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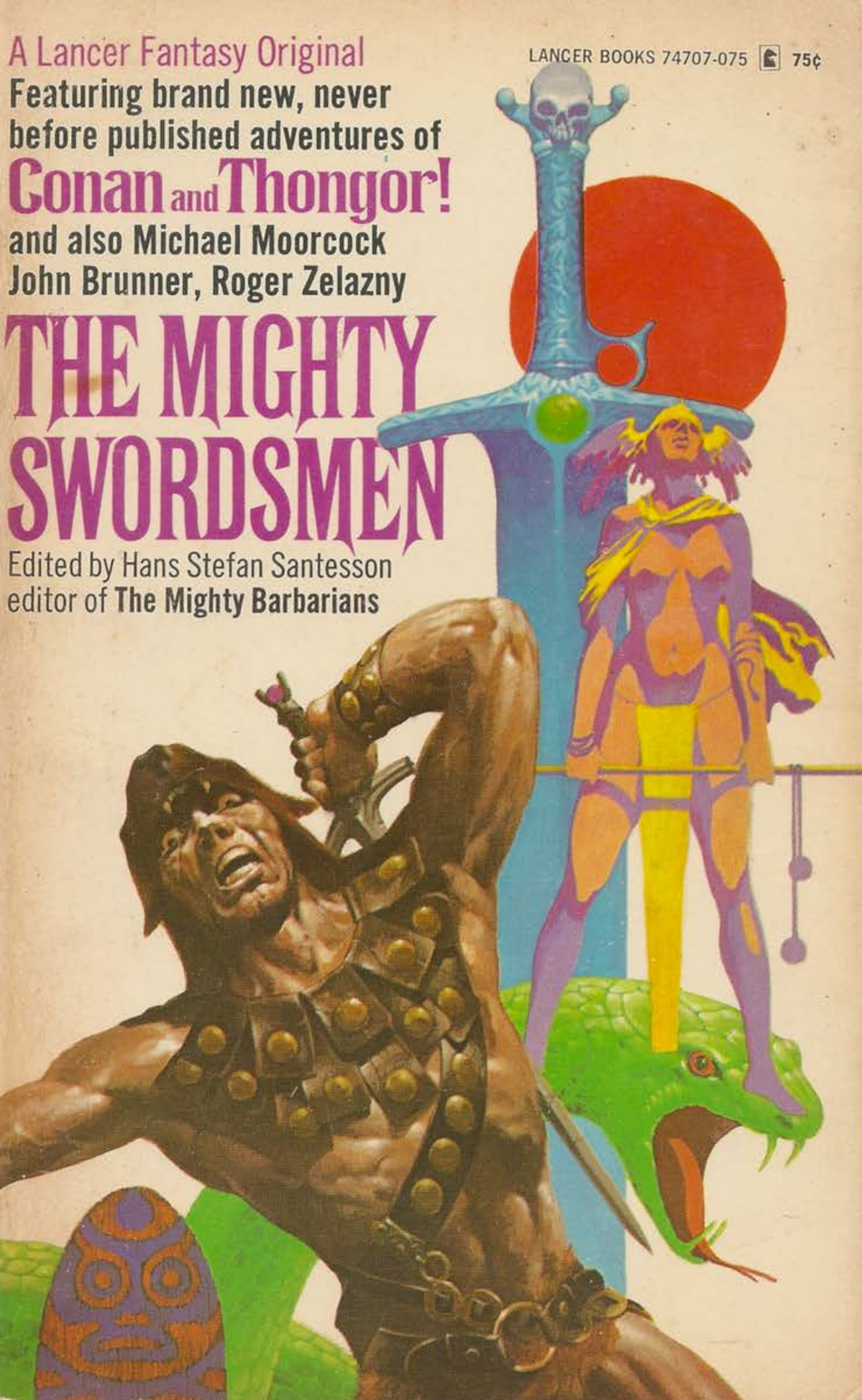
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THE MIGHTY SWORDSMEN

Edited by Hans Stefan Santesson

Dedicated to Harold G. Crawford

and other friends at

Bergen Pines County Hospital

Paramus, New Jersey

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A LANCER BOOK

THE MIGHTY SWORDSMEN

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THE MIGHTY SWORDSMEN
AN ANTHOLOGY OF SWORD AND SORCERY STORIES

Edited by
Hans Stefan Santesson

THONGOR THE MIGHTY
MAZDA
DILVISH THE DAMNED
ELRIC OF MELNIBONE
CONAN

Introduction

From the very dawn of history, and as we are now beginning to suspect, from beyond that dawn, the arts of healing and of "sorcery" were known only to those few who, either as priest-rulers or as guardians of disciplines the very origins of which were often lost in the mists of time, were among the literate few in societies which, very much as ours, were more concerned with what might happen than with *why*.

This is not to imply that power did not at times corrupt, or that the ability of these men to harness the potentials of the human mind and the elements around them could not be misused or abused. As a race, we carry within us the seeds of our self-destruction, and it has been so since the beginning of time.

The fact remains however that, in the main, these men, often alone in their society, were also the healers, the only ones who would know how to bring you back to life after everyone else, and quite possibly you yourself, had begun to murmur the prayers for one who was about to pass on. Inevitably, this ability to apparently tell Death to wait would seem to have the quality of sorcery to those witnessing this happening, particularly as this priest-physician could very likely also call on forces, in the mind and in the elements, unknown and unseen to those about him.

Sorcery is, in other words, an expression which is apt to mean precisely what it seems in the eye of the current beholder. What we must keep in mind is that it need not necessarily only mean the improper or even the evil exercise of strange powers over others. Nor need it necessarily mean the casting of spells, or what seems to others to

be spells, intended to rob the victim of his strength, his will, his powers, his dreams, or his life. Nor need it necessarily mean the building of castles in the sky through the rooms of which the hero, or the victim, can wander at will, living out his dreams—or his fears.

Just as much as witchcraft has come to have another connotation, instead of being recognized as the surviving form of the original faith often driven into the woods by the neo-Christian occupiers of the country, sorcery—included in fantasy—has come to have what can perhaps be described as an equally anti-social meaning. You use sorcery to enslave, to entrap, to enmesh and to destroy. You use sorcery as a tool of evil, in order to strengthen evil, and in order to make this evil triumph.

I suggest that this, though valid in a society which recognizes only that which can be tasted, touched or felt, is an oversimplification, and a contradiction of the original meaning of the acts implied by the word. It is admittedly simpler, as we have a tendency to do, to talk in terms of either black or white, but neither the world, nor society, nor history, is quite that simple. We *must* look into the shadows of history, into the half forgotten memories of the race, if we are to understand at all what actually did happen, and why, either yesterday or ten thousand yesterdays ago.

Starting with this premise, that our present day understanding of history is somewhat limited, we can thus legitimately wonder, as Lin Carter and others do in this group of stories, what life *was* like in those days before the dawn of history. Or what we now know as history. All that is demanded of us is the willingness to accept the possibility that civilizations have risen and have fallen, long before those which may be known to us by their records or by their monuments. We have to recognize the possibility that we may even have misread these rec-

ords or failed to understand the meaning of these monuments.

Indeed, we must also recognize the possibility—and I am aware of the fact that it is heresy to even murmur this, even in fantasy and science-fiction circles—that ours is not necessarily the best of all possible worlds.

To do this we must recognize the possibility that someone like Thongor of Lemuria may once have lived —or the traveler in black—or the green-booted rider who left no footprints when he walked—or Elric of Melnibone, doomed to live out his life in a world of barbarism and treachery.

Or Conan the Cimmerian, possibly the personification of this approach to an age, on the frontiers of which, in a mood familiar to us in more recent days, we overhear this conversation:

"Barbarism is the natural state of mankind," the borderer tells Conan. "Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph."

It is generally against this background that our heroes —and our sorcerers—act out their destinies in these stories. One is tempted to wonder, assuming there is any interest by then in the subject, what the writer-dramatists of the Days After the Tomorrows will make of our folk-myths, of our folk-heroes, and of our undoubtedly misread political and social mores.

HANS STEFAN SANTESSON

KEEPER OF THE EMERALD FLAME

By

Lin Carter

The history of Thongor the Mighty, warrior-king of Lemuria, has been told in a series of novels published during the past six years. Here is one of his earliest adventures, written especially for this book. It takes place in the Year of the Kingdoms of Man 7001, when Thongor was nineteen years old.

CHAPTER I

The Sign of the Skull

The Daotar Dorgand Tul shifted gingerly in the hard saddle, scratched irritably at the bite of a stinging insect, and wished for the thousandth time that he had entered the priesthood rather than obeying his father's desire by purchasing a commission in the legions of Arzang Pome, the Lord of Shembis.

He was a fat, soft-faced little man, with quick, clever eyes, a petulant mouth, and a waspish temper. For all his silver-gilded cuirass, jewelled honors, and the martial-looking longsword that hung at one plump thigh, he seemed distinctly out of place at the head of this punitive expedition. And, indeed, with every league his troop penetrated yet deeper into the dense jungles, his dissatisfaction with the military life grew more profound.

The bad-tempered little Daotar was hot and weary, and his buttocks and thighs ached from long hours on kroter-back. He sat slouched in the saddle, dreaming of a soft couch, cooling breezes from the Gulf, nubile slave-girls at his beck and call, and tall frosted goblets of perfumed wine. He wondered if he would ever feel comfortable again.

For seven days and nights, now, he and his troop of warriors had plunged ever deeper into the jungles of southern Kovia, until by now he was heartily sick of the whole business. The massive crimson boles of soaring lotifer trees rose all about him; snaky vines dangling from low branches overhead caught the plumes of his helm; stinging gnats whirled in buzzing clouds about him as he guided his plodding kroter through thick bushes of tiralons, the strange green roses of ancient Lemuria. Behind him, half a hundred footsore warriors toiled along, their

mail smeared with sap and black with mud. They longed for the comforts of civilization no less than he.

For the ten-thousandth time he cursed this Northlander savage and his gang of bandits, on whose elusive track they followed. The bold young Valkarthan raider had been harrying the caravan routes for the past six months, and his depredations cut deeply into the revenues of Arzang Pome, who delighted more in the clink of fat gold coins than in the caresses of all his women and his perfumed boys. At length, stung beyond endurance by the daring of the bold young bandit chieftain, the Sark of Shembis had sent a troop of warriors on his trail and it was the sad fate of Dorgand Tul that he was the commander of that troop.

The day was wearing on apace. Ere long the gold disc of Aedir the Sun God would expire in crimson splendor on the western horizon and the thick night of the jungle would cloak all of Kovia in darkness. It was the night that Dorgand Tul feared most, for then the monstrous predators were aprowl; the slinking vandars, the great black lions of the Lemurian jungles, the savage Beastmen, and most dread of all, the colossal jungle-dragons whose enormous size and ferocity rendered them virtually unkillable.

Dorgand Tul shivered at the thought. The days were exhausting and muddy and vile with the steaming jungle reek but the nights were made hideous by the coughing roar of hunting reptiles and the glare of hungry eyes through the blackness, mirroring the flicker of the watchfires. Already he had lost two spearmen of his troop to the slavering jaws of the jungle brutes, and were it not for the fact that his own tent was set each night in the very center of the camp, the plump little Daotar would have trembled to the depths of his soul for his own precious hide.

Just then his kroter shied, almost toppling him from

the saddle. He seized the saddle-horn in one fat fist, straightening the plumed helm, which had slipped down over his eyes, with the other hand, and snarling a blasphemous curse as he saw the cause of the disturbance.

The bushes ahead parted and the muddy, haggard-faced figure of one of his advance scouts, a grizzled old veteran, appeared, making a sketchy salute.

"Well, what is it, Yazlar? Don't tell me you have lost their trail again?" he demanded shrilly. The old scout shook his head.

"No, Daotar. It continues straight ahead. I estimate they are now only about four hours ahead of us."

"Well, what then?"

The scout turned, gesturing for the Dorgand Tul to follow, and vanished in the underbrush. The fat little officer thumped the kroter's ribs with his booted heel and guided the weary beast through the bushes, whimpering a curse as thorn-edged leaves stung his hand. The kroter shouldered through the glossy-leafed bushes and Dorgand Tul found himself in a little clearing.

The glade was small, hedged about with densely packed trees. Reining the beast to a standstill, the officer glanced about. His eyes caught an ominous and grisly emblem and he froze, while a small thrill of apprehension ran over him.

A tall pole of gaunt black wood thrust up from the muddy earth at the edge of the clearing. Atop the pole was affixed the grinning white horror of a naked human skull.

A cryptic hieroglyph was etched in crimson paint on the bald bony brow of the death's-head. The eyes of Dorgand Tul were caught and held by that coiling crimson symbol.

"The sign of Omm," whispered the old scout in a hoarse voice.

The fat little Daotar paled and swallowed, but could

not tear his eyes from the blot of bloody color blazoned on the naked grinning skull. It held his gaze with a horrid fascination, like the cold enigma in the hypnotic eyes of a snake.

"Did the bandits . . . pass it?" he asked at last, in a weak voice.

The old scout nodded, his lank grey locks swinging. "They did," he said somberly.

A flame of malignant delight blazed up in the eyes of Dorgand Tul. New energy surged within his weary, aching form. He snatched up the reins, wheeled the kroter about and plunged through the bushes by which he had entered the clearing.

The first bedraggled warriors of his troop were just catching up to him, as he retraced his path. A scarred, hard-faced sergeant came forward to receive orders at the Daotar's impatient gesture.

"Turn the troop about, my man. We shall camp for the night and in that large clearing we passed through an hour or so ago. And then back to the city!" the Daotar crowed delightedly.

Then, at the look of blank incomprehension in the sergeant's eyes, he laughed with vicious humor.

"The Barbarian in his flight has led his bandits past the Sign of the Skull and ere night falls across the world, he will be in the power of Shan Chan Thuu!" he smirked. The sergeant's eyes widened in horrified amazement.

His lips parted and he whispered to himself a dread phrase at which his men shuddered. One which cooled even the malignant joy in the heart of Dorgand Tul and made the fat officer fumble at his throat, where a protective amulet of blue paste dangled on a silver chain.

"*The Keeper of the Emerald Flame!*"

"Only the Nineteen Gods can save Thongor of Valkarth now," the grizzled scout said under his breath.

CHAPTER II

The Watcher in the Night

Thongor of Valkarth was baffled.

He crouched in the crotch of a great tree, his keen gaze studying the jungle behind his track, and deep in his heart he felt a nameless qualm . . . a distinct yet shadowy unease.

Something was wrong. Yet he knew not what!

Lithely he swung down from his perch, dropped to a lower branch, and clambered down a dangling vine, to drop lightly to the thick grasses of the clearing as might a lithe jungle cat.

His warriors, who had been resting while he sought the upper levels, rose now to their feet, turning questioning eyes upon their young chieftain as he appeared.

For a moment he stood silent, brows knotted in puzzlement. As the men of his band watched him, waiting for his words, there was not one man among them who did not gaze at him with admiration.

He was superb, the half-naked young Barbarian, his bronze body hewed like some savage god. Black and heavy as a vandar's mane, his unshorn hair fell across his broad naked shoulders, framing a stern, impassive face, strong-jawed and manly for all his young years.

Beneath scowling black brows, his strange gold eyes blazed with sullen, wrathful, lion-like fires. Few men could meet the gaze of those somber, burning eyes, for behind them smouldered the fighting fury of a Barbarian, whose savage heart had never learned the cool restraints of civilized men.

His powerful torso was clad in the plain black leather of a Lemurian warrior. A great cloak was flung back over his shoulders and a massive girdle bound his taut,

rock-hard midsection. The leather strap of a baldric was slung across his chest from shoulder to hip, and therefrom hung scabbarded a mighty Valkarthan broadsword. A crimson loin-cloth and black leather boots completed his costume.

"What is it, Thongor?" one of his lieutenants demanded, as the long silence of their young leader began to puzzle the men.

The Barbarian shook his head.

"Strange, Chelim! The Shembian troop are *going* back!"

Chelim, a tall, massive Zangabali with shaven pate and gold hoops in his ears, scratched his heavy, stubbled jaw thoughtfully.

"Maybe it's a trick?" he suggested. "Maybe they split up, one group returning, the other sneaking around, hoping to catch us off guard, once we were convinced they were all turning back . . ."

Thongor grunted. "Not a chance. I counted heads as they went through that big clearing with the lightning-blasted tree. Every man-jack of the troop is bound in full retreat."

A scrawny, rat-like little man with one eye sniggered. "Chief? Maybe seven days o' jungle muck and vandars in th' night convinced 'em this be no place for Arzang Pome's warriors, eh? A lot o' craven-hearted dogs, those Shembians, anyway!"

Thongor grinned. "Well, maybe you're right, Fulvio. At any rate, we'll take no chances on being surprised. We'll push on—even past nightfall—until we find a place that can be stoutly defended. On your feet, men. Mount up, and let's get out of here."

Night fell, shadow-winged, across the edges of the world. Stars glittered like magnificent jewels in the dark sky and soon the great golden Moon of elder Lemuria

emerged from her palace of clouds to bathe the black jungles of Kovia in her silken, shimmering light.

Thongor and his bandits made camp in the hills, where sheer walls of rugged stone enclosed their position on three sides. The hill-slopes were covered with loose fragmented shale. Thongor believed that it would be impossible for any force to creep up on their position without dislodging underfoot a rattling miniature avalanche of loose broken rock, whose noise would give warning of the advance of the foe.

They watered their kroters in the small stream that trickled by the foot of the hills, built a fire to keep the beasts away, and made a rude supper, gnawing on cold joints of meat and dry cheese, washed down with thin sour ale in waxed skin bags.

