug that made her cry out with pain. Fiercely he whispered to her lips' red waiting:

"Know this, Lua, I will not lose you to any other thing or time or place, and live. Think you I want the fate that tears always the heart of that poor woman in her cliff back there? Whenever we are near this tube, our hands must be as grown to each other!"

And Lua, who had not yet even given in to her long love for this man, and he pressed his lips hot on hers, her body quivered against him eager and hungry, and they both knew that for them was only each other always. Neither of them wondered why it had been so, apart, that she had still loved him, and why he had been unfortunate and fallen slave, for both now understood that men and women mate their complement or lead unlucky lives! And then they had been separated by the walls of circumstance as here they had been separated by the frail walls of time itself! Both understanding now by this chance of their separation how it had been in the past when they were young, a thing between them, a barrier as impossible to circumvent, now removed by the vagary of chance.

"It is so we learn of love, Ruy Egan! Not by intention, not by accident, but by seeing how it can be had!" Her eyes were wet against his face.

Egan said: "It is blindness, strange ignorance which they never manage to remove and reach the simultane together, a simultaneous seeing each of the other that is a marriage mightier than any priest's. Down there is the ultra-simultane of terrible ever-life. Here over it are we and the ephemeral worlds of repeated Nows unfolded in the wash of strange energies across the solid world of All."

LUA SOBBED a little, in his arms, at all the wasted years behind them. "If only, Egan, we had known what foolish flimsy barriers there exist, we could have torn them aside and reached each other."

"I was blinder than you, Lua. I did not even see you wanted me. To me you were a peak unscalable, beyond dreams, beyond my sphere. That was my opinion of this wall between people. What it is I know not, but it is somehow like the Now that is the plane of life, separated by the dark space between the worlds."

"Perhaps it *is* unscalable, that unseeable but terrible wall. Mayhap there is no way across it, but only at certain times or places where it overlaps."

"It seems that way. But hurry, now, Lua, we upset the witch's time-table for our passing. Keep tight hold, we go into the Now."

They stepped again across the flickering bisection of the plane by the tube of time-energy, and felt their feet strike the solid Now of this strange plane of life that was a round world.

There on the great bole of a tree was the blaze he had just cut moments ago, and rain had wet it, and mould had grown upon the fresh white-slashed wood. Egan wondered at the complex mystery of this Universe of worlds Feronia had plunged them into. How many days had become yesterday while they stood pressed lip to lip and breast to breast there in the mouth of the power-flow from the witch's weird ancient machine?

Still walking hand-in-hand, they passed on through the wood, and now and then Ruy Egan struck a blaze from a tree as they passed, for if they did not find the exact spot of the tube opening they could never leave this world.

A GREAT pig ran squealing from before them, as the two came out upon a height, where the land fell away in great sweeps of forest and of green natural unkept fields. Far below were farm dwellings, and farther on, by itself upon a large stretch of velvet green, the sharp white walls of a temple, pillared and low-roofed, like the Classic Greek,

Without thought they turned their faces toward the temple, scrambling down the near slopes of crumbling rock, and out upon the cropped fields. Here and there were groups of sheep, and in the shade a sprawling boy, asleep.

So walking, stimulated by the calm beauty and peace of the scene to a keen sense of enjoyment, they followed the dim paths of the herds-boys, and more and more frequently their steps startled a pig in the brush.

Now there were vineyards, and sheds and low thatched dwellings, and people who turned their eyes away and did not speak. Their clothing was strange and rude and very little of it, but their bodies were fine and sun-browned and their features regular as sculptures. Some were fair-haired, and others dark-locked and olive-skinned. But one and all refused to look at the two strangers, Lua in her suit of light chain and the curved sword at her hip, the mask of her helmet lifted and looking very handsome in the rig; Egan in a hunting coat of leather once her husband's, with a hat of green felt and a cock's feather in it, and at his waist the same sword she had put in his hand the night she had freed him. Incongruous and alien they must have seemed, to these rude shepherds in their rough tunics and sandals, but that their passing should be looked upon with an eye of utter disregard was to them a wonder and an ill omen, Egan put it down to fear of their supernatural nature, and tendered them the same lack of attention.

They walked on through the silence that attended their footsteps, to rise into a whispering discussion of them after they passed, and presently were looking across a low stone wall to the white, strange temple.

Here and there rooted the same man-sized great pigs, and it seemed to Egan that these pigs were tendered the same disregard, intentional and somehow insulting, that was directed upon themselves. There was something about those pigs that struck a chord in Lua's memories of her chaotic studies, but what it was she could not recall. For what is so common as a pig, and how could a pig seem to be important, even such very big pigs as these, and so many of them, and so busy everywhere at their rooting?

Egan vaulted the low wall, waist high, and helped Lua across, and side by side they walked toward the temple, feeling that if knowledge was present here in these rude farm people, it would be in the temple only.

Now as they came round the wide corner of the building, they entered a paved court, and this was the pillared front they had seen from the mountain side.

On the flags were several square stools, four-legged and strong and carved, and on the stools were several women, young and matrons and girls not yet fourteen, gathered in a group about one personage, a woman weaving. They were intent upon her swift-fingered hands upon the shining fabric, and Lua and Egan stood, their eyes drawn by the focus of the other eyes to the glittering stuff and the bright pattern of it, and the hands that moved so swiftly over it as to seem a blur.

In Lua's mind memory evoked a phrase: "that shining stuff the Gods are wont to weave," and she wondered as she looked at the noble figure of the woman at work, and all the others agaze, that she should feel for her such awe and such fear and other emotions too intense quite to understand, too swiftly passing and changing to name or know their nature. Her mind was a chaos.

LUA'S EYES left the group, from very wonder weary, and passed on to the temple front, and up to the low wide doorway where the cool interior could be seen in dim shadows, and over the doorway big letters spelling out a word. Her eyes picked out the letters one by one, noting the shaping and the clever clean work of the stone-cutter. Idly she spelled it out, aloud: C-I-R-C-E!

As the meaning of the word struck home, her memory brought the whole meaning of the scene clear to her, and she gave a low cry of startled wonder. "Circe, she too is then *eternal*, and not vanished in the past of any single world!"

For the multitudinous details of the simultane planes of life were all too much for her mind as yet, and she could not understand that each world is but a repetition of the other, but with a different *now-bisection* of the simultane. Which was no wonder, for her studies were made without teacher, by accident, spurred on only by the keen curiosity of her birthright of a sharp, inquiring mind. Few students of the mysteries ever learn the facts of simultane, and the details of the repetitive Nows of life, in one mortal lifetime.

At her cry, the whole absorbed group of women turned, and saw the strangers come among them, and Circe's hands left off the weaving, and her eyes turned to their faces. Seeing they were not of her world, she got to her feet with sharp interest, for intrepid and few are those who cross the planes of time.

Strangely enough, her eyes were the only eyes which focused quite correctly upon them, the others' eyes seemed to have difficulty finding their shapes, wandering about in their stare as if startled to hear words where no one stood.

As *she* stood, Egan was struck with the awful beauty of her, and knew fear and attraction of an intense kind, both at once, and knew again that this experience was teaching him of the reality of super-natural life, for here it was before him.

Egan turned his eyes from the broad-browed beauty, and beyond her, through the trees, he could see the sea, with white topped waves rolling inward, and it was strange to him he had not seen the sea from the heights, but could now see it.

Her voice brought his eyes back to her face. He could not understand the words, and shook his head, noting that Lua also shook her head.

Circe now tried another tongue, and another, and then he heard his own speech come from her mouth with a strange antique sound, as if she had learned it centuries before, when it was spoken that way. He had heard oldsters use those words in just that way.

"Whence come ye, and what seek ye, from what world, that ye know not ye tread forbidden soil?"

LUA'S VOICE was low and firm, but very careful and slow, as if she feared to anger this being, and wanted very much to be fully understood.

"We come in search of a certain being's mate, who is lost somewhere in these multi-planed worlds of the many Nows. To save her heart and her life from intolerable sorrow, help us, O one-whom-we-know-not, but reverence for the power we know you possess. This man was of a rose-purple skin, very big, and a little child followed after him, unknown to him. It is his son, and hers who sent us. Help us, Circe of wisdom, Circe of the kind generous heart, and show us not your anger. We are but messenges of a greater one."

It was strange to Egan to hear the humble tone of Lua's voice, who was not apt to be humble to any one, but the reverse. He looked at her, and saw her keen mind struggling with the things she saw that

were too much to understand, and the careful wit of her working on her face to play no note of her voice the wrong tone, the sharp wakefulness of her eyes intent to miss no bit of learning in this woman that might betray itself to her. Egan felt a little humble before the spirit and the mind of Lua—showing then on her like light upon what was before in shadow. His eyes flashed back to the face of the Sorceress, and some vague tale of his childhood gave him memory of what she might be, but that was all. But his eyes gave evidence, and his senses made sure, that here was no ordinary life, but something else that was no woman born of life as he knew it. No eyes so big and deep and yellow-green, no hair so rich and lustrous and shining, no skin so velvet soft upon flesh so firmly moulded and alive upon her noble frame. No lips so flexible as to be both soft and firm in one breath, no spirit of woman as he knew her could flash itself through so many swift changes, merely from thinking about they two before her. This was an intense and voluptuous creature, vastly alive and hungry for more and yet more of the pleasures of life—and having the wisdom needful for wringing from that life what she wanted of it all.

Cruelty was on her face, and generosity, a lustfulness about the mouth that came and went flickeringly, as if hiding. And above these swift betrayed emotions was a nobility that denied them, yet seemed to look at them, as a man looks at his fingers, wondering how they do accomplish all the things that are demanded of them.

The harsh line of thought between the thick straight brows, too heavy for beauty but made beautiful by the way the hairs grew, all in their places perfectly, accenting the broad white sweep of brow, balancing the strong cheekbones and round firm chin. Luxurious nostrils, firmly carved, moving with her breath like an animal's, a breath swifter than those about her by twice. It was a face intensely human, betraying all the human weaknesses of passion and anger and thoughtless indulgence, but so much greater by the intense strength of her were these things that they were God-like.

Egan knew himself to be a gaunt figure from an impoverished and hateful world, in her eyes, and felt ashamed of the gaunt great body of him, and the shameless stare of his own eyes upon her, and turned half way 'round to keep from such sharp regard.

NOW THERE came scampering from the dim depths of the temple a little boy, seemingly of four years or so of age, and came up to Circe, putting his hands upon her skirts and hanging there, hiding his head in the rich sheer folds, peeking out at them with black, deepset eyes that were familiar to Egan's memory like the eyes of someone he knew! Curly and jet-black his hair, well-set his head; supple and strong and active, yet his skin was an off-shade of white, a purplish cast in the shadows of it! A strange alien look to him from the others, he was no son of any of these women who stood silent and taut, waiting for Circe's welcome to make them regard the two interlopers with eyes that *saw* them. And Egan wondered if they *could* see the two with whom Circe talked, for ever their eyes seemed to search for them, and then turn away, afraid.

Circe caught the boy up and pressed it to her lush breasts, kissed it fondly, then poised it astride her hip, holding it with one hand as she turned again to them.

"There is a long message I want you to take back to your mistress, of whom I know. She will not like the message, but I don't think she can do much about it. I have her Druga, and her child, and I have use for both of them in the work I do, and that is far more important than anything she does with her life or would do with theirs."

"Have you ever seen Feronia's face?" asked Lua, startled to hear Circe admit she intended to keep another's husband and child.

