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A STRANGE DETECTIVE STORY

By E. Hoffmann Price

THE DEVIL'S CRYPT

As the creatures of a condemned man's dream, the Brotherhood of Black Evil arose from the dust of 800,000 years to weave its spell of criminal sorcery over those who knew the answer to the Gray Sphinx riddle.

*Complete
Novelette*



The words of the chant, hideously fascinating, bound Barrett and D'Artois. The bowl was ready. And the knife was raised for the thrust.

CHAPTER I SATAN'S FOOTPRINTS

GUIDEBOOK tourists to Southern France concentrate on Biarritz; but those who love unspoiled antiquity prefer Bayonne, that gray-walled city that basks in the warmth of the Pyrenees and guards the road to Spain. The moat that girdles the citadel is dry, and the drawbridges are no longer serviceable; but at sunrise, when the Lachepaillet Wall and the cathedral spires seem floating on banks of low-lying river mists from the Nive and the Adour, Bayonne is a hasheesh dream rather than a city.

France and Spain, England and Navarre, have contended for possession of that fortress, and before them, the Moors occupied that old city

which was once the encampment of Roman legions; but it is only at night that one remembers the crypts and passages that undermine the citadel, and senses that soil which for centuries has drunk the blood of defender and invader alike is still thirsty.

Bayonne is an old gray sphinx, somnolently smiling through the veils of her mystery.

Two men emerged from the Lachepaillet Gate as the cathedral clock struck eleven. They were bareheaded, and in full evening dress. Davis Barrett, the younger, was tall, bronzed, and rugged as the massive masonry of the walls. The elder was grizzled, with fine, stern features and bristling, close cropped hair that gleamed white in the moonlight. It was no promenade to continue a private discussion that would have been disturbed

by the laughter and music and tingling glasses in José Guevara Millamediana's luxurious apartment; they walked with expectant, searching alertness; and the elder was perturbed, as though he feared to find what they sought.

"Why," demanded Barrett, "do you think you'll find Louise here, of all places?"

"Her apartment, just a block from Don José's, must have been her destination, but she's not there. And since she left without her cloak, she must have intended to return in a few minutes. As it is—"

D'Artois shrugged, regarded his friend. Barrett glanced up toward the parapet along which ran rue Lachepaillet.

"She could have slipped," he admitted.

"Precisely, my friend," replied Pierre d'Artois. "With a bit too much of Don José's wine—a moment of dizziness, a misstep in the mist—there's no guard rail up there."

Barrett agreed. It was logical; yet he sensed that his companion had withheld more than he had expressed. He shivered in anticipation of the end of what had started as a casual courtesy to allay the misgivings of Yvonne Marigny concerning the unduly prolonged absence of her sister, Louise.

THEY BOUNDED the swelling curve of the bastion that marks the turn of the wall toward the Gate of Spain. Barrett's heart and breath for a moment stopped as he abruptly halted, frozen by the horror that confronted them.

The gray sphinx had lifted her veil, and revealed not her seduction, but her terror and darkness.

A woman lay on the sandy bottom of the dry moat. Fright had so hideously transfigured her face that it was her scarlet gown and blue-black hair and silver *lamé* slippers rather than the olive-tinted features which Barrett recognized. He saw how Louise Marigny had died, and tried to convince himself that it was illusion, and the fantasy of a moon-haunted night.

"Pierre—look at her throat! Look at—" His voice cracked, and for a moment failed. Louise Marigny's throat had been terribly mangled, as by a beast of prey. Barrett resolutely denied the thoughts that followed his first impression.

D'Artois, his seamed features pale and drawn, nodded.

"My friend, look again. You have seen but half of it."

Barrett wondered what further horror there

could be; but his gray eyes followed the old man's commanding gesture and saw the footprints of that which had roamed by moonlight.

Man, beast, or devil, its feet were webbed; yet for all the resemblance of the tracks to those of some monstrous aquatic fowl of aeons past, there was that which suggested a hybrid combining the feet of an anthropoid with those of a web-footed bird, or bird-like reptile.

"And the prints end after a few paces," muttered d'Artois.

"It might have jumped to the bank," countered Barrett, making a final effort to lend a touch of sanity to the outrageous implications of the suddenly ending trail.

D'Artois shook his head.

"Impossible. Facing the way its tracks indicate, it would have had to clear the moat by leaping crabwise. It must have flown away."

"Good Lord! A bird with feet that large! Or a winged reptile—couldn't possibly be!" Barrett was thinking of the *pterodactyl*, that flying, reptilian slayer which has been extinct for uncounted thousands of years.

D'Artois for a moment studied the uncanny trail.

"Something worse than any honest reptile," he muttered somberly. Then, to Barrett: "Let's notify the *Sûreté*. At once."

Barrett was glad to leave that sinister spot; but as d'Artois turned: "Pierre, one of us should watch here until the police arrive."

"There is no time to waste in courtesies to the dead," he countered. "And I may need your assistance. *Allons!*"

And presently, passing the Lachepaillet Gate, they ascended the slope, skirted the parapet, then turned down rue Tour de Sault, near whose end was the 13th Century ruin which d'Artois had restored and modernized, making of it a town house wherein he was not only comfortable, but content in being in the heart of the old city he loved so well.

D'Artois led the way to his study on the second floor, stepped to the telephone, and called the Prefect of Police. The machine gun sputter of d'Artois' French was too much for Barrett, but he caught a phrase from time to time, and the incredulous horror of the Prefect's voice as it filtered faintly from the receiver.

"He will make plaster casts of the footprints; he

will measure the stride; he will look for bits of hair, thread, lint," d'Artois enumerated as he replaced the instrument. Then, with an expansive gesture, "but he will find nothing!"

