

\$1.00

the
Adventuress
no. 9



ANDERSON

CHIDO
ANDERSON
'79

THE COMICS HEROINES FAN CLUB

Publisher

Steven R. Johnson

Editor

Nick Chinn

Staff

Brent Anderson

Lela Dowling

Deby Dunn

Scott Gibson

Tom Luth

Paul McCall

Carol Strickland

Scott Taylor

Mercy Van Vlack

Gary Winnick

Cat Yronwode

Contributors

Alex Bialy

Greg Espinoza

Rudi Franke

Al Gordon

Larry Heller

Fran Hopper

Gerald Perkins

Steve Swenston

British Agent

Martin Lock

Typography

SJ Graphics

Editor Emeritus

Al Tanner

BACK ISSUES:

Single issues, \$1.25; 2 or more, \$1.00 each

The Heroines Showcase #5,6,9,12,16

The Adventuress #1,5,7,8

The United Kingdom Heroine Addict #1

Single issues, \$1.75; 2 or more, \$1.50 each

The U.K. Heroines Showcase #2

Single issues, \$2.25; 2 or more, \$2.00 each

The Heroines Showcase #14,15,17

The Heroines Showcase Art Portfolio #2

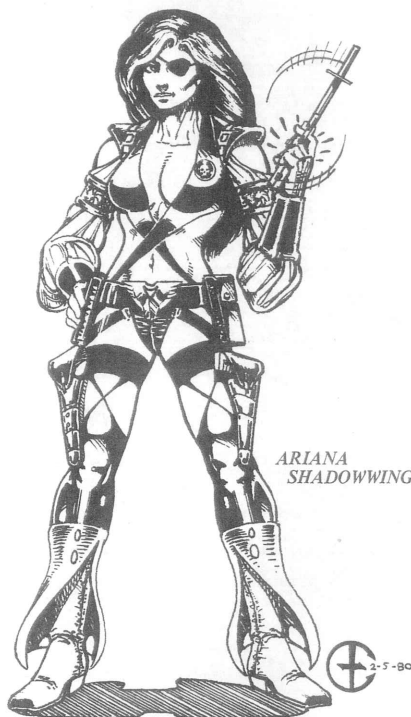
Single issues, \$5.25; 2 or more, \$5.00 each

The Adventuress #6

Single issues, \$10.25; 2 or more, \$10 each

The Heroines Showcase #13

THE ADVENTURESS #9, Spring 1980. Published quarterly, or whenever time, money and material permit, by Steven R. Johnson. Single copies: \$1.25 via first class mail; \$1.10 via third class mail. All original material is covered by first publication laws; "Gale Allen" copyright 1945 by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc. Cover printed by Fly-By-Nite Grafiks, Willow Springs, MO; interior printed by Village Printers, Los Gatos, CA.



CONTRIBUTIONS & LOC'S from fans and potential new contributors are always welcome. We can not return any materials however, unless they are accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope of sufficient size with sufficient postage affixed.

SUBSCRIPTIONS to *The Heroines Showcase*, *The Adventuress*, and other CHFC publications are available for an initial account payment of \$4.00. For more information on our multi-subscription arrangement, send a large sase for a copy of our club brochure. If the words "PAYMENT NOW DUE" are stamped on the outside envelope when you receive one of our publications, the balance in your account has dropped below the amount required to send you our next issue. Subscription accounts have been charged \$1.00 for this issue.

ALL MATERIALS & MONIES should be mailed to: *The Comics Heroines Fan Club*, P.O. Box 1329, Campbell, CA 95008 - Attn. Steven R. Johnson.

IXIONA:

by Nick Chinn

Centauress in the 20th Century

Chapter Six: "The Pit of Blood"

The pool of blood bubbled as three somber figures looked on.

Centaur, supposedly mythical beings, became extinct during ancient Greek times, or so thought Diana Morris, an account executive with a major international public relations firm. She was summoned on short notice to fly (on winged-horseback) to the hills of Thessaly in Greece . . . to meet and aid a centauress named Ixiona.

"I have a public relations problem," Ixiona explained to Diana. "We centaurs have long been depicted as drunken, lawless and untrustworthy. I was hoping you could help me, Diana."

She went on to tell how her father, Chiron, son of Cronus, was accidentally wounded by Hercules. Chiron relinquished his immortality and his image was placed in the heavens as the constellation, Sagittarius.

"And you said you had a brother, also immortal?" Diana asked.

"There is an arrow - mystical arrow kept by the Lapithae family. The arrow accidentally killed my father. It rightfully belonged to Hercules, but the Lapithae stole it and have used it against my kin. They're our deadly enemies. . . . a feud is still boiling ever since the era of the great gods."

Ixiona offered Diana some wine, but she refused. "I don't think that drinking wine will help your image any," suggested Diana. "It perpetuates the drunken centaur stereotype."

"I can't hep it," Ixiona shrugged. "I love it. It's the nectar of the Gods - and my father would be an honored god if his soul weren't imprisoned in Hades. Besides, I don't need to uphold an image if most humans don't even believe I exist."

"Why is your father in hell? I thought he was a good, kind creature, er . . . man." Diana wondered.

"I don't have the answer," sighed Ixiona. "But I won't be happy until I find out why my father's reputation was besmirched."

"Wouldn't it be easy to journey to Hades and free him or something?"

"It's not that simple. The path through Hades to the lower realm is dangerous. Didn't you ever read your mythology?"

"I guess. Yeah, it's not so easy, is it?"

"Once I sent one of my followers - one of the best warriors in Greece - to find my father in Hades. Of course, we never heard from him again, until we heard his ghost one night."

Diana shuddered. "Ghost?"

"Yes," said Ixiona. "I don't think he appreciated the fact I sent him to oblivion, but he insisted he'd be okay. He was brave. I was too chicken to go myself."

"So you still have the problem . . ."

"Yes - I won't rest until my father is vindicated. I want my father cleared. I want . . ." Ixiona stared at her reflected image on her shiny wine goblet. She removed her single gold loop earring. Her reflection blurred, and her mind wandered.

"Andros, you must tell me where you saw that centauress, and where she went. She's crazy mad. Insane, you understand?" Angelo Lapidopoulos paced the floor of his modest home. A well-worn path was beaten where many generations paced in front of the living room mantel. Angelo pointed to an arrow hanging in a golden frame above the fireplace. "This arrow killed that centauress's brother. It will also kill her."

Andros frowned. "This is a futile war, father. Must we kill those who've done us no harm?"

"Enough of your philosophizing," his father barked. "Your ancestors and their ancestors fought the centaurs. Who are we to dishonor them by neglecting their last wishes? We must

eradicate the centaurs! You're no son of mine if you want no part of this. Now . . . where did you see that centaress?"

Andros hesitated. He gazed out the living room window to the dirt road outside. His mother chased a flock of geese into the yard.

"Look at me," growled his father. "Don't daydream."

* * *

Ixiona's thoughts wandered. Her reflection in the wine goblet transformed into an apparition. It was her father!?

"Ick . . ."

"Huh?" Ixiona snapped out of her trance. "I'm sorry, Diana . . . I'm so tired I thought I saw my dad in this goblet."

"You need some sleep. Let me take this wine and let's get you to bed."

"Okay. I'll see you in the morning and we'll start with our plans." Ixiona trotted to her sleeping chamber and disappeared quietly behind an Oriental tapestry.

Diana drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Tomorrow she would have to take part in a ritual which would, she thought, most likely be the most tasteless act of her life. She looked around the cave which now served as her home. It seemed unusually warm and comfortable despite the cold rock walls and ceiling. Maybe her own heritage as a descendent of the gods meant she wasn't supposed to be a western civilization inhabitant.

Strangely there were not any echoes in the main chamber, although the tunnel entrance would announce the sounds of any intruder. As she sat down, she didn't notice that Ixiona's wine goblet was very warm even though it held chilled wine. Diana turned around to go to her room, the goblet immediately turned cold, and a barely visible image on its side disappeared.

* * *

"Andros . . . look at me. Come here. I want you to hold this arrow. It is a sacred family heirloom." He thrust it quickly toward his son, who backed off and refused it.

Andros reluctantly reached for the weapon, fearful of his father's wrath. His father slightly smiled and held the arrow at his son's eye level. Andros weakly touched the fletchings, petting them as he would a dog.

"Grasp it with both your hands! Like this . . ." Angelo Lapidopoulos held each end of the arrow at arm's length. His face turned from rage to pleading, easing some of his son's hesitance. "Please take it, son."

Hands trembling, Andros put his hands on the arrow's shaft, just inside his father's hands. His eyes concentrated on the perfectly straight and round wood, pure white feathers, and shining metal point. He didn't hear or notice his mother come in the room, observe father and son together, and quietly leave the room without a sound. Angelo clasped his hands tightly around his son's and fixed his eyes on his son's. "Close your eyes, Andros, and be taken on a journey eons beyond your seventeen years."

Andros, shuddering, his eyes riveted intently on his father's, obeyed the command, and slowly lowered his eyelids, encasing his thoughts in darkness.

"Hayavihs haman mo," mumbled Angelo, mindlessly.

"What's that?" Andros blurted, opening his eyes. "That's not Greek."

"Silence. Close your eyes again."

Andros obeyed.

"Hayavihs haman mo," repeated Angelo. "Say it after me . . . with me . . . *hayavihs haman mo.*"

Andros spoke the strange phrase quietly, unknowing of its meaning.

"Once again — and keep repeating it," urged Angelo persuasively. "*Hayavihs haman mo.*"

Andros breathed the words, trying to concentrate on something he thought unattainable. It was all a mystery. He felt hungry. He clamped his eyes even more tightly, hoping he would see what his father promised. "*Hayavihs haman mo.*" He held the arrow more tightly. His father let go of his son's hands. Andros also wanted to let go, but couldn't!

* * *

Eunice, the unicorness, the strange misfit combination of human, goat, unicorn and perhaps other beings, sat with her legs propped on the table. She popped bon-bons into the air down into her mouth with a gulp.

