

BRON FANE

# UNKNOWN DESTINY

An archæological party in Mesopotamia found a chest of stone tablets in an unknown script. Disaster struck every man who worked on the tablets, every man save one. The stranger who offered his services to the archæologists claimed to read the ancient unknown symbols, but the stranger vanished together with the tablets and the mystery deepened.

The stranger's claims had not been exaggerated. Incredible events began to take place in unlikely places, as the man-who-knew slowly gained a mastery over the Power Tablets. Like all megalomaniacs he over-reached himself and the power of the tablets took over. He no longer controlled them. . . . They controlled him. The vengeance of the ancients was slow and terrible to behold.

The Thing was the worst part of their vengeance . . . a supernatural monster striding like a colossus over the trembling world. Man's weapons failed to stop it. Only the courage of three priests stood between humanity and annihilation.



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DESTINY

Man had  
raised a  
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nothing could  
chain



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Supernatural  
Special



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## "UNKNOWN DESTINY"

By Bron Fane

*Man's curiosity had raised a fiend  
which nothing could chain*

### INTRODUCTION

An archaeological party in Mesopotamia found a chest of stone tablets in an unknown script. Disaster struck every man who worked on the tablets, every man save one. The stranger who offered his services to the archaeologists claimed to read the ancient unknown symbols, but the stranger vanished together with the tablets and the mystery deepened.

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### Chapter One

#### THE ARCHAEOLOGISTS

THE sun glared down across the Tigris and the Euphrates, like the angry eye of a hot celestial god. Iraq sweltered in that blazing sun from Mosul in the north to Basra, close to the Persian Gulf, in the south. The two mighty rivers moved southwards under the blazing sun as they have moved southwards for countless centuries, mingling their great waters a few short miles from the hot blue northern tip of the Persian Gulf itself. The cradle of civilization seemed in many ways as timeless and as unchanged as it had ever been. The sun, the rivers, the plants that grew by their banks were as timeless as nature intended, but there were a few superficial alterations. Oil, money and the hand of man had made Baghdad on the Tigris something that was a cross between a modern city and a Hollywood interpretation of what the mysterious East should be like.

A few miles and two rivers away from Baghdad, across the broad waters of the Tigris and southwest across the brimming Euphrates, Karbala also showed itself to be a

mixture of Eastern mystery, timeless Mesopotamian magic and oil speculation, plus the import of Western ideas.

Andrew Bennett, was not interested in Baghdad or Karbala. Basra and Mosul concerned him not the slightest. Persia to the east, Syria and Jordan to the west, Saudi-Arabia to the south and Turkey in the north interested him not the least. Violent middle eastern politics and the financial machinations at the back of the big business that was middle-eastern oil could not influence the mind of Andrew Bennett. He was a tall, rapier-thin, scholarly looking man. His eyes were the liveliest part of him. They flashed like Jewels in a parchment face, for Bennett was no longer a young man. Only the eyes were still young and they looked youngest and most interested when they were engaged in archaeological research.

Bennett looked around quickly at his four companions. Charlie Downing, fat, bald and perspiring unashamedly in the middle-eastern heat, was digging with more energy and enthusiasm than with success. Eric Fraser was working with a sieve as Downing carefully sprinkled shovelfuls of material on to the soft nylon mesh which Fraser was shaking gently. George Harris, a dried up old parrot of a man, tottered a little as he supported himself on his shooting stick and peered interestedly through his monocle at the relics which Eric Fraser was sieving out. Ian Johnson was working with a tape measure, checking up on the sites which the local Arabian workers were digging at the instigation of Andrew Bennett's party.

Charlie Downing paused suddenly.

"Mr. Bennett," he called, urgently, anxiously.

Andrew hurried across. He was a man who was a little too aware of his own dignity and of his own place and purpose as party leader to allow himself to run. He would have liked to run, for Downing's voice had held the promise of some worthwhile discovery. Fraser put down the riddle. George Harris tottered over and removed his wide-brimmed straw hat for a moment to fan his sweating forehead.

"What have you found Charlie?" asked Andrew Bennett.

"I'm not sure," said Downing, "but . . . ." He was on his hands and knees, scraping at something with his hands. "I think it's a chest of some sort—a wooden chest."

"The sand is very dry here," said Fraser, "and this is an old strata in which we are working."

"Most interesting!" George Harris's voice was returning again to what Shakespeare had called 'the childish treble pipe.'

Ian Johnson said nothing but his face expressed interest

as he got down in to the hole which Downing had been digging and started working at the wooden chest which his plumper companion had discovered.

"It is a wooden chest, isn't it?" said Bennett.

"Definitely," said Downing. "Babylonian by the look of it," said Fraser.

"I would say it goes back to the first or second dynasty," quavered Harris excitedly. He had removed his Panama hat again and was fanning himself vigorously. Vigorously, at least, by his standards. "I wish it wasn't so hot," he quavered.

"Are you all right?" asked Eric, "or had you better go and sit in the tent for a few moments."

"I'm all right," said Harris in his quavering voice, "I'm not going to be kept out of this, young fella. This is one of the most interesting discoveries we've made on this trip." He turned to Bennett. "I've been on the point of telling you that you weren't making the best use of the site. I didn't altogether approve of your method but I'm prepared to take all that back now. My word!"

Andrew Bennett smiled patiently at the old man. Harris had insisted on coming. In his day, thought Andrew, Harris had been one of the greatest archaeologists in the country. Now, senility was eating away at the edges of what had once been a great mind.

They dropped the chest—which was in a remarkable state of preservation—on to the sandy soil by the side of the excavation in which Charles Downing had been performing. Bennett looked at the chest carefully.

"It's heavy," said Charlie.

"Certainly is," agreed Ian Johnson.

"What do you think it is then?" asked Fraser.

"Let's get it open," said George Harris. He sounded, despite his age, the most excited of the party. It had been, in some ways, against Andrew Bennett's better judgment to bring the old man but, tottery as he was, it was next to impossible to keep George Harris off an archaeological expedition. For old time's sake Bennett had taken the great old scholar with his party, but George Harris's semi-senile behaviour, was by no means an easy thing to tolerate, particularly in the heat of Iraq.

"There doesn't seem to be any way into the darn thing," said Charlie Downing, perspiringly.

"No, there doesn't," said Fraser.

"There must be," remarked Ian Johnson, examining the box. Andrew Bennett had produced a medium-stiff nylon brush with which he was carefully removing the light, dry

sandy soil. He looked carefully at the strata from which the box had been taken.

"I think it's been here a very long time," he said choosing his words carefully.

"First or second dynasty; I said so," quavered old Harris.

"Yes quite, quite," said Andrew Bennett. He was one of those men who had the knack of saying 'quite' with such an air of finality and with such overtones of meaning that he could give the word a significance which far exceeded its monosyllabic vocal value.

"You don't suppose," said Ian Johnson thoughtfully, "that there is a sliding panel. Do you?"

"It's an idea of course," said Bennett.

Charlie Downing's pudgy fingers were going all over the wooden chest. Eric Fraser stood back a little and mopped the sweat from his brow and thought about the problem. By the weight of it the chest was far from empty, and the strangely carved symbols, in which it was covered, gave them the impression that it contained something of considerable value. It was far too ornate to have been used as a receptacle for any common objects.

Andrew Bennett who was examining the peculiarly carved decorations of the chest thought that the most striking figure was something which appeared to be a winged genie with the head of an eagle. The anatomy—particularly the muscles of the calf—showed the characteristic Babylonian exaggeration. In one hand the strange creature seemed to hold what appeared to be a small water vessel, with its other hand it grasped a bunch of fruit. The tree on which the fruit grew looked very like the sacred tree which was represented on a carving belonging to the period or Sargon from the 8th century B.C. Near this great, eagle-headed figure there were a number of others. A peculiar lion-headed genie carried a dagger. Another held a huge spear, while a third held its hand in the air as though driving an invisible chariot.

"What do you think they are?" quavered old George Harris.

"I'm not sure," said Bennett, "but they don't look particularly benign. I get the impression that this one," he pointed to a singularly ugly representation near the other figures, "is definitely an *utukku*."

"Yes, it could be, but what kind of *utukku* do you think it is?" asked old Harris.

"Well, I don't think it's an *edimmu*," replied Bennett. "It doesn't look human enough for that."

"No I think it is definitely an *arallu*," said Eric Fraser thoughtfully.

"I'd be inclined to agree," said Charlie Downing. "The normal representations of the *edimmu* show them in a particularly humanized form, whereas this has a completely inhuman look to it."

Ian Johnson was studying the figure closely.

"That's definitely an *arallu*," he agreed.

"I wish we could get this wretched box open," said Eric Fraser.

"There must be some way into it," said Bennett.

"Unless of course something was put into it and the box was then secured permanently," suggested Johnson.

"You mean the box was built around its contents," said Bennett.

"It's a possibility," said old Harris. "I have come across similar examples." He shuddered a little. "Of course, when a box is constructed around whatever it contains then the carpenter's intention is that those contents shall never be released."

"Which would mean that the contents themselves are pretty sinister," said Downing.

"Very sinister in my opinion," said Harris.

"We are archaeologists, gentlemen, we are scientists, we are not going to be put off by primitive ideas of Assyrian or Babylonian curses," said the party leader.

Slowly and carefully Andrew Bennett applied a thin steel crowbar to a joint in the box. There was a sound of protesting wood, as pegs which had not left their seating for centuries parted again. The lid came back with surprising suddenness and the five archaeologists looked down into the box as the middle-eastern sun streamed down on to a number of flat clay tablets.

"That's an incredible script," said Andrew Bennett.

"I don't recognise it," said Charlie Downing.

"Neither do I," said Fraser.

"I haven't seen it before," said Harris peering closely.

"Nor have I," said Ian Johnson.

"It's not any of the normal Assyro-Babylonian scripts," said Bennett, "between us we can read all the known characters." He looked at them again appealingly. "And there is nothing here that is familiar to you gentlemen?"

"Nothing there that I can read," said Charlie Downing, "not on the top anyway. There may be some more familiar tablets underneath."

"I agree with Charlie," said Eric, "I have never seen anything like this." George Harris took on: of the tablets out



and screwed his old eyes up against the sun as he studied the small characters closely.

"No. I stand by my original opinion; this is a hitherto unknown script."

"An unknown script," repeated Ian Johnson. He too took out one of the tablets and began examining it with close interest.

## Chapter Two

### THE TRANSLATORS

BENNETT, Downing, Fraser, Harris and Johnson spent hours attempting to decipher the peculiar, unknown script. The characters, to the eyes of the archaeologists, were not a development of any ancient alphabet that they had ever seen. Yet, on the other hand, there was something about the tablets which gave their would-be translators the impression that they were not as primitive as they appeared.

"This is something of an enigma," said Bennett.

"Decidedly," agreed Downing.

"Do you think they were interpolated into that strata?" asked Fraser. "I mean do you think they really had any business to be there, are they as old as the strata itself?"

"Well of course," squeaked Harris, "people have perpetrated frauds of similar nature. I remember that Piltdown business, a most peculiar state of affairs, you know."

"Oh?" Johnson's voice was interrogative. "I know all about the Piltdown business, of course, we all do, but what had you in mind that connected Piltdown with the discovery of these tablets here?"

"Well, the placing of the artificial remains in a strata where they had no right to be," said old Harris. He was speaking more slowly than usual.

"What do you suggest?" said Bennett, looking at his older colleague. "Do you think that somebody has actually come out here and having spent a great deal of time and trouble making these tablets, has then buried them in a box, upon the genuineness of which I would stake my reputation? It is genuinely Assyrian or Babylonian and of extreme age and value."

"Hoaxers are queer people," Downing interrupted him.

"Yes, the mentality of the hoaxer takes a bit of weighing up," agreed Fraser.

"If a hoaxer was really determined to hoax, it wouldn't be

beyond his ingenuity or his resources to come out here and put these preparations in the ground."

"This Piltdown business," said Johnson.

"Oh, Oakley of the British Museum and Drs. Weiner and Clark proved in 1953, that the jaw of the Piltdownskull belonged to a modern ape. It has no connection whatsoever with that top part of the skull which Charles Dawson, the lawyer-antiquarian took out of the gravel pit on Piltdown common in 1911." Old Harris was chuckling. He looked in a reminiscent mood.

"I remember Charles Dawson, a most interesting man—most interesting. That hoax of his confused modern anthropology for over forty years. The great thing about it was that it didn't line up with the other discoveries on the evolutionary scale."

"It was Oakley's study of the fluorine process which really led him to detect the fraud, wasn't it?" said Bennett.

"Yes. Yes, it was," said old Dr. Harris. "Oakley realised that the longer a bone lay in the ground where fluorine-bearing water was present, naturally the more fluorine the thing would absorb. Using Oakley's knowledge, tests were made on the Piltdown skull; the top part showed was only fifty thousand years old, not five hundred thousand. It also showed that the jaw was a complete and utter fake. When Weiner wrote 'Piltdown Forgery' he put forward evidence that Charles Dawson had stained bones and fabricated finds before." Old Harris shook his head. "I remember when poor Charles died in 1916, he was still known as the wizard of Sussex and the monument there commemorates his famous discovery."

"So you think that these tablets could be a hoax," said Johnson.

"Ah, they could be," said the old man. "I'm not saying they are, I'm just saying they *could* be."

"What about that American business, the thing they call the Kensington Stone?" asked Bennett.

"Oh, that!" said Downing. "That's interesting, you know. If those tablets are genuine, if the characters on them are runic characters, they would prove that the Vikings arrived at what is now modern Minnesota in 1362."

"I see!" said Fraser.

There was silence for a few moments. They were all looking at the strange clay tablets.

"Of course, Piltdown," said old Harris, at last breaking the silence, "wasn't the only scientific hoax to be perpetrated. I remember the tragic story of Paul Kammerer. A man whose career was ruined by a drop of ink beneath the skin

of a toad's thumb." He shook his head sadly. "Poor Paul!" the old man sighed. "A brilliant man; I knew him well. He based his book 'The inheritance of acquired characteristics' on evidence that had been faked, presumably by someone who had worked very close to him at some time. He was doing this work with midwife toads."

"I'm afraid I'm not much of a biologist," said Charles Downing. "What exactly are they, Mr. Harris?"

"They are so named because the female has an odd habit of allowing her husband to carry the eggs about stuck to his legs, until the young hatch out under water."

"Let's see, Kammerer was Viennese, wasn't he?" asked Johnson.

"Yes that's right," said old Harris. "He worked this experiment as far as I can remember by taking two groups of the toads and raising the first group entirely out of water while keeping the others in tanks where the only land available—so to speak—was in the form of small islands, from which they would soon return to the water because the islands had been heated to an uncomfortable temperature—from the toads point of view." The old man chuckled.

"This experiment went on a long time, did it?" said Downing idly fingering the stone tablet in his hand.

"Oh yes, went on for some considerable time," said old Harris. "Many generations of toads were involved until finally Kammerer said that the male toads which he had raised exclusively on land, lost their egg carrying habits, but those that were forced to live in the water developed little horny pads on the thumbs—such as are frequently seen among water frogs. Much was said at the time; Kammerer took his specimens to London to lecture—I remember attending that lecture too. Dr. Gardin was there and so was Dr. Nuttall, he was Biology Professor at Cambridge at the time, I believe. They both spoke very highly of Kammerer."

"What went wrong exactly?" asked Fraser.

"Well, it was Noble of the American Museum of Natural History in New York who finally saw what had happened. It was an August day in 1926, I remember it well, I almost said I remember it like yesterday, but I don't, I remember it a darn sight better than yesterday. You'll find your memory does that as you get older young fella." He paused, wheezing a little in the hot sun.

"Noble saw something wrong with the specimens?" suggested Johnson.

"Oh, yes, yes," squeaked the old man, "the little blackened thumb pads lacked certain characteristics, according to Noble; they were smooth, very smooth and although I'm not

primarily a biologist I believe Noble said that the epidermal spines were missing and the colouring was subcutaneous, it should have been actually *in* the skin you see but it wasn't it was *underneath* it. And the skin also showed marks of having been interfered with, having been cut in some way. When he dissected the specimen," the old man was laughing heartily now, "all the black ink washed out."

"And Kammerer killed himself as a result of this," said Bennett. It was half question, half statement.

"Yes, poor fellow. Poor fellow! His farewell letter was published shortly after his death. He said he found it impossible to survive the destruction of his life's work and that he hoped to find enough courage and fortitude to end his wretched life. Poor fellow. Poor fellow!"

"I say!" Bennett interrupted Harris's commiserations of the dead Viennese biologist. "Look! Look over there!"

"What is it?" asked the old man, "I don't see as well as I used to—most annoying."

"There's someone coming," said Bennett.

"White man?" asked Harris.

"No, he's an Arab by the look of him," said Downing.

"He's rather an odd looking character," murmured Johnson.

"Decidedly!" agreed Fraser.

"He appears to be coming straight towards us," said Bennett, "it is obvious he wants to see us about something."

The stranger was drawing rapidly closer . . . .

### Chapter Three

#### ABOU-BEN-SIRA

THE five archaeologists replaced the clay tablets which they had been examining in the box and stood watching the strangely robed eastern figure moving swiftly towards their camp. Despite the fact that the olive-tanned Arab had been hurrying—hurrying at least as far as his dignity would permit in the broiling Iraq sun, he was nevertheless, perfectly cool, calm and self-possessed when he began to speak.

"I bid you good day, Professor Bennett."

"I don't think we have had the pleasure, have we?" said the tall, scholarly leader of the archaeological expedition.

"It would be too much to hope that you would remember me, sir." The Arab's English was impeccable but there was just a trace of an almost indefinable accent. Downing looked carefully at the man and saw an Eastern face that was a mask of politeness. The eyes were as black as the eyes of a vulture, and about as cruel. The nose was a long curving beak of an affair. The mouth below it thin, but at the same time sensuous. It was difficult to judge the man's age, he had that look which seems to descend upon the middle-eastern male at about the age of twenty-five and which lasts him for almost the whole of his adult life thereafter.

"My name is Abou-ben-Sira," said the Arab, "perhaps it is familiar to you sir?" He raised one eyebrow hopefully. It was a typically English mannerism and Bennett found himself wondering if the newcomer had been educated at an English school. But his dress, those odd robes, did not have the mark of an Arab who had been through a European education.

Fraser was looking at the man who had introduced himself as Abou-ben-Sira with something that was almost tantamount to suspicion. He had seen this fellow before somewhere, he felt, or had he? Was it the man he had seen, or a

picture of the man? Something about Abou-ben-Sira struck Fraser as being not altogether pleasant, yet he couldn't have put his finger on it. There was an indefinable, sinister aura, an invisible aura, that seemed to surround and envelope Abou-ben-Sira over and above the strange robes. Arabian dress, thought Fraser, doesn't change much with the passage of centuries, and yet, there was something that was mediaeval at least, about this man. He looked like an authentic illustration from a book of Old-Testament history. The quality that delineated his difference would have been extremely hard to put into words, thought Fraser, but there was something about him that was different. No doubt, if they could have stood him beside half a dozen of their Arab workmen and studied him closely they would have seen exactly what those differences were. Fraser did just flash a quick glance in the direction of the Arab excavators to see whether he could spot any signal points of difference. He saw nothing, nothing enough to satisfy the question mark which was probing away at the back of his mind and making him feel uneasy. But, he did see that the Arabian labourers were looking thoughtfully towards the strange newcomer who had introduced himself as Abou-ben-Sira.

Before any of the archaeologists could make a move to prevent him the stranger had stooped and taken a tablet from the box. He held it close to his face examining it carefully in the brilliance of the glaring sunlight.

"You are able to interpret these Professor Bennett?" asked Abou.

"We have not succeeded in translating them *yet*," Bennett chose his words with great care and placed considerable emphasis on the 'yet' at the end of the sentence.

"I expect we shall in a few moments," said Downing. Plump jovial Charlie Downing was not very often put off his stride by anybody but there was something about this man who called himself Abou-ben-Sira, that made Downing feel uncomfortable and uneasy.

Eric Fraser cast a swift sideline glance at Downing and their eyes met in a look that spoke volumes. It was as though Downing had said 'I'm not particularly impressed with this fellow' and as though Fraser's assent had been voluble and conclusive.

George Harris was squinting at Abou until his face was as wrinkled as the physiognomy of an Orang-utan.

"I've got the strange feeling we've met before," squeaked the parrot-like tones of George Harris.

"It is possible that we have, learned sir," replied Ben-Sira without looking up from the tablet.

"But it was many years ago," said Harris.

"Indeed. Indeed." Ben-Sira was paying little or no attention to the old man's remarks.

"If you are the man I think you are," quaked old George Harris, tremulously. "Then, the circumstances in which we met were not particularly favourable ones." It is difficult for a quaking, senile falsetto to take on a note of sternness or rebuke—either real or implied. But, listening to Harris's voice, Johnson got the impression that this was what the veteran archaeologist was trying to convey.

Andrew Bennett was beginning to show his annoyance.

"May we ask the reason for your visit?" he asked rather coldly.

"I am aware that you have made a discovery which interests me learned sir," said Abou. He turned and fixed Eric Fraser with a particularly meanful glance.

"You have not translated these tablets Mr. Fraser?"

"How the devil do you know who I am. I'm sure we've never met?" said Eric rather tersely.

"I know a great deal about visitors to my country," said Abou-ben-Sira.

"You don't look like an Iraq citizen to me," said Andrew Bennett.

"Did I say that Iraq was my country?"

"We are visitors in Iraq and you gave the impression it was the country to which you were referring," said Ian Johnson rather crisply.

"These modern divisions are largely artificial," said Ben-Sira.

"What's that meant to imply?" enquired Andrew Bennett.

"It is meant to imply, learned sir," said Abou-ben-Sira, taking up the archaeological leader's remark, "that countries are countries from time immemorial, though men may change their names; rivers and mountains, these things are boundaries, not barbed-wire and flags and oil pipes, these are the mere trappings of civilization; they register nothing in my mind."

Ian Johnson was looking at the peculiar Arab very strangely indeed.

"When you were talking about your country you meant Mesopotamia, you meant Babylon," he said.

"Perhaps!" Ben-Sira flashed an almost warning glance at Ian Johnson. Johnson, with the mind of a philosopher, was studying Abou-ben-Sira as though he represented a most interesting phenomenon which Johnson had not seen for several decades.

"You have failed to state your business satisfactorily," said Andrew Bennett, rather angrily, "and we have a lot of important work to do. These tablets must be translated."

"This, of course, is why I have come learned sir," said Abou-ben-Sira. "Have I now stated my business satisfactorily?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Andrew Bennett.

"I think I do," said Charlie with a grin, "he thinks he can translate them."

"I do not *think* I can translate them, learned sir," said Abou-ben-Sira, with an emphasis upon the 'learned sir' which would have been rather more fitting if the phrase had been a violent expletive or obscene oath. "I KNOW I CAN TRANSLATE THEM." He looked at them. "The wisdom of the west is as the wisdom of a child. Your nations were young, sprawling, mewling, pewking, infants when my country was old."

"I wouldn't pretend to understand your last remark at all," said Bennett; his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Ian Johnson was still weighing up Abou-ben-Sira with careful, philosophic thoughtfulness. Charlie Downing had stopped grinning. Eric Fraser was looking a little puzzled. Old George Harris was still screwing up his eyes and racking his brain trying to think exactly where he had seen Ben-Sira before.

The mysterious Easterner ran his finger along a line of baked clay symbols.

"These are incantations," he said. "Incantations which have the power of summoning or retarding the progress of great genies. These incantations are capable of summoning the Arallu or the Utukku." He implied more by his tone than his words.

"You don't really believe there is anything in such superstitions, do you?" said Andrew Bennett.

"It's interesting mythology," said Charlie Downing, "but it's no more than that." He laughed. But it was rather a nervous laugh. Eric Fraser was looking thoughtfully at Abou-ben-Sira.

"You do mean it, don't you?" he said.

"Yes, I mean it," said the Arab. "Mr. Fraser you are the only man who appears to be taking me seriously, you find me disturbing?"

"I find you very strange," said Fraser. He spoke with commendable frankness and honesty.

"I think I remember exactly now," said Harris, "it was . . ."

Abou-ben-Sira fixed him with a look that stabbed like a driven sword.

"There are some things which are best forgotten, ancient one," hissed Ben-Sira, with a voice of pure sibilant danger. "For the old who wish to grow older a poor memory can be one of Allah's greatest blessings."

"Are you threatening me?" squeaked old George Harris.

"You may interpret my words as you will," said the Arab.

"I can't have you speaking to Mr. Harris like that," said Andrew Bennett rather tersely. Ian Johnson was still looking philosophically at Ben-Sira. Charlie Downing looked more serious than he had done since the expedition set out. Eric had known Charlie a long time and had never seen him looking so serious. Downing was biting his lip thoughtfully as he looked at the strange man who called himself Abou-ben-Sira.

"Look here!" said Andrew Bennett, "if you really can interpret the tablets we shall be very glad to engage your services." Abou-ben-Sira bowed low.

"Very well, gentlemen, I will commence work for you immediately. How would you like them translated? Into Latin, Greek, Hebrew, English?" He sounded as though he could have run through a much longer list.

"Are you familiar with all these tongues?" asked Bennett.

"I have had more *time* than most in which to devote myself to the pursuit of ancient languages. The pristine Egyptian tongue is one of my favourites, alas, rarely heard now in all its full fluency and beauty. I think that so many of our modern languages are degenerate in form." There was something about the personality of the peculiar Abou-ben-Sira which was almost overwhelming. Bennett was not the kind of man with whom it was possible to get away with much. Downing, despite his plumpness and joviality was, in his own way, a man to be reckoned with. Fraser was no fool and Harris, although old and dodderly could be a crotchety and pernicious old man if things did not go his way. Johnson had that depth of philosophic insight which made him an opponent to be reckoned with in the mental sphere. Each of the archaeologists, in his own way, was a character, a personality, but somehow Abou-ben-Sira overwhelmed them all. It was done so cleverly, so swiftly, they didn't realise it was being done. We all have our weaknesses—Ben-Sira appeared to have that penetrating insight which could pick out another man's weakness and capitalise on it.

It was as though his eyes, or his mind, could detect with

a horrible ease and facility the chinks in everybody's armour. And, having found them, he sent psychic mental shafts through those chinks, until the soft ego-body below the armour was hopelessly lacerated.

"I shall be taking the tablets now, to examine them," said Abou-ben-Sira.

"Well, I'm not altogether sure," said Bennett.

"Surely! Surely gentlemen! Surely, O learned ones, it is your wish that the tablets be deciphered as quickly as possible?"

Like Svengali hypnotising Trilby in that immortal novel of artist life in the Paris of the Edwardian epoch, or thereabouts, Abou-ben-Sira forced his will by sheer mental effort on the five archaeologists. None of them really wanted Ben-Sira to take the tablets. Normally it would have been the easiest thing in the world for Bennett to say so; there the matter would have ended. There were few men who were really willing to cross swords mentally with Bennett, but once their leader had succumbed to the peculiar mental attack, which Ben-Sira had the knack of mounting before anybody knew that it was being mounted, the rest of the party followed suit quite easily.

Like two labourers carrying a craftsman's tools, Downing and Fraser carried the chest with the tablets, at Abou's direction, to a tent which had previously held a few supplies; Ben-Sira sat down just inside the flap. One by one he began taking the clay tablets out of the chest. He held them close to his face as he deciphered the strange old script which had beaten Bennett, defeated Downing, frustrated Fraser, harassed Harris, and jinxed Johnson.

"He's an incredible chap you know," said Andrew Bennett.

"Most peculiar chap I've ever met," said Charlie Downing. He grinned; some of his humour was returning. "And believe me I've met some funny ones. Not funny *ha ha*, funny *peculiar*," he added.

"I don't like it," said Eric Fraser. "I don't like it at all. There's something very odd about that character."

"And he's a decidedly unpleasant man, I feel," squeaked George Harris.

"I can't get to the bottom of him," said Ian Johnson. "I've been thinking about him ever since he arrived." He turned to Andrew Bennett. "Look here, Mr. Bennett, do you realise what he has done to us?"

"What do you mean, done to us?" echoed Bennett.

"What he has done to our party I mean," said Johnson.

"He hasn't done anything that I am aware of," said Bennett a trifle testily.

"Oh, he has, you know," said Johnson.

"You mean the way he has got under our skins?" said Downing.

"Yes. I think that's what Ian means," said Eric Fraser. "He's certainly got under my skin, and I'll admit it. I'm rattled."

"I'm rattled too," quavered George Harris, "we're all a bit rattled. There is something strange about him; the man is a bouncer; he's an absolute bouncer." The archaic word seemed characteristic coming from old George Harris, thought Ian Johnson.

"He just seemed to usurp my authority," said Andrew Bennett. He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. The tall scholar was stooping a little.

"I don't know how he does it," said Charlie Downing. "I mean he just came walking in; is it just that he's got the devil's own cheek?"

"I've seen plenty of fellows with cheek, nerve that kind of thing," said Eric Fraser, "none of them would have got away with what this man Ben-Sira has got away with."

"He's got more than brazen affrontery; he's got some kind of secret sinister power. I don't know what it is, but it's as though his personality is shielded by something supernatural, something psychic, something abnormal." He looked round, "I'm sorry, I'm making a speech gentlemen."

"This may be a good time for making speeches," said Andrew Bennett.

"Is any time a good time for making speeches?" cut in Charlie Downing.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not," said Fraser non-committally.

"Speeches!" squawked old George Harris, sounding like a parrot. "Too much talk, not enough action. Bennett you are in command of this expedition, you go and tell that Arabian, or whatever he is, that we want those tablets back at once."

"Why don't you go and ask him," said Ian Johnson. There was no love lost between the philosophical Ian and the semi-senile Harris. Johnson was no great believer in the precept that old men should be venerated simply because of their age. He had the kind of mind that would have agreed with the villager in the classic joke who was reputed to have said that the oldest inhabitant's sole achievement was growing old and it had taken him a devil of a time to do that! Johnson would also have been amused by the story of the centenarian being interviewed by the local journalist writing an article in the treacly sentimental tripe tradition that is normally written about centenarians, surrounded by rose

gardens and culinary herbs. When the journalist was supposed to have asked the old man if he had any enemies, the centenarian was reported to have replied in the negative, adding that he had outlived every one of them! Ian Johnson had the kind of mind in which one joke led to another. Thinking about the two anecdotes that had already flashed from memory into his consciousness, Johnson was reminded of yet another story, a story that came up from the depths of far away and long ago, a story that concerned a Temperance worker who had heard of an old gentleman who had just attained his hundredth birthday and who was also a total abstainer. The Temperance worker rushed round at once and found the old man sitting up in bed, desperately weak and ill. The ancient one had been persuaded to sign a testimonial to the effect that he had never tasted alcoholic liquor and that he was one hundred years old. Just as the feeble old hand was being guided shakily across the signature by the enthusiastic Temperance worker there was a sudden diabolical racket from the room above, the sound of bottles going over, wild giggling and feminine screams. It sounded as though a beatnik party was in full swing. The horrified Temperance worker had looked up enquiringly at the ceiling, whereupon a tear had trickled down the centenarian's cheek and the old man had whispered, "I'm so sorry about that, sir, that's my old father, he's having another of his drunken orgies."

Ian Johnson's thoughts must have been evident on his face to some extent for George Harris was looking at him closely, rather angrily. Eric Fraser was also casting a swift glance in his direction and Charlie Downing had the expression of a man who is waiting for somebody to speak and wondering why the dickens they don't. Andrew Bennett turned to Johnson with an air of calm detachment. Bennett had by this time recovered a great deal of his *sang froid*. When he spoke his voice was completely under control again.

"I don't really like to take the tablets away from him having told him that he could get on with the translation," he said. "On the other hand, I have no objection if any of you would like to go and take some of the tablets to work on them yourselves."

"I don't think I'll bother," said Charlie Downing quietly.

Eric Fraser shook his head.

"I think I'll turn in," he said, "I er . . . don't think I could do much with them now anyway."