Barrett set down the decanter of *Vieux Armagnac*, whose level he had appreciably pulled down while listening to d'Artois remarks. The fiery liquor burned out the chills that had raced up and down his spine.

"You haven't much respect for the Prefect," he said with something approaching a smile. D'Artois' extensive studies in criminology and psychology at times made him critical of the *Sûreté*.

"This is something which transcends scientific crime detection," the old man countered. "It is not a case of an assassin disguising his feet with something which will leave an outlandish footprint. Yet that is what *Monsieur le Préfet* will attempt to prove, and he will fail.

"But I will approach from another angle."

AS HE SPOKE, d'Artois, with swift gesture, swept his desk clear of its accumulated debris. Then he laid out a sheet of paper and with a compass drew a circle which he divided into twelve equal sectors. That done, he took from a bookcase a thin volume whose pages were divided into columns. It was an ephemeris.

"*Mon ami*," explained d'Artois in response to Barrett's exclamation, "astronomical tables are not exclusively used for navigation. An ephemeris, you recollect, is also used by astrologers."

"I am inquiring into the planetary aspects. In the meantime, do you swill the rest of my brandy. Your stomach doubtless needs settling."

Barrett selected a cigar from d'Artois' humidor; then, his curiosity overcoming him, he peered over the old man's shoulder, watching him enter astrological symbols in the twelve sectors of the circle. The cigar had accumulated less than an inch of ash when d'Artois thrust back his chair.

"I see more than murder and mutilation," he declared. "I see a sinister configuration that cries out of an old and malignant magic. Neptune, in the Eighth House, indicates death by *strange spiritual causes*. And look at the position of Saturn, the lord of those who follow *subterranean pursuits*; Uranus, the sovereign of thaumaturgists and black magicians; and over all is the evil aspect of the moon, the mother of sorcery."

"Still and all, Pierre," interjected Barrett,

perplexed by the astrological jargon, "you've only repeated what we already know. We saw it was uncanny and horrible. Anyway, this astrology business—"

"Has been degraded by charlatans, I grant," snapped d'Artois. "But it is none the less a true science, and only limited by the intelligence of the investigator.

"I am looking into the background of this monstrous crime. And the first move is to seek *underground*, a black magician working in some of the hidden vaults beneath the city. Check up on all those known or suspected of having occult connections. Thus we have already eliminated all common criminals, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Barrett, impressed by his friend's solemnity, conceded the point, outrageous as it was to hear a sane, hard-bitten old soldier and scholar to speak of black magic as an actual menace; but d'Artois' ensuing assertion left Barrett too astonished even to protest.

"And the first of these devil mongers and dabblers in the occult that I will investigate is our charming host of the evening, Don José. He is the head of a clique that has gathered in Bayonne. On the surface, they seem to be harmless cranks who babble of telepathy, mysticism, and the like; but tonight's tragedy confirms my contention that modern Bayonne is living up to its ancient reputation for being a nest of malignant occultists and necromancers!"

"Good God, Pierre!" Barrett finally contrived to ejaculate. "Why—that's utterly impossible—"

"So was the gruesome tragedy in the moat," retorted d'Artois, his blue eyes cold and glittering as sword points by moonlight. "And wait till I tell you the rest: *Yvonne and Louise are twins*. If there is one iota of truth in astrology, Yvonne will succumb, or at the best, narrowly escape the doom that overtook her sister.

"Their horoscopes, while, of course, not identical, would be so similar that both would be susceptible to the occult evil that is stalking tonight. The stars have warned us. You watch the living while I set out to trip up the monster responsible for that ghastly crime. Hurry—before it's too late!"

Barrett's last remnant of skepticism melted before his friend's unwavering conviction. He followed d'Artois to the street, and through the river mists that billowed from the Nive and

marched up rue Tour de Sault like a phantom army.

CHAPTER II
THE BEAST FROM THE CRYPT

D'ARTOIS' car was parked near Don José's house. "I will not only need it tonight," explained d'Artois as they hurried along rue Lachepaillet, "but we must also get Mademoiselle Yvonne—get her away from that party. That Spaniard—"

"But I don't see how he could be connected with it," contended Barrett. "He was there, all the time, among his guests. Yvonne just stepped out for a moment for a breath of air, or—"

"*Imbécile!*" snorted d'Artois. "That's just the point: Don José being always in sight of his guests gives him a perfect but deceptive alibi."

"But that doesn't prove—"

"Of course it proves nothing. But if you'd read that fellow's book on Tibetan magic, and heard the rumors of his doings near the roof of the world, you would think twice, *pardieu!*"

"Alone, I am handicapped. But fortunately there is in Bayonne an occultist who can help me. A profound scholar whose researches can perhaps save the day: Sidi Abdurrahman, an Oriental mystic and *chêla*, a disciple of an occult Adept."

Barrett shuddered as they passed the bastion of the Lachepaillet wall and heard the detectives, already on the case, and the crisp, incisive voice of the Prefect who had appeared to take charge in person. And then, presently, they heard music, and laughter, the mirth of Don José's guests. Barrett nerved himself to ascend the stairs and enter the glow of lights and the mocking presence of gaiety.

Yvonne, they learned, had left Don José's house only a few minutes after d'Artois and Barrett had gone in search of Louise.

"*Por Dios, Señor,*" said the courtly Spaniard, "she fancied her sister was ill and went home to join her. I trust that you will present my compliments and regrets to the lovely Louise. I am indeed sorry that she had to leave so early. Is it possible that she may return for her wrap?"

