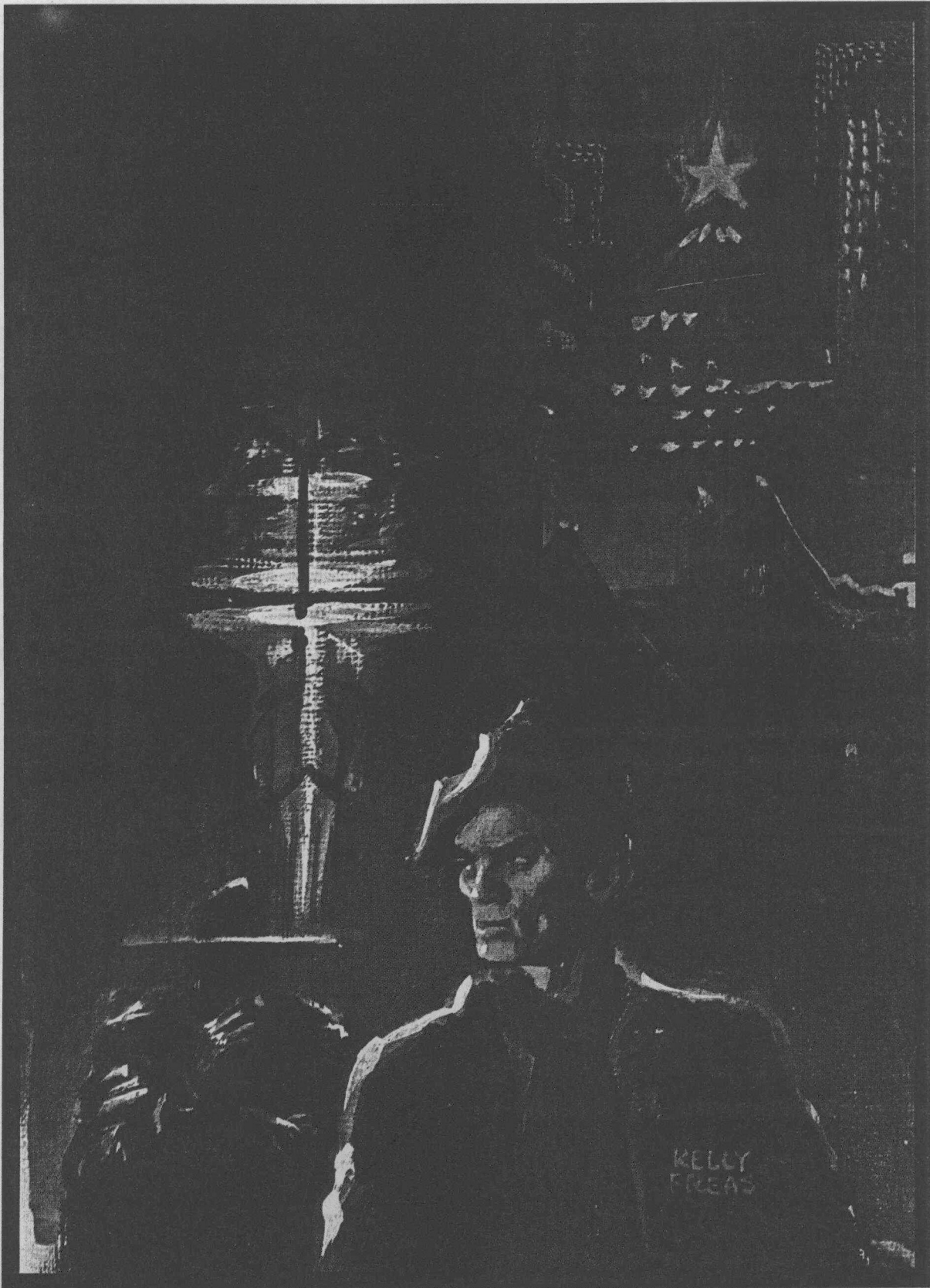


MAGLARS



Radio silence was broken at this time, relaying details of our successful attack and learning from Earth that no other migration convoys had managed to escape before Hela's atmosphere had begun to burn. Earth and Hela were now in sight of each other so that the burning planet was under close observation. The entire horizon of our temporary home, Hela's moon, was alight with an early sunrise glow which would brighten slightly in the next few hours, then diminish rapidly as the man made "sun planet" burned to oblivion. The arc of Hela's moon would soon bring us around to a full and final view of Earth. At the request of all crew members, we donned space suits and disembarked from the ships. Earthrise occurred soon after. As the beautiful, blue ball of Earth lifted over a craggy moon horizon, not a man regretted his choice of duty or contained his tears. Huge and majestic, the sapphire planet hove into full view, larger than we had expected, closer. Mostly to keep the men occupied, navigators were given sighting assignments and other crew members made ship inspections and readied final reports. A few rock hounds took samples of this moon's materials. All information, including last words from the men would be sent home when oxygen needles indicated a near zero reading. As was expected, static from the energy releasing Hela was playing hell with radio communication. I conferred with the engineers, concerning the possibility of constructing a mini-craft to send Earth-bound with a payload of a few pounds of tapes and rock samples. The information they would compile, along with the navigators' report would result in surprising news. Earth was now at her zenith with her moon hanging some distance beyond, moving away and behind its protective mother. A small television attempted to relay the incredibly beautiful scene back to Earth, but the result could not have done justice to the actual performance. Hela's fire was dimming, false sunrise had become false sunset. Earth was dropping now, approaching the horizon opposite where she had risen. No, not exactly opposite, and things seemed out of kilter. No mistake now, Earth

was twice as large as it should have been. A check with navigation immediately showed the cause. Hela's moon was now a runaway asteroid. The sudden rush of energy, along with the doomed planet's diminishing mass, had forced the barren sphere out of orbit and sent it hurtling in the direction of Earth. Course and speed were soon determined. No danger of collision, but we would come close; maybe close enough. The hope of escape hit us like a fever. One ship, stripped of non-essential equipment could carry us all. The time involved in fuel transference would be the deciding factor. If air supply lasted. If enough fuel remained to land safely. If! Thirty men worked as one; thirty minds touching in an effort of mutual survival. Our intention was radioed to Earth, then the radio was junked. The rim of Earth was low in our horizon as we lifted off. Rising rapidly, we saw Hela, a firefly in the distant darkness, die out. Sanctuary, Hela's moon, fell away in the opposite direction as we raced after the retreating, though seemingly motionless, Earth. Swinging into a solar orbit, Sanctuary would become a familiar sight in Earth's heavens, disappearing every six months behind the sun to re-appear a month later from the other side. Then the call of our home planet beckoned, even before we felt the pull of gravity. A reaching of minds grasped us, drawing us home. Striking the outer atmosphere, we tumbled end over end in a joyously rough re-entry. Trimming our craft we dropped tail first in a sub-orbital flight. Billions of minds sang our return. The blue Earth became a patchwork of color. We steered for an uninhabited coast-area and dropped heavily into a swampy creek. Rescue squads arrived within the hour, cutting away the exposed nose of our ship. No words were exchanged or even spoken. The triumph of man was complete. We were all one at last; mankind finally was God's most noble creation. We had come through the furnace and were whole.

Our "Thousand Years" had begun.



IT'S HELA'S MOON, SIR. UNLESS A TERRIBLE ERROR HAS BEEN MADE, WE'VE SOMETHING NEW TO CONSIDER.

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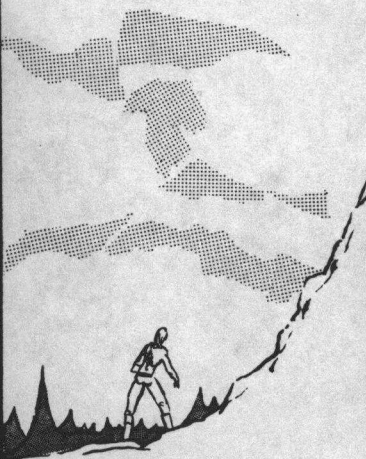
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THE CONTACT WITH THE ESPER "HOUND" WAS CLEAR; THEY MUST ALMOST BE IN SIGHT BEHIND.



CRAIKE PAUSED. THEY WERE NOT GOING TO TAKE HIM ALIVE, WRING FROM HIM KNOWLEDGE OF HIS PEOPLE AND RECONDITION HIM INTO ANOTHER "HOUND!"



THERE WAS ONLY ONE WAY; HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN FROM THE FIRST.

HIS DECISION HAD SHAKEN THE "HOUND!" CRAIKE BARED TEETH IN A DEATH'S-HEAD GRIN. NOW THE MOB WOULD SPEED UP. BUT THEIR QUARRY HAD ALREADY CHOSEN A PART OF THE CANYON WALL WHERE HE MIGHT PULL HIS TIRED AND ACHING BODY UP FROM ONE HOLD TO ANOTHER.



HE MOVED DELIBERATELY NOW, KNOWING THAT, HAVING LOST HOPE, HE COULD THROW ASIDE THE NEED FOR HASTE. HE WOULD BE ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSE BEFORE THEY BROUGHT A GAS RIFLE TO BEAR ON HIM.

AT LAST HE STOOD ON A LEDGE, THE SAND AND GRAVEL SOME FIFTY FEET BELOW. FOR A LONG MOMENT HE RESTED, STEADYING HIMSELF WITH BOTH HANDS BRACED ON THE STONE. THE WEIRD BEAUTY OF THE DESERT COUNTRY WAS A PATTERN OF VIOLENT COLOR UNDER THE AFTERNOON SUN.