The sun was setting; it made Ian Johnson think of a line from Omar Khayyam: "*The stars are setting and the caravan starts for the dawn of nothing. O make haste!*" Something

about the stone tablets, the clay tablets that they had found, made Ian Johnson think of the words of the superb old Persian philosopher-poet. There was such poignant honesty, and yet at the same time so much depressing cynicism in Omar's words. Yet, perhaps, if we lived more for the present and less for the future that may never materialise, thought Johnson, we shall get more out of life. He wondered, philosopher that he was, exactly what the philosopher's calling ought to be. The idea of cynicism went through his mind again and he remembered one particularly bitter joke that had been made against philosophers as a whole, the idea that most contemporary philosophers gave good advice to people who were happier than they were! He thought of a line from Belloc's "Cautionary Verses". One of his amusing poems had referred to a lady known as Aunt Jane. Aunt Jane had apparently been a meddlesome old busybody. As Ian Johnson now remembered those lines the words sprang visibly to his mind: "*She often bestows good advice upon those who give her no thanks in return.*" The philosophers of the world, particularly a number of the contemporary philosophers—those who were accused of giving good advice to people who were happier than they were—probably came under the same condemnation as the Aunt Jane of Belloc's verse. Philosopher that he was, Johnson wished that he could have thought of something that was even half as wise as the secret depth that underlaid so much of Belloc's verse.

As though they were somehow ashamed of the strange power which Abou-ben-Sira had been able to exert over their expedition, Bennett, Downing, Fraser, Johnson and tottery old George Harris made their way towards their tents. Perhaps it was the middle-eastern setting that made Bennett think as he did, but a line of the Old Testament suddenly flashed into his mind: "*To your tents, O Israel!*" He smiled a little, the smile of a scholar who makes a joke which satisfies the scholar himself if no one else.

Charlie Downing closed the flap of his tent and lay in the darkness thinking with considerable misgivings over the events of the last few hours. The discovery of the strange tablets, the arrival of the peculiar Abou-ben-Sira, none of these things were in the least pleasing as far as Charlie was concerned.

Eric Fraser also lay thinking in the lonely darkness of his own tent. The more he thought about Ben-Sira the less happy he was.

George Harris with the sleeplessness of old age was sitting by the door of his tent like old Caspar in the ballad,

looking out upon the village green where his grandchild was shortly destined to find the skull of the unknown warrior who fell in the course of "The Famous Victory."

Ian Johnson was lost in deep, semi-existentialist thoughts of his own.

George Harris got up and began moving slowly and rather uncertainly through the gathering twilight until he reached the tent where Abou-ben-Sira sat with the tablets.

"I want one of the tablets," croaked the old man.

"I am afraid, learned sir, that I am unable to comply with your request," said Ben-Sira.

"Er . . . don't . . . don't be so impudent," said the old man. He put a doddering hand on one of the baked clay oblongs.

"It will be necessary for me to take strong action, old learned one, if you interfere with my purposes," said Ben-Sira.

"Are you threatening me?" squeaked George Harris.

"Please do not speak so loudly, you will be disturbing the others, old one," said Ben-Sira. This time even Harris's senile old mind was aware that the title 'learned' had been dropped from the Arab's form of address.

"I shall report your conduct to Mr. Bennett. I will have you know that I am venerated as an authority in my own country." George Harris felt very angry—justifiably angry. Who was this unknown Arabian upstart? Memory frightened him with a strange answer his reason could not accept.

Anger had welled up within him to such an extent that his rickety old heart was moving far too fast, far too excitedly. Ben-Sira picked up the next tablet from the box.

"Old one," growled the Arab. In a voice so low that only George Harris could hear it. "Look at me, old one." The senile archaeologist turned and stared at Ben-Sira. "Look at me!" intoned the Arab again, "look at me, AT ME," he repeated. His voice took on a note of deep, lower power, as though some strange dark psychic force was using him as a focal point. "At me!" he intoned once more. And the tablet in his hand appeared to old George Harris to be glowing, to be giving out some kind of strange white light; yet, it was not a pure white light; it was tinged with yellow and green. There were odd, unhappy colours, as though from some non-terrestrial spectrum, some psychic colour band, some weird wheel of macabre hues, evil tints and sombre shades. It was as though the light from the nethermost caverns of Hell was refracting in some peculiar manner through the opacity of the clay tablets.

"Light can't shine through an opaque object like that," protested old George Harris—more to his own outraged sense of what was rational and reasonable, than to the man who held the stone. "Light can't do that, besides it's not proper light its . . ." he coughed and spluttered a little, there was a pain in his chest. He turned and made his way in the direction of Andrew Bennett's tent. "Andrew," he called faintly, "Andrew, I don't feel very well." His voice had become very weak indeed. His intonation was so feeble as to be scarcely audible. "Andrew," he panted again. Bennett heard a faint sound outside his tent; he sat up, bolt upright almost immediately.

"Who's there?" his voice was quick, crisp, precise. "Who's there?" he called again.

"Andre . . . ew," came a faint moan from outside. Bennett pulled on his trousers and a pair of sandals and thrust aside the tent flap. It was almost dark, but not quite. In the dim light he saw the prostrate form of old George Harris, twitching and fluttering feebly, like a man with a high fever.

"George," Andrew Bennett crossed the intervening yards swiftly on long powerful legs and knelt beside the old archaeologist. "George, what's happened?" Old Harris put a hand on his chest, his eyes rolled.

"Ooooooooooh," he said, "I think I'm dying." He sounded to Andrew Bennett like a singularly poor rendition of Polonius's famous lines from Hamlet: "*Oh I am slain*," something so peculiar and incongruous about the similarity of the old man's intonation to those Shakespearean lines made Bennett almost want to laugh, yet it was not a humorous laugh, it was the kind of laugh that relieves the nervous tension in a man's system when circumstances are putting pressure on him, more pressure, in fact, that he can rightly be expected to take.

Bennett was shouting for Charlie, Eric and Ian. Downing, looking rather like a great, fat, drowsy owl, blundered through the tent flap doing up his trousers as he came. Eric Fraser, pyjamed and looking terribly British arrived within minutes. Ian Johnson stirred himself from the depths of his philosophic reverie, dragged himself back from the remote spheres of existentialism and logical positivism and joined the others. George Harris was not yet dead; his lips were moving; he was trying to say something, but no words would come out. A moment later his last shuddering breath left the senile old body and George Harris's soul passed in to that great beyond where all secrets are known and where past and present meet in eternity.



Bennett, Downing, Fraser and Johnson, as though inspired by some strange external prompting, turned and looked in the direction of the tent where Abou-ben-Sira worked at the stone tablets. It was as though a peculiar light had been emanating from behind the tent flap. But, even as they looked, it died away. Andrew Bennett rose from beside the body of his dead companion and strolled briskly, angrily, towards Ben-Sira's tent. He pulled the flap to one side.

"Our friend, Mr. Harris, is dead," he said, "do you know anything about it?"

There was something in Bennett's voice that came as close as made no difference to accusation. Abou-ben-Sira stood with his arms folded inside the robes of his strange mediaeval costume. His glittering eyes looked back arrogantly into the face of Andrew Bennett.

"I know nothing about it. An old man is dead; all men must die sometime; he is fortunate that his hairs grew white before he left the land of the living." Abou-ben-Sira looked around at the party of archaeologists. "Some may not be so fortunate," he said with a voice of sinister foreboding.

"Just exactly what is that remark meant to imply?" Bennett had straightened up, some of his scholarly stoop had left him. The anger that now welled up within him was temporarily stronger than the peculiar psychic power with which Abou-ben-Sira had previously held Andrew and the other archaeologists in a kind of invisible net.

Ben-Sira backed away just a little, some of the arrogance went out of his eyes.

"Why should you wish to think that I had any part in the death of this poor old man?" The sudden immediate change in his attitude took Bennett, Downing and Fraser rather unawares. Johnson, however, looking at Ben-Sira with the penetrating insight of the amateur philosopher that he was, had observed something of the psychic mental processes which seemed to be motivating the strange Arabian, the peculiar Mesopotamian; Ben-Sira was playing with them, thought Johnson, playing with them as an angler plays with a large but rewardingly valuable fish. Thinking of Ben-Sira in this piscatorial simile Johnson got the impression that the Arab was playing with them only until such time as he could bring up stronger tackle. It was as though he were using a very thin twine, but, as though he knew that hundred-pound breaking-strain best nylon line was available, or would be available to him very shortly. There was a sense in which Johnson got the impression that the extra power which Abou-ben-Sira intended and anticipated exer-

cising, was in some way connecting with the tablets. A great battle of wills was being fought between Ben-Sira and Andrew Bennett at that moment; Ben-Sira was now trying to exert himself again and Bennett, always a highly civilised man, had allowed his anger to subside. It had subsided to a point where it no longer transcended the peculiar psychic power which emanated from Ben-Sira the strange Arab.

Portly Charlie Downing stood like a friendly barrel that has suddenly been kicked in the bung-hole and doesn't quite know what to do next.

Fraser was frowning thoughtfully. He felt as disconcerted in the presence of Abou-ben-Sira as he had never felt.

Harris lay very still and very quiet. He looked far more like a wax effigy than the remains of what had once been a living, breathing man.

As Fraser looked down at the corpse of the old archaeologist he got the impression he was looking at a shell that had been discarded. The old man lay like a heap of worn clothing thrown on the floor. It made Fraser think of a discarded coat that a man takes off when the weather grows warm.

The Arab seemed to gather all his resources together for a superb, supreme, fundamental effort and then, without knowing why, the archaeologists found themselves moving away from him, back towards their own tents.

Fraser pulled back the flapper, stooped and made his way towards his bed. He had no idea why he was doing it; there just seemed to be some kind of overwhelming demand that had dominated his own volition for the time being.

Bennett, Downing and Johnson were behaving similarly. Each had walked like a somnabulist in the direction of his own tent. There, each had flung himself down on the bed as though invisible hands were urging him towards it. How long this strange feeling remained none of them could have said accurately afterwards, but it was the tall, solemn Bennett who recovered himself first. With a startled cry, uncharacteristic of his normal smooth, suave, exterior, Bennett leapt from his bed and ran across the moonlit clearing to the grim spot where the body of George Harris still lay unattended.

"Eric," he called sharply as he ran. "Charles, Ian."

There was no response from his colleagues at first and then it seemed to Eric Fraser on his canvas bed in the tent that he was hearing a voice from a thousand miles away. He seemed to be lying at the bottom of a deep well, or a vast pit. The voice was calling, *calling*. He almost expected that someone would lower him a rope, or perhaps

even a bucket on a chain, but there was nothing except a voice. His returning consciousness seemed to be fighting against a kind of psychic anaesthetic. His consciousness finally won, he got to his feet and stumbled through the tent flap. It seemed strangely cool in the moonlight after the heat of the day.

"Andrew?" His voice was not properly under control, it held a questioning intonation. Andrew knelt beside the body of George Harris, he looked at Eric Fraser gratefully.

"Thank God you are all right, I thought perhaps something had happened to you as well."

"What happened to us?" said Fraser, "were we drugged? I . . . I . . . heard you calling but it took me a thousand years to get organized. I don't know what's the matter."

"No, I don't think we were drugged in the chemical sense. I don't think we were drugged in the biological sense, but we've been the victims of some kind of sinister influence, some kind of macabre mental power," said Andrew.

"You mean the Arab?" said Fraser. His senses were now returning rapidly.

"Yes, I do mean the Arab," said Andrew Bennett.

"Where is he?" said Fraser.

The flap of Ben-Sira's tent was open.

"That's very odd," murmured Andrew. "Let's have a look."

Bennett and Downing were also emerging from their tents, looking sleepy and bewildered, as Andrew and Eric made their way swiftly and purposefully across the few paces of moonlit clearing to the tent which Ben-Sira had previously occupied.

"He's gone!" said Fraser.

"It doesn't seem possible," said Bennett, "what about the tablets?"

"They've gone too by the look of things," said Fraser.

"But he's alone; it took two of us to carry that box!"

"There are far more things about Abou-ben-Sira than meet the eye," said Eric.

"I'm well aware of that," agreed Bennett.

"What do we do next?" asked Eric.

"Let's get some lights going I find this moonlit gloom most depressing," said the expedition leader.

## Chapter Four

### TRAGEDY

**THEY** buried George Harris there in the Mesopotamian archaeological site. He was a man who had given his present to the past. He was a man who had given his mind and energy, and now his life itself, to what for him was the sacred cause of unravelling the mysteries of the ancient world. Somehow, thought Andrew Bennett and the others, it seemed fitting that old George Harris should lie deep and at peace in a strata which he had investigated. If the old man had been able to have a say in where he wanted his remains to lie, it seemed to the others this would have been the kind of choice he would have made. Great lines from a great pen came to the mind of Eric Fraser as the short but moving service concluded.

"I believe it was Stevenson who said 'here he lies where he loved to be,'" said Fraser.

"Yes, I think it was," agreed Bennett. "Didn't he go on to say: 'Home is the sailor, home from the sea, and the huntsman is home from the hill?'"

"He did," concurred Ian Johnson.

"The archaeologist has come home from his last dig," said Bennett softly.

None of them felt like doing any more work that day, they stood or sat about in small desolate groups of two or three. The native workmen were carrying on the routine procedure. But, somehow to Bennett and the others there didn't seem to be any point in it. George Harris had not been a pleasant or an easy man to live with, but he had been a man, he had been one of them. He had been a living personality and now, it seemed as if that personality was extinguished.

"In a situation like this," said Johnson looking up from the small canvas folding stool, from which he had been doodling in the sandy soil with the end of a stick, "some-

thing makes you think about the great issues, the really big issues, things that matter when everything else turns to chalk and tinsel."

"You mean—where do we go, if anywhere?" asked Bennett.

"Yes, this to my mind is the ultimate question that philosophy must try to answer. There are other questions for philosophy to concern itself with—the *why* and the *wherefore*—"

"But the only reason for wanting to know the *why* and the *wherefore*," said Fraser suddenly, "is surely to know whether there is anything to look forward to on the other side?"

"I'll be quite honest," said Bennett, "I'm open-minded about it. I like to *think* that there is, I like to *hope* that there is, but it is no more than hope, it is no more than thought. I couldn't claim that in any sense I was a man of faith. I wouldn't like to say that each new sunrise is to me proof of the immortality, or the resurrection of man. I wouldn't like to say that when a butterfly emerges from its chrysalis we see a nature parable of incorruption rising from corruption." He spread his hands expressively. "I'm an agnostic in the fullest sense of the word. *I just do not know.*"

"I think you are being very honest intellectually," said Eric Fraser. "At the same time I don't agree with you. I don't say that we can prove these things with the same kind of mathematical logical certainty that we can use to prove Pithagoras." He smiled a little, it was the first time that any of them had smiled that day. "But I do think," went on Fraser, "that there is more to life than the things that we can see, touch, taste and handle. After all, faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen, if I make myself clear. It is one of the essential ingredients of life and it is certainly an essential ingredient of happiness. Some of the most important things can never be proved to the satisfaction of the scientist. You can't prove a victory before you win it. You can't prove a man can lead, and be a leader worth following, unless you follow him."

"Well, I'd agree with that," said Bennett, "without any hesitation. But, at the same time you must admit that some men can follow the wrong leaders and some men can believe in a victory which turns out to be nothing but a defeat."

"It seems to me," said Ian Johnson, "that far from arriving at a solution this is a mere playing with words. Unless we get down to something deep or something more fundamental, unless we ask ourselves what the basic purpose of life itself

is, we remain on the surface. You both seem to be assuming that life's purpose is happiness. A moment ago one of you said that faith is an essential ingredient of happiness. But, is happiness the chief end and aim of man? Is it the thing we ought to be striving for, or is it so elusive that it can only be reached by going in what appears to be the opposite direction?" He paused thinking hard to find a simile. "In '*Alice through the looking glass*' you remember everything was back to front, the only way in which she could reach her objective at one point, was to walk in the opposite direction—or what appeared to be the opposite direction. Having done this, she was then able to reach her objective."

"You mean to say that we find happiness by going in the opposite direction?" asked Bennett.

"Well, it is a pretty logical thought from a philosophical stand point," said Ian. He looked at the newly made grave. "George Harris never set out to find happiness. George Harris set out to find objects of archaeological interest. He set out to reconstruct ancient civilisations. He set out to do something which he felt was a worthwhile job, something which absorbed his heart, his mind, his soul, something to which he has ultimately given his life. If George was here so that we could ask him, I think he would say that he found great happiness. He found it by absorbing himself in his life's interest. It was something bigger than himself. Happiness is something that affects the soul, the mind, the personality the *id*, the inner core of a man's being, call it what you will, call it an *ego*, call it . . . " he waved his hand in the air, "*the self*. But, the only way that can be found is the abnegation of the soul; the only way you can make the self happy is to forget that it exists."

"What about the people we might call playboys and pleasure seekers? Do you think they get anything out of life?" asked Bennett.

"If they get as much as they think they get why do so many of them commit suicide?" asked Ian, "and think too," he went on, "of those who appear to have nothing from life compared with those who have everything. Think of Diogenes in his tub."

"In his tub?" asked Bennett.

"I'm using the popular terminology as you well know," said Ian.

"Yes. Yes, scholarship has shown," said Bennett, "that Diogenes did not live in a barrel-tub, but in an enormous earthenware wine jar."

There was a brief pause and a short silence, a temporary lull in the conversation; eyes strayed back to the newly

turned earth beneath which the body of their companion lay.

Plump, jovial-faced Charlie Downing was looking very serious, very melancholy. It was so unusual for him even at a moment like this, that Fraser turned towards him with a sympathetic expression in his eyes.

"Don't take it too hard, Charlie, after all he'd had a good innings."

"Yes, I suppose he had," said Charlie, "must have been coming on for ninety you know, it's an incredible age and he was still on the job."

"I hope that we are as fit as he was when we reach that age," said Bennett. It was a platitude, a truism.

There was another silence, a lull in the conversation, a lapse of speech.

"I'm not feeling terribly fit," said Charlie Downing. "I think poor old George's death has upset me more than I realised. I think I'll go and lie down in the cool." The other three exchanged meaningful glances.

"Do you want some quinine?" asked Andrew Bennett.

"No, I don't think so, skipper; I'll be all right when I've had an hour's lie down, I think." Lines of pain were mingling with the expression of melancholy on Charlie Downing's normally rubicund countenance.

A few moments later the others heard the sound of heavy breathing coming from his tent.

"I've been with Charlie on many expeditions," said Bennett, "and I've never known him to ail a thing in his life."

"No, I haven't either," said Fraser, "and I've been with him more than once."

"What do you think it is then?" said Johnson.

"There are so many things here that seem to be open to nothing but a kind of psychic, or supernatural, explanation," said Bennett, "and yet I'm as agnostic about the possibility of there being laws which transcend the laws of physics, the things that we call the laws of nature, as I am about the possibility of human survival or the existence of a God. I just don't know and it's not an avenue of research to which one can apply the empirical approach." He was speaking rather slowly choosing his words with care.

"Are you seriously suggesting?" began Eric Fraser, "that Ben-Sira has not only disappeared with those clay tablets, but that he was responsible for the death of George Harris? And, responsible too for whatever illness or indisposition has just struck Charlie?"

"I don't know," said Bennett, "but it seems a very strange coincidence," he looked at his two companions, "you others are feeling all right, are you?"

"Yes, I'm fine," said Fraser.

"How about you, Ian?" asked Andrew.

"Nothing to complain of, I don't like the heat any more than anyone else does, but I've been hot before."

"You're not feeling *unusually* hot, are you," said Bennett, "not feverish, or anything?"

"No, I don't think so."

"I tell you what. I really want to get away from here for a little while, I want a change of scenery, I think," said Bennett, "I'm going to take the jeep and get some supplies. I'll be back by nightfall, all being well."

There was an oil company trading store sixty miles to the south of them and they were normally able to obtain supplies from it.

"Do either of you want to come?" asked Bennett.

"No, I don't think so. Thanks all the same, I'd rather hang on here. I may try and read a little, or I may even do some digging tonight when it gets a bit cooler," said Ian.

"How about you, Eric, keep me company?"

"I feel more in the mood for a walk, if you don't mind, skipper, I don't want to go too far from poor old George." He nodded towards the grave. "It may sound rather quaint and old fashioned, but there it is"

"I understand," said the leader of the expedition.

The jeep was parked behind one of the supply tents. Its khaki-painted body-work shimmered and sweltered in the heat of the sun. The wheel itself felt warm to the archaeologist, as he climbed aboard and pulled the starter. Too much heat, or too much cold, prevents an engine from functioning at it's best, from being at a maximum peak of efficiency. It was so now with the jeep. Although the sturdy vehicle had been modified for service in middle-eastern temperatures, if it stood too long in the heat there was always a certain amount of evaporation in the carburettor and supply pipes, which meant that a few squirts of petrol had to be pumped up before she would fire. As Andrew Bennett put his foot on the accelerator the engine roared and reverberated up to a crashing cacophony of sound. The bonnet rattled and the archaeologist eased his pressure on the throttle pedal. It was by no means a new jeep, it had in fact been with them on many an expedition and it had suffered mechanical abuses which very few other vehicles would have been able to stand. The old khaki chariot was still as tough as a tank and it seemed to Bennett that like the legendary T-model Fords of yesteryear, it was impossible to wear out a jeep.

He depressed the clutch and dropped in the gears. Like the rest of the jeep the gears were getting a little worn, a

little inclined to rattle and protest, but they still worked and they were still strong and this was all that mattered as far as Bennett and his archaeologists were concerned. Over the roaring noise of the engine he called loudly in the direction of Eric Fraser.

"Sure you don't want to come?" Fraser shook his head. A verbal reply would have been superfluous. The noise of the engine would have rendered it quite fatuous anyway.

Andrew Bennett let the clutch up with more enthusiasm than skill. Like a number of learned scholars, he did not always apply his intelligence to the task immediately confronting him. The absent-minded professor does not only exist as a music-hall joke. Men who can recall lengthy scientific terminology with practised ease, often tend to leave their umbrellas in cloakrooms or trains. Savants, who know the stars in their courses as well as most of us know our back doors, cannot always be relied upon to recall their own telephone numbers. Archaeologists of the standing of Andrew Bennett who are able to reel off translations of archaic scripts, who can translate hieroglyphics and date a fragment of pottery to within a few years, sometimes forget the simpler but essential matters of driving a motor vehicle. The simple rule about letting the clutch up slowly was a thing that never stuck for very long in Andrew Bennett's mind.

The jeep, used to such abuses, bounded away, almost sitting up and begging like a well trained, rather energetic puppy. Bennett clung on to the wheel of the bucking khaki chariot as it bludgeoned its way across the rather sandy Iraq soil in the direction of the oil company's supply store. He waved to one or two of his local workers as he drove past. The actual job of driving has a psychological therapeutic effect on some people—Bennett was such a man. The depression which he had felt since the loss of the tablets and the death of George Harris began to lift a little. Despite its age the jeep was capable of good speed and although the road left a great deal to be desired, although in fact there were many people who would not have described it as a road at all, Bennett's slim, neat, scholastic foot was urging the jeep forward at a comfortable fifty.

The road improved a little and Bennett's toe went down harder still. At this point the land fell away, but not too steeply, on the south side of him and rose gently the other side, as the road wound its way around the side of a gentle hill. The hill grew steeper and the drop on Bennett's left grew steeper accordingly. The road was narrow and the bank on Bennett's right had now become something after

the style of a young cliff. It would have been impossible for two vehicles to pass, and it was common, in fact necessary procedure to use the horn fairly frequently.

Bennett's mind had gone off at a tangent, on a track of its own. He was thinking about the tablets; he was wondering how Ben-Sira had got them away, whether Ben-Sira had had help. From that, he started wondering whether any of the home-born Iraq local workmen were in league with the strange mediaeval looking Arab.

So engrossed was Bennett in his thoughts that he had not sounded the horn for some considerable time and he was still pushing the jeep forward at a comfortable 55 m.p.h. Ahead of him around the bend, as the road followed the curve of the mountain into which the little hill had grown, there loomed a huge lorry loaded with what looked like some kind of builders' material. Bennett had a fleeting glimpse of the startled brown face of the driver beneath its turban, and then he was doing frantic things with brake and clutch. It was obvious that a head-on collision was unavoidable; the tyres of the jeep, their wheels locked on by Bennett's feverish pressure on the brakes were skidding, sliding and throwing up dust-devils all over the road. At the last moment Bennett flung his arms in front of his face and shouted something incoherent. There, there was a violent impact. The jeep, sturdy vehicle that it was, was no match for the enormous truck, crumpled and bent it jarred to a tangled halt and Bennett catapulted from it. He struck the side of the lorry with horrible violence and fell like a crumpled, broken bird, which has just received a charge of lethal buckshot. He rolled helplessly down the long boulder strewn slopes. The native driver was unhurt; he was a little dazed and shocked at the sudden impact with the jeep, but he was a sensible practical man; he climbed bravely from his bent cab and began picking his way skilfully down the side of the ravine among the boulders, scrubby bushes and sandy soil between them. It took him ten minutes steady climbing to reach Bennett's body and by the time he got there the leader of the archaeological expedition was very, very dead.

down the ravine. The driver seems to have been a pretty good type, he went down after him although he was a bit shaken and dazed himself. A man from one of the oil companies saw it happen. He also went down to give a hand; he said Bennett must have been killed long before he reached the bottom of the slope. So now there are three of us, you and I and Charlie."

Ian and Eric exchanged swift meaningful glances.

"I called him a second ago," said Eric, "when I called you, and he didn't come."

"Perhaps he's still asleep, maybe it's the best thing for him; he did look groggy when he went to lie down."

"Yes, but we must tell him the boss is dead," protested Eric.

"Of course," agreed Ian.

The two men made their way over to Charlie's tent.

"Charlie! Charlie!!"

"He is in a deep sleep," said Ian. There was a trace of anxiety in his voice. They stooped, passed through the tent flap and knelt beside Charlie Downing's canvas bed. They shook him gently.

"Come on Charlie, wake up," said Ian, "something terrible has happened." There was no answer. Eric and Ian looked down at the rounded mound on the canvas bed. Eric shook Charlie again.

"Charlie," but he realised as he spoke that he was only going through the motions.

"He's dead," said Ian. He said it in a tone of horrible finality. He said it in the voice that had been stripped of emotion because of the very power of the emotion that was even now numbing his mind.

"I can't believe it," murmured Fraser, "but nevertheless it's true."

Johnson pulled back the sheet and they looked at Charlie Downing's face. There was no doubt now that he was dead, no living face could emulate such a mask of completed mortality. They were not looking at the face of the Charlie Downing they had known, they were looking at the face of a corpse; they were looking at a death mask. There was something about those lifeless features which was a common denominator with every dead face since the first primitive man realised that he was not immortal.

Charlie Downing looked like an old earthenware bottle from which precious essence has evaporated.

"The golden cord is broken, the pitcher is broken at the well," murmured Eric Fraser.

*"One moment in annihilation's waste, one moment of the*

## Chapter Five

### AND THEN THERE WERE THREE

ERIC FRASER was aware that a radio call was coming through. Normally, he enjoyed radio contact with what he liked to think of as the outside world, when he was engaged on one of these Mesopotamian digs. The site was rather isolated and the radio, a small medium range transmitter, was a vital link for the party, as and when they required contact with record sources and other experts. It also kept them up to date with news and was a valuable standby in case of emergency. Eric picked up the headphones, gave the code sign and then said:

"Eric Fraser speaking; Andrew Bennett's archaeological party. Come in please." His face went white and then grey as he got the message. Apparently an oil company man had been a bare half mile behind the fatal lorry; he got there in time to see the Iraq-born driver climbing down to give what help he could to Andrew Bennett. The old man explained to Fraser that he had gone down himself, but that Bennett was beyond human aid. In a flat, lifeless voice Eric thanked the oil man and called Ian and Charlie.

"What's the matter?" asked Ian, as he came across.

"It's the skipper." One glance at Eric's face told Ian some kind of tragedy had struck again.

"What's happened?"

"There's been an accident," said Eric.

"An accident!" exclaimed Johnson. Eric was nodding.

"Fatal," he said, "the skipper's dead."

"Dead!" The monosyllable was a breathless whisper.

"The jeep collided with a builder's lorry; the skipper was thrown at the side of the lorry then he went rolling

*well of life to taste. The stars are setting and the caravan starts for the dawn of nothing. O make haste!*" quoted Ian Johnson.

"What are we going to do?" said Fraser. He had recovered himself rather more quickly than the philosopher.

"Is there anything to do?" asked Johnson, "the expedition's finished. Andrew is dead; George is dead and now Charlie; there are only you and I left, Eric. Only you and I, he repeated.

Mesopotamia seemed suddenly very lonely, very empty; a place of fear. Eric and Ian walked outside the tent and pulled the flap to, reverently behind them. They walked slowly towards the newly turned earth, below which lay the body of old George Harris.

"I know this is 1964 and I know that we are supposed to be an enlightened race but . . ." Eric left the half question unfinished.

"You mean was it anything to do with *the tablets*?" Ian Johnson flashed his friend a swift questioning glance.

"Could have been you know, could have been but . . ." It was a day for leaving sentences unfinished. Words are only the poor vehicles by which thought is conveyed. A gallon cannot be confined in a pint pot and the kind of feelings, thoughts, sentiments and emotions which were flooding the minds of Eric Fraser and Ian Johnson, could not be confined in the limited media of words. But, there is a language of emotion, a language of expression, a language of the eyes, of the face, which is stronger than words, which is more fluent than syllables, which is more capable of conveying meaning than the strange sounds that men make under the title of speech. This language was even now the medium through which Eric and Ian were communicating. It was the tongue of commiseration, sympathy, shock—something that might almost have been fear—bound them close together in the presence of their dead companions.

"If it was Ben-Sira . . . If it was something to do with those incredible tablets in that script we couldn't translate," began Eric, "we must do something about it; we can't let him get away with it."

"Perhaps it's just coincidence," said Ian. But even as he spoke Eric knew that he didn't mean it.

"I agree we could say it was coincidence and I would also agree that coincidence itself is a most peculiar phenomenon, however," he shrugged his shoulders, "three men . . ."

"Hundreds of men die every hour," said Eric Fraser, "thousands, perhaps, over the whole world. The fact that three of them have died here may not mean anything."

"You don't mean that," said Johnson.

"No, I don't," said Eric, "I'm just saying it, I suppose, because I'm trying to make some kind of sense out of the nonsense, to make some kind of pattern out of the confusion, to make some kind of gestalt out of the haphazard disarray that's all around us."

"Andrew had been driving that jeep for years, he drove well," said Jim.

"I wouldn't exactly say he drove well," said Eric Fraser.

"All right, he was competent," said Ian.

"Yes, he was competent, but why did he have that accident this morning of all times? George Harris was an old man, an old man with a weak heart, he got over-excited, fair enough, his heart stopped. But, why did it stop *when* it stopped? I would have thought that there was a kind of archaic toughness about old Harris which would have seen him through not only this expedition, but several more in the future. I know he was getting a bit senile but he was one of those thin, wiry, bird-like, old men who sometimes go on for the century. There was no real reason why he should have dropped dead just when and where he did." Eric pointed back into the tent where Charlie Downing lay pale and still. "Well, what about him? Plump, jovial, a natural comedian, a man who could stand up to almost anything in any circumstances."

"Yes, there are two kinds of fat men," said Ian Johnson, "there are the flabby fat men and there are the tough fat men. He was a tough fat man, was Charlie. Beneath that smooth, almost blubbery exterior, beneath the plump joviality there was muscle and a strong constitution. And, beneath the jokes there was a fine clear, cool mind, he was a scholar."

"And now he's a dead scholar," said his friend. "Now he's a dead comedian." There was silence for a moment and then Ian Johnson said:—

"I think a dead comedian is one of the most tragic things in the world."

"You're probably right," agreed Eric. There was another silence. "We are not handling this very realistically," said Fraser, "we're acting like a couple of frightened schoolboys in the presence of death for the first time."

Ian Johnson pointed to the dig on which they had both been working.

"We shouldn't be unused to death, we dig it up every day. Dead men's clay tablets, the accounts of long departed Assyro-Babylonian accountants, astrological tables of priests who haven't chanted through their cold clay lips for millennia." He shook his head sadly. "So what's the answer?"

"The answer is we pull ourselves together and do something about it."

"Easier said than done." There was another long silence.

"We *must* do something," said Fraser.

"All right," agreed Ian, "I'll get on the radio."

They called up the nearest of the oil company's depots for help. Help came. Oil companies are busy organizations, but in emergency they were willing and helpful neighbours.

Eric and Ian were still rather dazed by the shock of what had happened. They were glad to stand by and let a quietly efficient assistant depot manager deal with all the necessary formalities.

"You chaps look as if you want to be getting back home," he said.