Then, setting his sentries, Thongor curled up on a bed of dry leaves under the shelter of an over-hanging lip of rock, wrapped his great cloak around him against the night-chills, set Sarkozan, his great Northlander broadsword, near to his hand, and fell asleep almost instantly. Even his giant frame was weary from the long trek through the jungles and from boyhood he had learned the knack of falling asleep at will. His early youth, spent on the wintry plains of the wild north beyond the Mountains of Mommur, had taught him the survival-skills known only to a barbaric people such as his own Black Hawk tribe. To survive in a rugged, frozen land, where the ravening forces of hostile nature are leagued with savage enemies and monstrous predators against every human life, one learns early or one does not live long. Thongor learned—and lived.

It was now four years since all of his tribe had fallen in battle against an enemy tribe. He alone had survived that terrible, day-long holocaust of blood and iron—a boy of fifteen, alone and friendless in a harsh world of savagery

and death; strong, brave, trained virtually from the cradle in the use of weapons, but still, only a boy of fifteen.

Down across the wintry steppes and across the rugged Mountains of Mommur he had come. He was a hardy, bronzed lad of seventeen when he reached at last the lush junglelands and splendid, glittering cities of the Dakshina, as the Southlands of Lemuria were known. And for the two years since that time, he had eked out a precarious living as thief and wandering adventurer, and now, most recently, as a bandit chieftain in the wilderness of Chush. He had joined the caravan raiders eight months ago, and fought his way up the ranks to the leadership of the band, slaying the former chief, Red Jorn, in a frightful battle to the death.

Some might think it odd that a youth of nineteen, scarce more than a boy, should lead a band of experienced warriors, most of whom were half again, or twice, his age. Odd, perhaps, but not illogical. For Thongor, from the first hour he had entered the ranks of Jorn's Raiders, had proved himself bold, audacious, fearless and indomitable. As for his men, seasoned veterans all, their very lives depended on the quality of the leadership of the band and if the young Barbarian, not yet twenty, could prove his superior gifts, they were willing to swallow the fact that he was younger than the least of them.

The secret of his swift domination of the bandit company may be summed easily. At nineteen, Thongor had faced more perils, fought more foes, seen more of death, war, and adventure, than any man of them. In part this was due to his wild upbringing in the savage north, and to the skills of warfare and survival he had mastered at an early age.

It was those savage skills that roused him now.

The scrape of leather sandals on rough stone! The click and rattle of a dislodged pebble!

The boy snapped in an instant from a deep slumber of exhaustion to full, tingling alertness. Yet, in the transition from sleep to wakefulness, not a muscle moved in all his mighty frame. To the eye of any watcher, he was still slumbering in heavy sleep.

Again, the faint sound. And now his keen senses told him it came from directly above his rude couch. Someone was descending the face of the steep hill. *Someone was crouching just above the rock under which he lay!*

He rose lithely to his feet, drawing a long dagger from his girdle. The broadsword he let lay—it would make too much sound to draw the blade, and he would need his hands free.

As silent as a jungle cat, the Barbarian padded to the edge of the overhanging ledge.

Emerging from under the low rock, Thongor rose slowly to his full height, flattening himself against the side of the cliff wall of stone.

Dimly, in the moon-silvered gloom, he could make out a crouching figure, black against the sky. It seemed to be surveying the bandit camp. One hand clutched a long spear and it was the heft of this spear that had dislodged the pebble.

Like a striking snake, Thongor seized the unknown watcher.

CHAPTER III

Jungle Girl

He dragged the fiercely struggling figure down to the ground and sought to pinion its lithe arms. But it was as if he had seized a spitting, wriggling armful of clawed fury. It writhed and snarled in his grip like a maddened wildcat. Sharp nails drew lines of leaking scarlet across his bronze hide and drew stinging furrows in chest, cheek and shoulder.

Suddenly Thongor gasped with astonishment, released his captive, and sprang back. For in their struggle, his arms had gone around the chest of his opponent from behind and his hands had touched—not the flat, muscular chest of a male warrior—but the warm, pointed breasts of a young girl!

Illana the Moon Lady had veiled her shining face behind a cloud moments before; now she displayed the glory of her unveiled visage, and by the sudden wash of silver light Thongor could clearly see his foe.

It was a half-naked young girl, of his own age or a year or two younger, who crouched, stone-bladed dagger clenched in one small capable fist, challenging him to continue the combat.

Her supple, slender body was bare save for a strip of fur worn low about her smooth hips, and twisted about her slim loins. This, leather sandals, and a bauble worn about her throat on a thong constituted her only garments.

Very lovely was she in the silver of moonlight, her hair long, black, a shining cascade that poured over sleek shoulders and down her slender back to the firm, delicious rondure of her little rear. Her legs were long, adolescent, graceful. Her breasts were shallow, but firmly

rounded, warm, pointed. They rose and fell as she panted, and their surging rhythm drove his hot young blood to interesting speculations.

"Come, girl," he growled. "Forgive my rough handling. I knew not what you were, in the darkness. Come, let us be friends. I make no war on women!"

She crouched, wordless, moonsilver glinting on the flinty blade in her fist.

He straightened, laughed, and tossed away his dagger, showing her his empty hands. She straightened reluctantly, fingering her stone knife, and finally thrust it into a phondle-skin sheath tied by thongs to her loincloth.

When she smiled, the pale round oval of her face, framed under the waterfall of shining black hair, was inexpressibly lovely. He felt a small pulse thud hotly at the base of his throat as he watched her bare body move in the moonlight.

"I am Thongor of Valkarth, the chieftain of this band," he growled. "And I thought you were the vanguard of a troop of Shembian soldiers!"

She voiced a husky laugh. "I am Zoroma of the Pjanthan," she said, "and I feared you were a troop of," her voice dropped, "*ghosts!*"

He gave a grunt of laughter. "We are flesh and blood! But, tell me, girl, what are the Pjanthan? Never have I heard of them till now."

"Jungle hunters," she answered. "There are many tribes like ours in Kovia. How can you not know this?"

He rubbed his jaw ruefully.

"Frankly, I know nothing of Kovia, save for the jungles around Shembis the Dolphin City. We are bandits who raid the Shembian caravans, but now we have been chased deep into this jungle-country, unknown to us, by the Sark's soldiers. I fear we raided one caravan too many!"

"It is as I thought," she said, enigmatically. "You are

strangers. Few dare come into these regions of the jungle. Even the legions of Shembis never enter here."

Thongor wondered why—and wondered if the answer to that question might not also explain the curious retreat of the warriors of Dorgand Tul—but before he could put the query into words, his sentinels, attracted by the sounds of their struggle and the resulting conversation, came over to where he and the girl stood, to see if everything was well with their chieftain. And by the time he had reassured them and, learning that the girl, Zoroma, hungered, saw to it that the remnants of their meal were put at her disposal, the girl's curious remark had slipped his mind.

She slept the remainder of the night in his bed of leaves, under his cloak, while he stood guard to make certain that none of his men, who had not seen a woman in weeks, did not abuse the hospitality he had offered her.

Many times her eyes stole to his stalwart figure as he stood before the over-hanging rock, black and silvered bronze in the moonlight. But, at length, she fell into a fitful slumber, from which she did not awaken until all the world was bright with the glory of a tropic dawn.

They broke their fast on cold water from the stream, and the small scraps of meat and cheese that remained uneaten. Then they pressed forward. Thongor was still uncertain as to whether the pursuing troops had retreated completely, or were circling around, so he moved his men out early and with all possible speed.

Zoroma rode his kroter and he walked along side the beast. The trail through the hills was rough and rocky, but they made better speed over clear dry ground than they had the previous days, hacking a path through dense jungles and the muck of rotting leaves.

The sun burned high above like a puddle of molten

gold in a cauldron of searing brass. They were hot and dusty, but he urged them on, with brief and infrequent rest-stops.

"Do your people, the Pjanthan, dwell nearby?" he asked her.

"No; many leagues to the west."

"How is it, then, that you are roaming these hills alone, so far from your tribe?" he asked.

"I am searching for a youth who is . . . lost," she said.

"A brother?"

She shook her head. "My lover. He was to have been my mate." There was a note of somber sorrow that haunted her low, hesitant voice.

"And your people, they would not assist in your search? They would permit a young girl to stray so far, in so hostile a land, all by herself?" He grunted and spat. "Mine are a savage people, too, and no soft-gutted city-dwellers. But rather than permit a maiden to venture alone into peril we would sacrifice half the fighting strength of the clan!"

She moistened her lips hesitantly.

"They . . . they fear to penetrate the borders of this region," she said in low tones. And she explained that it was under a bad omen; she used a term which we would translate as *taboo.*

He grunted, scratching his arm. But he said nothing. His people, too, knew the terrors of the darkness and the curse of ill omens. The Black Hawk people of Valkarth were not immune to the strength of the taboo but never would the stalwart heroes of the North have permitted shadowy terrors of taboo to come between them and the protection of their womenfolk. Privately, he decided that these Pjanthan were either weaklings or fools, or both!

But he said nothing, rather than offend her.

Frequently that morning as he strode along beside her kroter his lambent gaze strayed to her bare brown thighs,

rounded calfs and slender tapering ankles and to the proud lift of her naked young breasts, her sleek flat abdomen, the rondure of her little rump. And, whenever he thought she thought he was not looking, the girl's huge dark eyes took in the swelling arch of the boy's deep chest, his flat belly, his long, powerful arms.

It was nearly noon when they came upon the white grinning skull mounted on a black pole, set up like a silent warning directly in their path.

CHAPTER IV

The Shadow of Shan Chan Thuu

Zoroma shrieked as the naked white skull loomed up in their path. The kroter shied nervously and Thongor growled and oath and sprang to catch the bridle before the beast could panic into flight.

The girl sat shuddering, her terrified eyes fixed on the grisly emblem of warning that stood grinning at them from atop the black gaunt pole.

Thongor examined it narrowly.

"We passed such a thing in a jungle clearing yestereve," he grunted. "I thought it a warning sign reared by the Beastmen, but the hairy folk of the jungles would not be here, in these harsh dry hills. Do you know what this thing means, girl?"

"It bears the Sign of Omm," she said faintly. "The emblem of Shan Chan Thuu!"

"And what might Omm and Shan Chan Thuu be?" he growled.

Her face pale, her dark eyes haunted by a nameless fear, she shuddered, for all the baking heat of the dusty hills. It was as if a clammy, crawling wind blew against her naked spine.

"Have you never heard of Omm?" she asked faintly. "Indeed, you are strangers to the jungles of Kovia . . ."

"I told you our accustomed territory lay to the north, in the wilderness of Chush," he said impatiently. "Come. Out with it, girl!"

"Omm is a legend in this land, an age-old city that dates back to the dark days of Time's Dawn, when the Children of Nemedis first came into this realm out of the Ultimate East, to lay the foundations of the Nine Cities!"

Her voice fell to a whisper, and there was something in

her tones, a crawling note of cold menace and elder evil, that lifted his nape-hairs and roughed the skin of his forearms with the thrill of premonition.

"No man knows where the Lost City of Omm lifts its aeon-crumbled towers, but legend whispers that it is the cradle of an evil deviltry, a lore of science-magic foul with the slime of Chaos, and black with the horror of man's cruelty," she whispered. "Such is the unholy legend of Omm."

"And what of Shan Chan Thuu?" he pressed. "Is it some black god of the Pit?"

She shuddered. "Perhaps that is what he is, after all, but he was mortal once, an ancient devil-wizard out of Omm who came into this land to dwell in his black citadel among these very hills, wherein to pursue unmolested by his sorcerous brethren his strange worship and his stranger arts! That was seven hundred years ago, men say."

"And he lives yet?" Thongor demanded, incredulously.

The girl shrugged slim bare shoulders, tawny, pink-tipped breasts lifting. "They say he prolonged his life beyond the normal limitations of mortal flesh. That he bartered his soul to Chaos for some vast magical price."

"*The Emerald Flame!*" a voice gasped behind them.

Thongor turned, to see that his lieutenant, Chelim, had heard the girl's fable.

"Have you never heard of it, lad?" Chelim grunted, his shaven pate gleaming with perspiration, his powerfully-muscled arms grey with rock-dust. "A fabulous jewelled treasure—I've heard the same tale as the wench relates—the old Omnian sold his immortal part to possess it! They say 'tis a wealth of gems of a kind unknown to men—the ransom of a dozen emperors! And the old wizard long-since dead!"

A speculative gleam shone in the fierce eyes of the young Barbarian.

"Gems, eh? And this death's-head means we are approaching his fortress, or whatever it is? It is supposed to warn men away from his treasure-house?"

The girl nodded. Thongor and the burly Chelim exchanged glances.

"What do you think, Chelim?" the youth growled. "Will the men let old fables fright them from a treasure like this?"

White teeth flashed in the bald giant's tanned face.

"Not Jorn's Raiders, lad! They'd dare the horrors of the Pit itself, for a handful of gold!"

The girl watched them but said nothing.

"Where is this place?" Thongor asked. She pointed.

"Directly in our path, but—"

He waited. "But what?"

She bit her lip. "Nothing . . ."

After a brief consultation with his warriors, Thongor led the march forward. Some of the men had demurred: that scrawny little thief, Fulvio, whined that it was not wise to disturb the bones of dead wizards, for life clings long about the dust of those great sorcerers who have sworn the awful Vow to Chaos. But Thongor laughed and mocked their fears.

"I have faced and fought gods, ghosts and devils, magicians and monsters, ere now," he grunted. "And never yet have I found a thing that cannot be killed!"

And so the bandits rode on, ignoring the grisly warning that grinned down at them from the black stake, the ominous crimson symbol coiled between its bare bony brows.

And Zoroma rode with them. But now she was silent and her face was tense and haunted with a nameless terror.

For all the hot sunlight of noon, it seemed to her that they rode through gathering shades of darkness, as if a dread and formless shadow lay over all this dead, dry land.

The shadow of Shan Chan Thuu!

CHAPTER V

Black Citadel

As the long purple shadows of late afternoon stretched across the rocky hills of Kovia, they came within sight of the ruined structure.

It had been built atop a round knoll and it thrust high up above the surrounding barrens.

Gaunt and stark and ominous was that dead citadel, the only sign of man in all this dead, dusty waste.

Thongor studied it with eyes narrowed thoughtfully. It was odd, he thought, that the transition from lush, steaming jungles to this harsh and barren land should be so abrupt. One moment they were cutting a path through sweltering underbrush, the next their boot heels crunched in dry, crystalline soil where not a single blade of grass grew. He had not even glimpsed a mold or lichen, such as one might find underneath boulders or on the shadowed base of rocky cliffs, even in the most desertlike of wildernesses.

It was more than odd—it was uncanny!

It was as if that black citadel that thrust its broken walls up into the dim gloaming were the center of some cosmic contagion that had cast its evil blight over all this land, draining the life and the vigor from every living thing.

Not one single sign of life had they seen since leaving camp the night before. Not so much as a crawling scorpion, a carrior bird, or a venomous snake.

All of this land was a land of death.

From this distance, the citadel was a black, featureless mass, a clotted cluster of shadows, in which no details could be discerned. But it was evident that the structure was of far greater antiquity than the legends hinted, for

the extent of decay was extraordinary. Thongor could see fallen columns, shattered architraves, and entire sections of wall that had collapsed into mouldering ruin. Surely, the passage of a few centuries could not account for so extensive a degree of ruin. It would take millenia, perhaps even ages, for a stone structure to crumble like this, particularly in a dry, desert wilderness, whose acridity should preserve worked stone, not hasten its decay!

The rocky eminence whereupon the black citadel stood was in the exact center of a vast, bowl-like depression, a disc-shaped valley, like some enormous crater. The floor of this crater was a stretch of dessicated sand as dead as the surface of the Moon.

They rode across the breadth of this huge, bowl-shapen depression, the hooves of their kroters crunching and squeaking in the crystalline sand. Thongor stooped and picked up a handful of the strange stuff. It was not sand at all, but rock—stone that had been subjected to some weird force that had sapped the hardness of the mineral until at length it crumbled into this flimsy, crystalline substance.

Under the pressure of his fingers, the sand crystals crushed to fine powder, like dry wood-ash.

What uncanny force had leached the solid strength from living stone?

They rode on.

As they drew nearer, it became easier to make out the details of the structure. And they became aware of its true size. Distance, a trick of perspective, or perhaps the absence of any nearby object large enough to measure it against, had somehow concealed the truth of its proportions.

It was the largest stone edifice Thongor or his warriors had ever seen. It may well have been the most enormous man-made structure on Earth at that time. Indeed, it would have dwarfed even the pyramids of Egypt, or the

mighty Sphinx herself, had those relics of ancient Atlantis been built in the age of Thongor, the dim Pleistocene.

The colossal stone wreck was one of incredibly detailed and curiously unfamiliar architecture. The eye became lost in a maze of balconies, towers, colonnades and buttresses. The mind was baffled and confused among the mad profusion of wall and arch and wing and extension. It was not so much one building as a cluster of buildings, all built together in a rising man-made mountain of stonework. The nature, the origin, the uses, of the citadel were impossible to make out.

It was like nothing else on Earth.

The extent of the decay was incredible.

The outer walls, which were as much as twenty paces thick and built of solid stone, had crumbled and lay fallen, scattering the slopes of the high place with enormous cubes of broken stone, each weighing several tons. Minarets were toppled and square turrets leaned crazily, or strew the earth with rubble. The whole outer surface of the enigmatic ruin was worn and pitted, as if bathed for countless centuries in the fierce glare of some intolerable radiation. From the rough, porous condition of the outer walls, Thongor got the feeling that solid *inches* of stone had melted into powder, sifting down from the face of the structure.

As they approached yet nearer, they became aware of a further element of mystery.

They felt a weird, uncanny sensation of being close to some enormous living—*thing.*

It was hard to say precisely what there was about the shadowy citadel that gave them the uncanny feeling that it was, somehow, alive.