Some tension in Lua's tone, and on Circe's face made Egan put in his oar, to avert the imminent storm.

“What is this work you speak of and its importance? Perhaps we too could be important cogs in this gin of yours?”

Now as they talked, the maids and matrons about Circe went silently away, one by one, and Egan noted each for the grace of their going and the swing of their hips, the light youth of their steps and the bright colors of the dyes in their peplums or shifts. Whatever they called them it was a shame they hid those bodies with them.

Presently there came and stood behind Circe two tall warriors with high nodding-plumed helmets, and great round shields and short wide bronze swords. And Egan knew he did not want any of their fighting.

Meanwhile he had better listen to the proud words she was so rapidly tossing at his ears:

“How can I explain to mortals the high designs of an immortal, who spends lifetimes preserving for men one little bit of the great wisdom of the past—who works night and day to bring the plan of the immortals for the simultane state into complete fruition? Who are you to come aquestioning Circe? Bah, your mistress is a witless fool to send such as you to myself. Go back, and tell her I have need for such men as Druga in my work, and not of such ignorant ephemerae as yourselves at all.”

Lua’s face flushed rosy red and raised an inch in anger as Circe insulted them, but she only repeated in a tight, hard and angry little voice her question,

“Saw you ever the face of Feronia, Circe?”

“I spend my endless weary time devising for the good of man, to raise him from his low estate to something more than mortal, and I find a man able and willing to help me in my work, and a child smart and able to learn the immortal wisdom I alone possess—and this mistress of yours sends you to take them back! No, no little people, Druga the Bold stays here with me, and all others like him will I keep for my own use, and no talk of tears of broken hearts or mothers’ empty arms will turn me from my intended work. Go back, you two pygmies of the life-stream, and tell your mistress to find another mate. To have another child, and to keep them both where they belong, not drop them into the interstices of time’s manifold wrinkles.”

“Could we talk with this man, so that we can tell our mistress how he looks, and that his health is good, and that he asked after her and we told him?” Lua’s voice had lost its anger, but was still cold and a little quiver in it, as one speaking gently to a poisonous serpent about to strike, to turn away its thought to some other thing to avert its poison fangs.

BUT CIRCE had turned from them, and gone into her temple entrance, still bearing the child on her hip, and the two warriors still stood, facing them and not moving, so that they could not follow her.

Slowly they turned away, and walked back through that antique village of shepherds and vine-raisers, and back into the forest, and there lay themselves down upon the mosses to rest and sleep. And everywhere about the pigs rooted and waddled, or ran from their presence lumbering and slow, like old men too fat to move properly.

“Lua, I don’t get her talk, or her actions. Is she mad?”

“You thought me mad at first. We just don’t understand her, that is all.”

“What can we do if she is so totally against us?”

“Try to get to the man. He could help us!”

“After dark, Lua, we’ll scout the place, see where he is kept.”

“She talks largely of high designs and hard work. I suspect she lies, is an enchantress of some low degree compared to such as Feronia, who yet thinks she can thwart her of this Druga, but why she would want to risk her anger I don’t know.” Lua turned over on her side, composed herself to sleep.

“She is an attractive creature...” murmured Egan, to see what Lua would say.

“Hmmp,” said Lua of Vole.

* * *

DARKNESS came, and they awoke from the chill of the night. Sitting up, Lua saw waiting beside them a very large purple pig, who regarded them steadily and unabashed, did not flee at their movement as had the others. She shook Egan to make him notice, and both sat, observing the strange pig, which was very eery in the dimness. Purple and huge he was, and his snout curiously un-pig-like. Presently he spoke:

“I am the man you seek. My brothers in distress told me of your visit, and I trailed you here by means of my nose, which is good, I assure you. For instance, you of the metal shirt have a most pleasant odor, are you a friend of Feronia’s?”

“You are Druga? And Circe made you into a pig? But why?” Lua stood up, and went and bent over him, exploring his hide and pig-face with her hand.

“These Elder survivors have different ways of thinking than more modern souls, and I don’t think she needs what we call ‘why’ in her vocabulary. This pig-changing stunt of hers is an old one, spoken of in the lore of more than one world where she has lived. I knew better, but I wanted to talk to her and see what the truth about her doings really amounted to. I learned. She preserves men in this guise for some project she has in mind, just what I can’t quite figure. We don’t run away, for she is the only one who can change us back to men again, you see. It saves her trouble guarding us, she lets us run wild. Presently, she is going to take us all to some world she is preparing to colonize, where we are to take our places as her people.” So she seizes all the men she can get hold of. Ridiculous habit for a woman to cultivate, I’d say.”

“Eh, I seem to have been lucky.” Egan was feeling his limbs, to make sure some such change had not overtaken him in his sleep.

“Yes, she didn’t take a fancy to your style. You are too starved looking for her taste, you would make a very poor looking pig.”

Lua was thinking. “Druga, hadn’t we better take you back to Feronia the way you are? Do you know how long you have been here in this condition?”

“Why, it has been a few weeks. I suppose the time rates are a little different.”

“It seemed to my mind that your Feronia has been waiting there alone for you for more than a lifetime of ordinary years. It has been a terribly long time on our world.”

“Can’t go back without the boy, you know. And besides I’m ashamed for Feronia to know I got myself into this shape.”

“Never mind your being ashamed! She’ll be glad to see you even in a pig-skin, Druga. If you could see her face and the awful strain of waiting all these years.”

“Funny she never came, or sent some one.”

“If she had, who would operate the machine of the tube? She can’t leave; she alone knows the way of the machine.”

“Yes, of course, I forgot. Well, I can’t get the boy in this shape, but I can take you to him. Steal him, and we’ll get off this island. That woman is full of the wildest ambitions I ever found in a mind. Simply impossible plans for dominion over man. She wants to be the tyrant of all time, if you ask me. Do you know how many pigs there are on this island?”

“No, do you?”

“No, redtop, I don’t. But there are so many I can’t even find enough acorns to keep me in flesh. I’m losing weight, running it off.”

“I wouldn’t trust those sheep herders if I was carrying all that bacon around with me,” Egan smiled at the purple pig. “I wouldn’t worry about losing some of it. Gradually is better than all at once!”

* * *

NOW, TOWARD morning, they stole into the temple of Circe, and the pig led them to the crib where the child slept. The pig said a charm that kept the woman by the crib soundly asleep. They took the child and mounted him on his father’s back and went back the way they had come.

So it was that as the morning broke again over the Cliff of Erdis, Lua of Vole led the purple pig and the little boy out of the tube of force into the cliff-palace of Erdis, and Egan came out, too, glad to be free of the fear of the forces that were too much to understand.

“Feronia!” cried the purple pig, “I’m back! Oh, but it’s good to see you again!”

Her dark face smiled, then frowned, and she picked the little boy off his back and hugged it, then turned it over her knee and soundly spanked the child until it screamed.

Setting the boy down, she shut off the power of the great time-force generator that did twist all the lines of *then and there* into a tube of *here and now*, and the tube blinked out; the strange hole in the walls of the many worlds disappeared, and the chamber was empty of the terrible hum of it.

“Now this is too much, to come back to me as a pig, of that particular exotic hue of hide. It is too much for a woman to bear! It was bad enough when you fell into that nymphomaniac’s arms! Doris—Anthea was hardly fair, but at least she gave you back in one piece and your self whole and well. But this time you’ve gone too far! However do you manage to get yourself into such scrapes? Now Mors only knows how much research it will take to get you back to your own inadequate form again. Maybe it would be simpler to leave you this way...”

Which scolding voice the purple pig seemed to enjoy, nuzzling about Feronia’s graceful knees with his big wet snout, and smiling gently with his huge mouth that could have bitten off her leg.

Lua and Egan stole silently from the two, the scolding dark-eyed witch now weeping and clasping the great purple pig about the tremendous neck, and the pig seeming to weep too.

CHAPTER THREE

IN THE MORNING, in that dim-lit palace of antique wonder, Lua and Egan awoke to find a tall purple male summoning them to breakfast. He was dressed in loose-fitting Turkish trousers of lavender,

with golden scimitars embroidered, a vest of brilliant blue silk and a pair of carpet slippers. As he sat down to table across from Feronia and beside themselves, making four at table, Egan surmised that sometime in the night Feronia had managed to learn and execute the necessary antidote for the spell Circe had put on him.

“Most uncomfortable being a pig,” said Druga, his mouth full of toast and egg. “And I had always thought a pig led a lazy life! Why I was busy morning till night just satisfying my appetite, running about till my bones ached with weariness, looking for *something* to eat.”

Feronia, quite composed, but looking a bit weary as if she had been up a great part of the night, greeted them with a smile for each. Any doubts Lua had had of her intention to fulfill her promise to them was driven from her mind by her words:

“I have promised you your desire for wisdom and for life such as my own, and I will give it to you. But there is a deal of work attached.”

“I can tell you that!” Druga was very emphatic, his eyes rolling at them reminiscently. “She is a slave driver, when there is work to be done, and that process of making a mortal into an immortal is extremely complicated. Moreover there is no end to it, you go on and on doing things to the body to make it resistive to time, or what passes for time to most people, the destruction of disintegrant force. You see, Lua and Ruy, I appreciate what you have done for me and my son, and I intend to help with your re-education into our way of life.”

“What is this disintegrant force you say is mistaken for time?” asked Lua, her eyes on Druga’s big handsome body a little too interestedly.

“Well, in the universe there is a *growing* of all things, and there is a *burning* away of all things, for one must balance the other. One is called integrant, and the other disintegrant, or *dis* for short. One keeps on living by surrounding oneself, and filling oneself with the most active integrant substances and energy flows one can get hold of. It is enormously complicated. It takes a real magician to accomplish it. It is a very old science, such magic, and few there are anywhere who manage the thing successfully.”

Feronia took up the instruction from Druga’s somewhat haphazard description. “The immortal surrounds himself with a focus of integrant flows of energy, and fills himself with certain substances that induct the integrant forces into his flesh and blood. The mortal who does not do that, is burnt away as the burning particles gather in the body unresisted and not cast out again.”

“Why don’t you teach this process to all people, Feronia?” asked Lua. “Must they all go on dying, from pure ignorance?”

“There is an ancient compact among immortals everywhere to keep it to themselves. I do not wholly approve, but I cannot struggle against the might of much more ancient wizards. As I told you, we have the right to break this contract only for those who have done us some important service.”

“Like Circe, they are a lot of decadent, ill-intended old debauchees,” said Druga, his eyes angry and frustrated. “But they are too powerful to argue with overmuch, and their laws must be accepted. When the worlds turn about enough, and a certain place is reached in the arc of Bon; a segment of the world circuit of macro-space, you know, why there will be a new order come to being, and that will be changed. Until then, we do our best with *things as they are*.”

“So today you two will serve as Feronia’s laboratory assistants, while she studies her thaumaturgical pursuits, and I will take care of young Branchus, here.”

The twig was busily ascending the brawny leg of Druga, and presently sat himself there on his lap at

table, and began reaching for food.

“There is a deal of astonishing things about it all, which to Feronia are familiar and she hardly mentions as wonderful. For instance, among the immortals are those who have been living so long, their growth enters a new phase, an onward step in life; and these ancients become something vastly more than matter of flesh. They are able to cast themselves into hyper-space as a vortice of energy, to reassemble again into flesh in another part of space or in another plane of matter, to traverse the myriad Nows which you crossed in Feronia’s tube of force, without apparatus, merely by willing their bodies to overcome the barriers between. These are lives who have forgotten their beginnings, for the most part, and recognize no kinship with men like you and I. Of them all, I have only made friends with one, Mors, and she is superior to any of the others, to my way of thinking.”

