

The Sleeping



Sleeping for uncounted ages she lay,
a goddess enshrined. Then, under Jerry
Miles' touch, she awoke, to explain the
mystery of the incredible valley of science,
controlled evolution . . . and grim danger!



The Sleeping Goddess

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CHAPTER I - The Glass Wall

"BLAZES!" muttered Jerry Miles. He rumbled his flaxen hair in perplexity. "Wish old Prof. Higgins back at U.S.C. could see this."

Jerry was gazing amazedly at such a scene as he had never before seen, and that it should be in the desert wastes of northern Afghanistan was equally as incredible.

Several hundred feet away were a number of squat buildings. Composed of a substance that might have been an opaque glass, they looked as if they had been molded in a gigantic die-cast. But these structures were mere details, for beyond towered an object that dwarfed all other buildings into puny insignificance.

It was a wall, a stupendous barrier that rose sheer, unguessable hundreds of feet heavenward, curving from sight on either side in the distance. More amazing yet was the fact that it was transparent! A titanic bulwark that might have been composed of a single piece of the finest crown glass!

He strode to it, and it loomed above huge as a mountain of quartz. For what curious purpose had it been built? It seemed sunk firmly in the earth, and rose sheer without a break to a terrible height.

Eagerness mounted in him as he saw a group of levers near a circular door. But they were jammed, and his mightiest efforts would not budge them.

Then he saw the ladder. A series of rungs, it was, projecting from the wall and extending up out of sight. They seemed molded as part of the wall itself firm and apparently safe.

In an instant Jerry was decided.

He started up the ladder. Keen anticipation fired him, and he worked vigorously at the task of climbing. Soon, however, he began to tire. Only then did he realize the seriousness of the task he had allotted himself. One little fumble or slip. . .

Below, the little group of buildings contracted as they sank lower and lower. He could look over an immense distance, across the shimmering desert like a sea of silver. He had the horrible impression of being suspended free in space.

Finally, toward noon, his flagging muscles carried him slowly over the brink of the barrier and onto the top. He stumbled exhausted to its surface and lay for a while reveling in the feel of a solid mass beneath him. Then he raised his head.

THE top of the wall was perhaps fifty feet in width, apparently level and the same thickness as the base, curving away in either direction like a modern highway. Directly across from him were the top rails of a ladder leading down the inner side.

Jerry rose stiffly to his feet, gave a wry glance behind him. The whole arid plain was visible, curving up to the surrounding mountains like a vast saucer, and the sense of it caught in his stomach like a nauseous weight. He turned quickly, approached the inner side of the barrier with quickened interest. An utterly strange, unearthly scene lay spread beneath him.

Weird jungle stretched to the broad land below. Jumbles of green, banks of vivid crimson, glowing plants, possibly bizarre and alien vegetation. The basin still was the atmosphere that filled the basin. Jerry grunted in amazement. A deep blue-green, almost curling consistency, it seemed, covered the scene to within a few feet of the wall's top like a sea. Miles gazed. Faint purple clouds floated within.

For a while Miles gazed at this landscape of weird beauty spread beneath him, wondering and speculating at all its mysteries. Then his eyes caught a steadily rising movement from the masses of green—something rising upward. He saw that it was a giant brilliant globe ascending through the blue gas. Wonder gripped him as he realized that it was a bubble, formed somehow on the plain of luxuriant vegetation below. As it rose nearer he saw that its diameter was perhaps ten feet, that it was moving quite fast. Then perhaps ten feet up, it burst through the surface of gas and vanished into nothingness.

Quickly he saw another moving sphere in the distance. Jerry's gaze went back to the broad basin floor. They discovered more—dozens—and as he gazed intently, more were discovered, dozens, hundreds of them scattered all over the basin floor in little clusters. They were motionless, but now and then there were loose bubbles gliding to the surface—like bubbles in a fermenting liquid.

For a long time Miles—like bubbles in a fermenting jungle. He deliberated a little on venturing down, but there was a thick unwholesomeness about the gas filling the basin he didn't like. Then, too, the prospect and an added curiosity overcame his inertia, and soon Miles found himself making the long ladder descent into the strange valley below. About him flowed the blue-green gas, tumbling and billowing upward like the slow moving figments of a dream. Warm it was, laden with sweet heavy fragrance from nameless jungle growths. It exerted a physical pressure almost like a liquid, but aside from a few retching gasps it almost seemed not to affect him.

With a tinge of elation, he soon reached bottom.

Jerry's gaze went back to the broad basin. Spheres were all about, ranging from marble-size to giant ten-foot globes that dotted the landscape with silver profusion. As he had suspected, they grew over clumps of vegetation; a large bubble here and there hung suspended, balloon-like, a score of yards above the ground from faintly visible cables. Some four or five yards they stood invisible from above, but now they stood out sharply, substantial enigmatic objects.

He cast a wary, analytical glance. He could see the basin's massive wall curving up to obscurity on either side far in the distance. Visibility was poor and he realized the riotous foliage would obviously offer convenient hiding places for dangerous animals. He hitched his gun holster to a more accessible position on his hip, then stepped forward onto the yielding moss carpet.

CHAPTER II - Neena

HARDLY had he taken a dozen steps when a faint rustling from a tangled bank of green before him drew his attention. He whipped out his gun, and then his hand went limp in utter surprise.

Jerry gasped in amazement. Nothing could have been more startlingly incongruous than a woman in this bizarre jungle. That the woman was one of breathtaking loveliness was at once apparent. Her body was like a slender, sleek, pale-bronze flame of perilous beauty—a slender body curved and rounded, clad in a silken tight-fitting robe of yellow, half revealing. Her hair was silken, tight-fitting rose of yellow, half revealing. Her eyes were an exotic oval, deep red lips curved in a smile as she stood gazing at him.

Then with graceful, almost feline movements she strode toward Jerry, halted before him. His throat felt choked, dry. Chaotic emotions pulsed through him at her nearness. She spoke, her voice soft, throaty, and again he started. For she used a rare form of the ancient Semitic tongue whose Phoenician analogues were representatives. Her meaning, if not her words, was clear.

She repeated them.

"Welcome to Iroq, Lord Zendraf. We await your bidding." Then, as Miles stood in silent confusion, she went on, a puzzled frown wrinkling her brow. "You are silent. Something displeases you? I, Neena, High Priestess of Iroq, have come alone to welcome you; that is as it should be. Perhaps it is I then, in whom you find disfavor?"

She stood close before Miles, the heady fragrance of her hair thick in his nostrils. She was like a pulse-quickenning vision of Astarte come to life. Yet there was something in the dark depths of her eyes that sent a little tug of doubt through him. It was a cold, calculating something that seemed not so much a conscious quality as it was an inborn instinct.

Yet Jerry's senses pounded again at the nearness of the woman. Slowly a smile once more parted those crimson lips. She laughed softly, the unfamiliar syllables—"No—no tongue fumbling mortal could find fault with such as you. I am merely Lord Zendrap—whomever he might be."