He was a very understanding man; he had in fact, worked his way up through the personnel side of management and it was a background which had given him innate sympathy and a great deal of fellow feeling. He was a good organizer, most oil men are, and in a surprisingly short time Eric and Ian found themselves across frontiers and on a boat. The routine clearing work done, they stood disconsolately at the rail watching the coast of Palestine drift away as their boat sailed steadily to the west.

The blue waters of the Mediterranean were illuminated by the rays of the setting sun. White foam streaked away from the stern of the liner on which the oil man had arranged their passage. In that white foam Fraser and Ian could see faces. It was like making pictures in the fire.

"What is it?" asked Ian, half to Fraser, half to himself, pointing down to the white foam.

"I don't know," returned Fraser.

"It's like the face of George Harris, the face of Downing, or of Bennett. It's almost like the face of Ben-Sira," said Johnson.

"The whiteness is like the whiteness of those clay tablets; I can't get them out of my mind," said Eric.

"The thing that puzzles and frightens me most," said Johnson, "is the way that this has hit us. I feel that there is more working against us than grief, the shock and bewilderment of the events that have happened. I've been walking round like an earthquake victim for days. If that oil man hadn't turned up trumps we should have been absolutely stuck. We wouldn't have done anything but wander round like a pair of pathetic, pale zombies in the ruins of our site."

"You're right!" said his friend.

"It's as if some strange power had hold of our minds," grunted Johnson leaning over and looking down at the white foam.

"I feel as though I am under some kind of psychic anaesthetic," said Fraser.

"Psychic anaesthetic," repeated Johnson, "it's a good phrase, Eric; it describes it. It's as though my brain has been injected with cocaine; I feel as if it's frozen, as though I am in some kind of invisible spiritual, or mental, chain which I can't break. I don't know the answer," concluded Johnson sadly. His voice was low and weary.

"Is there an answer?" asked Eric. Johnson was looking down at the deep blue mediterranean waters with their foam decorated wavelets.

"There's an answer of a kind," he said.

Eric looked at him sharply doing all in his power to break that peculiar feeling of unreality which held them both.

"Don't even think about it, Ian. I've got the feeling myself that some invisible power, some unseen hand, is trying to throw me into the water."

"I'm sure that's the face of Ben-Sira down there," murmured Johnson. "I'm *sure* it is," he repeated.

"Let's get away from this rail," said Eric determinedly. He took Ian by the elbow and the two of them walked deliberately towards the saloon.

Eric Fraser bought two brandy and sodas. There was no one else in the saloon for it was early in the evening and the decks were pleasant in the cool of the brief Mediterranean twilight.

As Eric carried the drinks back to their table a tall, broad-shouldered, iron-grey man entered accompanied by a woman of scintillating Cleopatrine beauty. The big man smiled in a friendly way. He nodded to them. Fraser still feeling a little dazed smiled and nodded in return, but his expression was still comparatively blank.



voice like the proverbial bull of Basham. It was a deep, rich, base-baritone; it thundered and yet it thundered gently. It had the controlled power of a racing car that travels slowly during the lap of honour after the race is won.

"Please do." Eric Fraser's own voice was high and thin by comparison and yet Eric Fraser's voice was a perfectly normal one. He made an effort to bring it more under control. "I'm afraid my friend and I are not very conversational at the moment, but we should be most glad of company, wouldn't we Ian?"

"Yes. Yes, we would," said Johnson.

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" The big man had drawn up a chair for the beautiful Cleopatrine woman who accompanied him. Her eyes were as black as her hair, both were as black as the darkest night. She could have been as old as time, or as young as tomorrow. "Now! Let me introduce myself. My name is Stearman, I'm a sort of journalist. We've just been covering that Jerusalem business, you know."

"Oh, yes," said Ian Johnson, not knowing what the Jerusalem business was but having no doubt that something of interest to journalists had been going on there while he and the others had been digging up the past in Mesopotamia. "The assignment has finished now?" asked Eric Fraser, hopefully trying to make some small talk.

"Well as finished as these things ever are, the usual sort of minor political crisis, official press conferences with specially prepared hand-outs. It's not really my line of country at all, but our regular man was taken ill and we have an Editor who is a law unto himself."

"I believe that editors and archaeological expedition leaders have certain things in common," smiled Fraser. He was beginning to shake off the worst of the numbing ennui and depression that had held him, but Ian Johnson was still submerged in it. Fraser was finding that there was something in the company of this man and woman that did things for him.

"This is my wife, of course," said Stearman turning to the woman beside him. Fraser and Johnson smiled and shook hands. La Noire looked at them with that kind of mysterious radiant beauty that was hers and hers alone. At the same time she was studying them and her enormous sensitivity was going deeper than the surface expression.

"You have recently suffered a tragic loss," she said.

"Yes. Yes, we have," said Fraser, "we are the last two survivors of a Mesopotamian expedition. Have you heard of Dr. Andrew Bennett?"

## Chapter Six

### ONE FOR DAVY JONES

THE big man with the curly, iron-grey hair had the cast of feature which made Eric Fraser think that he was flashing back through the centuries and looking at a retired Roman centurion. The man's face was striking, but there was nothing particularly handsome about it. It was striking in a bold rugged way; it was the face of a warrior; it was scarred, for in its time it was a face that had received fists, boots and broken bottles. But, the lines of character etched into it by more than forty years of adventure seemed to hide the scars. It was one of the most exciting faces that Eric Fraser had ever seen, and something about the power in the steel grey eyes, looking with friendly interest in his direction, almost broke the power of the incredible mental anaesthetic that seemed to have descended on him since the appearance of Abou-ben-Sira and the disappearance of the weird Assyro-Babylonian tablets.

"Do you mind if we join you?" The grey colossus had a

"I certainly have," said Val Stearman, "I would have said that he was one of the leading British archaeologists of the present time."

"Do you know George Harris?"

"What! old George Harris," said Stearman. "*The George Harris* who made those great discoveries in the Valley of the Kings between the wars. I didn't know he was still alive."

"He isn't," said Eric, "but he was a few days ago, he was a sort of honorary supernumerary on our expedition. My name is Fraser by the way," Eric added pointing to Ian, "and this is Ian Johnson."

"Well, now we've completed the formalities," said Stearman, "perhaps you would like to tell me a bit more about what has happened. I'm not asking you as a journalist. I just thought that sometimes it helps to talk about these things."

"Yes, it does," said Fraser. "At least, I find it so. What about you, Ian?"

"Oh, yes. I'd rather talk about it. I'd rather get it out of my system than bottle it up and repress it. Doesn't do any good to repress these things at all." The philosopher was speaking in a rather dim, faraway voice.

"Andrew Bennett was killed in a motoring accident," said Eric Fraser. "Poor old George Harris appears to have died after some sort of heart failure, a little while before. And the third victim was our friend, Charlie Downing."

"I haven't heard of Downing," said Stearman, "but Harris and Bennett I knew well, as I told you. I knew *of*, I should say. I've never met them, but they were well-known names in Fleet Street."

"Stearman?" said Eric Fraser. He rolled the word around his tongue questionably. "Now, aren't you *the* . . ." Val grinned. He had heard so many conversations that began this way.

"Yes, I'm the Val Stearman who writes the psychic column for the 'Daily Globe'," he said, "I'm Val Stearman, the supernatural reporter."

"You're more than just a supernatural reporter. You're a psychic adventurer," said Fraser. "Tell me," he looked at Ian, questionably, before proceeding and Johnson nodded approvingly. He too, seemed to be coming out of the torpor a little. "Tell me," repeated Fraser, "there is an essence of truth in the articles you write?"

"More than an essence in some cases," said Stearman.

"And those adventures of yours . . . ?" persisted Eric.

"You mean the ones my good friend, Bron Fane, chronicles

for me?" said Val Stearman. "A number of those are based on fact."

Eric and Ian exchanged another swift glance.

"Then perhaps you'd like to hear the rest of the story. You see, we've been trying to convince ourselves that it was just coincidence that our three companions should die as they did."

"And there are facts that convince you that it is other than coincidence?" asked La Noire.

"We haven't much to go on," said Ian, "but it all began with a box of clay tablets, stone tablets. You know the sort of thing the Assyro-Babylonians used. Thousands of them have been discovered in Mesopotamia."

"There was something unusual about these?" asked Val.

"Yes, very unusual," said Ian. "They were in an unknown script."

"You're sure of that?" said Stearman.

"Neither Downing, Bennett, Harris or ourselves could make anything of them," stated Eric Fraser.

"How old was the strata they were in?" asked Val, who had more than a smattering of theoretic archaeological knowledge, and more than a smattering of experience in that field.

"Oh, first or second millenium B.C., possibly older. They were well down towards the bottom of the strata."

"Did they look like a plant?" asked Stearman.

"No, I don't think they had been put there to deceive," said Eric, "I think they were as genuine as anything can be genuine."

"Was it as a result of looking at the tablets that your friends Harris, Downing and Bennett died?" asked Val.

"Well, not directly, I don't think," said Ian, "you see a most peculiar looking Arab turned up; there was something odd about him, something very wrong; he didn't seem to fit. I can't put it more clearly than that but that was the impression I got. He said his name was Abou-ben-Sira and he sort of moved in on us, he had a peculiar, almost hypnotic power over us. It was after *he* arrived that the accidents happened."

"He claimed he could interpret the tablets?" asked La Noire.

"Yes, he did," said Fraser.

La Noire was thinking, her keen sensitive mind was dipping below the surface facts and going down into strange, incredible theories known only to her, for there was a mystery that surrounded La Noire Stearman which was deep as any

of the mysteries which she and Val had unravelled. There was silence in the saloon for a moment while they were deep in thought.

Stearman got up suddenly.

"Let me get you some more scotch and soda."

"It was brandy, actually," said Fraser.

"Fine," said Val, "let me get you one." He recharged the glasses all round. Fraser sipped appreciatively at his drink; the brandy was going all over his body, warming him, making him feel that life was perhaps worth living after all.

"What happened to this Ben-Sira character?" asked Val.

"He disappeared," said Ian Johnson.

"And the tablets?" asked La Noire.

"He took them with him," said Fraser.

"I see," murmured Stearman thoughtfully, "did he seem very interested in these tablets?"

"He seemed fascinated by them, wouldn't let them out of his sight."

"Did he say anything about them to you?" asked La Noire.

"Yes," said Ian, "whether of course any reliance could be placed on it I don't know; he said that they were incantations."

"He may have been telling the truth there," said La Noire, "the Assyro-Babylonians were great believers in incantations, particularly in exorcism and conjuration."

"You mean for raising some kind of evil powers, some kind of dark spirit?" asked Eric Fraser.

"Yes, broadly speaking," said La Noire, "that's the sort of thing."

"I need some fresh air," said Ian Johnson suddenly.

"You all right, Ian?" asked Eric anxiously.

"Yes, I'll be all right."

Johnson's voice didn't quite ring true, but Eric didn't like to argue with his friend. Johnson walked slowly, rather jerkily, like a man in a dream, up the companion-way, out of the saloon and on to the deck. Stearman was looking after his retreating back with every trace of anxiety.

"Is he all right?" asked Val.

La Noire seized Val's arm.

"Go after him darling," she said suddenly. Stearman needed no second bidding. His great muscular legs carried him up the companion-way in four short bounds. He reached the deck and looked around in the crepuscular twilight. There was a sudden splash from the starboard side.

"Man overboard!" roared Stearman, and now his voice was not controlled power, it was unleashed power; it was the

power of the north wind howling through the pine trees of the Canadian Rockies; it was the power of a tornado; the power of a hurricane; the power of a great whirlwind. Heads began appearing as though by magic and men started looking for lifebelts and life rafts; smartly uniformed stewards and ship officers were blowing whistles and going quickly and efficiently to action stations.

Stearman flung off his jacket and kicked off his shoes as the ship's searchlight went on. The Captain was already ringing 'full astern' down from the bridge. The great liner shuddered to a kind of gliding halt. Long before the ship had lost way Stearman had balanced himself for a fractional instant on the rail and then dived like a huge graceful porpoise, like some massive, muscular dolphin, into the water on the starboard side of the liner. She was a big ship and she rode high out of the water. It was several moments before Stearman surfaced again. Somebody was getting a boat launched, two or three life belts had already found their way into the water. The searchlight gave the scene a strange, rather eerie quality, a look of unreality, a peculiar melodramatic lighting effect.

Stearman continued to swim. He swam strongly; he dived and dived again. Two of the ship's officers joined him, they were both powerful swimmers. The lowered boat with burly young seamen aboard it was making a slow search of the area. More searchlights had been brought to the rear of the liner near the starboard stern, they only revealed the powerful figure of Val Stearman and the two swimming officers searching, *searching*, but in vain. It was twenty minutes before they gave up the hunt, the two ship's officers clambered wearily into the boat. Stearman swam back to the side of the liner itself and grabbed a rope that hung over the starboard stern rail. With the agility of a great ape the massive journalist-adventurer hauled himself up, hand over hand, as calmly, as eagerly and as easily as though he had been for a quiet stroll along a moonlit beach, instead of swimming hard for twenty minutes.

He vaulted lightly over the rail and found himself surrounded by cheering, enthusiastic crowd. He smiled at them and then his expression changed.

"I'm sorry I couldn't find him," he said.

"I should never have let him go," said Eric, "it's my fault, I . . ." he hesitated.

"What's the matter?" asked La Noire.

"A little way out we stood over the stern rail looking down at the wash together, looking down at the wake and Ian said then that there was one answer."

"You mean he talked about suicide?" said Stearman, "he talked about jumping in?"

"I didn't know exactly what he meant. I knew that he was as confused, as dazed, as shocked and as grief stricken as I was and yet it was more than just the shock of the loss of those three friends . . ." again Fraser hesitated.

"Please go on," urged La Noire.

"It was as though some strange, dark power was trying to urge us over the edge. It was as though we were puppets and invisible strings were leading our hands and feet towards the rail. I put it all down to imagination and then I kept thinking I could see the face of Abou-ben-Sira grinning up at me out of the foam flecked sea." Fraser shuddered.

"I think you ought to go to your cabin and lie down," said Stearman, "have a good night's rest. I'll get the ship's doctor to come and give you a sedative, you'll need it."

"I think that'll be a great idea. Thanks," said Fraser. Stearman helped him down to his cabin. A steward fetched the ship's doctor and under mild sedation Eric Fraser passed a strangely disturbed night.

He lay in his bunk with Mediterranean starlight gleaming through the port hole; he dreamed strange, troubled dreams.

## Chapter Seven

### THE DREAMER

THE great ocean going liner was adequately stabilized, but even so Eric Fraser lying in his strange troubled sleep in the starlit cabin was aware of movement, of motion. It was not strong or unpleasant; he felt like a drugged infant being rocked in a huge cradle. There was something relentless and irresistible about the rocking motion. Fraser felt no sickness, no overwhelming nausea, but at the same time he was assailed by a sensation of helplessness. Slowly, like a mirage or a visual fallacy of some kind, he seemed to be seeing peculiar images on the cabin ceiling. Was it merely his imagination, was it some kind of fanciful ecstatic objectification—was he building the images with his mind, was he projecting them? They were so amorphous in their outline, they were not even as substantial as his dreams, but gradually the outlines began to crystalise, the shapes began

to condense. It was some kind of peculiar delusion, he told himself, some kind of weird hallucination, and yet although he was partially asleep, a tiny fraction of his mind was hanging on to the realisation that he was lying on a bunk on board a ship. He was in a peculiar reverie, as though he were in some kind of trance. He was aware of a sensation of abstractedness. He felt like the mental traveller who visits Utopia, or the Isles of the Blessed; he felt like the hero of the mediaeval romance who has found his way to fairyland, or who has climbed the mythical beanstalk to the castle in the air.

He lay in this strange state watching the unreal and insubstantial images floating and drifting across the ceiling; they were peculiar, chimerical, illusory things and he knew with a feeling of strange terror that they were not of this world; there was something horribly cloudy and vaporous about them. They were pictures drawn of the air; they were three dimensional images built in the air; they were suppositional and hypothetical; he knew that he only saw them with the eye of the mind. There was a horrible meaningless quality to them—they were amorphous, a kind of nonsense in the air. They looked at first as though they had no significance, or, if they had a significance, it was unintelligible to him; the things were incomprehensible, they were not to be understood, they were inexplicable and unaccountable—it was just a wild chaotic mixture of sphinx-like and enigmatic illusions.

He wished that the dream would break, he wished that he could escape from it; he wished that he could take control of his senses again. There was something stealthy, silent, furtive and cat-like about the hallucinations. He began to lose touch with reality as they prowled and skulked across his ceiling. They were loitering and lurking in strange clandestine groups as though they were sentient entities, strange evasive things bent on his destruction.

The dream, the fantasy, the illusion drew him into itself, now he was no longer watching—he was *involved* with it; he was absorbed and yet the absorption was a strange negation in itself—it was a kind of denial, a refusal, it was a confutation, it was a contradiction of reality, a repudiation of normality. It was something which disavowed everyday life; it was the abnegation and renunciation of all that he had ever understood reality to mean. There was a horrible quality of falsehood, of spuriousness and treachery about it. The images kissed him with the kisses of Judas, there was a deep underlying strata of deceitfulness about it—the whole thing was a hideous fabrication, a fiction, a forgery, a falsi-

fication. It was ultimate prevarication in which he found himself involved. There was something hollow and deceitful about the whole thing. He felt that he was being overwhelmed by some peculiar fabricated something, neither mortal mind nor tongue could describe those incredible sensations which now overwhelmed Eric Fraser. The dreams, which no longer seemed like dreams, continued to absorb him. The shapes finally came quite clear of the strange vaporous base of which the evil portent was constructed. Fraser found himself looking into the eyes of the dead George Harris. He saw the shattered, twisted, crippled body, the broken corpse, the smashed cadaver, that had once been his expedition leader. He saw the ominous dead bulk of Charlie Downing, so pitiful in death. He felt sick; he wanted to scream, to run. He had an idea that there was somewhere to escape to, but the dream had now absorbed him to such an extent that it seemed to become reality; it had replaced reality; it was reality and he was absorbed in it. He seemed to have been lifted from the bed by those phantom forms, to have been forced to join with them in that weird dance on the ceiling of the cabin. The dance was contained in and enveloped by the rolling, swaying motion of the ship.

He tried to scream, to cry out, but no sound would come. Now, he saw the face of Abou-ben-Sira sitting with the strange stone tablets laid out in front of him; ben-Sira was chanting . . . . . chanting . . . . . *chanting*. It went on and on until it seemed that eternity came and went while the chant endured . . . . . At last the chant ended.

While the chant had been proceeding Eric Fraser realised he had understood the incantation. It was not an incantation which he could ever have translated it contained thoughts and ideas which utterly transcended anything that a modern language could hope to contain. It contained ideas as old as creation itself, as old as the Cosmos, as old as the Universe. It contained ideas that were never spoken by human tongues and that were never generated by human minds. It contained ideas that belonged to great Cosmic elemental spirits that had been old long before the Sphinx was built, that had been old long before the first Ziggurat had been erected in ancient Mesopotamia when Gilgamesh had set off on his ill-fated pilgrimage in quest of eternal life. These elemental spirits had lived and moved and had their being, had already lived thousands of human lifetimes, hundreds of human centuries. He knew that somehow the stone tablets were the key to tremendous power.

At last, he felt the sides of the bunk under his hand and the horrible movement of the dream became the rolling

motion of the ship, gliding through gentle evening waters. His throat was dry, his eyes dilated, he felt as though it was impossible to breathe. Coughing and choking and giving vent to little half-animal cries of fear, he staggered towards the door of his cabin. He felt as though his brain, more than his brain, his very soul had been seized and wrung out by two huge hands of Cosmic power.

Stearman's cabin was just across the way. Val was a light sleeper. As Eric Fraser blundered out into the corridor Stearman flung open the door of his own cabin and saw the white-faced wreck of a man that had once been Eric Fraser.

"Help me!" croaked Eric Fraser, "help me, Mr. Stearman. For God's sake, help me."

La Noire, looking gloriously seductive in a transparent nylon nightdress that was a mass of frills and bows, stood at the door of the cabin. She was framed in the aperture for only a second and then she stepped swiftly across and helped Val to get the tottering wreck of Eric Fraser into their cabin. They made him comfortable on one of the bunks and Val undid a flask of brandy. Fraser had the look of a man who has spent six months being interrogated by the Gestapo. He had the look of a man who has been brain washed by a ruthless totalitarian Police. Gradually, as the brandy coursed around his brain, a little colour came back into his cheeks.

"I had a terrible dream," he said hoarsely, "it was more than a dream; O God, I've never been so frightened in my life!" His hands were trembling uncontrollably. "Can I have another drink, Val? Please! Please, just another little drop of your brandy?"

"Of course," said Stearman, "relax, take it easy, you're safe now you're with me."

If any other man had suggested to Eric Fraser that there was safety to be found in mere human company after the mental terrors to which he, Fraser, had just been subjected, he would have found no comfort in the statement whatsoever. But now, his sanity was saved; it still hung by a thread, but it was intact and the one thing that he desperately needed was security. Above all else at that moment he wanted to feel safe, he wanted to feel secure, and in a world which had suddenly collapsed into a holocaust of hideous nightmares, Stearman stood out like a great rock in a boiling, storm-lashed ocean and the terrified Eric Fraser sheltered his soul in the shadow of the mighty rock that was Val Stearman. Val seemed to tower above him mentally and spiritually as well as physically. For a few semi-delirious moments

Fraser felt as though he were in the presence of a Demi-god, as though he had been rescued from incalculable danger by a Hercules or a Hector. It was like being in the presence of someone who was more than mortal.

Slowly, very gradually, Fraser got his nerves under control again.

"Thank you. Thank you very much indeed." And he wasn't just being grateful for the drink; it was more than brandy that he needed; he required the kind of spiritual tonic, a psychic shot in the arm, an injection of something that couldn't be carried in a syringe, the sort of power that was Val Stearman.

"Now that you are over the worst of the shock," said La Noire, "tell us what happened?" She spoke quietly, comfortingly, reassuringly. Looking at her in that transparent nylon gown Eric Fraser reckoned that she was just about the most ravishingly beautiful woman that he had ever seen. It gave him a renewed interest in life. Despite his fear, deep basic instincts moved slowly around his body bringing a new courage, a new life; the fear receded further. Slowly in halting, stumbling sentences, he tried to tell the Stearmans as much as he could about the incredible dream—experience, a feeling that he had been sucked into a vortex of dark psychic power, a vortex in which Abou-ben-Sira and the weird stone tablets featured very prominently indeed.

"Well, what you need is sleep," said Stearman, "but it is the one thing you won't get. I reckon you could be shot full of knockout drops and you'd still stay awake after that last experience. So I won't suggest sleep again, instead I'll suggest that you come in over here and bunk with us."

"You're sure you don't mind?" said Fraser, "you hardly know me, I' . . . m a complete stranger to you."

"You are a man in trouble," said Stearman, "and no member of the human race should think himself as a stranger. There are no strangers anywhere in the world, there are only friends we don't know yet."

"Is that really your philosophy of life?" asked Eric Fraser, still trembling a little from the effects of his ordeal.

"Yes, that's my philosophy," said Stearman, "mind you," he grinned, "I don't always live up to it. There are times when I hit first and ask questions afterwards."

"There are also times," La Noire reminded him, "when you shoot first and ask questions afterwards."

"I would have thought some of those occasions were necessary," said Val.

Eric Fraser was looking in bewilderment from one to the other.

"I don't know why it is," said Stearman slowly, addressing his remarks to the carpet, but intending them for Eric, "but there appears to be some kind of psychic, spiritually-magnetic field which surrounds La Noire and I. People in your kind of trouble drift towards us with a regularity which is not monotonous, but is certainly very frequently repeated. If you have the time and the inclination I could go through perhaps a hundred adventures in which people in trouble have come to us as though by some strange coincidence, and yet we believe—don't we," he looked at La Noire for confirmation and she nodded, "that it's more than coincidence, far more; it's as though in the invisible spiritual psychic realm, we are lit up like a sort of neon sign. If I hadn't been such a down to earth character I might have made quite a passable priest. People come and cry on my shoulder," he grinned. Eric Fraser was looking at him.

"Well, I couldn't account for the phenomenon you've just described any more than you could Mr. Stearman."

"Call me Val," said the big journalist.

"I didn't want to presume on our friendship at this point, although I called you Val instinctively when I woke up."

"Call me Val," insisted the psychic adventurer.

"All right Val. Thank you," said Fraser. "As I said I couldn't begin to account for the things you've described any more than you could, but I do feel despite the shortness of our acquaintance, that . . ." He hesitated as though uncertain how to go on, "well, I feel that I can talk to you as I have never been able to talk to anyone before. You seem to be a mixture of doctor, psychiatrist, big brother and father confessor all in one."

"I like being all those things," said Stearman, "do you remember the parable of the talents in the New Testament. Well, I believe that all men have different gifts. Some of us are made to be good listeners, some of us are made to be good talkers, some of us are made sympathetic and receptive. What I am saying is very much an over simplification of the facts, human personalities are incredibly involved things. In fact, we are all so involved that we never really know ourselves and to presume that you know someone else is presumption indeed. We think we know, we listen to what other people say, we watch their actions and their behaviour, but we can't see their inner motives. Men are made of flesh and blood and flesh and blood are opaque; men are not glass, men are not transparent. So, we project our own ideas of what people are like on to those people, and if some of their actions are in keeping with our ideas, then we feel that our ideas are accurate; we preen ourselves upon our expert

knowledge of psychology but we are only deluding ourselves. The greatest mystery with which a human mind can be confronted is the mystery of another human mind."

"I believe that one of the old Greek philosophers once said 'that the proper study of mankind—is man'," murmured Eric Fraser.

"Very true and a worthwhile saying," agreed Stearman.

La Noire nodded.

"Very true," she echoed.

There was a sudden call over the ship's loudspeaker system. It was the kind of public address arrangement which is a feature of nearly every ocean-going liner of any size. It serves a number of functions, it can be used by travel-wise guides to point out the beauties of distant coastlines or specific objects of interest which the liner is passing at a given moment. It can also be used in cases of alarm and emergency and a further function is the communication of news bulletins of special importance or interest.

"This is the Captain speaking," said the public address loudspeaker nearest to Val, La Noire and Eric Fraser. They paused and looked up at the modest self-effacing design of the speaker.

Val thought back a few years. There had been a time in his boyhood when loudspeakers had been very much after the fashion of an electronic megaphone. This was vastly different. It perched itself coily away in one corner rather aft'r the manner of a discreet juke box in a high-class café, a juke box of the kind which patrons have to look for rather than of the type which forces itself upon their attention by virtue of its chromium and its noise. There was no more time for Val to spend in contemplation of the design of the speaker. His mind was now fully absorbed by the significance and the content of the words which were pouring from it in the captain's voice.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. This is a special announcement and I want to assure you at the outset that there is absolutely no cause for alarm." To an experienced old traveller like Val Stearman that was the worst possible preface to any nautical announcement, because it at once conveyed an impression, which was exactly opposite to that which the speaker intended! Those who might not have thought about being alarmed would automatically be alarmed as soon as they were told not to be. Stearman thought it might have been a good idea if somebody had given the captain a basic course in psychology, when he was doing his navigational training and his papers in seamanship.

"I repeat," came the captain's voice again, as though in some strange way he had been in telepathic communication with Stearman and picked up the big journalist-adventurer's critical thought. "There is absolutely no cause for alarm, however, during the next few minutes it seems likely that the ship will encounter some freak weather conditions. The Meteorological office have broadcast an emergency signal to the Mediterranean and we are expecting to encounter a number of electrical storms and some marine disturbances of an unknown nature. Let me assure you again, that there is absolutely no cause for alarm."

"That's the third time he's said that," said Stearman, turning swiftly to La Noire.

"It reminds me," she said, "of the old story about the charwoman who found the Vicar's sermon notes when she was doing out the pulpit on Monday morning."

Eric Fraser looked at La Noire questioningly.

"I can't see the connection."

"In red ink in the margin," went on La Noire, "the Vicar had made a number of comments which read something like a film script. There were things like 'take a pace to the left' and 'raise one arm'."

"I still don't see the connection," said Fraser.

La Noire smiled. "I'm coming to that," she said. "In another place he had written 'argument very weak at this point—shout like mad'." Val's rugged face broke into a grin.

"So our captain is rather like the vicar who left his notes on the pulpit, eh?"

La Noire nodded.

"Argument very weak at this point, shout like mad," said Stearman. "Sounds a bit stilted and quasi-Edwardian-Victorian. Still it conveys the general purport."

"You mean," said Eric Fraser who had at last woken up to what La Noire was driving at, "that our worthy captain's triple repetition of the fact that there is no need for any alarm, indicates that there is *every* need for alarm?"

"Take it as you will," said Stearman, "but it could be translated as 'argument very weak at this point, repeat it three times to make sure you've got it across to them'."

"I've crossed the Med. several times," said Fraser.

"If you are thinking what I am thinking I agree with you," said Stearman.

"Well, I don't know what you're thinking," said Fraser, "but what I was going to say was that on all those trips I've encountered some interesting types of weather, but I've not encountered any of the kind of weather that would cause

me to panic and I've never heard a captain make a remark like that before."

"What, about freak storms and peculiar marine phenomena?" said Val. "No, I haven't either."

"The Mediterranean can be very strange," said La Noire, her voice sounded faint and far away.

Val and Eric looked at her.

"What do you mean?" asked Stearman.

"Oh, nothing really," said his wife, "I was just taking my mind back rather a long way." There was a mysterious expression in her eyes which Val found almost frightening.

"Darling, are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm perfectly all right." But the mysterious expression remained deep in her impenetrably mysterious dark eyes.

Val felt suddenly shut-off from her, as though her mind was travelling in some strange bourn, where it was impossible for him to follow. Sometimes he got the impression that La Noire existed on two different levels, one of which he could share and the other he couldn't. It was as if there were two La Noire's inhabiting the same beautiful body. One of them warm, loving, human, loyal and devoted—the perfect companion. The other, just as loving, just as loyal, just as devoted, but impossible to understand and strangely, *not human, in the sense that he was.* In those few seconds during which he looked at her with puzzled bewilderment Val's mind went back to their first meeting. How long ago? A dozen years, twenty years, could it have been as long as that? *Could it?* How fast time had gone and yet how much they had crowded into it; so many adventures! He remembered how as a young reporter, a very sceptical young reporter, he had rescued her from a coven of black magicians, how he had fought the sinister Jules and the deadly Von Haak. He remembered how one by one Jules Von Haak and the hunchback had all gone to join the black master they served. There had been a sense in which life in those days had been considerably less complicated. He had been able to see things more clearly and in sharper shades of black and white but now maturity—perhaps middle-age—strange term that it was, had mellowed his judgment; he saw things more in shades of grey now. He wondered if he had lost some of the zest for living that he had once had; perhaps, he told himself, but then again perhaps not. Life was still life, living was still living, adventure was still adventure. There was a kind of restlessness in Val Stearman, a restlessness like the restlessness of the sea. It was a deep, unsatisfied quality, something that was as funda-



mental to him as his heart, his mind, his very soul, something that impregnated and permeated his entire being, a quality of dissatisfaction with his own philosophy of life, a desire for fuller integration, a desire to do something more than he was doing. And yet what more could a man do? he asked himself. A man could only say in his own way that with all his faults and imperfections he would fight evil as best he could and when he saw it. Or else he could say that he would lie down and enjoy the evil and wallow in it. Stearman was anti-evil. Stearman was a Hell-fighter. He had chosen his path deliberately and with a realisation in advance of where that path might lead.

Evil had many forms, thought Val. He was still looking searchingly at La Noire. Evil had many forms, he thought to himself again. Disease is a form of evil. The doctor fights disease. The nurse, the medical research worker, the bio-chemist, all of them are fighting evil in that particular form, fighting it in that particularly loathsome manifestation of itself. Poverty is another form of evil, he realised. The philanthropist, the social worker, the politician, the reformer and dedicated men of that calibre were fighting poverty, fighting inequality, justice, thought Stearman, was a form of good, therefore injustice must be a form of evil. The lawyer, barrister, or solicitor, genuinely dedicated to the upholding of the law were fighting evil when evil manifested itself in the form of injustice. Ignorance was a widespread form of evil and insofar as it often led to prejudice it was the father of many other evils. The professor, the lecturer, the teacher, these men were fighting evil when it showed itself in the form of ignorance. But these were only symptoms, thought Val.

