

Hark! The Rattle!

By Joel Townsley Rogers

I

WE SAT in the Purple Lily-Tain Dirk, that far too handsome young man, with me.

I drank coffee; Tain Dirk drank liquor—secretly and alone. The night was drenched with sweating summer heat, but I felt cold as ice. Presently we went up to the Palm Grove Roof, where Bimi Tal was to dance.

“Who is this Bimi Tal, Hammer?” Dirk asked me, drumming his fingers.

“A woman.”

“You’re a queer one, Jerry Hammer!” said Dirk, narrowing his cold yellow eyes.

Still he drummed his blunt fingers. Sharp— *tat! tat! tat!* Something deep inside me—my liver, perhaps—shivered and grew white at hearing that klirring sound.

I didn’t answer him right away. Slowly I sent up smoke rings to circle the huge stars. We sat in a cave of potted palms close by the dancing floor. Over us lay blue-black night, strange and deep. Yellow as roses were the splotches of stars swimming down the sky.

“It shows you’ve been away from New York, Dirk, if you don’t know Bimi Tal. She’s made herself more famous as a dancer than ever was Ynecita, Some mystery is supposed to hang about her; and those simple children of New York love mysteries”

“I’ve been away three years,” said Dirk sulkily, his eyes contracting.

“That long? It was three years ago that Ynecita was killed.”

“Well?” asked Dirk. His finger-

drumming droned away.

“I thought you might have known her, Dirk.”

“I?” His wide, thin lips twitched. “Why, Ynecita was common to half New York!”

“But once,” I said, “once, it may be assumed, she was true to one man only, Tain Dirk.”

“I’m not interested in women,” said Dirk.

That was like him. He drank liquor only—secretly and alone.

“I was interested in Ynecita, Dirk. We used to talk together—”

“She talked to you?” repeated Dirk.

“Strange how she died! No trace, no one arrested. Yet she’d had her lovers. Sometimes I think, Dirk, we’ll find the beast who killed Ynecita.”

Tain Dirk touched my wrist. His blunt fingers were cold and clammy. Incomprehensible that women had loved his hands! Yet they were artist’s hands, and could mold and chisel. Wet clay, his hands!

“What makes you say that, Hammer?”

I looked up at the stars. “It was a beast who killed Ynorita, Dirk. Some vile snake with blood as cold as this lemon ice. Those marks of teeth on her upper arm! Deep in, bringing blood! What madman killed that girl? *Mad*, I say!”

Dirk twisted. He wiped his brown forehead, on which sweat glistened in little beads like scales. “Too hot a night to talk about such things, Hammer. Let’s talk of something else. Tell me about this Bimi Tal.”

“You’ll see her soon enough,” I said,

watching him. "A girl of about your own age; you're not more than twenty-four, are you?"

"Born first of January, '99."

"And famous already!"

"Yes," said Tain Dirk. I guess you've heard of me."

"Oh. I've heard lots of you," I said; and saw he didn't like it.

"You've heard I'm fast with women, eh?" asked Dirk, after a pause.

"But Ynecita—"

"Why do you talk of *her*?" asked Dirk, irritably. "I never knew her."

"Those marks of teeth on Ynecita's arm—two sharp canines, sharp and hooked; barely scratching the skin—like fangs of a snake. Dirk—"

Tain Dirk's hand crept to his lips, which were thin, red, and dry. The light in his eyes darkened from yellow to purple. Softly his blunt fingers began to drum his lips. *Tat! tat! tat!* But silent as a snake in grass.

"A curious thing about teeth, Dirk—you're a sculptor; maybe you've observed it—a curious thing that no two are quite alike. We took prints, Dirk, of those marks in the arm of Ynecita—"

Dirk's thin lips opened. His coarsely-formed, but marvelously sensitive, fingers felt the hardness of his teeth. That gesture was sly. At once he knew I'd seen him. He crouched back in his chair, his strong, broad head drawn in between his shoulders.

"Who are you?" he hissed.

Again the klirring of his fingertips—a dusty drumming.

"Why, I am only Jerry Hammer—a wanderer, and a soldier of bad fortune."

"*Who are you!*"

"Brother of Stella Hammer, who was known as Ynecita, the dancer."

II

Upon the Palm Grove Roof, beneath

those gigantic stars the orchestra began to play. A brass and cymbal tune. The air was hot. From far in the pit of streets rose up the noises of the city. Loud! Discord shot with flames. I trembled.

Tain Dirk's fingers drummed. His head commenced to sway.

BIMI TAL danced barefooted on the glazed umber tiles of the Roof.