"Sweet tooth again, right Eunice?"

"Oh — good morning Ick. Sleep well?"

"Not much . . . I saw my father's image on this very goblet last night." She lifted the glass, still where Diana had left it hours earlier. The goblet was cold.

"You mean you dreamed you saw him . . . on *that*?" Eunice giggled.

"Don't be so snitty, lady. Or I'll dump you back in the forest where I found you."

"Okay . . . if you saw him, I believe it. What'd he say? Or don't goblets speak?"

"I just don't know . . . maybe I did dream it." Ixiona rapped the oak table rhythmically with her fingers. She downed the remaining wine and grimaced.

"Yuck . . . warm wine . . . but the goblet's cold!" Ixiona plopped her horse's body down on the floor and her eyes stared at the goblet. No image of her father.

"Daddy, are you trying to speak to me? Please daddy . . . I want to hear from you . . ." Ixiona's voice tailed off to a whisper. "Oh, daddy . . ." She stared at the goblet and silently commanded it to produce her father's image, with no success. Even her reflection now was dulled.

"Dammit!!" bellowed Ixiona. "I had my chance last night and blew it!" Ixiona took the goblet and poised herself to hurl it across the room, knocking Eunice out of her chair.

"Hey, Ick," interrupted Eunice as she checked her head for bumps. "You don't really know if you saw him or not. Isn't that a bit too much hocus-pocus to believe in?"

"I don't know . . . I suppose," admitted Ixiona. "But how many humans would believe you or I really exist? Tell me that!"

"I suppose you're right," said Eunice.

* * *



Andros dropped the arrow — or did it jump from his hands? He opened his eyes and exhaled sharply. “Wh—what was that, father? I wanted to let go of the arrow . . . but I couldn’t . . .”

“That is the mysticism of the arrow. It is sacred. With it, you and I will destroy the last centaurs . . . something my father and his father could not do.” Angelo picked up the arrow from the floor and replaced it on its perch in the frame. “What did you feel and see when you held it? It was great, wasn’t it? All the righteous power of the Gods!”

“Father. I . . .”

“Never mind . . . I know what you experienced — all the Lapithae descendants who held that arrow have had the same revelation. Let’s just you and I go and have a fine dinner. Tomorrow you and I will hunt the centauress you saw.” Angelo ushered his son out the front door and down the road to a downtown restaurant. Overwhelmed by his father’s perverted ebullency, Andros did not have enough heart to confess he saw nothing at all . . . no religious enlightenment his father spoke of. But he sensed that the arrow did hold some power.

* * *

Ixiona tossed the goblet end-over-end in the air, catching it and flipping it up again and again. Her eyes concentrated on the object. Eunice was still tossing bon-bons into her mouth.

“I know what you’re thinking, Ick. You’re still wondering if the goblet is magical.”

“I just don’t know,” said Ixiona. “I’ve had this goblet since — oh, for about a thousand years. I bought it in an out-of-the-way trinket shop in India when I vacationed there once. I entered a beat-up, bare wood door which was so low I had to duck to get in. There was a thick haze of burning incense in the store, and the shopkeeper kept on mumbling something about ‘bowing to myself’ when he wasn’t jibberizing in Sanskrit. It took me a long time to look around because the aisles were crowded and I had to be careful not to knock over anything with my big body. Naturally I was wearing the cloaking spell from my earrings to fool anyone into thinking I had a ‘normal’ body.” Ixiona looked over at Eunice, who listened intently. “Well, I saw this goblet . . . this very one . . . out of the many lamps, candles, bowls and cups in the store. I was looking for a unique wine glass to add to my collection. I just thought this one was real pretty, but I don’t recall being psychically driven to pick it. When I brought the goblet up to the man it took him awhile to even open his eyes, and he still kept on mumbling. I wanted to get out of there because the smoke from the incense was really thick and was making me dizzy and driving me crazy. I told the little guy I wanted to buy this. He stopped his mumbling, almost begrudgingly, and slowly looked up at me and said something, although it wasn’t a price. I expressly asked him for a price, shrugged at him and pulled some money out of my vest, but he refused it. He pointed his long, dark finger at me — his fingernail was longer than mine! — and after a few seconds I realized he was pointing at my left earring! I asked him in English if he wanted to trade the earring for the goblet, and he nodded yes. Even in those days gold was worth a lot, and the goblet was made of more gold than my earring.”

“But your earring is magical, and you dad gave it to you,” interrupted Eunice.

“That’s why I debated it. I told him to wait a second, and he went back to his mumbling. It kinda gave me the creeps, his being sort of unconscious with me right there. I went outside and took the left earring off — if the people outside started staring at me, then I knew I couldn’t give up the earring. But after a long time nobody noticed me, so I decided that maybe the other one was the enchanted one. I tested that, too, taking off the right one and leaving on the left one. Some old lady screamed and pointed at me, so I knew right away that didn’t work. I ran back into the shop and put the earring back on. The shopkeeper didn’t even notice that a centauress walked into the shop. I just hoped that the people outside wouldn’t come in. I tried to catch my breath — I lost it again when a buncha people burst into the store with their inquisitive faces. I was shocked when the shopkeeper jumped up and started yelling at the people . . . and they left quietly. Of course by that time I was looking like a human again. I guess the fact that he ‘saved’ me made up my mind. That goblet was so beautiful that I consented and gave the shopkeeper my left earring.”

Eunice was spellbound. “So that’s why you only have one earring of that style.”

“That little man gave me a strange, peaceful smile when we traded items, and he mumbled something again about ‘worshipping myself’ — and he went back to mumbling to himself. I wanted to ask him something but I didn’t think he’d answer, so I left.”

“That’s the longest story you ever told me, Ick. And after all that you don’t think the goblet’s enchanted?”

“It just doesn’t give me the chilly feeling like other mystical, enchanted objects do.”

“Does wearing the earring make you tingle?” Eunice wondered.

“Only when I use it. I think it’s only good for cloaking spells.”

* * *

Andros Lapidoupoulos sat pensively in his bedroom and the near-full moon cast his shadow on the wooden floor. At his father’s urging, he had gone through an exhausting emotional experience. It seemed silly to him, holding an arrow and reciting a chant. True, he found it difficult to release the arrow from his grasp. But was it fear or mysticism? His father had explained nothing, seemingly knowing what Andros would experience. He examined the palms of his hands, and then the back of them. Obviously no answer was there. So he got up, walked out of his bedroom door, and went slowly to the living room. He walked down the dark hallway . . . past his younger sister’s room as she slept; and past the door to his parents’ room, where inside they giggled playfully.

He emerged in the living room and advanced toward the fireplace. Reaching above the mantel, he lifted the mysterious arrow, held it high above his head, and uttered the words his father taught him.

“*Hayavihs haman mo!*”

No. Too loud. Too forceful for something that should be sacred.

“*Hayavihs haman mo.*” he mumbled quietly.

The room began to swirl. He repeated the words. The room began to roll. Violently. Andros drew a deep breath and gritted his teeth to keep from getting sick from the motion . . . apparent motion. His pulse quickened. And visions entered his brain. His temples began to pound with every heartbeat. He saw the visions clearly . . . as though it was daytime. Voices from the past called him . . .

* * *

The pool of lamb’s blood bubbled as three somber figures looked on.

“It’s not working.”

“Just wait. It will. I’ve done this before.”

“How long ago?”

“Oh, about a thousand years.”

“I hope you remember how.”

* * *

“Good morning everyone,” Diana announced, entering the cave’s living room. Eunice jumped up and enthusiastically grabbed Diana’s shoulders.

“Ick just told me this neat-o story about how she got that magical goblet!”

“So you’ve determined that the goblet is magical?” Diana asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Eunice said. “She got it a million years ago from this Indian guru.”

“C’mon Eunice,” Ixiona scoffed. “It wasn’t that long ago and he wasn’t a guru.”

“How do you know?” Eunice retorted. “I bet he knew the goblet was magical.”

“Then why did he let me have it?” Ixiona questioned.

“Let’s go ask him.”

“What is going on?” Diana asked.

“We don’t have time, Eunice,” Ixiona sighed. “We have to get going here to talk to the spirits about my father. Today is the only day we can do that. Let’s go, Eunice, we need some lamb’s blood . . . enough for about a small bucket or a gallon.”

“I wasn’t raised to kill no lambs,” protested Eunice. “I’ll help you in any way I can, but I won’t kill any animals.”

“It’s the only way. We have to dig a large pit in the earth, fill it with lamb’s blood, and then spirits from the past will be drawn to it and drink it. We’ll need to fend off evil ghosts with our swords to be able to speak with the ones we want.”

Eunice and Diana shuddered together. “You’ve done this before?” asked Diana.

“Just how many ghosts show up when we do this?” added Eunice. “I can’t handle the presence of one ghost, much less a whole flock of them.”

“There’s no guarantee any ghosts will show up,” Ixiona warned, “only the ones who died

near there just like my dad. If we dig the pit near his death place, we have a better chance of seeing him, or some of his friends. Last time I did this, dad didn't show up and the ones who did couldn't tell me anything. When the sun starts to shine and dawn dies, the ghosts go away."

"Oh, well," said Diana. "We're here to help you, so let's get going. Why don't we have more help?"

"Uh," stuttered Ixiona. "To tell the truth, everyone else is scared silly."

"But what about talking to the guru?" Eunice said. "I have a feeling he knows something."

"He's in India . . . and that was a thousand years ago."

"I bet he's still alive. He could have some advice for us."

"I doubt it." Ixiona grew impatient. She hurried to a wine bottle and poured three full



goblets, including her questionably mystical one. "Let's drink to our success, girls."

* * *

Andros stood silently in the cold room, his brow soaked with sweat. The visions stopped. Daylight began to barely peek through the window, and he realized that he had been there, motionless, for the entire night. Or was it a dream? He dropped the arrow and raced to his parents' bedroom, and burst into their privacy.