The woman's laugh was like the sonorous mellow notes of a bell. She let her eyes pass over him, her strong square-cut face, his tall muscular body.

"Who else could come from the nether land beyond the Wall?" she asked, and her voice had a musical lilt. "And you are different, much different from the men of Iroq."

Her eyes glowed deeply as she appraised him anew. "The air up here—" he gestured—"is poison to my people?"

The black eyes widened with surprise. "Not poison. Knows that! But come. The people of Iroq await you."

Miles smiled faintly. The thought of duplicity did not please him, but neither could he turn from something that promised novel adventure. He couldn't help it if that promised novel adventure.

SHE was at his side, crooking a warm bare arm through his. She faced the weird forest ahead, and uttered a clear, shrill call. Immediately from somewhere ahead came a dull thud, thud, thud of huge thumping feet, and the sound of bodies smashing through fleshy growths.

Unconsciously Miles tensed himself, set his jaw grimly. There was an alien unnatural note to that sound he didn't like. But the next moment his muscles sagged in complete surprise. For, pushing through a tangle of violent vegetation, a thing so strange, so utterly at variance with anything surrounding that he could do nothing but stare.

But a machine red man stood coming toward Jerry. A lustrous red machine stood on coming jointed legs projecting outward spider fashion. Eight feet tall it was, its body a stubby

upright cylindrical section from which three pliable tapering tentacles emerged. Surmounting its body was a “head,” a ruddy metal globe four feet in diameter, completely smooth except for three lens-tubes protruding outward and spaced feet, triangularly close together.

The thing lumbered forward on metal feet, and its lens seemed to glow with sentient consciousness. He dropped his hand to his holster instinctively.

Neena saw the movement and must have sensed something of Jerry’s perplexity. She laughed gaily.

“It’s only one of my servants,” she said. “They take you into Iroq.”

Miles saw that two more of the robots, identical to the first, were striding out. Dangling from outward-held tentacles of the third was a canopied litter, elaborately embellished and inscribed with strange characters. They came to a halt near Jerry, each like the mechanical rhythm of turning shafts and gears.

A slim golden arm was tugging at Jerry’s sleeve.

“Come,” said the woman, and thrust him into the sedan chair. Lord Zendrap,” she gestured, urged him toward the richly bedecked seat dangling from the robot’s appendages. Dazedly he seated himself, noticing absently that the tentacles did not sag in the least under his weight.

Desperately he tried to shake off the aura of strangeness and unreality that held him. Certainly this was no dream or hallucination, this fantastic world in which he found himself. This incredible transparent wall cupping a strange thick atmosphere so jungle that people had lived in this strange thick atmosphere so long that normal air was injurious to them?

And then the woman herself—Neena, High Priestess of Iroq. And she had called herself—Neena. Where did she fit in? Certainly her kind had not built the wall, for she few words she had spoken had led him to believe in a “faded race” beyond, and in a pagan god Iroq?

Miles smiled faintly. The thought of duplicity did not please him, but neither could he turn from something that promised novel adventure. He couldn't help it if that promised novel adventure.

NEENA was seating herself gracefully in the canopied palanquin next to him. She uttered a sharp command and the contrivance jolted into motion, the litter swaying like a steady mechanical stride in the grasp of the running sedan. The other two automatons followed at either side and a little behind. Lihely the woman leaned toward Jerry.

“Long ages have my people kept sentries to watch for your coming. Today my people kept sentries when they saw you ascend the Wall. Your quarters in the Palace are in readiness.”

She called another command and their strange sedan plunged forward more swiftly. The green balloons he had discovered with their emerging thirty-foot spheres of vegetative tissue apparently filled with escaping gas and growing to the ground by cable-stalks. At the juncture where these stems entered earth they were provided with thorns, cruel spear-sized spines radiating outward like a natural defense. The huge outward spikes of a huge jewel-like, cruel spear-sized spines radiating outward like a natural defense.

Miles felt a desire to question Neena about these odd plants, but something deep within him cautioned, warned him peremptorily not to show too great an ignorance. Zendfap would be expected to know all about his land. And Jerry remembered, too, that cold something that lurked in the depths of the woman's eyes. What would happen if she were to be convinced he was not a deity? No telling what power she wielded in this fantastic place...

The robots were carrying them swiftly over the mossy ground. They mounted the crest of a gentle swell and for a moment Jerry could peer above the massed vegetation. His eyes were caught by a slender white tower thrusting up dimly in the distant thick atmosphere. Neena gave a quick nod at it.

“Yonder is the Temple of the Gods. You shall dwell there after your wedding day.”

Jerry coughed, choked back his surprise. “My wedding day?” he managed in a voice that didn’t ring with the nonchalance intended.

“Truly,” replied Neena, black eyes studying him enigmatically. “What other reason would bring Zendfap among the mortals of Iroq?”

“What other indeed?” responded Miles, and determined mentally to learn more about the god Zendfap at his first opportunity.

PRESENTLY their ruddy steed carried them to a wide trail cleared of the carpeting moss. It cut straight over the low hillocks toward the white spire visible now, looming larger each second above the clustered brilliant vegetation. Finally the path widened into a well-defined road, and here and there appeared low stone houses, crude of construction. People lined the way; not a shouting waving throng, but a silent curious one. He saw that they were a thick-set, swarthy folk; on the whole the crowd displayed dull-witted impassiveness.

The woman at Jerry’s side sat stiffly, regally in the chair as they passed down the thickening aisle of people.

They were in a village now, all the houses and buildings constructed uniformly and unskillfully from dark stone; certainly not the handiwork of the people who had built the great wall...

Directly down the road, and looming above all, was that slender tower of white. The beauty of its unearthly architecture caught in Jerry’s throat. He gestured at it.

“It is old, the Temple of the Gods?” He tried to keep the querying inflection from his voice, but Neena glanced up quickly, eyed him quizzically.

“None should know better than you, my Lord. It has been here since the beginning, even before the first mortal touched foot on Iroq’s soil. It is—Temple of the Gods.”

The thronged people stood away respectfully from about the white building, nor did they follow as the robot carrying Miles and Neena plodded mechanically to the temple and halted before a low white porch. With lithe grace the woman sprang from the litter. She turned to face Miles and he read a baffling challenge, a malicious eagerness in her eyes.

“Come,” sounded her mellow voice, “I know you are anxious to see the Sleeping Goddess...”

Obeying in silent wonder, Jerry stepped from the swinging litter and followed at the girl’s side into a long cool corridor with slender flanking pilasters alternately fluted and twisted. Then up a spidery curving stairway to a magnificent circular room, steeply vaulted.

CHAPTER III - Sleeping Goddess

THE circular room itself was strikingly bare except for the highly carved and ornamented walls. The floor was a glistening black expanse like a polished obsidian dance floor. In the center was a dais upon which rested a golden metal object perhaps seven feet in length. Oblong, it was, and reminded Miles strongly of a coffin.

