

CHAM OF THE HILLS

A NOVEL OF LOST WORLDS

By Charles R. Tanner

Last of their kind were they, the remnants of a world gone mad, the lean-jawed fighting men who followed a strange lost chieftain – Cham of the Hills, who had sworn to set his people free!

CHAPTER ONE – Double Trouble

He sat on a big, moss-covered granite boulder, a boulder that had once been the cornerstone of a huge apartment building sheltering a hundred families. It had been a splendid thing of wire cut brick and steel in its day, but the steel had long since rusted and the brick had returned to the mud from whence it had come. Now all that was left of the building was this stone block which served the youth as a table.

He was eating the black bread and cheese which was a square meal to him, the food to which he and his people had long been accustomed, and he attacked it with zest.

He was rudely dressed, in the usual attire of a Hillman. He was hatless, with a shaven chin and a mop of long red hair, tied back with a fillet. The bright red sash he wore separated the white shirt from worn brown trousers that were tucked into his half-boots. At his side, hanging from a leather belt that was strapped on over the sash, hung a long sword in a worn and rusty looking scab-bard. The mud on his boots showed clearly that he had been journeying, and it would not have taken an especially clear mind to deduce that here was one of the hillman of Dronadac, come to seek his fortune in the city of Niarc.

His meal finished, he wiped his lips on the back of a freckled hand; then, dusting off the crumbs of bread and cheese from his trousers, he set off toward the city to the south. He had spent the whole morning wandering through the farmlands of Bronnis and he knew that it would not be very long before he reached the northern limits of the city.

Presently he topped a rise and strode down to where a rude bridge crossed a shallow, sluggish river. As he approached it, a man emerged from a little shanty built by the bridge, a huge black man clad in the tight-fitting, quilted, scarlet uniform of the Niarcan soldiers.

The red-haired hillman eyed him curiously, for though he had often heard of the Harlings, those black dwellers in the northern part of the city, he had never before seen one. The black-skinned Harling watched the hillman's approach truculently, and, as the latter paused uncertainly, he raised a long staff he carried and barred the way to the bridge.

Cham fumbled in his sash and brought out a big copper daim, the coin usually given at toll bridges. He tossed it to the Harling, who seized it and tucked it away in the pocket of his shirt. But he still barred the way to the bridge.

"They like to know who enters the city," he said gruffly. "They don't like too many foreigners in the city these days."

The hillman grinned. "I'm not a foreigner," he announced. "I'm Cham, of Saroon. That's a town up by Lake Saroon, in the hills of Dronadac. We're loyal to Hendrik, up there, and I heard there was going to be a war, so I've come down to join the army."

A smile spread over the black man's face at this statement. He looked the red-topped hillman up and down, and the smile spread and became a chuckle, then a laugh, and at last a guffaw. He slapped his thigh and whooped his pleasure.

"You're going to be a great help to King Hendrik," he cried, walking around to the hillman's back as if to view him from all angles. "Where'd you ever learn to be a soldier, hillman?"

Cham scowled. "From better men than you will ever be, Harling!" he snorted angrily. "My uncles were

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“They should have taught you something about soldiers’ dress then,” the Harling sneered. “You’ll be a sight for sore eyes in the city. But go ahead,” he went on, dropping his staff. “I suppose before long they’ll give you a captain’s

uniform to take the place of those clothes of yours.”

Cham might have answered hotly, but he reflected that he was in the city now and had better not get into trouble until he had learned a little more of the city now and had better not get into trouble until he had learned a little more of the city people and their ways. So, paying no more attention to the dusky guardian of the bridge, he passed across it and into that section of the island which for hundreds of years had been the domain of the Harlings.

He could have passed through this section in an hour or so if he had wished, but the sights that now confronted his eyes so amazed and

interested him that the hours passed unnoticed while he wandered from one spot to another.

Foremost among the wonders was his first distant look at the High City, the great ruins towering up far to the south. Like huge skeletons of long-dead monsters, the rusting steel framework stood, their outer covering of brick and stone in most cases long since fallen away. Just to see those tremendous works on the distant southern horizon gave Cham a feeling of awe, a weird, uneasy feeling that he had not felt since the days, long ago, when as a child his mother had frightened him with stories of the wonderful doings of the wizards of old who had builded them.

But the ruins were not the only things that excited Cham's interest. There were the markets, where dark—haired white men with big noses and rings in their ears bar-gained and quarreled with the Harlings as they bartered the goods they had brought from afar for the goods that were made in the homes of the Harlings.

Then there was a street preacher, exhorting a crowd of shouting and singing listeners. And once he stood for an hour and watched a group of dark-skinned men and boys engaged in a complicated game played on the ground with two small cubes of bone.

These sights so interested him that he soon realized it would be useless to try to reach the High City that night, so he

looked about to find an inn. The one he chose at last was a small unassuming place, and Cham chose it largely because he felt that its very smallness would make it safer and less likely to be frequented by the thieves who made most of the inns dangerous shelter indeed. He entered this inn and after ordering the Harling landlord to prepare him a room, he sat down at a table and called for beer and tobacco. Even before it was brought, he noted with some surprise that he was not the only white man in the place. Across the room and closer to the bar, two soldiers sat, one tall, dark and eagle-beaked, the other shorter, with mild blue eyes and a cherubic countenance, a man as fair as

his companion was dark.

They were dressed in the usual quilted uniform; they boasted each a brace of crude pistols which the more affluent fighters could afford, and their shields, hanging over their right shoulders, were without insignia of any kind. This, and the fact that their clothes were of a light blue shade, showed that they were mercenaries, free men who had evidently not yet been accepted into the army of King Hendrik. They were in a jolly mood, chattering volubly and now and then bursting into a bit of song when they started a new mug of beer. Cham warmed to them as he watched them over the rim of his own mug, and wondered, a little enviously, if perhaps

in a few years he too might not be such as they. But the Harlings gathered around the bar and seated at the other tables did not seem to share Cham's opinion of the mercenaries. They had paid little enough attention to them at first, but a little brown fellow had entered shortly after Cham, and the hillman could have sworn he saw recognition and then antagonism in his eyes when he spied the mercenaries.

Thereafter, the little Harling had gone from table to table, and to the bar; and though his conversation had been seemingly light and inconsequential, Cham saw sidelong glances cast in the direction of the two mercenaries, glances that seemed to bode little good

for them. The hillman loosened his sword in its scabbard for, come what may, it seemed a good time to be ready for anything. It was well that he had prepared him-self, for presently a big Harling detached himself from the group by the bar. He strolled over and began a conversation with the mercenaries. It was brief and pointed and spoken too low for Cham to catch the words, but suddenly the taller of the mercenaries spat out a oath and sprung upon the Harling. The others in the room acted at once, as though this was a signal they had long been waiting for.

Those at the bar hurled themselves immediately at the two mercenaries, but they were not to be caught napping. They

leaped to their feet instantly; their swords were out almost before they were up, and in a trice they were standing back to back, their swords making a veritable wall of steel about them. When Cham leaped to his feet, he was still uncertain whether he should go to the aid of the others or not, but as he rose, a burly Harling darted past him, intent on joining the fray. Instantly the hillman made his decision; almost instinctively his foot darted out and the Harling, stumbling over it, sprawled to the floor. He rolled over as he fell, cursing wildly, his sword swinging up to a parry, but he was just a fraction of a second too late to avoid a vicious downward cut from Cham's own

weapon.

There was a cry of "Here's another one. Get him too !" Out of the corner of his eye, Cham saw two of the Harlings stop in their rush toward the mercenaries and turn toward him. With his free hand he seized the stool he had been sitting on and hurled it straight into the face of the foremost of his opponents. then snatched up another and, using it as a shield, rushed toward the second.

The fellow gave a cry and fled as if in panic. Cham would have pursued him had not the first fellow been just a little too eager in his strategy. He was not as badly hurt as he had pretended when he fell; he and his friend intended to get on either side of Cham and thus finish him

off easily. But the hillman caught the first man's furtive move, and as he passed him he swung out with a savage back-handed cut that rendered the fellow hors de combat—permanently.

