

# **Bride of the Serpent God**

Ki-Gor, Lord of the Jungle

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by John Peter Drummond

## I. - Treachery

KI-GOR placed a plump, scarlet berry in his mouth, and munched slowly, with much satisfaction. He lay in the cool shade of a flowering shrub, completely relaxed, obviously at peace with the world and pleased with life in general. The only sounds were the soft hum of insects drawn by the heavy scent of flowers and the lulling murmur of the broad river which flowed a scant twenty paces from where Ki-Gor rested.

Helene, his mate, vibrantly young and alive, stood beside Ki-Gor. She looked down at her lounging husband and feigning disapproval, she placed hands on hips and sighed with disgust.

“You lazy thing, Ki-Gor. Are you going to lie there all day eating berries?” she asked, pouting lips as red and much more inviting than the fruit which had occupied her Jungle Lord the past half hour.

The bronzed giant stirred only slightly, and without opening his eyes, he plumped another luscious berry in his mouth, and began chewing contentedly. But a little boy’s smile of guilt slowly edged his lips, as he opened one cautious eye to peer at the accusing figure of his wife.

“For two days, Mister Ki-Gor, you’ve been rushing me along like mad, saying you had an important meeting here with Tembu George,” she said, pointing a meaning finger at the Jungle Lord. “Now that we are here, I find no Tembu George, no important meeting, nothing but a lot of fruit you persist in stuffing yourself with because it is the nearest and easiest thing at hand!”

Ki-Gor’s gray eyes opened wide in a great show of innocence. He made a valiant, though completely unsuccessful, effort to show hurt dismay that Helene would doubt his motives for a moment.

“Why, Helene, you know how healthful fruit is, and the fact it happens to be hanging right at arm’s reach from me has nothing to do with my eating it,” he righteously pointed out. “And you know also how very good rest is to build a person up. That’s the only reason I am lying down.”

The redhaired girl looked at the superbly proportioned body of her mate, and burst out laughing. "You certainly look like you need to be built up, you frail little mountain of a man!"

"Well, anyway," he grinned, "it is only proper to show adequate appreciation of gifts so conveniently and lavishly provided for us by nature." Stretching out his hand he urged, "Here, try some of these berries you'll find them delicious."

Helene tossed her red hair in a definite negative reply, and nudged Ki-Gor's ribs with one small foot.

"I will not let you fill me up on those things," she declared. "You promised to catch me some fish for lunch if I would hurry, and I want my fish!"

Ki-Gor shook his head apologetically. "Wrong time of day. Never catch fish this time of day. Better wait until morning."

He watched the slim, briefly clad girl turn with a switch of her hips and walk to where his spear rested on the ground. She bent, picked it up, and returned to place it across his chest.

"I want fish!" she said.

The white man glanced from spear to river, and reflected sadly, "Too muddy. I could never get anything in that muddy water. Besides, Tembu George is due to arrive any minute, and there wouldn't be time to cook fish even if we caught any."

"Fish, Ki-Gor!" Helene stated, catching the arm of the feebly protesting Jungle Lord, tugging mightily. With much groaning he got to his feet, and then abruptly he swept Helene up under one arm, and grasping the spear with the other, strode toward the river, humming loudly and tunelessly.

"Put me down, Ki-Gor! Don't you dare throw me in that river!" Helene cried, wriggling and kicking as she tried to escape. On he strode, unperturbed by the rising din of her cries. At the very edge of the bank, he halted, carefully putting his spear down. He appeared to debate as to where to throw the laughing, struggling girl, and then his solemn face breaking into a smile, he carefully set her down on the bank.

“Now sit there, and don’t go puddling around the river bank,” he told her, “because there are some very discerning crocodiles hereabouts who would like nothing better than a redhaired, long-legged young lady for dessert today.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied. “Now you go to work.”

Helene watched the agile grace with which the big man crouched and picked up the spear. He straightened, threw back his massive shoulders, and walked several steps away to where the bank overhung a quiet, deep pool. He studied the spot, and then satisfied, he bent to one knee, holding the spear ready.

Minutes passed, and the motionless Jungle Lord was a graven image, his keen, searching eyes alone betraying the restless energy he held in check. Then the muscles of his shoulder and arm abruptly tensed, as he caught sight of a movement in the water below. A large fish passed with a languid grace up from the depths toward the surface. It swept by within Ki-Gor’s reach, but he made no move, for with the subtle judgment of a wild creature, he knew the chances were still too great against a certain catch.

The big fish turned, and swept up ever closer to the surface, then came in close to the bank. The speed of the Jungle Lord’s action bewildered the eye. With the smooth sureness of a piston-drive, his powerful muscles sent the spear point true, even before the cold lightning in the finny body could pull the fish to safety. The practiced skill of a primitive fisherman showed in the adroit manner in which Ki-Gor spun the twisting fish safely from the water and deposited it carefully on the dry ground behind him.

Helene gleefully slapped her hands, watching the success of her husband. “Ho, ho,” she taunted him, “too muddy to catch anything, is it? Now, my vegetarian friend, we begin to make some progress. Two more as big as that, and you may go back to your resting.”

She jumped to her feet and ran up the bank to make preparations for cooking the meal. The Jungle Lord glanced at her running form, and with a smile turned back to his patient task. Crouching on one knee, he again seemed to freeze into stone, so still was his great body.

Pell mell up the low slope ran Helene in her typically enthusiastic manner. Occupied with the matter before her, she paid little attention to her surroundings, giving not a glance to the barrier of shrubs, brush and thorn which rose head

high around the clearing where they had made camp. She bent to select stones to be heated red hot in flames as the first step in preparing leaf wrapped fish steamed to mouth-watering deliciousness in the native manner. She picked up one rock, and started to reach for another when a low ominous rumble of sound jerked her upright.

There at the edge of the clearing restlessly moved a big lion, its mane golden in a bright shaft of sunlight. The huge male glanced arrogantly around, his baleful yellow eyes coming to rest on the girl. Out of the jungle behind the sleek male padded a lioness, nervously testing the air.

Fright burned through Helene with an electric blaze. She kept her head, however, and though prickles of anxiety ran along her spine, with deliberate slowness she edged backward one step, then another.

Tense, evil, yellow eyes flickered and burned at her like twin torches. Every instinct urged her to turn screaming and flee but with iron will she fought off this suicidal impulse. Her greatest hope lay in Ki-Gor's keen senses, for if the lions waited a few more moments before deciding to charge, she felt it was a certainty her mate would discover something was wrong and in some miraculous manner forestall the fate which faced her.

But now the great male grew more restless than ever; his jaws opened and the long tearing teeth glinted whitely against the red cavern of his mouth. Issuing from his deep chest came a thunderous rumble of hate, and he gathered himself in cat fashion for a swift, raging charge at the defenseless woman.

The hideous challenge of the lion struck Ki-Gor's ears like a thunderclap. He spun up and around, his gray eyes knifing up to Helene and beyond to take in the situation at a glance. The surface robe of civilization was torn away by what he saw. His nostrils spread and whitened, his firm lips drew back over his teeth in an unuttered snarl. Propelled by a jungle fury as great as that of the stalking lion, he leaped forward to face the beast and shield Helene. Before Ki-Gor could reach her, the huge lion straightened from its crouch and flung with mad speed toward the girl.

Ki-Gor knew instantly he could never reach her. There was but one long chance, and he took it. His steel muscles corded as he braked to a stop, and drawing the heavy spear in his right arm back, he plunged it forward with tremendous speed.

The terrible power of the throw sent the heavy spear hurtling like a weightless shadow. It sped past the cringing girl and crashed between the fore legs of the charging lion, through the beast's chest and deep into its vitals. The skewered animal in its final plunge dashed the spear hilt against the ground driving it in deeper. Then with a last gurgling roar of pain the big male careened to one side of Helene and fell shuddering and dying in the dirt.

Maddened by the sound of her dying mate, the lioness, slaving with anger and excitement, bounded forward to the attack. Ki-Gor had anticipated this move, however, and the moment he threw the spear he resumed his leaping rush. He swept by Helene, straight at the oncoming lioness. The knife from his belt sheath gleamed in his right hand. There was a lash of bodies and a blinding melee of dust. The harsh grunts of the man mingled with the staccato growling hate of the animal. Through the cloud of dust Helene saw Ki-Gor fasten himself with unbreakable grip on the back of the lioness, his left arm tight about the creature's throat, while the right hand drove the knife with relentless power again and again into the chest. The plunging beast staggered and stumbled and fell lifeless. Ki-Gor stepped back lightly from the inert body, and the cruel mask on his face softened and disappeared. He pulled a great draught of air into his lungs, then bent with steady hands to clean his knife. Thrusting the weapon back in its sheath, he turned, calm and unshaken, and walked to Helene's side.

"It's all right now," he said.

Her eyes were still large with fright, but seeing how unperturbed her mate was, she caught hold of her feelings, and smiling, reached out a small hand to caress Ki-Gor's arm.

She smiled, and her voice was steady, as she said, "You really have a time trying to get your wife fed, don't you, Ki-Gor?"

He took her by the arm and guided her close to the riverbank. Selecting a clear spot for a fire, he set about collecting firewood and stones for heating. Expertly he arranged the wood and stones, and in the age-old jungle manner of rapidly revolving a dry stick with his broad hands, he soon had flames biting their way along the base of the wood. Helene gathered the proper leaves, long, broad, heavy leaves to wrap the fish in, while Ki-Gor deftly prepared the fish for cooking.



The Jungle Lord was busy, his back turned to the river, when Helene, looking up the river suddenly cried, "Here comes Tembu George now!"

"I might know food would bring him hurrying at top speed," Ki-Gor said without turning from his task.

Shielding her eyes, Helene strained to make out the figures in the distant boat which swept down stream towards them.

"He certainly is traveling in style," she commented, "that looks like the finest war canoe the Masai ever turned out."

His curiosity aroused, Ki-Gor turned to peer downstream, the opposite direction from which the boat approached. In a puzzled tone he asked, "Where is any war canoe?"

"Why, right there," the girl cried.

He looked up the river then and instantly arose. "That can't be Tembu George. He will come from the other direction."

Gliding swiftly with the current, the big craft came at a fast pace. It was a long, low, rakish boat, seating at least twelve warriors. Paddles dipped rhythmically into the glittering water sending the craft along with practiced skill and precision. Ki-Gor made out the dark forms of the oarsmen now, and he saw the black carved prow.

Apparently the men in the canoe had sighted the couple on the bank, for they veered in and slackened their pace. There was a harsh cry, a flurry of action by the rowers, and the big craft slowed almost to a standstill, and nosed its way up to the bank a few yards from where the jungle couple stood. In the manner of skilled river men, the natives hastily made the boat fast to the shore.

The Jungle Lord saw the leader of the warriors leap ashore. The man was tall and thin, with a lean hard face and nervous, darting eyes. Those uneasy eyes ran quickly over Helene and Ki-Gor, and then the man raised his right hand and called out a greeting of peace. The words he spoke were ones Ki-Gor knew, but his accents were of some distant locality.

"Welcome, traveler," the big white man said, responding to the native's greeting.

“The war canoe you have there is one to be proud of.”

“Aye! I am proud of it,” the black man replied. His eyes flickered past Ki-Gor to Helene and then off up the slope.

“It has carried us far and fast this day,” he said. “Tell me, is this the country of the Wasuli? It is many years since I was last here and the region has changed, making it difficult for me to be exactly sure of my place.”

Ki-Gor noted that the other natives in the long canoe were now all ashore, and each man was fully armed. With studied casualness, he took in every detail of the group, meanwhile answering, “Yes, this is the upper edge of the Wasuli area, and their region extends down river a half-day’s ride at least, even in your swift craft.”

Several of the men scattered up the bank, and though the Jungle Lord in no way betrayed the knowledge, his searching eyes knew the men were on the lookout for others who might be in company with the jungle couple. With regret, he remembered his bow and quiver of arrows lying where he had left them by a shrub, and his heavy spear resting against a tree where he had placed it after dispatching the lion.

From two of the natives padding about in the clearing above them came surprised exclamations. They had come on the bodies of the slain beasts. They called to their leader, and Helene and Ki-Gor accompanied him to the spot. He looked at the big bodies, studying the wounds, and with a tone of unbelieving admiration in his voice he asked Ki-Gor, “Who did this?”

“I did,” the Jungle Lord stated simply, without any trace of boastfulness for to him the deed was not in the least unusual.

“You are a great warrior to have done this singlehanded,” commented the tall black man, his uneasy eyes weighing and appraising Ki-Gor again. “What is your name?”

“I am Ki-Gor,” was the answer.

“I am Basru,” the native volunteered. “I come from a place of great warriors, but by the golden moon, I know no other man who could have performed such a deed as this.”

He turned away to go, barking a command for his men to board the canoe. As though trained to obey, the natives turned toward the craft. The hostility Ki-Gor had sensed lurking in the strangers, he suddenly thought, seemed unwarranted. The bronzed jungle man moved to accompany the native leader to the riverbank. It was this momentary relaxation of his instinctive guard that Ki-Gor was long to regret. As the Jungle Lord walked along with Basru toward the boat, he paid little attention to the two big natives who lingered behind their fellows and now ambled slowly along at his back.

Basru raised his hand as though to stroke his hair, and at this signal, the two black men who trailed behind flung themselves on Ki-Gor's back. The completely unexpected onslaught sent the Jungle Lord crashing to his knees under the shocked eyes of Helene before he knew what was happening.

But Ki-Gor's trained reflexes changed him into a raging fury by the time he struck the earth. He made no single outcry, but fought silently, desperately, terribly, from the first moment he could bring his great muscles into play. His steel-hard hands caught hold of one of the native's ankles and the sheer overwhelming pressure of his grip burst the man's skin and flesh as he tore him down within closer reach. He snapped the native's neck like a rotten twig and lashed out with mighty blows that caved in the ribs of the other native.

The treacherous Basru, seeing that the massive white man was recovering his footing, picked up a big rock and darted in behind Ki-Gor. The native smashed the rock down once, twice, against Ki-Gor's skull. This cowardly blow accomplished what the two natives had failed to do. Ki-Gor pitched face forward like a felled ox. Helene screamed in horror as she saw her beloved mate lying crumpled, blood gushing from his head.

In panic she started to throw herself at Ki-Gor, but ruthless hands caught her arms and drew her back.

Basru's cruel eyes shifted from the fallen Jungle Lord to the sobbing girl. "You'll have no further need of him, woman. He's dead, or if he's not, he soon will be."

At an order from Basru, Helene was taken to the boat, but it took three men to force the struggling girl along. The hard-faced native leader glanced at Ki-Gor's unmoving form, debated a moment, then directed the white man also be brought along to the boat.

“The great Serpent God will smile on us for this day’s work,” Basru said in a pleased voice. “Even as the High Priestess ordered us, we have found a worthy sacrifice for the Festival of the Seventh Moon.”

The tall leader jumped into the war canoe to see personally to the binding of Helene’s wrists and ankles. She was forced to lie down in the bow of the boat, so that her red hair and fair skin could not be detected by anyone watching from shore. Satisfied that the girl was safely tied and placed, Basru ordered the boat cast off. His eye ran down the row of men waiting with paddles ready, and came to light on the big form of Ki-Gor. The natives had carried the white man and placed him in the boat, assuming from Basru’s directions that he intended taking the Jungle Lord along.

“We have no use for that lifeless hulk,” he called out sharply. “I meant only for you to bring him to the river bank and throw him into the water, thus erasing all trace of his body. Quickly now, throw him over the side.”

Helene fought at her bonds, and succeeded in straining her head up to plead with Basru. He ignored her tumbling words, and the two men nearest Ki-Gor, rose and caught hold of the Jungle Lord. Through reddened tear-wet eyes, Helene saw the natives lift the limp and unresisting Ki-Gor and toss him out over the low side of the war canoe. She heard the loud splash as he struck the water. Simultaneously, Basru’s harsh voice called out a command and the boat jumped forward and with steadily increasing speed cut its way Upstream through the sluggish current.

## II. - Amnesia

KI-GOR’S long heavy frame struck the water hard as the two natives threw him overboard. The flat shock caused an instinctive reflex in the jungle-bred giant, a sudden tightening of his muscles even though his mind was fogged deep in unconsciousness. The spark of life in this powerful man was not easily quenched. The will to live burned in him, conscious or unconscious, more strongly than it would in any civilized man, because this will, above all else, was the sustaining force which had brought him through innumerable seemingly hopeless situations.