Don José was mocking them; and Barrett, remembering d'Artois' dreadful surmises, sought to deny the thought that Yvonne, like her sister, had gone out into the mist and the moonlight to meet a horrible death; nor was he reassured by the fierce glitter in d'Artois' eyes and the twitch of his waxed

moustache as he paused a moment before replying, "I will take her wrap, and leave it on my way past their apartment."

D'Artois and the Spaniard regarded each other as though they had crossed swords instead of glances; and during the exchange Barrett sensed a sudden tension, a current of deadly animosity, like a dagger biting through a shroud of silk. He saw Don José's cheeks for an instant lose their olive tint; and the dark eyes, troubled by the frosty, unwavering stare of d'Artois, seemed eager to shift.

"*Sacré salaud!*" hissed d'Artois, "you know she will never need her wrap. I am busy this evening—and you know why. But I will meet you, with sword or pistol. Soon."

Don José recoiled before the insult and the vague accusation. Then he shrugged, smiled blandly, twisted his black moustache.

"*Señor*, I have not the least idea why you insult me, or what you are implying. Neither am I interested. But if you live long enough, and your courage is equal to the occasion, I will be happy to meet you with any weapons you may prefer."

The stilted, formal speech would have seemed absurd to Barrett had he not sensed the deadly, blazing hatred that flashed for an instant from Don José's eyes.

"*Mordieu, cordieu, pardieu!*" retorted d'Artois, advancing a pace. "If anything happens to Mademoiselle Yvonne, I will not meet you with weapons—I will dismember you by hand."

They exchanged bows with punctilious formality; and then d'Artois turned and led the way to the Mercedes.

"I am more than ever convinced that in some way he's responsible. He, or one of his devil mongering clique," declared d'Artois as he took the wheel.

"But how could he? It's utterly incredible—"

"Science scoffs at sorcery, glibly explains its manifestations as *hysterical hypnosis*," countered d'Artois. "But that does not make it any the less magic. Remember what you saw in the moat and how the horoscope confirmed our first impressions. Certainly I am at loss, but Sidi Abdurrahman's years of study will solve the riddle."

"Maybe," conceded Barrett, "you're right. Oddly enough, your remarks didn't puzzle him as they should have."

"By no means strange," retorted d'Artois as they drew up before the apartment of the two

sisters. "He knew that I knew."

A STURDY, white-haired Basque maid admitted them. Yvonne Marigny received them in the living room. Her olive skin was deadly pale, and her dark eyes burned with an unnatural light.

"Yes. The *Sûreté* notified me, just a few minutes after I arrived," she said with a calmness that was more devastating than any outburst of grief. "I had a premonition of evil when Louise slipped out for a breath of air. And when I sent you to look for her—*mon Dieu!* It was too late."

"But why did you leave before we returned?"

Yvonne shook her head.

"I don't know. Just an irresistible urge to get away. To go home. Like the instinct that urges an animal to creep off to its den and die."

She shuddered, made a perplexed, despairing gesture.

"So . . . you were almost driven from there," said d'Artois, speaking very slowly, and glancing meaningfully at Barrett. Then his eyes flashed toward the windows and their closely spaced wrought-iron bars. He nodded approvingly; and Barrett caught the unspoken thought.

"*Mon vieux*, do you stay here with Mademoiselle Yvonne. I am going to get Sidi Abdurrahman. He lives out beyond the Mousserole Wall, not far off the river road." Then, as Barrett accompanied him to the door, he continued in a whisper, "The same strange, unreasoning compulsion that sent Louise to her death may send Yvonne wandering by moonlight. Don't let her out of the house. Hold her. Tie her, if necessary!"

The door clicked closed behind d'Artois; and a moment later they heard the soft whir of gears.

The proximity of tragedy depressed Barrett. He resolutely directed his eyes away from the barred window, and the moon-drenched mists beyond, and sought to banish the memory of what he had seen in the moat; but a strange fascination forced him to gaze into the ghastly glamour of the night. Barrett shivered, rose from his chair, intending to draw the shades to screen that ill-omened view. Yvonne nodded, sensing his motive, and smiled wanly through the tears that glistened in her dark eyes.

"Monsieur Barrett," said Yvonne, "this is all so terribly unreal . . . it is like an awful nightmare. It seems as though all the evil that has ever existed is concentrating about us."

Thus she described the feeling that Barrett had vainly sought to dispel. He had assured himself that it was but natural for Yvonne, grief-stricken and horrified as she was, to infect him with her own emotions; and yet, that reassurance by no means convinced him.

He noted that the lights were dimming. He frowned perplexedly, and resumed his seat, instead of drawing the shade.

"Bum voltage regulation," he insisted; but Barrett's intuition told him that the trouble was not electrical. Then he saw that wisps of mist were swirling and drifting in through the window.

Yvonne stared into the coals of the grate, whose ardent glow had suddenly cooled. The girl herself had become lethargic, as though her spirit had left her. For a moment Barrett felt utterly alone. It was as though Yvonne were a lovely simulacrum and not a woman who shrank shuddering into the depths of her spacious chair.

Gray vapors swirled and surged through the room. A chilling breeze urged the mist whorl into sweeping spirals; mists that came neither from the Nive nor the Adour, nor any earthly river. Barrett thought again of d'Artois' solemn declaration, "*Saturn, the lord of subterranean places, Neptune, who governs strange spiritual enemies, and malignant Uranus, rule this night.*"

Barrett stepped to the center of the room, where he could see the double windows that overlooked the Lachepaillet Walk. He saw a monstrous shape peering at him as, perched on the sill, it clutched the window-bars and slowly wrenched them apart.

The walls had become obscured with dense, vibrant mist banks, so that only in the center of the room was any light left. The incandescent lamps were now a dull, somber red that vainly sought to filter through the surging haze.

