

ON ACCOUNT OF A WOMAN A novelette by THEODORE ROSCOE

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THE ship, Cairo-bound, was steaming out of the Red Sea into the Gulf of

Suez, and a sunset with more glory than all the battle flags of the world had transmuted an eastern shoreline to a coast of solid gold.



Farraday, the foremost animal collector in the business, had been moody, almost nervous throughout the afternoon. Ordinarily occupied with his specimen cages on the foredeck, he had paced in offish solitude behind the steering-engine house, gravity in his weathered, angular face, eyes brooding on the passing shore. And at dinner, that night when the naturalist started his first spoonful of consomme, then flung

napkin to lips, pushed back from the table and stalked from the saloon as if ill, his traveling companion, Mendel the metallurgist, was worried.

"What was the matter?" he wanted to know, coming abreast with the naturalist, who was hurrying aft. "You looked, when you started your soup, as if you'd been poisoned."

"I have." Farraday touched his

forehead with a handkerchief. "That chef must have gone insane. That stuff tasted deadly to me. Deadly as-as sin." Mendel suggested summoning the captain, but the naturalist shook his head.

"Not that way," he demurred. "That isn't what I mean."

When they stood by the jackstaff where the frigate birds wheeled, metallurgist voiced some exasperation.

"Look here, Farraday, what's been eating you? All afternoon you've gloomed around by yourself, watching that Sinai coastline as cryptic as an Egyptian cat, and now a spoonful of soup sets you off as if a ghost had seen you. If there's anything I can do-"

"You started it," the naturalist said somberly. "Remember when our ship came in sight of Sinai? I said we must be passing over the spot where Moses led the Children of Israel across the Red Sea. The place where the waves rolled back to let the Chosen People cross dry-shod and escape the armies of Pharaoh. You said you didn't believe in those Bible stories."

"I said I didn't believe in miracles," the metallurgist snapped. "Moses might have led his crowd across the Red Sea at some shallow spot that has since been dredged out by the Suez Canal engineers. Perhaps some conjunction of wind and tide drove the waters back. But there wasn't any so-called miracle. And I expressed surprise at you, a scientist, talking as if you believed there was. And what's this to do with a dish of soup?"

Farraday's eyes were focused on the tenuous gold thread that was land in the east; his voice came curiously solemnized from his lean and hardened jaws. "Coincidence, that's all. You disputing the miracles, then that soup. Miracles? There's the land they came from, that Near East littoral out there. As for Moses and his Children—I knew one of those Israelites. A woman with all the

mystery of midnight and the wonder of day, a face and figure of pure magic, an allure and bafflement that could turn men into fanatics and set two friends clawing at each other like murderers." The naturalist scrubbed his lips with his handkerchief as if to scour them of the memory; and the metallurgist, who had known him as a confirmed bachelor, regarded Farraday in mounting astonishment.

"Go inland," the naturalist pointed, "through those hills beyond Sinai and you'll come to the Gulf of Akaba. Arabia lies across the Gulf, and just north of the Arabian border you'll come to a place I don't like to think about. That's where I met this woman. I didn't believe in miracles. myself, in those days. Neither did a friend of mine who was with me when I met her. She had the sort of face that wouldn't believe in miracles, either. Bold. Hard. Wait till I tell you how hard. My friend pronounced her a woman who would take a dare, just the precious type of woman he wanted. He wanted her and I wanted her, and we almost murdered each other in cold blood to get her. Only a miracle saved us. Do you want to know what kind of poison was in my soup, tonight? Do you want to hear about this wonderful woman and the miracle that happened?"

Fixed on that flaming eastern shoreline, Farraday's eyes were dark with a light not reflected from the Red Sea sundown.

The metallurgist said he wanted to know.

The metallurgist was hungry when his friend began the story, but when it was finished he had lost his appetite.



TWO years after the War (Farraday began) the natural history society I was working with decided to send me into the Arabian desert after specimens—a rare type of basilisk

lizard, to be exact—and I was to go in from the Gulf of Akaba, work across the north end of Arabia and swing back south to the coast of the Red Sea. Egypt, Palestine and Arabia all meet at the Gulf up there, but they don't shake hands.

It's a foul neck of the woods at best, and two years after the World War wasn't best. Allenby's army had been around there, so had Lawrence. You'll recall the British made a lot of promises to the Arabs that London didn't keep, and some of the tribes didn't care if the War was over or not. If I wanted to get out of there with lizard skins— not to mention my own—I'd have to walk on eggs. My employers instructed me to sing low when I met any Arabs; then they sent me Rallston as my assistant collector!

It was a ticklish enough assignment without the extra hazard of this Johnny Rallston. A naturalist runs across some pretty wild specimens in his work, but Rallston was just about the wildest young mammal I'd been associated with. Indigenous to Australia, he hailed from Brisbane, and when I say "hail" I mean he came shouting, jaw out, fists cocked, ready to go.

His father was a revivalist clergyman of the old hell's fire and damnation school, and the boy had been reared in a parsonage on prunes and proverbs— and a horsewhip, too, I fancy—by the sort of maiden aunts who still wore bus-ties on the back of their minds. Then the war had let him out of his cage and he'd started off to see the world with Allenby. He'd been everything from air pilot to cameleer, and after the Armistice he'd bummed around the Near East on all manner of crazy jobs, finally landing a position with my outfit.

I'll never forget my first view of Rallston. He'd been with the Society about a month, and he came slamming into our Cairo office as if he owned the affair. He wore a British officer's cap, insignia removed, set challengingly forward on a thatch of bleached hair; a cowboy's grin in a face as ruddy as a cherub's; impudence in green-blue eyes; a pair of whipcord riding breeches that had lost their whip and most of the cord. Over his shoulder he carried an expensive photographer's kit — "borrowed" from the department of signals—and his feet were bare.

"Sold the field boots," he told me with a grin. "Thomas of London and worth most a ticket anywhere. Sold 'em to buy this naval officer's wife a bit of jade. All I wanted was one dance because she was beautiful. She took the jade; then she wouldn't dance with me 'cause I'm barefoot."

"Sold your boots to buy a trinket?" I gaped at Rallston. "I thought you were working to save money and go back to Australia."

"Go home?" he laughed. "Not me! Not back to that parsonage. You never knew my old man. Believes every word of the Bible, that sort of thing. Say, he almost had me studying for the ministry."

"And why didn't you?"

"I couldn't believe," he told me, "in miracles."

We came to be fast friends the following months in Cairo, and I thought I knew Rallston pretty well. I was fifteen years younger, myself, in those days, and we got in some wild scrapes together around the town. I didn't know what was the matter with him, but I thought I could guess. Typical minister's son breaking loose from too much early repression. Out to paint the town red. His hatred of that home parsonage and all it represented amounted to a phobia. He read all the sophisticated agnostic literature he could lay his hands on, and called himself an atheist.

"I've chucked all that religion stuff," he liked to say. "Old-fashioned bunk, that's all it is. I've got a new ideal."

Apparently this new ideal had nothing to do with keeping solvent or sober, but he did his work well enough and the Society kept him on. He had a likely fist, and he knew the Arab lingo. That's why they sent him on the Arabian lizard-hunting expedition to be my assistant.

Now you may think yourself acquainted with a chap around the city, but you never know a man until you're off with him in some isolated spot like that jumping-off Gulf of Akaba place, north end of the Red Sea. That's where I first came to know the real matter with my Australian assistant collector. That's where I learned about his "new ideal". Rallston was a collector, all right, but not of lizards. I collected lizards. Rallston collected women!

Women, women! That boy had gone girl-crazy. Let a British pleasure yacht come steaming up the coast and there was Rallston swimming out to the ship—quite literally—with a rose in his teeth. Let a caravan come grunting and snuffling over the sand dunes, and Rallston was down in the oasis to meet it, like as not fighting three beachcombers for the hand of some desert belle before the camels had time to kneel. I thought when we got clear of the seaport that marked our base of supplies, and started into the desert, he'd get over it, but the desert was worse.

Do you know why he lugged that photographer's outfit with him? To take pictures of beautiful women, that was why. To photograph the lovely ladies he always thought he was meeting. His tunic pockets were stuffed with snapshots. Egyptian dancing girls in seven veils. Moslem debutantes with one eye wistful behind bars. Circassian "princesses" in fantastic costumes from heaven knew where.

Officers' wives. Russian refugees. All the backwash the War had left stranded on the Near East beach and rarer specimens from the direction of Mecca. Daytimes I'd be off bottling basilisks, Rallston would be camera-hunting ladies off in oasis palms. Nights he'd lie sprawled on the sand, sorting through his precious photographs and sighing like a crack-brained Romeo.

Like a lot of sophisticated young men who went through the war and came out thinking they were tough, this Australian hellion was as sloppily romantic inside as a bouquet of sweet peas. Having coughed up an overdose of religion, he had proceeded to swallow in its stead—on an empty stomach—such a mess of romanticism as would have sickened St. Valentine.

"Tagging around after every skirt you see," I gibed him one night. "You're too smart to believe the Old Testament, but fall for every female who gives you the eye. Keep up this game, and you'll go home sooner than you think. In a box."

For the first time Rallston's eyes were sober. "I won't go home in a box or any way. Not till I've found that ideal."

"And what's this wonderful ideal?" I had to jeer.