The flight of the other one was in earnest now. He had seen Cham put two of his fellows out of the fight in as many minutes, and he had no stomach to face him. In his flight, he stumbled against one of the Harlings who was engaging the tall mercenary. In the second that the black one wavered off balance, the tall one's sword sped instantly true to the heart of his opponent.

For a moment the ring around the mercenaries was broken. Cham rushed in and took his place by their side and

was rewarded by a grin from the tall one. He was panting from exertion but he found time to say,

“Your help is welcome, hill-man. If three such fighters as we are can’t fight our way out of this, we can at least leave a mark that the Harlings will not soon forget.”

Another Harling fell as he spoke, this time to the sword of the little blond fellow. The tall one, schooled in the strategy of war, was quick to see the advantage.

“The way to the door is clear,” he cried. “Outside, quick! We can’t expect to send this whole group to whatever heaven they believe in. Outside, and we’ll run for it!” Suiting the action to

the word he dashed to the exit, followed immediately by his comrade and by Cham.

It was dark without; apparently most of the people who had crowded the streets earlier in the day were now home to sup-per. This probably saved their lives, for as they sped down the street, there came shouts and cries from the Harlings who poured out of the tavern; and had not the streets been fairly deserted, the three might have been captured at once.

“To the river, Chimra,” shouted the tall mercenary. “To the river, hillman. If we can reach the river, we’ll get away from ‘em yet.”

Cham supposed he meant the Otsin

River, the broad stream that flowed to the west of the city, so at the first opportunity he turned to the right and sped westward. The others did likewise. As they sped along, they could hear the hue and cry behind them. Two Harling guards, scarlet-clad and armed with sword and pistol, swung suddenly out of an alley in front of them, and from behind came a cry of some sort that roused the guards to action. One whipped out his sword; the other reached for his pistol. But the fleeing white men were on them before the pistol was out.

“Get him, quick!” cried the smaller of the mercenaries. “If he gets that pistol out—”

His sword swung up, a vicious, tinder-hand cut, and at the same moment Cham's sword came clown. The Marling parried Cham's cut but suddenly forgetting his pistol and whipping out his sword, but it was beyond human power to parry both blows at once, and he went down with Chimra's sword in his throat. It was foul fighting, Cham thought regretfully, but it was life or death, and if they were held tip until that mob behind caught up with them.

The dark mercenary had beaten his opponent against the wall and had worked his way around him. "Go for it, Chimra," he called. "We can't stop to play with this boy now." With a final vicious swipe, he was off, Chimra and

Cham following close behind. There was a crash of sound a moment later; Cham felt a bullet whistle past his ear, and sighed with relief as he realized that the guard's pistol had been emptied without harming them.

The crowd pursuing them had grown larger now, and for the first time it dawned upon Cham that all these Harlings could hardly be expected to assist a pack of thieves to rob a couple of mercenaries. Indeed, even the guards had joined the opposition. Had he gotten himself mixed up in some intrigue far deeper than mere robbery?

There was little time to think of that now, though. They were approaching the banks of the river and the Harlings were

not far behind. Cham felt a moment of doubt, and then, splash, he was in the waters of the Otsin, and two more splashes indicated that his companions had followed him.

“Downstream!” he heard the voice of the tall one whisper. “Underwater and swim downstream. We’ll make it faster that way. It’s dark and they won’t be able to see us. And get farther out in the river.”

The advice was wise, and they heeded it at once. When they were forced to come up for air, far out and some distance down, they were quite invisible to their pursuers. They swam and floated silently for some little time, until Cham, chilled by the evening cool,

suggested returning to shore.

“Surely,” he said, “they have abandoned the search or lost us by this time.”

But, strangely enough, the two mercenaries insisted on continuing down the stream, and Cham’s suspicions of them rose again. Had he done the right thing, after all, in aiding them against the Har-lings?

He grinned disengagingly at Cham as he spoke, but Chimra nodded. In silence they floated on down the waters of the Otsin.

By this time they had floated several miles and were approaching the boundaries of the High City. Cham had begun to realize when he first saw the

ruins in the distance why it was called the High City, but closer proximity made him gasp at the towering immensity of it.

For stark and black against the velvety background of the starry sky, the ancient towers rose to the eyes of the hillman, it seemed that his very hills would have been dwarfed into insignificance by them. Here and there, their gaunt ribs of steel, of rust—scaled, perishing steel, were covered by patches of masonry that for some reason or another still clung to the sides and managed to give the buildings a curious look of leprous decay.

It was cold way up there, Cham thought, and let his gaze wander down to the base of the buildings, where the light

of the modern city illuminated the ruins dully. Some ten or twelve stories from the ground his eye was attracted by a scattered group of twinkling and flickering lights, and for a moment he was puzzled. Then it dawned on him that these were the forges of the steel-reclaimers, those metal workers who toiled precariously in the tipper ruins, tearing down the last remnants of what the wiser men of old had built. **CHAPTER TWO ~**

Beneath the City

The log had grounded. Cham felt his feet touch the mud-covered shore and lowered his gaze to look about him. This spit of sand and mud, jutting out into the river, had once been a pier, but the hillman knew nothing of that. All he

knew was that he was once more on land. He struggled to the shore and set off toward the higher land, followed by the two mercenaries.

He made no attempt to conceal himself, and so found himself suddenly with one of his two friends seizing an arm on either side while they hurried him to the shelter of an ancient concrete wall that ran along, some twenty feet from the shore, offering some concealment. Buttresses jutted out at intervals, and in the shelter of one of these the two mercenaries sat down, pulling Cham down beside them. Hanok spoke at once.

“Now look here, my bold hillman, there’s got to be an understanding

between us before we part. If you haven't begun to get suspicious of us yet, you're simpler than I thought. And if your suspicions are all they should be—why, it would be mighty dangerous to let you go without coming to some sort of understanding.”

“I'm suspicious of you, certainly,” Cham answered. “The whole town of Harlings didn't attack you just for fun, or to aid a band of Harling thieves. But blast me if I know just what to suspect you of.”

Hanok scratched his head and looked quizzically at the hillman “I'm cursed if I know why I should want to confide in you,” he said. “Maybe it's because of the way you helped us out at the tavern,

but, well— Look here, suppose you start it off. Tell us what you can of yourself.”

Nothing loath, indeed proud that these soldiers were about to take him into their confidence, Cham started off to give them an extended history of his life. He told of his youth in the hills of Dronadac, of his harsh, vixenish mother, his stern but just father, and of those laughing, keen-eyed uncles who had trained him in the ways of a soldier. He told of the sword play they had taught him, of the marches and long trips without food which they had taken to harden him, of swimming in Lake Saroon and the climbing in the hills. And he told of the day, not long ago, when they had approved of Mm and advised him to go

and take service in the army of King Hendrik of Niarc.

“But why King Hendrik?” interposed Chimra. “I thought you told us your uncles were soldiers of Behostun.”

“My uncles are mercenaries, though they have fought for Behostun many years. But they suggested Hendrik because Saroon is in Hendrik’s land, and Niarc is nearest to there. Besides, if war comes between Niarc and Fidefya, as many think, Hendrik will be needing men.”

Hanok chuckled.

“You’ve never taken art oath of allegiance then? You are a free man?”

“Yes.”

The two mercenaries breathed sighs

of relief and looked at each other significantly.

“Look here. Chan,” Hanok said seriously. “Any soldier who amounts to anything these days is a mercenary—one who hires himself out to the highest bidder. Your regular soldier works for a salary, but the mercenary not only gets paid better but reserves the right of pillage.”

“And when the battle’s over,” Chimra put in, “who gets the credit? The mercenaries, that’s who. Who captured Tarentum for King Timatso of Fidefya? And who overthrew the men of Kinettika in Hendrik’s father’s day? For that matter, who put down the rebellion against Hendrik, in Bru-Kaleen, a few

years ago? The mercenaries, of course. There's no money in being a homeguard, Cham, my boy. Be a mercenary and sell your sword to the lord who wants it bad enough to pay for it."