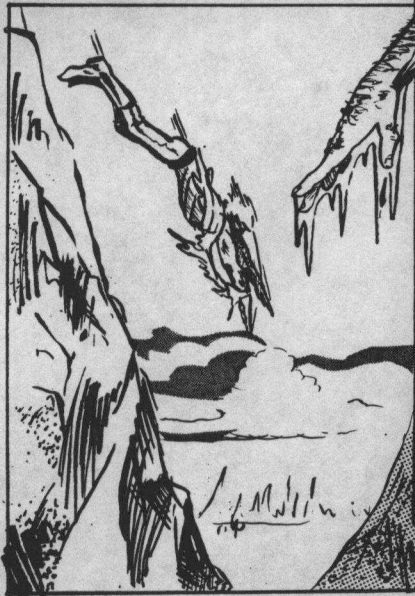


ANDRE NORTON'S

WARD'S WORLD

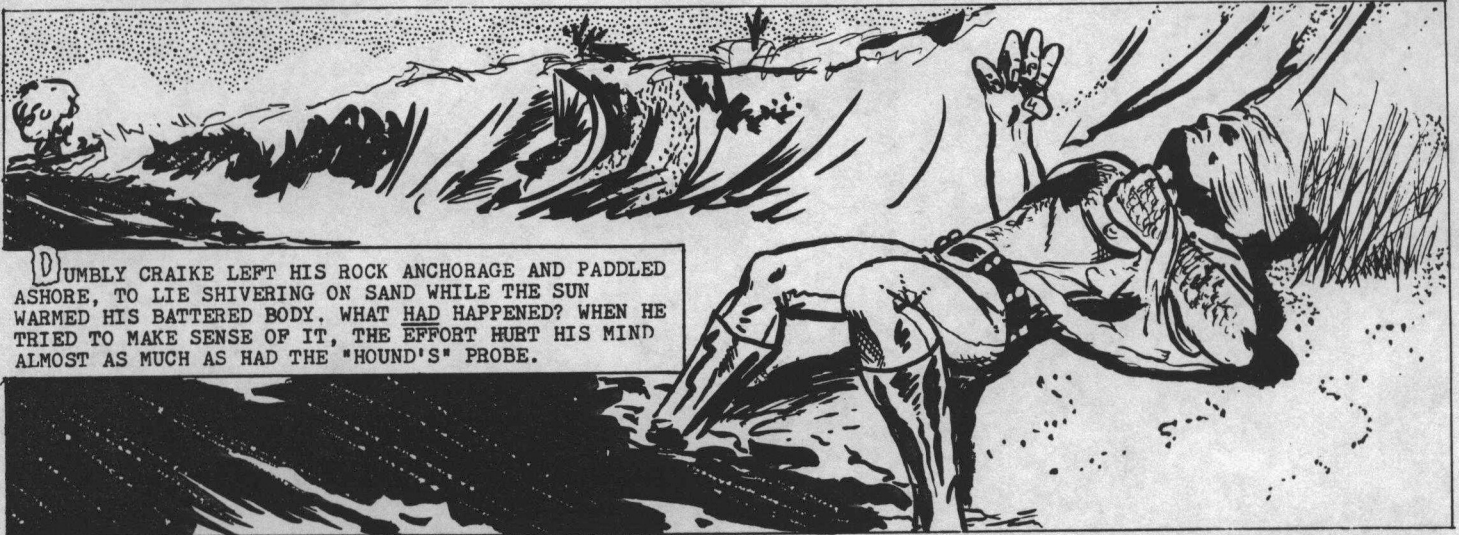
CRAIKE BREATHED SLOWLY; HE HAD REGAINED A MEASURE OF CONTROL. THERE CAME SHOUTS AS THEY SIGHTED HIM.

HE LEANED FORWARD AND, AS IF HE WERE DIVING INTO THE RIVER WHICH HAD ONCE RUN THERE, HE HURLED HIMSELF OUTWARD TO THE CLEAN DEATH HE SOUGHT.



WATER, WATER IN HIS MOUTH! DAZED, HE FLAILED WATER UNTIL HIS HEAD BROKE SURFACE. INSTINCT TOOK OVER, AND HE SWAM, FOUGHT FOR AIR. THE CURRENT OF THE STREAM PULLED HIM AGAINST A BOULDER COLLARED WITH FROTH, AND HE ARCHED AN ARM OVER IT, LIFTING HIMSELF, TO STARE ABOUT IN STUPEFIED BEWILDERMENT.

HE WAS CLOSE TO ONE BANK OF A RIVER. WHERE THE COLORFUL CLIFF OF THE CANYON HAD BEEN THERE NOW ROLLED DOWNS THICKLY COVERED WITH GREEN GROWTH. THE BAKING HEAT OF THE DESERT HAD VANISHED: THERE WAS EVEN A SLIGHT CHILL IN THE AIR.



DUMBLY CRAIKE LEFT HIS ROCK ANCHORAGE AND PADDED ASHORE, TO LIE SHIVERING ON SAND WHILE THE SUN WARMED HIS BATTERED BODY. WHAT HAD HAPPENED? WHEN HE TRIED TO MAKE SENSE OF IT, THE EFFORT HURT HIS MIND ALMOST AS MUCH AS HAD THE "HOUND'S" PROBE.

THE ESPER HOUND! CRAIKE JERKED UP, OLD PANIC STIRRING. FIRST DELICATELY AND THEN URGENTLY, HE CAST A THOUGHT-SEEK ABOUT HIM. THERE WAS LIFE IN PLENTY. HE TOUCHED, CLASSIFIED AND DISREGARDED THE FLICKERS OF AWARENESS WHICH MINGLED IN CONFUSION—RIVER ANIMALS, BIRDS.

CRAIKE RELAXED. SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED. HE WAS TOO TIRED, TOO DRAINED TO SPECULATE AS TO WHAT. IT WAS ENOUGH THAT HE WAS SAVED FROM THE DEATH HE HAD SOUGHT, THAT HE WAS HERE INSTEAD OF THERE.

HE HAD GOTTEN STIFFLY TO HIS FEET. THE TIME WAS THE SAME, HE THOUGHT, LATE AFTERNOON. SHELTER, FOOD—HE SET OFF ALONG THE STREAM. HE FOUND AND ATE BERRIES SPILLING FROM BUSHES THAT BIRDS HAD RAIDED ABOVE HIM. THEN SQUATTING IN A SIDE EDDY OF THE STREAM, HE SCOOPED OUT A FISH AND ATE THE FLESH RAW.



BUT NOWHERE DID HE MEET A HIGH INTELLIGENCE. IT WAS A WILDERNESS WORLD WITHOUT MAN AS FAR AS ESPER ABILITY COULD REACH.



THE LAND ALONG THE RIVER WAS RISING; HE COULD SEE THE BEGINNING OF A GORGE AHEAD. LATER, WHEN HE HAD CLIMED THOSE HEIGHTS, HE CAUGHT SIGHT THROUGH THE TWILIGHT OF THE FIRES. THERE WERE FOUR OF THEM BURNING SOME MILES TO THE SOUTH-WEST, SET OUT IN THE FORM OF A SQUARE!

HE RETRACED HIS PATH TO THE RIVER AND HOLED UP IN A HOLLOW NOT LARGE ENOUGH TO BE TERMED A CAVE. AUTOMATICALLY HE PROBED AGAIN FOR DANGER. HE FOUND NOTHING BUT ANIMAL LIFE. HE THEN FELL INTO A SLEEP BORNE OF EXHUSTION.

CRAIKE SENT OUT A THOUGHT PROBE. YES, MEN! BUT THERE WAS AN ALIEN TOUCH. THIS WAS NO HUNTING MOB. AND HE WAS DRAWN TO THE SECURITY OF THE FIRES, THE CAMP OF MEN IN THE DANGERS OF THE NIGHT. BUT AS AN ESPER, HE WAS NOT ONE OF THEM. HE WAS AN OUTLAW WHO DARE NOT RISK JOINING THEM.

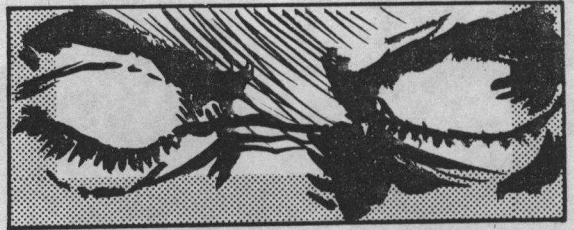


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THE SKY WAS GRAY WHEN HE ROUSED. CRAIKE HAD AWAKENED WITH THE NEED TO KNOW MORE OF THAT CAMP.



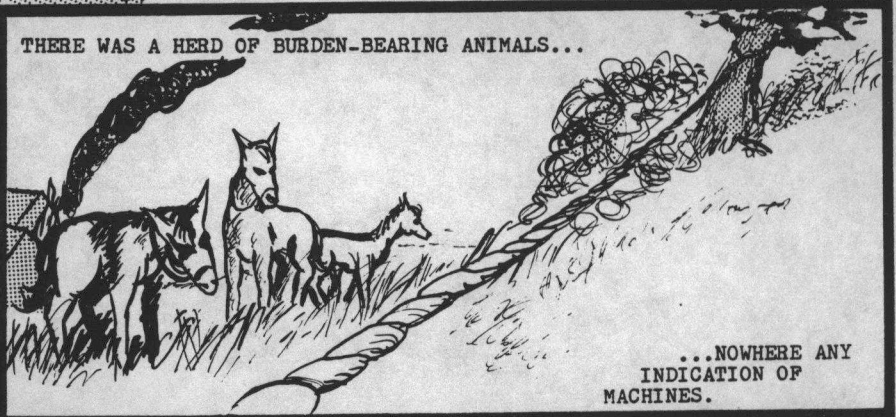
HE CLIMBED ONCE AGAIN TO THE VANTAGE POINT, SHUT HIS EYES TO THE EARLY MORNING AND SENT OUT A SEEKING. IT WAS A CAMP OF MEN FAR FROM HOME. THEY WERE NOT HUNTERS, BUT MERCHANTS, TRADERS. CRAIKE LOCATED ONE MIND AMONG THE REST AND READ IN IT THE DETAILS OF A BARGAIN TO COME. BUT A SENSE OF SEPARATION GREW STRONGER AS THE FUGITIVE ESPER SORTED OUT THOUGHT STREAMS, ABSORBING SCRAPS OF KNOWLEDGE THIRSTILY.