The creature's feet identified it as the monster of the moat.

Barrett saw now what had torn Louise's throat and drunk her blood, then taken three long strides and—

It had spread its membranous bat-wings and soared into the moonlight, and thence to whatever unknown hell had sent it forth. The face was anthropoid, but malignant, beyond the bestial wrath of any honest ape. The body was hybrid, neither reptilian nor simian: a blasphemy and an outrage whose hideously confused anatomy was all the more abhorrent in its mingling of hair and scales.

The feet were almost human at the heel, but branched into three claw-like toes, joined by webs. Beast it was, yet bird, and reptile. The hands were similarly formed, with arms long enough to accommodate the broad sweep of the membranous wings.

BARRETT knew that the creature had no thought for him. He knew that he could then and there stride safe and harmless through the ever-thickening mist banks, past the somber, vengeful forms that leered out of the haze, and pass on, unmolested. The beast ignored him. It advanced with a slow, fluent, serpentine motion that was entirely out of accord with its grotesque, awkward bulk. It paused, ready to spring forward and rend Yvonne's throat, mutilate her as it had her sister.

The Basque maid, alarmed by Yvonne's single shriek of mortal terror, came running in, stared in incredulous horror. Then she screamed and collapsed on the threshold.

As the monster lunged toward Yvonne, who was paralyzed by the apparition, Barrett seized a heavy chair and lashed out, shattering it across the simian skull. The beast recoiled, sank back to its haunches, shook its head as though bewildered.

Barrett stood for an instant regarding the fragments that remained in his grasp. Then in a flare of rage born of terror and outraged reason, he charged, driving the splintered stumps full into the monster's face.

The assault was vain. He had disconcerted the beast more than he had shaken it. It lashed out with arms that reached almost to its ankles, and enfolded Barrett with its shroud of membranous wings. It screeched and hissed in inarticulate fury. Its long carnivorous teeth sought his throat, even as Barrett, beyond terror or reason, evaded the fangs and sought to throttle the beast, and tear it to pieces with his bare hands.

It was a mad dream of combat in a steaming, prehistoric jungle. The reptilian exhalation of the monster, its squeaking, gibbering wrath and the stifling embrace of its wings, drove Barrett to an insane rage. The thing was strong, but not beyond the strength of human wrath spurred to frenzy; and the very horror of its presence stirred up reserves of destructive fury whose force was dimly echoed in Barrett's ears as he heard the splintering of furniture that crashed and fell into fragments as he

and the monster rolled and leaped, broke, and closed in again, seeking each other's throat.

And yet for all his rage-inspired strength and agility, Barrett vainly sought to rend that tough, scaly body which yielded instead of tearing or breaking as he applied in succession, one after another savage trick of wrestling, and murderous holds practiced by Japanese experts. Though, it could not quite overcome Barrett, it resisted the full flame of his fury. Its endurance was unflagging, and its counter attacks fresh and vigorous as from the start. It seemed to gain strength from Barrett's blood, which streamed from a score of cuts and scratches and long, ragged furrows gouged by its teeth.

Barrett's strength at last was consumed by the futility of his rage. As in a confused dream, his mind began double-tracking: one half still a vortex of flaming wrath, the other impersonally pondering on d'Artois' astrological observations. He knew that this division of consciousness heralded the end of his resistance; and exerting an ultimate, despairing effort, sought to sink his teeth into the monster's throat. But the mists blackened, and the enemy evaded him. His arms clutched a void of abysmal coldness shot with burning flashes of scarlet and orange and dazzling, metallic blue. Then it seemed that he was falling swiftly through unbounded space . . . and as from a great distance he heard a long drawn wail of uttermost terror.

CHAPTER III THE SAVOR OF BLOOD

WHEN BARRETT finally regained consciousness he saw that the lights were bright again. D'Artois, kneeling at his side, was sponging his wounds.

". . . all in the approach," a calm, deep voice was saying. "Your friend—though God alone knows how—withstood the beast by pure force of will to slay. But that was misguided effort."

Barrett with a sudden effort propped himself up on his elbow to confront the person who so lightly disposed of that nightmare battle with that monster from an unknown hell; but his strength was unequal to his curiosity, and he sank back to the floor.

D'Artois helped him to his feet. Barrett, still dazed, for a moment had assumed that d'Artois' presence left victory to be taken for granted; but a second glance at his friend's grim features and

despair haunted eyes told him the truth.

"Where is she?" he demanded, stubbornly resisting his fears. "Good Lord, did it—"

And then Barrett saw d'Artois' companion, Sidi Abdurrahman. Despite the freshness of the occultist's bronzed skin, he seemed incredibly ancient. Barrett's first impression was that some solemn Assyrian colossus had come to life. The neatly trimmed, square cut beard added to the resemblance; only the tall miter was lacking. For an instant Barrett's despair subsided; and then he remembered that d'Artois had failed.

"Where is she?" he repeated. "We can't stand here, idle."

"We do not know—yet," replied the *Chêla*, unperturbed by Barrett's impatient outburst. "But there are ways of finding out. First, be so good as to clear the floor."

Barrett shot a dubious glance at d'Artois. His friend's answering nod was reassuring. And while they cleared away the wreckage of the furniture, Sidi Abdurrahman laid off a circle which he subdivided into seven sectors, and about which he drew a concentric circle.