Like a titanic idol, hewn from a solid mountain of dead black stone, carved by the unknown denizens of some unthinkably remote aeon of the world's morning, it

squatted, motionless, brooding, amid all that dreary waste of death and desolation.

There exuded from the dark structure an aura of cold menace.

The black openings of windows seemed to peer down at them with sentient watchfulness. They gaped like the eye-sockets of a skull. The cold wind of fear blew from the towering colossus, like a chill and fetid breath from the mouth of the Pit itself.

The men muttered among themselves, signing their breasts with the names of half a hundred gods and totems and protective spirits. Thongor alone remained impassive. He had looked Death and Horror in the face ere now—and he had laughed!

When all the west was a welter of crimson vapor whereon Aedir the Sunlord lay expiring in scarlet and gold, they reached the summit of the height and colossal portals loomed before them like the yawning jaws of a dead behemoth.

Within they found a vast, echoing hall whose roof, supported by stone columns like marble sequoia, was lost in clotted shadow far above. Galleries and antechambers in incredible number branched away from this central hall. All was a murmuring emptiness of dim shadows and whispering echoes.

For a very long time, it was evident, the hall had lain untenanted.

Moldering rubbish littered the stone pave of the echoing vastness of this gloom-drenched hall wherein one hundred men could have marched abreast without brushing the further walls to either side. Thongor poked among the rubbish of dry leaves, rotten bits of cloth, and nameless scraps of dry ancient leather—and the toe of his boot dislodged a human skull!

Zoroma stifled a cry.

He knew she was thinking of her lover. But this could not be he. The bone of the skull was brown and scabrous with antiquity. Many centuries had passed since the last hour in which that bony sphere held cupped within it a living brain.

Thongor dispatched some of his troop to explore the nearer galleries, while assigning to a limping rogue named Randar the task of stabling the kroters in an antechamber close by the front gate. Then, while a few men under the command of a grey grizzled old swordsman from Thurdis marched off to take a look at the far end of the colossal hall, he drew his lieutenant, Chelim, to one side.

Zoroma stood, staring blankly about her with wide, apprehensive eyes, absently fingering a protective amulet of white crystal that hung between her shallow breasts by a thong about her throat. She did not notice as they stepped apart for a consultation.

"Well, what do you think?" Thongor inquired.

Chelim rubbed his nose, which had been broken once or twice, and clumsily re-set, and sniffed.

"I don't like it, lad," he muttered. "I get the feeling this place is somehow *alive*, watching me, waiting for me to take a false step, before it pounces, or does something even worse."

Thongor grunted. He had the same feeling, and he liked it little. "This can't be the citadel of Shan Chan Thuu," he grunted, "not if the old Omnian sorcerer only lived seven hundred years ago! This place has been abandoned for thousands of years and its true age must be measured in millions of years. Look at that area of wall. The facing-stones have decayed away, littering the floor with dust. Why, it would take ages to do that!"

"Aye, lad. And those columns, see how they're cracked and split and pitted? I've seen the sides of *moun-*

tains that looked younger. Well, the old legend must be wrong; the sorcerer must have found this place as it is, and made it his dwelling, rather than building it himself."

"I think you're right," the youth grunted. "No one man—wizard or no—could build anything this big. It is a task that would require a nation!" He paused, fingering the hilt of his sword. Then he said, "I have heard that, in the ages before the Father of the Gods created the first of men, this world was ruled by ponderous and wily and malignant creatures known as the Dragon Kings of Hyperborea and that they entered into the land of Lemuria when all their land was overwhelmed and lost beneath the eternal snows of the boreal pole."

"Yes, I've heard the same tale. You think this is some ungodly palace or temple or shrine left over from the fall of the Hyperboreans?"

Thongor nodded. "I do. For I have seen many of the lands of men, and looked upon his cities, yet never til this hour have I seen this fashion of building—not in my homeland, or among the shadowy foothills of Mommur, or in Kathool or Thurdis or Zangabal, or any of the cities of the Dakshina. This is, must be, a survival of some dim, forgotten age before the coming of man."

Chelim's face was stolid. "Gorm knows what prehuman deviltry these black and ancient walls have looked upon or what shadowy forces may linger within those walls, waiting for the chance to spring to life again."

Thongor uttered a rude expletive.

"Keep this in mind, comrade. I've seen much that the world affords in the way of dangers. Ghosts and monsters and dark gods—but never have I encountered anything that could do me physical harm and which could not itself be destroyed!"

Chelim grinned. "Aye, there is that! Sharp steel is a mighty remedy against things in the night."

The leader of the men Thongor had dispatched to

explore the furthest reaches of the hall came up to them then and they held no further converse.

"Well, Thad Novis, what's it like at the other end?" Thongor asked.

The grizzled old Thurdan paused to catch his breath from the long hike. "Just more of the same, Thongor. Galleries leading off in every direction, chambers opening into halls and corridors. This temple, or whatever it may be, is like a whole city, a whole city under one roof!"

They ate what few scraps were left, finished the ale, and bedded down for the night in the midst of the echoing vastness of the central hall, save for those whom Thongor designated as sentries of the first watch.

That night the first of them died.

CHAPTER VI

The Thing That Walks in the Night

Deafening, filled with unendurable agony and horror, the scream rang out through the gloomy castle!

Wakened suddenly from fitful, uneasy slumbers, the bandits sprang up, cursing, snatching up their weapons, staring about for the enemy that had struck suddenly and without warning. But there was nothing to be seen.

Thongor, who had taken a small antechamber off the central hall for his bed-chamber, appeared naked in the doorway, the steely length of Sarkozan, his broadsword, glittering in his hand.

Sentries peered about with wide eyes and white faces, but nothing untoward was to be seen. Yet *something* had happened. They could not all have dreamed that horrible shriek of agony and terror!

At Thongor's command, a head-count was taken, and one man was found to be missing. It was a fat, red-faced little rogue named Kovor. He had bedded down with the main body of the men, who lay in a ragged circle around the huge bonfire they had built against the night-chills. Now his pallet was empty.

One of the bandits suggested Kovor might have stepped outside to answer a call of nature. Thongor dispatched searchers to investigate but they found nothing.

Urging the sentries to be wary, Thongor bade his men return to their interrupted slumbers, and withdrew into his little room again. But it is doubtful whether a single warrior of the band so much as closed his eyes through all the rest of that fear-haunted night.

With dawn, the men refreshed themselves with water from the small quantity they had dipped out of the run-

ning stream the night before, when they had camped in the hills that surrounded this valley of death and mystery and terror. Then the young Barbarian organized them into search-parties and carefully directed the exploration of the central portion of the monstrous edifice.

Lest anyone become lost in the maze of suites and corridors and chambers, he commanded them to scratch the symbol of an arrow on the sill of every portal through which they passed, pointing back the way they had come, so that in any eventuality they should all be able to find their way back to the central hall. They trooped out, under search-leaders designated by Chelim.

They found what was left of little Kovor an hour later. A runner was sent back to fetch Thongor and the girl.

"We could *smell* it before there was anything to see," panted the wild-eyed bandit as he guided the chieftain through the maze of dusty chambers. "Then we found—*this!*"

Zoroma moaned sickly, covered her eyes and turned away.

Even Thongor, toughened as he was to sights that would have shriveled the souls of softer men, felt his belly writhe and heart sicken within him as he peered beyond the portals of the room of horror.

It was a huge, square room, unadorned; its floor one solid piece of unbroken stone. The only element of decoration was a square design cut in the exact center of the floor.

Floor, walls and ceiling were besplattered with gouts of blood and gobbets of raw flesh. The stone chamber stunk like a slaughterhouse.

Kovor had, literally, been torn apart. No fragment could be found that was any larger than a man's thumbnail. His sword, dented and broken, lay in one corner. His reeking gore flecked and dribbled the interior of the hollow stone cube like a ghastly scarlet dew.

Chelim, who had also been summoned, came up and stood at Thongor's shoulder, a grim, sickly look on his ugly face.

"What kind of thing could have done anything like . . . this?" he muttered. "There isn't even enough of him left to bury and say a couple of words over."

"Little, fat, red-faced old Kovor . . ." Thongor said slowly.

There was not much else that a man could say.

All that day they searched the endless rooms of the vast citadel, but nowhere did they find any sign of recent habitation.

If the ancient Omnian sorcerer had, in truth, made this unearthly castle of terror his habitation, they had yet to come upon the portion of the structure wherein he had dwelt.

There would be books, bits of furniture, athanors and crucibles and aludels and the other apparatus of the magical sciences.

That night, ferociously hungry, they again settled down to sleep, but terror haunted the dreams of every man and they started awake at the slightest sound.

Towards morning, the second man died.

Thongor staggered to his feet, kicking aside his cloak, cursing vilely, knuckling the sleep from his bleared and aching eyes, grabbing up his naked broadsword. From her pallet across the chamber, Zoroma stared, white-faced with terror.

"Not—another one!" she whimpered.

But it was so. The echoes of the mad scream of unearthly horror still sounded through the vastness of the gloomy structure.

The second victim of the haunted palace was discovered to be one Orovar, a stolid, close-mouthed Pelormian who had few friends among Thongor's troop.

They did not find his bloody remnants, although they searched all the next day. But he was missing, that was certain.

Thongor questioned his sentries closely. He had put the fear of death into them the evening before, threatening to disembowel any man who slept on sentry-duty. But he knew the men were so frightened they would not have dared to fall asleep, not if they had gone a week without rest. Only one of the sentries had heard or seen anything in the least suspicious. None of them had noticed Orovar creep stealthily from his pallet, but one hesitantly said he thought he had seen something—something tall and black and thin—walking silently in the night. He had thought it was a trick of the eyes, of his over-strained nerves, or just a curious shadow cast by the flickering of the flames. But now he was no longer so certain.

Something that walked in the night.

Something tall and black and thin.

Something that—*killed.*

That next morning, Chelim drew Thongor aside, leaving the old Thurdan veteran, Thad Novis, to organize the search-parties.

"What do you say, lad, shall we leave this place before it takes us one by one?" he asked.

Thongor's strange gold eyes were inscrutable.

"Is that what you advise, Chelim?"

The huge Zangabali shrugged, the golden hoops in his ears glinting in the morning light.

"You are the chieftain," he grunted. "But we have no food or water left and are not likely to find any in this accursed ruin. And the men are very frightened by now, and are beginning to whisper among themselves. All the jewelled treasure in the world will not tempt them to stay much longer in this devil-haunted mausoleum. Thus far you have held them here, because they admire and

trust you, but before too much longer, their fears will get the better of them, and they will begin slipping away, by ones and twos, into the hills."

Thongor folded his arms upon his chest, and bent his head, brooding thoughtfully on the stone pave. At length he lifted his black mane and looked Chelim in the face.

"You can leave, if you like. But if I go from this place now, without finding the solution to this mystery, it will haunt me for all the rest of my days," he said.

CHAPTER VII

Zoroma Vanishes!

Thongor came awake suddenly. He could not tell precisely what had awakened him but something was wrong. Those ultra-keen senses of the Barbarian, which are dulled and vestigial in softer, city-bred men, had triggered him to alertness. He lay motionless, pulses drumming, searching the gloom with keen eyes and listening ears.

He had found it difficult enough to get to sleep, his belly growling with hunger and thirst raging in his throat like a small red demon, but eventually he had drifted off into a fitful, uneasy slumber filled with shadowy and terrible dreams. Now some faint signal, some vague premonition of danger, drove sleep from him.

Lifting himself on one elbow, he searched the darkness of the far corner of the room where Zoroma slept.

He had not touched her, although he wanted to and although he sensed her own interest in him, since he had learned she mourned her lost lover. Although a Barbarian, the boy was not without a certain rude chivalry in such matters. But he could not trust the more ruffianly of his bandits to leave her unmolested. Hence he had offered her the protection of his presence. Now his eyes searched the dim corner where her pallet lay.

And saw that it was—empty!

A tingling shock drove the last vestiges of sleep from him. He sprang to his feet, buckling his warrior's harness about him, dragging on his boots loosely, not taking the time to buckle them securely. His face was grim and impassive, and beneath scowling brows his eyes burned like hot coals. If anything had happened to the girl . . .

Out in the vastness and echoing silence of the central hall he found the sentries awake and alert, and he questioned them urgently. None had seen or heard anything unusual and not one of them had noticed the girl as she had crept from the small side-chamber she shared with the Barbarian youth.

"Shall we rouse the men?" asked one-eyed Fulvio. Thongor considered briefly, then shook his head, tousling his coarse black mane.

"Let them sleep if they can. The wench cannot have left more than a moment or two ago, and she cannot possibly have gone far. I shall search for her myself," he growled.

Snatching up a burning brand from the fire, he strode off into the darkness.

Some undefinable impulse led him in the direction of that dread room in which fat Kovor had met a terrible and nameless fate. He could not have explained his reasons for selecting this goal but he had long-since learned to trust his hunches, for the Barbarian has a wildnerness-trained sense of intuition which was better developed than most.

The gigantic pile of masonry echoed about him, ringing with his rapid strides. He strode along, searching every shadow with alert eyes, scrutinizing the dusty pave for some trace of Zoroma's small bare feet. His cloak rustled behind him and his loose boots flopped. He bore the torch in one hand; the other held the hilt of his naked broadsword.

She had either taken another path or she had moved more rapidly than he had guessed likely, for it took him some ten minutes to reach the distant chamber wherein Kovor had so horribly died at the hands of their unseen and monstrous opponent.

The enigmatic structure was as dark and silent as a tomb. And tomb-like was the noisome stench that hovered in the cold, dry, dusty air. Thongor uttered a low growl, as might some prowling predator of the jungle whose savage senses detected the scrutiny of invisible eyes.

At length he came to the portal of the cube-shaped chamber and peered within.

There was no sign of the vanished girl.

The crusted flakes of Kovor's gore, dried now to brown scabs, still clung to walls and ceiling and floor. But although he searched every corner of the stone chamber, he found no token to suggest that Zoroma had come this way.

His brows knotted in bafflement. Every presentiment in his savage breast urged him that she had stood in this room but moments before, yet she was not here. Yet his jungle-trained nostrils caught the warm odor of her tender young flesh hovering on the stale air. But his eyes found no evidence that she had ever come this way.

Baffled, he prowled on. But the endless rooms beyond were deep in the dust of millenia. No one had entered them in countless ages, that was obvious.

He doubled back and entered the room again. He stood motionless, searching with every sense for the slightest sign of something wrong. There was—*something*—about this room that obscurely bothered him, but he could not give a name to the vague unease that stirred deep within his primitive soul.

It was an odd room, the walls totally devoid of any ornament, unlike most of the others, whose surfaces were sculptured with weird and alien geometrical designs in low relief.

The only attempt at any sort of design was the shallow square cut in the exact center of the floor.

On sudden impulse, he squatted down and peered closely at the square in the stone floor, holding the crackling torch closer.

A muffled exclamation escaped his lips.

Earlier, when he had scrutinized the room following the strange doom of Kovor, the cracks that formed a perfect square in the floor of the chamber had been thickly-packed with dust.

Now that dust was—*gone.*

His strange gold eyes narrowing in thoughtful surmise, the young Barbarian studied the square design cut in the solid stone of the floor.

Could it be a trap door, leading to unknown regions below?

They had not, in days of searching, found that portion of the black citadel wherein Shan Chan Thuu had made his magical laboratorium. Could it not lie in unexplored crypts hollowed out of the heart of the hill?

He inserted the tip of Sarkozan in the crack and probed and pried.

Was it only his imagination—or had the stone block shifted ever so slightly?

Now he wedged the blade of his small dagger in the other side of the crack, and played both steel blades against the other for leverage. The stone slab creaked—groaned!

Working with infinite care, wary of snapping either of the steel blades, he slowly wedged the sword and dagger deeper into the knife-thin crevice, and began to work the slab loose.

When he had pried the stone slab up at one end so that there was enough of an edge to get a grip with his fingers, he released the broadsword and closed his hands over the lip of the slab—and threw all his steely strength into one tremendous effort.

With a harsh rasp of stone against stone, the slab lifted slowly.

And Thongor stared down into a weird, shadowy world.

CHAPTER VIII

The Crypt of the Sorcerer

From the mouth of the black opening a flickering green glare shone. It bathed the bronze mask of his impassive features in a lambent jade luminance.

By the vagrant and elusive emerald radiance, the youth perceived a flight of worn and ancient steps of stone that descended from the level of the secret door.

Sheathing his dagger, but keeping the great Valkarthan broadsword bare in his hand, the young Barbarian stepped through the trap door and lowered himself until his booted feet touched the topmost step of the ancient stone stair.

He descended the stair cautiously, eyes roving from side to side, alert for the slightest sign of danger.

Beneath the floor of the citadel he found an immense cavity hollowed from the stone of the hill whereon the edifice was reared.

At the foot of the stair he found the stone floor besplattered with a ghastly crimson dew. His jaws tightened grimly. The splattered gore must be the remnants of Orovar of Pelorm, who had vanished on the night following the disappearance of fat Kovor. But what, then, of Zoroma? Did the tattered remains of her warm and lithe young body bedew some far corner of the crypt? Perhaps—and perhaps not.

He recalled that, as yet, the ghastly scream of mingled horror and agony, that had twice rung out to signal the demise of two of his band, had not yet sounded the death-knell of the jungle girl.

He prowled through the crypt without finding anything of further note.

Here and there portions of the stone floor were

encrusted with a noisome, scaly residue that suggested the dried blood of earlier victims. He searched on, seeking the source of the curious flickering green light that dimly illuminated the recesses of the enormous vault.

In the far wall he found a dark opening and strode warily therein, finding a gloomy passage of ancient and molding stone. Cautious as a jungle cat, he padded through the gloom of the dark passage, which soon widened into a groined and vaulted chamber even more enormous than the one he had quitted.