Neena’s slim arm was in his, drawing him to it.

“See,” she whispered throatily, “the Sleeping Goddess!”

Jerry stared through the curved transparent covering of the golden box, and his eyes were caught by the vision within.

She lay stretched there as if in death, a young woman of pale cameo-like beauty. Hair lustrous golden as the coffin that held her, coiled spirals of it falling about the pure whiteness of an aristocratic face. Fine matchless beauty was there, more enhanced by the slender curves of her body showing beneath the silken whiteness of a simple gown. Her tiny feet were shod in classical sandals.

Jerry could not repress an intake of breath. Here was real beauty, understandable womanly loveliness, nothing of the perilous beauty of Neena.

Something else within the golden coffin caught his eye. The girl's right arm lay at her side and close to her relaxed hand was a group of small silver levers projecting from the plush-lined wall. Strange dials and meters were there too. Some faint suspicion of the truth sent the blood pounding eagerly through Jerry's veins. The Sleeping Goddess: could it be that...?

Neena's black eyes were upon him, her carmine lips twisted in an oblique smile. Obviously some response was expected of him.

He nodded down at the beautiful reposed figure. "When," he said boldly, deliberately, "will the Sleeping Goddess awaken?"

Quick surprise flooded her face to be instantly masked by an expressionless stare. "I would not presume to know," she replied. "That is for my Lord to decide!" And she bowed extravagantly to Miles.

He cursed under his breath. Every verbal tilt so far had gone to this sleek dark beauty at his side. It seemed nothing could escape the flashing intuitive stare of those eyes—and that sinister something in their depths was growing. Soon, very soon, perhaps, a crisis would be reached and something told him it would not be pleasant.

Jerry let his eyes feast once again on the beauty of the golden-haired girl beneath the transparent lid. Here certainly was the crux of the whole baffling adventure, the key that would explain, that would fit each mystery into a completed whole with kaleidoscopic precision. But, and Miles felt a tug of hopelessness, it required at least rudimentary knowledge to use the key. He lacked even that!

Neena was near at hand, her honeyed tones soft. "Always has the Sleeping Goddess rested here. And once, when Iroq was young she awoke, came among our people and blessed

them. But that was long ages ago, Lord Zendfap, and then one morning she had returned to her bed of sleep.” A faint malicious glitter appeared in the jet eyes. “She awaits only your touch to rise again!”

Jerry hid a sudden quickening of interest. Neena’s words were probably barbaric legend, yet it tied in with a growing suspicion of his. Those levers and dials within the golden casket were not mere decorations. Vital scientific reason must be behind it all. But he could not investigate with the cold eyes of Neena watching him.

He wheeled abruptly, faced the woman squarely.

“Priestess,” he said, “I will awaken the Sleeping Goddess so that she may walk once again among the people of Iroq. But the time has not yet come. Right now I tire, and would taste of your earthly food.”

The ebon head bowed in assent, and Jerry could not see her face as she answered: “Your desire is my command.”

She turned with him and glided lithely across the black crystal floor toward the stairs. Her slim yellow-cased figure was close to Miles, the Stygian torrents of her hair tumbling about her shoulders, the perilous mystery of her enveloping him like the heady fragrance of perfume. Worlds different she was, from that still golden-crowned beauty back there.

DUSK was in the thick atmosphere when Neena and Jerry emerged from the white temple. Three grotesque metal robots stood stiffly in their former positions, and further beyond at a respectful distance from the tower waited the stocky people of Iroq.

The woman waved a slim bronzed arm at the canopied seat. “Come; my servants will carry us to the Palace.”

She was beside him in the litter then, and a spoken word to the automaton brought it to life. Its jointed metal legs moved and it clumped rapidly into the street, the throng making way for it. As before, the robot retinue escorted them.

Darkness was settling fast within the hazy confines of the great wall, seemingly to pour in like ink into a tumbler of water. But the stomping robots did not slacken their stride; some uncanny sense seemed to guide them unerringly. The swaying of the seat threw Neena close against him. His heart leaped. Her exotic oval face shown palely through the darkness, turned up to his.

“The best of Iroq is yours,” she whispered. “May your stay at the Palace be pleasing; you are my guest, I High Priestess of Iroq!”

Swiftly the ruddy machine carried the swaying litter along a paved path between alternate banks of vegetation. Miles glanced about him in silent confusion. The coming of evening had only increased the unreality, the dream-like quality of everything. He turned almost desperately to gaze at the girl beside him in the chair. Her face was calm, undisturbed, eyes looking ahead at a squat building looming directly before them.

At a command from Neena the robots had slowed their pace, then they were clattering through a passage illuminated ineffectually by occasional smoking torches. Another word from the girl halted the machines beside stone steps leading upward. A short hallway was on the second floor, and Neena drew him toward a large bronze door. It swung open at her touch, revealing a wide square room.

Standing within the doorway were four men. Stocky, powerful, dark as were all the men of Iroq. The very similarity of three, cast them as nondescript individuals. Plainly attired they were, in livid-red robes and sandals. Their dark features were thick, coarse, reflecting brute dullness.

The fourth man differed only in his clothes and the stamp of his face. A silken purple garment was draped imperiously over his broad shoulders, and beneath it flared loose trousers of the same hue. Sullen harshness was visible on his swarthy face, reflected in the thick

hawk-nose, the twist of the wide lips. And a brutish sense of power was there, too, lurking in the crafty depths of his eyes. Here was a force in the destinies of Iroq.

He bowed low, and the three red-robés beside him followed suit.

Neena's throaty voice sounded: "This is Borko, my Chief Administrator, and his deputies."

The man stepped back from the doorway, flung out his arm in gesture. "This is your dwelling place, Lord Zendfap," he said in a thick voice. "Never has it been occupied; endlessly have we kept the torches burning in hope that some day you would come . . . we are honored, and pleased!"

But as Miles entered the room, Neena's arm in his, he saw that Borko was far from pleased. Jealous hatred blazed in the man's eyes.

Revealed in the flaring light of cressets, the chamber was barbarously resplendent with furnishings and trappings. Pelt rugs littered the floor, strange skins that Jerry could not classify. Blue and orange fresco work decorated the walls, and at one side was a waist-high block of stone, the top hollowed to form a basin. Flanking it were two huge urns of water.

Neena gave a graceful bow of her head, excused herself, and walked to the door. She turned then, looked back at Miles. Like a pale-bronze medallion she stood, the flaring light playing over the yellow of her gown. And in the mirroring pools of her eyes was a mocking challenge, an enigmatic promise of caprice that sent Jerry's blood thumping through his veins.

Then she was gone.

BUT that glance had not escaped the beady eyes of Borko. Ill-concealed rage flooded his hawk-nosed face, and Miles knew that here was an implacable enemy, one that would cause trouble sooner or later.

