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# SWORDS & SORCERY

Action, magic, enchantment —  
eight novelettes by masters of heroic fantasy

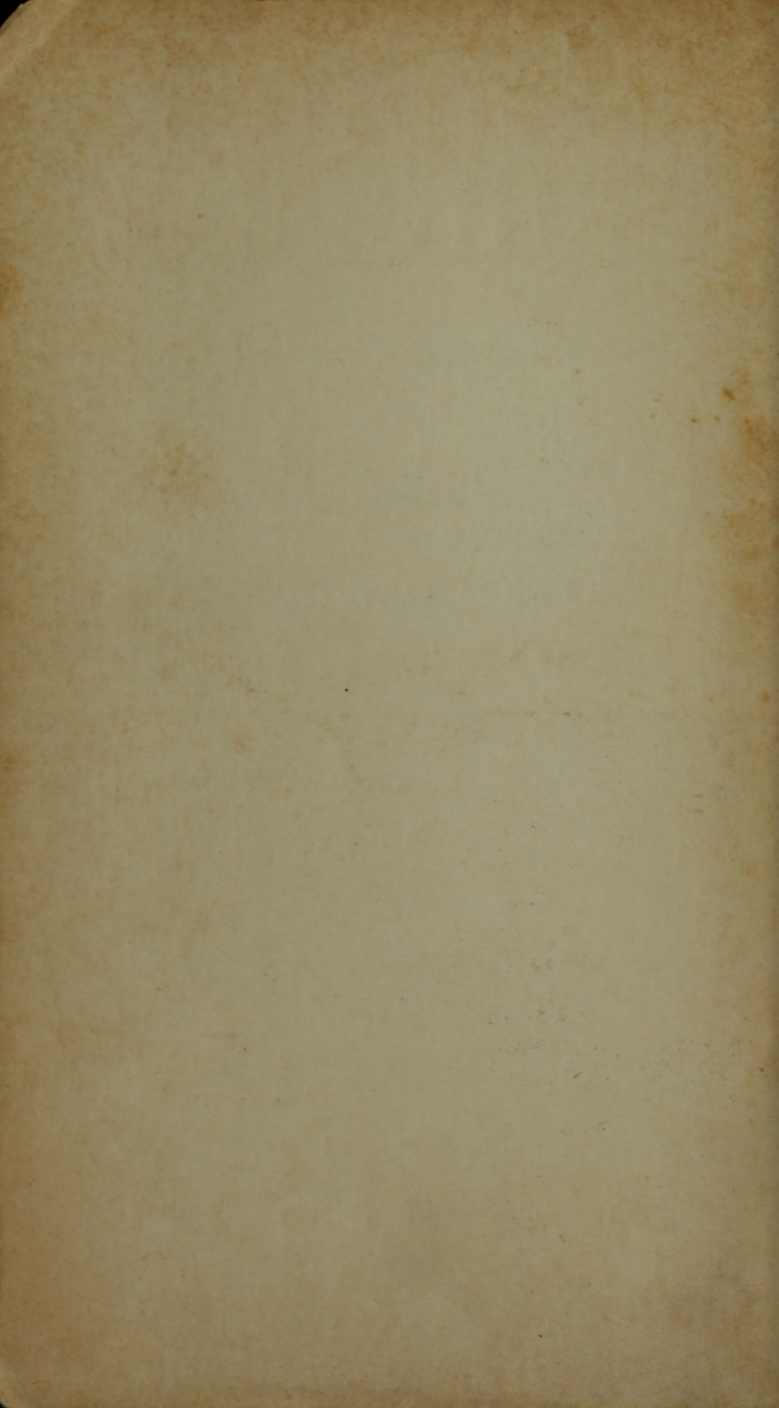
**POUL ANDERSON**  
**H. P. LOVECRAFT**  
**ROBERT E. HOWARD**  
**HENRY KUTTNER**  
**LORD DUNSANY**  
**CLARK ASHTON SMITH**  
**C. L. MOORE**  
**FRITZ LEIBER**

Selected and with an Introduction by  
**L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP**

Illustrated by **VIRGIL FINLAY**









## **THE SWORDSMEN**

**CONAN THE CIMMERIAN**—whose island refuge held a danger more terrible than a man might face

**FAFHRD**—who followed his fancy to the bottom of the sea . . . ready for a love affair or a fight to the death

**PRINCE RAYNOR**—who called forth the darkest powers of the Universe when his sword failed him

**JIREL OF JOIRY**—a woman, but in battle the equal of any man alive . . . though not of the Undead

## **THE SORCERERS**

**GHIAR**—whose eldritch magic turned men to stone

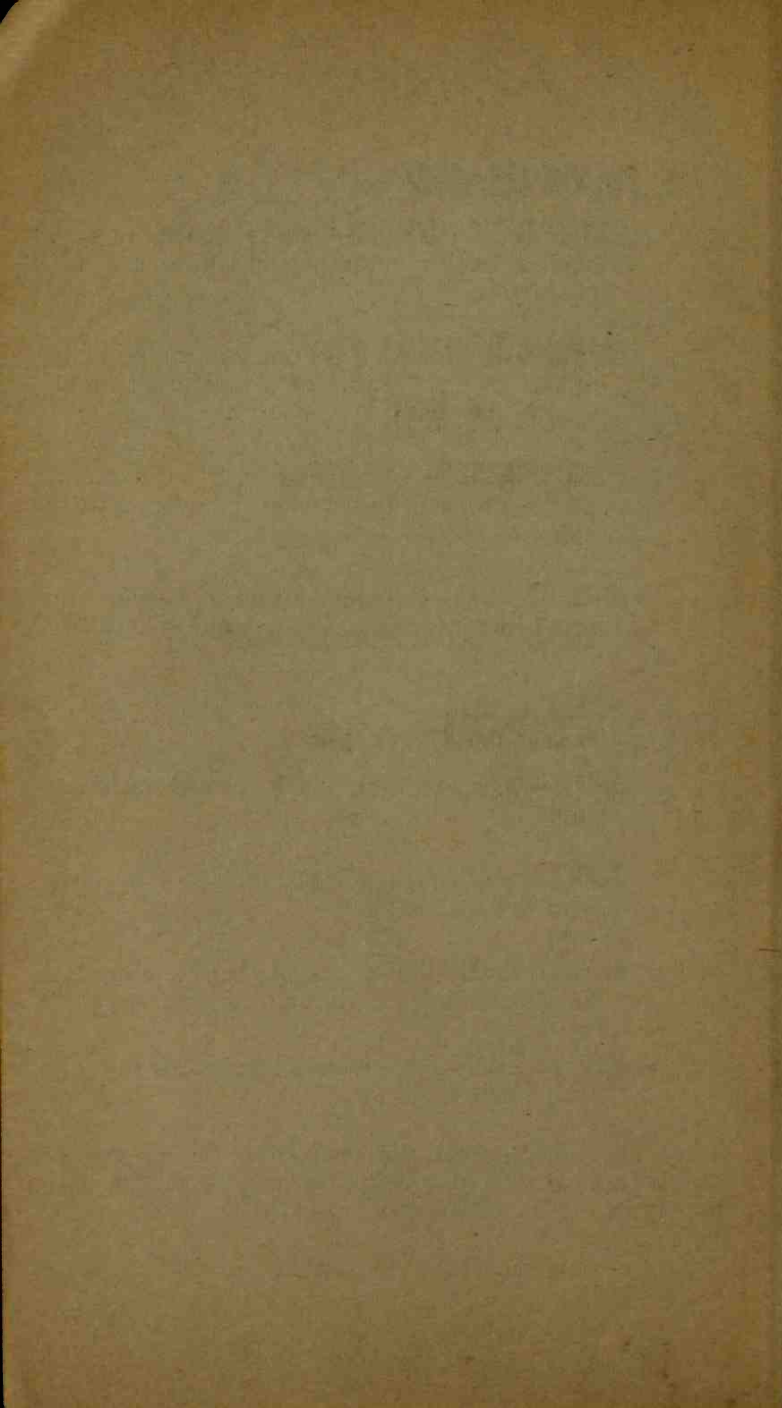
**ALARIC**—who sought for pleasures beyond human understanding

**KNYGATHIN ZHAUM**—you could behead him . . . he didn't mind . . . but would you dare?

**HLO-HLO**—who repaid mockery and theft . . . with interest

These and other heroes and enchanters fill the pages of this book with their epic strife—ready to delight and horrify its . . . shuddering? . . . readers.







# **SWORDS AND SORCERY**

stories of heroic fantasy

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selected and with an Introduction by  
**L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP**

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Illustrated by  
**VIRGIL FINLAY**



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## SWORDS AND SORCERY

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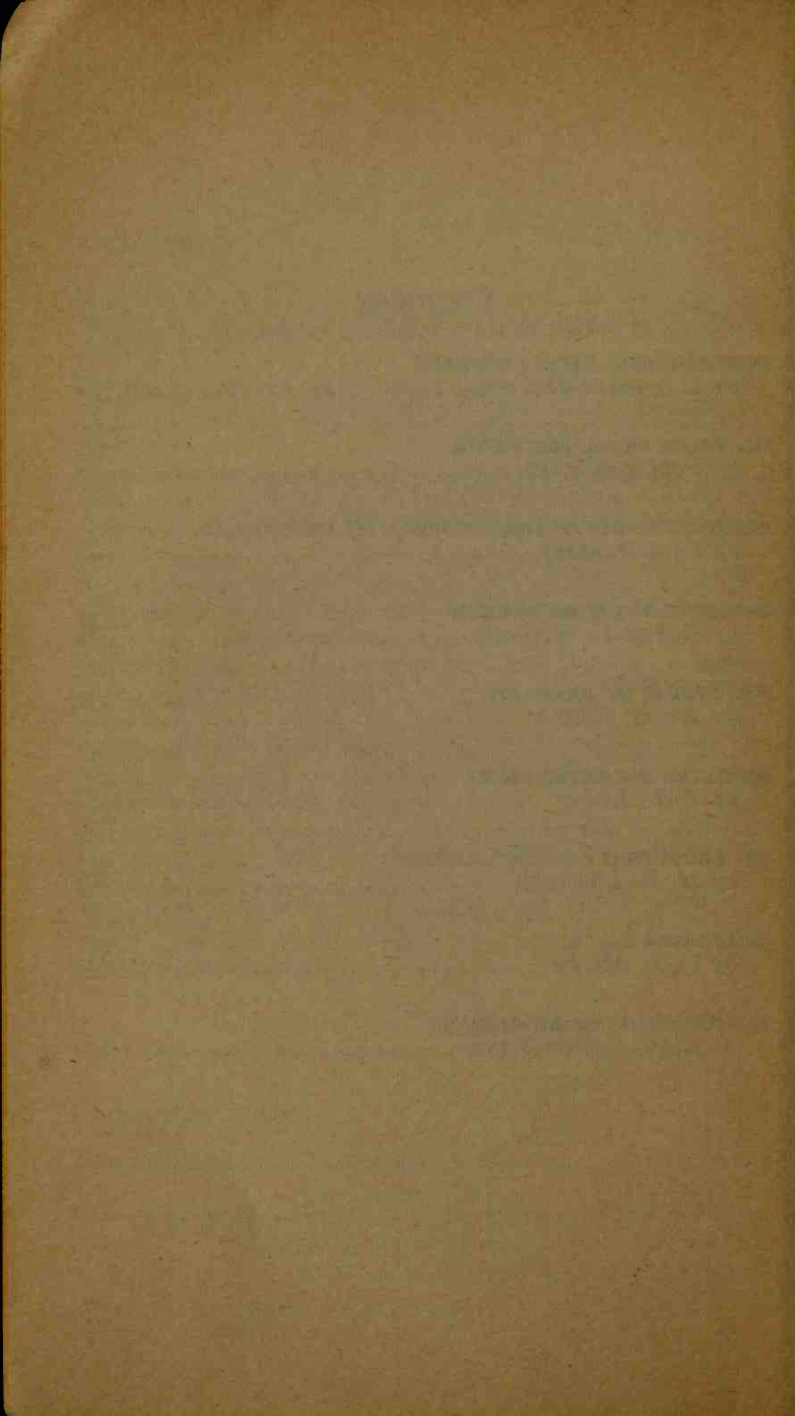
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## ***Introduction: Heroic Fantasy***

"Heroic fantasy" is the name of a class of stories laid, not in the world as it is or was or will be, but as it *ought* to have been to make a good story. The tales collected under this name are adventure-fantasies, laid in imaginary prehistoric or medieval worlds, when (it's fun to imagine) all men were mighty, all women were beautiful, all problems were simple, and all life was adventurous. In such a world, gleaming cities raise their shining spires against the stars; sorcerers cast sinister spells from subterranean lairs; baleful spirits stalk crumbling ruins; primeval monsters crash through jungle thickets; and the fate of kingdoms is balanced on the bloody blades of broadswords brandished by heroes of preternatural might and valor.

The purpose of these stories is neither to teach the problems of the steel industry, nor to expose the defects in our foreign-aid program, nor yet to air the problems of the housewife. It is to entertain. These stories combine the color, gore, and action of the costume novel with the atavistic terrors and delights of the fairy tale. They furnish the purest *fun* to be found in fiction today.

Heroic fantasy is escape reading in which you escape clear out of the real universe. But, come to think of it, these tales are not a bit more "unreal" than any of the hundreds of whodunnits wherein, after the stupid cops have fallen over their own big feet, the brilliant amateur—a private detective, a newspaper reporter, or a little old lady—steps in and solves the crime.

In the 1880s heroic fantasy, neglected since the days of Spenser and Ariosto, revived. William Morris, the British artist, decorator, poet, reformer, publisher, and novelist, revived it. Morris wrote eight novels in this genre as well as shorter stories. All are laid in an imaginary medieval world, or (in *The House of the Wolfings*) in northern Europe in Roman times. Morris' language is beautifully poetic and artfully archaic.



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Of these novels, the longest, *The Well at the World's End*, is still fairly readable. The others tend to start well but to become very dull towards the end. Morris' stories suffered, not from Victorian prudery—his characters relish a good roll in the hay—but from Victorian optimism. His good people are too good and his bad ones not very bad. There is just too much sweetness and light for the taste of our somber century. His Germanic barbarians—in history a singularly dirty, ill-mannered, treacherous, and bloodthirsty lot—are cleaned up and prettified to the point of burlesque.

But let us give credit to Morris for reviving the genre. Echoes of his novels are still heard in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring* trilogy and in Fletcher Pratt's *The Well of the Unicorn* (by "George U. Fletcher").

Morris was followed by Lord Dunsany, who early in this century adapted heroic fantasy to the short-story form. At the same time, Eric R. Eddison carried on the tradition of the long adventure-fantasy novel with his stories of Zimiamvia, *The Worm Ouroboros* and its successors.

The founding of *Weird Tales* in 1923 opened up a new market for such tales in addition to its general run of creepy-crawlies. Under the editorship of Farnsworth Wright (1924-40) this magazine, defunct since 1953, published many outstanding heroic fantasies, notably those of Clark Ashton Smith, Robert E. Howard, and C. L. Moore. Later, the magazine *Unknown Worlds* (1939-43) printed many polished novels and short stories in the genre.

Although the market for fantasy shrank during the Hitlerian war, short stories of heroic fantasy still appear in such magazines as the American *Fantastic Stories of Imagination* and the British *Science Fantasy*. Novels of adventure-fantasy, like Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth* and Poul Anderson's *Three Hearts and Three Lions*, continue to be published. Nearly all the authors in this volume have had collections of short heroic fantasies printed.

So, if you read for fun and relaxation—and why shouldn't you?—go ahead. If any of these imaginary worlds fascinates you, and you would like more of the same—well, some of the collections are in print, while others can be had in libraries or through second-hand book dealers. If you really like the genre and have only just discovered it, you have years of reading pleasure ahead of you. I envy you.

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP



POUL ANDERSON was born in 1926 in Pennsylvania of Danish parents, and was reared in Denmark and in various parts of the United States. He began writing as soon as he graduated from the University of Minnesota and has published a large volume of science fiction (*The High Crusade*), fantasy (*The Broken Sword*), detective stories (*Perish by the Sword*), and historical novels (*The Golden Slave*). The present story, based upon a medieval Danish legend, appeared in *Fantastic Universe Science Fiction* for January, 1957.

Anderson is a tall, curly-haired, youthful-looking man with a capacity for beer that would make his Viking ancestors whistle in admiration. He lives in California, has the Danish flag painted on his mailbox, and pronounces his given name like "pole."





## ***The Valor of Cappen Varra***

*by POUL ANDERSON*

The wind came from the north with sleet on its back. Raw shuddering gusts whipped the sea till the ship lurched and men felt driven spindrift stinging their faces. Beyond the rail there was winter night, a moving blackness where the waves rushed and clamored; straining into the great dark, men sensed only the bitter salt of sea-scud, the nettle of sleet and the lash of wind.

Cappen lost his footing as the ship heaved beneath him, his hands were yanked from the icy rail and he went stumbling to the deck. The bilge water was new coldness on his drenched clothes. He struggled back to his feet, leaning on a rower's bench and wishing miserably that his quaking stomach had more to lose. But he had already chucked his share of stockfish and hardtack, to the laughter of Svearek's men, when the gale started.

Numb fingers groped anxiously for the harp on his back. It still seemed intact in its leather case. He didn't care about the sodden wadmál breeks and tunic that hung around his skin. The sooner they rotted off him, the better. The thought of the silks and linens of Croy was a sigh in him.

Why had he come to Norren?

A gigantic form, vague in the whistling dark, loomed beside him and gave him a steady hand. He could barely hear the blond giant's bull tones: "Ha, easy there, lad. Me-thinks the sea horse road is too rough for yer feet."

"Ulp," said Cappen. His slim body huddled on the bench, too miserable to care. The sleet pattered against his shoulders and the spray congealed in his red hair.

Torbek of Norren squinted into the night. It made his leathery face a mesh of wrinkles. "A bitter feast Yolner we hold," he said. "'Twas a madness of the king's, that he would



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guest with his brother across the water. Now the other ships are blown from us and the fire is drenched out and we lie alone in the Wolf's Throat."

Wind piped shrill in the rigging. Cappen could just see the longboat's single mast reeling against the sky. The ice on the shrouds made it a pale pyramid. Ice everywhere, thick on the rails and benches, sheathing the dragon head and the carved stern-post, the ship rolling and staggering under the great march of waves, men bailing and bailing in the half-frozen bilge to keep her afloat, and too much wind for sail or oars. Yes—a cold feast!

"But then, Svearek has been strange since the troll took his daughter, three years ago," went on Torbek. He shivered in a way the winter had not caused. "Never does he smile, and his once open hand grasps tight about the silver and his men have poor reward and no thanks. Yes, strange—" His small frost-blue eyes shifted to Cappen Varra, and the unspoken thought ran on beneath them: Strange, even, that he likes you, the wandering bard from the south. Strange, that he will have you in his hall when you cannot sing as his men would like.

Cappen did not care to defend himself. He had drifted up toward the northern barbarians with the idea that they would well reward a minstrel who could offer them something more than their own crude chants. It had been a mistake; they didn't care for roundels or sestinas, they yawned at the thought of roses white and red under the moon of Caronne, a moon less fair than my lady's eyes. Nor did a man of Croy have the size and strength to compel their respect; Cappen's light blade flickered swiftly enough so that no one cared to fight him, but he lacked the power of sheer bulk. Svearek alone had enjoyed hearing him sing, but he was niggardly and his brawling thorp was an endless boredom to a man used to the courts of southern princes.

If he had but had the manhood to leave— But he had delayed, because of a hope that Svearek's coffers would open wider; and now he was dragged along over the Wolf's Throat to a midwinter feast which would have to be celebrated on the sea.

"Had we but fire—" Torbek thrust his hands inside his cloak, trying to warm them a little. The ship rolled till she was almost on her beam ends; Torbek braced himself with practiced feet, but Cappen went into the bilge again.

### *The Valor of Cappen Varra*

He sprawled there for a while, his bruised body refusing movement. A weary sailor with a bucket glared at him through dripping hair. His shout was dim under the hoot and skirl of wind: "If ye like it so well down here, then help us bail!"

"'Tis not yet my turn," groaned Cappen, and got slowly up.

The wave which had nearly swamped them had put out the ship's fire and drenched the wood beyond hope of lighting a new one. It was cold fish and sea-sodden hardtack till they saw land again—if they ever did.

As Cappen raised himself on the leeward side, he thought he saw something gleam, far out across the wrathful night. A wavering red spark— He brushed a stiffened hand across his eyes, wondering if the madness of wind and water had struck through into his own skull. A gust of sleet hid it again. But—

He fumbled his way aft between the benches. Huddled figures cursed him wearily as he stepped on them. The ship shook herself, rolled along the edge of a boiling black trough, and slid down into it; for an instant, the white teeth of combers grinned above her rail, and Cappen waited for an end to all things. Then she mounted them again, somehow, and wallowed toward another valley.

King Svearek had the steering oar and was trying to hold the longboat into the wind. He had stood there since sundown, huge and untiring, legs braced and the bucking wood cradled in his arms. More than human he seemed, there under the icicle loom of the stern-post, his gray hair and beard rigid with ice. Beneath the horned helmet, the strong moody face turned right and left, peering into the darkness. Cappen felt smaller than usual when he approached the steersman.

He leaned close to the king, shouting against the blast of winter: "My lord, did I not see firelight?"

"Aye. I spied it an hour ago," grunted the king. "Been trying to steer us a little closer to it."

Cappen nodded, too sick and weary to feel reproved. "What is it?"

"Some island—there are many in this stretch of water—now shut up!"

Cappen crouched down under the rail and waited.

The lonely red gleam seemed nearer when he looked again. Svearek's tones were lifting in a roar that hammered



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through the gale from end to end of the ship: "Hither! Come hither to me, all men not working!"

Slowly, they groped to him, great shadowy forms in wool and leather, bulking over Cappen like storm-gods. Svearek nodded toward the flickering glow. "One of the islands, somebody must be living there. I cannot bring the ship closer for fear of surf, but one of ye should be able to take the boat thither and fetch us fire and dry wood. Who will go?"

They peered overside, and the uneasy movement that ran among them came from more than the roll and pitch of the deck underfoot.

Beorna the Bold spoke at last, it was hardly to be heard in the noisy dark: "I never knew of men living hereabouts. It must be a lair of trolls."

"Aye, so . . . aye, they'd but eat the man we sent . . . out oars, let's away from here though it cost our lives . . ." The frightened mumble was low under the jeering wind.

Svearek's face drew into a snarl. "Are ye men or puling babes? Hack yer way through them, if they be trolls, but bring me fire!"

"Even a she-troll is stronger than fifty men, my king," cried Torbek. "Well ye know that, when the monster woman broke through our guards three years ago and bore off Hildigund."

"Enough!" It was a scream in Svearek's throat. "I'll have yer craven heads for this, all of ye, if ye gang not to the isle!"

They looked at each other, the big men of Norren, and their shoulders hunched bearlike. It was Beorna who spoke it for them: "No, that ye will not. We are free housecarls, who will fight for a leader—but not for a madman."

Cappen drew back against the rail, trying to make himself small.

"All gods turn their faces from ye!" It was more than weariness and despair which glared in Svearek's eyes, there was something of death in them. "I'll go myself, then!"

"No, my king. That we will not find ourselves in."

"I am the king."

"And we are yer housecarls, sworn to defend ye—even from yerself. Ye shall not go."

The ship rolled again, so violently that they were all thrown to starboard. Cappen landed on Torbek, who reached

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up to shove him aside and then closed one huge fist on his tunic.

"Here's our man!"

"Hi!" yelled Cappen.

Torbek hauled him roughly back to his feet. "Ye cannot row or bail yer fair share," he growled, "nor do ye know the rigging or any skill of a sailor—'tis time ye made yerself useful!"

"Aye, aye—let little Cappen go—mayhap he can sing the trolls to sleep—" The laughter was hard and barking, edged with fear, and they all hemmed him in.

"My lord!" bleated the minstrel. "I am your guest—"

Svearek laughed unpleasantly, half crazily. "Sing them a song," he howled. "Make a fine roun—whatever ye call it—to the troll-wife's beauty. And bring us some fire, little man, bring us a flame less hot than the love in yer breast for yer lady!"

Teeth grinned through matted beards. Someone hauled on the rope from which the ship's small boat trailed, dragging it close. "Go, ye scut!" A horny hand sent Cappen stumbling to the rail.

He cried out once again. An ax lifted above his head. Someone handed him his own slim sword, and for a wild moment he thought of fighting. Useless—too many of them. He buckled on the sword and spat at the men. The wind tossed it back in his face, and they raved with laughter.

Over the side! The boat rose to meet him, he landed in a heap on drenched planks and looked up into the shadowy faces of the northmen. There was a sob in his throat as he found the seat and took out the oars.

An awkward pull sent him spinning from the ship, and then the night had swallowed it and he was alone. Numbly, he bent to the task. Unless he wanted to drown, there was no place to go but the island.

He was too weary and ill to be much afraid, and such fear as he had was all of the sea. It could rise over him, gulp him down, the gray horses would gallop over him and the long weeds would wrap him when he rolled dead against some skerry. The soft vales of Caronne and the roses in Croy's gardens seemed like a dream. There was only the roar and boom of the northern sea, hiss of sleet and spindrift, crazed scream of wind, he was alone as man had ever been and he would go down to the sharks alone.

The boat wallowed, but rode the waves better than the



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longship. He grew dully aware that the storm was pushing him toward the island. It was becoming visible, a deeper blackness harsh against the night.

He could not row much in the restless water; he shipped the oars and waited for the gale to capsize him and fill his mouth with the sea. And when it gurgled in his throat, what would his last thought be? Should he dwell on the lovely image of Ydris in Seilles, she of the long bright hair and the singing voice? But then there had been the tomboy laughter of dark Falkny, he could not neglect her. And there were memories of Elvanna in her castle by the lake, and Sirann of the Hundred Rings, and beauteous Vardry, and hawk-proud Lona, and— No, he could not do justice to any of them in the little time that remained. What a pity it was!

No, wait, that unforgettable night in Nienne, the beauty which had whispered in his ear and drawn him close, the hair which had fallen like a silken tent about his cheeks . . . ah, that had been the summit of his life, he would go down into darkness with her name on his lips . . . But hell! What *had* her name been, now?

Cappen Varra, minstrel of Croy, clung to the bench and sighed.

The great hollow voice of surf lifted about him, waves sheeted across the gunwale and the boat danced in madness. Cappen groaned, huddling into the circle of his own arms and shaking with cold. Swiftly, now, the end of all sunlight and laughter, the dark and lonely road which all men must tread. *O Ilwarra of Syr, Aedra in Tholis, could I but kiss you once more—*

Stones grated under the keel. It was a shock like a sword going through him. Cappen looked unbelievably up. The boat had drifted to land—he was alive!

It was like the sun in his breast. Weariness fell from him, and he leaped overside, not feeling the chill of the shallows. With a grunt, he heaved the boat up on the narrow strand and knotted the painter to a fang-like jut of reef.

Then he looked about him. The island was small, utterly bare, a savage loom of rock rising out of the sea that growled at its feet and streamed off its shoulders. He had come into a little cliff-walled bay, somewhat sheltered from the wind. He was here!

For a moment he stood, running through all he had learned about the trolls which infested these northlands. Hideous and soulless dwellers underground, they knew not

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old age; a sword could hew them asunder, but before it reached their deep-seated life, their unhuman strength had plucked a man apart. Then they ate him—

Small wonder the northmen feared them. Cappen threw back his head and laughed. He had once done a service for a mighty wizard in the south, and his reward hung about his neck, a small silver amulet. The wizard had told him that no supernatural being could harm anyone who carried a piece of silver.

The northmen said that a troll was powerless against a man who was not afraid; but, of course, only to see one was to feel the heart turn to ice. They did not know the value of silver, it seemed—odd that they shouldn't, but they did not. Because Cappen Varra did, he had no reason to be afraid; therefore he was doubly safe, and it was but a matter of talking the troll into giving him some fire. If indeed there was a troll here, and not some harmless fisherman.

He whistled gaily, wrung some of the water from his cloak and ruddy hair, and started along the beach. In the sleety gloom, he could just see a hewn-out path winding up one of the cliffs and he set his feet on it.

At the top of the path, the wind ripped his whistling from his lips. He hunched his back against it and walked faster, swearing as he stumbled on hidden rocks. The ice-sheathed ground was slippery underfoot, and the cold bit like a knife.

Rounding a crag, he saw redness glow in the face of a steep bluff. A cave mouth, a fire within—he hastened his steps, hungering for warmth, until he stood in the entrance.

*"Who comes?"*

It was a hoarse bass cry that rang and boomed between walls of rock; there was ice and horror in it, for a moment Cappen's heart stumbled. Then he remembered the amulet and strode boldly inside.

"Good evening, mother," he said cheerily.

The cave widened out into a stony hugeness that gaped with tunnels leading further underground. The rough, soot-blackened walls were hung with plundered silks and cloth-of-gold, gone ragged with age and damp; the floor was strewn with stinking rushes, and gnawed bones were heaped in disorder. Cappen saw the skulls of men among them. In the center of the room, a great fire leaped and blazed, throwing billows of heat against him; some of its smoke went up a hole in the roof, the rest stung his eyes to watering and he sneezed.



## *Swords and Sorcery*

The troll-wife crouched on the floor, snarling at him. She was quite the most hideous thing Cappen had ever seen: nearly as tall as he, she was twice as broad and thick, and the knotted arms hung down past bowed knees till their clawed fingers brushed the ground. Her head was beast-like, almost split in half by the tusked mouth, the eyes wells of darkness, the nose an ell long; her hairless skin was green and cold, moving on her bones. A tattered shift covered some of her monstrosity, but she was still a nightmare.

"Ho-ho, ho-ho!" Her laughter roared out, hungry and hollow as the surf around the island. Slowly, she shuffled closer. "So my dinner comes walking in to greet me, ho, ho, ho! Welcome, sweet flesh, welcome, good marrow-filled bones, come in and be warmed."

"Why, thank you, good mother." Cappen shucked his cloak and grinned at her through the smoke. He felt his clothes steaming already. "I love you too."

Over her shoulder, he suddenly saw the girl. She was huddled in a corner, wrapped in fear, but the eyes that watched him were as blue as the skies over Caronne. The ragged dress did not hide the gentle curves of her body, nor did the tear-streaked grime spoil the lilt of her face. "Why, 'tis springtime in here," cried Cappen, "and Primavera herself is strewing flowers of love."

"What are you talking about, crazy man?" rumbled the troll-wife. She turned to the girl. "Heap the fire, Hildigund, and set up the roasting spit. Tonight I feast!"

"Truly I see heaven in female form before me," said Cappen.

The troll scratched her misshapen head.

"You must surely be from far away, moonstruck man," she said.

"Aye, from golden Croy am I wandered, drawn over dolorous seas and empty wild lands by the fame of loveliness waiting here; and now that I have seen you, my life is full." Cappen was looking at the girl as he spoke, but he hoped the troll might take it as aimed her way.

"It will be fuller," grinned the monster. "Stuffed with hot coals while yet you live." She glanced back at the girl. "What, are you not working yet, you lazy tub of lard? Set up the spit, I said!"

The girl shuddered back against a heap of wood. "No," she whispered. "I cannot—not . . . not for a man."

## *The Valor of Cappen Varra*

"Can and will, my girl," said the troll, picking up a bone to throw at her. The girl shrieked a little.

"No, no, sweet mother. I would not be so ungallant as to have beauty toil for me." Cappen plucked at the troll's filthy dress. "It is not meet—in two senses. I only came to beg a little fire; yet will I bear away a greater fire within my heart."

"Fire in your guts, you mean! No man ever left me save as picked bones."

Cappen thought he heard a worried note in the animal growl. "Shall we have music for the feast?" he asked mildly. He unslung the case of his harp and took it out.

The troll-wife waved her fists in the air and danced with rage. "Are you mad? I tell you, you are going to be eaten!"

The minstrel plucked a string on his harp. "This wet air has played the devil with her tone," he murmured sadly.

The troll-wife roared wordlessly and lunged at him. Hildigund covered her eyes. Cappen tuned his harp. A foot from his throat, the claws stopped.

"Pray do not excite yourself, mother," said the bard. "I carry silver, you know."

"What is that to me? If you think you have a charm which will turn me, know that there is none. I've no fear of your metal!"

Cappen threw back his head and sang:

*"A lovely lady full oft lies.  
The light that lies within her eyes  
and lies and lies, in no surprise.  
All her unkindness can devise  
to trouble hearts that seek the prize  
which is herself, are angel lies—"*

"Aaaarrgh!" It was like thunder drowning him out. The troll-wife turned and went on all fours and poked up the fire with her nose.

Cappen stepped softly around her and touched the girl. She looked up with a little whimper.

"You are Svearek's only daughter, are you not?" he whispered.

"Aye—" She bowed her head, a strengthless despair weighing it down. "The troll stole me away three winters ago. It has tickled her to have a princess for slave—but soon I shall roast on her spit, even as ye, brave man—"

"Ridiculous. So fair a lady is meant for another kind of, um, never mind! Has she treated you very ill?"

## *Swords and Sorcery*

"She beats me now and again—and I have been so lonely, naught here at all save the troll-wife and I—" The small work-roughened hands clutched desperately at his waist, and she buried her face against his breast.

"Can ye save us?" she gasped. "I fear 'tis for naught ye ventured yer life, bravest of men. I fear we'll soon both sputter on the coals."

Cappen said nothing. If she wanted to think he had come especially to rescue her, he would not be so ungallant to tell her otherwise.

The troll-wife's mouth gashed in a grin as she walked through the fire to him. "There is a price," she said. "If you cannot tell me three things about myself which are true beyond disproving, not courage nor amulet nor the gods themselves may avail to keep that red head on your shoulders."

Cappen clapped a hand to his sword. "Why, gladly," he said; this was a rule of magic he had learned long ago, that three truths were the needful armor to make any guardian charm work. "Imprimis, yours is the ugliest nose I ever saw poking up a fire. Secundus, I was never in a house I cared less to guest at. Tertius, ever among trolls you are little liked, being one of the worst."

Hildigund moaned with terror as the monster swelled in rage. But there was no movement. Only the leaping flames and the eddying smoke stirred.

Cappen's voice rang out, coldly: "Now the king lies on the sea, frozen and wet, and I am come to fetch a brand for his fire. And I had best also see his daughter home."

The troll shook her head, suddenly chuckling. "No. The brand you may have, just to get you out of this cave, foulness; but the woman is in my thrall until a man sleeps with her—here—for a night. And if he does, I may have him to break my fast in the morning!"

Cappen yawned mightily. "Thank you, mother. Your offer of a bed is most welcome to these tired bones, and I accept gratefully."

"You will die tomorrow!" she raved. The ground shook under the huge weight of her as she stamped. "Because of the three truths, I must let you go tonight; but tomorrow I may do what I will!"

"Forget not my little friend, mother," said Cappen, and touched the cord of the amulet.

"I tell you, silver has no use against me—"



## *The Valor of Cappen Varra*

Cappen sprawled on the floor and rippled fingers across his harp. "*A lovely lady full oft lies—*"

The troll-wife turned from him in a rage. Hildigund ladled up some broth, saying nothing, and Cappen ate it with pleasure, though it could have used more seasoning.

After that he indited a sonnet to the princess, who regarded him wide-eyed. The troll came back from a tunnel after he finished, and said curtly: "This way." Cappen took the girl's hand and followed her into a pitchy, reeking dark.

She plucked an arras aside to show a room which surprised him by being hung with tapestries, lit with candles, and furnished with a fine broad featherbed. "Sleep here tonight, if you dare," she growled. "And tomorrow I shall eat you—and you, worthless lazy she-trash, will have the hide flayed off your back!" She barked a laugh and left them.

Hildigund fell weeping on the mattress. Cappen let her cry herself out while he undressed and got between the blankets. Drawing his sword, he laid it carefully in the middle of the bed.

The girl looked at him through jumbled fair locks. "How can ye dare?" she whispered. "One breath of fear, one moment's doubt, and the troll is free to rend ye."

"Exactly." Cappen yawned. "Doubtless she hopes that will come to me lying wakeful in the night. Wherefore 'tis but a question of going gently to sleep. O Svearek, Torbek, and Beorna, could you but see how I am resting now!"

"But . . . the three truths ye gave her . . . how knew ye . . . ?"

"Oh, those. Well, see you, sweet lady, Primus and Secundus were my own thoughts, and who is to disprove them? Tertius was also clear, since you said there had been no company here in three years—yet are there many trolls in these lands, ergo even they cannot stomach our gentle hostess." Cappen watched her through heavy-lidded eyes.

She flushed deeply, blew out the candles, and he heard her slip off her garment and get in with him. There was a long silence.

Then: "Are ye not—"

"Yes, fair one?" he muttered through his drowsiness.

"Are ye not . . . well, I am here and ye are here and—"

"Fear not," he said. "I laid my sword between us. Sleep in peace."

"I . . . would be glad—ye have come to deliver—"

"No, fair lady. No man of gentle breeding could so abuse

## *Swords and Sorcery*

his power. Goodnight." He leaned over, brushing his lips gently across hers, and lay down again.

"Ye are . . . I never thought man could be so noble," she whispered.

Cappen mumbled something. As his soul spun into sleep, he chuckled. Those unresting days and nights on the sea had not left him fit for that kind of exercise. But, of course, if she wanted to think he was being magnanimous, it could be useful later—

He woke with a start and looked into the sputtering glare of a torch. Its light wove across the crags and gullies of the troll-wife's face and shimmered wetly off the great tusks in her mouth.

"Good morning, mother," said Cappen politely.

Hildigund thrust back a scream.

"Come and be eaten," said the troll-wife.

"No, thank you," said Cappen, regretfully but firmly.

"'Twould be ill for my health. No, I will but trouble you for a firebrand and then the princess and I will be off."

"If you think that stupid bit of silver will protect you, think again," she snapped. "Your three sentences were all that saved you last night. Now I hunger."

"Silver," said Cappen didactically, "is a certain shield against all black magics. So the wizard told me, and he was such a nice white-bearded old man I am sure even his attendant devils never lied. Now please depart, mother, for modesty forbids me to dress before your eyes."

The hideous face thrust close to his. He smiled dreamily and tweaked her nose—hard.

She howled and flung the torch at him. Cappen caught it and stuffed it into her mouth. She choked and ran from the room.

"A new sport—trollbaiting," said the bard gaily into the sudden darkness. "Come, shall we not venture out?"

The girl trembled too much to move. He comforted her, absentmindedly, and dressed in the dark, swearing at the clumsy leggings. When he left, Hildigund put on her clothes and hurried after him.

The troll-wife squatted by the fire and glared at them as they went by. Cappen hefted his sword and looked at her. "I do not love you," he said mildly, and hewed out.

She backed away, shrieking as he slashed at her. In the

### *The Valor of Cappen Varra*

end, she crouched at the mouth of a tunnel, raging futilely. Cappen pricked her with his blade.

"It is not worth my time to follow you down underground," he said, "but if ever you trouble men again, I will hear of it and come and feed you to my dogs. A piece at a time—a very small piece—do you understand?"

She snarled at him.

"An *extremely* small piece," said Cappen amiably. "Have you heard me?"

Something broke in her. "Yes," she whimpered. He let her go, and she scuttled from him like a rat.

He remembered the firewood and took an armful; on the way, he thoughtfully picked up a few jeweled rings which he didn't think she would be needing and stuck them in his pouch. Then he led the girl outside.

The wind had laid itself, a clear frosty morning glittered on the sea and the longship was a distant sliver against white-capped blueness. The minstrel groaned. "What a distance to row! Oh, well—"

They were at sea before Hildigund spoke. Awe was in the eyes that watched him. "No man could be so brave," she murmured. "Are ye a god?"

"Not quite," said Cappen. "No, most beautiful one, modesty grips my tongue. 'Twas but that I had the silver and was therefore proof against her sorcery."

"But the silver was no help!" she cried.

Cappen's oar caught a crab. "What?" he yelled.

"No—no—why, she told ye so her own self—"

"I thought she lied. I *know* the silver guards against—"

"But she used no magic! Trolls have but their own strength!"

Cappen sagged in his seat. For a moment he thought he was going to faint. Then only his lack of fear had armored him; and if he had known the truth, that would not have lasted a minute.

He laughed shakily. Another score for his doubts about the overall value of truth!

The longship's oars bit water and approached him. Indignant voices asking why he had been so long on his errand faded when his passenger was seen. And Svearek the king wept as he took his daughter back into his arms.

The hard brown face was still blurred with tears when he looked at the minstrel, but the return of his old self was



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there too. "What ye have done, Cappen Varra of Croy, is what no other man in the world could have done."

"Aye—aye—" The rough northern voices held adoration as the warriors crowded around the slim red-haired figure.

"Ye shall have her whom ye saved to wife," said Svearek, "and when I die ye shall rule all Norren."

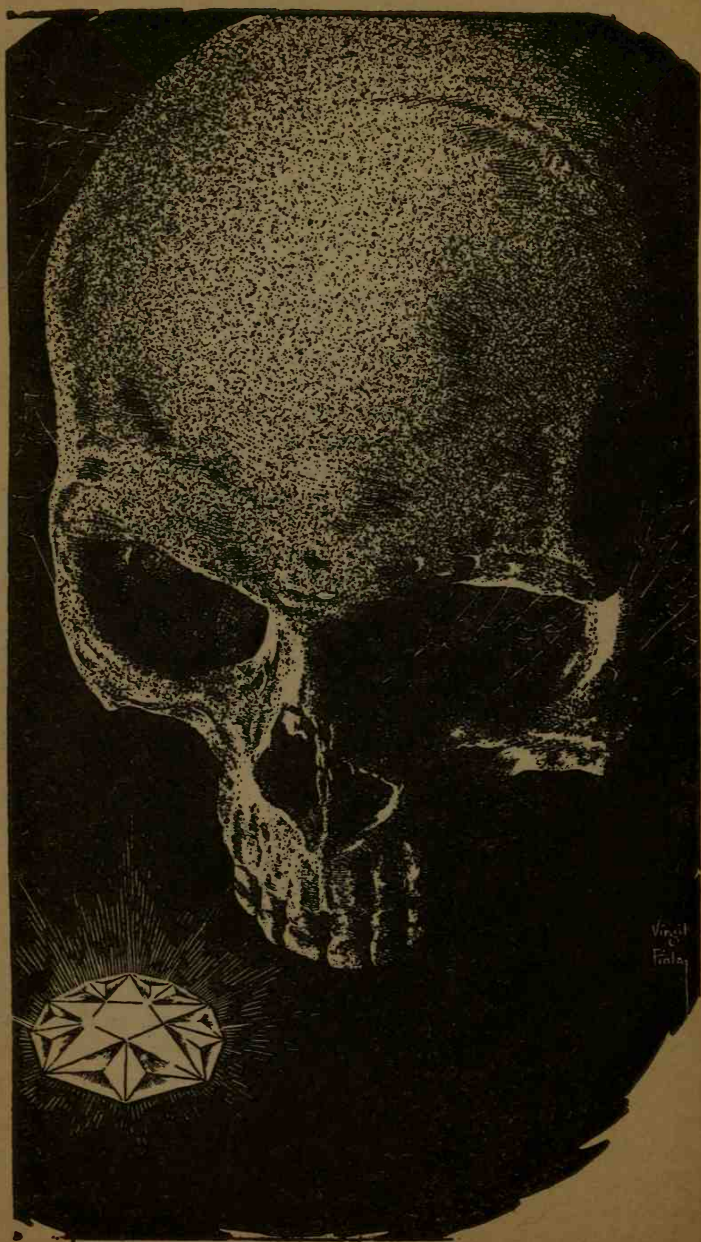
Cappen swayed and clutched the rail.

Three nights later he slipped away from their shore camp and turned his face southward.

EDWARD JOHN MORETON DRAX PLUNKETT (1878-1958), eighteenth BARON DUNSANY and master of Dunsany Castle in Ireland, was the kind of lord that many people would like to be if they had the chance. He was 6' 4" tall, and a sportsman, soldier, traveler, and a man of letters, with a grand gift of poetic speech. In youth he held a commission in the Coldstream Guards, serving with distinction in the Boer and Kaiserian wars. Later he traveled the world, hunted wild goats in the Sahara, and made an abortive entry into British politics. He was an enthusiast for games and sports, from chess (he was once chess champion of Ireland) to lion hunting.