La Noire was still far away with her own thoughts. Eric Fraser was looking from Val to his wife and feeling that both of them were now locked so deeply in their own thoughts that they were oblivious of his presence. He wished that he could have quietly withdrawn into a shell like a hermit crab and closed the door after him. Eric Fraser wondered whether hermit crabs had doors on their shells which they could close. Winkles, he thought, rather incongruously, did have doors of sorts. It must be nice, thought Eric, to be a winkle, to withdraw into your shell and to close that little scaly scab of a door behind you. Perhaps, there was a certain amount of safety in being a winkle, perhaps, thought Eric again, there was a certain amount of safety in being an ostrich. But, did ostrich's really bury their heads in the sand or was that merely some strange legend which was attached to the ostrich? It occurred to

him that if the ostrich really did have this peculiar habit when danger threatened, it would now be as extinct as the Dodo! The thought of an extinct creature took him by a process of mental association back to an idea of the past, and the past made him think of archaeology. Archaeology reminded him of the ill-fated expedition from which he had just staggered back, still dazed with shock, the ill-fated expedition which had been the last trip for all his companions.

Eric looked hard at Val and La Noire. Her expression was changing.

La Noire descended slowly like the burning stick of a high-flying rocket on a November night. She came back from whatever plane of mental experience she had been visiting for the last few moments. Her glorious black eyes, now no longer far away, but vivacious and bright, regarded first Val and then Eric Fraser.

"I'm so sorry," she said, "I was lost in thought; it's awfully rude of me. I do get these rather whimsical moods sometimes."

Val held her hand.

"I know darling," he said.

La Noire looked at Eric Fraser.

"You do forgive me, don't you Mr. Fraser?"

"Yes, of course, Mrs. Stearman."

She frowned at him as though a little hurt.

"Of course, I do, La Noire," he repeated. She smiled.

"I hate formality," she said, "life is so short, you haven't time for formality. People should be real, people should be genuine all the time; small talk, time filling, time wasting, word-churning; these things are for fools and cowards. Fools who know no better and cowards who are afraid to take hold of life and live it."

So deep had they been in their own thoughts for a few moments that only gradually did they realise that the captain was speaking again over the public address system.

"The weather of which I warned you a few seconds ago seems to be directly ahead of us. Passengers would be well advised to stay below decks in the saloons, or in their own cabins. I assure you again that there is no cause for alarm."

Stearman looked up at the address system.

"If you say that once more Captain," he grinned, "I shall come up to the bridge and throw you straight into the Med."

"Perhaps," said La Noire, "he can't think of anything else to say."

"Well, he's beginning to make even my nerves edgy," said Val Stearman, "what do you think he's doing to people who

are really nervous?" He looked at Fraser. "What will he do to your nerves with that constant harking on 'there is no need to be afraid' business."

"I don't know," said Fraser, "I'm afraid my nerves are dead."

"Dead?" enquired Val.

"I think I understand," said La Noire, "you've been through such a lot, haven't you, Mr. Fraser? Eric," she smiled. "There you are I'm doing what I just advised you not to do."

"Forgiven," said Fraser.

"I was saying, Eric, you've just been through such a lot that you've expended all your supply of emotion. I might almost say that you were emotionally bankrupt, that you have got no more to give at the moment. You've given out and given out till you just haven't any more, you're numbed by the shock."

"Yes, I am," said Fraser, he shrugged his shoulders, "I suppose feeling will come back eventually."

"Feelings do come back eventually," echoed La Noire. And now she spoke as though she had the wisdom of a hundred thousand centuries behind her. She spoke with the wisdom of the ages.

The ship nosed its way into the violence of the incredible weather....

"I'm much better now," said Fraser. "I'd like to be alone with my thoughts for a little while. I think I'll go back to my cabin."

"Call if you need me," said Val.

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"I'm sure that wasn't the original version," said La Noire.

"The original version was rather too long to remember," said Val, "besides it's also full of heroic thoughts. There are few things so finely calculated to make a man want to turn tail and run as the deliberately engineered heroic thought. Our Victorian forebears were masters of that gentle art," he added.

"Yes, they were," said La Noire and again she looked far away, her eyes strangely sad. She looked at Val as the first streak of lightning darted from an enormous cloud as black and lowering as the face of an angry god. It crashed its way with a spitting hiss of violent energy into the rapidly rising sea.

"It's so easy," said La Noire, "to mock those Victorian battle-sentiments, to say that they were not only trumpet and drum historians but that several of them played unmuted trombones."

"Oh, I've heard that said about Kipling," said Stearman, "and I certainly wouldn't agree there. For all his Empire Building sentiments, I rather like Kipling."

"You're a mixture," said La Noire. "We're all mixtures of Empire Builders on the one hand and missionaries on the other. Part of us wants to go out and conquer as young Alexander went out and conquered."

"Sometimes," said Val interrupting her, "you know, darling, you talk as though you were a contemporary of Alexander."

La Noire smiled. It was a smile of such depth and power that if he had not been used to these moods of hers, Stearman would have been taken aback by the sheer depth of her expression.

"Perhaps I was," she whispered quietly. "Perhaps I remembered the young Alexander." She laughed. "Forgive me, Val, I'm whimsical; the storm always makes me feel like this. It makes me feel that I want to be out there with it, with the elements, that I want to be part of the storm. I want to flash with the lightning and roar with the thunder. I want to sail with those great black clouds across the greying dome of Heaven. I want to ride the waves in a chariot of seashell. I want to stand on the storm-lashed beaches and greet each wave with an exalting cry of joy, as it breaks upon the beach. I want to feel my whole body being transformed into the spirit of the storm until I am myself a thing of air, until I ride with the spirit of the storm, until I AM THE STORM—THE STORM IS ME,

## Chapter Eight

### THE STORM

CONTRARY to the captain's stringent recommendation, Val and La Noire made their way out on deck. Apart from the officers on the bridge and two men on look-out, the liner's deck was deserted. Val and La Noire looked at one another significantly.

"The boy stood on the burning deck, whence all but he had fled," began Stearman with a grin. That was Stearman's way. Give him danger and he would tackle it with laugh. Give him peril and he would face it with one or other of those much maligned British attributes 'the stiff upper lip' or 'the cheerful grin.'

"The boy stood on the burning deck," said La Noire. "The ship began to roll."

"The water came up to his neck," chuckled Stearman, "and drove him up the pole!"

until WE ARE AT ONE, until we have achieved some strange unity and then as the storm dies comes stillness and peace, and the waves sink gently down to rest; then I want to steal away from the storm and come back to my own tiny human body and be La Noire again." Her breath on his cheek was warm and sweetly feminine and more exciting than the storm in all its fury. He put his arms around her and drew her tightly towards him, they shared an eternal moment of silence and then there was no more silence for the storm was all around the ship. It was as though they had sailed to the heart of the maelstrom. It was as though Neptune in his fury was stirring the waters with his trident.

"This is one of the most savage storms I've ever encountered," said Val. Even his great, deep, base-baritone had to exert itself to the full to make itself heard above the noise of the waters and the noise of the air. The black clouds hovered above them like huge ethereal vultures ready to swoop, ready to destroy, ready to descend upon the carcass of the ship. Val felt as though they were some tiny herbivorous creature that has fallen into the jaws of a mighty predator, fallen into the jaws of some great carnivore of the night.

The decks were awash with foaming brine. Val, his great left arm locked like a steel bar around La Noire's waist, was hanging to the rail immediately beside the saloon stairs. The seaman on watch called back from the port bow. His exact words were lost in the roaring of the storm, but his gesture was explicit. He was suggesting unmistakably that they must go below! Val waved back, grinning. As long as La Noire wanted to stay out and enjoy the storm, Stearman—the Iron Grey Warrior—would stay out there with her. He had seen storms that were the equal of this, possibly that had exceeded this, but, at the moment the elements seemed to be raging with a particular, vicious, *personal* quality. It was a quality which made Stearman understand how primitive man could have developed the system of belief which Fraser in 'The Golden Bough' had delineated as *animism*.

The ship continued to plough its way, nose-on to the storm, bows-on to the waves, sometimes being lifted so high out of the water at the stern that her screws were thrashing madly at the empty air before coming down again to bite once more into the heaving, boiling seas. The lightning was dancing all around them. Stearman turned his face up towards the stinging lash of the wind driven rain. It seemed somehow, to be a moment of truth, a moment taken

out of time and belonging fitly to eternity. It was as though experience had somehow transcended time and space.

The moment ended and Val and La Noire were aware that the ship's motion was changing, she seemed to be going across in some peculiar manner of her own. She was pulling across to port and pulling across hard. Val, experienced traveller that he was, had no idea what was causing this peculiar deviation.

"Let's ask the man on watch," he shouted loudly, close to La Noire's ear. Judging the moment between torrential rain and huge waves breaking over the decks, Val and La Noire raced across the swaying deck-plates until they reached the spot where the seaman on watch stared out on the port side.

"What's the matter with the ship?" called Stearman, "what's pulling us over this way?" The seaman looked at him as though fully convinced Stearman was insane.

"I shall have to order you below, sir."

"You won't order me anywhere, sonny boy." Val looked down from his full height; he stood head and shoulders above the sailor, and the sailor was not a small man. Stearman didn't only have height; he had breadth. The sailor was a broad, sturdy son of the sea. Stearman was half as wide again and he seemed to ride that storm-lashed deck like some old Norse marauder, like some Viking Sea-King in his Dragon ship. The sailor made no more mention of ordering Stearman below. His tone changed, it became quite deferential. Val got the impression that the sailor's philosophy could be summed up in the phrase 'if you can't beat them, join them'. The seaman pointed.

"I don't know if you can see anything out there, sir, I've had the glasses on something for some time. I shouldn't say this, of course, but you obviously aren't scared, so I shan't be worrying you."

"What is it you shouldn't say?" said Val. With one arm he held the rail, with the other he clung tightly to La Noire.

"It looks as though a whirlpool is going to start up, sir."

"A whirlpool!" said Stearman, "in the Med. There?" He stared out where the sailor pointed.

Changing his grip on the rail, so that he had one arm free while his right leg twined itself around one of the up-rights, after the style of a wrestler applying the devastating hold known as 'the grapevine,' Val took the sailor's glasses and looked in the direction which the man indicated. There, seen through a cloudy curtain of wind-swept waves, em-

belished by illuminating flashes of demonic lightning, was a disturbance in the sea that looked horribly like the beginning of a great whirlpool. Val had seen whirlpools before. He had seen the Maelstrom in all its fury, he had seen maritime and aquatic phenomena which were in themselves awe-inspiring and fear-provoking. But, of all those he had seen, there had been no whirlpool to equal the size of this. Calmly, coolly, he handed the glasses back to the sailor. He smiled rather laconically.

"Do you think that's only a pool or the beginning of a spout?"

"The beginning of a *spout*? That big, sir!" The sailor sounded really scared.

"I'm sorry," said Val, "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You don't really think it is the beginning of a spout. Do you, sir?"

"It could be. It may just be some freak effect of the storm." Val glanced up towards the bridge. "Anyway, your captain seems to be taking the necessary evasive action."

The ship heaved and strained as her great screws endeavoured to edge her away from the mysterious patch of Mediterranean on the port side, which was behaving in a manner unlike that of any terrestrial ocean which Stearman had ever seen before. The howling and the roaring of the storm, the crashing of the waves against the bows, the splashing of the foam as it roared over the deck made the whole ship look like a scene from one of those grimly exaggerated Victorian seascapes in which proud Georgian galleons are depicted fighting for their lives in monstrous oceans.

La Noire, clinging to Val as tightly as he clung to her, was looking out towards the incredible whirlpool.

"Toll for the brave," she began, "the brave that are no more."

"It's a cheerful time to start reciting 'The Loss of the Royal George,'" said Val. La Noire smiled that mysterious storm-goddess smile of hers.

"I feel the mood of gentle melancholy, Val, my darling." There was clarity in the penetrating quality of her voice which made it audible above the storm. Val timed his moment accurately and then streaked back across the heaving deck until he reached the comparative shelter and safety of the saloon stairs, he carried her with him, easily and lightly.

"Shall we go below?" he asked.

"Yes, I've seen enough now," said La Noire. "I want to think about all this, Val. There's something here that doesn't belong. There's something *wrong*; this isn't a natural storm...."

were coming in over the radio at ever increasing speed. Stearman listened and continued to poke pins and flags into the map.

To the north of Crete the islands of Naxos, Ios and Thira, were being engulfed by tidal waves of such magnitude that they were practically unknown in the sheltered waters of the Aegean. Athens, Corinth and Navplion reported earthquakes and freak winds. From Izmir and Antalya came reports of freak hail-storms and earth tremors. Silifke reported mysterious outbreaks of fire and Adana was being inundated by floods. Aleppo reported earthquakes. Latakia, immediately east of Cyprus was being deluged by peculiar freak snow. In Cyprus itself, Nicosia, Limassol and Famagusta were reporting hailstones the size of oranges and minor earth tremors. In Tripoli and Beirut, tidal waves were breaking over houses near the harbours. Haifa was being shaken by a small earthquake. In Tel Aviv, an electrical storm was raging, causing incredible sky patterns. Port Said and Suez together with Ismailia and El Quantara, together with the whole of the Canal Zone, were flooded. The temperature of the waters of the Gulf of Suez was rising at an incredible rate. And a report from Aquaba stated that the Gulf of Aquaba was so intolerably hot that the natives were evacuating to the highlands of the Sinai Peninsula.

Stearman watched the pattern which his flags were making. In Cairo and Tanta, earth tremors were shaking the delta mud. Refugees were already streaming away from Kubar and floods in El Alemein were streaming inland from Matruh where the railway ended. They were making their way south to the higher land behind them. Tobruk, not so very far from the storm-lashed liner, was sending out reports of torrential rain in peculiar colours, and Derna, north-east of Tobruk across the Bay of Bomba was shaking as the Cyrenaica Peninsula from Benghazi and El Marj found itself the centre of a power with played with the forces of nature as though they were toys in the hands of a capricious giant magician.

"Do you notice the really incredible thing about all this?" asked Stearman, as he looked at his flags.

"Yes, I do," said La Noire. "Nothing at all to the west of us; it's all behind us, as though the ship is the demarcation line of the trouble area."

"This is fantastic," said the radio operator.

More reports were coming in from the towns and villages surrounding the eastern Mediterranean.

"You really think this is connected with the ship?" asked La Noire.

## Chapter Nine

### THE CATASTROPHE

THE storm, which was at that moment doing its best to destroy the steamer on which Eric Fraser and the Stearmans were making their way back to England, was by no means the only natural disaster which had launched itself mysteriously upon a bewildered world.

Val and La Noire had made their way down to the Steamer's radio room and with increasing interest Val was sticking little coloured flags and bright, plastic-headed map-pins into a chart. Their steamer was at the moment about a hundred miles south of Crete—immediately north of Tobruk. The freak weather conditions were raging all around them; they appeared to be part of a number of inexplicable so called 'natural' phenomena, reports of which

Val nodded.

"Yes, I do," he said, "in fact I'm certain of it."

"But how?"

"You know more about this sort of thing than I do, darling," said Stearman.

"It's almost like the story of Jonah," said La Noire.

"Jonah!" called the wireless operator over his shoulder.

The ship was now rocking and pitching forty degrees either way, as the great storm played with her like a cork.

"You mean to say we've got a Jonah on board now?"

La Noire and Val exchanged swift meaningful glances; their eyes were vibrant with meaning. Stearman put the pins back in the bucking drawer of the leaping chart table.

"Thanks," he said dryly. "Keep your valves flashing there's a good chap."

"And the best of British luck to you too," called the wireless operator. He was typical of the breed, thought Stearman. He was the kind of Sparks who would sit at his microphone or his 'key', calmly tapping out an S.O.S. or a 'Mayday' call, while the ship sank around him. He was the stuff of which heroes are made. But, possibly because the kind of role to which men of his calibre were best suited was so taken for granted in his service, the wireless operator would have been the last man to think of himself as a hero.

Stearman helped La Noire up the bucking stairs out of the wireless cabin. They reached their own cabin, not without difficulty, and moved across the corridor in search of Eric Fraser. He lay on his bed, and even from the door Stearman knew that he was looking at a corpse. It would have been superfluous to say that Eric Fraser was dead—Eric Fraser was very dead, if it is possible to apply the adjective of degree to a term which has within it such absolute finality. Eric Fraser was horribly, gruesomely, completely and rather revoltingly dead. Someone, or something had smashed in the back of his head. It had been stove-in like a little fragile lifeboat which has run itself on to the rocks. There was a mess, which made even Val Stearman's iron hard stomach turn over. La Noire covered her face in her hands for a second.

"Oh God!" she said suddenly.

"We should never have left him," said Val.

"He said he wanted to be alone," said La Noire, "I thought he would have been all right. It's my fault, I never sensed any immediate danger surrounding him, I was so absorbed by that storm. It was selfish of me." She had turned on herself in anger. "I was so fascinated by the storm, Val, I . . . I . . . wasn't allowing my mind to be receptive to his

needs. Perhaps if I had been I would have realised. He was probably calling to us, I think he must have needed us."

"Do you think he knew there was danger?" asked Stearman.

"He must have done," said La Noire.

"He doesn't look as if he struggled," said Val.

"No, he doesn't," she agreed rather hesitantly at first, then more confidently as she looked at the position of the body.

"No chance that it was an accident, I suppose?" said Val.

La Noire gave a little scream and pointed to the floor. "No!" she said, when she got her voice under control again.

"No chance it was an accident. Look darling! Look *there!*"

Val followed her pointing finger. There on the floor lay a broken stone tablet. He bent and examined it, but he was careful not to touch it. Stearman had been involved in enough crime reports to know what could and what could not be done; that tablet might hold valuable finger prints. He didn't think it did; he didn't think the power that had struck him with that stone tablet had needed fingers. There was no doubt from the blood and hair on the clay that it had been the weapon which had struck Eric Fraser down.

"And then there were none!" said Val Stearman quietly. He straightened up and looked at La Noire, as though awaiting further suggestions.

"And then there were none!" she echoed.

"Where do we go from here, darling?" asked Val.

"I don't know," said his wife.

"There's got to be an explanation of some kind?" said Stearman, his tone was interrogative.

They moved out of the cabin and closed the door carefully behind them.

"We'd better go and tell the captain, I suppose," said Val.

"Yes, I think we had," she agreed.

La Noire and Val made their way up the rocking, rolling steps of the liner. As they reached the bridge the storm seemed to blow itself out with a final bang—like an oil gusher that has been blown out by a blast of dynamite.

The captain looked at the sea; the thing that had been trying itself into a water spout had died down again into a series of great circular waves and was even now vanishing from sight. Within minutes an uncanny calm had descended; the wind dropped to a soft murmuring whisper; clouds vanished as a frown vanishes from the face of a man who is no longer angry. The captain looked at Val Stearman.

"You want to see me, sir?"

"Yes, I do," said Val. "I would like to see you alone a

moment, please. Can you spare a minute now that the emergency is over?"

"Yes, of course, sir. Of course! Come along to my cabin."

Val and La Noire walked down the stairs from the bridge, down to the captain's cabin. He closed the door behind him and motioned towards two easy chairs; then he pulled up a third for himself. He was smiling broadly, it was a smile of relief as much as anything, thought Stearman. It was the smile of a man who had wondered whether he was going to see another sunset and now realizes that he probably will. More than that, it was the smile of a man who realized that the lives of others who were very dependent upon him, and who has borne his responsibility well. It was the smile of a man who has just come back from the gates of death, the smile of a man who has just turned from the jaws of hell.

"What can I do for you then?" The captain looked quizzically first at Val then at La Noire.

"There's a dead man in the cabin opposite to mine," said Stearman.

"The cabin opposite yours?" asked the captain. He reached for a passenger list. "Let's see, sir, you're Mr. Val Stearman, the journalist aren't you?"

"Such is fame," said Stearman.

"Well, the man opposite would be Mr. Fraser. Mr. Eric Fraser, the archaeologist. Poor man, his friend went overboard a little while ago."

"That's right," said Val. "He was the last. Three of the others were killed in Mesopotamia. *He was the last!*" repeated Stearman.

"It was uncanny the way that storm subsided, you don't think there was some sort of curse on them, do you? I suppose it is a well-known fact that sea-faring men are inclined to be more superstitious than most, but we see nature in all her fury, more than some of the landsmen do. I won't include you in that general heading, Mr. Stearman. I know you have probably had more adventures than I have on land and sea."

"Oh, that's a possibility," said Val. He did not usually suffer from modesty, but he didn't feel that this was either the time or the place to enlighten the liner's captain about the adventures which he and La Noire had had in both spacecraft and timecraft, not to mention adventures in various unknown realms beyond the bourne of time and space which men call reality. Val would have liked to have told these stories, but this was not the time and this was not

the place. Besides, he thought to himself, my old friend Bron Fane has already chronicled them for me—and chronicled them very adequately.

Stearman looked at the captain thoughtfully. He moved forward a little in his chair.

"I wouldn't say that you were unduly superstitious, captain. I think a certain amount of credulity is a good thing. In my opinion there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophies, and at the same time there are powers which are beyond the comprehension of orthodox science, as we understand it. But, for all that, there has to be a limit to our credulity. Too much credulity can lead to an over-simplification, an explanation which is only adequate to the mind of the seven year old child, or primitive humanity, at best. Too much scepticism can mean that we shall never reach a solution at all. We have to strike a balance; we have to find a happy medium." The captain sighed.

"Yes," he said, "a happy medium, but alas, in the wrong hands a happy medium can be a miserable mediocrity."

"I see I am not the only wordsmith on board," said Stearman. The captain smiled.

"I'll let you into a little secret," he said. "Some sailors occupy their spare time doing crochet work and embroidery. Others build ships in bottles, or make models of almost incredible complexity. There are a few who spend their spare time writing—the sea gives us a kind of inspiration. Perhaps that is too strong a word to use; perhaps it's too grand a claim to make, but I am one of those few. The sea is my inspiration. In my spare time I like to try and write a little poetry. As you say, you are not the only wordsmith aboard. Well, if your friend Fraser really is dead," said the captain, "I'd better come and have a look at the body." He had changed the subject very abruptly. He bowed courteously and La Noire preceded him from the cabin, with Val close behind her. They reached Fraser's cabin.

Stearman opened the door and pointed soundlessly. The captain drew a deep breath and stared at the pitiful mortal remains that had once been Eric Fraser.

"I'll get the ship's doctor," he said briskly. He sounded to Stearman as if he were glad of an excuse to get out of that cabin. The captain strode into the corridor. He stopped a passing steward.

"Fetch the doctor and tell him it's urgent, will you."

"At once, sir." The steward disappeared as if on magic wings, or on feet that were heeled with springs. It seemed



a surprisingly short time before the doctor arrived in the wake of the steward.

"I've fetched the doctor, sir. Is there anything further I can do?"

"I don't think so, thank you. Oh, you might just tell the chief steward to post a couple of men in this area. I don't want a lot of curious sightseers. There's been a nasty accident in this cabin."

"Very good, sir." The steward went off to carry out the captain's order.

The doctor knelt beside Fraser's body and began to examine the grisly wound in the skull. He looked at the broken, bloodstained clay tablet.

"There is little doubt that this is the murder weapon," he said.

"You come to any conclusion at all?" asked Val.

The doctor looked at him rather sarcastically. "You going to suggest it was suicide? Perhaps he suspended that thing on a piece of string and then did some heading practice. Maybe he was trying to make the ship's football team!"

"Very funny," said Stearman. Something in the tone of his voice made the doctor cower a little.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so sarcastic."

"It's all right," said Val. "Only you were very quick to jump to the conclusion that it was murder."

"Well, what other conclusion is there? The man didn't hit himself on the head with it."

"I'm not sure that he was killed by any physical mortal assailant," said Val.

The captain was looking at the broken pieces of the clay tablet.

"It looks very old and very mysterious," he said. "What is it?" He shook his head. "Some sort of coptic script?"

"No," said Stearman. "It's a Mesopotamian language of some kind. It's very, very early."

"How early?"

"Possibly pre-human," said Stearman.

"What the devil does that mean?" gasped the captain.

"What it says."

"You mean to say that script is older than the human race? But it can't be. There had to be men before men could learn to write," argued the captain, with simple logic.

"I didn't say that a man wrote that."

"Well, what was it?" asked the doctor. "Letters from space?"

"That wouldn't have been impossible," said Stearman, "though not the visitors from space that you imagine."

"I don't understand," said the doctor. He looked at Stearman with a mixture of curiosity and irritation.

"Doctor, you're a man of science," said Val. "How long has life existed on this planet? Perhaps five hundred million years, something like that?"

The doctor nodded. He was frowning slightly.

There was silence for a few moments, then Stearman continued.

"And for how long has anything that could be recognised as a human being existed on this planet?"

The doctor shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"Difficult to say. I'm not an anthropologist by any means, but I would suggest that Man, including the most primitive forms, has been around for somewhere in the region of half a million years, perhaps a few more, perhaps a few less. Give or take twenty thousand."

"Exactly," said Stearman, "and what about civilised man?"

"Oh, civilised man!" said the doctor. "Again, a lot would depend on what you would call civilisation."

"Well, for the purpose of this discussion," said Stearman, "I will accept Palaeolithic culture as being civilised."

"All right," said the doctor, "well, twenty thousand years at the most."

"Right," said Val, "twenty thousand years out of five hundred million, that's not much, you know. It represents a microscopic fraction of the time span during which life has existed on this earth." Stearman did a swift calculation in his head. "Civilised man has been in evidence on this earth for one twenty-five-thousandth part of the time during which there has been life! If the time chart on which you represented terrestrial life was a mile long, then only the last three inches would be the history of civilised humanity!"

The doctor was looking at the broken clay tablet.

"So you think that there were non-human intelligences living in Mesopotamia before humanity arose?"

"Surely," said the captain, "Mesopotamia has been known as the 'cradle of humanity.' I believe that it was in Mesopotamia that the mythical 'Garden of Eden' was situated. At least, according to certain archaeologists."

Stearman pointed rather dramatically to the mute corpse. The remains of Eric Fraser.

"Archaeologists," he said, rather grimly. There was a stark silence in the cabin.

"You're not suggesting that this is a repetition of the Tutankhamen business, are you?" suggested the doctor. "You remember, the Mummys Curse sort of thing?"

"It all depends what you mean by the 'Tutankhamen business' and the curse," remarked Stearman.

"Well, it was said that those who opened his tomb all met with a violent death. Or at least their life spans were dramatically curtailed," persisted the doctor. "Surely you remember?"

"Do you think there is any truth in that, then?" Val was playing him rather as an angler plays a fish.

"I don't know," said the doctor. "They say there's no smoke without fire. There may be something in these old legends. There may be something in the power of a dead man's curse. We still know very little about the power of human thought. After all, the frontiers of psychosomatic healing are being pushed steadily further outwards each year. We know that a healthy mind in a healthy body is the ideal. Perhaps we ought to add to that concept a further idea, the healthy soul using a healthy mind in a healthy body."

"Would you differentiate between mind and soul?" asked La Noire.

"I think so," said the doctor, "surely mind requires a physical brain for its manifestations?"

"Oh, you would believe then, that soul is something beyond mind, which is independent of the physical?" asked La Noire.

"I rather wonder," said the doctor, "whether soul is something that grows out of mind."

"Do you think," interrupted the captain, looking at the doctor in particular and directing his remarks towards the medical man, who was a member of his crew and therefore under his jurisdiction, rather than towards the passengers, Stearman and La Noire.

"Do you think," he repeated, "this is really the best time and place for a discussion on metaphysics?"

"Possibly not," said the doctor. It isn't my day, he thought to himself.

"How far are we out of England now?" asked Stearman.

"About thirty-six hours," answered the captain.

"All right," said Val Stearman. "I suggest that this cabin be locked, a guard posted and then it should be left as it is. Let the British police handle this."

"I shall be very relieved to do so. I shall send off radio messages to that effect at once," said the captain.

Stearman nodded.

"The best thing to do," he agreed.

"I suppose I really ought to take statements," said the captain. "I have never had this sort of thing happen on

board my ship before . . . . On board *any* ship. Oh, I've had fatal accidents, of course. Fatal accidents do sometimes happen at sea, just as they happen anywhere else. It's as hard to keep death off the sea as it is to keep death off the road, perhaps even harder."

"I would have thought that the risk of collision was slighter," said Stearman, rather grimly.

"Yes, it may be," said the captain. "But although its incidence is lower the results can frequently be far more serious. I mean, a fellow who's flung off his cycle can get up and walk home. A fellow who is flung off his ship in mid-Atlantic cannot be expected to swim home."

"True," agreed Stearman. "Very, very true."

There was another tense, thoughtful silence as the doctor began putting his kit away again.

"By the way, how long do you think he's been dead?" asked the captain.

"I was wondering when you would be getting around to asking me that," said the medical man.

"Well, said Stearman, "how long has he been dead? This is interesting."

The doctor looked at him rather truculently, as though not wanting to answer.

"About an hour," he said finally. There was a grudging tone in his voice.

"About an hour," said Stearman. He nodded.

"If," said the doctor, suddenly, "and I only said *if* that stone that killed him was not wielded by a human hand, what do you think wielded it?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if it wielded itself," said Stearman.

"Wielded itself!" exclaimed the doctor.

Val nodded.

"Itself!" he repeated, with a kind of firm finality that brooked no further argument.

The doctor and the captain exchanged glances.

"Yes, I know it sounds strange," said Stearman. "But power is in itself a peculiar thing. It is not necessarily something which can be confined naturally and intrinsically to a living thing. Energy can pass along an electric wire and make it strangely dangerous. Energy can accomplish feats which are beyond the present understanding of orthodox science," he paused, trying to think of an example.

"There's Doctor Rhine at Duke University," said La Noire.

"Yes, of course," said Val. He looked at the doctor.

"Have you read 'New Frontiers of the Mind'?"

"No, I don't think I have," said the ship's medical man.

"You should," said Val. "It's very informative and brilliantly written."

"What's it about?" asked the captain.

"It concerns the experiments in telepathy, telekinesis, and teleportation which were carried out by Doctor Rhine and his team with a number of volunteer helpers at Duke University."

"I'm not entirely sure what those things mean," said the captain.

"Well, I suppose all of them can be summed up under the heading of E.S.P.," said Stearman.

"Extra sensory perception," amplified the doctor.

"Exactly," said Val.

"You mean the power of transferring thought from one person to another without any recognised medium of communication," said the captain. His remark was half question, half statement.

"Yes, that's right," said La Noire. "That would be straight forward telepathy."

"Telepathy," repeated the captain.

"Comes from the Greek," explained Stearman. "*Tele* meaning, at a distance, and *pathos*, meaning feeling, thought, sympathy. One of those rather wide words which have an ideal meaning in Greek, but which don't translate as well as they might."

"I see," said the captain, "*Tele-Pathos*." He repeated the words slowly, as though to get the feeling of them. "This other word you mentioned. Telekinesis. If *tele* means at a distance, what does the *kinesis* mean?"

"Energy," said Stearman. "Another rough translation; power, movement. These words can have different meanings in different contexts. I'm not a Greek scholar by any means. I don't pretend to be."

"Ah!" The captain gave a sort of non-committal grunt. "So I guess that telekinesis is the power to move objects at a distance, or to use energy. I believe I once read a science fiction story about a chap who could do that with the power of his mind."

"Well, the work that Doctor Rhine has been doing at Duke University is far more than science fiction," said Stearman. "It's more than a novel; it's more than a story. It's *fact*."

"What sort of experiments did he do?" asked the doctor. "It sounds fascinating. Intriguing, I must admit."

"Among other things," answered Val, "he conducted a great many experiments with cards and dice. The cards were shuffled in automatic shuffling boxes to ensure that there was

pure random as far as selection was concerned, and the dice were thrown from automatic shakers. Now, the upshot of this was that when a sufficient number of people were concentrating hard enough on a certain number coming up, or conversely, when they concentrated hard enough on a certain number *not* coming up, their thoughts were apparently able to influence the number of times the number came up, or failed to come up."

"That all sounds very complicated," said the doctor.

"Not really," said Stearman. "Look, let's take a simple example. If you are waiting for the number six to come up, the mathematics of chance dictate that the number six will come up once in every six throws. And the more throws you perform the closer should your result be to the statistical average."

"Yes, that's fair enough," said the doctor. "I can follow that all right."