The shock of the fall, the tensing of his muscles sent a faint glimmer of feeling along his stunned nerve centers. The cool water pressed further awareness into

his numbed body, and then as he sank below the surface, the water bit into the deep gash on his head. This abrupt burning pain jerked Ki-Gor back to semi-consciousness. He awoke in choking blackness, and without reasoning, he threw his energies into an immediate, frenzied fight.

Where it would have seemed impossible for a normal man to have will or strength left for a struggle, Ki-Gor's jungle heritage rallied his waning energies. Flailing ponderously, gulping great quantities of water, he fought his head above the surface.

The big man's body was an agony of hurt and weariness. His eyes saw nothing. His lungs labored and fought to sustain his failing strength. But an inner force pushed him on, calling forth from his spent muscles another, and still another, effort. It was an eternity of time, a burning stretch of aeons, that he floated and sank, and floated again, until through luck, his own unseeing efforts, and the eddying movement of the slow current, he came into a shallow stretch of water near the bank.

Ki-Gor tried to walk in the shallow water, but his legs refused to sustain him. He stumbled and fell repeatedly, each time having even greater difficulty in rising again. But each time he did rise. He came finally to the low bank, and with one last mighty effort, he pulled himself up on the dry land, and fell face downward.

The big white man lay in a tumbled heap, his long body pressed into the gently waving growth of river ferns and grass. Blood from the ugly gash on his head ran down over his face and dripped on the warm earth. He slept the deep, black sleep of utter exhaustion and painful hurt. Africa's ever present clouds of venomous little insects sought him out and feasted their greed, but Ki-Gor, wrapped in black forgetfulness, was unconscious of their torturing bites. The slender shadows of the grass fronds steadily lengthened across his body as the sun departed westward in a hot and shimmering sky.

Shadows crept out from the great trees along the bank, and slipped over Ki-Gor to dull the surface of the water. A faint breeze sifted down the river and with it came night. A mist, gray and ominous, rolled along the river, gathering in density, and rolling out wetly over the banks. Still Ki-Gor lay unmoving in the damp grass, his breath coming with a hard deep regular rhythm. .

Once a large buck, followed by two does, came out of a lane in the forest, and on

soundless feet in the soft turf, picked its way to water. With the man-scent blanketed by the mist, the daintily stepping feet of the buck were almost upon Ki-Gor before the wary creature sighted the white form. Instantly the animal froze, his nostrils swelling out in search of danger. Reassured by the absolute quiet of the white body, the buck soon swerved off to the left and continued to the water's edge, obediently followed by the two does.

The long night was merging into dawn when a lone jackal, after hours of luckless foraging for easy prey, came panting down to the river to fill its hungry belly with the cool water. The dirty, bedraggled, jungle scavenger picked its way along in the natural cringing gait of its breed. Slavering in disgruntlement, the jackal padded up to the bank and lapped thirstily. After a full minute, it raised its head nervously and snuffled at the air. The fur on the animal's back bristled up at the scent of man, and after a slight wait, the gray form watchfully moved to follow the scent. The evil ghost crept within cautious yards of Ki-Gor. The savage brain of the animal sought out and weighed the man's hurt, balancing the risk of attack against possible gain for its grumbling belly.

The still form of the Jungle Lord, with its fresh blood scent, stimulated beyond endurance the greedy gnawing of the beast's stomach.

The jackal, sensing life in the sprawling body, fought to down its fear of man. With quiet, nervous steps it padded a wide ring around Ki-Gor, its teeth grinning whitely as rising hunger tried to force courage into its cowardly heart.

The soft, early-morning wind caught the strong smell of the beast and brought it to Ki-Gor's nostrils. For the first time since he had crawled out of the water, the bronzed giant stirred. He shifted uneasily, but did not waken. The jackal tensed at this movement and stood head pointed at the man. Again the strong jackal scent poured into Ki-Gor's consciousness. A primal protective sense shook his nerves from their stunned lethargy, and his gray eyes flickered open.

Urged by the strong scent of danger, Ki-Gor struggled to focus his eyes. His vision in the faint light of dawn formed only a confusing, colorless blur. The jackal growled, sensing the helplessness of the man. Under the stimulus of this noise, Ki-Gor made out the menacing figure of the scavenger, the beast's form swimming in outline against a weaving, shifting background. The jackal girded its courage to the maximum and advanced with stiff, bristling steps toward the Jungle Lord. Ki-Gor could see now the white fangs of the hated skulker, and a

wave of sheer anger at this most cowardly of all beasts churned enough strength into his legs to heave the Jungle Lord to his feet.

He stood there weaving, fighting off waves of nausea. Try as he might, Ki-Gor could not make his feet respond to his will. With bare hands he tried to advance, but he was unable to walk. The jackal slowed its advance, and then halted. A fallen man was one thing, but an aroused one, even though wounded, was another matter. The animal debated, emitting low snarls, and then as Ki-Gor at last achieved a staggering step forward, the jackal leaped back, and with one last growling outburst, turned and darted away.

Ki-Gor watched the animal disappear. Abruptly the swimming blur closed over his vision again as the sense of danger faded. A numbness crept over the Jungle Lord, and with a sense of great effort, he slipped to his knees and awkwardly stretched out in the wet grass. Dull, aching sleep came over him, and his mind shut itself off from the stirring daylight world.

When the Jungle Lord next roused, the sun stood high in the sky, its scorching rays beating directly on his now dry and feverish body. He sat up. He looked about him with heavy-lidded eyes, puzzled eyes that sought an understanding of his present predicament. Slowly he lifted an exploratory hand and felt his aching head, probing the gash there.

His brows furrowed in thought, but the terrific blows dealt him had blocked the delicate memory mechanism. Events of not only the past few days, but of the past years, refused to come. The cruel blow had cut Ki-Gor off from the past, cutting away from him at the same time the acquired veneer of civilization which contact with Helene and others of the outer world had brought him.

He stood up and drew a deep breath into his great lungs. Already his marvelous recuperative powers were at work restoring power and strength to his hard muscles. In a few days, with the proper rest and no untoward accidents, he would be as sound and vigorous as before. But there was a vague uneasiness in his mind for he sensed that all was not well. He tried to reach back through the curtain which had fallen so suddenly and grasp at the memories which troubled him, but which he could not pluck from his subconscious.

Ki-Gor shook his aching head and glanced around him. His eyes halted on the inviting water of the river. He walked to the bank and washed the caked blood

and grime from his head and shoulders. Then he drank deeply. Refreshed, the big man rose and went at a slow gait toward the rising wall of the jungle. He walked into the darkening shadows of the trees for a distance of about one-hundred yards, and then, selecting a towering giant of a tree, he climbed cautiously into its upper limbs. In the high branches of the tall tree, he selected a comfortable perch, leaned back against the trunk and closed his aching eyes. The gentle sway and movement of the ancient tree quickly lulled the big man to sleep. So passed another night and day, with Ki-Gor, except for occasional trips to the river, resting and sleeping like any animal recovering from its wounds. The feverish burn left Ki-Gor's body, and he shook off the sense of giddy weakness. Hunger began to prick him into activity. He set out in search of food. His keen eyes searched the jungle floor for the fresh spoor of game, and at length along a narrow trail he came across recent signs made by a small buck.

The Jungle Lord's long stride lengthened, as driven by hunger, he quickened his pace. He sped down the narrow green aisle, eluding the occasional choking stands of bramble, slipping wraith-like over the bunched undergrowth.

Ever fresher was the scent of the deer. Ki-Gor's hand slipped automatically to the hilt of his knife, the always present knife which had stayed at his waist even during his struggles in the water. The blade gleamed free in his right hand. The jungle was silent except for the raucous calls of a few brilliantly plumaged birds.

Ki-Gor's passage was soundless. He was in every sense a cunning relentless huntsman. He was downwind from the unsuspecting buck, and though the animal's scent drew him on like a magnet, his own presence was protected from the hunted creature. He glided within yards of where the buck stood browsing.

He sprinted to within arm's reach of the fleeing buck, and in a bounding leap, dived on the animal with crushing weight. The shock of Ki-Gor's onslaught toppled the buck, and his knife bit deep into the creature's vitals as it fell.

His appetite satisfied, the Jungle Lord stretched luxuriously and looked about for a protected resting place. But a strange feeling of urgency began to permeate his being, and refused to let him rest. Though he was completely unable to fathom the reason, something within him propelled Ki-Gor back to the river. He gave in to this inner urging and began moving leisurely back along the trail he had recently traversed.



When Ki-Gor reached the river, he hesitated a moment and then swung upstream. It was not long before the cat-treading white giant neared the clearing where the natives had attacked him and carried off Helene. Ki-Gor did not think at this time of the treacherous assault. He did not recall the event, for the dreadful blows he had suffered on the head had blotted out even any remembrance of Helene. Buried deep within his subconscious, however, was the burning knowledge of his mate and it was this that drew him back to the clearing.

Ki-Gor came up to the edge of the clearing along a narrow animal trail through a rustling break of tall reeds. He paused, cautious jungle creature that he was, to survey the ground ahead before advancing into the open. His keen gray eyes automatically searched the clearing, alert for any sign of danger.

Ki-Gor's eyes suddenly narrowed and grew cold. He drew back into the concealment of the reeds, and the powerful muscles along his lean hard body tightened. There on the river bank, its carved prow drawn up on the green grass, stood a long, grim war canoe.

### III. - The Black Arrow

Ki-Gor stared long at the war craft. The sight of the boat stirred a feeling of anger in him, started the blood surging through his veins. This instantaneous reaction was a completely unreasoning one, for he had no idea why this sight should stir such emotions. Soon his careful, wary visual search for any sign of life or hidden enemy, convinced him the open plot was deserted.

Satisfied no enemy lurked in ambush, the Jungle Lord glided out of the rustling reeds to the war canoe. The scent of natives, still fresh and strong, was in the boat. Ki-Gor studied the footprints about the boat, and then went up the low slope following the natives' clear trail. At the top of the slope, he found the remains of a recent campfire and scattered remnants of food.

He was painstakingly studying the ground, when nearby he heard the muffled voices of natives. Ki-Gor stood still for a moment, judging the sound. He turned then and ran lightly to a gnarled tree a few yards away. With one powerful spring, he leapt high in the air, caught a sturdy branch, and rapidly pulled himself up into the leafy protection of the upper boughs.

The white man watched narrowly as three armed natives, tall, brawny men,

emerged from a jungle trail and passed directly below him. He saw the warriors halt and place their spears and bows against a small tree, and then sit down close together near the burned out fire. His eyes studied with interest the long heavy knives carried by the men, deadly blades which they did not discard even now when they were resting.

Although all three of the black men were exceptionally fine physical specimens, Ki-Gor's eyes were drawn especially to the largest and most superbly proportioned of the natives. This man was a massive warrior, graceful as a panther. There was an air of quiet assurance about him. He wore no gaudy tribal markings nor any of the usual native decorations, but there was a definite air of command about him, a clear indication that he was a chieftain.

The three men sat for a long time, staring moodily at the ground, seldom conversing. Though every stranger in the jungle is potentially an enemy until proved otherwise, Ki-Gor oddly enough felt no threat resting in these men. For reasons he could not explain, a sudden urge came over him to make known his presence. He was armed with only a knife, however, and even though he felt there was no danger to be feared from these warriors, he was cautious enough to advantageously place himself as close to their discarded spears as possible.

He worked his way silently out along a broad overhanging limb. Then Ki-Gor dropped to the ground on cushioned feet, and moved so swiftly and quietly that he stood before the three sitting natives almost before they sensed his presence. The startled natives looked up in unison, and for a moment their hands hesitated at the hilts of the heavy knives. Ki-Gor's face betrayed no sign of emotion, but inwardly he enjoyed the bewilderment of the natives immensely. It was a tribute to his wisdom, however, that his right hand hovered ever close to the shaft of one man's spear.

The expressions of alarm on the warrior's faces quickly changed to bewildered surprise. They seemed unable to believe their eyes. They stared speechless at Ki-Gor. The massive warrior was the first to regain his tongue.

"Ki-Gor!" he boomed out in a surprised, unbelieving voice. "But how can it be you?"

The now friendly eyes of the huge Negro looked expectantly past the Jungle Lord searching for another person. He seemed disappointed to find the white

man alone.

“But where is Helene?” the warrior asked, his voice reflecting deep concern. “Is she hurt? Where is she?”

Ki-Gor listened gravely to the man’s words. The tongue he spoke was familiar; it was the language of the Masai. Ki-Gor understood the words, but he did not understand what the native spoke about. His face showed clearly how puzzled he was.

“I come as a friend,” the Jungle Lord said slowly, “but I do not understand your questions. Perhaps you mistake me for some other one you know.”

The mouth of the natives’ spokesman dropped open at this odd statement from the great Ki-Gor, the firm friend of many years, the beloved companion and leader in many exciting and dangerous adventures.

“I-I’m Tembu George! What’s wrong with you? Surely you can’t be joking.”

The Jungle Lord studied the native’s face a moment and then repeated, half to himself, “Tembu George.” After a pause, he again addressed Tembu George, saying, “I have no reason to joke, Tembu George, I don’t recall seeing you before, and I have no knowledge of the person you call Helene.”

Tembu George stood up now, and came closer to the white man. The concern he felt at Ki-Gor’s strange tone was apparent. His grave eyes, as he came closer, noted the ugly gash on Ki-Gor’s head.

“You have suffered a bad hurt recently,” Tembu George stated, noting every action of his friend. “How did you get that cut?”

Ki-Gor’s hand raised to the gash and his brows knit in thought. “Somehow I can’t seem to remember” he replied.

“Hmmm. And what did you say your name was,” Tembu George asked, snapping the question quickly.

In normal fashion and with every evidence of assurance, the Jungle Lord started to reply, “Why, I am ... I am.” He halted and passed his hand over his brow.

“It is a ridiculous thing,” Ki-Gor said in a sheepish, yet worried tone, “But I can’t for the life of me tell you my name.”

Tembu George stood looking directly into his eyes now. “You are Ki-Gor, my friend of many years,” he said. “Somehow you have been injured and are suffering from a loss of memory. It was over four days ago that I was to meet you and your mate, Helene, here at this spot.”

The warrior turned and glanced at his two gaping men. He looked then down the slope to the riverbank for a few moments before turning back to his friend.

“When we arrived there were clear signs that a boat had brought men ashore down there. There was abundant evidence you had been here.” And now there was a hint of a smile in Tembu George’s eyes, “for we found the carcasses of two lions lying over there.”

Ki-Gor listened carefully to the big Negro’s words. Instinctively, he felt this man was a friend, a good friend who could be trusted. “Tell me more,” he said.

“Well, reconstructing the scene from the evidence we could find, it is certain that a group of natives, roughly about twelve, came ashore from a war canoe, talked with you and Helene for a period of time, and then there was a sudden brief struggle right over there. There were blood stains leading from that spot down to the boat.”

Ki-Gor tried hard to recall this scene which was described to him but he could remember no single detail. He shook his head, indicating his complete lack of knowledge of the event.

“When we arrived the signs were still very fresh, and we thought you had been carried off by boat,” Tembu George said. “We went up river two days’ journey but could find no sign of a war canoe so we returned to search this place more carefully.”

The Masai chieftain related the details of his four day search for Ki-Gor and Helene. He knew it was impossible that the marauders had gone down river because he would have encountered them as he approached. The two day search up river was completely fruitless, as there was no evidence to be found of any raiding party. Without any lead to aid him, Tembu George therefore returned to the clearing to search for further evidence. His men were now beating the jungle

approaches to the clearing thoroughly for any clue as to the identity of the attackers or for any sign that Helene or Ki-Gor either one might have escaped into the forest.

While Ki-Gor listened, Masai warriors began to return in groups of two and three to the clearing. Any further proof needed by Ki-Gor that he was well known to Tembu George was quickly given by these men. Each native, as soon as he sighted the bronzed Jungle Lord cried out in pleased surprise and called him by name. These powerful warriors, respected the length and breadth of Africa for their grim fighting qualities, immediately showed a worried sympathy when they learned from their fellows of their great friend Ki-Gor's strange behavior.

"This Helene," Ki-Gor said, "but how could I forget my own mate?"

"The mind is a strange thing," Tembu George replied, "but even though fate has struck you such a sudden, unkind blow, we must delay no longer than absolutely necessary our search for Helene."

Ki-Gor nodded his approval. "Aye, the trail grows cold as we wait."

Tembu George was somewhat cheered by Ki-Gor's response. The Jungle Lord was undoubtedly convinced that he spoke the truth and that he was the white man's friend. "Our search proves Helene did not go into the jungle, so it is evident she was carried away upstream by boat. Come, let us follow."

