

Both Harry Harrison and Katherine MacLean are well-known American writers of science fiction and fantasy in their van country, but we believe that this is the first time either has appeared in a British magazine. Written originally as a novel, the "Web Of The Norns" has been considerably revised and shortened to suit our particular requirements. It nevertheless is a different type of fantasy story.

WEB OF THE NORNS

By Harry Harrison and Katherine MacLean

The Three Norns, weavers of men's destiny, sit in the dusty hall of eternity with the glittering tapestry of the dimensions around them. Their aged fingers move tirelessly over the strands—twisting, weaving and joining in an infinity of combinations.

Each strand is a life. As they guide the strands they guide the lives. Their voices rise and fall in a constant murmur: they pass the single eye, one to the other, to watch the weaving of this incredible fabric. The voices grow louder, their tones change. Man's destiny is not always smooth.

"No, stop, you cannot bring that world line here."

"It makes the pattern . . ."

"It makes the pattern worse. I will have to make changes in my section."

"Destroyed, I say; ruined. The work of centuries!"

The voices grow louder, there is a hint of anger in the tones. "Stop, Grissel, stop. Those changes cannot be made." Her hand flicks across the tapestry in an angry gesture.

There is a ring on the middle finger, the Unicorn Ring. The ring brushes the surface and the Unicorn's horn catches in one of the tiny glittering threads of a human life—and pulls it loose.

"I'll do it my way—give me the eye."

The argument continues. The thread of a man's fate floats unattached in space, unnoticed.

I

"Sorry; mother, it doesn't fit."

"I got it in your size, Granty," Grant's mother said firmly. "Try it on again and see if it really doesn't fit."

Grant O'Reilly, tried it on, He knew very well that it wouldn't fit, and it didn't. The coat was tight across the shoulders and his wrists stuck three inches of cuff out past the sleeves. He had become used to this kind of thing. His mother had bought all his clothes for the wedding, and as usual she had assumed he was younger than he was and got everything too small. This time it was serious. It was Sunday, and they had come a long way out of town for his wedding in this small church where Lucy's aunts and, uncles and cousins had been married. There was no chance of buying or renting a morning coat.

He looked at himself in the mirror, trying to see himself in the eyes of Lucy's poised and influential-relatives. No, it wouldn't do. Lucy would be dismayed, ashamed of him with his wrists sticking out like a gawky farm boy. He tried to tug the sleeves down. Today of all days, he had to look sophisticated, the way Lucy liked him to be.

His reflection stared back calfishly from the pier glass and made the same plucking gestures at the jacket cuffs. He didn't really like this tall, thin young fellow with the ash-blond hair. The eyebrows were so light that they were almost invisible, giving the face a gentle, saintly expression. When he was away from mirrors he always imagined himself stronger and darker—the fit husband and defender of a lovely woman like Lucy.

Lucy! A warm glow flushed his face at the thought of her. It was more of a physical thought than a spiritual one and he felt that it somehow didn't belong in church. He turned from the glass and tried to shrug off the jacket and the thought at the same time.

Herb Collomb slumped in his chair against the far wall and puffed composedly on his ancient pipe. The strength in his solid form gave Grant a feeling of security—the same way it had done all the way through college. They had roomed together and graduated together. It was only fitting that Herb be his best man. Herb grinned around his pipe and Grant was surprised to find himself grinning back.

The vestry window was open and a warm breath of spring air blew in. A bird was singing somewhere outside; the whole world seemed very wonderful to Grant.

Then he looked at the ill-fitting coat he held in his hand and felt the unhappy tension building up inside himself. How could he get a new coat? But it was already too late to do anything; he could hear the warming-up notes of the organ and the shuffling feet of the guests entering the chapel. He muttered a repressed *damn*.

"Don't swear, Grant. I'm sure Lucy would be very hurt if she heard you talk like that. She's from a very good family."

"I'm sorry, mother."

"That's right, dear. I always want to be proud my son is a gentleman."

Herb dropped his pipe and picked it up, looking somewhat red in the face.

Grant tried to smile, and then felt the old, sinking change coming. He tried to stop it. No, not now! Why did it have to be now? Once or twice in his life—by a great effort—he had managed to postpone an attack when its timing was bad.

But he would not be able to hold it back through the entire wedding. Better to get it over with and not spoil the wedding later. All he had to do was to get away from the voices and eyes and be alone for awhile. There was a thin ringing in his ears, coming closer. He stopped fighting it and let it come.

"There's ten minutes yet," he said, hastily over the singing in his ears and the feeling of growing distance between himself and all others. "I'm going to step out in the fresh air a moment."

There was a comfortable old graveyard outside, with slanted stones and long green grass and a gnarled peach tree in full bloom. It was cut off from the outside world and the passage of time by a high stone wall. The side door of the vestry opened to a little flagged path and curved around the building, away from the observing eyes of windows. A private place for a moment at least.

"I have to avoid excitement," Grant thought, letting the door shut behind him. It was too late to avoid it now; he'd have to take his medicine. Anyone watching would have seen Grant's lips curl back from his teeth in an unhappy grimace that showed irregular canine teeth and changed his angelic appearance to a rather pleasant animal look, like a blonde bird dog. He wandered on, past thought with the pounding in his head, unconsciously seeking a sheltered spot to let go. He found it, a deep right angle in the stone wall where it turned. He blundered off the path and into it, and leaned forward against the wall, propped himself in a corner and waited for the *petite mal*, the time of stone-like unconsciousness.

There was no knowing how much time had passed, but the sudden pressure was gone and the thin ringing in his ears, and he could see and hear and feel again. He leaned there a moment longer, grateful for the cool roughness of the stone against his forehead, thankful that he was not the kind who fell down and thrashed around. He could go and stand quietly in the bathroom with the door shut and not frighten Lucy with it when they were married.

The sickness had deprived him of the games of childhood, hedged him around with the watchful care of his mother. It had taken away his freedom to risk and dare, leaving him only the second-hand adventures of poetry and books. But he was not going to let it take his marriage away from him. His hard-learned ability to feel the fit coming would let him live a normal life and earn money as an architect without his clients ever seeing anything wrong with him. With warning enough, there was always a quiet place where he could go to have an attack.

He turned and looked out across the greenness of the deep grass and the old stone wall with the small sandstone tombstones slanting right and left; everything was more vivid, as if sight were cleansed.

There was a window above his head and he could hear his mother's voice trickling out, very clear and distant, like a memory. "Granty has fits, you know, if he gets excited, that is. It took me a great deal

of trouble to get him exempted from athletics at all his schools without saying what his trouble was. His father had fits, too; they began after we were married. Such a sweet man. It runs in the family. They're sensitive, you know."

He ignored the unhappy feeling the words gave him and told himself that everything she did was for his good. She would take care of the jacket, too; she always fixed things so they came out the right way. He stood up to return inside.

Then he saw it.

It was long and white and huge. It was like a giant bar or an elephant's tusk stretching across the sky from horizon to horizon. One instant it was as far away as eternity; the next it was swooping down towards him. He couldn't tell where that awareness came from, but he knew it was true. It was coming directly towards *him*. It was like being on the tracks in front of an express train.

Before he could scream—before the thought that formed the scream was fully born—it was too late. It struck without impact—softly with a sudden sensation of tremendous motion.

The world vanished. In his eye he could see the after-image of the graveyard, the orange of the grass and the red of the sky. The bright colours slowly faded and were replaced by nothing.

That was the only word that described the sensations he felt. At first his mind went out in an expanding spiral of fear, then contracted back to something like sanity. He felt nothing, he heard nothing. What he saw was puzzling until he realised it was no-colour. It was also not black. It was nearest to grey, a grey fog of velvet that pressed in on him from all sides.

With a heart-stopping shock he realised that he wasn't breathing. But his heart couldn't stop, because it wasn't beating. All the functions of his body were dead.

I am dead.

The thought had been scratching at the surface of his mind and now it gibbered its way in. His tightly held thoughts collapsed and his mind screamed out in madness.

There was no measurement of time or duration, so Grant had no idea how long the period lasted. It could have been years or seconds, but slowly it ebbed away. After the insanity came thoughts, but they helped no more than the madness; he had no idea where he was nor what had happened.

After the thoughts came boredom, and this lasted for eternity.

His mind became like his body and he hung there in the unchanging grey fog, changeless himself, and waited.

II

"Look now f Look what you've done. You've pulled one of the threads loose."

"I never—you're the one who did it when you were screaming at me that the pattern was wrong."

"Well the pattern is wrong . . ."

The argument continued and the second sister leaned forward to shout her opinion. The loose thread blew in her face and in anger she shoved it back into the fabric.

She did not weave it back into the pattern but pushed it in at random and returned to the argument.

Abruptly the greyness and silence was smashed by a screaming clamour and Grant found himself falling through air that seemed thick with sound. A filthy board floor came up and smote him, and he lay stunned for a moment amid the clamour of drunken howls, the smash of breaking bottles, the leathery thud and grunt of blows meeting flesh. Yellow light flickered in his eyes and shadows surged above him, snarling.

There was a crunching thud almost directly above him and a man with a short scraggly beard and overlong hair tumbled heavily across Grant's legs. Blood began oozing from his ragged hair, and the

shape of his head looked horribly dented.

With a reflex of revulsion, Grant yanked free from beneath the limp hulk and rose to a half crouch. A man had just been killed and dropped on top of him, and no one paid any attention. The crowd and howls had surged away from him and were somewhere else now, although running forms still went past to plunge into it.

Smoke of flickering tapers, the fumes of cooking, the stench of spilled wine and aged food assailed his nostrils and stung his eyes; but he could make out that the room was as big as a barn, with hand-hewn beams close overhead, reflecting back noise and heat and light, and further up, a roof lost in smoky shadows. The beams seemed to waver in the flickering light with the fury of the human sounds coming from below them.

The screaming crowd had grown until it was close again, but their backs were toward him. Ragged hair hung down below their ears; they waved staffs, daggers and broken bottles threateningly, shouting at someone in the middle. Filthy shirts of rough brown, like burlap, covered each back, hanging over dirty fur pants.

Grant straightened and found that he was tall enough to see over the heads to the maelstrom in the centre of the mob.

The crowd was attacking a big man who had his back to one of the supporting pillars. As Grant watched, the man lunged with a grunting shout, swung a sweeping blow with a long sword, flung himself back, fended a descending pole from his head with the flat of the sword, smashed back another with a thing like an iron Indian club in his left hand, carried the smash through with a lunge to the head of the staff wielder with a crunch, and lunged back to the pillar again. He moved in jerky stops and starts and retreats of extraordinary energy, slashing and fending, grunting in a half shout with each effort.

The athleticism of it was astonishing, but it was not that which froze Grant. It was the man's costume. The dull brown shine of leather armour like a picture in an encyclopedia, the glint of chain mail, the broad-sword, and the Indian club thing—a mace? It was something out of pre-medieval history. What was he doing here? For a moment, his eyes searched for a camera. But this was real blood.

Where was the way out? Crouching with the wary immobility of a hunted animal, Grant turned his head. Thick benches and tables were scattered around the empty half of the room, tapers flickered in howls and added smoke to the murky air, overturned tables and spilled bottles littered the floor. Where was the door? The dimness and smoke confused his eyes, the ghastly sounds rocked in his brain. Where in the name of sanity were there even windows? What kind of place was this?

He moved away from the mob sounds, putting a long table between himself and the battle, but a crescendo howl turned him in time to see the end. The fighter in leather armour was temporarily confused; his sword lodged in a pole where its edge had turned and cut into the wood. He stood trying to free his sword. A pole, jabbed like a spear, took him in the cheekbone with a blow that canted his head over. His sword pulled free as he was hit, but he had no time to lift it. Jolted back and forth under the thud of heavy staffs finding him at last, hit savagely on all sides at once, the thickset man in barbarian armour staggered a few steps further from the protecting pillar. With a jointless look of unconsciousness and broken bones he pitched headlong in Grant's direction.

Grant broke out of his frozen trance and began to back off, still staring, feeling his way by grip on the splintery boards of the table behind him. Staffs rose and fell over the thing on the floor and daggers flashed, and he was thankful that the triumphant howling drowned out some of its sound. This might be a nightmare, but death in this nightmare was as real as any butchery.

The howl died and men mumbling and cursing and nursing bruises and wounds began to look around. Grant still sidled slowly backward, depending on their attention being held by the dead thing on the floor, while one of the triumphant attackers bent over it, and pried loose the sword from a dead hand. As he raised it toward the ceiling in a triumphant drunken arc, his eyes found Grant and saw him moving. Being seen by one, of these creatures of a nightmare was carrying nightmare too far. Grant froze between the instinct to turn and run and the hope of being ignored.