Cham looked more than half convinced.

"It sounds likely enough," he admitted. "But I'm here in the city, and Hendrik of Niarc is here in the city. To whom else could I offer my services?"

Hanok hesitated, and then seemed to make a sudden decision.

"I'll tell you, Cham. And I'm trusting you too much in telling you. But, by the wizards of old, I believe that help you gave us in the tavern was an omen; and in a way, I believe you've been sent to

help us. Offer your services to our lord, Cham, to him who will some day be master of Niarc as well as of his own city. In short, to Timatso, King of Fidefya!”

Cham started in surprise, and then slapped his thigh.

“Blast me, I might have known you weren’t Niarcans! That explains everything!” Chimra leaped up and clapped a hand over Cham’s mouth, looking about anxiously.

“Yes, we’re spies,” he agreed softly. “And you see what a confidence we’ve placed in you. You might as well know the whole story now. Perhaps then you’ll ally yourself with our cause, as you’ve allied yourself with us.

“You see, for years Timatso has been preparing to attack Niarc. The indolence and sheer indifference of Hendrik to the good of his people has so disgusted Timatso that I’ve actually seen him rage over each proof of it.

“The attack would have been begun months ago, but some Niarcian ophzars, while hunting in the marshes of Sharsee, discovered young Kolap, Timatso’s son, engaged in the same pursuit. Capturing him by a clever ruse, they brought him here, where Hendrik has since held him as a hostage.”

“And of course—” Chimra took up the story—”of course, it was impossible to attempt an attack on Kolap here. So Timatso sent us, two officers of his

guard, to rescue Kolap and bring him home again.”

“And we, seasoned strategists that we are, proceed to let ourselves be discovered before we have ever so much as seen our prince,” Hanok said disgustedly. For a while they sat in silence, Cham because he had nothing to say, the Fidefyans, apparently, because they were too angry with themselves to speak.

“Well, no use throwing your dirk after a broken sword,” said Cham. “Let’s find a place to sleep and maybe we’ll think of something in the morning.”

“If we sleep, it’ll be in an alley or a hail somewhere,” said Hanok grimly. “If Buka’s hue and cry has carried, every

streetguard and innkeeper in Niarc will be looking for us.”

So they climbed the embankment and started cautiously into the city. They walked up the first street they came to, then darted down an alley. A little way down the alley was a wooden fence, and beside it a huge sycamore grew, casting a deep shadow that effectively concealed the ground beneath it. They paused here and removed their clothes, still dripping from the river. They debated for a while the necessity of posting one for a guard, but fatigue arguing heavily against it, all three at last fell asleep in the shelter of the great tree.

Dawn had hardly broken when Cham

was awakened by a sharp, quickly stifled exclamation of surprise from Hanok, followed by a round of muttered oaths. He saw the hawk-nosed Fidefyan peering through a knot-hole in the wooden fence beside which they had slept.

When Hanok saw that Cham had awakened he gestured silently for the hillman to come and look through the hole.

Cham looked and as he did so, Hanok whispered angrily in his ear, "Look where we are! Of all the places for a forlorn bunch of fools to sleep! It's a squad range, and we decide to sleep snuggled up against it as calm as a babe in its mother's arms. Good Lord, is that

an omen? Chimra! Wake up, you fool!”

Beyond the wall, Cham saw a yard of burnt brick paving, a yard that stretched for ten yards or so to a high wall of the same brick. In front of this wall the brick paving was covered with sand to the depth of several inches, yellow sand which was stained here and there with odd dark stains. The brick wall above was pitted with small holes. Suddenly Cham knew what a squad range was. A firing squad range—the place where military executions were carried out.

Hanok was shaking Chimra fiercely. The little blond man opened his eyes at last. He would have closed them again had not Hanok whispered something in his ear, some explanation that set him

upright, wide awake in an instant.

They would probably have stolen away a t once, but just then a door opened i n the building t o the right, beyond the fence. All three clapped their eyes to the crack in the fence to see what was about t o take place. Their hands went instinctively to their belts, for they were by no means certain that they had not been discovered.

It became obvious immediately, however, that it was not their discovery that brought the group out o f the house, but the more usual event that took place here.

There were six men on the other side o f the fence, one o f them certainly an ophzar, another just as certainly a pris-

oner. The prisoner was not a large man, but his immense breadth of shoulder and round pot belly made him seem so, and the impression of huge size and dignity were accentuated by great shaggy black brows and a beard that, black as night, poured down upon his chest. He was naked to the waist, exposing a chest so hairy that it was almost impossible to tell where his beard left off and the hair of his chest began; and his only article of clothing was a pair of long loose trousers gathered at the foot like the trousers worn by the Turks of old.

The other four were common soldiers and their purpose here was plain. This to be a military execution, and they were not left long in doubt as to the reason for

it. The ophzar took a paper out of his pocket and began to read:

“Order of execution for the self-confessed wizard, known as Borduzai,” he began, apparently addressing himself to the prisoner, and then, without pausing again for breath, he gabbled through the entire order. He finished, and shoved the paper into his belt.

Look here, Borduzai,” he said, “you admit you’re a wizard, don’t you?”

The prisoner nodded a trifle wearily. “Then what’s the idea of letting yourself die like this,” the ophzar went on. “You’ve admitted to me that you know of the secret underground ways of the ancients. And everybody knows that the ancient ones buried their treasures in

those ancient ways. You must have access to treasure worth millions. Just by giving me a little of it, you might win your freedom. Why must you be so stubborn?”

The prisoner sighed deeply, then answered.

“If the time ever comes, Obreyan, when you acquire the sense intended for a medium smart goose, you’ll know that we wizards, as you call us, are not wielders of magic and evil, but merely seekers after the lost wisdom of our ancestors. I know of no such treasure as you speak of, though I shall admit I know of the under-ground ways. But many know of them.”

The ophzar gave a snort of anger.

“I’ve given you your chance, Borduzai. If you don’t want to give in, all I can do is obey my orders.” He turned to the four and called them to attention. And then Hanok was whispering suddenly in Cham’s ear. Chimra leaned forward to hear.

“Listen to that! This fellow knows the secret of Niarc’s underground ways. What a spot for a hideout!

We’ve got to rescue him and persuade him to take us there. Come on!”

Chimra protested wildly as Hanok leaped up to climb the fence, but the prospect of adventure was too much for Cham. So all three were over the fence and rushing across the brick pavement before the soldiers by the wall had

finished loading the guns. It was fortunate for the three adventurers that they were so speedy, for if those guns had been loaded...

Hanok sped for Obreyan, the ophzar. Chimra and Cham swept down on the four soldiers, shouting wildly to startle them. The wizard, dazed at the turn of events, backed away, apparently wondering what under the sun had happened to delay his impending annihilation. But Obreyan, strangely, seemed suddenly stricken with cowardice.

“Into the barracks, men!” he cried. “Don’t try to fight. These are demons that he has called up! Shades of our wizard ancestors. Get away, men,

quick!“

Cham thought he caught a false note in the panic-stricken cry, but the men dropped their guns and bullets and fled wildly through the door, followed by Obreyan.

“Quick, wizard, it’s a rescue!” shouted Cham, and seizing the big man by the left arm, he swept him toward the wall. The spies followed, but Hanok paused long enough to pick up the bullets lying on the ground.

“They’re silver,” he explained laughingly, as he caught up with Cham and seized the wizard’s other arm.

“You can’t kill a wizard except with a silver bullet, you know. And I’ve fought harder fights than this, many a time, for

less silver.”

They reached the fence, scrambled over it, and sped down the alley. “To your underground ways, wizard,” barked Hanok, “and as quickly as possible. We didn’t rescue you for nothing. You’re a marked man now, and, more than likely, we are too.”