A moment he stood in front of Jerry, eyeing him boldly.

“The clothes of Lord Zendfap are strange,” he growled. “I have always thought they would be robes of the priesthood . . .”

“Indeed?” snapped Miles. “Are you one to judge?”

A shadow of fear passed over the swarthy face. “Your pardon, Lord Zendfap,” he murmured. Then, hurriedly: “I will have food served.”

Deliberately Jerry turned his back upon the four men, strode across the room to a huge window—and he could almost feel the hate-filled eyes of Borko piercing his back. Somehow the Chief Administrator had guessed that he was not a divinity!

Sound of the opening door behind him wheeled Miles about. Five servants were entering the room, bearing silver platters crowded with food. Silently they placed the trays upon short cradling tripods near a banked pile of cushions. Then, at a gesture from Borko they retired.

“Food, Lord Zendfap,” said the purple-garbed Administrator with a humbleness that did not deceive Jerry.

When Miles had seated himself cross legged upon a pillow before one of the trays, the four officials took positions opposite him. He did full justice to the meal. There were odd-flavored cooked vegetables, a variety of strange fruit and nuts, and tender meat.

Borko’s eyes were on him, again growing insolently belligerent in their scrutiny.

“Lord Zendfap finds earthly food pleasing?” He leered mockingly.

Jerry caught the implication. He realized that Borko, becoming ever more certain that he was not immortal, would soon make trouble. The only way to check such an occurrence was to overawe, bluff.

“It amuses me to taste your crude offerings,” he retorted imperiously.

Brief anger flared in the obsidian eyes. “But you do eat food like a common mortal,” growled Borko boldly. “You look like a mortal . . .”

“Watch your tongue!” snapped Miles threateningly. “Displease me, Administrator, and I may destroy you with thundering death!”

The three red-garbed deputies, Jerry could see, were afraid. The swarthy faces had changed to an apprehensive white. But Borko was unconvinced, had lost all caution.

“Your words are mighty,” he grunted. “But words are useless; what proof have you that you are in truth Lord Zendfap?”

“Proof that will crush you if you anger me further!” growled Jerry. He jerked out his pistol, leveled it quickly at one of the water urns across the room. Three shots crashing on the heels of one another smashed the earthenware crock to pieces. Water splattered on the floor.

The three deputies reached the door in a single concerted rush, struggled through, hoarse wails of fear on their lips. Borko retained his position with obvious difficulty. His mouth was open, his thick harsh features distorted with baffled surprise.

Quickly he bowed his head to Miles, mumbled an apology.

Jerry pointed at the door. “Go!” he thundered, “before I lose patience!”

Borko obeyed with alacrity.

And Miles, watching the powerful purple-clothed figure leave, knew that the man had not been convinced one iota of his divinity.

CHAPTER IV - Puppets of Evolution

JERRY did not wait for further developments. Now, if ever, was the time to visit the white temple and the golden Sleeping Goddess. Key to the whole mystery was there; all he had to do was find it. In any event, a secret foray could do no harm.

He crossed to the rectangle window, crawled over the wide sill, and let himself down by his arms. He dropped lightly upon the roof of the first story, then repeated the performance from the roof, landed on thick carpeting moss. All was quiet in the dusk shrouded courtyard.

Obviously there were no guards about, nor was there need for them. Jerry strode freely along curving paths among the banked foliage until he came to the low arching gate. He halted momentarily, peered into the darkened street. It was deserted. Even if he did chance upon someone he would attract no untoward attention in the darkness.

He made the trip to the Temple of the Gods quickly and uneventfully. Its slender white tower shimmered faintly in the moonlight, guiding him like a beacon.

Quickly he mounted the graceful curving staircase to the silent splendor of the rotunda above. As he strode to the golden coffin he was startled to see light flooding from the interior through the transparent lid.

Jerry leaned forward. The illumination, he saw, came from a cleverly concealed indirect lighting tube circling the coffin where the lid and plush-lined interior met. And the warm glow played over the still form of the Sleeping Goddess.

Her pale beauty seemed scarcely earthly now, with the light rippling on the golden cascades of her hair, etching in faint strokes of shadow the long lashes and the closed lids. Full sensitive mouth was deep pink. Here was a vibrant loveliness strangely piquant. But as she lay there Miles wondered if indeed she had ever risen from the "sleep."

He looked again at the levers and dials on the casket wall. They were well within reach of the girl's hand. But there seemed no way of discovering their purpose; there were no duplicating levers on the outside. . . Sudden inspiration made him examine the thick carvings on the coffin's exterior directly opposite the inside levers. Almost immediately he perceived a fine circle in the gold; like the flush end of a small shaft, it appeared. And in this circle was a

shallow square hole plainly at variance to the sweeping curves of the other engravings. It seemed to him that a lever was meant to fit in that hole.

Jerry substituted the handle of his bowie knife, forcing the squared end into the hole. Then he twisted upon the blade.

His heart thumped. The circle was turning slowly! He bent low over the coffin, saw that a single inside lever was also moving; it then, was connected to the golden shaft he was twisting. Abruptly sounded the click of a moving tumbler. The shaft would budge no further. Soft whirring of hidden machinery issued from somewhere beneath the coffin, the hiss of gas under pressure. And then Miles jerked erect with a low gasp on his lips.

The curving transparent lid of the casket was swinging silently back!

A PUNGENT odor wafted outward and the girl lay exposed to reach. Breathlessly he looked close. Faint flushing pink was flowing through her ivory cheeks, and a rhythmic pulsation of her breast began. Then a flutter jerked the blond lashes, they lifted. Deep brown eyes stared uncomprehendingly upward. Quickly calm intelligence came to those eyes, and the Sleeping Goddess sat up in the silken trough of the coffin—a miniature on ivory come to life; delicate features, gown sheer white, sleeveless, high-waisted and pleated.

A moment she absorbed the lean height of Jerry with speculative brown eyes. Queer hope came into them, and she smiled up.

“You are from the city of Nu-Der?” Her tones were liquid, the words oddly inflected, more of a classic form even than those of Neena.

Pulsing excitement made Jerry’s voice disturbingly thick. “I’ve never heard of—Nu-Der.”

The woman’s face registered vague disappointment. “Then you live here in Iroq?”

“Hardly.” Miles gave a short laugh. “I’ve been here only since this afternoon. Because I came from—outside, the people think I’m a god!”

Quick interest lit the brown eyes and the girl leaned forward eagerly. Her hair rippled in a golden cascade about slim shoulders.

“You are from beyond the Wall then! You have seen the shining city nestled in the far mountains?”

Jerry shook his head. “There is no city there.”

The girl bowed her golden head and her voice came tonelessly: “It is as I suspected; Nu-Der is no more.”

Miles struggled to keep growing wonder in hand. “Why do you speak of this city, Nu-Der? What is the purpose of the wall around Iroq, and why have you slept for ages in this white tower?”