A snaggle-toothed grin split the face of the man who had seen him. "Kill *the blasphemer!*" He put a foot on a bench and leaning over the table separating them and swung at Grant with a clumsy two-handed blow. "Blood for *N'tigh'ta!*"

Grant moved sidewise because he could not go back. The sword sank three inches into the next table behind him, revealing at this close inspection a huge bloody length and a heaviness that was more like an extended axe blade, a terrible weapon that could split a man in half. As the other struggled to free it, Grant leaped around the end of the table and ran, feeling as if he moved on leaden legs. Shouts and howls sounded behind him. He ran toward one end of the room where it was darker. A human figure was dimly visible, and something beyond him that might be a door. A few more strides and, straining his eyes, Grant saw a wide, closed door. He could also see that the man who stood in front of it was raising an axe, waiting for him, grinning.

Grant stopped. He stopped the easy way, by running into a table. There were howls behind him, coming closer, but near him was a ladder, leaning against one of the foot-square rafters that held up the roof. It took half a second to reach it. He pulled himself weakly up the rungs and onto a transverse beam, then turned and kicked the ladder into the faces of the screaming mob below.

For a moment he felt safe. There weren't as many down there as he had thought; the main crowd seemed to be howling elsewhere in the building after another victim. Nevertheless, four men below him still seemed interested in him. They glared up with their ragged hair in their eyes, and shouted curses about the stain that had to be washed from *N'tigh'ta*, whatever that was. Those who had staves struck at his legs. Their aim was drunken and missed him, but the grinning lout with the sword was heaving its monstrous length into the air again, and another one had picked up a stool. A staff struck Grant a painful blow on the ankle and he saw he could not stay where he was. He did something he would never have had courage to do an hour earlier. He released his clutch on the vertical pillar and turned and ran along the beam he stood on. It was less than a foot wide and uneven.

Under other circumstances he would have fallen off, but to fall now meant death, so he managed to stay on, although every successful step was a constant astonishment to him. Half-running, Grant staggered the last ten feet and collapsed panting against a central pillar. From this vantage point he had a wide view of the barnlike place.

A small group of the fur-pants were struggling with the ladder that he had kicked down, attempting to right it and follow him. Three blowsy looking women and a fat man were huddling in a gigantic fireplace against the far wall. But below Grant's feet was the centre of the noise.

The whole howling mob that had downed the other soldier, and twice as many besides, seemed to be pressing in around another swordsman with his back toward the pillar Grant was clutching. Massive shoulders and thick arms encased in seemingly inadequate coverings of scarred red leather armour swung in and out with a long sword that seemed from Grant's vantage to be even more huge than the terrible weapon that had missed him a few minutes earlier. A heavy barbed mace in the big swordsman's left hand made abrupt occasional swings that contacted encroaching staves, daggers or arms with an equal sounding thud and smash, leaving nothing that it touched unbroken.

The athletic energy of the other big soldier had been phenomenal, but as Grant looked down on the glittering, weaving sweep of sword he saw a skill that smoothed away effort and wove a web of steel around the swordsman. The man combined parries and slashes into one unfaltering swing that curved back along its deadly course without ever stopping or slowing when it sliced through wood and flesh and bone, its deadly force not in any separate surge of the arm that swung it, but in the whispering speed of the heavy blade. It was as smooth and dangerous as the singing circle of a propeller, and the mob feared it.

Snarling with drunken fury, they still stayed back from the circle and tried blows at long range, or threw daggers and knives that rang against metal and were smashed aside before reaching the soldier.

Not all of them had been cautious; red-throated and split-skulled corpses lay within the circle and men dragged themselves apart from the crowd, groaning and nursing broken arms. One was being

helped by another to wrap up a bleeding, handless stump.

The soldier sang and shouted as he swung his sword, a wordless chant that fitted the dance of its glittering edge. As Grant watched, he stepped out, grunted with an extra surge and swayed forward in a balanced half step that reached the blood-wet tip of the sword a foot further in its circuit and was rewarded by three separate shrieks from three directions. The encircling mob crowded back, cursing and striking each other in their haste, and resumed formation at a more respectful distance, leaving another of their number on the floor curled up around a half severed arm, trying to staunch the red life that pumped from it, dying and not worth the extra stroke that would kill him.

The big soldier was holding his own, but he could not hold that webwork of steel and speed around him forever. He was panting in his chant. Already the crowd had circled behind the pillar. One slip, one falter, and a concerted rush from all sides would overwhelm him.

Grant found he regretted it. Such skill and delight as the big soldier showed in his bloody work was a kind of art and deserved life. Then he realised that when the soldier went, it would be his turn. It was only the singing circle of the soldier's blade that cleared space where the crowd could not swarm under his beam and batter him down. When the soldier died, Grant would go, too.

Grant clutched at the smoke-blackened wood as a surge of nausea tore at his bowels. What was he doing in this impossible place? Had he been struck by a car and was this all just a feverish dream?

As if to answer, a hurtling bottle crashed against his chest. The blow and the jagged tear in his vest were real, as well as the ache in his ankle where a staff had struck him. He reached a sick certainty that even if this *were* a dream, it would be safer to treat it as hard, merciless fact. There seemed to be a good chance that his death here would be as final as any he would ever have.

The ladder was finally propped against the further end of the beam and the men below were pushing and scrambling to see who would be first up it. Fur-pants with the sword climbed up three rungs, only to be hit in the back of the neck by fur-pants with the stool. As he dropped off, the one with the stool scrambled up, followed closely by the five or six others. Weaving, but keeping their feet easily, they ran along the beam toward Grant.

The one with the stool stopped at a good range and swung the stool back over his head for a skull-crushing blow. The ones behind were not ready for that sudden stop and pushed into him, pushing him closer, and at the same instant, Grant realised that he needed a weapon. Taking advantage of the stool-man's unbalance and hesitation, Grant leaned forward and gripped a leg of the stool and yanked. His yank had force because he kept a hold on the central pillar with his other arm, but fur-pants with the stool had a strong grip on the other legs, and was too befuddled to let go. He was yanked off his feet. With a hoarse shout of anger, the man dove down into the soldier's private battleground of clear floor below; badly entangled with the stool, he landed and had his throat neatly slit by a casual side sweep of the whispering sword.

The big soldier looked up, thinking he was being attacked from above. His face split in an immense grin as he saw Grant facing a line of attacking men.

"Oho! A friend." He paused, completing another swing around the circle below that was answered with one pained curse, and shifted his position a little, glancing back up at Grant. "And just in time, too!"

In the natural course of some pattern he was weaving, as though without his effort, the sword extended its range in a backhand curve and licked up over the edge of the beam, cutting the ankles from under the first two men; they tottered, ankle tendons severed, tripping on their limp dangling feet, and fell into the mob. The next man tried to retreat, but only succeeded in unbalancing the unsteady file behind him. As they began to topple off they added to the confusion below, and for a moment the mob drew back, thinking it was being attacked by enemies from above.

The soldier stuck his blood-encrusted mace into a loop on his belt while he drove the circle further back with savage advances and then made a rush to the pillar, as though to clear away the few lurking behind it. There was only one, who leaped backward and tumbled over a bench. In the shadow behind the pillar, where it would not be immediately clear to the mob what he was doing, the soldier laughed and

stuck a free hand up to Grant.

"Come on, mate, give us a lift up and we'll soon be out of here."

It was the first friendly word Grant had heard among what had seemed a million howls of hate and murder, and suddenly everything seemed more sane and matter of fact, like the friendly commonsense tone of the soldier. Rapidly but without hysteria, Grant knelt on the beam, locked his right arm around the vertical pillar, and extended his left down to be grasped. He felt a calloused hand grip his.

As the soldier pulled himself up, Grant thought his arm would be wrenched apart at every joint. He bit down on a scream of pain. Still gripping his sword, the big man hooked its hilt over the beam and pulled himself the rest of the way up. He came up smoothly, but most of his weight had been on Grant's arm, and the man was even bigger and thicker with muscle than he had looked from below. At least three hundred pounds of man and equipment had heaved himself up on the tensile strength of one thin, slightly undernourished arm.

Ignoring a clatter of bottles, daggers and small objects that sailed past, the soldier was sheathing his sword and peering into the darkness at the end of the room. He stepped onto the right-angle beam without a glance at Grant, and began to move toward the rear wall. Grant went after him, rubbing his aching arm, but oddly pleased because this time he walked on a narrow beam without a tremor.

As they walked, the roof slanted down closer until Grant could see a low clerestory with sealed windows facing them; above that the smoke-blackened roof angled up into the shadows. The soldier rapped the wall with his pommel and looked satisfied, as though he had found a way out.

Gesturing to Grant to crowd in close, the soldier pointed to the wall, which was hung with shapes like pairs of full sacks and things that looked like festoons of dried weeds.

There was a rancid foodlike smell in the air and Grant realised that the noxious looking things were probably cured meat and herbs. The soldier unhooked two linked hams and draped them over Grant's shoulders. They were massive, pulling him down with a staggering weight for which he was unprepared, seeing them handled so lightly. Grant found himself over the edge and falling, and was brought back onto the beam by a lightning grip and heave of the soldier.

The man grunted a derogatory remark to himself, and then laughed, braced his hands against an overhead timber and began kicking boards out of the side of the building.

For a moment Grant doubted his eyes; the soldier was husky and big, but even a superman should not put holes in a building with a few kicks. Yet the soldier continued to kick, loosening and dispatching another board. Grant had learned about crooked contractors substituting flimsy workmanship in his studies of architecture. The thunk of the boards under the soldier's kicks was not the sound of seasoned timber. As the second kicked board leaned outward and vanished, Grant decided that the sidewalls had probably been fastened on with old chewing gum or something of equal strength, and dismissed the problem. A deeper darkness showed where the boards had been and icy air and snowflakes swirled in instead of the spring sunshine he had vaguely expected. The big man at the opening hardly hesitated for a deep breath before crouching at the edge and leaping out of sight.

Grant, balancing groggily on the beam, looked at the darkness outside. It was not inviting. His moment of indecision ended as a pole reached up and cracked his shin. To stay would be to condemn himself to a peculiarly undignified and butcherish kind of death at the hands of a particularly bestial mob. Other forms of death were to be preferred. He shuffled to the edge and tottered there.

Clutching his hams, he made a hampered attempt to crouch at the edge and leap outwards as the big swordsman had done. He tried and toppled through into frigid, snow filled darkness.

III

The snow outside had drifted and banked high against the building wall. Grant sank into it and floundered helplessly until his head came above the surface.

He could not remember ever having been so uncomfortable before. His body was bruised and sore,

the hams hung like a dead weight around his neck, melted snow was soaking into his clothes, and the air, when he came up and encountered it, was icy and filled with flying particles that stung against his face.

His surroundings were completely invisible, a black wilderness of cold. A shout reached him from somewhere ahead and Grant floundered toward the sound to a place where the drifts were only waist high and the wind cut through his thin wedding suit like an icy lash. A few yards on he found what appeared to be a path where other bodies had floundered before him and lowered the snow a little. He jumped as a hand clutched him out of the darkness.

"Follow me, mate—and don't lose those hams or I'll tear out your skinny throat." The soldier moved off, ploughing a shallow channel in the deep snow, and Grant floundered after him.

His shoes were pointed, black, shiny and expensive—or had been when he had last seen them. He couldn't see them now, but he could feel them. They were fine for dancing or getting married in, but they were worse than useless for walking in the snow. Soaked and soggy, they squished with every step. Grant shoved through the clutching drifts and felt sorry for himself.

He had thought of asking the trudging form ahead to stop and let him rest, but he had the horrible thought miles back that if he stopped he would freeze to death. This was the only thing that enabled him to put one numbed foot in front of the other. He had followed the swordsman, expecting him momentarily to arrive at a house or some warm place; it would be impossible that the man was content to plough through endless hellish snow. But he had long ago given up thinking about when they would arrive at the warm place, or where they were going, and just stumbled after the moving man ahead, as if he were warmth itself, always retreating, always out of reach.

The darkness was passing and the sky was brightening—showing the wastes of snow around him. Even light seemed to hurt with the bitter numbness of nerves that were almost frozen.

In the growing light he saw small trees on either side. They thickened until the men were threading in and around large trees in a wood thick enough to stop the biting wind and allow only a thin layer of snow to cover its floor. Grant followed the man in barbarian armour over the clearer ground, his mind awakening and beginning to ask unanswerable questions, until they emerged from the trees into the cold and the drifting deep snow again.

Closing his eyes against the bite of wind, Grant tried to stop sensation and thought. They ploughed across a rutted path that might have been a road under the snow, and then down a slope with trees, the soldier going faster, and Grant keeping up because it was easier to stagger downhill. The wind got behind and hurried him, putting knives of cold into his back.