"None of 'em have come up to it so far," he admitted seriously, "but I'm going to find a woman, my lad, that's something a bit different from the Alice-sit-by-the-fires you've got back in civilization. No more clinging vines for me. I don't want citified swank and lipstick, either. I want a woman with spirit, a woman"—he swept his arm in a Shakespearean gesture—"who isn't all tied up with corsets and rules of conduct and religion. She's got to be gorgeous looking and all, but she's got to be something more. That's why I like the girls in this country around here. No knitting and rocking chairs and chaperoned tea-parties in this neck of the woods. They have to fight their way to get around. They won't take no for an answer. That's what I want, old man. The sort of women the only thing she will take is dare. Righto! A woman who could give or take a dare."

So that was the ideal my assistant collector had substituted for his old-time religion. That was the reason for his battling from one bar-room to the next and his midnight excursions where angels feared to tread. I saw what he meant, all right. Clumsily phrased, but the mental picture he conveyed was a back-to-nature dream girl riding a white horse across windswept horizons, beautiful as Godiva, spritely as Eve and bold as Ninon de Lenclos with a whip.

And of course he was looking through just the region where you'd never find such a girl. Wind-swept, starry-eyed and nature-free as an Arab's daughter may look as she rides across the dunes, your desert maiden is most hide-bound and rule-booked of all the breed. Allah to her is a great big thundercloud waiting to pounce; Life is one long inhibition and next to that she's scared of her henna-whiskered menfolk. And the next biggest sin in a Moslem maiden's category is to let some white unbeliever snap her photograph.

I told you there was trouble enough to begin with, and now you've got the set-up on my assistant collector, Rallston. I scarcely have to tell you how the storm broke. Lord knows, I'd warned him. But advising your fellow man about women—especially if you've knocked around together and happen to be nearly of an age—is something you can't do. I was fool enough, myself, on that score, and nobody to preach. You'll see I didn't hold any monopoly on the brains.



I WAS bottling basilisks in my tent on the sands one evening when Rallston came walloping over the horizon as if the devil

were after him. Dust trailed like the smoke from an express train behind his racing camel, and not one devil, but twenty were after him. Twenty Arab horsemen bunched together, cloaks bannering, yells yapping from their beards and bullets snapping from their guns.

"Run!" Rallston shouted at me. "Run! They'll kill you!"

I had just about time to saddle my *mehari*, and that was all. Water casks, rifles, rations, baggage, collector's equipment, everything had to be left behind. It was touch and go with those desert nomads shooting the callouses off my camel's heels; our only chance lay in outdistancing those ponies to the Red Sea coast and we were a good many miles up the north end of Arabia from the Red Sea.

Darkness swept down out of Asia and the desert was blotted by India ink. There wasn't a star in that blackness, or a moon. I think there was an upper layer of sand blowing overhead, and the firmament was blanked out. A wonderful situation when your compass was miles behind.

By midnight we were lost, and by sunrise we might have gone over the edge Columbus' sailors were afraid of, deep in a wilderness of canyons and barren mountain ranges ablaze in the sun like hills of scrap iron. The Red Sea was nowhere in sight, but our pursuers were. They kept right on chasing us, deeper and deeper into those burning hills of rock, and they never gave up until late afternoon.

Rallston and I pulled our doddering camels into the shadow of a big yellow boulder, and watched our enemy go. They fired a few discharges into the air as a final warning, turned their horses and rode back over a ridge, vanishing in the dust-haze toward Arabia. Rallston lounged against the rock and watched the departure with a rueful grin.

"By Jove, that was a shave! Imagine them going off the deep end like that, just because I was taking this Arab girl's picture." He patted the camera-box slung at his side, and the corners of his mouth went down. "She wasn't worth it, though. Just like all the rest. Didn't care when I held her hand, but screamed when I snapped the camera. That brought her old man and all those devils down on me like a pack of mad dogs—"

I wanted to come down on him like a pack of mad dogs, myself. All night and all morning of that crazy race I'd been too mad to speak. Now when I blew up my tongue was so swollen with thirst I could only stand croaking and waving a fist at the sky.

"You've done it this time, you crackbrained fool! You realise we're lost? Lost! My Mauser rifles, my Zeiss binoculars, maps, five hundred dollars worth of collector's equipment, eight weeks work picking up specimens—"

"Honest, buddy, when I get the money I'll pay you back."

"Eight weeks work, specimens, probably my job, everything—" I shook my fist at the horizon where the Arabs had vanished—"everything lost back there in those sand dunes, just because you wouldn't keep your girl-crazy hands off the first female who smiled at—"

"She wasn't smiling," he corrected me, "she was crying. Standing in that oasis with her hands over her face. I thought she was swell when I first saw her. She was wearing these little ankle bells—"

"Ankle bells!" I panted. "I don't care if she was wearing the bells of Saint Mary's. Get it through your head that we've run off the map and we haven't any water! Not a drop! Only a miracle got us out of that," I raged; then I flung an arm at the landscape around us. "It'll take another miracle to get us out of this!"

"Bah!" Rallston snapped. "You know I don't believe in such rot. I'd hate to depend on Bible magic to get out of anything. I got you into this, and I'll get you out of it."

He was a cool one, all right, and

scanning the gray cliffs around us, I would not have expected divine intervention, myself. There are some places on the globe where faith can waver, and that was one of them. Now that I had a chance to look at where we were, I wasn't sure we were on the globe. You've seen pictures of Death Valley. Well, this was Death Valley doubled. Even the air was dead. Heat rained down through a silence as quiet as deafness, and the rocks lay around on shelves of pumice and limestone like white bones.

There wasn't a breath of air or a jackal as far as the eye could see. Great fissures had cracked the floor of the valley we were in, and the canyon walls sheared up as silent and bare as deserted skyscrapers. Ashes. That's what the landscape made me think of. Dead ashes. Westward where the sun was lowering, as if in a hurry to withdraw its blood-stained eye from this scene of desolation, a range of cliffs stood up jagged as the roof line of a shelled town. I tell you, there wasn't a single sign of life.

I'd never seen a place like that on the Arabian map. Maybe we'd ended up among the craters on the other side of the moon. It was a hell of a country. I could smell the sulphur.

"All because of this damned dream girl of yours," I sneered at Rallston. "Well, what are you going to do about it? The camels had a good feed yesterday afternoon and they can keep going. But we'll be dead and cured as figs by tomorrow afternoon if we don't find water."

He pointed west up the valley.

"The Red Sea ought to be over there. I'll ride that way, and you take it east. We'll meet back at this big rock at sunset. Okay?"

I told him I wouldn't die of grief if I never saw him again, and we set out in opposite directions looking for water. But the moment Rallston's featherbrained head was out of sight I was sorry. There was something about the burning silence of that

gray landscape that got up under my skin the minute he was gone.

I started leading my camel, and my boots sent echoes up the canyon, echoes that died of loneliness away up the cliffs against the sky. A kicked pebble would go rattling across the rocks with the disturbance of a rat in a tomb, and when I sat down on a boulder to rest, the silence flowed up around me in a pressure that hurt my ears.

A couple of miles by myself in that solidified, ten-million-ton hush, and I was suffering for companionship as avidly as drink. Water was nowhere to be seen. Just calcined cliffs and emptiness. I might have been the first man along that fissured valley since the time of Exodus, and I felt pretty tiny among those skyscraper walls of stone.

The queerest sensation stole over me, something quite apart from the nervousness of fatigue or fright. A feeling of evil cloaking this burned-out landscape. A sort of a repugnance mixed with fear, if you can imagine the feeling. The sort of shudder you might experience on passing a leper island far at sea. or standing before an empty house with the blinds drawn on an evil street. There was something about that scorching emptiness of stone that was bad.

The oddest panic came over me. I wanted to run. I wanted to make a lot of noise and get out of there. I could see why those outraged desert tribesmen hadn't followed us in these hills. I could have throttled Rallston for losing me in this landscape, but I give you my word, when sunset started slanting ochred shadows across the rocks, I mounted and rode back to our rendezvous as if the legions of Eblis were on my track.

Just as I reached the big yellow boulder, there was Rallston riding out of the west the same way. A second his camel was silhouetted atop that ragged ridge with red sky between its legs; then he came on the gallop, riding the hump like a jockey, hair wild, camera flying on its strap, larruping along the valley bottom as if to outstrip the long gray shadows that were reaching like giant fingers after him.

I was mighty glad to see him coming, that's the truth. But when I saw his face my heart contracted with fresh alarm. Plastered with white dust from boot to crown, he looked like a wild-eyed ghost scared to grinning, until he came close enough for me to see his eyes, bloodshot not with fear but excitement. Before I could muster a yell, he was off his camel with a rodeo rider's leap, bounding at me through the dust-whirl.

"I've got her!" he screamed at me. "By God, Farraday, I've got her!"

"Water!" I cried.

"The woman, you fool!" Rallston laughed and capered around me like a crazy man, holding up his precious photographer's kit. "The woman I've been looking for. Beautiful! Marvelous! Best looking woman you ever saw, and she's got more nerve in her little finger than you ever heard of. A pack of Arabs are holding her captive in a village the other side of those cliffs," he screeched at me, "and we're going back to rescue her tonight!"

Word of honor, I could have killed him there and then. Shot him down in cold blood. That crack-potted, romance-crazy Romeo! Send him after water in this thirst-smothered wilderness and have him come back blabbing out a love story. I don't know what did stop me from killing him, except that you just can't kill fellows of Rallston's kidney. He had that hell-for-leather, sword-and-cloak, cow-jump-over-the-moon quality which charmed the lives of Casanova and Cellini and all those scapegrace matinee idols who balcony-climbed their way through history and got away with it.