"Father! It happened. I saw it all. We must leave now!"

His mother instinctively covered herself with the blanket. Groggy from the abrupt intrusion, his father sat up slowly with a grouchy look. "What gives you the right to barge into here?"

"I saw the past . . . the arrow showed me . . . we must go after the centaress now!"

"What do you mean? Explain!" Angelo was caught up in his son's excitement.

"The arrow told me that the centaress will be at the Old Well at daybreak today."

"Get dressed quickly . . . I'll get the arrow and the bow!" exclaimed Angelo as he flew out of bed. "Today is the designated day our ancestors have talked about for one thousand years . . . the Ritual of the Blood Pit, when the centaress speaks to her own ancestors as you have communicated with yours." Angelo lowered his eyes and he smiled sardonically. "And this morning we will catch her in the act . . . off guard. They will all die."

* * *

"This is the only time in eons that I have a chance to perform this ritual," said Ixiona. "So we can't mess it up. All the elements are right - last night's full moon; the alignment of the planets and stars; the belt of Sagittarius directly over the Old Well, where my father accidentally was shot - where Hercules held my dying father - and where the arrow was stolen by the Lapithae as Hercules cried over my father."

"I don't understand why your people have never stolen back the arrow," Diana said.

"It must be protected mystically or something."

Ixiona stared mindlessly at the wall. Moments passed quietly, tensely.

"You're right," whispered Eunice, answering for the solemn Ixiona. "Nobody has ever returned from an attempt to recapture the arrow."

Ixiona snapped out of it. "Let's go. Time's short."

* * *

"Are you ready, son?"

"Yes, father. Time's short. Let's go."

* * *

"How much time do we have left?" asked Diana. Her warm breath formed a mist in the early morning air. It was cold, but she couldn't feel it for the pressure.

Ixiona pointed to a bare dirt patch 15 yards to the left of the Old Well, now dry, situated at the edge of the woods a couple of miles north of town. The terrain was flat for a hundred yards in each direction from the Well. "Dig at this spot . . . 15 feet wide, 20 feet long, and two feet deep."

"Just like that?" Diana said sarcastically. "You got all day?"

"Only you can do it Diana, just like one of your ancestors did for me the last time. You'll know what to do." Ixiona handed Diana a shovel with a silver spade. "Trust me. Dig, please."

Diana shook her head in wonder. She jammed the shovel in the ground, and the earth trembled slightly. Visions of her home in California jumped at her, and she jerked the shovel out of the ground.

"Keep it up . . . it won't take long at all," Ixiona pleaded. Diana continued. With one pitch, what seemed like a ton of soil was displaced, moving itself aside.

* * *

Andros and Angelo hid just inside the woods, only a short hundred yards from Ixiona and her friends. "We can't possibly shoot the arrow that far," Andros said, pointing to the Well.

"We will have to rush at them to get close enough."

"Won't they see us?"

"No. Just wait."

* * *

The pit now completed to exact specifications, Ixiona directed Eunice to pour in fresh

lamb's blood. "Do you have the blood?" Ixiona asked.

"Yes, I do. I got it from a butcher in town who just slaughtered a lamb. Is that okay? Will that work?"

"It'll work. Pour it in. When that's done, Zeus's power will completely fill the pit with blood."

Without a cloud in the sky, a bolt of lightning soared from the heavens directly into the center of the pit, making Eunice and Diana shriek. The pool shook, and the bloodline began to move up, swelling to within inches of the top of the pit.

"Oh, my heart," moaned Eunice.

"What was that?" said a bewildered Andros.

"Power from the gods, it must be. Our turn comes soon." Angelo caressed the fine point of the arrow, testing its lethality. "When the ghosts arrive, a foggy mist will fill the air. That's when we rush the enemy, and kill them."

Three quiet, somber figures looked on. The pool of lamb's blood began to boil and bubble, filling the air with an acrid smell.

"That's sickening . . . I feel like throwing up," burped Eunice.

"Don't mind it," urged Ixiona, hugging Eunice for comfort.

"Nothing's happening. Is everything right?" asked Diana as she looked around for ghosts.

"Just wait. Let's have patience." C'mon, ghosts, Ixiona thought to herself.

What seemed like hours passed and the blood boiled on. The sun began to rise above the tree tops.

"I hate to say this, but it's taking too long," Ixiona said with a shudder.

"It seems to be taking a long time," Angelo said.

"Do you know much about this, father?"

"I only know what the arrow told me in my own younger days."

"Look, father . . . smoke is rising from the pit!"

"Oh-oh," Ixiona brooded, "this ain't right."

"Do something!" shouted Diana.

Eunice screamed. "There's a hand in the pit! It's coming out!"

A blood-soaked body - a demon - began to arise from the blood. Followed by another . . . and then more of them. One of them opened his toothy mouth and gurgled some hideous sounds.

"Let's get outta here!!" shouted Ixiona, scooping Diana onto her back. "These aren't our ghosts!" Ixiona bolted and galloped away, with Diana clinging desperately to Ixiona's waist.

"What about Eunice?" Diana yelled.

"She's fast enough on her goat's legs!"

Eunice, still at the pit, drew her sword and bravely took a swipe at the first ugly demon. The blade passed through his arm without making a scratch, but her sword was covered with blood. Eunice ran. The demons growled at her but didn't follow, and the trio of women was too occupied running to look back.

"It's very smoky up there, father. I can't see anything."

"It's getting on to daylight," Angelo noticed. "We must rush them *now!*"

Angelo burst out of the woods and beckoned for Andros to follow him. Andros was already close on his father's heels, screaming a war whoop. It seemed like more than a hundred yards, what with the anticipation and the smoke that they ran into, making visibility poor. The two men became separated, as Angelo ran faster than his son. He slowed, not being able to see his way through the smoke. He smelled the smoke, and held back retching. His eyes watered. He walked now. Drawing the bow, he placed the arrow carefully on it and pointed it blindly ahead. "Where are you centaress?" he yelled. A growl came from the foreground, and he stepped carefully in that direction. Suddenly he faced a towering monster with gleaming fangs, dripping with blood. He shot the arrow, and it went clean through. The demon glowered, as if laughing at him. Angelo froze in his tracks as the monster stalked him, raising his huge arm to deliver a mortally wounding blow. ■

Gale Allen

by Douglas McKee





THERE-THERE-IT SPOUTS-RUN BROTHERS, RUN-FILL YOUR VESSELS, EVERY DROP IS PRECIOUS!

WHILE IN THE SHIP-

GRACIOUS-THIS IS AWFUL!

BLESS MY SOUL-WE'VE HIT SOMETHING!

MINUTES LATER-

COME ON, CLIMB OUT-WE'VE LANDED. WHAT IS THIS STUFF?

OUR SHIP'S COVERED WITH A STRANGE GROWTH. WHAT IS IT?

VERY SIMPLE, IT'S-LOOK WE'RE GOING TO HAVE VISITORS!

QUICK, SHOOT THE MEN!

INSTANTLY-

2



BLESS MY SOUL-THAT'S A STRANGE GUN...IT SHOOTS, BUT NOTHING HAPPENS. MAN-MAN-WHAT'S THE MATTER? WAKE UP-WAKE UP!

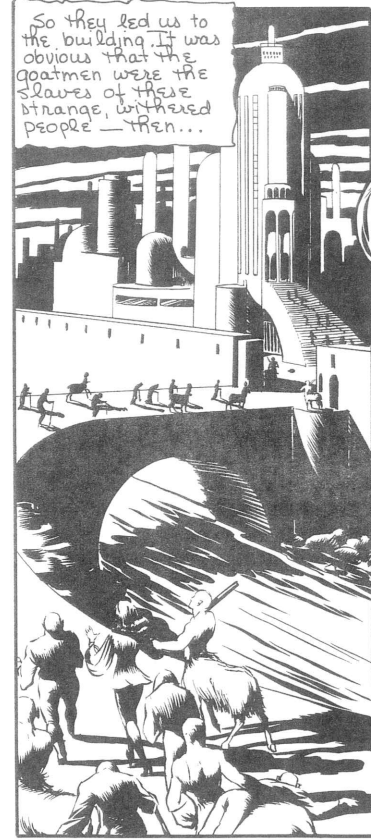


HE'S PARALYZED, BUT WILL RECOVER IN A FEW SECONDS-GOATMEN, BRING THEM ALONG TO THE PALACE.



GRACIOUS-WHAT HAPPENED...LET ME DOWN-LET ME DOWN.

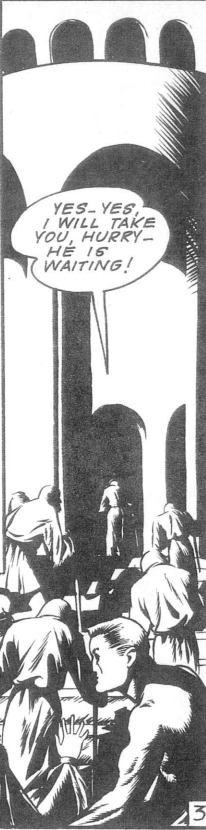
THANK HEAVENS YOU'VE RECOVERED PROFESSOR.BUT I, CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHY THE DOCTOR WASN'T AFFECTED.



So they led us to the building. It was obvious that the goatmen were the slaves of these strange, wizened people-then...



TAKE US TO THE RULER-I WILL DEMAND OUR IMMEDIATE RELEASE.



YES-YES, I WILL TAKE YOU, HURRY-HE IS WAITING!

BLESS MY SOUL-I DON'T LIKE THE WAY HE SAYS THAT!

3



SECONDS LATER-

YOUR MAJESTY - WE LANDED HERE BY ACCIDENT... WE DEMAND TO BE RELEASED.

SILENCE, EARTH-GIRL. YOUR CASE WILL BE HEARD LATER. SLAVES, PREPARE THE BATH!