Down in a hollow ahead, sheltered from the wind, a small campfire flickered. Grant's first realisation that they had reached their journey's end was when a hoarse voice called

"Hold there! Who is it?" There was the quick rasp of a sword being slipped from the scabbard.

"Aker Amen and some hams—make room by the fire, you lazy sons!"

The soldier pushed up to the blaze, with Grant tottering eagerly after him. Before he could reach its beckoning warmth, the man with the sword jumped forward and clutched him by the shirt front.

"Aker, this isn't Begiln! What happened to him—and who is this wreck with the meat necklace?"

Aker Amen toasted his wet feet and frowned into the fire. "Bigeln was a fool and now he's dead. I would be too, except that this stranger came along and we managed to get out of that filthy spowl's nest together. Let him be."

The swordsman let go of Grant's coat. Since this was the only thing holding him up, Grant collapsed in a limp heap. One of the hams plopped into the mud next to Aker Amen, who produced a dagger from his belt and calmly sawed himself off a piece of meat. He chewed the tough flesh and ruminated. He must have been thinking of the battle because he made a disgusted noise and shook his dagger at the swordsman.

"Put that sticker away, Grayf, and let me tell what a fool that Bigeln was. We were in this drinking hall finishing three or four small bottles. The townsmen are dirty, ugly and stupid—more animals than men. The only thing they care about is their stinking little god, N'tigh'ta. He's an ugly little monster with a big belly and a hollow head—they put sacrifices and such in this scooped-out top of his head. They have

little idols everywhere; it's about all you can do to avoid stepping on them."

Grant groaned as he turned his other side toward the flame.

"Well, we're sitting there drinking. That stupid Bigeln should have known better—he's been in this place before. But you know what he does? He's chewing weed, and before I can stop him, he rolls a great gob around on his tongue and lets fly."

Grayf, the other soldier, let his jaw drop with amazement. "No!"

"Yes!" Aker roared the word out. "He thought the idol was a nice fancy little cuspidor. He spits in it, and those fur-pants' spowls let out a shout you can hear ten miles away. The next second we have our swords out and are fighting the whole damn town. They got Bigeln and I got out."

"But what about *this*?" Grayf jerked his thumb at Grant's collapsed form. "What are you going to do with him?"

Aker cut another slice of meat. "Not going to do anything with him. He was just standing around, so I brought him along to carry those hams. I wanted to keep my sword arm free. Fact is, I don't even know who he is." He jabbed a giant thumb about three inches into Grant's ribs. "Hey—who are you?"

Grant opened one bleary eye and tried to gather together his foggy thoughts.

"M'name's Grant O'Reilly and I'm a student at Columbia. I was just—just standing—when—"

He bogged down at the attempt to describe what had happened to him and his head dropped back onto his chest.

A pimple-faced boy of about sixteen, who had been keeping in the background, leaped forward, shouting at the same time.

"You heard him ! He said he's a student—student magician, that's what! I'll cut his throat and drink his blood and take his clothes and—" He grabbed a handful of Grant's hair and snapped his head back, starting to draw a battered dagger across Grant's throat.

Aker shifted his weight and kicked the boy into a snowdrift.

"You take orders from me and that's all you do. You do the carrying and the cooking and leave him alone. Even if he is a student, he can fight, which is more than you can do." The boy drew back, sniffling and rubbing his hip, and threw look of black malevolency at Grant.

Grant ignored him because he was already drifting into sleep.

During the night, the flight and battle with the mob recurred in fragments of dream that wove in with what he had heard Aker Amen say. And slowly, penetrating ever deeper, with a chill like the cold beyond the fire, came the realisation that these men spoke and lived as if their way of life was the only one—as if they had never heard of any other. Wherever his world of money, air-conditioned houses, of warm beds and swift automobiles and police and ambulances to protect him had gone, it was gone so unreachably far that Aker Amen and Gras and the snarling ones in the tavern had never encountered it, never heard of it. However he had arrived here, he was a long way from home. There would be no easy road back.

Slowly through the night, the reality of memories of civilization and comfort and the hopes of rescue faded until they seemed mere fantasies of a world that had never been.

The boy poured water on the fire, and the hissing and steam woke Grant from his soggy sleep.

It was snowing again.

He felt mauled. His muscles ached terribly and were so stiff he could scarcely move. His back, which faced away from the fire, was numb with cold; his feet were soaked and his nose was running. He sat huddled beside the smoking ruin of the fire and tried to pull his ragged thoughts together. Perhaps he was in Alaska or some savage corner of Greenland. That was a possibility.

With his arms clasped around his legs and his chin resting on his knees, he was forced to stare at the tattered remains of his dress shoes. They focused his attention, because they were more than shoes. They were symbolic. The shoes were Grant. A well-constructed, civilized product, perfectly in tune with a well-ordered world. Now a period of darkness and a night of madness, and that world was gone. Security and comfort vanished with it. All that remained of the shoes was a torn, bruised cover with a bit

of blue flesh peeping through—his flesh. He rubbed his dripping nose on his coat sleeve and snuffled in self pity.

It was still snowing, white flakes falling out of the grey lead sky into a silent world. The only thing he could hear was the soft sibilance of falling snow. Grant sat up suddenly, the little drifts of snow falling from his back.

The significance of the doused fire penetrated. He was alone.

He forgot the soreness and fatigue of his body now—it was a matter of survival again. Slipping in the slushy soup around the fire, he tottered to his feet. The clearing was empty. He screamed at the top of his lungs, his voice cracking with terror.

"Akerrrr . . . ! Aker Amen! Helloooo!! "

It was like shouting into a sea of drifting feathers, and produced as much result. He lurched around the clearing and noticed a track leading off through the trees. The footprints were fresh, but the windblown drifts were already beginning to fill them in. Grant followed them; it was his only chance for survival in this icebound wilderness. Aker would help him—*had* to help him. He realised for the first time how completely incapable he was. Without some help he would be dead by nightfall.

He pushed through the woods, stumbling over concealed obstacles and falling headlong in the drifts. As he came down a slight rise, he found himself on the same road-like track he had crossed on the way in. Three dimly-seen figures were just starting up the bank on the far side. At his shout, they stopped and he rushed up to Aker, who was breaking trail.

"You can't leave—you can't leave without me You've got to take me with you!"

Aker Amen adjusted his sword belt and fixed Grant with a cold, indifferent gaze.

"Why?"

Grant gaped twice, but couldn't think of what to say. There were no answers to the devastating question. Why should they help him? He realised instinctively that a plea of "humanity" or "friendship" would be worthless, as well as out of place. This society wasn't built like that. With the speed of desperation, his mind raced to other possibilities. Convenience, help? He knew that he didn't dare offer fighting assistance; last night had shown how woefully lacking he was in that important commodity. He could think of no other talents that might interest them. For the first time in his twenty-five years of existence he would have liked to reverse his civilized attributes and have a strong back and a weak mind.

Weak as his back was, though, it might be useful to them.

" I can carry your things, your equipment or whatever ..." Grant stopped suddenly as he realised that Aker and Grayf had, besides their weapons, only large leather wallets slung from their belts. His unspoken question was answered by a jerk of Aker's thumb.

Grant had been in such a panic when he passed the boy that he hadn't realised what he was carrying. He saw it now, a gigantic pack, hung with pots, sacks, and bundles and crowned with one of the stolen hams. The weight of this monster load had forced the boy to the ground as soon as the group stopped. He sat on a hummock in the road now, breathing heavily and greeting Grant with a malevolent stare.

That job was taken care of, too.

Aker Amen had turned back to resume the trail, but he stopped suddenly, his head cocked to one side. At the same instant Grant was aware of a distant rumbling, like muffled drums.

"Horses coming! Into the woods!" Even as he shouted the words, Aker was diving into the underbrush. Grant was too startled to act, but Grayf was galvanised into instant action. Grant was between him and the safety of the trees, a fact that made little difference to Grayf. He scarcely slowed when his shoulder hit Grant; then he was among the trees and Grant lay sprawled helplessly in a deep snowdrift.

The boy was still struggling to his feet when the horse-women came. Grant had just a fleeting glimpse of them—long, flowing blonde hair and gilt breastplates—as they swept down the road. One of them uttered a coarse cry as they passed. She leaned far out of the saddle and made one sweeping stroke with

her sword. The boy stumbled and fell to the ground. The ham, loosed by the fall, flew in one direction; the boy's head bounced in another. A thick stream of blood gushed from the dismembered neck and stained the snow a deep red.

The two soldiers reappeared at the edge of the road and hurled blistering oaths after the horses. Clear, girlish laughter floated back and they cursed the louder. Grant pulled himself from the chill embrace of the drift and tried to brush off most of the snow before it melted.

"You there—Grant O'Reilly! Still want to come along? We need a boy to carry our duffle."

Aker and Grayf howled with laughter and pounded each other on the back. Grant couldn't quite see the joke, and considered it to be in the worst taste possible. He found it hard, however, to stifle his own feeling of happiness and relief. The boy's death, untimely though it had been for the lad, might provide Grant's one chance of survival.

He pulled the packstraps from the limp form and tried to ignore the accusing stare of the bodiless head. He would have taken the pack and left, if Aker hadn't reminded him that survival was still the most important factor in this brutal world.

"Might as well take his clothes. Unless you have to wear those things you've got on."

Grant swallowed squeamishness and took the advice, while Aker Amen and Grayf waited, lounging against a tree and making remarks. The falling snow thinned and stopped as Grant stripped the boy's grey body, unpeeling layers of unsewn fur and belts and bands of leather that held the fur in place, and wrappings of filthy cloth which he dropped on the snow after he observed black specks of fleas hopping off.

Aker Amen shifted his weight with an impatient creak of leather. "Make it fast."

Grant could not grasp the intricacies of the boy's wrappings, but one large cowhide was slit in the centre like a poncho, and when he slid his head through the hole and belted the hide around the waist with a leather strip from which dangled the boy's dagger it was a neat, respectable tunic, and the thickness of the leather shut off the cold blasts of the wind. A sudden itch indicated the leather had other tenants, but just then he did not care.

Hastily, already feeling better, Grant sat down in the snow and ripped the soggy shoes off his blue feet, hissing between his teeth at the needling pangs they gave forth at every touch, and shoved them into the lumbering boots of the boy with a grunt that barely restrained desperate profanity.

The boots were warm and oddly soft inside and crackled when he stood up in them. He realised that they were mukluks, soft leather boots stuffed with hay. The Eskimos used them, he knew his feet should be comfortable, though now they felt as if all the imps of hell were applying red hot needles.

Bits and pieces of leather in various odd shapes were stacked beside the corpse in the snow. Grant looked them over uncertainly, draped one piece around his neck like a scarf and took a piece that was wide in the middle and thin on the ends and tied it over his head and under his chin. Judging by Aker's and Grayf's sudden roar of laughter, that was not the use for which the item was intended, but it kept the wind from his ears. Aker straightened, ready to go, and Grant abandoned the rest of the inexplicable odds and ends of leather and left them scattered beside the naked, headless body as he went to pick up the pack.

It was too heavy to get off the ground, but its shoulder straps stood out stiffly, as if suggesting a solution. He half knelt and slipped his arms through and then pulled himself hand over hand up a sapling until he was almost upright and had his legs under him enough to take his weight.

It was a neat bit of commonplace practical thinking which he would not have been capable of a freezing half hour ago. He was still cold, but he could move and think; his mind was no longer congealed with cold and already the exertion was beginning to warm him. He looked around for approval, but Aker and Grayf had vanished into the silent, snow-filled wood, leaving a double trail of footprints.

Stumbling under the unwieldy load, but moving ahead steadily, he followed the trail of the footprints, occasionally hearing the murmur of a voice ahead.

IV

He was secure, with a place and a job and protectors. As he trudged, the exertion warmed him. His feet stopped flaming with thawing pains and began to feel like feet again. Without the counter-irritant of other aches for the first time, his attention was drawn to a hollow sensation in his stomach and he realised that he was hungry. As he walked he reached back with the dagger and hacked off slices of ham and stuffed them between his teeth. It was delicious in his salivating mouth; and once down, it glowed in his stomach, sending messages of nourishment and cheer through his blood. He ate enormously, although in a less hungry state he would have found the ham inedible. This time he had skipped three meals and had undergone more exertion than ever in any comparable period of his life. The badly smoked ham tasted like the best food he had ever eaten.

He was puzzled. By all that he knew about himself and his state of health, he should be feeling sick, or be dead, not feeling this unexpected exhilarated pleasure at the simple fact of eating; nor should he be enjoying the dazzling whiteness of snow in spite of the cumbersome weight of the pack he lugged. He had been told that he was weakly, that he should avoid exertion and excitement, yet he had the thought that no one who was weak could have picked up the monstrous pack at all. He had lifted it because he had to carry it or die, and every step was a new and conscious effort, but the strain was probably the effort to force lazy surprised muscles to do the job they had been intended to do, and the pangs were pangs of disuse.

