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# Weird Tales



## THE SAPPHIRE GODDESS

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# Tarbis of the Lake

By E. Hoffmann Price

“MY SON,” said white-haired Father Peytral to his companion, whose steel-grey eyes seemed far older than his rugged, bronzed features, “suppose that you abandon this hypothetical *friend* of yours and tell what is worrying you. Never mind what I’ll think. Just express yourself.”

John Rankin started. His face darkened for an instant; then he smiled as he caught the kindly expression in the old priest’s eyes.

“I might have known you’d see through it, Father Peytral. But before I go any further, tell me who—what—well, *was* there ever a woman named Tarbis? I mean, other than—”

Rankin abruptly checked his speech, stared at the earth and at the heels of the unending throng of pilgrims who passed along the Esplanade.

Father Peytral’s scrutiny of Rankin became keener at the mention of Tarbis.

“What’s that?” he demanded. “*Tarbis?*” The priest frowned as he groped for a moment for a thought that was evading him, then resumed, “There is an old tradition to the effect that Tarbis, Queen of Ethiopia—”

“Ethiopia?” interrupted Rankin. “Why—*she* is as white as I am.”

Father Peytral’s eyebrows rose. Then, instead of asking the question that was on his lips, he explained, “Ethiopia in those days was the upper kingdom of Egypt. A queen of that country was no more negro than Rameses the Great.

“And Tarbis,” he continued, “offered her hand and crown to Moses, who declined both. The pride of the queen and the woman being sorely wounded, she abandoned her throne and set sail, wandering until she reached France. She founded not only the city of Tarbes, which to this day bears her name, but also its neighbor Lapurdum—our modern Lourdes which

God has so signally honored in selecting it as the place for the apparition of the Holy Virgin to appear.

“They say that the site of the original Lapurdum was three kilometers from here. Its inhabitants practised black magic. The place became a den of necromancers, an affront to God, man, and nature. But instead of following the Scriptural precedent, and destroying Lapurdum with fire, the Almighty caused a flood to rise out of the earth and overwhelm the city, whence the present lake, not far from the outskirts of the modern city of Lourdes.

“All of which,” concluded Father Peytral, “is to be found in the archives of Lourdes.”

“Good God!” muttered Rankin. “Worse and worse! You’ve just succeeded in confirming my outrageous fancy—the thing I’ve tried to deny. . . .”

Rankin suddenly sat bolt-upright. His bronzed cheeks had become sickly yellow. His eyes were burning with an unnatural light, and his face was drawn and haggard as he regarded the priest for a moment before continuing, “That Ethiopian queen never died. *She is living in Lourdes, on the street that leads to the chateau.* I knew—I sensed—and now you have confirmed it!”

Father Peytral recognized solemn-voiced knowledge.

“My son,” he said in a low, even voice, “that any human being, man or woman, could attain everlasting physical life is denied both by the Church and by science. Whatever the source of your obsession, you must forget such fantastic thoughts!”

“Forget them?” exclaimed Rankin. “I’ve tried that for several years. You’ve often tried to get me to open up. I evaded your queries, but my fear finally got the best of me. First it was a lover’s fancy, that idea that Tarbis Dulac had in the dim past discovered the secret of eternal youth. That didn’t alarm me. It was just a quaint conceit, a whimsical fancy about a

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girl I think a great deal of. But at last I found that I was telling myself that I didn't believe anything of the kind."

"Which," said the priest, "assured you that you did believe just that, and it frightened you."

Rankin nodded.

"So I left Lourdes. I roamed all over Asia, trying to forget. And when I finally succeeded in driving her antique smile from my conscious memory, and with it the idea that she was some one who had lived for ages, she returned and haunted me in nightmarish dreams. She made statuesque gestures, like—you've seen them, sculptured—"

"*Mais oui*," agreed Father Peytral. "In the Louvre, for instance."

"She wore a tall, curious head-dress. She murmured words that I could not understand, except in momentary flashes. And what I understood troubled me more than what I didn't. I'm afraid of Tarbis—and I'm in love with her."

He raised his eyes and made a despairing gesture of his hand, then let his head droop wearily. Father Peytral murmured to himself as he contemplated the hopelessly baffled expression of Rankin's rugged features.

"And now you tell me a legend of a Tarbis who was a queen, Lord knows how many centuries ago," muttered Rankin. "And of the lake—her very name today, Dulac . . . *du Lac* . . ." Then, jerking himself erect: "What do you say? Am I utterly insane?"