He began writing (with a quill pen, a habit in which he persisted) in the early 1900s. For a while he was associated with the Abbey Theatre in Dublin during the Irish Renaissance. He wrote sixty-odd books: collections of short stories, plays, and poems; novels, travel books, and volumes of autobiography.

Lovecraft called Dunsany's work: "Unexcelled in the sorcery of crystalline singing prose, and supreme in the creation of a gorgeous and languorous world of iridescently exotic vision . . ." Some of Dunsany's tales are laid in Ireland, some in an Africa odder than any thought up by Edgar Rice Burroughs, and some in never-never lands of his own creation. One of these last is printed here. It appeared in the collection *The Book of Wonder* (London and Boston, 1912) and was reprinted in *The Sword of Welleran and Other Tales of Enchantment* (Boston, 1954).



Vincent  
Finley



## ***Distressing Tale of Thangobrind the Jeweller***

*by LORD DUNSANY*

When Thangobrind the jeweller heard the ominous cough, he turned at once upon that narrow way. A thief was he, of very high repute, being patronized by the lofty and elect for he stole nothing smaller than the Moomoo's egg, and in all his life stole only four kinds of stone—the ruby, the diamond, the emerald, and the sapphire; and, as jewellers go, his honesty was great. Now there was a Merchant Prince who had come to Thangobrind and had offered his daughter's soul for the diamond that is larger than the human head and was to be found on the lap of the spider-idol, Hlo-hlo, in his temple of Moun-ga-ling; for he had heard that Thangobrind was a thief to be trusted.

Thangobrind oiled his body and slipped out of his shop, and went secretly through byways, and got as far as Snarp, before anybody knew that he was out on business again or missed his sword from its place under the counter. Thence he moved only by night, hiding by day and rubbing the edges of his sword, which he called Mouse because it was swift and nimble. The jeweller had subtle methods of travelling; nobody saw him cross the plains of Zid; nobody saw him come to Mursk or Tlun. O, but he loved shadows! Once the moon peeping out unexpectedly from a tempest had betrayed an ordinary jeweller; not so did it undo Thangobrind: the watchmen only saw a crouching shape that snarled and laughed: " 'Tis but a hyena," they said. Once in the city of Ag one of the guardians seized him, but Thangobrind was oiled and slipped from his hand; you scarcely heard his bare feet patter away. He knew that the Merchant Prince awaited his return, his little eyes open all night and glittering with greed; he knew how his daughter lay chained up and screaming night and day. Ah, Thangobrind

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knew. And had he not been out on business he had almost allowed himself one or two little laughs. But business was business, and the diamond that he sought still lay on the lap of Hlo-hlo, where it had been for the last two million years since Hlo-hlo created the world and gave unto it all things except that precious stone called Dead Man's Diamond. The jewel was often stolen, but it had a knack of coming back again to the lap of Hlo-hlo. Thangobrind knew this, but he was no common jeweller and hoped to outwit Hlo-hlo, perceiving not the trend of ambition and lust that they are vanity.

How nimbly he threaded his way through the pits of Snood!—now like a botanist, scrutinising the ground; now like a dancer, leaping from crumbling edges. It was quite dark when he went by the towers of Tor, where archers shoot ivory arrows at strangers lest any foreigner should alter their laws, which are bad, but not to be altered by mere aliens. At night they shoot by the sound of the strangers' feet. O, Thangobrind, Thangobrind, was ever a jeweller like you! He dragged two stones behind him by long cords, and at these the archers shot. Tempting indeed was the snare that they set in Woth, the emeralds loose-set in the city's gate: but Thangobrind discerned the golden cord that climbed the wall from each and the weights that would topple upon him if he touched one, and so he left them, though he left them weeping, and at last came to Theth. There all men worship Hlo-hlo; though they are willing to believe in other gods, as missionaries attest, but only as creatures of the chase for the hunting of Hlo-hlo, who wears Their halos, so these people say, on golden hooks along his hunting-belt. And from Theth he came to the city of MOUNG and the temple of MOUNG-GA-LING, and entered and saw the spider-idol, Hlo-hlo, sitting there with Dead Man's Diamond glittering on his lap, and looking for all the world like a full moon, but a full moon seen by a lunatic who had slept too long in its rays, for there was in Dead Man's Diamond a certain sinister look and a boding of things to happen that are better not mentioned here. The face of the spider-idol was lit by that fatal gem; there was no other light. In spite of his shocking limbs and that demoniac body, his face was serene and apparently unconscious.

A little fear came into the mind of Thangobrind the jeweller, a passing tremor—no more; business was business and he hoped for the best. Thangobrind offered honey to

### *Distressing Tale of Thangobrind the Jeweller*

Hlo-hlo and prostrated himself before him. O, he was cunning! When the priests stole out of the darkness to lap up the honey they were stretched senseless on the temple floor, for there was a drug in the honey that was offered to Hlo-hlo. And Thangobrind the jeweller picked Dead Man's Diamond up and put it on his shoulder and trudged away from the shrine; and Hlo-hlo the spider-idol said nothing at all, but he laughed softly as the jeweller shut the door. When the priests awoke out of the grip of the drug that was offered with the honey to Hlo-hlo, they rushed to a little secret room with an outlet on the stars and cast a horoscope of the thief. Something that they saw in the horoscope seemed to satisfy the priests.

It was not like Thangobrind to go back by the road by which he had come. No, he went by another road, even though it led to the narrow way, night-house and spider-forest.

The city of MOUNG went towering up behind him, balcony above balcony, eclipsing half the stars, as he trudged away with his diamond. He was not easy as he trudged away. Though when a soft pittering as of velvet feet arose behind him he refused to acknowledge that it might be what he feared, yet the instincts of his trade told him that it is not well when any noise whatever follows a diamond by night, and this was one of the largest that had ever come to him in the way of business. When he came to the narrow way that leads to spider-forest, Dead Man's Diamond feeling cold and heavy, and the velvety footfall seeming fearfully close, the jeweller stopped and almost hesitated. He looked behind him; there was nothing there. He listened attentively; there was no sound now. Then he thought of the screams of the Merchant Prince's daughter, whose soul was the diamond's price, and smiled and went stoutly on. There watched him, apathetically, over the narrow way, that grim and dubious woman whose house is the Night. Thangobrind, hearing no longer the sound of suspicious feet, felt easier now. He was all but come to the end of the narrow way, when the woman listlessly uttered that ominous cough.

The cough was too full of meaning to be disregarded. Thangobrind turned round and saw at once what he feared. The spider-idol had stayed at home. The jeweller put his diamond gently upon the ground and drew his sword called Mouse. And then began that famous fight upon the narrow way in which the grim old woman whose house was Night



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seemed to take so little interest. To the spider-idol you saw at once it was all a horrible joke. To the jeweller it was grim earnest. He fought and panted and was pushed back slowly along the narrow way, but he wounded Hlo-hlo all the while with terrible long gashes all over his deep, soft body till Mouse was slimy with blood. But at last the persistent laughter of Hlo-hlo was too much for the jeweller's nerves, and, once more wounding his demoniac foe, he sank aghast and exhausted by the door of the house called Night at the feet of the grim old woman, who having uttered once that ominous cough interfered no further with the course of events. And there carried Thangobrind the jeweller away those whose duty it was, to the house where the two men hang, and taking down from his hook the left-hand one of the two, they put that venturous jeweller in his place; so that there fell on him the doom that he feared, as all men know though it is so long since, and there abated somewhat the ire of the envious gods.

And the only daughter of the Merchant Prince felt so little gratitude for this great deliverance that she took to respectability of a militant kind, and became aggressively dull, and called her home the English Riviera, and had platitudes worked in worsted upon her tea-cosy, and in the end never died, but passed away at her residence.

For vivid, violent, gripping, headlong action, the stories of ROBERT ERVIN HOWARD (1906-36) take the prize among heroic fantasies. Howard was born and lived in Cross Plains, Texas, attended Brownsville College, and during his short life turned out a large volume of general pulp fiction: sport, detective, western, and oriental adventure stories besides his fantasies. Although a big, powerful man like his heroes, he suffered delusions of persecution and killed himself in an excess of emotion over his aged mother's death.

Of Howard's several series of heroic fantasies, the most successful were those laid in the imaginary Hyborian Age, between the sinking of Atlantis and the beginnings of recorded history. The hero of these tales is a gigantic barbarian adventurer, Conan the Cimmerian, who wades through rivers of gore to defeat natural and supernatural foes and at length becomes king of Aquilonia. In most of the stories he has a girl, but a different one each time; we never learn what befell the previous one.

All but three of the twenty Conan stories appeared in *Weird Tales*, and all twenty were published by Gnome Press in *The Coming of Conan* (1953), *Conan the Barbarian* (1954), *The Sword of Conan* (1952), *King Conan* (1953), and *Conan the Conqueror* (1950), the last a book-length novel. There are also two volumes of pastiches, *Tales of Conan*, by Howard and de Camp, and *The Return of Conan*, by Nyberg and de Camp. General collections of Howard's stories have also been published. The present story appeared in *Weird Tales* for April, 1934, and was reprinted in *Conan the Barbarian*.

The story deals with one of Conan's earlier adventures. He is about thirty and has already led a picaresque career as a thief, corsair, and mercenary in many lands. More recently he has captained a band of outlaws on the steppes of Turan, one of the Hyrkanian kingdoms surrounding the eastern Vilayet Sea.





## ***Shadows in the Moonlight***

*by* **ROBERT E. HOWARD**

"Know, O prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the sons of the Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars—Nemedias, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold. But the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia, reigning supreme in the dreaming west. Hither came Conan, the Cimmerian, black-haired, sullen-eyed, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholics and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandaled feet."

—The Nemedian Chronicles

A swift crashing of horses through the tall reeds; a heavy fall, a despairing cry. From the dying steed there staggered up its rider, a slender girl in sandals and girdled tunic. Her dark hair fell over her white shoulders, her eyes were those of a trapped animal. She did not look at the jungle of reeds that hemmed in the little clearing, nor at the blue waters that lapped the low shore behind her. Her wide-eyed gaze was fixed in agonized intensity on the horseman who pushed through the reedy screen and dismounted before her.

He was a tall man, slender, but hard as steel. From head to heel he was clad in light silvered mesh-mail that fitted his supple form like a glove. From under the dome-shaped, gold-chased helmet his brown eyes regarded her mockingly.

"Stand back!" her voice shrilled with terror. "Touch me

### *Swords and Sorcery*

not, Shah Amurath, or I will throw myself into the water and drown!"

He laughed, and his laughter was like the purr of a sword sliding from a silken sheath.

"No, you will not drown, Olivia, daughter of confusion, for the marge is too shallow, and I can catch you before you can reach the deeps. You gave me a merry chase, by the gods, and all my men are far behind us. But there is no horse west of Vilayet that can distance Irem for long." He nodded at the tall, slender-legged desert stallion behind him.

"Let me go!" begged the girl, tears of despair staining her face. "Have I not suffered enough. Is there any humiliation, pain or degradation you have not heaped on me? How long must my torment last?"

"As long as I find pleasure in your whimperings, your pleas, tears and writhings," he answered with a smile that would have seemed gentle to a stranger. "You are strangely virile, Olivia. I wonder if I shall ever weary of you, as I have always wearied of women before. You are ever fresh and unsullied, in spite of me. Each new day with you brings a new delight.

"But come—let us return to Akif, where the people are still feting the conqueror of the miserable *kozaki*; while he, the conqueror, is engaged in recapturing a wretched fugitive, a foolish, lovely, idiotic runaway!"

"No!" She recoiled, turning toward the waters lapping bluely among the reeds.

"Yes!" His flash of open anger was like a spark struck from flint. With a quickness her tender limbs could not approximate, he caught her wrist, twisting it in pure wanton cruelty until she screamed and sank to her knees.

"Slut! I should drag you back to Akif at my horse's tail, but I will be merciful and carry you on my saddlebow, for which favor you shall humbly thank me, while——"

He released her with a startled oath and sprang back, his saber flashing out, as a terrible apparition burst from the reedy jungle, sounding an inarticulate cry of hate.

Olivia, staring up from the ground, saw what she took to be either a savage or a madman advancing on Shah Amurath in an attitude of deadly menace. He was powerfully built, naked but for a girdled loin-cloth, which was stained with blood and crusted with dried mire. His black mane was matted with mud and clotted blood; there were streaks of dried blood on his chest and limbs, dried blood on the long

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straight sword he gripped in his right hand. From under the tangle of his locks, bloodshot eyes glared like coals of blue fire.

"You Hyrkanian dog!" mouthed this apparition in a barbarous accent. "The devils of vengeance have brought you here!"

"*Kozak!*" ejaculated Shah Amurath, recoiling. "I did not know a dog of you escaped! I thought you all lay stiff in the steppe, by Ilbars River."

"All but me, damn you!" cried the other. "Oh, I've dreamed of such a meeting as this, while I crawled on my belly through the brambles, or lay under rocks while the ants gnawed my flesh, or crouched in the mire up to my mouth—I dreamed, but never hoped it would come to pass. Oh, gods of Hell, how I have yearned for this!"

The stranger's bloodthirsty joy was terrible to behold. His jaws champed spasmodically, froth appeared on his blackened lips.

"Keep back!" ordered Shah Amurath, watching him narrowly.

"Ha!" It was like the bark of a timber wolf. "Shah Amurath, the great lord of Akif! Oh, damn you, how I love the sight of you—you, who fed my comrades to the vultures, who tore them between wild horses, blinded and maimed and mutilated them—*ai*, you dog, you filthy dog!" His voice rose to a maddened scream, and he charged.

In spite of the terror of his wild appearance, Olivia looked to see him fall at the first crossing of the blades. Madman or savage, what could he do, naked, against the mailed chief of Akif?

There was an instant when the blades flamed and licked, seeming barely to touch each other and leap apart; then the broadsword flashed past the saber and descended terrifically on Shah Amurath's shoulder. Olivia cried out at the fury of that stroke. Above the crunch of the rending mail, she distinctly heard the snap of the shoulder-bone. The Hyrkanian reeled back, suddenly ashen, blood spurting over the links of his hauberk; his saber slipped from his nerveless fingers.

"Quarter!" he gasped.

"Quarter?" There was a quiver of frenzy in the stranger's voice. "Quarter such as you gave us, you swine!"

Olivia closed her eyes. This was no longer battle, but butchery, frantic, bloody, impelled by an hysteria of fury and hate, in which culminated the sufferings of battle, mas-



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sacre, torture, and fear-ridden, thirst-maddened, hunger-haunted flight. Though Olivia knew that Shah Amurath deserved no mercy or pity from any living creature, yet she closed her eyes and pressed her hands over her ears, to shut out the sight of that dripping sword that rose and fell with the sound of a butcher's cleaver, and the gurgling cries that dwindled away and ceased.

She opened her eyes, to see the stranger turning away from a gory travesty that only vaguely resembled a human being. The man's breast heaved with exhaustion or passion; his brow was beaded with sweat; his right hand was splashed with blood.

He did not speak to her, or even glance toward her. She saw him stride through the reeds that grew at the water's edge, stoop, and tug at something. A boat wallowed out of its hiding-place among the stalks. Then she divined his intention, and was galvanized into action.

"Oh, wait!" she wailed, staggering up and running toward him. "Do not leave me! Take me with you!"

He wheeled and stared at her. There was a difference in his bearing. His bloodshot eyes were sane. It was as if the blood he had just shed had quenched the fire of his frenzy.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am called Olivia. I was *his* captive. I ran away. He followed me. That's why he came here. Oh, do not leave me here! His warriors are not far behind him. They will find his corpse—they will find me near it—oh!" She moaned in her terror and wrung her white hands.

He stared at her in perplexity.

"Would you be better off with me?" he demanded. "I am a barbarian, and I know from your looks that you fear me."

"Yes, I fear you," she replied, too distracted to dissemble. "My flesh crawls at the horror of your aspect. But I fear the Hyrkanians more. Oh, let me go with you! They will put me to the torture if they find me beside their dead lord."

"Come, then." He drew aside, and she stepped quickly into the boat, shrinking from contact with him. She seated herself in the bow, and he stepped into the boat, pushed off with an oar, and using it as a paddle, worked his way tortuously among the tall stalks until they glided out into open water. Then he set to work with both oars, rowing with great, smooth, even strokes, the heavy muscles of arms and shoulders and back rippling in rhythm to his exertions.

There was silence for some time, the girl crouching in

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the bows, the man tugging at the oars. She watched him with timorous fascination. It was evident that he was not an Hyrkanian, and he did not resemble the Hyborian races. There was a wolfish hardness about him that marked the barbarian. His features, allowing for the strains and stains of battle and his hiding in the marshes, reflected that same untamed wildness, but they were neither evil nor degenerate.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Shah Amurath called you a *kozak*; were you of that band?"

"I am Conan, of Cimmeria," he grunted. "I was with the *kozaki*, as the Hyrkanian dogs called us."

She knew vaguely that the land he named lay far to the northwest, beyond the farthest boundaries of the different kingdoms of her race.

"I am a daughter of the king of Ophir," she said. "My father sold me to a Shemite chief, because I would not marry a prince of Koth."

The Cimmerian grunted in surprise.

Her lips twisted in a bitter smile. "Aye, civilized men sell their children as slaves to savages, sometimes. They call your race barbaric, Conan of Cimmeria."

"We do not sell our children," he growled, his chin jutting truculently.

"Well—I was sold. But the desert man did not misuse me. He wished to buy the good will of Shah Amurath, and I was among the gifts he brought to Akif of the purple gardens. Then——" She shuddered and hid her face in her hands.

"I should be lost to all shame," she said presently. "Yet each memory stings me like a slaver's whip. I abode in Shah Amurath's palace, until some weeks ago he rode out with his hosts to do battle with a band of invaders who were ravaging the borders of Turan. Yesterday he returned in triumph, and a great fete was made to honor him. In the drunkenness and rejoicing, I found an opportunity to steal out of the city on a stolen horse. I had thought to escape—but he followed, and about midday came up with me. I outran his vassals, but him I could not escape. Then you came."

"I was lying hid in the reeds," grunted the barbarian. "I was one of those dissolute rogues, the Free Companions, who burned and looted along the borders. There were five thousand of us, from a score of races and tribes. We had been serving as mercenaries for a rebel prince in eastern Koth, most of us, and when he made peace with his cursed sov-

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ereign, we were out of employment; so we took to plundering the outlying dominions of Koth, Zamora and Turan impartially. A week ago Shah Amurath trapped us near the banks of Ilbars with fifteen thousand men. Mitra! The skies were black with vultures. When the lines broke, after a whole day of fighting, some tried to break through to the north, some to the west. I doubt if any escaped. The steppes were covered with horsemen riding down the fugitives. I broke for the east, and finally reached the edge of the marshes that border this part of Vilayet.

"I've been hiding in the morasses ever since. Only the day before yesterday the riders ceased beating up the reed-brakes, searching for just such fugitives as I. I've squirmed and burrowed and hidden like a snake, feasting on muskrats I caught and ate raw, for lack of fire to cook them. This dawn I found this boat hidden among the reeds. I hadn't intended going out on the sea until night, but after I killed Shah Amurath, I knew his mailed dogs would be close at hand."

"And what now?"

"We shall doubtless be pursued. If they fail to see the marks left by the boat, which I covered as well as I could, they'll guess anyway that we took to sea, after they fail to find us among the marshes. But we have a start, and I'm going to haul at these oars until we reach a safe place."

"Where shall we find that?" she asked hopelessly. "Vilayet is an Hyrkanian pond."

"Some folk don't think so," grinned Conan grimly; "notably the slaves that have escaped from galleys and become pirates."

"But what are your plans?"

"The southwestern shore is held by the Hyrkanians for hundreds of miles. We still have a long way to go before we pass beyond their northern boundaries. I intend to go northward, until I think we have passed them. Then we'll turn westward, and try to land on the shore bordered by the uninhabited steppes."

"Suppose we meet pirates, or a storm?" she asked. "And we shall starve on the steppes."

"Well," he reminded her, "I didn't ask you to come with me."

"I am sorry." She bowed her shapely dark head. "Pirates, storms, starvation—they are all kinder than the people of Turan."



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"Aye." His dark face grew somber. "I haven't done with them yet. Be at ease, girl. Storms are rare on Vilayet at this time of the year. If we make the steppes, we shall not starve. I was reared in a naked land. It was those cursed marshes, with their stench and stinging flies, that nigh unmanned me. I am at home in the high lands. As for pirates——" He grinned enigmatically, and bent to the oars.

The sun sank like a dull-glowing copper ball into a lake of fire. The blue of the sea merged with the blue of the sky, and both turned to soft dark velvet, clustered with stars and the mirrors of stars. Olivia reclined in the bows of the gently rocking boat, in a state dreamy and unreal. She experienced an illusion that she was floating in midair, stars beneath her as well as above. Her silent companion was etched vaguely against the softer darkness. There was no break or falter in the rhythm of his oars; he might have been a fantasmal oarsman, rowing her across the dark lake of Death. But the edge of her fear was dulled, and, lulled by the monotony of motion, she passed into a quiet slumber.

Dawn was in her eyes when she awakened, aware of a ravenous hunger. It was a change in the motion of the boat that had roused her; Conan was resting on his oars, gazing beyond her. She realized that he had rowed all night without pause, and marvelled at his iron endurance. She twisted about to follow his stare, and saw a green wall of trees and shrubbery rising from the water's edge and sweeping away in a wide curve, enclosing a small bay whose waters lay still as blue glass.

"This is one of the many islands that dot this inland sea," said Conan. "They are supposed to be uninhabited. I've heard the Hyrkanians seldom visit them. Besides, they generally hug the shores in their galleys, and we have come a long way. Before sunset we were out of sight of the mainland."

With a few strokes he brought the boat in to shore, and made the painter fast to the arching root of a tree which rose from the water's edge. Stepping ashore, he reached out a hand to help Olivia. She took it, wincing slightly at the bloodstains upon it, feeling a hint of the dynamic strength that lurked in the barbarian's thews.

A dreamy quiet lay over the woods that bordered the blue bay. Then somewhere, far back among the trees, a bird lifted its morning song. A breeze whispered through the leaves, and set them to murmuring. Olivia found herself

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listening intently for something, she knew not what. What might be lurking amid those nameless woodlands?

As she peered timidly into the shadows between the trees, something swept into the sunlight with a swift whirl of wings: a great parrot which dropped onto a leafy branch and swayed there, a gleaming image of jade and crimson. It turned its crested head sidewise and regarded the invaders with glittering eyes of jet.

"Crom!" muttered the Cimmerian. "Here is the grandfather of all parrots. He must be a thousand years old! Look at the evil wisdom of his eyes. What mysteries do you guard, Wise Devil?"

Abruptly the bird spread its flaming wings and soaring from its perch, cried out harshly: "*Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!*" and with a wild screech of horribly human laughter, rushed away through the trees to vanish in the opalescent shadows.

Olivia stared after it, feeling the cold hand of nameless foreboding touch her supple spine.

"What did it say?" she whispered.

"Human words, I'll swear," answered Conan; "but in what tongue I can't say."

"Nor I," returned the girl. "Yet it must have learned them from human lips. Human, or——" she gazed into the leafy fastnesses and shuddered slightly, without knowing why.

"Crom, I'm hungry!" grunted the Cimmerian. "I could eat a whole buffalo. We'll look for fruit; but first I'm going to cleanse myself of this dried mud and blood. Hiding in marshes is foul business."

So saying, he laid aside his sword, and wading out shoulder-deep into the blue water, went about his ablutions. When he emerged, his clean-cut bronze limbs shone, his streaming black mane was no longer matted. His blue eyes, though they smoldered with unquenchable fire, were no longer murky or bloodshot. But the tigerish suppleness of limb and the dangerous aspect of feature were not altered.

Strapping on his sword once more, he motioned the girl to follow him, and they left the shore, passing under the leafy arches of the great branches. Underfoot lay a short green sward which cushioned their tread. Between the trunks of the trees they caught glimpses of faery-like vistas.

Presently Conan grunted in pleasure at the sight of golden and russet globes hanging in clusters among the leaves. Indicating that the girl should seat herself on a fallen tree, he

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filled her lap with the exotic delicacies, and then himself fell to with unconcealed gusto.

"Ishtar!" said he, between mouthfuls. "Since Ilbars I have lived on rats, and roots I dug out of the stinking mud. This is sweet to the palate, though not very filling. Still, it will serve if we eat enough."

Olivia was too busy to reply. The sharp edge of the Cimmerian's hunger blunted, he began to gaze at his fair companion with more interest than previously, noting the lustrous clusters of her dark hair, the peach-bloom tints of her dainty skin, and the rounded contours of her lithe figure which the scanty silk tunic displayed to full advantage.

Finishing her meal, the object of his scrutiny looked up, and meeting his burning, slit-eyed gaze, she changed color and the remnants of the fruit slipped from her fingers.

Without comment, he indicated with a gesture that they should continue their explorations, and rising, she followed him out of the trees and into a glade, the farther end of which was bounded by a dense thicket. As they stepped into the open there was a ripping crash in the thicket, and Conan, bounding aside and carrying the girl with him, narrowly saved them from something that rushed through the air and struck a tree-trunk with a thunderous impact.

Whipping out his sword, Conan bounded across the glade and plunged into the thicket. Silence ensued, while Olivia crouched on the sward, terrified and bewildered. Presently Conan emerged, a puzzled scowl on his face.

"Nothing in that thicket," he growled. "But there was something——"

He studied the missile that had so narrowly missed them and grunted incredulously, as if unable to credit his own senses. It was a huge block of greenish stone which lay on the sward at the foot of the tree, whose wood its impact had splintered.

"A strange stone to find on an uninhabited island," growled Conan.

Olivia's lovely eyes dilated in wonder. The stone was a symmetrical block, indisputably cut and shaped by human hands. And it was astonishingly massive. The Cimmerian grasped it with both hands, and with legs braced and the muscles standing out on his arms and back in straining knots, he heaved it above his head and cast it from him, exerting every ounce of nerve and sinew. It fell a few feet in front of him. Conan swore.



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"No man living could throw that rock across this glade. It's a task for siege engines. Yet here there are no mangonels or ballistas."

"Perhaps it was thrown by some such engine from afar," she suggested.

He shook his head. "It didn't fall from above. It came from yonder thicket. See how the twigs are broken? It was thrown as a man might throw a pebble. But who? What? Come!"

She hesitantly followed him into the thicket. Inside the outer ring of leafy brush, the undergrowth was less dense. Utter silence brooded over all. The springy sward gave no sign of footprints. Yet from this mysterious thicket had hurtled that boulder, swift and deadly. Conan bent closer to the sward, where the grass was crushed down here and there. He shook his head angrily. Even to his keen eyes it gave no clue as to what had stood or trodden there. His gaze roved to the green roof above their heads, a solid ceiling of thick leaves and interwoven arches. And he froze suddenly.

Then rising, sword in hand, he began to back away, thrusting Olivia behind him.

"Out of here, quick!" he urged in a whisper that congealed the girl's blood.

"What is it? What do you see?"

"Nothing," he answered guardedly, not halting his wary retreat.

"But what is it, then? What lurks in this thicket?"

"Death!" he answered, his gaze still fixed on the brooding jade arches that shut out the sky.

Once out of the thicket, he took her hand and led her swiftly through the thinning trees, until they mounted a grassy slope, sparsely treed, and emerged upon a low plateau, where the grass grew taller and the trees were few and scattered. And in the midst of that plateau rose a long broad structure of crumbling greenish stone.

They gazed in wonder. No legends named such a building on any island of Vilayet. They approached it warily, seeing that moss and lichen crawled over the stones, and the broken roof gaped to the sky. On all sides lay bits and shards of masonry, half hidden in the waving grass, giving the impression that once many buildings rose there, perhaps a whole town. But now only the long hall-like structure rose against the sky, and its walls leaned drunkenly among the crawling vines.

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Whatever doors had once guarded its portals had long rotted away. Conan and his companion stood in the broad entrance and stared inside. Sunlight streamed in through gaps in the walls and roof, making the interior a dim weave of light and shadow. Grasping his sword firmly, Conan entered, with the slouching gait of a hunting panther, sunken head and noiseless feet. Olivia tiptoed after him.

Once within, Conan grunted in surprise, and Olivia stifled a scream.

"Look! Oh, look!"

"I see," he answered. "Nothing to fear. They are statues."

"But how lifelike—and how evil!" she whispered, drawing close to him.

They stood in a great hall, whose floor was of polished stone, littered with dust and broken stones, which had fallen from the ceiling. Vines, growing between the stones, masked the apertures. The lofty roof, flat and undomed, was upheld by thick columns, marching in rows down the sides of the walls. And in each space between these columns stood a strange figure.

They were statues, apparently of iron, black and shining as if continually polished. They were life-sized, depicting tall, lithely powerful men, with cruel hawk-like faces. They were naked, and every swell, depression and contour of joint and sinew was represented with incredible realism. But the most lifelike feature was their proud, intolerant faces. These features were not cast in the same mold. Each face possessed its own individual characteristics, though there was a tribal likeness between them all. There was none of the monotonous uniformity of decorative art, in the faces at least.

"They seem to be listening—and waiting!" whispered the girl uneasily.

Conan rang his hilt against one of the images.

"Iron," he pronounced. "But Crom! in what molds were they cast?"

He shook his head and shrugged his massive shoulders in puzzlement.

Olivia glanced timidly about the great silent hall. Only the ivy-grown stones, the tendril-clasped pillars, with the dark figures brooding between them, met her gaze. She shifted uneasily and wished to be gone, but the images held a strange fascination for her companion. He examined them in detail, and barbarian-like, tried to break off their limbs. But their material resisted his best efforts. He could neither disfigure

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nor dislodge from its niche a single image. At last he desisted, swearing in his wonder.

"What manner of men were these copied from?" he inquired of the world at large. "These figures are black, yet they are not like Negroes. I have never seen their like."

"Let us go into the sunlight," urged Olivia, and he nodded, with a baffled glance at the brooding shapes along the walls.

So they passed out of the dusky hall into the clear blaze of the summer sun. She was surprised to note its position in the sky; they had spent more time in the ruins than she had guessed.

"Let us take to the boat again," she suggested. "I am afraid here. It is a strange, evil place. We do not know when we may be attacked by whatever cast the rock."

"I think we're safe as long as we're not under the trees," he answered. "Come."

The plateau, whose sides fell away toward the wooded shores on the east, west, and south, sloped upward toward the north to abut on a tangle of rocky cliffs, the highest point of the island. Thither Conan took his way, suiting his long stride to his companion's gait. From time to time his glance rested inscrutably upon her, and she was aware of it.

They reached the northern extremity of the plateau, and stood gazing up the steep pitch of the cliffs. Trees grew thickly along the rim of the plateau east and west of the cliffs, and clung to the precipitous incline. Conan glanced at these trees suspiciously, but he began the ascent, helping his companion on the climb. The slope was not sheer, and was broken by ledges and boulders. The Cimmerian, born in a hill country, could have run up it like a cat, but Olivia found the going difficult. Again and again she felt herself lifted lightly off her feet and over some obstacle that would have taxed her strength to surmount, and her wonder grew at the sheer physical power of the man. She no longer found his touch repugnant. There was a promise of protection in his iron clasp.

At last they stood on the ultimate pinnacle, their hair stirring in the sea wind. From their feet the cliffs fell away sheerly three or four hundred feet to a narrow tangle of woodlands bordering the beach. Looking southward they saw the whole island lying like a great oval mirror, its bevelled edges sloping down swiftly into a rim of green, except where it broke in the pitch of the cliffs. As far as they could see,



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on all sides stretched the blue waters, still, placid, fading into dreamy hazes of distance.

"The sea is still," sighed Olivia. "Why should we not take up our journey again?"

Conan, poised like a bronze statue on the cliffs, pointed northward. Straining her eyes, Olivia saw a white fleck that seemed to hang suspended in the aching haze.

"What is it?"

"A sail."

"Hyrkanians?"

"Who can tell, at this distance?"

"They will anchor here—search the island for us!" she cried in quick panic.

"I doubt it. They come from the north, so they cannot be searching for us. They may stop for some other reason, in which case we'll have to hide as best we can. But I believe it's either a pirate, or an Hyrkanian galley returning from some northern raid. In the latter case they are not likely to anchor here. But we can't put to sea until they've gone out of sight, for they're coming from the direction in which we must go. Doubtless they'll pass the island tonight, and at dawn we can go on our way."

"Then we must spend the night here?" She shivered.

"It's safest."

"Then let us sleep here, on the crags," she urged.

He shook his head, glancing at the stunted trees, at the marching woods below, a green mass which seemed to send out tendrils straggling up the sides of the cliffs.

"There are too many trees. We'll sleep in the ruins."

She cried out in protest.

"Nothing will harm you there," he soothed. "Whatever threw the stone at us did not follow us out of the woods. There was nothing to show that any wild thing lairs in the ruins. Besides, you are soft-skinned, and used to shelter and dainties. I could sleep naked in the snow and feel no discomfort, but the dew would give you cramps, were we to sleep in the open."

Olivia helplessly acquiesced, and they descended the cliffs, crossed the plateau and once more approached the gloomy, age-haunted ruins. By this time the sun was sinking below the plateau rim. They had found fruit in the trees near the cliffs, and these formed their supper, both food and drink.

The southern night swept down quickly, littering the dark blue sky with great white stars, and Conan entered the

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shadowy ruins, drawing the reluctant Olivia after him. She shivered at the sight of those tense black shadows in their niches along the walls. In the darkness that the starlight only faintly touched, she could not make out their outlines; she could only sense their attitude of waiting—waiting as they had waited for untold centuries.

Conan had brought a great armful of tender branches, well-leaved. These he heaped to make a couch for her, and she lay upon it, with a curious sensation as of one lying down to sleep in a serpent's lair.

Whatever her forebodings, Conan did not share them. The Cimmerian sat down near her, his back against a pillar, his sword across his knees. His eyes gleamed like a panther's in the dusk.

"Sleep, girl," said he. "My slumber is light as a wolf's. Nothing can enter this hall without awaking me."

Olivia did not reply. From her bed of leaves she watched the immobile figure, indistinct in the soft darkness. How strange, to move in fellowship with a barbarian, to be cared for and protected by one of a race, tales of which had frightened her as a child! He came of a people bloody, grim and ferocious. His kinship to the wild was apparent in his every action; it burned in his smoldering eyes. Yet he had not harmed her, and her worst oppressor had been a man the world called civilized. As a delicious languor stole over her relaxing limbs and she sank into foamy billows of slumber, her last waking thought was a drowsy recollection of the firm touch of Conan's fingers on her soft flesh.

## 2

Olivia dreamed, and through her dreams crawled a suggestion of lurking evil, like a black serpent writhing through flower gardens. Her dreams were fragmentary and colorful, exotic shards of a broken, unknown pattern, until they crystallized into a scene of horror and madness, etched against a background of cyclopean stones and pillars.

She saw a great hall, whose lofty ceiling was upheld by stone columns marching in even rows along the massive walls. Among these pillars fluttered great green and scarlet parrots, and the hall was thronged with black-skinned, hawk-faced warriors. They were not Negroes. Neither they nor their garments nor weapons resembled anything of the world the dreamer knew.

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They were pressing about one bound to a pillar; a slender white-skinned youth, with a cluster of golden curls about his alabaster brow. His beauty was not altogether human—like the dream of a god, chiseled out of living marble.

The black warriors laughed at him, jeered and taunted in a strange tongue. The lithe naked form writhed beneath their cruel hands. Blood trickled down the ivory thighs to spatter on the polished floor. The screams of the victim echoed through the hall; then lifting his head toward the ceiling and the skies beyond, he cried out a name in an awful voice. A dagger in an ebon hand cut short his cry, and the golden head rolled on the ivory breast.

As if in answer to that desperate cry, there was a rolling thunder as of celestial chariot-wheels, and a figure stood before the slayers, as if materialized out of empty air. The form was of a man, but no mortal man ever wore such an aspect of inhuman beauty. There was an unmistakable resemblance between him and the youth who drooped lifeless in his chains, but the alloy of humanity that softened the godliness of the youth was lacking in the features of the stranger, awful and immobile in their beauty.

The blacks shrank back before him, their eyes slits of fire. Lifting a hand, he spoke, and his tones echoed through the silent halls in deep rich waves of sound. Like men in a trance the black warriors fell back until they were ranged along the walls in regular lines. Then from the stranger's chiseled lips rang a terrible invocation and command: "*Yag-koolan yok tha, xuthalla!*"

At the blast of that awful cry, the black figures stiffened and froze. Over their limbs crept a curious rigidity, an unnatural petrification. The stranger touched the limp body of the youth, and the chains fell away from it. He lifted the corpse in his arms; then ere he turned away, his tranquil gaze swept again over the silent rows of ebony figures, and he pointed to the moon, which gleamed in through the casements. And they understood, those tense, waiting statues that had been men. . . .

Olivia awoke, starting up on her couch of branches, a cold sweat beading her skin. Her heart pounded loud in the silence. She glanced wildly about. Conan slept against his pillar, his head fallen upon his massive breast. The silvery radiance of the late moon crept through the gaping roof, throwing long white lines along the dusty floor. She could see the images dimly, black, tense—waiting. Fighting down a



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rising hysteria, she saw the moonbeams rest lightly on the pillars and the shapes between.

What was that? A tremor among the shadows where the moonlight fell. A paralysis of horror gripped her, for where there should have been the immobility of death, there was movement: a slow twitching, a flexing and writhing of ebon limbs—an awful scream burst from her lips as she broke the bonds that held her mute and motionless. At her shriek Conan shot erect, teeth gleaming, sword lifted.

"The statues! The statues!—*oh my God, the statues are coming to life!*"

And with the cry she sprang through a crevice in the wall, burst madly through the hindering vines, and ran, ran, ran—blind, screaming, witless—until a grasp on her arm brought her up short and she shrieked and fought against the arms that caught her, until a familiar voice penetrated the mists of her terror, and she saw Conan's face, a mask of bewilderment in the moonlight.

"What in Crom's name, girl? Did you have a nightmare?" His voice sounded strange and far away. With a sobbing gasp she threw her arms about his thick neck and clung to him convulsively, crying in panting catches.

"Where are they? Did they follow us?"

"Nobody followed us," he answered.

She sat up, still clinging to him, and looked fearfully about. Her blind flight had carried her to the southern edge of the plateau. Just below them was the slope, its foot masked in the thick shadows of the woods. Behind them she saw the ruins looming in the high-swinging moon.

"Did you not see them?—the statues, moving, lifting their hands, their eyes glaring in the shadows?"

"I saw nothing," answered the barbarian uneasily. "I slept more soundly than usual, because it has been so long since I have slumbered the night through; yet I don't think anything could have entered the hall without waking me."

"Nothing entered." A laugh of hysteria escaped her. "It was something there already. Ah, Mitra, we lay down to sleep among them, like sheep making their bed in the shambles!"

"What are you talking about?" he demanded. "I woke at your cry, but before I had time to look about me, I saw you rush out through the crack in the wall. I pursued you, lest you come to harm. I thought you had a nightmare."

"So I did!" She shivered. "But the reality was more grisly

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than the dream. Listen!" And she narrated all that she had dreamed and thought to see.

Conan listened attentively. The natural skepticism of the sophisticated man was not his. His mythology contained ghouls, goblins, and necromancers. After she had finished, he sat silent, absently toying with his sword.

"The youth they tortured was like the tall man who came?" he asked at last.

"As like as son to father," she answered, and hesitantly: "If the mind could conceive of the offspring of a union of divinity with humanity, it would picture that youth. The gods of old times mated sometimes with mortal women, our legends tell us."

"What gods?" he muttered.

"The nameless, forgotten ones. Who knows? They have gone back into the still waters of the lakes, the quiet hearts of the hills, the gulfs beyond the stars. Gods are no more stable than men."

"But if these shapes were men, blasted into iron images by some god or devil, how can they come to life?"

"There is witchcraft in the moon," she shuddered. "*He* pointed at the moon; while the moon shines on them, they live. So I believe."

"But we were not pursued," muttered Conan, glancing toward the brooding ruins. "You might have dreamed they moved. I am of a mind to return and see."

"No, no!" she cried, clutching him desperately. "Perhaps the spell upon them holds them in the hall. Do not go back! They will rend you limb from limb! Oh, Conan, let us go into our boat and flee this awful island! Surely the Hyrkanian ship has passed us now! Let us go!"

So frantic was her pleading that Conan was impressed. His curiosity in regard to the images was balanced by his superstition. Foes of flesh and blood he did not fear, however great the odds, but any hint of the supernatural roused all the dim monstrous instincts of fear that are the heritage of the barbarian.

He took the girl's hand and they went down the slope and plunged into the dense woods, where the leaves whispered, and nameless night-birds murmured drowsily. Under the trees the shadows clustered thick, and Conan swerved to avoid the denser patches. His eyes roved continuously from side to side, and often flitted into the branches above them. He went quickly yet warily, his arm girdling the girl's waist so strongly

that she felt as if she were being carried rather than guided. Neither spoke. The only sound was the girl's quick nervous panting, the rustle of her small feet in the grass. So they came through the trees to the edge of the water, shimmering like molten silver in the moonlight.

"We should have brought fruit for food," muttered Conan; "but doubtless we'll find other islands. As well leave now as later; it's but a few hours till dawn——"

His voice trailed away. The painter was still made fast to the looping root. But at the other end was only a smashed and shattered ruin, half submerged in the shallow water.

A stifled cry escaped Olivia. Conan wheeled and faced the dense shadows, a crouching image of menace. The noise of the night-birds was suddenly silent. A brooding stillness reigned over the woods. No breeze moved the branches, yet somewhere the leaves stirred faintly.

Quick as a great cat Conan caught up Olivia and ran. Through the shadows he raced like a phantom, while somewhere above and behind them sounded a curious rushing among the leaves, that implacably drew closer and closer. Then the moonlight burst full upon their faces, and they were speeding up the slope of the plateau.

At the crest Conan laid Olivia down, and turned to glare back at the gulf of shadows they had just quitted. The leaves shook in a sudden breeze; that was all. He shook his mane with an angry growl. Olivia crept to his feet like a frightened child. Her eyes looked up at him, dark wells of horror.

"What are we to do, Conan?" she whispered.

He looked at the ruins, stared again into the woods below.

"We'll go to the cliffs," he declared, lifting her to her feet. "Tomorrow I'll make a raft, and we'll trust our luck to the sea again."

"It was not—not *they* that destroyed our boat?" It was half question, half assertion.

He shook his head, grimly taciturn.

Every step of the way across that moon-haunted plateau was a sweating terror for Olivia, but no black shapes stole subtly from the looming ruins, and at last they reached the foot of the crags, which rose stark and gloomily majestic above them. There Conan halted in some uncertainty, at last selecting a place sheltered by a broad ledge, nowhere near any trees.

"Lie down and sleep if you can, Olivia," he said. "I'll keep watch."



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But no sleep came to Olivia, and she lay watching the distant ruins and the wooded rim until the stars paled, the east whitened, and dawn in rose and gold struck fire from the dew on the grass-blades.

She rose stiffly, her mind reverting to all the happenings of the night. In the morning light some of its terrors seemed like figments of an overwrought imagination. Conan strode over to her, and his words electrified her.

"Just before dawn I heard the creak of timbers and the rasp and clack of cordage and oars. A ship has put in and anchored at the beach not far away—probably the ship whose sail we saw yesterday. We'll go up the cliffs and spy on her."

Up they went, and lying on their bellies among the boulders, saw a painted mast jutting up beyond the trees to the west.

"An Hyrkanian craft, from the cut of her rigging," muttered Conan. "I wonder if the crew——"

A distant medley of voices reached their ears, and creeping to the southern edge of the cliffs, they saw a motley horde emerge from the fringe of trees along the western rim of the plateau, and stand there a space in debate. There was much flourishing of arms, brandishing of swords, and loud rough argument. Then the whole band started across the plateau toward the ruins, at a slant that would take them close by the foot of the cliffs.

"Pirates!" whispered Conan, a grim smile on his thin lips. "It's an Hyrkanian galley they've captured. Here—crawl among these rocks.