Why had he ever believed he was an invalid?

Because his mother had told him, and because he had those fits of immobility.

Slipping and catching at bushes, he followed the trail of footprints as they wandered down an embankment and struck left along a dry creek bed at the bottom.

The floor of the creek bed was a nightmare for a novice woodsman. There were hidden tree roots to catch his feet and snow-laden branches to catch at his face and dump their burden of snow on his head. As he went on, he reviewed the passages in Cooper where the hunter went silently and skillfully through the forest, and remembered how he had envied and wished he could do it too. If he had followed his inclinations, he might have been as soft footed as an Indian, as magnificently muscled as Aker Amen, not a clumsy beginner.

His smooth-soled mukluks slipped on a downslope in the stream bed and he sprawled ignominiously on his back, and had to scabble for holds to pull himself upright, losing many minutes before he could hurry on. Grant O'Reilly took the falls and bruises without the concern that had always made him fear mortal damage to his health—a bitter anger against his unused, pampered body kept him driving on. He would overtake Aker Amen and Grayf and show them he was no laggard.

But they remained elusive, although sometimes he heard their voices ahead. Hours passed, and as he went on, he remembered the coddling care his mother had given him, her warnings to avoid excitement, to stay away from the other children. Why had he believed her?

Because of the fits, the moments of dizziness and immobility. Yet now, when his muscles ran with liquid flame, when he had never exerted himself so much for so long in his life, he was not sick. Yesterday he had been closer to death and more legitimately frightened than at any time in his life, and yet he had had no fits and had not been sick. As a matter of fact, he felt more wide awake and his senses were sharper now than at any time he could remember. Then what had given him fits and dizziness, if not this kind of thing?

Half skidding, half sliding down another short drop in the stream bed, Grant braced his hand against the bank and fell sidewise as his hand went through into a snow covered bush which had looked like solid earth. For a moment, in the sudden sheltering dark, he lay limp and thought of something that might be an answer. Excitement without any exertion was notoriously unhealthy, a source of ulcers to business men. And a child needed activity more desperately than an adult. Inaction, then, had made him sick. His mother's coddling had made him sick!

Anger drove him, and he clawed his way out of the bush and staggered out into the bright snowy day to follow the footprints of the eternally elusive Aker and Grayf, grinding his teeth. He would show his mother, he would be a savage, like these savages, and not the puny, effete fool she had tried to make of him.

The soldiers held him in too much contempt to walk with him, he thought bitterly. They could tell he was following anyhow; probably the thumps and crashes of his blundering could be heard for miles. They did not know he had been deprived of his birthright, that he could have been as good a man as either of them, if he had been given a chance.

The sound of a branch cracking ahead and a murmur of voices encouraged him to totter forward at a more rapid rate. If only he could catch up, he might be able to ask them to stop for a short rest. He scrambled up a short embankment from the dry stream that they had been following and found the broken branch when he reached for the last hand hold. There was no one there when he reached the top—only footprints which circled as if in doubt or discussion and then started off in a line again.

Grant followed, and the woods thinned and the ground grew more level. He could go faster now without tripping. He found himself stumbling across a large clearing and looked up from the trail of footprints just in time to see the two soldiers disappearing into the forest on the far side. He tried to make a cheerful shout, but the most noise he could muster was a faint croak.

But his voice was heard. He was answered from the woods behind his back by a rumbling cough that raised the short hairs on the nape of his neck!

There was terror in the sound, and a bestial strength that made him sick at heart. No animal he knew could make that sound and he had no desire to get better acquainted. He moved across the clearing as fast as he could. There was a crashing from the thicket he had left. His pace increased.

Halfway across the clearing he tried to look over his shoulder—and tripped. He sprawled in the snow. He could summon no strength to rise, even when the beast broke out of the woods.

At his first glance, it reminded him of a black kangaroo, but outside of the powerful rear legs there was little resemblance. The front legs were short and thick, ending in curved, white talons. The beast's head was long and wolfish, the ears tufted like a lynx's, and very mobile. They twitched in all directions until they suddenly centred on Grant. The animal coughed again and then showed double rows of pointed teeth and charged.

Grant struggled to free his dagger as the beast bounded across the snow. He pulled it free of his belt but had no idea of how to use it on a brute each of whose paws held claws as long as his blade.

The black-furred legs sank into the snow six feet from where he lay. They contracted for a last leap. Grant could see the tiny green eyes, the saliva that speckled the black fur beneath the teeth.

There was a sudden *thank*, the clean sound of an axe biting deep into a tree, and a feathered shaft appeared between the eyes. The legs jerked once and the great body flopped sideways, the black hulk half sinking into the white snow.

Grant looked dazedly at the lustreless eyes with the red arrow projecting between them. He looked quickly around. The forest was as quiet and apparently as empty of life as it had been all day. He shook once—and then again in an uncontrollable spasm. In the brief respite from walking, exhaustion had finally caught up with him and the delayed terror of death reached through his tired mind a second later. The woods were full of unseen black monstrosities and arrows of secret death.

He fought to his feet, struggling against the weight of the pack as if it were heavy paws on his shoulders and fled, screaming and staggering headlong through the forest. He would have run until he crashed into a tree if a strong arm had not stopped him.

Grant tried to struggle from the clutch, howling with tenor, and at last freed himself of the pack. He did not feel the blow across his face—but he was sitting on the ground, the red mist clearing from before his eyes.

Then he saw that Aker Amen stood over him, and knew that he was safe. His body, racked by over-exhaustion, shook uncontrollably.

Aker Amen glowered down, and gouged Grant's buttocks with a not-too-gentle toe. "Now what's all the noise about? You hollered enough to be heard from here to the Crying Mountains."

"An animal," Grant stammered between deep gasps for breath. "Strange animal, black, big and black, with claws and long hind legs. It was going to—"

The description obviously meant something to Aker. He half drew his sword and peered into the thickets under the trees. "Damn the miserable luck! We've got a Berl-Cat on our trail. He must be right behind you."

Grant went white again and hastened to dismiss the idea. "No, the arrow took care of him, a perfect shot. But I couldn't see where it came from. That was the trouble." He was leaning on the ground, relaxing and letting his spine uncurl from the punishment of the pack load, quite sure that Aker Amen was woodsman enough to prevent any mysteries from creeping up on them. He was resting his eyes on Aker Amen's leather-wrapped feet as he talked, and he saw them suddenly stiffen motionless. It was an odd impression to get from feet.

Aker's voice reached his ears in a whisper. "What colour was the arrow?"

"Red."

Grant looked up and saw sweat suddenly shining on the big soldier's forehead.

With a very slow, steady motion, his arms trembling with a barely perceptible tremor, Aker Amen put his left hand to his sword hilt and finished drawing it from its sheath.

"We have come in peace and we go in peace!" His voice was loud and falsely calm, and he seemed to be addressing the trees of the forest. "We love the holy men of Al'kahar, and desire to share the test of power."

Holding his sword dangling lightly from his fingertips, Aker pushed it carefully through the snow into the ground until it stood unsupported. He stepped away from it with a courteous gesture and hissed at Grant between his teeth. "Get up, you outland idiot! Slowly. Look *polite* and put your dagger in the snow."

Following instructions occupied Grant's attention. When he looked up, he saw the men coming out from between the trees...

V

They were coming from all directions. Men in black robes, their heads covered by cowls. Each man had a long red bow across his back and a handful of crimson arrows in his waistband. They crossed the snow as silently as falling leaves.

Their faces were the faces of the dead, grey and bloodless, with eyes that glimmered in the dark caverns of their eye-sockets.

Grant tried to make out the expression in the eyes but if there had ever been a soul behind those eyes, that soul had died and rotted and dried up many years ago. It was like trying to look into the expression of a mummy.

Aker Amen's steady voice was like unexpected sanity in a bad dream. "I wilt give myself to the test of arm, and my companion will give himself to the test of . . ." He delayed and swept Grant with a contemptuous glance and muttered, "What in hell can you do? Sword, dagger, mace, bow . . .?"

Grant recalled that he had one talent which might be of value in this primitive place. He had taken archery, classified as a low exertion sport, for his required gymnasium credits in college. He heard his own voice thin and hesitant.

"I think I could use one of those bows, if . . ."

Aker spoke loudly. "My companion will give himself to the test of eye. Who will test me?"

There was still no reply, but a black-robed figure, taller than the others, stepped forward and divested himself of arrows and bows. He pushed his hood back, revealing an expressionless head, as hairless, smooth and unhuman as a statue's head, with eyes no more alive than stone eyes.

Watching the man, Aker stripped off his weapons and armour and dropped them in the snow, leaving

himself lightly clad and younger and more supple in proportions of shoulders to belly than Grant would have thought. Grant was again suddenly shamed with the realisation that Aker was almost as young as he, for all his manly skills. The soldier stretched his muscles and arched his fingers, scanning his opponent, and estimating.

The others did not speak, even to murmur among themselves. The trees held the hush of snowfilled woods, and somewhere there was the susurrant of an overlaid fir branch bending and releasing its white burden to the snow covered ground.

The two men leaned forward imperceptibly; then like an uncoiling snake, in a blur of speed, the tall one in the dark cloak leaped forward with his spread fingers jabbing to Aker's face. With equal speed, Aker slapped the hand aside before it reached him, as if slapping aside an insect, and countered with an underhand swing of a balled fist. But the tall one's jab had been a feint and it was matched by a simultaneous low jab from the other hand. It might have killed a lesser man. Aker reacted with a startled grunt, and his first blow wavered off centre, glanced off the other's ribs and spun the tall one away from him. The exchange of blows and jabs was short and fierce; it ended when the other hooked one of Aker's legs from beneath him. As Aker fell, he grabbed the other to him like a cat, twisted in midair and landed heavily with his opponent beneath him.

The robed stranger struggled to his feet with Aker on his back. They fell again, their feet kicked up streamers of snow, and again the tall one's tendoned hands crept over Aker's shoulders to seek his eyes. Aker buried his face against the other's back, muffling his eyes in the folds of the hood, and shifted position subtly. The muscles of his arms sprang up in clear relief and his tunic began to split across the shoulders.

For a moment they lay still, locked in ultimate effort, both of them so covered with snow as to be white sculpted marble; then a sudden small noise shot the length of the clearing, the sound of a dry branch cracking. Breathing heavily Aker climbed to his feet and left his opponent lying limp with a broken spine.

Grant glanced around apprehensively, but the watchers remained impassive, without grief or vengeance for their dead companion.

Abruptly a bow and six arrows were shoved into Grant's hand. He looked at them stupidly until he heard Aker Amen's fierce whisper. "Shoot, you fool! Hit some small target. Their man will have to match the shot."

With a heavy pounding in his heart, Grant set five of the arrows into his belt and nocked one onto his bowstring. The bow was heavier than the ones he was used to, and had a different feel. He would have liked to have had a few trial shots first, but knew that would be impossible. His hands were still trembling, but he hoped they would steady on the pull. Glancing around the clearing he saw a scar on a tall, oaklike tree. It was white against the dark trunk and should make an easy mark,

The bow had a very heavy pull. With great labour Grant drew the arrow back its full length and let fly. He almost gasped with honor as he saw it was a full six feet wide of the mark.

The arrow continued, arched downward, and struck a tree ten yards further on, impaling a sucker and pinning its single leaf to the bark. If that had been his mark, he would have considered it a good shot at an unusual distance.

The robed men had turned to follow the arrow's flight, and had not seen him wince at the miss. He tried to act smugly confident, in spite of the scowl and the fierce set of Aker's eyebrows. The soldier had been watching and was aware of Grant's ineptitude.

One of the dark figures moved next to Grant and pushed back his cowl. His hair had been shaved off and the pale skin was covered with small sores, every one with a tiny cut in the centre. The sores were evenly spaced and, Grant realised with a shudder, undoubtedly self-inflicted.

The man wet his finger, tested wind direction, settled his feet, raised his bow, measured the distance and the mark a moment—then drew the string and released it in a single motion. The arrow was a scarlet blur against the leaden sky. It arched upward and fell straight, hitting Grant's arrow and splitting a long sliver from it.

"Robin Hood," Grant tried to mutter sneeringly, but it did not succeed. Fear still clutched at his guts.

Now the other would shoot first, and Grant follow, and he had very little faith in his ability to best a marksman as sure and steady as the man with the sores.

His opponent nocked another arrow to the string and stood relaxed as one of the robed men poked into a coppice of small bushes.

The arrows were slid from Grant's belt as he watched.

Startled, he glanced aside to see Aker standing close, peering at the arrows with his head bent ostentatiously.