They reached the end of the alley, and, still seeing no signs of pursuit, they stopped for a moment to peer out into the street. The coast was clear. They emerged into the street and at a gesture from Borduzai, set off toward the center of town. Presently the wizard turned a corner, started down another street. Like all the streets which ran the length of the island, it wound its way up and down

over innumerable hillocks, which were the piled blocks of stone once used in facing the ancient buildings. The piles had filled with silt and sand during the centuries and now presented the appearance of small, rounded hills, covered with grass and weeds, with only occasionally a bit of eroded stone projecting from them.

At last Borduzai stopped, where two great stones stood up out of a hillock far bigger than any of the others they had seen.

“Now,” he said mysteriously. “If you do not fear the spirits of our dead ancestors, enter here with me.”

Cham shuddered and looked at his two companions questioningly. But

Hanok answered briskly, “We’re from Fidefya, wizard. And in Fidefya, we neither slaughter wizards nor worry too much about their claims of magic. We know them for what they are.”

Borduzai made no answer as he worked his huge form between the two stones, but there was a twinkle in his eye, and he felt that, wizard or not, there was also gratitude in his heart. So he followed the two Fidefyans as they wended their way into the narrow cavern that wound down from the crevice between the stones.

Borduzai stopped suddenly. Cham could barely see him in the semi-dark. Then Borduzai picked something up from it and turned about.

“It’s as black as a pirate’s heart down here,” he announced. “Don’t be afraid of this light. It’s one of the secrets of our ancestors that we wizards have rediscovered.”

As he spoke, a beam of brilliant yellow light burst from the object he held in his hand, casting a sparkling spot on the wall and filling the cavern with a harsh glow. Cham blinked and, in spite of the wizard’s preliminary caution, he backed away. But the Fidefyans were not impressed.

“We have some of those lights in Fidefya,” Chimra told Cham. “The wizards there make ‘em and sell

‘em to the wealth-ier lords. They’re called lekrik lights.”

The wizard was leading the way deeper into the cavern now. "The narrow crack opened suddenly into a great round tunnel, a tunnel obviously made by the hand of man, for the upper half was perfectly circular and the lower half was cut sharply level, while on each side a ledge ran, wide enough to walk on with safety. It was onto one of these ledges that the narrow crack through which they had come emerged, and along this ledge, the black-bearded wizard continued to lead them.

This is but one of the under-ground ways," Borduzai announced presently. "It is said that our ancestors had cars driven by strange powers that carried them instantly from place to place

through these ways. There are several that run up and down the length of the city; there are some whose outlets have been found in Bru-Kaleen ; one goes to Sharsee and one, the greatest of all, even goes from Bru-Kaleen to Sharsee. There are lesser ways, called seers, that were not used for travel, and we modern wizards and our fathers have, through prodigious labors connected many of them with the great tunnels, and so can travel underground from place to place throughout the island.”

“It’ll be a safe enough place to hide,” said Chimra, and then went on dubiously, “But I’d hate to spend much time here. Lord, it’s a dismal place.”

“You will not have to stay here if you

do not wish, Fidefyans. The great cavern of Ho-Lan emerges in Sharsee, as I said, and if you wish, I can lead you to it, and through it to the other side of the Otsin. It's a foul journey, but once in Sharsee we can soon find our way to Timatso's realm."

Hanok overruled the idea at once.

"Nothing doing," he harked emphatically. "Now that we have a place of comparative safety, we're going to try to think up some way of finishing the job we were sent here to do. Chimra, could you go back to the king with a message of failure?"

"Not I," swore the smaller man, "If there's a way to rescue the prince, Kolap, I'll be with you to the death,

Hanok.” Cham might have said something in this vein too, but just then Borduzai gave a cry and pointed up the corridor. Si-multaneously a voice broke out from the direction in which the wizard pointed.

“There they are! The magician and his companions ! Get them!”

Borduzai whirled around and flashed his light in the direction from which the cry had come. Over a dozen men were swarming clown the tunnel, armed with swords and waving torches, Some were on the ledge, hut more had leaped right down into the slippery mud of the lower level. And i n the lead was that ophzar, Obreyan, who had fled when the three adventurers had rescued the wizard.

A thought came to Cham. "I knew he was faking that fear," he snapped. "He let Borduzai escape, so that he could follow him down here. He still thinks there's treasure in these caverns."

"It's a common enough superstition," said Borduzai. "But' we must get away from them. Come on! We'll give them a merry chase through these passages and ways."

Cham and Hanok might have lingered had there been a few less of the enemy, but a dozen or more were just a little too many for even these fearless ones, and so they turned and followed Borduzai and the al—

ready fleeing Chimra.

Down through the huge tube they sped,

the bawling, cursing mob almost at their heels. I-lad Borduzai not been thoroughly familiar with the way, they might soon have been captured, but he ran along straight into the dark, holding the flash-light back so that the other three could see where they trod, and thus they were able to make considerable time.

They had traversed almost half a mile without a sign of any side passage, and Cham was beginning to wonder just how far they would have to go, when Borduzai stopped and motioned them into a crevice that opened in the wall of the great tube.

“In here, quickly!” he exclaimed. “This is one of the tunnels that we wizards have dug to connect the great

ways. It leads into the suers, and if we can once find our way into that warren of caverns, no man on earth can find us.”

Cham and the Fidefyans darted in, Borduzai behind them, and at once the wizard extinguished his light.

“Let me take the lead,” he ordered. “And one of you hold on to me and the others. We’ll soon lose them in here.”

They hurried on, but almost immediately they saw the glare of the torches of their pursuers behind them, and heard their shouts as they again sighted their quarry.

Borduzai swore. “The thought of treasure is a strong incentive,” he panted. “Any other time, those fools wouldn’t enter these caves to save their

mothers' lives.”

He turned a corner, entered another narrower tunnel.

“Maybe we can elude them in here,” he snorted. “It’s an old hole, very little used, and I don’t know it any too well, but we’re safer here, for there are a hundred different passages, all twisting and turning—”

They hurried on for a while and then, looking back, they saw that the light from the torches was quite invisible. They slackened their pace to a walk then, and continued on at that speed for some time.

“I think we’ve gotten rid of them,” Borduzai whispered finally. “I’m going to risk a light.”

He flashed on his light-making

machine as he spoke, and his three companions looked about them. The tunnel which they were in was a low one, lined with blocks of limestone. The moisture seeping through the walls and gathering in puddles on the floor made Cham think that the river was not far away, perhaps even above them. Borduzai was looking worried.

“This is not just where I expected to be,” he said hesitantly. “I must have taken a wrong turn. But never mind. I’ll soon find a familiar spot. Come on !”

He started off again and Cham and his friends followed him uncertainly. It was not in their plans that the wizard lose his way in what might be called his very own domain, and they were beginning to

feel decidedly uneasy. But now there was nothing else to do, and so they followed him.

Oh they went until, far ahead in the tunnel, a faint light was visible. Borduzai extinguished Ins own light to study their glow more plainly and then turned to them with a pleased ejaculation.

“That must be a light from above,” he chuckled. “I knew I’d find a way out. Come along, boys, we’re safe now.”

He started off, but Cham seized him suddenly, and pointed behind him. Around the corner a torch-bearer had appeared and, spying the group instantly, silhouetted as they were against the light ahead. had let out a cry and started

toward them.

Borduzai looked and almost spat his anger.

“The mob!” he snapped out. “Is there no losing them? How in thunder could they have traced us through that warren? Quick, let’s get out in the open.”

They sped toward the light, came to the entrance of the tunnel, raced through — and stopped in amazement. They were not in the open at all, but in a great tunnel, bigger by far than any Cham had yet seen, and gathered in that tunnel were a group of thirty or forty men, clad in a more amazing fashion than any of which the hillman had ever dreamed.

Each of the men had his head shaven and wore a headdress of metal spikes

that stood out like a crown. Their heads were painted a brilliant red, their bodies a pure white, and their legs a blue. The kirtles they wore were blue, too, and were sprinkled with stars, and each had a golden-colored belt with a long sword hanging in a golden scabbard.