Those velvet-panted rapscallions were salesmen, that's why. They talked their way into it and turned around and talked

their way out of it. But they were tonguetied bumpkins compared to my assistant collector Rallston selling me his latest heartthrob in that gray valley of petrified desolation, that night.

"Rallston," I snarled at him, "I'm going to knock your damned lovesick block off for this. Instead of asking for water in that village you were playing post office with some dame. Before I go over there to get a drink I'm going to break your head."

"Like hell," he countered, waving his arms. "You're going to help me save this woman, see? She's white, Farraday. A white woman!"

He knew the "white woman" angle would break down my sales resistance, and once he got his teeth in that opening, he didn't let go. He out shouted me, and I began to listen. It was all pretty queer against that Valley of Death background with Rallston's voice petering out in microscopic echoes up the cliffs. If I'd had any sense I'd have whacked that Australian on the jaw right at the start, but I've said I didn't hold any monopoly on the brains, and you'll see.

When I'd left him that afternoon, Rallston had scouted over that western rim of cliffs sniffing for water, and no sooner topped the rise than he'd found it. Unfortunately it wasn't drinking water, though. As far as Rallston could tell, the water beyond those cliffs was the Red Sea.

"A devilish barren coast," he told me, "with a smell in the air. Alkaline. There's a yellow fog combing in from the western horizon, and all I could see was a couple of small boats way out. A shoulder of mountain stretched seaward under the cliffs; from where I was I couldn't see the other side of that headland, but it sure is a desolate spot. I hiked my camel down to the shore thinking I'd start around the headland, hoping to find a town."

Rallston's hopes were raised by

finding a bumboat in a sort of rocky lagoon,. a good-sized sailing barge about the build of a big launch with a forward hold for stowing freight.

"There's still oars in the row-locks and a deckboom with block and tackle unlimbered, like some one's put in to pick up cargo. But when I get near enough, I see that hull's been there a long time. Beached a couple of years. Sail gone to rag. The forward hold's empty, and so's a water cask under the rowing thwart. That dry keg and a skull lying up the beach told me what happened. Somebody'd come ashore and started afoot around land's end. Died of thirst and never been found. It's got my wind up a bit, that skull."

It got my own wind up, hearing Rallston tell about it.

"What's this deserted native bumboat and a skull got to do with your dream girl?" I wanted to know. Rallston was reciting this detail with all the wordage of a newspaper broadcast, and I yearned to hear the end of it and wring his neck.

"I'm coming to that," he panted. "I'm coming to that. I'm telling about the boat because we're going to use it for the rescue. I'm sure that Arab village doesn't know it's there. Well, I started my camel around this headland, taking the same path that skull had been following. About two miles up over the headland, there's the town on the other side."

He halted to draw maps in the dust with his boot-toe.

"The beach spreads out under cliffs too steep for an eagle, see? There's a batch of native boats along the beach, and the town's hugged against the base . of the cliffs like a bunch of white blocks piled there by high tide. It's a Moslem stronghold, judging by the minarets, a hell of a tough-looking town."

Having reason to fear the Arab temper, my assistant hadn't started down

hot-foot to beg for water, but had tethered his camel and climbed down through the rocks to spy. At first he thought the village deserted; then he saw the whole population, like a crowd of sheeted ghosts, massed on the beach under the headland. Right under the rock where he was crouching.

"And that's where I saw her!" Rallston shook me by the arms. "She was standing in the middle of that ragged, stinking swarm, the dust standing up around her like smoke. The whole crowd was hooting, yelling, hollering around her in some kind of dance, and dragging her—dragging her, you hear me? She was chained, Faraday! Chained by the ankles to a flat platform of planks that was hitched to a camel. That gang of Arab wolves was

dragging her down the beach. You think she was crying out, fainting? She was not! She was standing upright like a soldier, Farraday. A white mantle pulled tight around her and the sort of figure—say, when I think of those brown heathens screaming at her, it makes me sick!"

In the sooty gloaming that had filled the valley about us, Rallston's eyes were glittering like a cat's. He made me see that woman and the brown mob pulling her down the beach. He walked up and down, clenching and unclenching his fists as his voice painted the picture. He dug his father's best sermon-tones out of his memory to preach me the story of that woman's figure and how the Arabs dragged her and mobbed around her.



"And she's white," Rallston shook me. "Young. Beautiful. Stood there, ankles chained to that platform, and never made a sound nor shivered a finger. Even when she saw me up there in the rocks she never made a sound. Get this! She saw me there. Looked straight at me. Her head was turned on her shoulder all the time, disdainful, and when the drag went under the rock-shelf where I was, she looked right into my face. Did she scream for help? Not her! Any other woman would have screamed and given me away. This girl stood steady as Gibraltar. Didn't move a muscle. I couldn't see her eyes for the shadow, but her face was proud as a queen's, not a sign of fear. Head to her little bare feet she was simply covered with that stinging white dust, but her chin was up, I tell you. Her mouth. Defiant. Damn near contemptuous. Of the mob and-and me, too. 'Come and get me,' she looked at me with that expression. By God! like a challenge. 'Come and get me if you're big enough. I don't think you can do it, but come and get me if you think you're big enough. I dare you!" "

Rallston's lips went white at this part of his story, and the sweat beads glittered like mercury on his knotted forehead. I could feel my own pulse getting up speed. Talk about Latins— it takes the Anglo-Saxon to play the heroics. Already I'd forgotten my lips were splitting from thirst.

"What happened then?" I whispered. "What did they do with her then?" "Then the whole rotten hubbub went off down the beach," Rallston cursed, "and she just kept looking back over her shoulder, chin raised, looking up at me with that expression. I couldn't help her. All I could do was lie low and watch. Watch that mob of brutes drag her to a hole in the rocks down the headland, a little cave. They left her there. Posted a dirty beggar with a big iron spear on guard, and streamed back to their filthy village. She was looking back at the last. My God, for all

I know they're going to kill her. You've got to help me save her, Farraday! I'm going back and get her out of there tonight if it's the last thing I live to do!" I said harshly:

"It'll be the last thing you'll live to do, all right. Listen, you fool. How can two of us attack an Arab village tonight or any night? Croaking for water, unarmed—"

"We'll surprise them," he blazed at me. "That cave isn't far from the water and the town's about a mile up the beach, away from the headland. We'll row around the headland in the dark, take her on the rush!"

"Take her where?" I swore. I was weakening, and it made me mad. Where could you take a woman in that desert of stones? Even the atmosphere was petrified.

Rallston swung an impatient arm. "Take her to sea, man! To sea! There's a fog out there. We wouldn't have a chance going inland, but they'll never see us in that fog. All we've got to do is make the ship lane to Suez and we'll be picked up by midnight. Look!" Now how do you suppose that lad ended his sale's talk? He was a devil of a boy, all right. He began to tear into his photographer's kit; dumped out his camera, rolls of film, little bottles of chemical, all the truck these vagabond photographers around fairs and boardwalks have to carry. Next thing I knew, he'd fished from an envelope, a damp, glazed picture. A photograph, on my word!

"I got her," he panted through his teeth, "just as the mob was dragging her away. Snapped the camera just at the second. Too much dust and no time to focus; then I had to stop and develop the thing in twilight up in those cliffs and only a little water from my bottle in my kit."

A little water in his kit and he'd used it for photography! But I never thought about it then. I was staring at that photograph and that photograph was staring at me. There wasn't much light left to see it by, but there was enough. Enough to see the

white figure of a woman standing on a wooden drag in the midst of a hooded, dark-whiskered mob; her mantle pulled tight about her, her back to the camera, face turned on her shoulder, chin lifted above the coiling dust.

Some women can hug a woolen wrap around them and make it sheer as a veil. Only it wasn't the figure that bothered me. It was the expression on the woman's face. Rallston hadn't missed it when he called it, "Come and get me. I dare you!" But he hadn't gone far enough. All the defiance and scorn of a woman for the terrors of a man's world were in that expression.

Maybe she was in trouble, but she'd ask nobody's advice. There was independence in that chin, neither fear nor humility. It was a beautiful face, wilfully beautiful—the face of a lost *Peri* who defied the devils and taunted the angels to the rescue. The *challenge* and beauty of that face struck up out of the photograph, dim as it was, and made my senses swim.

"Maybe they're going to kill her," Rallston hoarsed out. "Or they're holding her for ransom! Are you going to leave her chained in that cave for the hands of those brutes?"

"Rallston," I cried, "what are we waiting for?"

Did you think there was a woman so wonderfully bold and beautiful just the sight of her photograph would bring you running? Well, you don't know the half of how wonderful that woman was! Rallston jumped his camel and I grabbed mine and followed him up the valley and over the western cliffs with no more thought of the danger than the proverbial fool in a place forbidden to the angels. And there weren't any angels around the coast where Rallston led me that night. There was none of the windy distance, no healthy oceanic sweep to that seascape.

A moon that looked moldy was

sneaking down a low-hung sky as our camels topped the crags, and I got my first view of the sea. The beach far below was a ragged thread of lime. Rocks were mounded like slag along the shore, waste deposit left there from some long-ago reducing process, some overwhelming fire that had killed even the stones. The smell of that ancient fire was still in the night, sulphurous.

