

knelt, and then returned to the sacred flame. She held it up with her round, white arms, her little, shapely head thrown back, that she might gaze into the idol's emerald eyes.

Then she inverted it, and the green, transparent oil flowed into the bowl. When she turned I saw her with the light full upon her features.

Hers was the beauty that has wrecked empires and sent philosophers insane. She stared past me into the play of the shimmering stars with wide, blue eyes, jet-fringed beneath joined black brows. Vividly scarlet against the pallor of her flawless features, her red lips arched with a fierce hauteur that brought the corners down toward the rounded chin. Binding back the heavy strands of red-gold hair was a broad gold band, set in stars and crescents with blue diamonds. Depending from a heavy gold chain upon her white, magnificently arched chest was a mighty emerald, and coiled beneath the perfect white satin hemispheres of her breasts was a lurid corselet of rubies. They clicked and shimmered in snakelike coils at her slender waist and undulated and scintillated with the smooth play of the flat hip muscles. The ruby robe terminated just above the round, white knees. Against the angry fluid fire of the stones the bare feet seemed whiter, whiter than milk or ivory, and almost as white as the snow of the great Luen Kun peaks.

© © ©

THE wonder of her beauty caused the play of the stars in the blue of the heavens to dim before my eyes. The gold and green of the temple swam before my eyes, leaving her framed against a dull background, vivid and beautiful and cold as the diamonds in her hair. She deposited the golden vase beside the great silver oil vat and walked over in front of the golden calf. Over her white shoulders and down upon the jeweled armor of her hips her golden hair rippled like a living flame.

I had forgotten Lee Fu. But now like a great spectral shadow I saw him. He had emerged into the light and was creeping up behind the Red Virgin. His blunt head was thrust far forward, and he walked on his toes. His hands were in the loose silk of opposite sleeves. Three paces behind her he stopped. His long, skinny talons crept forth from his sleeves. In his right hand flashed the jade dagger that had killed McLauren. His evil gaze seemed to focus upon the girl's rippling corselet.

"Good God!" I screamed. "Not that, Lee Fu, not that!"

I bounded across the great stone flags and clutched his wrists. Over his shoulder I saw the girl whirl about, her jet-fringed violet eyes wide with terror. The husky Mongol picked me up bodily. His face had never altered a line of its expression, but the red-rimmed eyes glowed like balls of blood-amber, close to my own. His tremendous muscles crushed the air from my lungs. Then high above his head I caught in topsy-turvy panorama for a single second the vast stone spirals of the Temple of Silence and the light-spattered, luminous velvet of the sky. Lee Fu was hurling me over the edge of the terrace.

In that single second of terrified realization I heard Lee Fu cough. Then the lean arms that held me poised against the fluid pearl of the glittering milky way, trembled and relaxed. We crumpled down together upon the edge of the rock. Shakily, with limbs that quivered, I struggled to my feet.

The girl shrank back into the temple and stared at me with frightened eyes. In her hand she held a short, curved scimitar. I glanced at the smear of blood on its blade and then at Lee Fu. His head was severed. It stared with unseeing eyes up at the baleful glare of the golden calf. The lips had writhed back from the yellow teeth and Lee Fu seemed in death to exult over the fact that I must needs play out our desperate hand alone.

I was young, and the night sky was

blue-white with flaming planets, and the sacred flame deepened the charm of the Red Virgin's long-lashed violet eyes. I stared at her, drinking in the splendor of her living presence. I walked toward her and she shrank fearfully from me, and the blood-smeared scimitar clattered on the stone flags. She backed against the great silver urn and cowered before my brazen admiration.

I placed my hands on her warm white shoulders and looked at the wide, long eyes beneath the level, joined brows. She quivered beneath my touch, and the huge emerald on her arched bosom rose and fell with the heaving of her breast.

"I came to steal your rubies," I said aloud. "But now I know I was mistaken. It isn't the jewels I want. It's you!"

She didn't understand a word, but such is the subtle telepathy of love that even there, limned against the flaming universe, with the night sky like a great black velvet curtain sprinkled with star dust, she stared into my eyes and read my message. She lifted one warm, round, youthful arm and pointed up to the emerald eyes of the golden calf and shook her head wistfully, causing her golden hair to quiver like sunlight on the facets of a yellow diamond. Then she made a movement as if to thrust me away. But I would not be repulsed.