"I think you were given crooked arrows—let me look at them." He stooped more closely over the arrows and Grant had a momentary glimpse of a bright flash in his hand. Aker had one of the arrows hidden behind the others and was rubbing it with something that flashed. He whispered now, but Grant could catch the words.

*"Sharp the point and keen the eye,
Hit the mark when off you fly."*

He straightened up and handed the arrow to Grant.

"Here, this one looks to be the best."

When Grant examined the arrow, he started to smile. In his own crude way the barbarian was trying to help. Aker had scratched a little eye on the flat metal point of the arrowhead and muttered a spell over it! He had even daubed a little colour onto it. Grant stared at the little green eye and it stared back.

Then it blinked slowly and looked away.

Grant jerked and almost dropped the arrow. He became aware, with growing horror, that the wood shaft was writhing gently in his hand. The point of the arrow was twitching back and forth. It reminded him of only one thing, a dog's nose twitching after a scent.

There was a swift whirring from the woods and Grant looked up, glad of the diversion. The beater had disturbed a covey of fat little birds and they flew up in a dun-coloured cloud. Grant's opponent drew and shot with smooth speed, the red shaft hissing up. One of the birds was caught fair in the middle and tumbled down, impaled on the arrow. The men all looked to Grant.

He seemed to be watching himself also. He had the strange arrow nocked on the string and drawn back with no conscious effort. He never had the slightest chance to aim before his fingers relaxed and the arrow plunged upwards.

It hit one bird and, curving slightly, penetrated another bird. The weight of the two hapless flyers dragged at it and the arrow turned a slight arc and fell back towards earth. The next thing was a little too grandstand, Grant felt, too much like showing off. The arrow turned obviously and impaled a squirrel to the branch it had been scampering along. Grant rubbed his eyes to clear away what he was sure was a fault of vision. When he looked back, the scarlet arrow was still stuck in the branch with its load of three tiny bodies. He had won the test of power by a score of three to one,

When the whirr of the flushed birds had faded away in the shadows under the trees, silence returned to the forest. The silence lasted an instant and was replaced by a sound.

The cry of a wounded cat, the throbbing wail of a coyote, the trumpet of a bull elephant—these were the inhuman echoes of the sound, but there was more; the tone of sobbing, weeping, cursing, all the emotion-torn cries of sick mankind.

Heads back and mouths stretched wide as animals, the black-robed men wailed. Grant sank to his knees before it and covered his eyes against the rain of arrows he felt sure was to follow.

The wail throbbed and sank. He dropped his cowardly arm. A few bushes shook and were still. The clearing was empty. The dead man had been carried away. The heavy beating of his heart and the bow and arrows tightly clutched in his white-knuckled hands were the only signs of the strangers' visit.

Aker Amen had also felt the terror of that last wail. He pulled his sword from the snow, and cursed eloquently as he wiped the blade dry. Grant walked to where he had dropped his pack and collapsed

against it. Without interrupting his stream of invective, Aker aimed it at Grant.

"You misbegotten, worm-fingered, stew-brained, rock-headed civilian . . . if you hadn't made all that fuss with the Berl-Cat those Al'kahar maniacs might never have heard us. Not only that, but with your lousy shooting I had to use up that good *climean* spell I Urrrgh . . ." The vituperation tapered off into a growl of anger as he buckled on his armour. As soon as all his equipment was secured, he started to leave, but turned to glare at Grant tugging tiredly and halfheartedly at the pack. "Rouse up and lean into that pack—we have to be out of these woods by sunset."

He did not say why, but Grant needed no urging. He had his fill of the things that lurked in this forest.

He lifted the hand clutching the bow and arrow, nodding questioningly at the encircling forest.

"Keep 'em," Aker growled. "You're supposed to have won them." He started moving again.

With a certain confidence at having a weapon at last, Grant unstrung the bow and shoved it and the arrows into a strap of the pack and shrugged the giant burden onto his shoulders. By the time Aker reached the edge of the clearing, Grant was a pace behind, settling the burden into position as he went.

Suddenly he was aware that Grayf was missing, and had been missing through the entire affair.

Between shifts of the pack he wheezed, "Where's Grayf?"

"We were down the trail when I heard your noise. I came back. He should have gone ahead and waited." And Aker Amen added like a grim prayer, "If he went far enough away he'll be out of the way of *them*."

Five minutes later a turn of the trail gave them the answer. Grayf lay there face down, his arms extended and his fingers hooked into the ground. He was like a monstrous pincushion full of monstrous red pins. From his back and legs there projected at least two dozen arrows.

"The fool must have tried to run." Aker passed the body in a wide circle, dragging Grant after him. "Don't go near him, or you'll look the same. The dead are sacred to the Al'kahar." He added in a fierce rumble, "That's what they eat."

As soon as they were out of sight of the riddled corpse Grant leaned against a tree and tried to lose his breakfast.

VI

They continued the next hours at a slower pace. Aker grumbled and prodded Grant on with word and toe, but eventually gave up and adapted his long stride to that of the slower man, frequently ranging ahead silently to scout the trail.

At dusk they came to the end of the forest. The trees ended abruptly at the edge, a vertical escarpment, a granite wall with a thread of trail meandering down the face of it, widening out once into a green tree-grown shelf, then narrowing again. At the foot was a pleasant valley, with fields and meadows, and far away a smudge of smoke rising from some kind of habitation.

As they went down the path they left the forest of the "holy men" of Al'kahar.

The path was less difficult than it had looked from above; it had been hand carved many ages ago, to judge from the weathering, but it was still usable and steps had been hacked out for the worst descents. The brisk wind swept the path free of snow. Grant concentrated on balancing his pack and staying away from the sheer drop on his left.

There was a shallow grotto where the trail levelled out halfway down, and the smoke-blackened wall and lumps of charcoal under the snow showed that travellers had stopped here before. As Grant groaned out of his pack, Aker ranged ahead onto the shelf with its overgrowth and the sound of wood being hacked rang back. The long sword had more than one use.

Now that they had stopped, Grant's hard-earned warmth seeped away. He hopped from one foot to another and blew on his numbed fingers.

Aker was back after a time with a load of dead branches. He stamped a clear spot at the base of the stone wall, where the stones before it would, cut off the light of the fire, and made a conical pile of broken sections of tree limb. Then he shredded a mound of splinters under them. From the depths of his

wallet he dragged out a small metal box. Grant tried to guess what it contained—a fire bow, or perhaps flint and steel. He was taken aback when Aker shook a little orange lizard out onto his hand. The lizard, sluggish from the cold, slowly drew the nictitating membrane from one eye. Obviously unhappy at the frigid world, it closed the membrane and tried to curl up. Aker stirred it to life with a blunt finger and proffered a few splinters picked from the freshly cut wood. This unlikely food seemed to please the little reptile; its eyes flew open and it gulped the splinters down. It chewed voraciously when Aker produced some larger splinters about the size of toothpicks.

Grant was annoyed and cold. He couldn't see the connection between playing with the pet and starting the much needed fire. The lizard, finished with his dinner, began to curl up again and go back to sleep. Aker brought it close to the mound of splinters and squeezed its tail. The lizard gave him a protesting roll of its eyes and belched a small cloud of flame. Aker popped it back into its box and blew on the smouldering kindling.

Grant felt his mouth hanging open stupidly. In fairy tales he remembered mention of a creature something like this. The mythical lizard that lived on flame. "A salamander!" he murmured aloud.

"Yeah," Aker mumbled between blasts at the fire. "They come in real handy."

The snow had stopped and the wind had fallen at sunset. The fire roared and sizzled and threw back a warm glow from the rock wall Grant's stomach ground contentedly. He pulled a piece of gristle from between his teeth with a grimy forefinger, surprised he could actually be feeling so well. His body was exhausted, but he enjoyed the pleasure of relaxation after continued exertion. He took a long drag of sour wine from the musty animal-skin container.

He had the salamander box open and teased the little animal with a twig. The indignant lizard blew out a little cloud of red flame, but he jerked his fingers away in time. He fed it, some tender splinters to soothe its ruffled feelings. It chewed the wood contentedly and let a little trickle of smoke out of its nostrils.

The tiny lizard symbolized all his troubles. By the laws of reality it couldn't exist. Neither could these strange people with their impossible customs, nor the Berl-Cat, nor the spelt that Aker had used on the arrow. Either he was insane and this world was all a part of his tortured mind; or, if he were sane, he had been transported here from his own world in some unthinkable manner. Wherever *here* was.

"Aker, what country is this?"

"Ter-Klosskrass, Independent Free State of the Tyrant Helbida, Na'tunland. What's the matter, you lost or something?"

"Something." Grant went back to tugging at the gristle between his teeth. The names meant nothing to him. *The names*—they weren't English, yet Aker spoke perfect English. Well, maybe not perfect—but crude English. This *must* be the key to the whole mess.

"Aker, how is it that you speak perfect Xtylporf ... I mean Hiiopmert . . ." Grant stopped and rubbed the sudden perspiration from his forehead. Aker looked up from his sword-sharpening operation, slightly startled,

"How come I speak *what*?"

Grant knew what he wanted to say; the concept was perfectly clear. The English language, tongue of our fathers, Shakespeare, literature courses at Columbia. The English language. He'd say it slowly this time . . . ENGLISH!

"UZQINNP!"

"You better give me the wine skin. I think you need some sleep."

"No, no. Aker, you must listen! Haven't you ever heard of ... my country? The capital city is Rtyydbx, I live in . . ." Grant didn't say it, he didn't want to hear it. He knew he would say something horrible that didn't sound in the slightest like New York. He could visualize the ideas so clearly, but he didn't have the words to express himself.

Was it amnesia? Or was it, the thought struck him suddenly, that he was no longer speaking English?

"What language are we speaking?"

"Why, High Na'tunlish of course. Are you stupid—or trying to kid me that you don't know the name

of your own language? I can tell you were born here—no accent like me." He gave his chest a thumping blow. "I'm pure Thin tribesman. Slave traders stole me when I was a boy. I killed them later and became a Free Soldier. That's when I first learned Na'tunlish, so I still got an accent. Not like you."

Grant O'Reilly knew he had not been born here. He was sure now that *here* was not even his own world. This must be another world altogether, separate from his own in time and space. He wasn't sure about the details—it had been a long time since he had read H. P. Lovecraft—but this theory seemed the most tenable.

It also explained the language difficulties—or lack of difficulty. He spoke the language of this world, or this part of the world. Sort of like turning a radio to a different station. Same tubes and parts, but a different frequency going in, so different words came out. It was as if he had been tuned out of his own world into this one. The words for *English* and *New York* did not exist here; only their abstract concepts existed in his brain. It was all very confusing.

The wine and the warmth of the fire were making his head heavy. He pulled what looked like a moth-eaten bearskin rug out of the pack and wrapped it around himself. There was another question he wanted to ask. He raised his head and opened his eyes.

"Aker, who were those men in the forest?"

The soldier growled deep in his throat like a big cat and spat into the fire. "Arkahar ghouls! They're the curse of these filthy woods. They *test* all the travellers they can lay their hands on and eat all the ones who fail the test. Something to do with their religion." He spat again, as if to rid his mouth of an unpleasant taste. "There are more of them in the valley, but we'll be out of their territory in the morning."

By heroic effort of will, Grant kept himself awake long enough to arrange the bearskin comfortably so that only his nose was sticking out; then, muffled and warm: he fell into dreamless sleep.

VII

In the morning it was raining: Rain dripped steadily from the mouth of the shallow cave, making long soggy looking icicles that fell off with a crash, leaving the dripping rock bare for the formation of more icicles.

The fire had gone out and the warmth long departed from the rock. The damp reached up from the sodden ground through the worn animal skin that covered Grant and drew the warmth from his body. He pried open gummy eyes and stared at the dawn sky, grey and dripping. He tried to go back to sleep, but Aker must have heard his movements. A prehensile toe reached out and gouged him in the most sensitive part of his chilled anatomy.

"Get up and start the fire." The voice was muffled, but the meaning was clear. Grant groaned as he hauled his stiff form out of the covers.

The salamander burnt his finger instead of lighting the fire, and he pinched its tail in retaliation. He found a small log, back in a crevice of the cave, and dropped it on his toe and cursed with a growing fluency for at least ten minutes. In spite of this the fire was finally started, and Aker Amen pulled himself next to it and heated up a slab of ham. Grant followed suit, then turned back into his blanket and shivered with comfort, glad that it was raining. There was no going out into the icy rain and Grant wondered, if there had been no rain, *could he have picked up the pack and continued?* He answered himself. *No!*

After breakfast, Aker hummed a war song as he cleaned the matted blood and hair from the spikes of his mace, and told a few reminiscent tales of the skulls the mace had crushed. The rain continued, so he went on with each of his weapons and pieces of armour in turn, telling the stories they reminded him of as he cleaned them. The life of a free soldier was close to the life of a bandit, Grant decided as he listened. It was a carefree sort of telling, but incredibly villainous by civilized standards.