"No," replied the priest as he grasped Rankin by the shoulder. "On the contrary, your doubts prove your sanity. An insane person is assured that every one but himself is unbalanced. Your denying this delusion is your best assurance."

"Well, what am I to do?" demanded Rankin, taking heart. "I can't stand being near a woman who I *know* is an uncanny creature that should have died ages ago. And neither can I stay away from her. I've tried both!"

**F**or a moment neither spoke. Then Father Peytral's frown of perplexed pondering was replaced by a smile of calm assurance.

"You have unwittingly taken the right course," he said, "in speaking your thought aloud instead of letting it be an inner murmuring that has poisoned your mind. See this Tarbis Dulac, look her in the eye, speak to her and tell her your thought. Never

mind what she thinks of your sanity. Face her unflinchingly and express yourself. Ask her solemnly who and what she is, and tell her why you ask. If she cares for you, she will not be harsh in her judgment."

"Father Peytral, I can't do that!" protested Rankin. "She'll think—" He regarded the priest with outraged amazement.

"You seem to forget—"

Father Peytral shook his gray head. His smile was a tale of time-mellowed grief.

"My son," he said in a voice that was none the less authoritative for being low, "I do not forget. I *know*. If she cares for you, she will not judge harshly. And once you have enunciated this outrageous thought, you will have conquered it. Your fear and your furtive denials have fostered this obsession, even as your speaking boldly will burn it out."

Rankin pondered for a moment. He rose from the stone bench and stood erect. His eyes were less haggard, and his drawn face had relaxed.

"Thank you, Father," he said. "I'll see her tonight, and I'll follow your advice."

Rankin lifted his hat and bowed. Then, to himself, as he strode down the Esplanade, "Fine old man . . . not a sign of a sermon . . . seems perfectly natural to call him *Father*. . ."

Like those pilgrims who flock toward Lourdes, Rankin had crossed land and sea for the good of his soul, even though he had not come to pray, or to drink the water of the spring that had miraculously burst forth from the grotto of the great black rock of Massabielle. But, though Father Peytral's assurance gave Rankin a new grip on himself, and a weapon with which to combat his obsession, the priest's words had at the same time strengthened Rankin's ever-present feeling that he was dealing with one whose name was written on the first pages of the archives of that city which had not always been a holy place, comparable to Rome, Jerusalem, or Mekka.

**T**hat evening Rankin sat once more in the luxuriously furnished reception room of that outwardly unprepossessing house which was perched on the steep slope of the hill whose high-walled fortress and square donjon built by the Moslem conquerors commanded the valley of the Gave.

"It is good to see you again, *mon ami*" she said as she regarded Rankin with her smoldering, long-lashed eyes. "Incurable nomad, you tried to forget Tarbis, didn't you?"

"But I couldn't," Rankin admitted somberly. The assurance that he had gained from Father Peytral was slowly melting before the loveliness of Tarbis Dulac. "And I know now that I never shall. You've haunted me. Your memory followed me and made a madness of my dreams. So I've returned."

"I knew that you would, some day," murmured the girl. "I've been expecting you."

She smiled that slow, archaic smile that had haunted Rankin; but her eyes were dolorous and incredibly ancient. They contradicted the youthful freshness of her skin and the gracious contours of her throat and shoulders. Tarbis was uncommonly lovely, and any one but Rankin would have accepted her without undue wonderings and fancies.

Then Rankin nerved himself for the assault.

"I've returned to solve the riddle," said Rankin. "You've evaded me and mocked me with that sphinx smile of yours, and your eyes have laughed at me. I've wondered entirely too long who and what you are. So I've returned to find out, once and for all," he concluded.

The girl's eyebrows rose in Moorish arches, and she made a fleeting gesture of her slender hand. That damnable, haunting gesture! That insidious suggestion of sculptured fingers on the granite of deserted temples and rifled tombs!

"Insatiable, aren't you?" she chided. "What more do you want? What have I ever denied you?"

Tarbis was right. Any sane man should have been content. Yet there was that same evasion which had always left Rankin baffled. Rankin knew that he had flinched from the assault; that he had failed solemnly to demand who and what she was.

"Tarbis, how old are you?" he asked in blunt-spoken desperation.

"Such a question, *mon ami!*" Her laugh was light. She refused to take him seriously. Then she answered, "I'm ever so much older than you suspect, John. But would I be any more pleasing if you could catalogue me like a piece of antique furniture, a bit of jade, a Persian carpet?"