HE SUCKED IN A DEEP BREATH—HE WAS—HE WAS IN ANOTHER WORLD!



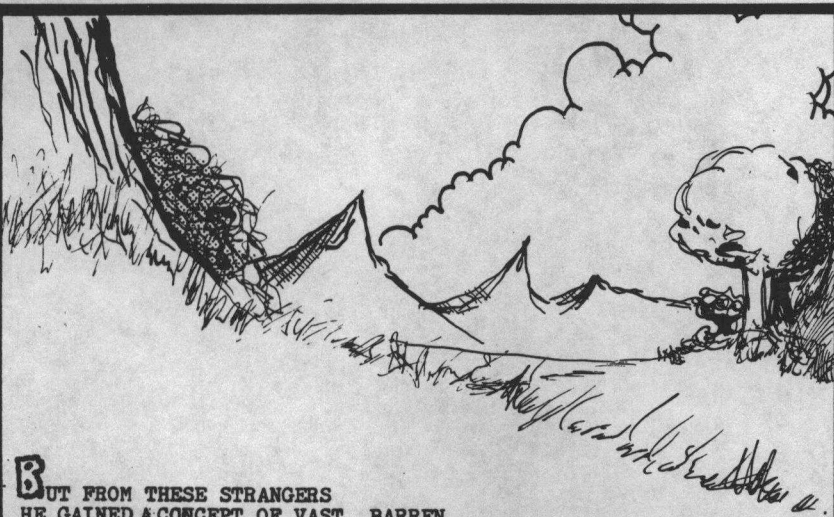
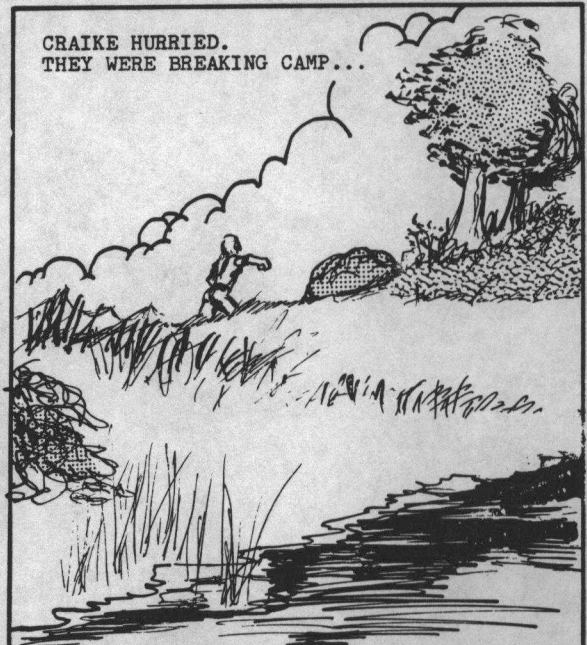
THERE WAS A HERD OF BURDEN-BEARING ANIMALS...



...NOWHERE ANY INDICATION OF MACHINES.

THEY WERE MERCHANTS TRAVERSING A WILDERNESS—A WILDERNESS? THOUGH HE HAD BEEN DRIVEN INTO DESERT THE DAY BEFORE, THE LAND THROUGH WHICH HE HAD EARLIER FLED COULD NOT BE TERMED A WILDERNESS. IT WAS OVER-POPULATED BECAUSE THERE WERE TOO MANY WAR-POISONED AREAS WHERE MANKIND COULD NOT LIVE.

CRAIKE HURRIED. THEY WERE BREAKING CAMP...



BUT FROM THESE STRANGERS HE GAINED A CONCEPT OF VAST, BARREN TERRITORY BROKEN ONLY BY SMALL, SPARSE, STRIPS OF CULTIVATION.

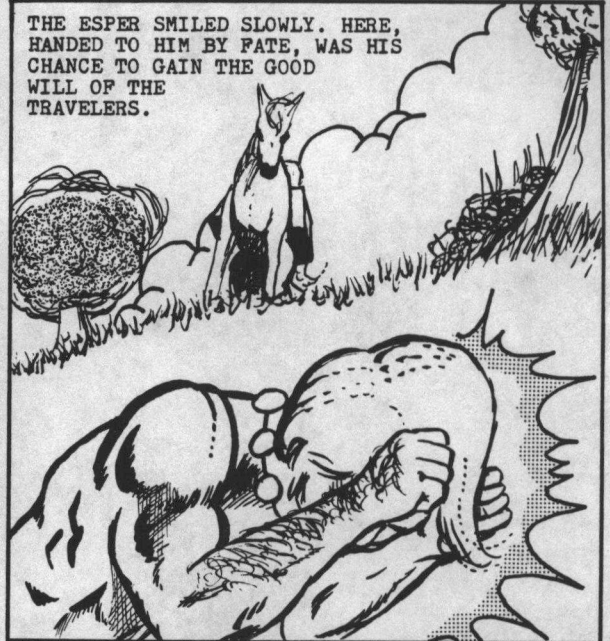
...AND THE IMPRESSION OF AN UNPEOPLED LAND THEY HAD GIVEN HIM MADE HIM WANT TO TRAIL THE CARAVAN.

THERE WAS TROUBLE:
AN ATTACK. THE
CARAVAN ANIMALS
STAMPEDED.



CRAIKE RECEIVED A STARTLINGLY VIVID MIND PICTURE OF A HISSING LIZARD THING HE COULD NOT IDENTIFY. BUT IT WAS DANGER ON FOUR SCALED FEET. HE WINCED AT THE FEAR IN THOSE MINDS AHEAD. THE LIZARD HAD BEEN KILLED... ANIMALS SCATTERED... TAKE HOURS TO FIND... SO STRONG WAS THE MASTER TRADER'S EXASPERATION, CRAIKE COULD ALMOST TASTE IT.

THE ESPER SMILED SLOWLY. HERE, HANDED TO HIM BY FATE, WAS HIS CHANCE TO GAIN THE GOOD WILL OF THE TRAVELERS.



BREAKING CONTACT WITH THE MEN, CRAIKE CAST AROUND PROBE WEBS, AS A FISHER MIGHT CAST A NET. HE CONTACTED ONE PANIC CRAZED ANIMAL AND THEN ANOTHER, HE TOUCHED MINDS, SOOTHED AND BROUGHT TO BEAR HIS TRAINING.

WITHIN MOMENTS HE HEARD THE DULL THUD OF HOOVES ON THE MOSSY GROUND, NO LONGER POUNDING IN A WILD GALLOP. A SHAGGY MOUNT—NEITHER PONY NOR HORSE OF HIS KNOWLEDGE, BUT LIKE EACH IN WAYS—CAME TOWARD HIM AND NICKERED QUESTIONINGLY. IT FELL BEHIND CRAIKE, TO BE JOINED BY ANOTHER AND ANOTHER, AS THE ESPER WALKED ON—UNTIL HE LED THE FULL TRAIN OF RUNAWAYS.



HE MET THE FIRST OF THE CARAVAN MEN WITHIN A QUARTER OF A MILE AND SAVORED THE FELLOW'S ASTONISHMENT AT THE SIGHT. YET, AFTER THE FIRST SURPRISE THE MAN DID NOT APPEAR TOO AMAZED.

Many thanks, Man of Power.

THE WORDS HE HAD SPOKEN WERE IN A CLICKING TONGUE, BUT CRAIKE READ THEIR MEANING MIND TO MIND. THEN AS IF PUZZLED ON HIS CLOSER EXAMINATION OF THE ESPER, THE STRANGER FROWNED, HIS INDECISION SLOWLY TURNING HOSTILE.



OUTLAW!
Begone, horned one!
See?... I make The Sign... We pass free from your spells—

Be not so quick to pass judgement, Alfric. This one is no local outlaw. Would such use his power for our aid? If he is a horned one, he is unlike any I have seen.

I am not what you think.
I hope I mimicked their speech well enough.



That is true. And you intend us no harm; for the sun stone on my cap does not glow.

In this one is no evil, Alfric; rather does he come to us in aid. Have I not spoken the truth to you, stranger from the wastes?