The tawny eyes were studying Jerry’s bronzed square face. Then abruptly she became conscious of the man’s own intent stare. She flushed. “You speak my tongue oddly. Your land is far away?”

He nodded, gestured vaguely with his arm. “On the other side of the world across wide oceans.”

“And you have great men of learning, of science?”

“Many,” responded Miles.

“Then you will understand what I have to say,” she explained. “Once I lived in Nu-Der. Never in all the world was there such a city. A city of science. Things to stun the mind with wonder; knowledge was the gauge of a man’s wealth.

“But the mystery of life still escaped the masters. And so they built this great transparent cup, filled it with a thick atmosphere that would speed up evolution enormously. All the materials and constituents of life were placed in it. But no spore or germ was allowed to enter. Life would come of its own accord and they would watch it grow and evolve, and perhaps learn its immemorial secret.

“But they knew that even with the speeding effect of the gas many years would pass before life would appear; that civilizations might rise and fall.”

Miles nodded eagerly. “Go on.”

“So the scientists built this tower. I was chosen to dwell within it, travel down through the ages by suspended animation; gas within this golden box achieves that. Every five thousand years it would automatically open, return me to life so that I might check the progress of evolution within the wall, and carry that knowledge to some future race—and so it has been.

“Every five thousand years I have awakened and made brief studies of a few weeks, returning once again to my bed of sleep. I have seen the first wriggings of life, have watched it grow into the weird forests yonder. I have studied humans on the long ladder of evolution, have seen them form the primitive empire of Iroq here within the wall.

“And during all these millenniums my shining city of Nu-Der has come with me, larger, more wondrous each time I beheld it. But alas, on my last awakening no scientists were here to greet me. I could not travel on foot across the burning desert to Nu-Der, and so I went to sleep again fearful that I was now fulfilling the duty for which I had been placed here—that my great civilization had crumbled somehow, to nothingness.

“You, man of the future, have confirmed that belief.” The golden head bowed in sorrow.

MILES shifted his feet. The sheer immensity of her story whetted his wonder, yet even stronger than this curiosity was a desire to take the girl in his arms and comfort her. The loss of her city, her very people must have created a gnawing void within her. But all he could manage in way of consolation was a soft: "All things must end sometime."

The brown eyes lifted to his and they cleared bravely. "You are right. Regret is useless." Her delicate rose lips parted in a faint smile. "I am called Orleen, and you. . . ?"

"Jerry Miles."

"Jerry Miles," she repeated, her mellow voice imparting a liquid inflection to the syllables. "It is a pleasing name—and Jerry, the dials show that I have slept only four thousand years this time. Is it—"

"I woke you," he put in hastily. "When I saw you resting there so calm and lifelike, so beautiful I couldn't believe you dead. . ." He clipped off his words, confused at their ardent rush.

A pleased flush colored Orleen's cheeks and her laugh was like the musical clatter of silver coins. "I do not mind. I had thought perhaps the natives of Iroq had discovered the means of opening my casket."

Miles frowned with sudden remembrance. "No. I don't understand it either. Their priestess has marvelous robots, yet no one seems to recognize those levers as being controls of some kind."

Again the woman's silver laugh sounded. "I gave those robots to the savages of Iroq four thousand years ago. I taught them my language, hoped the machines would hasten their march toward civilization. Apparently it was a useless gesture."

For a moment there was silence in the ornate rotunda while Miles tried to orient his rushing thoughts. The jig-saw mystery was piecing together bit by bit. This girl from the immemorial past sitting gracefully there like a golden goddess had truly been the keystone to the whole baffling structure. Incredible tale it was!

Abruptly as Miles stood in the clear light by the gilded casket he became aware of footsteps ascending from the stairway from below. Baseless surging panic gripped him.

He spun to Orleen. "Quick!" he whispered urgently. "Someone's coming. They mustn't find you awake!"

The girl's eyes widened with dread. She clutched at his arm. "You will not desert me, Jerry? You will wake me again?"

"I swear it! As soon as I'm able. Hurry, close the lid!"

She gave his arm a trusting squeeze, then dropped back among the silken plush of the casket. Her hand flicked over a tiny silver lever and the transparent lid swung silently into place. She looked up at Jerry, a tremulous smile about her lips. Then a second lever slid back beneath her hand. Somewhere within sounded the muffled escape of gas. Her eyelids fluttered, closed, and once again Orleen was the Sleeping Goddess of Iroq.

A footstep sounded behind Miles. He wheeled to look into the faintly smiling face of Neena. Taunting mockery shone boldly in her black eyes.

"Does Lord Zendfap find his quarters at the Palace so unsuited that he seeks shelter in the Temple? Or is it the beauty of the Sleeping Goddess that draws him?"

Dull anger surged within him. "Since when," he demanded incisively, "must a Lord account to you, Priestess?"

The expression on the exotic oval face did not alter. But she said humbly, "I beg your forgiveness," and gave a quick bow of her head. Then she turned. "Come. My metal servants wait to take us to the Palace."

CHAPTER V - Neena's Offer

NEXT morning when Miles woke among the piled blankets and pillows of the big stone room he made an immediate and chilling discovery. As he buckled on his cartridge belt and holster, he saw that his pistol was missing. A quick search assured him that it had not fallen among the cushions.

Anger and apprehension flared within him. Only two people, of course, would have the audacity or the reason to steal his gun while he slept: Neena and Administrator Borko.

The High Priestess might have doubted his godly eminence, was perhaps planning to somehow capitalize on his appearance in Iroq, had taken his gun to assure her success.

Or Borko, fired by jealous hatred and belief that he, Miles, was not Zendfap, might have pilfered it.

In any event, Jerry knew that the weapon was irrevocably lost to him. The fact that its loss foretold danger did not add to his peace of mind.

Three red-jacketed men brought his breakfast. But when he sought to question them concerning the activities of Neena and Borko, they professed ignorance, withdrew hurriedly.

It was not until noon that Neena, accompanied by Borko, came to call upon him. The Priestess' slender pale-bronze figure was clothed in livid green, her ebon hair falling on the shoulders of a milky-white jacket. Dark oblique eyebrows and crimson lips gave exotic mystery to her face.

She extended a slim arm to Miles. "Lord Zendfap," she said, "we wish to show you more of the land of Iroq. My metal servants await us. . ."

Borko's swarthy hawk-nosed face was carefully devoid of expression. He bowed low in greeting, saluted Miles as Lord Zendfap. Over his shoulders was the same purple chamys, voluminous enough, Jerry realized, to conceal a sword—or a pistol. But Miles determined not to mention the theft; it would do no good, would only be an admission of his concern.

In the Palace's lower passageway the three robots stood like bulbous red spiders. Now both the first and second machines were provided with litters. Neena seated herself next to Miles; Borko took his position in the second automaton. At a call the stiff metal legs jerked into motion.