"Now," went on Stearman, "if you continue throwing for several hundred thousand throws and number six does not come up as often as you expect it, when everybody is willing it not to appear, then you can reasonably assume that their thoughts are having some sort of influence on the frequency with which the number turns up." He hesitated for a moment. "Let me put it in its simplest possible context. Out of thirty six throws the number six ought to appear six times. Now, if we were all willing it not to come up and it only comes up once out of thirty six throws, then there is reasonable statistical evidence, if nothing more, that our thoughts have had some kind of influence on the number of times which the number six appeared when the dice were thrown. Now, if the next time we will it to come up, if we try and force the dice to turn up with the six at the top, and we find that out of thirty six throws it turns up twelve times when the law of averages, if such an abstruse mathematical concept may be said to exist, dictates that it should only have come up six times, then the extra times which it has appeared are some kind of indication that our thought has had a power, or an influence, if you like to put it that way, over the dice. Perhaps by themselves these two separate experiments would mean nothing. But let us put these two experiments together." He was looking around him challengingly. "When our minds are working against the six, the six comes up less often than is expected. When our minds are working for the six, it comes up more often than the law of averages anticipates."

"Yes," said the doctor, rather vaguely. He again exchanged glances with the captain. "Yes, I see."

"Now, of course, a mere thirty six throws, a mere seventy two throws, a mere seven hundred throws would mean little or nothing," said Val. "This has got to be worked out over several hundred thousand throws, preferably several million throws. And if the results are both persistent and significant, then I feel we have some grounds for saying that there is more in extra-sensory perception than the critics would admit."

"Don't you think that there is some danger of wishful thinking coming in here?" asked the doctor. "The danger that because we want a certain thing to happen, we will misconstrue the evidence?"

"Doctor Rhine's experiments were conducted with faultless precision, in accurate, well-recorded conditions," said Stearman. "I will admit," he went on, "that a number of experiments in E.S.P. or straightforward spiritualism, for that matter, have produced results that had more in common with the hopes of the experimenters than with scientific accuracy." Stearman gave a dry chuckle.

"But you don't think Rhine's experiments come under that heading?" asked the captain.

"Definitely not!" retorted Stearman. "He is a pioneer, and like all pioneers, I suppose, some of his results meet with certain criticism. This, of course, is one of the great safeguards of the scientific world. If a man's work is able to withstand the criticism and investigation of his fellow-scientists, then we can rest assured that in the majority of cases such work is valid and accurate. On the other hand, the man who works alone, the man who is an exclusive recluse, the man who regards all his colleagues as jealous busy-bodies is probably no more than a megalomaniac or a paranoic."

"That, of course, is proved from the pages of scientific and medical history," said the doctor.

"Yes. Proved many times over," said Stearman.

"Do you think we have concluded our work in here," said the captain, "and we can find some more cheerful venue to continue this discussion."

"Yes, I think we could," said Stearman. They stepped out of the cabin and the captain locked the door.

The steward to whom he had spoken earlier was hovering about in the corridor, looking like a pigeon who was seeking an uncrowded flagstone in Trafalgar Square on which to land and devour a peanut.

"The chief steward will carry out your instructions, sir," he said to the captain.

"Very good, very good," said the captain.

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and today I have won £232 10s. Please send two more." B.C., Tredegar, S. Wales.—Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book, 1931"

## JOAN THE WAD



GUARANTEED DIPPED IN WATER  
FROM THE LUCKY SAINTS' WELL

"For 10 years I have enjoyed the most unbelievable good fortune and have always had my J.T.W. by me. Unfortunately I have lost her and feel exactly as if I had lost a human relative. My friend tells me his wife's mother has had Joan for 40 years and would not part with her for all the tea in China."

**SUCCESS FOR SEVEN YEARS.** Another writes . . . "I sent for Joan the Wad seven years ago, during which time I have had many wins on Pools, including one of £72 2s. 0d. and another of £342 15s. 0d. I lost Joan and things immediately began to go wrong. Please send me another, for which I enclose P.O. 6s." Mr. D. H., Greatham, Hants. 26.1.56.

**WON HOLIDAY CONTEST.** Mrs. B. E. H., of Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey, writes, 12.4.56 . . . "I really feel I must write and tell you of my good fortune. After having J.T.W. for only a month or so I have just won a Holiday Contest and I feel I owe my good luck to the little lady. It has made me feel very happy."

**ANOTHER POOLS WINNER.** "Please send me 3 Histories. Enclosed is 3s. I want them for friends. By the way, you may be interested to know that I had only received my J.T.W. two weeks when I won £1,068 on the Football Pools—thanks to Joan the Wad, and since I have sent for 4 others for friends and now want 3 more as soon as possible please." writes Mrs. E. M., of Bebbington, Cheshire, 6.2.56.

**COMPLETELY CURED. FOUND A JOB, PROMOTION TWICE, OWN HOME.** Mrs. D. J., of Stockport, writes, 29.5.56: "On coming to England 24 years ago we were dogged by ill-luck. A friend told me I ought to have 'Joan' for my husband and 'Jack O' Lantern' for myself. I did, and from that very week all our luck changed for the better. My husband was a very sick man and is now completely cured. He had no job, and very soon he got a job and promotion twice. I myself bettered my position. We are now in our own house, which we are succeeding to buy. We are a happy and most contented little family and attribute all our present happiness and success to J.T.W. and J.O.L. Thank you for all you have done for us. I tell everyone about it."

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"I'm one of the first men on watch, sir," said the loquacious steward.

"Righto!" said the captain in a friendly voice.

The captain, doctor, La Noir and Val Stearman made their way along the corridor back to the captain's own quarters.

The messages went through to the police and by the time the ship docked, a rather grim-looking boarding party were waiting by the gangway.

The boarding party, consisting of a police superintendent, an official police doctor, police photographer, fingerprint man and two uniformed constables, came up the gangway. The ship's captain met them at the top of the gangway and gave the superintendent the bare facts regarding the demise of Eric Fraser.

And the official police enquiries began . . .

The crystal seemed to come alive at her touch, as though the hidden fires of a thousand centuries burned with a strange pearly ghost of a flame inside its enigmatic surface. Val continued to watch quietly and unobtrusively as La Noire made a series of mystic passes in the air. They were passes which were deeply significant and half as old as time itself.

In that enchanting, exciting, mysterious voice of hers, which always made Stearman think of an Egyptian priestess, La Noire murmured an incantation which was contemporary with the mysterious passes which she had already been making. The glowing crystal grew stronger—she continued to make passes in the air above it and the incantation which she was chanting grew more intense. Slowly, rather amorphously at first, and then with increasing distinction, clarity and brilliance forms began to appear in the crystal. So quietly that even a fly could not have moved more silently, big Val Stearman mover around so that he could see into the crystal over his wife's shoulder. The crystal, he thought, was somehow symbolic, somehow emblematic of the eternal mystery which was personified in La Noire herself. There was a quality about the crystal and a quality about this beautiful, mysterious wife of his, which had an important common denominator one with the other.

There were some questions which Val dare not ask. One of them returned to him with a kind of increased intensity with every passing day and with every passing week, as months and years succeeded one another. Twenty years ago, when he had first known La Noire, his own hair had been as dark as hers—now he was iron grey, but she was still young, as fresh and as beautiful as she had ever been. There was no sign of a line on her face, not one minute inroad made by age. There were times when Val tried to tell himself that this was some feminine cosmetic secret. He had a kind of old world chivalry which made him think that the ladies were rightly and excusably reticent about their ages; they did all they could to keep time in check and anything as rude as a calendar ought never to be applied as a yardstick to a woman's appearance, her general demeanour or her attitude to life.

A woman, thought Stearman, was as young as she looked. A man, he concluded with a rueful grin, was as young as he felt. There were times when Val Stearman felt about sixteen, there were other times when he felt as though he were ninety six. He looked at La Noire's flawless Cleopatra beauty and heaved a deep but inaudible sigh. There was a mystery—a mystery which seemed almost to frighten

## Chapter Ten

### DIVINATION

VAL and La Noire had given their official signed statements, not only to the captain on board ship, but to the superintendent who was now in charge of what was being assessed provisionally as a 'murder investigation'. Val and La Noire, however, had ideas of their own. They had returned to their London flat and from a number of cupboards, most of which were kept carefully locked, La Noire was producing a number of peculiar but interesting objects. The first of these was a neat black velvet case about the size of a hat box. The case itself was locked and securely fastened in addition.

It was growing dark and Val closed the venetian blinds against the last of the sun's evening rays. La Noire took the crystal from its box and set it up on a table in the living room. Val sat silent in the semi-darkness, watching, as with her slim, dainty, yet strong fingers La Noire turned the crystal to the vibrations of her own etheric being in the way that a skilled radio operator tunes in a complex receiver. Val knew better than to distract La Noire's attention while she was actually engaged in scrying.

him, she had appeared to be no more than eighteen or twenty when he had first known her, she looked no more than eighteen or twenty now. *Why?* he asked himself. *How?* Surely with all the cosmetics in the world, although he had never seen her use any, nobody could remain untouched by time for twenty years?

His thoughts snapped off at that point and he stared into the crystal, fascinated. In the crystal he saw five men. Two of them he recognised because he had seen them recently. The first was Eric Fraser, the second Fraser's companion—the man who had plunged overboard and whom Stearman had vainly attempted to rescue. The others looked vaguely familiar, he realised that two were well-known men whom he knew by repute if nothing else. They were the three archaeologists—Bennett, Downing and Harris.

Val drew a deep breath. The men were at a camp site, somewhere in Iraq by the look of it, thought Val. The action of the vision was strangely speeded up; it was like watching one of those early films. It was not as jerky as the first Chaplin comedies, or the earliest Keystone epics, but it had a strangely unreal quality about it. Val got the impression that in some strange way La Noire had probed into the past with her crystal vision and this was the result which was now unfolding itself on the glowing round screen in front of them.

He watched the men discovering the box of clay tablets. He saw the arrival of the sinister Abou-ben-Sira. He saw the death of George Harris and he saw Ben-Sira carrying the Tablets away as though they had been no more than feathers. He got the sensation of power, enormous power centring on those tablets and then the scene changed to the ship and the incredible weather which the ship had encountered.

The crystal showed them the death of Eric Fraser and as Val and La Noire had suspected there was no mortal hand holding the tablet, it appeared in the room like some strange bat, like some weird creature of ill-omen. It struck Fraser down as though an invisible hand had thrown it and yet, looking at it, Stearman got the impression that it was not so much an invisible hand that held the table but that the tablet itself was the seat, the centre, the focal point of a peculiar dark power; a power that was pre-human; a power which all the great mythologies seemed to hint at; a power which had been touched on in the extraordinary words recorded in the *'Necronomicon'* of *Abdul Alhazrad*, the mad Arab, a strange semi-mythical tome which some scholars claim exists, but others argue emphatically against it.

Val watched the scene change once more and now the crystal was not showing the past but the present. Its mysterious psychic probe was travelling on another wave length, another beam, another frequency. They were seeing some distant part of earth, some Eastern spot by the look of it. But the East is a big place and experienced traveller and expert geographer that he was, Stearman could not nail down the exact location which was being revealed to them by the crystal ball.

He saw Abou-ben-Sira. The man was sitting in a cave somewhere. Stars were rising and a crescent moon hung low in the sky pointing like the bow of a cosmic archer in the direction of the departed sun. Abou-ben-Sira had arranged the tablets into a kind of weird altar; he knelt before them; he prayed to them. The crystal did not convey the sound, but from his working lips and upcast eyes it was obvious to Val and La Noire that the strange Arab was venerating the strange, ancient tablets.

The picture faded. La Noire put the crystal ball away. She turned to Val.

"Well, darling, what do you think of it?"

"Strange!" said Stearman. He put an arm around her shoulders. "Very strange!" He was breathing slowly, heavily; it was almost as though he was thinking with his lungs as well as his mind. "I don't know what to make of it, La Noire, my beloved. I don't know what to make of it at all. There is some deep sinister and highly significant supernatural scheme at the back of all this. This strange Arab, Ben-Sira, is obviously an evil and dangerous being, but he is more than he appears to be."

"Yes, he is much older than your generation," said La Noire. And the way she said *'your'* instead of *'our'* gave Val a nasty feeling in the pit of his stomach as he thought again of the timeless quality of her beauty.

"You mean he is more than mortal?" asked Val.

"He is semi-mortal," said La Noire, "he is not very great in the evil hierarchy, nevertheless he has a place in that hierarchy, he is a man to be reckoned with. He would be too much for ordinary human scholars like Fraser and his friends."

"Yes! Yes, he would." Stearman's voice was low and thoughtful. He looked at La Noire searchingly. "What do you suggest we do now darling?"

"I think we need more knowledge."

"Well, we've already used the crystal," said Val.

"I didn't mean the crystal," said La Noire.

"The sand tray," he suggested. She nodded.

"I think so."

"Sometimes I fail to see how the divinations of the sand tray can show us anything that the crystal can't," said Val.

"It is all a matter of degree," said La Noire. "The crystal has great penetration and clarity in certain directions, the sand tray has equal penetration and clarity in other directions. It is like using a radar and a sonar together to discover different things about the movements of the enemy." She paused for a moment and then a smile occurred to her. "The human mind gets information from its eyes and its ears; the things we see are more definite, more clear than the things we hear, most often, yet both senses are very valuable and complementary to one another."

"I see," said Stearman. He couldn't help but admire not only La Noire's psychic ability but the clarity and lucidity of her mind, factors which enabled her to express deep spiritual reality in terms of simple everyday parallels. There was silence for a moment, a thoughtful silence and then La Noire spoke again.

"The crystal ball is the eyes of the seer, the sand tray is her ears. Sometimes when the darkness is very thick, when the darkness is most complete then the ears are able to bring more information to the brain than the eyes."

"Yes, this is true," said Val. He grinned. "You should take up writing fables, darling. Yours are just as good as anything that Aesop could create."

"Ah, yes, Aesop." For a second her face took on a strange nostalgic look and Val got the impression that he had mentioned the name of an old friend—someone she hadn't seen for years. It occurred to him yet again that the longer he knew La Noire the more mysterious she became.

He watched as she took the sand tray, a thing of beautifully inlaid, ornate, oriental workmanship and sprinkled the fine white grains of pure dry sand on to the beautiful surface. It seemed almost sacrilegious to pour sand on to such a fine piece of workmanship and yet these grains were so smooth and rounded that under a microscope—for Stearman had once examined them curiously under his microscope—they appeared more like cosmic dust than the rough grains of broken stones.

La Noire shook them gently and they moved with a soft, strange, murmuring sound. Patterns began to form on the tray. She caught her breath in excitement.

"Aaah!" she whispered. Val was looking over her shoulder, as he had been looking over her shoulder when she had been working with the crystal ball.

The strange patterns on the sand tray continued to change and to mutate and to be transmogrified. The grains moved as though they were possessed with some strange psychic life of their own. Watching the sand on the tray was like watching the changing expressions on the face of an old friend.

Val moved his gaze from the tray itself to his wife's beautiful, graceful hands. The movements grew slower and more relaxed. At last she put the tray down.

"This is the pattern," she whispered quietly. Stearman looked at it with frank, rather earthy eyes; he admired La Noire's psychic gifts and supernatural abilities tremendously, they were somehow a part of her personality, a corollary of her sensitivity. But, although he admired them so much it was not within his nature to be able to participate in them. Stearman was by no means an insensitive man, he was strong, straightforward, direct, but he was not a bore or a philistine. He was not the kind of man who would have echoed the sentiment of the unlovable Field Marshal Goering 'when I hear the word culture I feel like reaching for my revolver.' On the other hand, had that sentiment come from any other mouth than that of the repulsive Nazi thug Stearman would have felt perhaps a certain understanding of it; a comprehension of the feeling that lay behind it, if not an exact sympathy with it. There were some forms of 'culture' which made Val Stearman feel like planting the sole of his number ten boot in the seat of the cultured one! He hadn't got much time for the effeminate, long-haired parasites who talked loftily of the finer points (as they called them) of art, music and drama. Stearman was one of those men who said quite frankly that he had no pretensions where the understanding of the arts was concerned, but he knew what he liked. He did not like macabre, bizarre or bad and ugly work masquerading as some new kind of art form. If he didn't understand an art form he was prepared to say so. The famous disumbrationist hoax had amused him tremendously.

"What are you thinking?" La Noire looked at him suddenly.

"I was thinking about your sensitivity and the way you are handling the sand tray," he said. "I was also thinking about sensitivity in general; art and culture."

"You were smiling," said La Noire. For a second the sand tray was forgotten.

"Yes I was laughing about that disumbrationist business."

"Oh yes," said La Noire. She smiled a little. "Wasn't that something to do with Paul Jordan-Smith?"



"Yes," said Val, "that was the chap. He wrote a book called 'Nomad' and another called 'Cables of Cobwebs'."

"Oh yes," said La Noire.

"Some time ago," said Val. He raised an eyebrow quizzically and scratched his head trying to think of a date.

"1924," said La Noire.

"Was it as long ago as that?" said Stearman. He looked at her, looked at her now that they were in the mid-1960's, looked at that fresh youthful beauty and knew that that radiant young body of hers could not have been in its cradle in 1924 and yet she had spoken so authoritatively. Val himself had been at school then and he remembered the disumbrationist hoax. He remembered his father laughing over it. Paul Jordan-Smith had disguised himself as a scrofulous Russian and under the name of Pavel Jerdanowitch he had fooled the modernists and the distortionists together with the other art innovators.

"I saw one of his paintings in a gallery at Boston, New England," said Val.

"I think that would be 'Exhortation'," said La Noire questioningly.

"Yes, that was the one. Smith explained that it represented the breaking of the shackles of womanhood. It showed a South Sea Island girl with a little skull as part of her hair ornament waving a banana from which she had just taken a bite. Smith explained to his credulous audience that the lady had just killed a missionary and as women were forbidden to eat bananas on that island, she had just taken a large bite and was waving the skin around in triumphant freedom. It's marvellous to think how they actually fell for that."

There was a long silence, then La Noire's eyes went back to the sand tray, the patterns began to change as she tilted it slightly.

"That's unusual," she said. "I thought we had reached the final pattern."

## Chapter Eleven

### THE TRAY OF TRUTH

"THERE is some power here," said La Noire, pointing to the shifting sand, "that is trying to interfere with the pattern that we originally received. Quickly, we must make a pentagram."

With a stick of chalk she made the necessary marks on the floor and placed a number of objects at the points of the stars; candles, a silver talisman, a strange dry herb from an inlaid box and a book. Inside the pentagram she placed the sand tray. It looked as though winds from two opposite directions were stirring and troubling the sand, as though the north wind and the southerly gale were fighting together for mastery of the shifting grains.

"What do you think it means?" asked Val.

"It seems to me that some power is trying to prevent the spirit of the sand from showing us what it has seen," said La Noire.

"You mean the evil power of Abou-ben-Sira," suggested Val.

At the mention of that name the sand on the tray rippled

and there was a strange angry humming sound in the room.

"Yes," said La Noire, "quite definitely."

She took an old vellum-bound book from her cupboard and began to chant in a loud clear voice a language that Val did not know though he had heard her use it many times in the past when they were engaged on one of the psychic adventures.

He said nothing to interrupt and then it seemed that the chant, the incantation, had proved too powerful for the dark evil magic that Ben-Sira was directing against them. The sand returned to its original position—the pattern which La Noire had at first produced. She and Val leaned carefully over the edge of the pentagram and studied the designs carefully.

"What does it tell you?" asked Val.

"It tells me where he is," said La Noire. "It also shows great and terrible danger."

"Danger?" he asked.

She nodded her beautiful head. Her hair rippled deliciously across her graceful shoulders.

"He is still in the East?" asked Val.

"Yes, he is in Mesopotamia."

"What is he doing?"

La Noire looked intently at the sand again.

"He is working with the tablets of power. I think I can find the cave, the cave which was revealed to us by the crystal." She gave a sudden gasp of fear. "The tablets are too powerful for him," she said.

"Too powerful?" Val echoed her words hesitantly, questioningly.

"He no longer controls them, they are controlling him."

"You mean the power of the tablets has overcome Ben-Sira?"

"Yes." La Noire's voice was soft and sibilant. "It is as though Aladdin had rubbed the magic lamp and released a genie to which he became a slave. It is as though the evil man has now become a slave to the evil power."

"Don't all men who traffic with evil become slaves of that evil in time?" said Stearman. He spoke rhetorically.

"In time," said La Noire. She sighed. "Surely," she said, "this is the greatest punishment of evil, to be fashioned in the likeness of evil men."

"That sounds like a classic quotation from somewhere," said Stearman.

"Yes. Yes, it is," said La Noire. "And yet it seems like yesterday."

"What seems like yesterday?"

"Nothing!" She looked at him strangely, sadly, their hands met for a moment. "One day my Val, one day I will tell you."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "We are together, I've got you and that is all that matters. These other things are just like dark shadows that pass in the night; they seem to have no reality." At the back of his mind he was wondering what it was she had been on the verge of saying. He half suspected that she had been going to say that she remembered hearing the words from the lips of the man who had spoken them. But, they were an old quotation, a centuries old classic. The little nagging doubt tried to leap to the forefront of Val's consciousness. Was there really something so very old about her, could she really be as old and as mysterious as the Pyramids—older perhaps, what was the secret of this beautiful, exciting, mysterious, enigmatic wife of his? Part of him longed to know and the other part was afraid to know.

She swept aside the items that had made up the points of the pentagram.

"We must go darling," she said.

"Go?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, we must go back to Iraq. We must go back to Mesopotamia; we must find this Ben-Sira creature in its cave. He has angered the power but the vengeance of the power will not only be directed against him, it will be directed against others of us. Already it has struck down five men, already the tablets have destroyed those who uncovered them."

"Starting at the beginning," said Val, "tell me everything that you've worked out about the tablets so far."

"I'm sure that we were right," said La Noire, as she began packing a case, while Val checked the loading of his big Browning automatic and fingered the silver bullets in their clip.

"Right about what?" he asked. La Noire was putting shirts and blouses into a suitcase with practised feminine efficiency. She answered without looking up.

"Right about this other race, these old ones, the things you were saying to the captain and the doctor on board the liner."

"I see," said Val.

"They had powers which were far greater in their way than many of the powers of modern science." La Noire turned to Val and looked at him with a strange thoughtful look. She sat on the case to close it.

"Power," she said quietly, "can be reached by many roads, just like truth. Knowledge can lead to power, science can lead to power, strength can lead to power and so can *magic*."

Val nodded.

"This we have already seen many times," he said.

"Power itself is neither good nor evil," said La Noire thoughtfully, "it is the way that men use power. Money in the hands of a good man can buy happiness for many; for money is a form of power, a unit of exchange. But, money in the hands of evil men buys misery, slavery, pain and death. Of itself, it is quite a neutral thing; it is what good and evil men do with it which imputes to it qualities of either evil or goodness." Val was nodding his understanding as she went on. "There was great power available to these ancient things and they were evil rather than good—they were darkness rather than light—they were the night not the day; they were the shadow not the substance."

"Yes," Val prompted gently.

"The ancient Chaldeans were not fools; there was wisdom among them. Perhaps one might say that their road to power was the road of wisdom, of thought, of a desire for knowledge, a thirst for truth. They reached a kind of power, I'm sure they did." The way she said 'sure' gave Val that strange sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach again. Just for one trembling, fleeting instant he wondered whether he was in the presence of an immortal. He had seen enough of the unseen world, he had encountered the occult often enough to know that there were mysterious beings whose lives were not like those of the vast majority of men and women. If, as he and La Noire had seen on scores of occasions, there were strange beings who used their power in evil ways, why should there not be strange beings who were not evil—strangeness and evil did not have to go together and yet in so many ways Val knew that his beautiful La Noire was human and almost ordinary. She was a mixture of woman and goddess, a mixture of timeless wisdom and child-like simplicity. Stearman gave up trying to solve the insoluble. To accept and enjoy were far better than to worry and to try to decipher, he decided. As he looked at her he felt that she was somehow aware of the thoughts that were passing through his mind. He changed the mental subject quickly.

"Please go on with what you were saying," he asked.

"I think perhaps the Chaldeans, some of the Magi, overcame part of this dark power."

"You think that the earliest civilized races overlapped this pre-human evil force?" asked Val.

"I think so," she said. She said '*think*' as though she could have been speaking as an eye witness, he thought.

"And what then?" he asked.

"I think that wise men who meant well, who used the power of the eternal stars, as did all the great Chaldean thinkers, took these tablets of the dark power and buried them, buried them deep in a sacred case. You know the legends of the *genie* and the *djinn*."

"Yes, of course," he answered.

"You know how the evil spirit in its bottle, or its earthenware vase, is held in place by the great seal of Solomon, or some other mighty wise man who works for the powers of light?" Her voice held an interrogative inflection.

"Yes, of course," said Val again.

"So I believe these stone tablets were stored in this case by wise men of the distant past and that man's curiosity has raised a fiend which nothing in this scientific age may be able to hold. As I said before, there are many roads to power. Science is a road to power, magic is a road to power—but we have not yet travelled as far along the scientific road to power as the Ancients once travelled along the magic road to power."

"This I can well accept," said Val.

La Noire had practically finished her packing.

"But not all magic is dead."

"Yes, we know that," said Val, he put his arm around her affectionately.

"We know that," she agreed.

"You think that there is still a human magic which can defeat the power of the tablets?"

"Not a human magic in that way," said La Noire, "a power that is available to men, a power which men may be able to use, a power which gave itself and gives itself to men."

"I'm not altogether sure that I follow you."

"The Supreme power of light," said La Noire.

"It is available to us. Imagine men standing in a tiny twilight zone which we call time and space. On either side of the great spiritual universe there are enormous powers of good and of evil. The powers of good are far stronger than the powers of evil and yet—think if you will of the contemporary scene. Imagine a European country, England, France, Germany, ranged against a tiny state like Monaco or Luxembourg. Man is Monaco or Luxembourg on this simile. The size of the power of evil would be the size of England, France, or Germany; but in contrast the great powers of light would be a nation the size of Russia, or America. So, that although both good and evil, as powers,

are incomparably greater than this tiny state which we call reality—good is nevertheless infinitely more powerful than evil.”

“As I said before,” said Val, “you have a great gift for the lucid simile, my darling.”

There was silence for a moment. They went down to the car. Val drove swiftly to the airport. While they were waiting for the plane Stearman found a telephone booth and rang Mac the irascible old Scots editor of the ‘Globe’. Mac and Stearman had been verbal duellists for so long that there had developed a conversational technique, a dialectic method that was somehow all their own.

When a man has argued long and hard with a companion, or fellow worker, or boss, for many years they develop a number of remarks which are themselves the vestigial traces of other remarks, made long ago, and representing vocal battles long since lost or won.

“To what am I indebted for the pleasure of this call?” Mac’s broad highland accent lost little or nothing for being transmitted via Edison Bell’s invention.

“I shall be away for a few days,” said Stearman.

“You’ll be *what*?” The Editor seemed to be exploding into the phone.

“You know that’s very bad for your blood pressure,” said Val.

There was a sound from the other end which could not be represented by the most erudite professor of phonetics armed with the finest set of representative symbols. It was a sound which could only be described very roughly in terms of what it resembled; the sound was an interesting mixture of a sneeze, a cough, a roar, the rattle of a snake, the baying of great hound, the hissing of air when brakes are applied violently, the open throttle of a jet liner, the rattle of rain on a galvanized roof, the slam of a door and the sound of a brick going through a plate glass window. It was all these noises and many more. It was the sound of pure anger; it was a sound from the jungle and yet, Mac, despite his irascibility was a highly civilized man and an extremely intelligent one.

Stearman held the receiver at arm’s length until the jungle sounds had stopped.

“One day,” said Mac, “one day Mr. Val all-mighty Stearman, I’m going to fire you. I’m going to fix it so that no other paper anywhere in Fleet Street would employ you as a copy boy.”

“This has been a recorded conversation,” grinned Stear-

man, “and the tape has now been passed to my solicitor who will consider action in due course.”

“I’d tell you to go to hell,” said Mac, “except that Satan has my sympathy and I wouldn’t want to add to his burden.”

“You are a kind, affectionate and considerate old man,” said Stearman.

“I am not an old man,” roared Mac.

“Well then I must strongly recommend that you change your tailor, your barber and the gentleman who does your face massage,” said Val, “you could have fooled me!”

There was another sound of uproarious anger and then like a calm after the breaking of a storm, like the calm that comes when the fury of the billow lies down again at peace on the soft bosom of the sea, Mac said:

“What is it this time then, Val?”

Just as Mac’s anger brought out the implacable taunting devil in Stearman the steel shell through which nothing could penetrate, so, the ending of that anger was a kind of psychic signal for Stearman to remove the shell. He heaved a deep sigh.

“Mac,” he said, “this is something big and something serious. I know you’ve got a paper to run. I know it must be the very devil when people keep disappearing into the distant corners of the globe, especially when they have only just come back.”

“I will forgive that inexcusable pun about the corners of the globe,” said the Editor. “Go on Val.”

Briefly, lucidly, succinctly Val explained all that he and La Noire knew and of the peculiar affair of Ben-Sira, and the tablets of power that seemed to hold within them a weird unknown destiny.

Val Stearman, journalist-adventurer, had worked for—or against—depending on whether the viewpoint was his or Mac’s—the Daily Globe—for a long, long time. He was that *rara avis* the supernatural reporter, expert on the occult, connoisseur of the unusual, pedant of the peculiar; a kind of Ulysses of the unknown, a journeyer into the mysterious. As such, the kind of trips that he had to make in his chosen walk of life meant that neither clocks, nor office desks, neither timetables, nor teleprinters, were his masters. But a man who has to run a mass circulation daily like the ‘Globe’ has to have his machine, his organization, running with the smoothness and efficiency of a mighty clock. Every member of staff has to be as predictable and as reliable as the vibrations of a quartz crystal. Only a man of Val Stearman’s unlimited talent would have been tolerated for

a minute in view of the incredible irregularity of all that he did and much that he wrote.

For all his love of organization and method, of system and repetition, Mac, the irascible old Scots editor, was not so hidebound by his love of efficiency that he was unable to appreciate a rough diamond when he had one.

It would have been folly to suggest that more than fifteen or twenty per cent of the "*Globe's*" readers were addicted to Stearman's column, but a mass circulation daily like the "*Globe*" had rivals—close rivals—circulation means revenue, circulation is the lure which brings the advertiser, who in turn brings the money that keeps the paper running, keeps the presses rolling and keeps Editors and Journalists alike working at their desks and on their assignments.

The "*Globe*" was a few hundred thousand ahead of its rivals and although the absence of Stearman's column might only account for a smallish percentage, it did account for a significant percentage. Small percentages of circulation figures are always significant on big competitive papers. Despite his threat, despite his growlings, his ravings, his roarings and his gesticulations, despite his quasi-apoplectic fit old Mac would not have wanted Val Stearman to change horses and Stearman would have no more considered leaving the "*Globe*" than he would have considered tying lead weights around his feet and diving off Tower Bridge.

Beyond all the surface bickering, the play, the counter-play, the threat and the counter-threat Stearman and Mac had a great deal in common. There was a deep underlying loyalty, which is only found in the strongest characters. In one breath Mac could tell Stearman to go to hell and for that moment mean it, in the same breath Stearman would return the compliment and they would storm away from each other's presences like two fighting cocks at the end of a round in a cock pit. But, when tempers had cooled that deep underlying something, that common denominator, that affection and mutual regard of one strong man for another would take over and Mac, almost biting his tongue out of his head with reluctance, would apologise and Stearman would sheepishly accept it. Kipling, for all that the critics said about him, was perhaps one of the greatest poetical psychologists ever to put pen to paper. He knew men because of his experience of life and when he wrote the ballad of 'East and West' in which two strong men of vastly different temperments are confronted with one another, he was in effect stating a principle which is as true as it ought to be obvious. The strength of Val Stearman on the one hand and of Mac the old Scots Editor on the other, were vastly

different things. Stearman had a wild, free, happy-go-lucky mind, matured a little but still possessing the eternal freshness of the school captain mentality; he had the wide, travelled mind of the adventurer; there was nothing he wouldn't tackle and of the things he tackled he tackled most of them very well indeed. Stearman was a big man with a constitution like the bull of Bashan and muscles that could tear out an oak tree by the roots.