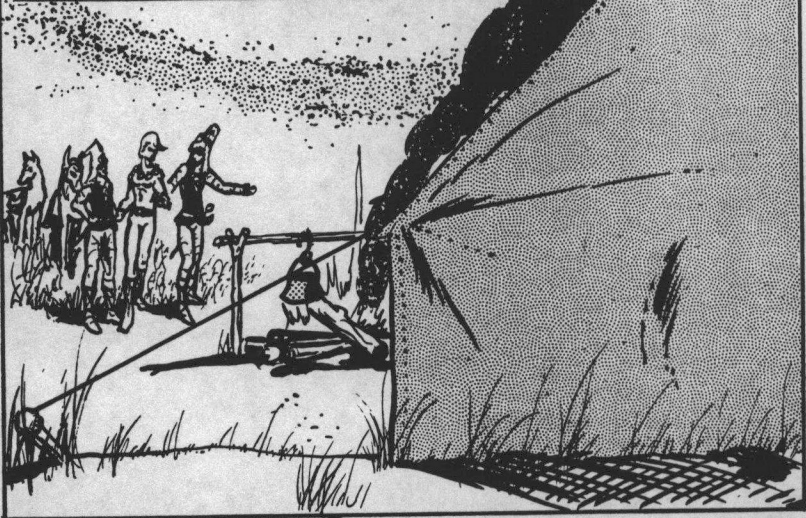
CRAIKE BROADCAST GOOD WILL AS STRONGLY AS HE COULD, AND THEY MUST HAVE BEEN SOMEWHAT INFLUENCED BY THAT.



I feel—he DOES have the power!

He has power, but not that of a Black Hood. Has he striven to possess our minds as he could do? We are still our own men. No, this is no renegade Black Hood. Come.

WE BECKONED TO CRAIKE, AND THE ESPER, THE ANIMALS STILL BEHIND HIM, FOLLOWED INTO CAMP WHERE THE MASTER FILLED A BOWL FROM THE CONTENTS OF A POT SET OVER THE COALS OF A DYING FIRE.

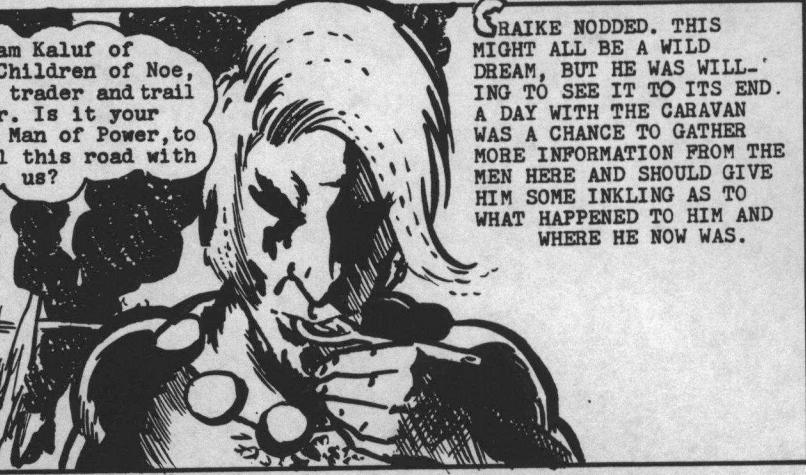


CRAIKE GULPED AN EXCELLENT AND FILLING STEW.



I am Kaluf of the Children of Noe, a far trader and trail master. Is it your will, Man of Power, to travel this road with us?

CRAIKE NODDED. THIS MIGHT ALL BE A WILD DREAM, BUT HE WAS WILLING TO SEE IT TO ITS END. A DAY WITH THE CARAVAN WAS A CHANCE TO GATHER MORE INFORMATION FROM THE MEN HERE AND SHOULD GIVE HIM SOME INKLING AS TO WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM AND WHERE HE NOW WAS.



CRAIKE'S DAY WITH THE TRADERS BECAME TWO AND THEN THREE. ESPER TALENTS WERE ACCEPTED BY THIS COMPANY MATTER-OF-FACTLY, EVEN ASKED IN AID. AND FROM THE TRAVELERS HE GAINED A PICTURE OF THIS WORLD WHICH HE COULD NOT RECONCILE WITH HIS OWN.

HIS FIRST IMPRESSION OF A LARGE CONTINENT BROKEN BY WIDELY SEPERATED HOLDINGS OF A FRONTIER TYPE REMAINED. IN ADDITION THERE WAS KNOWLEDGE OF A FEUDAL GOVERNMENT, PETTY LORDLINGS HOLDING TITLE TO LANDS OVER MEN OF LESSER BIRTH.

KALUF AND HIS MEN HAD A MILD CONTEMPT FOR THEIR CUSTOMERS. THEIR OWN HOMETOWN LAY TO THE SOUTHEAST, WHERE, IN SOME COASTAL CITIES, THEY HAD BUILT UP AN OVERSEAS TRADE, RETAINING ITS CREAM FOR THEIR OWN CONSUMPTION AND PEDDLING THE REST IN THE BARBAROUS HINTERLAND. CRAIKE, HIS FACILITY IN THEIR CLICK IN SPEECH GROWING, ASKED QUESTIONS WHICH THE MASTER ANSWERED FREELY ENOUGH.

These inland men know no difference between Saludian silk and the weaving of the looms in our own Kormonian quarter. Why should we offer Salud when we can get Salud prices for Kormon lengths and the buyer is satisfied? Maybe, if these lords ever finish their private quarrels and live at peace so that there is more travel and they themselves come to visit in Larud or the other cities of the Children of Noe, then shall we not make a profit on lesser goods.

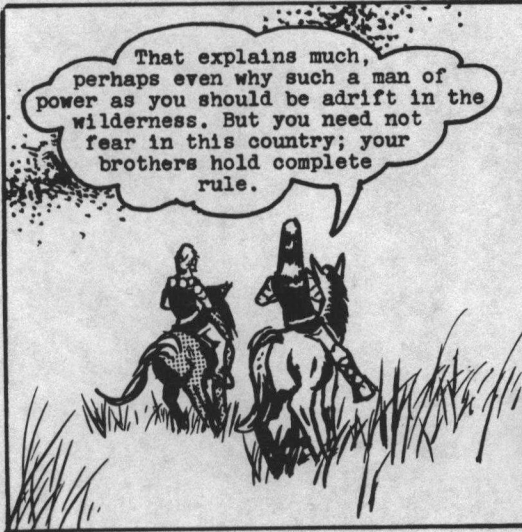


Do these lords never try to raid your caravans?

They tried that once or twice. Certainly they saw there was profit in seizing a train and paying nothing. But we purchased trail rights from the Black Hoods, and there was no more trouble. How is it with you, Ka-rak? Have you lords in your land who dare to stand against the power of the Hooded Ones?



Yes.

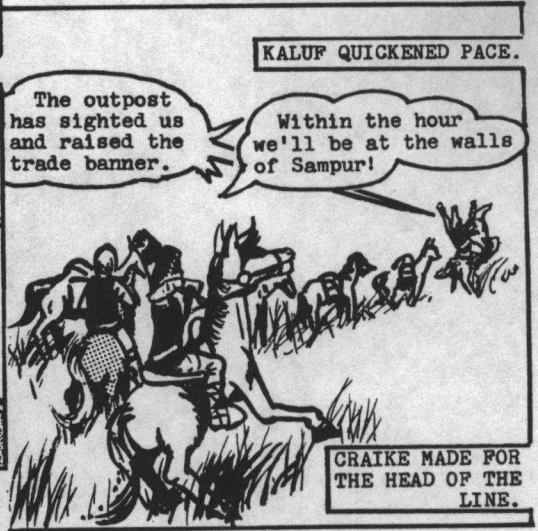


That explains much, perhaps even why such a man of power as you should be adrift in the wilderness. But you need not fear in this country; your brothers hold complete rule.



A COLONY OF ESPERS!

HAD HE, THROUGH SOME WEIRD CHANCE, FOUND HERE THE LONG-HOPED-FOR REFUGE OF HIS KIND. BUT WHERE WAS HERE? HIS OLD BEWILDERMENT WAS RETURNING WHEN...



KALUF QUICKENED PACE.

The outpost has sighted us and raised the trade banner.

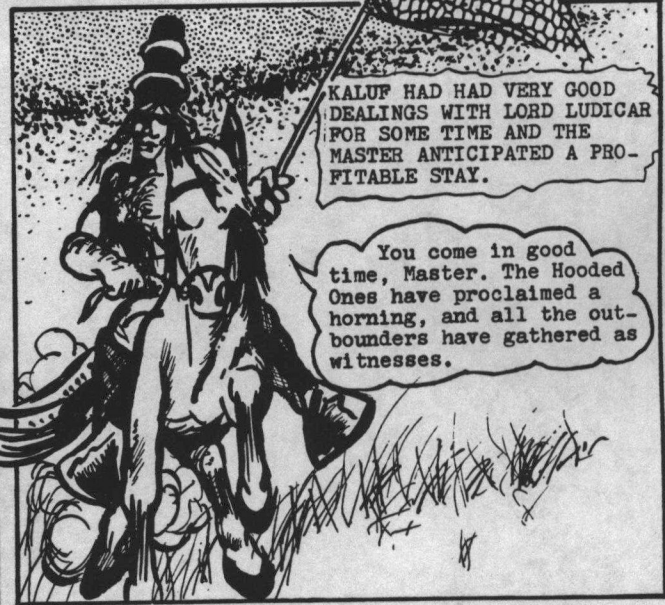
Within the hour we'll be at the walls of Sampur!

CRAIKE MADE FOR THE HEAD OF THE LINE.



SAMPUR WAS THE LARGE DOMAIN OF A LORD LUDICAR.

THE MAN WHO HAD RIDDEN OUT TO GREET THEM WAS FULL OF NEWS.



KALUF HAD HAD VERY GOOD DEALINGS WITH LORD LUDICAR FOR SOME TIME AND THE MASTER ANTICIPATED A PROFITABLE STAY.

You come in good time, Master. The Hooded Ones have proclaimed a horning, and all the out-borders have gathered as witnesses.