The water that had come too late had lain there too many centuries, yellowed, stagnated. Not far from the shoreline a saffron fog that might have been the smoke of that ancient, now-forgotten holocaust was banked up under the sky to blot the horizons.

Can you imagine a sea gone stale? Sweeping in with long undulant strides that came from no impulse in the earth but might have been started by the moon, the swells washed the coast with a sullen mutter that only undertoned the silence.

If I didn't like the hinterland we'd come from, I liked that coast even less. It couldn't be the Red Sea. The scrap iron cliffs, the clinker-like shore, the sea under the moon made me think of water in the firebox of a cast-off iron stove.

"Turn the camels loose here," Rallston ordered in a voice trembling with excitement. "There's the boat I told you about. Hurry."

That boat with its empty thwarts, its dried watercask, its sailcloth with the moon shining through, oars abandoned and that silent skull for a watcher up the beach, did nothing to cheer the scene. Surf creamed against the hull, booming a leaden echo through the square hatchway in the foredeck, the sound coming up from an empty cargo hold. Not unlike a small canal barge, the craft looked about as seaworthy as that Norsemen's gondola they found on the coast of Labrador.

But I couldn't back out now. My companion dredged a rusty anchor out of the

shallows, and side by side on the thwart, each with an oar, we pulled our brains out to get her around the headland. Like a thieving galleon we thefted around land's end, and I was sweating like a teakettle when Rallston steered us into a hideaway between tall rocks and told me we'd reached the spot.

Spot was right. The beach there curved like a gigantic simitar flat under the moon, and when I saw the white-walled village at the far end of its tip, I held my breath.

"There's the town," Rallston whispered. He was leading me through a goat-jump trail up the rocks, stooped over, tense, stealthy as an Indian. "And" —he stopped to fasten sinewy fingers around a loose rock—"there's the cave and the guard. Now!"

As Rallston gritted, "Now!" he sprang from the shadows like a panther. I had a momentary glimpse of a dark aperture scooped out under the cliff's overhang and a figure posed on the threshold, a ragged figure leaning on a spear. *Slug!* The man's turban muffled the blow. Rallston's rock dropped like a meteor and the Arab fell. My assistant collector collected the heavy iron spear, spun, beckoned, darted into the cave. I jumped in after him, stiffened as my boots hit over the threshold, stopped. Mr. Rallston had already stopped. Together we stood. And stared.

She was waiting in the inner darkness of that close-walled den, barefoot on her platform, her toes pointed toward the back wall, her head turned on her shoulder, face toward the door. Moonbeams poured yellow-green through the arch in the rocks and touched her curved, tense figure with gelid radiance, cold as witch-shine.

She was tall as a man, and from heels to crown in the dimness she sent off a white glow, ghostly as one summoned from the astral plane. Beneath the stiff folds of her tight-drawn shawl, her eyes stared in colorless, fixed immobility, stared at us in a way that put creeps through my hair.

Not a feature in that white face stirred. Not a muscle under the white-dusted cloak. Face posed in that over-the-shoulder "come get me if you think you're big enough" expression, she stood. Not a mouse of sound from her, and motionless as rock.

It was Rallston who fractured the silence, and when that rascally Australian opened his lips the whisper came out of them like a rush of air from a broken tire valve.

"Good God! Farraday! It's a statue!"



WELL, I saw what had happened. That woman-daffy Australian's mind had been so stuffed with

visions of his dream girl that, coming suddenly on a statue which met his romantic requirements, he'd failed to distinguish it from flesh and blood. There was always this wonder woman's picture in the cornea of his eye, and dust and a few shadows had tricked him. I started to give him a tongue-lashing. I was going to call him every name in the directory for bringing me across limbo to rescue an image. Then I stopped.

"I didn't know," Rallston was groaning. "I swear to God she looked real as life—"

Looked real as life? That statue was real as life! Rallston wasn't the only one who'd been tricked. The eye of his British military camera had been tricked, too. Anything that could deceive a lens made for penetrating camouflage had to be pretty lifelike, and I found myself staring at the sculptured woman's face in deepening astonishment.

Eye to eye with the thing, I couldn't drag my glance away. That sculpture had life to its very eyelids. Detail, chin, cheek, lips, a curl of hair on the forehead, texture of the shawl, the tight folds of the mantle outlining a lissom thigh, every detail had

been carved to perfection.

How many statues have you known that could convey an expression? I'd been around the Louvre and I'd seen the Greeks. You'll suggest Praxiteles, and he was a master sculptor, but he never did anything as good as that woman in the cave. The figures in the Louvre were lumps of clay by comparison. This statue fairly breathed. Another moment and the lips would speak, demand us to take the chains off her ankles, be arrogant about it, too.

I couldn't tell whether she was marble or granite from the coating of dust, but whatever rock she was hewn from was vital in contrast to the burned-out slag of that wilderness. The thing came over me like a wave as I stared. Can you see the thoughts through my head? The first shock of astonishment followed by the second of awe?

I had to put out a finger, touch that stone to make sure. If genius shows in

slavery to detail, if art means creating a verisimilitude to life, that statue had it. A master artist had done that piece of work. The greatest sculptor in the universe! It was a wonderful statue!

"It's wonderful!" I gasped at Rallston. "Wonderful!"

His voice was low, throaty. "The woman I've been looking for all my life —a statue!"

"Don't be a fool," I whispered at him. "This is worth a thousand flesh-and-blood women! Why, it's the greatest bit of carving in the world. To think these Arabs have kept it hidden in a cave. It must be over hundreds of years old, brought here by Arab pirates. But it isn't Athenian. That artist was long before Athens. Have you any idea what a thing like this is worth?"

I saw Rallston's lips had wried back in a grin. He was nodding, breathing hard.

"Come on, then. Let's get her out of

here."

Looking back on that part of this story, I sometimes wonder if that atheistic minister's son hadn't put one over on me, after all. I sometimes wonder if he hadn't known it was a statue all along, hadn't pretended his bafflement and surprise.

Guessing I'd never help him abduct any piece of statuary at the risk of my neck, he'd cooked up the woman angle, brought the snapshot to convince me because he needed my help in lifting the thing.

Well, he didn't have to convince me when I saw it, whether or no. I wanted that statue as I



never wanted anything before, and so did Rallston. Any fool could have seen the genius in the thing. As to the lifting, both figuratively and actually, it was a job for two men.

Rallston attacked the chains fastening it to its platform, prying at the links with the spear, while I wrapped my arms around the statue and strove to shift its weight. Sweat broke on my forehead. The thing was heavier than three tombstones; must have weighed half a ton.

"Hold on," I puffed at Rallston. "We couldn't carry her out of here if there were six of us. We'll pull it on the drag!"

I sped a glance out of the cavern and up the beach to the walls of the moonlit town, expecting any second hell would pop. I didn't need any little bird to tell me what would happen if those Moslems discovered us pilfering their treasure. They knew the value of this statue, or they wouldn't have kept it hidden in a cave.

Then it occurred to me they might worship this wonder. Islam forbade idolatry, but there were tribes in Arabia who dated their customs to the days of Solomon and Sheba—if this image were a fetish and Rallston had spied it during some religious festival, there'd be triple hell if we were caught.

"Snap into it," Rallston goaded me breathlessly. "We've got to get out of here before that guard wakes up. Shove! Give her a shove!"

To this day I don't know how we ever budged that woman. The drag had no runners and we might have set out to move Mohammed's mountain. Teeth set, veins jutting, we put shoulders together and hands on the platform's end, braced our feet on the cave wall and pushed like the twins of Hercules. On the stone floor Rallston's boots skidded and thrashed like the drive wheels of a freight engine trying to start on wet tracks.

We panted, puffed, swallowed oaths. Then for no reason at all the thing came unglued from its lethargy; platform and statue went slithering out into the moonlight past the upturned toes of the unconscious sentry. The platform gave a little scream as it scraped out over the stones, and for half an instant I thought the woman had come to life and voiced a cry.

My word, I did. I shook with anxiety, fearing the town would hear that screech, but the distant white walls went on sleeping, like the recumbent guard.

Rallston gave the guard a second crack on the head for good luck, and we started our wonder woman down the beach. Out in the moonlight, the statue was more wonderful than ever. There was something about that expression in stone that almost scared me. The curled stone lips, the sneer of the nose, the expression was more than a taunt, it seemed to jeer and invite at the same time—you've had women look over their shoulder at you like that?—and meanwhile the beauty of form rushed the blood to my forehead.

Rallston's voice came savage through his set teeth.

'Tush, you idiot! Get her to the boat!"

If ever there was a madder kidnaping in history, I'd like to know it. It was easier sledding on the crusted sand. The beach sloped toward the water, and we skidded the drag at half a mile an hour, raising columns of white dust that stood up against the moon. The white dust was thick as gunpowder, acrid, bitter in the nostrils; twice I had to sneeze. I labored like a piano mover, darted nervous eyes at the sleeping town.

But a man will risk plenty when he's looking at a million dollars, and the statue was worth two million, or I was blind. When I thought of what the archeologists and art collectors would pay for the sculpture, desire gripped me like a drug. Rallston

looked drugged, too. His gray-green eyes were shining as if coated with enamel. We were a pair, all right. A pair of deuces playing in a game with a joker.