Mac had the toughness of a fine steel wire. He was a little, gnarled spring of a man, ready to uncoil with terrific mental nervous energy in a hundred and one different directions. His was a kind of dry preserved strength, there were qualities of acuteness, alertness and vigour in his mind which had defied the ravages of time. Despite his age, he had that brisk intelligence that marked the closing years of Bernard Shaw's life. He was as sprightly as Lord Russell the philosopher and when these two strengths met, when on remote occasions Stearman and Mac were not at each others throats, when they were moving in the same direction—then the combination of these two forces was an Armada-like thing, a thing that was practically unconquerable. Both of them wished in their innermost hearts that these moments of collaboration could be prolonged but, being the men they were they were impatient of obstacles and when they did not think alike—which strong intelligent men rarely do—they regarded one another as obstacles to some extent. A strong man confronted by an ordinary obstacle can brush it aside and his irritation would be negligible, confront him with a big obstacle and his frustration will be increased and his furious onslaught on the obstacle will increase in direct ratio with it. Val and Mac were practically insurmountable obstacles to one another when they came into conflict and their head-on collisions set the "*Globe*" building trembling until Fleet Street began to shake from one end to the other.

But now, as Stearman hung up, the collision was over. Mac knew where he was going and Mac approved. He didn't approve of the upset in the routine, but he did approve of the story that would come out.

Stearman went back to La Noire.

"And how is the little tiger-man in its dry and withered den?" she smiled.

"Oh, snarling and gnashing its teeth," said Stearman, "raving, ranting and probably throwing inkwells at the office boy." La Noire smiled.

"Poor lad."

"Who, the office boy, or Mac?"

"Both."

He put his arm around her and they both went towards the plane.

## Chapter Twelve

### FLIGHT

VAL and La Noire were both very seasoned and experienced air travellers, but there is always something excitingly magical about a flight—even by night—when you seem to be one with the stars, when the mood rides beside you high and bright and clear, and the clouds spread themselves under your plane like a great soft blanket. The heavens by night, in the superb comfort of a modern airliner are more like a brief glimpse of an enchanted moonlit fairyland. Val and La Noire were both incurable romantics. They sat now holding hands, looking first at each other and then out into the stars; their thoughts were deep, so deep that it would have been an intrusion and a blasphemy to try to set them down. They were a man and a woman in love, as deeply in love as they had ever been and out there among the stars the eternal quality of their love was reflected back and they saw that human love was itself only on tiny reflection—a minute sparkling drop from the great ocean of almighty love which was the source, the mainstay and the purpose of the Universe itself. It was only on rare occasions—moments like this snatched out of time—that Val and La Noire could really relax, could be alone with each other and with eternity and in a sense with God; now they could bask together mentally and spiritually in the Infinite and the Eternal. It was a moment when it seemed possible for them to recharge their psychic batteries, when they could refill

themselves with the spiritual energy which they were constantly giving out in the battle against occult evil which was the lot they had chosen for themselves on their journey through life.

At last the plane came dipping down, down through the night sky, down through the fleecy white cloud blanket and there were airport lights below; they were landing in Iraq. Then there were disembarkation formalities. Val and La Noire went through customs as they came off the plane and made their way to the cab rank.

The driver, a healthily-bronzed, intelligent looking Iraqi in a smart uniform that would have done justice to any chauffeur anywhere in the world, took them swiftly to their hotel and departed with a broad smile, for Stearman was a generous tipper. The hotel, a sign of the oil prosperity of Mesopotamia, was a tall, modern, air-conditioned building with first class service and a cuisine which would satisfy modern sophisticated tastes. Val and La Noire ate what was either an early breakfast or a late dinner and then settled themselves down for the night.

The morning was bright and clear, as bright and clear as only the Eastern morning can be. The sun rose across the broad waters of the Tigris, shed its light waves above the banks of the Euphrates and greeted the dawning land. The whole country seemed to rub sleep from its mysterious old eyes and look up at the sun as a tired child looks at his mother when she wakes him for school in the mornings. The sun rose a little higher, athwart the azure dome of the heavens, as Val and La Noire made an excellent real breakfast. Stearman watched while the waiter deftly removed the vestigial traces of the rainbow trout with which Val had filled his massive physique and then, breakfast forgotten, Val went over to the reception desk and made arrangements for a self-drive car to be delivered. Such things were not as easy to obtain in Iraq as they were in England.

Cars in Mesopotamia had to contend with road conditions which were not always the kind of things which the motorizing organizations seek to ensure for their members. The Mesopotamian car has to be an extremely adaptable vehicle. It must have the ability to resist heat, vibration and—in the case of self-drive cars—the vagaries and vicissitudes of those who do not drive as their instructors and examiners would wish. The car, had it been coherent, had it possessed a mind of its own, had it been able to express any kind of conscious approbation or otherwise, would have been delighted to have had Stearman at its wheel. There were few things which the iron-grey colossus did not do well.

He did many things *superbly* and driving was one of them. Val Stearman could have backed a car through the eye of a needle blindfold and parked without snapping the thread. He had a dexterity, a delicacy of touch, a cool, iron-hard nerve and a sense of empathy with the vehicle that he drove which would have made him a formidable opponent on any race track. He could negotiate the narrowest traffic-bound streets, or the most rugged mountain road, with consummate skill and a driving ability which was a kind of poetry in motion, an artistry on wheels. Perhaps of all his many attributes Stearman's two greatest accomplishments were driving and fighting. He loved both with a passionate fervour that was only excelled and exceeded by his feeling for La Noire.

The car that arrived as a result of the arrangement he had made in the hotel was not a 1964 model, it was four or five years old and it was battered bodywork-wise. On the other hand the engine had a number of commendable features, the most important of them being that it was considerably newer than the bodywork and it was nicely run-in. Val spent a few minutes making some minor adjustments to the carburettor and tuning generally. It was a big, three-litre job and when he had finished he reckoned that in an emergency it would give him four score and then some in hand even on these Mesopotamian roads.

He and La Noire climbed aboard and although they left the majority of their luggage at the hotel they carried one or two items with them, items which they considered indispensable when they were actually engaged on a case of this kind. Perhaps the most essential part of the luggage in Stearman's opinion was the grim, strong, purposeful shape that nestled in the pocket of his broad, comfortable jacket. It was the Browning automatic which he loved like a brother. It was a beautifully precise gun, a superb one. It was accurate enough to have enabled a marksman like Val Stearman to have come away from any pistol shooting target championship with an armful of cups and trophies. But a gun needs two things, if it is to be a perfect weapon. It needs accuracy and it needs power. The Browning had both, like all its brothers from that famous gun-making stable. Stearman sometimes went into almost poetic ecstasy when he described the qualities of that gun. His cartridges were special—the bullets were silver, the charge was an extra high velocity special powder. It was an expensive way of shooting and Stearman didn't have to use it very often, but when he did, life, very often more than one life, hung

in the balance. That gun had the accuracy of a diving kestrel and the power of a charging rogue bull.

They drove vaguely north-west. They were driving on instinct and impulse as much as anything. La Noire's incredibly sensitive mind was directing them, as a result of the information which she had received from the sand tray, towards what she felt was the focal point—the central spot—from which the evil that was Abou-ben-Sira and his terrible tablets was emanating.

It was noon before Val cast a questioning glance at his wife. There was a tense, almost an anxious expression on her face. But even when she looked tense nothing seemed to mar the mysterious Cleopatrine quality of her ageless beauty.

"Are we nearly there?" asked Val.

"Yes, darling, we are very close."

Ahead of them a range of medium to tall hills rose like the teeth of an old dragon, teeth worn down by the constant chewing of bones of victims. The teeth were studded with caries, each cavity a dark blemished-looking cave.

"You think one of those is Ben-Sira's hiding place?" asked Val.

"Yes, I do," said La Noire. Stearman patted the bulge in his pocket, it felt somehow comforting. La Noire picked up the small case that carried the other psychic weapons which they hoped to use against the foul thing masquerading as a man in the shape of Ben-Sira, the strange Arab-like figure in robes that were out of period and out of character. They moved towards the hills.

They were on foot now. Stearman for all his weight and size climbing with deft ease over the small boulders that strewed the lower slopes. A sudden noise, perhaps an instinct rather than the actual physical hearing of the noise made La Noire look up. A boulder, larger than any of those on which they trod, was rolling down the hillside towards them. She gave a swift startled cry; Val pushed her swiftly to one side and flung his own great body protectively on top of her. The boulder bounced and rolled, moving towards them with swiftness that it would have been impossible to dodge. It struck an outcropping a few feet above them. Its great bulk speeding from its roll lifted in the air and flew over them. Showers of dry red earth and small stones spattered harmlessly across Val Stearman's vast shoulders. The great boulder, gathering speed, bounced down the mountain like the puck in some gargantuan ice-hockey match, travelling at what must, by this time, have

been close to a hundred miles an hour. It landed with a sharp, but at the same time ponderous, crash against an outcropping of jagged rock as hard as itself. It split in the way that a diamond cutter divides a gem. Showers of tiny peripheral splinters flew up into the air—some of them razor sharp—as dangerous as flying glass or shrapnel. The two major portions veered off and diverged from one another at graceful tangents; they spun for a moment as an old-fashioned circular breadboard spins when children at a party are playing the popular old game of 'Trencher'. And then, having rolled rather disconsolately up the opposite side of the valley, the pieces slithered to a stop and fell with a heavy finality among the lesser boulders that had travelled such a path before them.

Val got up, dusted himself down and helped La Noire to her feet.

"Are you all right darling?" his voice was full of concern. "Yes, I'm fine." She too brushed herself down and they both paused and looked up the mountain—scarcely a mountain—thought Stearman and yet, now that they were on it, it seemed far bigger, far more mountain-like and less hill-like than it had seemed previously. It was the kind of experience, thought Val, that a man gets if he climbs on to a diving-board, from the side of a pool it looks nothing, but when you actually climb up the iron steps, wet from the feet of swimmers and divers who have climbed up that way before you, and when you walk out across the board you suddenly realise just how high up you are and how small a man is compared with the diving board and the water below. From the side of the pool seven feet doesn't look very high, but a man who stands poised on the edge of the seven foot board looks down at the water below and feels for one fleeting second that he is looking down from the top of Tower Bridge into the mighty waters of the Thames. A seven foot diving board can look to a man perched on it like the Empire State Building, or the wing of a high flying aircraft. Stearman saw the similarity between that sensation and the sensation of being on the mountain. In the distance it had seemed to be no more than a hill, one of the small range of hills—tooth-like hills scarred with decay-hole caves, black cavities in the dentine. But, if these were no more than teeth, thought Val rather picturesquely, then the biggest man was only a microbe, a speck of bacteria, a minute virus. He and La Noire continued to ascend.

It seemed a long way down when they looked back and they still had not reached the lowest of the caves. No man, not even Val Stearman, was so super-human that an en-

counter with death like their recent brush with the boulder could leave him completely unmoved. Familiarity does breed contempt to a high degree, but there are some things with which no amount of familiarity can breed the sort of sensation which could, in the round, be referred to as contempt or anything approaching contempt. If a man has had enough close brushes with death, danger and disaster, he will, all things else being equal, face such perils with more equanimity than a man who has hitherto led a sheltered life. On the other hand, the steeplejack, or the spiderman, working high on his steel erections, the deep-sea diver separated from hundreds of tons of pressure by an artifact of man, the mountaineer, or the potholer, the Polar explorer, or the penetrator of the Amazon basin are all very ready to admit that the sense of awe never entirely leaves them. Stearman had faced enemies, some crude, some subtle, all of them dangerous, most of them mortally dangerous. He always experienced the same kind of tingling excitement when he found himself in that situation again.

"It wasn't an accident, of course," said La Noire, she raised one beautifully curved eyebrow, an eyebrow of perfect symmetry, a worthy harbinger of the beautiful eyes, one of which it overshadowed.

"No, I know darn well it wasn't darling," he answered. She looked at him and her eyes were like two mysterious black stars, two jewels shining in a face which could not have been bettered anywhere on earth. Looking at her, Val doubted whether even the heavens could match such beauty, whether the noblest singer in the angelic choir, or the most shining seraph could equal the radiance of this glorious woman who belonged to him.

"It was Ben-Sira," said Val. His remark was part-statement, part-question.

"He is near," said La Noire, "I sense it, my darling. He is very near, but he is not the danger." She held Val's hand tightly as they continued to ascend. "The tablets have seized control of the evil thing of which they are a symptom has taken possession of Ben-Sira."

"You think so?" he asked.

"I know it." Her voice was very serious. Val drew a deep breath.

"So!" he said grimly.

"We are not fighting Ben-Sira," said La Noire, "he would be formidable enough, for he is no mortal man, but we are fighting something else, something older than human history, something that had developed and partially decayed before men came out of their caves, before they came down from the



trees. The decline of these *things* over-lapped the rise of humanity. I know that the old Chaldean astronomers, the old Babylonian sages, the seers of ancient Mesopotamia, were able to destroy, to overcome, to defeat, to imprison and to capture, by means of their magic, this peculiar power."

Val looked at her slowly, searchingly.

"Man's curiosity," he said as they climbed. "Man's curiosity; archaeologists who dig, climbers who explore the heights of mountains, potholers who go down into those remote depths of great caves." La Noire was nodding.

"Man's curiosity! I fear that this time it may have unleashed a monster which we can no longer control. I fear that man's curiosity may have raised a fiend which nothing can chain."

"You think it's as bad as that," said Val.

"I do not really say that *nothing* can chain it, but I feel that nothing in man's armoury, nothing in man's technology, nothing in orthodox physical science will be able to hold it. If the power is the power which I fear it to be then . . ."

She left the sentence unfinished.

"There was a movement in that cave, darling," he whispered.

"A movement!" she cried.

"A furtive one, too," said Val.

"Yes, up there," she pointed.

"I can't see anything now," said Val.

"I'm not sure that I saw it with my physical eyes or whether I became aware of it by some psychic process," said La Noire, she spoke frankly, urgently.

"Well, we don't want to walk straight into it, whatever it is," said Stearman, "we'll go round." Still holding her hand he led the way with strong, sure steps. He was circling the cave so that he could take it from the side and a little above. He saw a sudden flash of movement from the aperture. They both froze in their tracks, a boulder moved from the cave entrance; it was big, it must have weighed a ton or a ton and a half, it was far more vast than an unaided man could have pushed out of its balance; perhaps using every sinew and every fibre of his colossal physique in a moment of absolute desperation Stearman might have budged that boulder, but no ordinary man could have done it. Even for Stearman it would have been a supreme consummation of his physical power; it would have been accomplished at great cost. But, the power that moved the boulder now moved it casually. They didn't see the power only the flurry of movement and then the boulder was cascading down the mountain side in front of the cave along

the path which they would have been taking if Val had not struck off to try and outflank the cave.

They continued to climb and to circle. They climbed fast and there was no further sign of movement from the dark aperture. Val reached the ledge on which the cave stood. He and La Noire stood listening in silence. From within the cave came strange sounds and the Stearmans felt as though they were being enveloped in a strange web of incalculable dark power . . .

## Chapter Thirteen

### THE CAVE OF TERROR

LA NOIRE opened the case she was carrying, it contained a number of rather unusual assorted objects. Among the unusual there were also some very familiar things. With a graceful movement of her lovely hands La Noire lifted two silver crosses on chains out of the case. She hung one around Val's neck with the gentleness of a Polynesian girl giving a garland of flowers to the man she loves. She put the other swiftly over her own head and then stooped to the case again and uncorked a silver flask. With a swift, but at the same time conservative movement she sprinkled the few drops of the holy water which the flask contained over Val. He took it from her and splashed a similar miniature silvery cascade over her. The Babylonian moon looked down, as it must have looked down when worshippers climbed the Ziggurats.

There was an increase of sound from within the cave. La Noire replaced the re-stoppered silver flask carefully in its case. Val's left hand was protectively around her waist. He was a little ahead of her as they approached the cave, the moonlight cast long shadows, strange silver and black shadows, among the rocks. There was a sensation of a web of dark power trying to snare them, to envelop them, to enmesh them in its toils; but somehow it was failing. It was as if the holy water and the silver crosses were throwing out a radiation as powerful as a lazar beam and cutting through the foul reticulations.

Val and La Noire walked swiftly along the ledge and

stepped purposefully into the cave. Stearman's big beautiful Browning lay in the palm of his hand. A mongoose ready to spring; he felt as though he held a hawk on its leash, as though he had a great hunting dog on a chain. Press the trigger and the dog would fly from its chain at tremendous speed.

Inside the cave there was a dull gloom, but it was relieved by the light of a small fire that burned in an alcove above which a natural shaft served as a chimney. The fire had only just been lit by the look of it, otherwise Val realised he and La Noire would have seen the smoke as they climbed. As they looked at the fire it seemed to wink at them like the malevolent red eye of some sinister ogre, some brooding nagian beast, some weird predator of the cave.

They pressed on past the fire into the shadowy orange-flecked interior. On the floor Stearman suddenly noticed a clay tablet. He stooped to pick it up and held it a little to the side of his head so that the light from the fire, shining over his shoulder, cast an orange gleam upon the strange characters cut into the clay. He passed it to La Noire.

"What do you make of this, darling?"

She too studied it in the firelight.

"It's the image of the one that killed poor Eric," she said softly. The clay tablet twisted in her hand as though it were a living thing. Val made a grab at it as La Noire screamed. The tablet fell to the floor before Stearman could clutch it, but it didn't fall at the proper speed it fell in slow motion, as though it were trying to resist the fall in some way. Val stooped as though to pick it up. The tablet edged away from him like a living thing, and yet a living thing that was injured or wounded. It made him think of a rat that has been winged with buckshot and yet manages to summon from somewhere the strength to elude the grasp of the rodent officer who has fired at it.

The tablet continued to edge away in a series of painful little jerks. It was one of the most incongruous and yet at the same time horrible sights that Stearman had ever seen. He wasted no more time trying to pick it up, he drew a bead on the leaping tablet with the big Browning. The crash of the exploding cartridge sounded loud in the echoing confines of the cave. The silver bullet struck the tablet very close to its geometric centre. There was a flash of silver, almost so fast that it was invisible, but not quite; Val and La Noire were aware of it as a flash, in the same way that the observer is aware of a flash of lightning even though it passes almost too rapidly for the eye to see. It was as though the image of the flash remained on the retinas of their eyes

after the flash itself has come and gone, after the moment of impact has moved from the present to the past, had turned from action into history. A cloud of greenish-grey vapour rose from the tablet, as though the bullet had uncorked a bottle in which some powerful spirit lived and moved and had its being; it was as though some ancient genie had been released.

Val and La Noire backed away a little from that cloud of poisonous, vapourous fumes. The fumes continued to swell out of the tablet as though the impact of the silver bullet had detonated some strange chemical component. The smoke or vapour, or whatever it was, the weird aerial precipitate continued to billow out like a spinnaker catching a light breeze on a yachtsman's holiday.

Val and La Noire flung themselves to the floor of the cave. From only a few feet away Stearman could see the clay tablet disgorging this obnoxious effluvium. There was a foul reek in the smoke, it had about it the stench of graveyard mould, it smelled of midnight and dank tombs, it smelled of corruption and decay. It was a blemished smell.

"What on earth is it?" asked La Noire.

"It is unusual for you not to know the psychic answers," said Val.

"Well, it is some kind of manifestation of evil," she whispered, "I have rarely seen anything that came out in this quantity."

They were still clear of the actual smoke which was billowing above them.

"It doesn't seem to be coming to an end yet," said Stearman, "it will fill the whole cave in a few moments, it will choke us."

"Have you noticed," said La Noire pointing swiftly, "it has already reached floor level all around us."

"Yes it is the crosses and holy water that are keeping it at bay," said Stearman.

"The holy water," said La Noire quickly.

"Of course," said Val. She passed him the case, he unfastened it with a swift dextrous movement and then he sprinkled a few drops of the precious liquid on to the smoking stone tablet. There was a violent, crackling, hissing sound, as though water had been poured on to a white-hot flint. The tablet began to crumble, the smoke stopped, a pile of strange greyish-white ash was all that remained.

"Well, that's it then," said La Noire.

Above them the smoke was already beginning to disperse. As it did so there was the sound of a great rumbling, as

though a volcano was about to erupt, as though an earthquake was about to unleash its terrors against the mountain-side.

"That is the end of that particular tablet," said Stearman, "but I think it is only the beginning as far as the opposition are concerned."

Something enormous suddenly thrust its way through the smoke. It might have been one colossal finger, perhaps a thumb. There was no doubt that it was an incredibly magnified digital extremity. Val, holding La Noire behind him on his left arm, fired two shots in swift succession from the massive Browning automatic. The heavy .45 calibre slugs tore their silver destruction into the thing that was coming towards them. There was a roar, the sound as of a bull being pole-axed, as of a great male gorilla being wounded by an express bullet, a sound as of an elephant hurtling over a precipice, and then, the thing that had opposed them was withdrawn and something else appeared. Something, that could only have been another digit of that great hand, if the huge, deformed monstrous claw-like thing could be described as a hand, by the wildest stretch of the imagination.

"It's a monster!" said La Noire, "it is something that the tablets have created, like a manifestation of evil again, but this is something far deadlier than the smoke even your silver bullets won't stop it Val, it's too big. This needs even greater White Powers than those which we carry."

"You mean to say that this has come from the tablets?" said Stearman.

"This is the hand of a monster which the tablets have created," said La Noire.

A great finger and thumb came through the thinning vapours, the attenuated smoke. Val and La Noire began backing down the cave. Stearman fired again and again at the monstrous hand and each time the silver bullets struck one of those enormous digits the hand withdrew a little. There was a great roar, but always it came after them again.

Stearman knew now what had flicked the boulder down the mountain side so casually. A few moments later they reached the mouth of the cave, passed the small fire, and then they were gone, racing headlong down the mountain side to the accompaniment of brutish laughter magnified a thousandfold . . .

upon tearing it up by the roots and hurling it into the sea.

Val and La Noire ended their precipitous flight; they came to rest against a ledge of rock that protruded at an acute angle from the side of the slope down which they had been stumbling. The v-shaped cross section formed by the angle of the rocky outcrop and the side of the hill, was filled with a kind of morain, a sort of stone and soil mixture washed down by the rain of centuries. It was by no means a soft or comfortable landing place but it was a great deal softer by comparison than the rock upon which they might have ended their headlong descent.

They lay where they were for a moment or so, feeling the mountain moving beneath them and then as Val recovered himself a little he staggered to his feet and helped La Noire to rise. He put the Browning back in his jacket pocket.

"Darling, I'm so sorry I've lost the case somewhere," she said.

"Don't worry," he said grimly, "I don't suppose anything we had there would have done any good against this."

A deluge of rocks, a minor malestrom of debris raced down the mountain side not far from them. Stones and loose earth in their wake clattered past like the Wild Hunt in full flight from the mediaeval Norse-skies. But, frightening as the miniature avalanche was, it was a mere bagatelle to the sight that now met their gaze.

At the top of the mountain the THING of which they had so far seen only the hand had forced its way out of the solid rock. The mountain at that point being honeycombed with small caves and eroded by countless rain fissures, it had cracked along a fault-line. The monster had lifted off the lid of its cave as a man would tear around the perforations on a packet of soap flakes. It stood holding the jagged stone above its head like an umbrella, a strange grey-green light emanated from it and by its own illumination Val and La Noire could pick out a number of features.

"Who is it?" asked La Noire, "is it something new?"

Inspiration came to Val Stearman like a dove alighting on his mind.

"No," he said, "it is not someone new. Look at that face, the face we saw in your crystal, my darling, but distorted and transformed out of all recognition, unless you know what you are looking for."

"The face in the crystal," gasped La Noire. She looked hard at the shining physiognomy of the monster. "You're right darling!" she whispered, "it is. IT IS!"

The Thing tossed the rock aside and waved its great arms like a windmill. At that moment Val Stearman had no

## Chapter Fourteen

### THE MONSTER

VAL and La Noire were falling, slipping, sliding and rolling. Their progress down the moonlit boulder-strewn mountain side was an almost impossible thing to describe. La Noire had dropped the precious case and Val's gun was empty, they were bruised, battered and breathless as they continued to slip and roll among the boulders and the small stones. The whole mountain seemed to be vibrating and shaking like the cage, the inadequate cage, in which a gorilla or fierce denizen of the jungle is held captive.

As they rolled and staggered down the mountain side there was a roaring, tearing sound, greater than any disturbance than they had heard yet. The mountain shook as though it were in the grasp of some cosmic giant who was intent

quixotic feelings, he had no gallant impulse to charge. The monster lowered its arms and the roar to which it gave vent seemed to frighten the clouds to a higher strata of the air.

It began to descend on slow but frighteningly powerful feet. It turned a little; its great head sniffed at the air; it made Stearman think incongruously of the ancient giant from the child's fairy tale saying 'fe fi fo fum I smell the blood of an Englishman'. It reminded him of the days of long ago when he had first seen Jack and the Beanstalk at a Christmas Pantomime and how he had been frightened of the Ogre who clumped about the stage on stilts.

There was something horrifying about the sheer size of the brute as it moved down the mountain side towards them.

"It is Ben-Sira!" said La Noire, "this is what the tablets have done to him. He thought he controlled them, now they control him. The power from the tablets has flowed into his body and where they merely destroyed others, because Ben-Sira was an Eastern magician, because he had a certain primitive knowledge they have taken a terrible vengeance upon him. He was not destroyed as an ordinary mortal would have been destroyed, they have invaded his body, they have changed it to their own use; Ben-Sira and the tablets were melted together into this huge and terrible thing. I know it. I KNOW IT!"

There was another deluge of small rocks and stones as the Thing drew nearer.

"We've got to get further away," said Stearman, "although it looks slow and clumsy the size of it means that it is really descending at enormous speed."

"How can we get away?" said La Noire, "you saw what it did, it lifted off the top of the mountain."

"We must hide," said Stearman, "we must hide, my darling."

"But, where?" she asked. "Where?"

Almost instinctively Stearman felt for the empty gun in his pocket. There had been a spare clip in the case that La Noire had dropped in the hurried flight but his experience in the cave had shown that the silver bullets were no more than toys against this lumbering colossus, this evil thing that was the *form* of the tablets, this thing that had once been the physical body of Abou-ben-Sira.

"Perhaps he only lifted the top off the mountain because it was honeycombed with fissures and caves, thereby weakening it? Maybe they had been driven deep into the solid rock. If we can find a cave that goes down like some of the old potholes in the limestone hills at home, we might be able to get further down than he can follow," suggested Val.

"It's our only chance," said La Noire.

"What about that one there," said Stearman. "That looks likely to lead down."

The mountain was still shaking as the great thing lumbered down after them.

"Right," said La Noire. "Let's try it." She and Val raced for the black mouth of the cave. The air was cooler inside, but as soon as they had moved six paces from the aperture there was no way at all. All they could see behind them was the moonlit circle of the cave mouth.

Val went first holding tightly to La Noire's hand. He moved into the darkness, praying as he walked, praying that there would be no sudden vertical shaft, no death dealing, unexpected trap. La Noire turned and looked behind. The ring of moonlight had shut itself out behind her, she realised that the monster would soon reach the mouth of the cave; the huge hand began to grope a finger at a time into the cave mouth. La Noire screamed as the great digit pursued her. The cave was growing narrower.

"Mind your head," said Val, who had already caught his with dizzying force on the sloping roof above them. Moonlight suddenly appeared again behind them. The great finger had crooked and was tugging at the rocks, pulling them away.

"If this doesn't go deep, we're finished," said Val. His mind went back to their very first meeting. His mind went back to that fateful séance at which he had rescued La Noire from the clutches of the Coven, from the sinister Jules and the deadly von Haak. His mind went back to the adventures that they had had, adventures in time and adventures in space. He recalled the fiends they had fought and the friends with whom they had shared the strange, mystic communion which men call life. He thought of the good times and the bad, he thought of the fear and the exultation which life had held and now, as that unbelievably colossal finger probed towards them, tearing away at the mouth of the cave, it seemed that the glorious adventure called Life was coming to an end.

It was like watching an old-fashioned flickering silent film to watch that finger coming and going, pulling away at the rock at the cave mouth so that the whole hand of the vast incredible creature could be admitted. They were playing a game of blind man's bluff, playing it against time with no prizes for winning and death as the punishment for failure.

Val and La Noire moved on as fast as was humanly possible in the strange darkness. It was no longer possible to walk upright. Stearman was down on his hands and knees,

crawling. La Noire had released his hand and was holding the back of his shirt. They could hear rocks being torn away with a snapping, crunching sound. Incongruously enough, it made Val think of a child eating cornflakes!

The tunnel they were in grew narrower, and then narrower still. Stearman was not crawling now, he was wriggling; he could feel La Noire's hand on his ankle. Maybe, he thought, this is all for the good perhaps this is so narrow he won't be able to get his finger in to pick at it. Maybe, if this goes down we can beat him yet. The tunnel *was* going down, going down a considerable way. He reckoned that they were descending at an angle of about 15 degrees from the horizontal. The angle of the declivity increased, now they were descending at something that was more like 20 degrees, perhaps even 25 degrees. It was an odd sensation crawling there through the darkness not knowing more than his outstretched hands could tell him.

"Are you all right, darling?" he called over his shoulder.

"Yes, Val, I'm all right." He knew at least that she wouldn't get stuck, if he could get his massive chest and shoulders through then he had no doubt at all that La Noire would be able to follow. He kept on forcing his way along the tunnel; his hands felt grazed and there was a wet sticky sensation like blood on his palms for in places the rocks were sharp. Every few feet he would bang his head against a protrusion from the ceiling, and behind them all the time they could hear that terrible magnified-cornflake sound as the gigantic evil thing kept plucking and tearing at the mouth of their sanctuary cave.

Val's groping hand suddenly failed to encounter solid rock floor, in fact they encountered nothing.

"Hold it!" he gasped, "this is the end of the tunnel." He moved his hand around in the darkness. The darkness was absolutely stygian; it was as black as pitch. It was the kind of darkness a man can almost feel. There was something tantamount to a tactile sensation about it. It was the sort of darkness that seems to seep into the pores of your skin and get into your lungs so that you breathe it and absorb it like a piece of human blotting paper. It was like the darkness of death, the darkness of midnight; it was an indescribably horrible darkness, a solid macabre, supernatural darkness; a darkness such as man never experiences on the surface of the Earth. Even on the darkest night there is a tiny glimmer somewhere, but here there was *nothing*. It was as though this was the innermost domain of the court of darkness itself, as though light had abandoned this place with a shudder of despair.

Val groped down, he felt the smooth side of a rock cavern. "It seems to be a long drop here, darling," he said; his hands could encounter nothing.

"I have found a loose stone," said La Noire, "I'll pass it to you."

With cool calm courage they managed to wriggle their bodies in the narrow confines of the tight passage until their hands touched. The stone that La Noire had found was about the size of a billiard ball. Val took it and squeezed her fingers gently as he did so. He stretched his hand out over the edge and released the stone. There was an almost immediate splash.

"Water!" said La Noire.

"Yes, and only a few feet below the level of this tunnel," said Val.

"What shall we do?" asked his wife.

"Well, we could go through into it, at least it will give us room to manoeuvre." Val put his hands above his head, "there doesn't seem to be a touchable ceiling here either. It would be a treat to stretch even if it is soaking wet, we shan't have time to fall."

"All right," said La Noire, "let's go into it."

Val eased his way forward, he hung over the edge and stretched his arms as far down as they could go. He could just touch the surface of the water, he estimated it must be something like four or five feet below him. It felt very cool. He wondered if any strange creatures, transparent blind fish perhaps, or other things less pleasant to the imagination, lived and moved and had their being in this lightless water. They could still hear the crunching, breaking sounds behind them. They sounded more distant now, as though the monstrous thing was venting its fury on the rocks around the cave because it could get in no deeper.