Her dark red hair was free on her naked shoulders. *Stamp! stamp! stamp!* her feet struck flatly on the tiles. Her head was bent back almost to the level of her waist. Bracelets jangled on her wrists and ankles.

"I am the daughter of the morning!
I shout, I dance, I laugh away...."

Shaking her clump of red hair; her strong muscled limbs weaving; laughing at me with all her eyes. How like she looked to a man dead long years before! How like her glances to the glances of Red Roane! On her breasts two glittering shields of spangles. About her waist a kirtle seemingly woven of long strands of marsh grass, rustling, shivering with whispers. The sinews of her trunk and limbs rippled beneath her clear brown skin.

The head of Tain Dirk swayed sideways, slowly. The drumming of his fingers on the table was a reiterative rattle. His eyes—liquid, subtle—dulled with a look near to stupidity, then blazed to golden fire. Thin and wide were his unsmiling lips. His tongue flicked them. *Tat! Tat! Tat!*

"She's a beauty!" whispered Dirk.

His terrible eyes seemed to call Bimi Tal as they had called other women. Mesmerism—what was it? Singing, she pranced toward the den of potted palms where we were sitting. Her skirt rustled like the marshes. Wind of summer.

Little searchlights, playing colored lights on Bimi Tal, grew darker. Red and

violet deepened to brown and green. Still the hot stars above us. In that artificial paper Palm Grove, with the silky puffy women and the beefsteak-guzzling men looking stupidly, was born the mystery of the great savannahs.

Dirk's head nodding. Dirk's thin lips slowly opening. Dirk's golden eyes glimmering. *Tat! tat! tat!* Dirk's steady fingers.

The great savannahs and the tropic marshes. Bimi Tal dancing. Stealthily, the music softened from that brass and cymbal tune. It rustled. It crawled. It reared fanged heads.

For a little while I did not see Bimi Tal nor Dirk, but the steamy Everglades. Winter noon. Grass leaves silvered by sea-wind; puddles stirring at the roots of the grasses. Silence booming like the loud silence of death.

Bimi Tal was dancing her snake dance. Dirk's lips quivered.

The marsh wind makes a little stir (it is the whispering flute.) The marsh waters make a little moan (it is the violin).

III

WHERE was the soul of Bimi Tal dwelling that tropic winter so many years ago? On her mother's breast, a little bud of love, crooned over with the song of sleep? Or meshed in bleeding poinsettia or rose? Or a soul yet unborn?

I close my eyes. The vision does not fade. Florida; the marshlands; winter noon. January's first day, 1899. Where was lovely Bimi Tal on that stifling day we saw the fanged thing coil, and death struck us there by Okechobee?

Your eyes, Bimi Tal, or the laughing eyes of Red Roane!...

Now the snake dance. The piccolo screams.

Life immortal in your glistening lips,

Bimi Tal; in your deep bosom promise of everlasting fecundity. Passion and power of the earth! Life is immortal. Your laughing eyes, Bimi Tal, will never dull. Yet I saw Red Roane die....

Beneath the shifting lights, Bimi Tal leaped and spun, scarcely treading the floor. Her eyes sparkled at me. She did not see Tain Dirk. *Stamp! Stamp! Stamp!* Her bare feet struck the tiles, tightening the muscles of her calves. Her bangles rang.

I could not keep my eyes from Dirk. His broad brown-and-golden head swayed continually. His thin lips worked, and I caught the flash of his teeth. His eyes drowsed, then flashed open with sudden flame. *Tat! tat! tat!* The rattling of his fingers was never still.

That swaying head! It was loaded with the wisdom of the serpent that harkens to the wind, swaying with the marsh grass, winding its golden coils, curving in neck to the sun—*Hark! The rattle!*

... Red is the sun. Two men plow through the marshes. O endless pain (the harsh viol quivers), a life struggles in the womb. Who will die, and what will die, that this new life may be born? Whimpering agony. And an old crone singing a song....

All people who sat within the Palm Grove were hushed, watching Bimi Tal. Fat hands fanning powdered breasts; silk handkerchiefs wiping ox necks; sweat beneath armpits. Still heat. Far away thunder. The stars going by.

Music swelled. Beneath its discord sounded a steady drumming rhythm. The arms of Bimi Tal waved about her head. She shouted for joy of life.

The pale eyes of Dirk, basking in mystery, gleamed into fire, blazed up in fury and hate undying! His dry lips opened. I saw his teeth.