"Don't show yourself unless I call to you," he instructed, having secreted her to his satisfaction among a tangle of boulders along the crest of the cliffs. "I'm going to meet these dogs. If I succeed in my plan, all will be well, and we'll sail away with them. If I don't succeed—well, hide yourself in the rocks until they're gone, for no devils on this island are as cruel as these sea-wolves."

And tearing himself from her reluctant grasp, he swung quickly down the cliffs.

Looking fearfully from her eyrie, Olivia saw the band had neared the foot of the cliffs. Even as she looked, Conan stepped out from among the boulders and faced them, sword in hand. They gave back with yells of menace and surprise; then halted uncertainly to glare at this figure which had appeared so suddenly from the rocks. There were some

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seventy of them, a wild horde made up of men from many nations: Kothians, Zamorians, Brythunians, Corinthians, Shemites. Their features reflected the wildness of their natures. Many bore the scars of the lash or the branding-iron. There were cropped ears, slit noses, gaping eye-sockets, stumps of wrists—marks of the hangman as well as scars of battle. Most of them were half naked, but the garments they wore were fine: gold-braided jackets, satin girdles, silken breeches, tattered, stained with tar and blood, vied with pieces of silver-chased armor. Jewels glittered in nose-rings and ear-rings, and in the hilts of their daggers.

Over against this bizarre mob stood the tall Cimmerian in strong contrast with his hard bronzed limbs and clean-cut vital features.

"Who are you?" they roared.

"Conan the Cimmerian!" his voice was like the deep challenge of a lion. "One of the Free Companions. I mean to try my luck with the Red Brotherhood. Who's your chief?"

"I, by Ishtar!" bellowed a bull-like voice, as a huge figure swaggered forward: a giant, naked to the waist, where his capacious belly was girdled by a wide sash that upheld voluminous silken pantaloons. His head was shaven except for a scalp-lock, his mustaches drooped over a rat-trap mouth. Green Shemitish slippers with upturned toes were on his feet, a long straight sword in his hand.

Conan stared and glared.

"Sergius of Khrosha, by Crom!"

"Aye, by Ishtar!" boomed the giant, his small black eyes glittering with hate. "Did you think I had forgot? Ha! Sergius never forgets an enemy. Now I'll hang you up by the heels and skin you alive. At him, lads!"

"Aye, send your dogs at me, big-belly," sneered Conan with bitter scorn. "You were always a coward, you Kothic cur."

"Coward! To me?" The broad face turned black with passion. "On guard, you northern dog! I'll cut out your heart!"

In an instant the pirates had formed a circle about the rivals, their eyes blazing, their breath sucking between their teeth in bloodthirsty enjoyment. High up among the crags Olivia watched, sinking her nails into her palms in her painful excitement.

Without formality the combatants engaged, Sergius coming in with a rush, quick on his feet as a giant cat, for all his

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bulk. Curses hissed between his clenched teeth as he lustily swung and parried. Conan fought in silence, his eyes slits of blue bale-fire.

The Kothian ceased his oaths to save his breath. The only sounds were the quick scuff of feet on the sward, the panting of the pirate, the ring and clash of steel. The swords flashed like white fire in the early sun, wheeling and circling. They seemed to recoil from each other's contact, then leap together again instantly. Sergius was giving back; only his superlative skill had saved him thus far from the blinding speed of the Cimmerian's onslaught. A louder clash of steel, a sliding rasp, a choking cry—from the pirate horde a fierce yell split the morning as Conan's sword plunged through their captain's massive body. The point quivered an instant from between Sergius' shoulders, a hand's breadth of white fire in the sunlight; then the Cimmerian wrenched back his steel and the pirate chief fell heavily, face down, and lay in a widening pool of blood, his broad hands twitching for an instant.

Conan wheeled toward the gaping corsairs.

"Well, you dogs!" he roared, "I've sent your chief to Hell—what says the law of the Red Brotherhood?"

Before any could answer, a rat-faced Brythunian, standing behind his fellows, whirled a sling swiftly and deadly. Straight as an arrow sped the stone to its mark, and Conan reeled and fell as a tall tree falls to the woodsman's ax. Up on the cliff Olivia caught at the boulders for support. The scene swam dizzily before her eyes; all she could see was the Cimmerian lying limply on the sward, blood oozing from his head.

The rat-faced one yelped in triumph and ran to stab the prostrate man, but a lean Corinthian thrust him back.

"What, Aratus, would you break the law of the Brotherhood, you dog?"

"No law is broken," snarled the Brythunian.

"No law? Why, you dog, this man you have just struck down is by just rights our captain!"

"Nay!" shouted Aratus. "He was not of our band, but an outsider. He had not been admitted to fellowship. Slaying Sergius does not make him captain, as would have been the case had one of us killed him."

"But he wished to join us," retorted the Corinthian. "He said so."

At that a great clamor arose, some siding with Aratus, some with the Corinthian, whom they called Ivanos. Oaths



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flew thick, challenges were passed, hands fumbled at sword-hilts.

At last a Shemite spoke up above the clamor: "Why do you argue over a dead man?"

"He's not dead," answered the Corinthian, rising from beside the prostrate Cimmerian. "It was a glancing blow; he's only stunned."

At that the clamor rose anew, Aratus trying to get at the senseless man and Ivanos finally bestriding him, sword in hand, and defying all and sundry. Olivia sensed that it was not so much in defense of Conan that the Corinthian took his stand, but in opposition to Aratus. Evidently these men had been Sergius' lieutenants, and there was no love lost between them. After more arguments, it was decided to bind Conan and take him along with them, his fate to be voted on later.

The Cimmerian, who was beginning to regain consciousness, was bound with leather girdles, and then four pirates lifted him, and with many complaints and curses, carried him along with the band, which took up its journey across the plateau once more. The body of Sergius was left where it had fallen, a sprawling, unlovely shape on the sun-washed sward.

Up among the rocks, Olivia lay stunned by the disaster. She was incapable of speech or action, and could only lie there and stare with horrified eyes as the brutal horde dragged her protector away.

How long she lay there, she did not know. Across the plateau she saw the pirates reach the ruins and enter, dragging their captive. She saw them swarming in and out of the doors and crevices, prodding into the heaps of debris, and clambering about the walls. After awhile a score of them came back across the plateau and vanished among the trees on the western rim, dragging the body of Sergius after them, presumably to cast into the sea. About the ruins the others were cutting down trees and securing material for a fire. Olivia heard their shouts, unintelligible in the distance, and she heard the voices of those who had gone into the woods, echoing among the trees. Presently they came back into sight, bearing casks of liquor and leathern sacks of food. They headed for the ruins, cursing lustily under their burdens.

Of all this Olivia was but mechanically cognizant. Her overwrought brain was almost ready to collapse. Left alone and unprotected, she realized how much the protection of the

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Cimmerian had meant to her. There intruded vaguely a wonderment at the mad pranks of Fate, that could make the daughter of a king the companion of a red-handed barbarian. With it came a revulsion toward her own kind. Her father, and Shah Amurath, they were civilized men. And from them she had had only suffering. She had never encountered any civilized man who treated her with kindness unless there was an ulterior motive behind his actions. Conan had shielded her, protected her, and—so far—demanded nothing in return. Laying her head in her rounded arms she wept, until distant shouts of ribald revelry roused her to her own danger.

She glanced from the dark ruins about which the fantastic figures, small in the distance, weaved and staggered, to the dusky depths of the green forest. Even if her terrors in the ruins the night before had been only dreams, the menace that lurked in those green leafy depths below was no figment of nightmare. Were Conan slain or carried away captive, her only choice would lie between giving herself up to the human wolves of the sea, or remaining alone on that devil-haunted island.

As the full horror of her situation swept over her, she fell forward in a swoon.

### 3

The sun was hanging low when Olivia regained her senses. A faint wind wafted to her ears distant shouts and snatches of ribald song. Rising cautiously, she looked out across the plateau. She saw the pirates clustered about a great fire outside the ruins, and her heart leaped as a group emerged from the interior dragging some object she knew was Conan. They propped him against the wall, still evidently bound fast, and there ensued a long discussion, with much brandishing of weapons. At last they dragged him back into the hall, and took up anew the business of ale-guzzling. Olivia sighed; at least she knew that the Cimmerian still lived. Fresh determination steeled her. As soon as night fell, she would steal to those grim ruins and free him or be taken herself in the attempt. And she knew it was not selfish interest alone which prompted her decision.

With this in mind she ventured to creep from her refuge to pluck and eat nuts which grew sparsely near at hand. She had not eaten since the day before. It was while so occupied that she was troubled by a sensation of being watched. She

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scanned the rocks nervously, then, with a shuddering suspicion, crept to the north edge of the cliff and gazed down into the waving green mass below; already dusky with the sunset. She saw nothing; it was impossible that she could be seen, when not on the cliff's edge, by anything lurking in those woods. Yet she distinctly felt the glare of hidden eyes, and felt that *something* animate and sentient was aware of her presence and her hiding-place.

Stealing back to her rocky eyrie, she lay watching the distant ruins until the dusk of night masked them, and she marked their position by the flickering flames about which black figures leaped and cavorted groggily.

Then she rose. It was time to make her attempt. But first she stole back to the northern edge of the cliffs, and looked down into the woods that bordered the beach. And as she strained her eyes in the dim starlight, she stiffened, and an icy hand touched her heart.

Far below her something moved. It was as if a black shadow detached itself from the gulf of shadows below her. It moved slowly up the sheer face of the cliff—a vague bulk, shapeless in the semi-darkness. Panic caught Olivia by the throat, and she struggled with the scream that tugged at her lips. Turning, she fled down the southern slope.

That flight down the shadowed cliffs was a nightmare in which she slid and scrambled, catching at jagged rocks with cold fingers. As she tore her tender skin and bruised her soft limbs on the rugged boulders over which Conan had so lightly lifted her, she realized again her dependence on the iron-thewed barbarian. But this thought was but one in a fluttering maelstrom of dizzy fright.

The descent seemed endless, but at last her feet struck the grassy levels, and in a very frenzy of eagerness she sped away toward the fire that burned like the red heart of night. Behind her, as she fled, she heard a shower of stones rattle down the steep slope, and the sound lent wings to her heels. What grisly climber dislodged those stones she dared not try to think.

Strenuous physical action dissipated her blind terror somewhat and before she had reached the ruins, her mind was clear, her reasoning faculties alert, though her limbs trembled from her efforts.

She dropped to the sward and wriggled along on her belly until, from behind a small tree that had escaped the axes of the pirates, she watched her enemies. They had completed



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their supper, but were still drinking, dipping pewter mugs or jewelled goblets into the broken heads of the wine-casks. Some were already snoring drunkenly on the grass, while others had staggered into the ruins. Of Conan she saw nothing. She lay there, while the dew formed on the grass about her and the leaves overhead, and the men about the fire cursed, gambled and argued. There were only a few about the fire; most of them had gone into the ruins to sleep.

She lay watching them, her nerves taut with the strain of waiting, the flesh crawling between her shoulders at the thought of what might be watching her in turn—of what might be stealing up behind her. Time dragged on leaden feet. One by one the revellers sank down in drunken slumber, until all were stretched senseless beside the dying fire.

Olivia hesitated—then was galvanized by a distant glow rising through the trees. The moon was rising!

With a gasp she rose and hurried toward the ruins. Her flesh crawled as she tiptoed among the drunken shapes that sprawled beside the gaping portal. Inside were many more; they shifted and mumbled in their besotted dreams, but none awakened as she glided among them. A sob of joy rose to her lips as she saw Conan. The Cimmerian was wide awake, bound upright to a pillar, his eyes gleaming in the faint reflection of the waning fire outside.

Picking her way among the sleepers, she approached him. Lightly as she had come, he had heard her; had seen her when first framed in the portal. A faint grin touched his hard lips.

She reached him and clung to him an instant. He felt the quick beating of her heart against his breast. Through a broad crevice in the wall stole a beam of moonlight, and the air was instantly supercharged with subtle tension. Conan felt it and stiffened. Olivia felt it and gasped. The sleepers snored on. Bending quickly, she drew a dagger from its senseless owner's belt, and set to work on Conan's bonds. They were sail cords, thick and heavy, and tied with the craft of a sailor. She toiled desperately, while the tide of moonlight crept slowly across the floor toward the feet of the crouching black figures between the pillars.

Her breath came in gasps; Conan's wrists were free, but his elbows and legs were still bound fast. She glanced fleetingly at the figures along the walls—waiting, waiting. They seemed to watch her with the awful patience of the undead.

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The drunkards beneath her feet began to stir and groan in their sleep. The moonlight crept down the hall, touching the black feet. The cords fell from Conan's arms, and taking the dagger from her, he ripped the bonds from his legs with a single quick slash. He stepped out from the pillar, flexing his limbs, stoically enduring the agony of returning circulation. Olivia crouched against him, shaking like a leaf. Was it some trick of the moonlight that touched the eyes of the black figures with fire, so that they glimmered redly in the shadows?

Conan moved with the abruptness of a jungle cat. Catching up his sword from where it lay in a stack of weapons near by, he lifted Olivia lightly from her feet and glided through an opening that gaped in the ivy-grown wall.

No word passed between them. Lifting her in his arms he set off swiftly across the moon-bathed sward. Her arms about his iron neck, the Ophirean closed her eyes, cradling her dark curly head against his massive shoulder. A delicious sense of security stole over her.

In spite of his burden, the Cimmerian crossed the plateau swiftly, and Olivia, opening her eyes, saw that they were passing under the shadow of the cliffs.

"Something climbed the cliffs," she whispered. "I heard it scrambling behind me as I came down."

"We'll have to chance it," he grunted.

"I am not afraid—now," she sighed.

"You were not afraid when you came to free me, either," he answered. "Crom, what a day it has been! Such haggling and wrangling I never heard. I'm nearly deaf. Aratus wished to cut out my heart, and Ivanos refused, to spite Aratus, whom he hates. All day long they snarled and spat at one another, and the crew quickly grew too drunk to vote either way—"

He halted suddenly, an image of bronze in the moonlight. With a quick gesture he tossed the girl lightly to one side and behind him. Rising to her knees on the soft sward, she screamed at what she saw.

Out of the shadows of the cliffs moved a monstrous shambling bulk—an anthropomorphic horror, a grotesque travesty of creation.

In general outline it was not unlike a man. But its face, limned in the bright moonlight, was bestial, with close-set ears, flaring nostrils, and a great flabby-lipped mouth in which gleamed white tusk-like fangs. It was covered with

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shaggy grayish hair, shot with silver which shone in the moonlight, and its great misshapen paws hung nearly to the earth. Its bulk was tremendous; as it stood on its short bowed legs, its bullet-head rose above that of the man who faced it; the sweep of the hairy breast and giant shoulders was breathtaking; the huge arms were like knotted trees.

The moonlight scene swam, to Olivia's sight. This, then, was the end of the trail—for what human being could withstand the fury of that hairy mountain of thews and ferocity? Yet as she stared in wide-eyed horror at the bronzed figure facing the monster, she sensed a kinship in the antagonists that was almost appalling. This was less a struggle between man and beast than a conflict between two creatures of the wild, equally merciless and ferocious. With a flash of white tusks, the monster charged.

The mighty arms spread wide as the beast plunged, stupefyingly quick for all his vast bulk and stunted legs.

Conan's action was a blur of speed Olivia's eye could not follow. She only saw that he evaded that deadly grasp, and his sword, flashing like a jet of white lightning, sheared through one of those massive arms between shoulder and elbow. A great spout of blood deluged the sword as the severed member fell, twitching horribly, but even as the sword bit through, the other malformed hand locked in Conan's black mane.

Only the iron neck-muscles of the Cimmerian saved him from a broken neck at that instant. His left hand darted out to clamp on the beast's squat throat, his left knee was jammed hard against the brute's hairy belly. Then began a terrific struggle, which lasted only seconds, but which seemed like ages to the paralyzed girl.

The ape maintained his grasp in Conan's hair, dragging him toward the tusks that glistened in the moonlight. The Cimmerian resisted this effort, with his left arm rigid as iron, while the sword in his right hand, wielded like a butcher-knife, sank again and again into the groin, breast and belly of his captor. The beast took its punishment in awful silence, apparently unweakened by the blood that gushed from its ghastly wounds. Swiftly the terrible strength of the anthropoid overcame the leverage of braced arm and knee. Inexorably Conan's arm bent under the strain; nearer and nearer he was drawn to the slaver's jaws that gaped for his life. Now the blazing eyes of the barbarian glared into the bloodshot eyes of the ape. But as Conan tugged vainly at his sword,



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wedged deep in the hairy body, the frothing jaws snapped spasmodically shut, an inch from the Cimmerian's face, and he was hurled to the sward by the dying convulsions of the monster.

Olivia, half fainting, saw the ape heaving, thrashing and writhing, gripping, man-like, the hilt that jutted from its body. A sickening instant of this, then the great bulk quivered and lay still.

Conan rose and limped over to the corpse. The Cimmerian breathed heavily, and walked like a man whose joints and muscles have been wrenched and twisted almost to their limit of endurance. He felt his bloody scalp and swore at the sight of the long black red-stained strands still grasped in the monster's shaggy hand.

"Crom!" he panted. "I feel as if I'd been racked! I'd rather fight a dozen men. Another instant and he'd have bitten off my head. Blast him, he's torn a handful of my hair out by the roots."

Gripping his hilt with both hands he tugged and worked it free. Olivia stole close to clasp his arm and stare down wide-eyed at the sprawling monster.

"What—what is it?" she whispered.

"A gray man-ape," he grunted. "Dumb, and man-eating. They dwell in the hills that border the eastern shore of this sea. How this one got to this island, I can't say. Maybe he floated here on driftwood, blown out from the mainland in a storm."

"And it was he that threw the stone?"

"Yes; I suspected what it was when we stood in the thicket and I saw the boughs bending over our heads. These creatures always lurk in the deepest woods they can find, and seldom emerge. What brought him into the open, I can't say, but it was lucky for us; I'd have had no chance with him among the trees."

"It followed me," she shivered. "I saw it climbing the cliffs."

"And following his instinct, he lurked in the shadow of the cliff, instead of following you out across the plateau. His kind are creatures of darkness and the silent places, haters of the sun and moon."

"Do you suppose there are others?"

"No, else the pirates had been attacked when they went through the woods. The gray ape is wary, for all his strength, as shown by his hesitancy in falling upon us in the thicket.

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His lust for you must have been great, to have driven him to attack us finally in the open. What——”

He started and wheeled back toward the way they had come. The night had been split by an awful scream. It came from the ruins.

Instantly there followed a mad medley of yells, shrieks, and cries of blasphemous agony. Though accompanied by a ringing of steel, the sounds were of massacre rather than battle.

Conan stood frozen, the girl clinging to him in a frenzy of terror. The clamor rose to a crescendo of madness, and then the Cimmerian turned and went swiftly toward the rim of the plateau, with its fringe of moon-limned trees. Olivia's legs were trembling so that she could not walk; so he carried her, and her heart calmed its frantic pounding as she nestled into his cradling arms.

They passed under the shadowy forest, but the clusters of blackness held no terrors, the rifts of silver discovered no grisly shape. Night-birds murmured slumberously. The yells of slaughter dwindled behind them, masked in the distance to a confused jumble of sound. Somewhere a parrot called, like an eery echo: "*Yagkoolan yok tha, xuthalla!*" So they came to the tree-fringed water's edge and saw the galley lying at anchor, her sail shining white in the moonlight. Already the stars were paling for dawn.

#### 4

In the ghastly whiteness of dawn a handful of tattered, blood-stained figures staggered through the trees and out on to the narrow beach. There were forty-four of them, and they were a cowed and demoralized band. With panting haste they plunged into the water and began to wade toward the galley, when a stern challenge brought them up standing.

Etched against the whitening sky they saw Conan the Cimmerian standing in the bows, sword in hand, his black mane tossing in the dawn wind.

"Stand!" he ordered. "Come no nearer. What would you have, dogs?"

"Let us come aboard!" croaked a hairy rogue, fingering a bloody stump of ear. "We'd be gone from this devil's island."

"The first man who tries to climb over the side, I'll split his skull," promised Conan.

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They were forty-four to one, but he held the whip-hand. The fight had been hammered out of them.

"Let us come aboard, good Conan," whined a red-sashed Zamorian, glancing fearfully over his shoulder at the silent woods. "We have been so mauled, bitten, scratched and rended, and are so weary from fighting and running, that not one of us can lift a sword."

"Where is that dog Aratus?" demanded Conan.

"Dead, with the others! It was devils fell upon us! They were rending us to pieces before we could awake—a dozen good rovers died in their sleep. The ruins were full of flame-eyed shadows, with tearing fangs and sharp talons."

"Aye!" put in another corsair. "They were the demons of the isle, which took the forms of molten images, to befool us. Ishtar! we lay down to sleep among them. We are no cowards. We fought them as long as mortal man may strive against the powers of darkness. Then we broke away and left them tearing at the corpses like jackals. But surely they'll pursue us."

"Aye, let us come aboard!" clamored a lean Shemite. "Let us come in peace, or we must come sword in hand, and though we be so weary you will doubtless slay many of us, yet you cannot prevail against us all."

"Then I'll knock a hole in the planks and sink her," answered Conan grimly. A frantic chorus of expostulation rose, which Conan silenced with a lion-like roar.

"Dogs! Must I aid my enemies? Shall I let you come aboard and cut out my heart?"

"Nay, nay!" they cried eagerly. "Friends—friends, Conan. We are thy comrades, lad! We be all lusty rogues together. We hate the king of Turan, not each other."

Their gaze hung on his brown frowning face.

"Then if I am one of the Brotherhood," he grunted, "the laws of the Trade apply to me; and since I killed your chief in fair fight, then I am your captain!"

There was no dissent. The pirates were too cowed and battered to have any thought except a desire to get away from that island of fear. Conan's gaze sought out the blood-stained figure of the Corinthian.

"How, Ivanos!" he challenged. "You took my part, once. Will you uphold my claims again?"

"Aye, by Mitral!" The pirate, sensing the trend of feeling, was eager to ingratiate himself with the Cimmerian. "He is right, lads; he is our lawful captain!"



### *Shadows in the Moonlight*

A medley of acquiescence rose, lacking enthusiasm perhaps, but with sincerity accentuated by the feel of the silent woods behind them which might mask creeping ebony devils with red eyes and dripping talons.

"Swear by the hilt," Conan demanded.

Forty-four sword-hilts were lifted toward him, and forty-four voices blended in the corsair's oath of allegiance.

Conan grinned and sheathed his sword. "Come aboard, my bold swashbucklers, and take the oars."

He turned and lifted Olivia to her feet, from where she had crouched shielded by the gunwales.

"And what of me, sir?" she asked.

"What would you?" he countered, watching her narrowly.

"To go with you, wherever your path may lie!" she cried, throwing her white arms about his bronzed neck.

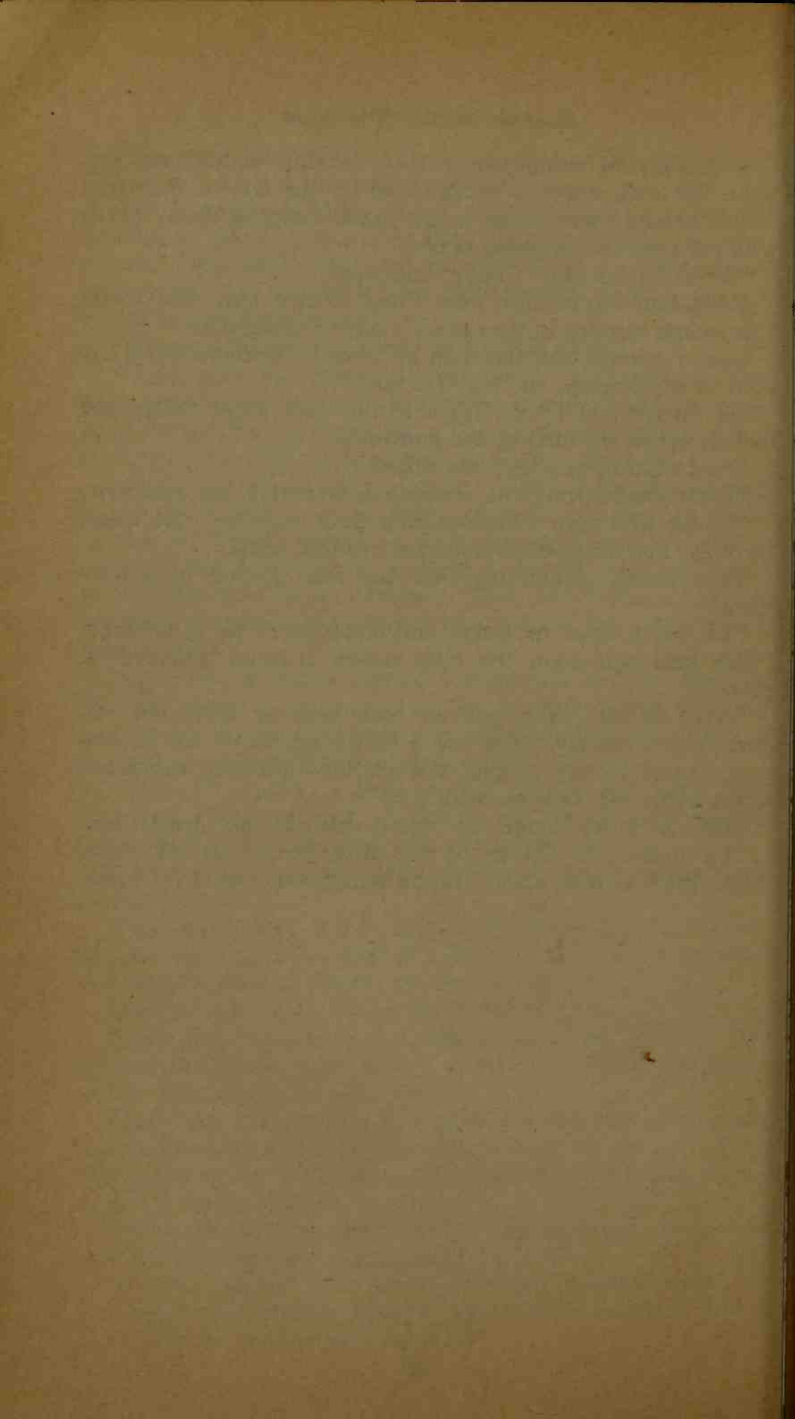
The pirates, clambering over the rail, gasped in amazement.

"To sail a road of blood and slaughter?" he questioned. "This keel will stain the blue waves crimson wherever it plows."

"Aye, to sail with you on blue seas or red," she answered passionately. "You are a barbarian, and I am an out-cast, denied by my people. We are both pariahs, wanderers of the earth. Oh, take me with you!"

With a gusty laugh he lifted her to his fierce lips.

"I'll make you Queen of the Blue Sea! Cast off there, dogs! We'll scorch King Yildiz's pantaloons yet, by Crom!"



HENRY KUTTNER (1914-58) was born in Los Angeles, worked as a youth for a literary agency, and began writing professionally in the 1930s. His first success was a celebrated horror story, "The Graveyard Rats," in *Weird Tales* for March, 1936. A small, dark, shy, quiet man, he became one of the most prolific and versatile writers of fantasy and science fiction.

Kuttner used at least sixteen pseudonyms. Although some of his output was hasty potboiling and some was frankly imitative, much was of excellent quality. Kuttner was one of the few imaginative writers to specialize in humor. During his last two decades he wrote largely in collaboration with his wife, C. L. Moore.

In the 1950s the Kuttners went to college. Both earned their B.A.'s, and Kuttner was studying for his master's degree when a heart attack carried him off.

After Robert E. Howard's death, several writers entered the field of heroic fantasy with stories somewhat like Howard's. Kuttner wrote two series, the first (in *Weird Tales*) about the Atlantean adventurer Elak. The second series, which appeared in *Strange Stories*, comprised only two stories, about Prince Raynor of Sardopolis in prehistoric central Asia. In the first, *Cursed Be the City*, King Cyaxares captures and destroys Sardopolis but is in turn destroyed by supernatural means. In the sequel . . .





## ***The Citadel of Darkness***

*by HENRY KUTTNER*

Hearken, O King, while I tell of high dooms and valorous men in the dim mists of long-passed aeons—aye, long and long ago, ere Nineveh and Tyre were born and ruled and crumbled to the dust. In the lusty youth of the world Imperial Gobi, Cradle of Mankind, was a land of beauty and of wonder and of black evil beyond imagination. And of Imperial Gobi, mistress of the Asian Seas, nothing now remains but a broken shard, a shattered stone that once crowned an obelisk—nothing is left but a thin high wailing in the wind, a crying that mourns for lost glories. Hearken again, O King, while I tell you of my vision and my dream. . . .  
The Tale of Sakhmet the Damned

### **I**

#### **THE SIGN OF THE MIRROR**

For six hours the archer had lain dying in the great oak's shadow. The attackers had not troubled to strip him of his battered armor—poor stuff compared to their own forged mail, glittering with brilliant gems. They had ridden off with their loot, leaving the wounded archer among the corpses of his companions. He had lost much blood and now, staring into the afternoon dimness of the forest, he knew death was coming swiftly.

Parched lips gaped as the man gasped for breath. Once more he tried to crawl to where a goatskin canteen lay upon the glossy, motionless flank of a fallen war-horse. And again he failed. Sighing, he relaxed his fevered cheek against the cool earth.

Faintly a sound came to the archer's ears—the drumming

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of hoofs. Were the raiders returning? One hand gripped the bow that lay beside him; weakly he strove to fit an arrow to the string.

Two horses cantered into view—a great gray charger and a dun mare. On the latter rode a tall, huge-muscled black man, his gargoylish face worried and anxious.

The gray's rider seemed small beside the Nubian, but his strong frame was unwearied by hours in the saddle. Under yellow, tousled hair was a hard young face, bronzed and eagle-eyed. He saw the shambles beneath the oak, reined in his steed.

"By Shaitan!" he snapped. "What devil's work is this?"

The dying man's fingers let the bow fall.

"Prince Raynor—water!" he gasped.

Raynor leaped to the ground, snatched a goatskin, and held it to the archer's lips.

"What's happened?" he asked presently. "Where's Delphia?"

"They—they took her."

"Who?"

"A band of warriors took us by surprise. We were ambushed. We fought, but—they were many. I saw them ride south with Delphia."

The archer of a sudden looked oddly astonished. His hand reached out and gripped the bow that lay beside him.

"Death comes," he whispered, and a shudder racked him. His jaw fell; he lay dead.

Raynor stood up, a hard, cold anger in his eyes. He glanced up at the Nubian, who had not dismounted.

"We also ride south," he said shortly. "It was a pity we fell behind, Eblik."

"I don't think so," Eblik observed. "It was an act of providence that your horse should go lame yesterday. Had we been trapped with the others, we'd have died also."

Raynor fingered his sword-hilt. "Perhaps not. At any rate, we'll have our chance to cross blades with these marauding dogs."

"So? I think——"

"Obey!" Raynor snapped, and vaulted to the saddle. He set spurs to the horse's flanks, galloped past the heap of bodies beneath the oak. "Here's a trail. And it leads south."

Grunting his disapproval, the Nubian followed.

"You may have been Prince of Sardopolis," he muttered, "but Sardopolis has fallen."



## *The Citadel of Darkness*

This was true. They were many days' journey from the kingdom where Raynor had been born, and which was no longer a home for him. Three people had fled from doomed Sardopolis—Raynor, his servant Eblik, and the girl Delphia—and in their flight they had been joined by a few other refugees.

And now the last of the latter had been slain, here in unknown country near the Sea of Shadows that lay like a shining sapphire in imperial Gobi. When Raynor's horse had gone lame the day before, he and Eblik had fallen behind for an hour that stretched into a far longer period—and now the archers were slain and Delphia herself a captive.

The two rode swiftly; yet when night fell they were still within the great forest that had loomed above them for days. Raynor paused in a little clearing.

"We'll wait here till moonrise," he said. "It's black as the pit now."

Dismounting, the prince stretched weary muscles. Eblik followed his example. There was a brook near by, and he found water for the horses. That done, he squatted on his haunches, a grim black figure in the darkness.

"The stars are out," he said at last, in a muffled tone.

Raynor, his back against a tree-trunk, glanced up. "So they are. But it's not moonrise yet."

The Nubian went on as though he had not heard. "These are strange stars. I've never seen them look thus before."

"Eh?" The young prince stared. Against the jet curtain of night the stars glittered frostily, infinitely far away. "They look the same as always, Eblik."

But—did they? A little chill crept down Raynor's spine. Something cold and indefinably horrible seemed to reach down from the vast abyss of the sky—a breath of the unknown that brooded over this primeval wilderness.

The same stars—yes! But why, in this strange land, were the stars dreadful?

"You're a fool, Eblik," Raynor said shortly. "See to the horses."

The Nubian shivered and stood up.

"I wish we had never come into this black land," he murmured, in an oddly subdued voice. "It is cold here—too cold for midsummer."

A low whisper came out of the dark.

"Aye, it is cold. The gaze of the Basilisk chills you."

## *Swords and Sorcery*

"Who's that?" Raynor snarled. He whirled, his sword bare in his hand. Eblik crouched, great hands flexing.

Quiet laughter sounded. A shadow stepped from behind an oak trunk. A giant figure moved forward, indistinct in the gloom.

"A friend. Or at least, no enemy. Put up your blade, man. I have no quarrel with you."

"No?" Raynor growled. "Then why slink like a wolf in the dark?"

"I heard the noise of battle. I heard strange footsteps in the forest of Mirak. These called me forth."

A glimmer of wan, silvery light crept through the trees. The moon was rising. Its glow touched a great billow of white hair; shaggy, tufted eyebrows, a beard that rippled down the newcomer's breast. Little of the man's face could be seen. An aquiline beak of a nose jutted out, and somber dark eyes dwelt on Raynor. A coarse gray robe and sandals covered the frame of a giant.

"Who are you?"

"Ghiar, they call me."

"What talk is this of a—Basilisk?" Eblik asked softly.

"Few can read the stars," Ghiar said. "Yet those who can know the Dwellers in the Zodiac. Last night the sign of the Archer was eclipsed by the Fish of Ea. And this night the Basilisk is in the ascendancy." The deep voice grew deeper still; organ-powerful it rolled through the dark aisles of the forest. "Seven signs hath the Zodiac! The Sign of the Archer and the Sign of the Fish of Ea! The Sign of the Serpent and that of the Mirror! The Basilisk, and the Black Flower—and the Sign of Tammuz which may not be drawn. Seven signs—and the Basilisk rules tonight."

Meeting the brooding stare of those dark eyes, Raynor felt a nameless sense of unease.

"My business is not with the stars," half-angrily he said. "I seek men, not mirrors and serpents."

The tufted eyebrows lifted.

"Yet the stars may aid you, stranger, as they have aided me," Ghiar rumbled. "As they have told me, for example, of a captive maid in Malric's castle."

Raynor tensed. "Eh?"

"Baron Malric rules these marshes. His men captured your wench, and she is his prisoner now."

"How do you know this?" Raynor snapped.

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"Does that matter? I have certain powers—powers which may aid you, if you wish."

"This is sorcery, Prince," Eblik muttered. "Best run your blade through his hairy gullet."

Raynor hesitated, as though almost minded to obey. Ghiar shrugged.

"Malric's castle is a strong one; his followers are many. You alone cannot save the girl. Let me aid you."

Raynor's laugh was hotly scornful. "You aid me, old man? How?"

"Old? Aye, I am older than you think. Yet these oaks, too, are ancient, and they are strong with age. Let me tell you a secret. Malric fears the stars. He was born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea, which serves the Sign of the Black Flower. I, too, was born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea, but to me has been given power to rule, not to serve. The baron knows my power, and in my name you may free the girl."

Eblik broke in. "What would you gain by this?"

For a moment Ghiar was silent. The cold wind ruffled his white beard and tugged at his gray robe.

"What would I gain? Perhaps vengeance. Perhaps Baron Malric is my enemy. What does that matter to you? If I give you my aid, that should be enough."

"True," Raynor said. "Though this smacks of sorcery to me. However"—he shrugged—"Shaitan knows we need help, if Malric be as strong as you say."

"Good!" Ghiar's somber eyes gleamed with satisfaction. He fumbled in his robe, brought out a small glittering object. "This amulet will be your weapon."

Raynor took the thing and scrutinized it with interest. The amulet was perhaps as large as his palm, a disc of silvery metal on which figures were graven clockwise.

Six signs the amulet bore.

An arrow and a fish; a serpent and a circle; a flower and a tiny dragonlike creature with a long tail and a row of spines on its back.

In the amulet's center was a jewel—cloudy black, with a gleaming starpoint in its tenebrous heart.

"The Sign of Tammuz," whispered Ghiar. "Which may not be drawn! Yet by the star in the black opal ye may know him, Tammuz, Lord of the Zodiac!"

Raynor turned the object in his hand. On the amulet's back was a mirror-disc.

Ghiar said warningly, "Do not look too long in the



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steel. Through the Sign of the Mirror the power of the Basilisk is made manifest, and you may need that power. Show Malric the talisman. Order him, in my name, to free the girl. If he obeys, well. If he refuses"—the deep voice sank to an ominous whisper—"if he refuses, turn the amulet. Let him gaze into the Sign of the Mirror!"

Ghiar's hand lifted; he pointed south. "There is your road. The moon is up. Ride south!"

Raynor grunted, turned to his horse. Silently he vaulted to the saddle and turned the steed's head into the trail. Eblik was not far behind.

Once Raynor turned to look over his shoulder. Ghiar was still standing in the clearing, his shaggy head lifted, motionless as an image.

The warlock stared up at the stars.

## II

### THE SIGN OF THE BASILISK

So Eblik and Prince Raynor came to the outlaw's castle, a great gray pile of stone towering above the gloomy forest. They came out of the woods and stood silent for a time, looking across a broad grassy meadow, beyond which the castle brooded like a crouching beast. Red flame of lamps and flambeaux glittered from the mullioned windows. In the gateway light glistened on armor.

"Follow!" Raynor snapped, and spurred forward.

Across the sward they fled, and before the nodding guardsman had sprung to alertness, two muscular figures were almost upon him. Bearded lips opened in a shout that died unuttered. Gleaming steel thrust through a bare throat, slipped free, stained crimson. Choking on his own blood, the guard clawed at the gate and fell slowly, face down, to lie motionless in the moonlight.

"One guard," Raynor murmured. "Baron Malric fears few enemies, it seems. Well, that will make our task the easier. Come."

They went through the flagged courtyard and entered the castle itself. A bare sentry-room of stone, with a great oak door in the far wall—a room stacked with weapons, sword and mace and iron war-hook. Raynor hesitated, and then slipped quietly to the door. It was not barred. He pushed it

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gently open and peered through the crack. Eblik saw his master's figure go tense.

Raynor looked upon the castle's great hall. High-ceilinged it stretched up to oak rafters, blackened with smoke, that crisscrossed like a spider's web far above. The room itself was vast. Rich furs and rugs covered the floor; a long T-shaped table stretched almost from wall to wall. Around it, laughing and shouting in vinous mirth as they fed, were the men of Malric, his outlaw band.

Bearded men, wolf-fierce, gnawing on mutton-bones and swilling from great mugs of heady spiced liquor. At the head of the board, on an ornate throne, sat the baron himself—and he was truly a strange man to lord it over these lawless savages.

For Malric was slim and dark and smiling, with a gayly youthful face, and long hair that fell loosely about his slim shoulders. He wore a simple brown tunic, with loose, baggy sleeves, and his hands were busy twirling a gilded, filigreed chalice. He looked up as two burly outlaws entered, half dragging the slim form of a girl.

It was Delphia. She still wore her dented armor, and her ebony hair, unbound, fell in ringlets about her pale face. There was beauty in that face, wild and lawless beauty, and fire and strength in the jet eyes. She straightened and glared at Malric.

"Well?" she snapped. "What new insult is this?"

"Insult?" the baron questioned, his voice calm and soft. "I intend none. Will you eat with us?" He motioned to a chair that stood vacant beside him.

"I'd sooner eat with wild dogs," Delphia declared.

And at her words a low, ominous growl rose from the outlaws. One man, a burly fellow with a cast in one eye and a white scar disfiguring his cheek, leaped up and hurried to the girl's side. There he turned to face Malric.

"Have I given you leave to rise, Gunther?" the baron asked gently.

For answer the other growled an oath. "By Shaitan!" he snarled. "You've kept me waiting long enough, Malric. This wench is my own. I captured her, and I'll have her. If she eats with us, she sits beside me!"

"So?" Malric's voice did not change. Ironic laughter gleamed in the dark eyes. "Perhaps you grow tired of my rule, Gunther. Perhaps you wish to sit in my throne, eh?"

The outlaws watched, waiting. A hush hung over the long

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table. Involuntarily Raynor's hand crept to his swordhilt. He sensed death in the air.

Perhaps Gunther sensed it too. The white scar on his cheek grew livid. He roared an inarticulate oath and whipped out a great blade. Bellowing, he sprang at Malric. The sword screamed through the air.

The baron scarcely seemed to move, so swift was his rising. Yet suddenly he stood facing Gunther, and his slim hand dipped into his loose sleeve and came out with the light glittering on bright metal.

Swift as a snake's striking was Malric's cast. And a lean knife shot through the air and found its mark unerringly. Through eye and thin shell of bone and into soft, living brain it sped. Gunther screamed hoarsely once and his sword missed its target, digging instead into the wood of the table.

The outlaw's body bent back like a drawn bow. Gunther clawed at his face, his nails ripping away skin and flesh in a death agony.

And he fell, his mail ringing and clashing, to lie silent at Malric's feet.

The baron seated himself, sighing. Once more his fingers toyed with the gilded chalice. Seemingly he ignored the shout of approbation that thundered up from the outlaws.

But after a moment he glanced up at Delphia. He gestured, and the two guards dragged her forward.

Watching at the door, Raynor decided that it was time to act. Madness, perhaps, walking into a den of armed enemies. But the prince had changed his opinion. He had developed a queer, inexplicable confidence in Ghiar's talisman. He found the disc in his belt, cupped it in his palm, and with a word to Eblik kicked open the door and stepped into the hall.

Ten steps he took before he was discovered. Ten steps, with the Nubian at his heels, great battle-ax ready.

Then the wolves saw him and sprang up, shouting.

Simultaneously Malric called an order. His voice penetrated knife-keen through the tumult, and silence fell. The baron sat motionless, a little frown between his eyes, watching the two interlopers.

"Well?" he demanded. "Who are you?" And he cast a swift glance at Delphia, whose slight start had been betraying.

"My name matters little," Raynor said. "I bring you a message from a certain Ghiar."

"Ghiar!"



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A repressed whisper shuddered through the outlaws. There was fear in it, and bitter hatred.

"What is this message?" Malric demanded.

"That you free this girl."

The baron's youthful face was bland.

"Is that all?" he asked.

Raynor was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. He had expected some other reaction—what, he did not know. But Malric's calm passivity baffled him.

The baron waited. When no answer came, he made a quick gesture. And up from the board leaped armed men, shouting, blades bared. They poured down upon Raynor and on Eblik crouching behind him, gargoyle face twisted in battle lust.

So this was what came of warlocks' promises! Raynor grinned bitterly, whipped out his sword—and remembered the talisman. What had Ghiar said?

"If he refuses, turn the amulet. Let him gaze into the Sign of the Mirror!"

The foremost man was almost upon him as Raynor flung up his hand, the talisman cupped within it. From the mirror darted a ray of light—needle-thin, blindingly brilliant.

It struck full in the outlaw's face. It probed deep—deep!

Instantly a mask of stark, frightful horror replaced the look of savagery. The man halted, stood frozen and motionless as a statue, his eyes like those of a tortured animal.

Like a soundless whisper in Raynor's brain came the memory of Ghiar's words:

"The gaze of the Basilisk chills you. . . ."

And now from the mirror in the talisman pale bright rays were streaming, cold as white fires, unearthly as the arrows of the fabled Moon-goddess. And like arrows, too, they flamed swiftly through the air, seeking and finding their marks; and one by one Malric's men stiffened and stood frozen.

And last the baron himself. And then the fires of the talisman died and were gone.

"Delphia!" Raynor cried. The girl was already running toward him, down the length of the hall.

"This is sorcery, Prince," Eblik said. "And it is evil!"

"It aids us, at least," Raynor flung at him, and then turned to meet the girl.