"As I was saying a few moments ago," resumed the occultist, "fighting that monster was misdirected effort. We must find its master; for even though we destroyed the beast, body and soul, he would create—"

"Soul?" exclaimed Barrett. "That—"

"Yes. We are confronted by the recrudescence of an ancient evil that began among the Black Magicians of Atlantis. It is written in the occult records: *The Atlanteans had become magicians who created monsters with the strength of the brute and the cunning of the savage; and these they ensouled with the most malignant of elementals, who became guards and messengers, the terrible symbols of the power of the Kings of Darkness.*

"To bind these dread beings more closely to their service, they offered them sacrifices of slain animals and slain men. Fifty thousand years passed: and then the Dragons of Wisdom sent a doom forth from Holy Shamballah."

"Is that creature fifty thousand years old?" wondered Barrett.

The *Chêla* smiled and shook his head.

"That is only the time during which the Black Masters were at the height of their power. They were destroyed something like 850,000 years ago when the word went forth from Shamballah. And

as it was done then, so must we do now: make the slave betray the master," continued Sidi Abdurrahman as he drew a seven-pointed star in the innermost circle.

"We will bribe and drug that monster with blood. It shall find its doom in the very evil by which it has lived all these ages; it cannot resist the bait; and instead of warning its master, it will lead us to him."

"For a Mohammedan," whispered Barrett as the *Chêla* reached for a small copper bowl which he had brought with him, "he certainly is unorthodox."

"*Mordieu!* Who said he was a Moslem?" countered d'Artois. "His name signifies nothing. He gets his knowledge from study of occult records which are the fountainhead of learning, and transcend race and religion."

SIDI ABDURRAHMAN set the bowl at the center of the circles; then he cast into it the contents of a small packet: a fine, bluish powder.

That done, he drew a dagger, saying, "this will be its last drink of blood! And it cannot refuse the bait; for such is the law of its kind."

But before the keen blade touched the vein of the *Chêla's* forearm, Barrett interposed.

"Let me in on this," he said, thrusting forward his own arm.

"No. I have an old debt to pay. One contracted in a former life, by a former failure. Just is the Wheel, and unswerving and this is my, debt."

With the evening's earlier madness, Barrett found the occultist's reference to a previous incarnation entirely rational. He stepped back as the blade bit, and the old man's blood spurted redly into the copper bowl.

When the bowl was filled to the brim, d'Artois stepped forward and with a handkerchief and lead pencil devised a tourniquet to check the flow.

They watched the occultist bow ceremonially to the cardinal points of the compass, and make ritual gestures. They heard him intone, "*The hour has struck, and the black night is ready . . . let their destiny be accomplished. . . .*"

And then Barrett could no longer understand the *Chêla's* utterance. The sonorous, majestic intonation was in a tongue so foreign and archaic that it seemed not even remotely related to any speech of mankind.

They stood, poised and expectant, watching the

copper bowl and the blood that glowed like a monstrous carbuncle. They became aware of another presence in the room. A grayish vapor finally coalesced above the red surface; and then as Sidi Abdurrahman's great voice thundered the ultimate, triumphant syllables of that age-old occult chant, the materialization became complete.

Barrett started in sudden alarm as he recognized at the center of the circle the same beast which had so nearly overcome him; but it was now translucent and unsubstantial, a phantom replica of the living horror. It knelt submissively, wings folded over its back as though it were a bird of prey subdued and garbed in the mockery of human form; and as with bestial eagerness it lapped up the bowl of blood, its body seemed to become more dense. A musty, reptilian stench pervaded the room.

When the bowl was empty, Sidi Abdurrahman's arm flashed out in a commanding gesture. The monster shrank as from the touch of red hot iron, then stepped from the circle.

D'Artois slipped an automatic pistol into Barrett's hand. The cold metal reminded him that at least a shred of reality remained.

"There will be men, later," d'Artois explained. Then, anticipating Barrett's question: "When this is over, I will tell you the answer—if we survive."

The grotesque procession filed down the hall and to the deserted rue Lachepaillet. The monster shambled down the street and at the end of some fifty yards, crossed toward the parapet, then stepped into a narrow doorway. They followed it down a steep, rubbish-littered stairway that led to a vaulted chamber which, by the beam of d'Artois' flashlight, Barrett recognized as a long untenanted dungeon; and then, on its hands and knees, the apparition crept through a low archway. It emerged on the bottom of the moat.

"Ah . . . this is not entirely a surprise," muttered d'Artois as he noted the direction taken by their spectral guide. "And we'll soon see whether Don José is its master."

After passing Porte d'Espagne, they ascended the steep bank of the moat, and thence toward the somber grove at the Spring of St. Léon, where their spectral guide turned toward a casemate which was barely visible in the shadow of a solitary, gigantic tree.

SIDI ABDURRAHMAN halted at the entrance of the casemate. His majestic features were tense; and the fixity of his gaze betokened the concentration whereby he maintained his control of the monster. The occultist gestured toward the passageway which led straight into the heart of the knoll that rose from the level of the clearing.

"Part of Vauban's fortifications?" wondered Barrett, as by the beam of d'Artois' flashlight they stepped into the darkness.

"For a distance, yes," agreed d'Artois. "But before we are through, we will enter a place which neither Vauban nor any other honest engineer ever built."

Although the apparition was faintly luminous in the darkness, Barrett was certain that the *Chêla* followed it by some sense other than the five which normal humanity has.

"How did he call that thing out of thin air?" whispered Barrett, to whom the entire uncanny proceeding seemed like the fantasy of a nightmare.

"He provided it with a body, very much as a spiritualistic medium furnishes the substance for a materialization," explained d'Artois. "Its visible form is made up of part of the etheric double which every living creature has. And in order to maintain the form that the creature is using, Sidi Abdurrahman is exerting a tremendous effort, and drawing on an incredible reserve of psychic and physical energy. Few can endure the strain of lending too much vital force: which accounts for the eventual collapse of most spiritualist mediums.