He crawled closer to the fire and wrapped himself more tightly in the blanket. Every joint creaked with the motion, and though he was almost as hot as a toasting ham slab, he continued shivering in spasms.

"You sick?" Aker eyed him sharply.

Grant came out with an excusing lie he had thought of to explain his faults, a lie that he considered more than half true. "No, just out of condition. Weak. I was . . . a prisoner a long time and I've got soft." He paused, ashamed but pleased by the respectful attention visible in Aker Amen's face, then added with a burst of worried truth, "I can't see why I keep shivering. I'm not cold."

"Stiffening up," Aker said casually. "If you don't keep moving around you'll be as stiff as a timber brace by morning." He chuckled, and reached a long arm for a branch from the depleted fire stack. "When you come back from collecting firewood, we'll have a little sword practice."

With every muscle creaking in protest like a rusting puppet, Grant dragged himself out of his blanket to look for firewood in the cold rain. When he came back, drenched and shivering, Aker greeted him with a blow of a light stick he had fashioned from a branch, and handed Grant another to defend himself with. Aker amused himself by swinging slow motion blows at Grant and watching him scramble clumsily to parry or duck.

Thus the day passed, and it was probably the rain that gave Grant a chance to live and survive, for it rained the next day, too, and in the alternate drowsing by the fire and being prodded awake to seek firewood, in listening open-mouthed to Aker Amen's good-natured tales of thievery, rapine, loot and death, he gradually recovered from the exhaustion and cold-shock of the two days before. The shudders stopped, the weakness and stiffness passed and he ate more ravenously than ever in his memory, the meat going to fill some insatiable hollowness within.

Even as early as the second day, the thin muscles over his big-boned frame had begun to thicken, responding eagerly to the strains that, after a delay of years, had come to them as a cue for growth.

Grant did not appreciate the process; he only wanted to sleep and eat; and yet he had to busy himself collecting firewood. He picked up numerous small bruises around head and throat to the tune of Aker Amen's roaring laughter, until he learned to fend off the unexpected blows from the light stick in Aker Amen's hand. He was learning the elemental skills of handling a broadsword.

The muscles of his wrist and arm and shoulder were alerted by this unaccustomed stress and put in their share of call for more nourishment.

At the end of the second evening, Grant and Aker finished the remains of the second ham, and, for a tidbit, ate a squirrel which Grant had put an arrow through in the afternoon. The rain stopped, only the sound of dripping and running water was heard, and the air began to chill.

"Tomorrow we move," growled Aker, and put his sword carefully beside him as he lay down to sleep for with the rain stopped, the predators of the night would be abroad again.

"Where are we going?" Grant's question was muffled by the warm bearskin.

The other man had rolled up next to the fire. He raised his head for an instant, light from the fire glinting from his eyes. "We're going to a war of course, what else? It's going to be good. Wine and blood. Kill and be killed. Good, huh?"

The philosophy of these barbarians could not have been better expressed. Grant roused himself just long enough to answer, with a wry glimmer of irony. "Good, sure . . . that's the only way to live—die." He sank back into a dreamless sleep.

The fire crackled and died. The only sound was the dry rustling of the dead leaves in the trees. The clouds blew away and the stars pierced the cold winter sky, sharp and diamond-like.

The next morning was clear and cold. Grant got up first without any prodding and, shivering, broke the stacked firewood free from the iced ground, and made a small fire. Aker sat up and began humming a battle chant as he buckled on his armour and hung his weapons at his belt.

The sight of the wicked instruments plus the memory of the past four days of bloodshed tended to make Grant thoughtful as he stowed away the contents of the giant pack. The idea of putting on that pack again merely to do murder or be murdered hardly seemed worth the struggle. If he were separated from Aker Amen he would not have to carry all that baggage.

The thought came to him with a twinge, for he liked the big soldier, and had a hunch the soldier liked him—that the rough treatment he was getting, by the standards of these people, was an extreme of good

natured protection.

The big soldier finished stowing away his deadly arsenal and kicked the fire down into the snow. "Let's go."

Grant stood up beside the pack and cleared his throat. "Er . . . Aker . . . I've decided to try some other way of *life* . . . I mean . . . I'm not so good as a fighter . . . You don't need me along."

His big decision made no observable difference to Aker. The soldier hooked a giant hand through one of the pack-straps and lightly swung it across his shoulder.

"Fine by me, only watch out for Berl-Cats. And Holy Men. The woods are full of them. And if you get clear of the woods, don't go near the peasants. They don't like strangers. If they catch a stranger they stick a big sharp pole through his bottom, and stand him out in the fields to dry out for a scarecrow."

The last words were a little indistinct as Aker was trudging off rapidly down the trail. Grant, who always had a pictorial mind, quickly followed.

Aker turned at his hail and dropped the pack on the ground, then went on without slowing his pace. With an inward groan, Grant slipped the straps into the well-worn grooves on his shoulders, and found with surprise that the burden was not nearly as heavy as he had expected. Perhaps because of the peculiarly vivid alternative Aker Amen's remark had conjured up, but more likely because the ham was now eaten and gone. Grant thought he saw a tilt to the back of Aker's head which meant a big grin was on the front of it.

The trail wound out of the trees to the edge of the cliff again and steepened, going down its face toward the trees of the valley.

At the last turning, Aker suddenly became wary. "This place stinks like an ambush. I'll see what's below."

With Grant standing back and covering him with a nocked arrow, Aker spent a seemingly interminable time crawling up to the edge of the cliff with a branch in front of his face and peering down. Apparently satisfied, he crawled back, then went a little way down the bend of the trail.

Grant slipped the pack off his back and stretched his shoulder muscles. Nothing moved below. Aker had stopped on a little ledge and was again peering into the depths below.

Grant yawned, and turned his head automatically at a slight movement to his right, then went rigid as one of the hideous Berl-Cats came out of a cave.

It had not seen him yet, but he could see the nose and whiskers twitching, following some scent. There was a clink of metal from the trail below. The beast looked up alertly, the ears turned in the direction of the sound. With one bound it was at the edge. Aker was on the ledge twenty feet below, his broad back turned helplessly toward the animal.

With the utmost silence, Grant raised his bow. The string was taut and he was sighting down the arrow as the animal's legs tensed to leap. The range was short and the twang of the bowstring and the chunk of the arrow came as one sound. The cat made a small mew of pain as its foreleg was pinned to its ribs. It had leaped as he fired.

Grant saw a perfect example of the reflexes needed to survive in this barbarian world. At the sound of the bowstring, Aker's head had jerked up, and at the sound of the cat's cry, the big man in the leather armour leapt back and had his sword out and braced, blade slanting up, ready to impale anything that landed on him.

If the big cat had landed on Aker, it would have been spitted. It tried hard to do just that, but it could not change its course in midleap. Snarling and twisting and clawing towards him in the air, it passed through the spot where Aker had been, caught with its good foreleg on the edge of the drop, was over-balanced by the failure of its wounded foreleg, and twisted with an outraged mewling over the edge. There was a crash and a sound of rolling and sliding and scrabbling down through the brush.

Aker wiped the hilt of his sword before returning it to his scabbard, and looked up at Grant with more respect than before. "A fair shot, Grant." He waved Grant after him and moved towards the valley.

With caution, alert for the wounded cat, they filed down the path to the trees.

The snow began again, and soon filmed everything in white. The woods ended at the edge of a cleared field and they climbed an embankment onto a rutted farm road. The road swung through the fields and passed close by a sod-covered stone house.

Grant watched it nervously and found his suspicions justified as four bearded men, followed closely by a shrieking woman, ran through the doorway. They howled crude obscenities and swung a wicked assortment of flails and scythes over their heads. It was a startling sight, and Grant flinched back. Aker seemed to find it neither frightening nor interesting. He stood quietly, a bored sneer on his lips, as they approached.

The screaming men were just a few yards away when he whipped out his long sword and bellowed a terrible war-cry. The great weapon flashed just once, and the flails of the first pair were hacked in two. They stared stupidly for a long instant and then fled, howling a more despondent note this time. Long before they had resumed the safety of the house, Aker had turned his back and continued his interrupted course down the road.

The episode reminded Grant again of the value of swordsmanship. He picked up a stick and, as he trudged down the road, swung at every mark that caught his eye, trying to learn to gauge a swing from any angle to hit the spot precisely, imagining the spot as an enemy. It made the time pass entertainingly, and again he felt that sharpening of the senses, almost exhilaration, that seemed to have something to do with the steady exercise and something to do with the clean whiteness of the landscape and much to do with a feeling of irresponsibility.

They stopped at noon by a frozen stream and made a lunch from an unspeakable lump of bread dredged from the depths of the pack. Aker kicked a hole in the ice and they mixed a drink in the horn cups; half spring water and half wine. It was an invigorating and thirst-quenching drink, particularly since the water seemed to be carbonated and flavoured. Grant smacked his lips over it and made no attempt to understand the geological impossibility that produced it.

VIII

The road wandered up the wide valley and they stuck to it, rather than cut across the furrowed fields. About mid-afternoon the winter ended.

That was the only way that Grant could describe it. They trudged along the road, ankle deep in the snow, with the big flakes falling slowly on all sides. The sky seemed much lighter ahead, then Grant noticed what appeared to be a line drawn across the road. The near side of the road was covered with snow, but beyond the line the warm sun shone on the brown dirt road and green fields. They passed the invisible barrier with no difficulty but, on looking up, Grant saw that none of the snowflakes were getting through. The ones that approached simply vanished.

On three sides stretched a warm and fertile landscape; behind was a wall of whirling flakes and a frigid winter scene. Grant looked at it dumbfounded.

Sunshine and a warm breeze seemed to please Aker. He opened the collar of his jerkin and took a deep breath of the grass and tree-scented air.

"We're getting close to the army. It's good to feel a little sun on the back. That's why I always like to work for the Good Duke Darikus—he's got gout and can't stand cold weather. *The sun always shines on Darikus*. That's what they say."

"You mean he's *causing* this warm weather?"

"Sure. He casts a mean spell. Built this one up twenty-five years ago, I hear. Hasn't failed yet. It's always midsummer around him, no matter what the weather should be."

They had topped a rise in the road and before them lay a green meadow bright with tents and pavilions and dark with the figures of many men. Most of them wore leather or chain armour; a few, mounted on the six-legged horse-like animals, wore full armour of silver and gold. The air was filled with the murmur of many voices, of shouted orders and the clank of steel and sound of bugles. A guard tent

stood close by the road, a half dozen pike-men lounging around it.

The nearest soldier sighted Grant and Aker. He levelled his pike across the road and challenged them in a sleepy voice.

"Halt and be recognized. What business here?"

"Free soldiers to serve the Good Duke Darikus." Satisfied, the soldier lowered his weapon and shouted toward the tent.

"Hey, Corporal, couple more guys want to join up."

There was a stirring in the tent and a young man with long, curling moustaches poked his head out. He looked the two men over with an insulting stare. His gaze fixed on Grant's sagging form, scanned the indoor pallor and the gentle look that was part of the blondness of his hair and eyebrows. The corner of the man's mouth turned back in a sneer.

"Looks like pretty poor material, but I suppose you better take them to the Duke—he'll hire anybody."

Aker spat full in the man's face and loosened his sword in the scabbard.

"Right you are, sonny, he hired *you*. I was fighting with the Good Duke when you were still peeking under your nurse's skirt." Aker started to walk away but turned and added, as a happy afterthought, "Want to fight?"

The corporal wiped his beet-red face and opened and shut his mouth like a fish out of water. He looked more closely at Aker this time. He saw the man's tremendous girth and mighty arms under the travel-stained leather and thought twice. His bead popped back into the tent. The soldiers grinned happily and a pair detached themselves to go with Aker and Grant.

They made their way through the camp and up to the largest tent, a sprawling construction of many-coloured cloth. A pennant flew over the entrance, a black, mailed fist squeezing out drops of blood against a white field. The pikemen saluted the flag. Grant and Aker saluted also, then entered the tent.

Armed soldiers stood around the walls. Two littered tables stood in the centre; a thin clerk with ink-stained fingers sat at one, an old man wearing a gold coronet sat at the other. Aker stepped forward and saluted with a thump of his fist against his chest.

"Hail, Duke. I am here to serve you."

"Hail, hell. Who are you and what's *that* with you?" the Duke replied testily, and shifted his bandage-wrapped foot on its cushion.

"Aker Amen and spear slave."

Grant started to protest his new status but closed his mouth when he realised that Aker undoubtedly knew best how to handle the situation. The affair with the corporal of the guard proved that. The clerk was rapidly flipping pages in a giant, leather-bound book. He ran his finger down one page and then read from the selected line.