“But that is advanced study, and they are not ready to understand such things, Druga. Give them time, please!”

* * *

A YEAR passed, and another, or were they years? Neither Lua nor Ruy Egan knew any more whether they were there one year or ten, so absorbed were they by their work.

Now Ruy Egan and Druga were both men used in the past to a deal of outdoor activity, and one day when the two women had hurried off to the lab to attend to a certain diverting experiment having something to do with the foetus of an ape and the creation of something which they would not mention from it, and themselves were barred from the lab in consequence of this wish for feminine secrecy... Druga proposed a little “hunting” as a change.

“Whether it’s going to be a cockatrice or a succubae I don’t know and can’t work up much enthusiasm for these more spectacular and less useful avenues of research,” Druga was saying. “So let’s saddle up and get out in the air.”

Ruy was very much in favor of the idea, but he remembered Feronia distinctly telling Druga only last week “not to get any such ideas in his head and go gallivanting off and into trouble again. For she had quite enough of it for a long, long time to come.” Which words Egan quoted to Druga, for he had a hearty respect for Feronia’s ability.

“But man, she doesn’t mean I’m not to get a breath of air if I want it. Why, if we listened to women all the time we would never do anything but mind the baby and do the laundry. Am I a man or a mouse? I ask you!”

“The trouble with that is,” said Egan, with a grimace, “that your dear wife can change us both into mice if she is driven to it, and I for one have no desire for the fate. I’m not married to her, you know, and she would find it no loss if I *did* become a mouse.”

“Tom can take care of the boy. He’s a most reliable hob-goblin. Come on, man! After all, I’m your host, and I can’t sit here and watch you pine away to a shadow for the want of a breath of air.”

With misgivings Egan got out the horse that had brought him there, and Druga saddled up a very peculiar looking elderly grey mare, and they rode off up the valley in the shadow of the great cliff of Erdis.

That there was something else on the big purple man’s mind Egan could see quite well, for they had brought nothing in the shape of weapons but the swords at their belts, and you can hardly shoot rabbits with a sword.

As they rode hard and steadily north-by-east for a good three hours, and it became evident it would take the rest of the daylight to get back to the cliff, Egan asked: "I don't know what you're thinking, and I don't want to be a kill-joy or a spoil-sport or a timid goose or anything, but still and all I don't want to anger your wife in any way. And if we are going to be home in time for supper we'll have to spur these none too rapid mounts most of the way!"

"We're not going to be home for supper, and you can rest your mind on that score. I have to assert myself a little once in a while you know, and I'm not living all my days just exactly for Feronia. Be a man, Egan. Must we be at the women's beck and call day in and day out? We need a vacation of our own devising!"

Now Egan was a little fed-up with the same delving into musty books and practicing of thaumaturgical fum-a-diddles day in and day out, however profitable it had all been to his health, as he knew. After all, there was something in what this tall purple individual was saying. And indeed he knew a deal more about women than himself, who had spent most of the years of young opportunity with a steel collar on his neck and a shovel in his hand. So Egan rode along in silence, only muttering that it might have been wise to leave a note saying how long they would be gone.

"We'll tell 'em we chased a deer, and got lost. Don't worry so much, Egan! They've got to get used to it soon or late. We're men, and we can't be under foot around the house too much or they will forget we're necessary and begin to think we're nuisances. You want your woman to love you, don't you?"

NOW IT WAS increasingly plain to Egan that this strange fellow had a purpose, and was hurrying to keep an appointment, and had no intention of letting Ruy Egan in on it till the time came.

"You're not fooling me, Druga the Bold, as they call you for a reason I don't know as yet. You are up to something your wife would not approve of, and it is very probable that she's right. Else you would tell me, but you think I would let it out when we get back that this appointment of yours you are hurrying to keep was known to you beforehand."

Darkness had fallen, and still they rode on under a very large red moon, perfectly full and somehow ominous.

"All right, I'll tell you. You notice the full moon and the date is the latter day of October, by some reckonings. This night is Hallowed Eve, when certain doings take place which I have never observed and which I mean to observe, whether it's safe or not. So you can go back now that you know, and wait for me or not, just as you please. I am going to see what happens when they call up the black man, and what he is, and what is done there that is spoken of so much and with such reservation of information as to drive a man mad with curiosity."

"I'll stick it out, but it doesn't sound like a man should fool without proper precautions. Have you brought with you the herbs, the silver cross, a sword with a silver blade, garlic and all the other essentials of staying alive?"

"Why, man, we couldn't get within a hundred yards of the rites, with all that clutter on us. Garlic indeed! We have to pretend we're of the black order, and that is not hard, they're an ignorant lot. Just do as I do, you'll be safe enough. I want to see this."

"They perform certain erotic dances I admit to having a yen to observe myself—but from what little I know one is apt to wake up as a black cat the next morning, or as a pig or someone's donkey. I should think you would have had enough of being a pig!"

"No use living if you're going to miss all the fun. Why, Feronia used to attend these shindigs herself

before she settled down to married life.”

“Its easy to see how you get into all these scrapes, as Feronia says so often. You have little enough prudence in your makeup.”

“Ninny!”

“I am no milksop, Druga. But just the same I don’t like to put my head in a bag without taking a look at the one holding the bag. And you will be left holding some kind of Bag before the night is over, if you don’t take some kind of precautions. Witches are up to their worst tricks this night, and you know it.”

“Pshaw. They’re too scared of Feronia to bother me. Now shut up, we’re getting close.”

The two men dismounted, tied the horses, and made their way on foot up the slope of a hill. At the top they crawled forward among the bushes, until they could see down the farther slope. Druga said:

“’Tis Marlowe Heath, a spot, accursed and shunned of all mortals. The Sabbath is held here four times a year, but this is the one night when the real gentry attend, and not a lost soul misses the rites.”

“So you’re only going to watch, and not walk into the mess. I’m glad of that.”

“I want to see who’s here, first I might see some friends of mine, you know. If it looks safe for us, well join in the frolic. Druga cocked an eye at Egan, half serious, but in fun.

EGAN DID not answer for below was a tremendous circle of dark stuff like smoke, and many torches and spirits of people going about in it like fiends in hell. Through the air rushed more and more of them, landing in the circle of smoke and dull flame, and they were misty shapes, some of them, and some of them young and pink and extremely naked and quite solid looking.

“Now are they there in the flesh or in the spirit?” asked Egan.

“It is a matter much disputed of virtuous people and theologians everywhere, as if the only way to find out was not to go there and see. I think it is both, by the look of it.”

“I wish you’d explain just what is going on, so I’d have some idea what its all about,” Egan was straining his eyes after the numerous gyrations of various dancers, some with pink and white bodies of a marvelous well-formed appearance, others black as ink and ugly shaped, others still red as fire and glowing all over as if they were made of hot iron.

“There’s an awful press of them. Let’s go down and mix in the mob. They’ll never notice we’re not of the annointed.”

First explain it to me, Druga. The night’s young yet; there’s plenty of time. Why, there’s more of them arriving all the time; nothing’s going to happen till they’re all here.”

“Well, Satan, or the Red Dwarf, or the numerous other names the many-bodied thing has, is a kind of God and these are his worshippers. I don’t *know* whether Satan and the Red Dwarf are the same or not; if they are, I don’t believe this Sabbath is the one evil thing men think it is. It’s one of the points I want to clear up. I think they are separate entities, and this Satan of the Sabbath is the one called the Black Man, who had a deal to do with the beginning of things and setting this clock of many-walled earths up and ticking on its way. But then he lost out in the shuffle, and got kicked out, which didn’t worry him much, as the whole pantheon of Gods has perished since then, and he still exists. There is only *the one God* of course, and Satan is his rival, nowadays, but once it was a lot of them against Satan. Just who was in the right and trying to do the right thing for the sad earth of our Now I want to find out, as there is so much written about it by men who ought to have known better.”

“Yes, yes, go on. What is the lewd naked dancing all about, for instance?”

“Well, Satan is a survival of a time when such dancing was considered natural and appropriate, and the prejudice against such frank displays is of rather modern origin. So we can’t hold his old-fashioned taste for nude flesh particularly against him. There are moderns who hold that men are too repressive of their natural instincts these latter times, and I for one could do with a little more fun of some kinds that I ever get out of life, without it particularly harming anyone. That is another thing I want to learn, whether he is the last stronghold of paganism or is a really devilish influence trying to tear down the work of the good forces of life.”

“Yes, yes, but what are they going to do and what does it mean?”

“Well, see that large feminine display of flesh flying directly over our heads? That is the Queen of the Sabbath being borne to the feast by her attendant witches. She is to be the central part of the feast, everything will revolve around her. I’ve read up on the rituals pretty thoroughly.”

“What is the feast about, and why tonight?”

“Just ancient custom. The original meaning is unknown to any but Satan, I guess. They practice an inverted form of the Mass, the Black Mass, you know, and go through a ceremony that has been deviously misreported by a thousand and one writers who never saw a Sabbath.”

“They go through a ritual of the church of God in reverse to show contempt for it and its power to harm them for the sacrilege, I have heard.”

“Yes, but a really honest historian has to admit that this ritual is much older than modern religion, so how could it be a reversal of the present-day ritual if it’s older? I want to see the details and learn whether the Moderns didn’t borrow theirs and change it by reversal. The Moderns wear clothes to the chin, the Demonists wear nothing but skin, and it seems to me that bare skin is the older of the two garments. Everything else is likewise in reverse, but which came first is a matter in which these Demonists have History on their side.”

“AND WHAT is that dark statue squatting there, with the naked nymph astride its lap?”

“Once it was called Priapus, and then Pan, and now Satan. What it really is is an excuse to forget that modern affliction of the mind called conscience, or consciousness of sinning, or remorse or what name you will. Nowadays a person can’t amuse himself with his natural equipment for amusement without feeling guilty. So that statue came into being when the affliction became general, and has somehow evolved into Satan, the immortal creature who created the first alibi for erotic debauch.”

“You seem to have a sympathy for this evil business going on here tonight!”

“Maybe I do, Egan. Things are not so right with the world that we can condemn an ancient order which has been a *minority objector* for so very long.”

“And then of course it isn’t wisdom to antagonize an order so noted for getting even with their enemies, Druga?”

“Exactly. Moreover, belonging to those who study the arts of magic, I can’t condemn an order devoted wholly to that study, to whatever purpose they are said to devote their powers. There is a deal of ill-intended gossip in the world, you know.”

“Still it hardly seems fitting to approve of what I see going on so furiously down there. Why every man has a woman with him, and you can’t tell me that they intend any good...”

“Men and women will get together one way or another, and it is traditional of the Sabbath that no woman or no man may be there without one of the other sex. So each female brings a male, and vice versa.”

“Why this intense concentration on such matters? This monstrous gathering seems hardly the place!”

“Ancient custom, bred into a behavior pattern by the exigencies of life in the past.”

“They still come flying through the air in droves. They are lining up back to back, men in one line, women in the other. Strange dance formation...”

“We’d better get down there. We can’t see anything from here.” With which words Druga heaved himself to his feet and began to stride speedily down the slope. Egan decided he might as well go along. Was he a man or a mouse?