"It's only senseless metal, girl!" I cried; "it's only a thing of heartless gold and soulless emeralds. But you—you're alive—you're flesh and blood and warm and lovable. You're too beautiful to waste out your days in a wilderness, in service to an inanimate heathen idol!"

She put up her arms to fend me off, but I grasped them at the wrists and roughly forced them behind her back. Then I kissed her on the red lips that had lost their haughty curves and were crumpled with the vast bewilderment of a child. My arms went round her and I crushed her to me until I could feel the beating of her heart beneath the clicking chain armor of jewels. The perfume of her breath and hair intoxicated me. She ceased to struggle.

I thought she had fainted. But when I held her from me a glorious red had crept up from the arched chest and flooded her cheeks up to the very curved tips of the downcast lashes of her wide eyes. She trembled, and tears shone in her lashes, brighter and more beautiful than the emerald that flared on her breast.

She glanced up shyly and said something in an alien tongue. I could only guess at the meaning, but in her soft, full throated contralto it sounded like a caress. While the green orbs of the golden calf burned through the night and the Whispering Prophet rested rigidly unconscious of the sacrifice, I held her close to me and whispered in a choky voice the ecstasy that was mine.

With my arm around her yielding waist I led her to the door and swept my arm in a great vague arc toward the south and west.

"It's there, darling," I said. "The world of which you have never dreamed. There I will worship you with greater constancy than you have worshiped the golden calf. Men there don't cringe before bloodless idols. Here you are a slave to senseless rubies and ages-outworn rituals. There you'll be a queen."

© © ©

SHE looked up into my face with eyes alight in the shadows. I think she understood. I like to think that. Otherwise there is no explanation for what followed. Slowly her bare arms crept up until they rested timidly on my shoulders. Then gently she turned me around until the sacred flame fell upon my face. For a long minute, while the sacred fire hissed and purred over the mineral oil in the jasper bowl, she stared up at me. She must have been satisfied with the message she read in my face. The jet-fringed eyes drooped, her glorious golden haired head inclined forward against my chest, and the white arms crept on around my neck.

She was young, and her ruby-clad figure trembled with the new significance of

life. Fifty fortunes in the blood-red gems yielded to the pressure of my arms and rustled with the rise and fall of her short respirations. But I had forgotten that. The idea had gone out, somehow, with the very lifeblood of old Lee Fu!

From the village below, thin and shrill, came the crowing of a cock. The sky had grown dim, and the luster of the milky way had faded to a straggling streak of dying stars. The girl stirred in my arms. She pointed through the gloom toward the village and said something. I understood, it seemed. She was warning me that we had tarried too long.

© © ©

I WRAPPED her in Lee Fu's silken jacket, which he had dropped at the door of the Temple of Silence, and drew the black panther pelt over her shoulders. Furtively we stole down the interminable arcs of stone and across the little court into the trail beneath the cedars. She motioned for haste and turned toward the left.

It seemed to me that we had come from the right, from farther up the valley, but she ignored my protest. Higher and higher we mounted, until the cedar had given way to sandalwood, and the sandalwood to little stunted gray-green trees of a species new to me.

Abruptly we entered the mouth of a little cave far up on the cliff. The girl cast herself down upon a bundle of dry leaves and motioned for me to follow suite. The sun rose, a blinding burst of crimson light, against the kindling eastern sky. Birds began to twitter in the thickets at the mouth of the cave.

From her neck the girl took the heavy golden chain and hung it from the mouth of the cave, so that the twinkling facets of the emerald seemed almost red with the sunrise. After a few minutes' wait she permitted a pebble to roll down the hill, and at intervals thrust others over the ledge. I wondered what it signified.

Then there was a crackling sound farther down the hill, and a man emerged into view. He was short and stocky, with long black beard and hair. As he came closer I observed that he was young, that he carried a crooked distaff, and that his features were twisting, as if from great nervous strain.

The girl called out softly, and he hastened his pace. There was a short colloquy. The girl spoke slowly and calmly, but the young man in the white tunic spoke rapidly and harshly, as if consumed with anger. He advanced as they talked, and then he saw me. His olive features, with the tense striations of fanaticism, were distorted with rage. I think he would have rushed me had not the girl intervened. She talked long and pleadingly, striving to grasp his arm.