And halted—staring.

## *Swords and Sorcery*

A sudden, icy chill had dropped down upon the great hall. The lamps dimmed swiftly and faded into utter darkness.

Through the midnight black Raynor heard Delphia scream. He sprang forward, cursing.

His foot struck a prostrate body. He bent, and searching fingers found a man's bearded chin.

"Delphia!" he shouted.

"Raynor!" she called, and her voice seemed to fade and dwindle as though from infinite distances. "Raynor! Help me!"

The prince's sword screamed through the dark. He stumbled forward blindly, seeking to penetrate the jet blackness, and quite suddenly one hand gripped hard, leathery flesh.

He heard an angry voice.

"Thou meddling fool! You dare to lift steel against the Lord of the Zodiac?"

The voice of—Ghiar! Ghiar, the warlock, come now to Malric's castle by some evil sorcery.

"Lift steel?" Raynor questioned furiously. "I'll give you a taste of it, skulking wizard!"

He thrust strongly just as Ghiar pulled free. A pain-filled screech rang out.

But Raynor had lost the wizard in the darkness, and he pushed forward hurriedly, before the oldster could escape.

"Thou fool!" Ghiar's voice whispered, cold with bitter menace. "Blind, rash fool!"

Raynor, groping in the dark, paused suddenly. A strange, greenish glow was beginning to pervade the hall. But its eerie light gave no illumination. Rather, it served only to reveal the source from which it sprang.

A gross and hideous bulk, scaled and shining, loomed above the man. It was shaped like a dragon, and Raynor suddenly remembered the symbol that he had seen on the talisman.

The Sign of the Basilisk!

Only instinct saved the prince then.

He knew, with a dreadful certainty, that to meet the dreadful gaze of the horror would mean death. And before he had time to catch but a flashing glimpse of the Basilisk, Raynor whirled, both hands lifted to his eyes. Through them, darting into the secret fortress of his mind, an icy chill had leaped suddenly—a cold beyond cold, a horror beyond life.

## *The Citadel of Darkness*

Four strides he took, blinded, his head throbbing with agony. Something soft and heavy caught his foot, and Raynor stumbled and crashed down upon the stones. The world went out in a blanket of merciful oblivion.

### III

#### THE SIGN OF THE BLACK FLOWER

Raynor awoke suddenly. Sunlight was slanting down through the high oaks, and a gruff voice was cursing steadily in several outlandish dialects of Gobi. The prince realized that he was being carried on someone's back, and recognized the deep voice as Eblik's.

He wriggled free, dropped to the ground, and the Nubian turned swiftly, his ugly face twisted with delight.

"Shaitan!" he growled. "The gods be praised! So you're alive, eh?"

"Just about," Raynor said wryly. "What's happened?"

"How should I know? When the lights went out back in Malric's castle, I blundered out of the hall in the dark, and when I got back Delphia was gone and you were lying on your face with a bump as large as World-Mountain on your head. So I picked you up and headed east."

"Why east?" Raynor asked. "You have my thanks, but it might have been better to have remained in the castle. Delphia—"

"She's to the east," Eblik grunted. "At least, our best chance is to go in that direction. I picked up one of Malric's men and brought him with us. He woke up an hour ago, and I choked some information from the dog. Ghiar has a citadel in Mirak Forest, in that direction." He nodded toward the rising sun. "You were cursing the warlock in your sleep, so I guessed a little of what had happened. What now?"

"We go to Ghiar's citadel," Raynor decided. "You did well, Eblik." Swiftly he explained what had happened. "Where are our horses?"

"Shaitan knows. They took fright and ran off. It isn't far, however."

"So? Well, I'm beginning to understand now, Eblik. Ghiar used me as a cat's-paw. Though just how I still cannot understand."

Raynor pondered. No doubt Ghiar had abducted the girl, but why had not the warlock stolen her by means of his



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magic, without seeking Raynor's aid? Could it be that the wizard had been unable to enter Malric's castle until someone had opened a gateway for him?

The prince had heard of such beings—creatures that could not enter a house unless they were lifted across the threshold, alien things that could never cross running water. Perhaps the amulet itself had given Ghiar power to materialize in the castle.

Reminded of the talisman, Raynor fumbled in his belt and found the disc there. He examined it with renewed curiosity. In the black jewel the star-point glowed with pale brilliance.

"Well, we go east, then," Raynor decided. "Come."

Without further words he set off at a steady, effortless lope that ate up the miles. The giant Nubian paced him easily, swinging his great ax as though in anticipation.

The oak forest stretched far and far, beyond their horizon. Overhead the sun grew hotter, pouring down its rays that would still be blasting upon Gobi when the empire would be not even a memory in the minds of men. But at last, hours later, the trees thinned and the two men found themselves at the top of a long slope that stretched down to the dark waters of a lake.

In the lake's center was an islet. And on the islet—Ghiar's citadel.

A citadel of darkness! Blacker than the nighted gulf of Abaddon was the great block of shining stone that towered up to the sky, a single, gigantic, polished oblong of jet, with neither tower nor window to break its grim monotony. No bridge spanned the lake.

The waters were steel-gray; frigid as polar seas they seemed.

On the islet, about the citadel, the ground was carpeted with darkness. The nature of this shadowy stain was a riddle; it was not stone, for now and again a long ripple would shudder across it as the wind sighed past.

The citadel lay in the shelter of a valley, and over all seemed to hang a slumbrous, eerie quiet. No sound stirred, save for the wind's occasional murmuring. And even that was oddly hushed.

Thus might sleep the fabled Elysian Fields, where the dead who have tasted Lethe wander to and fro, with a half-incurious yearning for lost delights, amid the eternal hush of the shadowland.

With a little shiver Raynor shook off the spell. He strode

## *The Citadel of Darkness*

forward, the Nubian at his side. Eblik said nothing, but his keen barbaric senses guessed that sorcery dwelt in this valley. The black's eyes were distended; his nostrils twitched as though seeking to scent something that dwelt beyond the threshold of his realization.

As the two went down the slope a dim, unreal perfume seemed to rise and drift about them, an odor sensed rather than actually scented. And a drowsy languor made Raynor's eyes heavy.

Truly dark magic guarded Ghiar's citadel!

They reached the lake's shore. They circled swiftly, and discovered there was no means of crossing to the islet.

"Short of building a raft," Raynor observed, "which would take too long, I see nothing to it but a swim."

"Aye," Eblik assented, readily enough, but his somber eyes dwelt on the motionless gray waters. "Yet it would be well to have our blades ready, Prince."

A dagger hung at Raynor's side; he unsheathed this and gripped it between his teeth.

Without a word he dived into the lake, came up yards away, swimming strongly.

And the water was cold—cold! Frigid beyond anything Raynor had ever known.

The dreadful chill of it lanced deep into his bones, making them grind together with the sheer pain of the unearthly cold.

Looking down, he found that the water was opaque. A uniform dull grayness made it seem as though he was floating on clouds. What mystery might lurk in these hidden depths he could not guess; but at least nothing rose to halt his progress.

The lake was not wide; yet Raynor was curiously exhausted when at last he waded through shallows and on to dry land. Eblik was not far behind. Now, not far away, Ghiar's citadel rose blackly cryptic before them.

And at their feet were—the Black Flowers!

The ground could not be seen, so thickly they grew. A living carpet of velvety darkness, they covered the islet, weirdly beautiful, with stems and leaves and soft petals all of the same glossy black.

Ever and anon a soft wind whispered past, and waves rippled across the jet sea.

Save for the wind, it was utterly silent.

The two men moved forward. The flowers brushed against

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their ankles, and a soft cloud of disturbed pollen hung like smoke in their wake. And ever the insidious perfume crept into their nostrils—stronger now, vaguely repellent, and redolent of unknown and forbidden things.

His gaze riveted on the citadel, Raynor did not at first realize that he was making little progress. Then he glanced down quickly, or tried to. But his muscles seemed to respond with unwillingness, and it was with a genuine effort that he succeeded in looking down. The black flowers seemed to be swaying toward him; around his feet the smoky darkness hung.

The dim haze fingered up, questing!

Raynor tried to spring forward. His feet kicked up a great cloud of pollen, and it shrouded him like a pall.

He was unconscious of the fact that he had halted and was swaying to and fro, slowly.

Over his vision a dim curtain dropped.

He seemed to fall very slowly.

The black flowers leaned toward him hungrily. A velvet blossom brushed his cheek; another seemed to cup his mouth as though in dreadful simulacrum of a kiss. Raynor breathed the dark perfume of the flower's heart. . . .

Of a sudden veils were lifted, and he saw unimaginable things. A blaze of sound and light and color swirled into being. Trumpets shrilled in his ears, and he heard the thunder of high walls crumbling to ruin. Confused visions of the past came to Raynor, and he lived again, dimly as in a dream, things he remembered and things he had forgotten.

And always the strange, deadly perfume was strong in his nostrils; but he felt no urge to move. The soporific spell of the Lethean flowers held him bound in fetters of dark magic.

It was pleasant to lie here, to rest, and to remember.

Then a rough hand gripped Raynor's arm; he was lifted, and immediately fell again heavily. From an immense distance came a harsh, despairing cry.

The voice of Eblik!

The sound pierced through the mists that shrouded Prince Raynor's brain. The Nubian was in danger, had cried to his master for help. Realization of this gave the prince strength as he battled down the terrible urge to remain motionless, to sleep, and at last Raynor won. The effort left him sweating and exhausted, but abruptly the visions faded and were gone.



## *The Citadel of Darkness*

He looked upon Ghiar's citadel, and the haunted islet in the lake.

With a sobbing curse he staggered upright. At his feet lay the unconscious Nubian, and Raynor lifted the black to his shoulders. Then, holding his breath, he plunged forward across the dark sea, even at that moment of mad turmoil feeling an odd sense of sadness at the thought of the jet, velvety beauty he crushed underfoot.

A wind rippled the blooms; they seemed to sigh as in farewell.

The Sign of the Black Flower was conquered!

### IV

#### THE SIGN OF THE SERPENT

Now Ghiar's citadel loomed above them. Grimly enigmatic it towered there featureless, with no gate or window breaking the dull monotony of its gloomy structure. Sick and dizzy, Raynor plunged on. And, quite suddenly, he realized that he had been wrong. A portal gaped in the high wall just before him.

Had it previously escaped his searching gaze? Perhaps; it was more probable that a hidden door had slid silently aside to admit the interlopers. It was not a comforting thought, for it meant that eyes were invisibly watching Raynor—eyes of the warlock Ghiar.

Nevertheless, the prince sprang over the threshold. Instantly the portal shut behind him. With little hope Raynor turned and attempted to reopen the door, but he failed.

Even if he had succeeded, what then? His path lay into the heart of the citadel. And a dimly lighted passageway stretched slanting down before him. Smiling grimly, Raynor moved on, carrying the unconscious Eblik, who now, however, began to stir and twitch feebly.

In a moment the giant Nubian had regained his senses. With one catlike movement he leaped free, the huge war-ax gripped in his hand. Then, seeing no enemy, he relaxed, grinning somewhat feebly at Raynor.

"We're in the citadel?" he asked. "Shaitan, there's magic in those damned flowers. Sorcery of the pit!"

"Keep your voice down," Raynor said. "Ghiar may have ways of hearing us, and watching us too. But we can't

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turn back now, and anyway I want to try my sword on Ghiar's ugly neck."

"I'm curious to see if necromancy will armor him against this," said Eblik, with a flash of white teeth, and the ax cleft the air in a deadly blow. The Nubian handled the heavy weapon as though it were light as a javelin.

Warily the two continued along the corridor. The dim light came from no discernible source; it seemed to gleam faintly from the air all about them. The walls and roof and floor were of the same dark stone.

The passage dipped, widened. The two men came out on a little ledge overhanging an abyss. At their feet was a gulf, dropping straight down to a milky, luminous shining far beneath. Nor was it water that lay at the pit's bottom, though it was certainly liquid. It glowed with a wan eerie light that reflected palely upon the black room arching above.

Here the corridor broadened into a circular cavern. A bridge spanned the abyss. It arched from the ledge's lip, straight and unbroken as Bifrost Bridge that Norsemen say reaches to Valhalla's gate. It stretched to a black wall of rock and ended beneath an arched opening in the stone.

"Our path lies there," Raynor said grimly. "Pray to your Nubian gods, Eblik!"

The prince stepped forward upon the perilous bridge.

It was narrow, terribly so. Giddy vertigo clutched at the man's brain, impelling him to look down. He fought against the dangerous impulse, kept his eyes steadily upon his goal. He felt Eblik's hand grip his shoulder, heard the Nubian gasp:

"It draws me! Guide me, Prince—I dare not keep my eyes open."

"Hold fast," Raynor said between clenched teeth. Yet he looked down. He could not help it.

Nausea clutched him. Far below, in the milky slime, dark bodies moved slowly, writhing and squirming in the dimness. What they were Raynor could not tell, but the creatures had a sickeningly human aspect, despite their ambiguous outlines. A blind deformed face stared up; a shocking muzzle gaped; but no sound came.

The things squirmed and flopped their way through the pale liquid, and Raynor knew that his hasty glance down had been an error. He felt stronger than ever the weird compulsion that seemed to tug at him, drawing him, overbalancing him so that he swayed perilously on the giddy bridge.

## *The Citadel of Darkness*

With a grinding effort he looked again at the bridge's end. Through some secret reservoir of mind he drew strength and will. He stepped forward, slowly, carefully. But he could not banish the thought of the horrors that dwelt below.

Yet at last the two men reached their goal. Sweating and gasping, they stepped to solid footing. And before them the portal in the rock opened enigmatically.

"Gods!" Eblik groaned. "Must we cross that hell-bridge on our return? If we do return!"

But Raynor had crossed the threshold, and was standing silent before the Snake.

He was in a small cave, high-roofed, dimly lit and containing nothing but a crude throne of rock directly facing him. On the throne sat a thing that bore a vague resemblance to a man. Staring at it, Raynor was reminded of the creatures he had just seen in the abyss.

Black and hideous and deformed it towered there, a pulpy shapeless thing of darkness, less human than a crudely chiseled idol. The head was worst of all. It was flattened, snake-like, with bulging dull eyes that stared blindly. The lower part of the face was elongated into a muzzle, and the creature was entirely covered with scales.

It sat there motionless, and bound about its brow like a dreadful crown was a snake. Its flattened head was lifted as in the uraeus crown of the Pharaohs, and its wise, ancient gaze dwelt coldly upon Raynor.

He had never seen anything as lovely and as horrible as this serpent.

The scintillant colors in its body flickered, changed, fading as smoke fades from red to violet, emerald green, shining topaz, sun-yellow, all in an intricate design that also shifted and moved strangely. The blinding beauty of the snake struck through Raynor like a sword.

Its eyes held him.

Very horrible were those eyes, alien beyond all imagining. Their gaze was at first tender, almost caressing, like that of a well-loved maiden. Strange magic reached out to grip the man.

The eyes of the snake probed into his soul. He felt nothing, heard nothing, saw nothing but the flood of alien sorcery pouring into his mind from the incredibly ancient eyes of the serpent.

He was unconscious of the fact that Eblik had halted behind him, motionless, paralyzed.



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And those passionless bright eyes were not evil—no! They were older than evil; beyond it, above it, as a god is above human motives and ideals.

They spoke of a wisdom beyond earthly understanding. They erased all else from Raynor's consciousness.

The cords that bound him to this earth, the human ties, slipped away slowly. He had not lost his memories of warm hearths, of laughing, fire-lit faces, of sword-play and of the mad high excitement of war. He remembered these things, with a distant, diamond-sharp clarity; but they had lost their significance.

They were unimportant.

They would pass, and be enveloped in the shadow of the ultimate night, and, in the end, they would not matter.

He remembered Eblik the Nubian, the pale proud face of Delphia rose up before him; but he felt no warmth of human kinship or understanding.

All these things were slipping away from him, in a clear, cold wisdom that came from beyond the stars. He envisioned man as a bit of animate clay moving for a little while upon a ball of mud and stone and water that drifted through the void, through the darkness that would finally engulf it.

So the Snake, that ancient one, gave to Raynor its vision. And the serpent uncoiled from the brow of the seated thing, and it slid down and glided across the stones to the prince, and it coiled about his body with a chill and merciless grip. The wise, flattened head lifted, till it was on a level with the man's face. The eyes of the serpent reached into Raynor's brain, into the secret fortress of his soul, and the prince stepped back one pace.

Then another. Slowly, like an automaton, he moved back toward the abyss that gaped behind him. He passed Eblik without seeing the black. For nothing existed but the dark, alien gaze of the serpent, brooding and old—old beyond earthlife!

The pit yawned behind him. Some stirring of human consciousness gave Raynor pause. He stopped, his sluggish thoughts feebly trying to rise free from the frigid ocean that held them motionless. Dimly he heard a cry from Eblik—muffled, faint, scarcely more than a despairing groan.

And that cry again saved him. Raynor could not have saved himself, but he knew that the Nubian called to his master for aid. And the thought of that was a faint, hot

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flame that rose and waxed brighter and slowly burned away the chill darkness that darkened his mind.

Slowly, slowly indeed, did the prince battle his way back to life. He swayed there upon the edge of the great gulf, while the serpent watched, and Eblik, after that one moan, was silent. And at last Raynor won.

Tide of life surged through his blood. He uttered a hoarse shout, gripped the cold, muscular body of the serpent, dragged it from his body. He flung the snake from him into the abyss.

A far sighing drifted up, unearthly, distant.

With that the spell lifted. Raynor came back to consciousness, no longer bound by the dark fetters of primeval magic; he swayed and leaped away from the edge of the pit.

He gave an inarticulate cry, somehow triumphant—exulting.

For the Sign of the Serpent was vanquished!

## V

### THE SIGN OF THE FISH OF EA

A movement caught Raynor's attention. The hideous image on the throne was moving slightly. Its misshapen black hand lifted; the muzzle gaped and shuddered. From the deformed mouth came a voice, deep as though it burst from the tongue of a corpse. Harsh, half-inarticulate, and muffled, it croaked:

"Mercy! In your mercy, slay me!"

The dull eyes looked upon Raynor. Shrinking a little in revulsion, the prince almost by instinct whipped out his sword. The monster slowly lifted its frightful head.

"Slay me! Slay me!"

"By all the gods," Raynor whispered through white lips, "what manner of being are you?"

"Once human, like you," the harsh voice groaned. "Once I ruled this citadel. Once I was a greater sorcerer than Gh iar."

A black paw beat the throne's side in agony. "Gh iar served me. I taught him the dark lore. And he turned to evil, and overthrew me, and prisoned me here. He set the Serpent to guard me. From my lips even now he learns wisdom. I serve him in ways I may not tell you. My soul roves between the stars to bring him knowledge."

Raynor forced himself to speak. "Know you aught of a girl, a captive of Gh iar's?"

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"Aye! Aye! The warlock has need of a maiden once in a decade. Thus he renews his youth. Ghiar is old—death should have taken him centuries ago. But by the young blood of a maiden, and by her young soul, he drinks fresh vigor. He gains strength to work new evil. Follow this road, and you will find the girl."

Raynor made an impulsive gesture. But the horrible voice froze him in mid-stride.

"Hold! You have conquered the Snake. Yet I am still captive, still in agony you cannot imagine. Give me release, I pray you! Slay me!"

Raynor dared not look upon the hideous figure. "You seek death?"

"I should have died centuries ago. Free me now, and I shall aid you when you need aid most. Slay me!"

Raynor's lips tightened in resolution. He stepped forward, lifted his sword. As the blade swept down the monster croaked:

"Remember! The Sign of Tammuz is Lord of Zodiac. It is the Master Sign."

Steel put a period to the words. The horror's head leaped from its shoulders; a foul-smelling ichor spurted a foot into the air. The creature toppled to lie motionless on the stones.

"Blood o' Shaitan!" Raynor muttered shakily. "I think we've walked into hell itself."

"Those be true words," said a low voice. "Once again you have saved us, master. But for what? Some worse doom, I think."

Eblik was rubbing his head, shivering. The prince gave a bark of laughter that held no mirth.

"Well, our road is open before us. And a brave man goes to meet his doom, instead of waiting for it to creep up on him. Hold fast to your ax, Eblik."

Raynor skirted the throne and entered a passage that gaped in the wall behind it. Once more the way led downward. It was a monotonous journey between dull walls of black stone.

What had the monster on the throne meant? "The Sign of Tammuz is Lord of the Zodiac." The Master Sign that could not be drawn—the sign of which the jet jewel in Ghiar's amulet was the symbol.

The passage turned and twisted, but always descended. They were far beneath ground level now, Raynor thought.



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His leg muscles were beginning to ache when at last the way was barred by a door of iron.

It was, however, unfastened, and moved aside at Raynor's cautious push.

He looked into a great circular room. Wan green light illuminated it dimly. The floor was of mosaic, figured in a bizarre design that centered in the Signs of the Zodiac. A golden Archer and a blue Fish; a scarlet Serpent and a black Flower; the Basilisk, all in shining green; and the disc of the Mirror in dull steel-gray.

In the exact center of the room was an immense jewel of jet set into the mosaic. A blindingly bright starpoint glittered deep in the gem's heart.

It was frigidly cold. Looking up, Raynor realized why. The room was roofless. Its shaft probed up through the heart of the huge stone structure, a hollow tube that ended, far above, in a purple-black sky, shot with innumerable stars. The day had ended, and moonless night brooded over the warlock's citadel.

The stars looked down upon the Signs of the Zodiac.

The walls were hung with curtains of white samite. They parted now, and a slim figure entered. It was Delphia. She moved slowly, her gaze staring blindly before her, the coils of midnight hair clustering about the pale, keen face. Three paces she took, and halted.

"Delphia!" Raynor called, and stepped forward. The girl did not move.

She lifted her head, gazed up at the stars. There was a queer avidity in her face, a tenseness as though she waited eagerly for something. It was utterly silent—and cold, cold.

Raynor gripped Delphia's arm, shook her roughly.

"Wake up!" he said urgently. "Are you under a spell?"

"She has enchantment on her," Eblik grunted, peering into the girl's eyes. "Let me carry her, Prince. Once we're out of this evil place she may awaken."

Raynor hesitated. Before he could speak a new voice came, softly mocking.

"Nay, let me carry the wench! I shall be gentle."

With an oath Raynor whipped around, his sword bared. Eblik's war-ax was suddenly in his hand, quivering like a falcon straining to be released. There, filling the passage by which they had entered, were a dozen men, fierce-eyed, grinning with hate and triumph—the outlaws of Mirak Forest.

At their head stood Baron Malric. His youthful face wore

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a gay, reckless smile, despite the fact that he was in the heart of the wizard's stronghold.

"Hold!" he whispered. "Do not move! For if you do, I shall slay you." And one slim hand slipped toward the loose velvet sleeve and the sharp knife Malric wore strapped to his forearm.

"How the devil did you get here?" Raynor snarled.

"I followed the path you opened for me. I swam the lake and crossed the field of the Black Flowers. I tracked you here through the citadel. It was not an easily won victory—no! Of all my men, these few are all that remain. Some sleep amid the Black Flowers. Others died elsewhere. But it does not matter. Ghiar was too reckless when he hired you to steal the girl from my castle. Warlock he may be, but I rule Mirak!"

"Hired me?" Raynor said slowly. "You mistake. Ghiar is my enemy, as he is yours."

Malric laughed softly. "Well, it does not matter whether you lie or tell truth. For you and this black shall both die here, and after I have found and slain Ghiar, I shall go back to my castle with the wench."

"After you have slain Ghiar!"

The words whispered out; the samite curtains parted, and a man stepped through. It was the warlock. The dim green light touched the great billow of white beard, the shaggy eyebrows, of the giant. The dark, somber eyes held no emotion.

"You seek me, Malric? I am here. Slay me if you can."

The baron, after a single start, stood motionless. His gaze locked in a silent, deadly duel with the cold stare of the wizard.

Abruptly, without warning, Malric moved. Too fast for eye to follow his hand dipped, came up flashing, brought death. Steel flickered through the air. The keen knife drove at Ghiar's throat—and fell blunted, ringing on the stones.

"Mortal fool," the warlock whispered. "You seek to battle the stars in their courses. Malric, I am Lord of the Zodiac. I have power over the Signs that rule men's lives."

The baron moistened his lips. His smile was crooked.

"Is this so? I know something of the Zodiac, Ghiar, and I know you do not rule all the Signs. You, yourself, once spoke to me of being born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea. As was I. How can you rule your ruler—or any other Sign? Nor are you Lord of the Stars. There is a certain Sign"—Malric glanced at the great black jewel in the mosaic's cen-

## *The Citadel of Darkness*

ter—"Aye, there is Tammuz. He is Lord of the Master Sign."

"Who can call on Tammuz?" Ghiar said coldly. "Once in a thousand years is a man born under his Sign. And only such a man may work the ultimate magic. Aye, I said to you I was born under the Sign of the Fish of Ea, but who are you that I should tell you full truth—as I do now?" The warlock frowned at Raynor. "As for you and your servant, you shall die with the others. Had you been wise, you would not have sought me, here. This girl is mine; I need her life to give me renewed youth."

"D'you think I fear a wizard?" Raynor snapped, and sprang. His sword sheared down, screaming through cleft air.

And rebounded, clashing. The weapon dropped from Raynor's nerveless hand, which was paralyzed as though by a strong electric shock. Snarling an oath, the prince tensed to leap, ready to close with the warlock with bare hands.

Ghiar's peremptory gesture halted him.

"Rash fools!" the wizard whispered, a chill and dreadful menace in the sibilant words. "You shall die as no man has died for a thousand years."

His arms lifted in a strange, archaic gesture. A gesture that reached up toward the stars far above, a gesture that summoned!

Bleak and ominous came the warlock's voice.

"Your doom comes. For now I call on the Sign of the Fish of Ea!"

## VI

### THE SIGN OF TAMMUZ

The green light thickened and grew fainter. An eerie, cloudy emerald glow dropped down upon the roofless room. The figure of Ghiar was a dark shadow towering in the dimness. And the deep voice thundered out:

"Ea! Lord of Eridu and E-apsu! Dweller in the house of the watery deep! Shar-apsi! By the power of thy Sign I call on the Lord of that which is below, watcher of Aralu, home of the restless dead. Ea, troubler of the great waters, consort of Damkina, Damgal-nunna, rise now from the eternal abyss!"

The green darkness thickened. Raynor, straining his eyes,



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could see nothing. He made an effort to move, but found he could not. A weird paralysis held him helpless.

He heard a sound, faint and far away. The sound of waters. The tinkling of brooks, the rushing of mighty cataracts, the thunder of tides crashing on basalt cliffs. The noises of the great deep heralded the coming of Ea, Lord of the waters under the earth.

Nothing existed but the glowing emerald fogs. A deeper light began to grow above. The mists poured up toward it.

Thicker they grew, and thicker. They swirled into an inverted whirlpool, rushing up toward the bright green shining in the air, flooding into it, vanishing. Vanishing as though plunging into an abyss that had no bottom!

A figure swam slowly into view, stiff and rigid. One of Baron Malric's wolves. Raynor had a glimpse of a strained, agonized face, and then the man was caught up into the torrent and vanished into the emerald glow. A thin, high scream drifted faintly from afar.

There were others after that. One by one the outlaws were caught up by the tide of alien magic, drawn into the weird whirlpool, swirled into nothingness. All were gone at last save for Malric.

Now the baron came into view. His youthful face was expressionless, but in the wide eyes was a horror beyond life. The bright hair tossed as though the man floated through water.

No sound came from Malric. He drifted up—and vanished!

The tide gripped Raynor. He felt himself lifted weightless, felt himself circling, rising. The shining abyss loomed above him. Desperately he fought to escape from the necromantic spell.

Quite suddenly the green mists were blotted out. Raynor seemed to hang in a black, starless immensity. He was alone in the void of eternal night.

In the distance a white, chill light began to grow. It approached, meteorlike, and Raynor saw a round, oddly familiar object speeding toward him. Soon it hung in the void not far away, and the prince remembered the deformed monster that had sat on the throne above the abyss—the captive of the snake that he had slain. Here was the same misshapen, hideous head, with its glazed eyes and elongated muzzle, all covered with glittering scales.

The Thing spoke.

## *The Citadel of Darkness*

"My promise, Prince Raynor. You gave me release. And I promised aid when you should need it most. I bring that aid now.

"The amulet," said the monstrous disembodied head.

Abruptly Raynor remembered the talisman Ghiar had given him in Mirak forest, the disc that bore the Signs of the Zodiac on its surface. He did not seem to move, yet the amulet was in his hand, and lifted high. It had changed. The Signs were erased, all but the black jewel in its center. Within the gem the starpoint pulsed and waned with supernatural brilliance.

"Tammuz is Lord of the Zodiac," the hideous muzzle croaked. "His magic is above magic. He is master of truth. Through him you may cast away the fetters of glamour and sorcery. Once in a thousand years is a man born under this Sign, and only such a man may call on Tammuz. I am that man! I was born under the Master Sign! Ghiar lies—he boasts of that which he is not! And now, to keep my promise and to aid you, I summon the Lord of the Zodiac. I summon—Tammuz!"

Forthwith the black jewel blazed with an icy, incredible light, starkly pitiless and blindingly bright; and the fantastic vision snapped out and vanished. The talisman was snatched from Raynor's hand. He felt firm stone beneath his feet; a cold wind blew on his sweating face.

Once more he was in Ghiar's citadel. He stood in the roofless room of the Zodiac. But no longer was it filled with the green mists.

Delphia and Eblik stood motionless; near them towered the warlock. Of Malric and his wolves there was no trace.

Ghiar's beard fluttered in the frigid blast. His deep eyes were hate-filled. And, with a queer, strange certainty, Raynor knew that by the Sign and the power of the real Tammuz, all magic had been stripped from the wizard.

No longer master of dark sorcery, Ghiar was human, vulnerable!

Raynor's shout was madly exultant as he sprang. The armor of invulnerability had been torn from Ghiar. But inhuman strength still surged in the giant frame. Huge muscles rolled under the coarse robe.

Ghiar swept out his arm in a bonecrushing blow. The shock of it made Raynor reel. Shaking his head blindly, he reeled in and closed with the warlock.

The two men crashed down on the stones. Ghiar fell up-

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permost; his fingers stabbed down at Raynor's eyes. The prince rolled his head aside, and the warlock bellowed with pain as his hand smashed against the rock. Abruptly Ghiar thrust himself away, and his mighty body dropped upon Raynor with an impact that drove the breath from the smaller man's lungs.

Weakly the prince drove a blow at the wizard's face. Blood spurted, staining the white beard. Roaring, Ghiar's hands fastened on Raynor's throat. They tightened remorselessly.

The prince rolled aside; he caught Ghiar's body between his legs, locking his feet together. Breath spewed from the warlock's lips in a foul gust. Ghiar bared his teeth in a murderous grin. And his fingers tightened—tightened.

A hot, throbbing agony was in Raynor's skull. He could not breathe. Knifelike pain thrust into his spine. A little more pressure, and his backbone would crack.

Sheer blind madness swept down on the prince then. Like a flood of red waters it poured through him, sweeping away all else but an insane lust to kill—and swiftly.

Raynor's thigh muscles bulged, holding Ghiar's body in a vise between them. The grinding strain of that frightful effort made sweat burst out on the prince's face; yet he knew that this was the crucial time. It was kill or be slain.

Bones cracked and gave sickeningly. There was a sudden softness in the wizard's body. Ghiar gave a frightful, howling shriek that seemed to burst up from the depths of his lungs. Blood spewed from the gaping mouth, frothed over the white beard, fell on Raynor.

The mighty hands released their grip on the prince's throat. Ghiar sprang up in one last convulsive effort. Dying, he thrust up his arms to the cold stars and screamed like a beast.

And he fell, as a tree falls, smashing down on the stones. He lay inert. From him blood crept darkly across the mosaic, touching and then covering the Sign of the Fish of Ea, the Sign under which Ghiar had been born and had ruled.

The warlock was dead.

Consciousness left Raynor then. Merciful darkness blanketed him. Nor did he recover until he felt water poured between his lips, felt a cool soft hand on his brow. He opened his eyes.

Above him sunlight slanted between the branches of an oak. The green, warm daylight of Mirak Forest was all



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about him. And Delphia knelt at his side, her eyes no longer blinded with sorcery, her face clouded with anxiety.

"Raynor," she said gratefully. "You're alive, thank the gods!"

"Alive?" growled Eblik, coming from behind an oak. "I'd not have carried him here if he hadn't been. How do you feel, Prince?"

"Well enough," Raynor said. "My legs ache like fire, but I'm unharmed, I think. You carried me out of the citadel, Eblik?"

"That he did," Delphia nodded. "And swam the lake with you. The Black Flowers were dead, Raynor, blasted as though by lightning."

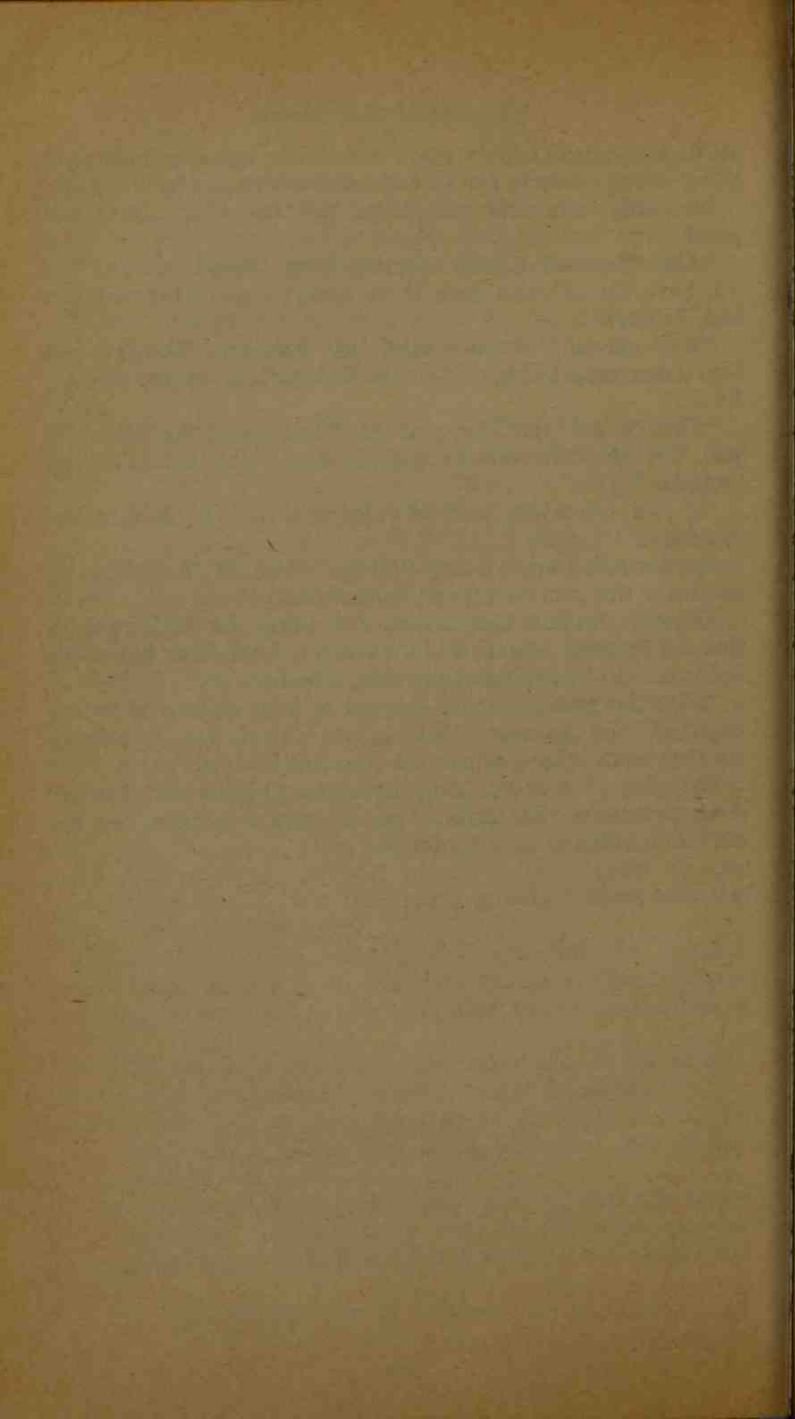
"If you can walk, we'd best be moving," Eblik said impatiently.

Raynor stood up, wincing slightly. "True. We'll find horses and leave this accursed forest behind us."

Together he and Delphia set out along the winding path that led through Mirak. Eblik hesitated a moment before he followed. He looked up at the blue, cloudless sky.

"May the gods grant we get out of this wilderness before nightfall," he grunted. "Out of this black forest, and in another land—a land where the stars are less evil."

Gripping his war-ax, he hurried after Delphia and Raynor. And, presently, the three of them were swallowed by the cool, dim aisles of the vast forest.



FRITZ LEIBER (born 1910) is the son of a Shakespearean actor of the same name. A tall man with large handsome features and stiff gray hair (looking, you might say, like a more mature Fafhrd), he has been a minister, an actor, a teacher, an aircraft inspector, and an editor. In recent years he has lived in California, writing full-time.

Leiber's heroic fantasies, about the adventurers Fafhrd and Gray Mouser, began with the publication of *Two Sought Adventure* in *Unknown* for August, 1939. The two heroes had been conceived several years before in correspondence between Leiber and his lifelong friend Harry Fischer. Four more novelettes about the rogues of Lankhmar followed in the same magazine. In 1947 Arkham House published a collection of Leiber's stories, *Night's Black Agents*, containing one of these five stories, *The Sunken Land*, and a short novel, *Adept's Gambit*, about the same characters.

Since then, Leiber has had six more Mouser stories printed in various magazines. In 1957, Gnome Press published a collection of seven Mouser stories under the title *Two Sought Adventure*. The present story appeared in *Fantastic Science Fiction Stories* for May, 1960; and Leiber promises more in the future.

Lankhmar, the city of the black toga, is in the world of Newhon, and world similar to ours and somehow connected with it across gaps of space, time, or dimensions. The city stands on a long, straggling peninsula, which sunders the Inner and Outer Seas on one side from the Sea of the East on the other. It also joins the Eastern Lands, with their Sea of Monsters and Mountains of the Elder Ones, to the southerly land of Quarmall. After various adventures—including a raid on the Crypt of Votishal, A Visit to the Forbidden City of the Black Idols, and a passage of the Sea of Monsters, the rascals have failed at a monumental religious swindle in Lankhmar (*Lean Times in Lankhmar*). Fleeing in a borrowed sloop, they have been adventuring along the northern shores of the Inner Sea.





## When the Sea King's Away

by FRITZ LEIBER

Stripped to his loincloth, underbelt, and with amulet pouch a-dangle under his chin, the Gray Mouser stretched lizard-like along the bowsprit of the sloop *Black Treasurer* and stared straight down into the hole in the sea. Sunlight unstrained by slightest wisp of cloud beat hotly on his deep-tanned back, but his belly was cold with the magic of the thing.

All round about, the Inner Sea lay calm as a lake of mercury in the cellar of a wizard's castle. No ripple came from the unbounded horizon to south, east and north, nor rebounded from the endless vertically-fluted curtain of creamy rock that rose a bowshot to the west and was a good three bowshots high, which the Mouser and Fafhrd had only yesterday climbed and atop which they had made a frightening discovery. The Mouser could have thought of those matters, or of the dismal fact that they were becalmed with little food and less water (and a tabooed cask of brandy) a weary sail west from Ool Hrusp, the last civilized port on this coast—or uncivilized either. He could have wondered about the seductive singing that had seemed to come from the sea last night, as of female voices softly improvising on the themes of waves hissing against sand, gurgling melodiously among rocks, and screaming wind-driven against icy coasts. Or he could perhaps best have pondered on Fafhrd's madness of yesterday afternoon, when the large Northerner had suddenly started to babble dogmatically about finding for himself and the Mouser "girls under the sea" and had even begun to trim his beard and brush out his brown otterskin tunic and polish his best male costume jewelry so as to be properly attired to receive the submarine girls and arouse their desires. There was an old Simorgyan legend, Fafhrd had insisted,

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according to which, on the seventh day of the seventh moon of the seventh year of the Sevens-Cycle, the king of the sea journeyed to the other end of the earth, leaving his opalescently beautiful green wives and faintly silver-scaled slim concubines free to find them lovers if they could . . . and this, Fafhrd had stridently asserted, he knew by the spectral calm and other occult tokens, was the place of the sea king's home and the eve of the day!

In vain had the Mouser pointed out to him that they had not sighted an even faintly feminine-looking fish in days, that there were absolutely no islets or beaches in view suitable for commerce with mermaids or for the sunbathing and primping of loreleis, that there were no black hulks whatever of wrecked pirate ships drifting about that might conceivably have fair captives imprisoned below decks and so technically "under the sea," that the region beyond the deceptive curtain-wall of creamy rock was the last from which one could expect girls to come, that—to sum it up—the *Black Treasurer* had not fetched the faintest sort of girl-blink either to starboard or larboard for weeks. Fafhrd had simply replied with crushing conviction that the sea king's girls were there down below, that they were now preparing a magic channel or passageway whereby air-breathers might visit them, and that the Mouser had better be ready like himself to hasten when the summons came.

The Mouser had thought that the heat and dazzle of the unrelenting sun—together with the sudden intense yearnings normal to all sailormen long at sea—must have deranged Fafhrd, and he had dug up from the hold and unsuccessfully coaxed the Northerner to wear a wide-brimmed hat and slitted ice-goggles. It had been a great relief to the Mouser when Fafhrd had fallen into a profound sleep with the coming of night, though then the illusion—or reality—of the sweet siren-singing had come to trouble his own tranquility.

Yes, the Mouser might well have thought of any of these matters, Fafhrd's prophetic utterances in particular, while he lay poised but unsweating in the hot sun along the stout bowsprit of the *Black Treasurer*, yet the fact is that he had mind only for the jade marvel so close that he could almost reach down a hand and touch the beginning of it.

It is well to approach all miracles and wonders by gradual stages or degrees, and we can do this by examining another



### *When the Sea King's Away*

aspect of the glassy seascape of which the Mouser also might well have been thinking—but wasn't.

Although untroubled by swell, wavelet, or faintest ripple or quiver, the Inner Sea around the sloop was not perfectly flat. Here and there, scatteredly, it was dimpled with small depressions about the size and shape of shallow saucers, as if giant invisible featherweight water-beetles were standing about on it—though the dimples were not arranged in any six-legged or four-legged or even tripod patterns. Moreover, a slim stalk of air seemed to go down from the center of each dimple for an indefinite distance into the water, quite like the tiny whirlpool that sometimes forms when the turquoise plug is pulled in the brimful golden bathtub of the Queen of the East (or the drain unstoppered in a bathtub of any humbler material belonging to any lowlier person)—except that there was no whirling of water in this case and the air-stalks were not twisted and knotted but straight, as though scores of slim-bladed rapiers with guards like shallow saucers but all as invisible as air had been plunged at random into the motionless waters around the *Black Treasurer*. Or as though a sparse forest of invisible lily pads with straight invisible stems had sprung up around the sloop.

Imagine such an air-stalked dimple magnified so that the saucer was not a palm's breadth but a good spearcast across and the rodlike sword-straight stalk not a fingernail's width but a good four feet; imagine the sloop slid prow-foremost down into that shallow depression but stopping just short of the center and floating motionless there; imagine the bowsprit of the slightly tilted ship projecting over the exact center of the central tube or well of air; imagine a small, stalwart, nutbrown man in a gray loincloth lying along the bowsprit, his feet braced against the foredeck rails, and looking straight down the tube . . . and you have the Gray Mouser's situation exactly!

To be *in* the Mouser's situation and peering down the tube was very fascinating indeed, an experience calculated to drive other thoughts out of any man's mind—or even any woman's! The water here, a bowshot from the creamy rock-wall, was green, remarkably clear, but too deep to allow a view of the bottom—soundings taken yesterday had shown it to vary between six score and seven score feet. Through this water the well-size tube went down as perfectly circular and as smooth as if it were walled with glass; and indeed the Mouser would have believed that it was so walled—that

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the water immediately around it had been somehow frozen or hardened without altering in transparency—except that at the slightest noise, such as the Mouser's coughing, little quiverings would run up and down it in the form of series of ring-shaped waves.