CRAIKE FELL BACK. PUNISHMENT? AN EXECUTION? NO, NOT QUITE THAT. HE WISHED HE DARED ASK QUESTIONS. CERTAINLY THE PICTURE WHICH HAD LEAPED INTO KALUF'S MIND AT THE MENTION OF "HORNING" COULD NOT BE TRUE!



This is a good day for your trading, the Cloudy Ones have indeed favored you. But hurry, the Lord Ludicar is now riding in and soon there will be no good place from which to watch.

CAUTION KEPT THE ESPER ALOOF. SOONER OR LATER HIS ALIEN ORIGIN MUST BE NOTED. THE CEREMONY WAS TO TAKE PLACE JUST OUTSIDE THE MAIN GATE OF THE STOCKADE, WHICH FORMED THE OUTER RAMPART OF THE TOWN. LORD LUDICAR STOOD THERE, WITH HIS RING-HELMED WARRIORS.



SOMETHING WAS WRONG! THE EMOTION WHICH BEAT AT CRAIKE WAS TERROR. THE TERROR WAS COMING FROM A PARTY OF FIVE. AN IMPACT OF ESPER POWER CAME FROM THREE OF THEM...BLACK-HOODS!

HE USED HIS OWN TALENT CAREFULLY, DREADING TO ATTRACT THE ATTENTION OF THE MEN IN BLACK. FEAR—IN ONE OF THOSE BOUND, STUMBLING PRISONERS IT WAS ABJECT, THE OTHER CAPTIVE HAD NO HOPE, BUT THERE WAS A THICK CORE OF DEFIANCE, A DESPERATE DESIRE TO STRIKE BACK...



...AND SOMETHING IN CRAIKE AROSE TO ANSWER THAT.

AS THE DUST OF THE CAPTIVES' STRUGGLE SETTLED CRAIKE SAW THAT THE DRAB CLOTHING OF THE TWO HAD BEEN TORN AWAY. SHAME, BLOTING OUT FEAR, CAME FROM THE GIRL.



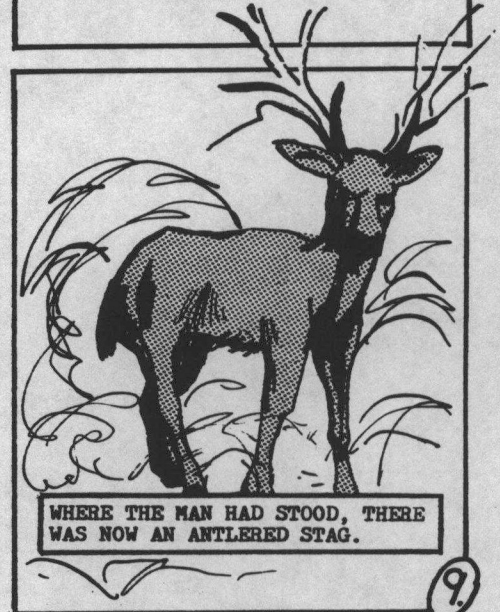
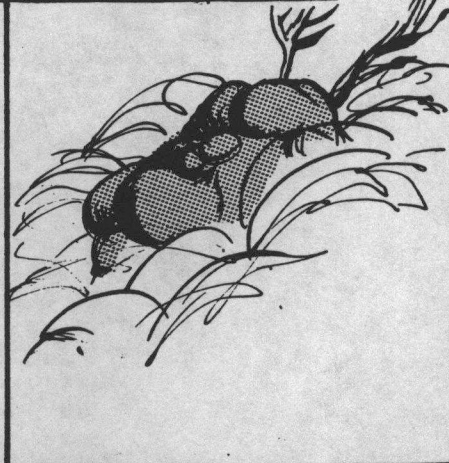
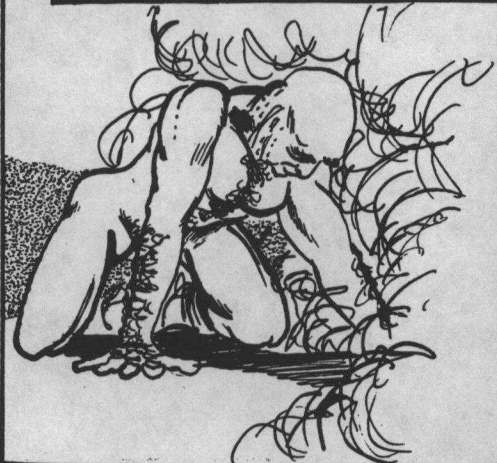
A VIOLENT SHAKE OF HER HEAD LOOSENED HER HAIR TO FLOW, BLACK AND LONG, CLOTHING HER NAKEDNESS. CRAIKE DREW A DEEP BREATH AS HE HAD BEFORE THAT PLUNGE INTO THE CANYON. MOVING QUICKLY HE CROUCHED BEHIND A BUSH.

THE BLACK HOODS HAD DRAWN AN INTRICATE PATTERN ABOUT THE FEET OF THE PRISONERS.



A CHANT BEGAN IN WHICH THE TOWNSPEOPLE JOINED. THE FEAR OF THE MALE CAPTIVE WAS AN ALMOST VISIBLE CLOUD. BUT THE OUTRAGE AND ANGER OF HIS FEMINE COMPANION GREW IN RELATION TO THE CHANT, AND CRAIKE COULD SENSE HER WILL BATTLING AGAINST THAT OF THE ASSEMBLY.

THE WATCHING ESPER GASPED. THE IMPOSSIBLE WAS TAKING PLACE!

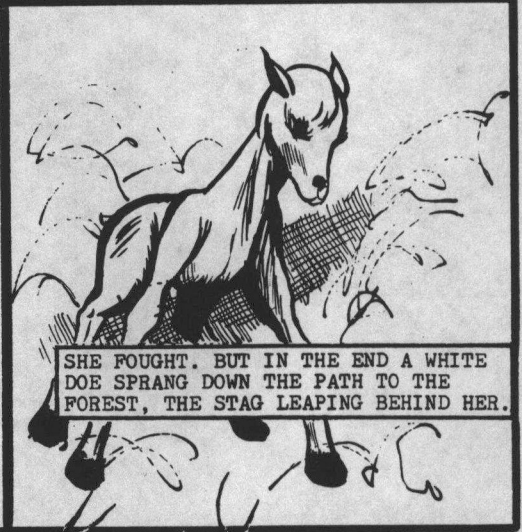


WHERE THE MAN HAD STOOD, THERE WAS NOW AN ANTLERED STAG.

AND THE GIRL?



HER TRANSFORMATION CAME MORE SLOWLY. THE POWER OF THE BLACK HOODS HELD HER, FASTENING ON HER THE FORM THEY VISUALIZED.



SHE FOUGHT. BUT IN THE END A WHITE DOE SPRANG DOWN THE PATH TO THE FOREST, THE STAG LEAPING BEHIND HER.

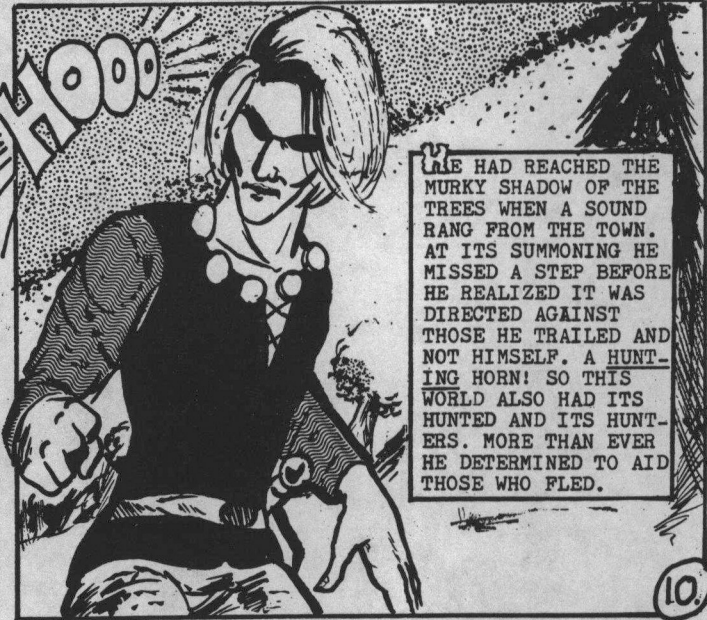
THEY WHIPPED PAST THE BUSH WHERE CRAIKE HAD GONE TO EARTH, AND HE WAS ABLE TO SEE THROUGH THE ILLUSION.



NOT A RED STAG AND A WHITE DOE, BUT A MAN AND WOMAN RUNNING FOR THEIR LIVES, YET ALREADY KNOWING IN THEIR HEARTS THERE WAS NO HOPE IN THEIR FLIGHT.



CRAIKE, HARDLY KNOWING WHY HE DID IT OR WHO HE COULD HELP, FOLLOWED, SURE THAT MIND TOUCH WOULD PROVIDE HIM WITH A GUIDE.



BY THE TIME HE HAD REACHED THE MURKY SHADOW OF THE TREES WHEN A SOUND RANG FROM THE TOWN. AT ITS SUMMONING HE MISSED A STEP BEFORE HE REALIZED IT WAS DIRECTED AGAINST THOSE HE TRAILED AND NOT HIMSELF. A HUNTING HORN! SO THIS WORLD ALSO HAD ITS HUNTERS. MORE THAN EVER HE DETERMINED TO AID THOSE WHO FLED.