Now Druga and Egan pushed through a throng of people, trying to get nearer the center of the performance which now seemed officially to be opened and begun. Egan had many a shiver getting used to the sight of normal fleshly people, farmers and serfs and laborers, as well as a sprinkling of rich folk, all mixed in with a vast number of transparent and evidently ghostly spirits, all of these in the nude, and almost solid-seeming except when they got in front of the firelights. Egan had a hard time understanding the state they were all in. For the most part *they had their eyes closed*, though many did not. They seemed in a state of drugged sleep, in which they could yet see and hear everything going on! As they passed a long board, several little and quite charmingly nude young witches pressed refreshment on Egan, and as Druga drank the bitter stuff down, so did Ruy Egan. Then on, pushing through the milling mob of dreamers, some floating overhead, some roosting in trees, some dancing back-to-back or cheek-to-cheek, all awaiting something, and getting gloriously drunk with this strange brew they were handing out in quart size goblets. Their cheerful excited hospitality was the thing that struck Egan as most incongruous, as he had heard so many stories to the contrary.

Moreover the fact that nearly half of them were not even there in the flesh, but present in a most immaterial body fashioned seemingly of their own imagination, some very beautiful as only an imagination could make a body, others grotesque as only a person who thought very poorly of himself would shape a dream body. Moreover these very nicely colored pink and white nude immaterialities *changed constantly* to suit the tenor of the thoughts of those eyes that looked at them, melting into exactly that kind of personal appearance one desired them to be, so that as he went along after Druga’s tall pushing form, Egan was treated to the sight of such houris as no man had ever seen before, that he had heard of. There was distinctly something *to* this Sabbath. Just how these transparent people got into that shape Egan hadn’t the faintest idea, but they seemed to be having by far the best time of anyone present.

ONE OF THESE lovely spirits lay a hand upon Egan’s arm, and he stopped, thrilled to the core of him by the surge of electric delight sent from her fingertips into the core of his bones.

Softly her body moved, and as it moved it melted subtly and changed, just *there* where he thought the hip a trifle bony, he saw that it had been the light and that in truth her hip was nobly rounded and quite perfect, and *there* where he thought her inner thighs lacking flesh, they became full and touching as she walked, and her eyes that had seemed at first small became as he looked tremendous wells of green fluorescence sparkling with strange and secret eroticisms, and as he looked into those depths, his inner clutching self *was dragged out of his mouth* and he fell to the ground, a dead hulk! The female spirit, with his hand in hers, whirled him in a wild dance up and up into the air, then down and down, thrillingly, ecstatically, free as the air and daringly flying better than any bird!

Now Egan and his companion hovered over the strong young witch, nude and outspread upon the

altar her silken net of midnight hair dragged in the dust, offered up as a sacrifice. And Egan settled over her face with his body very close, his eyes peering into hers, and she was real living flesh and not any dream-walking, as he knew himself to be that night.

Now upon her flat belly the offertory of the faithful was deposited, in the shape of a great heart-shaped cake, a cake of black texture, Devil's Food indeed. Egan was too excited by the electric arms of his flying nymph about him to remember the words, except that some ancient deep thought of life was invoked, strangely enough, for the purpose of making fruitful the fields, and for the enfranchisement of the oppressed. Which did not seem strange at the time, and contrary to report, but did so later as he thought back.

Egan noted Druga now, foremost of the males about the altar, his eyes taking in each detail of the wild pagan scene carefully, and the drink that had driven the soul right out of Egan's body into arms of a temptress had not seemed to affect him at all!

The wild ritual went on, the horned Demon who was the Officiary for the still absent Dark God let loose a flight of birds, one each of several different kinds, from between the bright breasts of the naked altar, and what the pretty ceremony was for Egan did not know.

Pan-pipes were tuning up in the background, and big kettle drums, little drums were beginning a slow and steady beat, which was constantly gradually added to and increased in tempo. Whatever that music was, it was like none he had ever heard in its effect, for every sound seemed to go right through his immaterial dream-body, and Egan danced in spite of himself to the sound, as if the music and himself were become the same thing.

Then a handful of wheat grains were sprinkled over the prostrate body of the witch-altar, and the cake was distributed with care, one bit was passed here and one there, so that all touched it at least once.

Then the Devil's Bride, as Egan thought of this nude altar of flesh, rose to her feet, and Egan saw she was a beautiful and mature sorceress of a full thirty years of age, with the face of a Medea and the beauty of a Madonna, her eyes deep-set and restless, tragic with the woes of mankind, her hair a torrent untamable, reaching below her hips, wildly writhing as she moved in a posturing dance of supplication, to the Dark spirit who had not yet graced the festival.

As she moved thus, wholly beautiful but forbidding as death itself, she chanted—"Lord, preserve us from the traitorous and the overbearing. Keep us to the ancient path of life that is good for all and not only for the few, help us to preserve the ancient teachings of Pan and Bacchus and Priapus, help us not to fall into the dark ways of morality and suppression of all goodness in life."

AS HER CHANT went on thus, Egan was vastly confused not to hear evil from her lips, but this defense of debauchery of the most convincing kind, as if it were a God's gift from the past much abused in the present time here on this earth. And Egan left the arms of the sweet transparent nymph, and settled down beside Druga, who stood with eyes hypnotically glued to the dark magic of the Sabbath Queen's beauty, and asked:

"Explain this to me, Druga. They do not think of themselves as evil but think of what they call morality as evil afflicting mankind..."

"Every man to his own philosophy, Egan. It is an ancient relic of a life vastly different from modern times. Once it was good wholly, and wisely preserved man's delight in his kinship with nature and with the beasts. But it has become perverted into acceptance of true evil as necessary in life, which is untrue entirely. They have lost some of the true wisdom, and preserved some. The Moderns have likewise

saved some and lost some, hence they are at opposite points of the compass, both partly right, and both wholly wrong in thinking these things are opposed in nature itself. By the way, how did you get into such an airy shape. Were you beguiled out of your body?"

"Eh! Why, yes, a pretty witch pulled me right out with the touch of her lips to mine. Why?"

"Just be sure you get back into the right one afterward, there are a lot of others lying about like yours."

"I thought it was the bitter wine they gave us."

"My God, man, you didn't drink that witches brew? Why, I only *pretended* to drink it, to keep my wits!"

"Now he tells me," groaned Egan, and flew off to join his witch again. For the Sabbath only comes once a year after all.

Now the Queen of the Sabbath went thoroughly into some very picturesque activities with the great body of the statue of darkness in the back of the place where she had served as altar, and Druga was vastly diverted by the fancies these people held to be true. As she purified herself afterward, Druga edged nearer, and examined the drugs and other things laid out on a table for her use. She turned from her late employment, and for an instant their eyes met, and Druga felt that he knew this woman from of old, but could not remember where.

"It is odd to see you here, virtue!" she murmured in his ear, and for an instant he would have sworn it was Feronia's voice, but it was not, of course. There were violets in her hair, and vervain, and ivy, woven into a wreath, and Druga knew these things had to do with death. And Druga did not desire to have any thing whatever to do with death, and kept his mouth firmly shut.

Then she took up a handful of white powder, and tossed it into a low fire under a kettle, and put things into the kettle, and writhed her sweetly formed dancer's body about the fire in a way that would have made the dead rise out of their graves. And this seemed the necessary medicine, for out of the pot began to emerge a mist far darker than steam, which mist coagulated swiftly into a man's body, black and scaled all over. This personage stepped out of the steam of the little cauldron calmly, and embraced his Queen with fervor and much too great frankness of affection.

Now the dark lovely queen appealed to the lightning to strike down this new-comer if it were able, and the black scaled man glanced up calmly, as if knowing it would do no such thing.

The tom toms and kettle drums had been steadily increasing their tempo and their volume, and the music of fifes and pipes as well as strings joined in more and more. The whole assemblage were dancing now, back to back, touching their bodies and lifting their feet in a very ancient dance of great meaning.

* * *

NOW THE BLACK Man decapitated a toad, which seemed to Druga rather a strange proceeding, but he called it by a name that Druga had little time for as he did it, so that Druga realized it *had* a meaning, for if the one so named had been able to resent the insult, he would have done so.

Druga had learned that the Red Dwarf had nothing in common there this night with the Black Man, and one of his purposes had been accomplished. But there was a deal to learn, for one interested in magic, and Druga was keeping his ears open, as well as his eyes.

Now this Dark one raised his hands, and by a miracle, every one of those unattractive people who

had remained back to back became at once hand some beyond words, and at once turned about, facing each other delighted and astounded at the sudden improvement Which to Druga seemed the height of kindness, for some of them had been most infirm and ugly of body. Now, for one night at least, they would appear as they would like to appear to one they loved!

As the Black Man relinquished the Queen to the waiting stag line, and the dance went on into transports of utter madness or delight, according as the view-point is. Druga engaged this gentleman in conversation, which he seemed to resent, but Druga had things to learn.

“How is it that you are supposed to be the God of Evil, yet here tonight I have seen no evil as yet?” asked Druga the Bold, and inwardly wondering if he did not deserve the name Bold for being so forward with one who is feared so generally.

“Ah, a stranger in our midst! I have not the honor of your acquaintance sir. Have you been initiated, or are you just an observer?”

“Why, I am Druga the Bold, of Erdis Cliff, and I was curious. I wanted to talk to you. It is a part of education, you know, a most necessary part. So I came to the Sabbath in quest of wisdom.”

“Well,” and Satan, or the Black Man, or Lucifer, or whoever he might really be if anyone knew, rubbed his hands together, “I’ve heard of you. and I’m glad to make your acquaintance. You are considerably older than you appear, and Mors herself was so kind as to take you under her protection. So you come well recommended, and I am glad to have you here.”

“Yes, I am glad to be here, and I think your ritual a most charming one so far, and most exciting and well conceived. But what is all this talk of dreadful evil in your person and customs, and why are these delightful witches said to be distributors of disease and storms and such like inconveniences of life.”

“Well, I’ll tell you, Druga. It is an old custom of the ‘ins’ to blame everything on the ‘outs’, and I have been ‘out’ of favor with certain great responsible parties for a long, long time. So it is that people generally have come to the belief I am the one responsible for what is really the gods’ fault. They designed the earth themselves, and not a bad job, but let it drift afterward, and it got into a very evil part of space where all kinds of ills befell the people who had trusted fate so fully they forgot to take care of themselves. Naturally they needed a scape goat, and they drove me out of heaven as the color of my skin lent itself to calumny most handily. You know the old saying: ‘There’s a black man in the woodpile’”.

“So there is a heaven, after all?”

“Well there was, the last I heard, but to tell you the truth, I’ve heard it’s vastly run down and not nearly so attractive as it’s trumped up to be. ” Now the Devil put one leg upon the bare wood where the naked Queen had so lately lain in his worship, and began to expound even more interestedly to Druga, so that he felt that here he had met a man who was really interested in Wisdom and in himself, except that he hated very much to waste the time with him, as the night was drawing on and he had hardly danced with any of these delightful young witches and sorceresses as yet. But he could hardly be impolite to the Devil himself, so Druga composed himself, only casting a wistful eye out over the madly capering throng of them with their eyes tightly closed and seeing everything in the perfect form and color that is only possible on this earth when the eyes are closed.

NOW THERE came scampering up to the two men talking by the vacant altar two twin sisters, with black hair and young sharp breasts and every capable appearing hips and limbs well shaped and their cheeks red with dancing, their bright little red tongues hanging out upon their soft lips, panting, and squealing a little as they pushed and shoved each other to get closer to either Druga or the Black Man. And one of these set herself astride the Black Man’s extended leg, and the other mounted up on Druga’s

shoulders and back and made herself comfortable with her legs about his neck. And the Dark One and Druga went on talking while the two girls chattered to each other in whispers, and that made the time seem less wasted to each of them. For on the Sabbath everything must be as one would wish it, for the faithful, and certainly no men would wish to stand alone and talk without the company of women.