What power prevented the tremendous weight of the sea from collapsing the tube in an instant, the Mouser could not begin to imagine.

Yet it was endlessly fascinating to peer down it. Sunlight transmitted through the sea water illuminated it to a considerable depth brightly if greenishly, and the circular wall played odd tricks with distance. For instance, at this moment the Mouser, peering down slantwise through the side of the tube, saw a thick fish as long as his arm swimming around it and nosing up to it. The shape of the fish was very familiar yet he could not at once name it. Then, thrusting his head out to one side and peering down at the same fish through the clear water alongside the tube, he saw that the fish was three times the length of his body—in fact, a shark. The Mouser shivered and told himself that the curved wall of the tube must act like the reduction lenses used by a few artists in Lankhmar.

On the whole, though, the Mouser might well have decided in the end that the vertical tunnel in the water was an illusion born of sun-glare and suggestion and have put on the ice-goggles and stuffed his ears with wax against any more siren-singing and then perhaps swigged at the forbidden brandy and gone to sleep, except for certain other circumstances footing the whole affair much more firmly in reality. For instance, there was a knotted rope securely tied to the bowsprit and hanging down the center of the tube, and this rope creaked from time to time with the weight on it, and also there were threads of black smoke coming out of the watery hole (these were what made the Mouser cough), and last but not least there was a torch burning redly far down in the hole—so far down its flame looked no bigger than a candle's—and just beside the flame, somewhat obscured by its smoke and much tinied by distance, was the upward-peering face of Fafhrd!

The Mouser was inclined to take on faith the reality of anything Fafhrd got mixed up with, certainly anything that Fafhrd got physically into—the near-seven-foot Northerner was much too huge a hulk of solid matter to be picturable as strolling arm-in-arm with illusions.

### *When the Sea King's Away*

The events leading up to the reality-footing facts of the rope, the smoke, and Fafhrd down the air-well had been quite simple. At dawn the sloop had begun to drift mysteriously among the water dimples, there being no perceptible wind or current. Shortly afterwards it had bumped over the lip of the large saucer-shaped depression and slid to its present position with a little rush and then frozen there, as though the sloop's bowsprit and the hole were mutually desirous magnetic poles coupling together. Thereafter, while the Mouser had watched with eyes goggling and teeth a-chatter, Fafhrd had sighted down the hole, grunted with stolid satisfaction, slung the knotted rope down it, and then proceeded to array himself, seemingly with both war and love in mind—pomading his hair and beard, perfuming his hairy chest and armpits, putting on a blue silk tunic under the gleaming one of otterskin and all his silver-plated necklaces, armbands, brooches and rings as well, but also strapping long-sword and axe to his sides and lacing on his spiked boots. Then he had lit a long thin torch of resinous pine in the gallery firebox, and when it was flaming bravely he had, despite the Mouser's solicitous cries and tugging protests, gone out on the bowsprit and lowered himself into the hole, using thumb and forefinger of his right hand to grip the torch and the other three fingers of that hand, along with his left hand, to grip the rope. Only then had he spoken, calling on the Mouser to make ready and follow him if the Mouser were more hot-blooded man than cold-blooded lizard.

The Mouser had made ready to the extent of stripping off most of his clothing—it had occurred to him it would be necessary to dive for Fafhrd when the hole became aware of its own impossibility and collapsed—and he had fetched to the foredeck his own sword Scalpel and dagger Cat's Claw in their case of oiled sealskin with the notion they might be needed against sharks. Thereafter he had simply poised on the bowsprit, as we have seen, observing Fafhrd's slow descent and letting the fascination of it all take hold of him.

At last he dipped his head and called softly down the hole, "Fafhrd, have you reached bottom yet?" frowning at the ring-shaped ripples even this gentle calling sent traveling down the hole and up again by reflection.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

Fafhrd's answering bellow, concentrated by the tube and coming out of it like a solid projectile, almost blasted the Mouser off the bowsprit. Far more terrifying, the ring-



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ripples accompanying the bellow were so huge they almost seemed to close off the tube—narrowing it from four to two or three feet at any rate and dashing a spray of drops up into the Mouser's face as they reached the surface, lifting the rim upward as if the water were elastic, and then were reflected down the tube again.

The Mouser closed his eyes in a wince of horror, but when he opened them the hole was still there and the giant ring-ripples were beginning to abate.

Only a shade more loudly than the first time, but much more poignantly, the Mouser called down, "Fafhrd, don't do that again!"

"WHAT?"

This time the Mouser was prepared for it—just the same it was most horrid to watch those huge rings traveling up and down the tube in an arrow-swift green peristalsis. He firmly resolved to do no more calling, but just then Fafhrd started to speak up the tube in a voice of more rational volume—the rings produced were hardly thicker than a man's wrist.

*"Come on, Mouser! It's easy! You only have to drop the last six feet!"*

"Don't drop it, Fafhrd!" the Mouser instantly replied. "Climb back up!"

*"I already have! Dropped, I mean. I'm on the bottom. Oh, Mouser . . . !"*

The last part of Fafhrd's call was in a voice so infused with a mingled awe and excitement that the Mouser immediately asked back down, "What? 'Oh, Mouser'—what?"

"It's wonderful, it's amazing, it's fantastic!" the reply came back from below—this time very faintly all of a sudden, as if Fafhrd had somehow gone around an impossible bend or two in the tube.

"What is, Fafhrd?" the Mouser demanded—and this time his own voice raised moderate rings. "Don't go away, Fafhrd. But what is down there?"

"Everything!" the answer came back, not quite so faint this time.

"Are there girls?" the Mouser queried.

*"A whole world!"*

The Mouser sighed. The moment had come, he knew, as it always did, when outward circumstances and inner urges commanded an act, when curiosity and fascination tipped the scale of caution, when the lure of a vision and an adventure

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became so great and deep-hooking that he must respond to it or have his inmost self-respect eaten away.

Besides, he knew from long experience that the only way to extricate Fafhrd from the predicaments into which he got himself was to go fetch the perfumed and be-sworded lout!

So the Mouser sprang up lightly, clipped to his underbelt his sealskin-cased weapons, hung beside them in loops a short length of knotted line with a slip-noose tied in one end, made sure that the sloop's hatches were securely covered and even that the galley fire was tightly boxed, rattled off a short scornful prayer to the Gods of Lankhmar, and lowered himself off the bowsprit and down into the green hole.

The hole was chilly and it smelt of fish, smoke, and Fafhrd's pomade. The Mouser's main concern as soon as he got in it, he discovered to his surprise, was not to touch its glassy sides. He had the feeling that if he so much as lightly brushed it, the water's miraculous "skin" would rupture and he would be engulfed—rather as an oiled needle floating on a bowl of water in its tiny hammock of "water skin" is engulfed and sinks when one pinks it. He descended rapidly knot by knot, supporting himself by his hands, barely touching his toes to the rope below, praying there would be no sway and that he would be able to check it if it started. It occurred to him he should have told Fafhrd to guy the rope at the bottom if he possibly could and above all have warned him not to shout up the tube while the Mouser descended—the thought of being squeezed by those dread water-rings was almost too much to bear. Too late now!—any word now would only too surely bring a bellow from the Northerner in reply.

First fears having been thus inspected though by no means banished, the Mouser began to take some note of his surroundings. The luminous green world was not just one emerald blank as it had seemed at first. There was life in it, though not in the greatest abundance: thin strands of scalloped maroon seaweed, near-invisible jellyfish trailing their opalescent fringes, tiny dark skates hovering like bats, small silvery backboned fish gliding and darting—some of them, a blue-and-yellow-ringed and black-spotted school, even contesting lazily over the *Black Treasurer's* morning garbage, which the Mouser recognized by a large pallid beef-bone Fafhrd had gnawed briefly before tossing overside.

Looking up, he was hard put not to gasp in horror. The hull of the sloop, pressing down darkly though pearled with

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bubbles, looked seven times higher above him than the distance he had descended by his count of the knots. Looking straight up the tube, however, he saw that the circle of deep blue sky had not shrunk correspondingly while the bowsprit bisecting it was still reassuringly thick. The curve of the tube had shrunk the sloop as it had the shark. The illusion was most weird and foreboding, nonetheless.

And now as the Mouser continued his swift descent, the circle overhead did grow smaller and more deeply blue, becoming a cobalt platter, a peacock saucer, and finally no more than a strange ultramarine coin that was the converging point of the tube and rope and in which the Mouser thought he saw a star flash. The Gray One puffed a few rapid kisses toward it, thinking how like they were to a drowning man's last bubbles. The light dimmed. The colors around him faded, the maroon seaweed turned gray, the fish lost their yellow rings, and the Mouser's own hands became blue as those of a corpse. And now he began to make out dimly the sea bottom, at the same extravagant distance below as the sloop was above, though immediately under him the bottom was oddly veiled or blanketed and only far off could he make out rocks and ridged stretches of sand.

His arms and shoulders ached. His palms burned. A monstrously fat grouper swam up to the tube and followed him down it, circling. The Mouser glared at it menacingly and it turned on its side and opened an impossibly large moon-crescent of mouth. The Mouser saw the razor teeth and realized it was the shark he'd seen or another like it, tinied by the lens of the tube. The teeth clashed, some of them inside the tube, only inches from his side. The water's "skin" did not rupture disastrously, although the Mouser got the eerie impression that the "bite" was bleeding a little water into the tube. The shark swam off to continue its circling at a moderate distance and the Mouser refrained from any more menacing looks.

Meanwhile the fishy smell had grown stronger and the smoke must have been getting thicker too, for now the Mouser coughed in spite of himself, setting the water-rings shooting up and down. He fought to suppress an anguished curse—and at that moment his toes no longer touched rope. He unloosed the extra coil from his belt, went down three more knots, tightened the slip-noose above the second knot from the bottom, and continued on his way.



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Five handholds later his feet found a footing in cold muck. He gratefully unclenched his hands, working his cramped fingers, at the same time calling "Fafhrd!" softly but angrily. Then he looked around.

He was standing in the center of a large low tent of air, which was floored by the velvety sea-muck in which he had sunk to his ankles and roofed by the leadenly gleaming undersurface of the water—not evenly though, but in swells and hollows with ominous downward bulges here and there. The air-tent was about ten feet high at the foot of the tube. Its diameter seemed at least twenty times that, though exactly how far the edges extended it was impossible to judge for several reasons: the great irregularity of the tent's roof, the difficulty of even guessing at the extent of some outer areas where the distance between water-roof and muck-floor was measurable in inches, the fact that the gray light transmitted from above hardly permitted decent vision for more than two dozen yards, and finally the circumstance that there was considerable torch-smoke in the way here and there, writhing in thick coils along the ceiling, collecting in topsy-turvey pockets, though eventually gliding sluggishly up the tube.

What fabulous invisible "tent-poles" propped up the oceans-heavy roof the Mouser could no more conceive than the force that kept the tube open.

Writhing his nostrils distastefully, both at the smoke and the augmented fishy smell, the Mouser squinted fiercely around the tent's full circumference. Eventually he saw a dull red glow in the black smudge where it was thickest, and a little later Fafhrd emerged. The reeking flame of the pine torch, which was still no more than half consumed, showed the Northerner bemired with seamuck to his thighs and hugging gently to his side with his bent left arm a dripping mess of variously gleaming objects. He was stooped over somewhat, for the roof bulged down where he stood.

"Blubber brain!" the Mouser greeted him. "Put out that torch before we smother! We can see better without it. Oh oaf, to blind yourself with smoke for the sake of light!"

To the Mouser there was obviously only one sane way to extinguish the torch—jab it in the wet muck underfoot—but Fafhrd, though evidently most agreeable to the Mouser's suggestion in a vacantly smiling way, had another idea.

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Despite the Mouser's anguished cry of warning, he casually thrust the flaming stick into the watery roof.

There was a loud hissing and a large downward puff of steam, and for a moment the Mouser thought his worst dreads had been realized, for an angry squirt of water from the quenching point struck Fafhrd in the neck. But when the steam cleared it became evident that the rest of the sea was not going to follow the squirt, at least not at once; though now there was an ominous lump, like a rounded tumor, in the roof where Fafhrd had thrust the torch, and from it water ran steadily in a stream thick as a quill, digging a tiny crater where it struck the muck below.

"Don't do that!" the Mouser commanded in unwise fury.

"This?" Fafhrd asked gently, poking a finger through the ceiling next to the dripping bulge. Again came the angry squirt, diminishing at once to a trickle, and now there were two bulges closely side by side, quite like breasts.

"Yes, *that*—not again," the Mouser managed to reply, his voice distant and high because of the self-control it took him not to rage at Fafhrd and so perhaps provoke even more reckless probings.

"Very well, I won't," the Northerner assured him. "Though," he added, gazing thoughtfully at the twin streams, "it would take those dribblings years to fill up this cavity."

"Who speaks of years down here?" the Mouser snarled at him. "Dolt! Iron Skull! What made you lie to me? 'Everything' was down here, you said—'a whole world.' And what do I find? Nothing! A miserable little cramp-roofed field of stinking mud!" And the Mouser stamped a foot in rage, which only splashed him foully, while a puffed, phosphorescent-whiskered fish expiring on the mire looked up at him reproachfully.

"That rude treading," Fafhrd said softly, "may have burst the silver-filigreed skull of a princess. 'Nothing,' say you? Look you then, Mouser, what treasure I have digged from your stinking field."

And as he came toward the Mouser, his big feet gliding gently through the top of the muck for all the spikes on his boots, he gently rocked the gleaming things cradled in his left arm and let the fingers of his right hand drift gently among them.

"Aye," he said, "jewels and gauds undreamed by those who sail above, yet all teased by me from the ooze while I sought another thing."

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"What other thing, Gristle Dome?" the Mouser demanded harshly, though eyeing the gleaming things hungrily.

"The path," Fafhrd said a little querulously, as if the Mouser must know what he meant. "The path that leads from some corner or fold of this tent of air to the sea king's girls. These things are a sure promise of it. Look you, here, Mouser." And he opened his bent left arm a little and lifted out most delicately with thumb and finger-tips a life-size metallic mask.

Impossible to tell in that drained gray light whether the metal were gold or silver or tin or even bronze and whether the wide wavy streaks down it, like the tracks of blue-green sweat and tears, were verdigris or slime. Yet it was clear that it was female, patrician, all-knowing yet alluring, loving yet cruel, hauntingly beautiful. The Mouser snatched it eagerly yet angrily and the whole lower face crumpled in his hand, leaving only the proud forehead and the eyeholes staring at him more tragically than eyes.

The Mouser flinched back, expecting Fafhrd to strike him, but in the same instant he saw the Northerner turning away and lifting his straight right arm, index finger a-point, like a slow semaphor.

"You were right, oh Mouser!" Fafhrd cried joyously. "Not only my torch's smoke but its very light blinded me. See! See the path!"

The Mouser's gaze followed Fafhrd's pointing. Now that the smoke was somewhat abated and the torch-flame no longer shot out its orange rays, the patchy phosphorescence of the muck and of the dying sea-things scattered about had become clearly visible despite the muted light filtering from above.

The phosphorescence was not altogether patchy, however. Beginning at the hole from which the knotted rope hung, a path of unbroken greenish-yellow witch-fire a long stride in width led across the muck toward an unpromising-looking corner of the tent of air where it seemed to disappear.

"Don't follow it, Fafhrd," the Mouser automatically enjoined, but the Northerner was already moving past him, taking long dreamlike strides. By degrees his cradling arm unbent and one by one his ooze-won treasures began to slip from it into the muck. He reached the path and started along it, placing his spike-soled feet in the very center.

"Don't follow it, Fafhrd," the Mouser repeated—a little



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hopelessly, almost whiningly, it must be admitted. "Don't follow it, I say. It leads only to squidgy death. We can still go back up the rope, aye, and take your loot with us . . ."

But meanwhile he himself was following Fafhrd and snatching up, though more cautiously than he had the mask, the objects his comrade let slip. It was not worth the effort, the Mouser told himself as he continued to do it: though they gleamed enticingly, the various necklaces, tiaras, filigreed breast-cups and great-pinned brooches weighed no more and were no thicker than plaitings of dead ferns. He could not seem to equal Fafhrd's delicacy and they fell apart at his touch.

Fafhrd turned back to him a face radiant as one who dreams sleeping of ultimate ecstasies. As the last ghost-gaud slipped from his arm, he said, "They are nothing—no more than the mask—mere sea-gnawed wraiths of treasure. But oh, the promise of them, Mouser! Oh, the promise!"

And with that he turned forward again and stooped under a large downward bulge in the low leaden-hued roof.

The Mouser took one look back along the glowing path to the small circular patch of sky-light with the knotted rope falling in the center of it. The twin streams of water coming from the two "wounds" in the ceiling seemed to be running more strongly—where they hit, the muck was splashing. Then he followed Fafhrd.

On the other side of the bulge the ceiling rose again to more than head-height, but the walls of the tent narrowed in sharply. Soon they were treading along a veritable tunnel in the water, a leaden arch-roofed passageway no wider than the phosphorescently yellow-green path that floored it. The tunnel curved just enough now to left, now to right, so that there was no seeing any long distance ahead. From time to time the Mouser thought he heard faint whistlings and moanings echoing along it. He stepped over a large crab that was backing feebly and saw beside it a dead man's hand emerging from the glowing muck, one shred-fleshed finger pointing the way they were taking.

Fafhrd half turned his head and muttered gravely, "Mark me, Mouser, there's magic in this somewhere!"

The Mouser thought he had never in his life heard a less necessary remark. He felt considerably depressed. He had long given up his puerile pleadings with Fafhrd to turn back—he knew there was no way of stopping Fafhrd short of

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grappling with him, and a tussle that would invariably send them crashing through one of the watery walls of the tunnel was by no means to his liking. Of course, he could always turn back alone. Still . . .

With the monotony of the tunnel and of just putting one foot after the other into the clinging muck and withdrawing it with a soft *plop*, the Mouser found time to become oppressed, too, with the thought of the weight of the water overhead. It was as though he walked with all the ships of the world on his back. His imagination would picture nothing but the tunnel's instant collapse. He hunched his head into his shoulders, and it was all he could do not to drop to his elbows and knees and then stretch himself face down in the muck with the mere anticipation of the event.

The sea seemed to grow a little whiter ahead and the Mouser realized the tunnel was approaching the under-reaches of the curtain-wall of creamy rock he and Fafhrd had climbed yesterday. The memory of that climb let his imagination escape at last, perhaps because it fitted with the urge that he and Fafhrd somehow lift themselves out of their present predicament.

It had been a difficult ascent, although the pale rock had proved hard and reliable, for footholds and ledges had been few and they had had to rope up and go by way of a branching chimney, often driving pitons into cracks to create a support where none was—but they had had high hopes of finding fresh water and game, too, likely enough, so far west of Ool Hrusp and its hunters. At last they had reached the top, aching and a little blown from their climb and quite ready to throw themselves down and rest while they surveyed the landscape of grassland and stunted trees that they knew to be characteristic of other parts of this most lonely peninsula stretching southwestward between the Inner and Outer Seas.

Instead they had found . . . nothing. Worse than nothing, in a way, if that were possible. The longed-for top proved to be the merest edge of rock, three feet wide at the most and narrower some places, while on the other side the rock descended even more precipitously than on the side which they had climbed—indeed it was deeply undercut in large areas—and for an equal or rather somewhat greater distance. From the foot of this dizzying drop a wilderness of waves, foam and rocks extended to the horizon.

*They had found themselves clinging a-straddle to a ver-*

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itable rock curtain, paper-thin in respect to its height and horizontal extent, between the Inner and what they realized must be the Outer Sea, which had eaten its way across the unexplored peninsula in this region but not yet quite broken through. As far as eye could see in either direction the same situation obtained, though the Mouser fancied he could make out a thickening of the wall in the direction of Ool Hrusp.

Fafhrd had laughed at the surprise of the thing—gargantuan bellows of mirth that had made the Mouser curse him silently for fear the mere vibrations of his voice might shatter and tumble down the knife-edged saddle on which they perched. Indeed the Mouser had grown so angry with Fafhrd's laughter that he had sprung up and nimbly danced a jig of rage on the rock-ribbon, thinking meanwhile of wise Sheelba's saying: "Know it or not, man treads between twin abysses a tightrope that has neither beginning nor end."

Having thus expressed their feelings of horrified shock, each in his way, they had surveyed the yeasty sea below more rationally. The amount of surf and the numbers of emergent rocks showed it to be more shallow for some distance out—even likely, Fafhrd had opined, to drain itself at low tide, for his moon-lore told him that tides in this region of the world must at the moment be near high. Of the emergent rocks, one in particular stood out: a thick pillar two bowshots from the curtain-wall and as high as a four-story house. The pillar was spiraled by ledges that looked as if they were in part of human cutting, while set in its thicker base and emerging from the foam there appeared an oddly criss-crossed weed-fringed rectangle that looked mightily like a large stout door—though where such a door might lead and who would use it were perplexing questions indeed.

Then, since there was no answering that question or others and since there was clearly no fresh water or game to be had from this literal shell of a coast, they had descended back to the Inner Sea and the *Black Treasurer*, though now each time they had driven a piton it had been with the fear that the whole wall might split and collapse . . .

"Ware rocks!"

Fafhrd's warning cry pulled the Mouser out of his waking memory-dream—dropped him in a split instant as if it were, from the upper reaches of the creamy curtain-wall to a spot almost an equal distance below its sea-gnawed base. Just ahead of him three thick lumpy daggers of rock thrust down inexplicably through the gray watery ceiling of the tunnel.



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The Mouser shudderingly wove his head past them, as Fafhrd must have, and then looking beyond his comrade he saw more rocky protuberances encroaching on the tunnel from all sides—saw, in fact, as he strode on, that the tunnel was changing from one of water and muck to one roofed, walled and floored with solid rock. The water-borne light faded away behind them, but the increasing phosphorescence natural to the animal life of a sea cavern almost compensated for it, boldly outlining their wet stony way and here and there glowing with especial brilliance and variety of color from the bands, portholes, feelers and eye-rings of many a dying fish and crawler.

The Mouser realized they must be passing far under the curtain-wall he and Fafhrd had climbed yesterday and that the tunnel ahead must be leading under the Outer Sea they had seen tossing with billows. There was no longer that immediate oppressive sense of a crushing weight of ocean overhead or of brushing elbows with magic. Yet the thought that if the tube, tent and tunnel behind them should collapse, then a great gush of solid water would rush into the rock-tunnel and engulf them, was in some ways even worse. Back under the water roof he'd had the feeling that even if it should collapse he might reach the surface alive by bold swimming and conceivably drag the cumbered Fafhrd up with him. But here they'd be hopelessly trapped.

True, the tunnel seemed to be ascending, but not enough or swiftly enough to please the Mouser. Moreover, if it did finally emerge, it would be to that shattering welter of foam they'd peered down at yesterday. Truly, the Mouser found it hard to pick between his druthers, or even to have any druthers at all. His feelings of depression and doom gradually sank to a new and perhaps ultimate nadir, and in a desperate effort to wrench them up he deliberately imagined to himself the zestiest tavern he knew in Lankhmar—a great gray cellar all a-flare with torches, wine streaming and spilling, tankards and coins a-clink, voices braying and roaring, poppy fumes a-twirl, naked girls writhing in lascivious dances . . .

*"Oh, Mouser . . . !"*

Fafhrd's deep and feelingful whisper and the North-erner's large hand against his chest halted the Mouser's plodding, but whether it fetched his spirit back below the Outer Sea or simply produced a fantastic alteration in its escapist imagining, the Gray One could not at once be sure.

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They were standing in the entrance to a vast submarine grotto that rose in multiple steps and terraces toward an indefinite ceiling from which cascaded down like silver mist a glow about thrice the strength of moonlight. The grotto reeked of the sea like the tunnel behind them; it was likewise scattered with expiring fish and eels and small octopuses; molluscs tiny and huge clustered on its walls and corners between weedy draperies and silver-green veils; while its various niches and dark circular doorways and even the stepped and terraced floor seemed shaped in part at least by the action of rushing waters and grinding sand.

The silver mist did not fall evenly but concentrated itself in swirls and waves of light on three terraces. The first of these was placed centrally, and only a level stretch and then a few low ledges separated it from the tunnel's mouth. Upon this terrace was set a great stone table with weed-fringed sides and mollusc-cruste'd legs but level top of grained and spotted marble polished to what looked an exquisite smoothness. A great golden basin stood on one end of this table and two golden goblets beside the basin.

Beyond the first terrace rose a second uneven flight of steps with areas of menacing shadow pressing upon it from either side. Behind the areas of darkness were a second and third terrace that the silvery light favored. The one on the right—Fafhrd's side, to call it that, for he stood to the right in the tunnel mouth—was walled and arched with mother-of-pearl, almost as if it were one gigantic shell, and pearly swells rose from its floor like heaped satin pillows. The one on the Mouser's side, slightly below, was backed by an arras of maroon seaweed that fell in wide scalloped strands and billowed on the floor. From between these twin terraces the flight of irregular steps or ledges continued upward into a third area of darkness.

Shifting shadows and dark wavings and odd gleamings hinted that the three areas of darkness might be occupied; there was no doubt that the three bright terraces were. On the upper terrace on Fafhrd's side stood a tall and opulently beautiful woman whose golden hair rose in spiral masses like a shell and whose dress of golden fishnet clung to her pale greenish flesh. Her fingers showed greenish webs between them and on the side of her neck as she turned were faint scorings like a fish's gills.

On the Mouser's side was a slimmer yet exquisitely feminine creature whose silver flesh seemed to merge into silver

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scales on shoulders, back and flanks under her robe of filmy violet and whose short dark hair was split back from her low forehead's center by a scalloped silver crest a hand's breadth high. She too showed the faint neck-scorings and finger webs.

The third figure, standing a-crouch behind the table, was sexlessly scrawny, with an effect of wiry old age, and either gowned or clad closely in jet black. A shock of rope-thick hair dark red as iron rust covered her head while her gills and finger webs were starkly apparent.

Each of these women wore a metal mask resembling in form and expression the eaten-away one Fafhrd had found in the muck. That of the first figure was gold; of the second, silver; of the third, green-splotched sea-darkened bronze.

The first two women were still, not as if they were part of a show but as though they were observing one. The scrawny black sea-witch was vibrantly active, although she hardly moved on her black-webbed toes except to shift position abruptly and ever so slightly now and then. She held a short whip in either hand, the webs folded outside her bent knuckles, and with these whips she maintained and directed the swift spinning of a half dozen objects on the polished table top. What these objects were it was impossible to say, except that they were roughly oval. Some by their semi-transparency as they spun might have been large rings or saucers, others actual tops by their opacity. They gleamed silver and green and golden and they spun so swiftly and moved in such swift intersecting orbits as they spun that they seemed to leave gleaming wakes of spin in the misty air behind them. Whenever one would flag in its spinning and its true form begin to blink into visibility, she'd bring it back up to speed again with two or three rapid whip-flips; or should one veer too close to the table's edge or the golden basin, or threaten to collide with another, she'd redirect its orbit with deft lashings; now and again, with incredible skill, she'd flick one so that it jumped high in the air and then flick it again at landing so that it went on spinning without a break, leaving above it an evanescent loop of silvery air-spin.

These whirring objects made the pulsing moans and whistles the Mouser had heard along the tunnel.

As he watched them now and listened to them, the Gray One became convinced—partly because the silvery curving tubes of spin made him think of the air shaft he'd rope-climbed and the air-tunnel he'd plodded—that these spin-



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ning things were a crucial part of the magic that had created and held open the path through the Inner Sea behind them, and that once they should cease whirring then the shaft and tent and tunnel would collapse and the waters of the Inner Sea speed through the rock-tunnel into this grotto.

And indeed the scrawny black sea-witch looked to the Mouser as though she'd been whipping her tops for hours and—more to the point—would be able to keep on whipping them for hours more. She showed no signs of her exertion save the rhythmic rise and fall of her breastless chest and the extra whistle of breath through the mouth-slit of her mask and the gape and close of her gills.

Now she seemed for the first time to see him and Fafhrd, for without leaving off her whipping she thrust her bronze mask toward them, red ropes a-spill across its green-blotched forehead, and glared at them—hungrily, it seemed. Yet she made them no other menace, but after a searching scrutiny jerked back her head twice, as if for a sign that they should go past her. At the same time the green and silver queens beckoned to them languorously.

This woke the Mouser and Fafhrd from their dazed watching and they complied eagerly enough, though in passing the table the Mouser sniffed wine and paused to take up the two golden goblets, handing one to his comrade. They drained them despite the green hue of the drink, for the stuff smelt right and was fiery sweet yet tart.

As he drank, the Mouser saw into the golden bowl. It held no store of green wine, but was filled almost to the brim with a crystal fluid that might or might not have been water. On the fluid floated a model, hardly a finger long, of the hull of a black boat. A tiny tube of air seemed to go down from its prow.

But there was no time for closer looking, for Fafhrd was moving on. The Mouser stepped up into his area of shadow to the left as Fafhrd had done to the right . . . and as he so stepped, there sidled from the shadows before him two bluely pallid men armed each with a pair of wave-edged knives. They were sailors, he judged from their pigtails and shuffling gait, although they were both naked, and they were indisputably dead—by token of their unhealthy color, their carelessness of the thick slime streaking them, the way their bulging eyes showed only whites and the bottom crescent of the irises, and the fact that their hair, ears, and other

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portions of their anatomies looked somewhat fish-chewed. Behind them waddled a scimitar-wielding dwarf with short spindle legs and monstrous head and gills—a veritable walking embryo. His great saucer eyes too were the upturned ones of a dead thing, which did not make the Mouser feel any easier as he whisked Scalpel and Cat's Claw out of their sealskin case, for the three converged on him confidently where he stood and rapidly shifted to block his way as he sought to circle behind them.

It was probably just as well that the Mouser had at that moment no attention to spare for his comrade's predicament. Fafhrd's area of shadow was black as ink toward the wall, and as the Northerner strode through the margin of it past a ridged and man-sized knob of rock rising from the ledges and between him and the Mouser, there lifted from the further blackness—like eight giant serpents rearing from their lair—the thick, sinuous, crater-studded arms of a monstrous octopus. The sea-beast's movement must have struck internal sparks, for it simultaneously flashed into a yellow-streaked purplish iridescence, showing Fafhrd its baleful eyes large as plates, its cruel beak big as the prow of an overturned skiff, and the rather unlikely circumstance that the end of each mighty tentacle wrapped powerfully around the hilt of a gleaming broadsword.

Snatching at his own sword and axe, Fafhrd backed away from the be-weaponed squid against the ridged knob of rock. Two of the ridges, being the vertical shell-edges of a mollusc four feet across, instantly closed on the slack of his otterskin tunic, firmly holding him there.

Greatly daunted but determined to live nevertheless, the Northerner swung his sword in a great figure eight, the lower loop of which almost nicked the floor, while the upper loop rose above his head like a tall arching shield. This double-petalled flower of steel baffled the four blades or so with which the octopus first came chopping at him rather cautiously, and as the sea monster drew back his arms for another volley of slashes, Fafhrd's left arm licked out with his axe and chopped through the nearest tentacle.

His adversary hooted loudly then and struck repeatedly with all his swords, and for a space it looked as though Fafhrd's universal parry must surely be pierced, but then the axe licked out again from the center of the sword-shield, once, twice, and two more tentacle tips fell and the swords they gripped with them. The octopus drew back then out of

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reach and sprayed a great mist-cloud of stinking black ink from its tube, under cover of which it might work its will unseen on the pinned Northerner, but even as the blinding mist billowed toward him Fafhrd hurled his axe at the huge central head. And although the black fog hid the axe almost as soon as it left his hand, the heavy weapon must have reached a vital spot, for immediately the octopus hurled its remaining swords about the grotto at random (fortunately striking no one although they made a fine clatter) as its tentacles thrashed in dying convulsions.

Fafhrd drew a small knife, slashed his otterskin tunic down the front and across the shoulders, stepped out of it with a contemptuous wave to the mollusc as if to say, "Have it for supper if you will," and turned to see how his comrade fared. The Mouser, bleeding greenly from two trivial wounds in ribs and shoulder, had just finished severing the major tendons of his three hideous opponents—this having proved the only way to immobilize them when various mortal wounds had slowed them in no way at all nor caused them to bleed one drop of blood of any color.

He smiled sickishly at Fafhrd and turned with him toward the upper terraces. And now it became clear that the Green and Silver Ones were at least in one respect true queens, for they had not fled the prodigious battles as lesser women might, but abided them and now waited with arms lightly outstretched. Their gold and silver masks could not smile, but their bodies did, and as the two adventurers mounted toward them from the shadow into the light (the Mouser's little wounds changing from green to red, but Fafhrd's blue tunic staying pretty inky) it seemed to them that veily finger-webs and light neck-scorings were the highest points of female beauty. The lights faded somewhat on the upper terraces, though not on the lower where the monotonous six-toned music of the tops kept reassuringly on, and the two heroes entered each into that dark lustrous realm where all thoughts of wounds are forgotten and all memories of even the zestiest Lankhmar wine-cellar grow flat, and the Sea, our cruel mother and loving mistress, repays all debts.

A great soundless jar, as of the rock-solid earth moving, recalled the Mouser to his surroundings. Almost simultaneously the whirl of one of the tops mounted to a high-pitched whine ending in a tinkly crash. The silver light began to pulse and flicker wildly throughout the grotto. Springing to his feet and looking down the steps, the Mouser saw a



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memory-etching sight: the rust-topped black sea witch whipping wildly at her rebellious tops, which leaped and bounded about the table like fierce silver weasels, while through the air around her from all sides but chiefly from the tunnel there converged an arrow-swift flight of flying fish, skates, and ribbon-edged eels, all inky black and with tiny jaws agape.

At that instant Fafhrd seized him by the shoulder and jerked him fully around, pointing up the ledges. A silver lightning-flash showed a great cross-beamed, weed-fringed door at the head of the rocky stairs. The Mouser nodded violently—meaning he understood it resembled and must be the door they had yesterday seen from the ribbony cliff-summit — and Fafhrd, satisfied his comrade would follow him, dashed toward it up the ledges.

But the Mouser had a different thought and darted in the opposite direction in the face of an ominous wet reeking wind. Returning a dozen lightning-flashes later, he saw the green and silver queens disappearing into round black tunnel mouths in the rock to either side of the terrace and then they were gone.

As he joined Fafhrd in the work of unsettling the cross-bars of the great weedy door and drawing its massive rusty bolts, it quivered under a portentous triple knocking as though someone had smote it thrice with a long-skirted cloak of chain mail. Water squirted under it and through the lower third of the central vertical crack. The Mouser looked behind him then, with the thought that they might yet have to seek another avenue of escape . . . and saw a great white-headed pillar of water jetting more than half the height of the grotto from the mouth of the tunnel connecting with the Inner Sea. Just then the silver cavern-light went out, but almost immediately other light spilled from above. Fafhrd had heaved open half of the great door. Green water foamed about their knees and subsided. They fought their way through and as the great door slammed behind them under a fresh surge of water, they found themselves sloshing about on a wild beach blown with foam, swimming with surf, and floored chiefly with large flat water-worn oval rocks like giants' skipping stones. The Mouser, turned shoreward, squinted desperately at the creamy cliff two bowshot away, wondering if they could possibly reach it through the mounting tide and climb it if they did.

But Fafhrd was looking seaward. The Mouser again felt

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himself shoulder-grabbed, spun around, and this time dragged up a curving ledge of the great tower-rock in the base of which was set the door through which they had just emerged. He stumbled, cutting his knees, but was jerked ruthlessly on. He decided that Fafhrd must have some very good reason for so rudely enjoining haste and thereafter did his best to hurry without assistance at Fafhrd's heels up the spiraling ramplike ledge. On the second circling he stole a seaward look, gasped, and increased the speed of his mad dizzy scramble.

The stony beach below was drained and only here and there patched with huge gouts of spume, but roaring toward them from outer ocean was a giant wave that looked almost half as high as the pillar they were mounting—a great white wall of water flecked with green and brown and studded with rocks—a wave such as distant earthquakes send charging across the sea like a massed cavalry of monsters. Behind that wave came a taller one, and behind that a third taller still.

The Mouser and Fafhrd were three gasping circles higher when the stout tower shuddered and shook to the crashing impact of the first giant wave. Simultaneously the landward door at its base burst open from within and the cavern-traveling water from the Inner Sea gushed out creamily to be instantly engulfed. The crest of the wave caught at Fafhrd's and the Mouser's ankles without quite tripping them or much slowing their progress. The second and third did likewise, although they had gained another circle before each impact. There was a fourth wave and a fifth, but no higher than the third. The two adventurers reached the stumpy summit and cast themselves down on it, clutching at the still-shaking rock and slewing around to watch the shore—Fafhrd noting the astonishing minor circumstance that the Mouser was gripping between his teeth in the corner of his mouth a small black cigar.

The creamy curtain wall shuddered at the impact of the first wave and great cracks ran across it. The second wave shattered it and it fell into the third with an explosion of spray, displacing so much salt water that the return wave almost swamped the tower, its dirty crest tugging at the Mouser's and Fafhrd's fingers and licking along their sides. Again the tower shook and rocked beneath them but did not fall and that was the last of the great waves. Fafhrd and the Mouser circled down the spiraling ledges until they caught

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up with the declining sea, which still deeply covered the door at the tower's base. Then they looked landward again, where the mist raised by the catastrophe was dissipating.

A full half mile of curtain-wall had collapsed from base to crest, its shards vanishing totally beneath the waves, and through that gap the higher waters of the Inner Sea were pouring in a flat sullen tide that was swiftly obliterating the choppy aftermath of the earthquake waves from the Outer Sea.

On this wide river in the sea the *Black Treasurer* appeared from the mist, riding straight toward their refuge rock.

Fafhrd cursed superstitiously. Sorcery working against him he could always accept, but magic operating in his favor he invariably found disturbing.

As the sloop drew near, they dove together into the sea, reached it with a few brisk strokes, scrambled aboard, steered it past the rock, and then lost no time in toweling and dressing their nakedness and preparing hot drink. Soon they were looking at each other over steaming mugs of grog.

"Now that we've changed oceans," Fafhrd said, "we'll raise No-ombrulsk in a day with this west wind."

The Mouser nodded and then smiled steadily at his comrade for a space. Finally he said, "Well, old friend, are you sure that is all you have to say?"

Fafhrd frowned. "Well, there's one thing," he replied somewhat uncomfortably after a bit. "Tell me, Mouser, did your girl ever take off her mask?"

"Did yours?" the Mouser asked back, eyeing him quizzically.

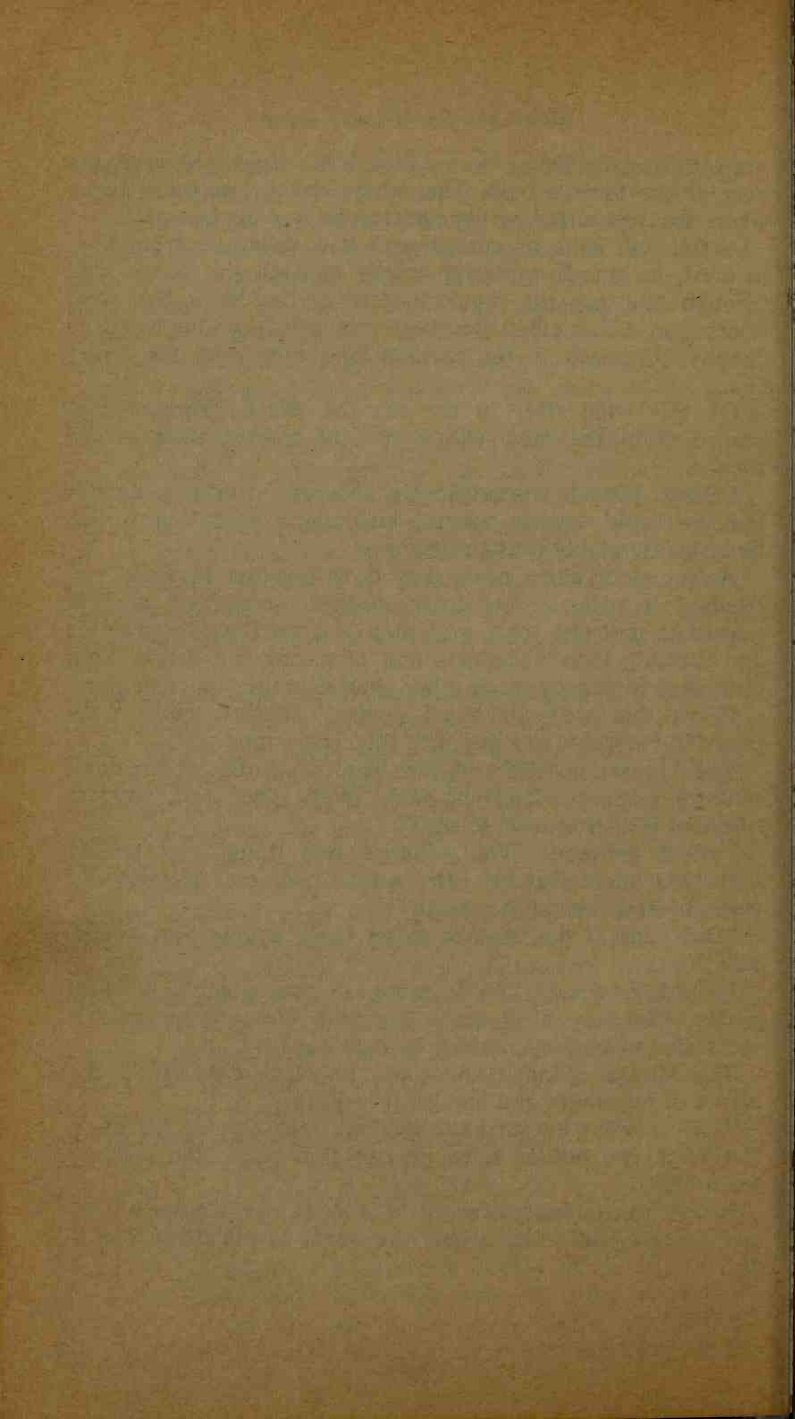
Fafhrd frowned. "Well, more to the point," he said gruffly, "did any of it really happen? We lost our swords and duds but we have nothing to show for it."

The Mouser grinned and took the black cigar from the corner of his mouth and handed it to Fafhrd.

"This is what I went back for," he said, sipping his grog. "I thought we needed it to get our ship back, and perhaps we did."

It was a tiny replica, carved in jet with the Mouser's teeth marks deeply indenting it near the stern, of the *Black Treasurer*.



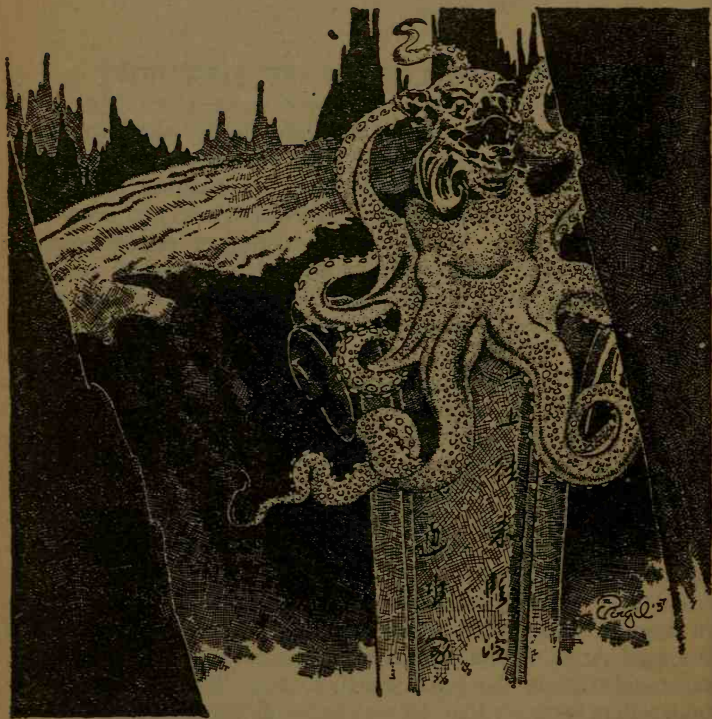


HOWARD PHILLIPS LOVECRAFT (1890-1937) was a frail, lantern-jawed recluse who lived most of his life in his native Providence, Rhode Island. He dwelt with two aged aunts, seldom ventured abroad save at night, and indulged in many obsessions and affectations. He married a successful businesswoman and moved to New York but soon fled back to Providence. For years he made just enough money from writing and from revising others' manuscripts to keep from starving. He sold fifty-two stories, all but three to *Weird Tales*. Poe, Dunsany, Chambers, and Bierce influenced him.