BUT IT WAS NOT ENOUGH JUST TO RUN BLINDLY ON THE TRACK OF STAG AND DOE. HE LACKED WEAPONS, AND HIS WITS HAD NOT SUFFICED TO SAVE HIM IN HIS OWN WORLD. BUT THERE HE HAD BEEN CONDITIONED AGAINST TURNING ON HIS HUNTERS, HAMPERED, CRUELLY DESIGNED FROM BIRTH TO ACCEPT THE QUARRY ROLE. THAT WAS NOT TRUE HERE.



ESPER POWER—CRAIKE LICKED DRY LIPS. THEY WERE ILLUSIONS SO WELL DONE THEY HAD ALMOST ENTHRALED HIM.

COULD ILLUSION UNDO WHAT ILLUSION HAD DONE? AGAIN THE CALL OF THE HORN RANG IN HIS EARS. HE FOLLOWED THE FEAR OF THOSE WHO FLED.

HE FORMED HIS OWN ILLUSION. ONE OF THE MAID AS SHE HAD BEEN. NO DOE, BUT A WOMAN...NO DOE, BUT A MAID-

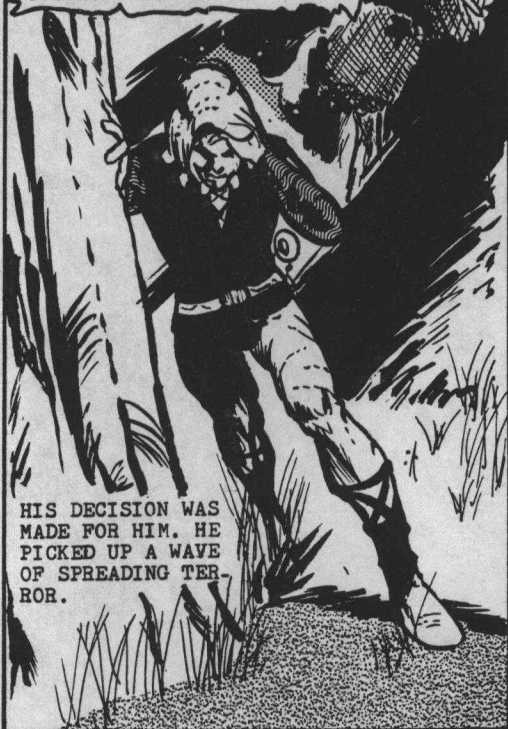


IN THAT MOMENT, AS HE CONSTRUCTED THAT PICTURE CLEARLY, HE CONTACTED HER IN THOUGHT. IT WAS LIKE BEING WASHED BY SEA-SPRAY, COOL, REMOTE AND VERY CLEAN. AND, AS SPRAY, THE CONTACT VANISHED IN AN INSTANT, ONLY TO RETURN.

"Who are you?"
"One who follows," HE ANSWERED, HOLDING TO HIS PICTURE OF THE RUNNING GIRL.

"Follow no more, you have done what was needful." THERE WAS A BURST OF JOY, SO OVERWHELMING A RELEASE FROM TERROR THAT IT HALTED HIM. THEN THE CORD BETWEEN THEM BROKE.

FRANTICALLY CRAIKE CAST ABOUT SEEKING CONTACT. THERE WAS ONLY A DEAD WALL. LOST, HE PUT OUT A HAND TO THE ROUGH BARK OF THE NEAREST TREE, WOOD THINGS LURKED HERE, THEN ONLY DID HIS MIND TOUCH. WHAT DID HE DO NOW?



HIS DECISION WAS MADE FOR HIM. HE PICKED UP A WAVE OF SPREADING TERROR.

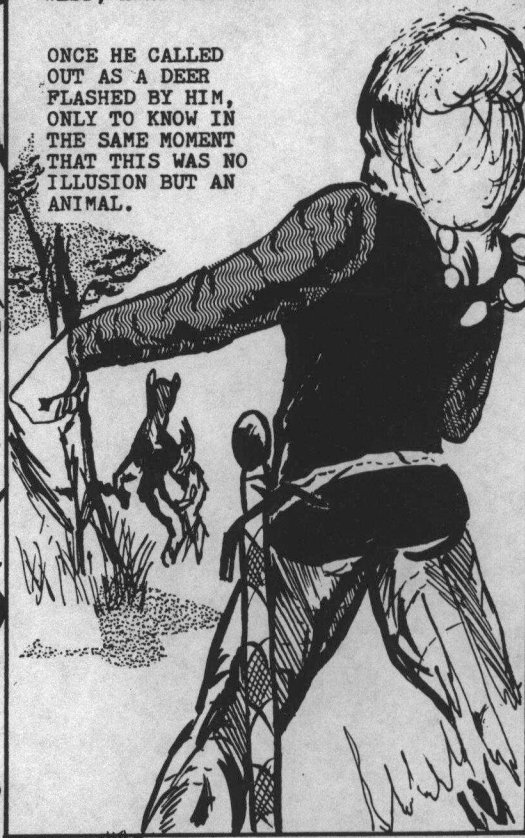
FIRE!



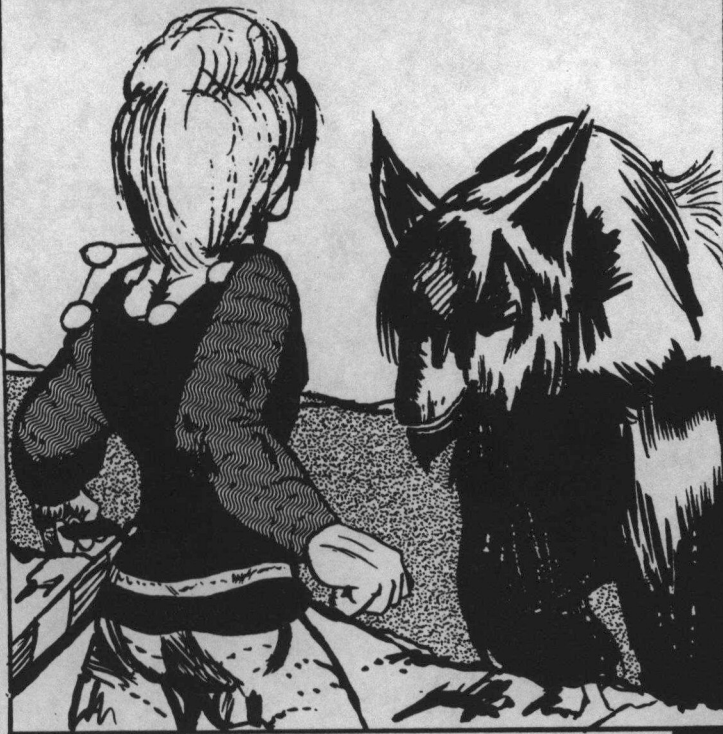
HE CAUGHT THE THOUGHT FROM MINDS OF BIRD AND BEAST.

CRAIKE STARTED ON, TAKING THE WAY WEST, AWAY FROM THE MENACE.

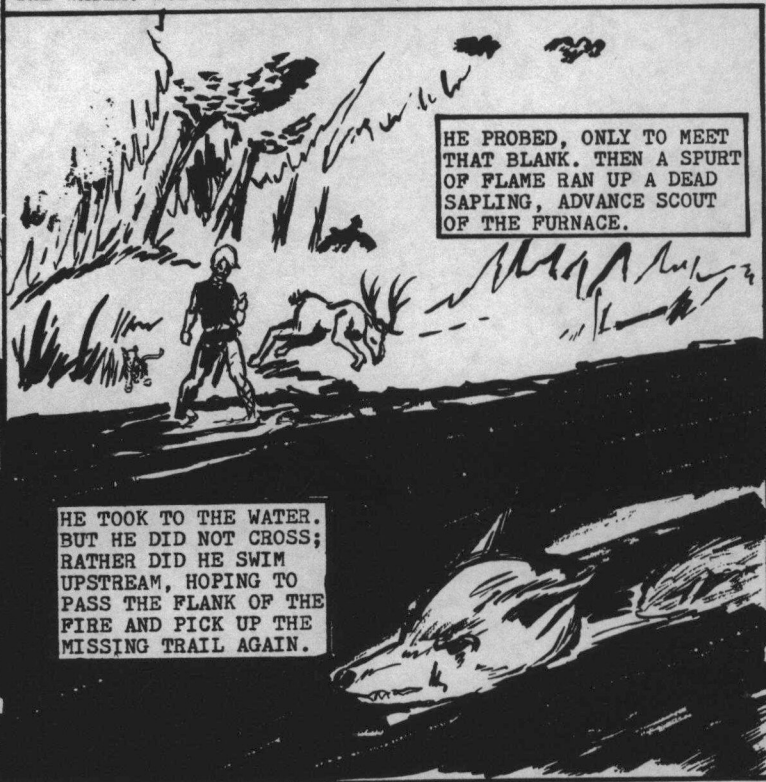
ONCE HE CALLED OUT AS A DEER FLASHED BY HIM, ONLY TO KNOW IN THE SAME MOMENT THAT THIS WAS NO ILLUSION BUT AN ANIMAL.



A MOUNTAIN OF FLESH, MUSCLE AND FUR SNARLED AND REARED TO FACE HIM. BUT CRAIKE HAD NOTHING TO FEAR FROM ANY ANIMAL. HE CONFRONTED THE GREAT RED BEAR UNTIL IT WHINED, SHUFFLED ITS FEET AND PLODDED ON. MORE AND MORE CREATURES CROSSED HIS PATH OR RAN BESIDE HIM FOR A SPACE.