They had been engaged in some mystic ritual, apparently, for they were gathered in a ring when the four burst in upon them, a ring around a big fire which provided the light that had fooled the adventurers. But no sooner had the four emerged from the tunnel than the entire group whirled and, after standing transfixed for the barest second, rushed toward them, their swords flashing from the gilded scabbards as they came. Cham

felt certain, at once, that their case was indeed hopeless now. With this mad group of fanatics in front, and Obreyan's men in the rear, they were opposed by at least fifty enemies. But he gave not a thought to surrender. Nor did the others. They whipped out their swords and charged upon the strange crowd, hoping against hope that they might fight their way through them and perhaps find safety in flight in the darkness of the huge tunnel beyond the fire.

Instantly the place was a bedlam, a pandemonium. The weird ones hurled themselves upon the four with an absolute disregard of life. Cham slashed at one who had leaped upon him without even attempting to draw his sword,

jerked his weapon from the falling man's body, and in the very motion of jerking it upward, caught another, a vicious blow in the bowels, as the second leaped eagerly over his fallen companion! Even before he had finished this second one, he was forced to pound violently with his free left hand into the face of a third, who had managed to get by Borduzai on the hillman's left.

Hanok had drawn his pistol, and the air of the place was suddenly shattered as he fired it directly into the face of one of the weird ones. The crash had one effect, at least, beside that of ending the life of Hanok's opponent. Silence reigned for a moment after, and in the silence, the voice of Borduzai roared

out, "Do not be taken alive! These be the infernal priests of the Goddess Libidi! Better far we should be taken by Obreyan's mob—"

His voice was muffled as he went down under a very avalanche of priests, and again the howling of the priests shattered the air of the great tube. Cham soon found, as did his friends, that to talk of dying rather than be taken alive was one thing, but to do so was another. For a sword can kill but one man at a time, and a pistol can shoot but once, and when a dozen wiry, demoniac creatures hurl themselves suddenly at you, utterly unmindful of death, there isn't much chance of a clean death on a sword's edge. And so, in a few minutes,

Cham and his three friends were flat on their backs, with the red, white and blue demons holding them clown. Ropes which had been procured from some mysterious place were being wrapped around and around them un-til it was lucky they could breathe, much less move. Throughout the short fight, Cham had seen nothing of Obreyan and his mob, but as soon as the fight was over, and the four were lying, neatly trussed, on the floor, he heard the voice of the ophzar bawling, "Hold!

Unhand me! In the name of King Hendrik's law. I'm an ophzar of Hendrik's army, damn it ! Let me go, I say!"

Cham twisted his head around, and saw the disgruntled ophzar raising

himself from the midst of a crowd of priests. Several of his companions had also been beaten down by the strangely painted men, and these were now allowed to rise, while several more, trying to look as unconcerned as possible, stepped out from the tunnel into which they had fled when the fighting began.

“This is a most high-handed attack,” began Obreyan. “These four men are my prisoners. I thank you for capturing them for me, but just what was your intention in attacking my men too?”

One of the weird men stepped out from the group, one who was evidently the man in authority among them.

“I am afraid, ophzar,” he said in a

surprisingly cultured voice, “that your prison-ers, as you call them, have left your juris-diction. I am the prez-dun of the Sons of Libadi, and this cavern you are in is sacred to that goddess. We have a writ given us by Hendrik, giving us juris-dic-tion over all found in these caverns.”

“But these men are criminals.” pretest— ed Obreyan. “One of them is already con-demned as a wizard. They must be returned—”

“They are mine!” snapped the head of the Sons of Libadi. “If they are criminals, as you say, fear not but that they shall be fittingly punished for their crimes. But they are mine!”

Obreyan protested vehemently, argued

volubly, but the priest remained calm and refused to give in. Obreyan went from demands to threats. At last the priest suggested that they leave the decision to the King of Niarc, himself. Obreyan was somewhat taken aback by the idea of taking the question to so high a source, but, being one of Hendrik's men, he could hardly refuse. So it was agreed that the high priest should lead them by a short route to the surface, and that the prisoners should be brought before Hendrik at the first opportunity.

The wizard, Cham, and the two Fidefyans were accordingly whipped to their feet and herded down the great tunnel. In a surprisingly short time they found themselves emerging onto the

surface again, among a moss-covered group of ruins such as were so common in various parts of the city. Borduzai was surprised to find the location of the place where they emerged, but the others evidently considered the queer priests capable of anything, and so showed no surprise, nor indeed felt any.

On the surface Obreyan took charge of the prisoners, apparently by tacit consent of the priests. The group had dwindled now; many of the priests had remained behind in the underground way; and, once in the open air, Obreyan's mob of treasure seekers dissolved like mist on a summer morning. By the time they reached the vicinity of Hendrik's palace, Obreyan, the high priest and four other

priests were all that remained of the fifty-odd men who had captured the four in the tunnel. But it still might have been the fifty, as far as the adventurers were concerned, for the priests of Libadi had not been sparing with their rope. Their arms were bound tightly to their sides, and their legs were hobbled so closely that they found it necessary to take two short steps to every one of their captors'. There were four simultaneous sighs of relief when at last they stood before the entrance to King Hendrik's palace.

CHAPTER THREE ~ The "Drinker"

The palace of the king of Niarc did not lie among the great ruins as did the homes of so many of his subjects. For some reason, unknown to the modern

men, the wizards of old had left a great open space in the center of the island that was Niarc, a spot where their great sky-piercing towers never raised their heads. Here the modern, barbaric world had done its best to produce a city worthy to succeed the mighty works of an older, wiser day.

That the stones, the window glass and the metal that went to make up the modern city were all filched from the ruins meant little to the present-day builders; they looked upon the ruins much as we look upon iron mines and spruce forests—as things placed there for their benefit.

But it would not be right to think of Hendrik's palace as a haphazard patch-

work. The architects had done their work well; and Cham, whose experience with modern buildings was limited to the brick and wood structures of his home village in the hills, stared in amazement as he was led through long halls and up wide stairways to the court of the king.

They entered the court-room, a long, high-ceilinged hall, and were immediately surrounded by curious, questioning courtiers. Presently a scribe approached, asked a number of questions and left them, going in the direction of the other end of the hall.

Cham's eyes followed him and saw a high desk with a group of lower desks around it. The throne room had been furnished to follow, as closely as

possible, the style of the courts of justice of the ancients. Presently a great giant of a man, richly clad and crowned with a gold-crusted cap, came out of a door behind the high desk and took his seat at it. He was an affected sort of a man, a man who shed a strange air of effeminacy in spite of his bulk, and his crown was set at a very precise angle on a mass of blond curls that had very obviously been curled with extreme care and taste. His robes were works of art, and as he seated himself at the bench, he draped himself over it with an air of studied carelessness and indolence. At once silence fell upon the gabbling groups and all eyes turned toward him. An officious-looking steward came and

led Cham's group to the foot of the desk. Obreyan saluted and stood at attention, eyes rigidly forward.

"At ease!" drawled the voice of the big king. He glanced at a script before him and went on in the same indolent tones:

"This is a case of three men accused of encompassing the escape of a condemned wizard. M-mm, pretty serious. Also a matter of disputed jurisdiction." He glanced at the writ again.

"Let's see. Ophzar Obreyan and a priest of the goddess Libadi, named Alcarr, in dispute. Are you Obreyan?" he asked, turning to the ophzar.

"Yes, irronor." Obreyan's voice was

low; it was obvious that he was stricken with awe at being in the presence of such a mighty being as the lord of Niarc.

“And you,” Hendrik turned. “Are you Alcarr, the priest?”

“Aye.” No awe in that tone. The priest’s voice was characteristically arrogant.

“Well let’s hear the argument.” Hendrik nodded to the priest, who began his tale of the capture of the four. When it was finished, Hendrik turned to Obreyan, and that worthy, hampered by the necessity of distorting the facts to conceal his attempts to discover the supposed treasure, stumbled through what was a miserable fiasco, as far as stating his own case went.

The king, who had listened halfheartedly up to now, gave an order to one of the scribes, who disappeared. After a long wait he came back with—Buka, the Harling.