Rankin had to admit that Tarbis was right. And to consider her as a normal woman was the sane and logical thing; yet there would be no peace until she had answered the solemn adjuration he was to make.

"I wonder," she continued, "if you are sure that you want to know. Did you ever stop to think that you might have long regrets?"

Worse and yet worse! She was hinting at the very thought that he had sought to disown.

"You know," said Tarbis after a long pause during which her lips were alternately smiling and grave, "I could just as well question you, and wonder why you've left me several times, with never a quarrel or any apparent necessity. And I do know that you've always cared for me—a great deal. There is nothing to prevent your staying in Lourdes. You know I'd not seek any claim on you. Yet you've always left."

"Yes, and always returned!" he retorted, stung by the memory of his resolutions to forget her, and his inevitable relapse from his determination. "But this time I'm going to get the answer. You're so much more than you appear to be. You're not one woman but a world of women in one, and you are withholding a hundredfold more than you'll ever reveal."

"Such versatility should be pleasing," suggested Tarbis with a lightness that belied her unsmiling eyes.

Rankin decided that she was not mocking him, but he would no longer accept evasion. He rose abruptly and seized her by the wrist.

"Let's not fence any longer! Just because I've not found words to express myself—"

Rankin stopped short. He had found words, but he dared not use them.

"Then tell me what is on your mind, John," said Tarbis. "Maybe I'll understand."

She spoke very solemnly now. Her voice was grave, and her eyes were unsmiling and age-old. Rankin released her wrist and stared at the golden-olive tint that crept back to erase the white imprint of his grasp. She regarded him intently for a long moment, then spoke again.

"Can't you forget your morbid curiosity?" she pleaded. "Can't you take me for what I am, and without question? Kiss me, and love me for the sake of the evening, and for myself. And if you do care enough to be jealous, stay here in Lourdes, always,

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and watch me as closely as any Turk ever guarded his harem.”

Rankin saw the gleam of tears in her great lustrous eyes. He knew that he was about to weaken as he had so many times before. At the moment, his thoughts seemed outrageous and insane beyond expression. And then he thought of the obsession that had overwhelmed him and affronted every trace of reason. No matter what she thought of his sanity, he had to declare himself. It would be better for her to think him utterly mad than for him to become so in fact. He nerved himself for the final plunge.

“Tarbis, do you know that most of the time I’ve been resisting the thought that you are not a woman at all, but *something*—”

“Must you know *all* about me?” she interrupted, recoiling from the implication of his last word, and eager to prevent his expressing that which she sensed would follow. “John, can’t you take anything for granted? Have I ever—”

“No, I can’t,” declared Rankin, evading her attempted change of subject. “I’ve reached the verge of madness, telling myself, arguing with myself to prove that you are not older than any woman has a right to be. In my own mind I’ve denied breaths of rumors and hints that no rational person would bother to deny.”

“Oh, those damnable, meddling priests and villagers!” exclaimed Tarbis with a despairing, impersonal bitterness. “Can’t they live and let live? Can’t they be content to go their placid, ordained ways and leave me in peace?”

“But they didn’t talk about you,” protested Rankin.

“No, but they spoke of *her*,” countered Tarbis. “John, can’t you forget all this? You do care for me, don’t you? Or am I just another riddle that your insatiable mind must solve lest it perish of unsatisfied vanity? Must you know everything?”

“Not everything. Tarbis. But this one thing, yes; for the good of my soul and my sanity. Who and what are you?” he demanded desperately, steeling himself to resist the appeal that he read in her eyes.

She was about to yield. He could not now relent.

“Since you insist, I’ll tell you,” she finally assented. “No, I’ll show you, and let you draw your own conclusion. I will let you meet my rival face to face.”

“*Your* rival?” gasped Rankin, amazed at that turn. “You mean *my* rival don’t you?”

“No, I mean what I said: *my* rival,” affirmed Tarbis. “My rival, and my damnation. She will drive you away. She will everlastingly destroy the happiness I have stolen—we have stolen. But since it must be—”

She took Rankin by the hand, and half turned toward the winding stairway. Then she paused and reached for her wine-glass.

“A toast, John,” she proposed, with the air of one gallantly drinking to impending doom. “To my rival and to her damnation!”

Rankin drained his glass. Tarbis barely moistened her lips, and set the stemmed glass back on the old lace runner that crossed the table. Then she led the way upstairs.