"Amen, Aker, born Thin, Master Swordsman, Axe Expert, Excelling Infighter, qualified on dirk, mace, arbolest, crossbow, scimiter . . ."

"All right, all right!" The testy voice of the Good Duke interrupted him. Two gold *Enn* a day, and loot for you, loot for the slave and pick of the captured weapons. Done?"

"Done," Aker roared. "We fight to the death!" He slammed the flat of his band down on the table, signifying his acceptance of the contract. The Good Duke slammed his down too and winced as the vibrations shook his gouty foot. Grant wondered if he should slam also, but Aker turned and pushed him out of the tent.

There were more men milling about now, and Grant saw why when they formed a ragged line leading to a giant stew kettle. He and Aker quickly joined the end of the line. As they shuffled forward he thought over the recent, past, then turned to Aker.

"You never told me—who are we going to fight?"

"I don't know. What difference does it make? Get some chow, you're next."

When they each had a horn cup full of steaming stew and were finishing it off as they walked along looking for tent space, Aker spoke again with his mouth full. "Ask an officer. He might know."

"Maybe later." Grant walked, absorbing the sun warmth and the rich mingled flavour of meats and

potatoes and rice and unidentified vegetables. He was beginning: to accept Aker Amen's philosophy. "Not a bad stew."

The Duke was planning to attack the Tyrant Helbida, whoever that was. The fifth man Grant asked told him that much, but no one knew when they would attack, not even the Good Duke himself. According to the talk of the camp, every evening at sundown His Goodness cast a pair of twelve-sided astrological dice onto a silken cloth. So far the omens and portents of the dice had not been favourable for the morrow, so the army stayed in the encampment, eating and guzzling, lounging and quarrelling, and polishing up on the arts of slaughter.

Twice a day, everyone turned out to the drill field, the soldiers and officers rounding up all the reluctant novices and conscripts that could not escape, and herded them to the field where they hammered away at each other with an earsplitting rattle and clamour. The experienced soldiers worked out against each other with live steel; beginners and those less competent were given wooden swords and poles for spears.

The novices were prevented from leaving the field during drill, but otherwise were not watched, so Grant transferred himself from the spear men to the group learning the broadsword. The reluctant beginners belaboured each other, sweating and bruised, often angry and cursing, urged on by shouts from the officers. Grant found quickly when a parry was poor by picking himself up from the dust. But he husbanded his strength, put brains into his fighting, was watchful of techniques and thought about his mistakes when he picked himself up . . . and he kept up the practice in the after hours when most of the others left the field.

In a few days Grant sported a mask of colourful bruises and lumps, and a vastly improved fighting technique. Aker Amen, strolling over after working out with the swordsmen, sometimes separated Grant from his novice opponent and picked up a wooden sword to give Grant a few painful but useful demonstrations of professional swordsmanship.

The fifth day a new element was added. For the entertainment of the professional soldiers and the officers who lined up on the sides, shouting encouragement and making bets, the end of the afternoon's drill was turned to a free-for-all. The trainees were turned loose on the field with instructions to fight, and keep fighting until disarmed or unconscious. The only rule was to keep the combat single combat still, but the rule was not enforced. Broken bones and missing teeth were in evidence from the moment the fray started.

One group of thickset louts, obviously farm conscripts, were the terror of the field; they stuck together, attacking in such close sequence that no outsider had time to collect his scattered wits between one bout and another. Soon their end of the field was scattered with the defeated, and a wide clear space was being given them by the others. Their leader was a young giant named Splug, who seemed to be beating down everyone he encountered by sheer weight and strength and fatness.

Grant tried to stay to one side and fight a quiet defensive fight without attracting attention to himself, but this time he had an appointment with destiny. He was due to find out something about himself, a fact he had kept hidden for an entire lifetime.

Splug saw him from the distance and shouted, then charged with a roar of laughter, evidently deceived by Grant's mild expression and unassuming stoop.

Slobbering, he swung a simple overhand blow down at Grant with the clumsy simplicity of chopping wood. Grant parried it easily and thumped the other in the ribs on the return stroke. Angered, Splug swung again with tremendous force and weight, his muscles standing out under his fat. Grant's guard held, but by sheer push, he was forced to give ground. Stepping back, he found a wooden sword tip inserted between his feet, tangling them, and lost balance. One of the other farm hands was slyly helping his leader. As Grant tottered, Splug cracked him across the head and roared with laughter. When Grant stepped away from the entanglement and tried to return the blow, a foot tripped him from another direction, and the wooden sword hit his shoulder with a white burst of pain. Splug laughed again.

At that moment Grant felt one of his fits coming on. The ringing began in his ears and the pressure in his temples and the distance from sounds. Why now, of all times?

The brutes were all around him, all wide and sturdy, and enough alike to be brothers, probably conscripted from the same inbred farm town. They all worked together; if Grant fell they would probably beat and trample him into the ground. The officers couldn't see what was happening. He had to fight.

He felt as if he were growing. Everything else seemed small and clear and the wooden sword seemed as light in his hand as a matchstick. The blows he received felt light and distant and the blows he struck seemed like taps. He swung countless taps at things that looked like Splug, or perhaps the same tap over and over; it was all the same. But through the distance, he was aware that he was enjoying himself. He felt relaxed. There was no resistance either inside or outside, as in a dream.

Then startlingly, everything went black. He came up to the surface again, sitting on the ground, holding his aching head in both hands. An officer was standing over him, slapping a weighted cosh into the palm of his hand thoughtfully. He scowled as Grant looked up.

"Just keep your temper after this, me lad. We're here for practice, not for skull cracking."

Grant looked around dazedly at a circle of unconscious figures. Splug was a distance away, sitting up, holding his bloody face and moaning. Across the field the other fighters had stopped and were watching Grant. The entire thing made no sense.

The officer said, "You had reason enough. They were asking for trouble. But when you started to ram the broken end of your sword down the fat one's throat *you* were asking for trouble. I had to tap you one. Just try to save that kind of thing for the enemy from now on."

Looking around with slowly dawning understanding, Grant saw that all the men were Splug's gang. A *few* were beginning to crawl painfully to their feet and stagger away.

He felt himself blush. "I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to . . ."

"I don't say you didn't give fair warning, howling like that," grinned the officer. "But try to hold your temper down next time."

The grizzled bearlike man walked away, his gold armour glinting, but Grant stood up slowly, thinking of what he had been told—that he had a hot temper!

This was a thing he had never known. What he had been calling fits, and thinking of as illness, was temper, a hot, sudden wish to kill, too primitive for thought, too savage for civilized expression. It was too strange for recognition as part of the Grant they had always called a sweet boy, and a little angel—or later a sensitive type. Finding no outlet of action or thought for the emotion, he had had fits, rigid and shaking, with his mind a blank until the anger passed.

This time the temper had found outlet. He spun slowly on his heel, surveying his victims. The thought occurred that there might be a berserker, among his ancestry. From the Swedish side of his family, he had inherited his blond hair and almost white brows. He could have inherited his disposition also. The ancient Swedes were the people who occasionally produced berserkers, men of apparently gentle disposition who, in battle, changed and killed as savagely and blindly as uncaged tigers.

He stood there in the torn field, looking gentle and worried, not as skinny as before, but still a slim, tall figure with a scholar's stoop and a delicate look. Yet none of the others sneered at his slumped figure, and they left a wide space around him as they returned to their fighting.

He swung the broken sword in an idle pattern as he walked off, badly worried with the wonder of how close he had been the other times during his life. How near had he been to committing murder when he thought he was just being sick?

IX

The next fit came just two nights later. He and Aker had been drinking late in a tent across the camp. They were weaving back, leaning on each other and singing one of the plaintive melodies of this world. Aker sang the verses and Grant came in, loud and flat, on the chorus.

*She told the king no, but smiled at me
And lifted her dress above her pink knee*

I said, why bless me, I never did see

Such a . . .

A dark figure stepped out from behind a tent and landed a heavy blow on the back of Aker's head. The big soldier dropped, the breath whooshing from his limp body, and simultaneously Grant was backhanded to the ground by a gloved fist, his uncertain balance easily destroyed.

The man stepped out into the moonlight and Grant recognised the moustached corporal of the guard, on duty the day he and Aker arrived.

"Nobody spits in *my* face," the man muttered, and raised his foot to grind it down on Aker's face. As a burst of icy distance and rage shot through his brain, Grant swung his wooden sword up across the corporal's throat as if, by hatred, the wood had become a real sword. It seemed a light blow, but the man began to crumble together, then hunched over and poured blood out of his mouth as from a tilted bottle, and continued bending more and more until he folded down onto the ground, a shrunken and writhing bundle, rapidly becoming still. Grant stared numbly until he remembered he had heard of the deadly trick of breaking the larynx. Apparently he'd done it.

As Grant pulled himself to his feet, he became aware for the first time that someone else was there. The flap on a lighted tent had been thrown back and a man stood there watching. From the rings that flashed on his fingers, he must be a noble of some kind. He laughed suddenly, and Grant recognised him—the officer who had knocked him out on the drill field.

"Remember what I said, about controlling your temper."

He noticed Grant's tense position and laughed again. "Don't worry, I'm not going to turn you in. Anyone who hits a man in the midst of a good song deserves what he gets. Drag your friend in here and pour some wine down his throat. I want to hear the rest of that verse. I thought I knew all of them!"

He turned back for an instant. "Bring the body in too. The armour and weapons are yours by right of conquest, anyone who can kill with a wooden sword deserves a man's weapon."

The next day Grant swaggered through the camp in leather armour with a bow and quiver of arrows slung on his back and the weight of a light broadsword at his belt. He enjoyed the way the servants and slaves of the camp scurried out of his path, the deference they gave a fighting man, and noticed the eyes of the women camp followers turning to him as he went by.

Then he felt something like a fool as he carefully took off his armour at the practice field and picked up a wooden sword to practice with. He showed himself no more strong or skilled than the day before when he had been merely ranked as a slave. But he lost himself in the exercise and the day passed quickly. At the dinner call, Grant grounded his sword, suddenly aware of weariness, but aware he had learned and improved.

He went to buckle his armour back on. After only one day it was beginning to feel like a second skin and he had felt naked without it.

Aker went by with the stream of men heading for the stew line and slapped him on the shoulder as he passed, which he had been doing often since Grant had won his armour, his way of expressing his pleasure in what had happened.

At the meal line the word was passed. The cast of the Duke's dice had been favourable. Tomorrow they would fight. There was a rush of last minute readying of weapons, and a blowing of discordant bugles for formations.

They marched in the morning against the forces of the Independent Free State of the Tyrant Helbida. The Tyrant's castle stood some miles up the valley. They didn't reach it until afternoon.

The Duke's forces halted in a rough semi-circle about the base of the castle and awaited orders. The castle was of black stone and seemed to grow out of the rugged valley wall. Flags flew from the battlements and occasionally a helmeted head could be seen peering over the edge.

There was a parley and one of the Good Duke's men rode into the castle through an opened postern. Some time later, the gate clanged open and the officer rode back, clutching the bleeding place in his face where his nose had been.

This decided the Duke. He waved his sword, the bugles blew loudly off key, and the men surged forward. They crushed around Grant, who clutched at the spear he had been issued and was pushed forward.

The air was filled with arrows and the roar and crash of battle. The first line of men carried wide shields and scaling ladders which they placed against the sheer walls. Men were clambering up the ladders under a canopy of arrows from bowmen in the rear. Their fire was keeping the parapets fairly clear, but archers concealed behind the crenellations and fire slots poured down a withering rain of arrows at those on the ground.

Grant saw men dropping on all sides, but there were always more pressing from behind. Then he was in the comparative safety of the base of the wall, too close for the archers at the slots to see him. He got his hands on the rungs of a ladder and started to climb. At the next ladder he saw Aker Amen climbing rapidly.

Two forces pulled at him as he clutched the rough wooden rungs. He was conscious of a desire to prove his new-won strength and to keep up with Aker. But one corner of his civilised brain tried to drag him away from that deadly battle. What was the percentage of getting killed in some foolish little war?

No percentage at all Grant mumbled as he clawed his way up the ladder. *But if you want to live like a man, you have to be ready to die like one.*

The man ahead of him fell off when a heavy rock bounced from the top of his head. Grant tried to catch him but it was over too fast. Then he rapidly ran up the cleared ladder until he was two-thirds of the way to the top.

He turned, grinning, to shout to his friend Aker, just in time to see an arrow pierce Aker's neck from side to side. For an instant the big soldier's hands held their grip on the ladder, and Grant stared into the glazed, sightless eyes. Then Aker was gone over the side of the ladder, gone forever, and there was another man there climbing up from below.