"The force that animates this materialization of the monster is the elemental spirit that ensouled the body of the beast that killed Louise. This which we now see is not its physical body; and thus, being bound in an artificially created etheric form, the elemental cannot warn its master of our approach—ah . . . we're getting somewhere!"

The passageway had opened into what seemed to be a squad room for that portion of the outer defenses of the citadel. Sidi Abdurrahman and his guide had passed through an opening which pierced the further wall of the chamber.

"This is where Vauban's work ends," muttered d'Artois. "Beyond—God alone knows!"

The opening had been roughly cut through the masonry. Beyond it was a low tunnel whose spade-marked walls showed that it had been recently dug. At the end of a dozen paces it terminated at the

upper landing of a staircase which was not the work of any military engineer. It had been relieved of the earth which had buried it for uncounted ages—brought to light again by the black master who had sent death stalking in the moonlight.

An aura of incalculable antiquity oppressed them as they stepped to the threshold of the blackness below.

Flight succeeded flight, until they arrived in a vaulted passage whose walls were buttressed with pilasters of masonry whose prodigious bulk dwarfed the mighty columns of Karnak.

“Good Lord!” whispered Barrett, awed by the monumental architecture. “It looks as though we’ve gone beyond time and reason and—”

“*Mon ami*,” countered d’Artois grimly, “the evening is young. Listen—”

Far ahead of them, out of the age-old darkness, came the muttering of drums and the wailing of pipes. Sidi Abdurrahman halted, gestured.

“He will stay here to hold the messenger,” explained d’Artois. “*Allons!*”

As they advanced along the passage they heard chanting, and the antiphonal responses of a ritual. And finally, as they rounded a turn, the corridor opened into a vault which was pervaded by a vibrant bluish glow.

The dome, supported by colossal pillars, swelled high above those who flitted to and fro in the satanic twilight of great glowing orbs whose quivering radiance was beclouded by fumes that rose stifflingly sweet from tall censer-tripods. They were warped and gnarled, those subterranean dwellers, long-armed, hairy survivors of a race that had vanished aeons before man in his present form appeared.

One among them, however, was tall and towering, and resplendent in a robe that flamed and coruscated as though woven of gems; and on his head he wore a conical miter of beaten silver. At his gesture the drumming and piping subsided and the acolytes ranged themselves on each side of an arch that pierced the further extremity of the vault. The arch was veiled by a heavy damask drape of crimson shot with gold.

“The master of the show,” whispered d’Artois. And then, as the tall, resplendent leader turned: “And I was right—*Don José!*”

The dabbler in forbidden arts had finally descended to become high priest of those subterranean beast-men. Barrett shuddered as he

thought of what their food might be, since they did not appear by daylight to eat of what grew beneath the sun. He wondered whether they had always lived in those archaic vaults, or whether they had but recently been revived from suspended animation—

And then the crimson drapes parted like flames torn by the breath of some nether hell. Barrett knew then that Sidi Abdurrahman had guided them well.

IN THE NICHE exposed by the parting of the gold-shot curtains was a lotus blossom carved of rock that glistened with the glassy luster of lacquer-ware. In the heart of the black lotus sat Yvonne, eyes veiled by her long lashes, arms crossed on her breast, head slightly inclined. Her fine features had the tranquility of the drugged, or of the quiet dead.

Barrett’s hand flashed to his pistol butt as he gathered himself to spring from the concealing shadows; but d’Artois restrained him.

“They will cut us to pieces with their knives,” whispered the old man. “This calls for strategy.”

The odds were twenty to one. Though they emptied their pistols and extra clips, the survivors could still overwhelm them; and the enemy had to be exterminated if Yvonne were to be taken from that satanic vault.

“Then let’s go back and get reinforcements,” suggested Barrett.

D’Artois shook his head.

“Maybe, maybe not. Better see what this show signifies. We might not be able to return in time to—”

“What’s that—over there?” demanded Barrett. “Good Lord! Did it get away from Sidi Abdurrahman?”

He indicated something that stirred in the shadow of a pillar at the right of the altar; and then he saw that despite its similarity to the beast which had overcome him, it was distinctly another creature.

“A new monster about to be ensouled by an elemental, to be a companion to the one that killed Louise,” explained d’Artois. “And Yvonne is here to provide the blood offering—remember Sidi Abdurrahman’s remarks?”

“Let’s go out blazing!” growled Barrett; but again d’Artois restrained him.

“Not yet,” murmured d’Artois. “We have to get her out of here.”

But despite the calmness of his voice, his features were pale, and perspiration cropped out on his forehead as in desperation he searched his brain for some device to accomplish the impossible. Sidi Abdurrahman, holding the first monster helpless, was out of the question as an ally; but now, if ever, they needed that great occultist's aid.

"He won't fail us," d'Artois said. "And we'll see our moment. . . ."

Two acolytes were advancing toward the altar. One had a bowl of burnished copper, the other, a long-bladed knife. And as they took their posts, Don José began chanting.

"Bal-Taratan, come forth! Bal-Karadîn, come forth! From the blackness and from Avichi, Dark Lords, come forth!"

The braying and bellowing of strange wind instruments and the savage thunder of drums was bestial as the sluggish shape that crouched whimpering by the altar, awaiting the elemental that was to emerge from Avichi, the eighth and nethermost hell.

"God . . . that's awful," muttered Barrett as he watched the weaving gestures of Don José and his acolytes.

Brass clanged. The deep, hoarse, booming blasts of horns shook the vault. Mists were writhing like phantom serpents basking in the rays of a phantom sun that revived them from the chill of night.