Val slipped down in a kind of sliding dive into the water. He went down like a ship going down a slipway, he deliberately swam down holding his breath tightly trying to find the floor of the underground pool in which he was swimming. He went down to a depth of at least fifteen or sixteen feet as far as he could calculate; it was difficult to gauge depth there in the blackness. He turned and struck out for the surface again. He reached it and his hand encountered not air but solid rock, he groped desperately. Val Stearman was not a man to panic, he realised that somehow in the course of that exploratory dive he had gone further than he had intended. Although in the groping darkness while he had been wedged still in the mouth of that narrow tunnel he had

been unable to encounter the sides of the cavern in which the underground pool was situated, it was obviously not as large as he had thought when he had dived in. He had perhaps moved six or eight feet away from the mouth of the little tunnel from which he had dived, obviously the pool went on under the ceiling of the cave which had come down to meet it, *and he had no idea in which direction the open surface of the pool lay.* If he groped in the wrong direction then he would only be taking himself further and further away from the life giving air. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to panic at that moment and Val Stearman could not have been blamed if he had been overwhelmed by a sensation of blind unreasoning terror. But blind unreasoning terror is a short cut to the mortician; it is the man who can think coolly and calmly who saves his life. That, thought Stearman is the psychological aspect of the wise old text to the effect that the man who seeks to save his life shall lose it and the man who is not concerned about saving it will probably keep it. A man whose instinct of self-preservation is so strong that he exercises the blind, animal, panic reaction of wild struggling, floundering and desperate movement in any direction will die. But, the man who is not so concerned to exercise the instinct of self-preservation, the man who can remember that the rise of Homo Sapiens above the best creation has been due very largely to his brain, that man will stop and think and have at least a fighting chance of living. And so, rather than flounder off in the wrong direction, Stearman remained perfectly still, trapped under the rock ceiling. He knew that at any minute La Noire would call out, wondering why he had not surfaced. When she called out, if only his breath would hold out that long, he would be able to find his way back to the point from which he had dived in. He could hear a strange roaring sound in his ears, the pressure on his lungs seemed to be unendurable. A deep instinct made him want to shout her name but he dare not release any of the precious life-giving oxygen, the instinct to breath out became so near to overwhelming that only Val Stearman's iron hard will kept it under control. And then, he heard her voice.

"Val? Val darling, where are you? For God's sake where are you? Val come up! VAL!" The voice was away to his left. He turned so that he was on his back and with fingers and toes he propelled himself along the rock surface.

"Val! Val, I'm coming in to find you." He heard a sudden splash ahead of him. La Noire had dived into the black water. Three or four more quick movements and Stearman's hand broke the surface, there was an air space at

last between water and rock. A few seconds later he was treading water and breathing again.

"La Noire," he called. "La Noire darling, where are you?"

If she had dived down to look for him, for she was a competent swimmer, then there was every danger that she had done what he had just done. Perhaps there was some deep sub-current? Perhaps this underground lake drained slowly and in its draining moved divers and swimmers away from the point at which they had dived? He heard something splash in the water ahead of him.

"La Noire, darling?" he called and swam towards the sound. "Are you all right?" His hand encountered something, something that felt like wet hair. "Darling!" It didn't feel like *her* hair. Something shot out of the darkness and seized him, something began pulling him down into the smothering depths. Val Stearman was a big powerful man, a man who could swim for miles with tireless ease. He was a man who could hold his own as well in water as he could on land, but the sudden unexpectedness of finding a living creature down here—something big and powerful by the feel of it—had temporarily taken him off balance, both literally and metaphorically. The thing was drawing him down . . . down . . . down . . . far deeper than the fifteen feet he dived before, into strange black depths . . .

pressed so that he was bending the creature's fingers back against its wrists. The pressure was not without results, the tentacles untwined themselves from around his throat as though the pain in the creature's fingers caused by the pressure of Stearman's hands, had made it necessary for it to withdraw the tentacles in order to adjust its body position.

Val snatched himself clear and struck out rapidly towards the surface. He had scarcely made six upward strokes when he felt tentacles and powerful, webbed, prehensile hands clasping around his ankles. Despite his violent kicking and upward striking the thing pulled at him until he realised that all his efforts at upward progress were entirely in vain. It was dragging him irrevocably towards the deepest depths of the pool. He let go of the air which had been sustaining him. Even his great lungs could stand no more. He felt consciousness leaving him; his last thoughts were of La Noire; he was anxious not for himself, but for her; that he had lost this round of the battle was important to Val Stearman not because it meant that his own life would end, but because he wanted to help her. He thought of her desperate and lost somewhere in the blackness of this pool, perhaps trapped as he had been trapped, trying desperately to find the surface again, caught against that rock like a skater who has fallen through dangerously thin ice and was now trapped between ice and water.

Val felt as though he were diving into deep, dark waters. This, was by no means surprising considering his environment, but the water seemed to close above his head and consciousness left him like the light of a candle that is snuffed out at eventide. If this is death, he thought, it is a peaceful and gentle thing.

Then he knew nothing more at all until he opened his eyes and found himself sitting on a luminous rock. Myriads of tiny grey creatures hung from the room; they seemed to be stuck there by some kind of gelatinous substance secreted from their tiny soft bodies. Stearman looked up at them and realised that they were something like submarine or subterranean glow worms. The light they gave off was by no means bright, but it was bright enough to see by, after the abysmal darkness of the cavern above and the cold watery blackness of the pool.

Immediately in front of the big journalist-adventurer stood, or rather squatted, the creature that he guessed must have been his opponent in the water. It was a rather sickly semi-transparent white; it was a translucent but leathery-bodied thing, looking vaguely like a man, yet also

## Chapter Fifteen

### THE WATER THING

VAL was struggling fiercely with the peculiar animal or sub-aquatic beast that held him. It was a very powerful beast; it seemed not only to be armed with tentacles but with peculiar prehensile fore-limbs, not very dissimilar from human hands; yet, as he struggled with the thing, Stearman realised that those strange fore-limbs were webbed. There were two if not more tentacles coiling round his throat and his own hands were occupied with grappling with the webbed digits of the hands of the beast. He was aware of a quantity of long wet hair that moved across his face as the vagaries of the current and the vicissitudes of their conflict moved it on his opponent's head.

No man can throw a good punch in the water. In the sub-aquatic battle it is the wrestling hold which counts. Stearman's powerful fingers interlaced with the webbed extremities as far as the webs would permit and then he



looking something like a seal or a walrus. There were no eyes, although the forehead sloped down towards the face over two rounded ridges that might once have been brows. It looked to Stearman as though this creature's ancestors had once had sight but years, perhaps generations of living in the blackness had rendered sight superfluous. The creature was equipped with delicate feathery membranes on either side of its head. Stearman assumed that these were some kind of auxiliary gills, he realised now why the thing had done better in the pool than he had. If it had gills as well as the remains of air-breathing lungs then it was equipped for amphibian life. From its sloping streamlined shoulders two fore-limbs sprouted. They were smooth and broad, but at the end of them there were webbed hands, the hands that Stearman had found so powerful when they grasped his ankles. From the shoulders there also emerged a number of tentacles, like the tentacles of an octopus and when they were not in use it appeared they hung by the creature's side like strands of thick rope. There was something very macabre and bizarre about the thing.

Stearman was no biologist, no anthropologist, no expert on evolution; he had the smattering of popular knowledge which most intelligent well-read men possess, but no more than that. It did just occur to him that perhaps in the remote ages when these pools were young, a race of primitive men or perhaps some descendants of the Lemur might have fallen into them and developed into this strange, aquatic, semi-human amphibian. Stearman looked at the luminous insects. He had a shrewd idea that luminescence of this kind was vaguely connected with radioactivity. He wondered whether it was possible that these strange little characters owed their illumination to the same radiation which was responsible for the mutation of the genes and chromosomes of the creature whose ancestors had fallen into the pool in a vastly different form from that into which it had subsequently evolved. Even as these thoughts flashed through Stearman's mind he realised that they were no more than the wildest speculation. It would have taken a team of trained zoologists, biologists and experts on evolutionary tendencies to have hazarded an educated guess at the creature.

It reached out towards him with one of the dangling tentacles. So far, thought Val, it hasn't killed me. He made no move to turn away as the tentacle rested on his forehead for a moment. He moved his head a little, for the touch of the thing was wet and uncomfortable, but as he did so he saw past it and leapt up with a sudden cry. Lying

on the opposite side of the room—the illuminated cavern—was La Noire. Val couldn't see whether she was breathing or not. She was very still and very pale. It was obvious to him that the creature had found her in the pool just as it had found him and it had brought both of them to its cave.

Val bent over her. She was breathing, but it was light and irregular. He turned her over carefully and pulled thin strands of translucent aquatic weed from her mouth and then not knowing whether he was doing the right thing from the first aid point of view, or not, seeing that she was already breathing again, he applied the 'kiss of life' method of artificial respiration, timing it carefully to coincide with the breathing that she was already sustaining by her own effort.

Slowly the colour came back to her cheeks. Val helped her into a sitting position; she coughed a little and brought up some of the water which she had taken in during the period of submersion.

The strange white creature had moved across to their side of the cave and now rested one of its tentacles on each of their heads. Val turned and gave it a questioning look; it certainly had not done anything since his regaining consciousness which would give him any reason to suspect that it was hostile. Thoughts flooded into his brain with an overwhelming suddenness. He looked at La Noire.

"It's telepathic, darling," she whispered, "he's communicating with us."

The creature's thoughts which were expressed neither in pictures, nor recognisable symbols, seemed to direct themselves at Stearman's *emotions* more than at any logical, rational thinking process. The first thing he was aware of was the sense of surprise and anxiety, a feeling of alarm, of being disturbed, and then this was replaced by curiosity and bewilderment. He realised as the creature continued to transmit thoughts along its peculiar tentacles that it was explaining in terms of its own mind what had happened since their encounter. Stearman also gained an impression of the set-up of this luminous cave. The cave apparently contained an airlock above the level of the water, but having no openings anywhere else, to escape it was necessary to swim under water for a considerable distance. In its own strange impacted way the creature's mind was communicating its side of the encounter to Val and La Noire. It had heard the splashes; it had sensed the vibrations of their bodies in the water. It had gone from its cave following the vibrations in the darkness. Stearman was reminded of the way in which

a spider is sensitive to the vibrations of a fly which lands on a strand of its web. It was like a kind of bush telegraph, he thought. The creature continued its weird telepathic communication. Val and La Noire realised that it had gone up, found them, brought them to its cave where it had left them until they recovered, now it wanted to know—its thoughts at this point became interrogative in character—what was the cause of the rumbling vibration of which they were still aware even within this underwater sanctuary. Stearman thought hard about the monster, he tried to convey pictures of the monster, but the creature, which had no eyes, was unable to absorb the picture that Stearman was trying to transmit.

"The sensation," said La Noire suddenly, "imagine that you've got your eyes closed Val, imagine that you are groping your way around the monster." Stearman closed his eyes and imagined what it would be like grappling with the monster in the darkness. At once he sensed that the underwater creature's mind was with him, that it understood. Val tried to indicate in terms of touch and sound alone that the gigantic thing was clawing at the entrance to the cave above. He felt waves of alarm and despondency rising from the mind which was communicating with his by means of the tentacle which the creature had placed on his forehead. He became aware too of thoughts of escape, of flight. This thing, whatever it was, was not only harmless and friendly, but timid. Apparently, as far as Stearman could guess, it lived on the thin translucent weeds and the peculiar fish that glided their blind translucent way in the darkness through the pool below the mountain cave.

Stearman was an experienced potholer and he knew that the water level at which they were now could not by any means be the only one within this honeycomb of caves. There must be others and they would be deeper; there was a fair possibility that they connected. He tried to protrude the thought, to project the idea in terms of touch and sound to the blind aquatic tentacle-man who had brought them to his luminescent cave.

At last he succeeded in getting through to their strange host and thoughts of flight came back in return. The creature was as timid as Stearman suspected. It wanted to get away; it wanted to get as far away as possible; it wanted to go deeper down into the rocks. It wanted to go deeper down into the black subterranean waters.

Val concentrated hard on the thought of air and the creature seemed to understand this with surprising speed

and facility. Val and La Noire realised that it wanted them to accompany it on a journey deeper down. The rumblings were getting louder. The thing that had once been Abouben-Sira was having some kind of success on the mountain side above them. If they were to escape they must get deeper into the bowels of the earth and they must get there quickly. Their weird translucent white guide held their hands with his webbed prehensile extremities. His strange leathery digits felt damp and peculiar.

Looking round the luminous cave La Noire had the impression that there was a macabre quality, a touch of *Grand Guignol* about the whole thing. The atmosphere was bizarre and grotesque and yet there was no hostility; it was strange; it was *very* strange but there was no feeling of enmity.

The creature who now held their hands led them slowly towards the edge of the water in the cave; then, with a gentle tug, it moved forward into the water. Val and La Noire drew deep breaths and followed. The creature clasped their hands tightly diving down through the water, swimming powerfully with its broad flat feet; like some strange living white submarine it took them down . . . down . . . to almost unimaginable depths. Val's lungs were coming close to bursting point. He reached his free hand around in front of the creature's body and clasped La Noire's other hand for safety. He was afraid that soon she would lose consciousness again; he was afraid the creature might relax its hold of her.

Then . . . they were travelling upwards. Val realised they had undergone a change of direction. There was a warning sound in his ears he knew that consciousness was not going to remain with him much longer. He eased a tiny stream of bubbles through his lips it took some of the pressure from his aching lungs. His eardrums felt as though little devils with trip-hammers were pounding at the sides of his head and the next moment, miraculously, they broke surface.

They were in another luminous cave. It seemed that these strange glutinous luminous creatures occupied all the aquatic recesses at this strata of the honeycomb on the interior of the mountain.

Stearman and La Noire were grateful for the pale light which the creatures gave off from their tiny sticky bodies. Occasionally one would fall from the rock into the cave and would disappear as a translucent white fish swam up and swallowed it. Stearman began thinking, as he and La Noire gasped desperately for air, of the life of these peculiar cave-dwellers. Their strange companion lived on the fish, the fish lived on these small glowing worms, but on what

did the worms live? Some minute plankton-like substance? Stearman was no marine biologist; he had an idea that plant life could not exist if there was no light. He wondered vaguely whether the luminous glow given off by these little creatures would be sufficient light for photo-synthesis to take place in any plant-like life form. Minute single-celled chlorophyll-using creatures close to the surface. He doubted it; he doubted it very much, but no doubt an experienced marine biologist would have been able to explain the life cycle of the creatures in the cave. Perhaps, thought Stearman, the peculiar gelatinous worms fed on the waste products of the fish, perhaps they were insectile scavengers. He wondered whether they developed into some kind of moth, or flying creature, something like a subterranean super-aquatic fly. He tried to remember what he had once heard at school many years before about the life cycle of the dragon-fly, but memory refused to come back in any kind of detail. Besides, his problem now was not marine biology but survival.

The strange aquatic sub-man who had led them to the other cave placed his tentacles on their heads; once more they were aware of his thoughts. A feeling of relief and safety was uppermost in the mind of the strange translucent humanoid. They could no longer hear the rumblings and the roarings from the digging monster. Val got the impression that there was another water-logged cave below this one, which, should it be necessary, they could reach. The creature rose suddenly as though an inspiration had occurred to it and taking Val by the hand it led him towards the corner of the cave that was furthest from the water. Val put his face to the corner of the cave and became aware of a gentle current of air.

"La Noire," he called excitedly, "there's an air current!" She had been brought close to the point of exhaustion by their trials in the water, her brilliant mind was not functioning quite as quickly as usual.

"What's so special about that darling?" she asked dully.

"It means there's a way out," said Val. "Another way . . . way . . . out," he repeated, he was stammering a little with excitement, some of it was the result of the water he had shipped on board. He coughed and spat water from his mouth. La Noire too was coughing, suddenly she shivered a little.

"Val darling, I'm so cold, so cold." He put his arm around her comfortingly, protectively.

"Yes, I am too, my love, but there's nothing much we can do about it at the moment." His hands strayed through his pockets as though to find some means of creating warmth;

he had not matches for being a non-smoker he had no particular need to carry them. He encountered with sudden relief the familiar outline of the heavy Browning, took the gun from his pocket and shook the water from the barrel.

"She'll need a good oil and clean," he said grimly, "but I thought I'd lost her." He put the gun back lovingly and tucked the flap carefully around it. There were strands of strange translucent material that might have been a kind of colourless weed, or perhaps some form of simple animal life that fringed on the edge of the rock. To ensure that the gun remained in his pocket Val plucked a number of these strands from the waters edge and screwed them into a ball like a piece of cotton wool used to pack the top of a medicine bottle full of tablets. He stuffed his pocket until it bulged. He reckoned that the gun was now as secure as it could possibly be in the circumstances. When he thought of the way that he had crawled and dived and fought with the creature who had since befriended them, it seemed to him one of the minor miracles of the whole episode that the gun had remained in his pocket. It seemed as though the angels were looking after their own on this occasion. Val reckoned that considering the size of the opposition he and La Noire could certainly do with a little angelic assistance. As the thought went through his mind he suddenly remembered the place where, if not necessary angelic assistance, then assistance of a very powerful kind could be obtained. That place was the Secret Monastery.

Almost as though the telepathic contact which they had been enjoying with the strange subterranean aquatic creature had reinforced their own mental communion, La Noire turned to him and her face was glowing brightly, excitedly, in the luminous chamber.

"Val darling," she said, "I know what we can use to deal with that creature. We can go to the Secret Monastery."

"Of course," said Val. "*The Secret Monastery!*"

thickness of the rock would insulate as well as isolate. How did they know when it was spring, how did they know when it was the depth of winter! Obviously there was no means, no way by which they could learn those things.

Stearman felt a deep pity for this creature. He felt for its loneliness and wondered whether his sympathy, his empathy, was purely a subjective experience or whether it had an objective quality, whether it was purely within his own mind or whether it was coming to his mind from the telepathic contact he was having with the creature. In either case, he thought, it was not important. At last, however, he and La Noire decided that they must follow the air current out of the cave; the subterranean aquatic sanctuary cave which had been their salvation from the foul thing that had once called itself Abou-ben-Sira, the thing which was the weird hybrid culmination of the union of Abou-ben-Sira with the peculiar Mesopotamian Power Tablets, discovered by the ill-fated and now late lamented archaeological expedition.

Val shook 'hands' with peculiar solemnity as he took his leave of the white translucent creature in the luminous cave. La Noire shook 'hands' too with their webbed-fingered guide and followed Val into the aperture through which the breeze was blowing. It was a long, difficult, scrambling climb through the darkness. In places the tunnel along which they moved, as they followed the air current, was so narrow that once or twice Val felt that he would have to stop and let La Noire go on without him. But, by dint of much heaving and straining he finally got his broad shoulders through those narrow constrictions and confinements until the darkness began to change a little. It was still dark; it was still black; but there was a more *natural* quality to it, a kind of ordinary evening darkness quality. It was no longer quite so stifling; it no longer seemed tactile. It was no longer the kind of darkness that penetrated the pores of a man's skin. It was no longer the kind of darkness which you seemed to breathe into your lungs as you climbed. It was ordinary darkness, black and frightening, but *ordinary*.

It grew lighter; it grew lighter very gradually and then around a bend in the upward slanting shaft, which they climbed, Val and La Noire suddenly saw a tiny grey patch and knew that this was the source of the light. They knew that this was the end of the tunnel, the end of the scrambling and climbing.

Seeing it was one thing and reaching it was another. But they reached it as last, weary, more than weary, *exhausted*,

## Chapter Sixteen

### THE SECRET MONASTERY

IT took a surprisingly long time for Val and La Noire to persuade the peculiar translucent white thing that they wished to leave the cave. Although he himself had shown them the escape route he seemed reluctant to terminate their company. It seemed to Val, from the impressions he was receiving out of the creatures mind, the peculiar translucent sub-man in his dark, weird, subterranean world was lonely. He imagined just what kind of life it must be for the creature. He and La Noire had seen no evidence of any others of the species. Obviously there must have been others at one time, this thing hadn't existed since palaeolithic times or earlier but, *if* there were others where *were* they? Perhaps like some other strange forms of life they only came together for a brief period at the breeding season, leaving their fellows in self-chosen isolation for the rest of the year; but would such a seasonal term as *year* apply to these things? There was no light down here; it was eternal night; there could be no change in the temperature, the

hungry—more than hungry, famished, *starving* and aware of a burning thirst, a thirst which they had not experienced, strangely enough when they were immersed in the cold black waters of the cave. A man does not seem to experience thirst when he is swimming and yet, it had been a long time since they had had anything to drink. With bodies that were crying out for food, drink and rest Val and La Noire scrambled through the mouth of the small cave on the far side of the mountain from that which they had originally entered.

There was no sign of the vast monstrosity that had once been Abou-ben-Sira. It was only early morning by the look of the sky, a grey morning at that. The sun rose higher. In Eastern lands twilight and morning gloom, greyness and half-light are qualities which are only rarely experienced, if ever. The sun came up with a strange rapidity, a peculiar suddenness. Val and La Noire were experienced travellers, it did not surprise them as much as it would have done had they spent all their lives in England, or in the Northern climes.

The sun grew hot as it rose, but its light showed them, as the greyness dispersed and the blueness of the Iraq sky re-asserted itself like an inverted azzure bowl, a moving vehicle on the road about two miles from the side of the mountain. Val tore off his shirt and waved with the violence of a castaway who had hoped never again to see civilisation. It seemed as though the vehicle hadn't seen them and then it stopped. A man climbed out and peered in their direction. They heard a shout, so faint and distant as not to be coherent, but they waved more enthusiastically and began moving towards the man who had stopped his vehicle. He climbed back into it, reversed a little on the dirt track of a road and then started nosing the truck in their direction. It was a rugged four-wheel-drive job and as it grew closer Val could see that it belonged to one of the oil companies. Just as the commercial undertaking had been prepared to assist the archaeologist, so now they found that this oil-man, busy though he was with his own affairs, was prepared to come and assist them.

They climbed dazed and exhausted into the truck.

"You look as if you've had a rough time," said the oil-man. He was an Australian by the sound of him, although from what Val knew of engineers and drillers they travelled so much that many of them acquired a kind of cosmopolitan accent which is the result of listening to many dialects and meeting enormous quantities of new people with new tongues. The oil-man found their car for them and looked at Val a

little doubtfully as he climbed in behind the wheel.

"Are you sure you're going to be all right, friend?" Stearman nodded.

"I shall be all right once I get behind the wheel," he said. "Now listen. This may sound as if I've got some kind of hallucination or heatstroke, but it's not I can assure you. There is something very dangerous on that mountain. If I try to explain in more detail you wouldn't believe me and you wouldn't take any notice, but it is important that you do believe me, so I'm going to spare you any detail. There is something dangerous; think of it as a huge wild beast. It is not the kind of thing you will stop with ordinary guns. I want you to warn everyone you come across." The oil-man raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"I'm not sure about that," he said. "I mean what have I got to go on?"

"Only my word," said Stearman, "there's no sign of the thing at the moment, I know, but . . ." he pointed up the mountain to where the discarded rock flake had been lifted off by the creature when it had emerged from its 'cocoon'. "You see that piece of rock up there?" he asked.

"Yea, it looks like someone blasted the top off the mountain; you'd want a fair bit of dynamite on that," said the oil man. He looked at it with the experienced eye of the geologist, of a man who was used to the effects of blasting powder.

"That wasn't blasted off," said Stearman, "it was torn off by this creature that emerged from the cave."

"Are you serious? It must be as big as a house," said the oil-man.

"It's bigger," said Stearman, "a whole lot bigger and . . ." he hesitated, "well it's so horrible and so dangerous I can't begin to explain it."

"Well, if something really did lift that off there, it must be as big as a diplodocus, or a dinosaur, one of those old pre-historic things. Is that what you were going to say?"

"It's old," said Stearman non-committally, "but it is not shamed like the typical pre-historic monster."

The oil-man adjusted his hat brim against the rays of the sun.

"I'm going back to my base camp," he said, "I'll certainly tell the boys that there's trouble and when I get to a radio I'll call through to the military authorities. Is that o.k.?"

"Thanks," said Val.

"Maybe they will send a team out here to investigate," said the oil-man.

"Anybody trying to investigate would be committing

suicide," said Stearman, "I know what this thing is and I know how to deal with it." There was an eagerness in Val's voice which carried conviction despite his tattered appearance and his obvious exhaustion.

"The best thing to do would be to get this area cordoned off. Could you recommend that to the authorities?" said La Noire.

"I'll try," said the oil-man.

"Good," said Stearman, "and many thanks for your help."

Then, with will-power overcoming exhaustion Val piloted the big car back along the way which they had come. He drove long and hard and at last they arrived back at their hotel.

A bath, a meal and above all a drink had Stearman feeling very nearly his old self again. All he wanted now was a few hours sleep. He found his bed and with his left arm around La Noire picked up the bedside phone.

"Now listen, this is urgent, very, very important. I want you to wake me in two hours. I must get up in time to get the next plane to France. Is that clear? But if I don't get any sleep it will be no good getting on that plane, I shall be dead!"

"Certainly sir," the reception clerk was one of those implacable individuals who would have received even news that the four minute warning had gone with complete equanimity. His sophisticated *blasé* exterior was almost bovine in its inability to register emotion.

The telephone receiver slipped from Stearman's fingers and he fell into a deep restful sleep. He slept like the dead for two hours and then there was a respectful knock on the door.

"Who is that," Val's voice was thick, confused with sleep. Normally he slept lightly and woke instantly, but now the swimming, the half-drowning he had received on two occasions, the struggle with the creature and the endless crawling through the subterranean passages in the mountain had sapped some of his colossal strength. It took him half a minute to recover himself more fully.

"You asked to be called, sir." The door opened a crack and a nervous olive-tanned face appeared round it.

"Oh, yeah, yeah," yawned Stearman, "thanks very much, look . . . I'm awake now; good man." The hotel man disappeared. The door closed quietly and discreetly. Val shook La Noire into consciousness, climbed out of bed and pulled on his shoes and jacket. He had thrown himself down wearing clean shirt and trousers into which he had changed on arriving back at the hotel.

La Noire was ready in a matter of moments. She and Val made their way down in the lift and out to the airport. They got the next plane out of Iraq. They left the Mesopotamian plain behind them and flew westward through Rutba, then they were crossing Syria and the timeless white shape of Damascus appeared below them. The land was rising all the time and the hills of Lebanon stretched out around them on either side as the plane flew over Beirut and across the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. They flew on, passing Cyprus, which appeared on the right hand side of the plane like an elongated green and brown pear that had been thrown into the puddle that men called the Mediterranean. In the hot afternoon sun the coast of Asia Minor gleamed and shone brightly. They flew on until the Island of Rhodes itself appeared on the right of their plane, while to the left of them the long outline of Crete stretched itself in leisurely fashion like a huge swimmer basking in the warmth of the Mediterranean.

They flew past the Pelopennesus, the three fingered hand of southern Greece reaching down towards Crete, while the mainland itself could be seen much further to the north.

Visibility was so good that they were able to see the water shimmering in the Gulf of Corinth on the other side of the Pelopennesus. The afternoon sun became a little less brightly, and a little less intensely, as it sank slowly in the western skies. They were flying almost into that setting sun but it was a little to the left of them now as they turned and streaked over the Straits of Messina, passing Reggio on the very toe-cap of Italy on their right and the Lipari Islands on their left. They flew on.

Sardinia and Corsica appeared ahead of them looking vaguely from the height of their plane like a juggler balancing a ball on his head or a performing seal balancing a beach ball on his nose. They flew over the Straits of Bonifacia and then leaving Corsica with the peak of Mount Cinto to their right, the airliner streaked on north-westward to Marseilles. That was as far as the plane could take them.

From there Val and La Noire took the train as far as Avignon, changed there and took another train back through Nîmes, Montpellier and Beziers as far as Narbonne. From here they took the next train west and left it at a village station a few miles north of Toulouse, between the valley of the Tarn and the Dordogne, with the broad waters of the Garonne flowing away to Bordeaux in the north-west. Val and La Noire hired a cab at the station. The driver was by no means a young man. He looked like a veteran of the

'Resistance' and he chewed garlic with an enthusiasm which made even Stearman's strong nose take a pace back. La Noire who had recovered almost completely from their ordeals in the Middle-East leaned back and enjoyed the moonlit view of the Southern French countryside. Where the Auvergne hills descended to the right of them the moonlight showed the outlines of a Monastery, one of hundreds that dotted this part of the countryside. There was nothing in its architecture to suggest that it was in the least different from any of the others, but Val Stearman knew better and so did La Noire, for both of them had visited this Monastery before.

At a cross-road a good mile and a half from the Monastery itself they paid off their surprised jehu and set out on foot. The stars had added their light to the brightness of the moon; there was a sense of peace, an air of tranquillity, an overall sense of the infinite.

"The Secret Monastery!" said La Noire as she pointed. Val nodded.

"The Secret Monastery," he said.

"I love it here," said La Noire, "there is so much goodness radiating from that place, you can *feel* it." She put her hand on her heart, "down here, in your very *soul*, you can feel it."

They walked hand in hand through the moonlit beauty of the quiet Auvergne foothills . . .

## Chapter Seventeen

### THE ABBOT

Val and La Noire reached the door of the Monastery. It was simple but plain and strong. Val seized a wrought iron bell-pull and gave a gentle but urgent tug. The silence was broken by the sonorous tones of a mediaeval bell tolling . . . tolling . . . like the song of a celestial door-keeper deep inside the echoing chambers of the beautiful old building. They heard the soft tread of sandalled feet. A monk appeared, his hood was black and his tonsured head was set off by a pair of bright eyes below a broad, high, intelligent forehead. His face lit up with a smile of recognition and welcome.

"Monsieur Stearman, Madame Stearman! It is a long time since we had the pleasure of entertaining you. Tell me do you come at a time of peace or a time of war, business or pleasure?" He had already opened the door and was ushering them inside as he spoke his words of welcome.

"We've come at a time of war," said Stearman, "a time of war such as I have never seen before."

"Where does the enemy rage?" asked their guide, he seemed quite imperturbable and yet his imperturbability was not the *blasé* indifference of the hotel receptionist back in Iraq, his was the concern of a strong man who was sorry that there was danger to other men, who wanted to help them and yet who was unperturbed because he knew that the outcome of the conflict could only be total victory for the side of right and light.

A tall grey bearded figure as stately as the statue of a mediaeval saint appeared from the doorway of the library ahead of them. He paused.

"Some friends to see us, Father." The monk who had shown them in bowed and the Abbot's clear old eyes, rich with the wisdom of the ages lit up with pleasure as he saw Stearman and La Noire.

"Val, my son, it is a long time since you were here."

"Too long, Father," said Stearman.

"But I can see that you have not come on any social call," said the Abbot.

"No, Father, I have not come on a social call," said Stearman, "there is trouble; there is terrible trouble."

On impulse he took the gun from his pocket. "Such a weapon is familiar to you?"

"It is indeed," said the Abbot. "Normally I detest the things, but I know that this is used in our cause. There are others like it here that my own men are trained to use. They fire the same expensive shots as yours."

"This gun is of no use against the thing which has been raised," said Val. The Abbot's eyes narrowed.

"Of no use? Pure silver of no use?"

"Oh, it wounded the thing," said Stearman.

"You must tell me everything," said the Abbot, "everything, and you must tell me quickly. A thing of such power can only mean that some relic of the *ancient evil ones* has been found, some relic in which there lingers a great power, something perhaps . . ." he hesitated, his strong old voice quavered for the first time. "Perhaps even the *Tablets of power* themselves have been found and if so the matter is serious indeed."

"This is what has happened," said Stearman. "The tablets of power have been found, Father."

The Abbot's beard dropped to his chest. He looked like a man who had just heard a pronouncement of doom upon his beloved world.

"They must be fought. **THEY MUST BE FOUGHT.**" He looked quickly from Val to La Noire. "Sit down. Sit down. Now, you must tell me everything," he urged again.

Very briefly, leaving out no essential detail but putting in no superfluous padding, Val Stearman explained all that he knew of the finding of the Tablets, the death of the archaeologists and the peculiar transformation, the gigantic lycanthropy, which had overtaken the peculiar, sinister Arab who called himself Abou-ben-Sira. Val went on to tell the Abbot about the adventures in the cave which had overtaken La Noire and himself. He explained about the finding of the strange, white, under-water creature, the translucent sub-man amphibian. The Abbot listened in silence, his

eyes were alert and bright, intelligent and wise. From time to time his grey beard would nod against his chest as he agreed or emphasized some point that Stearman was making.

"And that is everything you can tell me?" he said when Val finally concluded his narrative.

"Everything," said the big journalist-adventurer.

The Abbot turned and looked up at the ceiling for inspiration.

"I shall need my three most spiritual priests, my three most deeply contemplative and devoutly dedicated men."

"The power is as great as that?" said Val.

"The power is so great that only the three finest priests in my order can hope to prevail against it. So much evil power has been generated here that in order to focus a sufficient quantity of good power, of light power against it, we will need a very wide channel. Such a channel can be furnished by three devout and dedicated priests in a state of grace."