Pleased at the prospect of avenging the wrong done Ki-Gor, the rangy Masai warriors swiftly gathered their war gear and hastened to the boat. The Jungle Lord was lifted from his puzzled gloom by the friendly bond which he felt ever more strongly for these stalwart fighting men. He felt kinship with them, and a hope, that through their company and aid, the dark blank in his mind would be remedied.

Ki-Gor followed the Masai down the slope. He paused as he came to the carved prow of the black war canoe. He stared hard at the prow for a long minute. Tembu George saw the rapt expression on his friend's face, and came over to him. The Masai chieftain looked at the prow, but saw nothing except the familiar panther figurehead.

"The figurehead," Ki-Gor said suddenly. "Somehow the sight of that prow brings

back the memory of another war canoe. One with the figurehead of a fanged serpent.”

“Fanged serpent,” Tembu George repeated thoughtfully after him. “I know the tribal symbols used throughout this region, and that is not one of them. I believe this is the clue we needed to find Helene.”

Tembu George consulted with his men carefully, and in great earnestness, they discussed the serpent figurehead described by Ki-Gor, concluding the war canoe must have come from far afield.

Ki-Gor listened to the discussion, then pointed out, “If the symbol is an unusual one, then certainly it will be noticed somewhere along the river, and if we try hard enough we are sure to find those who have seen the boat pass.”

The Masai made their boat ready now, and skillfully they cast off and swept upstream in search of the foe. The muscled blacks bent to their work, and in fast, smooth rhythm their broad paddles cut the placid surface of the wide river. The proud war canoe scudded forward at a fast, sustained pace.

Long, hot hours passed, and still the broad backs of the Masai resisted fatigue. The paddles rose and fell with deceptive ease as the men labored under the burning sun. The bright green of the jungle, unbroken except for brilliantly colored splotches of flowers, flowed by, an impenetrable sameness that wearied the eye. The merciless bright sky dimmed before the approach of evening, and the shimmering glaze over the water softened and faded. High clouds rolled out across the sky with night. It was now Tembu George who guided the long craft ashore.

The Masai laid down their paddles, and rising stiffly from the positions so long held, stepped on land. The warriors rested and ate, taking their ease while they waited for the moon to rise. But beneath their apparent air of leisure was a restless undercurrent, for these grim men would not again rest quietly until their quarry was run to earth. Only the silent, moody Ki-Gor, looming big in the firelight as he sat apart from the others, was completely relaxed.

At last the moon came, swollen and yellow, its diffused rays reflecting silver on the river. The fire was doused, and hurriedly the natives took their places in the boat again. The wall of the jungle on each side of the river rose black and smothering above the canoe. The Masai were soon too busy to feel lost and

alone in this canyon of darkness, for Tembu George set them a fast pace. The sweat gathered on their shoulders and trickled down their backs as with endless repetition they dug their paddles, sending the craft sweeping through the night.

Not until dawn tinged the cloud masses in the east with red did the Masai call another halt, but this, too, was only another breathing spell, a brief pause to regain strength. In a short time they headed forward again, moving toward where the early morning sun hung over the already steaming horizon. The grueling pace continued except for occasional breathing spells, throughout the day. When night came, the worn men went ashore and flung themselves down to sleep heavily until midnight.

Three days and nights Tembu George pushed his men forward in this fashion. On the morning of the fourth day, the war canoe nosed up to a landing at a large native village set along the bank. Ki-Gor and Tembu George stepped out on the landing and walked through the crowd of curious natives that quickly gathered. Searching out the chief, they found him sitting before his hut, directing one of his sons in the fashioning of a spear. After an appropriate exchange of greetings, Ki-Gor asked the chief, a gaunt, humped native, whether a war canoe with a fanged serpent on its prow had been seen by any of the villagers.

The thin native sucked in his cheeks in thought, and then replied, "We have not seen this boat here, but one of my men who has been upriver described such a craft to me only yesterday."

"It is probable the boat passed this village during the night to avoid being seen," Ki-Gor pointed out to Tembu George.

Turning back to the chief, Ki-Gor asked, "Did your men see which way the boat was headed?"

"Yes, it was going up the river and was moving fast," the chief answered, proud to have such ready and complete knowledge at his fingertips.

Tembu George leaned forward eagerly now. "And tell us, did your man see a white woman in the canoe?"

The native wrinkled his forehead in thought, and scratched his skinny ribs. "No, he saw no woman in the boat. There were only warriors, men not of this region."

While the chief spoke, a slight wiry man, grizzled with years, but still strong and active came up beside him. There were white markings painted across his bare chest and his forehead was disfigured with a crudely tattooed emblem. Around his neck and wrists he wore bands of bones, teeth and odd stones, and close inspection showed many of the bones and teeth were human ones. He was the tribal witch doctor, feared and respected.

“These strangers come in search of a white woman?” he asked, as though he knew already much of the conversation that had passed between Ki-Gor and the chief.

“Yes, O wise one,” responded the chief, “and they seek to trace a war canoe with the figure of a serpent carved on its prow.”

His voice showing surprise at the witch doctor’s knowledge of their search, Tembu George addressed the old man, “Do you know where we can find the woman?”

The grizzled witch doctor rustled his necklaces with his fingers, and his eyes looked beyond Tembu George in a far away, unseeing stare. The chief maintained respectful silence as the old man pondered. The witch doctor shifted his eyes to Ki-Gor and spoke directly to him.

“I recognize you as the great Ki-Gor, friend of the jungle peoples. I would like to give you some definite aid, but unfortunately my poor knowledge makes it possible only to give you a general lead.”

The witch doctor paused and wrinkled his brow, as he appeared to probe his mind for the exact information he wished to give Ki-Gor.

“I have heard it said that a strange tribe,” he continued slowly, “that worships a fearsome serpent, dwells many days up this river in a region of vast lakes. I believe your search would end successfully, if you could find this tribe.”

Ki-Gor expressed his thanks to the witch doctor, for this slender thread of information was the first positive clue he had received as to the identity of the marauders. He and Tembu George then returned to the canoes and the wearing pace was resumed.

The burning merciless days merged into hot sweltering nights, as the grim,



tireless Masai warriors unsparingly pushed themselves. The grueling punishment they took did not dampen the vengeful spirit which inspired the powerful natives. Through their prodigious efforts, in nine days the Masai brought their craft into a section of rolling hills. The river now bit its way between higher banks, banks in some places which rose to canyon proportions. But the river still lay broad and placid, a muddy, slow-moving thing.

In midmorning on the ninth day, Tembu George selected an even, open place to halt for food and rest. The boat was made fast, and the men picked out sheltered places to relax, all except one hot, tired warrior. This rangy Masai fighting man ambled back to the river and strolled out into a shallow section, splashing the cooling water over his sweaty body. Intent on the refreshing water, he was careless of his surroundings.

The native neither felt nor saw the cold, staring eyes that fastened on him. He failed to see the slimy, gray-green bulk of the huge crocodile lying near the bank like a half-submerged log. The big reptile, with scarcely a stir of the water slid forward, placing itself between the man and the shore. As the creature reached the shallow place where the native entered the water, it used its powerful tail for leverage in climbing.

This abrupt splash roused the warrior to his danger. He turned, and with horrified eyes saw the hideous monster heading for him. The man cried out in alarm to his mates. The shout brought all the natives upright instantly, but in their surprise, they hesitated, groping for a means of saving their fellow. Ki-Gor, who also was brought to his feet by the cry, did not hesitate.

The Jungle Lord, reared to a perilous existence which depended on split-second judgment, moved with flashing speed in this fateful interval. Ki-Gor sped toward the river, scooping up a Masai spear from the ground without breaking his stride. The crocodile was almost upon the native, its gaping jaws opened in anticipation of the kill, when the Jungle Lord leaped far out over the water directly at the reptile. As he descended, Ki-Gor bore his full weight on the haft of the spear and drove the broad, sharp point under the crocodile's left fore legs.

The bronzed giant's unerring skill enabled him to send the spear deep into this less heavily armored spot on the creature. The dreadful pain of the wound sent the monster into an agonized, writhing plunge at the defenseless native. With sudden death from the flailing tail hanging over him, Ki-Gor pressed forward.

He had landed at the very side of the crocodile, and now he dived forward on the back of the slimy creature, digging his legs around its belly and his left arm encircling its neck. His free right arm wielded his long hunting knife, and he drove the steel into the crocodile's hard underthroat. Ki-Gor heard the native shriek in pain, and the sound poured more strength into his straining knife arm.

The heaving crocodile plunged forward now, mad with pain and fury, into deeper water. The deep spear wound was eating the life from the creature, but its tremendous powers were not easily dispersed. The great reptile smashed into the deep water and dived, rolling as he went, to shake loose the burden on his back. The Jungle Lord realized his only hope was to cling to the crocodile and strive for a mortal blow; for once dislodged he would fall easy prey to it in the water.

Down went the crocodile until Ki-Gor felt his lungs would burst. In the impenetrable, muddy blackness of the river bottom the reptile gave another terrific spin. It was impossible for the Jungle Lord to keep his hold from loosening. Desperately he grappled, catching himself before he was torn completely loose. He found he had slipped to one side of the creature, and though choking in his agonized craving for oxygen, he realized this was his opportunity.

He gathered his waning strength, slashed deep into the exposed under belly of the crocodile, laying its stomach open in long ragged ribbons. The crocodile shook violently and suddenly went limp. Ki-Gor's numb arms and legs released their grip and he drove to the surface.

The moment his blond head broke the water, the Jungle Lord greedily sucked deep breaths into his aching lungs. When his body's painful hunger for oxygen was sated, he turned his attention to the shore. The worried Masai, fearful that their white friend was lost, shouted with pleasure when they saw Ki-Gor strike out for land. The courageous action of Ki-Gor in leaping immediately into seeming death to save the Masai warrior was only another of many bonds which welded these indomitable fighters to the side of the beloved white leader.

Ki-Gor climbed out on the bank and went to where the rescued native lay. The man's legs were badly mangled, but Ki-Gor knew there was a chance through careful nursing to save the man's limbs. Employing the best means at hand, he treated the wounds and stopped the bleeding.

“We will go on to the next village along the river, where perhaps we can find the proper herbs and medicines for the treatment of our comrade,” Ki-Gor announced to the assembled warriors.

The wounded man weakly asked that he be left behind, so as not to interfere in any way with the search for Helene. Ki-Gor would not hear of this, and within a brief while, the wounded native was made comfortable in the war canoe, and the trip was resumed.

In a few hours, Ki-Gor spied a broad path which led out of the jungle to the river’s edge. He ordered the boat moored. With the aid of Tembu George, he quickly fashioned a sturdy litter in which to carry the wounded Masai.

“This path shows it is used by many people,” Ki-Gor stated, “and probably a village lies just a short distance away. We will take this man there for treatment, and perhaps we can gain further information of the serpent boat.”

The broad, well-trod path was an easy avenue through the dense forest. The Masai, wary in this strange land of possible foes, ranged themselves in a long skirmish line, and held their weapons ready. Ki-Gor advanced at the head of the column. It was roughly an hour’s journey over the clean winding trail before the warriors sighted a large village. The men held back as Ki-Gor walked up to the open entrance to the stockade surrounding the cluster of huts. Two natives lounging inside the gate looked up in surprise at the massive white man, but they evidenced no enmity. He held up his hand, palm outward, in the sign of peace, and the men returned the greeting, calling out to him in a dialect that was closely akin to the Wasuli.

“Welcome, O white one, who comes under the sign of peace,” one of the natives said in a shrill voice.

Ki-Gor responded with the words, “Greetings, O friends, I would see your chief.”

The natives rose without haste and escorted the Jungle Lord down a lane between the huts to a thatched abode somewhat larger than the rest. In answer to their calls, the lion’s skin hung over the door was thrust aside, and the chief came out. He was a fat, genial native, of medium height with round eyes and a mild, honest face.

“I am Ki-Gor,” the Jungle Lord said simply, “and I need your help in treating one of my friends who has been injured by a crocodile.”

The round eyes of the native grew even rounder, as he expressed his sympathy at this news. “I am Wabumaa. You are welcome in my village. We are a peaceful people and we welcome in friendship all those who come in peace.”

Ki-Gor’s trained eyes already had ascertained that this was not a war-like tribe. There was ample evidence these people were friendly and peace-loving, preferring to live a simple, plain, safe existence, instead of the sometimes rich, but always dangerous, costly life of a war-like, marauding tribe.

Ki-Gor thanked Wabumaa and the two went out to meet the waiting Masai. The roly-poly little chief stared with frank admiration at the stalwart warriors who came forward at the white man’s motion. The wounded Masai was quickly made comfortable in a vacant hut, and a brew of rare herbs was prepared to heal his lacerated legs.

Weary after their days of strained, unrelenting haste, Ki-Gor, Tembu George and their men soon took advantage of this opportunity for rest. They sought cool, sheltered spots and soon were fast asleep, all except one man who sat beside the injured warrior. It was nightfall when the increasing clatter and bustle within the village roused the Masai one by one. Ki-Gor awakened, completely refreshed, and went to search out the reason for the unusual stir.

He found the amiable Wabumaa waddling about in a pleased bustle, giving directions right and left. He was preparing a feast for the visitors. The chief, being both a hospitable man and also one who enjoyed celebrations, had no intention of letting this excellent excuse for a banquet pass unheeded. The air was fragrant with the satisfying aroma of cooking meat. The circular area about the lone, big tree which had been left standing in the center of the village was being prepared for the diners.

Perspiring, but wreathed with smiles, the chief motioned to Ki-Gor and the Masai to take their places. Wabumaa’s men joined them, sitting cross-legged in a wide circle around the tree. Wabumaa made a gracious, flowery address repeating in detail his briefer welcome of earlier in the day. Tembu George replied in kind, as required by native etiquette and then the heaping platters of savory game and fresh fruits were brought forward.

Ki-Gor had hardly begun his meal when there was a sudden, splintering thud. An abrupt silence fell over the company. The eyes of the natives shifted to a point on the tree trunk about eight feet from the ground. Following the chief's gaze, Ki-Gor looked to see a long, black arrow embedded in the tree, its haft vibrating.

Ki-Gor glanced around the ring of staring natives. Their gay, happy mood of a few moments before was completely gone.

Ki-Gor stood up, walked to the tree, and jerked the long black arrow free. He turned back to the chief and inquired, "What is wrong with your people? Does this one arrow shot by a sneaking bowman have some evil significance?"

The chief rose now, his plump face troubled, as he sought words to answer Ki-Gor. "It is the Black Arrow of the Serpent God!" he said fearfully. "It means my two finest warriors must go to their death!"

#### IV. - The Sacrifice of Zaa

HELENE began to believe the long nightmare of the canoe trip would never end. Forced to lie on the floor of the boat, cramped by her bonds, barely protected from the burning sun, she was worn and exhausted. The harsh Basru paid her scant attention except to see she was well fed, and that she did not want for water.

The red haired girl, consumed with her burning sorrow, gave little notice to the rising spirits exhibited by her abductors one morning, and the renewed energy with which they began to ply their paddles. Had she been interested, she would have known the men were nearing home. The war canoe had left the broad river and sped up one of its tributaries. By midday the canoe fought through a long, turbulent stretch of rapids to glide out upon a vast, blue lake.

An island stood, green and inviting in the middle of the lake, and Basru directed his course straight for it. When the island rose close before them, three other craft darted from a hidden cove.

One of the craft drew near and its captain, after careful inspection called out: "After all these days, surely you don't return empty handed, friend Basru!"

Basru's hard face broke into a wide smile as he bent and carefully raised Helene to a standing position. With an eloquent gesture, he triumphantly indicated the

precious cargo he carried. The captain at this sight swept in very close, and gazed with long interest at Helene, who remained breathtakingly beautiful despite the hardships she had suffered.

The man nodded his head admiringly and called, "You have done well, Basru! This voyage will win you the favor of the Serpent God."

Helene looked at the broad lake, the green island, and the towering mountains which rose in the far distance. This was a strange region, an area completely unfamiliar to her. She noted the island was quite large and the banks were grown up with huge trees.

Basru skillfully brought the war canoe in near shore, sending it gliding up a narrow inlet into a snug harbor which nature had carefully camouflaged from outside view. The boat was soon beached, and for the first time since her capture, Helene was completely freed of her bonds. When the cramps in her legs and arms were relieved, the tired girl climbed from the boat.

A smooth, clear road led from the beach into the forest. It was up this road Basru and his men escorted Helene past clumps of staring natives with ill-concealed pride. The jungle girl noted with interest that the avenue was paved with blocks of wellworn stone, and was not the usual dirt path found in African villages. Before she could dwell on this oddity, Helene entered the outskirts of the town.