As Rankin passed the carved newel post and followed her up through the dim light, it seemed that he was marching toward a perilous rendezvous. For a moment he wanted to take the steps three at a bound, seize her and carry her back to the warmth and light of that familiar living-room, to fight those torturing fancies on the level ground of sanity. But Rankin remembered his resolve, and stifled the sadness that was mingled with his sense of impending peril.

Tarbis halted at the head of the stairs. Her blue-black hair glistened under the glow of a shaded oil lamp. Queer, how this luxurious house of hers should be so obsolete in some details. The square-cut emerald on her finger was phosphorescent as the eyes of a beast of prey. Rankin knew why he observed and made mental comment on such irrelevancies . . . once, in crossing a courtyard to face a firing-squad, he had noted the pattern of the tiles and had observed that the color scheme was clashing. . . .

“She is waiting for us,” he heard Tarbis saying. “Here, in my own room.”

Rankin fought the raging impulse to retreat and let well enough alone. He followed her into the dimness of that familiar room with its canopied bed and its dressing table. A hand-mirror lay, as always, face down, the twining golden serpents of its handle gleaming in the faint light. Rankin wondered again why that mirror was never face up.

Then, in a niche in the masonry of the wall he saw a mummy-case whose gilded features stared vacantly at him.

"She is here," said Tarbis. "I will leave you with her. Her last words were spoken far back in the first youth of time. Her lips are silent, but she will speak to your mind. And when you *know*, you may return to the living-room. I'll probably be asleep on the divan."

She paused and regarded him intently for a moment; then she continued, "Perhaps, when she tells you who I am, and how old I am, you'll pass quietly on, without even a word of farewell. But, perhaps—the memories we share—I hope—"

She turned, without expressing her hope. The door closed behind her, leaving Rankin with his strange companion. The loneliness of the room oppressed him. The departure of Tarbis made it appallingly like a tomb.

**H**e felt in his vest pocket for cigarettes, but found none. Well, no matter; although a smoke would be company while he sat there, seeking the point of the tableau she had arranged. Then he saw a silver case among the combs and perfume vials and powder boxes. It was half filled with long, slender cigarettes. He struck light to one. It was ever so faintly scented and had a curious but not unpleasant aroma. That exotic tobacco was appropriate to Tarbis. Rankin snapped his lighter closed and leaned back in his chair to contemplate the gilded features of the sycamore case and its rows of painted hieroglyphs.

Through the gray wisps of smoke he regarded the gilded mask, at first idly, then with an intentness that he sought to deny himself. Something new was stirring disquietingly in his mind. He forced himself to think of Tarbis whose slender length was now stretched out on the Shemaka rug that covered the divan. Tarbis du Lac . . . Tarbis of the Lake . . . asleep or awake, she would be smiling in whimsical mockery of her latest lover.

Even though she had never once hinted that he had any predecessors in her affections, Rankin knew that Tarbis must have had many lovers before him. He knew that she must have learned ever so long ago that illusion is more alluring than candor.

And this thought slowly but certainly brought his consciousness back to the gilded face before him.

The convictions that had haunted him so long became stronger than ever before. Had the occupant of that sycamore case lived until today, she too would have learned from experience that no lover cares for candor about his predecessors. *Had she lived—*

Then Rankin surrendered to a new madness which was more perturbing than that which he had sought to conquer that evening. It was terrifying. He shivered and sat erect in his chair. The scented poison of the cigarette curled unheeded around his fingers and stained them.

If the carver had given life and animation to those long almond-shaped eyes, they would be the eyes of Tarbis. The fire of the cigarette ate into his fingers and momentarily broke the spell. He ground the butt into the rug beneath his feet and struck light to another smoke. But the distraction was not enough to stop the surge of surmise that had become knowledge. That curved, antique smile of gilt was Tarbis herself staring at him, mocking the wooden conventions of Egyptian carving and fighting through the gold leaf into faithful portraiture.

He knew now what Tarbis had intended to convey to him. He had been haunted by the outlandish idea that Tarbis, ages ago, had discovered the secret of everlasting youth. Rankin had considered such a fancy outrageous, and any woman who inspired the like, uncanny. But now—

**T**arbis had become something infinitely more terrifying: she was not one who had, ages ago, discovered the secret of eternal youth, but rather the product of an Egyptian magic which had enabled dead Tarbis to materialize and present the semblance of a physical woman.

Rankin clutched the arms of his chair. Every memory of Tarbis and her amorous encircling arms denied the conviction carried by that gilded smile; yet as he stared, Rankin began to remember things which he wished that he had never learned. To distract himself from the fancy that Tarbis was age-old, he had listened to adepts in High Asia, who muttered of Tibetan lore, and the lost magic of Egypt, never suspecting that he was acquiring a knowledge that would in the end be more horrible than the whim he sought to cast out.