Well, we got her down to the bumboat, and we smuggled her aboard. We worked like pyramid builders to do it, I can promise you. Rotted tackle snapped like thread, had to be knotted in a dozen places. That decayed deck boom bent like a sapling bough as we hauled and tore our fingernails, elevating the cargo inboard and lowering her down the hatch.

Get a picture of us loading that statue on that wilderness shore. Rallston broke her ankle chains with the spear, and we hoisted her up and let her down. I groaned in fear of breaking the brittle statuary. Lowering her into the bum-boat's hold we splintered a chip from her shoulder, and it brought the tears to my eyes.

Down in the dusty gloom of the barge-hold—a box of a place about big enough for fifty sacks of meal-we struggled like stevedores to stow her upright in a corner. I don't know where the moisture came from, for the thirst was swelling my tongue against my teeth, but the perspiration was guttering on both of us when we chinned ourselves out of the hatch, slapped down the hatch-cover and rushed to the thwart amidships to grab the oars. I guess I'd forgotten how tired I was. I guess I'd forgotten a lot of things. All I could think of was the living expression on that stone statue's face and what the art galleries would pay to see it.

"But we'll never make it," I groaned at Rallston as we pulled the barge out of the headland's shadow and set her blunt snout for open sea.

Off the bows that saffron fog was creeping in, and the long swells marched out from under the vapor banks like lava swishing molten out of steam. The barren headland, the junk-iron cliffs with that

Valley of Death behind them, the Arab town at the end of the simitar beach made the backdrop for a play laid on the moon.

"If this *is* the Red Sea, we've miles out to the ship lane. Those Arabs will be after us like hounds when—"

Rallston laughed, and his laughter hardly sounded sane. Nothing was sane that midnight, I promise you.

"Suppose they do take after us—they didn't see us snaffle the woman, did they? There's other pirate ships on this waterway, and once in the fog we're safe."

My teeth were knocking together just the same, but premonitions aren't much good against thoughts of a million dollars. We pulled the blisters out on our palms, rowing out to reach that fog. We pulled with might and main, and the barge moseyed along like a Chinese junk, but we got there. I think the devil let us get there just to encourage us. Rallston had scuttled his religion for romance; I'd thrown over common sense for a fortune; both of us had fallen for the type of woman a man should let by; the devil encouraged us to let us down because we needed a lesson.

The lesson started just as we reached that yellow fog-bank. A Lilliputian chorus of howls splitting the silence along the shore. Torches dodging and darting along the beach. Arabs came pouring down the miniature walls of that distant town like fireflies swarming out of a hive. Guns snapped in crackling strings like boxes of crackers suddenly exploding. They must have seen us, because little fountains plunked and spurted in our wake. Next minute their boats were out, oars flashing, spreading across the water like a horde of water-spiders many-legged heading seaward. A bullet cut an invisible violinstring over my head

"Row!" Rallston yelled. "They're after us!"

We stabbed our oars into the brine, and the

fog plunged over us at a swoop. The regatta was on!



IT will be a long time before I forget that midnight row. The mist of that excursion is still in my head, and the prints of an oar-

handle are branded on my palms. Have you ever been rowing at night when the wind dies and leaves the sea running, when everything is quiet above the surging water? Add fog to the business and you have something downright uncanny. The fog we burrowed into that night was mysterious as smoke from Aladdin's lamp.

Shots crackled behind us as our bumboat collided with the fog-bank, and then it was precisely as if we had gone through a wall. A wall of gauze spread in layers above the wave-tops; then it was cotton, pulling, raveling, weaving around us as thick as an old man's beard. Deeper in, the fog was banked in piles like washed wool, great masses of aqueous wool heaped atop the water by invisible hands.

The wool swirled over us, dripping, smothery, silent. Kissed our faces, bandaged our heads, blurred Rallston to a shadow at my side. We were buried. Wrapped in a goose-flesh, creaming smother, opaque as the glass of a frosted lamp-bulb. A queer incandescence shone through the stuff. It wasn't blind. Perhaps like light seen by a cataracted eye. And there were rainbows, vague as the colors in an opal, arching in the formless clouds, the sort of other-world rainbows that moonbeams would cast.

On the thwart beside me, Rallston was pulling his oar with the automatic fury of some one pumping a colossal handcar, and the teeth grinned in his errant face like a string of pearls.

"They'll never catch us now," he bawled at my ear. "Row! Don't slow down!"

We weren't slowing down because we'd never gone fast enough to admit any slowing, but an illusion of decreased momentum affected by fog was not dispelled by the armada I knew was whooping after us. I knew those Arab feluccas were coming like Indian war canoes, and I slammed my big blade in the sea with all the energy of fear. Don't think that barge with that shanghaied lady weighting the bows was any trifle to row. She wasn't any college shell. She plowed through the mist with all the elephantine grace of a New York garbage scow butting a head sea of mud.

Rallston feathered his oar and sat with his ears cocked, listening.

"Do you hear them coming?"

"I can't hear anything," I confessed.

It was remarkably quiet when we listened. We couldn't hear a trace of those bloodhounds we'd seen astern. We might have been barging through the sky, save for the wash of water hammocking by abeam, the little wallops of brine that smacked against the bow and scattered miniature showers across our necks.

"They've missed us all right," Rallston chuckled. "It's been at least two hours since we saw 'em last, and they're off our course or they'd have overhauled us long ago. All we've got to do now is pick up a ship for Suez."

You see how it was? We didn't know we were on the Red Sea to begin with, but all we had to do was pick up a ship to Suez.

Of course there were a variety of other reasons why we might never pick up that ship. Conceivably such a ship might pick us up in the vapor and slice us like a buzz-saw cutting cheese. Or we might be rowing in a circle. Or an Arab broadside might catch us out of the mist. But we didn't think of that.

It doesn't do to navigate when you're in love, and we were in love. Rallston was in love with the cynicism of our lady

passenger, and I was in love with her money. It would pay me back for the rifles and equipment I'd lost. More than repay me. Do you know what I was thinking as I rowed myself black and blue in that fog? Not that I was a thief, I can tell you. I told myself I was stealing the woman because she was a great work of art, a supermasterpiece that belonged to the salons of the world.

And I was counting the dollars the salons would pay for such a prize. The workmanship of the statue inspired me, but the dollars intoxicated me. Paris. Nice. Monte Carlo. No more grubbing with lizards. I had no more religion than my young assistant collector, that night! I was drunk as I rowed that barge.

And at every mile and every hour, deeper and deeper in the fog, I grew drunker. Not from anything to drink, either. My mouth had been bone-dry when we'd launched the cruise, and a few hours exercising at the sweeps had turned my tongue to a herring.

The fog was something. Tantalizing. I wrung drops from my cuffs, licked the beads from my wrists, but the taste of water only aggravated thirst a hundredfold. Just the devil's way of keeping us going. I'd have bartered my soul for a glass of wine, but every time I thought of the statue in the forward hold I forgot I had a soul.

I guess the good Lord thought I'd better be reminded of it, for I got a little jolt about then. Rallston shipped his oar, flung a fist to my elbow, dragged me down on the seat, froze.

"Ouiet!"

We hunkered down on the thwart and bulged our cheeks with stifled breath. A sound of rhythmic splashing obtruded on watered hush. Cambridge, Oxford, two dozen racing crews were going by somewhere. We caught the murmurous cantata of many voices, and there was the merest suggestion of a shadow off to starboard, as of the passage of a phantom ship tacking through imagination.

"It's them," Rallston gritted after an interval of baited silence. "Damn them, they're heading straight out. We've got to turn north."

"I don't see any compass in our binnacle," I choked. "How do you mean, turn north?"

We weren't doing any loud talking, believe you me. Rallston's words barely touched my ear. "A head sea coming in from the west when we put out. Take it on the port beam, we're going north. Row like hell."

For an hour that seemed a century we rowed like hell with the barge growing heavier every drag. As an extra goad to effort, the fog began to tear away in spots, rip and fray into fog-dogs—holes in the vapor where moonlight shafted down from a glimpse of open sky and our oar-blades crunched through a patch of glittering water dark as a whirlpool sighted at the bottom of a mine.

When we scowed through one of those openings we flattened like turtles on the thwart, holding breath, sick, expecting a fusillade from some mist-am-bushed Arab craft to blow us out of water. But the enemy armada might have phantomed off into cloudland, set sail for the Pleiades. From the massed wool hemming us in there was only the sound of water underneath.

I don't know how long we played hide-and-seek through those fog-dogs, then, but I'd worn the flesh from my fingers, worked my spine numb and my tongue out—I'd have sworn we'd crossed the Atlantic—and I was dreaming of Paris again, when Rallston gave another cat-jump and blurted, "Land!"

I was a galley slave hanging on the oar-handle, cursing in disbelief. "Where?"

"Can't vou hear what I hear,

Farraday? Listen!"

"All I hear is running water," I husked. "I can't hear any—"

Then I caught it. A far-off muttering that had forced its echo through the fog from a distance of at least two miles, not unlike the long roll of muffled marching drums beating across a valley filled with rain.

Dilated, exultant, Rallston's eyes burned hot in his mist-smudged face.

"Surf!" he cheered the whisper. "Surf on a beach!" Leaping upright, he sent a triumphant glare across our bow, pointing a shaky finger dead ahead. "That's Egypt, by God; we've made the other side. We've done it, Farraday! Brought her over. Land! We're saved!"