The village puzzled her even more. First came a belt of thatched native huts, the small dingy kind found throughout Africa, but these huts halted at the edge of a tall stone wall. The wall gave evidence of having been built long decades before, and though it remained generally strong and imposing, it was cracked and falling into disrepair in places.

The road went through a wide, arched gateway set in the wall and entered a second or inner city. Helene could not suppress a cry of surprise at the sight which greeted her. Within the wall, lay a totally different type of community, a well laid out city of square stone buildings. The structures were simple in design, but these solidly built rock houses were a unique and astounding sight to find in the heart of primitive Africa.

This was some ancient fortress city, built by long dead hands, Helene could easily see. It was apparent many of the structures were deserted, and she was impressed by the absence of any signs of life on the streets. Helene's inspection

was cut short, however, for Basru marched her to a large building, and rapped on the carved door.

Basru averted his eyes and bowed low when the broad door swung open. With misgiving, Helene looked through the open doorway. She was greeted with another totally unexpected shock. Seven young women, their skins almost as fair as Helene's, stood waiting upon the threshold. With their long dark hair and great black eyes, the women were like exquisite tropical blooms, exotic and fragile in their delicate beauty. They were oddly dressed, wearing silver breastplates and brief girdles, likewise heavy with silver. Over this scanty dress, each wore a long cape of brilliant yellow, fastened at the bare throat with a jeweled clasp.

One dark haired woman reached out a graceful hand in welcome. She spoke in a low musical voice and though many of the accents and words were unknown to Helene, Ki-Gor's mate understood the greeting to mean, "Enter, O bride to be of the mighty Zaa."

The proud redhaired girl, unsure of the fate which lay ahead, but feeling the company of the women in any event to be more desirable than association with the cruel Basru, shrugged her shoulders and stepped through the door. Helene turned and looked back at Basru. Both he and his men bowed low and withdrew, walking backwards, so that they still faced the young women respectfully. The big door swung closed, and Helene was guided down a long passage into a large comfortable room.

The jungle girl noted the rich furnishings of the room. Fine tapestries hung from the walls. Strangely fashioned pieces of furniture adorned with beautifully carved figures, indicated a quite high type of civilization. A low table of burnished red-tinted wood, inset with gold workings, stood in one corner. The fair young spokesman drew a small bench up to this table for Helene.

"Be seated, lovely one of the red hair," she said in her soft, warm voice, "and we will bring you food and drink."

Tired, hungry, thirsty, Helene needed no further urging. She sat down, and in a few minutes vessels of hand beaten silver were placed before her. The various dishes were delightfully flavored, and acquainted though she was with the world's finest foods, Helene had never tasted more exquisite cookery. She ate

ravenously, and as the pangs of hunger were satisfied, her spirits rose.

The women departed after serving Helene, leaving her to her own devices. She studied the odd furnishings for a time and then lay down on a couch to rest. She fell into a deep sleep and awakened only on the return of the women.

“Tell us your name,” the dark haired spokesman said, after Helene had rubbed the sleep from her eyes and looked inquiringly at the smiling faces.

“Helene,” answered the jungle girl.

“Helene. Helene,” the girl pronounced in her odd accents. “It is an unusual name, one I have not heard before, but I like it. I am known as Rannee.”

“Who are you?” Helene asked in a puzzled voice.

“We are handmaidens of the High Priestess of Zaa.”

Helene’s face showed clearly she did not understand. “Yes, but who is Zaa?”

There was a touch of awe and fear in Rannee’s face as she replied, “Zaa is the all-powerful god of my people, the great Serpent God. Surely you jest when you say you do not know of Zaa.”

Helene shook her head slowly. It was difficult to believe that people as apparently civilized as these had such a primitive religion, but she had no opportunity to pursue the matter further, because Rannee now beckoned her to follow.

Helene rose and accompanied the seven girls down a stone passage and into a large, oval room.

The walls floor and ceiling of the room were of glistening black stone, so dark and shining she could see herself mirrored in it. Set in the exact center of the room was a rectangular pool of gleaming white marble. Steps led down into the pool, and from gaping mouths of odd figureheads set in each corner of the pool poured crystal-clear streams of water.

Rannee pointed to the inviting pool, saying to Helene, “It is the hour for your first ceremonial bath of purification.”



The unexpected splendor and luxury of the gleaming black room took Helene aback. The unrealness of this scene set in the heart of a dense, primitive jungle fastness overwhelmed and confused her, and she gave small attention to the meaning of this ceremonial. In her disturbed state of mind, she hardly cared in any case. She offered no objection, therefore, when Rannee came forward and gently aided her to slip out of the leopard skin brassiere and breechclout.

Helene walked down the white steps into the clear water, shivering with pleasure as the refreshing coolness slipped up to cover her body. She bathed hurriedly, paying little attention to her quiet audience. The pleasant luxury of the bath, the feel of the water on her smooth, young body, soothed and rested Helene. Reluctantly, at last, she emerged from the pool. The handmaidens waiting to dress her exclaimed admiringly at the radiant beauty of her graceful form, and Rannee murmured in deepest sincerity, "You are very lovely, Helene, you will be the most beautiful bride taken in my memory by the great god Zaa."

Helene, though not displeased by the compliment, was disturbed at its implications. But before she could speak, Rannee called out to her sisters and two of them came with woven towels and care fully dried the jungle girl. Next they brought silver flasks containing rare and exquisite scents which they applied. Rannee herself put breastplates delicately fashioned from gold and gleaming with rare gems on Helene, and fastened about the jungle girl's shapely hips a girdle of worked gold likewise resplendent with jewels. About Helene's shoulders was thrown a cape of purest white, exceedingly soft and fine to the touch. Small gold sandals were placed on her feet.

The seven handmaidens drew back to survey their handiwork, and their faces amply reflected the pleasure and admiration with which they regarded the red haired girl. Helene, in returning the looks of the handmaidens, found it hard to believe these fair, gentle women were preparing her as some sort of sacrifice or offering to this Serpent God they worshipped.

For a moment, she felt the urge to tear the soft white cape from her shoulders and throw it at their feet, and offer resistance to these superstitious fools. But the memory of her beloved Ki-Gor going to his death came back to her, and a black despair laid hold of her heart.

What did it matter what became of her, she thought. There was no life for her without Ki-Gor and if these odd people meant to send her to her death, then

perhaps all was for the best. Ki-Gor's arms would never hold her again, nor would she ever again hear his teasing, laughing voice. Life held no attraction. What was the sense of resisting.

Helene was escorted back down the stone passages and into a square high ceilinged room. It was an outside room, but the windows were small and placed high up on the walls, well beyond her reach. The afternoon sun filtered through these small openings softly illuminating the rich, but ancient, interior.

Ranee and her companions left Helene to her thoughts. The despondent girl, overcome by her grief, now that the dreadful shock of recent events had abated and her mind again functioned, threw herself on a couch and sobbed bitterly. She resolved in her unhappiness to openly welcome whatever means of death the snake people planned for her.

Helene was subjected for the next two days to the same quiet ritual. The seven women, always together, brought her superb meals and saw to her comfort, disturbing her little, except to insist on the luxurious bath taken in the great black room. It was midmorning the fourth day that the dark haired girls came to summon Helene, and Ranee, their spokesman, said with suppressed excitement, "You have completed the formal ceremony of purification and the time has come for you to enter the temple and be presented to Dian, High Priestess of Zaa."

The occasion, which obviously excited the handmaidens, stirred no emotion in Helene. Without objection, she rose and followed them out through the wide doorway to the flagstone street, where they turned their footsteps east. The warm morning sun emphasized the extreme age of the village, and although there was an impressive beauty to the place, Helene felt a sense of death and evil, an indefinable atmosphere of decay over everything. This was a place out of the past, she thought, a pale remnant of a long-dead civilizations, a decadent holdover forgotten by time.

Few people were about as the party wound through the eerie, deserted streets toward a vast stone structure that rose in the center of the village. The vast building was impressive in size, but the most striking feature was its complete ugliness. Everything about it was too heavy, too big. The tremendous stone columns which jutted up to support the heavy roof were bulbous, obscenely huge.

Helene walked across the flagstone courtyard and mounted the broad, worn steps. Through the open doors of the temple, she looked into the tomblike interior, and from the dense gloom, broken only by the faint light of flickering torches, there rolled out an intangible sense of evil. The red haired girl drew her white cloak more closely about her, took a deep breath and crossed the portals into the inner dimness.

Helene's attention was drawn as though by a magnet to a great yellow square of stone placed in the center of the temple. This flat slab, set on a dais of black marble, sent a chill over the red haired girl; this, she knew, was the sacrificial stone of the pagan temple. The uneven light of the sputtering torches revealed long lines of squat, round, stone chairs extended along the right and left sides of the temple, facing the yellow altar of the Serpent God.

The sound of a heavy gong reverberated ominously as Helene neared the rock slab. When the waves of sound from the gong fell away, the shrill, high chanting of women's voices seeped into the temple. The thin, sing-song notes came nearer, steadily growing in intensity, until the pagan chant filled the air with its weird pulsation.

A faint radiance wavered in the darkness behind the great stone. The baleful fluorescence burned more brightly, until in a sudden burst of light, a double file of torchbearers, walking in slow, measured step, appeared through an arched doorway at the front of the temple. Holding the fiercely burning torches high, the two files of chanting handmaidens split, one going to the left, and one to the right of the smooth, glistening stone altar slab.

Helene watched the rapt, intent faces of the singers, white and unreal above their yellow capes. Her eyes were drawn back with resistless attraction to the massive rock, which in her fancy, appeared to glow dully at first, but with increasing intensity as the long seconds dragged by. Helene shook her head and lifted her eyes by sheer force of will from the hateful, inanimate stone.

The singing abruptly ceased. The curious chant did not reach a climax of any kind before halting, nor did it fall away softly; instead, the voices rose in full volume at one breath, and at the next were absolutely stilled. Silence, eerie and startling in its suddenness, burst over the huge temple like a thunderclap.

Helene's eyes followed those of the torchbearers to the door. A dark-haired,

fullbreasted woman, a woman of incredible, burning beauty, stepped forward into the center of the light. Her cape was flung back over her bare shoulders, revealing the exquisite curves of her firm, lithe body. All attention focused on this magnetically beautiful woman as she moved with liquid, feline grace toward the altar.

Ranee, who had stood quietly all the while, now bowed deeply, saying, “Hail, O All-Powerful. Dian, High Priestess of the Mighty Zaa. As the ancient writs prescribe, we bring before you the chosen one, whom Zaa will take into himself at the Festival of the Seventh Moon.”

The High Priestess looked directly at Helene during this formal speech. Then as Ranee finished speaking, Dian raised her right arm high, and lifted her eyes toward the shadowy gloom which enfolded the high ceiling of the temple. Her lips moved soundlessly in this ancient rite of accepting Zaa’s bride-to-be into the protection of the temple.

Helene studied in this interval the haughty, barbaric figure of the High Priestess. Dian stood during the ritual with head thrown back, dark eyes half-closed, her body taut with emotion. Her raised arm, both commanding and beseeching, was encircled at the wrist with a bracelet wrought in the likeness of a coiled serpent. Dian’s firm, full breasts were cupped by loose, revealing gold coils, cleverly encrusted with green gems. The brief, jeweled girdle she wore was made up of the same green stones worked into the gold.

It was the woman’s face, however, that most attracted Helene’s attention. It was a cruel, exotic face. The white, smooth skin was doubly-fair set as it was against the cloud of raven hair. The forehead was high, and the lips full, scarlet, and sensuous. Dian’s firm chin and strong cheekbones clearly were those of one born to command. But the eyes of the High Priestess were her most dominant feature, for they were large, dark, burning pools, so black as to be almost luminous, so charged with inner fire they were electric in their intensity.

Dian concluded at length the initial part of the ritual and roused from the near hypnotic spell, in which she had communed with Zaa. She addressed Ranee and the handmaidens, saying throatily, “Zaa will be pleased with his people for bringing him this fair one. You have handled your trust well, and I bid you welcome now into the sacred inner portals of the temple.”

The handmaidens who had cared for Helene the past three days bowed deeply, and the weird chant of the torchbearers was resumed. The High Priestess advanced around the stone altar to within arm's reach of Helene. Behind her came a young girl bearing in extended hands an ornate ivory box. Dian spoke again in a soft undertone, and because of her nearness, Helene could hear many of the words, but they were in a strange tongue, some forgotten language reserved now by these people only for their formal ceremonies. When the speech was ended, Dian turned and opened the small box held by the girl, and lifted out a slender, gold headband, set with rubies.

The High Priestess placed this slender band on Helene's head, stepped back one pace, made a mystic symbol with her hand, and after one last glance at the jungle girl with those intense, glowing eyes, said, "The temple now receives you, O Promised of Zaa!" Rannee placed a hand on Helene's arm at these words and urged her forward after the retreating figure of the High Priestess. The chanting handmaidens fell in behind Helene, filing after her toward the archway beyond the altar.

Helene had the look of a sleepwalker as she went through the door. The incredible events which had piled up in her life, one on another, in such a short span of time had dazed and shaken her. The world was suddenly too grotesque to seem real. Her pale face reflected a soul weariness as she advanced half-bravely, half-unbelieving, into the musty, gloomy inner sanctum of the temple.

#### V. - The Mysterious Warrior

Ki-Gor balanced the black arrow of the Serpent God in his right hand. He stared long and thoughtfully at this ominous missile which had spread fear and consternation among the natives. His eyes traced and retraced the writhing serpent carved about the arrow's polished, black shaft. The Jungle Lord turned a thoughtful gaze on Wabumaa, the chief. The laughter and happiness were gone out of the fat, good-natured native, for the slim arrow had wrought a fearful change in Wabumaa. The man's color was a sickly yellow, and his plump jowls trembled as he nervously sought to moisten dry lips with his tongue.

"You mean your two strongest warriors will be sent as a sacrifice to the Serpent God, merely because someone shoots a black arrow into your village," Ki-Gor asked in an incredulous voice, finding it difficult to comprehend the abject submission of the tribesmen to such tyranny.

“Aye, I dare not do otherwise,” the chief said fearfully. “A tribe to the north of us tried once to revolt against this old, old custom, and the people of the Serpent God came with spear and fire and wiped them out.”

Never had Ki-Gor brooked arbitrary action or words from any man, so there was scornful anger in his voice as he snapped, “You have many strong, young men in your tribe! It is hard to understand warriors who won’t battle for their rights.”

The disturbed black man shook his head helplessly. “We are a peaceful people and fighting is not our calling. For many generations before us, our fathers followed the custom of sending the required two men.” Wabumaa saw there was still no understanding in Ki-Gor’s stern face, so pointing for emphasis to an unhappy group of his people standing nearby, he declared with finality, “Is it not better these two should be given up that the rest of us may live in peace? Resistance to the Serpent God would mean the destruction of all my people. Aye, all this was settled and determined long ago by my fathers.”

Clearly the chief had no thought of resisting the Serpent God’s summons, so Ki-Gor asked how often the sacrifice was required.

“Always at this season,” was the thickly muttered reply. “Always when the moon grows swollen and heavy with the approach of the great rains, this summons comes from the hated Serpent God.”

Tembu George, who had shouldered his way up in time to hear part of the conversation, questioned, “Where do these snake people live, and what sort of rites do they hold?”

“I don’t know,” Wabumaa answered. “The two men must go out alone and unarmed along a trail to the north. It is taboo for us to go into that region. What happens to them I don’t know, but none has ever returned.”

Ki-Gor toyed with the arrow, while his mind weighed a desperate plan. He felt certain the serpent worshippers were the marauders he sought. It was typical of him to seek direct action, heedless of overwhelming odds and danger. A grievous wrong had been done him by these people, his mind darkened by a cowardly blow, his wife stolen, and here he found further evidence of long-standing crimes against these submissive natives.

The Jungle Lord’s voice was as deliberate as though he inquired about the

weather when he asked calmly, "You would not object if some one took the place of one of the men you must send to the Serpent God?"

This soft-spoken remark could have had no more stunning effect on the fat native if it had been a thunderclap of sound. Bewilderment and disbelief crowded into Wabumaa's face.

"No one has ever made an offer of that kind," he said, and then as the rising wails and laments of his tribesmen fell on his ears, he hurriedly added, "but it would make no difference to the Serpent people that I can see."

The big Masai Chieftain, Tembu George, turned and scrutinized the Jungle Lord closely, the significance of the white man's statement slowly dawned on him, and a gleam of admiration came into the massive fighting man's eyes.

"Then I will replace one of the victims!" the Jungle Lord declared.

The fat chief felt the white man certainly was mad to make such an offer, but it was with regret in his voice that he pointed out the proposal was impossible in Ki-Gor's case. "I do not believe the snake people would accept you because your skin is fair. They would think it was a trick and would know you were not my tribesman. If you were a native, I do not think it would matter to them."