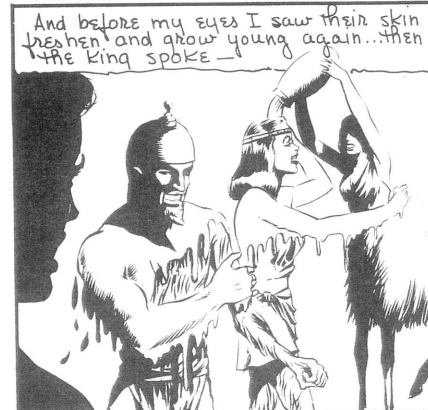
WE ARE CURSED, IN THAT OUR PLANETOID IS BUT A SHORT DISTANCE FROM OUR SUN... SO WE AGE WITHIN A YEAR... BUT THE MOUNTAIN GOD IS KIND - HE IT IS WHO MAKES THE GEYSER GUSH THE HEALING WATER. AH - THEY ARE WAITING - WATCH!



THEN-

HURRY, SLAVES - POUR THE HEALING WATER... DAUGHTER, ARE YOU READY?

YES, FATHER - BUT HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN THAT I REGAIN MY BEAUTY, ONLY TO DIE?



And before my eyes I saw their skin freshen, and grow young again... then the king spoke -



YES DAUGHTER YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL - TOO BEAUTIFUL TO BE SACRIFICED TO THE MOUNTAIN GOD! WHERE IS THE EARTH-GIRL?



HERE I AM, NOW YOU'LL CALL OFF THESE GUARDS AND HELP US!

THERE WAS SOMETHING I NEGLECTED TO TELL YOU - THE MOUNTAIN GOD DEMANDS A SACRIFICE - SEIZE HER!



HERE - TAKE YOUR HANDS OFF HER - DO YOU HEAR ME?



THEY PAY NO ATTENTION - QUICK, TRIP THE ONE WITH THE GUN!

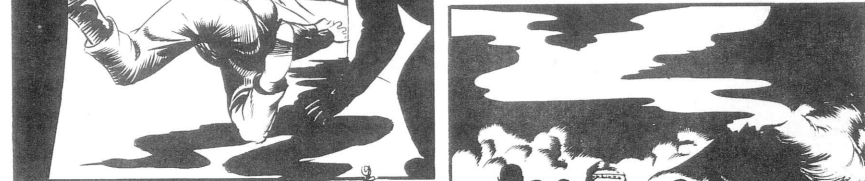


INSTANTLY



CLUMSY FOOL - IF I WASN'T AFRAID I'D MISS THE SACRIFICE, I'D TEACH YOU HOW TO MIND YOUR FEET!

BLESS MY SOUL - IT WAS AN ACCIDENT!



AND SECONDS LATER -

STOP - STOP - LET ME LIVE - DON'T - DON'T!

GOATMEN, SHOOT HER WITH THE PARALYZING RAYS - SHE'LL DIE EASIER!



The gun bearer pointed his weapon toward me, for a second I stared at death... then

OHH!



AH... THE GUN BACK-FIRED AS I KNEW IT WOULD... MY TRICK WORKED... NOW TO REMOVE THE REPELLER.



QUICK, PROFESSOR, UNTIE GALE - MAKE FOR THE SHIP - I'M PARALYZING THEM ALL!



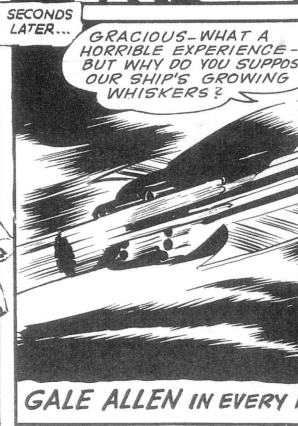
HURRY, HURRY - THEY'LL RECOVER IN A FEW SECONDS.



THANK HEAVENS, WE MADE IT! I TURNED ON THE CHARGER AFTER WE CRASHED - START THE ROCKETS! BUT HOW DID YOU WORK THIS?



WHEN THE PROFESSOR WAS PARALYZED AND I WASN'T AFFECTED I KNEW THE REPELLER WAS THE REASON. I INSERTED IT IN THE GUN WHEN THE DOCTOR TRIPPED THE GUARD.



SECONDS LATER...

GRACIOUS - WHAT A HORRIBLE EXPERIENCE - BUT WHY DO YOU SUPPOSE OUR SHIP'S GROWING WHISKERS?

BLESS MY SOUL - VERY ELEMENTARY - THE FLUID THAT MAKES HUMANS YOUNG - MAKES METAL OLD.

LISTEN, YOU TWO - I'M GALE ALLEN, PILOT - AND I DON'T WANT TO PLAY SACRIFICE FOR A BUNCH OF GOONS. FROM NOW ON, DON'T MEDDLE WITH THE MACHINERY!

GALE ALLEN IN EVERY ISSUE OF PLANET COMICS

The Visitor

CHAPTER ONE

An Opening Fragment

Gerald Perkins, story

Rudi Franke, art

To most people the word "slum" means dirty urban streets, rundown multi-story apartments and ethnic ghettos. They don't consider rows of identical, cheaply built, one-family houses sprawled across square miles of land. They don't consider failed development projects, unfinished and decaying in the southern California sun. The cabbie had very nearly gotten lost trying to find the anonymous canyon west of San Diego that contained one of the latter.

"Jeez," he muttered to himself, "I never been here before. Wonder what a fox like her wants in a creepy place like this." He glanced at his passenger in the rearview mirror.

Gray eyes set wide apart in a strong, high cheekboned face ignored him. Blond hair, bleached nearly white, made a pleasing contrast as it fell to the middle of her back past a complexion treated kindly by the sun. Firm high breasts kept the light blouse well away from a deep rib cage. The jounce caused by a pothole that the cabbie did not see in his study produced evidence that they were in no need of artificial support.

"You'd better watch where you're driving," said his passenger. Her melodious contralto voice held notes of amusement and irritation. The cabbie maintained his observation.

A gray pleated skirt gently enclosed a slim waist. He recalled from his first view of her that it covered pleasantly rounded hips and revealed shapely, strong thighs. Bare calves showed the muscles of a dancer or athlete and looked very good even though her feet were thrust into flat-heeled sandals. Short nails on slim strong fingers tapped a nervous rhythm on the portfolio she held in her lap. The cabbie turned his attention back to the job at hand.

"Man oh man, what she'd be like . . ." he thought. "But, God, I wouldn't want her mad at me. A dude could lose his *cajones* that way." Seeing the street he wanted, he spoke aloud. "Here's Calle Estrano, and that's got to be the place you're lookin' for up there."

The street was deserted. The hot morning wind moved occasional old newspapers or a cloud of dust along it. Most of the houses were walled in the Spanish fashion. Walled or open, all showed dirt, trash, weeds and fading paint except number 59. Here the walk and street were clean. The dun paint on the wall was bleached, but not cracked or flaking, and the gate showed signs of being kept in repair.

The cabbie pulled smoothly up in front of the gate. He was so involved in the memory of firm thighs revealed as his customer slid off the rear seat and the view down the top of her blouse that he had to be reminded to take the money she had bent over to thrust to him. He watched as she walked with a flowing stride through the gate that opened for her and closed itself behind her. He did not see her faintly amused smile.

The visitor's smile changed to a momentary frown as she realized that she had not announced her arrival in any way other than the sound of the cab pulling up, yet the front gate had opened without her intervention. Memory played back a solid sounding snap as the gate relocked itself. She didn't change her pace as she crossed the nearly nonexistent front yard but her eyes flicked left and right like those of a predator seeking possible danger. At first it seemed completely unkempt. However, the line of a branch on a desert shrub, the placement of a stone, the color of a closed bloom showed careful and subtle care.

The woman who opened the door, the visitor thought, would cause her driver to totally lose control of his cab. She wore only a single piece of gauzy light green fabric that draped

to her kness front and back, was gathered at her left shoulder by a clip and belted at her waist by a white silk cord. Her fine, shoulder length hair was as white as the cord, as was her skin. Though she had the translucent white complexion of an albino, her eyes were a brilliant blue.

"She's here," the apparition spoke over her left shoulder to someone out of sight in the sunken living room. She moved quickly and gracefully to the visitor's right down a short flight of stairs. As the visitor stepped through the door it closed itself behind her.

She stood on a small landing that fell off left and right in three stairs to a large room decorated in varying shades of blue. A couch below her faced another that had its back to a picture window which looked out onto a shaded backyard, pool and the rear wing of the house. A large garage or workshop was visible through greenery at the back of the lot. Chairs were scattered to the left and right of the couches. Her empathic sense registered three sources of cool hostility and one of warm interest. Her attention jerked left when a deep feminine voice said,

"The great white goddess has arrived." The voice belonged to a negress, fully as spectacular as the albino, who lounged in an overstuffed chair in the shadows at the end of the room. She wore translucent hostess pajamas with a light zebra pattern. Artful slashes on arm, leg and bodice revealed expanses of flesh. The startling thing was that the exposed flesh showed no hint of any shade of brown, but was a pure, even, matte black, as, the visitor thought, would be her eyes.

Her attention shifted to a tall, stooped, balding man as he rose from the couch facing her. She noticed papers and photographs spread out on the table in front of him. The photos were of her.

"Please, come in," he said in a soft dry voice. "I trust that you had only a little trouble finding us?"

"The cabbie had never been here before, but he found you alright," she said, descending to take the proffered hand.

Her host smiled and said, "That seems to be the usual case. I sought seclusion when I bought this house, but I didn't realize how much I would get. My name is Gray. You," he waved at the documents, "I know. Please sit down." He motioned to the other couch.

As the visitor sat she felt a strange pulse touch her nerves. It was clearly a summons, but to whom she was unable to tell until a sweet voice from beyond the hall at the right end of the room spoke.

"Yes, Boss?"

"Tea please, Mei," said Gray, not looking up from the papers he was straightening.

"I have it ready," replied the owner of the third voice.