Something hot snapped in Grant's head. Without any dizzying transition he was the berserker, cold with hate, and life became a simple matter of efficiently murdering the maximum number of the enemies of Aker Amen. He climbed.

Men were dying ahead of him, and then he was the first man on the ladder. The top of the wall was ahead, and an archer was peering down at him over a half-drawn bow. Grant drove his spear up into the man's eyesocket and pulled it back with a cold precision as the point crushed through flesh and bone. The man fell past him like a harpooned fish. Before another could fill the dead man's gap, Grant had a hand on the rough stone and pulled himself over the edge. A helmed knight swung a war axe down at his head and Grant barely rolled aside in time. The axe clanked a chip out of the granite crenellation. Before the knight could shift the axe, Grant had clutched him by the leg and thrown him over the edge of the parapet. The man's vanishing shout was followed by a satisfying clang from the foot of the wall.

In the instant before anyone else stepped forward, Grant managed to stand up and swing his spear in front of him. The point caught one of the Tyrant's men in the throat and he died with a hoarse gurgle. Though he was already dead the force of his rush sent him into Grant's arms. In the instant that Grant supported the corpse, three arrows thumped into its back.

The cold berserker rage controlled Grant's every move. He didn't drop the body—it made too good a shield for arrows. Instead he pried the broadsword from the convulsive death clutch of the man's fingers. Then he had time for his first look at the rest of the battle for the wall.

It wasn't going so well for the Good Duke. The few soldiers who had reached the wall were being rapidly killed, while cauldrons of hot oil were clearing the ladders below. On Grant's left there was a mixed tangle of battling men. On his right all of the ladders had been pushed away and at least a dozen of the Tyrant's men were rushing at him.

All of this took less than an instant to see, and in the same instant his berserker's mind made its decision. With a wordless cry he hurled the arrow-studded corpse at the group of attackers and leaped after it.

The very suddenness of the attack saved his life. Yet it was impossible to be in that melee of knives and swords without being cut. Blood ran from a score of wounds that he didn't feel. The Tyrant's men suffered far greater losses. Grant's whirling sword hacked through flesh and armour. When the soldiers came close enough his dagger ripped at their entrails.

Some of the nearest men quailed back before his fury, tangling the men behind. This only made their deaths more certain. Grant clutched the blood-wet pommel of his sword and chopped away at them. A few fell inside the wall; one managed to turn and run away. The rest were dead or dying at Grant's feet.

For that instant the section of the wall was cleared. Grant held the sword up, ready for the next attack. It never came. Slowly the red mist faded from before his eyes and he became aware of the aching soreness of his body. It was with a degree of surprise that he noted the blood soaking into his tunic and the gaping red mouth of a long slice across his right thigh. A clean cut, inches deep, slowly oozing blood from both ends.

Then he glanced up from the wound and saw that he was standing just above the mechanism that operated the drawbridge. Automatically his architect's eye took in the details of the crude windlass and pulleys.

The ramp of the drawbridge wasn't vertical, which meant it dropped of its own weight. Two giant supporting chains were attached to the outer end, they wrapped around an immense rotating log. This was in turn connected by a series of pulleys to the windlass. The pulleys added *some* mechanical advantage, but still exerted a good deal of pull on the windlass mechanism. A great cog wheel was bolted to the windlass drum, this cog was held in place by a metal pawl. A loop of rope kept the pawl from slipping.

It was absurdly simple. A piece of rope, no thicker than Grant's middle finger, was all that held up the drawbridge. Cut that and the bridge would drop.

Well—why not?

While his civilized mind was still pondering it, his newfound reflexes sent him off the wall. It was just as well he had jumped because an arrow went through the spot where he had stood an instant before. His wounded leg collapsed when he hit the platform below and he ground his teeth together with the pain. But all he had to do was stand up and stagger a few feet. A single stroke of his sword severed the pawl-rope.

Nothing happened. Friction and rust in the ancient mechanism were enough to keep it from moving.

A shout went up from someone who had seen Grant jump and a squad rushed his way. He kicked the cog wheel with his good leg and it began to revolve slowly. As inertia overcame friction it turned faster and faster.

With a great squealing of pulleys and rattling of chains the drawbridge slammed down into position. A tremendous cheer rose from the Duke's army massed outside. They rushed forward and all of the men inside the courtyard turned to face them. Grant was completely forgotten for the moment, an interested spectator to the battle.

The Good Duke's army thundered across the drawbridge and crashed into the portcullis, a sturdy looking gate of thick iron bars. They thrust their swords through the grill and howled at the defenders inside. A shower of arrows was their answer and a rush by the gate guards.

A confined and wicked battle developed around the portcullis. The Tyrant's men had no way of beating off the attack, while the Good Duke's men couldn't get through. There was much jabbing of swords through the grill and still moaning bodies were trampled underfoot. It was the Good Duke himself who ended the impasse.

Surrounded by his household troops he pushed up to the front of the attackers. His guards carried eight foot lances and used them to clear the other side of the portcullis. Under the protection of their shields, the Good Duke crouched against the steel bars. From his raised viewpoint Grant could see the Duke clearly.

It must have been magic of some sort. The warm sunshine in midwinter proved that the Good Duke Darikus was a powerful worker of the arcane arts. Probably counter-spells had stopped him during the

attack from outside. But now that he had penetrated the walls he met with more success. He sprinkled something on the bars of the portcullis, and passed his hand over them. His mouth worked as he mumbled a spell.

The results were gratifying. The bars shimmered in a sudden haze and turned a mottled red. They looked as if they had been rusting for a thousand years. When the soldiers cheered and charged, the bars fell into rusty shards.

By force of arms and magic the Good Duke Darikus had captured the castle. And he was aware of the part Grant had played. He saw Grant standing by the windlass and saluted him with his sword pommel before leading the final charge. Only the memory of Aker's death kept a glow of grim pride from Grant at that moment.

X

It was just at that instant that the scene before him froze. That was the only way he could think of it. Men seemed stopped in mid-stride and the sounds of battle died away like the ringing of bells in still air. Even the sunlight was frozen and solid.

The voices rumbled like thunder in the distance and Grant could almost understand their words.

"Gressel, now look where you put that thread!"

"Where I put it . . . we all know where the blame lies. Give me the eye ... I thought so. It goes over here. Your stupidity has almost ruined the pattern."

There was no feeling of transition. The scene before Grant was swept away and instantly replaced by another. It took a time for his befuddled senses to make out what it was.

Leaning stones. Gravestones. And a church. The memory they dredged up seemed incredibly ancient, but he recognised it. The sword slipped from his limp fingers and fell to the ground. He was home in his own world. Back in the same churchyard he had vanished from.

His rising elation was abruptly cut off as this vanished in turn, to be replaced by the formless time he remembered only too well.

"You can't just push him back like that—repercussions will alter the design in every direction."

"Simply done, you old hag. I'll just take a knot in time. Then nothing will be remembered . . . nothing . . ."

"What has happened . . . what he has done . . . will be as never was."

Eternity-wide laughter cackled and rolled.

Grant leaned against the stone wall, trying to hold onto a precious memory that kept slipping away from him. Something had happened during his attack; he couldn't remember quite what. The formal coat hugged him tightly across the shoulders, yet his thin wrists stuck well out of the sleeves. When he looked at his wrists they seemed wrong. For some incomprehensible reason he kept thinking they ought to be stronger, browner—dirtier. Yet he couldn't grasp why.

That should have been the end of it. The memories would die and he would go back into the church just as he had left it.

Except for an oversight. One raveled, loose end of his thread that hadn't been clipped off.

Looking past his skinny wrists he saw the sword on the ground, still wet with undried blood. Unbelievably he bent and picked it up. Heavy and crude, the blade was nicked and dirty as well. Yet it was the most precious thing in the world to him.

It was the key to what had happened. As long as he looked at it he could remember the snow, the Good Duke, the Berl-Cats, the war—and Aker Amen. Bloody, frightening memories of a barbarian world now impossibly distant. But they were precious memories too.

"Granty—where are you dear? You must hurry."

His mother's shrill voice penetrated and brought him back with a start. He straightened up slowly and let the sword fall back to the ground. It had done its work, he was finished with it.

When he walked back into the church he seemed to be the same tall and skinny young man in the tight coat. Only his back was erect for the first time anyone there had ever noticed.

"—where have you been, don't you know it's time? I thought by now—" His mother's voice sounded like a phonograph record played backwards too fast, and made about as much sense.

"Oh, shut up," Grant growled. "And go and tell. Lucy I want to see her at once. It's important."

His mother's voice cut off in mid-gripe, and Herb Collomb's pipe dropped from his suddenly slack jaw and clattered to the floor.

After, three gasping tries, his mother managed to choke out her words.

"What's come over you? You're not well. You *know* you can't see Lucy before the ceremony, she's in her *wedding gown*—so it is impossible, the bride and groom never . . ."

"I don't give a damn for your silly superstitions," Grant roared the words into his mother's face. "I said to get her in here—or should I do it myself?"

Grant's mother started to say something about blasphemy in church, but a single glance at his face sent her scuttling sideways like a crab, out of the room. Herb managed to retrieve his pipe and stuff it back into his mouth while Grant paced like a caged tiger.

Lucy steamed in, flushed with anger. "What do you mean by this, Grant, seeing me now. The ceremony is late as it is."

"Let them wait," Grant laughed. "After all, it's our wedding and we'll do it in our own way. It's just that I had to tell you how wonderful everything is and how much more different things are going to be than you or I had ever dreamed . . ."

In his exuberance he had taken her in his arms. She would soon be his wife, that's where she belonged.

"Stop that, you fool," she squealed. "This is neither the time nor the place—and you're crushing my lace!"

"The hell with your lace," Grant mumbled and his mother wailed again over the blasphemy. Things weren't going at all the way he had planned.

This was really the first time he had ever held Lucy so close. In the past they had always pecked a single good-night kiss from a distance. She was a lot bonier than he had realised and her skin was pale and mottled under the make-up. The barbarian girls had been much plumper and more feminine than this. He forced the thought from his guilty mind—after all, this was the girl he loved. Or did he? The thought hit him so suddenly that he let go of her and stepped back.

Both women were screeching at him now, but he didn't hear the words. Just the sound, like a pair of cats howling on the back fence.

Love her? He had never held her in his arms before, or really kissed her. They had always prided themselves on their intellectual match. How the devil did he ever put up with—that—and how had he ever got involved with her in the first place? Weren't her parents old friends of his mothers?

"Mother!" he said fiercely. They both shut up instantly at his tone. "Did you frame up this marriage? Did the two of you collaborate to put a ring in my nose? I want to know more about this before I go through with this ceremony."

"Well, I know enough right now," Lucy screamed in a high, cracked voice. "This marriage is off, postponed—until you apologise and act decently."

"Right you are," Grant interrupted calmly. "Marriage is off and you can keep the ring for a souvenir. Marry in haste, repent at leisure I always said."

Lucy gagged at his words. Of course her threat had only been a gambit to get him back into line. But something had gone terribly wrong.

Before either of them could find their voices again, Grant had pushed Lucy and his mother into the next room.

"Faint in here," he said quietly. "There's a soft rug."

Then he backed out, closed the door and turned the key in the lock. Herb sat quietly puffing his pipe, looking on.

"Congratulations," Herb said. "I hope you'll be very happy."

Grant's scowl turned to a smile as he caught the sincerity of his friend's words. "You're not running out too?" he asked.

"On the contrary," Herb said, standing up and knocking his pipe out. "You have just made me feel better than I ever thought possible. Now tell me what in blazes has suddenly come over you after all these years."

"It will take a bit of explaining," Grant said as he clapped his friend on the arm. His fingers closed on Herb's rock-hard biceps and triceps. Grant's smile vanished as he pinched his own pipestem arm. All the painfully won muscle was gone as if it had never been.

"What's the best way to build muscle and get into some kind of decent shape? A quick way," Grant asked.

If Herb was startled by the sudden switch in conversation he didn't show it. "Rock climbing, weights, gym work—anything will do it. I'm partial to rock climbing myself. I go every weekend."

"Sounds great," Grant said, and turned to the door. "Now let's find someplace where we can get a stiff drink—or better a bottle—and I'll tell you something you'll have no business believing. And we can make some plans to try out this rock business. Maybe I'll even tell you about a little rock climbing experience *I've* had."

The world seemed a brighter place; the sky a deeper blue and every detail charged with a deeper meaning than ever had been apparent to him before. Grant quickened the pace, savouring every mouthful of air he pulled into his lungs.

His hard-earned muscle, experience and reflexes were gone—but they could be built up again easily enough. As long as he had the desire and the knowledge to do it. And that he still had.

He silently saluted the memory of Aker Amen and that strange world he would never see again.

The two friends turned the corner and walked slowly from sight.

—**Harry Harrison and Katherine MacLean**