This objection had not occurred to Ki-Gor. As he frowned, and cast about for a solution, Tembu George broke in to agree with the chief.

"That's right. White men are scarce in this region and I don't believe those snake worshippers would take kindly to your appearance."

The big warrior paused a moment, and glancing out of the corner of his eye at Ki-Gor, advanced another suggestion. "They would find nothing suspicious in my looks, so I will go."

"Yes, yes, that's true," the chief was quick to urge, happy to think one of these foolhardy men would voluntarily save the life of one of his tribesmen.

There was a faint smile on Ki-Gor's lips when he looked at Tembu George, an expression of pleasure at the loyalty and courage of his friend.

"You may go if you like, my young lion, but you do not get rid of me quite so

easily,” Ki-Gor chuckled meaningly. “Give me a few hours’ time and the Serpent God himself will swear we are twin brothers.”

For the first time in many days, Ki-Gor laughed heartily. He slapped Tembu George on the shoulder, turned on his heel and strode away, his booming laughter startling the mourning natives. Ki-Gor heard their laments change to shouts of happiness and admiration behind him when their chief announced the two strangers would offer themselves up as a sacrifice to the Serpent God.

After searching through the jungle several hours, Ki-Gor returned to the village. He carried a leaf-wrapped bundle containing various herbs and plants, which he immediately placed in a large urn. The Jungle Lord filled the urn with water and placed it among hot coals to boil. He squatted by the mixture, stirring and watching it carefully, until tests convinced him it was properly done.

He then cooled the concoction and carried it into a hut with him. After a long while, a big figure loomed in the doorway of the hut. It was Ki-Gor, but it was a drastically changed Ki-Gor. Where a tall, superbly muscled white man had entered the thatched abode, a black man came out whose ebony skin glistened in the sun. The long, blond hair was replaced by a close-cropped black head of hair, stiff and slightly kinky.

The altered Jungle Lord strode through the village seeking Tembu George. The gleaming, velvety black of his skin accentuated Ki-Gor’s tremendous muscular development. His freshly oiled skin shone in the light, revealing in every detail the play of the steely muscles along his massive frame. Natives turned to gape at the strange warrior walking so confidently through their village, wondering at the identity of this awesome black fighting man.

Lounging idly near the central campfire, Tembu George noticed with interest the approach of the big native buck. He watched with good humor the swagger of the native, smiling to himself at this affectation, but in no way resenting it, because as a chieftain of real fighting men, he well understood the overdose of pride and self-satisfaction experienced by many young warriors. He did not recognize Ki-Gor, and little knew that this swagger was part of a show being put on for his benefit.

With elaborate indifference to Tembu George and the staring groups of natives, the Jungle Lord stooped and picked up a charred piece of wood from the edge of



the fire. He walked casually to the lone tree that stood nearby, the same tree in which the black arrow had been embedded, and reached up to mark three black crosses on the trunk. Standing back, he surveyed the three charcoal crosses placed one beneath the other at intervals of a foot. In the same casual manner, Ki-Gor strode a few steps to where two bows with partially filled quivers had been left by returning hunters.

“Would you risk embarrassment by matching your skill with the bow against mine!” Ki-Gor barked suddenly at Tembu George in a loud, rough voice. This display of arrogant self-confidence by the strange black man aroused a momentary flash of anger in Tembu George. Considering the suggested contest, however, the Masai chieftain, conscious of his own ability with the bow, regained his good humor, thinking it would be a good lesson to teach this upstart giant some manners. He heaved his muscled bulk up and walked toward the strange warrior. Hardly looking at his friend, Ki-Gor pitched a bow and three arrows to Tembu George.

Ki-Gor restrained his laughter with difficulty, and half turning his back to the Masai leader, he barked again in the assumed harsh voice. “Three arrows apiece, making one shot for each cross. You may shoot first.”

It would be a pleasure to shatter the studied indifference of the big native, Tembu George thought, so without a word, he fitted an arrow to the bow and raised it easily, almost carelessly. The bowstring twanged and like a gleam of light the arrow sped to the top cross mark. There was a crack of sound and the arrow dug into the tree trunk. A cry of approval went up from the watching natives. The arrow was embedded not half an inch from the exact center of the cross.

Outwardly solemn, but quite pleased with himself, Tembu George lowered the bow. “Let the swaggering buck beat that,” he said to himself. But before he had an opportunity to really enjoy his pride of marksmanship, he heard the big fellow say, “Would you like to try that shot over? It is so wide, perhaps your foot slipped.”

“That shot stands! Pay more attention to the contest, and less to the wagging of your tongue,” the Masai Chieftain growled, unable to restrain his anger this time.

“I have no desire to show you up, old man, if you are not at your best,” proclaimed the delighted Ki-Gor, “so if you prefer, we can forget the contest.”

“Stop your loud gabbing and get on with it!” roared the now infuriated Tembu George.

Having never yet deigned to look straight at his Masai comrade, the Jungle Lord sighed audibly, shrugged his shoulders, and raised the bow in one smooth motion, let fly an arrow. The arrow struck the tree so hard the impact cracked like a pistol shot. A gasp went up from the onlookers. The barked shaft was driven deep into the exact center of the cross.

The Jungle Lord pursed his lips, and squatted native fashion on the ground, apparently deeply interested in his big toe. It was all he could do to suppress the gale of laughter that threatened to burst from his throat.

The heavy brows of the Masai leader touched in a deep frown. It was clear this upstart was not to be taken lightly, so Tembu George dropped his casual air, and tensely prepared for the second shot. He would show him this time something about Masai marksmanship. Perhaps the fellow’s first shot was merely a lucky one anyway. The massive Negro aimed with great care, and then with exacting skill released the barb. Delighted cries went up. The arrow vibrated precisely in the center of the second cross mark.

“Well, that slight wind helped right your aim this time,” declared Ki-Gor, showing only casual interest in the accuracy of the shot. He took slightly longer aim himself this time and then sent his arrow flashing at the mark. The superhuman skill of the Jungle Lord was never better shown, for his arrow split the shaft of Tembu George’s barb cleanly, and sent the pieces flying.

He turned a quick glance at the face of the Masai Chieftain, and seeing the consternation in the big man’s expression, he was unable to control himself any longer. He shouted with delight, slapping his thighs and laughing until the tears came.

This display of poor sportsmanship on the part of his rival brought Tembu George up short, his mouth open to deliver a challenge. Then as he listened to the familiar tone of that storm of guffaws, he stared in bewilderment at his black foe, hardly knowing what to believe.

A sheepish grin suddenly appeared on Tembu George’s face as he comprehended the joke played on him. “Ki-Gor, I should shoot you with this last arrow. How on earth did you rig yourself up like that? You look more like a native than those

fellows standing over there.” The massive Negro joined Ki-Gor in the laugh had at his expense.

Now Ki-Gor drew Tembu George aside, and explained his plan to enter the realm of the Serpent God. The two men would probably be facing certain death, and they would have no means of protection for Wabumaa had warned them they must go forth completely unarmed, they were to travel straight along the designated path to the east until met by warriors of the Serpent God. Ki-Gor warned Tembu George not to resist no matter what provocation was offered. The two men must bide their time for the one lone chance when they might have an opportunity to either free Helene, or if it were too late for that, at least to avenge her.

The Masai warriors were called in and the plan explained to them. They were unhappy at the prospect of being left behind, and argued long to be allowed to go. When they finally understood this was impossible, they made a counter-proposal agreed to by Tembu George. The fierce fighting men exacted the promise from their leader that a clear trail he left for them to follow. The idea of violating the taboo district observed by the local natives in no way disturbed them. These great warriors would fight the devil himself if need be to aid either the White Lord of the jungle or their chieftain.

It was agreed the Masai would follow after an interval of a day, and using their own discretion, would decide on some feasible plan to aid in rescuing Helene. The wounded warrior would be left in the village, and if by the time he recovered, the others had not returned, then he would go downriver and gather the full forces of the Masai nation. This stern people brooked no insult or injury, and as surely as night follows day, if it became necessary, long files of grim Masai warriors would seek out the snake people and exact full vengeance.

The fat, little chief waddled up to warn Ki-Gor it was time to depart. Without ceremony, the two uncommonly hale and hearty victims rose and strode after the plump native. He led them into the jungle a distance and pointed out the trail they were to follow.

He pressed the black arrow into Ki-Gor’s hands. “It is necessary to take this dreaded thing with you,” he muttered.

Wabumaa glanced hastily at the two men with a mixture of admiration and

sorrow. He gulped in an unsuccessful search for words, and his eyes turned fearfully down the shadowy trail which lay ahead of these two madmen. A tremor of fright ran over the fat chief and he turned and ran back toward the safety of his village.

## VI. - A Battle for Life

THE TWO MEN spoke little as they traveled the narrow choked trail. Their minds were occupied with the dangers ahead, but despite, those dangers, their eagerness to match wits and strength against warriors of the Serpent God made it necessary for them repeatedly to slacken pace. It would be unwise to appear to invite the coming ordeal, so the two men played the role of frightened and none-too-anxious sacrifices.

The trail bored an uneven way through the wild and overgrown jungle. Great trees interlaced their branches tightly overhead, cutting off any sight of the sky. Twisted vines, ranging in breadth from the size of a man's waist to slender threads, twisted and clung, in an endless, choking battle for survival. Ki-Gor preceded Tembu George along this dank, sunless route, when suddenly on rounding a sharp turn in the trail, they confronted a group of heavily armed warriors.

Ki-Gor halted, and faced the warriors in silence. These men, he knew, were guards sent to escort the cringing natives, whom he and Tembu George had replaced. With an air of apparent resignation, the Jungle Lord held out the black arrow to the flat-nosed, ape-like, black man in command of the warriors. The native advanced with a heavy, splay-footed gait, his hard face sneering at these sheep who came so meekly to be slaughtered, and accepted the proffered arrow.

He wasted no words on his captives, merely calling out, "Come! Don't stand there like crippled monkeys, the trail ahead is long."

The group set off immediately, with Ki-Gor and Tembu George sandwiched in the center of the file of warriors. It was a long journey, requiring the better part of four days, with most of the ground covered at a dogtrot. At no time were the captives bound or mistreated, but a careful watch always was kept on them.

It was a weary, travel-worn party that struggled out of the smothering jungle in the late afternoon onto the beach of a sparkling, blue lake. The warriors dragged a long canoe from its place of concealment in the undergrowth, and slipped it

into the clear water.

The Jungle Lord's eyes narrowed coldly when he saw the canoe. The fanged serpent carved on the prow made him bristle instinctively. With one broad hand he rubbed his cropped head, struggling to break through the gate which barred his memory. Despite the careful, detailed outline given Ki-Gor by Tembu George, the past remained sealed in the inner recesses of his mind. He strove constantly to break this imprisonment of his memory, seeking especially to conjure up the faces of those responsible for his present troubles.

The sight of the serpent figurehead moved him deeply, bringing almost within reach the image of a man he felt was the one who tried to kill him. He remembered vaguely a loud, arrogant voice associated with uneasy shifting eyes, but he could not adequately visualize the man or the circumstances. Ki-Gor felt somehow he would recognize this key figure if only he could come face to face with him.

A large island formed a shimmering splash of green far out on the lake. The ape-like black leader hurried his captives into the canoe and set course for the island. With the goal of his search in sight, Ki-Gor could not help thinking how tremendous a gamble this venture was, and he felt a twinge of regret that Tembu George was involved in the dangerous undertaking out of friendship for him. Tembu George, however, was certainly no figure to invite concern for he sat without an apparent worry in the world, stolidly gazing at the rapidly approaching island much like a bored tourist on a boat ride.

The canoe reached the island with a final burst of speed and darted into the small harbor. Over a score of natives were busy on the bank, and they gathered about the canoe when it beached, turning curious eyes on huge Ki-Gor and Tembu George.

"These two look better than the usual run of cattle you bring back from Wabumaa," an onlooker said in a matter-of-fact voice to the guard leader.

The ugly warrior replied with disgust, "These two are merely larger than the usual yield from that tribe of jackals. These fellows are as meek and mild as all the rest, and I doubt their performance will add anything to the Festival of the Seventh Moon."

Tembu George narrowly watched Ki-Gor, half expecting the Jungle Lord to

throw off his air of resignation and make a sudden break for freedom, now that they had entered the realm of the Serpent God. Ki-Gor realized, however, any move on his part would be valueless until he knew exactly how to search out the captive jungle girl, so he let himself be herded along the same cobbled road over which Helene had passed. He experienced Helene's surprise when he passed from the outer village of thatched huts into the strange, deserted, inner city, but to his captors he evinced no flicker of interest.

The file of natives threaded its way through the silent streets to a lone, stone building, different from the rest only because it was more formidably constructed. The Jungle Lord and Tembu George were taken down a long flight of stairs, and through groaning, age-blackened timber doors. The doors opened on a low-ceilinged passageway which sloped down sharply to a second timber barrier. Two stolid warriors stood guard before the heavy door, and on the approach of the captives, they silently lifted the bar and the prisoners were impatiently pushed into a darkened room.

Ki-Gor was instantly alert as the door closed behind him. His vision adjusted itself with catlike swiftness to the semidarkness. He saw eight natives bunched together on the far side of the rectangular room. He recognized immediately in their listlessness the air of men who live without hope. These, then, were more unfortunates sacrificed by their tribes to appease the Serpent God.

The strong, muscular natives were fine looking specimens, quite evidently the picked men of their individual tribes. A surge of anger went through the Jungle Lord at the thought of numberless men like these cruelly and supinely sacrificed by their tribes as tribute to the Serpent God.

Ki-Gor and Tembu George moved forward and joined the natives, being quickly and easily accepted by this group brought together in a common misfortune. The eight men, Ki-Gor learned, had arrived in pairs that same day. Apparently the black arrows were delivered on a carefully planned schedule, so the victims would arrive at approximately the same time. The conversation of the moody natives soon died away, and rose again only at the scuffling of feet outside the door, heralding the approach of further victims.

When the door clicked open, two more figures were pushed into the damp room. Ki-Gor looked at the two newcomers who stood at the door, muttering nervously while they strove to adjust their eyes to the darkness. One native was average

size, well built, but in no regard unusual, but the other man was of tremendous bulk. This giant Negro was one of the most massive black men Ki-Gor had ever seen. He was almost neckless, with smooth shaven bullet head set close on great sloping shoulders. His arms, as thick, hairy and muscled as a gorilla's, were abnormally long. The man's trunk, grotesquely big, was supported by correspondingly large and muscular legs.

A greeting was called out to the newcomers, and reassured that the nameless horror of the Serpent God was not yet to greet them, the two warriors advanced. The smaller man was obviously happy to find the company of his kind, but to all appearances, his hulking companion did not share the same sentiments. Ki-Gor sized the giant up accurately now when he could view him at close quarters. Although the fellow was a giant insofar as muscular development, his brain had in no way kept pace with the growth of his body.

Except for a low, animal cunning, the man gave no evidence of intelligence. Even in the face of death, the big native was a boastful bully, mean tempered, his evil little eyes looking for trouble. His loud bellows and brutish arrogance grew more insufferable as the minutes passed, and the mild dislike Ki-Gor first felt for the native grew by leaps and bounds.

Ki-Gor in no way was intimidated by the black man's size, for fear had no part in the Jungle Lord's being. Except for a reluctance to create a disturbance which would bring the guards down upon all the natives, he would have immediately crossed the warrior. He held himself in check, however, until one final act of the overbearing bully was too much to swallow.

The occasion was the bringing of food to the prisoners. Guards opened the door and placed inside a large vessel, which contained food for the entire group. A prisoner, out of courtesy to his fellows, stepped forward and picked up the vessel, intending to place it in the center of the group for all to share. As the man bent to place the container on the floor, a brawny, hairy arm scuffed him aside and the hulking giant took possession of the food.

"I will eat first," he declared belligerently, "and when I am finished, you jackals can paw over the remains!"

An angry chorus burst from the natives at this gross display of arrogance and greed. The giant black pulled the food closer, and growled contemptuously at the

natives.

“If any of you have different ideas, let him come forward and we shall soon decide whose word is law here,” rumbled the bully, swelling his vast chest, parading his hugeness before the others.

The natives realized crossing the man would plunge them into unarmed combat, and a hand-to-hand struggle with the gorilla-like creature, obviously, was an invitation to death. The cries of protest ceased, bringing an ugly smile to the giant’s thick, animal lips. With considerable show, he prepared to reach one hand into the vessel, already pleased at the prospect of gorging himself before the hungry eyes of the others.