The visitor looked up to see another exotic woman enter the living room carrying a tray with the makings of a light social tea. Not quite as tall or as voluptuous as the albino or the black, she was clearly of oriental descent. The cheong-sam that was her only garment was exquisitely brocaded, but cut and slit so that any movement exposed much more to view than her demure bearing would indicate. Her coloring was even more extraordinary than the other two. Rather than the faintly yellowish tan considered to represent Asians, it was a true, almost metallic gold. Her eyes, when she glanced at the visitor, were dark bronze. Her long black hair appeared heavily dusted with gold.

Mei poured tea and served the albino who had curled up in a chair on Gray's left, set a cup of the hot liquid on Gray's table and served the negress. She placed the tray, pot and final cup on the table in front of the visitor. As she poured she began to shake slightly. By the time she had picked up the cup and was about to hand it to the visitor, the tremor was pronounced. Before the visitor could take it, Gray spoke.

"Do not spill on our guest, Mei," he said in a mild voice that caused a small spurt of adrenaline in the visitor.

There was not a ripple in the cup as the visitor received it from Mei.

"These are my three witches," said Gray once Mei had seated herself on a cushion by the albino. "Sometimes they think they run the place. They are Mary, Melissa and Mei Ling." He tilted his head toward the black negress, the albino and the golden oriental. "For reasons they have chosen not to tell me, they have been rather disturbed since your application for my services. They've been acting, hmm, catty, you might say."

"Meow," said Mary from her corner. She became very interested in her tea as Gray



looked her direction.

The visitor massaged her temples as the tension in the room scraped against her empathic senses. "I don't suppose," said in a mildly sarcastic voice, "that you have a red Indian working for you."

"I did," said Gray in a conversational tone. "but she left. Politics, you know."

Melissa choked on her tea and spluttered. Gray almost smiled.

"Now," Gray said briskly, "we come to you and your request. You have done quite a lot during your 28 years. M.D. specializing in tropical medicine, D.V.M. specializing in tropical animals, a natural linguist and a high grade empath. On the physical side, you are much faster and stronger than the ordinary woman athlete." He tapped the papers in front of him. "A personal problem kept you from being accepted on the Olympic team. The decathlon coach lived, by the way. He should have know better. Then we have your phenomenal healing ability, immunity to disease, adaptability to extremes of climate and resistance to poisons. Hmm . . . what happens if you break a bone?"

"When it's set, it heals quickly."

"Mmm . . . but not until it's set. I see. Yes, well, it would seem as though you had aimed yourself at being the "great white goddess" as Mary put it. In fact you fulfilled nearly that role for a while, or more accurately, you filled the role commonly attributed to the comic book jungle heroine: Helping people, protecting animals, bringing law breakers to justice and things of that sort.

"For your efforts you had a certain respect from the country folk, disdain from the city folk and active hatred from powerful persons in and out of the local governments. As a consequence you have been expelled from every country in Africa, jailed several times (where you either broke or bribed your way out), been an unwilling guest in a couple of harems and escaped death, both natural and man-made, an amazing number of times. I'm curious about how you got away from Idi Amin."

"Her cats got her out," sneered the albino.

"Don't be ridiculous, Melissa." Looking up from his tea, Gray said, "You could, however, have made yourself much less conspicuous if you didn't make a habit of keeping a big cat for a pet and running around in

in a fur bikini. Well, that's not important.

"After the last country, Kenya, threw you out... They were very polite about it, I imagine."

"And very firm," said the visitor.

"Yes. You disappeared for a while. I presume from the data available that you were investigating the South American jungles?" Gray raised his eyes questioningly.

"A waste of time!" snapped his visitor. "The governments there are as bad or worse than those in Africa. To make things worse, they are making it a deliberate government policy to destroy, to 'utilize,' their jungles. I wouldn't stay there if I could."

Gray returned his attention to the papers on his coffee table. "After you returned to the States, you wandered around trying this and that and getting into and out of various kinds of trouble. Finally you heard about my unique services for unique and dissatisfied people and contacted me. I agreed to help you and here you are. Have you completed the preliminaries?"

The visitor tapped her portfolio. "I have all the papers here," she said. Melissa swayed insolently over to get the case and returned to her chair where she began to rapidly page through the contents. "I have signed over all my holdings to you effective a year and a day from the time I complete the documents, conditional on my full satisfaction. Is your secretary satisfied?"

"Melissa?"

"Everything's in order, Boss. This one's really rich. Diamonds, gold, you name it. If Africa has or had it, she owns some of it. Looks like her old man, or maybe his, did it," was the insouciant reply.

"That's fine. Did you get the physical exam?"

"That was the most embarrassingly thorough examination I have ever had," the visitor said heatedly. "They must have enough data to build my duplicate." Mei accepted a sheaf of papers from Melissa and took them to Mary who began to study them intently.

"I needed to be very sure that you can survive where you are going," said Gray. "Did you leave the samples I require?"

"Yes," the visitor flushed, "four viable eggs. One more than you asked for. What do you want those for? Artificial breeding?"

"Precisely," said Gray. "I will have them fertilized by sperm samples left by some of the men that I have helped. If that is successful, I will have them implanted in host mothers and the resulting children raised to make the best of their genetic heritage."

"I suppose that one of those men is you," the visitor said sardonically.

"I'm sterile," said Gray emotionlessly. "I know a great deal about you. You will want to know more about me than that I offer you an opportunity and a place to satisfy your need to live your own life and use your talents in your own way. Are you familiar with the theory of alternate time streams?"

"You mean the theory that for each major historical decision both possibilities were realized and that two histories diverged, each based on the results of the different decision?"

"That's a bit simplistic, but you have the idea. My talent is the ability to carry myself and others through time; not forward or back, but sideways, to worlds where things are as they might have been if something different had happened than our history records.

"At first I used this talent to provide unique settings for my photography. You've undoubtedly seen my advertising pictures. You may have seen some collections of my 'fantasy' photographs. I assure you that they are not fantasy. I was there and my camera recorded a reality.

"I hired my three witches, or they attached themselves to me, I'm not sure which, because their talents, unusual and mundane, are very useful to me. Melissa is a lawyer, executive secretary par excellence and a communicating empath. I don't understand her antipathy toward you. Mei Ling has numerous minor talents, but her major ones are that she is the deadliest person you wouldn't want to meet professionally and a psychokineticist of strength and delicacy. Mary is a doctor, artist and finder. She cannot get lost and can find almost anyone or anything.

"I was becoming bored with commercial photography when they found me. They suggested my sideline. So far I haven't made much money at it, but I have had some very interesting experiences and helped a number of remarkable people.

"Simply put, someone of talent who doesn't fit this world comes to me. I find a world

where that person fits and taken them there. I require all their worldly possessions to be sure of their commitment, but provide the year and a day term to allow anyone who doesn't fit the new world either to return. So far I've not had any takers. I require the gamete samples to prevent the valuable genetic heritage of these people from being lost.

"That's what I do. I know that you have attempted to investigate me even as I have investigated you, but you met with much less success. Do you believe that I can do what I say and are you willing to try the world I have selected for you?"

His visitor said, simply, "Yes."

"Yes? That's all?" asked Gray. "Ah, your empathic talent tells you that I'm neither lying nor insane; of course. Well, shall we get on with it? If you will sign the papers Melissa has, we will take you to your new world."

* * *

Gray and his visitor walked along the hall connecting the front of the house with the workshops, followed closely by the three witches. Their feet, shod and bare made no sound on the heavy carpet.

"How will we cross to this alternate history you have selected for me?" asked the visitor.

"Well," replied Gray pointing to a large free standing cabinet at the end of the hall, "I thought that we might use that."

"Not the wardrobe again!" said Melissa in a disgusted voice.

"What's good enough for C.S. Lewis is good enough for me," said Gray loftily.

"You're joking," said the visitor.

"Often," said Gray, "I can generate the transport and change field anywhere I wish, but some places are easier than others. It amuses me to use this old wardrobe as one of my main crossing points." He stopped and opened the wardrobe with a flourish to reveal a collection of very ordinary clothes for both men and women that filled, but did not crowd, the available space. "Now, if you will step in, we'll follow you. Please don't go beyond the second row of clothing.

The visitor gave him a quizzical look, but ducked her head and stepped through the space that Gray held open for her. "Hey," came her muffled voice, "there's more room in here than I thought. All I can see is more clothes, though."

"Wait, I'll be there," Gray said. Turning to his assistants, he waved his hand toward the opened door and said, "After you, ladies."

"Uh, uh, Boss! Have a nice trip. Jungles and I don't get along."

"Yeah, have a nice trip, Boss. You know what the sun does to me."

"Please, I do not wish to go."

"March!" snapped Gray. "Mary, Melissa, Mei, you have been unbearable ever since I accepted our visitor's request. I will not have that. It's time you were reminded just who is 'Boss' and who is not. Now, in!"

The three women, black, white and gold, stepped reluctantly through the gap in the clothing. Gray looked around, gave a short satisfied nod of his head and followed them. The wardrobe door closed silently behind him.

"It's getting a bit crowded in here, don't you think?" said the visitor dryly.

"Oh step forward, step forward," said Gray, "there's plenty of room. Things will get less crowded presently." Silence fell for several moments, broken only by the swishing sound of garments being moved aside and falling back.

Finally the visitor said, "I know we've travelled farther than the rear property line of your place, yet this oversized closet keeps on going." Further silence ensued. "Some of these costumes are becoming very strange. How is it that I can see them?"

"The light is part of the change field effect," said Gray. "We should be coming to the threshold soon. Ah, here we are."

They parted one last rack of clothing and came out into a clear space. The sourceless gray light showed the clothing, two walls with clothes hooks on them and an unsolid wall of darker, opaque gray. The visitor stepped to her left. Gray stepped to his right and the assistants stopped against the clothes when they appeared.