Huddled in one corner, Zoroma lifted dulled eyes and tear-wet cheeks to him.

"Gorm! Are you unharmed, girl?" he burst out, surprise and relief mingled in his tones. Woefully, she nodded.

He strode over to the corner wherein she sat huddled.

"How came you to this dismal place?" he inquired. She shook her head mutely.

"I . . . I know not. It was like a dream. I seemed to hear a voice that called my name—a voice that seemed to come from a great distance. And I followed it, like one entranced, to the room where your man, Kovor, died."

"And found the trap door in the floor?"

She nodded listlessly.

"It stood open, and a dim green light beat up from the opening in the floor. Still the far, faint voice called, and it seemed in my dream that I could not resist the urgency in that voice. It drew me on, down the stone stair, to this place, where I found. . . . I found . . ."

Her words died in a choked sob. Bare shoulders shook as thick waves of her shining black hair fell across her tear-stained face. And it was then that, peering about, he saw that this corner too was scaled with the dry crust of long-shed gore.

"Alatur!" she sobbed, holding out one hand.

"Your lover?"

She nodded mutely. Clenched in her fingers a bronze talisman flecked with dried blood could be seen. She wept, and he let her weep, knowing it the best remedy for woman's sorrow. He raised his head and peered about alertly.

"A voice that calls one, as in a dream, to the hidden place of death," he mused. "There must be more to these crypts than this. Come, lass, let us explore further."

Fear leaped suddenly into her great dark eyes.

"Should we not be gone from this place before . . . before . . . *It* comes?"

He revealed white teeth in a swift, wolfish grin.

"Probably you are right," he growled. "But it goes against my ways to retreat from danger and never yet have I faced a foe that cold steel could not kill!"

He helped her to her feet and they went forward through the green-litten gloom.

As his eyes roamed about restlessly, ears straining to catch the slightest sound, he felt the pressure of unseen eyes, but could see nothing but bare, worn stone about him. The walls of these crypts radiated an almost tangible aura of cold menace, but still he went forward, searching for something to kill.

Why had not the unknown, murderous thing torn apart Zoroma? Was it perhaps because it sensed his own presence, and the swiftness of his approach? He would find the answer to that mystery soon enough, he somehow guessed.

He would find the answer to many mysteries here, he knew.

They came at length into another chamber, larger than all the others. And on the threshhold, Thongor halted abruptly, amazement written upon his features, and an oath of astonishment on his lips.

The floor was heaped and littered with fantastic treasure!

The far walls bore chests and shelves of ancient wood, whereon molding objects lay scattered. Huge old books of thick-leaved parchment, bound between boards of carven wood, or plates of ivory, or bound in the scaly hide of dragons.

A long bench of black marble bore instruments of the sorcerous arts—a brazen astrolabe, a huge hourglass filled with darkly crimson powder, mortar and pestle, and a great deal of broken crockery—the remnants, he doubted not, of crucibles and vats and cucurbits and other devices of the alchemic art. There was even a gigantic instrument of verdigris-eaten bronze, a weird conglomeration of rings and hoops, with an ingraved bronze sphere at the center. Thongor dimly recognized it as an armillary sphere, whereby a necromancer may follow the movements of the stars and planets through the celestial circle of the zodiac.

Over everything lay a thick grey blanket of dust, and the heavy webs of dead spiders festooned the walls.

The floor was heaped with a splendor of treasure and trash.

Bits of old, worm-eaten wood, dried bones, the withered remnants of ancient mummies, globes of dusty glass, the wink and flash of gems, thick gold coins, bright goblets of precious metals, crumpled scrolls and scraps of antique parchment, rust-gnawed blades of dagger, axe, sword and spear, dented helms, casks of gems, all manner of bottles and vases and phials, filled with colored powders or nameless oils—all lay jumbled together in a trash-heap of decay and neglect.

With a muttered oath, Thongor strode over to examine the drifts of wreckage that bestrew the floor. Gems crunched under his boots and ancient coins spilled, clat-

tering, down the sides of the heap as he disturbed their ancient rest.

It was from this pile that the lambent green light shone.

He dislodged a clattering avalanche of broken bottles and spilled jewelry, as he dug down through the heap of ancient treasure and junk.

Suddenly green flame bathed his bronze torso in restless and flickering light. A muffled exclamation burst from his lips as he gazed down at the incredible thing his searching fingers had discovered twisted around the scrawny throat of a brown leathery mummy.

"Thongor! What is it?" Zoroma cried.

He turned, to flash an exultant grin in her direction, holding up the flashing object he had found.

"*The Emerald Flame*—by all the Gods!"

CHAPTER IX

Secret of the Emerald Flame

It was an incredible thing—and its value must have been fabulous. It was like a great collar and heavy pectoral, but it was fashioned entirely from strange nameless gems whose like the Barbarian youth had never before encountered in all his wanderings.

The gems varied in size from that of a kernel of corn to great lumps as large as birds' eggs.

They were uncut but polished smooth, and they were the pale, lucent green of clear water or the fresh bright jade of young leaves.

In the heart of the nameless jewels an elusive wisp of flame danced and flickered. This wavering flake of fire was the fierce yellow-green we call chartreuse. Not all of the gems contained this wisp of flame at their hearts—there must have been a couple of thousand gems in the heavy collar, which, when worn about a man's throat would lap over his shoulders, chest and back, covering them with a mantle of flickering jade fire. Some of the jewels were dead and dull and lusterless, but most were alive with inner flames that danced and danced with a restless and ever-moving semblance of life.

Thongor stared at the incredible treasure in his hands. For incredible it was in very truth. There was the ransom of a hundred captive kings in this heavy handfull of living green fire.

With the unbelievable wealth this collar represented, a man could purchase an empire—nay, a dozen!

He laughed delightedly, drunken with the exultation of his incredible discovery, and lifted the collar to set it about his throat—

And then a bony, claw-like hand clutched his ankle in a vise-like grip of steel.

He stared down, his face cortorted with astonishment. The hand was scrawny as an eagle's talons: scarce more than bare bone sheathed in scaly, dessicated, parchment-like skin, woven together with dry sinews like cords of cat-gut. It was the hand of a thing long dead and withered . . . but it clung to his ankle with incredible living strength and tenacity.

He stepped back, dragging his captured foot. A thin gaunt arm appeared to view, coins and parchment tatters spilling away from the movement. Dried flesh hung in ropes and tatters to the brown old bone. But the thing, somehow, *lived.*

Now the rest of the mummy came into view, a hideous thing with a bony mahogany face that was as fleshless as a skull and to whose bald brow a few tatters of dessicated skin yet clung. The eye-sockets were deep and hollow, mere black pits of shadow, but within them eyes blazed with cold, awful fires of malignant hatred. The eyeballs themselves, Thongor could see, had dried to beads of yellowing gum, but still they burned with cold, inhuman vigor and intelligence.

His skin crawled with an indescribably indescribable thrill of horror as he saw that the dust of centuries filmed those naked, burning eyes!

Behind him somewhere the girl screamed with sheer horror as the living dead thing arose into view, clutching his leg in an unbreakable grip.

And Thongor somehow knew that even after centuries of death, Shan Chan Thuu was still the Keeper of the Emerald Flame, and by whatever nameless sorcery animation lurked yet within its withered flesh, the mummy of the old Omnian magician still guarded its ancient trust!

Thongor swept his sword up and chopped an awkward blow at the scrawny arm. But it was tough as old, sun-dried leather and although the keen edge of Sarkozan cut through a shred of dried flesh and snapped a thread of gristle, naught else was accomplished. The vise-like grip on his boot tightened inexorably. Already his ankle was numb from the paralyzing pressure of those withered talons.

On sudden inspiration, he recalled that in his haste in dressing he had not bothered to buckle the boots securely. Thus, with a twist of his leg he tore his foot out of the boot, leaving it in the grip of the mummy's hand, together with a few square inches of his hide.

He sprang backwards, clumsily, thrusting the collar of glittering green flame into his girdle so as to free his hands.

The grinning, skull-like jaws of the long-dead sorcerer gaped in a soundless howl of rage. Convulsively, the bony claws closed on the empty boot like a steel trap. And then Thongor saw the ferocity and demoniac strength that had torn his men asunder into bloody gobbits of splattering flesh—for in a mindless fury, the claws of the mummy ripped and tore the tough leather of his boot into rags!

His jaw tightened grimly. If once those bony claws closed on his flesh, he would be maimed for life.

Whatever the nature of the force that animated the wizard's mummy with a ghastly semblance of life, it lent unbelievable strength to the withered lich of Shan Chan Thuu.

Now the thing came lurching down the mounded treasure towards him, bony arms reaching for him, eyes aflame with a reptilian ferocity.

Behind him the girl watched, her face milk-white, hands to her cold cheeks, eyes wide and filled with horror.

CHAPTER X

When Dead Men Walk

Thongor circled the stone chamber slowly, fending off the mummy of the ancient wizard with the gleaming steel of the broadsword.

With jerky, ungainly strides, the thin brown thing stalked after him, its burning gaze fixed on the mass of gemmy flame that flashed and scintillated at his girdle.

It closed with him suddenly, and the boy took his stand and swung the mighty broadsword in a whistling blow that caught the mummy full in the side.

The impact of that slashing steel would have slain a living man. Gaunt ribs, over which leathery hide was stretched drum-taut, crunched and splintered. The mummy staggered, but did not seem to feel the terrible crippling blow in the slightest.

Another blow caught the mummy's forearm, splintering the bone and shattering the wrist-joint. The blow, which would have put any mortal warrior out of action, did not in the slightest impede the stalking progress of the skeletal lich. The young Barbarian felt his skin crawl with horror.

How do you kill a thing that is already dead? he wondered.

Again he circled the chamber, followed by the staggering mummy that stalked tirelessly after him, bony arms outstretched to rend and tear his flesh.

Kovor and Orovar had, doubtless, stood still, mesmerized by the uncanny powers of the dead sorcerer—helpless to move as the grasping claws ripped their bodies asunder. But Thongor was free of the spell—which indicated that a man who was awake was immune to the magic of Shan Chan Thuu, who gained his powers over

the minds of sleeping men by whispering to them in their dreams his eerie, sirenic song.

It occurred to Thongor to wonder for what reason the mummy had lured the two men and the girl, Zoroma, into its grasp. Merely to protect his treasure of ensorcelled gems? He frowned thoughtfully. It was not likely, for until he had penetrated to the secret crypt, they had not known of its existence, and thus posed no threat to the mummy's treasures.

Why, then, this bestial fury—this necromantic urge to kill?

Suddenly, it came to Thongor, as if by sheer intuition!

That collar of green gems, some of whom were only lit by eerie, writhing emerald flames, and some of which were dead, unlit, and lusterless . . .

Something the boy knew of the dark, perverted cult of Chaos, for his adventures had brought him into proximity with their grisly worship and unholy rites ere now. He knew that the gifts of Chaos were never bestowed freely . . . that always the seeker after wisdom and power had a grim and terrible price to pay.

What price had Shan Chan Thuu paid for his magisterium?

Thongor had a horrible suspicion that he already knew.

For each weird gem in that mighty collar, the old Omnian wizard had taken a human life . . . and the flickering, restless flames that beat within those crystals of pallid green, as prisoners might beat against the bars of their cells . . . *each flame was a captive soul!*

And there were still a score or more of dark, lusterless gems at whose cold heart no captive flame danced and flickered!

"Great Gorm!" he breathed hoarsely, and the curse was more than half a prayer.

No reason, now, to wonder that life clung with un-

natural tenacity to the dried, dead mummy of Shan Chan Thuu.

For his spirit would not be free of its ancient curse until every crystal which composed the Emerald Flame was horribly lit!

Zoroma watched as the young warrior circled the stone-walled chamber again and again, followed by the shuffling steps of the untiring mummy. The horror of their predicament gradually dawned to her frozen mind, which was gripped in the icy clutch of supernatural terrors.

Why had she violated the precepts of the tribal elders, and sought out this haunted castle of death and horror? She had known that her lover, Alatar, was lost . . . for no man who entered the realm of Shan Chan Thuu ever left it alive.

Her vain and foolish quest had accomplished nothing. And it would soon bring a ghastly doom down on herself and on the stalwart Barbarian boy who now battled so heroically—but so hopelessly—against the animated mummy of the ancient wizard.

Thongor, too, knew that it was only a matter of time before he would fail to elude the grasping claws of the murderous mummy. And once that bony grip closed on his arm, he would be helpless to oppose the unnatural strength of the vengeful lich.

His strength was failing even now. Days of toil and tension, sleepless horror-haunted nights, and the lack of food and water, all had taken their toll even of his magnificent young physique. In a moment—or an hour—his weary legs would falter or stumble, and the claws of the mummy would seize him in an unbreakable grip and those mad, glaring eyes burning from back pits sunken in that gaunt, grinning skull would be the last sight he would see in this life . . .

Fiercely, he redoubled the fury of his attacks against the stalking dead man. Sarkozan whistled through the stale fetid air, smashing a thigh-bone here, slicing through a taut ligament—terrible crippling blows that seemed to cause the walking dead thing no discomfort.

One shattering blow stove in the side of the bald bony brow, extinguishing the mad glitter of one scummed, dusty eye in a shower of splintering bone. Yet on it came, grinning with a rigor of hellish mirth!

Another terrific blow cracked the bony saddle of its pelvis. A web of black lines ran jaggedly through the dry brown bone, but did not slow or impede its tireless advance.

The weary boy was panting with effort now, his face black and congested, his naked breast rising and falling. The broadsword in his hands seemed to weigh like a ton of lead and the taut sinews of his arms trembled with the effort of wielding it. It was only a matter of time before he—

Zoroma screamed!

His booted leg stumbled against the ruin of a broken chair and suddenly he felt himself falling. The broadsword spun away from his empty hands and rang like a stricken gong against the stone flags of the pave.

Then he lay sprawled, his feet entangled in the broken rungs of the chair, the air knocked out of him by the impact of his fall—and before he could clamber to his feet again, the mummy lunged like a striking serpent and he felt the dry, bone bony claws clutching at his throat and stared up through rising red mists into the single glaring eye of Shan Chan Thuu!

CHAPTER XI

The Flaming Death

The clutch of the bony claws was crushing his throat. A numbness went tingling through his body and his skin crawled with loathing at the touch of the dead sorcerer.

Dimly, through the rising haze that obscured his vision, the young Barbarian stared up into the ghastly, grinning visage of the mummy as it loomed above him.

Its bony jaws worked soundlessly, and he could smell the dust-dry odor of the breath that blew from between the brown fangs, sour as sweat.

He fumbled desperately, seizing the gaunt wrists in his numb and suddenly powerless hands, and strove to tear the vise-like grip loose. But all of his young strength was helpless to dislodge the clutch of the mummy, whose gaunt claws were crushing his throat.

The muffled thunder of his pulses was loud in his ears. Faintly, as if from a vast distance, he could hear Zoroma screaming his name.

Then blackness rose about him and it seemed to Thongor that he fell with weird slowness through veils of dim vapor, ever-darkening around him . . . and he knew that soon his mighty spirit would be but one more captive flame flickering within an eternal prison of cold crystal . . .

Terror broke the cold paralysis that had seized the girl. She sprang forward, crying Thongor's name, casting about her frantically for some weapon to use against the murderous mummy.

On a long low table of acid-stained black wood she spied a heavy carboy of clouded glass, and snatched it up.

Sustaining its massive weight with numb, trembling

hands, she staggered to the struggling pair, raised the heavy container above her head, and brought it down with a shattering blow upon the naked skull of Shan Chan Thuu.

Bone crunched, glass cracked, and a noisome chemical stench suddenly permeated the air.

The whole back of the mummy's skull was crushed inward by the force of her blow, and from the broken carboy rivulets of a heavy fluid seeped, crawling over the bony back and shoulders of the dead sorcerer.

Suddenly it staggered erect, releasing the half-conscious Barbarian youth. It peered about at her with one mad blazing eye. She stood frozen, watching a strange and miraculous transformation take place.

The heavy fluid, which had soaked into the dessicated, leathery flesh of the mummy,—*smoked!*

Burst into flame!

An oily metallic vapor went whirling up from the mummy's wriggling, jerking torso. Now its entire upper thorax was one seething mass of crackling flames!

Whatever virulent fluid the carboy had held—some powerful acid, no doubt—the centuries had not lessened its fierce potency!

As the mummy, wrapped in crackling flame, went staggering away, she dropped to her knees beside the half-conscious youth and cradled his head on her bare thighs. Was he dead? Had the crushing claws of the malefic mummy quenched his young vigor?

No, he lived; for now his perspiration-smeared chest rose and fell, drinking the fetid air deep into his oxygen-starved lungs. Even as she watched, the blackness drained from his congested features and his eyelids flickered. The youth voiced a hoarse, inarticulate growl and forced himself up on one elbow, staring with dizzy amazement at the mad cortortions of the leaping, blazing thing.

As if it was capable of feeling pain, the burning mummy staggered and cavorted about the stone-walled chamber, writhing and flapping its flaming arms, cavorting in a macabre dance of death.

The ghastly scene was made all the more gruesome by the utter silence of its terrible struggles. For although the bare fanged jaws moved and mouthed horribly, as in mute agony, no slightest sound escaped it.

Frozen with horror, they watched the dance of the flaming death!

The leathery flesh and dried bones of the mummy had absorbed all of the acid the heavy carboy had contained. Now it was one seething mass of scarlet flame from head to foot. Even as they watched, it blackened and shriveled, dwindling, like a moth caught in a candle-flame!

Immune to pain, to crippling blows, the supernatural vitality that animated the mummy's form was helpless against the one enemy to which it was vulnerable due to its own nature—the healing purification of naked flame!

"Look—the thing has the collar!" Thongor croaked, pointing.