IT WAS THEIR INSTINCT WHICH BROUGHT THEM, AND CRAIKE, TO A RIVER. WOLVES, RED DEER, BEARS, GREAT CATS, FOXES AND ALL THE REST CAME DOWN TO THE SAVING WATER. A CAT SPAT ON THE FLOOD, BUT LEAPED IN TO SWIM. CRAIKE LINGERED ON THE BANK. THE SMOKE WAS THICKER AND MORE ANIMALS BROKE FROM THE WOOD TO TAKE TO THE WATER. BUT THE DOE — WHERE WAS SHE?



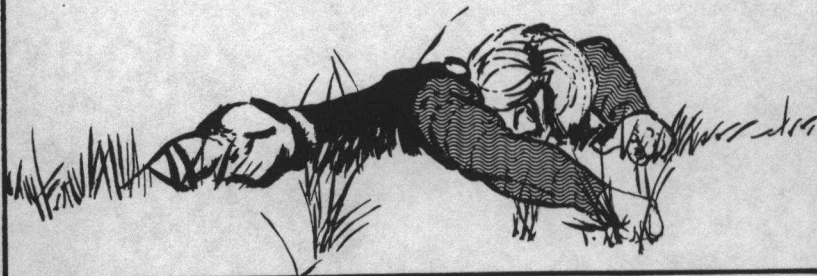
HE PROBED, ONLY TO MEET THAT BLANK. THEN A SPURT OF FLAME RAN UP A DEAD SAPLING, ADVANCE SCOUT OF THE FURNACE.

HE TOOK TO THE WATER. BUT HE DID NOT CROSS; RATHER DID HE SWIM UPSTREAM, HOPING TO PASS THE FLANK OF THE FIRE AND PICK UP THE MISSING TRAIL AGAIN.



SMOKE CLEARED AS CRAIKE TROD WATER. HE WAS BEYOND THE PATH OF THE FIRE, BUT NOT OUT OF DANGER, FOR THE CURRENT AGAINST WHICH HE HAD FOUGHT HIS WAY BEAT HERE THROUGH AN ARCHWAY OF MASONRY.

CRAIKE CAME ASHORE, WINNING HIS WAY UP THE STEEP BANK BY HANDHOLDS OF VINE AND BUSH NO ALERT CASTELLAN WOULD HAVE ALLOWED TO GROW.



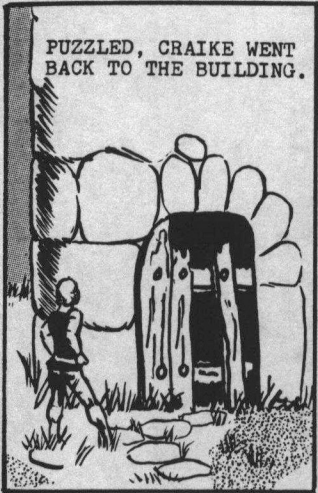
AS HE REACHED A TERRACE OF COBBLES STIPPLED WITH BUNCHES OF COARSE GRASS...

A SWEETISH SCENT OF DECAY DREW HIM AROUND THE BASE OF THE TOWER TO LOOK DOWN AT A BROAD LEDGE EXTENDING INTO THE RIVER.



PILED ON IT WERE SMALL BASKETS AND BOWLS, SOME SO ROTTED THAT ONLY OUTLINES WERE VISIBLE. OTHERS WERE NEW AND THEY ALL WERE FILLED WITH MOLDERING FOODSTUFFS. BUT THOSE WHO LEFT SUCH OFFERINGS MUST HAVE KNOWN THAT THE TOWER WAS DESERTED.

PUZZLED, CRAIKE WENT BACK TO THE BUILDING.



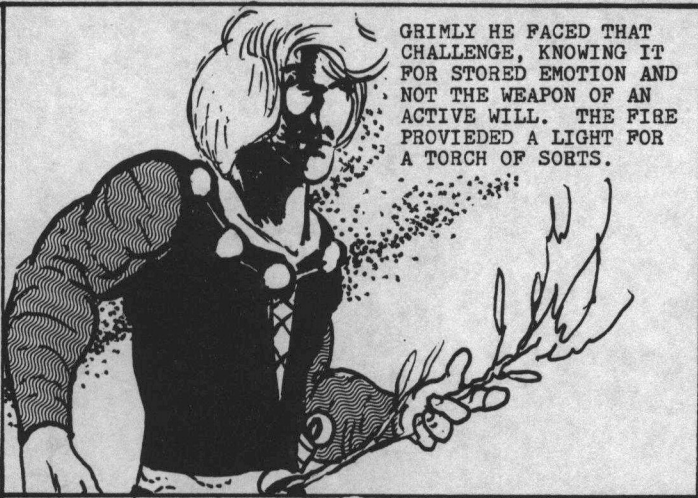
THE BLOW HE FELT MIGHT HAVE BEEN PHYSICAL.



AS HE PUT HIS HAND TO THE INSECT-BORED DOOR CRAIKE DISCOVERED THE GUARDIAN THE LONG-AGO OWNERS OF THE FORTRESS HAD LEFT IN POSSESSION

OUT OF THE STRONGHOLD BEFORE HIM CAME SUCH A WAVE OF UTTER TERROR AND DARK PROMISE AS TO FORCE HIM BACK, BUT NO FARTHER THAN THE EDGE OF THE PAVED SQUARE.

GRIMLY HE FACED THAT CHALLENGE, KNOWING IT FOR STORED EMOTION AND NOT THE WEAPON OF AN ACTIVE WILL. THE FIRE PROVIDED A LIGHT FOR A TORCH OF SORTS.



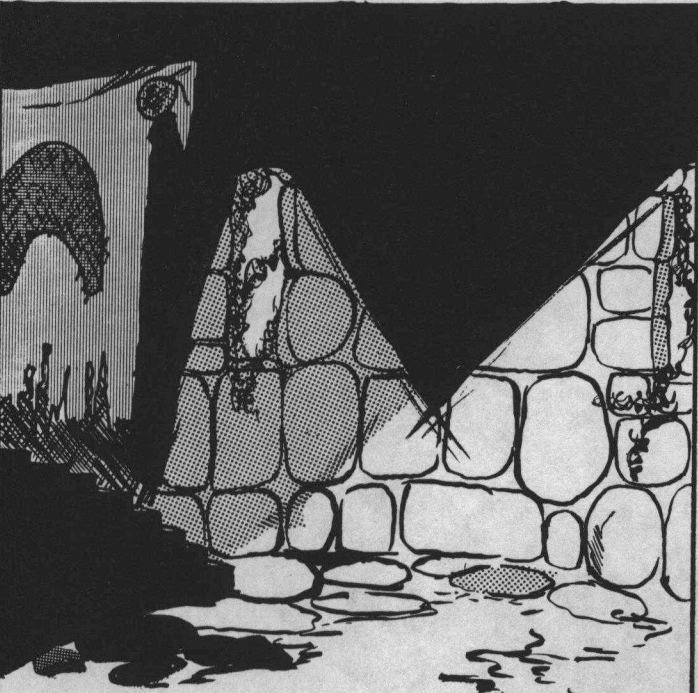
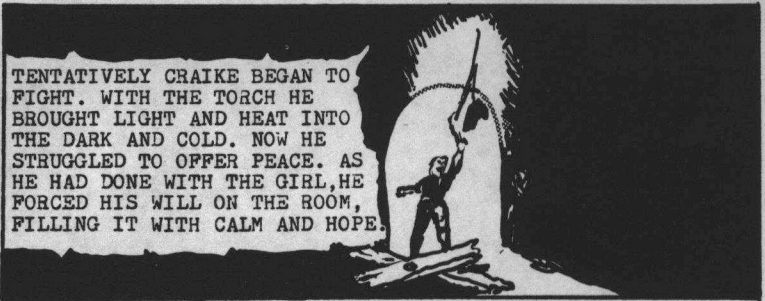
CRAIKE PUT HIS SHOULDER TO THE POWDERY REMNANTS OF THE DOOR.



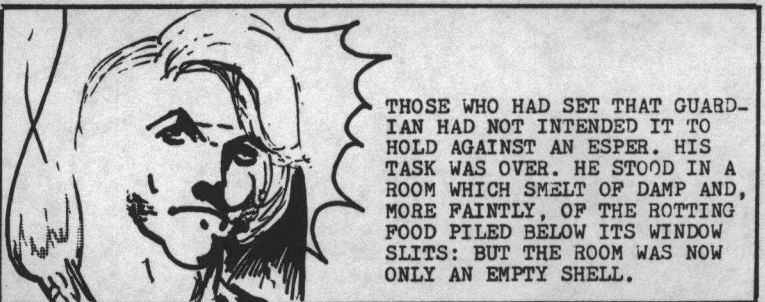
LIGHT AGAINST DARK. WHAT LURKED THERE WAS NOURISHED BY DARK, FED UPON THE NIGHT FEARS OF HIS SPECIES.



TENTATIVELY CRAIKE BEGAN TO FIGHT. WITH THE TORCH HE BROUGHT LIGHT AND HEAT INTO THE DARK AND COLD. NOW HE STRUGGLED TO OFFER PEACE. AS HE HAD DONE WITH THE GIRL, HE FORCED HIS WILL ON THE ROOM, FILLING IT WITH CALM AND HOPE.



THOSE WHO HAD SET THAT GUARDIAN HAD NOT INTENDED IT TO HOLD AGAINST AN ESPER. HIS TASK WAS OVER. HE STOOD IN A ROOM WHICH SMELT OF DAMP AND, MORE FAINTLY, OF THE ROTTING FOOD PILED BELOW ITS WINDOW SLITS: BUT THE ROOM WAS NOW ONLY AN EMPTY SHELL.