UPON noticing a movement in the underbrush, Neena let out a sharp command. The third robot darted forward. A pig-like six-legged animal scurried swiftly from under the pulpy leaves, but not swiftly enough. A flash of ruddy metal legs and in a trice the unfortunate beast

was snapped off the ground in the grip of a coiling tentacle. It screamed horribly and its brown eyes bulged in death as the metal tentacle contracted.

Sickening disgust filled Jerry, most of it directed at the woman at his side. She was intently leaning forward, breast heaving with excitement. Borko, in the second robot, was leering appreciatively.

“Sport of the Gods!” cried Neena. “Nothing escapes my metal servants; they can scent and trail quarry to the ends of Iroq!”

Miles reclined far back in the swaying seat, thoughtfully silent. What was the point of this demonstration? A subtle warning calculated to impress him with their power? If so, it could not have originated on Borko’s part, for he was plainly not a man of subtleties.

Dusk was near when the tour was completed and the robots finally directed back towards the village and the Palace. But Jerry’s thoughts were of the gleaming white tower, and the golden-haired goddess immured there. The appeal in her voice for his return still lingered with him. He couldn’t let her down; somehow he’d fulfill that hurried promise to awaken her once again.

When they reached the Palace, Neena conducted him to a room on the ground floor. Borko entered also, but the priestess turned quickly to him.

“You may leave, Administrator,” she said calmly.

Instantly jealous anger flared on his harsh features, and a snarling protest rose to his lips.

She cut him short. “Go!”

A moment he stood, then bowed stiffly in assent. But as he turned away he shot a glance at Miles from eyes snapping with hatred.

THE room was small. Colored, finely-woven reed mats covered the stone floor, the walls ornate with flowing tapestries. At one side was a circular green-tiled bathing pool, on

the other a large window giving into the dusk shadowed court. Smoke from the flickering cressets seemed incensed. The room, Jerry realized with vague discomfort, was typically feminine.

Neena was quick to see his wondering glance. “This is my chamber. I wish you to dine with me. . .”

A soft tumbled mass of pillows was piled against the nearer wall and she drew him toward it, pulled him down with a slim bare arm. He seated himself Turkish-fashion on a cushion, sat awkwardly erect. He sensed that planned events were working into shape; that he must be on guard.

From her supine position of the pillows, Neena clapped her hands. Six trailing servants entered bearing food. They were short men, wearing the same style red tunics and white short-cut pantaloons Miles had seen before. The Priestess waved them away after they had deposited the trays on a cluster of tripods.

Jerry ate sparingly, aware that Neena only dabbed at her food. The inscrutable dark eyes rose often to his, and he was conscious that the meal was only the prelude of things to come. He nodded his head at the food.

“The people of Iroq live well, Priestess,” he remarked, trying to ease an awkward situation.

“Only because the Gods are generous,” she retorted silkily. “You are pleased with us, Lord Zendfap?”

He hid his wonderment. “I find no fault.”

“Then you have chosen your wedding day?”

Inwardly Miles jumped. The blow had fallen from an unexpected quarter. He was aware that the woman had moved closer to him on the pillow, was regarding him from beneath lowered lashes. The best he could do was counter boldly.

“Why all this interest in the marriage, Priestess? What are days compared to ages of waiting? I see no reason for its immediate fulfillment.”

Abruptly, as he half reclined on the cushions, he felt the vibrant warm nearness of Neena’s body against his, caught the thick intoxicating perfume of her jet hair.

“Perhaps,” she said, her voice a throaty whisper, “the bride grows impatient!”

The truth burst upon him in a single illuminating flood. And that flood was instantly absorbed in a maelstrom of emotion; for Neena’s slim bronze arms had slid about his neck, soft yet strong as they pulled him toward the exotic upturned oval of her face. Alien depths of her eyes were aglitter with exultation.

Abrupt panic seized him. He tore loose, pushed her back upon the cushions.

“You are Priestess of Iroq,” he growled at her severely. “And you are mortal. A mortal can not mate a god!”

Neena had drawn angrily erect, breast heaving. Then strangely she relaxed; a smile parted the full red lips.

“You speak truly,” came her voice with perilous sweetness. “A mortal may not wed with immortal—but you are not Zendfap! You are not a god!”

JERRY felt a sudden weak deflatedness. Her words had stabbed like a knife ripping a bladder.

“I suspected from the first,” she said triumphantly. “You knew too little of the ways of Iroq. And then last night in the Temple my beliefs were confirmed. . .”

A gasp wrenched from his lips. "You heard Orleen and me?"

"Truly. I followed you to the Temple, heard every word between you. You are not a god—neither is the Sleeper!"

Setting his jaw, Miles faced her defiantly. "So what?" he gritted.

Faint mockery shone in her eyes and she shrugged delicately molded shoulders. "I do not care. In truth it has allowed me to make certain plans—"

"Then you took my gun?" interrupted Jerry impulsively.

"Gun?" Neena's voice was querulous. "What is gun?"

"My thundering weapon."

She dismissed the matter with a petulant shake of her head. "I know nothing of your weapon."

And strangely, Miles knew that she had spoken truthfully. It was Borko . . .

Again the Priestess was speaking—

"My people need never know you are not Zendfap; they are content, not unduly curious. No one would see wrong in our marriage!"

"A certain Administrator would hardly be pleased," Jerry pointed out.

"He can be—removed!"

"I'm sorry, Neena; your offer doesn't appeal to me."

Angrily the ebon head tossed. "You spurn a throne of the gods? A kingdom to do with as you choose? Wealth! Power! The whole of Iroq to do your bidding?"

"Oh, it isn't that—"

"What more could one desire?" she demanded with fierce intensity. "Am I ugly? Do you find me so repulsive you dread the thought of sharing my throne?"

"No one can deny your beauty, Neena—"

"Then what displeases you?" she murmured, slipping close to him again. "I have not seen your like before. The men of Iroq are thick and short and ugly. You are tall, slim, your hair is the color of yellow moss . . ."

Again slim arms stole about his neck, and the warm nearness of her whirled in his brain. The flushed pale-bronze of her face was upturned, eyes black pools, full reddened lips close . . . abruptly he threw his arm around her lithe body, crushed his lips against hers.

When he lifted his head he was trembling a bit, and a guilty stab went through him as he thought of that fair sleeping girl in the Temple. Somehow that kiss seemed like a betrayal.

"What of Orleen?" he asked huskily.

Neena's voice was close, mellow. "She shall continue to be—the Sleeping Goddess!"

The heady appeal of Neena vanished; he tore her arms roughly away, sprang to his feet.

FEATURES contorted, Neena leaped up. A small hand was digging in the lining of her jacket. Jerry stumbled backward in time to avoid the thrust of a slim ivory stiletto. He clutched her wrist, upsetting the silver trays as he wrenched it from her hand. He hurled the carved white weapon across the room where it shattered against the stone wall of the room.