And it was true! As it tore loose from Thongor, sensing the bite of the virulent acid, the mummy had snatched its precious jeweled treasure from Thongor's girdle. Now it brandished the Emerald Flame amidst the seething scarlet fury that was rapidly consuming it.

One hipjoint, eaten through, collapsed, and the burning mummy fell to the stone flag, coming apart. An arm dropped, twitching, from the blackened rib-cage, soothy claws still scrabbling and clutching. Within seconds the mummy crumbled amidst the roaring fire, which died to glowing coals, and then to a heap of white ash wherein a few lumps of unconsumed bone protruded.

Thongor limped over to inspect the remains of the enchanter's mummy. The skull was a blackened shell, hol-

low and cracked in the heat. It fell to pieces at his touch. From the pile of ashes, crumbling bits of bone, and scaly, blackened gristle, he drew forth the jeweled collar, smeared and dull with ashes. He wiped his hand across the glistening crystals.

They were dead and dull. No longer did the dancing emerald flames illuminate them. Mere lusterless bits of smooth crystal now, devoid of beauty or value.

Obviously, when the life-force of the mummy was extinguished at last in the flames, the spell was broken whereby the souls of his murdered victims were chained within the gems. Thongor dropped the dead crystals with a little grimace of disgust.

By mid-morning they had reached the ring of hills that enclosed the vast, bowl-shaped depression.

Thongor reined in his kroter, and turned for one last look at the black citadel that thrust its wilderness of turrets and cupolas skyward from the rocky knoll at the center of the valley of death and desolation. Rarely had he been so glad to shake the dust of any place from his heels.

From where she lay in his arms, seated before him astride the kroter, Zoroma shivered at the memory of the horrors they had endured in that ghastly ruin.

Grinning, Chelim reined up beside his chieftain.

"Where now, Thongor?" he inquired.

The young Barbarian flexed his powerful arms as the girl lay back against the deep arch of his chest, her warm cheek laid trustingly upon his mighty heart.

"Anywhere at all where we can find water and game—due north along the coast, I think; the sooner we get back into Chush the happier I will be!" he grunted.

The massive Zangabali grimaced and spat, following his gaze to where the fortress of Shan Chan Thuu loomed in the distance.

"After the nights o' fear we spent in that haunted mausoleum, I'll be glad to face Dorgand Tul and his spearsmen again," he laughed. "They, at least, are mortal! Give me a foe you can kill with a thrust of good, clean steel and I will stand against any enemy. But this battling against shadowy sorcerers is not for the likes o' me!"

Thongor grinned. "Aye, but still, we did not come away empty handed," he growled. Chelim blinked in puzzlement—then grinned at the girl nestled demurely in the circle of the young Barbarian's arms.

"Say, rather, that *you* did not come away with empty arms—but what of the rest of us?"

Thongor chuckled and dug one hand into the pocket-pouch of his girdle. He held out a fistful of gold coins and glittering gems and laughed at the expression of astonishment that crossed Chelim's heavy features.

"In Gorm's name, man, you did not think I came away from that crypt of nameless horrors in such a hurry that I failed to fill my pouch, did you? There's enough riches here to buy you all women and weapons and new mounts at the next city we enter!"

The slack-jawed astonishment faded from Chelim's features and was replaced by a grudging admiration.

"Well, perhaps I did underestimate you," he grunted. "I doubt that *I* would have lingered in that gloomy cavern long enough to pick up loot," he confessed.

"Nonsense," Thongor snorted. "Why fear? The mummy was dead at last. But, come, let us get on. Ahead lie good, comfortable jungles—complete with streams of fresh, cold water, and game. *Game!* Gorm's blood, it has been so long since I last had a good steak, that my belly has almost forgotten the taste of meat! Tell the men to ride west, Chelim—I'll have a hot meal before I curl up on my pallet to sleep this night!"

He thumped booted heels in the ribs of his kroter and rode past the burly Zangabali. Noticing with a grin how

the arms of his young chieftain tenderly enfolded the slim form of the demure jungle girl, Chelim laughed. Thongor was thinking of more things than filling his hungry middle, Chelim knew, and it would be hours before the young Barbarian finally slept!

They rode off through the dusty hills, bound for the jungles of Chush and a host of new adventures.

THE BELLS OF SHOREDAN

By

Roger Zelazny

The Bells would only respond to a member of the House of Selar. Dilvish, called the Damned, who left no footprints where he walked, was the only one left who could raise what Man remembered as the cursed legions of Shoredan.

No living thing dwelled in the land of Rahoringhast.

Since an age before this age had the dead realm been empty of sound, save for the crashing of thunders and the *spit-spit* of raindrops richocheting from off its stonework and the stones. The towers of the Citadel of Rahoring still stood; the great archway from which the gates had been stricken continued to gape, like a mouth frozen in a howl of pain and surprise, of death; the countryside about the place resembled the sterile landscape of the moon.

The rider followed the Way of the Armies, which led at last to that archway and on through into the Citadel. Behind him lay a twisted trail leading downward, downward, and back, toward the South and the West. It ran

through chill patterns of morning mist which clung, swollen, to the dark and pitted ground, like squadrons of gigantic leeches. It looped about the ancient towers, still standing only by virtue of enchantments placed upon them in foregone days. Black and awesome, high-rearing, and limned in nightmare's clarity, the towers and the Citadel were the final visible extensions of the character of their dead maker: Hohorga, King of the World.

The rider, the green-booted rider who left no footprints when he walked, must have felt something of the dark power which still remained within the place, for he halted and sat silent, staring for a long while at the broken gates and the high battlements. Then he spoke a word to the black, horse-like thing he rode upon, and they pressed ahead.

As he drew near, he saw that something was moving in the shadows of the archway.

He knew that no living thing dwelled in the land of Rahoringhast. . . .

The battle had gone well, considering the number of the defenders.

On the first day, the emissaries of Lylish had approached the walls of Dilfar, sought parley, requested surrender of the city, and been refused. There followed a brief truce, to permit single combat between Lance, the Hand of Lylish, and Dilvish called the Damned, Colonel of the East, Deliverer of Portaroy, scion of the Elvish House of Selar and the human House which hath been stricken.

The trial lasted but a quarter of an hour, until Dilvish, whose wounded leg had caused his collapse, did strike upwards from behind his buckler with the point of his blade. The armor of Lance, which had been deemed invincible, gave way then, when the blade of Dilvish smote at one of the two devices upon the breastplate—those

which were cast in the form of cloven hoofmarks. Men muttered that these devices had not been present previously, and an attempt was made to take the Colonel prisoner. His horse, however, which had stood on the sidelines like a steel statue, did again come to his aid, bearing him to safety within the city.

The assault was then begun, but the defenders were prepared and held well their walls. Well-fortified and well-provided was Dilfar. Fighting from a position of strength, the defenders cast down much destruction upon the Men of the West.

After four days the army of Lylish had withdrawn with the great rams which it had been unable to use. The Men of the West commenced the construction of helepoli, while they awaited the arrival of catapults from Bildesh.

Above the walls of Dilfar, high in the Keep of Eagles, there were two who watched.

"It will not go well, Lord Dilvish," said the king, whose name was Malacar the Mighty, though he was short of stature and long of year. "If they complete the towers-that-walk and bring catapults, they will strike us from afar. We will not be able to defend against this. Then the towers will walk when we are weakened from the bombardment."

"It is true," said Dilvish.

"Dilfar must not fall."

"No."

"Reinforcements have been sent for, but they are many leagues distant. None were prepared for the assault of Lord Lylish, and it will be long before sufficient troops will be mustered and be come here to the battle."

"That also is true, and by then may it be too late."

"You are said by some to be the same Lord Dilvish who liberated Portaroy in days long gone by."

"I am that Dilvish."

"If so, that Dilvish was of the House of Selar of the Invisible Blade."

"Yes."

"Is it true also, then—what is told of the House of Selar and the Bells of Shoredan in Rahoringhast?"

Malacar looked away as he said it.

"This thing I do not know," said Dilvish. "I have never attempted to raise the cursed legions of Shoredan. My grandmother told me that only twice in all the ages of Time has this been done. I have also read of it in the Green Books of Time at the Keep of Mirata. I do not *know*, however."

"Only to one of the House of Selar will the bells respond. Else they swing noiseless, it is said."

"So it is said."

"Rahoringhast lies far to the North and the East and distressful is the way. One with a mount such as yours might make the journey, might ring there the bells, might call forth the doomed legions, though. It is said they will follow such a one of Selar to battle."

"Aye, this thought has come to me, also."

"Willst essay this thing?"

"Aye, Sir. Tonight. I am already prepared."

"Kneel then and receive thou my blessing, Dilvish of Selar. I knew thou wert he when I saw thee on the field before these walls."

And Dilvish did kneel and receive the blessing of Malacar, called the Mighty, Leige of the Eastern Reach, whose realm held Dilfar, Bildesh, Mystar, Mycar, Portaroy, Princeaton and Poind.

The way was difficult, but the passage of leagues and hours was as the movement of clouds. The western portal to Dilfar had within it a smaller passing-place, a man-sized door studded with spikes and slitted for the discharge of bolts.

Like a shutter in the wind, this door opened and closed. Crouched low, mounted on a piece of the night, the Colonel passed out through the opening and raced across the plain, entering for a moment the outskirts of the enemy camp.

A cry went up as he rode, and weapons rattled in the darkness.

Sparks flew from unshod steel hooves.

"All the speed at thy command now, Black, my mount!"

He was through the campsite and away before arrow could be set to bow.

High on the hill to the east, a small fire throbbed in the wind. Pennons, mounted on tall poles, flapped against the night, and it was too dark for Dilvish to read the devices thereon, but he knew that they stood before the tents of Lylish, Colonel of the West.

Dilvish spoke the words in the language of the damned, and as he spoke them the eyes of his mount glowed like embers in the night. The small fire on the hilltop leapt, one great leaf of flame, to the height of four men. It did not reach the tent, however. Then there was no fire at all, only the embers of all the fuels consumed in a single moment.

Dilvish rode on, and the hooves of Black made lightning on the hillside.

They pursued him a small while only. Then he was away and alone.

All that night did he ride through places of rock. Shapes reared high above him and fell again, like staggering giants surprised in their drunkenness. He felt himself launched, countless times, through empty air, and when he looked down on these occasions, there was only empty air beneath him.

With the morning, there came a levelling of his path, and the far edge of the Eastern Plain lay before him, then

under him. His leg began to throb beneath its dressing, but he had lived in the Houses of Pain for more than the lifetimes of Men, and he put the feeling far from his thoughts.

After the sun had raised itself over the jagged horizon at his back, he stopped to eat and to drink, to stretch his limbs.

In the sky then, he saw the shapes of the nine black doves who must circle the world forever, never to land, seeing all things on the earth and on the sea, and passing all things by.

"An omen," he said. "Be it a good one?"

"I know not," replied the creature of steel.

"Then let us make haste to learn."

He remounted.

For four days did he pass over the Plain, until the yellow and green waving grasses gave way and the land lay sandy before him.

The winds of the desert cut at his eyes. He fixed his scarf as a muffle, but it could not stop the entire assault. When he would cough and spit, he needed to lower it, and the sand entered again. He would blink and his face would burn, and he would curse, but no spell he knew could lay the entire desert like yellow tapestry, smooth and unruffled below him. Black was an opposing wind, and the airs of the land rushed to contest his passage.

On the third day in the desert, a mad wight flew invisible and gibbering at his back. Even Black could not outrun it, and it ignored the foulest imprecations of Mabrahoring, language of the demons and the damned.

The following day, more joined with it. They would not pass the protective circle in which Dilvish slept, but they screamed across his dreams—meaningless fragments of a dozen tongues—troubling his sleep.

He left them when he left the desert. He left them as he entered the land of stone and marshes and gravel and

dark pools and evil openings in the ground from which the fumes of the underworld came forth.

He had come to the border of Rahoringhast.

It was damp and gray, everywhere.

It was misty in places, and the water oozed forth from the rocks, came up from out of the ground.

There were no trees, shrubs, flowers, grasses. No birds sang, no insects hummed.

. . . No living thing dwelled in the land of Rahoringhast.

Dilvish rode on and entered through the broken jaws of the city.

All within was shadow and ruin.

He passed up the Way of the Armies.

Silent was Rahoringhast, a city of the dead.

He could feel this, not as the silence of nothingness now, but as the silence of a still presence.

Only the steel cloven hooves sounded within the city.

There came no echoes.

Sound. . . . Nothing. Sound. . . . Nothing. Sound. . . .

It was as though something unseen moved to absorb every evidence of life as soon as it noised itself.

Red was the Palace, like bricks hot from the kiln and flushed with the tempers of their making. But of one piece were the walls. No seams nor cracks, no divisions were there in the sheet of red. It was solid, was imponderable, broad of base, and reached with its thirteen towers higher than any building Dilvish had ever seen, though he had dwelled in the high Keep of Mirata itself, where the Lords of Illusion hold sway, bending space to their will.

Dilvish dismounted and regarded the enormous stairway that lay before him.

"That which we seek lies within."

Black nodded and touched the first stair with his hoof. Fire rose from the stone. He drew back his hoof and smoke curled about it. There was no mark upon the stair to indicate where he had touched.

"I fear I cannot enter this place and preserve my form," he stated. "At the least, my form."

"What compels thee?"

"An ancient enchantment to preserve this place against the assault of any such as I."

"Can it be undone?"

"Not by any creature which walks this world, or flies above it or writhes beneath it, or I'm a horse. Though the seas some day rise and cover the land, this place will exist at their bottom. This was torn from Chaos by Order in the days when those Principles stalked the land, naked, just beyond the hills. Whoever compelled them was one of the First, and powerful even in terms of the Mighty."

"Then I must go alone."

"Perhaps not. One is approaching even now with whom you had best wait and parley."

Dilvish waited, and a single horseman emerged from a distant street and advanced upon them.

"Greetings," called the rider, raising his right hand, open.

"Greetings." Dilvish returned the gesture.

The man dismounted. His costume was deep violet in color, the hood thrown back, the cloak all-engulfing. He bore no visible arms.

"Why stand you here before the Citadel of Rahoring?" he asked.

"Why stand you here to ask me, priest of Babrigore?" said Dilvish, and not ungently.

"I am spending the time of a moon in this place of death, to dwell upon the ways of evil. It is to prepare myself as head of my temple."

"You are young to be head of a temple."

The priest shrugged and smiled.

"Few come to Rahoringhast," he observed.

"Small wonder," did Dilvish reply. "I trust I shall not remain here long."

"Were you planning on entering this—place?" He gestured.

"I was, and am."

The man was half a head shorter than Dilvish, and it was impossible to guess at his form beneath the robes he wore. His eyes were blue and he was swarthy of complexion. A mole on his left eyelid danced when he blinked.

"Let me beg you reconsider this action," he stated. "It would be unwise to enter this building."

"Why is that?"

"It is said that it is still guarded within by the ancient warders of its Lord."

"Have you ever been inside?"

"Yes."

"Were you troubled by any ancient wardens?"

"No, but as a priest of Barbrigore I am under the protection of—of—Jelerak."

Dilvish spat.

"May his flesh be flayed from his bones and its life yet remain."

The priest dropped his eyes.

"Though he fought the creature which dwelled within this place," said Dilvish, "he became as foul himself afterwards."

"Many of his deeds do lie like stains upon the land," said the priest, "but he was not always such a one. He was a white wizard who matched his powers against the Dark One, in days when the world was young. He was not sufficient. He fell. He was taken as servant by the Maleficent. For centuries he endured this bondage, until it changed him, as such must. He, too, came to glory in

the ways of darkness. But then, when Selar of the Unseen Blade bought the life of Hohorga with his own, Jel—he fell as if dead and lay as such for the space of a week. Near-delirious, when he awakened, he worked with counterspell at one last act of undoing: to free the cursed legions of Shoredan. He essayed that thing. He did. He stood upon this very stairway for two days and two nights, until the blood mingled with the perspiration on his brow, but he could not break the hold of Hohorga. Even dead, the dark strength was too great for him. Then he wandered mad about the countryside, until he was taken in and cared for by the priests of Babrigore. Afterwards, he lapsed back into the ways he had learned, but he has always been kindly disposed toward the Order which cared for him. He has never asked anything more of us. He has sent us food in times of famine. Speak no evil of him in my presence."

Dilvish spat again.

"May he thrash in the darkness of darknesses for the ages of ages, and may his name be cursed forever."

The priest looked away from the sudden blaze in his eyes.

"What want you in Rahoring?" he asked, finally.

"To go within—and do a thing."

"If you must, then I shall accompany you. Perhaps my protection shall also extend to yourself."

"I do not solicit your protection, priest."

"The asking is not necessary."

"Very well. Come with me then."

He started up the stairway.

"What is that thing you ride?" asked the priest, gesturing back. "—Like a horse in form, but now it is a statue."

Dilvish laughed.

"I, too, know something of the ways of darkness, but my terms with it are my own."

"No man may have special terms with darkness."

"Tell it to a dweller in the Houses of Pain, priest. Tell it to a statue. Tell it to one who is all of the race of men! Tell it not to me."

"What is your name?"

"Dilvish. What is yours?"

"Korel. I shall speak to you no more of darkness then, Dilvish, but I will still go with you into Rahoring."

"Then stand not talking." Dilvish turned and continued upward.

Korel followed him.

When they had gone halfway, the daylight began to grow dim about them. Dilvish looked back. All he could see was the stairway leading down and down, back. There was nothing else in the world but the stairs. With each step upward, the darkness grew.

"Did it happen thus when last you entered this place?" he asked.

"No," said Korel.

They reached the top of the stair and stood before the dim portal. By then it was as though night lay upon the land.

They entered.