... Through the breast-high grasses surge on the two marching men. Their boots sough in the muck. (Softly strums the bass

viol.) Something waiting in the marshes! Something with golden eyes and swaying head. *Hark! The rattle!* Beware, for death is in the path! ...

Bimi Tal was close to Dirk, not seeing him. She laughed and waved her jangling arms at me. Dirk's eyes sparkled with madness, his lips were tightened terribly. Bimi Tal was almost over him. His fingers drummed. Louder played the music.

...*Hark! The rattle!* Gaily the two men. plow through the bladed grasses. The coiled thing waits, hate within its eyes. They are nearer—nearer! (Drums begin to beat)....

In an avalanche of sound, crashed viol and violin, and stammering drum. Dirk's drawn head lunged upward with his shoulders, his lips opened and lifted.

Venomous his look. Deathly his intensity.

IV.

STRONG and young, fresh from the Cuban wars, Red Roane and I went north from the keys through the Everglades of Florida.

Through the fens as in God's first day. Through the reptile age, alive yet and crawling. Through strangling vegetation, which steams and rots beneath eternal suns. Through the everlasting Everglades, with their fern and frond and sorrowful, hoary cypress, Red Roane and I went north. Onward with laughter. What joy lay in our hearts! We sang many songs.

Fern and flower embracing in fecundity. Grasses thick with sap. Blossoms wilting at a touch. Mire teeming with creeping life. Above all, the gay sun. Beneath all, the coiling serpent eyes and the opened fangs. *Hark! The rattle!*

We sailed lagoon in crazy craft; dreamt on shady shores through sultry noons; shouted to the dead logs on river banks till they took fear, and dived and splashed away.

We pitched our tents by black waters. We beat brave trails through the fens.

"I'd like to stay here forever," said Red Roane.

By what way I go, with what drinks I drink, in what bed I lie down, I remember you who got your prayer, Red Roane—you who are in the swamp grass and swamp water forever.

Beating our way slow and heavily, at high noon, of the new year's first day in 1899, near Okechobee in the marshes, came we two on a hidden hut It was fashioned of the raff of the slough—dead fronds, rotting branches, withered marsh grasses. Its sad gray-green were in the living wilderness like a monument to death. Better the naked swamp. Better the clean quickmire for bed.

An old crone, mooning within that dreary hut, drowned out the sharp, short gasps of another woman. Red Roane came up singing, slapping his deep chest, swinging his muscular arms. Sunlight on his brown face, and sunlight in his red hair. At the hut's door, facing us, lounged a man with yellow eyes. Poor white trash. A gun was in his arm's crook. He spat tobacco juice at the earth. There was loathing, murder venom in his face!

Red Roane faltered back from that stare. He stopped short, and laughter left him. His brave eyes were troubled by that madman's hate. Yellow eyes staring—eyes of a rattlesnake!

An old Indian crone peered out beneath the crooked elbow of the ruffian in the doorway, she who had been dolorously singing. With a scream, she thrust out her skinny old arm, pointing it at Red Roane.

"He dies!" she screamed. "We want his soul!"

Another woman, hidden, moaning within the hut; a woman in her travail. New life from the womb—a life must die! I grasped the arm of Red Roane.

"Come away!" I said. "Come away

from these mad witches!”

In three steps that gray-green hovel was hidden in the cypresses. A dream it seemed. But we could yet hear the old witch woman singing. Something dragged at our heels, and it was not suction of the muck.

Toe to heel, Red Roane paced me, and we sang a song together. A crimson flower, short-stemmed, yellow-hearted, was almost beneath my boot. I stooped—who will not stoop to pick a crimson wild flower? A rattling, like the shaking of peas. A klirring like the drumming of a man’s fingertips. *Hark! The rattle!*

A yawning head flashed beneath my hand, striking too low. Heavy as a hard-flung stone, the snake’s head struck my ankle; yawning gullet, white-hooked fangs of the deathly rattlesnake. Out of the crimson flower that beast of gold and brown. Its yellow eyes flickered. Its thin lips were dry. How near I had touched to death!

“Thank God for those heavy boots, Jerry!”

With blazing eyes the snake writhed, coiling for another strike. Its sharp tail, pointed upward, vibrated continuously with dusty laughter. Its golden rippling body was thick as my arm.

Red Roane swung down his heavy marching stock. *Crash!* Its leaden end struck that lunging mottled head. Halted in mid-strike, that evil wisdom splattered like an egg, brain pan ripped wide.

The rattler lashed in its last agony, its tremendously muscular tail beating the ground with thumping blows, its yellow eyes still blaring with hate, but closing fast in doom.

I tried to say “Thanks. Red!”