Hanok let out a string of resounding oaths, and, turning to Chimra, muttered, “I guess this is the end of our journey, comrade,” he said. “Small chance of getting out of this trap, eh?” The little man nodded glumly. Then he nudged Hanok with his foot, and, with every sign of excitement, attempted to point out something in the crowd of courtiers gathered in the back of the room.

“Look at him, Hanok,” he whispered, excitedly. “The young one in the purple shirt. See, there! It’s young Captain

Kendi, who was with Prince Kolap when he was captured. What in the world is a man of his low rank doing among Hendrik's courtiers?"

Hanok looked and saw the one referred to, and was at once as excited and puzzled as Chimra. Cham, of course, wondered at their excitement, but being at a loss to account for it, allowed his attention to return to the king. The king was speaking:

"These three who helped the wizard to escape are now accused of being Fidefyan spies. I think it would be most foolhardy of my good friend, Timatso of Fidefya, to send spies into my domain while his son is here on a visit. But perhaps Kolap him-self will tell me if

these men are from his father.” He turned to the crowd of courtiers and called, “Kolap, will you come forward?”

Hanok and Chimra looked eagerly into the group of courtiers gathered around the bench, and Cham too turned to see the famous hostage.

And there stepped forward the one whom Chimra had named as Kendi!

King Hendrik apparently was quite unaware that there was any-thing strange about this. Whether this man was Kolap, prince of Fidefya, or Kendi, captain of the Fidefyan army, Hendrik himself apparently had no doubts that it was the prince.

“Lord Kolap,” he said smoothly, “These men have been arrested

attempting to rescue a condemned wizard. It has been claimed that they are Fidefyans, and, worse still, spies. Now, knowing your virtue and your love of truth—"the king's voice dripped with sarcasm—"knowing that, I am going to ask you, have you ever seen these men at your father's court? If not, I may sentence them with a free heart, knowing that the report that they are your father's men is false."

Kendi's eyes looked over the group without a sign of recognition. "I never saw them before in my life, ironor," he stated. "They're certainly not Fidefyans, as far as I know."

Hanok and Chimra winced as if from a shock that was almost too much for

them. Then Hanok leaned over and whispered something to his smaller companion, and their faces cleared. Hendrik cleared his throat.

“I cannot doubt that you have told the truth,” he announced to the mysterious one, and in his tone there was no doubt but that he did doubt him. Nevertheless, he went on: “There being no further need to suspend sentence, I assign these men to Alcarr, priest of Libadi, under whose jurisdiction they were captured, to dispose of them as he sees fit. Court’s adjourned.”

He raised himself out of his chair and clumped down the several steps to the floor. As he joined the courtiers and a buzz of conversation again filled the

room, Cham became aware that a group of priests, a little more fully clad than those he had seen in the tunnel, had entered the room and were preparing to lead him and his friends away.

“What’ll they do to us, do you suppose?” he asked Borduzai, as they wended their way out of the palace.

“That’s easy to answer,” grunted the wizard. “These Libadi worshippers, it is pretty well known, offer human sacrifices to their goddess. Hendrik probably knows that, for he certainly wouldn’t have turned a wizard and three spies over to Alcarr, had he expected them to be allowed to live. Cham turned to Hanok.

“Your prince denied knowing you,”

he said. “What was his reason? The way Hendrik talked, he might have saved you if he had admitted you were Fidefyans.”

Hanok snorted scornfully.

“Don’t show your ignorance, hillman,” he said. “Had the prince, as you call him, admitted that we were Fidefyans, we would not have died until Hendrik had extracted every bit of information his torturers could squeeze out of us. As it is— well, sacrifice will probably be a quick death, at least.”

“But what I can’t understand,” spoke up the puzzled voice of Chimra, “is the fact that it wasn’t our prince. I know Kendi, and Kendi knows me. And I know Prince Kolap. Kolap was not among those present in the court today!”

While they talked and tried to solve this mystery, they were being led through the winding streets of the new city, through the ruins to the west, and at last to the banks of the Otsin. Here they were driven into a boat, a long, ten-oared cutter which was rowed out into the stream and down past the High City and into the bay. And presently, looming up out of the mists to the south, Cham saw the legendary and monstrous idol that was the goddess, Libadi.

It was the great statue of a woman, mottled green and black with age, and it leaned a little toward the city over which it had watched for a thousand years. Its head was crowned with a crown of spikes. Cham remembered the

crowns that the priests had worn and realized that they had imitated this crown of the goddess. In one arm she held a tablet; the other was raised aloft, but some accident in the past, some explosion or similar disruption, had completely destroyed the hand and whatever that hand had once held. Yet, in spite of this mutilation, and the obvious dirt and filth, the statue was so majestic and imposing that Cham felt a thrill of awe surge through him, a vague wonder if this goddess might not be, really, the deity that her votaries claimed.

The boat was rowed out into the bay, straight for the island. Cham, whose spirits had been dropping slowly to a new low ever since their sentence, had

taken heart once, when Hanok had leaned over and carried on a whispered conversation with Chimra. But the conversation had ended abruptly and apparently nothing had come of it. Now, as the rusting towers of the High City began to merge into the mists of the evening, Cham's shoulders drooped dejectedly and he almost gave way to despair. Hanok sat up abruptly.

"You treat your captives with small consideration, Alcarr," he said to the priest. "Is there no sense of honor among the Sons of Libadi?"

Alcarr looked at him in surprise.

"That is a strange way for a condemned prisoner to talk. In what way have I treated you wrongfully?"

“We are as good as dead,” said Hanok. “We are out on the sea, surrounded by guards. Our throats are choking and we’re dying for what may be our last smoke. Yet you keep our hands tied behind our backs, and our feet hobbled. Are you priests such cowards as that, Alcarr?”

The priest looked at him shrewdly. “You spoke overmuch to your companion a while ago, Fidefyan,” he said. “I doubt not but that you have some sort of a plot together. But I would not want to be considered a harsh man. I will release the bonds on you and on the hillman behind you. And after you have smoked and rested yourselves, I’ll tie you up and let the other two smoke.”

He gave orders to that effect, and in a moment or two, Cham was stretching his arms and reaching in his pouch for the tobacco which, after rolling a cigarette, he handed to Hanok. The two oarsmen on either side of him watched him closely, but he made no overt move of any kind, nor did Hanok, and so after a while, the vigilance of the priests slackened.

And then, suddenly, Hanok acted!

He snatched at the dirk in the belt of the priest seated on his right, and with what seemed almost a single sweep, sliced cleanly the bonds that bound Chimra's hands behind him and buried the knife in the breast of the priest on his left. Chimra, who had evidently been

waiting for just such a move from his companion, leaped to his feet. With a mighty shove he sent the priest on his left into tile water. Then the two Fidefyans, in perfect unison, leaped to the gunwales of tile craft, poised the barest fraction of a second and dived into the water. They sank at once, and Cham knew beyond a doubt that they were swimming rapidly away beneath the waves. Alcarr, stunned for a second by the suddenness of the move, now began to bellow orders.

“After them, Kota,” he shrilled. “You too, Filpot. Jaim, Roklan, Ardi—all five of you. After them!”

The five priests he had named went into the water at once. Cham realized his chance and hurled himself on the priest

a t h i s r i g h t. T h a t p r i e s t ' s h a n d s w e r e h a m - p e r e d, d u e t o t h e f a c t t h a t h e w a s i n t h e a c t o f d r a w i n g h i s d i r k. C h a m s e i z e d h i s a r m w i t h b o t h h a n d s a n d w i t h a m i g h t y h e a v e s e n t h i m o v e r b o a r d t o j o i n h i s c o m p a n i o n s. T h e n t h e h i l l m a n l e a p e d f o r - w a r d, i n t e n t o n s e r v i n g t h e h i g h p r i e s t t h e s a m e w a y. A l c a r r h o w l e d w i t h t e r r o r a n d l e a p e d t o h i s f e e t, w i t h t h e i d e a o f b e t t e r p r o t e c t i n g h i m s e l f. H e c o u l d n o t h a v e p l a y e d i n t o C h a m ' s h a n d s b e t t e r h a d h e t r i e d. C h a m, c r a w l i n g o v e r t h e s e a t s t o t h e b o w o f t h e b o a t, s e i z e d t h e c a l f o f A l c a r r ' s l e g a n d j e r k e d t h e p r i e s t ' s f e e t o u t f r o m u n d e r h i m. A n o t h e r S o n o f L i b a d i s t r u c k t h e w a t e r w i t h a s p l a s h.