Only we weren't saved yet. Not by a jugful. Rather, not by a boatful! His cheer wasn't out of his teeth when the barge broke through a rift in the mist, drifted out into a patch of moonlight. I don't know why I looked down at that moment. Not till then did I realize my feet were wet; I suppose my subconscious mind had been trying to tell me, but I'd been having too good a time in Paris, been too busy exploring the fog for enemies, to pay attention to wet feet.

Well, I'd heard a sound of water under the fog, and it was running, all right. Running right into the boat! Boiling up through the bottom-boards and gurgling in through the seams at about two quarts a minute. Too long that craft had been beached in the tropic sun. The weather on that scrap-iron coast had eaten the pitch and gnawed the timbering to punk. Those planks were drinking in brine like thirsty blotting paper. The bilge was up to my bootlaces when I looked, and I pulled my feet out with a yell. Rallston looked down and squalled.

"Holy Moses! We're leaking!"

That barge was something more than leaking. Having sprung one leak, the whole moth-eaten hull had opened the rest of its seams; gone porous as the Dutch boy's dike.

Stealthily, lazily as a hippopotamus submerging, the craft had begun to sink!



WELL, we were in for it this time, and Paris in the spring vanished right out of the bubble in my head.

Picture that situation if you can. A girl-crazy lunatic and a naturalist who should have known better trying to kidnap a stone goddess in a scow of cardboard. Fog on a lost planet sea, and fangtoothed Arab pirates liable to be anywhere, and the ship going down. Lord, how that bumboat was drinking in the brine. It liked the taste. It had started slowly and developed a liking, and now it was gulping the stuff by the gallon.

Rallston stared at his flooded shoetops and went white.

"Bail!" he yelled, giving me a shove that knocked me off the thwart. "I'll do the rowing. Get that water out of here. Bail like the devil."

He snatched the oars and started pulling like a madman, while I bailed in the sternsheets like Noah's pump. I used my sun helmet to scoop with, and I might as well have tried to empty the Indian Ocean with a soup spoon. All the water I could jettison simply ducked down under our keel and sneaked in again, bringing a fresh supply with it. The seams were widening by the second, and I labored like an up-and-down in a Scotch freighter, dipping and throwing, dipping and throwing, with no more result than to see the intake rise to my ankles and start for my shins.

"She's going down," I had to pant. "It's coming in faster all the time. She's up two inches since I started."

Rallston slammed the oars into the swells and pulled as if to uproot the sea from its bed.

"We've got to make that shore off there, d'you hear? We can't lose that woman now!"

"But we're sinking deeper," I had to

groan a moment later. "It's up to my shins. The water must be in that hold forward, too. She's started a list in the head."

Rallston dropped the oars to snatch the helmet from my fingers. "You row! We can't sit out here and sink in this tub! If this fog wasn't on us we'd be in sight of land. Keep going, man! Keep going!"

I rowed and Rallston bailed. Rallston rowed and I bailed. We spelled off and panted and swore and rowed and bailed, and now that it had started the caper that bumboat kept filling like a bathtub under opened faucets, staggering up over the hills of brine and wallowing down the valleys, a little slower, a little logier at each successive swell

For the following half hour we fought to beat that sea inside and out, but it had us coming and going. Inside the brine climbed inch by inch to our kneecaps. Outside the hurrying swells rushed out from under the fog, grew off the bow, swept by with the whoosh of liquid glass, and I groaned each time our blunt-nosed barge survived the assault.

Land was ahead of us somewhere, no doubt of that. An echo of combers on a beach as difficult of attainment as Paradise. It wasn't for those who took the easy road. Our barge was too heavy for that ocean in the clouds. At each new swell the drunken hulk would shudder and stagger and swallow another gallon.

"Get out of the trough," Rallston shouted at me from the stern. "Another like that last on the beam and we'll go down."

I pulled my arms out to get her around, but she seemed to be settling in glue by that time, reluctant to swing. Her head was leaden. It rose and sank on the heaving floor under the fog with no more buoyancy than concrete, lowering a little farther at each swell like the head of some sea monster getting sleepy.

Rowing that hulk took the buoyancy

out of me, too. We wallowed down a sliding liquid valley smothered with fog, and it was all I could do to drag her up the other side. Rallston was throwing hatfulls of water forty feet over his shoulder, but his efforts could do nothing for those spread bottom boards. Over his knee-caps in water, he bent at the waist and started fumbling around under the bilge.

I yelled at him not to stop bailing, and he showed me a pair of eyes red as rubies in the sockets of a skull.

"I'm going to get that woman ashore if we drown in forty fathoms. It's too late to bail. We've got to lighten the boat."

You know how balloonists throw ballast out of the baskets in the sky? You should have seen Rallston throwing ballast out of that sinking barge to keep us afloat in the clouds. First he got that iron spear we'd stolen from the Arab guard—dragged that spear out from under the thwart, splashed by me to scramble to the higher ground of the foredeck where he chopped down our mast at one whack. Crack! Sail, cordage, boom and tackle went overside, splashing off in the mist. The anchor went next, followed by the watercask, a length of chain, a box of rusted spikes, anything he could lay fingers on.

"Throw everything that's loose," Rallston screamed. "We're almost awash!"

The spear sailed from his fist and disappeared in the steam. Floundering aft, he dredged the bottom-boards for excess baggage, flinging overside a coil of waterlogged hawser, a carpenter's maul from God knew where, a link of chain, such rubbish as an urchin might discard from a pocket.

Do you think five pounds of junk more or less made any difference in that situation? I thought of the half-ton cargo in our forward hold, and it made me sick. Rallston stiffened upright in the sternsheets just then, and he must have been thinking of the same thing.

"There's not much else to throw out," he said in a high-pitched voice. "We're still sinking."

I didn't say anything. The water was lapping the thwart, and my mouth was filled with a taste like dry quinine.

"There's not much else to throw out," Rallston repeated in the same squeaky tone. "But her—" he pointed at the foredeck "—and she's not going."

My lips cracked like an old cup as I grinned at him, nodding agreement. "Right. She's not going."

"Do you think I'd chuck that woman overboard after risking my life to get her?"

I shook my head. I could feel a little tendon throbbing under my left shoulder blade, and all the little hairs went tight and electric on my back. I whispered:

"I wouldn't chuck her overboard, myself."

"But there's too much weight," Rallston whispered. "Somebody's got to go."

I nodded, rising slowly from the thwart.

"And *she's* not the one of us that's going!" he squalled.

Water showered under our boots and we hit each other at the same time.

Now I'm not going to beg off responsibility in that assault by claiming I was crazy. I think we were both as crazy as bobcats when we went for each other —I'm certain we were—but it was the brand of craziness that comes from playing with money and wise women, and the judges won't take it as an excuse. What do you think the Admiralty Board would say of two boys who tried to throw each other overside to save a statue on a sinking barge?

Vividly I remember the pain of my knuckles landing on Rallston's jaw, the simultaneous explosion of stars as his own fist struck me between the eyes. Wham! That

Australian boy's fist was chain-mailed. The blow drove me backward with the force of a donkey's kick, and flung me head-overheels over the thwart, smack down under three feet of bilge.

The bath cleared my wits a little, and I came up draggled and coughing in time to catch Rallston's rebound from the stern. His face looked madder than the grimace of Cain. A thread of blood leaked from one splayed nostril where my knuckles had contacted, and his grin seemed composed of a thousand teeth.

Gabled under a roof of wet hair that streamed in two dark triangles on either temple, his eyes had contracted, dwindled to sharp points of green glass imbeded in a face hot as a boiler-plate. Jaw out, snorting, fingers spread, he flung himself at me.

"She's mine! I found her, you perishin' jackal! Think you can pitch me overside, do you? She belongs to me!"

"You woman-crazy, triple-blasted fool!"

I howled, trying to fist him off. We fought. Slashed and slugged, wrestled, kicked, tore, each striving to knock the other over the gunwales. We weren't the first young men to go mad over a million dollars and a woman. In a way, our supercargo in the hold was both. Grimly, murderously, deadly as rival animals, we fought. Wrist-twists and rabbit-punches. Snarling and circling for position. Leaping in for the catch. Howling backwards with kicked shins. Rallston's fingers closed like locked manacles on my throat, and I drove my knee into his midriff, a blow that spun him around like a dervish.

Locked together, we fell, ploughed along the bottom-boards, rolling about under water, arms twined, legs hooked, strangling, thrashing, eyes bugged, and cheeks distended for want of air. We broke, kicked apart, plunged to our feet and danced back, shoulders bunched, heads down, measuring

the second for another charge.

"Get off! Get off!" Rallston screamed at me. "You're sinking the barge, sinking my woman—"

"I'll go down with the boat if she goes," I promised him furiously. "But you're going overboard first—"

As he lunged at me then, I wrenched an oar from the rowing lock, jumped back, struck him across the mouth. He caught the blade in his hands, deflecting the blow, jerking me off balance. Dodging down, he snatched the second oar before I could stop him; planted the rounded handle in his armpit, charged me with blade pointed like a lance.

Whip! Crack! Slash! I'd like to have been a disinterested witness to the duel that followed. I'd like to have seen that battle aboard a barge sinking under opalescent fog, the oar-blades stabbing, whipping parabolas of light through mist, slashing together overhead, splinters shearing, slivers flying, the crack of wood on wood, the smack of wood on bone. What a joust that was! What a gallant contest of knights! What a lady for a prize, and what a field of honor! It sickens me to think of it now.