"Now," said Gray cheerfully, "everyone strip." He began to undo his shirt. When the visitor hesitated, he said, "When I take more people than myself through the transport, everyone must be naked. Unpleasant things tend to happen to non-living things that go through the change field.

A living thing knows what it is, but it takes all my concentration to take a simple camera through.

The three exotics glanced resignedly at one another and shed their minimal clothing. Only Mei took the care to hang the cheong-sam on the rack behind her. Their charms had been so well displayed that full nudity produced no surprises. However, when the visitor turned from hanging her skirt, it became clear that the valleys and shadows beneath her clothing had only hinted at the truth. Smooth muscles moved beneath flawless skin. She moved with the unconscious controlled grace of a wild animal. Next to the other three she was a jungle creature among housecats. Undressed, Gray looked even less impressive than he had fully clothed.

Gray rubbed his hand together. "Are we ready?" he asked. "Then all join hands, please. It will be three steps through the mist on firm footing all the way." He stepped forward to extend his right hand to the visitor and his left to Mei Ling. All five stepped carefully into the gray barrier fronting them.

On her first step into gray opacity the visitor felt a momentary vertigo and a sensation as of warm mist caressing her. On her second step howling winds out of some lost abyss clamored for her, but left her untouched. On her third step she felt sunwarmed rock gritty beneath her feet and blinked her eyes in the sudden glare. She looked quickly left and right to see the five of them standing in an uncast shadow on a sunny ledge high on the side of a mountain. They had stepped out of the solid rock at her back.

Gray dropped her hand and made a half bow toward her. "Please excuse me," he said, "but I have some personal business to take care of." He turned to his assistants.

"Ladies," he said sharply, "your behavior has been reprehensible, both toward me and toward our visitor. 'Catty' was the term I used. I hereby declare that for a year and a day you shall roam this world as cats — leopards."

"Aw no, Boss," said Mary backing half a step and hugging herself.

"Boss, please," said Melissa extending her hands pleadingly.

Mei said nothing.

Gray scowled. An electric tension thrummed against the visitor's nerves. Mary turned as if to run, but never completed the movement. The three shapes wavered, flowed, solidified; where three exotic women had stood, three magnificent leopards crouched. Mary was a piece of night with blue highlights, tail lashing and claws moving in and out. Melissa's silken pelt showed the light patterning of a snow leopard. Mei's black spots dappled a coat that shone like newly minted gold.

"Now listen," said Gray, "a year and a day. You will know when the time is up. Roam where you will, but be here in one year and one day from now. If you are lost, Mary will try to reach you. If you overstay your time, you will be left behind. Go now."

The three cats padded down the trail to the right. Mary kept her eyes straight ahead, a faint growl rumbling in her throat. Melissa looked up at Gray as she passed. Mei gave the visitor an enigmatic look, before she too, padded away.

"Ho . . . , how . . . " the visitor gulped, "How did you do that?"

Gray smiled. "As long as the transport and change field lasts, my powers within it are nearly unlimited. It doesn't last long and is fading even now, so I'd best give you what information you need about this world.

"First: This is Africa, but an Africa like you've never imagined. Think of the ringed craters on the moon. This Africa is something like that. A solid ring of mountains, higher than the Himalayas, encloses the whole land mass except for two passes, one to the northwest and one to the southeast. These passes are cauldrons of winds trying to get into the lowlands. They are nearly impassable on the way in and totally so in the outward direction. Any people you meet are probably descended from others who came through the "Mouths of the Winds" or over the very few and deadly high passes elsewhere.

"The winds circle the interior of the continents and exit into the stratosphere in the center, here at the top of this mountain range, above the "Mountain of the Winds." Their constant circling creates a situation similar to, but weaker than, the so called Bermuda Triangle. Some very strange things get in here that way, yourself not the least of them.

"Look out . . ." Gray noticed the direction of her gaze. Up she looked, up at mountains standing on one another's shoulders until a single mighty peak thrust itself above them all to disappear into a maelstrom of angry clouds. A continuous wail and low grumble came from



it. "Impressive isn't it, The Mount of Winds, The Womb of Storms? But our time grows short. Look out to the northwest. See that large patch of red vegetation? That's the Scarlet Jungle. Go there to find your best friends and allies in this place. They'll seem strange, but their loyalty will be unquestioning." He ignored her blank look. "Ah, here comes your passport now."

The visitor followed the direction of his look as she leopard staggered around the bend of the trail above them. It was gaunt from starvation and wounds covered its back and left side. The cub it carried was thin, but uninjured. Leopardess and cub were both a dark brick red with the usual spots. As the visitor examined the mother cat to determine what gave her a feeling of wrongness, she saw that its head was too big with a high arch of skull covering the brain.

As she stared at the leopardess her empathic sense was assailed. She felt hunger/fear/tired/hope?/exhaustion/help?/DEATH! She didn't realize she had moved until she found herself kneeling on the ledge cradling the cub. Gently stroking it she examined the mother. Whatever had attacked the leopardess was easily as big and probably more vicious. Dried blood and half healed scabs attested to the strength and willpower needed to survive near fatal wounds for several days to try to bring the cub down the mountain. She looked very closely at the skull before turning to Gray.

"With that much brain mass, these could almost be intelligent," she said. "I presume there are more of them in that 'Scarlet Jungle' you pointed out."

"That's right. I suggest you take the cub there to start your new life."

"You're joking!" she said in amazement. "I'm supposed to carry an un-weaned cub down a steep mountain, through unknown terrain and dangers, and deliver it to a patch of jungle that's easily fifty miles, line of sight, from here? Not only that, but I'm to do it before the poor thing starves? Not bloody likely!"

"That is precisely what you are supposed to do," said Gray sharply. "You wanted a challenge; here it is. As for feeding the cub, I think I can take care of that." He frowned momentarily. The visitor felt her breasts suddenly grow heavy and experienced an unaccustomed feeling of fullness.

"Oh no! You mean I'm to nurse it? I can't . . . It won't . . . It'll chew . . . It can't be done!"

"It can. I have arranged for you to give enough milk and of the proper kind. As for being chewed, and don't forget clawed, your remarkable metabolism will heal you without a scar, as you well know. Now be on your way. The field is fading and I have yet to prepare myself for my own stay in this world."

"Huh?!" she exclaimed, "you're just going to go off and leave me this way? No more information, no clothes, no tools, no weapons, no food or water? I'm supposed to waltz off into a strange wilderness, bare assed and ignorant and nursing a leopard cub while you go galavanting off into the wild blue? No way, mister! You use some of your so miraculous powers to give me some equipment and a fighting chance to survive."

Suddenly she found herself outside the hazy shadow of the change field. Gray looked out at her and said patiently, "This is what you said you wanted: A chance to try yourself to the utmost physically and mentally in a wilderness environment. Your wish is granted. I have calculated that you will survive, but have made things a bit easier for you by giving you an entree to the help of some remarkable beings. You will make friends and enemies, animal, human and inbetween. You will be tried to your limits. Be here in a year and a day to tell me about it."

The gray haze thickened; shadows flickered and moved in it. For a moment the visitor thought she saw three Grays; one coming, one going and the third changing, all in the same instant and all without leaving the field. The haze vanished abruptly. A younger, shorter Gray stood before her, his muscular form clad in a protective jump suit. A harness connected him to a pair of long balloons that made her think of an aerial catamaran. Propellers began to spin as Gray pulled himself onto the platform between the balloons. He waved cheerfully as he floated off toward the Mountain of Clouds. Her last sight of him was a tiny speck disappearing into the lowest clouds.

The visitor shivered as a cloud shadow passed over her. The cub mewed unhappily. She looked at the dead leopardess, the ledge, the mountains and foothills below her and sighed. "Well," she said to no one in particular, "you asked for this." Then, shrugging the cub more comfortably against her breasts, she began walking down the trail. She was smiling before she rounded the first turn.■





AND THIS WILL BE MY GREATEST TRIUMPH!

IT BEGINS...



NOW!

BY ISHIMAR...

...AND APHRODITE...

...I BRING THEE FORTH!



VOILA... IT IS DONE!



AND WHAT DO YOU DESIRE OF ME, O MASTER?



EVER SINCE I WAS A KID I WANTED ONE OF THOSE RED WAGONS, YOU KNOW THE KIND, WITH THE BLACK HANDLE AND THE FOUR WHEELS THAT YOU CAN TAKE THE

Oy-vay...

Shamrock and Pixie

story by Scott Gibson
art by Heller/Winnick

(in)
"REIGN of
The SPHINX!"

based on characters created by Al Tanner

Synopsis

Concerned about the lack of communication from their old friend and benefactor Dr. Azmoff, Bonnie and Heather Donovan journeyed to California to see the doctor. But, arriving at Azmoff's isolated, seaside mansion, the sisters were rebuffed by him and told to leave.

Later, in their hotel room, Heather and Donovan determined that Dr. Azmoff was being held captive in his home and that he had been trying to warn them of that when they spoke. At dusk, the pair changed into their crimefighting garb and returned to the doctor's lonely mansion where they discovered a gang of burly strong-men led by a mysterious criminal known only as Sphinx menacing Dr. Azmoff and his elderly housekeeper Emily.

Catching the captors off-guard, Shamrock and Pixie were able to overpower them and escape with the prisoners. Pixie and Dr. Azmoff became separated from the others, but managed to elude their pursuers by hiding in the thick undergrowth surrounding the mansion. It was there that Azmoff told Pixie that they had been tricked: His housekeeper Emily was not a helpless victim, but rather the conniving Sphinx!

* * *

Pixie stared at the elderly man, speechless, as chills ran up and down her spine. "Emily is The Sphinx?" she finally managed to gasp.

A slight breeze had sprung up, blowing Dr. Azmoff's white laboratory coat and his thin hair about. "Yes," he confessed, lowering his head as if ashamed.

"But . . . how? How did she come to be working as your housekeeper? Why —" He cut her off.