With a choking cry of utter fury she hurled herself at him, slashing, clawing, biting. It was like holding an enraged tigress in his arms, and for a few seconds he struggled desperately to grasp those raking talons. But she fought with furious demoniac energy.

Miles realized forcibly that he had incurred in her a hatred that would be appeased only in his death. He lunged out with both hands, hurled her bodily backward onto the pile of cushions. A moment she lay there eyes blazing, face contorted. "Fool!" she shrieked. "I'll—"

Abruptly, in the midst of that blurred moment, a pistol shot crashed into the room. A bullet whined past Jerry's head.

Framed in the blackness of the open doorway was the stocky bull-form of Borko holding Miles' automatic in a lax hand. Surprised incredulity flooded his hawk-nosed face; for Miles had not broken like the urn when the weapon was turned on it . . .

Deliberately Jerry strode toward the Administrator. “No use, Borko,” he growled. “The thundering weapon works only for me!”

Fear twisted the thick swarthy features, and Borko wheeled, plunged from view.

Neena’s voice knifed out in call behind Jerry. And somewhere down the passageway beyond the door sounded a responsive mechanical thumping of metal feet. The robots!

That heavy reverberation woke blind surging terror within him; only too fresh in his mind was the demonstration he had witnessed. He wheeled, spurted across the brilliant reed mats, and as he scrambled over the thick window sill into the courtyard, Neena’s hate-filled orders for pursuit reached his ears.

CHAPTER VI - Flight of the Gods

JERRY did not pause an instant, but lunged through the darkness among the weird vegetation of the court. A pulsing thought lent wings to his feet. Neena had called hunting with the robots “sport of the Gods!”

The moon was overhead, and everything glowed in a strange blue illumination. Clearly visible ahead was the white tower, and he made for it. There was double reason why he should go there, for he knew now that Orleen would not be safe from Neena’s vengeance. The Priestess herself would guess his intent, and the dash to the Temple would resolve into a mad race, with chances about equal. Miles with a head start, Neena with the greater speed of the robots.

Fortunately the distance was not great, and Jerry covered it at top speed, dashing past startled natives in the moonlit dusk. At any moment he expected the mechanical thud of metal feet behind him. The white structure loomed above, and he was plunging across the low porch and into the blackness of the splendid corridor. Up the gentle sweep of the stairs to the

ebon floor of the cupola. The beacon-like flare of the Sleeper's casket shone through the gloom.

Pale and beautiful she was, in the warm glow of the light-tube, and for a moment that loveliness held him. Then again he was twisting his bowie knife in the square depression of the golden box—with hasty assurance this time, for somewhere outside in the street came the clatter of multiple metal feet!

The curving transparent lid slid back as before, and renewed life was flowing through the slim figure within. Brown eyes opened to stare into Miles'. In that look was instant understanding. Orleen smiled.

"I knew you would return, Jerry!" came silvery tones. Sudden concern crossed her face; she sat up swiftly. "You're troubled. Something has happened?"

"Much!" he replied urgently. "Quick, Orleen, we've got to get out of here. We're in danger, both of us!"

Puzzled alarm showed on her white brow. "I don't understand . . ."

"No time to explain; they're right on my heels, three robots. Hurry!"

In the passageway below sounded harsh staccato of metal on stone. Neena was bringing the robots into the tower!

Jerry scooped up the white-draped form of Orleen from the casket. He placed her quickly on her feet, conscious as he did so, of her supple grace. But even as he led her toward the stairs, sound from the blackness beneath told him the robots were mounting the steps.

He set his jaw. "We're caught," he grated. "Too far to jump from the window, no use to hide, and I can't fight three robots with a dagger!"

SURPRISINGLY, Orleen was tugging on his arm, her voice an urgent whisper. "I have a way! The people of Iroq do not know this tower as well as they might."

She drew him toward the dusky curve that was the rotunda's wall. As her hand ran for a moment over the figured medallion work, the clatter on the stairway drew near. Then something clicked beneath her touch, and a panel opened, faint radiance showing. Together they ducked in; the door slid silently into place, cutting off outside sound.

It was an oblong little room they were in, pale illumination coming from the walls and ceiling. Cylindrical metal containers were piled in neat array.

"My secret store room," explained Orleen with a little gesture. "Food is here for use during my waking periods."

"Can you leave the tower from here?" demanded Jerry eagerly.

The golden head nodded. "Come . . ."

At her touch an opening appeared in the floor; a tiny spiraling stairway leading downward She led the way, Miles thumping at her heels. A minute later Orleen halted.

"Sh-h . . ."

A rectangle opened, and the golden girl peered forth. Then her hand found Jerry's, guided him out. They were in one of the dusk filled curving colonnades of the Temple.

"Come on," whispered Jerry, "we've got to reach the wall before those mechanical bloodhounds get wind of us!"

Silently they slipped through the ghostly gleaming splendor of the arcade, out of the tower and into the deserted streets of Iroq.

Lightly Orleen, daughter of a long forgotten people, ran at his side. No fear disturbed the pale beauty of her features; only calm trust. Indeed, thought Miles, she did not yet know the true gravity of the situation, and he could not bring himself to tell her of Neena's bloody thirst for revenge; that thirst would certainly put the Priestess on their trail again. It was, in fact, a desperate dash for their lives.

Soon the village was behind, the weird masses of the jungle about them. Miles slowed their pace to a trot; balloon-plants dotted the landscape, and there was danger of stumbling into the cruel projecting thorn-pikes. Then too, they'd have to conserve their strength; a final dash might well be the difference between life and death.

Still there was no sign of pursuit.

Evidently Neena still believed they were hid somewhere in the Temple. They reached the crest of a green-carpeted hillock, and Jerry stopped to look back.

They went on again, Orleen silent but uncomplaining at his side. Dull elation was mounting within Jerry. They were half way to the wall.

"Jerry!" gasped Orleen suddenly, tugged him to a halt. Her attitude was of intent listening. Miles turned, cocked his head.

Somewhere in the distance behind them, through the thick blue atmosphere, came the rich voice of Neena lifted in call. And as the blood drained from Jerry's face, a faint thud thud thud of pounding metal feet became audible.

MILES and the golden-haired girl sprang into the wild flight of panic. That stomping sound, horribly threatening in its mechanical rhythm, lent strength to their flagging muscles. They ran over the undulant terrain between the thick bubble-capped vegetation. And now the vivid green moss underfoot seemed to clutch at them with greedy malicious fingers.

Orleen stumbled, would have fallen had not Miles caught her. As he held her, the futility of that blind flight struck him. Only half the distance to the wall, and the robots close behind; to win such a race was a stark impossibility.

"No use, Orleen," he gasped. "We'll never make it." He cast a desperate glance about, rested his eye on the pulpy, heavy growths, looked hopelessly at the faintly gleaming bubbles, the huge balloon-plants tugging at brown cable-stalks . . .