"I see!" said Stearman, who was familiar with theological terms. He had often found it a very valuable thing to be familiar with the intricacies of theology and religious history. Much that he would once have dismissed as being trifling he now knew to be of vital significance in the battle between good and evil. Odd hints in ancient religions, a remote word here or there, a fragment of an old papyrus. These things together made up a spiritual armoury, a collection of psychic weapons, with which the forces of evil could be opposed at the supernatural level.

Val Stearman was one of a very small, select group who knew of the real purpose of the Secret Monastery. It served dedicated men of all denominations. The heads of more than one church organization had been admitted to its secrets. In complete privacy and under a cloak of security that would have made most political governments envious, priests were trained in the psychic law which was the prerogative of the Secret Monastery. Only the bravest and most dedicated men, and only a few of them, were allowed within those walls. To all else, it was just a small worshipping community—another brotherhood of monks—in a country where there were many brotherhoods of monks. But, Stearman knew some at least of the inner secrets and so did La Noire. They knew that here in the Secret Monastery there were weapons which had once been wielded by saints, for all Stearman knew the Holy Grail itself might once have rested here in the long dead days of chivalry. There were swords in the armoury of this Monastery that had been



carried by Crusaders. There were crosses that had been used by Bishops who were now regarded as Church Fathers. There were other Holy relics so sacred that they could scarcely have been named in a breath above a whisper, and they were as secure with their guardians in the Auvergne foothills as they would have been in the deepest vaults of Fort Knox, or the Bank of England itself.

Normally even the smallest of those weapons in the armoury of light, would have been adequate to deal with any manifestation of supernatural evil. The silver bullets in Stearman's gun would deal with a Vampire, a Werewolf, a Zombie or a Ghoul. The silver cross that he wore around his neck would hold back most evil forces. But, sometimes, these and holy water, together with the exorcism's which the lower ranks of priest and supernatural fighter knew were not enough.

Stearman had in his mind a picture of the psychic forces of good and evil as something akin to electrical energy. The black magician could forge a wire, could turn his own body into a strand of supernatural 'metal' along which a current of dark energy could flow. But, too much current burns out a small wire in practically no time at all. In the same way, vast powers of light and goodness could come through any man who is prepared to dedicate himself to the service of light and to the cause of light, who is prepared to fight against darkness in its insidious supernatural forms. But, when a vast power of darkness has been raised, when an enormous power of evil, such as that which was now manifesting itself in Iraq, had broken through the flimsy curtain which men call reality then equally enormous powers of light were needed to deal with it. One priest was not enough. One silver bullet, even a gun full of silver bullets, was not enough, more was needed, a bigger wire was needed so that a sufficient charge of good could come through. A big enough channel was needed for a flood tide of light and clean, healing power to sweep away the evil which Abou-ben-Sira had amalgamated within himself by his interference with the Tablets.

The good monks of the Secret Monastery prepared a guest room for Val and La Noire while the Holy old Abbot took his three dedicated priests down into the vaults to select and take with them a number of the Holy relics, the saintliest of the ancient crosses and the most highly blessed of the Crusaders' swords. Quite what prayers they said or what pious ceremonies they went through Val and La Noire did not know. It was a process of purification, a process of prayer and of communion with the Ultimate Power of Light.

With the first gleam of morning the three monks set out towards the road below the Monastery. Val and La Noire accompanied them, for theirs was the task of acting as guides. Beneath their robes, sombre and brown, the innocuous looking priests carried the weapons, some of the strongest in the armoury of the Secret Monastery itself, the weapons which they would take with them into battle against the dark evil power which had possessed what had once been Abou-ben-Sira.

The journey was not a particularly eventful one, ordinarily and without arousing the slightest suspicion that anything strange was happening Val, La Noire and the three monks caught the bus that took them into Toulous. From Toulous they caught the direct flight to Marseilles and from Marseilles they took the plane back along the same route which the Stearmans had used on their flight to the Secret Monastery. As they settled down in the plane Val and La Noire had their first real opportunity to study their three companions. The bus journeys had been too short to permit a close or detailed scrutiny of the quiet, unobtrusive monks. The three men, despite the superficial similarity of their costumes, were obviously strongly contrasting types.

It occurred to Val quite suddenly that at this juncture, he and La Noire did not even know the names of the three Holy men. He leaned forward and touched the brown-robed shoulder of the monk immediately in front of him.

A strong, intelligent face, lined with character and wisdom, smiled back at him, from under the hood . . .

"You wish to speak with us, friend?"

Val grinned broadly.

"I thought it was about time we knew your names," he said in an amicable voice.

"You must think us very rude," replied the monk. He smiled apologetically, "the rigours of the spiritual preparation which it is necessary for us to undertake, sometimes causes us to forget the niceties of civilised social communion."

"Please don't apologise," smiled La Noire.

"Let me introduce my colleagues," said the monk, to whom Val had just spoken.

## Chapter Eighteen

### THE MONKS

THE other two monks turned round and smiled in Stearman's direction. Val was thinking that it was all too easy for the man in the street to regard the monk as a kind of spiritual nonentity in a brown habit. These men had faces. They had personalities. They were living, breathing people. Now that he was really looking at them, Stearman could see that their devotion to their faith had not robbed them of their personality, but enhanced it.

In losing themselves, in selfless devotion, to their Higher Cause, they had found a new, high level of existence which did not somehow seem to be vouchsafed to lesser mortals.

"This is Brother Alexander," said the monk to whom Val had first spoken. "This is Brother Bernard." He indicated the second of the monastic trio, "and I am Constantine."

Alexander was about thirty five or six, as far as Stearman could judge. He had a long, rather droopy moustache—a singularly unusual feature for a man of his calling! His eyes were very dark; they burned like black diamonds, in deep, rather shadowy sockets. They were the eyes of a man who spent much time poring piously over precious pages of priestly print. Even though Alexander was sitting Val was able to make a shrewd guess at his height. The jet-eyed monk was tall, very tall. Val guessed that when Brother Alexander stood up, he would be well over six feet in height. His breadth, however, was not in proportion, to his vertical achievements. Looking at him, Stearman

realised that although a monk's habit was not the most flattering of garments as far as a man's shoulder width was concerned, even in a padded overcoat Father Alexander would have looked narrow. Stearman gave a little grin to himself, if ever a man's physical appearance had indicated that he was on the straight and narrow path, Brother Alexander was the man! Stearman had a vivid imagination, and just for one hilarious second, he imagined this Godly scholar blowing a cool trombone, and being the life and soul of a riverboat shuffle to the strains of *Alexander's Ragtime Band!*

Brother Bernard, much to Val Stearman's disappointment did not carry a flask of brandy round his neck! However, the well-stocked bar of the air liner made up for this deficiency. There was just a little something about Bernard which made Val think of that superb breed of Alpine rescue dogs. Perhaps it was the sadness about the eyes . . . Bernard had the look of a doubting Thomas, yet he was not a doubter. His was the kind of courageous pessimism which expected the worst but went on to the end, anyway. Bernard believed, by the look of him, that the path of duty, like the path of glory, led more often to the grave than anywhere else, but he had the kind of personality, the kind of courage, the kind of fortitude which is prepared to go to the grave, as, when and if, duty demanded it.

Brother Constantine had something in keeping with his namesake. There was just a touch of noble Roman about him, a suspicion of Senator, a smack of centurion, a legacy of the legionaire. He had the true Roman strength, without the fatally haughty Roman pride . . . To Val Stearman's way of thinking, Brother Constantine was in all probability the most devout, the most dedicated, and the most powerful of the three pious men whom the Abbot of the Secret Monastery had selected for this terrible encounter with the evil thing in Mesopotamia.

The plane flew on. Val and La Noire spent most of the rest of the journey telling Alexander, Bernard and Constantine all that there was to tell of the strange, clay tablets and the monster which they had created. They touched down in Iraq and the three monks followed Val and La Noire to the waiting cab rank. They stayed only long enough in the hotel, which the Stearmans had previously occupied, to enable their party to eat a quick meal and generally freshen up. While Val and La Noire were arranging to hire a car, the three monks occupied themselves in prayer.

When Val and La Noire returned to tell their three friends that the vehicle was ready the monks had completed their devotions and were standing on the fringe of a group in

the hotel lounge; the guests were listening in shocked disbelief to an emergency news broadcast.

Val and La Noire hurried forward.

"What's the matter?" asked the big journalist-adventurer. Brother Alexander held up a hand for silence.

"I fear we are a little late," he whispered to Val. Stearman's brow creased in a puzzled frown.

"What do you mean—*late*?" he asked. Before Brother Alexander could speak, the radio answered Stearman's question for him.

"Ladies and gentlemen," went on the announcer, "the third and most important government instruction is that everyone should remain calm. National forces have been mobilised, and should they prove inadequate, an appeal will be made to the United Nations Security Council.

There is no need for alarm."

Val's mind flashed back to the ship and the deaths of the ill-starred Eric Fraser and the unlucky Ian Johnson.

The captain had made soothing noises over the public address system and his reiterated exhortation to keep calm, together with his monotonous repetition of the pronouncement that there was no cause for alarm, had driven Val Stearman to the verge of anger.

There was a sudden crackle from the set, and then the voice of the announcer came through loud and clear.

"We are now going over to the scene on the mountain side itself, where the unknown phenomena is moving towards our troops."

Val and La Noire exchanged swift, meaningful glances.

"After it came for us," said La Noire, speaking as much for the benefit of the three monks as anything, "it must have gone back to that big cave from which it originally emerged."

"It must have been draughty," said Val with a grin, "seeing the brute lifted the roof off!"

"Now it's emerged again," said La Noire.

Val turned to Brother Alexander.

"How much of that news bulletin did we miss?" he asked.

"Not very much," said the monk, "they said the same things in two or three different languages, but the main gist of it seems to be that something huge and horrible was reported by an oil-man, and the army has been called in."

"Our monster?" suggested La Noire.

"Such is my belief," said Brother Bernard.

"Then what are we waiting for?" demanded Stearman. "Let's go!"

## Chapter Nineteen

### INTO BATTLE

VAL and La Noire piled swiftly into the hire car which Stearman had borrowed. It was similar to the earlier model which he had used but there had been no time for the big journalist-adventurer to make any modifications to the engine as he had done previously. Val and his wife sat in the front, the three monks sat together in the back. The whole struck Val as being slightly incongruous, the three monks sat as gravely as owls in the back of the sand-stained car. Val drove with the swashbuckling ease of an Errol Flynn, or a Douglas Fairbanks. La Noire relaxed beside him quiet and purposeful.

They left the town roads behind them and drove on into the wilder country to the north. The Mesopotamian sun burned with morning fierceness. It made Val think that some mischievous god with an oxy-acetylene cutter of cosmic proportions had amused himself by cutting through the blue steel bowl of the sky to examine the strange little creatures called *men* who lived beneath the celestial canopy.

Sand, soil and grit spun up from the wheels as the car raced along the dirt road. The heat was becoming oppressive but to have opened the windows to any appreciable extent would have been to invite choking, dusty suffocation. At least, thought Val, a sweating man is able to breathe.

They reached the plain below the mountain range from which they had fled so ignominiously such a short while before. Val halted the car as an olive-skinned soldier came towards him. The man looked grim and shaken.

"Where are you going please?" asked the Iraqi corporal. His English was good, thought Val. He reflected that it was better than anything he himself could ever have attempted in Arabic.

"We wish to visit the mountain where the disturbance has been reported," said Val.

"I could not allow you to proceed without a military permit," answered the corporal. His voice held doubts, and Val noticed that he was looking at the monks without any great enthusiasm.

"This disturbance," began La Noire in a soft seductive voice, "does it concern a monster, a thing that looks like an enormous and mis-shapen man?"

"Yes, yes, it does. But how did you know that?" the soldier suddenly looked angry and menacing, he was obviously not up to date with the broadcasts. Val guessed he had an isolated patrol.

"Talk gently, friend," warned Stearman. Nobody spoke to La Noire in that tone of voice, *nobody*.

"You are in possession of dangerous secret information. It is necessary for me to place this woman under arrest." The corporal blew a whistle and a group of soldiers appeared as though by magic. There were four of them. Val climbed slowly and quietly out of the car.

The Iraqi soldier backed off a little when he saw the size of Stearman's shoulders.

"I warned you," said Val softly.

"Put up your hands," snapped the corporal. He was nervous. It was obvious that he had been through a bad time recently and his neurones were playing up like hell, as far as the big journalist-adventurer could judge. Val felt angry with the man and sorry for him at the same time. However, big Val Stearman knew enough to know that nervous men are sometimes more dangerous than calm opponents. The nervous twitch of a frightened finger has sent more men to glory than this world dreams of. The corporal's pistol was wavering uncertainly as Val advanced on him.

"Give me the gun, before someone gets hurt," said Stearman gently. At the moment pity was slightly ahead of anger in Stearman's mind, but he could be an impetuous man on occasions and if the anger—pity balance should shift, it would be the end of the line for the corporal and his patrol. Five to one, even with guns, was about even odds as far as Val was concerned.

The patrol were moving in, pistols drawn. They looked as nervous and overwrought as their corporal. Val saw a

finger tightening on a trigger and he exploded into action. In one great bound he took the corporal completely by surprise, wrenched the gun from tired brown fingers and held the soldier in front of him like a shield.

Val turned to the patrol.

"Your first move is his last," he shouted. The tableau froze into silent immobility.

"Throw your guns down," invited Val.

"Do as he says," implored the corporal. The patrol complied with their N.C.O.'s wishes.

"That's much better," said Val, as La Noire gathered up the guns. "Now we can talk."

"What is there to talk about?" asked the corporal. "You are dangerous alien spies. Perhaps even that *thing* is a secret weapon which you are controlling?" the corporal's voice held a question.

"You have overpowered us," broke in another of the soldiers in very commendable English, "now you will kill us. That will be the end of the matter." He sounded resigned and stoical.

"In the first place," said La Noire. "We are not spies. In the second place we are on the same side as you." The light of hope dawned in the corporal's eyes.

"But how do you know about the monster?" he began. "It was a very closely guarded secret . . ."

"There was a recent broadcast," said La Noire.

"We encountered the thing before your army did," said Val. "There is no time to give you all the details, but the whole thing began with a party of archaeologists led by Andrew Bennett. These men discovered a box of clay tablets."

"Ancient Assyro-Babylonian tablets?" asked the corporal, who was obviously a man of some intelligence.

"Yes, that's about it," agreed Val. "Only these were in some strange unknown script."

"Most peculiar," said the corporal.

"None of the experts could translate them," broke in La Noire.

"Then a strange character calling himself Abou-ben-Sira came on the scene," continued Val.

"What happened then?" asked the corporal.

"He claimed he could translate the unknown script and he took the tablets with him," said Val.

"Was he able to translate," asked one of the soldiers. He spoke with the eagerness of a man who was anxious to find a point of superiority over the westerners. Stearman could almost read the Arabian's mind. If Ben-Sira could translate

the tablets and Western wisdom was baffled by them, then the East was superior to the west in that academic sphere.

"Yes," said Val, "he could translate them; but he was no mortal man."

"What are you saying?" gasped the corporal.

"He was centuries old," said La Noire. "He was an evil magician." Beneath the uniforms of their modern army the soldiers were still basically credulous, still ready and eager to believe in dark mysteries, which had lived traditionally in the east since time immemorial. They sat listening to Stearman like a bazaar crowd listening to a travelling storyteller.

"All of those on the archaeological expedition died," said Val.

"All?" asked the corporal.

"One was old and his heart failed," said Stearman.

"And the rest?" asked the corporal.

"The leader, Andrew Bennett, was killed in a car crash. Charles Downing died of a mysterious fever. Ian Johnson flung himself into the sea on the way home to England. I myself swam around in the great waters looking for him." Val had somehow seen himself in the role of oriental storyteller and he was adopting some of the semi-archaic poetical syntax which went with the part.

"The others?" asked the corporal eagerly.

"There was only one other," answered Val.

"What became of him?" asked one of the soldiers and this time his question was no mere attempt to prove a point in superiority in the imagined battle between Eastern and Western culture.

"He was killed by a stone tablet. Officially the police in England are regarding it as an ordinary murder."

"But you know something more?" prompted the soldier.

"I know more," agreed Val.

"No hand held the tablet," said La Noire.

## Chapter Twenty

### CONFLICT BECKONS

THERE was a dazed, frightened silence.

"No hand held the stone that crushed Eric Fraser's skull," said Val Stearman in a deep, sonorous bass-baritone.

"The stone killed him by itself," concurred La Noire.

"We are in the presence of a great and terrible evil," said Brother Alexander, speaking for the first time. The soldiers no longer regarded him disapprovingly.

"These tablets are the signs and the symbols of an ancient power of evil which it is difficult for us to imagine," added Brother Bernard.

"They are the store house of a dark magic which was old before Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees," agreed Constantine. "Before the first human worshipper climbed the sloping galleries of a Ziggurat these tablets were old, dangerous and evil."

"You speak of great mysteries," whispered the corporal.

"What happened next?" asked another soldier. He sounded like a child, impatient and eager for the story to continue. Val smiled a little at the man's enthusiasm.

"My wife and I," he indicated La Noire, "were able to find the cave in which Abou-ben-Sira had taken refuge with his tablets. They were no longer magic tools in his greedy, evil hands; he no longer controlled them, they controlled him. Man's curiosity had released a fiend which it seemed that nothing could chain. La Noire and I entered the cave, but we were driven back by the evil thing that had once been Abou-ben-Sira."

"Did you take no charms to use against the dark magic?" asked the corporal solicitously.

"We took many powerful charms," said Stearman, "but although they have always prevailed in the past against the enemies of Ormuzd this time they were insufficient to their task."

"How did you escape?" asked a soldier.

"We descended deep into a cave where the monster could not reach us," explained Val. He did not think that this was the time, nor the place, to tell the long and involved saga of their encounter with the peculiar translucent amphibian creature, who had saved their lives. Besides, he considered, it would be a poor reward on their part if they told of the creature's existence and in consequence its privacy could be invaded. Val thought cynically that some pompous military genius might well decide to kill it as a 'security risk' or some other flimsy pretext! The sub-aquatic-man was not easy to understand and Val knew from his own wide experience that when men do not understand they *fear*. When a man is frightened he becomes an ugly, destructive brute in his mistaken quest for security and safety.

"We then went to a place where there was more knowledge than we possess," said La Noire guardedly, "and our three friends here have come to destroy the monster."

"We were waiting in our hotel when we heard the news bulletin of this danger," said Brother Bernard.

"We bear secret arms of great power, symbols which will enable the great powers of light to use our poor bodies as instruments of their will," added Alexander.

"We will be the barrels along which *They* will fire divine bullets of supercharged cosmic energy," concluded Brother Constantine. Val looked at the monk and thought that as the conflict drew nearer Brother Constantine looked increasingly noble and increasingly Roman.

"I believe all that you tell me," said the corporal simply. Val returned the guns to the soldiers and they shook hands solemnly all round.

"I am sorry that we delayed you," said the corporal. "But if you will accept it from us, poor soldiers that we are, we would like to give you our blessing."

"We accept it most heartily and gladly," said Brother Alexander.

"Indeed we do," agreed Brother Bernard.

"Most willingly," concurred Brother Constantine.

"Then the blessings of Allah be upon you all," said the corporal.

"And may the power of Ahura-Mazda defend you," added one of the patrol.

"We thank you," answered Val simply.

"How easy and how bitter a thing it would have been for us to fight and kill one another in haste," said Brother Alexander.

"And how glorious and warm a thing it is for us to part in peace, as friends and allies," murmured Brother Bernard.

"Amen," whispered Constantine.

There was a sudden roaring, rumbling sound from around the angle of the mountain ahead of them. Part of the noise was gunfire, part of it was *something worse* . . . .

## Chapter Twenty-one

### MAN VERSUS MONSTER

THE patrol had a jeep waiting behind a rocky outcropping and they followed briskly as Val drove the car towards the mountain, and as far up the lower slopes as it was able to ascend.

When gravity and the angle of the hill dictated that the car could climb no higher Val and the three monks climbed out. La Noire sat still for a second and Val guessed that she was deep in prayer. She was in one of those mysterious moods when she seemed to be in close communion with the Infinite. A few moments later she joined them on the mountain slopes.

High above them, Val could hear the reverberating rattle of gunfire and the sounds of something else, something huge and inhuman. The monks had been assembling their psychic weapons. Brother Alexander held the specially dedicated crusader's sword. It was an even more potent weapon than the legendary sword of Kalinar, that famed blade which had been made by the finest silversmith of the Renaissance and with which many evil entities had been destroyed.

Brother Bernard was carrying an ancient vellum prayer book, as far as Stearman was aware, it was a book which had been used by Saint Jerome himself. As the monks began to ascend the steep and difficult slopes, Val and La Noire followed them. Soldiers were falling back rapidly; the retreat had become a rout. The roaring of the monster grew louder. The gunfire had become more spasmodic and intermittent. Then it ceased altogether. Around the curvature of the mountain Val and La Noire saw the monster again. It seemed to have grown since their first encounter. It was a colossus, a broddingnagian, an ogre, a giant of the first magnitude. Its huge body was marked and scratched in places by the gunfire of the heroic Iraqi artillery, but the wounds were superficial scratches, no more. The psychic evil which surrounded the thing was far too strong for anything as materialistic as a gun. Val realised that a monster of such evil as this, a monster which had been able to withstand the shots from his silver-bullet Browning, would certainly be able to stand up to any other metal. He had never before encountered an evil being of such precocity that it could endure silver. The knowledge that his bullets were not infallible had been a humbling experience. He had almost come to regard himself as a sort of Superman. Now he knew he wasn't. The experience had probably been good for his soul, he reflected, but it hadn't done much for his ego! Val found it galling to play second fiddle to the three quietly dedicated, unostentatious priests. He looked at Brother Alexander climbing bravely with his crusader's sword. He studied the pious figure of Brother Bernard reading from St. Jerome's book as he ascended. He subjected Constantine to a close and critical scrutiny. Val looked down deep into his own heart. *By God, he thought, I'm jealous!*

Like a shaft of illuminating inspiration from some higher plain Val saw that his feelings of jealousy were the result of the evil which was emanating from the hideous tablet-monster who had once been Ben-Sira. Evil could strike in many forms and this was one of them. The enemy were applying the principle of divide and rule. Val realised that the evil forces centre in Ben-Sira's magnified body were trying to make him jealous so that he would either hinder the priests or fail to support them to the utmost of his ability. As he realised what was happening, Val also saw what the prime danger was. The priests were men of the spirit, men of the mind. They were men who used their bodies only as vehicles for their minds and souls. With all the dedication and devotion in the world bodies which were

not equipped for arduous climbing would not climb as well as a man like Stearman.

True, he told himself, the priests were younger than he was, but that made no difference. Age had not weakened the great muscles which adorned Val Stearman's mighty body. He was perhaps a shade slower than he had been in the first flush of his youth, but the maturing process of the passing years had given him a teak-like hardness and an oaken strength that more than compensated for an excess of speed, which he might reasonably expect to encounter in a younger opponent.

He saw his part in the battle now; he saw it very clearly and lucidly. In other encounters, to use a cavalry simile, he had been the rider. This time he was the horse. The priests were carrying the weapons. Their deep spiritual preparations would enable them to use those weapons. He was there to see the priests got to their opponent. In that sense he was the horse. In a cavalry engagement a good horse is essential. The feeling of jealousy had gone completely now that Val saw his role with perfect clarity. His physical strength and courage were to be the vehicles on which the spiritual and psychic strength of the priests could ride.

Val looked at Brother Constantine, who was carrying a processional cross of great age and exquisite workmanship. There was no doubt in Stearman's mind that that cross had been carried by Holy Men in the distant days when Christendom had been completely united, in the far off epoch before the Great Schism had made a sad division in the Body of Christ on earth. Thinking about it, Val was reminded of the great efforts which had been made by saintly old Pope John and were being continued by his worthy successor Pope Paul. The reunification of God's Church would strike a blow at the bulwarks of evil such as it had not sustained since the martyrs had died with songs of joy on their lips to the amazement of the pagan world and the chagrin of persecuting despots.

Val moved like a mountain goat from one priest to the other. La Noire was a few yards lower down the mountain. She was climbing as well as Val and he had no worries on her behalf. First he would turn his attentions to Father Alexander and help the sword-bearing monk on his way. Then he would move over and assist Brother Bernard who read aloud constantly from the sacred tome that had reputedly once belonged to St. Jerome. After they had reached some new vantage point Val would turn his attentions to the more powerful Constantine. The Roman-like monk, who carried the ancient processional cross was least in need of

help, and Val gradually devoted less time to assisting Constantine and more of his moments to aiding Brother Alexander and Brother Bernard. The three monks were all perspiring freely in their robes but none of them made the slightest murmur of complaint. They climbed towards the monster as the fleeing gun crews cascaded down the mountain on either side of them.

A nervous young soldier suddenly missed his footing and fell with a pitiful scream. His falling body plummeted directly towards the reading Bernard, as though the evil forces that had taken over and expanded Ben-Sira's body were aiming the helpless young soldier's falling torso like a projectile.

Val raced to try and intervene, wondering desperately if he would be in time . . .



## Chapter Twenty-two

## THEIR FINEST HOUR

VAL was trying to do two things at once. He wanted to save the young soldier from a fatal fall onto the rocks beneath. He also wanted to prevent the lad's falling body from knocking the book out of Bernard's hands, or worse still, dislodging the sad faced monk from his hold on the rock face.

Stearman's outstretched right arm caught at the edge of the boy's jacket as he tumbled past, screaming wildly. Val's great fingers closed over the khaki cloth like the jaws of a steel trap; he felt the strain on his arm and shoulder socket as the boy's fall was checked. The jerk almost tore Val off the rock himself, but his left hand found a scrubby bush, of tenacious calibre, with its roots embedded deeply into rocky crevices. For a second that seemed an eternity Val held the boy dangling over infinity at arm's length and then his great sinews contracted and he pulled the lad to safety. The youngster was crying hysterically, but a moment later he stopped and looked gratefully at the big journalist-adventurer.

"You have saved my life," he gasped. "I can never thank you enough." He clung to the bush to steady himself.

"How can I ever repay you?" he asked. Val grinned.

"By climbing down slowly and carefully. Don't worry

about the *Thing* up there. My friends will deal with it."

"Not us, my son," said Alexander, "the Power which graciously condescends to use the poor servants that we are."

Val watched as the young soldier climbed slowly and carefully down the lower slopes. Stearman called to La Noire. "Everything O.K., darling?" His call was interrogative.

"Fine!" she answered and paused a second in her climbing to wave encouragingly.

They had reached a brief plateau and on the far end of it the monster waited. Its huge and hideous face, a terrifying caricature of the features which had once been those of Ben-Sira, glowered down at the priests, the fearless monks, the heroic men of God from the Secret Monastery. Brother Alexander advanced with complete courage. Brother Bernard moved forward without fear. Brother Constantine marched on with great gallantry. Val Stearman followed, feeling incongruously like a war correspondent in the wake of a commando raid. La Noire joined him and they stood watching as the monks came face to face with the monster, there on the diminutive mountain plateau. Smoking guns lay silent all around, mute testimony to the failure of physical weapons. The tokens of man's unaided inadequacy sent curling offerings of acrid cordite smoke up to the silent sky, and the Mesopotamian sun glared down fittingly, as it must once have glared down on the valley where David and Goliath met in mortal combat.

This time, thought Val, there were three Davids, but the Goliath whom they face was nearly one hundred cubits high! David had fought an opponent of flesh and blood. This enemy of theirs had only the semblance of flesh and blood. Goliath, despite his incredible stature, had been mortal. This thing was *more* than mortal. As though its tremendous size was not enough the gigantic caricature of Ben-Sira, which now faced them, was protected by an envelope of supernatural evil which the Iraqi field guns had been unable to penetrate.

The thing threw back its head in a hideous laugh and swept towards the three dedicated priests with a motion that was destined to hurl them from the mountain.

The huge hand passed over them harmlessly. The great evil entity paused. The expression on the face changed. It looked puzzled, almost worried. Brother Constantine advanced towards the monster, holding the cross aloft fearlessly. The watching Stearman was reminded of a film version of the story of Attila the Hun which he had seen

once, years ago. In the last dramatic moment, when Rome seemed to lie helplessly at the barbarians' mercy, Pope Leo had gone out fearlessly and spoken to the Hun commander. The marauders had turned away. It had been a dramatic moment. A moment of truth, thought Val.

Brother Bernard, still reading aloud from the sacred book of St. Jerome was advancing beside Constantine, while Alexander drew back the crusader's sword in preparation to strike at the deadly thing which had grown out of the body of Ben-Sira.

They reached the monster's foot and Alexander struck with his Holy sword. The upraised cross touched the angle of the hideous giant, and the voice of Bernard rose to a mighty shout of triumph, as he continued to call out the sacred words, which the saint's eyes had once scanned.

In that moment, thought Stearman, the world of time and space came suddenly meaningless. Just for a fleeting instant eternity came through. Val knew *that* what Plato had meant when he talked of a world of *ideas* and a world of earthly things, physical things. It was not eternity which was an illusion, it was the so-called world of time and space which was the illusion!

The mind of man was too limited to comprehend eternity, but that did not negate eternity. For centuries man's mind had not comprehended the truth concerning the mighty power locked in the atom, but that did not mean that such power did not exist. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were examples of that power, and terrible warnings to the rest of the world. Just as the concealed power of the atom had broken through with terrifying might in those doomed Japanese cities so, now, the great powers that lurked in eternity were breaking through into the world of sense with equally terrifying might.

The sword, the cross and the saint's book represented one aspect of eternity, the Powers of Light. The hideous blemished monstrosity represented the powers of darkness and chaos. Light was fighting darkness there and day was locked in mortal combat with night. Val realised that this was not an exact or true simile. Day and night were fairly equally matched in terrestrial terms. But, fierce as this conflict was, there was no comparison between the relative strengths of the two sides. Day, eternal day was infinitely greater than eternal light. Light, eternal light, was infinitely stronger than eternal darkness. As far as Val could now understand the cosmic duel that was being fought out a few yards ahead of him on the plateau, Good was vastly superior to Evil, but like all power Good needed a channel, and Good,

being what it was would not destroy its servants. Evil had destroyed Ben-Sira, had destroyed him contemptuously, made him into a *thing* where he had once been almost a man.

As far as Val could comprehend the problem, C. S. Lewis had been brilliantly right when he had written in "The Screwtape Letters":

*"Evil wants men as cattle which will become food. God wants men as servants who will one day become sons."* Val wasn't sure whether he had recalled the exact wording, but he knew that he had the gist of it correctly.

There were violent manifestations taking place on the plateau. The giant was collapsing. Val was reminded of the vision of the idol with feet of clay recorded in the Book of Daniel. The feet of the hideous monstrosity were turning to dust at the impact of the sacred symbols. The ogre had clapped its hands to its ears and was collapsing into a strange crumpled heap.

For one terrible moment it seemed to Val as if the obscene thing, which had once been Abou-ben-Sira, would fall with crushing force and violence onto the monk-priests, La Noire and himself. The envelope of benign power which surrounded the Holy men and their sacred relics prevented such a catastrophe. The monster seemed to be falling all around them, but not *on* them. The great blemished entity was turning to dry ashes and dust even as they watched. Within minutes the disintegration was complete. Only a few specks of dust remained and they were rapidly dispersing in the cool, strong mountain breeze that was springing up as though in answer to the summons of a Power that was greater than Nature.

Val and La Noire helped the three monks to descend. The holy men from the Secret Monastery were tired, very tired. By the time Stearman had helped them into the rear seat of the capacious self-drive hire car they were almost asleep on their feet.

Val, too, felt strangely exhausted and La Noire slid behind the wheel. Accompanied by a miniature cavalcade of Iraqi military vehicles they drove off in triumph.

As they drove, Val's strength returned and he sat upright looking interestedly through the windscreen. The sounds of gentle snoring came from the back seat.

"You know," said Val, "when a man has time to look at this countryside it's really beautiful, isn't it?"

"It certainly is, darling," agreed his wife, "and now that the power of the tablets has been smashed other people will be able to enjoy it, too."

"This has been a strange adventure my love," said Val.

"A very strange adventure," she agreed.

"And what of Abou-ben-Sira?" asked Val.

"He has gone to an unknown destiny," answered La Noire.

"An *unknown destiny* indeed," agreed Val. He put his arm around her beautiful shoulders as they drove away towards civilisation.

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