Some mesmerism in those yellow, dying eyes! Shaking with disgust, Red Roane bent above that foul fen watcher, put down his hand to pick up that stricken sin, over whose eyes thin eye-membrane already lowered in death.

“Don’t touch it, Red! Wait till the sun goes down.”

Hark? The rattle! Those opaque eyes shuttered back. Those yellow glances, though in mortal pain, were still furious and glistening. Those horny tail-bells clattered. Fangs in that shattered, insensate head yawned, closing in Red Roane’s arm above the wrist.

I see him. Sweat upon his broad brown forehead; his laughing eyes astounded: his thick strong body shivering; wind stirring up his dart red hair. Behind him the brown-green marshes, grasses rippling, a stir going through their depths. His cheeks had never been so red.

Before I could move, he unlocked those jaws and hollow fangs, gripped hard in his arm with mortal rigor. He shivered now from the knees. His face went white.

“Cut!” he whispered. “I’ll sit down.”

With hunting knife I slashed his arm, deep driving four crossed cuts. He laughed, and tried to shout. Howling would have been more pleasant. I sucked those wounds, out of which slow blood was spouting from an artery. We panted now, both of us. He leaned heavily on my shoulder—he, the strong. I bound his arm, my own fingers so numb I fumbled at the work. Sweat on Red Roane’s face was cold, and cold his wrists.

My arms clung about him. He swayed, almost toppling, clutching at grass stems with fading laughter. I picked up his marching stock and beat that golden, gory thing within the mire.

Beat it till clay-white flesh, and bone and skin were one with the mucky mire of the swamp. But still its heart ebbed with deep purple pulsing. A smashing blow, and that, too, died.

“It’s over!” Grimly I flung the bloody stave into the swaying grass.

“Yes, Jerry,” whispered Red Roane, “it’s nearly over.”

I could not believe it. Red Roane, the strong man, the shouter, the singer, the gay-hearted lover! Is death then, so much stronger than life?

“A woman, Jerry,” he whispered, “in Havana—Dolores! She dances—”

“For God’s sake, Red, wake up!”

“Dances at the—”

“Red! *Red Roane!* I’m here, boy!”

Out from the way, whence we had come, faintly I heard a cry. Who wept thus for the soul departing, sang paeon For the dead? Was it wind over the stagnant grasses? Frail in the solitude, rose that wail again. The whimper of new-born life! In the squatter’s hut the child had found its soul!

“Dolores!” whispered Red Roane. Beneath that brazen sky he whispered the name of love. “Dolores!”

Past a hundred miles of swamp, past a hundred miles of sea, did Dolores, the dancer, hear him calling her?

“Dolores!”

I hope she heard, for he was a good lad, though wild.

With a throat strangling in sobs, I sang to Red Roane. His eyes were closed, yet he heard me. Old campaign songs, songs of the march and the bivouac. Marchers’ tunes.

Then he whispered for a lullaby, and, last of all, for a drinking song.

V.

BIMI TAL had danced up to us—Bimi Tal, daughter of Red Roane and of Dolores, the dancer.

She laughed and tossed her dark red hair. Her broad nostrils sucked in the hot night wind.

“I am the daughter of the morning!

“I shouy. I dance. I laugh away.

“Follow, lover! Hear my warnings

“I, the laugher, do not stay ...

Stamp! Stamp! Stamp! Her body rippled. She cast her eyes at me.

Tain Dirk’s head was rising. His thin, dry, red lips opened wide. His golden eyes burned with undying hate. *Tat! tat! tat!* his fingers drummed.

“In a minute, Jerry,” whispered Bimi Tal, not pausing from her dance. Her lovely eyes looked downward, seeing Dirk. She screamed. The music silenced. She struck her arm at him, not knowing what she did.

Mad! the Man was mad! His jaw was opened wide. *He bit her arm above the wrist.*

Before the rush of frantic people had fallen over us, I struck his venomous face. With both fists, blow on blow. Blood came from his damned lips.

What madness had seized him I don’t know. Likely it was memory surging back through dead life—the venom of the rattler, hate undying. But of that, who can say? A strange thing is memory.

Yet I knew for sure that to him, the mad sculptor, born in that hut in the hot savanna, had passed the soul of the dying rattlesnake.

Hands dragged me back from him. I shouted and tore. He quivered, wounded heavily. His nervous fingers faintly clattered on the table, drumming with dreadful music. Police came in.

“Look!” I shouted to them. “Look at those marks of teeth on Bimi Tal’s wrist. Two deep fangs. *There’s the man who killed Ynecita, the dancer!*”