Lovecraft is best remembered for the tales in which he developed the "Cthulhu mythos." This is a fictional cosmogony wherein a race of benign deities, the Elder Gods, once banished or restrained a hostile race of supernatural powers, the Great Old Ones or Ancient Ones. However, ignorant mortals now and then tamper with the restraints upon the Ancient Ones, who thereupon manifest themselves in terrifying fashion.

In these stories Lovecraft created several imaginary books of ancient lore, such as the unspeakable *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred. His scholarly quotations and references made the book seem so real that librarians and booksellers were plagued by people inquiring for it.

Lovecraft also wrote a few heroic fantasies. This one was written in 1919; was published in an amateur magazine, *Marvel Tales*, in 1935; was reprinted in *Weird Tales* in 1938; and was printed again by Arkham House in the large collection, *Beyond the Wall of Sleep* (1943). This and its companion volume, *The Outsider and Others* (1939), are long out of print and command fabulous prices. Several smaller collections of Lovecraft's stories have also been published.





## ***The Doom That Came to Sarnath***

*by H. P. LOVECRAFT*

There is in the land of Mnar a vast still lake that is fed by no stream, and out of which no stream flows. Ten thousand years ago there stood by its shore the mighty city of Sarnath, but Sarnath stands there no more.

It is told that in the immemorial years when the world was young, before ever the men of Sarnath came to the land of Mnar, another city stood beside the lake; the gray stone city of Ib, which was old as the lake itself, and peopled with beings not pleasing to behold. Very odd and ugly were these beings, as indeed are most beings of a world yet inchoate and rudely fashioned. It is written on the brick cylinders of Kadatheron that the beings of Ib were in hue as green as the lake and the mists that rise above it; that they had bulging eyes, pouting, flabby lips, and curious ears, and were without voice. It is also written that they descended one night from the moon in a mist; they and the vast still lake and gray stone city Ib. However this may be, it is certain that they worshipped a sea-green stone idol chiseled in the likeness of Bokrug, the great water-lizard; before which they danced horribly when the moon was gibbous. And it is written in the papyrus of Ilarneq, that they one day discovered fire, and thereafter kindled flames on many ceremonial occasions. But not much is written of these beings, because they lived in very ancient times, and man is young, and knows but little of the very ancient living things.

After many eons men came to the land of Mnar, dark shepherd folk with their fleecy flocks, who built Thraa, Ilarneq, and Kadatheron on the winding river Ai. And certain tribes, more hardy than the rest, pushed on to the border of the lake and built Sarnath at a spot where precious metals were found in the earth.

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Not far from the gray city of Ib did the wandering tribes lay the first stones of Sarnath, and at the beings of Ib they marveled greatly. But with their marveling was mixed hate, for they thought it not meet that beings of such aspect should walk about the world of men at dusk. Nor did they like the strange sculptures upon the gray monoliths of Ib, for those sculptures were terrible with antiquity. Why the beings and the sculptures lingered so late in the world, even until the coming of men, none can tell; unless it was because the land of Mnar is very still, and remote from most other lands, both of waking and of dream.

As the men of Sarnath beheld more of the beings of Ib their hate grew, and it was not less because they found the beings weak, and soft as jelly to the touch of stones and arrows. So one day the young warriors, the slingers and the spearmen and the bowmen, marched against Ib and slew all the inhabitants thereof, pushing the queer bodies into the lake with long spears, because they did not wish to touch them. And because they did not like the gray sculptured monoliths of Ib they cast these also into the lake; wondering from the greatness of the labor how ever the stones were brought from afar, as they must have been, since there is naught like them in the land of Mnar or in the lands adjacent.

Thus of the very ancient city of Ib was nothing spared, save the sea-green stone idol chiseled in the likeness of Bokrug, the water-lizard. This the young warriors took back with them as a symbol of conquest over the old gods and beings of Ib, and as a sign of leadership in Mnar. But on the night after it was set up in the temple, a terrible thing must have happened, for weird lights were seen over the lake, and in the morning the people found the idol gone and the high-priest Taran-Ish lying dead, as from some fear unspeakable. And before he died, Taran-Ish had scrawled upon the altar of chrysolite with coarse shaky strokes the sign of DOOM.

After Taran-Ish there were many high-priests in Sarnath, but never was the sea-green stone idol found. And many centuries came and went, wherein Sarnath prospered exceedingly, so that only priests and old women remembered what Taran-Ish had scrawled upon the altar of chrysolite. Betwixt Sarnath and the city of Ilarneke arose a caravan route, and the precious metals from the earth were exchanged for other metals and rare cloths and jewels and books and tools for artificers and all things of luxury that are known to the peo-

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ple who dwell along the winding river Ai and beyond. So Sarnath waxed mighty and learned and beautiful, and sent forth conquering armies to subdue the neighboring cities; and in time there sate upon a throne in Sarnath the kings of all the land of Mnar and of many lands adjacent.

The wonder of the world and the pride of all mankind was Sarnath the magnificent. Of polished desert-quarried marble were its walls, in height three hundred cubits and in breadth seventy-five, so that chariots might pass each other as men drove them along the top. For full five hundred stadia did they run, being open only on the side toward the lake where a green stone sea-wall kept back the waves that rose oddly once a year at the festival of the destroying of Ib. In Sarnath were fifty streets from the lake to the gates of the caravans, and fifty more intersecting them. With onyx were they paved, save those whereon the horses and camels and elephants trod, which were paved with granite. And the gates of Sarnath were as many as the landward ends of the streets, each of bronze, and flanked by the figures of lions and elephants carved from some stone no longer known among men. The houses of Sarnath were of glazed brick and chalcedony, each having its walled garden and crystal lakelet. With strange art were they builded, for no other city had houses like them; and travelers from Thraa and Ilarneek and Kadatheron marveled at the shining domes wherewith they were surmounted.

But more marvelous still were the palaces and the temples, and the gardens made by Zokkar the olden king. There were many palaces, the last of which were mightier than any in Thraa or Ilarneek or Kadatheron. So high were they that one within might sometimes fancy himself beneath only the sky; yet when lighted with torches dipt in the oil of Dother their walls showed vast paintings of kings and armies, of a splendor at once inspiring and stupefying to the beholder. Many were the pillars of the palaces, all of tinted marble, and carved into designs of surpassing beauty. And in most of the palaces the floors were mosaics of beryl and lapis lazuli and sardonyx and carbuncle and other choice materials, so disposed that the beholder might fancy himself walking over beds of the rarest flowers. And there were likewise fountains, which cast scented waters about in pleasing jets arranged with cunning art. Outshining all others was the palace of the kings of Mnar and of the lands adjacent. On a pair of golden crouching lions rested the throne, many steps above

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the gleaming floor. And it was wrought of one piece of ivory, though no man lives who knows whence so vast a piece could have come. In that palace there were also many galleries, and many amphitheaters where lions and men and elephants battled at the pleasure of the kings. Sometimes the amphitheaters were flooded with water conveyed from the lake in mighty aqueducts, and then were enacted stirring sea-fights, or combats betwixt swimmers and deadly marine things.

Lofty and amazing were the seventeen tower-like temples of Sarnath, fashioned of a bright multi-colored stone not known elsewhere. A full thousand cubits high stood the greatest among them, wherein the high-priests dwelt with a magnificence scarce less than that of the kings. On the ground were halls as vast and splendid as those of the palaces; where gathered throngs in worship of Zo-Kalar and Tamash and Lobon, the chief gods of Sarnath, whose incense-enveloped shrines were as the thrones of monarchs. Not like the eikons of other gods were those of Zo-Kalar and Tamash and Lobon. For so close to life were they that one might swear the graceful bearded gods themselves sate on the ivory thrones. And up unending steps of zircon was the tower-chamber, wherefrom the high-priests looked out over the city and the plains and the lake by day; and at the cryptic moon and significant stars and planets, and their reflections in the lake, at night. Here was done the very secret and ancient rite in detestation of Bokrug, the water-lizard, and here rested the altar of chrysolite which bore the Doom-scrawl of Taran-Ish.

Wonderful likewise were the gardens made by Zokkar the olden king. In the center of Sarnath they lay, covering a great space and encircled by a high wall. And they were surmounted by a mighty dome of glass, through which shone the sun and moon and planets when it was clear, and from which were hung fulgent images of the sun and moon and stars and planets when it was not clear. In summer the gardens were cooled with fresh odorous breezes skilfully wafted by fans, and in winter they were heated with concealed fires, so that in those gardens it was always spring. There ran little streams over bright pebbles, dividing meads of green and gardens of many hues, and spanned by a multitude of bridges. Many were the waterfalls in their courses, and many were the liliated lakelets into which they expanded. Over the streams and lakelets rode white swans, whilst the



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music of rare birds chimed in with the melody of the waters. In ordered terraces rose the green banks, adorned here and there with bowers of vines and sweet blossoms, and seats and benches of marble and porphyry. And there were many small shrines and temples where one might rest or pray to small gods.

Each year there was celebrated in Sarnath the feast of the destroying of Ib, at which time wine, song, dancing and merriment of every kind abounded. Great honors were then paid to the shades of those who had annihilated the odd ancient beings, and the memory of those beings and of their elder gods was derided by dancers and lutanists crowned with roses from the gardens of Zokkar. And the kings would look out over the lake and curse the bones of the dead that lay beneath it.

At first the high-priests liked not these festivals, for there had descended amongst them queer tales of how the sea-green eikon had vanished, and how Taran-Ish had died from fear and left a warning. And they said that from their high tower they sometimes saw lights beneath the waters of the lake. But as many years passed without calamity even the priests laughed and cursed and joined in the orgies of the feasters. Indeed, had they not themselves, in their high tower, often performed the very ancient and secret rite in detestation of Bokrug, the water-lizard? And a thousand years of riches and delight passed over Sarnath, wonder of the world.

Gorgeous beyond thought was the feast of the thousandth year of the destroying of Ib. For a decade had it been talked of in the land of Mnar, and as it drew nigh there came to Sarnath on horses and camels and elephants men from Thraa, Ilarne, and Kadatheron, and all the cities of Mnar and the lands beyond. Before the marble walls on the appointed night were pitched the pavilions of princes and the tents of travelers. Within his banquet-hall reclined Nargis-Hei, the king, drunken with ancient wine from the vaults of conquered Pnoth, and surrounded by feasting nobles and hurrying slaves. There were eaten many strange delicacies at that feast; peacocks from the distant hills of Implan, heels of camels from the Bnazic desert, nuts and spices from Sydathrian groves, and pearls from wave-washed Mtal dissolved in the vinegar of Thraa. Of sauces there were an untold number, prepared by the subtlest cooks in all Mnar, and suited to the palate of every feaster. But most prized of all

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the viands were the great fishes from the lake, each of vast size, and served upon golden platters set with rubies and diamonds.

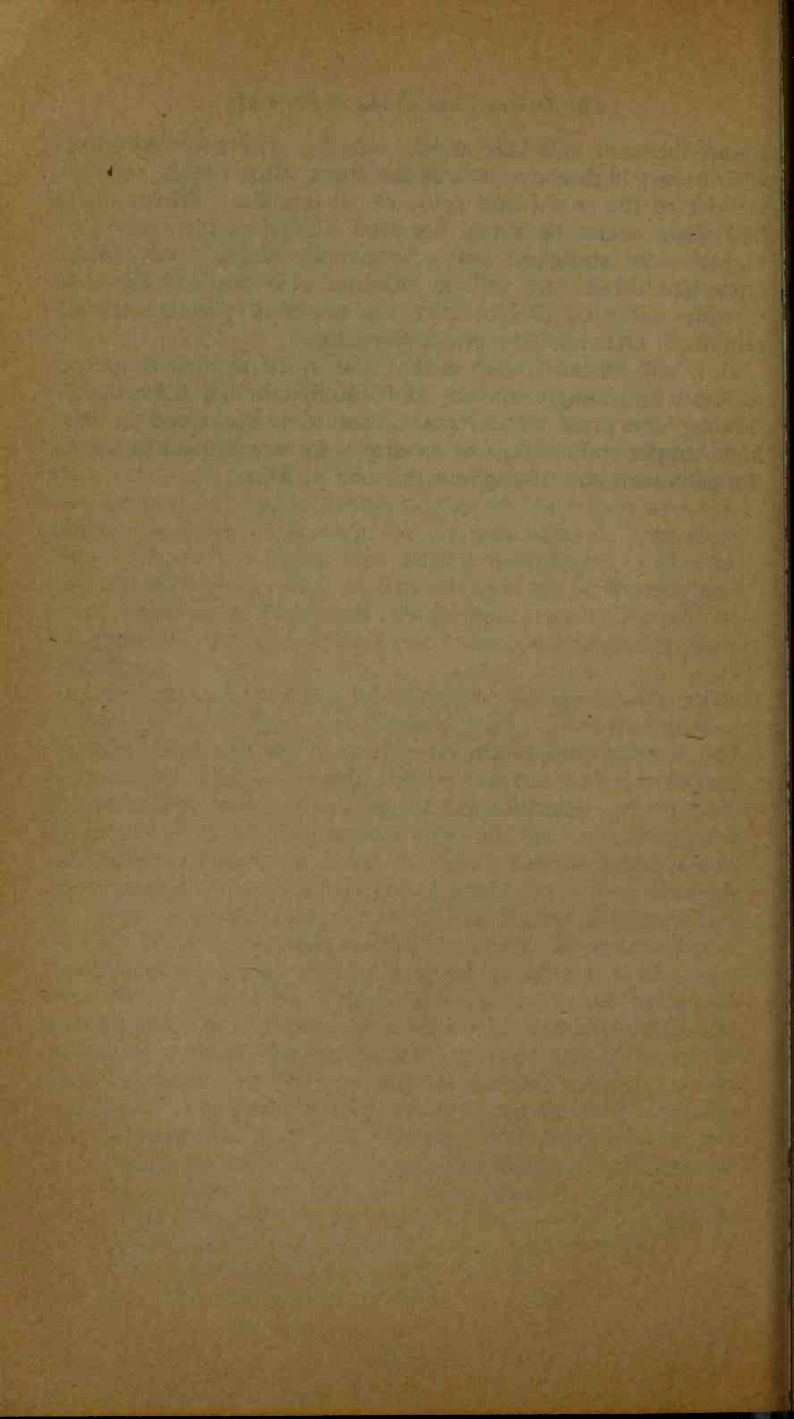
Whilst the king and his nobles feasted within the palace, and viewed the crowning dish as it awaited them on golden platters, others feasted elsewhere. In the tower of the great temple the priests held revels, and in pavilions without the walls the princes of neighboring lands made merry. And it was the high-priest Gnai-Kah who first saw the shadows that descended from the gibbous moon into the lake, and the damnable green mists that arose from the lake to meet the moon and to shroud in a sinister haze the towers and the domes of fated Sarnath. Thereafter those in the towers and without the walls beheld strange lights on the water, and saw that the gray rock Akurion, which was wont to rear high above it near the shore, was almost submerged. And fear grew vaguely yet swiftly, so that the princes of Ilarnek and of far Rokol took down and folded their tents and pavilions and departed, though they scarce knew the reason for their departing.

Then, close to the hour of midnight, all the bronze gates of Sarnath burst open and emptied forth a frenzied throng that blackened the plain, so that all the visiting princes and travelers fled away in fright. For on the faces of this throng was writ a madness born of horror unendurable, and on their tongues were words so terrible that no hearer paused for proof. Men whose eyes were wild with fear shrieked aloud of the sight within the king's banquet-hall, where through the windows were seen no longer the forms of Nargis-Hei and his nobles and slaves, but a horde of indescribable green voiceless things with bulging eyes, pouting, flabby lips, and curious ears; things which danced horribly, bearing in their paws golden platters set with rubies and diamonds and containing uncouth flames. And the princes and travelers, as they fled from the doomed city of Sarnath on horses and camels and elephants, looked again upon the mist-begetting lake and saw the gray rock Akurion was quite submerged. Through all the land of Mnar and the lands adjacent spread the tales of those who had fled from Sarnath, and caravans sought that accursed city and its precious metals no more. It was long ere any travelers went thither, and even then only the brave and adventurous young men of yellow hair and blue eyes, who are no kin to the men of Mnar. These men indeed went to the lake to view Sarnath; but though they

### *The Doom That Came to Sarnath*

found the vast still lake itself, and the gray rock Akurion which rears high above it near the shore, they beheld not the wonder of the world and pride of all mankind. Where once had risen walls of three hundred cubits and towers yet higher, now stretched only the marshy shore, and where once had dwelt fifty million of men now crawled the detestable water-lizard. Not even the mines of precious metal remained. DOOM had come to Sarnath.

But half buried in the rushes was spied a curious green idol; an exceedingly ancient idol chiseled in the likeness of Bokrug, the great water-lizard. That idol, enshrined in the high temple at Ilarnek, was subsequently worshipped beneath the gibbous moon throughout the land of Mnar.





CATHERINE LUCILE MOORE (Mrs. Henry Kuttner) was born in 1911 in Indianapolis, worked as a secretary in an Indianapolis bank, and caused a sensation with her first published story, "Shambleau," when it appeared in *Weird Tales* for November, 1933. The story concerned a dour interplanetary adventurer, Northwest Smith, who rescues a girl from a mob on Mars and then learns the hard way that she is really a Thing. The story showed such professional finish and sensuous emotional power that it drew praise from Lovecraft, among others. Other Northwest Smith stories followed, and then a series of fantasies about a medieval warrior-girl, Jirel of Joiry, of which the present story was the last one written.

As a result of correspondence with the Lovecraft circle, Miss Moore—tall, dark, and glamorous-looking—collaborated on a story with Henry Kuttner and in 1940 married him. Her later fiction was mostly in collaboration with Kuttner. Since Kuttner's death in 1958, Mrs. Kuttner has lived in California and has devoted most of her time to writing for television. Now she is studying for her master's degree.

Most of the stories about Northwest Smith and Jirel of Joiry were published in two collections by Gnome Press: *Shambleau and Others* (1953) and *Northwest of Earth* (1954). Each book contains several stories from each series. A final story, *Quest of the Star Stone*, which brought these two characters together, was not included because the Kuttners did not consider it up to the standards of the rest. Well, maybe; but I had rather read second-rate Moore than the first-rate of most writers.



## **Hellsgarde**

*by C. L. MOORE*

Jirel of Joiry drew rein at the edge of the hill and sat awhile in silence, looking out and down. So this was Hellsgarde! She had seen it many times in her mind's eye as she saw it now from the high hill in the yellow light of sunset that turned every pool of the marshes to shining glass. The long causeway to the castle stretched out narrowly between swamps and reeds up to the gate of that grim and eery fortress set alone among the quicksands. This same castle in the marshes, seen at evening from the high hilltop, had haunted her dreams for many nights now.

"You'll find it by sunset only, my lady," Guy of Garlot had told her with a sidelong grin marring his comely dark face. "Mists and wilderness ring it round, and there's magic in the swamps about Hellsgarde. Magic—and worse, if legends speak truth. You'll never come upon it save at evening."

Sitting her horse now on the hilltop, she remembered the grin in his black eyes and cursed him in a whisper. There was such a silence over the whole evening world that by instinct she dared not speak aloud. Dared not? It was no normal silence. Bird-song did not break it, and no leaves rustled. She huddled her shoulders together a little under the tunic of link-mail she wore and prodded her horse forward down the hill.

Guy of Garlot—Guy of Garlot! The hoofbeats thumped out the refrain all the way downhill. Black Guy with his thinly smiling lips and his slanted dark eyes and his unnatural comeliness—unnatural because Guy, within, was ugly as sin itself. It seemed no design of the good God that such sinfulness should wear Guy's dark beauty for a fleshly garment.

The horse hesitated at the head of the causeway which stretched between the marsh pools toward Hellsgarde. Jirel



### *Swords and Sorcery*

shook the reins impatiently and smiled a one-sided smile downward at his twitching ears.

"I go as loath as you," she told him. "I go wincing under spurs too, my pretty. But go I must, and you too." And she cursed Guy again in a lingering whisper as the slow hoofbeats reverberated upon the stone arches of the causeway.

Beyond it loomed Hellsgarde, tall and dark against the sunset. All around her lay the yellow light of evening, above her in the sky, below her in the marshy pools beneath which quicksands quivered. She wondered who last had ridden this deserted causeway in the yellow glow of sunset, under what dreadful compulsion.

For no one sought Hellsgarde for pleasure. It was Guy of Garlot's slanting grin that drove Jirel across the marshes this evening—Guy and the knowledge that a score of her best men-at-arms lay shivering tonight in his dripping dungeons with no hope of life save the hope that she might buy their safety. And no riches could tempt Black Guy, not even Jirel's smoothly curving beauty and the promise of her full-lipped smile. And Garlot Castle, high on its rocky mountain peak, was impregnable against even Jirel's masterfully planned attacks. Only one thing could tempt the dark lord of Garlot, and that a thing without a name.

"It lies in Hellsgarde, my lady," he had told her with that hateful smooth civility which his sleek grin so belied. "And it is indeed Hell-guarded. Andred of Hellsgarde died defending it two hundred years ago, and I have coveted it all my life. But I love living, my lady! I would not venture into Hellsgarde for all the wealth in Christendom. If you want your men back alive, bring me the treasure that Andred died to save."

"But what is it, coward?"

Guy had shrugged. "Who knows? Whence it came and what it was no man can say now. You know the tale as well as I, my lady. He carried it in a leather casket locked with an iron key. It must have been small—but very precious. Precious enough to die for, in the end—as I do not propose to die, my lady! You fetch it to me and buy twenty lives in the bargain."

She had sworn at him for a coward, but in the end she had gone. For after all, she was Joiry. Her men were hers to bully and threaten and command, but they were hers to die for too, if need be. She was afraid, but she remembered her



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men in Garlot's dungeons with the rack and the boot awaiting them, and she rode on.

The causeway was so long. Sunset had begun to tarnish a little in the bright pools of the marsh, and she could look up at the castle now without being blinded by the dazzle beyond. A mist had begun to rise in level layers from the water, and the smell of it was not good in her nostrils.

Hellsgarde—Hellsgarde and Andred. She did not want to remember the hideous old story, but she could not keep her mind off it this evening. Andred had been a big, violent man, passionate and wilful and very cruel. Men hated him, but when the tale of his dying spread abroad even his enemies pitied Andred of Hellsgarde.

For the rumor of his treasure had drawn at last besiegers whom he could not overcome. Hellsgarde gate had fallen and the robber nobles who captured the castle searched in vain for the precious casket which Andred guarded. Torture could not loosen his lips, though they tried very terribly to make him speak. He was a powerful man, stubborn and brave. He lived a long while under torment, but he would not betray the hiding-place of his treasure.

They tore him limb from limb at last and cast his dismembered body into the quicksands, and came away empty-handed. No one ever found Andred's treasure.

Since then for two hundred years Hellsgarde had lain empty. It was a dismal place, full of mists and fevers from the marsh, and Andred did not lie easy in the quicksands where his murderers had cast him. Dismembered and scattered broadcast over the marshes, yet he would not lie quiet. He had treasured his mysterious wealth with a love stronger than death itself, and legend said he walked Hellsgarde as jealously in death as in life.

In the two hundred years searchers had gone fearfully to ransack the empty halls of Hellsgarde for that casket—gone, and vanished. There was magic in the marshes, and a man could come upon the castle only by sunset, and after sunset Andred's violent ghost rose out of the quicksands to guard the thing he died for. For generations now no one had been so foolhardy as to venture upon the way Jirel rode tonight.

She was drawing near the gateway. There was a broad platform before it, just beyond the place where Andred's drawbridge had once barred the approach to Hellsgarde. Long ago the gap in the causeway had been filled in with rubble by searchers who would reach the castle on horse-

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back, and Jirel had thought of passing the night upon that platform under the gate arch, so that dawn might find her ready to begin her search.

But—the mists between her and the castle had thickened, and her eyes might be playing her false—but were not those the shapes of men drawn up in a double row before the doorway of Hellsgarde? Hellsgarde, that had stood empty and haunted these two hundred years? Blinking through the dazzle of sun on water and the thickening of the mists, she rode on toward the gateway. She could feel the horse trembling between her knees, and with every step he grew more and more reluctant to go on. She set her teeth and forced him ahead resolutely, swallowing her own terror.

They *were* the figures of men, two rows of them, waiting motionless before the gate. But even through the mist and the sun-dazzle she could see that something was wrong. They were so still—so unearthly still as they faced her. And the horse was shying and trembling until she could scarcely force him forward.

She was quite near before she saw what was wrong, though she knew that at every forward step the obscure frightfulness about these guardsmen grew greater. But she was almost upon them before she realized why. They were all dead.

The captain at their front stood slumped down upon the great spear that propped him on his feet, driven through his throat so that the point stood out above his neck as he sagged there, his head dragging forward until his cheek lay against the shaft which transfixed him.

And so stood all the rest, behind him in a double row, reeling drunkenly upon the spears driven through throat or chest or shoulder to prop them on their feet in the hideous semblance of life.

So the company of dead men kept guard before the gateway of Hellsgarde. It was not unfitting—dead men guarding a dead castle in the barren deadlands of the swamp.

Jirel sat her horse before them for a long moment in silence, feeling the sweat gather on her forehead, clenching her hands on the pommel of the saddle. So far as she knew, no other living person in decades had ridden the long causeway to Hellsgarde; certainly no living man had dwelt in these haunted towers in generations. Yet—here stood the dead men reeling against the spears which had slain them but would not let them fall. Why?—how?—when? . . .

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Death was no new thing to Jirel. She had slain too many men herself to fear it. But the ghastly unexpectedness of this dead guard! It was one thing to steel oneself to enter an empty ruin, quite another to face a double row of standing dead men whose blood still ran in dark rivulets, wetly across the stones at their feet. Still wet—they had died today, then. Today while she struggled cursing through the wilderness something had slain them here, something had made a jest of death as it propped them on their dead feet with their dead faces toward the causeway along which she must come riding. Had that something expected her? Could the dead Andred have known——?”

She caught herself with a little shudder and shrugged beneath the mail, clenching her fingers on the pommel, swallowing hard. (Remember your men—remember Guy of Garlot—remember that you are Joiry!) The memory of Guy's comely face, bright with mockery, put steel into her and she snapped her chin up with a murmured oath. These men were dead—they could not hinder her. . . .

Was that motion among the ghastly guard? Her heart leaped to her throat and she gripped the saddle between nervous knees with a reflex action that made the horse shudder. For one of the men in the row before her was slipping silently toward the flagstones. Had the spear-butt slid on the bloody tiles? Had a breeze dislodged his precarious balance? There was no breeze. But with a curious little sigh from collapsing lungs he folded gently downward to his knees, to his side, to a flattened proneness on the stones. And a dark stream of blood trickled from his mouth to snake across the pavement as he lay there.

Jirel sat frozen. It was a nightmare. Only in nightmares could such things happen. This unbearable silence in the dying sunset, no breeze, no motion, no sound. Not even a ripple upon the mirroring waters lying so widely around her below the causeway, light draining from their surfaces. Sky and water were paling as if all life receded from about her, leaving only Jirel on her trembling horse facing the dead men and the dead castle. She scarcely dared move lest the thump of her mount's feet on the stones dislodge the balance of another man. And she thought she could not bear to see motion again among those motionless ranks. She could not bear it, and yet—and yet if something did not break the spell soon the screams gathering in her throat would burst past her lips and she knew she would never stop screaming.



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A harsh scraping sounded beyond the dead guardsmen. Her heart squeezed itself to a stop. And then the blood began to thunder through her veins and her heart leaped and fell and leaped again in a frenzied pounding against the mail of her tunic.

For beyond the men the great door of Hellsgarde was swinging open. She gripped her knees against the saddle until her thighs ached, and her knuckles were bone-white upon the pommel. She made no move toward the great sword at her side. What use is a sword against dead men?

But it was no dead man who looked out under the arch of the doorway, stooped beneath his purple tunic with the heartening glow of firelight from beyond reddening his bowed shoulders. There was something odd about his pale, pinched face upturned to hers across the double line of dead defenders between them. After a moment she recognized what it was—he had the face of a hunchback, but there was no deformity upon his shoulders. He stooped a little as if with weariness, but he carried no hump. Yet it was the face of a cripple if she had ever seen one. His back was straight, but could his soul be? Would the good God have put the sign of deformity upon a human creature without cause? But he was human—he was real. Jirel sighed from the bottom of her lungs.

"Good evening to you, my lady," said the hunchback (but he was not humped) in the flat, ingratiating voice of a cripple.

"These—did not find it good," said Jirel shortly, gesturing. And the man grinned.

"My master's jest," he said.

Jirel looked back to the rows of standing dead, her heart quieting a little. Yes, a man might find a grim sort of humor in setting such a guard before his door. If a living man had done it, for an understanding reason, then the terror of the unknown was gone. But the man——

"Your master?" she echoed.

"My lord Alaric of Hellsgarde—you did not know?"

"Know what?" demanded Jirel flatly. She was beginning to dislike the fellow's sidelong unctuousness.

"Why, that my lord's family has taken residence here after many generations away."

"Sir Alaric is of Andred's kin?"

"He is."

Jirel shrugged mentally. It was God's blessing to feel the



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weight of terror lift from her, but this would complicate matters. She had not known that Andred left descendants, though it might well be so. And if they lived here, then be sure they would already have ransacked the castle from keep to dungeon for that nameless treasure which Andred had died to save and had not yet forsaken, were rumor true. Had they found it? There was only one way to learn that.

"I am nighted in the marshes," she said as courteously as she could manage. "Will your master give me shelter until morning?"

The hunchback's eyes—(but he was no hunchback, she must stop thinking of him so!)—his eyes slid very quickly, yet very comprehensively, from her tanned and red-lipped face downward over the lifting curves of her under the molding chainmail, over her bare brown knees and slim, steel-greaved legs. There was a deeper unctuousness in his voice as he said:

"My master will make you very welcome, lady. Ride in."

Jirel kicked her horse's flank and guided him, snorting and trembling, through the gap in the ranks of dead men which the falling soldier had left. He was a battle-charger, he was used to dead men; yet he shuddered as he minced through these lines.

The courtyard within was warm with the light of the great fire in its center. Around it a cluster of loutish men in leather jerkins looked up as she passed.

"Wat, Piers—up, men!" snapped the man with the hunchback's face. "Take my lady's horse."

Jirel hesitated a moment before she swung from the saddle, her eyes dubious upon the faces around her. She thought she had never seen such brutish men before, and she wondered at the lord who dared employ them. Her own followers were tough enough, reckless, hard fellows without fear or scruple. But at least they were men. These louts around the fire seemed scarcely more than beasts; let greed or anger stir them and no man alive could control their wildness. She wondered with what threats of punishment the lord Alaric held sway here, what sort of man he must be to draw his guard from the very dregs of humanity.

The two who took her horse stared at her under shaggy beetle-brows. She flashed them a poison glance as she turned to follow the purple cloak of her guide. Her eyes were busy. Hellsgarde had been a strong fortress in Andred's day; under Alaric it was well manned, but she thought she sensed a

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queer, hovering sullenness in the very air as she followed her guide across the courtyard, down a passageway, under an arch into the great hall.

The shadows of two hundred haunted years hovered under the lofty roof-beams. It was cold here, damp with the breath of the swamps outside, dark with two centuries of ugly legend and the terrible tradition of murder. But Alaric before the fire in his scarlet tunic seemed pleasantly at home. The great blaze roaring up the chimney from six-foot logs drove back the chill and the dark and the damp a little in a semicircle about the fireplace, and in that semicircle a little company of brightly clad people sat silent, watching Jirel and her guide cross the echoing flags of the great hall toward them.

It was a pleasant scene, warm and firelit and bright with color, but even at a distance, something was wrong—something in the posture of the people crouching before the blaze, something in their faces. Jirel knew a moment of wild wonder if all this were real. Did she really walk a haunted ruin empty two hundred years? Were the people flesh and blood, or only the bright shadows of her own imagination that had so desperately longed for companionship in the haunted marsh?

But no, there was nothing illusive about Alaric in his high-backed chair, his face a pale oval watching her progress. A humped dwarf leaned above his shoulder, fingers suspended over his lute-strings as he stared. On cushions and low benches by the fire a handful of women and girls, two young boys in bright blue, a pair of greyhounds with the firelight scarlet in their eyes—these made up the rest of the company.

Jirel's narrow yellow gaze summed them up as she crossed the hall. Striding smoothly in her thigh-length hauberk, she knew she was a figure on which a man's eyes must linger. Her supple height, the pleasant smooth curves of her under mail, the long, shapely legs bare beneath the linked metal of her hauberk, the swinging of the long sword whose weight upon its belt pulled in her waist to tigerish slimness—Alaric's eyes missed nothing of all these. Deliberately she tossed the dark cloak back over her shoulders, letting the firelight take the sleek mailed curves of her in a bright glimmer, flash from the shining greaves that clasped her calves. It was not her way to postpone the inevitable. Let Alaric learn in his first long stare how splendid a creature was Joiry's lady. And as for those women at his feet—well, let them know too.

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She swaggered to a halt before Alaric, resting a hand on her sword-hilt, tossing back the cloak that had swirled about her as she swung to a stop. His face, half in the shadow of the chair, tilted up to her leanly. Here was no burly brute of a man such as she had half expected on the evidence of the men-at-arms he kept. He was of middle years, his face deeply grooved with living, his nose a hawk-beak, his mouth a sword-gash.

And there was something oddly wrong with his features, a queer cast upon them that made him seem akin to the purple-clad courtier hovering at Jirel's elbow, to the grinning jester who peered across the chair-back. With a little twist of the heart she saw what it was. There was no physical likeness between master and men in any feature, but the shadow of deformity lay upon all three faces, though only the hunchback wore it honestly. Looking at those faces, one would have sworn that each of the trio went limping through life under the burden of a crooked spine. Perhaps, Jirel thought involuntarily, with a small shudder, the master and the courtier as well as the fool did indeed carry a burden, and if they did she thought she would prefer the jester's to theirs. His at least was honest and of the flesh. But theirs must be of the spirit, for surely, she thought again, God in His wisdom does not for nothing mark a whole and healthy man with a cripple's face. It was a deformity of the soul that looked out of the eyes meeting hers.

And because the thought frightened her she swung her shoulders until the cape swirled wide, and flashed her white teeth in a smile more boldly reckless than the girl behind it felt.

"You must not crave the company of strangers, sir—you keep a discouraging guard before your gate!"

Alaric did not smile. "Honest travelers are welcome here," he said very smoothly. "But the next robbers who ride our causeway will think twice before they storm the gates. We have no gallows here where thieves may swing in chains, but I think the guard before my castle will be warning enough to the next raiders who come."

"A grisly sort of warning," said Jirel. And then, with belated courtesy, "I am Jirel of Joiry. I missed my way in the marsh tonight—I shall be grateful for your hospitality."

"And we for your presence, Lady Jirel."

Alaric's voice was oily, but his eyes raked her openly. She felt other eyes upon her back too, and her red hair stiffened



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a little at the roots with a prickling uneasiness. "We keep a small court here at Hellsgarde," went on Alaric's voice. "Damara, Ettard, Isoud, Morgaine—all of you, make our guest welcome!"

Jirel swung round with a swirl of her long cloak to face the women, wondering at the subtle slight to their dignity, for Alaric made no effort to introduce them separately.

She thought they crouched a little on their low seats by the fire, looking up with the queer effect of women peering fearfully from under lowered brows, though she could not have said why they seemed so, for they met her eyes squarely. And upon these faces too lay that strange shadow of deformity, not so definitely as upon the men's, but visible in the firelight. All of them were thin creatures with big eyes showing a rather shocking space of whiteness around the staring irises. Their cheekbones were sharp in the firelight, so that shadows stood hollowly beneath.

The woman who had risen when Alaric said "Damara" was as tall as Jirel, strongly made under her close green gown, but her face too had that queer hollow look and her eyes stared too whitely under wide-open lids. She said in a tight voice:

"Sit down by the fire and warm yourself, lady. We dine in a few minutes."

Jirel sank to the low cushioned stool she dragged forward, one leg doubled under her for instant rising, her sword-hilt and sword-hand free. There was something wrong here. She could feel it in the air.

The two dogs growled a little and shifted away from her on the floor, and even that was—wrong. Dogs had fawned on her always—until now. And the firelight was so red in their eyes. . . .

Looking away uneasily from those unnaturally red eyes, she saw the boys' features clearly for the first time, and her heart contracted a little. For naked evil was upon these two young faces. The others wore their shadow of deformity elusively, a thing more sensed than seen. It might be only a trick of her legend-fed imagination that put evil there. But the two young lads had the faces of devils, long faces with high cheekbones and slitted, lusterless eyes. Jirel shuddered a little inwardly. What sort of company had she stumbled into, where the very children and dogs wore evil like a garment?

She drew a deep breath and glanced around the circle of still faces that watched her wordlessly, with an intentness



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like that of—of beasts of prey? Her pride rebelled at that. Joiry was ever the predator, not the prey! She squared her cleft chin and said with determined casualness:

“You have dwelt here long?”

She could have sworn a look went round the semicircle before the fire, a swift, amused glance from face to face as if they shared a secret. Yet not an eye wavered from hers. Only the two boys leaned together a little, and the look of evil brightened upon their wicked young faces. Alaric answered after the briefest possible pause:

“Not long. Nor will we stay long—now.” There was a subtle menace in it, though Jirel could not have said why. And again that feeling of knowledge shared ran like a strong current around the circle, a little quiver as if a dreadful amusement were almost stirring in the air. But not a face changed or turned. The eyes were still eager—almost avid—upon the bright, strong face of Jirel with the firelight warming her golden tan and touching her red curls to flame and trembling upon the soft curve of her under-lip. For all the bright clothes of the company around her, she had the sudden feeling that dark robes and dark eyes and dark faces hemmed her in—like shadows around a fire.

The conversation had come to a full stop; the eyes never wavered from her. She could not fathom this strange interest, for it was queer Alaric had not asked anything at all about her coming. A woman alone in this wilderness at night was sufficiently unusual to arouse interest, yet no one seemed concerned to ask how she had come there. Why, then, this concerted and deep interest in the sight of her?

To conquer the little tremor she could not quite ignore she said boldly:

“Hellsgarde of the Marshes has an ugly reputation, my lord. I wonder you dare dwell here—or do you know the old tale?”

Unmistakably this time that quiver of amusement flashed around the circle, though not an eye left hers. Alaric’s voice was dry as he answered:

“Yes—yes, we know the tale. We are—not afraid.”

And suddenly Jirel was quite sure of a strange thing. Something in his voice and his words told her very surely that they had not come in spite of the terrible old legend, but *because of it*.

No normal people would deliberately seek out a haunted and blood-stained ruin for a dwelling-place, yet there could

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be no mistaking the implication in Alaric's voice, in the unspoken mirth at her words that ran like a whisper around the circle. She remembered those dead men at the door. What normal person could make a joke so grisly? No, no—this company was as definitely abnormal as a company of dwarfs or monsters. One could not sit with them long even in silence without sensing that. The look of abnormality upon their faces did not lie—it was a sure sign of a deformity of the soul.

The conversation had stopped again. To break the nerve-racking silence Jirel said:

"We hear many strange tales of Hellsgarde"—and knew she was talking too much, but could not stop—anything was better than that staring silence—"tales of treasure and—and—is it true that one can come upon Hellsgarde Castle only in the sunset—as I did?"

Alaric paused deliberately for a moment before he answered with as deliberate evasiveness, "There are stranger tales than that of Hellsgarde—and who can say how much of truth is in them? Treasure? There may well be treasure here. Many have come seeking it—and remained, for ever."

Jirel remembered the dead men at the door, and she shot Alaric a yellow glare that would have clanged like the meeting of blades with his stare—had he met it. He was looking up into the shadows of the ceiling, and he was smiling a little. Did he suspect her errand? He had asked no questions. . . . Jirel remembered Guy of Garlot's smile as he sent her on this quest, and a murderous wonder began to take shape in her mind. If Guy had known—if he had deliberately sent her into this peril—she let herself sink for a moment into a luxury of picturing that comely smile smashed in by the handle of her sword. . . .

They were watching her. She came back with a jerk and said at random:

"How cold the marshes are after sunset!" And she shivered a little, not until that moment realizing the chill of the great hall.

"We find it—pleasant," murmured Alaric, watching her.

The others were watching too, and again she sensed that ripple of subtle amusement running around the circle that closed her out of a secret shared. They were here for a purpose. She knew it suddenly: a strange, unfathomable purpose that bound them together with almost one mind, so that thoughts seemed to flow soundlessly from brain to brain; a

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purpose that included her now, and in no pleasant way. Danger was in the air, and she alone here by night in the deserted marshes, among these queer, abnormal people who watched her with an avid and unwavering eagerness. Well, she had been in peril before, and hewed her way out again.

A slovenly wench in a ragged smock tiptoed clumsily out of the shadows to murmur in Damara's ear, and Jirel felt with conscious relief the removal of at least one pair of staring eyes as the woman turned to nod. Jirel's gaze was scornful on the girl. A queer household they kept here—the bestial retainers, the sluttish wench in her soiled gown.

Not even Joiry's kitchen maids went so slovenly clad.

Damara turned back to the fire. "Shall we dine now?" she asked.

Every face around the fire brightened magically, and Jirel was conscious of a little loosening of the tension in her own mind. The very fact that the thought of food pleased them made the whole group seem more normal. And yet—she saw it in a moment—this was not even a normal eagerness. There was something a little horrid about the gleam in every eye, the avid hunger on every face. For a little while the thought of food supplanted herself in their interest, and that terrible battery of watchfulness forsook her. It was like an actual weight lifted. She breathed deeper.

Frowsy kitchen scullions and a pair of unwashed girls were carrying in the planks and trestles for the table, setting it up by the fire.

"We dine alone," Alaric was explaining as the group around the fire reshifted itself to make way. It seemed a witless sort of fastidiousness to Jirel, particularly since they let themselves be served by such shamefully unkempt lackeys. Other households dined all together, from lord to stable hands, at the long T-shaped tables where the salt divided noblesse from peasantry. But perhaps Alaric dared not allow those beast-wild men of his even that familiarity. And she was conscious of a tiny disappointment that the company of these staring, strange-faced people was not to be leavened even by the brutish earthiness of their retainers. The men-at-arms seemed scarcely human, but at least it was a normal, open sort of brutality, something she could understand.

When the table was ready Alaric seated her at his right hand, beside the two evil-faced youngsters who sat preternaturally quiet. Young lads of that age were scufflers and squirmers at table in the company she knew. It was another



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count of eeriness against them that they scarcely moved save to reach for food.

Who were they? she wondered. Alaric's sons? Pages or squires from some noble family? She glanced around the table in deepening bewilderment, looking for signs of kinship on the shadowed faces, finding nothing but that twist of deformity to link the company together. Alaric had made no attempt to introduce any of them, and she could not guess what relationship bound them all together in this close, unspoken communion. She met the eyes of the dwarf at Alaric's elbow and looked quickly away again, angry at his little comprehending grin. He had been watching her.

There was no conversation after the meat was brought in. The whole company fell upon it with such a starved eagerness that one might think they had not dined in weeks before now. And not even their food tasted right or normal.

It looked well enough, but there was a subtle seasoning about it that made Jirel gag and lay down her knife after the first taste—a flavor almost of decay, and a sort of burning bitterness she could not put a name to, that lingered on the tongue long after the food itself was swallowed. Everything stank of it, the roast, the bread, the few vegetables, even the bitter wine.

After a brave effort, for she was hungry, Jirel gave up and made not even the pretense of eating. She sat with her arms folded on the table edge, right hand hanging near her sword, watching the ravenous company devour their tainted food. It was no wonder, she realized suddenly, that they ate alone. Surely not even the dull palates of their retainers could accept this revoltingly seasoned meat.

Alaric sat back at last in his high-backed chair, wiping his dagger on a morsel of bread.