He fended her off as if she were a leper, and then stared past her at me. Abruptly he turned and left. The girl followed him with deepening shadows in her eyes. Then she came over to me. Her arm swept the great arc toward the south and west. She smiled wistfully and asked me a question. I suppose she wanted to know if what I had promised still held good.

If it is possible for a woman to look more beautiful in the first flush of day than she has looked under the white play of the stars, then the Red Virgin had achieved that miracle. Her cheeks were pink in the morning light, and her skin, that had seemed so white under the rays of the sacred flame, was a warm olive. But in the sunlight her golden hair was of rich titian tints, that shamed the ruddy metal of the great idol. And she looked even younger than by starlight. With a catch in my throat I saw that she was only a child. I question if she was 18. But her figure had the voluptuous perfection of the quick-ripening Orient, and when she crept into my arms, and I felt the beating of her heart behind the clicking of the robe of rubies, I knew that she was a woman!

At high noon the young man returned. He came furtively and crept up another route on his hands and knees. He carried a bundle on his back. In it were

brown, flat cakes and honey and coarse woolen attire for the girl. He cast them down at our feet with scorn in his flashing eyes. Then he turned to go.

The girl called to him. He spun around and uttered something like a command. She knelt and he drew a knife. I thought he meant to kill her and cried out, with my rifle leveled at his low, square brow. But the girl turned to me and shook her head. He approached her and very slowly and deliberately severed the bands of the red robe that crossed the girl's shoulders. The heavy garment slipped down from the smooth bosom, and the girl cried out and clutched it to her straining breast. The man in the white tunic strode forth and was gone. He didn't look back.

And crumpled forlornly in the corner of the cave, with her hair and skin and ruby robe aflame in the intruding sunlight, the Red Virgin crouched and sobbed with the abandon of a little child. I understood the ceremony of the severed straps, I thought. It was the Valley of Gwar's bar sinister. Here was the age-old tragedy—a vestal virgin in disgrace! But I gathered her up in my arms, and her sobs were stilled at last, and the light of love glowed anew in the unfathomable shadowy depths of her violet eyes.

When the stars flamed again in the velvet void over the Luen Kun peaks we started up a secret trail to the peak of the Prophet's Prayer. It led from a narrow cleft in the hills into a little plateau and thence to the gloomy, gusty cavern of the cave of emeralds. Beyond it, faint and spidery against the flaming sky, swayed the hempen ladder. At this point the girl mounted upon it without fear. I guessed that all watches were withdrawn into the valley at night.

Her hair rippled and shimmered against the silvery high lights of the glistening panther pelt. It was a delight, there below her, to watch the sinuous play of the muscles in her agile, slender form. We mounted rapidly, so rapidly that it was I who was out of breath and exhausted when we gained the dizzy pinnacle.

We walked along the roof of the world, southward, toward the cleft in the trail whence we would descend to the dead ashes of Lee Fu's last camp fire and the ratty horses of Khotan.

© © ©

BELOW us the Valley of Gwar stretched away into the melting shadows where the hills and sky merged in a symphony of toneless black. Not a light was visible anywhere. Yet I thought it was near the hour for sacrificial fires. Even as I conjectured the time they began to flare forth beneath us, tiny, pin-points of lurid light.

The girl, walking ahead, shrouded in the woolen robes, stopped to watch them. When the procession formed for the nightly ascent to the Temple of Silence she stood beside me over the yawning chasm and watched the serpentine winding of the white-robed torch bearers. I thought I detected in the still air the eerie quavering of the triumphal chant. Then the Red Virgin made a tiny sound in her throat, as if she had choked back a sob.

I clasped her arm gently. "Let us go on," I entreated. "We have far to travel to the camp fire of Lee Fu and the horses of Khotan."

But she didn't seem to heed. Then gloriously loud and clear there lifted to us, the liquid notes of the chanting worshippers of the golden calf. That which had been an illusion became an actuality. And through a mile of perpendicular starlit stillness, when the chant had ceased, rose clearly, with awesome distinctness, the sibilant exhortations of the Whispering Prophet.

We could see them now, straining our eyes breathlessly over the edge of the damp granite. They were a great arc of light, and upon their bowed faces shone the flickering flare of the sacred flame. Some other virgin was pouring the green mineral oil into the great jasper bowl

(Continued on Page 11)