The pawlike hand moved down to select a piece of meat, but was halted in midair by Ki-Gor’s cold, steel-hard voice. “I would not touch that food, if I were you!”

“Eh,” grunted the black man, his evil, little, red-flecked eyes peering up in surprise at this implied opposition.

“We will all share alike here, and furthermore, I have heard enough of your blustering.” The Jungle Lord’s steady voice lashed out again. “Either you will stop acting like an animal, or I will see that you are given the treatment due one.”

When the meaning of this statement trickled into the slow mind of the brutish native, he swept the food vessel aside with a slap of his hand. Rage and contempt boiled up in his face to hideously twist his flat, oily features. He drew his lips back in a sneer, revealing uneven, yellow tusks, and a dribble of saliva slipped down the corners of his mouth. The elephantine native drew to his full height, swaying slowly as anger pulsed through him.

The figure of the black man, grotesque and inhuman in the shadowy light, completely dwarfed Ki-Gor. The watching natives gave the calm, quiet Jungle Lord little chance before the giant and they were spellbound at his deliberate stance. Tembu George alone among them realized Ki-Gor’s deceptive calm masked a dreadful fury, volcanic and terrible once unleashed. The natives fell back, leaving the two antagonists to face each other. Still Ki-Gor stood there, every muscle in delicate balance, his steady eyes never leaving the big man’s face.



“You dare challenge me, Brogar! You dare insult Brogar!” the giant bellowed. “You sniveling dango, you die for this!” he screamed, throwing his vast bulk forward in a headlong charge.

The Jungle Lord, alert for this move, flicked aside from the ponderous charge, and with the blasting power of a pile driver, struck the native’s temple with the open palm of his right hand. The blow from that rock-hard hand, which would have felled most men, only jarred Brogar. The enraged black man smashed at Ki-Gor again, moving with an agility startling in a person of such mountainous proportions. He kept rushing Ki-Gor, striving to catch the smaller man in his flailing arms, but the Jungle Lord successfully evaded him. Ki-Gor was forced to retreat, but he dealt terrible, punishing blows for every step he gave ground.

Brogar was accustomed to crushing his smaller opponents without undue trouble, and this experience of being mauled by the evasive Jungle Lord sent him insane with blood lust. The giant warrior was terrible to behold as he beat his chest savagely, a stream of guttural, animal sounds poured from his frothing lips.

Flailing, clawing, rushing, he drove Ki-Gor back steadily into a corner of the room. The one thought in his mind was to box the nimble Jungle Lord up where he could get his hands on him, then he would show him what the hate of Brogar meant.

Ki-Gor realized he was being forced into an unfavorable position, and he put forth every trick he knew to turn and divert the raging giant. The white man knew he could not cope with the vast bulk of the warrior, once the opportunity to maneuver was gone. Brogar would not be diverted, though, and Ki-Gor was pushed back, inevitably back, until his back suddenly struck the cold stone of the wall.

This was the opportunity Brogar awaited. He spread his great arms wide, and bore forward to close with this puny mortal, who dared oppose him. Ki-Gor lashed three rocking blows at Brogar’s exposed face, putting his full desperate strength in a last ditch effort to break out of the trap. The giant wavered, halted, and then came on again, his tremendous paws smashing on Ki-Gor’s head like sledge hammers. The Jungle Lord was torn from his feet by the shock and thrown to the floor. Brogar, screaming fiendishly, kicked Ki-Gor as he fell, sending him rolling.

When he went down and felt the cruel kicks, a black blinding rage poured over Ki-Gor. He changed in an instant from a calm, self-possessed man, fighting a deliberate battle, into a raging jungle killer. The uncontrollable fury that swept over Ki-Gor doubled and tripled his normally immense strength.

The amnesia previously caused by Basru's head blow, when Helene was abducted, had swept away much of his veneer of civilization; and now, rage and pain cut away every last vestige of civilized man. Ki-Gor was suddenly a jungle beast with the killer-madness on him, and the raging, primitive, savagery he exhibited made even the blood of the watching natives run cold.

The black giant leaped at Ki-Gor, straining with his thick fingers to capture the Jungle Lord's throat. But in vain did the huge black strain to hold Ki-Gor to the floor and throttle him. The flood of power exerted by the steel-hard muscles of the Jungle Lord was a resistless, terrifying force, nullifying and defeating the awesome strength of the native.

A small twinge of fear crept into the bully's heart as he found he could not control the writhing, demoniac Ki-Gor. The Jungle Lord forced the black warrior's choking handhold to loosen, slip and break. With a supreme effort, Ki-Gor drew his legs up under the smothering weight of the native, and catapulted them forward, plunging the big man off of him. Ki-Gor gained his feet in this interval like a leaping tongue of flame, and swept at the giant, utterly heedless of the punishing blow's dealt by the hulking warrior.

The leonine Ki-Gor dove straight into his foe, tearing and slashing with incredible speed and power. His face terrible with anger and a low, chilling snarl of hate sounded deep in his throat. The White Lord's lips were sheared back in an animal snarl, and his eyes spat flame.

The Jungle Lord was no longer a man battling only. He was a ruthless beast of prey intent on destruction, an irresistible fighting machine geared to tear and rend and kill. Essentially, this was the role nature had fitted him for, because from the earliest youth his life and safety depended entirely on his instinctive battle urge, on an ability to act quicker and with greater deadliness than the countless savage foes who hunted him.

The bewildered black warrior gave ground before Ki-Gor's fierce, unrelenting attack. The giant knew fear for the first time in his life. Never before had the

tremendously powerful native had reason to fear defeat in any struggle. But a fear crept over him now not merely of being humbled by an adversary, but an actual fear of being killed. The warrior fought ever more wildly, his guard crumbling before the shattering blows dealt by Ki-Gor as the two men grappled and strained, seeking always an opening which would bring decisive victory.

The natives, whose cause Ki-Gor championed, watched with excited delight as they saw the black giant waver and fall back before Ki-Gor. This sight of the Jungle Lord beating down the huge warrior was a totally unexpected turn of events. None of the prisoners, except Tembu George, had given the smaller man a chance, and for a time in the beginning, even the Masai chieftain looked with doubt on the outcome. The spectacle jerked the prisoners out of their silence as they loudly cried encouragement to Ki-Gor.

But Ki-Gor heard them not. He fought in a red haze which excluded all except the figure of his foe. He failed to hear also, the sudden clamor outside in the passageway, where the guards, aroused by the rising din made by the prisoners, called for more men to put down the trouble.

The reinforced guards burst through the door and swept into the room to halt the disorder just as Ki-Gor landed a stunning blow. He struck with the hard outer ridge of his hand, and the giant black man reeled back. Before the brutish figure could recover, Ki-Gor moved in like a panther, and with an iron grip swung the huge black from his feet.

The immense weight would have torn loose the shoulder muscles of a lesser man, but the massive Jungle Lord easily lifted the great bulk overhead and then smashed it to the ground. The moment the bully hit the floor, Ki-Gor dived to finish him. He gave no heed to the figures swarming at him. His attention was focused exclusively on reaching the dazed giant before the man could struggle to his feet.

A score of hands clamped on Ki-Gor as he pounced at the native. Other guards grasped the huge black, who gave them no resistance. He was not eager to resume the combat. The men who attempted to control Ki-Gor though, had their hands full, but their numbers were sufficient to hold him. When his senses cleared, he reluctantly submitted and stood quietly.

The Jungle Lord looked about him, as his rage cooled, realizing only gradually

what had taken place. He surveyed the battered visage of the giant with grim satisfaction, noting, however, the cold, baleful hate which shone in the native's eyes. The hurt bully would never forgive Ki-Gor, but this fact did not worry him. Ki-Gor was disturbed that his action might bring down punishment on the prisoners. He glanced regretfully to where they were lined up by the guards, and was reassured. The men's faces amply told him his humbling of the giant more than repaid them for any trouble which might ensue.

A sharp command rang out, and a sudden hush fell over the room. The guards stood stiffly erect as a commanding figure strode into the door. Ki-Gor's eyes widened in surprise at the newcomer. The man, obviously a person of rank and importance, was white.

He was an austere, middle-aged fellow, with severe, cold features. He was oddly garbed, wearing over his bare chest a long scarlet cape, embroidered with a figure of a fanged serpent. His loins were swathed with a metallic cloth, yellow as gold, and buckled at his waist was a short broad sword. Silver sandals encased his feet, and he wore a gleaming silver helmet on his head.

The white warrior stared around the room, then motioned one of the guards to him to report on the disturbance. His dark eyes searched Ki-Gor and the giant black, noting they were not seriously injured. He gazed at them impersonally, as at cattle, pursing his thin lips in displeasure at the entire event.

The commanding white man turned with a sweep of his cape, after this inspection, and stalked to the door. Abruptly, he halted, and half turning, addressed the prisoners in clipped, emotionless words.

"You will shed blood enough tomorrow, you savages, without spilling each other's blood in such foolish personal grudges as this!"

With that ominous pronouncement, the cold, precise white man strode from the room, leaving the cruel torment of his meaning to torture the thoughts of the prisoners.

## VII. - The Ritual of Flame

THE ETERNITY of suspense drew to an end for the prisoners. It was the first day of the Festival of the Seventh Moon, and their fate would soon be known. Uneasily, they waited.

Then the scarlet-robed white warrior came with the guards, four armed natives for each prisoner, and they were escorted individually from the cell. The guards took them out of the cool building into the bright sunlight. The procession of victims wound through the silent streets, past the great temple, to a long open stretch of ground which lay behind it.

Excited crowds of natives massed on each side held back by files of warriors standing shoulder to shoulder. The cleared strip was broken at regular intervals by what appeared to be barriers and obstructions of various kinds.

The prisoners had no opportunity to clearly view the field for they were hurried through the crowd and drawn up before a colorfully decorated stand containing several tiers of seats. The stand was located about the center of the field and a heavy guard of helmeted black warriors was stationed about it. The tiers of seats were packed with elegantly garbed men and women, and the eyes of the prisoners widened in surprise—every person in the stand was white skinned.

Ki-Gor looked at the scarlet and yellow robed people who stared disdainfully at the victims from their vantage point. These people then were the ruling class of this strange fortress city, a haughty, fairskinned handful who dominated hundreds of blacks on the island and made their baleful influence felt throughout the entire lake region.

He remembered the sprawling, overgrown outer city, jammed with crude, thatch huts and crowded with natives, and the inner city with its stone houses, deserted and falling into disuse. The two cities told the story. These whites were the fading remnants of a once mighty people, a handful who maintained their rule through religious domination of the vast numbers of superstitious natives. His interest in the Serpent God deepened. He realized this small island buried in the inner fastnesses of the jungle held one of the many weird, unbelievable secrets of Africa.

As these thoughts passed through his mind, the Jungle Lord studied the faces of these strange, barbaric whites. A woman of striking beauty occupied a raised throne in the front rank of the stand. It was Dian, High Priestess of the Serpent God. Ranged on each side of her were the Handmaidens of Zaa, except at the place to the immediate right of Dian, where the pale, beautiful Helene sat.

Tembu George immediately recognized Helene, but he was separated by a great

distance from Ki-Gor, and could not direct the Jungle Lord's attention to her. For his part, Ki-Gor's searching eyes had quickly singled out the redhaired, blue-eyed girl and noted how different she was from the other animated, interested spectators. Although dressed like the others, she seemed filled with sadness, withdrawn from the scene around her.

But though Ki-Gor's eyes paused long on Helene, he did not know her. Nor did he recognize the tall, hard native with the ever-shifting eyes who stood in front of the stand. It was Basru. The hatchetfaced warrior was reaping his first honor for the capture of Helene by being placed in charge of the personal guard of the High Priestess.

Helene's glance barely touched the prisoners. She had no interest in the proceedings, and sat pale and aloof, her thoughts turned inward. It would have been a miracle, in any case for her to recognize Ki-Gor even had she looked directly at him. He bore no resemblance to the beloved mate her memory touched on constantly, so altered was his appearance by the black, oiled skin and shortcropped hair. Helene would have known Tembu George instantly had she picked out his face from the mass of natives ranged before her.

The High Priestess rose to her feet and stared out over the multitude. She raised her right arm high and the roar of many voices fell away. The hushed silence was tense with expectancy; the crowd strained to hear the words of the High Priestess.

"I, Dian, High Priestess of Zaa, declare this day the opening of the Festival of the Seventh Moon, and do command my people to pay homage to the mighty Serpent God as proscribed by the ancient rites."

The roar of the crowd swept up in a flood of sound as the haughty priestess made this declaration, and then died away as the high pitched voice came again.

This time Dian spoke in a strange tongue, the words falling and rising in odd cadence, as she prayed to Zaa in the dead language of her forefathers. The moment the prayer was completed the bedlam of noise broke from the throats of the hundreds of natives, continuing until a signal from the priestess. Dian looked now at the prisoners and addressed them.

"Subjects of the Outer Realm, you twelve are sent here by your respective peoples to do honor to the almighty Zaa.

“As unbelievers, only one among you is given the priceless opportunity through the Festival of the Seventh Moon to be received into the service of our mighty god.

“But this fortunate one—the only one of you who will live—must be the strongest, the fittest, and the greatest warrior. The blood of the others will atone for the sins of their people.”

Dian paused as though to let her words sink into the minds of the prisoners. The unfortunate men, tense and trembling, looked uneasily at one another, wondering which would be the lone survivor of the festival. Anxiously, they strained to hear what the method of decision would be.

“The two who are most favored by Zaa will be determined through the Ritual of Flame,” continued the High Priestess. “All twelve of you will compete. Between lanes of fire you will race the length of this field, passing through five obstacles which will test your courage, strength and skill.”

As Dian halted dramatically, the milling crowd broke out in a bloodthirsty roar. This was the spectacle they wanted. They pressed to see how the prisoners reacted to the pronouncement of the High Priestess.

“One of the first two to cross the finish line will be the man whose life is spared,” cried Dian. “Those who lag behind the two winners must die on the altar.”

The prisoners were stunned by this harsh-cruel contest decreed for them. They wondered fearfully what the obstacles would be. And in the mind of each, the desire to live flamed up, and each resolved he must be one of those first two. They felt an instinctive, even though unwanted, fear and suspicion of each other, for every man was henceforth set against every other.

Ki-Gor and Tembu George alone remained undisturbed. These two ironnerved men willingly entered the realm of the Serpent God, and they were prepared to face any resulting dangers unflinchingly. It was obvious this packed field, with its countless warriors, offered no chance for escape, so the only alternative was to go on with the contest and hope for a further opportunity to rescue Helene.

The contestants were escorted down to the end of the field and lined up. Ki-Gor saw now the dangers they were to face. Two narrow ditches ten feet apart were

dug the length of the field and were filled with a thick, black residue. The Jungle Lord's nostrils quickly identified the black substance as being principally oil. This oil would provide the flaming barriers to keep the men on the obstacle course.

The first obstacle was a stretch of earth set with knives, buried hilt down, so the irregularly placed blades angled up to slash the legs of any runner who misjudged a step. Beyond this knife-sown area were three hurdles formed from spears. The hurdles were successively higher, and each row of spears was pointed to impale any man who failed to clear the jump.

Next lay an obstacle more dangerous than the first two. Five pairs of wooden posts were sunk in the ground, and chained to every post was a leopard. The chains on each pair of leopards permitted the animals almost to touch paws, when they strained forward, growling and fighting. Only a narrow, uncharted trail precisely between the pairs of leopards could be followed by the contestants with any hope of passing through safely.

A deep pit lay beyond the leopards, and it was impossible for Ki-Gor to see what danger awaited there. The final obstacle appeared to be a small ditch across the course, and he deduced it was filled with the same oily substance as the corridor lanes. It was likely a high flame barrier would be the final obstacle; and placed as it was at the end of the course, the flames would be hard for the tired and breathless natives to surmount.

The cruel mind that conceived this Ritual of Flame made certain the two winners were men not only of great physical prowess, but also men smiled on by luck and good fortune. Ki-Gor realized part of the twelve would never complete the course. He glanced down the lane of prisoners to place Tembu George, and he noted the hate-filled eyes of the giant Brogar in turn were searching him out. He understood the extent of the brutish warrior's hate, and resolved during the race to be watchful of the native.

The white warrior in charge of the prisoners shouted a command and all along the field, guards with burning torches ran forward to light the channels of flame which lined the course. The twin sheets of fire burst up, wavering yellow in the still air. The chained leopards screamed in an agony of fear at the fire, and a great roar went up from the watching crowd, lending a further barbaric note to the terrible scene.