"You do not hunger, Lady Jirel?" he asked, tilting a brow at her still-heaped trencher. She could not help her little grimace as she glanced down.

"Not now," she said, with wry humor.

Alaric did not smile. He leaned forward to pick up upon his dagger the thick slab of roast before her, and tossed it to the hearth. The two greyhounds streaked from beneath the table to growl over it hungrily, and Alaric glanced obliquely at Jirel, with a hint of a one-sided smile, as he wiped the knife again and sheathed it.

If he meant her to understand that the dogs were included



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in this queer closed circle of his, she caught it. Obviously there had been a message in that act and smile.

When the table had been cleared away and the last glimmer of sunset had faded from the high, narrow slits of the windows, a sullen fellow in frieze went around the hall with a long pole-torch, lighting the cressets.

"Have you visited Hellsgarde before, my lady?" inquired Alaric. And as Jirel shook her head, "Let me show you the hall then, and my forefathers' arms and shields. Who knows?—you may find quarterings of your own among our escutcheons."

Jirel shuddered at the thought of discovering even a remote kinship with Hellsgarde's dwellers, but she laid her hand reluctantly on the arm he offered and let him lead her away from the fire out under the echoing vaults of the hall where cressets brought the shadows to life.

The hall was as Andred's murderers must have left it two centuries ago. What shields and armor had not fallen from the walls were thick with rust in the damp air of the marshes, and the tatters of pennons and tapestries had long ago taken on a uniform color of decay. But Alaric seemed to savor the damp and the desolation as a normal man might savor luxury. Slowly he led her around the hall, and she could feel the eyes of the company, who had resumed their seats by the fire, follow her all the way with one unwinking stare.

The dwarf had taken up his lute again and struck occasional chords in the echoing silence of the hall, but except for that there was no sound but the fall of their feet on the rushless flagstones and the murmur of Alaric's voice pointing out the vanished glories of Hellsgarde Castle.

They paused at the side of the big room farthest from the fire, and Alaric said in an unctuous voice, his eyes seeking Jirel's with curious insistence:

"Here on this spot where we stand, lady, died Andred of Hellsgarde two hundred years ago."

Jirel looked down involuntarily. Her feet were planted on the great blotch of a spreading stain that had the rough outline of a beast with questing head and paws outsprawled. It was a broad stain, black and splattered upon the stone. Andred must have been a big man. He had bled terribly on that day two centuries past.

Jirel felt her host's eyes on her face full of a queer anticipation, and she caught her breath a little to speak, but before she could utter a sound, quite suddenly there was a riot of

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wind all about them, shrieking out of nowhere in a whirlwind gust that came ravening with such fury that the cressets went out all together in one breath and darkness like a blow fell upon the hall.

In the instant of that blackness, while the whole great hall was black and vocal and bewildering with storm-wind, as if he had been waiting avidly for this moment all evening a man's arm seized Jirel in a grip like death and a mouth came down upon hers in a more savagely violent and intimate kiss than she had ever known before. It all burst upon her so quickly that her impressions confused and ran together into one gust of terrible anger against Alaric as she struggled helplessly against that iron arm and ravenous mouth, while the storm-wind shrieked in the darkness. She was conscious of nothing but the arm, the mouth, the insolent hand. She was not pressed against a man's body, but the strength of the arm was like steel about her.

And in the same moment of the seizure the arm was dragging her violently across the floor with irresistible force, never slackening its crushing grip, the kiss in all its revolting intimacy still ravaging her muted mouth. It was as if the kiss, the crush of the arm, the violence of the hand, the howl of the wind and the drag across the room were all but manifestations of a single vortex of violence.

It could not have lasted more than seconds. She had an impression of big, square, wide-spaced teeth against her lips and the queer violence behind them manifest not primarily in the savageness of the kiss or the embrace, or the wild drag across the room, but more as if all these were mere incidents to a burning vehemence behind them that beat like heat all around her.

Choking with impotent fury, she tried to struggle, tried to scream. But there was no chest to push for leverage and no body to arch away from, and she could not resist. She could only make dumb animal sounds in her throat, sealed in behind the storming violation of that mouth.

She had scarcely time to think, it happened so quickly. She was too stunned by the violence and suddenness of the attack even to wonder at the absence of anything but the mouth, the arm, the hand. But she did have the distinct impression of walls closing in around her, as if she were being dragged out of the great open hall into a narrow closet. It was somehow as if that violence beating all about her were

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confined and made more violent by the presence of close walls very near.

It was all over so quickly that even as that feeling of closing walls dawned upon her she heard the little amazed cries of the others as the cressets were blown out all together. It was as if time had moved faster for her than for them. In another instant someone must have thrown brush on the fire, for the great blaze in the cavern of the chimney roared up with a gush of light and sound, for a moment beating back the darkness in the hall.

And Jirel was staggering alone in the center of the big room. No one was near her, though she could have sworn upon the cross-hilt of her sword that a split second before the heavy mouth had crushed her muted lips. It was gone now as if it had never been. Walls did not enclose her; there was no wind, there was no sound in the great hall.

Alaric stood over the black blotch of Andred's blood at the other side of the hall. She thought she must have known subconsciously after the first moment that it was not he whose lips ravaged her bruised mouth. That flaming vehemence was not in him. No, though he had been the only man near her when the dark closed down, he was not the man whose outrageous kiss still throbbed on her mouth.

She lifted an unsteady hand to those bruised lips and stared around her wildly, gasping for lost breath, half sobbing with fury.

The others were still around the fire, half the width of the room away. And as the light from the replenished blaze leaped up, she saw the blankness of their momentary surprise vanish before one leaping flame of avid hope that for an instant lit every face alike. With long running strides Alaric reached her side. In her dazed confusion she felt his hands on her arms shaking her eagerly, heard him gabbling in a tongue she did not know:

*"G'hasta-est? Tai g'hasta? Tai g'hasta?"*

Angrily, she shook him off as the others closed round her in an eagerly excited group, babbling all together, *"G'hasta tai? Est g'hasta?"*

Alaric recovered his poise first. In a voice shaking with the first emotion she had heard from him he demanded with almost desperate eagerness.

*"What was it? What happened? Was it—was it—?"* But he seemed scarcely to dare name the thing his whole soul longed for, though the tremble of hope was in his voice.



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Jirel caught herself on the verge of answering. Deliberately she paused to fight down the dizzy weakness that still swam in her brain, drooping her lids to hide the calculation that came up like a flame behind her yellow eyes. For the first time she had a leverage over these mysterious people. She knew something they frantically desired to know, and she must make full use of the knowledge she scarcely knew she had.

"H-happened?" The stammer was not entirely feigned. "There was a—a wind, and darkness—I don't know—it was all over so quickly." And she glanced up into the gloom with not wholly assumed terror. Whatever that thing had been—it was no human agency. She could have sworn that the instant before the light flared up, walls were closing around her as tightly as a tomb's walls; yet they had vanished more lightly than mist in the glow of the fire. But that mouth upon hers, those big, squarely spaced teeth against her lips, the crush of the brutal arm—nothing could have been more tangible. Yet there had been only the arm, the mouth, the hand. No body. . . . With a sudden shudder that made the goose-flesh ripple along her limbs she remembered that Andred had been dismembered before they flung him into the quicksands. . . . Andred. . . .

She did not know she had said it aloud, but Alaric pounced like a cat on the one word that left her lips.

"Andred? Was it Andred?"

Jirel recovered herself with a real effort, clenching her teeth to stop their chattering.

"Andred? He died two hundred years ago!"

"He will never die until—" One of the young boys with the evil faces said that much before Alaric whirled on him angrily, yet with curious deference.

"Silence! Wait! . . . Lady Jirel, you asked me if the legends of Hellsgarde are true. Now I tell you that the tale of Andred is. We believe he still walks the halls where his treasure lies hid, and we—we—" He hesitated, and Jirel saw a strange look of calculation dawn upon his face. He went on smoothly, "We believe there is but one way to find that treasure. Only the ghost of Andred can lead us there. And Andred's ghost has been—elusive, until now."

She could have sworn that he had not meant to say just that when he began to speak. She was surer of it when she saw the little flicker of communication ripple around the circle of faces closing her in. Amusement at a subtle jest in



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which she did not share . . . it was on every face around her, the hollow-cheeked women's white-rimmed staring eyes brightened, the men's faces twitched a little with concealed mirth. Suddenly she felt smothered by abnormality and mystery and that subtle, perilous amusement without reason.

She was more shaken by her terrifying experience than she would have cared to admit. She had little need to feign weakness as she turned away from them toward the fire, eager to escape their terrible company even though it meant solitude in this haunted dark. She said:

"Let me—rest by the fire. Perhaps it—it—he won't return."

"But he must return!" She thought that nearly every voice around her spoke simultaneously, and eager agreement was bright upon every face. Even the two dogs had thrust themselves forward among the legs of the little crowd around Jirel, and their shadowed eyes, still faintly aglow as if with borrowed firelight, followed the conversation from face to face as if they too understood. Their gaze turned redly up to Alaric now as he said:

"For many nights we have waited in vain for the force that was Andred to make itself known to us. Not until you come does he create that vortex which—which is necessary if we are to find the treasure." Again, at that word, Jirel thought she felt a little current of amusement ripple from listener to listener. Alaric went on in his smooth voice, "We are fortunate to find one who has the gift of summoning Andred's spirit to Hellsgarde. I think there must be in you a kindred fierceness which Andred senses and seeks. We must call him out of the dark again—and we must use your power to do it."

Jirel stared around her incredulously. "You would call—that—up again?"

Eyes gleamed at her with a glow that was not of the firelight. "We would indeed," murmured the evil-faced boy at her elbow. "And we will not wait much longer. . . ."

"But—God's Mercy!" said Jirel, "—are all the legends wrong? They say Andred's spirit swoops down with sudden death on all who trespass in Hellsgarde. Why do you talk as if only I could evoke it? Do you want to die so terribly? I do not! I won't endure *that* again if you kill me for it. I'll have no more of Andred's kisses!"

There was a pulse of silence around the circle for a moment. Eyes met and looked away again. Then Alaric said:

"Andred resents only outsiders in Hellsgarde, not his own

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kinsmen and their retainers. Moreover, those legends you speak of are old ones, telling tales of long-ago trespassers in this castle.

"With the passage of years the spirits of the violent dead draw farther and farther away from their death-scenes. Andred is long dead, and he revisits Hellsgarde Castle less often and less vindictively as the years go by. We have striven a long while to draw him back—but you alone succeeded. No, lady, you must endure Andred's violence once again, or——"

"Or what?" demanded Jirel coldly, dropping her hand to her sword.

"There is no alternative." Alaric's voice was inflexible. "We are many to your one. We will hold you here until Andred comes again."

Jirel laughed. "You think Joiry's men will let her vanish without a trace? You'll have such a storming about Hellsgarde walls as——"

"I think not, lady. What soldiers will dare follow when a braver one than any of them was vanished in Hellsgarde? No, Joiry, your men will not seek you here. You——"

Jirel's sword flamed in the firelight as she sprang backward, dragging it clear. The blade flashed once—and then arms like iron pinioned her from behind. For a dreadful moment she thought they were Andred's, and her heart turned over. But Alaric smiled, and she knew. It was the dwarf who had slipped behind her at an unspoken message from his master, and if his back was weak his arms were not. He had a bear's grip upon her and she could not wrench herself free.

Struggling, sobbing curses, kicking hard with her steel-spurred heels, she could not break his hold. There was a murmurous babble all around her of that strange, haunting tongue again, "*L'vraista! Tai g'hasta vrai! El vraist' tai laul!*" And the two devil-faced boys dived for her ankles. They clung like ghoulishly grinning apes, pinning her feet to the floor. And Alaric stepped forward to wrench the sword from her hand. He murmured something in their queer speech, and the crowd scattered purposefully.

Fighting hard, Jirel was scarcely aware of their intention before it was accomplished. But she heard the sudden splash of water on blazing logs and the tremendous hissing of steam as the fire went out and darkness fell like a blanket upon the shadowy hall. The crowd had melted away from her into the dark, and now the grip on her ankles suddenly ceased and

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the great arms that held her so hard heaved in a mighty swing.

Choking with fury, she reeled into the darkness. There was nothing to stop her, and those mighty arms had thrown her hard. She fell and slid helplessly across bare flagstones in black dark, her greaves and empty scabbard clanging upon stone. When she came to a halt, bruised and scratched and breathless, it was a moment before she could collect her senses enough to scramble up, too stunned even for curses.

"Stay where you are, Jirel of Joiry," Alaric's voice said calmly out of the blackness. "You cannot escape this hall—we guard every exit with drawn swords. Stand still—and wait."

Jirel got her breath and launched into a blasphemous survey of his ancestry and possible progeny with such vehemence that the dark for several minutes throbbed with her fury. Then she recalled Alaric's suggestion that violence in herself might attract a kindred violence in that strange force called Andred, and she ceased so abruptly that the silence was like a blow upon the ears.

It was a silence full of tense waiting. She could almost feel the patience and the anticipation that beat out upon her from the circle of invisible jailers, and at the thought of what they waited her blood ran chilly. She looked up blindly into the darkness overhead, certain for a long and dreadful moment that the familiar blast of storm-wind was gathering there to churn the night into chaos out of which Andred's arm would reach. . . .

After a while she said in a voice that sounded unexpectedly small in the darkness:

"Y-you might throw me a pillow. I'm tired of standing and this floor's cold."

To her surprise footsteps moved softly and quite surely across stone, and after a moment a pillow hurtled out of the darkness to thump softly at her feet. Jirel sank upon it thankfully, only to stiffen an instant later and glare about her in the dark, the hair prickling on her neck. So—they could see in the darkness! There had been too much certainty in those footsteps and the accurate toss of the pillow to doubt it. She huddled her shoulders together a little and tried not to think.

The darkness was enormous above her. Age upon age went by, with no sound except her own soft breathing to break that quiet pulsing with waiting and anticipation. Her terror grew. Suppose that dreadful storm-wind should come whoop-



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ing through the hall again; suppose the bodiless arm should seize her and the mouth come ravening down upon her lips once more. . . . Coldness crept down her spine.

Yes, and suppose it did come again. What use, for her? These slinking abnormalities who were her jailers would never share the treasure with her which they were so avid to find—so avid that they dared evoke this terror by night and brave a death which legend whispered fearfully of, simply that they might possess it. *It*—did they know, then, what lay in Andred's terribly guarded box? What conceivable thing could be so precious that men would dare *this* to have it?

And what hope at all for her? If the monstrous thing called Andred did not come tonight—then he would come again some other night, sooner or later, and all nights would find her isolated here as bait for the monster that haunted Hellsgarde. She had boasted without hope when she said her men would follow. They were brave men and they loved her—but they loved living more. No, there was not a man in Joiry who would dare follow where she had failed. She remembered Guy of Garlot's face, and let violence come flooding up in her for a moment. That handsome coward, goading her into this that he might possess the nameless thing he coveted. . . . Well, she would ruin his comely face for him with the crosshilt of her sword—if she lived. If she lived! She was forgetting. . . .

Slowly the stars wheeled by the arrow-slit windows high up in the darkness of the walls. Jirel sat hugging her knees and watching them. The darkness sighed above her with vagrant drafts, any one of which might be Andred roaring down out of the night. . . .

Well, her captors had made one mistake. How much it might avail her she did not know, but they thought they had disarmed her, and Jirel hugged her greave-sheathed legs in the darkness and smiled a wicked smile, knowing they had not.

It must have been after midnight, and Jirel dozing uneasily with her head on her knees, when a long sigh from the darkness made her start awake. Alaric's voice, heavy with weariness and disappointment, spoke in his nameless language. It occurred to Jirel to wonder briefly that though this seemed to be their mother tongue (for they spoke it under stress and among themselves), yet their speech with her had no taint of accent. It was strange—but she was beyond wondering long about the monstrous folk among whom she had fallen.



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Footsteps approached her, walking unerringly. Jirel shook herself awake and stood up, stretching cramped limbs. Hands seized her arms from both sides—at the first grasp, with no groping, though even her dark-accustomed eyes could see nothing. No one bothered to translate Alaric's speech to her, but she realized that they had given up their vigil for the night. She was too drugged with sleep to care. Even her terror had dulled as the endless night hours dragged by. She stumbled along between her captors, making no effort to resist. This was not the time to betray her hidden weapon, not to these people who walked the dark like cats. She would wait until the odds were evened.

No one troubled to strike a light. They went swiftly and unhesitatingly through the blackness, and when stairs rose unexpectedly underfoot Jirel was the only one who stumbled. Up steps, along a cold and echoing hall—and then a sudden thrust that sent her staggering. A stone wall caught her and a door slammed at her back. She whirled, a hot Norman oath smoking on her lips, and knew that she was alone.

Groping, she made out the narrow confines of her prison. There was a cot, a jug of water, a rough door through whose chinks light began to glimmer even as she ran questing hands across its surface. Voices spoke briefly outside, and in a moment she understood. Alaric had summoned one of his apish men to watch her while he and his people slept. She knew it must be a man-at-arms and not one of Alaric's company, for the fellow had brought a lantern with him. She wondered if the guardsmen knew how unerringly their masters walked the darkness—or if they cared. But it no longer seemed strange to her that Alaric dared employ such brutish men. She knew well enough now with what ease he could control them—he and his night-sight and his terrible fearlessness.

Silence fell outside. Jirel smiled a thin smile and leaned into the nearest corner, drawing up one knee. The long, thin-bladed knife she carried between greave and leg slid noiselessly from its sheath. She waited with feline patience, her eyes upon the lighted chinks between the door's planks.

It seemed a long while before the guard ceased his muffled pacing, yawned loudly, tested the bar that fastened the door from without. Jirel's thin smile widened. The man grunted and—she had prayed he would—settled down at last on the floor with his back against the panels of her door. She knew he meant to sleep awhile in the certainty that the door could

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not be opened without waking him. She had caught her own guards at that trick too often not to expect it now.

Still she waited. Presently the even breath of slumber reached her ears, and she licked her lips and murmured, "Gentle Jesu, let him not wear mail!" and leaned to the door. Her knife was thin enough to slide easily between the panels. . . . He was not wearing mail—and the blade was razor-keen. He must scarcely have felt it, or known when he died. She felt the knife grate against bone and gave it an expert twist to clear the rib it had grazed, and heard the man give a sudden, startled grunt in his sleep, and then a long sigh. . . . He must never have awakened. In a moment blood began to gush through the panels of the door in heavy spurts, and Jirel smiled and withdrew her knife.

It was simple enough to lift the bar with that narrow blade. The difficulty was in opening the door against the dead weight of the man outside, but she accomplished that too, without too much noise—and then the lantern sat waiting for her and the hall was long and empty in the half-dark. She could see the arch of the stairway and knew the way she had come. And she did not hesitate on the way down. She had thought it all out carefully in the darkness of the hall downstairs while she crouched on the cushion and waited for Andred's ravenous storm-blast to come shrieking down above her bent shoulders.

There was no way out. She knew that. Other castles had posterns and windows from which a fugitive might escape, but quicksands surrounded Hellsgarde and the only path to freedom lay along the causeway where Alaric's guard would be watching tonight. And only in minstrels' romances does a lone adventurer escape through a guarded courtyard and a guarded gate.

And, too—she had come here for a purpose. It was her duty to find that small treasured box which alone would buy the twenty lives depending on her. She would do that, or die. And perhaps, after all, it was fortunate that the castle had not been empty when she came. Without Alaric, it might never have occurred to her to dare the power of Andred's ghost in order to reach her goal. She realized now that it might well be the only way she would ever succeed. Too many searchers in the past had ransacked Hellsgarde Castle to leave her much hope unless great luck attended her. But Alaric had said it: there was a way—a terrible and deadly perilous way, but the only hope.

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And after all, what chance did she have? To sit supinely waiting, a helpless decoy, until the night when Andred's power swooped down to claim her again—or to seek him out deliberately and challenge him to the duel. The end would be the same—she must suffer his presence again, either way. But tonight there was a bare chance for her to escape with the treasure-casket, or at least to find it alone and if she lived to hide it and bargain with Alaric for freedom.

It was a forlorn and futile hope, she knew well. But it was not in her to sit waiting for death, and this way there was at least a bare hope for success. She gripped the bloody knife in one hand and her lantern in the other and went on down the stairs, cat-footed and quick.

Her little circle of light moving with her across the cold flags was so tenuous a defense against the dark. One gust of Andred's storm-wind would puff it out and the darkness would smash in upon her like a blow. And there were other ghosts here than Andred's—small, cold things in the dark just beyond her lantern light. She could feel their presence as she picked her way across the great hall, past the quenched logs of the fireplace, past the crumbling ruins of armor and tapestry, toward the one spot where she thought she might be surest of summoning up the dreadful thing she sought.

It was not easy to find. She ranged back and forth for many minutes with the little circle of light before a corner of that great black splotch she hunted moved into the light; beast-shaped, dark as murder itself upon the flagstones, Andred's life-blood spilled two hundred years ago.

Here once before that ravening ghost had taken her; here if anywhere, surely he would come again. She had her underlip firmly between her teeth as she stepped upon that stain, and she was holding her breath without realizing it. She must have stood there for a full minute, feeling the goose-flesh shudder along her limbs, before she could nerve herself for the thing she must do next. But she had come too far to fail herself now. She drew a deep breath and blew out the lifted lantern.

Darkness crashed upon her with the impact of a physical blow, almost squeezing the breath from her body. And now suddenly fright was past and the familiar winy exultation of tension before battle rushed along her limbs and she looked up into the darkness defiantly and shouted to the great vaults of the ceiling, "Come out of Hell, dead Andred! Come if you dare, Andred the Damned!"



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Wind—wind and storm and violence! It snatched the words from her lips and the breath from her throat in one tremendous whirling gust that came rushing out of nowhere. And in the instant of its coming, while the wild challenge still echoed on her lips, a ravenous mouth came storming down to silence hers and a great arm smacked down around her shoulders in a blow that sent her reeling as iron fingers dug agonizingly into her arm—a blow that sent her reeling but would not let her fall, for that terrible drag again was sweeping her across the floor with a speed that ran faster than time itself.

She had ducked her head instinctively when she felt the arm seize her, but not soon enough. The heavy mouth had hers, and again the square, wide-set teeth were bruising her lips and the violence of the monstrous kiss made fury bubble up in her sealed throat as she fought in vain against it.

This time the thing was not such a stunning surprise, and she could sense more clearly what was happening to her. As before, the whole violent fury of the attack burst upon her at once—the mouth seized hers and the arm swept her almost off her feet in the same instant. In that instant the unslackening grip around her shoulders rushed her across the dark floor, blinded in the blackness, deafened by the raving wind, muted and dazed by the terrible vehemence of the mouth and the pain of her iron-clawed arm. But she could sense dimly again that walls were closing around her, closer and closer, like a tomb's walls. And as before she was aware of a tremendous force beating about her, a greater violence than any one manifestation of it upon her body; for the mouth, the gripping hand, the arm, the sweeping drag itself were all but parts of that vortex.

And it was indeed a vortex—it was somehow spinning and narrowing as if the whole force that was Andred were concentrating into one tornado-whirl of savage power. Perhaps it was that feeling of narrowing and vortexing rotation which made walls seem to draw close about her. It was all too dimly sensed a thing to put clearly into words, and yet it was terribly real. Jirel, breathless and bruised and stunned with pain and violence, still knew clearly that here in the midst of the great open hall walls were drawing prison-tight about her.

Savagely she slashed at the arm around her shoulders, at the steel-fingered hand digging her arm to the bone. But the angle was an awkward one and she was too dazed to know



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if she cut flesh or simply stabbed at disembodied force. And the grip did not slacken; the storming mouth still held hers in a kiss so wild and infuriating that she could have sobbed with pure rage.

Those walls were very near . . . her stumbling knees touched stone. She groped dizzily with her free hand and felt walls dripping-damp, close around her. The forward motion had ceased, and the power which was Andred whirled in one concentrated cone of violence that stopped her breath and sent the darkness reeling around her.

Through the haze of her confusion she knew that this, then, must be his own place to which he had dragged her, a place of stone and damp and darkness somewhere *outside*—for they had reached it too quickly for it to be a real place—and yet it was tangible. . . . Stone walls cold against her hands, and what were these round and slipping things underfoot?—things that rattled a little as she stumbled among them—bones? Dear God, the bones of other seekers after treasure, who had found what they sought? For she thought the treasure-box must be here, surely, if it were anywhere at all—here in this darkness unreachable save through the very heart of the whirlwind. . . .

Her senses were failing and the whirl that was like the whirl in a tornado's heart seemed to create a vacuum which drew her out of her body in one thin, protesting wisp of self that had no strength to fight. . . .

Somewhere a long way off was her body, hanging limp in the clutch of the iron arm, gasping for breath under a kiss that made reality faint about her, still struggling feebly in some tomb-smelling, narrow place where stone walls dripped and bones turned underfoot—the bones of those who had come before her. . . .

But she was not there. She was a wispy wraith rooted only tenuously in that fainting body, a wraith that reeled out and out in a thin skein to spin on the whirls of tornado-violence pulling her farther and farther and farther away. . . . The darkness was slipping sideways—the stone walls were a prison no longer, for she was moving up along the great expanding whirl that sucked her out of her body, up and out around widening circles into night-time distances where space and time were not. . . .

Somewhere infinitely far away a foot that was not hers stumbled over something small and square, and a body that was not hers slid to its knees among wet, rattling bones, and a

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bosom that was not hers bruised itself on the corner of that square something as the tenantless body fell forward among bones upon a wet stone floor. But upon the widening whorls of the vortex the wisp that was Jirel rebelled in its spinning. She must go back—she must remember—there was something—something. . . .

For one fleeting instant she was in her body again, crumpled down upon the stones, arms sprawled about a small square thing that was slimy to the touch. A box—a wet leather box thick with fungus, bound with iron. Andred's box, that for two hundred years searchers had hunted in vain. The box that Andred had died for and that she would die for too—was dying for now in the darkness and the damp among the bones, with violence ravening down to seize her again. . . .

Dimly, as her senses left her for the second time, she heard a dog bark, high and hysterically, from far above. And another dog answered, and then she heard a man's voice shouting in a tongue she did not know, a wild, exultant shout, choking with triumph. But after that the dizziness of the whirlwind which snatched her out of her body made everything blur, until—until——

Queerly, it was music that brought her back. A lute's strings singing as if madness itself swept wild chords across them. The dwarfed jester's lute, shrieking with music that wakened her out of nowhere into her own fallen body in the dampness and the dark where that hard box-corner bruised her bosom.

And the whirlwind was—uncoiling—from about her. The walls widened until she was no longer aware of their prison closeness and the smell of damp and decay faded from her nostrils. In a dizzy flash of realization she clasped the wet casket to her breast just as the walls faded altogether and she sat up unsteadily, blinking into the dark.

The whirlwind still raved around her, but somehow, strangely, it did not touch her now. No, there was something outside it—some strong force against which it battled—a force that—that——

She was in the dark hall again. Somehow she knew it. And the wild lute-music shrilled and sang, and in some queer way—she saw. It was dark still—but she saw. For a luminous glow was generating itself in a ring around her and by its ghostlight she was aware—scarcely through sight—of familiar faces spinning past her in a wide, whirling ring. A witch dance, round and round. . . . Alaric's lined face flashed

by, blazing with exultation; Damara's white-ringed eyes glared blindly into the dark. She saw the two boys whirl past, the light of hell itself luminous on their faces. There was a wild bark, and one of the greyhounds loped by her and away, firelight from no earthly flame glaring in its eyes, its tongue lolling in a canine grin of ecstasy. Round and round her through that luminous glow which was scarcely light the mad circle spun. And ever the lute-strings wailed and sang with a wilder music than strings can ever have sung before, and the terrible joy on every face—yes, even upon the dogs'—was more frightening than even Andred's menace had been.

Andred—Andred. . . . The power of his volcano-force spun above her now, with a strength that stirred the red hair against her cheeks and a raving of wind through which the lute music screamed high. But it was not the full force that had overwhelmed her. For this maniac dance that spun round and round through the dark was building up a climax of cumulative strength that she could feel as she knelt there, hugging the slimy box. She thought the very air sang with tension and stress. That circle was reeling counterwise to the spin of Andred's vortexing force, and Andred was weakening. She could feel him slackening above her in the dark. The music shrieked louder above the failing storm-wind and the fearful joy upon those faces whirling past told her why. Somehow they were overpowering him. Something in the dwarf's mad lute-strings, something in the spinning of their dance was breaking down the strength of Andred's centuries-old violence. She could feel it weakening as she crouched there with the casket hugged bruisingly to her bosom.

And yet—was it this precious casket that they fought for? No one had a glance to spare for the crouching girl or the burden she hugged. Every face was lifted raptly, every eye stared blindly and exultantly into the upper dark as if the thing that was Andred was visible and—and infinitely desirable. It was a lust for that thing upon their faces that made joy so vivid there. Jirel's brain had almost ceased recording sensation in the bewilderment of what she watched.

When the dance ended she scarcely knew it. Lulled into a dizzy trance by the mad spinning of the dancers, she was almost nodding on her knees in their center, feeling her brain whirl with their whirling—feeling the motion slow about her so imperceptibly that nothing but the whirl itself registered on her mind. But the dancers were slackening—and with them, the whirl above. The wind no longer raved through



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the dark; it was a slow sigh now, growing softer and gentler as the circle of dancers ceased to spin. . . .

And then there was a great, soft, puffing sigh from the darkness above her that blew out her awareness like a candle-flame. . . .

Daylight fingering through the arrow-slits touched Jirel's closed lids. She awoke painfully, blinking in the light. Every muscle and bone of her supple body ached from the buffeting of last night's storm and violence, and the cold stones were hard beneath her. She sat up, groping by instinct for her knife. It lay a little distance off, rusting with last night's blood. And the casket—the casket! . . .

Panic swelling in her throat quieted in an instant as she saw that precious, moldering thing lying on its side at her elbow. A little thing, its iron hinges rusty, its leather whitened and eaten with rot from two centuries in a nameless, dripping place; but safe, unopened. She picked it up, shaking it experimentally. And she heard the softest shifting within, a sound and weight like finest flour moving gently.

A rustle and a sigh from beyond brought her head up, and she stared around her in the shadows of the halls. In a broad, uneven circle the bodies of last night's dancers lay sprawled. Dead? No, slow breathing stirred them as they lay, and upon the face of the nearest—it was Damara—was a look of such gluttoned satiety that Jirel glanced away in disgust. But they all shared it. She had seen revelers asleep after a night of drunken feasting with not half such surfeit, such almost obscene satisfaction upon their faces as Alaric's drugged company wore now. Remembering that obscure lusting she had seen in their eyes last night, she wondered what nameless satiety they had achieved in the dark after her own consciousness went out. . . .

A footfall sounded upon stone behind her and she spun half-way round, rising on one knee and shifting the knife-hilt firmer in her fist. It was Alaric, a little unsteady on his feet, looking down upon her with a sort of half-seeing abstraction. His scarlet tunic was dusty and rumpled as if he had slept in it all night upon the floor and had only just risen. He ran a hand through his ruffled hair and yawned, and looked down at her with a visible effort at focusing his attention.

"I'll have your horse brought up," he said, his eyes sliding indifferently away from her even as he spoke. "You may go now."

Jirel gaped up at him, her lips parting in amazement over



white teeth. He was not watching her. His eyes had shifted focus and he was staring blindly into some delightful memory that had blotted out Jirel's very existence. And upon his face that look of almost obscene satiety relaxed every feature until even his sword-gash mouth hung loose.

"B-but—" Jirel blinked and clutched at the mildewed box she had risked her life for. He came back into focus for an impatient instant to say carelessly:

"Oh—that! Take the thing."

"You—you know what it is? I thought you wanted——"

He shrugged. "I could not have explained to you last night what it was I wanted of—Andred. So I said it was the treasure we sought—you could understand that. But as for that rotting little box—I don't know or care what lies inside. I've had—a better thing. . . ." And his remembering eyes shifted again to escape hers and stare blissfully into the past.

"Then why did you—save me?"

"Save you?" He laughed. "We had no thought of you or your treasure in what we—did—last night. You have served your purpose—you may go free."

"Served—what purpose?"

Impatiently for an instant he brought himself wholly back out of his remembering dream to say:

"You did what we were holding you for—called up Andred into our power. Lucky for you that the dogs sensed what happened after you had slipped off to dare the ghost alone. And lucky for us, too. I think Andred might not have come even to take you, had he sensed our presence. Make no doubt of it—he feared us, and with good reason."

Jirel looked up at him for a long instant, a little chill creeping down her spine, before she said in a shaken whisper:

"What—are you?" And for a moment she almost hoped he would not answer. But he smiled, and the look of deformity deepened upon his face.

"A hunter of undeath," he said softly. "A drinker of undeath, when I can find it. . . . My people and I lust after that dark force which the ghosts of the violent dead engender, and we travel far sometimes between—feastings." His eyes escaped hers for an instant to stare gloatingly into the past. Still looking with that unfocused gaze, in a voice she had not heard before from him, he murmured, "I wonder if any man who had not tasted it could guess the utter ecstasy of drinking up the undeath of a strong ghost . . . a ghost as strong as Andred's . . . feeling that black power pouring into

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you in deep drafts as you suck it down—a thirst that strengthens as you drink—feel—darkness—spreading through every vein more sweetly than wine, more intoxicating. . . . To be drunk on undeath—a joy almost unbearable.”

Watching him, Jirel was aware of a strong shudder that rose in the pit of her stomach and ran strongly and shakingly along her limbs. With an effort she tore her gaze away. The obscene ecstasy that Alaric’s inward-looking eyes dwelt upon was a thing she would not see even in retrospect, through another’s words and eyes. She scrambled to her feet, cradling the leather box in her arm, averting her eyes from his.

“Let me go, then,” she said in a lowered voice, obscurely embarrassed as if she had looked inadvertently upon something indescribable. Alaric glanced up at her and smiled.

“You are free to go,” he said, “but waste no time returning with your men for vengeance against the force we imposed on you.” His smile deepened at her little twitch of acknowledgment, for that thought had been in her mind. “Nothing holds us now at Hellsgarde. We will leave today on—another search. One thing before you go—we owe you a debt for luring Andred into our power, for I think he would not have come without you. Take a warning away with you, lady.”

“What is it?” Jirel’s gaze flicked the man’s briefly and fell again. She would not look into his eyes if she could help it. “What warning?”

“Do not open that box you carry.”

And before she could get her breath to speak he had smiled at her and turned away, whistling for his men. Around her on the floor Jirel heard a rustling and a sigh as the sleepers began to stir. She stood quiet for an instant longer, staring down in bewilderment at the small box under her arm, before she turned to follow Alaric into the outer air.

Last night was a memory and a nightmare to forget. Not even the dead men still on their ghastly guard before the door could mar her triumph now.

Jirel rode back across the causeway in the strong light of morning, moving like a rider in a mirage between blue skies and blue reflecting waters. Behind her Hellsgarde Castle was a vision swimming among the mirroring pools of the marsh. And as she rode, she remembered.

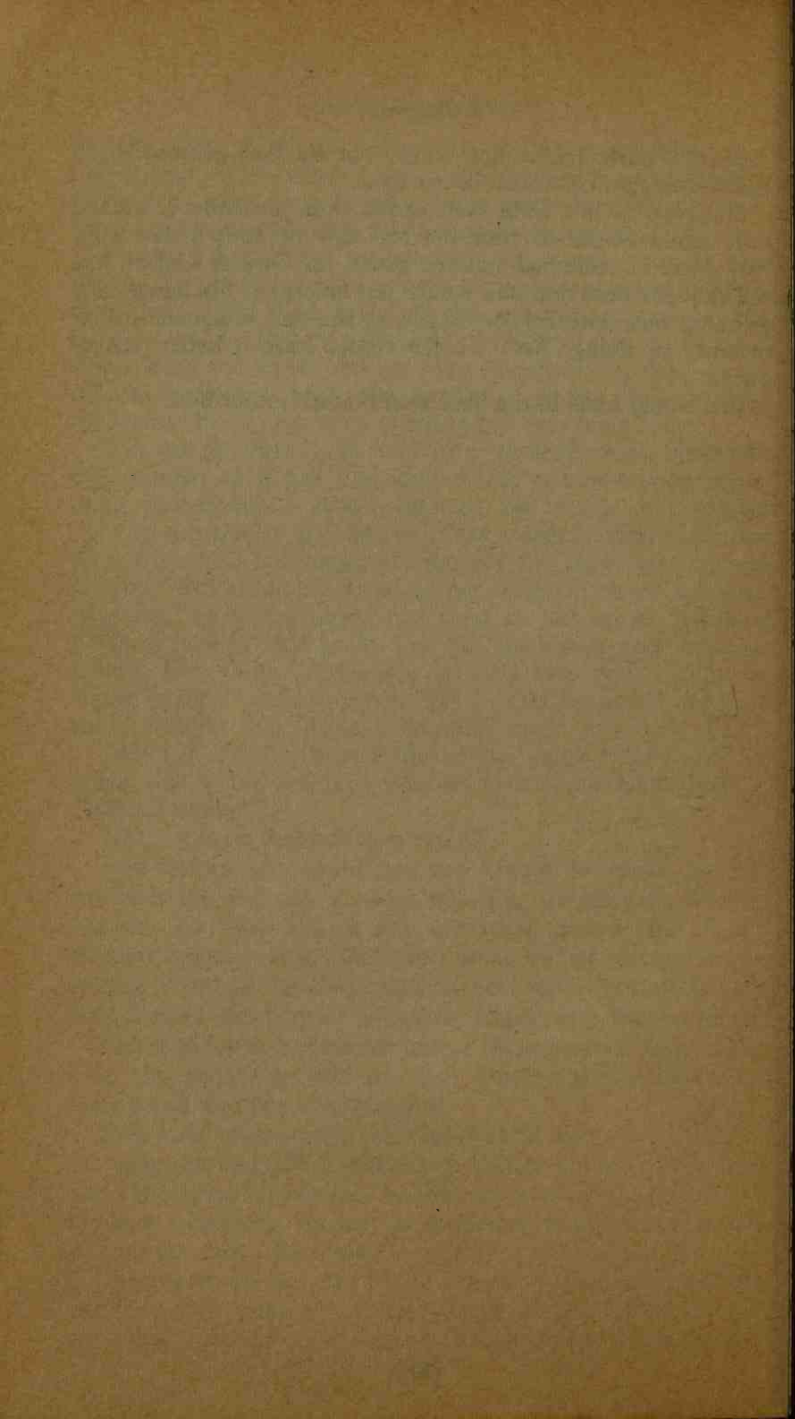
The vortex of violence out of which she had snatched this box last night—the power and terror of the thing that had treasured it so long . . . what lay within? Something akin to—

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Andred? Alaric might not know, but he had guessed. . . . His warning still sounded in her ears.

She rode awhile with bent brows, but presently a wicked little smile began to thin the red lips of Joiry's sovereign lady. Well . . . she had suffered much for Guy of Garlot, but she thought now that she would not smash in his handsome, grinning face with her sword-hilt as she had dreamed so luxuriously of doing. No . . . she would have a better vengeance. . . .

She would hand him a little iron-bound leather box.





CLARK ASHTON SMITH (1893-1961) was born in Auburn, California, and led a quiet, somewhat reclusive life in his native state. Largely self-educated, he supported himself by odd jobs while practicing drawing, painting, sculpture, and poetry. He began writing fiction in the 1920s. His total production was between ninety and a hundred short stories, over half in the period 1931-34 and over half of them published in *Weird Tales*.

A highly individualistic writer, Smith ascribed the main influences on him to Ambrose Bierce and Robert W. Chambers. His stories display a fondness for rare words, a vivid imagination, an ironic sense of humor, and a bent for the macabre. Besides a number of science-fiction stories, he composed many fantasies laid in the lost continents of Hyperborea and Atlantis, in the legendary medieval land of Malneant, and in the future continent Zothique, which will exist when the sun has dimmed and the present lands have disappeared beneath the sea.

The present story was published in *Weird Tales* for November, 1932, and reprinted in the Arkham House collection, *Out of Space and Time* (Sauk City, 1942). This book and another collection of Smith's stories, *Lost Worlds*, are long out of print and command high prices; but two other collections, *Genius Loci* and *The Abominations of Yondo*, are available.



## ***The Testament of Athammaus***

*by CLARK ASHTON SMITH*

It has become needful for me, who am no wielder of the stylus of bronze or the pen of calamus, and whose only proper tool is the long, double-handed sword, to indite this account of the curious and lamentable happenings which foreran the desertion of Commoriom by its king and its people. This I am well fitted to do, for I played a signal part in these happenings; and I left the city only when all the others had gone.

Now Commoriom, as every one knows, was aforetime the resplendent, high-built capital, and the marble and granite crown of all Hyperborea. But concerning the cause of its abandonment there are now so many warring legends and so many tales of a false and fabulous character, that I, who am old in years and triply old in honors, I, who have grown weary with no less than eleven lustrums of public service, am compelled to write this record of the truth ere it fade utterly from the tongues and memories of men. And this I do, though the telling thereof will include a confession of my one defeat, my one failure in the dutiful administration of a committed task.

For those who will read the narrative in future years, and haply in future lands, I shall now introduce myself. I am Athammaus, the chief headsman of Uzuldaroum, who held formerly the same office in Commoriom. My father, Manghai Thal, was headsman before me; and the sires of my father, even to the mythic generations of the primal kings, have wielded the great copper sword of justice on the block of *eighon*-wood.

Forgive an aged man if he seem to dwell, as is the habit of the old, among the youthful recollections that have gathered to themselves the kingly purple of removed horizons and



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the strange glory that illumines irretrievable things. Lo! I am made young again when I recall Commorion, when in this gray city of the sunken years I behold in retrospect her walls that looked mountainously down upon the jungle, and the alabastrine multitude of her heaven-fretting spires. Opulent among cities, and superb and magisterial, and paramount over all was Commorion, to whom tribute was given from the shores of the Atlantean sea to that sea in which is the immense continent of Mu; to whom the traders came from utmost Thulan that is walled on the north with unknown ice, and from the southern realm of Tscho Vulpanomi which ends in a lake of boiling asphaltum. Ah! proud and lordly was Commorion, and her humblest dwellings were more than the palaces of other cities. And it was not, as men fable nowadays, because of that maundering prophecy once uttered by the white sybil from the isle of snow which is named Polarion, that her splendor and spaciousness were delivered over to the spotted vines of the jungle and the spotted snakes. Nay, it was because of a direr thing than this, and a tangible horror against which the law of kings, the wisdom of hierophants and the sharpness of swords were alike impotent. Ah! not lightly was she overcome, not easily were her defenders driven forth. And though others forget, or haply deem her no more than a vain and dubitable tale, I shall never cease to lament Commorion.

My sinews have dwindled grievously now; and Time has drunken stealthily from my veins; and has touched my hair with the ashes of suns extinct. But in the days whereof I tell, there was no braver and more stalwart headsmen than I in the whole of Hyperborea; and my name was a red menace, a loudly spoken warning to the evil-doers of the forest and the town, and the savage robbers of uncouth outland tribes. Wearing the blood-bright purple of my office, I stood each morning in the public square where all might attend and behold, and performed for the edification of all men my allotted task. And each day the tough, golden-ruddy copper of the huge crescent blade was darkened not once but many times with a rich and winelike sanguine. And because of my never-faltering arm, my infallible eye, and the clean blow which there was never any necessity to repeat, I was much honored by the King Loquamethros and by the populace of Commorion.

I remember well, on account of their unique atrocity, the earliest rumors that came to me in my active life regarding

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the outlaw Knygathin Zhaum. This person belonged to an obscure and highly unpleasant people called the Voormis, who dwelt in the black Eiglophian Mountains at a full day's journey from Commorion, and inhabited according to their tribal custom the caves of ferine animals less savage than themselves, which they had slain or otherwise dispossessed. They were generally looked upon as more beastlike than human, because of their excessive hairiness and the vile, ungodly rites and usages to which they were addicted. It was mainly from among these beings that the notorious Knygathin Zhaum had recruited his formidable band, who were terrorizing the hills subjacent to the Eiglophian Mountains with daily deeds of the most infamous and iniquitous rapine. Wholesale robbery was the least of their crimes; and mere anthropophagism was far from being the worst.