“I have always heard you had a hand in creation, and then did your best to tear it all down again!”

“Why no, Druga, the truth was very different from the tale told generally. The White God and I had an argument of some length, you know I objected strongly to exile and slander, and besides I knew what was going to happen to earth and I wanted to get off it and go the proper direction through space. But he had to make me seem responsible, and the punishment seemed just, to make me accompany the earth on its unhealthy journey into the worst plague spots of all space—so here I am, making the best of a bad deal.”

“So you think that White God is a very poor astronaut who could not give his universe a proper course through the tides of space-energy. I see, and he blames you for it all, and goes scot free in the heavenly tribunals.”

Now the Medea’s face of his Queen appeared between Druga and the Dark One, and she seemed to desire to know just what was going on to keep the guest of honor, the Devil himself, from taking proper part in the Sabbath activities. But the Dark One only put his arm about her wonderful shoulders, and introduced her to Druga formally, and he learned her name was *Morganstern*.

Her dark torrent of hair was moist with sweat, and the satin-smooth hide of her glistened everywhere with moisture, so that in the firelight she seemed jeweled with blood-red rubies and little pearls everywhere on the whiteness of her. A well developed and mature Sorceress, of uncertain age, Druga knew, maybe a hundred years and maybe only twenty five, or perhaps a thousand. Who was he to say, who should have been in his grave many years ago except for Feronia’s work? She bent a somewhat suspicious eye upon the tall purple-skinned self of Druga, but as she examined him more closely a certain acquisitive glint came into her eye which Druga knew of old, and which tonight of all nights he knew he would be unable to circumvent.

Druga excused himself hastily, and was about to lose himself in the now quite frankly cohering multitude, nearly inosculant as they were, he found among them no interstitial crevices to insert his large self between, and so turned back perforce to find Morganstern whispering in the Dark One’s hairy long ear, who poured fluid into a large cup.

The Dark Man tasted of this fluid, then as Druga still did not any longer press himself upon the two beside the Altar, beckoned to him, saying:

“Can’t have you leave without tasting this particular wine, brought here at great trouble myself for my special friends, and I know that *you are going to be one*. It is not every day that I meet a man so broadly educated as yourself, who has read *the three books* and knows all the words, whether he realizes what they truly import or not. Drink, Druga!”

His tone admitted of no refusal in good taste, and as Druga took the big cup, Morganstern raised a cup very similar, except that two green snakes seemed to twine living about it, shining about it, shining green and scaly in the reddish light, which was very odd.

“To the good old days, before men forgot how to live and stay alive,” cried Morganstern, in a voice neither gay nor sad, but excited as at the prospect of some infernal joy beyond understanding.

“To the good old days,” murmured Druga mournfully, and drained his cup with utmost misgivings.

CHAPTER FOUR

NOTHING at all happened to Druga, as it had to Ruy Egan, after drinking this draft, except that everything got a deal rosier and more attractive upon the edges, including Dame Morganstern. But then Druga had been equipped with great care with an immortal constitution, which on that planet called earth was a constitution indeed.

Nothing at all, that is, except that shortly thereafter he had thrown one arm about Satan's shoulder and one about Morganstern's, and was singing with them a strange song about:

“The sly serpent, in the golden
flame,
The magic circle of her voice, her
voice, her name,
Her everlasting lair, her emerald
throne And Universal Pan, these twain
vernant
Within the mountains adamant,
Where the quick heart of the
world doth pant.”

and a deal more which he could never remember or get into the same silly rhyme again, when he tried later on. The three then joined the revel, and what they did the rest of the night Druga conveniently forgot.

Now the three, arm in arm, took three steps forward, three right and three back, turned and spun dizzily in a whirling that was to Druga like nothing he had ever been through, and in a moment they sank straight into the earth. Druga knew it was near morning, for he heard a cock crow as this occurred, but he was past worrying just then about anything.

Ruy Egan found himself back in his body about the same time, and got up with an aching head, to see around him only a few bucolic gentlemen and ladies who paid him the least possible attention and made their way off into the morning.

Now Ruy knew that he could not go back to Feronia without her Druga, and so he searched about till he found the bare spot of deserted earth where the altar had last night been surrounded by golden flames and where a throne had been set behind, and where a great black statue had sat—and there was now nothing at all of those things or the wonderful entertainment which had gone on so divertingly.

But there was a very charming young witch sweeping up the numerous leavings of the feast, scraps of food and bits of torn clothing and cake and what-not, and Egan went up to her humbly, inquiring:

“Have you seen a tall purple fellow about in green jerkin and hose, with a wide golden belt about his middle?”

The little minx smiled disturbingly on Egan's rueful face, and wiggled her hips unnecessarily, and went on with her sweeping saying:

“Why yes, strange one, I saw such a one dancing hell-bent with the Queen of the Sabbath, and with his arms about the Devil's shoulder and about the Queen's shoulder, and it seemed to me he went with them when they left. And they went straight down!”

“I've got to find him, I can't go back without him.”

“You’ll have to look in Hell, if I’m any judge, and I am, if I do say it myself. Morganstern took a liking to the tall purple fellow, I could tell, for she chased me off his back herself. I didn’t want to argue with her, I can tell you.”

“But how do I get there, charming witch that you are?”

“Why I would take you myself, if I could, and I can, for there is nothing I’m afraid of in this old earth you know, after what I went through last night. But I can’t promise to bring you back, even to come back, and I don’t know as I would want to if they let me in, and they might, you never can tell...”

The girl went on at a great rate in this vein, and Egan gathered that she knew the way from hearsay, and not from experience, and that people who had been there described the place in distinctly glowing and fiery terms.

So he sat down on the ground to wait for her to finish her sweeping, and presently she took her broom and shoved it between his legs where he sat, and then sat down on his lap and said:

“Fly low, fly high, where the Devil goes, there go I. Come hail, come sleet, come death or fire, why still I’ll follow and admire...”

There was more of it but it was unfit to mention and Egan forgot it anyway. Then she snapped her fingers and the broom rose in the air! Egan clutched the little witch firmly about the waist and she looked back over her shoulder at his sudden ardor, saying:

“Are you scared or just trying to squeeze me?”

“A little of both, of course, my dear,” replied Ruy Egan, smiling very anxiously. He had no wish to antagonize this particular female just then.

After a dashing time of up and round about as if she were chasing a smell through the windy air, a smell of brimstone that Egan could scent for himself, she flew down the open mouth of a volcano, and Ruy Egan gave himself up for lost as the smoke rose black and stifling about them.

* * *

NOW DRUGA and the Queen and Satan passed down through a strange tube of rock, and came out in a huge cavern, still singing a song that went on and on about

“Centaur and satyrs, and shapes that haunt,

Nymphs and dryads and Cerberus gaunt,

Wet clefts, and lumps neither dead nor alive,

Oh give me hot Hell, and there I’ll thrive.”

So the three of them progressed along a path of green malachite, laid out in weird designs with porphyry and garnet insets dividing, and Druga got even dizzier as the Devil insisted on not stepping on the cracks between the parquetry of stone, which was well nigh impossible. Druga had a suspicion that his companions were drunk, and that he could himself not fully remember everything that had happened last night, for he remembered whirling a certain witch up over his head, but couldn’t remember her coming down again at all! But he was quite sure he himself was not quite drunk and proved it quietly to himself by pronouncing the name “Asmodeus” and went on to clinch it by saying one after the other “Aphrodite, Zeuxippe, Zosteria and Venus Mechanitis.”

Satan swore a black oath at these names.

“Leave those old fogies out of this. Do you want them down here moralizing just when things are getting warm?”

“Why, does this Venus Mechanitis go in for moralizing?”

“Not her, but Zosteria is Minerva and is she a nasty old frump! She has never been a friend to me, I can tell you.”

“Very well. I was just proving I wasn’t drunk by pronouncing the names correctly.”

“Now what a way to tell,” murmured the Queen of Hell in his ear. “I can think of a dozen ways more entertaining than that.”

“For instance?” asked Druga, feeling a bit lost in the immensity of gouting flames and gloomy corridors and glorious sculpturings of a most vague antiquity which he could not remember ever having heard mentioned before.

“Why, count your fingers, and if you have ten you are sober. There are still other things you can count too, like noses, lips and limbs, if you feel so inclined and you can’t get up to ten. Why think about being sober, anyway? Its a most depressing state?”

“Two legs, two eyes, two lips, one nose—a most attractive nose it is too. Did you ever have that glorious cascade of hair counted, Morganstern?”

“No one of my acquaintance ever took time to count them that I recall. Would you like to try, Druga the Bold?”

“S’beautiful hair, you ought to keep better track of it all, you know. Why, last night it was positively dragged in the dust, and it broke my heart to see it so, too. Ah, Morganstern, I can’t think at all what I ought to be thinking, or why I am here and all the other things that were so important yesterday. You must forgive my condition and not notice. I am afraid I’m drunk!”

“Wonderful, you’re a most diverting fellow when you’re loosened up a little. Wherever have you been keeping yourself?”

“S’ funny, but I can’t remember a thing about it?”

“It’ll all come back to you, I’m sure, if you don’t worry about it too much. Now let’s have some more fun before everything gets spoiled.”

“Shpoiled. What’cha mean spoiled?”

BUT THE witch did not answer, only leading her two somewhat irregularly erect companions on into a chamber where a great emerald throne sat among a score of tall golden flames. There were dozens of scurrying black servitors here, who brought them immediately a flagon of something or other which they poured down their burning throats, and Druga said:

“Y’know, Satan old fellow, there’s a deal of talking we have to do yet about certain points you brought up last night. I remember I had a lot to learn that I didn’t know, but what were we talking about?”

“Never mind, never mind, we’ve got to tend to the judgment here, and then there’re several other duties to be got through, and then we’ll have the dancing corps amuse us. I’m going to show you Satan is

no niggard before you go back to your Cliff. However do you entertain yourself shut up in..." but here Morganstern shoved her elbow into Satan's ribs and he forgot to continue. But Druga was watching a very pretty red-skinned native with a pointed tail and provocative horns who was filling his cup which somehow still remained in his hand.

"Now you two make yourselves right at home while I'm gone," said Satan, mumbling his words a little. "I've got some business to attend to, you know, and then I'll join you." He waggled a thick black giant finger at Druga sagely; "Don't do anything I wouldn't do, Druga old man, or I'll keep you here for a sinner, you know. Ha-ha-ha. Sinner's sinner, sinner!"

As he moved off Druga heard him uttering—"S' funny things they tell people about poor old Satan, say I lie, make them uncomfortable, and such tales. Incredible how credulous people are about slander. Why, take that charming young fellow, well educated and yet he has the most astounding misinformation."

"Now who would have thought he was such a hospitable old gentleman?" murmured Druga into Morganstern's ear, where she had drawn him beside her to the tall emerald throne, and he was surprised to note the flames did not burn him, but were extremely pleasant of sensation, exhilarating and not at all what ordinary fire should be.

"Never mention his age to his face, he's most sensitive about it," said Morganstern, stroking Druga's flushed face with her hand, and bending and pressing a kiss to his lips.

"Ya know, Morg, old girl, I never met a woman appealed to me right off the bat, as it were, like you." Druga began to laugh. "That's funny, Morg, right off the bat. And him with bat's wings, and all."