"Part of what I told you this afternoon was the truth. I am engaged in some highly secretive experiments for the government. I was even assigned some security agents to protect me and my work. When just I was living here, I could easily see to my own needs, but with the government men staying with me as well, it seemed sensible to hire a housekeeper who could also cook. So I hired Emily several weeks ago. She came highly recommended — she was even checked out by the security agents — and things seemed fine.

"Then, about a week ago, I finally made an important break-through. That's when Emily showed her true colors, bringing in all of her henchmen, those fellows you saw in my laboratory. They dispatched the security guards and are now in the process of selling the results of my experiments to the highest bidder. Perhaps a criminal organization or maybe even an unfriendly foreign government!"

Questions filled Pixie's head. "What did they do with the governmental agents and why hasn't their absence aroused suspicion from their superiors?" she quizzed Dr. Azmoff.

"I don't know what became of the security people. Emily — Sphinx had them taken away in a car six nights ago. Washington Security hasn't become alarmed yet because we report to them only once a week — Friday evenings. It was just after last week's report that Sphinx and her men took control. She is very clever — she waited until she knew everything about our routines and schedules before attacking. She has until tomorrow night when our next report is due before anybody gets suspicious."

Pixie pondered this information for several seconds. "Twenty-four hours," she murmured, mostly to herself. "Twenty-four hours before she plans to have sold your project papers and clear out." Then, as an afterthought, "What will she do to Shamrock?"

* * *

There was a buzzing sound around Heather's head. It must be a mosquito, she thought, and she tossed her head to drive it away. With great effort, she forced her eyes open. Where was she? What was going on?

She was in a strange place. After a moment or two, she finally recognized it as Dr. Azmoff's laboratory, the one she and Pixie had been in earlier. But . . . why was she back?

"So, you're among the living again."

The voice, so terribly ice cold, came from inches behind her and made her start. She attempted to sit up and look at the speaker, but she could barely move. It was then that she



realized her arms and legs had been tightly bound. By rolling her head slowly to one side, Shamrock determined that she was lying across a heavy lab table, her arms pulled tightly over her head, each trussed to a leg of the table. In the same fashion, each of her legs was tied to the remaining two table legs.

The unseen figure behind her moved into view. It was a beautiful young woman with shoulder-length, jet-black hair. She was garbed in a vivid purple robe. Her mouth was drawn up in a thin, cruel smile and her dark

eyes glittered with satisfaction.

"And so the play draws to its close," she crooned. "I could not have asked for better players. You, my dear, and your little sidekick played your parts to perfection.

"I've worked long and hard to accomplish my means. Your appearance here this afternoon looked like a terrible complication at first. When I realized that that old fool Azmoff had managed to tip you off, my gang wanted us to pull out and forget this whole scheme. But I said absolutely not! I've worked at this project too long to have two scatterbrained, pseudo—heroines wearing ridiculous green costumes come along and spoil everything!"

Shamrock's head had finally stopped spinning. Now she could concentrate on what her captor was saying. But so far, it made no sense.

"So I had to lure you back here," the tall, lithe brunette was saying. "When you and your partner broke into the house earlier, you unwittingly tripped a silent alarm. So we went into our act. Naturally, I assumed the starring role."

"Suddenly, realization dawned. 'You!' Shamrock cried. 'You're Emily!'"

A broad smile played across the woman's lips. "A bit slow, aren't you, my sweet? But, as they say, better late than never!"

"That whole scene Pixie and I witnessed here a little while ago was enacted for our benefit!" cried Shamrock. "Those goons were never menacing you — they made it look that way so that we —"

"Would do just exactly what you did," Emily finished the sentence for her. "You came charging in to save us! I must admit, you both were better fighters than we gave you credit for. We assumed that we'd have no trouble subduing you. Instead, the little brat actually managed to escape with Azmoff. But *you*, my little cherub, foolishly attempted to rescue *me*! I had only to wait until you turned your back. I just grabbed up a paperweight and . . ."

She didn't have to finish. A painful lump on the back of Shamrock's head told the rest of the story. But the beautiful young heroine hardly noticed it, so relieved was she to hear that Pixie and Azmoff had escaped.

"Whatever you've been planning, you'd better give it all up now," Shamrock said coolly, sounding more confident than she actually was. "My partner will be back — with the police — before you can say 'The jig's up!'"

The Sphinx regarded her captive with an amused half-smile. "I think not," she returned.



"My employees are combing the estate now. Your little . . . Pixie may be loose on the grounds, but she'll never get off of this property without being caught."

Just then, one of the burly thugs whom Shamrock remembered tangling with earlier entered the lab. He looked at the securely-bound heroine curiously.

"What is it?" snapped Sphinx.

"Oh . . . uh, your *client* is on the phone and he says he's ready to discuss terms."

"Good. Watch her while I'm gone,"

she ordered before sweeping out of the room.

The fellow did just that. He shuffled over to stand by Shamrock's side and dutifully stared at her. He did not speak.

It could have been only a few minutes that The Sphinx was absent, but to Heather Donovan, strapped cruelly to a heavy table and left to the scrutiny of a silent captor, it seemed like hours.

"We have negotiated a price. We must be on our way to turn the plans over to the buyer," Emily/Sphinx said brusquely as she re-entered. From a pocket in her robe, she extracted a ring of keys. Selecting one, she moved to a filing cabinet and unlocked the drawers.

"Tell the others to bring the car around to the front of the house," she barked. Her henchman did not reply, but turned from Shamrock and left the room. "We have an appointment very soon," Sphinx added softly.

Shamrock watched the woman take a large envelope from the cabinet drawer. Using a knife, Emily cut open the envelope and removed several papers which she tucked into a leather pouch. These were obviously Dr. Azmoff's scientific findings.

It seemed as though the villainess had forgotten Shamrock as she put the pouch under her arm and pulled the hood to her robe up over her head. It hid most of her face and made The Sphinx look more sinister than ever. She moved to the door, but then turned and faced her prisoner once more.

"We won't be seeing each other any more," she said. "Naturally, I have to take steps to obliterate any loose details I've left behind."

"That, I take it, includes me," said Shamrock dryly.

"An acute observation. At any rate, it will all be over quite quickly. My men have planted a few explosives and a timing device. Nothing elaborate, but the results should be breathtaking. There should be almost nothing left of the laboratory . . . or you."

Heather said nothing. Her thoughts were on her sister.

Sphinx read her mind. "I daresay the explosion will take care of your little friend and that old fool doctor, too," she purred. "No doubt when they see my men and me leaving without you, they will come charging in to find out what's become of Miss Shamrock."

The Sphinx shifted the leather pouch and extracted a violet scarf from her robe. "But just to make sure you don't spoil my surprise, you'd better keep 'mum' on the subject!" Laughing at her little joke, the cold beauty stepped to the lab table and thrust the cloth in Shamrock's mouth and tied the ends behind the heroine's head, effectively silencing her captive's protests.

* * *

". . . three . . . four . . . five!" counted Pixie from her vantage lookout atop a shrub-en-shrouded knoll. She turned to Dr. Azmoff.

"Five of them just got into the car and drove away. Emily and four big guys. Are you certain that's all of them?"

Huddled by a nearby bush, the old man nodded. "That's all of them that were ever here," he replied, shivering.

Though overwhelmed with worry for her missing sister, Bonnie could not help but be concerned for Azmoff as well. His treatment at the hands of The Sphinx and her goons over the

past several days must have been anything but pleasant. Now, crouching in the bushes with Pixie for well over an hour, the doctor looked as though he were on the brink of exhaustion. Instinctively, the young girl gripped his arm reassuringly and managed to smile.

"Don't worry sir," Pixie said, swallowing her own fears momentarily. "I'm sure Heather is fine. This whole nightmare is almost over now. Those people won't hurt you — or us — ever again!"

The pair waited only long enough to see the car carrying Sphinx and the others pull beyond the gates which housed the estate and onto the main highway. As it sped out of sight down the coast highway, Pixie plunged recklessly down the hillside in the darkness. Dr. Azmoff followed at a much slower pace.

They emerged on the rolling lawn in front of the mansion. Pausing to catch her breath, Pixie gazed at the dark house. Her fears came back then, worse than ever. The rambling building looked . . . almost like a tomb. The young girl fervently hoped that it wasn't.

She ran up the front steps and in through the front door. The door banged against the wall and Pixie looked around in the darkness wildly.

"Shamrock!" she screamed. "Heather! Where are you?"

"Let's look in my laboratory," gasped Dr. Azmoff as he came up behind the girl. He located the light switch. As the room illuminated around them, the doctor moved swiftly through the room and down a corridor to a flight of steps with Pixie on his heels.

They descended the steps into Dr. Azmoff's lab. They were greeted by muffled frantic cries. "Shamrock!" Pixie cried, spying her sister bound and gagged on the lab table. She dashed to her side.

"What have they done to you?" Pixie asked as she fumbled with the gag in her partner's mouth.

Shamrock was shaking her head wildly from side to side.

"Will you stop squirming?" demanded Pixie. "I can't get you untied when you keep moving!" Just then, she succeeded in unknitting the scarf around Shamrock's face.

"Get out of here!" Shamrock screamed at the startled Pixie and Dr. Azmoff as the gag was removed. "Sphinx left a bomb that's set to go off any moment now!"

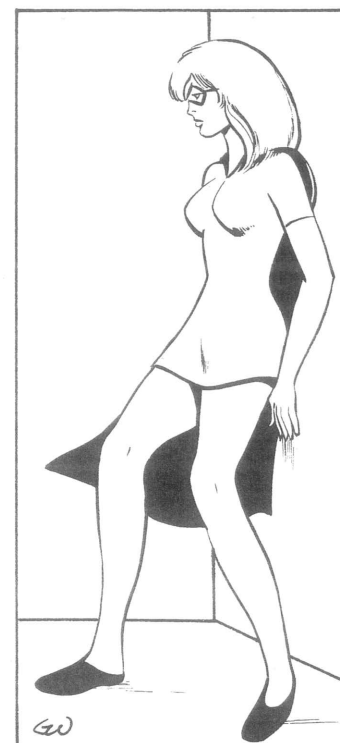
"We've got to get you out of here first!" Azmoff insisted. He began fumbling with the ropes binding the heroine's arms. Pixie tackled those which secured her sister's feet.