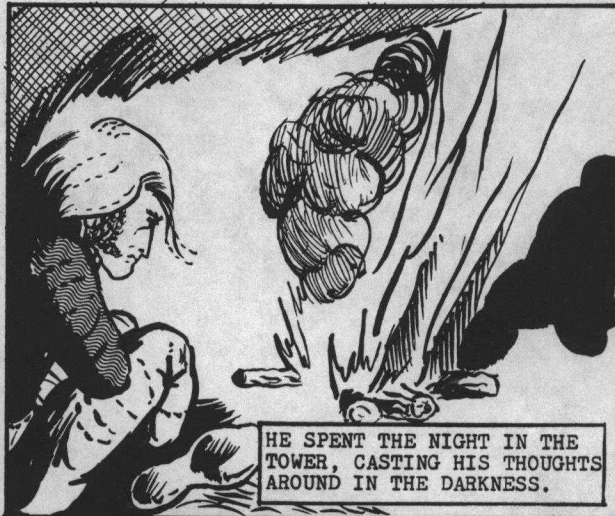
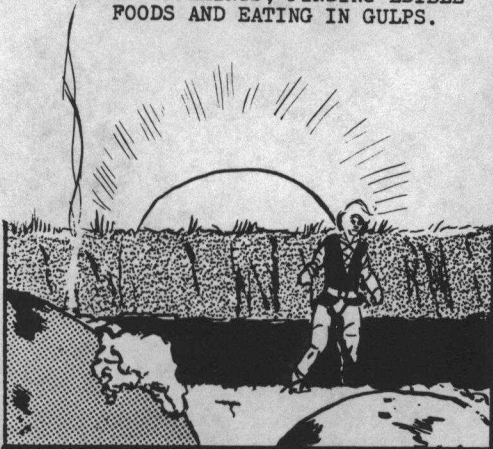
Why have I tired myself for this? Of what importance to me is the cleansing of a ruined tower?

THE ROUND ROOM WAS BARE EXCEPT FOR SOME CRUMBLING STICKS OF WOOD, A SERIES OF STEPS JUTTING OUT FROM THE WALL TO CURVE ABOUT AND VANISH ABOVE. CRAIKE MADE NO MOVE TOWARD FURTHER EXPLORATION, HE WAS SEEKING TO SEE THE REAL, NOT THE THREAT OF THIS PLACE. THOSE WHO HAD BUILT IT POSSESSED ESPER TALENTS, AND THEY HAD USED THAT POWER FOR TWISTED PURPOSES. HE READ TERROR AND DESPAIR TRAPPED HERE BY THE CASTELLANS' ART, AND HORROR, AN ABIDING FOG OF WHAT HIS RACE CONSIDERED EVIL.



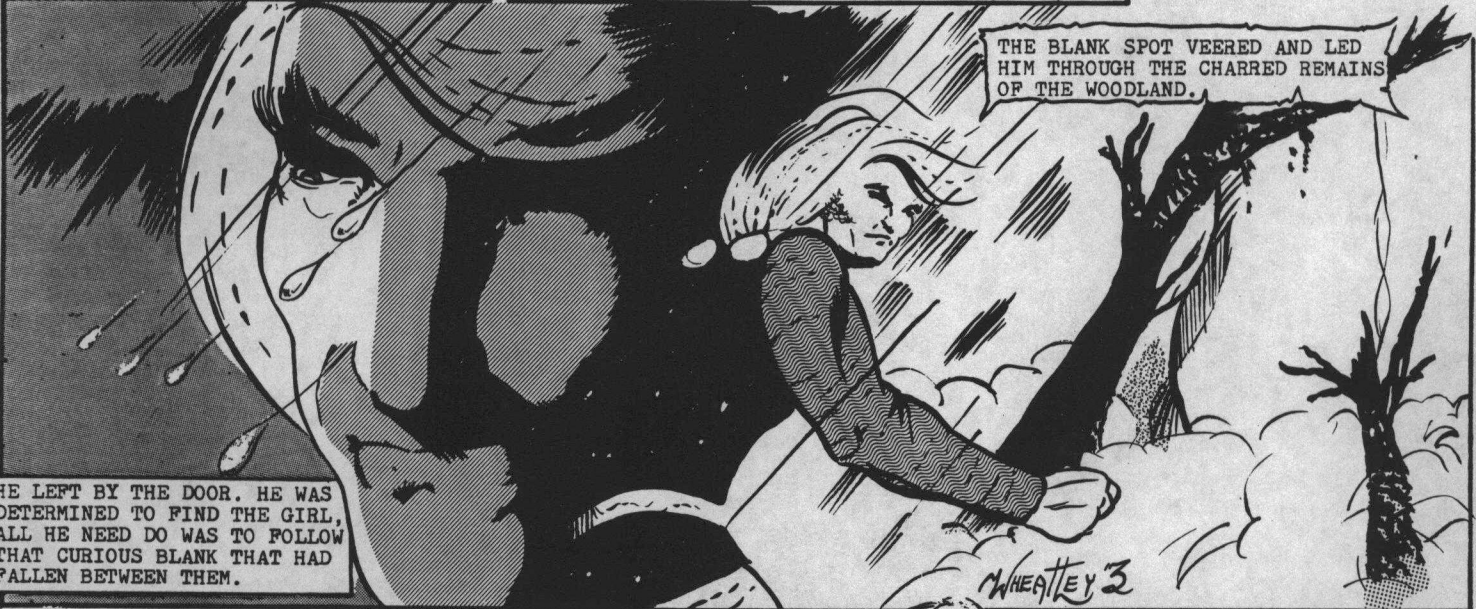
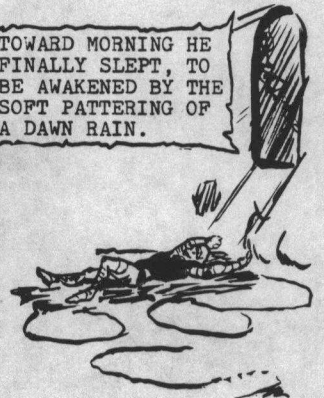
THOUGH TO STAY HERE HAD CERTAIN ADVANTAGES. IT HAD BEEN ERRECTED TO CONTROL RIVER TRAFFIC. THOUGH THAT DID NOT MATTER FOR THE PRESENT; JUST NOW HE NEEDED FOOD MORE.

AS THE SUN BEGAN TO SINK, CRAIKE RETURNED TO THE ROCK OF OFFERINGS, FINDING EDIBLE FOODS AND EATING IN GULPS.



HE SPENT THE NIGHT IN THE TOWER, CASTING HIS THOUGHTS AROUND IN THE DARKNESS.

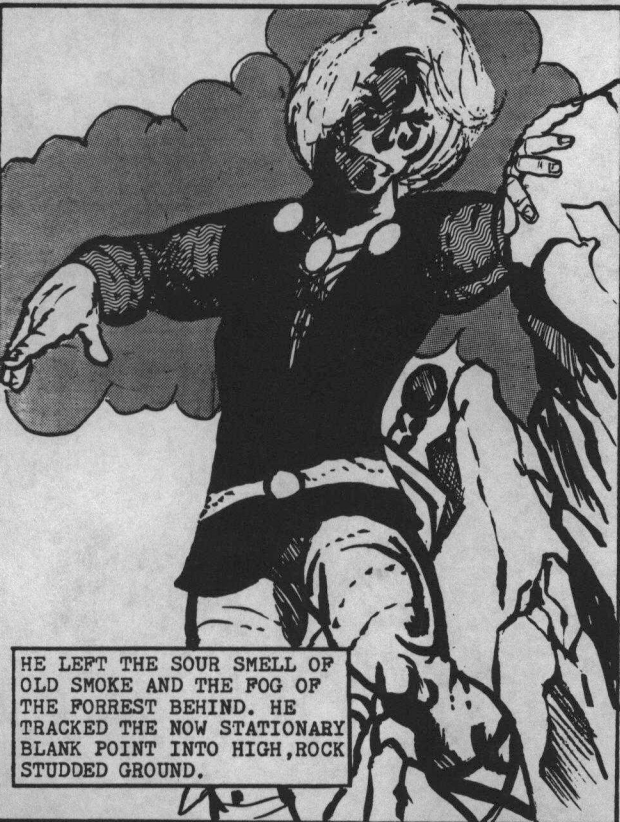
TOWARD MORNING HE FINALLY SLEPT, TO BE AWAKENED BY THE SOFT PATTTERING OF A DAWN RAIN.



THE BLANK SPOT VEERED AND LED HIM THROUGH THE CHARRED REMAINS OF THE WOODLAND.

HE LEFT BY THE DOOR. HE WAS DETERMINED TO FIND THE GIRL, ALL HE NEED DO WAS TO FOLLOW THAT CURIOUS BLANK THAT HAD FALLEN BETWEEN THEM.

WHEATLEY '3



HE LEFT THE SOUR SMELL OF OLD SMOKE AND THE FOG OF THE FORREST BEHIND. HE TRACKED THE NOW STATIONARY BLANK POINT INTO HIGH, ROCK STUDDED GROUND.



A VIOLENT BLOW ON THE SHOULDER WHIRLED HIM HALFWAY AROUND, AND ONLY BY A FINGER'S WIDTH DID HE ESCAPE A FALL. A CRY ECHOED HIS AND THE BLANK BROKE.

SHE WAS THERE.

TO BE CONTINUED...