Shouting above the noise, the white warrior told the prisoners the contest would begin the moment he lowered his sword. The twelve men, their dark skins pale with fear and stress, glued their eyes to the raised sword. Ki-Gor watched, too, his muscles tense, for he was anxious to get through the knife-strewn area before the full mass of men reached it. Twelve men fighting to outrun each other through that dangerous stretch meant several would be jostled into missteps and a fall would be fatal.

The short, broad sword glistened in the sun as the white warrior held it steady, and then with a shout, slashed it down, starting the contest.

The twelve men burst forward in a frenzied sprint. Twelve superb physical specimens strained every nerve and fiber to take the lead. Ki-Gor threw every ounce of strength into a powerful driving spurt, gaining speed like a startled hare. He edged slowly ahead, leading all except one figure, which hung with him. He saw from the corner of his eye this companion who kept pace with him was Brogar.

The agility of the huge black man was astounding. His size made him a slow starter, but his tremendous strength pushed him forward at surprising speed once under way. The sharp blades glittered close at hand now, and Ki-Gor had no desire to enter the obstacle running shoulder to shoulder with Brogar.

Barriers of flame reared up to swallow the racing men. The tightly grouped natives surged close behind Ki-Gor, and the sound of their pounding feet urged him to greater effort. Entering the flaming walls, the men swept down the center of the course, striving to avoid the torturing heat and smoke. The first obstacle rose before them, the leaping flames gleaming on the waiting forest of blades.

This was the moment Ki-Gor awaited. All the great strength in his magnificent body exploded into his driving legs as he spurted ahead of the others. He veered to the burning wall on the right, running so close the flame pricked his skin with its darting red tongues. Through this stratagem, Ki-Gor placed himself out of reach of the cunning Brogar, escaping at the same time the danger of being trampled by the pack should he stumble or misstep.

The main body of natives gave him no notice as they held to the middle aisle. Heat seared over Ki-Gor and he fought an overwhelming urge to escape the torturing fire. His iron will kept him from wavering and the pain was forgotten,

momentarily, as all his attention and concentration was required to avoid the wicked, blades that slashed up from the earth.

Ki-Gor had guessed the knives would be placed less thickly along the outer edge of the course than in the center. He was correct, but the field of gleaming blades was a tremendously formidable obstacle for a running man. The Jungle Lord called forth his greatest dexterity, and inviting death at each step, he threw himself over the cruel stretch in a dizzy, breathtaking gamble.

The massive White Lord of the jungle leaped free over the last row of knives at the same instant an agonized burst of screams filled the air. He knew without looking a native had gone down under the frenzied rush of the pack. Others, he knew, bore gaping leg wounds after jostling and fighting over the obstacle.

But the brutish giant had survived, for he swept into the lead now as Ki-Gor lost time turning back to the more endurable portion of the course. An excruciating hurt flared over Ki-Gor's dry, scorching body and it was impossible for him to stay so close to the flames. Two other natives besides Brogar passed him before he reached the center aisle. Clear of the knives, the Jungle Lord settled quickly into a dead run, straining to pass the three natives ahead of him.

His terrific pace carried him past the nearest straining native. He tried his utmost to close the gap to the next man, but the warrior ran like a frightened deer, the dread thought of the Serpent God urging him to supreme heights. And the monstrous black figure of Brogar sped as though all the fiends of hell pursued him, crashing over the earth with gargantuan strides.

The Jungle Lord saw the second obstacle near, and discarded any idea of regaining the lead until it was passed. The obstacle was three successive hurdles, each higher than the last. The hurdles were formed of braced rows of spears, their points honed to needle sharpness.

The giant Brogar swept over the first bank of spears, pounded three steps and cleared the second, and then with a rush threw his bulk over the third hurdle. The warrior who tailed Brogar cleared the initial jump, stumbled, tore himself back to his feet, and awkwardly but successfully leaped the second hurdle. Ki-Gor was close on the native's trail, and realizing this, the man refused to allow himself time to regain balance. The warrior flung himself at the third and highest barrier, and completely off-gait, he spun up in a faltering jump. The man crashed

with a scream on the spear points and hung there, the blood drenching down from his impaled body.

Ki-Gor cleared the second jump just as the warrior struck the spears, and his insides writhed at the cruel, mad scene. But it was too late to aid the dying man, and Brogar drew ever further ahead, so the Jungle Lord steeled himself and with a prodigious leap went over the final bank.

He ran now as he never ran before. The sight of the running giant acted as a whip-lash, beating new strength into his corded muscles. The hot, smoke-filled air sent a choke of pain over his chest at every laboring breath. Sweat drenched him, while the torturing flames burned him at the same time. But only one thought filled his mind: catch and pass Brogar.

And Ki-Gor's great body responded to his will. He gained steadily on the huge native. Ever faster he closed the gap. Then in amazement, he saw Brogar falter and come to a complete stop.

Suddenly, Ki-Gor understood. The big native faced the third obstacle and was afraid. The obstacle was, in truth, a sight to strike fear into the bravest of men. Ten leopards, chained opposite each other in pairs, had been driven insane by the scorching flames. The rearing, leaping beasts slashed and fought to break free, and their clawing bodies formed living barricades across the course.

Even the jungle-wise Ki-Gor was struck by the extreme peril ahead. He did not pause in his stride, however, but swung past Brogar into the hellish area. He knew the maddened beasts would strike at any moving object, but in their crazed state, he realized, the leopards would give no concentrated effort to bringing him down. If he could avoid their fearful, but aimless, writhings, he could pass through safely.

The White Lord burst between the first pair of leopards when one of the beasts was jerked back by its chain after a charge, leaving an open gap for passing through. He dove directly over the second pair, and the moment his feet struck the earth, he sprinted to the left, and hovering close to the wall of flame, circled behind the next raging beast.

When he reached the fourth pair, one of the leopards turned straight for him. The blood-chilling attack came with lightning swiftness. Ki-Gor saw the raging jaws yawn toward him as the animal leaped, and he threw himself backward. He

struck the ground violently and slid, his head nearly reaching the flames before he pulled it away. The leopard seemed to poise over him in the air for a moment, and then it crashed back away from him, its neck almost broken. The chain around the beast's neck had checked it in mid-air.

Ki-Gor sprang up and past the leopard like a released arrow. Again he hugged the barrier of fire, and though one of the leopards in the final pair started for him, the flames held the animal back, and the Jungle Lord sped through safely.

He turned at the edge of the obstacle and looked back, curious about the progress of the others. An unbelievable sight met his eyes. All the natives still in the race crowded up to the far side of the obstacle, hesitating at entering the raging leopard den. As Ki-Gor watched, Brogar shoved two natives forward with a great push which committed them to continuing, and then the giant caught up another native in his huge paws like a club and sprang forward.

It happened too quickly for anyone to know what Brogar was about. He sent the first two natives in ahead to distract the attention of the leopards from him. But not satisfied with this protection, the brutish monster swung the third native in his arms to use as a shield if he were personally attacked.

The Jungle Lord was both angered and sickened by Brogar's cowardly, inhuman action. Ki-Gor was helpless to act now, but he resolved to repay the brutal warrior in full for this performance, and this time the bully would not escape the penalty as before.

Spurred by his anger, Ki-Gor threw himself forward to complete the course. He neared the fourth obstacle, which was a deep, square pit extending completely across the field, from one lane of fire to the other. The White Lord's puzzlement at what new horror now faced him grew as he raced toward the yawning pit. When he reached it and looked down, the shock of the scene was as great as he anticipated.

The floor of the pit crawled with hundreds of snakes. The cold, squirming bodies were of every size, shape and kind, twisting and slithering over each other in constant, uneasy motion. He saw at a glance the excavation contained both deadly and harmless species. Addition of the harmless serpents, he thought grimly, was probably the High Priestess' conception of good sportsmanship toward the prisoners.

No other action was open to him but to jump into the pit. His feet landed squarely on two scaly bodies, crushing them. Then began a fearful dance, as he picked his way through the weaving pattern of snakes, leaping over the floor of the pit, taking advantage of every clear space. Time and again he barely avoided the fangs of the disturbed snakes. After an eternity, Ki-Gor reached the farther side of the obstacle.

He faced another problem now in getting out of the pit. Certainly, he had no wish to go back and attempt to run over that writhing pattern of death in order to gain momentum. A running leap was out of the question. The Jungle Lord gathered himself, and suddenly unleashing his strength, sprang up to catch the top of the pit wall. He fumbled at the soft turf, the earth crumbled in his grip and he fell back. Twice more he tried, only to fall. Worn by the exhausting ordeal, his strength was not at full ebb, but he took a great breath and bounded up the fourth time. One hand caught. Up, up, he pulled himself, while the sweat poured from his straining face. Without warning the bank crumbled, and he fell heavily. He lay still for a moment, and then when he started to rise, a cold, scaly body slipped over his legs. Ki-Gor fought down a wave of revulsion and cautiously raised his head to look at the snake. Relief flooded over him when he saw it was of a harmless species.

This experience lent him false strength, and with his next terrific effort, he managed a firm grip on the high bank and pulled himself to safety. Although he could hear the other contestants arriving at the obstacle behind him, the Jungle Lord did not permit himself a backward glance.

He went straight for the final barrier, a shimmering wall of flame rising to a height of over eight feet. His breath came in deep, laboring gasps, and his pace had fallen to a loping run. He came straight at the center of the burning hurdle, measuring the distance with his eyes. The Jungle Lord's indomitable will whipped his tired body erect, dragged up one last explosive burst of energy, and he vaulted. Ki-Gor arched up, slowed at the top of the leap, and then with a tremendous twist of his long body, jerked over the searing wall.

The shock of landing brought him to his hands and knees, and Ki-Gor's taut iron muscles trembled as he pulled his spent body up. He peered at the finish line through eyes, red and stinging from the smoke and heat. A score of guards were drawn up in wait for the survivors of the Ritual of Flame. At the sight of these guards, Ki-Gor stiffened, refusing them the pleasure of seeing him stagger with

exhaustion.

He trotted across the finish mark, his tired body held proudly, no sign of the utter weariness he felt showing on his expressionless face. Four guards formed about him immediately and led him in front of the milling throng of natives to the stand where the High Priestess waited.

Dian's hypnotic black eyes, stirred with excitement of the cruel spectacle, flickered over the regal body of the Jungle Lord. Her breath came quickly through half parted red lips. She pulled herself up, and leaned forward and called to Ki-Gor.

"You have proved your prowess, barbarian! You have won the Ritual of the Flame!" she called in a voice husky with emotion. "There is yet one more test you must meet. Tonight in the temple you must fight and kill the warrior who ran second."

#### VIII. - To the Death

KI-GOR was taken from the field to a small stone room in the rear of the temple. He was not permitted to see the other contestants. His mind tortured itself with the question of who the man was he must kill.

If the man was Brogar, then he welcomed the combat. But suppose he had to face one of the natives toward whom he felt no enmity. And Tembu George! What if he was pitted against his stalwart friend.

He dropped into an exhausted sleep with these anxious thoughts on his mind. Ki-Gor blinked his eyes open hours later. The small cell lay darkened in the purple-black African night. The tiny slits high on the wall which served as windows drew his gaze. Outside where the swollen moon rose silver over the blackness of the jungle was freedom.

There were steps at the door, and Ki-Gor stood up to face the guards. He stepped silently into the long hall and followed the lead of two men bearing torches. He rubbed his left arm as he walked, massaging the stiffness from it. With a start, he suddenly realized the natural white of his skin showed through in a small place under the pressure of his fingers.

The black mixture with which he had coated his skin in a well-nigh perfect

camouflage was ready to peel away. The protecting sheet of oil he had spread over his body was gone, and the terrific heat of the obstacle course had baked the texture off his body. He had not used a simple stain, because this formula showed him by a witchdoctor, achieved a more natural result and also could be taken off more easily.

The matter was pushed from Ki-Gor's mind when he stepped into the great temple. Hundreds of torches lit the massive expanse of stone, and except for a wide place about the sacrificial rock, every available space was jammed with chanting natives. The white skinned aristocrats occupied the rows of stone seats on each side of the altar.

Dian, High Priestess of Zaa, stood before the yellow altar, her arms thrown up in a beseeching gesture as she called upon the Serpent God to witness the faithfulness of his people and pour forth his bounty upon them.

Into this pagan scene came the dejected figures of the contestants who had survived the Ritual of Flame. Ki-Gor counted them as they passed into the temple. There were only five, and two of them were half-dragged by the guards, so badly cut and burned were they. Exactly half the natives had died on the diabolical obstacles.

The fourth man to enter was Brogar and the fifth was Tembu George. Both men had come through the ordeal unscathed. One of these two, the Jungle Lord knew, was the opponent he must face.

At the entrance of the natives, Dian concluded her high-pitched prayer, and pointing to the altar, cried to waiting guards, "Draw back the sacred stones about the altar!"

Burly warriors sprang forward and hooked chains into iron rings set in the floor stones around the yellow rock-slab. With tremendous hauls, the guards pulled the hinged floor back, section by section, revealing a yawning pit which ran completely around the altar. The gaping six foot void which separated the sacrificial stone from the temple floor was bridged at only one point, where a narrow path was left to reach the rock.

A signal from Dian brought absolute quiet, and she spoke again to the Serpent God, saying, "O Mighty Zaa, we call upon you to send your spirit into the serpent of the pit to receive our sacrifices. We offer up these men with the hope

you will be pleased, and will come among us again and lead us to renewed greatness.”

Ki-Gor listened intently to this prayer of a dying race. The previous ritual was offered for all the snake people, white and black, but this particular plea was made actually on behalf of only the fairskinned aristocrats. The High Priestess called on Zaa to return in earthly form and rebuild the former power of her tribe.

“Your sword and helmet, your scarlet cape await your return. Come unto us again as the Great White Warrior who brought our forefathers into this country from beyond the endless waters.”

Abruptly, Dian broke off the prayer. She paused in silence a moment, then commanded a helmeted warrior, “Make ready the two warriors. Zaa waits restlessly for the first sacrifice of the Festival.”

The hatchetfaced Basru hastened to obey the High Priestess. He barked two orders. Ki-Gor’s guards shoved him forward before the sacrificial stone. From the other side of the altar, guards brought his opponent. He stared narrowly at the man, and the tension in him relaxed. His foe was the hulking Brogar.

Basru spoke briefly to the two men, explaining what they were to do. They would fight on the flat top of the altar until one man was killed and cast into the pit. The winner would be accepted into the service of the Serpent God. Basru handed Brogar a knife and sent him over the narrow bridge and up on the yellow slab. The guard turned then, and his eyes shifted nervously over the Jungle Lord’s face as he held out a knife. The two stared at each other for a long second, before Ki-Gor, unbidden, swung on his heel and crossed to the altar. Frowning, Basru, looked after him, and then, his face puzzled, he glanced to where Helene sat before walking away.

The bride-to-be of Zaa occupied a place of honor beside Dian in the front row of seats. Helene cringed at the ruthless barbarism of the spectacle about to be enacted. The High Priestess felt the redhaired girl’s reaction, and a cruel smile played over her sensuous lips.

“I would advise you to watch, my dear,” she said tauntingly, “because the longer the two men fight, the longer you have to live.”

Despite Helene’s resignation to death, there was horror in her voice, as she



gasped. “You mean I, too, will die tonight on the altar?”

Dian’s burning eyes savored the girl’s suffering. “Yes! Immediately after the other sacrifices are made. Zaa’s bride is the last one he claims.”

Helene looked involuntarily at the armed black men on the yellow rock. The smaller warrior crouched across from the giant, his finely chiseled profile contrasted with the big man’s gross features. Helene’s eyes widened at that familiar figure. Only Ki-Gor fought from that deadly, crouching stance—and yet, this man was black.

She strained forward, her heart beating wildly. All doubt was swept away. It was Ki-Gor, she knew. It was impossible because she saw him die, but somehow, some way, the man before her was Ki-Gor. A wild joy burst over her, fading as soon as it began, to be replaced by a gnawing fear he would be killed by the hulking giant.

The Jungle Lord, for his part, was absorbed to the exclusion of all else with the crafty warrior who began now to stalk him. He saw there was no over-confidence in Brogar this time to make him less wary. The giant knew full well how dangerous the smaller man was.

Ki-Gor watched the huge Negro’s fingers tighten on the long knife as the fellow moved forward, his thick, gorilla arms held wide. The man’s red, pig eyes glinted evilly, and his loose features were set in a flaccid, hideous leer. Ki-Gor judged the overly wide reach of the native, measuring the disadvantage he must overcome.