"No, no!" insisted Shamrock. "There isn't time! You two can get out if you hurry! Those ropes are tied too well — you can't free me! Go!"

On a windswept bluff overlooking the ocean, five dark figures stood looking down on the Azmoff estate. Suddenly, there was an extraordinarily loud noise and the building seemed to waiver in the pre-dawn light. As the reverberations of the explosion began to die away, one whole wing of the house shivered and then collapsed.

"The lab," observed one of the figures.

"Yes," said The Sphinx smugly, as she stepped back



into the sleek, long car which was idling quietly. "Let's go now. We *still* have that appointment to keep."

* * *

The bloated, wheezing man in the expensive tailored suit received the leather pouch which The Sphinx handed him. He unzipped it and removed several sheets of paper. Stroking his double chin, he studied them for a few seconds.

"These are the papers?" he asked between heavy gasps.

"They are," she assured him. "They were completed just yesterday."

He studied them a bit longer. In the interim, his aides, standing in a neat line behind him stared critically at The Sphinx's men who were standing in a not-so-neat line behind their beautiful leader. They returned sullen glances.

"Yes, I think I can put these scientific findings to good use," the fat man said at last.

"Spare me details. The only thing I'm interested in is the \$250,000."

"Very well." He motioned to one of his men who stepped forward and removed a fat envelope from his suit pocket. He handed it to the hefty, wheezing man. The wheezing fellow in turn handed it to The Sphinx.

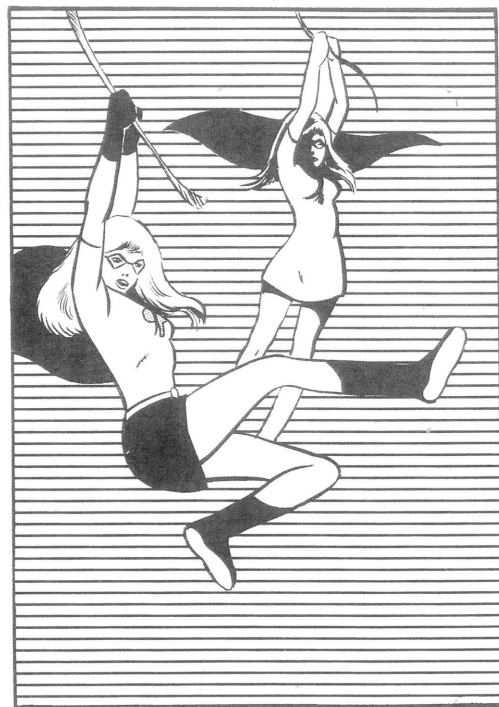
"There you are. Now, if you'll excuse us, we really must be off. I would like to put these findings to immediate use."

"You can't go just yet!" a new voice rang out. "We've only just arrived!" Startled, Sphinx and the others looked wildly about the dimly-lit warehouse. For several seconds, the echoes of that voice bounced off the high ceiling, making it impossible to surmise where the cry had come from.

"Boss!" cried one of The Sphinx's men. "That sounded like — like that dame we just blew up!"

"What? *What* dame? What's all this about? Who was that?" demanded the fat man nervously. His wheezing was coming in short, excited gasps. "If you've put me in any danger —"

"Shut up!" Sphinx screamed. "Shut up, all of you!" She pulled a small pistol from her robe and glanced nervously over her shoulder.



The fellow, surprised but pleased at this outcome, leaned forward. Instantly, Pixie threw her head back, catching him squarely on the jaw. With hardly more than a little sigh, the chap relinquished his grasp and slid to the floor in a heap. He did not move.

"Hardest head in the west," she said to herself satisfactorily.

Had the fight continued indefinitely, Sphinx's and the fat man's gangs would probably have won by force of sheer numbers over the two lone crimefighters. But the wail of a police siren had been growing steadily louder in the past several minutes, and what members of the gang who were not unconscious or otherwise incapacitated began making mad scrambles for the exits.

"The fat man!" exclaimed Shamrock suddenly. "Where is the fat man?"

Her eyes scanned the room quickly, but the overweight ringleader was not to be seen either making his escape or in any of the piles of subdued bodies scattered across the warehouse floor.

"Worry less about the fat man than about your scrawny little playmate!" A voice told her menacingly.

It was The Sphinx. Shamrock wheeled to see her antagonist holding her pistol to Pixie's temple.

Shamrock's shoulders slumped in despair. Oh *why* hadn't she kept an eye on Emily during the fight? She thought Pixie's initial kick had left the evil woman unconscious, but, if so, The Sphinx had recovered. And now she again had the upper hand.

"I won't soon forget what you've done to me and my plans!" she snarled. "This little . . . wretch (indicating Pixie) . . . is going to see me safely out of here, past all of the police and everybody!"



The once-beautiful Sphinx was a mess. Her nose was bleeding and one of her eyes was beginning to swell shut. Her purple robe was in ribbons. Just like her grand schemes, Shamrock thought to herself. But she was still dangerous. *More* dangerous. Like a wounded lioness.

"But *you!*" hissed Sphinx. "You I can be rid of here and now!" Tightening her grip on Pixie, the villainess aimed the gun at Shamrock.

"It . . . it isn't loaded," Pixie said softly.

"What?" cried Shamrock and The Sphinx together.

"The gun isn't loaded . . . after I knocked you down, I took out all of the bullets!"

The Sphinx's glance shifted uneasily to the pistol in her hand. It was all the distraction Shamrock needed. She lunged at her quarry. All three of them — Shamrock, Sphinx, and Pixie — went down in a heap on the floor. Everyone was scrambling for the gun.

Police came swarming into the warehouse. Several of them began to gather up the unconscious henchmen. A couple of the officers hesitantly approached the trio of tussling women. Suddenly, there was a loud 'BANG!' as the gun discharged. One of the policemen's caps was knocked off of his head.

Moments later, as two of the police officers were escorting The Sphinx to a waiting squad car, Shamrock wheeled on her junior partner.

"I thought you said you emptied that gun! I could have been killed! And so could that officer!"

All Pixie could manage was a confused look. "Well, I *thought* it was empty!" she said sheepishly.

* * *

Heather took a sip of her lemonade and settled back in her lawn chair. She waved to Bonnie who was splashing in the hotel swimming pool. Already, the memories of last night's triumph were fading, although they left her with a warm glow of pride, almost as warm as the rays of sunshine bathing her now.

Dr. Azmoff stirred restlessly in the chair beside Heather.

"I really should be back at the house, working on a few experiments," he fretted.

Heather patted his hand. "Now you just settle down!" she told him with mock severity. "Your laboratory was blown to pieces last night. You can't possibly do any work there!"

The old man sighed and nodded. "You're right, I suppose. Oh — did I tell you that the police found the kidnapped government agents?"

"No, you didn't!" Heather exclaimed. She sat up, removed her sun glasses and looked at the doctor. "Were they okay?"

"Yes, they were still all right. One of Sphinx's men broke down during questioning and told officers where the agents were hidden. It was in an old out-of-the-way roadhouse. Sphinx was waiting until she had sold my experimental findings before getting rid of the men."

"How wonderful! I'm so glad!"

"Speaking of that," Dr. Azmoff went on, "They say Sphinx is still wondering how you managed to get untied and out of my lab before it exploded."

"I think we'll just let her go on wondering," smiled Heather. It would only upset her all the more to know she had a hand in saving me herself!

"When Sphinx was getting ready to leave the lab to meet the fat man, she took the envelope containing your scientific findings out of a file cabinet. She opened that envelope with a knife and left it sitting on the table. Later, when you and Pixie rushed in, I suddenly remembered that knife. If you hadn't been able to cut the ropes with it; none of us could ever have escaped before the explosion!"

Dr. Azmoff nodded. "At last that woman is behind bars. And will be, for a long, long time. I'm just sorry that I didn't latch on to her schemes much sooner."

"It isn't your fault," Heather hastened to say. "She was clever enough to fool those government agents, too. They checked out her background — it was spotless enough that they let you hire her. In fact, who's to say that she didn't turn criminal until *after* she began working for you? By keeping her eyes and ears open, she must have picked up quite a bit of information?"

"But The Sphinx wasn't just after my secret plans. She had robbed some jewelry stores, warehouses and other places, as well!"

"That's right," Heather agreed. "But all of those things occurred *after* Emily came to work for you. She was just a plain, old mercenary. She was out to get money any way she could. Stealing your scientific findings was just another money-making racket to her."

Dr. Azmoff was quiet for a moment. "I suppose you're right. At any rate, I have all of my papers back — my research is complete and my contract with the government is finished. So I don't have to worry about anybody else trying to steal those findings. And all of those criminals are behind bars now."

"Including the fat man," added Heather. "Imagine! He was hiding inside one of those big, empty cartons all during the fight!"

"But I really would like to get back to my lab," Azmoff sighed. "I'm working on a new device which Shamrock and Pixie can add to their crimefighting arsenal."

"Oh?" said Heather with interest. "What is it?"

"A glue-gun. To prevent criminals like the fat man from escaping. You pull the trigger and a stream of glue shoots out which makes their shoes stick to the floor. Not that I blame you for the fat man nearly getting away . . ."

Heather smiled, adjusting her sun glasses and leaning back in her chair. The doctor was

still talking, describing in detail the merits of his glue-gun, but the beautiful young woman tuned him out. She respected the elderly man's inventive genius, even if sometimes it was a trifle misdirected.

"If I could make its adhesive qualities strong enough, maybe you could even walk on walls," Dr. Azmoff was saying. ". . . No, that's probably too much to hope for. Besides, who ever heard of a crimefighter who walks on walls?"

Heather smiled again. ■