It will readily be seen, from this, that the Voormis were a somewhat aboriginal race, with an ethnic heritage of the darkest and most revolting type. And it was commonly said that Knygathin Zhaum himself possessed an even murkier strain of ancestry than the others, being related on the maternal side to that queer, non-anthropomorphic god, Tsathoggua, who was worshipped so widely during the sub-human cycles. And there were those who whispered of even stranger blood (if one could properly call it blood) and a monstrous linkage with the swart, Protean spawn that had come down with Tsathoggua from elder worlds and exterior dimensions where physiology and geometry had both assumed an altogether inverse trend of development. And, because of this mingling of ultra-cosmic strains, it was said that the body of Knygathin Zhaum, unlike his shaggy, umber-colored fellow-tribesmen, was hairless from crown to heel and was pied with great spots of black and yellow; and moreover he himself was reputed to exceed all others in his cruelty and cunning.

For a long time this execrable outlaw was no more to me than an horrific name; but inevitably I thought of him with a certain professional interest. There were many who believed him invulnerable by any weapon, and who told of his having escaped in a manner which none could elucidate from more than one dungeon whose walls were not to be scaled or pierced by mortal beings. But of course I discounted all such tales, for my official experience had never yet included any one with properties or abilities of a like sort. And I knew well the superstitiousness of the vulgar multitude.

From day to day new reports reached me amid the pre-

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occupations of never-slighted duty. This noxious marauder was not content with the seemingly ample sphere of operations afforded by his native mountains and the outlying hill-regions with their fertile valleys and well-peopled towns. His forays became bolder and more extensive; till one night he descended on a village so near Commorion that it was usually classed as a suburb. Here he and his filthy crew committed numerous deeds of an unspecifiable enormity; and bearing with them many of the villagers for purposes even less designable, they retired to their caves in the glassy-walled Eiglophian peaks ere the ministers of justice could overtake them.

It was this audaciously offensive act which prompted the law to exert its full power and vigilance against Knygathin Zhaum. Before that, he and his men had been left to the local officers of the countryside; but now his misdeeds were such as to demand the rigorous attention of the constabulary of Commorion. Henceforth all his movements were followed as closely as possible; the towns where he might descend were strictly guarded; and traps were set everywhere.

Even thus, Knygathin Zhaum contrived to evade capture for month after month; and all the while he repeated his far-flung raids with an embarrassing frequency. It was almost by chance, or through his own foolhardiness, that he was eventually taken in broad daylight on the highway near the city's outskirts. Contrary to all expectation, in view of his renowned ferocity, he made no resistance whatever; but finding himself surrounded by mailed archers and billbearers, he yielded to them at once with an oblique, enigmatic smile—a smile that troubled for many nights thereafter the dreams of all who were present.

For reasons which were never explained, he was altogether alone when taken; and none of his fellows were captured either coincidentally or subsequently. Nevertheless, there was much excitement and jubilation in Commorion, and every one was curious to behold the dreaded outlaw. More even than others, perhaps, I felt the stirrings of interest; for upon me, in due course, the proper decapitation of Knygathin Zhaum would devolve.

From hearing the hideous rumors and legends whose nature I have already outlined, I was prepared for something out of the ordinary in the way of criminal personality. But even at first sight, when I watched him as he was borne to prison through a moiling crowd, Knygathin Zhaum surpassed the



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most sinister and disagreeable anticipations. He was naked to the waist, and wore the fulvous hide of some long-haired animal which hung in filthy tatters to his knees. Such details, however, contributed little to those elements in his appearance which revolted and even shocked me. His limbs, his body, his lineaments were outwardly formed like those of aboriginal man; and one might even have allowed for his utter hairlessness, in which there was a remote and blasphemously caricatural suggestion of the shaven priest; and even the broad, formless mottling of his skin, like that of a huge boa, might somehow have been glossed over as a rather extravagant peculiarity of pigmentation. It was something else, it was the unctuous, verminous ease, the undulant litheness and fluidity of his every movement, seeming to hint at an inner structure and vertebration that were less than human—or, one might almost have said, a sub-ophidian lack of all bony framework—which made me view the captive, and also my incumbent task, with an unaccustomed distaste. He seemed to slither rather than walk; and the very fashion of his jointure, the placing of knees, hips, elbows and shoulders, appeared arbitrary and factitious. One felt that the outward semblance of humanity was a mere concession to anatomical convention; and that his corporeal formation might easily have assumed—and might still assume at any instant—the unheard-of outlines and concept-defying dimensions that prevail in trans-galactic worlds. Indeed, I could now believe the outrageous tales concerning his ancestry. And with equal horror and curiosity I wondered what the stroke of justice would reveal, and what noisome, mephitic ichor would befoul the impartial sword in lieu of honest blood.

It is needless to record in circumstantial detail the process by which Knygathin Zhaum was tried and condemned for his manifold enormities. The workings of the law were implacably swift and sure, and their equity permitted of no quibbling or delay. The captive was confined in an oubliette below the main dungeons—a cell hewn in the basic, Archean gneiss at a profound depth, with no entrance other than a hole through which he was lowered and drawn up by means of a long rope and windlass. This hole was lidded with a huge block and was guarded day and night by a dozen men-at-arms. However, there was no attempt to escape on the part of Knygathin Zhaum: indeed, he seemed unnaturally resigned to his prospective doom.

To me, who have always been possessed of a strain of



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prophetic intuition, there was something overtly ominous in this unlooked-for resignation. Also, I did not like the demeanor of the prisoner during his trial. The silence which he had preserved at all times following his capture and incarceration was still maintained before his judges. Though interpreters who knew the harsh, sibilant Eiglophian dialect were provided, he would make no answer to questions; and he offered no defense. Least of all did I like the unabashed and unblinking manner in which he received the final pronouncement of death which was uttered in the high court of Commorion by eight judges in turn and solemnly reaffirmed at the end by King Loquamethros. After that, I looked well to the sharpening of my sword, and promised myself that I would concentrate all the resources of a brawny arm and a flawless manual artistry upon the forthcoming execution.

My task was not long deferred, for the usual interval of a fortnight between condemnation and decapitation had been shortened to three days in view of the suspicious peculiarities of Knygathin Zhaum and the heinous magnitude of his proven crimes.

On the morning appointed, after a night that had been rendered dismal by a long-drawn succession of the most abominable dreams, I went with my unfailing punctuality to the block of *eighon*-wood, which was situated with geometrical exactness in the center of the main square. Here a huge crowd had already gathered; and the clear amber sun blazed royally down on the silver and nacarat of court dignitaries, the hodden of merchants and artizans, and the rough pelts that were worn by outland people.

With a like punctuality, Knygathin Zhaum soon appeared amid his entourage of guards, who surrounded him with a bristling hedge of billhooks and lances and tridents. At the same time, all the outer avenues of the city, as well as the entrances to the square, were guarded by massed soldiery, for it was feared that the uncaught members of the desperate outlaw band might make an effort to rescue their infamous chief at the last moment.

Amid the unremitting vigilance of his warders, Knygathin Zhaum came forward, fixing upon me the intent but inexpressive gaze of his lidless, ocher-yellow eyes, in which a face-to-face scrutiny could discern no pupils. He knelt down beside the block, presenting his mottled nape without a tremor. As I looked upon him with a calculating eye, and made ready for the lethal stroke, I was impressed more

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powerfully and more disagreeably than ever by the feeling of a loathsome, underlying plasticity, an invertebrate structure, nauseous and non-terrestrial, beneath his impious mockery of human form. And I could not help perceiving also the air of abnormal coolness, of abstract, impenetrable cynicism, that was maintained by all his parts and members. He was like a torpid snake, or some huge liana of the jungle, that is wholly unconscious of the shearing ax.

I was well aware that I might be dealing with things which were beyond the ordinary province of a public headsmen; but nathless I lifted the great sword in a clean, symmetrically flashing arc, and brought it down on the piebald nape with all of my customary force and address.

Necks differ in the sensations which they afford to one's hand beneath the penetrating blade. In this case, I can only say that the sensation was not such as I have grown to associate with the cleaving of any known animal substance. But I saw with relief that the blow had been successful: the head of Knygathin Zhaum lay cleanly severed on the porous block, and his body sprawled on the pavement without even a single quiver of departing animation. As I had expected, there was no blood—only a black, tarry, fetid exudation, far from copious, which ceased in a few minutes and vanished utterly from my sword and from the *eighon*-wood. Also, the inner anatomy which the blade had revealed was devoid of all legitimate vertebration. But to all appearance Knygathin Zhaum had yielded up his obscene life; and the sentence of King Loquamethros and the eight judges of Commorion had been fulfilled with a legal precision.

Proudly but modestly I received the applause of the waiting multitudes, who bore willing witness to the consummation of my official task and were loudly jubilant over the dead scourge. After seeing that the remains of Knygathin Zhaum were given into the hands of the public grave-diggers, who always disposed of such offal, I left the square and returned to my home, since no other decapitations had been set for that day. My conscience was serene, and I felt that I had acquitted myself worthily in the performance of a far from pleasant duty.

Knygathin Zhaum, as was the custom in dealing with the bodies of the most nefarious criminals, was interred with contumelious haste in a barren field outside the city where people cast their orts and rubbish. He was left in an unmarked and unmounded grave between two middens. The

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power of the law had now been amply vindicated; and every one was satisfied, from Loquamethros himself to the villagers that had suffered from the depredations of the deceased outlaw.

I retired that night, after a bounteous meal of *suvana*-fruit and *djongua*-beans, well irrigated with *foum*-wine. From a moral standpoint, I had every reason to sleep the sleep of the virtuous; but, even as on the preceding night, I was made the victim of one cacodemoniacal dream after another. Of these dreams, I recall only their pervading, unifying consciousness of insufferable suspense, of monotonously cumulative horror without shape or name; and the ever-torturing sentiment of vain repetition and dark, hopeless toil and frustration. Also, there is a half-memory, which refuses to assume any approach to visual form, of things that were never intended for human perception or human cognition; and the aforesaid sentiment, and all the horror, were dimly but indissolubly bound up with these.

Awaking unrefreshed and weary from what seemed an eon of thankless endeavor, of treadmill bafflement, I could only impute my nocturnal sufferings to the *djongua*-beans; and decided that I must have eaten all too liberally of these nutritious viands. Mercifully, I did not suspect in my dreams the dark, portentous symbolism that was soon to declare itself.

Now must I write the things that are formidable unto Earth and the dwellers of Earth; the things that exceed all human or terrene regimen; that subvert reason; that mock the dimensions and defy biology. Dire is the tale; and, after seven lustrums, the tremor of an olden fear still agitates my hand as I write.

But of such things I was still oblivious when I sallied forth that morning to the place of execution, where three criminals of a quite average sort, whose very cephalic contours I have forgotten along with their offenses, were to meet their well-deserved doom beneath my capable arm. Howbeit, I had not gone far when I heard an unconscionable uproar that was spreading swiftly from street to street, from alley to alley throughout Commorion. I distinguished myriad cries of rage, horror, fear and lamentation that were seemingly caught up and repeated by every one who chanced to be abroad at that hour. Meeting some of the citizenry, who were plainly in a state of the most excessive agitation and were still continuing their outcries, I inquired the reason of



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all this clamor. And thereupon I learned from them that Knygathin Zhaum, whose illicit career was presumably at an end, had now reappeared and had signaled the unholy miracle of his return by the commission of a most appalling act on the main avenue before the very eyes of early passers! He had seized a respectable seller of *djongua*-beans, and had proceeded instantly to devour his victim *alive*, without heeding the blows, bricks, arrows, javelins, cobblestones and curses that were rained upon him by the gathering throng and by the police. It was only when he had satisfied his atrocious appetite that he suffered the police to lead him away, leaving little more than the bones and raiment of the *djongua*-seller to mark the spot of this outrageous happening. Since the case was without legal parallel, Knygathin Zhaum had been thrown once more into the oubliette below the city dungeons, to await the will of Loquamethros and the eight judges.

The exceeding discomfiture, the profound embarrassment felt by myself, as well as by the people and the magistracy of Commoriom, can well be imagined. As every one bore witness, Knygathin Zhaum had been efficiently beheaded and buried according to the customary ritual; and his resurrection was not only against nature but involved a most contumelious and highly mystifying breach of the law. In fact, the legal aspects of the case were such as to render necessary the immediate passage of a special statute, calling for re-judgment, and allowing re-execution, of such malefactors as might thus return from their lawful graves. Apart from all this, there was general consternation; and even at that early date, the more ignorant and more religious among the townsfolk were prone to regard the matter as an omen of some impending civic calamity.

As for me, my scientific turn of mind, which repudiated the supernatural, led me to seek an explanation of the problem in the non-terrestrial side of Knygathin Zhaum's ancestry. I felt sure that the forces of an alien biology, the properties of a trans-stellar life-substance, were somehow involved.

With the spirit of the true investigator, I summoned the grave-diggers who had interred Knygathin Zhaum and bade them lead me to his place of sepulture in the refuse-grounds. Here a most singular condition disclosed itself. The earth had not been disturbed, apart from a deep hole at one end of the grave, such as might have been made by a large rodent. No body of human size, or, at least, of human form, could



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possibly have emerged from this hole. At my command, the diggers removed all the loose soil, mingled with potsherds and other rubbish, which they had heaped upon the beheaded outlaw. When they reached the bottom, nothing was found but a slight stickiness where the corpse had lain; and this, along with an odor of ineffable foulness which was its concomitant, soon dissipated itself in the open air.

Baffled, and more mystified then ever, but still sure that the enigma would permit of some natural solution, I awaited the new trial. This time, the course of justice was even quicker and less given to quibbling than before. The prisoner was again condemned, and the time of decapitation was delayed only till the following morn. A proviso concerning burial was added to the sentence: the remains were to be sealed in a strong wooden sarcophagus, the sarcophagus was to be inhumed in a deep pit in the solid stone, and the pit filled with massy boulders. These measures, it was felt, should serve amply to restrain the unwholesome and irregular inclinations of this obnoxious miscreant.

When Knygathin Zhaum was again brought before me, amid a redoubled guard and a throng that overflowed the square and all of the outlying avenues, I viewed him with profound concern and with more than my former repulsion. Having a good memory for anatomic details, I noticed some odd changes in his physique. The huge splotches of dull black and sickly yellow that had covered him from head to heel were now somewhat differently distributed. The shifting of the facial blotches around the eyes and mouth had given him an expression that was both grim and sardonic to an unbearable degree. Also, there was a perceptible *shortening* of his neck, though the place of cleavage and reunion, midway between head and shoulders, had left no mark whatever. And looking at his limbs, I discerned other and more subtle changes. Despite my acumen in physical matters, I found myself unwilling to speculate regarding the processes that might underlie these alterations; still less did I wish to surmise the problematic results of their continuation, if such should ensue. Hoping fervently that Knygathin Zhaum and the vile, flagitious properties of his unhallowed carcass would now be brought to a permanent end, I raised the sword of justice high in air and smote with heroic might.

Once again, as far as mortal eyes were able to determine, the effects of the shearing blow were all that could be desired. The head rolled forward on the *eighon*-wood, and the

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torso and its members fell and lay supinely on the maculated flags. From a legal viewpoint, this doubly nefarious malefactor was now twice-dead.

Howbeit, this time I superintended in person the disposal of the remains, and saw to the bolting of the fine sarcophagus of *apha*-wood in which they were laid, and the filling with chosen boulders of the ten-foot pit into which the sarcophagus was lowered. It required three men to lift even the least of these boulders. We all felt that the irrepressible Knygathin Zhaum was due for a quietus.

Alas for the vanity of earthly hopes and labors! The morrow came with its unspeakable, incredible tale of renewed outrage: once more the weird, semi-human offender was abroad, once more his anthropophagic lust had taken toll from among the honorable denizens of Commorion. He had eaten no less a personage than one of the eight judges; and, not satisfied with picking the bones of this rather obese individual, had devoured by way of dessert the more outstanding facial features of one of the police who had tried to deter him from finishing his main course. All this, as before, was done amid the frantic protests of a great throng. After a final nibbling at the scant vestiges of the unfortunate constable's left ear, Knygathin Zhaum had seemed to experience a feeling of repletion and had suffered himself to be led docilely away by the jailers.

I and the others who had helped me in the arduous toils of entombment were more than astounded when we heard the news. And the effect on the general public was indeed deplorable. The more superstitious and timid began leaving the city forthwith; and there was much revival of forgotten prophecies; and much talk among the various priesthoods anent the necessity of placating with liberal sacrifice their mystically angered gods and eidolons. Such nonsense I was wholly able to disregard; but, under the circumstances, the persistent return of Knygathin Zhaum was no less alarming to science than to religion.

We examined the tomb, if only as a matter of form; and found that certain of the superincumbent boulders had been displaced in such a manner as to admit the outward passage of a body with the lateral dimensions of some large snake or muskrat. The sarcophagus, with its metal bolts, was bursten at one end; and we shuddered to think of the immeasurable force that must have been employed in its disruption.

Because of the way in which the case overpassed all known

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biologic laws, the formalities of civil law were now waived; and I, Athammaus, was called upon that same day before the sun had reached its meridian, and was solemnly charged with the office of re-beheading Knygathin Zhaum at once. The interment or other disposal of the remains was left to my discretion; and the local soldiery and constabulary were all placed at my command, if I should require them.

Deeply conscious of the honor thus implied, and sorely perplexed but undaunted, I went forth to the scene of my labors. When the criminal reappeared, it was obvious to every one that his physical personality, in achieving this new recrudescence, had undergone a most salient change. His motting had developed more than a suggestion of some startling and repulsive pattern; and his human characteristics had yielded to the inroads of an unearthly distortion. The head was now joined to the shoulders almost without the intermediation of a neck; the eyes were set diagonally in a face with oblique bulgings and flattenings; the nose and mouth were showing a tendency to displace each other; and there were still further alterations which I shall not specify, since they involved an abhorrent degradation of man's noblest and most distinctive corporeal members. I shall, however, mention the strange, pendulous formations, like annulated dewlaps or wattles, into which his kneecaps had now evolved. Nathless, it was Knygathin Zhaum himself who stood (if one could dignify the fashion of his carriage by that word) before the block of justice.

Because of the virtual non-existence of a nape, the third beheading called for a precision of eye and a nicety of hand which, in all likelihood, no other headsman than myself could have shown. I rejoice to stay that my skill was adequate to the demand made upon it; and once again the culprit was shorn of his vile cephaloid appendage. But if the blade had gone even a little to either side, the dismemberment entailed would have been technically of another sort than decapitation.

The laborious care with which I and my assistants conducted the third inhumation was indeed deserving of success. We laid the body in a strong sarcophagus of bronze, and the head in a second but smaller sarcophagus of the same material. The lids were then soldered down with molten metal; and after this the two sarcophagi were conveyed to opposite parts of Commorion. The one containing the body was buried at a great depth beneath monumental masses of



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stone; but that which enclosed the head I left uninterred, proposing to watch over it all night in company with a guard of armed men. I also appointed a numerous guard to keep vigil above the burial-place of the body.

Night came; and with seven trusty trident-bearers I went forth to the place where we had left the smaller of the two sarcophagi. This was in the courtyard of a deserted mansion amid the suburbs, far from the haunts of the populace. For weapons, I myself wore a short falchion and carried a great bill. We took along a plentiful supply of torches, so that we might not lack for light in our gruesome vigil; and we lit several of them at once and stuck them in crevices between the flagstones of the court in such wise that they formed a circle of lurid flames about the sarcophagus.

We had also brought with us an abundance of the crimson *foum*-wine in leathern bottles, and dice of mammoth-ivory with which to beguile the black nocturnal hours; and eyeing our charge with a casual but careful vigilance, we applied ourselves discreetly to the wine and began to play for small sums of no more than five *pazoors*, as is the wont of good gamblers till they have taken their opponents' measure.

The darkness deepened apace; and in the square of sapphire overhead, to which the illumination of our torches had given a jetty tinge, we saw Polaris and the red planets that looked down for the last time upon Commorion in her glory. But we dreamed not of the nearness of disaster, but jested bravely and drank in ribald mockery to the monstrous head that was now so securely confined and so remotely sundered from its odious body. And the wine passed and re-passed among us; and its rosy spirit mounted in our brains; and we played for bolder stakes; and the game quickened to a goodly frenzy.

I know not how many stars had gone over us in the smoky heavens, nor how many times I had availed myself of the ever-circling bottles. But I remember well that I had won no less than ninety *pazoors* from the trident-bearers, who were all swearing lustily and loudly as they strove in vain to stem the tide of my victory. I, as well as the others, had wholly forgotten the object of our vigil.

The sarcophagus containing the head was one that had been primarily designed for the reception of a small child. Its present use, one might have argued, was a sinful and sacrilegious waste of fine bronze; but nothing else of proper size and adequate strength was available at the time. In the

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mounting fervor of the game, as I have hinted, we had all ceased to watch this receptacle; and I shudder to think how long there may have been something visibly or even audibly amiss before the unwonted and terrifying behavior of the sarcophagus was forced upon our attention. It was the sudden, loud, metallic clangor, like that of a smitten gong or shield, which made us realize that all things were not as they should have been; and turning unanimously in the direction of the sound, we saw that the sarcophagus was heaving and pitching in a most unseemly fashion amid its ring of flaring torches. First on one end or corner, then on another, it danced and pirouetted, clanging resonantly all the while on the granite pavement.

The true horror of the situation had scarcely seeped into our brains, ere a new and even more ghastly development occurred. We saw that the casket was bulging ominously at top and sides and bottom, and was rapidly losing all similitude to its rightful form. Its rectangular outlines swelled and curved and were horribly erased as in the changes of a nightmare, till the thing became a slightly oblong sphere; and then, with a most appalling noise, it began to split at the welded edges of the lid, and burst violently asunder. Through the long, ragged rift there poured in hellish ebullition a dark, ever-swelling mass of incognizable matter, frothing as with the venomous foam of a million serpents, hissing as with the yeast of fermenting wine, and putting forth here and there great sooty-looking bubbles that were large as pig-bladders. Overturning several of the torches, it rolled in an inundating wave across the flagstones and we all sprang back in the most abominable fright and stupefaction to avoid it.

Cowering against the rear wall of the courtyard, while the overthrown torches flickered wildly and smokily, we watched the remarkable actions of the mass, which had paused as if to collect itself, and was now subsiding like a sort of infernal dough. It shrank, it fell in, till after awhile its dimensions began to re-approach those of the encoffined head, though they still lacked any true semblance of its shape. The thing became a round, blackish ball, on whose palpitating surface the nascent outlines of random features were limned with the flatness of a drawing. There was one lidless eye, tawny, pupilless and phosphoric, that stared upon us from the center of the ball while the thing appeared to be making up its mind. It lay still for more than a minute; then, with a catapulting bound, it sprang past us toward the open entrance of

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the courtyard, and disappeared from our ken on the midnight streets.

Despite our amazement and disconcertion, we were able to note the general direction in which it had gone. This, to our further terror and confoundment, was toward the suburb of Commorion in which the body of Knygathin Zhaum had been entombed. We dared not conjecture the meaning of it all, and the probable outcome. But, though there were a million fears and apprehensions to deter us, we seized our weapons and followed on the path of that unholy head with all the immediacy and all the forthrightness of motion which a goodly cargo of *foum*-wine would permit.

No one other than ourselves was abroad at an hour when even the most dissolute revellers had either gone home or had succumbed to their potations under tavern tables. The streets were dark, and were somehow drear and cheerless; and the stars above them were half stifled as by the invading mist of a pestilential miasma. We went on, following a main street, and the pavements echoed to our tread in the stillness with a hollow sound, as if the solid stone beneath them had been honeycombed with mausolean vaults in the interim of our weird vigil.

In all our wanderings, we found no sign of that supremely noxious and execrable thing which had issued from the riven sarcophagus. Nor, to our relief, and contrary to all our fears, did we encounter anything of an allied or analogous nature, such as might be abroad if our surmises were correct. But, near the central square of Commorion, we met with a number of men, carrying bills and tridents and torches, who proved to be the guards I had posted that evening above the tomb of Knygathin Zhaum's body. These men were in a state of pitiable agitation; and they told us a fearsome tale, of how the deep-hewn tomb and the monumental blocks piled within it had heaved as with the throes of earthquake; and of how a python-shaped mass of frothing and hissing matter had poured forth from amid the blocks and had vanished into the darkness toward Commorion. In return, we told them of that which had happened during our vigil in the courtyard; and we all agreed that a great foulness, a thing more baneful than beast or serpent, was again loose and ravening in the night. And we spoke only in shocked whispers of what the morrow might declare.

Uniting our forces, we searched the city, combing cautiously its alleys and its thoroughfares and dreading with the



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dread of brave men the dark, iniquitous spawn on which the light of our torches might fall at any turn or in any nook or portal. But the search was vain; and the stars grew faint above us in a livid sky; and the dawn came in among the marble spires with a glimmering of ghostly silver; and a thin, fantasmal amber was sifted on walls and pavements.

Soon there were footsteps other than ours that echoed through the town; and one by one the familiar clangors and clamors of life awoke. Early passers appeared; and the sellers of fruits and milk and legumes came in from the countryside. But of that which we sought there was still no trace.

We went on, while the city continued to resume its matutinal activities around us. Then, abruptly, with no warning, and under circumstances that would have startled the most robust and affrayed the most valorous, we came upon our quarry. We were entering the square in which was the *eighon*-block whereon so many thousand miscreants had laid their piacular necks, when we heard an outcry of mortal dread and agony such as only one thing in the world could have occasioned. Hurrying on, we saw that two wayfarers, who had been crossing the square near the block of justice, were struggling and writhing in the clutch of an unequalled monster which both natural history and fable would have repudiated.

In spite of the baffling, ambiguous oddities which the thing displayed, we identified it as Knygathin Zhaum when we drew closer. The head, in its third reunion with that detestable torso, had attached itself in a semi-flattened manner to the region of the lower chest and diaphragm; and during the process of this novel coalescence, one eye had slipped away from all relation with its fellow or the head and was now occupying the navel, just below the embossment of the chin. Other and even more shocking alterations had occurred: the arms had lengthened into tentacles, with fingers that were like knots of writhing vipers; and where the head would normally have been, the shoulders had reared themselves to a cone-shaped eminence that ended in a cup-like mouth. Most fabulous and impossible of all, however, were the changes in the nether limbs: at each knee and hip, they had re-bifurcated into long, lithe proboscides that were lined with throated suckers. By making a combined use of its various mouths and members, the abnormality was devouring both of the hapless persons whom it had seized.

Drawn by the outcries, a crowd gathered behind us as we

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neared this atrocious tableau. The whole city seemed to fill with a well-nigh instantaneous clamor, an ever-swelling hubbub, in which the dominant note was one of supreme, all-devastating terror.

I shall not speak of our feelings as officers and men. It was plan to us that the ultra-mundane factors in Knygathin Zhaum's ancestry had asserted themselves with a hideously accelerative ratio, following his latest resurrection. But, despite this, and the wholly stupendous enormity of the miscreation before us, we were still prepared to fulfil our duty and defend as best we could the helpless populace. I boast not of the herosim required: we were simple men, and should have done only that which we were visibly called upon to do.

We surrounded the monster, and would have assailed it immediately with our bills and tridents. But here an embarrassing difficulty disclosed itself: the creature before us had entwined itself so tortuously and inextricably with its prey, and the whole group was writhing and tossing so violently, that we could not use our weapons without grave danger of impaling or otherwise injuring our two fellow-citizens. At length, however, the strugglings and heavings grew less vehement, as the substance and life-blood of the men were consumed; and the loathsome mass of devourer and devoured became gradually quiescent.

Now, if ever, was our opportunity; and I am sure we should all have rallied to the attack, useless and vain as it would certainly have been. But plainly the monster had grown weary of all such trifling and would no longer submit himself to the petty annoyance of human molestation. As we raised our weapons and made ready to strike, the thing drew back, still carrying its vein-drawn, flaccid victims, and climbed upon the *eighon*-block. Here, before the eyes of all assembled, it began to swell in every part, in every member, as if it were inflating itself with a superhuman rancor and malignity. The rate at which the swelling progressed, and the proportions which the thing attained as it covered the block from sight and lapsed down on every side with undulating, inundating folds, would have been enough to daunt the heroes of remotest myth. The bloating of the main torso, I might add, was more lateral than vertical.

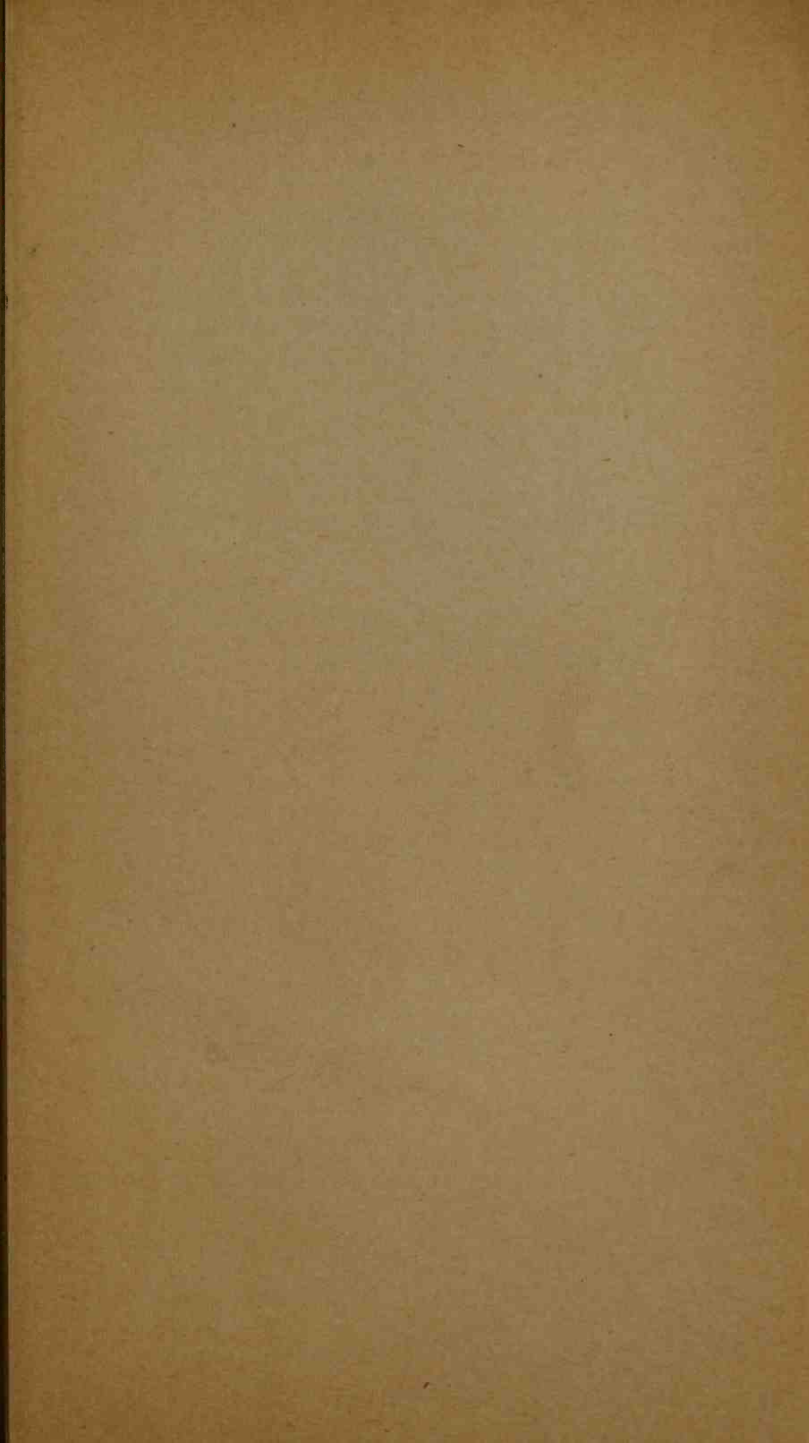
When the abnormality began to present dimensions that were beyond those of any creature of this world, and to bulge aggressively toward us with a slow, interminable stretching of boa-like arms, my valiant and redoubtable companions were

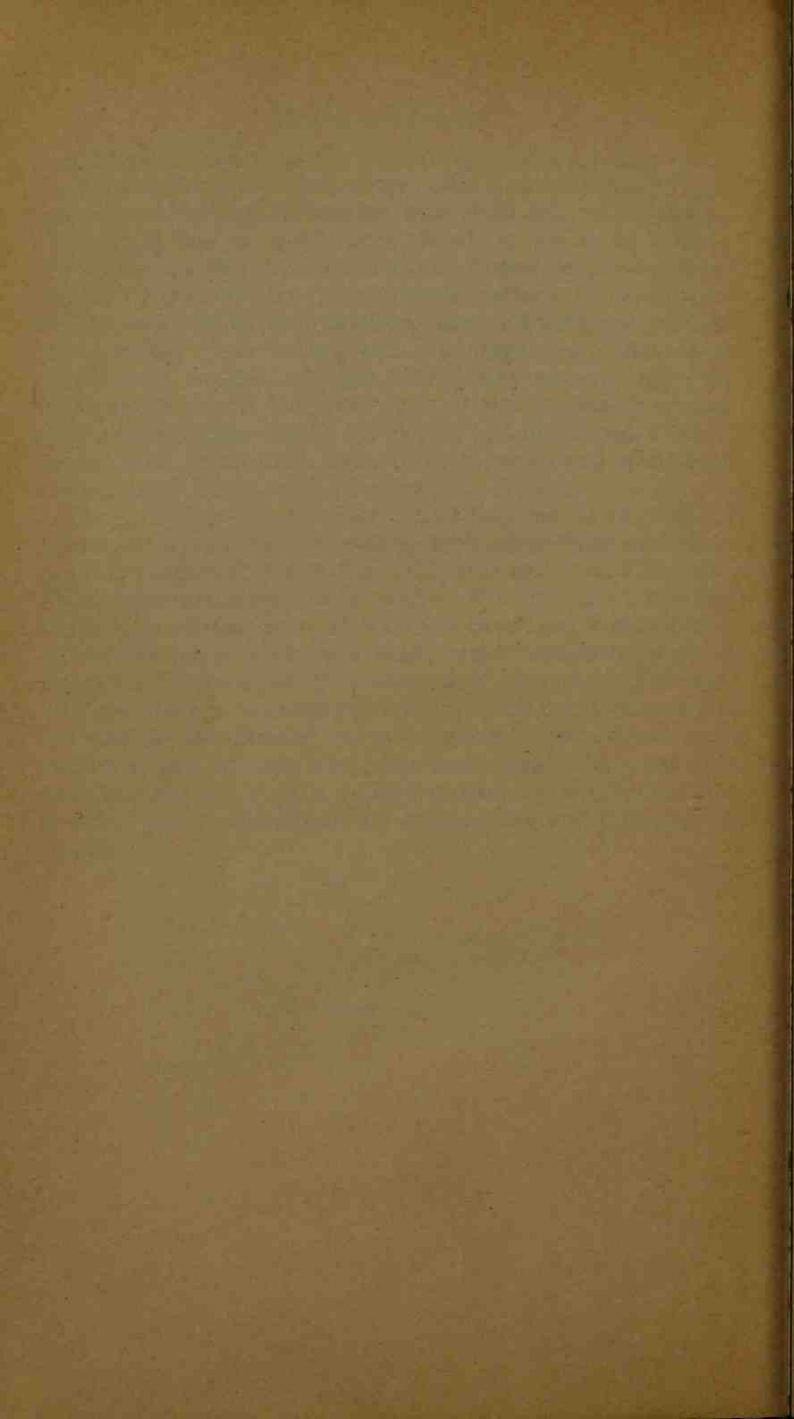
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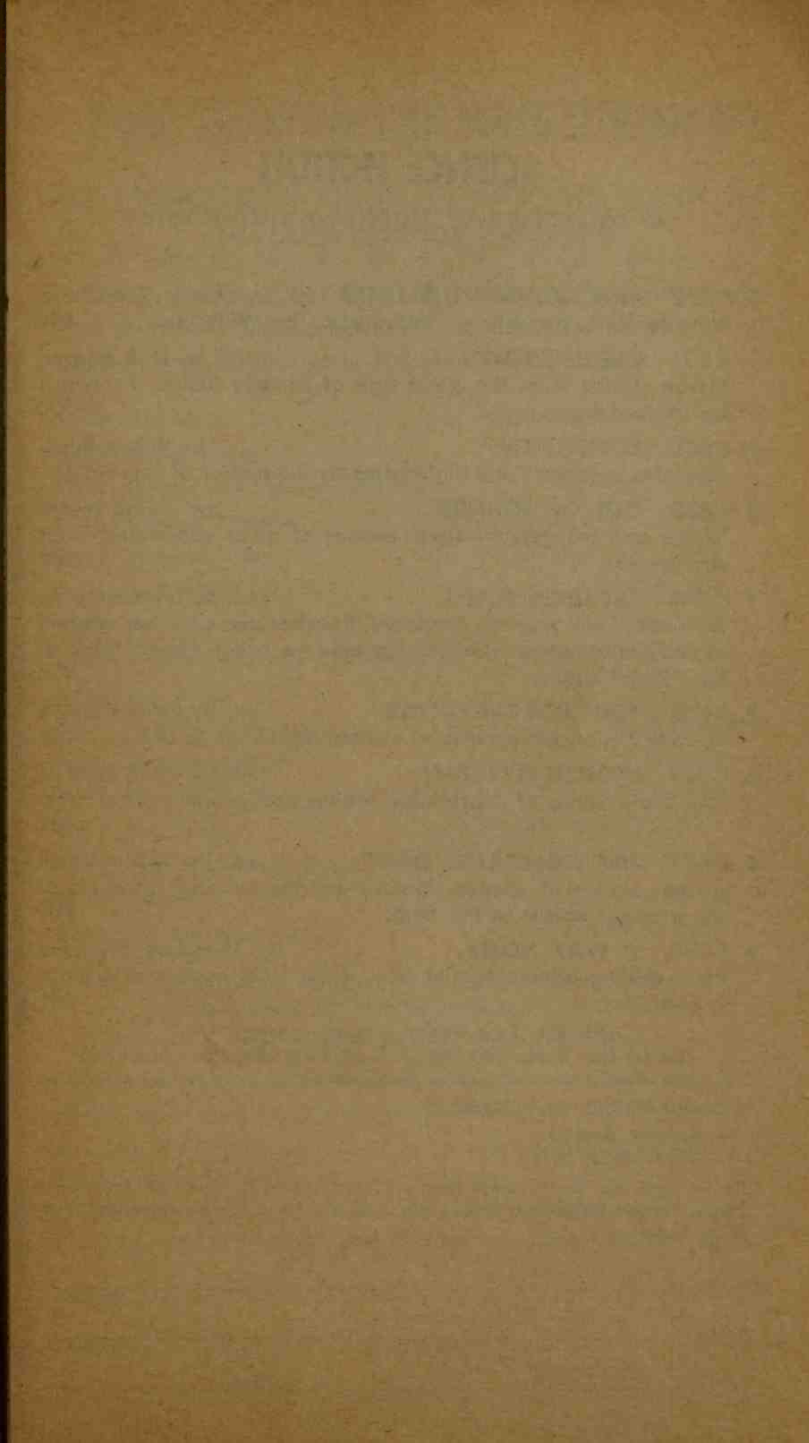
scarcely to be censured for retreating. And even less can I blame the general population, who were now evacuating Commorion in torrential multitudes, with shrill cries and wailings. Their flight was no doubt accelerated by the vocal sounds, which, for the first time during our observation, were being emitted by the monster. These sounds partook of the character of hissings more than anything else; but their volume was overpowering, their timbre was a torment and a nausea to the ear; and, worst of all, they were issuing not only from the diaphragmic mouth but from each of the various other oral openings or suckers which the horror had developed. Even I, Athammaus, drew back from those hissings and stood well beyond reach of the soiling serpentine fingers.

I am proud to say, however, that I lingered on the edge of the empty square for some time, with more than one backward and regretful glance. The thing that had been Knygathin Zhaum was seemingly content with its triumph; and it brooded supine and mountainous above the vanquished *eighon*-block. Its myriad hisses sank to a slow, minor sibilation such as might issue from a family of somnolent pythons; and it made no overt attempt to assail or even approach me. But seeing at last that the professional problem which it offered was quite insoluble; and divining moreover that Commorion was now entirely without a king, a judicial system, a constabulary or a people, I finally abandoned the doomed city and followed the others.











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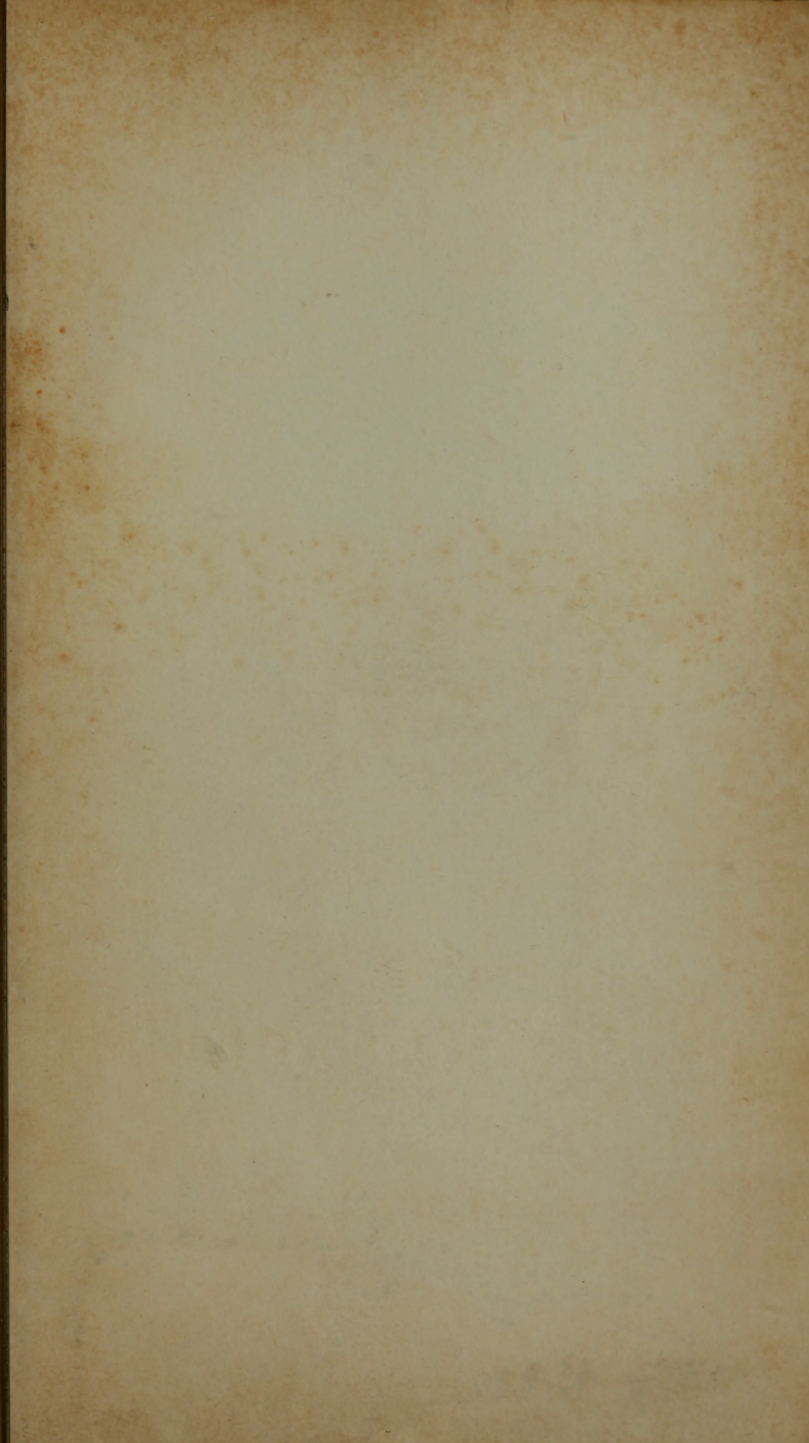
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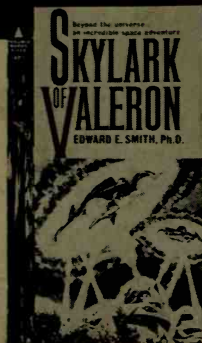
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