"It's not very funny to make fun of the old man, Druga, nor smart."

"S'unintentional, my girl, strictly accidental speech. I meant nothing whatever derogatory. I mean everything just the best by the two best friends I've met since...since... I can't remember when."

It wasn't every day she met a man so much larger and stronger and smarter and superior in every way to the general run of mankind, mused Morganstern, wondering just what blood this extremely attractive male had in his veins, to be so very different. But she was not the first to make a fuss over the big handsome animal, she realized. He thought pretty well of himself. As soon as the drink was out of him he would leave here, but meanwhile he was amusing and there was no hurry. It was odd that a few drinks should make him lose his memory, for she was anxious to learn all about him herself. But perhaps one of those designing witches that had been pussycatting around him when she met him had slipped a potion in his cup. You never knew, these degenerate days, what deviltry the profession might be up to their necks in practicing. Strictly against the rules, too!

"The one thing most apt to make him lose his temper would be to have him hear you call him an old bat, my fine purple-skinned male. Wherever did you get such an oddly attractive coloration, sort of an old rose with orchid trim, as it were?"

"S'been in the family for generations, all the people of my generation were like that, before I went searching for wisdom and got lost in the wiles of Diana—Hecate—you name her and you can have her. She is a—hiccup—she is, the old bat."

Druga was seated upon one of the steps of the dais of the emerald throne, his arm casually about the waist of Morganstern, and quite gradually his head slipped lower and lower until he was asleep with his head in her lap, and she sat brooding and holding the man's head, the tall golden flames flickered ceaselessly, and the dark shadows scurried on nameless errands.

CHAPTER FIVE

NOW INTO the tremendous chamber that was certainly big enough to hold an army comfortably with all their baggage and cavalry and horses, too, there came flying a broomstick carrying double, and accomplished a high banking turn, skidded with a fishtail sweep to a right and left and then turned turtle entirely, dumping Ruy Egan and the young witch onto the stone floor right in front of the brooding Morganstern and the sleeping Druga.

Morganstern frowned severely at the pretty young witch, and remembered her from last night. She asked:

“Aren’t you the slick young puss I saw astride this man’s neck last night? Don’t answer, I remember you. Just what did you give him to make him forget who he is?”

“Just a little *bhāng* in his cup, Queenie. I couldn’t help it. He’s such a large one, you know, and such a rare color. The collector’s instinct in me got the better of my judgment. You won’t report me to the council, please, Queen?”

“Not if you give me the antidote and that in a hurry. I want to bring back his wits when I get ready, you know. What good is a man who doesn’t know his own name?”

“What good is his name? You got the man, haven’t you? My goodness, I always said they give me the name, I’ll take the game that’s what I say. So I took him, and you got him. I’m the loser, not you.”

“Give me the prescription, puss, before I lose my temper.”

“Oh, all right, here it is, and you have to use it while it’s hot; it changes in the air. But you don’t need it, he’ll recover in a few hours. It’s no wonder he’s drunk, though, drinking the Devil’s own wine on top of what I gave him. And walked all the way down here—It took us hours to fly the distance. Whatever do you do with yourself all day here in the, shall we say, nether regions, or shall we say, warmer climes?”

“Does she go on like that all the time, you... whatever your name is?”

“My name is Ruy Egan, and I accompanied yon sleeping giant to the Sabbath against my better judgment. And she does go on like that whenever you ask her a question. Otherside she’s an amiable well-mannered witch, kindly and obliging and contrary to what I expected to find in a black witch.”

“Ruy Egan, eh. And you know who this gentleman is and his home and friends, eh? Well, make yourself at home till the entertainment the old Master of the Netherlands is preparing is over, and I fancy you will want to be returning again to the surface.”

“Do I have to go back, Queen? I always wanted...” began the little red-cheeked witch, but Morganstern only frowned at her and she fell silent, only muttering: “Not to have to build a fire every time I want some tea! It’s so nice and warm and all and now she won’t let me stay. I’ll see the Devil, that’s what I’ll do...”

Morganstern sent one of the lithe black things off to the prescription department with the paper the young witch had given her, and presently Druga had his wits back nearly as good as before. But he did not seem in a hurry to leave, which worried Egan, as he kept expecting Feronia to come around a corner, scolding, but she did not appear. Indeed, she hadn’t the faintest idea where they were. Or did she? Druga wondered as he looked at Morganstern. Where had he heard that voice before?

The two men and the two witches sat there about the great green throne, and presently the Black

Man came back looking considerably refreshed and glowing a little over his black body with little flames now everywhere, as if he had been basking in a fire. He sat himself down beside the large and lovely body of Morganstern upon the throne and clapped his hands, and from right and left swept a troupe of female demons, very loose in the hips; and into a sinuous dance that took full advantage of the hip motion which they seemed to have developed far beyond the normal human movement.

NOW ABOUT this black man, Druga noticed a vast dark majesty which he had laid aside the night before, a brooding timeless abyss of thought active behind the broad horned skull of him, a magnificence alien and inhuman but not evil. This intrigued Druga, and he resolved to make the most of this chance to acquire wisdom from an ancient source.

As he was about to begin to draw out the black man upon various philosophic and esoteric topics that occurred to him, Morganstern leaned to the black man and asked: "Did you shut off the dream beam. No use wasting the power on an empty heath."

The black man got up and went to the dim side of the chamber on the left of the throne, and there in the dimness Druga noted a vast whirling cage of metal and a panel of dials and switches beside it. From the top of the metal circular grillwork a vast beam of dream-colored force shot up through the reck, blue and violet and gold, misty and seeming filled with spinning globules of whitish mist.

As he returned after pulling a switch, and Druga watched the spinning cease and the beam of force die away to nothing, Druga asked:

"Now what the devil is that?"

"That is what made it possible for the dream bodies of the feasters last night to leave their flesh bodies and frolic as they were meant to do, in an illusion of perfection which the mind is equipped to engender about the sensing of the dream body. Didn't you notice how many revelers kept their eyes closed, how many were not possessed of normal fleshly bodies?"

"I noticed it, but I did not understand it."

"You don't understand it yet, but I can tell you a little about it. That beam of force created up there a static field of nourishment for the dream perceptions, for the mind even inside the body but most particularly for the imaginative faculties of the mind. Not one of the participants of the revels last night can give the same account this morning, because each saw what his will made his imagination form in the dream force. Each in that way receives those pleasures he most desires at the Sabbath. It is the least I can do for the poor benighted citizens of my lost world. It is one of the reasons the Gods hate me, my pity for his abandoned people shows their own lack of pity for them. Not nice characters, my opponents."

"I don't see why you consider God an opponent? According to other statements you made, he hasn't set foot on this earth for a long long time."

"Well, he is a jealous God, you know. He deplores the fact that because I am also exiled from Heaven to Earth for the rest of my days, I have the capacity to sympathize with others so exiled, the human kind of mortal, you know. He wants them waiting and ready to accept him as he desires to be accepted whenever the world swims back into the natural fields of beneficial force where he keeps himself, and where we should be if the world had not been improperly directed in its orbit."

"But was it really his fault, Lucifer? Aren't you blaming him for things, willy-nilly, the way he blamed you? Is it all true, these tales of responsibility for cosmic happenings. Isn't the God you blame for such things just a myth, and no one responsible but the natural vagaries of an imperfect and totally unconscious

universe, which may be a living and vast life but which is blind to the welfare of such motes as ourselves, and unable to see or do anything at all for us or against us.”

“Are you suggesting I don’t know anything about the beginning of things. Are you implying that Beelzebub, the Black God of the Fire-worlds, doesn’t know whether his opponent is alive or not?”

“Why yes, your majesty,” said Druga, grinning. “I can see that you are humoring my young innocence in these matters with the usual talk so that I will hear what I expect to hear, rather than the truth, which would be vastly more effort on your part to impart.”

“You’re right, Druga. The truth is vastly more than all that antique fol-de-rol people inherit from the past lies and misinformations. I’ll try to picture the truth of the matter out to you simply, though it will be necessarily skeletal and quite inadequate, still it will be better than such a picture as one gets from seeing myself and the great White Father in a titanic struggle for men’s souls. I wish I did have a use for those dream bodies and could keep them alive, but I can’t.”

MORGANSTERN, listening to all this with her pretty ear cocked and her eyes trying to follow the gyrations and curiously attractive undulations of certain muscular male dancers now performing before the throne, put in:

“Must you men bore us with this discussion just when we are supposed to be amusing ourselves. Couldn’t we have a drink all around and liven up the party?”

Lucifer-Beelzebub etc. turned to his beautiful witch; “Morganstern, you have been an understanding and lovely Queen of the Sabbath, but you should remember you are not Queen of Hell yet, and that the Sabbath will be officially over in a very short time now.” He looked at his wrist, on which a tiny affair was strapped by a leather thong. “You should also remember that men like ourselves think *nothing* so important as the wise and able handling of many high-sounding words. Not even sex is so interesting as this pastime of thinking we indulge in, and however much you want to get into the usual rut of eroticism, you must always humor the male in his desire to display his erudition.”

“Well, I like a chance for display, myself. It isn’t fun for a girl to sit ignored when she’s only Queen for a day!”

“Why don’t you join the dancers on the floor and get a nice workout. Just what *would* satisfy your desires, lovely Queen?” Lucifer had had his eyes on Morganstern for several seconds now as he talked, and you couldn’t do that without being distracted.

“I’ll let you know, Dark Master, when I get around to it,” murmured the near nude witch as she got to her feet, from beside his hot body, and descended to the male dancers whose musculature had so drawn her eyes.

“Now, where was I?” asked Lucifer as he turned back to Druga. “Women take one’s mind off things so, yet it is their greatest virtue.”

“You were just about to set me right in regard to the prevalent myth of your contention with the Good God and his followers.” Druga’s eyes and his whole quite urgent desire was to join the revelers who were now falling into quite a Bacchic dance, if you could call it a dance, led by the now quite nude and wholly exciting Morganstern in mystic and terrifically provocative movements about herself and each other, winding in and out in a procession that seemed to be leading toward some unimaginable culmination of which Druga could not but fear to imagine the nature... but Lucifer, sitting there beside the tall purple Druga, the two of them easily the most striking and magnificent spectacle in all that gloomy fiery magnificence of ancient splendor and immortal glory—was talking, in profound syllogism:

“You have observed, Druga the Bold, the multi-bodied existence of certain surviving Gods still remnant from the old times of earth. You have observed the repetitive Nows of which the many walled world of worlds is constructed. You have observed God-hood in various manifestations, but have you stopped to consider that the great God who permeates all is *not* as these?”

“I have observed and considered, and decided that the great God must be vastly more than my mind can grasp of being.”

“Exactly. And myself is then but another who goes about in a human-seeming body, pretending to a majesty he does not possess as a serious rival of the one Great God?”

“Such would be the obvious conclusion.”

“Well, what else *could* be true? Do you think I shall pretend any rivalry with such a vast omniscient all-permeating life as your true concept of God must necessarily embody?”

“So you are just another accidental survivor from the time of the Gods upon earth, who has been unable to escape from the universal fate of the fields of energy-life about this solar system?”