He wondered when she emerged from the painted case with its painted hieroglyphs. He wondered what

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she had done with her endless yards of linen bandages, and how she had escaped their firm embrace. Then, bit by bit, there came back to Rankin the words of that slant-eyed adept he had befriended.

“There are nine elements which when fused into a unit make what your eye sees as a single human body: the physical, flesh-and-blood body; the shadow; the double, or astral counterpart called the *ka*; the soul, or *ba*; the heart; a spirit called *khu*; a Power; a Name; and a ninth component which is a motivating force. . . . And all these, mark you, are used in a mystical, or esoteric sense. Yet this knowledge if truly interpreted and rightly used can serve to work all the wonders of the hidden Egyptian magic that was codified by Thoth. . . .”

**T**he embalmed physical body of Tarbis was in the case before Rankin; and that which had seemed to him to be a living woman was but an aggregation of elements that had joined the *ka*, which lingers near the physical body until it utterly disintegrates.

Every whimsical speech and mannerism of Tarbis came trooping back to confirm Rankin's dismaying conviction. His brain reeled at the recollection of her avoidance of daylight.

“My dear,” she had murmured one evening, “you sit up to the most unusual hours making love to me—oh, ever so charmingly!—and then you marvel that I'd rather not spend the following day strolling along the Esplanade, or scaling Pic de Jer. And it's one of my pet vanities, *tu comprends*, this being seen only at my best, at night, by my own lighting. . . .”

It was clear, now. That ancient necromancy had not been able to restore the missing *shadow*, so that Tarbis could not appear by the shadow-casting sun. The Name, the Power, the *ka* . . . perhaps all but the one missing irreplaceable element were present.

Then Rankin's sanity revolted. He fought the urge to wrench the lid from the sycamore case. He dared not yield to the demand to find out what was behind that gilded, smiling mask. If indeed it was empty, that would mean that that dead, bandage-swathed thing emerged from its cell to offer him the unholy semblance of a living woman.

Rankin shivered as though a breath of the abysmal outer spaces had been exhaled into his veins and was chilling his blood.

“It can't be empty!” his mind screamed to his *self*. “Good God, if it's empty—!”

He dared not complete the utterance. He refused to think of the slender, shapely arms of Tarbis and her curved, carmine smile.

“But if *it* is in there, then she's an illusion—a shadow from the tomb. That is as bad—or is it worse?”

Rankin forced his brain to cease that insistent surging that would end by cracking his skull. The veins in his temples would in another moment burst like rotted fire-hose.

Then the strokes of the cathedral bell mercifully interrupted the dread that he could neither accept nor deny. And during the moment of respite accorded him by that sound from the outer world, he noted for the first time the possible significance of the peculiar aroma of the cigarettes Tarbis had left in her case. It was reminiscent of something they smoked in Persia and Hindustan.

**H**e smiled at the gilded mask. The last rich note of the cathedral bell reminded him that Lourdes was a holy city. He envied the calm priests and the pious pilgrims, and was glad that they were there, not far from the foot of the hill.

“Tarbis, you devil, and your cigarettes!” he exulted, gratefully ascribing his dreadful fancies to the influence of *charras*, or whatever other like drug they might have contained thus to upset his mind. He sighed with relief and weariness. “But maybe I deserve it.”

He rose and found that he still trembled violently. His legs barely supported his weight; but his brain no longer rocked and quivered from clamorings from beyond the Border.

Tarbis would be waiting for him in the living-room. She would see the mark of terror still branding his features. But he forgave her the ghastly jest. He could be generous, now that he had conquered his obsession by expressing it in words. He had asked her: and she had answered by showing him in her oblique way that there were fancies infinitely more disturbing than that of her possessing everlasting youth. Only Tarbis could have devised such an answer: slender, alluring Tarbis curled up on the Shemaka rug.

But as he reached the door, a lurking residue of the evening's horror returned to remind him that his

conquest had not been complete. He knew that in the end he would begin to wonder anew whether that case was or was not empty, and whether Tarbis was a revenant imprisoned by day, but loose at night to fascinate him with her archaic, Egyptian smile. And Rankin's dreadful surmises marched once more in a circle that was started afresh by his glance of premature triumph at that gilded mask. That subtle, gilded smile! That hint of a hidden jest!