"Bal-Taratan! Bal-Karadîn! I open the Gateway! I mark the Path!" intoned Don José, his voice rich and clear above that lustful bellowing and the sharp *clack-clack* of pebbles rattled in a yellowed skull. The acolytes, gesturing now like automatons, stared glassily, unaware of the shapes that were becoming visible.

"Bal-Taratan! Bring him forth! Bal-Karadîn! Bring him forth! I have a house for him! And for him I have food! Ia Bal-Taratan! Ia Bal-Karadîn!"

And as Don José paused at the enunciation of the names of the Lords of the Eighth Hell, the acolytes hissed a phrase that was a dying, evil echo of those dread words.

"A feast of blood! A drink of blood!"

The acolytes responded, "Yea, the fumes of blood! The fumes, and the savor!"

The mist was now thicker, and its coldness had become folds of reptilian foulness. D'Artois and Barrett crouched in the angle of the pilaster, stricken by the sorcery of that evil chant. The terrific blasting of that awful rhythm had numbed

and paralyzed body and mind.

"Yea, the fume of blood, and its savor!" thundered the chorus.

They were weaving a red symphony. Blood . . . blood . . . red mists shot with streaks of blackness that coruscated, and blackness that flamed! There was a stirring and chirping and twittering, and the flapping as of monstrous wings beating the upper air of the vault.

D'Artois' cheeks were gray, and Barrett's face was distorted from the acute physical misery induced by that terrific reiteration and weaving of words. His teeth were clenched, and sweat poured from his brow.

The words of the chant now became strange syllables whose fusion and blending gave a meaning that transcended language, striking into the very souls of the two who crouched in the shadows, binding them with a hideous fascination.

The bowl was ready. And the knife was rising. . . .

CHAPTER IV THE LORDS OF FIRE

A SOLEMN COMMAND came from the chaos of sound: "Bring him forth, Bal-Taratan! Bal-Karadîn!"

Don José's voice was the final assault to pierce the veil, and open the Gateway for the elemental that was to possess that hideous body; but it served still another purpose. D'Artois flinched from the anguish of the impact; the shock wrenched into life his numbed muscles, his stupefied brain; and his wrath, suddenly released, sent his hand flashing to his holster—

"*Smack-smack-smack!*" The acolyte with the knife pitched forward. The one who held the bowl dropped to the flags.

"*Gardez-vous!*" shouted d'Artois, with his left hand jerking Barrett to his feet. "Pick them off! Steady, now!"

The ranks of the acolytes wavered before the deadly fire, broke in panic.

"Missed him!" growled Barrett, as Don José flattened behind a pedestal and a bullet ricocheted, whining into the shadows.

The enemy reformed and charged, knives advanced. They flashed forward like serpents, darting and zigzagging, hunched forward in a crouch. Some jerked suddenly upward as a slug pitched them end for end. Others, riddled, charged

on, to collapse within a pace of their mark. But many lived.

"Give me a clip!"

"*Fini!*" snapped d'Artois. "Take a knife—*voilà!*"

His pistol for another instant chattered like a machine gun; then came a sudden silence. The enemy paused, wondering; then they understood, and closed in.

Hoarse breathing, and the *slip-slip* of bare feet that wove in and out, devil-dancers darting back and forth with flickering blades.

"Too many," gasped Barrett, during a breathing space when the fury of their concerted assault drove the enemy back in momentary panic. "Get us—yet—get that—get José—"

D'Artois, master swordsman, might with his uncanny skill bore through the press and close in with the high priest. No other resource remained.

But the voice of Don José urged his beast-men to the attack, and the overwhelming wave surged resistlessly forward.

"Back!" yelled d'Artois. "Before they surround us. Into the niche. *Ca!*"

Even as he spoke, he flashed forward—then back, and on guard again, blade dripping afresh, hand ready to strike again, slash through some weak spot in the dense line.

Another command from Don José. The attack withdrew, and he advanced to parley.

"Ah . . . d'Artois," he said, "since steel will not dislodge you, let us try—"

Suddenly his dark eyes became fixed, and his hands made rhythmic gestures. D'Artois and Barrett, caught off guard by the unaccountable action of their empty-handed enemy, faltered for an instant, perplexed. Despite the wrath of battle, their instincts for a moment restrained their attack on an unarmed man.

D'Artois was the first to recover.

"Rush him!" he cried, leaping forward. But he had waited too long.

Flames began lapping up from the paving in a crescent that imprisoned d'Artois and Barrett in its semicircle. The fires slowly converged, inch by inch, hungry blue flame relentlessly advancing.

"Hold your breath and dive through!"

"No!" shouted d'Artois, seizing Barrett by the shoulder. "It'll burn us to cinders. *Elemental fires!*"

Barrett did not understand; but he read the desperation in d'Artois' eyes.

"Resist his will. Fight his thought! If you fear, you are lost!"

"What do you mean—"

"Do as I say or you're lost—she's lost!"

Barrett was dismayed by that uncanny, marching flame. Above his wavering crest burned the fixed, malignant eyes of Don José. The madness of that awful night had reached its climax when blue flames were exhaled by solid flagging. But when he saw that d'Artois' gaze was fixed, and his features composed, he gained courage.

"I defy your will and your power with my will and my force!" he heard d'Artois tensely whispering. The low murmur became rhythmic as drumbeats, and inexorable as fate. And Barrett began to repeat d'Artois' words, halfheartedly at first, then confidently.

"I defy your will with my will, your power with my power!" he repeated.

Suddenly he felt a strange thrill of triumph surge up from within him; and for an instant the psychic concussion of the liberated force, shook him, and his dry eyes blinded as he blinked, caught a sobbing breath, and repeated, "I defy you, my will against your will . . ."