“Just another immortal, Druga. And one vastly maligned, I can tell you. Once I was worshipped properly as Pan, as Faunus, as many another of the Gods who preceded me, but assuredly I have always been myself and none of these others. Once they may have existed really, but I have humored all these worshippers of the various Gods which led to a deal of confusion in the writings of mortal men who did not live long enough to get at the truth of anything. There has been but the one great Lord of the Underworld, myself, of course, but there have always been others, lesser Lords living in the underworld, who also pose as Gods and amuse themselves with the antics of their worshippers as I did at the Sabbath last night. Just between you and I, this immortal life gets very tiresome unless one is equipped with special talents for amusements.”

“Still, that mortals should blame all their ills on you is a peculiar fact I cannot understand.”

IN CLASSIC times, during the Greek and Roman dominance of the thought of the world, there were other scape-goats among the immortals upon whom men blamed their troubles. There was Pluto, and I do believe that many of his doings and ways of life have been confused with my own. Pluto became a rather ill-tempered monarch in his decline, and did do some pretty devilish tricks. But in his prime he was as good-natured a God as the next one.”

“Then Pluto was an immortal who died?”

“Yes, Druga, as we all must die if we do not get away from earth. The energies about this earth will reduce us all in time, struggle as we will. I am not at all the powerful being I once was.”

“Just why do you encourage all these sensual and mystic and supposedly decadent and enervating excesses that go on during the Sabbath and among your followers everywhere?”

“When one is young, Druga, one absorbs ideas of virtue from one’s forebears which, in a long life, one finds impossible of observance. It is such individuals, who expect even Lucifer’s followers to observe his own strict code of conduct, who malign us most greatly. We believe that life should be sensually as full and complete as possible, considering it is so short and unsatisfactory at best, and conduct ourselves accordingly. We take pleasure where and when we find it, and provide for more of the same as well as we can in the short future, and the more strict moralists and philistines and other sterile and unimaginative mortals condemn us as an evil influence in consequence. But, Druga, *just what is Evil?*”

“Why, Evil is a practice or custom that harms and corrodes the character; Evil is a character that

delights in giving pain and destroying the good things of life.”

“And am I such a character, Druga?”

“I have failed to observe any such failings in you as yet.”

“I believe that such sadistic delight in giving harm to other lives is a product of a madness in the mind. I believe that such Evil stems from a detrimental and disintegrant penetrative energy in the circumambient fluids of the solar system, which affects the minds of weak and idiotic human beings in such a way that they seem to have a ‘Devil’ riding their backs and driving them invisibly to destructive acts. I know that, Druga, and I am telling you the truth. It has nothing whatever to do with immortal beings or mystic doings of any-kind; it is an affliction. Of course there are cults of evil where such creatures get together and commit the acts of cruelty that satisfy their will to commit harm upon their fellow passengers into death. Such cults do sometimes take my name in vain and commit these acts in my name. But I deal with these creatures when I can and in so doing help men quite a bit. But I myself and my followers are not in truth allied with such doings.”

“But you have the power to do away with such humans, and with such longer lived sub-gods or near immortals who are so maddened, yet you do not annihilate them utterly. Are you not to blame for not ridding earth of them all?”

“The energy fields of our planets are breeders of such sicknesses, Druga. I myself could no more rid life of such illnesses than I could wipe out syphilis, or diptheria, or any other plague. When men learn to doctor themselves for evil, it will gradually disappear, as have other plagues. But men lack organization, and I am too enervated by years and by cynicism, by my inherited scorn for life in general, to bother with it. I love life, Druga, but what we have is not truly life—it is to me a kind of kindergarten which it amuses me to attend at times. That is all. I do lack sympathy for these children. I could try harder to be what men call good—going about and dispensing cheer and medicines and benefits generally. But my cynicism tells me that unless the will to cure themselves arises in man’s self and defeats evil, it would all be to no purpose. *I do not believe in men*, Druga. I have known them too long and too painfully. That is one reason I was interested in you; you are of an alien blood, not man as I know him.”

So Druga sat behind the dark alien majesty of the Lost God, and let his mind drink in the deep chill brooding thought of his waiting there in timeless, forgotten cavern, and watched the mad delight in the dancer’s bodies and the curious pleasures of which their bodies were capable which the swarm of dancers was indulging everywhere before their Dark Master. And Druga came thus to a greater understanding of the chill and terrible fate of the race of man, who cannot find within himself his own salvation, but must always pray to some ignoring great one to bring it to him on a golden plate, with fluttering golden wings of haste, and Druga felt a great weariness and a despair with this world of his well up in him, and he tried to drown it in drink from the hot goblets borne to him in the sweating hands of little red-skinned nymphs. So presently Druga had joined the mad revelry, and was stepping off a measure beside the tall and utterly too seductive naked Morganstern, and whirling beside him was Egan in the arms of the apple cheeked young witch who had brought him there.

THE PARTY went on for some hours thus, and that Dark Lord was generous with the supporting energy fluids which he poured out flooding throughout the enclosing walls of his throne room, and everything was getting very rosy and delightful for Druga. The dark despair he had absorbed from Lucifer’s ancient brooding thought had drowned itself for a time in the hot pleasure of his body, and he was finding the arms of Morganstern more than diverting, when he looked up to see his own Feronia standing with her hands on her hips and her lips in a tight line of terrific anger, watching the performance from beside the throne of Lucifer. Beside her was the flaming hair and tall form of Lua of Vole, and Ruy Egan had left off dancing and was standing there before the two women like a boy caught stealing who

was trying to think of a satisfactory lie.

So Druga relinquished his too-firm grasp of the satin smooth waist of Morganstern, and went to Feronia, smiling and feeling like a greater fool than ever before in his life.

“The minute my back is turned, you manage to get yourself right smack into Hell itself.” Feronia’s voice cracked like a whip, and Druga noticed that even His Dark Majesty upon his emerald throne winced at the sound of it and threw up an arm to ward off some invisible harm.

“Why, Feronia, I came here of my own accord, in my usual search for Wisdom wherever it may be found, and the trip has been wholly worthwhile. His Majesty has been most kind in elucidating many obscure points that have troubled me about the past, and about Evil and its source, and about the ways of life in general.”

“He has been seducing you into his own degenerate and dissolute ways with his talk of futility and helplessness in the face of human shiftlessness. I know his ways. *And I’ll have none of it, you understand!* He’ll not turn my Druga into a wastrel and a ne’er-do-well like himself, who has wasted a score of lifetimes trying to figure out that if you never try to do any good, why no one will believe but what you are the whole source of Evil itself. To Hell with Lucifer; he’s a bad influence, a confirmed rake and libertine, and has led more ambitious lives into lazy self-indulgence than any other immortal ever dreamed of doing.”

Druga was about to defend the poor lone dark gentleman, who had risen and was quietly making his way toward the door in the rear, but Feronia held up her hand with the fingers extended, and began counting off: “First you go astray with Dionaea, which I forgave as unavoidable. Then you fall for Eos with her blond slinky ways and her unnatural oversexed body, but I forgave you, for I was temporarily turned into stone and you had an excuse. *But*, then you fall into the clutches of dear Doris-Anthea, and I begin to suspect that these women are not wholly to blame! Then you let Circe turn you into a pig, as if you couldn’t resist her at all, but let her have her way with you, a better Sorcerer than she could ever hope to be. You could have done any one of a thousand things to her to get her to let you alone, but did you? No, you sat there like a pig and took it from her...”

“But, my dear...” managed Druga. But her voice went on, curdling Druga’s blood with the anger in it, and he quailed before her snapping eyes and angry red cheeks and flying black hair and her beautiful body so intensely alive in her fury:

“...As if you wanted only to sit about in a pig’s body and look at her. Then I began to wonder if you were *my* Druga or a weakling whom any woman could wrap around her finger. Then after I decide that after all you do love me and can’t help being human, I turn my back and you run off to the Sabbath and God knows how many wenches have been with you—and I find you with the very Queen of the Sabbath herself. Just how much wool do you think you can pull over my eyes, Druga the Meek?”

MORGANSTERN came up behind Feronia and winked at Druga over her shoulder, and Druga did not feel at all comfortable or correct in his attitude of “am I a man or mouse?” Just then Ruy Egan winked, too, and said.

“Tell her, Druga the Bold! Are we men or are we mice. If we’re always underfoot they will take us for granted and forget to love us. Tell her, Druga. Be bold, man, be bold.”

“Er, ah,” said Druga the Bold.

But Feronia did not stop to hear him :

“There is a black way and there is a white way, and you must learn soon to distinguish or I shall give you up to the black entirely and God help you then. Do you think Mors would take an interest then? She works for the future of man, she doesn’t sit around swilling rot-gut and indulging every bodily whim toward pleasure that occurs to her. These fatalists have no hope; they can’t imagine there is anything in life that could be better or worth striving for; they are not really alive. Have you no wits at all? Do you want to sink utterly in the deathly mire that enfolds these half-lives? Are you Druga the Bold or a mere creature of weak desire for pleasure and only pleasure? While you were gone Tom Hob stole off to the Sabbath himself and left his brother to watch the twig, and Branchus nearly got stolen by a Wheeger. That’s what your indulgence nearly cost us—our son! Have you anything to say to that, Druga the Bold? Bold, indeed! I’ll make you sincere before I’m through, you great hulk of appetite, you!”

Now Druga saw that it was indeed a bad time to leave Branchus to the guardianship of a mere witless hob, and that Feronia was, as usual, wholly right in her indignation. Which only made himself worse in his own eyes.

“Oh dear Dark Goddess of mine,” began Druga, “to hear that my son has been endangered hurts me as much as I can be hurt. But you must know that I am not exactly immune to temptation, and am not wholly a God of rectitude as yet, and overlook a few of my failings. I have always wanted to understand and observe the Black Mass of the Sabbath, and to talk with the Black Man himself, and to meet and observe the whole life of the shadows of the field of magic. Now I have accomplished the project and no harm done. I have learned a lot, and made some very good friends, however little you may approve of them, still they are as correct in their attitudes and analyses of life’s problems and their conduct in life as are you in yours. They are different from us in their interiors, and cannot be expected to live up to our strict regime of virtue which we set ourselves. After all, Feronia, it takes all kinds of people...

“And all kinds of women,” cut in Feronia.

“You must remember, Feronia, that when I first met you I thought that you represented the dark and mysterious paths of something very near to evil, and loved you still in spite of that, because you were too beautiful for me to do otherwise, and because you were Feronia, who took an interest in me and made me whole when I was injured. You should remember that I cannot help but be drawn by any opportunity to express or relieve the natural sybaritic tendencies of all flesh. You must be tolerant, remembering always that our own love sprang from these same springs of emotion, the dark and hot springs of all life, and not frown upon it anywhere. I loved you for a votarie of sinister and mystic revolt against ascetism, for an exponent of love for love’s sake, for a witch who understood and was expert in every augmentation of attraction that woman holds for man. For an immortal woman beyond all other women in ability to attract me, and I still love you so. But cannot you see that the very source of my love for you is a strength between us as well as a trap into which I can fall?”

“No!” said Feronia.

“You must understand, dear lubricious witch of my heart, that the things I love in you are in part present in every votaress of Love, in every Cyprian, in every Delilah, and that all strong men whom women love are liable to be drawn by that same terrific magnetism at times, even in other women. So long as I am able to love you with a virile love, just so long will it be possible for me to go astray, as you call it. I am only a man, however dear you are to me in every other way, too. Why there it is, I am a man, and attracted to women everywhere, at all times. And especially so when they set out to so attract.”

“You twist the truth!”