He retraced his steps. With an effort he grasped the cover. And then he slowly withdrew his hands. He knew that his sanity demanded that he refrain from giving any physical expression to that question. But, as he was about to step back, he knew what would become of his regained reason if he retreated without having learned, for ever and always, what the case contained, whose names and titles were depicted in painted hieroglyphs upon that carven sycamore.

**R**ankin thrust the cover aside. And then he tore the crumbling linen bandages that swathed the features of the dead. He had ceased thinking; he had nerved himself to the task and he could not stop. His mind was dead, but his fingers lived. They tore another layer of bandages, and another.

Something forced him to look at that face. A blind instinct and a compelling terror urged him to learn the truth, whatever it might be. The dust of centuries mingled with the dust of crumbled linen and pungent spices and choked him. Then he stepped back and regarded the shrunken, hideously life-like features. The gilded mask had been a portrait; *but here he faced Tarbis herself!*

He gasped for breath. He sought to deny his eyes, refute the evidence of his senses, prove that he had not felt the burning ardor of those shrivelled lips. This was the supreme horror, the uttermost outrage.

Rankin forced his eyes at last to leave that mockery of the loveliness of Tarbis. He saw what was worse: the final link in the evidence that bound Tarbis to that which had lived and died, ages ago. On the now exposed breast of the mummy he could see a knife scar: that same scar that marred the perfection of the living Tarbis—or the one that he had thought was living.

Rankin was bereft of all sensation but a terrific whirring in his ears and a drumming at his temples. He leaped back and flung open the door of the room. For a moment he thought of flight—flight in any

direction whatsoever. Then he knew that he could never escape that which he had seen face to face, never elude the recollection of an Egyptian magic that was based on the reassembling of the scattered nine elements of a corpse. Rankin had penetrated the veil; he had pried, and loosened upon himself a doom.

He thought for an instant of the day when he met Tarbis, a living, lovely woman. Each move that he had made had taken him farther from the woman he loved; yet the knowledge that there was no refuge from that which stared at him drove him to his final desperate resource.

Rankin snatched the oil lamp from its bracket and unscrewed its top. Then he poured the contents of the bowl over the mummy. He applied the still-burning wick to the linen bandages. That would settle it, once and for all: decide now and for ever who and what was waiting for him in that living-room, one flight below, and centuries away.

**A**s the flames enveloped the bandaged figure, he heard the voice of Tarbis screaming from the anguish of the dissolution of the bonds that tied the spiritual essences to the mummified body. He heard that awful cry from the living-room and knew that that fascinating simulacrum was in the agony of a second and final separation from its body. And the horror of having loved a shadow from the tomb was drowned in the greater horror of having caused the everlasting extinction of one who had loved life so well that she had returned from the dead.

Rankin dared not pass through that lower room to escape. And escape he must! Instantly, or never; yet to see beloved Tarbis—beloved though she was but the *khu*, the *ka*, the Name, and the Power assembled by a forgotten necromancer—to see her being consumed by the astral counterpart of the flames which enveloped the linen-banded body—

Rankin burst through the window at the head of the stairs. As he leaped, he heard above the crash and tinkle of glass a scream of mortal misery and despair more acute than any flame could wrench from her lips. He heard her very clearly pronounce his name.

She knew. As much of her as still remained knew that no power could ever restore her; that Rankin had destroyed her.

Rankin picked himself from the ground and fled blindly, without thought or sensation, and maddened



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by that final cry of agony. In his flight down the steep slope of the street leading from the hill of the citadel to the level of the city, Rankin stumbled and pitched headlong in a heap against a wall.

**T**he impact numbed his senses and for the moment dulled the misery of his mind. Then a man's voice pronounced his name, and a firm hand helped him to his feet.

In the moonlight he recognized Father Peytral. The old priest's usually placid features were tense, as with a reflected terror that he read in Rankin's staring eyes.

"My son," said Father Peytral in a low, trembling voice, "I was watching across the street. I heard, and

I saw the flames. . . . You have freed her earthbound soul . . . no, don't try to explain. . . .

Little as I know, it is too much. But she is released from an abomination. "I understand your grief," the old man continued, as he took Rankin's arm. "Let us pray for her soul, and the healing of yours."

"Too late," muttered Rankin in a strained, hoarse voice. The unutterable grief of Tarbis rang again through his memory. "My soul is damned beyond the redemption of time, or your prayers."

Rankin bowed; and the priest did not seek to detain him as he turned and strode down the slope.