He saw that the flames no longer advanced. The intolerable heat scorched and singed, but no longer increased.

The flames retreated—only by the breadth of a finger—but they retreated, beaten back by will that fought will.

And then Barrett faltered, cracking under the terrific strain.

"Can't make it . . . I'm done in!"

THEY heard a cry of triumph from beyond the wall of flame. Don José knew that his victims were helpless, and stood waiting for the fires to close in. D'Artois and Barrett exchanged despairing glances.

"Try it!" muttered Barrett. "It'll roast us anyway—"

D'Artois nodded, and his fingers closed on the haft of his red knife, but his occult knowledge assured him that the blade would fuse from the terrific heat.

Don José's exultation, however, was checked as a mighty voice thundered from the passageway, "*my will against your will, and my power against your power!*"

It was awful in its richness and volume. Sidi

Abdurrahman was chanting as he advanced, solemn, prodigious-seeming as a descending doom—a colossus of power stalking across the Border.

“I have returned to accomplish where once I failed. You escaped me, ages ago, when the Dragons of Wisdom proclaimed the black night of doom for lost Atlantis. I failed, but in the many lives I have lived since then, I have gained *power against your power, and will against your will!*”

Don José made a gesture. Then he found his voice, and uttered a command. The flames wavered as he spoke, then surged high as his followers clustered about him. They resisted the *Chêla*'s awful will—but in vain. The tips of the crescent of fire drew from the wall. Don José had lost command of the weapon he had devised; it lived on by the force that the *Chêla* concentrated. Flight was futile; space is nonexistent in occult combat. And the beast-men and their chief made their last desperate resistance as the flaming crescent reversed its curvature, enfolding them in its terrific embrace.

There was no outcry—only a hissing and crackling that endured but an instant. Then came the dreadful stench of searing flesh as flame, hungrier than any earthly fire, lapped with deadly swiftness, roaring, as winds lashing monstrous cliffs. A column of awful radiance burned for a moment with adamantine brilliance.

When their dazzled eyes had become accustomed to the ensuing dimness, d'Artois and Barrett emerged from their niche and strode over the blistering tiles. They were careful not to look at the spot where the flames had centered.

Sidi Abdurrahman's august features were still transfigured, but the power was leaving him. It was only with an effort that he kept his feet as, smiling wanly, he made a gesture of benediction.

“This is the end of an old feud that started many lives ago. I was not ready for this meeting—but to save her—and you—I spoke. The Occult Masters sought to help—did help—”

He gasped, caught his breath, and with difficulty resumed, “they warned me—I could not endure the test—since I could not—receive all the force they were sending. But I could not decline—”

D'Artois caught the *Chêla* as he collapsed. The silence for a moment was unbroken save for the bestial whimperings of the wounded who had dropped short of the vortex of flame.

“We can do nothing for Sidi Abdurrahman,” said d'Artois. “Get Yvonne—quick! Before we all go mad!”

AS THE SUN rose, Yvonne, revived from the drugs of the satanic ritual and quite unharmed, heard d'Artois' narrative. Barrett, bandaged and smarting from his wounds, answered her weary smile, then turned to his friend:

“Pierre, I'm still stumped by a few things.”

“Only a few?” countered the old man with a flash of good-humored irony that for a moment struggled through the somber memory of death's double thrust at a lovely girl and a great-hearted occultist.

“Where did he get that awful body for the elemental spirit?”

“The crypts beneath the city,” said d'Artois, “have spawned strange broods. Monstrous hybrids, perhaps archaic survivals of lost Shâlmali, revived from suspended animation by Don José. But that is an occult rather than a scientific problem.”

“After all,” said Barrett, “the final riddle is, why did anyone with Don José's talents dabble in such ghastly studies? What motive—”

“He was following the tradition of the Black Brotherhood,” replied d'Artois. “He was moved by the lust for power given by the services of elementals. He needed familiar spirits to help him further his pursuit of dark arts. Blood alone would bind them to his will; and you know to what lengths he went.”

Yvonne shuddered at the evening's memories, then interposed, “But why did your friend's heroism end fatally?”

“At the best, I can only guess,” admitted d'Artois. “Despite his great learning, he was only a *Chêla*, not a full initiate. Thus he could not endure the forces which he called forth, and he knew that he could not. Yet he accepted the challenge.

“He created a psychic explosion whose repercussion literally blasted him to pieces. Not his physical body, but his vital forces, which were unable to withstand the strain of mastering that elemental fire.”

D'Artois paused. The silence was acute; and for a moment it seemed that they felt the presence of Sidi Abdurrahman. Finally Barrett spoke.

“He mentioned other lives—”

“According to the traditions of his order,”

resumed d'Artois, "he believes in reincarnation. And it seems that in some former existence he failed in his duty, so that in the lives that followed, he sought to redeem himself.

"He stood there in the vault, holding the captured elemental a prisoner. He was oblivious to his surroundings; but when Don José called the fires down on us, the psychic impact aroused Sidi Abdurrahman and brought to his consciousness the presence of an age-old enemy of all mankind.

"But whatever the reason and however science may try to explain it, we owe our survival to Sidi Abdurrahman."

D'Artois cleared his throat, rose, stepped to the

door.

"I am an old man," he said, "and vengeance leaves me weary. Let me therefore leave you in good hands while I rout out *Monsieur le Préfet*. I will have him dynamite the entrance of that accursed vault, so that no matter how ominous the stars may be, there will be no more archaic survivals coming forth in search of victims."

And Barrett, regarding Yvonne Marigny, knew that when grief had received its due, untroubled moonlight on the Lachepaillet Wall would make the Gray Sphinx of the Pyrenees more alluring than before.