He heard a cry behind him. He turned

around. The two remaining priests, who had been rowing behind him in the boat, were coming after him, their dirks waving above their heads. They were so near that it seemed only a miracle could save him from their knives. And then the huge form of Borduzai, still bound hand and foot, raised up and hurled itself between the priests.

One huge shoulder struck the man on the right, the other the man on the left. Their balance, precarious enough in the boat, was destroyed entirely. One toppled and fell, grasping wildly, into the water. The other dropped into the boat and Cham hurled himself immediately on top of him, his hand seeking the other's dirk. They scuffled

for a moment for the weapon, but, as all through the battle, the priest found himself no match for the man trained in the arts of war.

It was the work of but a moment to cut Borduzai's bonds. Then they turned to see how the affair in the water was progressing.

Over two dozen yards away, Hanok and Chimra had appeared again. The priests of Libadi were swimming rapidly toward them, two definitely in the lead of the others. As Cham looked, the two Fidefyans sank again beneath the waves and presently one of the priests screamed and sank. The others thrashed vainly around in the waters, apparently fearful of being dragged under. And then,

behind him, Cham heard the familiar voice of Hanok. The spies hail swum under water to the boat and come up on the other side of it!

“Help me up, hillman,” cried the Fidefyan. “Once in this boat, I defy ‘em to capture us again.”

Cham and Borduzai leaped to their assistance, and in a moment the four were in command of the cutter. A moment later, a priest’s hands appeared on the gunwale and Hanok, seizing an oar, brought it down sharply on his knuckles. As he did so, another form appeared on the other side of the boat. Cham, following Hanok’s method, rapped smartly on the clutching hands, and again heard a howl as the priest’s

grip on the boat relaxed.

For several minutes the four were busy keeping the priests from boarding the boat. Then Hanok bawled, "You'll never get into this boat again, fools. Why don't you give up your attempts and swim for your island while you still have the strength to do it?" His advice was sound, but it was several moments before the Sons of Libadi realized it. Then, disgustedly, one by one, they abandoned their attacks on the boat and struck out for the distant island. And presently the four adventurers were alone.

"And now," said Borduzai. "Let's see if we can't make for Bru-Kaleen. I have friends there who will hide us until we

can make plans for our safety.”

Accordingly, they turned the boat and rowed for some time to the east. But something seemed to be swinging them toward the north, and presently they found it necessary to pull strongly to the south, in order to avoid moving back to the island of Niarc.

At last, they were forced to admit that four oars were not enough to keep the heavy cutter from tending in the direction in which the current was carrying it.

“It’s the tide,” said Chimra. “The tide is sweeping in and carrying us with it. Row harder, Cham.”

Row harder would have been good advice had they all not been practically at their strength’s end already.

And then Borduzai swore in his beard and spat out angrily, “Slay me for a fool, if I haven’t forgotten the

‘Drinker.’

“The what?” Three voices barked at the same time.

“The Drinker. So do the men of Niarc name a cavern on the lower end of the island. It lies exactly at the level of the sea, and each time the tide comes in, water pours in a great flood into that cavern, and each time the tide goes out, it pours out again. It is the one tunnel that even the wizards leave alone, for if one should be caught in there when the flood pours in—well, no one would ever know what became of you.”

“And we are drifting toward it?”

“Drifting? Nay, we are being sucked into it. See, over there by the shore, that dark space? Aye, it’s the Drinker, all right.”

Cham saw the place, and saw too that the boat was moving toward it with appalling swiftness. He hauled mightily on his oar, and the others did the same, but all in vain. It was but a surprisingly few minutes before they were swept along with the ever-increasing current, into the very mouth of the cavern. The great black hole yawned wide, the boat swept in, and daylight became a dwindling half circle shrinking into the distance. Hanok spoke, and his disgusted voice echoed hollowly from the walls of the tunnel.

“If ever four were pursued by an evil

fate, they sit here now, in this boat. First, the Harlings. Then the priests of Libadi. And now—this. By the wizards of old, we are doomed, as surely as ever a man was.”

Borduzai laughed shortly.

At intervals, projections not unlike buttresses stood out from the side walls, projections that had evidently been built to strengthen those walls. It seemed to Cham that if one could get a firm grip on one of those projections, it might be possible to hold the boat and end its mad flight. And if that hold could last long enough— What was it Bordu-zai had said about the water being ejected when the tide went out?

He pondered the matter for some little

time and then decided to act. As the boat, pitched and tossed by the tumbling waters, next approached near enough to one of the buttresses, he seized the corner of it in a mighty grip.

But he reckoned without the force of the speed which the boat had attained. His grip held, to be sure, and the boat did stop momentarily; but then his foot slipped and as Hanok gasped hoarsely in surprise and Borduzai and Chimra cried out in alarm, his balance failed him and the boat was jerked violently from under him. His grip gave way, and he fell with a splash into the tumbling waters. He sank, came up sputtering and shaking his head, and instinctively began swimming with the current. He glanced about and

s a w Borduzai's light, already yards away and dwindling rapidly. Before long he was alone, and the darkness could almost be felt.

The constant excitement, the constant lifting and dropping of his spirits since he had entered the city had made a greater demand on Cham's nerve system than he would have guessed. And now this last disaster, which had robbed him of the friends whose presence had buoyed him up more than he knew, seemed to extract from him his last ounce of courage. Instead of fighting, as was his nature, he re-laxed and began to simply tread water, letting the rushing flood carry him where it would. It carried him along, whirling and eddying,

sometimes on one side of the tunnel, sometimes, on the other, and always in darkness that could be cut with a knife. Cham had thought he knew the meaning of darkness before, but this inky blackness could almost be felt; it seemed, somehow, close; it hung before his face and seemed to smother him— His body struck something. One of the projecting buttresses, no doubt. His arms flew up, instinctively, to push him away from the wall. And his arm encountered emptiness! The other arm, which he brought up immediately, touched the wall that should have been there and thrust him back into the stream.

Cham was puzzled. For a moment he was at a loss to explain why his left arm

had encountered emptiness. Then it dawned on him—there had been a ledge, and his left arm, flung out and up so suddenly, had been higher than his right and had touched only empty air above the ledge, while his right arm had touched the wall below.

If there were a ledge, and if he could get up on it—why there was a chance for him yet. He swam eagerly to the right, his head struck another buttress, but though a thousand stars flashed about him, and his head rang, his arms flung out and in another minute of hard work, he rose and sat upon the ledge. He sat and panted and dripped for a full five minutes. Until this minute, he had not realized what a battle he had been

putting up. But now, in what might be called comparative safety, he was forced to admit that he was well-nigh exhausted.

But, once his breath returned and his head cleared, he rose up, resolutely determined to explore the ledge and find, if possible, some way to the surface. He remembered that Borduzai had led him and his friends along just such a ledge as this when they had entered the first tunnel, earlier in the day. This gave him reason to believe that this ledge, like the other one, might have some pathway to above. So, for what must have been the better part of an hour, he felt his way carefully along the ledge, avoiding or carefully crawling over the occasional

broken places or spots that were wet and slippery. And then there was an archway, and a hail that led away from the tunnel, and a flight of steps!

Cham's hopes were beating high now. He was expecting, momentarily, to see light ahead. That he was near the surface he did not doubt. Fortunately for him, he had not Borduzai's knowledge of the many, many exits that had become clogged with the silt of ages and no longer had any opening on the surface at all. So he felt his way along, and presently he was amazed to hear, as though coming from some distance, the faint sound of a human voice.

It was still too far away to make out the words, but it had a scornful,

imperious tone when he first heard it, a tone that made him imagine the speaker was haughtily refusing some plea or command. It continued in this vein while Cham drew nearer, and then suddenly changed to a hopeless, discouraged sob—then silence.

