

THE BLACK LILY—

(Continued from Page One)

The tall figure in priest's robes was—Father Jose. His noble head was held high. His venerable white beard fell in a cascade of silver far below his waist. The shock of white hair hung, unshaven, over his broad shoulders.

As the roar rose to a bellow and eyes began to gleam redly, the old man raised his hand high above his head.

In it writhed and squirmed the small brownish-green serpent.

The menacing growl died on a long hissing gasp of amazement. That serpent was so deadly that never in the history of the jungle had one been known to survive its bite, and yet, even as they looked, the old man's other hand steadily approached to within striking distance of those deadly fangs. Deliberately he held the small serpent in sight of all that vast throng. Deliberately he invited the darting blow of the lightning-like thrust of the small wicked head, into the bare palm of his extended hand.

Serpent Dashed to Pieces

Not once but several times did they see that darting, powerful blow of the evil head attached to the slender sinuous body so tightly wrapped about the high held forearm. After each blow two spots of blood leaped to the surface to tell that the fangs had "gone home." Then with a sud-

den whirling and snapping motion the old man threw the arm that held the serpent out and away from him, then downward.

The quick, powerful swing and jerk, accompanied by the tightening of the fingers that held the venomous reptile just below the neck, loosened and threw it to the marble floor with such violence that it was unable to squirm out of reach before

like the feathers on an excited hen. But the man in the High Priest's robe did not move from his place; instead, he only looked out over the people with a sweeping gaze of absolute authority.

Black Flower Petals Move

The sun was almost at the mid meridian.

The old man raised his hands high above his head in a sweeping gesture of greeting. It was as if some unseen presence stood before him. The people with one accord fell to their knees in breathless acknowledgement of the power that seemed to exude

around inside the misting glass globe, the ivory face went rigid, then slowly—slowly—the whole body relaxed and lay inert and unmoving.

With a strangled cry the man in the throne chair would have tried to rise, straining against the crossed ropes that meant his certain death by strangulation—the Death meted out to fors worn priests instead of the poisoned knife tip—but for a single sharply spoken word that preceded the High Priest's cry of consummation to the cheering people.

Impatient for Jonthra

The single word—"Remember!" It checked and quieted even the two men bound to the altar, although one could only sense its meaning by the tone. On the same breath he spoke to the people.

"THE GODS HAVE SPOKEN!" At the uplifted hands and raised voice of the old man the people were stilled to so deep a silence that the slithering of the still squirming body of the crushed serpent could be heard on the marble floor.

"THE BLACK FLOWER has rejected the unwilling bride. Behold beneath His Bridal Canopy the sullen breath of His love still moves. Its kiss brought—the Sleep—as it has always done to those who come unwillingly to his couch, as well as to those who dare the destruction of His True and Faithful Servants."

The old man paused; there was a straining forward of the great crowd—a sort of waiting of puzzled and expectant wonder. Someone out in the crowd half whispered, half shouted a single questioning word—"Jonthra?" The vast concourse of people echoed it hesitantly—"Yes, where is Jonthra?"

"The High Priest of the FLOWER!" An evil low-browed priest beamed at the altar added the descriptive words.

The white-haired old man turned a straight look of grim meaning in his direction. For a moment the looks crossed. Then the other lowered his eyes as one lowers a sword in defeat.

The girl lay motionless still.

Defies Jonthra

The old man, not looking at the altar group, spoke out in a loud carrying voice: "Aye Jonthra! Know ye not, oh, ye foolish ones, that the SACRED FLOWER metes its own punishment and its own rewards? Know ye not that in the secret chambers of the Temple it holds the wisdom of the ages, and that they who administer that wisdom are ever inviolate of death, even such death"—he pointed to the dead serpent at his feet and held aloft the hand it had wounded.

The silence deepened. "It is decreed that ye shall see and



The tall figure in priest's robe was Father Jose

the man's heel was placed on its head and was grinding it to a flattened pulp on the marble.

The action had not taken a minute but in that minute the roar had died down to a breathless, whispering sound of amazed fear.

The reddening eyes had become glazed with a sort of wondering terror, as they fixed themselves upon the tall grey-clad figure. For a brief space they waited. The hot silence was broken only by sharply indrawn breaths. Then—

The hooded figure in the throne-like chair uttered a deep cry of urgent questioning fear. It was directed to the old man, but the hooded face was turned toward the glass enclosed altar top.

The outer petals of the BLACK LILY were loosened and puffed up

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from that tall figure—Lord even of the Death that not even Jonthra, who should have stood in that place even now, dared to challenge. "Jonthra?" The very stillness seemed to shout the unasked question that, after what they had seen, his staunchest supporters dared not ask.

Slowly the petals of the black Flower swelled outward. Chenah shouted a guttural prayer that was in the same breath an imprecation to the tall, silent figure.

John Northington uttered a deep curse and turned eyes of futile threat in the same direction. A groan came from the throned man.

Dolores moved her head feebly and futilely the fraction of an inch backward from the swelling bud. But the slender steel cord and the heavy glass globe held her securely. Under the flowing veil the golden chains kept her body almost rigid.

Suddenly, as a hand might open and fling powdered dust upward, the fluffed petals of the magnificent blossom flung outward. There was a quick puff of smoke-like vapor straight into the face and nostrils of the beautiful girl.

A gasping, smothered cry was merged and was lost in an uproar of sounds from the watchers. While the vapor curled and moved lazily



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