It sickens me to remember that the only-thing in my mind throughout that battle was the million-dollar masterpiece in the hold at my back. When I thought of that precious image going to Davy Jones, I yelled and tried to break my oar over Rallston's head. Blow for blow, he gave me as good as he got, sometimes better. A score of times we teetered on the gunwale, whaling, fighting to keep balance, to stay aboard. There weren't any Marquis of Queens-bury rules in that brawl. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, it was. At that you couldn't understand unless you'd seen the workmanship, the genius in the absolute perfection of that statue. Unless you'd seen the living expression in that sculptured woman's face.

this time the barge was wallowing lower and lower in that swinging brine, lurching down a jolt at each wave. Every time we felt another lurch we went at it with doubled fury. If we'd been fresh at the start we'd have murdered each other first whack, but we'd been up too late the night before, worked too hard on empty stomachs and shriveled throats. I've an idea our blows and jabs were more sluggish than they **Perhaps** mental exhaustion seemed. sustained an illusion of top speed action that wasn't real, but the pain was authentic enough.

Our faces were cut open, and our fists red. Shirts sheared to tatters on our backs. I split my oar-blade on the side of Rallston's jaw, while he answered the blow with a slam on my head that nearly drove me through the leaky timbers of the bottom. Parrying, flailing. I forced him reeling into the stern. Back at me he charged, cutting strokes through mist that would have sliced my head like a melon if they'd landed. "Damn you, Farraday! She's mine—" "Over you go! Try that—that—another—"



OLDER men wouldn't have lasted. Only healthy young animals could give and take such a pounding. In

those days I was wiry, and my skull toppled Rallston's by an inch. Life in the open had stored a lot of energy in my hide. He was built for an athlete, muscled like an orangutan. My blows only enraged and confused him. His vitality seemed unquenchable. I punished his arms with criss-cross strokes, pounded his knuckles, couldn't chop his weapon from his fists. He beat me to my knees, crushed the ears flat on my head, brought the eyebrows swelled down over my lids, but he couldn't whip me out of that barge.

In the mist the oar-blades were flashing crimson. Water churning around our knees clouded maroon. Chips flew.

Lungs whined. Believe me, I can't tell you how long the fight lasted, any more than I can tell you how long we'd been out in that foundering bumboat. Time loses outline in fog, and our battle stopped the clock. We might have fought five minutes, ten, but it seemed to carry on for hours, a year. A drear, nightmarish quality came into that fog-screened conflict. The nightmare of Rallston's unstoppable attacks. The nightmare of standing again and once more to beat him back.

The feeling was pounded out of me. My hands were without nerves. I know that battle lasted until even the illusion of speed was dissipated and the power to stand up and swing my oar seemed to come from some mysterious element outside my whipped frame, some evil sustenance loaned me by a far, black star. It takes a lot of punishment to rid the human body of avarice, and the last fight between men on this world will take place because of greed.

The barge was on her last legs, too. Brine was slopping over the gunwales, and the seas slanted tall, gathering power for their own killing punch. A big swell came rushing out of the fog, but the drowning hulk was every bit as stubborn as the fools fighting across her thwart. The punch-drunk hull gave a stagger and a groan, shook streams of brine from her drooping head, wallowed over the crest and lifted her foaming pug-nose clear for another gasp.

Crying that I'd sunk her, Rallston rushed me with swinging oar; caught me a screeching wallop across the cheekbone. Wood broke to kindling on my face, and thrown sidewise, shocked wide awake with pain, I brought my own oar down on his scalp with a smash that shivered my oarblade to broom-straws. Both of us plunged over backwards; caught at the gunwale; hung. I can see it as if it happened yesterday— that untamed Australian pulling himself up to the rowing seat, panting and

gargling, hauling himself together piece by piece as if broken bones were joining themselves under his skin, the effort standing green veins on his forehead, bringing the tongue through his teeth, dragging himself upright with his oar for a crutch, inevitably, monstrously on his feet.

You know the picture of the dying Gaul? It made me think of that, Rallston coming up on his broken weapon. Head bloody, yes, and bowed. But on his feet. The tears scalded my eyes at seeing him there, and I cursed him as you'd curse an apparition, hauling my own carcass out of the bilge, forcing my own gruelled legs to a stand.

Propped on our oars, water gushing around our knees, backs sagged, faces dripping scarlet, we stood with the thwart separating us, eye to eye in the fog, two ruined gladiators sinking in our own misguided boots.

"Mine!" He brought the words with red bubbles through his teeth. "The woman—all—mine—"

"No, Rallston. No—" My head was too sick to shake. "No!"

As if by a common reflex we lifted the oars. Stood swaying. Lurched. Dropped our weapons. Fell together like scarecrows deprived of their wooden spines. Splash! Dropped like two cut-down bags of meal across the rowing seat.

A dark hill of water swept out of the mists to starboard, and the finish came.

But it didn't come from the sea. That finish came out of the fog. A chorus of howls breaking loose in the smother off the bow. The *plash*, *plash*, *plash* of a multitude of paddles. Shadows shooting in from all directions like mammoth shark-fins skating up through mist. Rows and files of merciless brown faces conjured out of vapor, and then the whole yowling regatta of dhows, nuggers, feluccas and sampans circling around us and engulfing us in a traffic jam

as wild as a tie-up on the Yangtze Kiang.

I never saw so many rifles aimed at my head at one time. So many brandished knives. A hook'-beaked Arab colossus, brown as a penny, black-whiskered, wearing a turban, was a figurehead posed in the foresheets of the nearest boat. His simitar looked bigger than the moon. He had grabbed up to heaven and caught that tremendous crescent in his hand. He let out a roar of coughing Arabic at his boatmen; his galley scraped alongside our half-submerged stern and he boarded us with the agility of a corsair, leaping at Rallston and me, simitar upraised.

"The image," he roared in guttural English. "We come for the sacred image, *feringi!* Return thy theft quickly, spawn of unholiness, and prepare to die!"

MYSELF, I prepared to die.

I found no time to wonder at this Arabian behemoth's English, expected to that climax as a British accent

Arabian behemoth's English, unexpected to that climax as a British accent on Mars. *I* didn't even wonder why our barge didn't plunge straight down under the weight of the pirate and his simitar. My neck was bared under that moon-sized blade, and I was too lame and tired to move. If the flooded bumboat didn't sink, my heart did then, and I couldn't lift my head off the thwart.

Rallston moved. I tell you, that Australian devil had more damnation left in his hide than a wounded tiger. He lifted his broken head, and even laughed. Sprawled beside me on the rowing seat, he reared up at the headsman towering over us and chewed a sound of mirth through his teeth.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he chattered at Blackbeard, "but if you don't get off this boat in half a nip she'll sink to the bottom. You understand English, you whisker-faced shark? Then understand you're talking to Captain Rallston of his Britannic Majesty's Corps of Signals and

this is Lieutenant Farraday of the American Observation Service. There's an official camera under this seat to prove it, understand? We're on military assignment and got wrecked in this fog, and by God, if you know what's good for you, you'll call off your pirates and have us put ashore."

It was a good bluff. A remarkable bluff. That boy was a super salesman, and when I think of how he blustered and stalled, half fainting and trapped on that foundering barge, I have to take my hat off to his gall. We were caught with the goods, but that superannuated lady-stealer wasn't licked yet. If he could stall a few more seconds the evidence would go down like the *Titanic* and we might get away.

He conjured a look of innocence on his pounded face that would have done credit to a saint. You'd have thought this Arab chieftain was no more than some irate papa who'd caught Rallston eloping with his daughter, but the girl was safely hidden behind the scenes. Image? What image did our visiting admiral mean? Sacred image? Where?

It didn't fool Blackbeard any more than Rallston had expected it would—that sheik knew we weren't any Captain Rallston and Lieutenant Farraday innocently wrecked to black eyes and crushed noses in the fog. What Rallston did expect was that our bumboat would go down like a plummet, and the bumboat refused to oblige. It wallowed level with the waterline while brine burbled over the stern and we clung to the thwart like rats on a raft. Blackbeard belted his simitar on a sash under his cloak and listened to Rallston's story with folded arms. Then.

"Move once," he snarled, "and my men will shoot the truthless heads from your shoulders. Wah! That would be a mercy compared to the tortures awaiting those thieves who dared steal the ancient image from the tribe of Haram-esh-Shereef! The proof of that guilt will not be far distant, *ferengi*, and by Allah's Holy Prophet! I think your blood will flow when I see what cargo lies hidden beneath that forward hatch!"

He bellowed at his followers to train their rifles for a broadside, then went scrambling and splashing to the bum-boat's foredeck, and ripped up the hatch-cover at a yank. He jumped down the hatch with a savage yell, and his armada of pirates shrieked with the glad prospect of a chance to torture the Christians when they saw him go. It was all up now. Overhead the fog was dissolving in watery light as if the dawn were trying to get through and make two scoundrels sorry they were seeing it for the last time. I pushed my bruised face down on the thwart, cold to the marrow with suspense.

"Rallston," I gibed him bitterly, "what do you think of your dream-girl, your daring wonder-woman, now? I wish I'd killed you before they do; it was your wonderful romantic ideas that got us into this."

"I won't go down prayin', anyway," he sneered from a corner of his bruised mouth. "I'll leave you do the howlin' to heaven for a miracle that won't come. I'll go to the devil like a man."