The girl was close to him. "We can't hide," she pointed out. "The robots will scent us."

Jerry's eyes gleamed with frantic speculation as they caught upon the balloon-plants.

"No," he grated, "we can't hide—but we won't have to. Come on!"

Somewhere in the jungle, thumping metal feet were drawing near with unfailing sureness. Jerry hurried the girl toward the nearest balloon-plant. Her eyes were wide with wonder as he made an opening in the plant's thorn barrier by pulling sideways on the radiating shafts. He gestured with his head at the growth's stem.

"Climb it. Quick!"

Orleen looked helplessly at the tawny stalk stretching stiffly upward like a huge rope hanging from a balloon.

"But I . . . how . . .?"

"Climb it, woman! Your life depends on getting up there!"

Orleen smiled tremulously at him, stepped quickly between the long spear-thorns and began a struggling ascent of the plant's stalk.

Jerry groaned inwardly. Valiant little thoroughbred that she was, she was nevertheless barely inching up the cable—much too slow!

Abruptly he wheeled. Coming around a near clump of vegetation were two of the red robots, the surmounting globes of their bodies catching the moonlight in cold flashes. Behind followed a third, carrying the familiar canopied litter. From it sounded Neena's shout, suddenly exultant. She had seen the fugitives.

But the robots did not spring ruthlessly upon Miles, rather they took positions behind the balloon-plant to prevent his escape. And Jerry saw the reason. The squat form of Borko was hunched forward in the seat beside Neena, a huge sword across his knees!

CHAPTER VII - Balloons of Chance

MILES gritted his teeth. Whacked to pieces without a chance to fight back, eh? Not while he had a brain and two arms! He whipped out his hunting knife, began whittling furiously at the base of one of the spear-thorns; its tough fourfoot length would make an ideal rapier.

The robot had halted with its passengers a short distance away, and Borko, like a grim diabolical gnome in his purple cape, stepped forth. Neena said nothing, did not move; a cruel statue of exotic beauty.

Desperately Jerry cut at the hard stem. Borko stalked forward confidently, huge sword upon his thick shoulder, gloating satisfaction showing in the harsh lines of his face. He chuckled deeply.

"Your roaring weapon kills only for you," he called. "Aye, but I have something that kills for me!"

Brandishing the great sword in both hands, the stocky Administrator bounded forward. Miles slashed through the pike just in time to meet the rush. Borko swung his weapon ax fashion, its blade descending in a hissing arc. Jerry, still on his knees, got in a short jabbing thrust of his improvised spear. It struck nothing; but Borko's own swing was diverted, and the very violence of that effort nearly impaled him on the balloon-plant's outward projecting spikes.

The dark man gave ground, and Miles sprang to his feet. Borko charged again this time his hewing blade directed at the menace of his opponent's spear. The blow was a glancing one, yet there was such force in it that Jerry's lance was almost ripped from his hands. He recovered on the instant, gave a desperate jab of the spear.

Fatigued as Miles was from his recent flight, there was neither accuracy or power behind that thrust. Nevertheless it caught Borko in the left shoulder.

With a roar of pained rage the man leaped backward, pressed a hand to his shoulder. And that hand came away red with blood. Sudden fear was reflected on the dark face. Miles sought to follow his advantage with a quick jab, and in doing so, found that Borko's wound had not impaired the efficiency of his muscular arm. For he met a blow from the huge sword that whistled within an inch of his face.

But the purple-garbed man's confidence had vanished, Miles could sense; he was fighting now with desperation. And slowly Jerry beat him around until his back was almost touching the out-thrust spikes of the balloon-plant's stalk. Then abruptly Borko's flashing blade caught Jerry's spear dead-center. There was a snapping of fibers and the broken shaft was wrenched from his hands, hurled away.

STUNNED, Miles stood rooted to the ground, his mind refusing to credit what his senses told him was horrible truth.

Instantly Borko's leering bravado flooded back. "Now, infidel," he shouted triumphantly, "you shall see how my weapon kills!" And like a baseball player striking a ball, he swung the ponderous sword.

Had that blow landed it would have cleaved a man in two. It grazed Jerry's shoulder as he ducked. The very power of that wasted effort twisted Borko's body half around, and thus for a moment an opening appeared.

Jerry leaped forward, swinging his fist from the ground in a terrific blow. His knuckles crashed squarely under the man's chin. Borko's stocky form was literally hurled backward and a single death shriek left his lips.

Two of the balloon-plant lances, bloody red, protruded through his chest.

"You are skillful with your fists!" said a throaty mocking voice behind Jerry.

He whirled. Neena sprawled languorously in the cushioned litter. Moonlight shone on the perilous beauty of her face, the taunting curl of her painted lips.

“Skillful, yes,” continued the honeyed voice, “but I wonder what your fists will avail you against my robots?”

Miles made no effort to reply. He glanced up at the floating plant overhead where the white form of Orleen was laboriously inching her way upward. Then he was parting the spear-thorns, was shinnying up the cable-stalk after her.

An amused chuckle sounded from below. “Fools! Do you think you are safe there? It will be pleasing to watch you cling until you fall. Or if I grow impatient my metal servants will pull the plant down. . .”

Jerry climbed swiftly until he was just beneath Orleen. The huge green bag of the plant was a yard above her. He looked down at Neena fifty feet below and he could contain himself no longer. He laughed grimly at her.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Priestess, but we’re not staying here!”

And he jerked out his bowie knife, began to cut the tawny anchoring cable beneath him. Instantly Neena grasped his intention. She called to the robots, and her voice was shrill with fury. They lurched forward, one on each side of the plant, their coiling tentacles whipped out, grasped the cable-stalk and began to pull it down like men drawing in rope.

A little gasp sounded from Orleen as the floating plant lunged precariously. With legs folded and clamped around the stalk, and holding meantime with one hand, Jerry sliced away at the tough stem stretching beneath him. But a command from Neena brought increased activity from the robots; their appendages jerking down the pliant stalk like the furiously flailing arms of a steam engine.

He could see the Priestess standing intently, as motionless as a bronze figurine, yet he sensed the flaming hatred that burned within her. And directly below, the frantically working tentacles of the robots drawing nearer and nearer—arms that would crush and tear if they chanced to come within reach.

Then abruptly Miles cut through the stalk. Upward surged the balloon-plant carrying its cargo effortlessly; it had in truth become a balloon. Below, the robots and the statuesque form of Iroq's High Priestess were dwindling dots that soon merged into the mottled expanse of the moonlit jungle. In the distance was a pale finger of white pointing silently heavenward...

Later, the man and woman stood upon the wall looking down at the mistiness that was sleeping Iroq. Orleen's golden head was close to Miles' shoulders, and her voice was husky, eager.

"I—I'm glad, Jerry, that we had to leave this—test tube! I'm tired of wandering through the centuries. I want to live a normal woman's life!"

For answer Jerry Miles' arm tightened about her shoulders.