A sound, as of music, came from far ahead and there was a flickering light within. Dilvish laid his hand upon the hilt of his sword. The priest whispered to him: "It will do you no good."

They moved up the passageway and came at length into a vacant hall. Braziers spewed flame from high sockets in the walls. The ceiling was lost in shadow and smoke.

They crossed that hall to where a wide stair led up into a blaze of light and sound.

Korel looked back.

"It begins with the light," said he, "all this newness," gesturing. "The outer passage bore only rubble and . . . dust. . . ."

"What else is the matter?" Dilvish looked back.

Only one set of footprints led into the hall through the dust. Dilvish then laughed, saying: "I tread lightly."

Korel studied him. Then he blinked and his mole jerked across his eye.

"When I entered here before," he said, "there were no sounds, no torches. Everything lay empty and still, ruined. Do you know what is happening?"

"Yes," said Dilvish, "for I read of it in the Green Books of Time at the Keep of Mirata. Know, oh priest of Babrigore, that within the hall above the ghosts do play at being ghosts. Know, too, that Hohorga dies again and again so long as I stand within this place."

As he spoke the name Hohorga a great cry was heard within the high hall. Dilvish raced up the stairs, the priest rushing after him.

Now, within the halls of Rahoring there came up a mighty wailing.

They stood at the top of the stairs, Dilvish like a statue, blade half-drawn from its sheath; Korel, hands within his sleeves, praying after the manner of his order.

The remains of a great feast were strewn about the hall; the light came down out of the air from colored globes which circled like planets through the great heaven-design within the vaulted ceiling; the throne on the high dais beside the far wall was empty. That throne was too large for any of this age to occupy. The walls were covered all over with ancient devices, strange, on alternate slabs of white and orange marble. In the pillars of the wall were set gems the size of doubled fists, burning yellow and emerald, infraruby and ultrablue, casting a fire-radiance, transparent and illuminating, as far as the steps to the throne. The canopy of the throne was wide and all of white gold, worked in the manner of mermaids and harpies, dolphins and goat-headed snakes; it was sup-

ported by wyvern, hippogriff, fire-drake, chimaera, unicorn, cockatrice, griffin and pegasus, sejant erect. It belonged to the one who lay dying upon the floor.

In the form of a man, but half again as large, Hohorga lay upon the tiles of his palace and his intestines filled his lap. He was supported by three of his Guard, while the rest attended to his slayer. It had been said in the Books of Time that Hohorga the Maleficent was indescribable. Dilvish saw that this was both true and untrue.

He was fair to look upon and noble of feature; but so blindingly fair was he that all eyes were averted from that countenance now lined with pain. A faint bluish halo was diminishing about his shoulders. Even in the death-pain he was as cold and perfect as a carved gemstone set upon the redgreen cushion of his blood; his was the hypnotic perfection of a snake of many colors. It is said that eyes have no expression of their own, and that one could not reach into a barrel of eyes and separate out those of an angry man or those of one's beloved.

Hohorga's eyes were the eyes of a ruined god: infinitely sad, as proud as an ocean of lions.

One look and Dilvish knew this thing, though he could not tell their color.

Hohorga was of the blood of the First.

The guards had cornered the slayer. He fought them, apparently empty-handed, but parrying and thrusting as though he gripped a blade. Wherever his hand moved, there were wounds.

He wielded the only weapon which might have slain the king of the world, who permitted none to go armed in his presence, save for his own Guard.

He bore the Invisible Blade.

He was Selar, first of the Elvish House of that name, great-gone sire of Dilvish, who at that moment cried out his name.

Dilvish drew his blade and rushed across the hall. He cut at the attackers, but his blade passed through them as through smoke.

They beat down Selar's guard. A mighty blow sent something unseen ringing across the hall. Then they dismembered him, slowly, Selar of Shoredan, as Dilvish wept, watching.

And then Hohorga spoke, in a voice held firm though soft, without inflection, like the steady beating of surf or the hooves of horses:

"I have outlived the one who presumed to lay hands upon me, which is as it must be. Know that it was written that eyes would never see the blade that could slay me. Thus do the Powers have their jokes. Much of what I have done shall never be undone, o children of Men and Elves and Salamanders. Much more than you know do I take with me from this world into the Silence. You have slain that which was greater than yourselves, but do not be proud. It matters no longer to me. Nothing does. Have my curses."

Those eyes closed and there was a clap of thunder.

Dilvish and Korel stood alone in the darkened ruins of a great hall.

"Why did this thing appear today?" asked the priest.

"When one of the blood of Selar enters here," said Dilvish, "it is re-enacted."

"Why have you come here, Dilvish, son of Selar?"

"To ring the Bells of Shoredan."

"It cannot be."

"If I am to save Dilfar and redeliver Portaroy it *must* be.

"I go now to seek the Bells," he said.

He crossed through the near-blackness of night without stars, for neither were his eyes the eyes of Men, and he was accustomed to much dark.

He heard the priest following after him.

They circled behind the broken bulk of the Earth-Lord's throne. Had there been sufficient light as they passed, they would have seen darkened spots upon the floor turning to stain, then crisp sand-brown, and then to red green blood, or something like blood, as Dilvish moved near them, and vanishing once again as he moved away.

Behind the dais was the door to the central tower. Fevera Mirata, Queen of Illusion, had once shown Dilvish this hall in a mirror the size of six horsemen riding abreast, and broidered about with a frame of golden daffodils which hid their heads till it cleared of all save their reflections.

Dilvish opened the door and halted. Smoke billowed forth, engulfing him. He was seized with coughing but he kept his guard before him.

"It is the Warden of the Bells!" cried Korel. "Jelerak deliver us!"

"Damn Jelerak!" said Dilvish. "I'll deliver myself!"

But as he spoke, the cloud swirled away and spun itself into a glowing tower that held the doorway, illuminating the throne and the places about the throne. Two red eyes glowed within the smoke.

Dilvish passed his blade through and through the cloud, meeting with no resistance.

"If you remain incorporeal, I shall pass through you," he called out. "If you take a shape, I shall dismember it. Make your choice," and he said it in Mabrahoring, the language spoken in Hell.

"Deliverer, Deliverer, Deliverer," hissed the cloud, "my pet Dilvish, little creature of hooks and chains. Do you not know your master? Is your memory so short?" and the cloud collapsed upon itself and coalesced into a bird-headed creature with the hindquarters of a lion and two serpents growing up from its shoulders, curling and engendering about its high crest of flaming quills.

"Cal-den!"

"Aye, your old tormentor, Elfman. I have missed you, for few depart my care. It is time you returned."

"This time," said Dilvish, "I am not chained and unarmed, and we meet in my world," and he cut forward with his blade, striking the serpent-head from Cal-den's left shoulder.

A piercing bird-cry filled the hall and Cal-den sprang forward.

Dilvish struck at his breast but the blade was turned aside, leaving only a smallish gash from which a pale liquor flowed.

Cal-den struck him then backward against the dais, catching his blade in a black claw, shattering it, and he raised his other arm to smite him. Dilvish did then stab upward with what remained of the sword, nine inches of jagged length.

It caught Cal-den beneath the jaw, entering there and remaining, the hilt torn from Dilvish's hand as the tormentor shook his head, roaring.

Then was Dilvish seized about the waist so that his bones did sigh and creak within him. He felt himself raised into the air, the serpent tearing at his ear, claws piercing his sides. Cal-den's face was turned up toward him, wearing the hilt of his blade like a beard of steel.

Then did he hurl Dilvish across the dais, so as to smash him against the tiles of the floor.

But the wearer of the green boots of Elfland may not fall or be thrown to land other than on his feet.

Dilvish did recover him then, but the shock of his landing caused pain in the thigh-wound he bore. His leg collapsed beneath him, so that he put out his hand to the side.

Cal-den did then spring upon him, smiting him sorely about the head and shoulders. From somewhere, Korel hurled a stone which struck upon the demon's crest.

Dilvish scrambled backwards, until his hand came upon a thing in the rubble which drew the blood from it.

A blade.

He snatched at the hilt and brought it up off the floor with a side-armed cut that struck Cal-den across the back, stiffening him into a bellow that near burst the ears to hear. Smoke arose from the wound.

Dilvish stood, and saw that he held nothing.

Then did he know that the blade of his ancestor, which no eyes may look upon, had come to him from the ruins where it had lain across the ages, to serve him, scion of the House of Selar, in this moment of his need.

He directed it toward the breast of Cal-den.

"My rabbit, you are unarmed, yet you have cut me," said the creature. "Now shall we return to the Houses of Pain."

They both lunged forward.

"I always knew," said Cal-den, "that my little Dilvish was something special," and he fell to the floor with an enormous crash and the smokes arose from his body.

Dilvish placed his heel upon the carcass and wrenched free the blade outlined in steaming ichor.

"To you, Selar, do I owe this victory," he said, and raised a length of smouldering nothingness in salute. Then he sheathed the sword.

Korel was at his side. He watched as the creature at their feet vanished like embers and ice, leaving behind a stench that was most foul to smell.

Dilvish turned him again to the door of the tower and entered there, Korel at his side.

The broken bell-pull lay at his feet. It fell to dust when he touched it with his toe.

"It is said," he told Korel, "that the bell-pull did break in the hands of the last to ring it, half an age ago."

He raised his eyes, and there was only darkness above him.

"The legions of Shoredan did set forth to assault the Citadel of Rahoring," said the priest, as though reading it from some old parchment, "and word of their movement came soon to the King of the World. Then did he lay upon three bells cast in Shoredan a weird. When these bells were rung a great fog came over the land and engulfed the columns of marchers and those on horseback. The fog did disperse upon the second ringing of the bells, and the land was found to be empty of the troop. It was later written by Merda, Red Wizard of the South, that somewhere still do these marchers and horsemen move, through regions of eternal fog. 'If these bells be rung again by a hand of that House which dispatched the layer of the weird, then will these legions come forth from a mist to serve that one for a time in battle. But when they have served, they will vanish again into the places of gloom, where they will continue their march upon a Rahoringhast which no longer exists. How they may be freed to rest, this thing is not known. One mightier than I has tried and failed.' "

Dilvish bowed his head a moment, then he felt the walls. They were not like the outer walls. They were cast of blocks of that same material, and between those blocks were scant crevices wherein his fingers found purchase.

He raised himself above the floor and commenced to climb, the soft greenboots somehow finding toeholds wherever they struck.

The air was hot and stale, and showers of dust descended upon him each time he raised an arm above his head.

He pulled himself upwards, until he counted a hundred such movements and the nails of his hands were broken. Then he clung to the wall like a lizard, resting, and felt the pains of his last encounter burning like suns within him.

He breathed the fetid air and his head swam. He thought of the Portaroy he had once delivered, long ago, the city of friends, the place where he had once been feted, the land whose need for him had been strong enough to free him from the Houses of Pain and break the grip of stone upon his body; and he thought of that Portaroy in the hands of the Colonel of the West, and he thought of Dilfar now resisting that Lylish who might sweep the bastions of the East before him.

He climbed once again.

His head touched the metal lip of a bell.

He climbed around it, bracing himself on the crossbars which now occurred.

There were three bells suspended from a single axle.

He set his back against the wall and clung to the crossbars, placing his feet upon the middle bell.

He pushed, straightening his legs.

The axle protested, creaking and grinding within its sockets.

But the bell moved, slowly. It did not return, however, but stayed in the position into which it had been pushed.

Cursing, he worked his way through the crossbars and over to the opposite side of the belfry.

He pushed it back and it stuck on the other side. All the bells moved with the axle, though.

Nine times more did he cross over in darkness to push at the bells.

Then they moved more easily.

Slowly, they fell back as he released the pressure of his legs. He pushed them out again and they returned again. He pushed them again, and again.

A click came from one of the bells as the clapper struck. Then another. Finally, one of them rang.

He kicked out harder and harder, and then did the bells swing free and fill the tower about him with a pealing which vibrated the roots of his teeth and filled his

ears with pain. A storm of dust came down over him and his eyes were full of tears. He coughed and closed them. He let the bells grow still.

Across some mighty distance he thought he heard the faint winding of a horn.

He began the downward climb.

"Lord Dilvish," said Korel, when he had reached the floor. "I have heard the blowing of horns."

"Yes," said Dilvish.

"I have a flask of wine with me. Drink."

Dilvish rinsed his mouth and spat, then drank three mighty swallows.

"Thank you, priest. Let us be gone from here now."

They crossed through the hall once more and descended the inner stair. The smaller hall was now unlighted and lay in ruin. They made their way out, Dilvish leaving no tracks to show where he had gone; and halfway down the stairs the darkness departed from them.

Through the bleak day that now clung to the land, Dilvish looked back along the Way of the Armies. A mighty fog filled the air far beyond the broken gates, and from within that fog there came again the notes of the horn and the sounds of the movements of troops. Almost, Dilvish could see the outlines of the columns of marchers and riders, moving, moving, but not advancing.

"My troops await me," said Dilvish upon the stair. "Thank you, Korel, for accompanying me."

"Thank you, Lord Dilvish. I came to this place to dwell upon the ways of evil. You have shown me much that I may meditate upon."

They descended the final stairs. Dilvish brushed dust from his garments and mounted Black.

"One thing more, Korel, priest of Babrigore," he said. "If you ever meet with your patron, who should provide you much more evil to meditate upon than you have seen

here, tell him that, when all the battles have been fought, his statue will come to kill him."

The mole danced as Korel blinked up at him.

"Remember," he replied, "that once he wore a mantle of light."

Dilvish laughed, and the eyes of his mount glowed red through the gloom.

"There!" he said, gesturing. "There is your sign of his goodness and light!"

Nine black doves circled in the heavens.

Korel bowed his head and did not answer.

"I go now to lead my legions."

Black reared on steel hooves and laughed along with his rider.

Then they were gone, up the Way of the Armies, leaving the Citadel of Rahoring and the priest of Babrigore behind them in the gloom.

BREAK THE DOOR OF HELL

By

John Brunner

The people of Ys had invoked the aid of magic in their attempts to bring back the great days of the past. They held their ancestors to blame and sought to call them back to behold the ruins they had bequeathed to the living. "As you wish," said the traveler softly, "so be it."

I will break the door of hell and smash the bolts; I will bring up the dead to eat food with the living, and the living shall be outnumbered by the host of them.

—The Epic of Gilgamesh

In those days, the forces were none of them chained. They raged unchecked through every corner and quarter of the cosmos. Here ruled Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes, capricious, whimsical, and when he stared things melted in frightful agony. There a bright being shed radiance, but the radiance was all-consuming, and that which was solid and dull was flashed into fire. At another place, creatures in number one million fought desperately with one another for the possession of a single grain of dust; the fury of their contesting laid waste whole solar systems.

—Imprint of Chaos

Time had come to Ryovora.

The traveler in black—who had many names, but one nature—contemplated the fact from the brow of the hill where he had imprisoned Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes, more eons ago than he cared to count. Leaning on his staff made of light, curdled with a number of interesting forces, he repressed a shiver. Single though his nature might be, unique though that certainly was, he was not immune to apprehension; his endowments did not include omniscience.

Time had come to that great city: Time, in which could exist order and logic and rational thought. And so it was removed from his domain forever, gone from the borderland of chaos which exists timeless in eternity.

The task for which his single nature fitted him was the bringing forth of order out of that chaos; accordingly, he should have felt the satisfaction of achievement, or even a mildly vain pleasure. He did not, and for this there were two most cogent reasons and a third which he preferred not to consider.

The first, and most piquing, was that a duty lay on him: that at a certain season following the conjunction of four significant planets hereabout, he must oversee that portion of the All which was his charge. And he had grown accustomed to terminating his round of inspection at Ryovora, known far and wide as the place where people had their heads screwed on right. There if anywhere he could look on his work and be pleased.

Lapses and backsliding had occasionally minded him to alter this habit; still, he had never done so, and to discover that Ryovora was—elsewhere—annoyed him.

The second reason was not annoying. It was alarming, and absolutely unprecedented, and dismaying, and many other distressing epithets.

"In sum," the traveler in black announced to the air, "it's unheard of!"

Another city had arisen in the borderland of chaos, and it was stamped all over with the betraying mark of Time.

How was it possible? Carried in some eddy whose flow ran counter to the universal trend, so that from reason and logic it receded to the random laws of chance? Presumably. Yet the means whereby such an eddy might be created seemed inconceivable; some great enchantment would be required, and in the grip of Time enchantment was impossible.

"Fantastic!" said the traveler in black, speaking aloud again to distract his mind from the third and least palatable reason for regretting the loss of Ryovora. It was known to him that when he had accomplished his task all things would have but one nature; then they would be subsumed into the Original All, and time would have a stop. Beyond which point . . .

He glanced around him at the hillside. It was sparsely overgrown with gray-leaved bushes, and dust-devils rose among the rocks to sift their substance, fine as ashes, over the footprints he had left on the path. That was the doing of Laprivan, to whom memories of yesterday were hurtful and who accordingly used what small power remained to him to wipe away the traces of the past.

The staff tapped, once, twice, and again. At the third tap the elemental heaved in his underground prison and cracks appeared in the road. From these a voice boomed, monstrous, making the welkin echo.

"Leave me be!"

"What do you know of the city which stands yonder?" said the traveler in black.

"Nothing," said Laprivan sullenly.

"Nothing? You say so to spare yourself the pain of memory, Laprivan! Shall I send you where Ryovora has gone, into the domain of Time?"

The whole hill shuddered, and an avalanche of gray rock rattled on its further side. The sourceless voice moaned. "What should I know of the city yonder? No man has come from it and passed this way."

"Bad," said the traveler thoughtfully. "Very bad."

After that he was silent for a long while, until at last the elemental pleaded, "Leave me be! Leave me to wipe clean the slate of the past!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler absently, and tapped with his staff again. The cracks in the ground closed; the dustdevils resumed their whirling.