While the big fellow came on, the Jungle Lord slipped into his deadly crouch, balancing his muscled weight for instant action. His earlier fatigue was gone. The few hours of rest had renewed all the tremendous power of his superbly conditioned body, and every nerve and fiber was alert. He followed the slightest move Brogar made, and with his knowledge of a thousand battles, calculated the best means of attack against this behemoth.

Then Brogar struck. The giant threw his great weight forward three paces and slashed his knife arm like a striking python at Ki-Gor’s chest. He hoped for his long reach and sudden onslaught to blast the White Lord over, disabling him before he could fend the blow.

Ki-Gor made no effort to retreat. His keen eyes anticipated the attack when Brogar betrayed himself through an unconscious tensing. The Jungle Lord threw himself forward, reversing the natural human reaction to retreat, and through his blinding speed slipped under Brogar's knife arm and close against the giant. In the same motion, he chopped his blade into the black's left shoulder with a short, hard blow. The native roared with pain and fury at this unexpected turn of events, and goaded into madness threw off all caution, charged headlong at Ki-Gor.

The Jungle Lord fought to retrieve his knife, but the strength of his blow had buried it in the rigid mass of bone and muscle of the native's shoulder. He delayed a fraction too long before freeing the blade from its human sheath and all the trampling power of the monster burst against him. Before he could recover or fight back, the raging man made his attack and sent Ki-Gor hurtling back.

The Jungle Lord crashed on the stone, slid wildly to the edge of the rock slab, teetered helplessly for a moment, and then fell. While the breathless audience watched, he whirled over in the air and struck with his body half on, half off, the narrow bridge which joined the altar to the temple floor. Dazed, he hung limply, then with rending slowness recovered sufficiently to inch himself upon the bridge.

Had the brutish giant been in full possession of his feeble wits, he would have leaped from the altar and kicked the White Lord into the pit. The wounded Brogar, however, in his animal madness at first did not realize what had occurred, and by the time he grasped the situation, Ki-Gor was on his feet. Fearing the death that lurked in the pit, he would not risk going out on the narrow walk to meet even a dazed foe.

Ki-Gor swayed on his feet, shaking his head oddly. He blinked his eyes and looked strangely at the knife still tightly gripped in his fingers. He raised his right hand to the side of his head and carefully felt along the long scar there.

He turned and his puzzled gaze ran over the room, along the nearby rows of seats, and came to rest on his mate. She seemed to swim into his vision, a blurred, uneven picture which gradually came into focus.

Then abruptly he understood. The picture fitted into place. His bruised lips drew

into a smile, and softly he formed the name, "Helene."

The terrific fall he had taken, striking head first on the altar, had been the shock needed to counteract the damage suffered from Basru. His memory came back with a rush. And the sight of that beloved face, pale with fear for him, sent a rush of indomitable power over him.

Ki-Gor whirled and ran lightly back to the altar. His mind raced feverishly. Determined to end the bout quickly, he circled the wounded giant like a hunting lion, his lithe, liquid movements ominous with purpose. Brogar circled with his antagonist, his black face yellow with strain and hate, alert for the least opportunity to slash at the Jungle Lord. Brogar was on the defensive now, but the stiffening wound did not disable him for his huge, insensitive body was not to be incapacitated by so minor a hurt.

Faster Ki-Gor circled, while his eyes, narrow and cold, endlessly measured the giant. He was darting lightning when his dagger struck. His massive legs flung him in, and his corded right arm exploded into action. The giant staggered under the rush and crimson flooded over his chest.

But the human beast was not to die so easily. The coursing hate in him and the physical urge to live made him batter back with frenzied power. Brogar had but one fleeting opportunity to use his knife, and Ki-Gor's remorseless battle skill nullified this chance. As Ki-Gor struck, the giant stabbed at him, but the White Lord caught and held that huge wrist in mid-air. The next moment his blade tore to the bone of the native's forearm, and the threatening knife tumbled from the fellow's fingers.

Brogar screamed hoarsely, and to protect himself, flung his great arms about Ki-Gor. He held the Jungle Lord in a chest-cracking hug, and the two men pitted brute strength in a gasping struggle. In their staggering battle, they moved ever closer to the edge of the altar.

Ki-Gor saw the yawning pit and fought to break the giant's steel grip. Brogar saw or knew nothing, every ounce of his ebbing strength being centered at crushing this dreadful foe. When the Jungle Lord fought to pull back, he threw his monstrous bulk into a counter pull, and the lighter man could not stand against him. The giant jerked backwards and one foot slipped off the altar. Too late he realized what he had done.

He teetered clumsily, and then careened into the dark pit, dragging Ki-Gor with him.

The two men hurtled down in the darkness. Instinctively, even in this desperate situation, Ki-Gor struggled to spin Brogar's great bulk under him. He accomplished this just as they struck. The two splashed deep into the slime and water, and although the impact was cushioned by the liquid, their velocity was so great Brogar's back was snapped by the impact.

Ki-Gor sought with difficulty to reach the surface of this stagnant, muddy pool. He gulped deep breaths of the foul air into his lungs, as he swam heavily in the slimy water. His eyes gradually accustomed themselves to the darkness and he made out faintly the outline of the nearby wall. He forced his way through the filthy water until he came to an ooze-covered ledge at the base of the wall.

The Jungle Lord hoisted himself onto this ledge, and a moment after heard the water break apart with a loud splash. Waves lapped over the stone ledge and broke against his ankles. He stared into the dimness and made out a vague but hideous reptilian form rising and shifting in the pool. The long, smooth head of the immense serpent weaved in a frightening pattern.

Ki-Gor shrank back against the pit's stone side and watched the serpent. Flattened against the wet rock, he saw the darting head dive into the black water and jerk up again holding a big object. The huge serpent had searched out Brogar's body and was gulping it. Fearful of any movement that might attract the serpent's attention, Ki-Gor glued himself to the wall hardly daring to breathe, until at length the ugly monster slid beneath the surface.

## IX. - The Coming of Zaa

A faint glimmer of light was visible across the pit. Ki-Gor worked his way around the perilous ledge, and after an eternity, he reached the point. He peered through a small opening into a room where an aged woman sat dozing on a bench. From the stained, yellow cape worn by the old crone, Ki-Gor knew she was a servant of Zaa. Exploring the area around the tiny window, he found he stood outside a stone door which was tightly fastened.

He sought in desperation for a means to get that door opened. He shivered, realizing a stream of cold water was splashing down on his shoulders from above. The fresh water came from a point high on the wall. He rubbed one

chilled arm, unable to bring himself to leave the lighted window, and as he stood there under the trickling water, a plan of escape came to him. Immediately he began scrubbing his body, vigorously washing and rubbing every inch of his skin.

Ki-Gor placed his face to the little window and called to the dozing crone. The old woman, deaf and half-blind, did not rouse until after repeated calls. Finally, she awoke with a start and stared about her with dim eyes, eventually locating the source of the voice.

The aged handmaiden of Zaa was upset and obviously disturbed by this disturbance beyond the door. She hesitated, fright growing on her, but deciding to act at last, she took a torch from its holder and carried it to the window.

The light from the torch streamed through the narrow slit and illuminated Ki-Gor's face. The Jungle Lord stared unflinchingly at the old crone, and in a commanding voice cried, "Open the door, Old One, that I may enter!"

The sight of this calm face staring at her from the pit completely upset the woman, and nearly fainting with fright, she stuttered in her cracked voice, "But who are you, who stands unscathed in the pit?"

It was an unbelievable occurrence to the woman. Since long, dim years before, when she was first relegated to this lonely task of watching over the pit, no single person had ever emerged alive from the Pit of the Serpent God. Ki-Gor now made his great gamble for freedom. The answer he gave to the woman's question was, "Open, Old One, and look upon me! Certainly, a true believer should be pleased at my coming!" The dim, watery, frightened eyes peered more closely at the clean-cut masculine features revealed by the window, and as the woman's frown changed to amazement, Ki-Gor knew he had won his gamble. The crone's mind, never too clear in the calmest moments, at this time of frightened bewilderment, jumped suddenly to the only conclusion which had presented itself.

She blanched with fear, and cried out, "It is he—Zaa-the Great One. He comes at last in human form to aid us."

With fluttering, fumbling hands she unlocked the stone door and utilized her greatest strength to shove it open. When the door swung out, the old handmaiden fell to her knees on the floor, abject and humble before this proud, regal white

man she thought was Zaa.

When he stood in the pit, anxiously seeking a means of escape, the memory of the High Priestess' prayer for Zaa to return to his people had come into Ki-Gor's mind. The Jungle Lord scrubbed the dark coating from his skin on the long chance he could pass himself off as Zaa. He little thought at the moment this plan would succeed so completely, but he had hoped it would so baffle and interest the ancient woman that she would permit him to enter.

Realizing now the extent to which this superstitious woman was taken in by his masquerade, he decided to press this opportunity to the extreme.

He strode into the small room, assuming a proud, arrogant, disdainful air. "You are a faithful servant, Old One, and for this one reason I present myself first to you. The young ones of the temple do not serve me with their hearts as do you. Thus do I reward you first for your years of faithful service to me."

Overwhelmed by this compliment, the grovelling woman, long resentful of the treatment handed her by the younger ones of the temple, could mutter only. "True, O Lord Zaa, too true. No longer, though, will the young ones scorn me after this. They have laughed at me because of this lonely job it has been my lot to tend. They will laugh no longer."

"Rise now, and fetch me fitting garments, for I would appear before my people," Ki-Gor ordered. He cautioned the woman to secure these garments without the knowledge of anyone, saying he did not wish to disclose his presence until the height of the sacrificial ceremonies in the temple.

Exaltation lent speed to the crone's feet, and soon Ki-Gor was caparisoned in the golden helmet and sweeping scarlet cape which were held always in readiness for the hoped-for return of Zaa. Ki-Gor buckled at his side the jeweled sword and slipped his feet into golden sandals. He told the woman to remain at her post, and then with a sweep of his cape he strode from the room.

Ki-Gor went through the deserted halls, and proceeded quickly to the door by which he previously was taken into the temple. He held himself back in the doorway, surveying the barbaric scene. Dian, High Priestess of Zaa, stood in the center of the sacrificial stone holding high a bloody knife.

Dian loosened her cape and dropped it onto the yellow stone. She stood there in

the flickering light of the torches swaying in time to the quickening chant of the massed spectators. The jewels on her almost nude body glittered with her sensuous movement. She jerked the knife in a stabbing motion, and four guards hurried forward another screaming victim.

Ki-Gor acted quickly to forestall this sacrifice. Tall and regal in the robes of the Serpent God, he stepped from concealment and stalked into the temple, going unnoticed until he stood before the altar. The sacred robes were known to every person in the temple. Every eye in the frenzied multitude seemed to focus on him at the same time.

Tense and ear-tingling silence exploded over the temple. The pregnant quiet was terrible in its intensity. Then an awed murmur ran back, over the staring ranks, swelling and growing as from countless throats burst the astonished whisper, "Zaa! ... It is Zaa! He has come!"

The dense mass of natives went to their knees as one man. The white-skinned snake people, thunderstruck by Ki-Gor's regal figure, hesitated uncertainly, and then one by one bent in homage. Behind him on the altar, the tense bare form of the High Priestess knelt.

Two people in the temple stared at this embodiment of the Serpent God with the most confused disbelief of all. Tembu George and Helene could not believe their eyes for a second. They were shaken by the Jungle Lord's audacity, but wild hope rose in their hearts.

Ki-Gor acted now to assert his authority.

His deep, measured voice resounded through the hall. "I—Zaa—return to lead you as I led your forefathers."

A low roar like the breaking surf rose from the snake people and died away, as they awaited his next statement.

"I am sickened of the blood spilled in my name, and these forays against peaceful tribes henceforth shall cease, and there shall be no further sacrifices. I declare this reign of blood and terror ended, and I command you to live in peace.

"In penance for your wrongs, I order you to remain in the temple tonight. Tomorrow you will gather again and select a chieftain and a council of wise,

good men to lead you in a life of peace.”

Cries of praise thundered up from the natives, except for the glowering black guards. Ki-Gor did not notice the shiftyeyed guard leader stare at him, and turn cursing to scurry to a group of the white warriors. The cruel, hard Basru, far more cunning than the others, caught the overjoyed look on Helene’s face when she saw Ki-Gor, and as the Jungle Lord spoke, he recognized the man posing as Zaa.

“I go now into the inner temple,” Ki-Gor cried, “and the prisoners and my bride shall accompany me.”

The Jungle Lord held out his hand to Helene, and the redhaired girl rose and came to him. The restraining hands on the prisoners loosened, and all that was left of the original twelve, three men including Tembu George, joined Ki-Gor.

Before the five could move, a white warrior leaped shouting: “This man is not Zaa!” he screamed. “He is the white savage Basru took this girl from far downriver. I don’t know how he comes here, but he is no god, and my sword will prove it.”

The warrior darted at Ki-Gor, sword in hand, but the alert Jungle Lord was not to be checkmated so easily. He swept Helene behind him, and Zaa’s sword flashed gleaming from its scabbard. The two swords shattered together as Ki-Gor blocked the man’s sweeping thrust and locked the weapons hilt to hilt. Before the white warrior could brace himself, the Jungle Lord threw his great weight forward, snapping the man’s blade from his grip, and in the same motion, half-severed the fellow’s head.

More white warriors ran at them, and Ki-Gor retreated toward the only open avenue, the narrow bridge to the altar. He tossed Tembu George the fallen man’s sword, and shoulder to shoulder they fought off the attackers, while Helene led the two natives over the stone walk.

Helene in the excitement had forgotten the High Priestess. Dian stood on the altar, holding the sacrificial knife, with her eyes glued on Ki-Gor’s mate. The High Priestess’ face was contorted with savage hate as she flung at Helene, intent on stabbing the girl. A pool of blood from the native sacrificed on the altar lay across the stone. The feet of the nearly-nude priestess struck the wet place, and she slipped out of control and plunged headlong past Helene into the pit.



The black mass of natives saw the white warriors swarm at the mighty figure they believed to be the Serpent God. Zaa had promised them they could rule themselves, and he had discredited and cast out these cruel masters.

A handful of blacks sprang to defend the Serpent God and the action of these few catapulted the entire mob forward. The roar of their charge shook the ancient temple as they flowed against the fair-skinned swordsman and the force of guards commanded by Basru.

“Come,” Ki-Gor called to Tembu George, “We must try to get through to the inner temple.”

The two men joined the others on the altar. Ki-Gor glanced across the yawning pit, locating an open space among the struggling groups on the far side. He pointed to the spot, and without a word, Tembu George leaped the gap. Ki-Gor picked up Helene and tossed her across to his waiting friend. Quickly the two natives followed, and then with an effortless bound, Ki-Gor was over the pit.

He led the way to the door, sword ready for instant action, while Tembu George brought up behind. Ki-Gor sent the others down the passage, while he lingered a moment to make sure they were not followed. And his wait was not in vain.

A tall, raw-boned guard forced his way to the door, his uneasy eyes searching for Ki-Gor. It was Basru staying on the scent of his victim. This time the Jungle Lord recognized the renegade, and with a grim smile, he stepped out to meet him.

Basru came at Ki-Gor like a dervish, his lean body whirling and dancing, and his sword whining as it slashed. The Jungle Lord met him with equal agility, and their blades sparked as they whirled.

Ki-Gor pressed the attack, raining blows at Basru’s head and shoulders, and the tall native retreated, almost staggering at times under the shock of the white man’s power. The sword bit at the native’s head ever faster, and Basru raised his guard further to ward off the onslaught. This was the trap Ki-Gor planned, and with an abrupt change of tactics, he abandoned the chopping head blows and stabbed completely through Basru’s chest. The black man reeled in anguish and fell backwards, writhing in death.

Delaying no longer, Ki-Gor ran in pursuit of Helene and the two prisoners with

Tembu George. The five hurried out of the temple and sprinted through the deserted streets. The battle clamor fell behind them as they went down the flagstone road to the lagoon. It was a minute's work to find and launch a small canoe.

There was no sound but the hard breathing of the men as they sent the canoe scudding over the lake. Helene sat quietly, drinking in the splendor of the African night for a time. Ki-Gor sat behind her and in the silvery brilliance of the full moon he saw every feature of her lovely face when she turned to stare at him.

"Tell me something, Ki-Gor," she said in her low, throaty voice.

"Yes, my dear," he answered softly.

"As I remember, Ki-Gor," she continued, "this all began because you had an important appointment with Tembu George. Tell me, just what was that appointment about?"

Ki-Gor grinned sheepishly. "Well," he said, ducking his head like a small boy explaining where the jam disappeared, "we were going hunting."

"Urrimmm," commented Helene.

An eavesdropper named Tembu George was totally unsuccessful in his attempt to suppress a chuckle.

THE END