The silence persisted, and Cham might have passed the speaker by had he not seen the light. It was a dim, dim light, and it shone through the chinks in a wooden door which, obviously built by moderns, walled an ancient archway at Cham's left. Cham stopped at once, and peered through one of the cracks in the door. And as he did so, a deep sigh welled from somewhere beyond that door.

“Who’s there?” Cham called sharply, and again: “Hallo, there. Where are you?”

He heard the one within gasp suddenly, and then the silence was deeper than ever, as though the other was holding his breath. “Speak again,” the voice said softly after a moment. “Who are you? And—where are you?”

“I’m beyond this wooden door,” Cham said. “Never mind who I am, for the present.”

There was another gasp from the one beyond the door.

This time it was almost certainly a gasp of fear.

“If—if you are of our wizard ancestors—” the voice began.

“Nonsense!” Cham snapped, thoroughly convinced now that there was no danger in the person to whom he was talking. It deed, judging from the voice, its owner must be younger than Cham, perhaps a mere boy. The hillman went on, “I’m no more a spirit than you are. I was caught in that tunnel that Niarcans call the Drinker. I managed to get out of the water and onto a ledge. I found a passage and it led to you. Now tell me about yourself, and how we can get out of here.”

“Get out of here!” There was a bitter laugh. “I can tell you many things, my unfortunate friend, but how to get out of here is a problem that more minds than mine have given up. This dungeon I am

in is the torture cell of King Hendrik of Niarc!”

“And my other question?” queried Cham. “What of yourself and how you came to be here? It is not often that anyone, save murderers and madmen are cast into these dungeons; and though I seem to be doomed, I still like to pick my company to some extent.”

Dignity filled the voice beyond the door. “Neither murderer nor madman am I, my friend; though if I revealed my identity, you might think me the latter.”

“I’m inclined to think it anyway,” said Cham bluntly. “Whom were you talking to, as I approached?”

To his surprise, he heard a sob from beyond the door.

Perhaps I am mad," came the voice after a moment. "But I have been down here alone so long that anything is understandable. Look! For some reason I trust you, my unseen friend. And I am going to tell you something that I have not spoken of since I came to Niarc. I am not a Niarcian, as you must have already guessed from my dialect. I am Kolap, the son of the King of Fidefya and— Why, what's the matter?"

For Cham had burst out with a cry of astonishment, and followed it with a resounding oath.

"Look here," he cried, excitedly. "I too am a stranger to Niarc. And in this city, I have but two friends and they. Hanok and Chimra, who claim they are

spies from your father's court, come to rescue you!"

"Hanok! Chimra! By the spirit of Penn! If they are searching for me, I am as good as rescued. They are two of my father's bravest and cleverest soldiers. Surely, stranger, that is good news!" Cham hated to lower the spirits that he had raised so suddenly. "I'm sorry, irro-nor," he said. "But when last I saw those two fighters, they and another were being swept to death down the mouth of the Drinker."

"Then—then they're dead?" The voice was hopeless again.

Cham shook his head, forgetful that darkness and the door between made it impossible for Kolap to see him. "I

doubt their deaths,” he said. “It was a sturdy boat, and a narrow one. And if ever three bore charmed lives, it was they.”

“Three?”

“Aye, there was a wizard with them, another encouraging fact. He knows the caverns and tunnels like one of the spirits of the ancients. And he has many very efficient charms.”

The conversation lagged. Cham could think of nothing else to say to encourage the prince, and Kolap was evidently so used to silence that it meant little to him.

“Why don’t you come in here?” he asked presently.

Cham started. “What do you mean?” His hand was on the door handle as he

spoke. "Isn't this door locked?"

"No." The prince spoke sadly. "Hendrik never let it be locked. He knew I would never leave the cell. I might easily have become lost in the corridors down here, and even if I found the way to the top, I could never escape. I think he thought to frighten me more by allowing the spirits of the ancients to haunt me."

As he spoke, Cham had swung the door open and stepped inside, and in the dim light which filtered in from a grated opening above, he saw the form of the young prince stretched out on a cot in the corner.

"I suppose I might as well tell you," the prince went on. "You see, when I

was captured one of my friends, the young Captain Kendi, was with me. Kendi believed that he would be held for some small ransom and soon returned to Fide-fya. But we knew that I, because of my rank, would be held as a hostage. So we changed identities, and he became Kolap and I, Kendi.

“We supposed that thus I would soon be ransomed and returned to Fidefya. But Hendrik, with a fool’s craftiness, believed that the ophzar, Kendi, should have information about the Fidefyan army that could be used if ever war came. Therefore, instead of holding me for ransom, he kept threatening me with death and torture if I didn’t betray all that I knew.”

Cham snorted.

“He’ll never get the chance now,” he scoffed. “You and I will not be here another day. Look! It was told me by the wizard Borduzai that the Drinker sucks water in while the tide rises, but that when the tide falls, the Drinker spews it out again. And I think, when the Drinker spews out its water this day, two men will be washed out with it!”

Without saying more, the hillman took Kolap by the hand and led him out into the passageway. Through the long hail they felt their way, down the steps, and came at last to the ledge and began to follow it to the left. Cham had no idea how far it might go in that direction, but he knew it was best to get as close to the

opening as possible before trusting to the wild waters.

Occasionally he let a hand down into the stream to see if the current still swept inward. Finally he could no longer notice it, and he began to hope that the inward sweep of the waters had ceased. And at last, sure enough, he felt a slight pull in the opposite direction.

Abruptly the ledge ended.

Then he turned to Kolap. "How well can you swim?" he asked.

"Like a Fidefyan," was the proud answer. "Have you never heard that saying, Cham?"

"No, but I hope it is a good one," answered the hillman. "For, if ever you swam, you must do it now."

“Ready,” was Kolap’s brief answer, and they plunged into the stream. The water picked them up and carried them away.

For a time, nothing was heard or seen at the spot where they had leaped in save the rushing and splashing of the water. As the tide ebbed faster, the waters poured out with greater and greater force, but it was all in darkness until, suddenly, from far upstream, came a glimmer of light. It turned back for a moment and re-vealed its source, a battered boat that held three battered men.

“It must have been about here that we lost him,” croaked the holder of the light. “I fear that we must give him up, Hanok.

We surely would have seen some sign of him, if there was any hope at all.”

Hanok sighed. “I suppose you’re right, wizard. And I’m indeed sorry. I had high hopes for that lad.”

There was silence again in the boat, for the men had obviously given up their search, although Borduzai continued to scan the water. At last, far ahead, they saw the faint semicircle of light that meant they were coming to the entrance of the tunnel. It grew and grew, and suddenly they were in the open sea, their eyes blinded by the sudden light. While they blinked and rubbed their eyes, they heard glad cries and felt hands grasp the gun-wale of the boat. When they could see again, there were Cham and Kolap,

climb-ing into the boat and pouring out, in one chattering flood, the story of their adventures. Cham, Hanok and Chimra felt as if their arms would break. After all that wild adventure in the dark, it had been necessary to bring the boat all the way around the island and across the bay to Sharsee. Borduzai and Kolap had helped, but the main portion of the rowing had fallen on the three soldiers and, fatigued as they were, it had told on them seriously.

But at last the shore was drawing near, and Kolap could not conceal his delight.

“Soon we’ll be in Sharsee!” he exclaimed. “I can hardly wait to see the marshes again. And once beyond the

marshes, a day or two and we'll be in my father's empire. Then we'll see, Master Hendrik, what my father'll do to you!"

He watched the approaching shore a moment. "I think my noble father will reward you richly, Hanok. And you too, Cham, you shall be rewarded too, for it was really you who saved me. You shall be —" He was interrupted by an apologetic cough from Hanok.

"Your pardon, ironor," said that worthy. "But I think I had better take charge of Cham's reward. He came down from the hills of Dronadac to be a fighter. And by the wizards of old, I am going to see that this ambition is fulfilled!"

The End