Ignoring all this, the traveler gazed over the green and orderly meadows in the valley. The city lay in noon-tide sunlight like a worn-out toy cast aside by a giant's child. The heedless ruin of Time was everywhere about it, toothmarks of the greatest leveler on brick and stone and metal. It had been fair and rich, that was plain; its gates were of oak and bronze—but the bronze was corroded green; its towers were of silver and orichalcum—but their bright sheen was overlaid with a dull mist like the foul breath of a swamp; its streets were broad and paved with marble—but the flags lifted to the roots of wild plants, and here and there one found holes filled by the rain and noxious with algae and insect-larvae.

Out of Time and into chaos. Almost beyond belief.

At length he stirred himself. There was nothing else for it—so he reasoned—but to set off on his journey of obligation, and come at last not to familiar, welcome Ryovora, but to this enigma wished on him by fate and boding no good whatever.

Relief carried him far and fast. To learn that Acromel stood where it had, the place where honey itself was

bitter; to know that they yet fished Lake Taxhling when the stars came out, and that the river Metamorphia fed it with strange unspawned creatures, greedy and unwholesome—this was reassuring, an earnest of balance continued in the cosmos.

And at these places and many many more he did what on this journey was required of him.

A lonely hut stood on the shelf-edge of a mountain pasture in the land called Eyneran; here where he paused to ask a crust of bread and a sup of ewe's milk from the flock high and distant as clouds on the steep meadow, a woman with a frightened face opened the ill-carpentered door to him, and met his request with a silent shake of the head.

She was wrinkled and worn out beyond her years; yet the hut was sound, a savory smell filled the air, and the clean floor and many copper pots the traveler could see assorted badly with the woman's ragged gown and bare feet. He waited. Shortly a cry—man-deep, yet edged with a child's petulance—rang out.

"Mother, come here! The pot's boiling over! What's keeping you, you lazy slut?"

"Mintra!" whispered the woman, and a patter of feet announced the passage of a girl, some twelve years old, across the floor to tend the pot.

Another cry, still louder: "Mother, come and give me some of it! Mintra can't lift the pot, you stupid old bag of bones!"

"We can't give you food," the woman said to the traveler. "It's for my son."

The traveler nodded, but waited still. Then at last with great heaving and panting came the son into view: gross-bulging in his apparel of velvet worked with gilt wire and stained with slobberings of food, so tall he nearly scraped the roof with his pate, yet so fat he breathed hard for the simple effort of standing upright.

His fist, big as a ham, cracked his mother behind the ear.

"Why don't you die, you lazy old cow, and get it over with?" he bellowed.

"It'd be a merciful relief," the woman whimpered. "And die I would of my own free will, but that I stand alone between you and your sister! With me gone you'd take her like a harlot, sister or no!"

"And wouldn't she be a tasty bit for my bed?" chortled the son with an evil grin, his tongue coming out thick as an ox's to stroke his lips lasciviously.

"As you wish," said the traveler, "so be it." And he knocked his staff on the threshold and took his leave.

That night the plague stole silent from the mountain mist, and took the mother as the son had wished; then the girl Mintra fled on light feet down the hill-trails and the fever-giddy glutton went calling her among the heedless sheep till his gross weight dislodged a rock and sent him like an animal to feed the crows.

In the rich city Gryte a thief spoke to curse the briefness of the summer night, which had cut short his plan to break the wall of a merchant's counting-house.

"Oh that dawn never came!" he cried. "Oh that I had lasting darkness whereby to ply my trade!"

"As you wish," said the traveler, "so be it." And darkness came: two thick gray cataracts that shut the light away.

Likewise in Medham was another rogue, striving to seduce a lady who feared her charms were passing with the years so that he might win to a coffer of gold secreted in her chamber. "I love you!" declared the smooth-tongued deceiver. "I'd love you had you no more than rags and a shack!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and the bailiffs came down the street to advise the lady that her

house and treasure were forfeit on another's debt, so that the liar turned and ran, not staying to hear the city officers who followed hard on the bailiffs' heels to report the honoring of the debt a day past due.

So too in Wocrahin a swaggering bully came down the street on market day, cuffing aside children with the back of his hand and housewives with the flat of his sword. "Oh that my way were not cluttered with such riffraff!" he exclaimed, his shoulder butting into the traveler's chest.

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and when the bully turned the corner the street he walked was empty under a leaden sky—and the buildings either side, and the taverns, and the shops. Nor did he again in all eternity have to push aside the riffraff he had cursed; he was alone.

This, however, was not the sum total of the traveler's doings as he passed from place to place within his realm. In Kanish-Kulya they had built a wall to keep Kanishmen and Kulyamen apart, and from either side, set into the masonry, grinned down the skulls of those dead in a war for which the reason had long been forgotten. In this strange and dreadful place Fegrim was pent under a volcano; shadowed by its cone the traveler halted and spoke long and seriously with that elemental, and when he was done the country for a mile on every side was dusted with cinders, little and bright as fireflies.

At Gander's Well, branched Yorbeth brooded in the guise of a tall tree whose main root tapped a wonderful subterranean spring and whose branches, fed with miraculous sap, sprouted leaves and fruit of which the like had not been seen under any sun before. The traveler spent an hour in the shade of that tree, and for the questions he asked was constrained to carry away a red twig and later

catch a cat and perform a ceremony with these two objects—a price he paid with heavy heart, for he had been told nothing of any great use in his inquiries.

Also he consulted with Farchgrind, and in Leppersley he cast the bones of a girl's foot to read the runes they formed, and after great labor he incarcerated Wolpec in a candle over whose flame he smoked a piece of glass which thereupon showed three truths: one ineluctable, one debatable and one incomprehensible. That was in Teq, when the end of his journey was near.

So finally he came to Barbizond, where there was always a rainbow in the sky because of the bright being Sardhin, chained inside a thundercloud with fetters of lightning. Three courses remained to him: he might free Sardhin and let him speak, and from here to the horizon nothing would be left save himself, the elemental and that which was of its nature bright, as jewels, or fire, or the shining edge of a keen-bladed knife; or he might do as once he had done in similar circumstances—address himself to an enchanter and make use of powers that trespassed too far toward naked chaos to be within his own scope—or finally he might go forward in ignorance to the strange city and confront the challenge of fate without the armor of foreknowledge.

Some little while remained to him before he needed to take his final decision. Coming to Barbizond, therefore, he made his way down a fine broad avenue where plane and lime trees alternated in the direction of a steel-blue temple. There stood the altar of Hnua-Threl, who was also Sardhin when he chose to be; the people invoked him with daily single combats on the temple floor. They were not a gentle folk, these inhabitants of Barbizond, but they were stately, and they died—in tournaments, or by the assassin's knife, or by their own hand—with dignity.

Such a death had lately occurred, that was plain, for

approaching the city gate came a funeral procession: on a high-wheeled cart drawn by apes in brazen harness, the corpse wrapped in sheets of lead, gold and woven leaves; a band of gongmen beating a slow measure to accompany musicians whistling like birds on pipes no larger than a finger; eight female slaves naked to the ceaseless warm rain; and last a straggle of mourners, conducting themselves with appropriate solemnity.

He who passed penultimately of the mourners was a fat and jolly person on each of whose shoulders perched a boy-child sheltered by the enormous brim of his leather hat. The traveler stared long at him before addressing him courteously.

"Your pardon, sir, but are you not Eadwil?"

"I am," the fat one answered, not loath to halt and let the funeral wend its way to the graveyard without his assistance. "Should I know you, sir?"

"Perhaps not," said the traveler in black. "Though I know you. I'd not have expected to see you here; you were formerly one of the chief merchant enchanters of Ryovora."

"A long time ago, sir," Eadwil answered with a deprecating smile. The two children on his shoulders giggled and one of them tried to reach for the traveler's staff, almost lost his balance, and righted himself with the aid of a pat from Eadwil's broad soft hand.

"May I ask what brought about your change of residence?" the traveler murmured.

"My change of employment," Eadwil shrugged, again nearly dislodging the more venturesome boy. "You spoke of me as a merchant enchanter—but when the decision was taken, many years ago, to let rational thought rule Ryovora and put an end to conjurations there, certain consequences followed. For myself I have no regrets; there was a geas upon me which made my feet grow red-hot when I walked, and now nothing worse attends a

long tramp like today's except an occasional blister. And these my grandsons, too—hey, you little nuisances?—they'd not be here today if I'd submitted to the other main restriction which purchased my powers." He rubbed the boys' backs affectionately, and they responded by pulling his ears.

This was quite true, as the traveler knew well; Eadwil had postponed the growing of his first beard till unusually late in life by making the trade on which his command of magic had been based.

"So there came an end to my conjuring of fine silks and spices, of rare wines and exotic perfumes!" Eadwil pursed his lips. "And there were, one must confess, certain persons in Ryovora who felt the lack of those luxuries and accused us ex-enchanters of—ha-hm!—betraying them. Barbizond is a fair city in its way, though the local customs are not to my taste; still, no one plagues me for magical doings and I've lived to be a grandfather to my own surprise. . . . You have late news of Ryovora, sir? For it comes to my mind that I've heard nothing from my old home in quite a while."

The traveler shook his head and gave a wry smile. "It's a fair span since I last set foot there. Indeed, I was hoping you might be able to give me certain information which I lack, rather than vice versa."

Eadwil looked politely downcast at being of no help; then one of the boys grew impatient and started to fidget.

"Home?" said his grandfather, and laughed indulgently. "Very well—old Harpentile is in no state to notice that we failed to attend his burying. Good day to you, sir," he added to the traveler. "It's been pleasant to renew our acquaintance, and I greatly hope you find someone who can aid you in these inquiries where I failed you."

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler under his

breath, and a great weight seemed to recede from his heart.

That accomplished, there was no more to do than to wait till the course of fate worked itself out. The traveler took a seat at a curbside tavern; with his elbows on a green tabletop he watched the passersby and wondered in what guise his helper would come. The avenue grew crowded as the day wasted. Men in gay jerkins with armor clanking at their saddle-bows came by, challengers in some tourney for the hand of an heiress; pedlars and wonder-workers with a few small tricks, for which they had paid excessively to judge by their reddened eyes, pocked cheeks, limping gait or even womanly shrill voices—no wonder, the traveler reflected. Eadwil felt he had had the better bargain.

Women, too, passed: high-wimpled dames attended by maids and dandling curious unnamable pets, harlots in diaphanous cloaks through which it was not quite possible to tell if they were diseased, good wives with panniers of stinking salted fish and honest bread and sealed jars of pollywogs for use in the commonplace home enchantments of this city.

And children also: some naked not necessarily from poverty but because skin was the best raincoat under Barbizond's light continual shower, others in fantastical costumes to match the whim of one or other parent—helmets of huge eggshells, bodices of leaves glued like scales, coats like tents and breeches like plant stems with the knees made to resemble knots in springtime. With spinning paper windmills, toy lances, tops, hoops and skipping-ropes they darted among the adults and left a trail of joyful disorder.

There was no joy in the heart of the traveler in black —only a dulled apprehension.

The places at the tables before the tavern filled with

customers, till only one was left—the second chair at this table where the traveler waited. Then, to the instant, appeared a curious bewildered figure from the direction of the city gate: a pale-faced, wild-haired man in a russet cape, clinging to a pitiful bag of belongings as though to a baulk of timber in an ocean of insanity. Time had etched his brow with suffering, and the traveler knew him the moment he clapped eyes on him.

Abreast of the tavern the stranger stopped. Enviously his eyes scanned the delicacies placed before the customers: fragrant jars of wine, mounds of mashed fruit stuck with silver spoons, crisp sheets of moonbark that only this city's enchanters knew how to bring across the freezing gulf of space without spoiling. Huddling his bag under his arm, he felt in his scrip for money, and pro duced one solitary copper coin.

Hesitant, he approached the traveler in black. "Sir, by your leave, will this purchase anything at your tavern here?" he muttered, and offered the coin on a trembling palm.

The traveler took it and turned it over, and was at pains to conceal the shock he felt on seeing what name the reverse of the coin bore.

Ys!

A city in Time so great and famous that rumors of it had crossed the tenuous border of chaos, running ahead of those who bore its news until the stories were magnified beyond believing, until there were prophecies caused by the recirculation of those rumors through one corner of eternity and back to Time—ahead of reality.

"No?" said the stranger sadly, seeing how long the blackclad one spent staring at his only money.

"Why—!" the latter exclaimed, and rubbed the coin with his fingertips, very lightly. "I should say so, friend! Is it not good gold, that passes anywhere?"

"Gold?" The stranger snatched it back, almost drop-

ping his shabby bag in his agitation, and scrutinized it incredulously. Through the coppery tarnish gleamed the dull warm yellow of precious metal.

Without more ado he slumped into the vacant chair at this table, and the waggle-hipped serving girl came to his side. "Food and drink!" he commanded, letting the miraculous coin ring on the table. "I starve and I'm clemmed with thirst—be quick!"

Eyes twinkling, the traveler regarded his new acquaintance. "And how are you called, sir?" he demanded.

"Jacques of Ys is my name," the other sighed. "Though truth to tell I'm not overmuch inclined to add my origin to my name any longer."

"Why so?"

"Would you wish to be shamed with a city full of fools?"

"Considering the matter with due reflection," said the traveler, "I think—no."

"Well, then!" Jacques of Ys ran his long bony fingers through his already untidy hair; the water had been trying to sleek it down, but half an ocean would probably have been unequal to the task. He was a gaunt man, neither old nor young, with burning gray eyes and a bush of tawny beard.

"And in what way are the people of Ys foolish?" probed the traveler.

"Once they were a great people," Jacques grunted. "And that's where the trouble started. Once we had a fleet—and not on any inland lake, either, but an Oceanus itself, mother of storms and gulls. Also we had an army to guard our trade routes, skillful money-changers, wise counselors . . . Ah, Ys was among the finest cities of the world!"

"I believe I've heard so," the traveler agreed.

"Then your news is stale, sir!" Jacques thumped on the table. "Listen! There came changes—in the times, in the

weather, in the currents of the sea. To be expected, *I* say, for did not Heraclitus teach us *panta rhei,* all things flow? But soft living and much ease had stolen the brains out of the people's heads! Faced with the silting-up of our great harbors, did they go to it and build dredgers? They did not! Faced with a landslide that closed our chief silk-road, did they go scouting to locate another way? They did not! Faced with long winters that killed our autumn wheat in the ground, did they sow barley or the hardy northern oat? They did not!"

"Then—what did they do?" the traveler inquired.

"Fell first to moaning and wringing their hands, and lamenting their sad fate; then, when this proved unfruitful and incapable of filling the granaries, turned to a crowning imbecility and invoked the impossible aid of magic. I see you scowl, sir, and well you may, for all the world knows magic is a vain and ridiculous snare laid by evil demons in the path of mankind."

This was a stubborn and pigheaded fellow, clearly; with his hand closed around a coin that veritable magic—and no petty domestic hearth-spell, either—had turned from copper to gold, he could still make such an assertion. He would not care for this domain in which he now found himself. Still, there was no help for that.

"And to what purpose did their researches in—ah—*magic* tend?" the traveler asked.

"To bring back the great days of the past, if you please," said Jacques with majestic scorn, and on the last word crammed his mouth full from the dish the serving girl placed before him.

While he assuaged his hunger, the traveler contemplated this news, Yes, such an event as Jacques had described would account for the paradox of Ys reversing the cosmic trend and exchanging Time for eternity and its attendant confusions. But there must have been a great and terrible hope in the minds of very many people for

the change to be brought about; there must have been public foolishness on a scale unparalleled in the All. Thinking on this, the traveler felt his face grow grim.

He got to his feet, grasping his staff, and Jacques glanced up with his cheeks bulging. Having swallowed frantically, he spoke. "Sire, did I intrude on your meditations? Your pardon if—"

"No, Jacques. You merely recalled me to some unfinished business. You are right in your description of the people of Ys. They are fools indeed. So do not—if you will take my advice—go back there."

"Where else shall I go, then?" Jacques countered, and for a second despair looked out from behind his eyes. "I set off thinking no place could be worse than my home had become—yet on this brief journey I've seen wonders and marvels that make me question my own good sense. I met a creature on the road that was neither man nor beast, but a blending; I saw a shining sprite washing feet like alabaster in a cloud rimmed with rainbows; and once when I bent to drink from a stream I saw pictures in the water which—no, I dare not say what I thought I saw."

"That would be the brook called Geirion," said the traveler, and gave a crooked smile. "Don't worry—things seen there can never become real. The folk round about go to the brook to rid themselves of baseless fears."

Jacques glanced over his shoulder at the motley crowd and shivered with dismay. "Nonetheless, sir, I'm not minded to remain in this—peculiar city!"

"It would be better for you to adapt to the local customs than to go home," the traveler warned. "A certain rather terrible doom is likely to overtake Ys, if things are as you say."

"Doom!" cried Jacques, and an unholy joy lit his face. "I told them so—over and again I told them! Would I could witness it, for the satisfaction of seeing them learn how right I was!"

The traveler sighed, but there was no help for it now; his single nature bound him to unique courses of action. He said sourly, "As you wish, so be it. Go hence toward the city men call Acromel, where honey itself is bitter, but do not enter it; go rather around it toward the setting sun, and you will reach a gray hill fledged with gray bushes where there are always dust-devils. Look behind you and see how they wipe out your footprints a moment after you have passed. From the brow of that hill you can see Ys. Wait there."

"Now just a moment," said Jacques, rising. "From my boyhood up I've wandered around and about Ys, and I know of no such hill as you describe!"

The traveler shrugged and made to turn away. Jacques caught at him.

"Wait! What's your name, that you say such strange things and send me on such an improbable errand?"

"You may call me Mazda, or anything you like," the black-clad man said, and shook off the claw-like grip with a moue of distaste.