There was a submarine splash as Blackbeard lit in the flooded hold, and I could hear Rallston cursing the hulk because it didn't sink. I listened to that Arab chief trampling and wading down under the hatch; heard snorts, muffled exclamations, a fierce yell. Then I don't exactly recall how it happened. To Judgment Day I'll never forget the sight of that Arab's head bellowing up out of that hatch, the picture of him climbing up to the foredeck like a buffalo rising from a manhole, turban over one ear, cloak soaked to the armpits from immersion down below, paddling, puffing, his face—have you ever seen an Arab who

found himself cheated in a deal? An Arab who'd wagered the wrong way?

He struck his forehead with a fist and glared dramatically up at the sky. Despair, humiliation, anxiety, fury fought for predominance on his features. It takes a raging Arab to speak in a voice of humility. He wrung his hands, stamped at Rallston and me, and wrung his hands. Truly, there had been a wretched mistake. Allah forgive this unwarranted assault on the *feringi*. It was the fog, the cursed fog which deluded the eye, making lambs appear as wolves.

Could Captain Rallston and Lieutenant the Amerikani and the emperors of both England and America—on whom be the blessing—pardon him an error caused by fog? Of course, now the daylight was coming, we did not in the least resemble thieves. But had we by chance passed other small boats in the dark? What? The feringi had seen many others? Then by the Three-Fingered Hand of the Wife of the Prophet, there was no more time to lose! He would be delighted to assist us to shore, but there was not the time.

Salaam? Salaam! Farewell!

My next visual impression, that Blackboard figurehead was back in the bows of its felucca. I give you my word, that Arab made a flying leap back to his own boat; I saw the pointed rifles withdraw like claws going into sheaths; saw those wolf-faced boatmen snatch their oars, sails go up like flags, paddles smack into the sea. Bag and baggage, that Arab pirate took leave.

He took the fog with him. His boats towed it after them as they rocked away, pulling the vapors astern to screen their departure. I was aware of pale blue sky opening overhead, a high bird planing in aery daylight. Sunlight sifted fans of gold over a cloud to warm a spreading view of waves. In the east where the fog was retreating, the Arabs were no longer visible. For a long time I lay immobile, staring at the

place where Blackbeard and his fleet had gone.

Then I turned my head very carefully, and surprised a coastline off the bow. Not half a mile away a glimmering beach, where quiet surf laundered white rocks and olive trees stood green atop a cliff and distant hills sloped violet and purple in bright upper air.

The shore looked virtuous and peaceful. It had no affinity to that coast of our embarkation. Sunshine on water. Sparkling wavelets. Goats posed on rocks, and there was a pastel house among the olives. We had drifted from a land of goblins into another sphere. Only the sunken hulk bearing us toward this sunny beach remained as evidence to last night's nightmare.



"RALSTON," I whispered tentatively, wanting to make sure. But it wasn't a dream. He voiced

a sound like a croak to let me know he was there, and I screwed around cm the seat to find him kneeling on the bottom-boards in bilge, arms hugging the thwart as if afraid to let go, head thrust forward, eyes staring. Drying brine had left a chemical deposit like diamond-dust sparkling in the tangles of his hair, so that his head glowed in the sun as if immortally crowned by some manner of halo. His face looked something immortal, too, crusted, swollen, harlequinned with rainbow-colored welts. His eyes, stuck in their sockets, were made of glass.

"Farraday," he whispered, "did you see some Arabs around here?" "*l* thought—"

"Did a big black-whiskered devil jump down into the hold and—and climb out and go away?"

"It seemed to me—"

"Come on."

The hatch was open, and we crawled on hands and knees. Rallston groaned as he chinned himself down, and as I lowered myself after him, day came across the sky in a yellow blaze and the air was filled with fight. You can't dream tropical sunlight, but the scene in that bumboat's flooded cargo hold had to be a dream. Sunshine poured down through the hatch overhead to fill the square enclosure with brilliance, and the water was clear and crystalline as a sea cave under the Bermudas. That six-by-six hold was shoulder-deep in water, water that had leaked in through the seams in the hull, but the planking was solid on the walls and bottom, and a half ton statue too heavy for a single man to lift can't get out through cracks.

Now laugh when I tell you that statue wasn't there. Laugh when I tell you that wonderful sculptured woman with her "come get me, I dare you" expression wasn't standing in the corner where Rallston and I had stowed her. No man could have budged that image. It had wanted block and tackle to get her aboard. Rallston hadn't touched her, nor had I; and Blackbeard had departed with empty hands. The statue had departed, too. She wasn't in her corner, or the other three corners; she wasn't on the floor. But there was something about the size of a lily pad and about the thickness of thin pie crust floating over the surface where the woman had been.

I stood with Rallston chest-deep in the water of that hold, sunlight cracking down through the hatch and ricochetting in white crescents off the little wavelets to make dancing reflections on the decktimbers overhead—I stood with Rallston in that boxed-in pond, and we stared. How we stared!

It wasn't any pie crust, I can tell you. Can you imagine the skim of some white powder floating on the surface of a pool? Or the skin of a human face, the top-layer, say, of a death mask set floating in brine? The back of that mask was gone. The body wasn't there. Just the last outer film, the

merest suggestion of that face remained afloat, as if sketched on the eddying ripples by a few strokes of dusty chalk.

"Look!" Rallston screamed. "Look!"

I saw it, all right. Misty as a photograph in smoke. An expression set adrift. The face of a woman looking over her shoulder, daring someone to "get" her— a mirage looking up at us from crystalline brine. Rallston's cry tore out of his throat in one exorcised devil of sound. Together we sprang. Together we rushed at that thing, hands out, like children trying to catch a reflection in a lake.

I caught it, too. How I caught it! I tripped over Rallston's boots and dived headlong, full face into that smoky expression, smack on the mouth. Those phantom lips in a phantom sneer! Can you see how it was? My face went into that thing and I closed howling lips on a mouthful of brine I'll not forget when the last trump blows. I swallowed a gulp of seawater that would have sickened a whale. I broke that pie crust face into a million particles; drank half of it; spluttered to the surface with that "come get me, I dare you" expression showering out of my fingers, pouring through my hair.

Rallston got some of it, himself. He flung a hand to his mouth and went up out of the hatch as if fired from a catapult. He was scrubbing his face when I pulled out of the bath to stand beside him, and that Australian renegade looked sick as a dog. Both of us did.

"Melted," he whispered. "My God—" "That's why the barge didn't sink," I groaned. "This *isn't* the Red Sea! Do you know that coast over there?"

"I know," he said thickly. "Palestine! It's the *Dead Sea*!"

"That valley last night—" "Gomorrah!"

He was praying on his knees when I went overboard. He fell to his knees as if

he'd been sniped through the spine, and as I swam for the beach I looked back and saw him there. Kneeling on the deck of that half-sunk barge, face to the sky.

I didn't look back again. On the beach, I ran. There would be a well near that house among the olives, and I wanted a drink to wash that woman's expression from my mouth. But I'll never wash it out. Never! To this day my mouth burns with the taste, and I can see her face, defiant still, as my face fell to smash it in that bumboat's bilge.



WHEN Farraday stopped speaking, the twilight had melted to darkness in a miracle of its own, the Red Sea

vanished to a path of bubbling phosphorus in the liner's wake. The tall mountain abeam was a shadow under a star, and somewhere within reach of that shadow, before the days of the Suez Canal, the Children of Israel had run dry-shod between waves, while the following chariots of Pharaoh were engulfed.

A bar of yellow light came from the steering-engine house and put a shining hard scar down the naturalist's profiled jaw. Mendel, the metallurgist, stared at his companion's face. His lips felt cold on the question.

"You mean that statue—it dissolved?"

Farraday nodded. "The water finished what those fanatical Arabs had been preserving in that cave for centuries. That southern coast of the Dead Sea goes back in history. It isn't a part of Palestine you read about in guide books. Nobody'd go there but a couple of young fools who'd lost their way. That land was cursed in Genesis."

The metallurgist winced as Farraday gripped him by the shoulder.

"You and your winds and tides!" the naturalist rasped. "You'll say some wandering Greek in the days of Praxiteles carved that image out of rock and left it there. Well, Praxiteles was an amateur compared to the hand that did that sculpturing. The greatest sculptor in the universe did that statue. Only the greatest creative artist in the universe could have captured that 'come get me, I dare you' expression in rock."

Farraday's eyes were bleak in the dimness. "And what kind of rock melts away? What kind of rock would disappear in the hold of a sinking bumboat and run out through the cracks? Not the kind of rock that Rallston's faith is built on, I can promise That atheistic, romance-crazy you. Australian was on his knees when I left him that day, and he's praying yet, from one end of Australia to the other. They say he's the greatest evangelist to ever start a crowd down the sawdust trail—his wife is a shy little woman who plays the organ—and a man has to be pretty sincere to pray in

public these hard-bitten days. I heard him recently on the radio, and what do you think his sermons are about? Miracles! His belief in miracles! Do you know what he uses for his text?"

Gold prickles moved up the metallurgist's skin. He waited with his mouth open a little.

Farraday was pointing toward the coast that was a shadow under a star, pointing in the direction of Arabia and the country beyond Arabia and the sea beyond that. His voice was low, husky on the quoted passage.

"'And it came to pass . . . that he said, Escape for thy life, look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain lest thou be consumed . . . But Lot's wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.""