“That hot sweet image of you which dominates my heart, Feronia, do you think it will survive these virtuous rages of yours when I for a little time indulge my love for people and places and doings of a warm and lively kind? You know it will, or you would not strain at that tie as you do! But must you, dear,

dear Feronia, must you so misguide the craft of our love? Can you not indulge me a little and understand I am not *really*, always and exactly, as you *dream* I am?"

FERONIA did not say anything, and her head came down a little from its proud set erect upon her tapered neck, and two little tears formed in her eyes and rolled down her hot red cheeks. And she was far more beautiful and wholly heartrending then in her tears than she had been in her fury.

So Druga took her in his arms, and The Black Man came from behind his throne. Morganstern took her place beside *Him* on the green throne, and the yellow flames which had seemed to recede, shot up more gracefully and exhilaratingly than before.

After a time, Druga led Feronia before that throne, and she bowed one knee, and touched the old Black Man's toe with one finger tip, and he said—

"Bless you, my child. Do not withhold your bright wisdom and your charming self from we who can no longer struggle, but have a warm spot in your heart even for our own sinful hearts."

"Bosh, I suppose you are no worse than others, if we were better acquainted. You must visit us in our place in the cliff, you old fraud, and see our work, and get closer to us. The ancient dividing lines merge, it seems, and what is good and what is bad are hard to distinguish, as you perhaps know better than I, who see more of the evil. We are shut up with our work too much always, to understand. Forgive me, Lucifer. You are a much maligned character, you know. I would not have my Druga so misunderstood when he becomes a myth like you."

"I am not a myth, Feronia!"

"Well, I mean when Druga gets more years and wisdom and retires from active life, I would have him thought of as a good force, rather than a temptation to evil."

The Old One tapped his long pointed foot a little petulantly, and Feronia went on:

"It will be hard for us to meet eye to eye, Lucifer. Do not be impatient."

"I have not retired and I am *not* a temptation."

"The ritual of the Black Mass includes an exhortation to preserve us from the traitorous and the overbearing, to keep the ancient path, and not to fall into the dark ways of intolerant suppression of natural expression of joy in life," murmured Druga into Feronia's ear.

"Then he and his witches and warlocks are not wilful destroyers?"

"Not that I have been able to observe. He says there are cults of evil who use his name falsely, which gives rise to that impression."

"Do you believe him?" Feronia asked and then,

"Why doesn't he change his name?"

"It is too late for that, it seems. After all..."

So talking, Feronia and Druga stood aside from the dread majesty of the throne of so-called evil, and went on talking about Him most impolitely, and the revel went on and on.

"Still we know there *is* a source of evil, conscious and working to destroy man and man's works entire, to make of him a chattel and a slave and an ignoramus who hides always behind some such facade of black mysticism!" Feronia looked at Druga with suspicion in her eyes.

“If we two were really good, white immortals, we would make public to every human all we know of life immortal and the pleasures we keep to ourselves from those who live in towns and cities and with each other everywhere. We would not observe the ancient precept of secrecy, but would teach everywhere all we know of healing and magic and thaumaturgy of all kinds, so that it would be open to all!”

“Yes, Druga, but we cannot face the consequences. Let us ask this kindly old Black Man, as he seems to be, to tell us what the consequences of such activity would be in reality?”

So Druga and his wife went up and sat upon the steps of the throne familiarly, and the Devil put the warm body of Morganstern down, and answered their soft question.

“They would band together, a great many who benefit by the secrecy, who make of it their chief means of sustenance, preying upon the ignorance and the appetites of man for such electric and terrific pleasure, and for woman when so augmented, and would try to kill you. If you were but two alone, you would be killed.”

“Would you, Satan, be one of those?”

“It is not necessary to answer that, as they would not need my help to kill you two alone. It is not good politics in the underworld to take a stand on that question.”

“Even for you, Satan, the overlord?? ?

“HAH,” CRIED Satan, a lightning gleam in his eye as he pictured revolt and himself putting it down. “I have not the energy even to think about such efforts, but if it becomes necessary, why I could handle the situation.”

“For us, or against us?” pursued Feronia, relentlessly.

“For myself! I do not subscribe to any notions of raising all mankind suddenly to any peaks of superior health and happiness. I am cynical of all such attempts’ success. I have seen them fail before.”

“But you would not war against us for such humanitarian work on our part, would you, you old Devil?”

“I would protest, dear Feronia, verbally or by letter, but only to save you the waste of your sweet time and breath in such useless attempt to elevate those who do not want to be elevated. They accept death and war and ignorance of all true pleasure; they have cursed me for some eighteen centuries. Must I love them, dear dark witch?”

“No, you black infidel, you do not have to love them, but I do wish you could leave them alone.”

“I will leave you alone in your work, dear witch. But I must have my fun, and my Sabbath, and my ancient rites and my worship. A man gets so used to things.”

“Well, that should satisfy me, but I have plans and for a moment you gave me hope. But I see you are incorrigible.”

“Quite. All I can tell you is to go ahead and see what occurs to stop you, if you really desire to waste your time. They are not competent to handle the ancient wisdom; only exceptional people grasp magic at all, such as you and your precious Druga. As for taking sides with you or against you, I scorn the thought.”

After which exchange of views, Feronia and Druga left the deep warm caverns of Hell, and Ruy Egan

and Lua left the dancing and followed them after bidding goodbye their host.

And when magic and witchcraft and the knowledge of the long dead Elder-Gods becomes general everyday knowledge of every man, and death becomes a thing of the past, and youth remains with men and women as long as they have breath—and pleasure such as the Gods indulged themselves becomes the daily fare of all men everywhere—why you will know the white witches such as Feronia, and the bold men such as Druga, have managed to defeat those ancient practitioners of the dark art who want only secrecy for what should be in the public library and in the laboratories of the world.

Until that time, you may know that Satan is right, and we are not worth worrying about because we are too ignorant and too incapable of learning for ourselves.

Now the Red Dwarf turns the pages of his book of time, reading in the simultane. Thinking of an old acquaintance, his eye-of-view swings in and down and across:

A valley lies open and unmisted under the green bright rays of the bizarre sun.

Through the center of the wide-flowered valley meanders a river of pink liquid, a wide and many-curved river of most strange appearance.

The sands that line the river are purple and poisonous to life.

Above the purple ribbons of treacherous sand are the grassy banks of the river, with spangling, garishly flowered plants among the twisted grasses. Beyond the grass the trees move their limbs slowly, rhythmically, waiting; waiting for what is to come to them.

High on the ridge of the grassy bank lies an old stone god. He is the God - who - never - moves - and -swears - he - never - will. He lies awaiting what can never be again for him. His limbs are half imbedded in the blue soil; it has been an age since he desired to move those strange, mottled, sculptural limbs.

Stonily the God stares over the lazy pink river, and over the groping limbs of the far hungry trees.

Softly the Red Dwarf murmured: “This Druga the Bold, what do you think of him? He came from this valley, long ago.”

Within that despairing mind of that God, the image of Druga and his doings moved, and a smile came on the stony lips, his eyes sought the Red Dwarf through the shimmering veils of reality, piercing into the simultane where he sat.

“Now the Day,” said the stone God. “’Tis Eldir and low point of the course. May he live to see sweet night again. May he rise when life rises, and with his lady take his place among the great, course the ether with the best.

Time moved, invisibly, trying to set her destroying grip upon this valley that waited, regarding her not. The Red Dwarf spoke into the stony mind.

“’Tis Eldir time, as you say, and the deep point of the misery of Day. The night will come, and joy and life fountain again. All this embroidery of pain and ugly death will vanish, the flowering of the living night descend. We will again meet the ethereans as in the latter time, before the Day. Meanwhile it amuses me to record the doings of the ephemerae, and most especially of such as these two, Feronia and Druga the Bold, who yet make headway and gain lifetimes against the destroying light of Day. The old Love moves in me for them. I feel again the vaunting fountain of life-strength as it used to be. And will again! Adieu, my friend, till the night comes again.”

The stony mind made effort, and the thought trickled toward the far shimmer of the Red Dwarf behind

his veils of thin-sliced glittering repeating Nows. And what else they said is for their endless contemplation alone.

* * *

DIM SLOW shift of dawn rose clouds coming brighter above the jagged outlines of Erdis' cliff edge. The eye fled down the sheer clean rock face of the cliff, to come softly to rest among the drifting, rising morning mists in the small sweet valley at the foot.

There where the rainbow bridge met the raw face of the rock, a great stone beast's face leered, and into the dark vast mouth of that impossible sculpture the glassy shimmer of the rainbow bridge thrust, stopped by the great bronze halves of the circular doorway.

One half the heavy ancient metal hung open, and in the gloomy opening a tiny figure stood, the morning breeze stirring timidly about the smooth curves of her warm and perfect body.

By some magic of life inward and intense the witch-figure dominates the majesty of the vast cliff and rising tinted mists and stretching valley waking below into the day.

In her mind the little swift-glittering magics of her thought moved, picturing Druga as he had been when he had gone "to seek a weapon to whip the worst secretives once and for all, and so win all for all men."

Feronia sighed, as one lonesome and weary of self, and turned away from the waiting view; the soft sweet grace of woman's entire meaning in the knee-lift of the kirtle, in the sway of arching hip, in the line of her arm's glory as she gestured to some invisible, and disappeared within the dark opening of the stone beast's mouth.

At the closing of the door, a magic shuddered out over that thrice hidden valley, the whole vista slid down some subtle scale of changing values, and presented now a face of utter desolation and malignant unwelcome to the chance life happening that way. The mists grew thicker, clinging concealingly about the still shimmering magic of that impossible bridge, making the whole valley and vast face of that cliff into one seeming of ghoulish-wasteland.

The witch-woman's step died away in the echoing halls of ancient stone, the small chattering's h a d o w's moved...

THERE IS A planet ultra-simultane with the vast veils of Time and Now fluttering about it, as you probably know. And Here and Now and Then and There become strangely intermingled, and there are worm holes eaten through the ancient pages of the book, where one can cross through to another page called Now, in the otherwhere.

So crossing, and so reading, you have—this tale of Erdis Cliff, and of the infernal regions, and of the Red Dwarf who pokes and prys into it all.

The Red Dwarf says the inconsequential and irrelative are not so, but that in this time of Eldir there is really only an insane kind of life to record, and so he bides his time and amuses his mind with such work. As do I. And both of us are waiting for the Day to end, and the Simultane to roll on into the more favorable tides of force where life can fountain into sanity and the creation of true growth.

But there are those bold spirits like Druga, who maintain stoutly that waiting is not the part of a man. These intend to battle for more of life's fluids brought to more of our race, and for greater minds for us

all, so that we may cross as we will into more favorable planes of life-energy, and there grow into a truly great form of life.

You can hold with the Black Man, who says we are not worth the vast effort necessary, or with the witch-woman, who both works for better Now and waits for better Then, or with Druga, who goes out to strike boldly for man against those who would object to our progress.

Or you can hold with the wise savants of the Mortal school, who hold that all such work is infantile and abortive, and that there is no Immortality, no witches and no magic, no Gods or Goddesses or Sorcerers or other substance to any fairy tale. These hold that dry death is ordained for all of us, immutable and unarguable, that hope is a child's dream, and that atom bombs are the best product of science.

I prefer the whispering feet of the white witch, to the dry dusty scraping of the dead bones of savants across their books of awful error... Besides, there are the writings of the Red Dwarf! He contends that if we spent our mortal effort on the study of the integrative, we should have a longer life than as we do—spend it all upon the disintegrative atomic power. And I agree. Besides, who can argue with the Red Dwarf?

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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To the best of my knowledge this story has never been reprinted.