"Hah! That's rich!" Jacques put his hands on his hips and laughed. "But still . . . For the sake of wanting to see how Ys goes to its fate, I'll follow your instructions. And my thanks!"

He parodied a bow, flourishing a hat that was not on his head.

"You may not thank me more than this once," said the traveler in black sadly, and went his way.

Lord Vengis sat in the Hall of State in Ys, and gazed at the nobility assembled in his presence. Once this had been a building to marvel at: mirrors higher than a man lined its walls, set between pilasters of marble, gilt and onyx, and the arching roof was painted with scenes in eleven bright colors, showing the birth of Saint Clotilda,

the martyrdom of Saint Gaufroy—that one was mostly in red—and the ascension of Saint Eulogos to heaven on the back of a leaping dolphin; the floor, moreover, had been carpeted with ermine and bear-pelts.

The pelts had gone. Some of them, to be exact, had returned—but in unusual fashion: they had been cut into paunches and bosoms with the aid of gilt girdles. Worse yet, some of the underlying slabs of marble had been prized up to expose crude stone flags—a rumor having got around as to the effectiveness of marble for sacrificial altars—and on an irregularity of this kind, in an ill-lit corner, Lord Vengis had twisted his ankle on the way into the hall.

That was the trouble with Ys now. The harbors that once swallowed the twice-daily ocean tides were blocked with stinking mud; grass grew on the stone moles as it did in the wheel-ruts of the fine old roads leading away from the city—though none of the personages present had seen this fact with his or her own eyes, all having declined to leave Ys since things took their turn for the worse. In the gardens of the great houses a plant like, but not identical with, mistletoe had spread over the handsome trees, letting fall a sticky fruit on those who walked beneath; in the deep sweet-water wells servants claimed to have heard ominous voices, so that now they refused to let the buckets down for fear of drawing up those who spoke: last week's market had reduced to two old men squabbling over a cracked earthen pot and a comb of dirty wild honey.

Lord Vengis glowered at the company, and they fell silent by degrees. Their attendants moved, silent as shadows, to the double doors of entrance, closed them, barred them against all intrusion—for this was no discussion which the common people were permitted to overhear.

With the clanging down of the final bar, one leaped to

his feet at the end of the front rank of gilded chairs, uttering a groaning cry and cramming his fingers into his mouth. All eyes turned.

"Fool, Bardolus!" Lord Vengis rapped. "What scares you?"

"In that mirror!" Bardolus gibbered, trying to point and finding his shaking arm disobedient to his will. "I saw in the mirror—!"

"What? What?" chorused a dozen fearful voices.

Bardolus was a small man whose manner was never better than diffident; he was accounted clever, but in a sly fashion that had won him few friends and none who would trust him. He said now, mopping sweat from his face, "I don't know. I saw something in the mirror that wasn't also in this hall."

Time hesitated in its course, until Lord Vengis gave a harsh laugh and slapped the arm of his chair.

"You'll have to become accustomed to manifestations like that, Bardolus!" he gibed. "So long as the things are in the mirror, what's to worry you? It's when they emerge into the everyday world that you must look out. Why, only the other day, when I was in my thaumaturgic cabinet testing a certain formula I—but enough of that." He coughed, and behind his polite covering had glanced to see if his words had had the desired effect. They had, even though the episode to which he referred was an invention. True, he'd spent much time in his cabinet; true, he'd rehearsed many formulae; nothing had so far come of his efforts, not even a harmless shadow in a mirror.

Still, that would change. One could tell by the feel of the air. There were forces in it that no man could put a name to, and sometimes scalps prickled as they do before a thunderstorm.

"We are here for a reason you know," he said after an

impressive pause. "We are agreed on the only course open to us. We admit that modern Ys stands on the shoulders of very great men and women; unkind fate has burdened us with such difficulties as they never encountered, and we eat stale bread and rancid meat where they ate pies running with gravy and soft delicious fruits from the ends of the earth. We drink plain water, none too clean, where they enjoyed wine and mead and beer like brown crystal.

"We have agreed that for all their—admitted—greatness, *they* are responsible, not us! We did not ask to be born at a time when our trees die, our crops wither, our harbor is blocked. In every way they are responsible: for siting Ys where it stands, for breeding children to inherit such a miserable legacy!"

"Ay!" came a rumble of assent from all around the hall.

"Some faint-hearts, some ignorant fools, have argued with us," Vengis went on, warming to a speech he hadn't intended to deliver at length. "These, of course, were base-born, lacking the insight which nobility gives. Jacques the scrivener, for example, would have had us turn to with hoes and shovels and clear the harbor with our bare hands!"

This time, it was a chuckle that circled the hall. "What's become of him, by the way?" someone asked audibly.

"Does it matter?" Vengis countered, drawing his beetling brows together. "We know we are doing the right thing. We have decided that we must employ something other than crude—ah—agricultural implements to cope with so massive a disaster. We shall, in short, restore all our fortunes, and the splendor of our city, *and* root out once and for all the disaffection among the common rabble spread by such as Jacques, by using the mightiest

means available to us. Magically, by decree of the will, by harnessing supernatural forces, we shall again make Ys the envy of the world!"

A roar of approval and a barrage of clapping went up. Unnoticed in the shadows, one listener alone did not clap, and he stood leaning on his staff, shaking his head very slowly from side to side.

"Let us have news, then—encouraging news of our progress!" Vengis cried. "I call first on Dame Seulte, around whose home last time I rode by I could not help noticing an aura pregnant with remarkable phenomena."

Silence. At length a portly woman near the back of the hall rose with some difficulty and spoke.

"Dame Seulte, as you know, is my close neighbor, and as she is not here I think perhaps I ought to mention that yesterday she was in high spirits and confident of success. She had obtained a free-will gift of a child to offer to—well, to a creature best not named directly—and was leading the pretty thing home on a leash of green leather. Such a sweet sight!"

"Dame Rosa!" said a man from nearer the front, turning in his chair. "A free-will gift—are you sure?"

And his companion, a pale girl of no more than eighteen in a dress of brown velvet, said doubtfully, "My maid said something about a fire at Dame Seulte's house this morning. . . ."

Vengis slapped the arm of his chair again, making a noise as sharp as a gavel's. He said sternly, "No defeatist talk, *if* you please, Lady Vivette!"

"But are you *sure* it was a free-will gift?" persisted the last man who had spoken.

Dame Rosa said stiffly, "Dame Seulte promised to raise the child as her own, and the parents were poor and hungry; they parted willingly with it."

"Then there was a fire at her home this morning," said the man, and shrugged. "My copy of the book she con-

jured from has a leaf that hers lacks, and on it the authorities are cited by dozens—deception is of no avail with that ceremony."

There was a stunned pause. Dame Seulte, after all had only been trying to manifest a comparatively straightforward elemental.

"I have better news," said a sweet, enticing voice from the opposite side of the assembly. They turned gratefully; this was Lady Meleagra, whose eyes like sapphires, lips like rose-petals and skin like snow had broken hearts for ten of her twenty-one years. As Eadwil had once done in Ryovora, she had accepted a basic proviso for her wished-for powers; she, though, had not suffered in consequence, but she had imposed a most regrettable condition upon those who craved to share the pleasures of her chamber at night. It was an efficacious precaution, but the number of suitors calling on her had signally reduced since she imposed the rule.

"I have sensed a change here in Ys," she mused aloud. "A great wonder has overtaken this city. So far I do not know its precise nature, but the fact is indisputable. See!"

She stretched out one graceful arm, swathed in white lace so fine her skin tinted it pink, and in the central aisle dividing the company a thing appeared. It was dark; it writhed, and it had no distinguishable feature except two glowing eyes alight with hatred. It lasted half a minute before it slowly faded, and at its going the air was full of a dank steamy odor against which those lucky enough to have brought them buried their noses in bouquets of flowers.

By degrees a clamor arose, as on all sides the nobles strove to show that they had been equally successful. "Look!" cried Messer Hautnoix, and between his hands he strung a chain of gleaming bubbles from nowhere, and again and yet a third time before the glamor faded. And: "See!" cried Dame Faussein, shaking a drum made

of a gourd capped either end with tattooed skin from a drowned sailor; this made the hall pitch-black for as long as it sounded, and all present had the eerie sense that they were adrift in an infinite void. And: "Watch!" bellowed rough old Messer d'Icque, spreading a scarlet cloth at the full stretch of both arms; on the cloth, a mouth opened and uttered five sonorous words that no one present understood.

Smiles greeted these achievements, and loud approbation gave place to a babble of inquiry as to means—"Five nights drunk under a gallows!" boasted Messer Hautnoix; "A day and a night and a day kissing the mouth of the man who bequeathed his skin!" bragged Dame Faussein; "Doing things to a goat I can't discuss with ladies present," Messer D'Icque muttered behind his hand.

"But that creature came to me when I did no more than call on him," Meleagra said, and at these disturbing words those closest to her chair drew as far back as they could from her without appearing rude.

Vengis on his high chair joined neither in the praising nor in the questioning; his heavy-jowled face remained set as stone. Had he not submitted himself to worse indignities? Had he not made pledges which in retrospect made him quail inwardly? And nothing had yet come from all his struggles—not even a pretty tricksiness like Messer Hautnoix's shining bubbles!

He thumped on his chair-side again, and cut through the chatter with a furious roar. "Enough! Enough! Are you children early out of school, that you disgrace our meeting with mere gossip? How far do these cantrips advance us to our goal? That's the question!"

A little embarrassed at their own enthusiasm, the company subsided into a period of asking each other with their eyes if any was bold enough to claim success in the central problem. At first they avoided looking at Meleagra; then, no other offer being forthcoming, they

took that plunge and were rewarded with a sigh and a shake of the head.

"As I thought," Vengis crowed in scorn. "You're overwhelmed with bright spectacle and have forgotten the urgent need confronting us. Next time you go to conjure, ask yourself first this: if I succeed, what comes by way of benefit? Can I eat it? Can I put it on my back, or mend my roof with it? In fine, how will it serve not only me, but the community and nobility of Ys?"

He glared at the now fidgety assembly. "It's not going to be easy, I know that well. I've had no success to speak of, myself. But at least I haven't been diverted down illusory byways!"

The one standing unnoticed in shadow shook his head once more. Here truly was a company of fools, and chief of them their chief Vengis: a man of consuming arrogance and vanity, blind to his faults and proud beyond description. In which case . . .

He gave a gentle cough, and heads whisked around to see from whom the noise issued. Vengis half rose from his seat in astonishment.

"What are you doing here?" he thundered. "Who let you in without my leave?"

The traveler in black walked without a sound along the aisle dividing the company until he was face to face with Vengis, and there was that in his eyes which stifled further speech prior to the answering of the double question.

At last he said, "As to what I am doing here, I have been listening and considering what you've said. As to the leave that was granted me, I go where my presence is required, whether you wish it or no."

The ranked nobles of the city held their breath. This was the speech of one holding an authority they dared not challenge.

"What—what do you want of us?" whispered Vengis when he had regained some of his composure.

"Say rather what you want of me," the traveler countered with a sardonic cock of his head. "From the confusion of your meeting here I've been unable to make it out. Put it in words for me. That is, if you are sure you know what you are after . . . ?"

There was a gently insulting turn to that last phrase. Vengis bridled.

"Of course we know!" he blustered. "Have you not seen the miserable pass to which our fair city is reduced?"

"I have," acknowledged the one in black. "And as nearly as I can discern, you hold your ancestors to blame."

"We do so!" Vengis snapped. "And we seek to make them rectify their fault. We seek to call them back, that they may behold the ruin they have bequeathed to us, and compel them to save us."

"Compulsion is no part of my task," said the one in black. "I know only choice. And you say you have chosen; what then restrains you from action?"

"What do you think?" That was Bardolus, half-frantic with the tension of the moment. "We want the power to bring it about, and so far all we've managed to achieve is some minor manifestations and a few personal calamities like the one which now overtakes Dame Seulte!"

"Is this the desire of you all?" said the traveler with very great sadness, casting his burning gaze to the furthest corners of the company.

"Ay!" came the chorus of replies.

"As you wish," said the traveler softly, "so be it."

Where he went, none of them saw. He passed from among them swiftly as thought, silently as shadows, and

they had no more stomach for their consultations once he had departed. Yet they felt a lightness, a sense of promise, as they called to the servants to unbar the doors and made their several ways toward their homes.

The streets by which they passed seemed more crowded than of late, and not a few of them had the impression that they recognized among the throng a familiar face, a known gait, or a garment of distinctive cut. However, such ideas were of a piece with the general mood, and served only to heighten the taut anticipation they had brought away from the hall.

"What think you of Dame Seulte's fate?" said the Lady Vivette to her companion—who was also her brother, but they had judged that an advantage in making their earlier experiments. She spoke as their carriage creaked and jolted over the courtyard of their ancestral home, a short ride only from the Hall of State; behind, the hinges of the gates complained of rust and lack of oil when the retainers forced them to.

"I think she was unwise," her brother said. His name was Ormond to the world, but recently he had adopted another during a midnight ritual, and Vivette knew what it was and held some power over him in consequence.

"Do you believe that we have been gifted by this—this personage?" Vivette insisted.

"We can but try," shrugged Ormond. And added, "Shall we now, or wait till after dinner?"

"Now," Vivette said positively. "I have a feeling . . ."

So, duly, they made their preparations: putting on fantastical garments which contained surprising lacunae, and over these items of no further use to their original owners, such as a necklace of children's eyes contained in glass for Vivette and a mask made from a horse's head for Ormond. Arrayed, they repaired to a room in the high tower of the mansion, where by custom the heads of

their family had been laid in state for a day and a night before burial since untold generations.

There, in a pentacle bounded by four braziers and a pot of boiling wax over a lamp, they indulged in some not unpleasurable pastimes, taking care to recite continually turn and turn about a series of impressive cantrips. The room darkened as they went on, and great excitement almost interrupted their concentration, but they stuck to it and . . .

"Look!" whispered Vivette, and pointed to the catafalque removed to the corner of the room. Under the black velvet draperies a form was lying—that of a man armed and armored.

"Why! Just so, in the picture downstairs, did Honorius our great-grandfather lie when he was waiting burial!" Ormond snapped, and leaped to his feet to pull back the velvet.

Impassive, a steel visor confronted them. Vivette pushed it open, and in the dark interior of the helmet eyes opened and a rush of fetid breath began. Stiffly, with effort, the occupant of the armor arose from the catafalque.

"Come, let me kiss you both," said a rusty voice, and the arms resistlessly encircled them, though they struggled to get away. "What, have you no feeling for your own kin?"

There was a hollow hideous chuckle, and strong as the steel enclosing them the arms forced them close; the horse-mask went thudding to the floor, and spittle-wet lips clamped on one mouth, then the other.

Both fainted. When they recovered, the figure in armor was gone, but where it had taken shape on the catafalque lay a manuscript book in bindings of leather and brass, open to the page recording the death of Honorius from a contagious fever against which no medicine was of use, in the three-and-thirtieth year of his age.

Dame Rosa, in her palanquin borne between two white female donkeys, passed the corner on which stood the house formerly owned by Dame Seulte, and drew aside the curtains to peer curiously upward. Sure enough, from the window of the room in which her friend had been accustomed to conduct her experiments, a licking tongue of greasy black smoke had smeared the walls.

She clucked with her tongue. Poor Seulte! Had she but waited another day she might have had the full fruit of her efforts. That at least was Dame Rosa's belief; she trusted the promise the one in black had made, and looked forward with impatience to the earliest moment she could closet herself with her books and apparatus and rehearse with improvements the most promising of her formulae.

Her family had in the past numbered among the most lascivious of Ys, and excessive indulgence by the womenfolk in the pleasures of the bed had often threatened to overpopulate the resources of their not inconsiderable estates. Accordingly there was a cellar where excess children had been discreetly disposed of, not by any crude and direct means but by consigning their nourishment to the fates. She entered this cellar by a bronze door, which she locked with a heavy key, and passed between rows of wooden stalls in each of which a set of rat-gnawed bones lay on foul straw, gyves about one ankle.

She had chosen this place after much thought; surely, she reasoned, the point of departure to eternity of so many spirits must have a peculiar potency!

Her method of working involved feathers, four liquids of which the least noxious was fresh blood, and long silent concentration while seated on a stool of unique design with no other covering for her ample frame than her age-sparse hair would afford. Briskly she carried out

the introductory rites; then she sat down and closed her eyes, shivering from excitement and not from cold.

She had, the books stated, to keep her eyes shut until she had completed the recital of a cantrip that lasted eight whole pages in minuscule script. There were two pages to go when she heard the first rustlings and clicketings behind her. There was one page to go when the first touch came on her fleshy thigh. Desperately wanting to know what marvels her work had brought about, she raced through the last page, and on the concluding word came the first *bite.*

Thirty starving children, mad with hunger and their teeth keen as any rat's left gnaw-marks on her bones too.

Bardolus trembled as he piled the curious ingredients high on the charcoal-filled brazier before his mirror. He had chosen the mirror spell out of those known to him because he had, after all, come closest to success with it before—even if he had been taken aback to see a manifestation in the unconstrained mirror of the Hall of State.

He wished he could find the courage to abandon the entire project, but fear and conceit combined to drive him on. He was beside himself with jealousy to think that a slip of a girl like Meleagra—not to mention that coarse peasant type d'Icque, or stupid complacent Dame Faussein!—had mastered simple powers while he still cried out in terror at the consequences of his own thaumaturgy.

He struck a light and ignited the pile. Saturated with the fat of a sow that had devoured her own farrow, it blazed up and gave off a choking smoke that veiled the mirror till it was all consumed.

Then the air cleared, and in the mirror was a face he knew: that of his own mother.

"My son Bardolus," she said with fawning sweetness. "Look behind you. There is an oaken cupboard which

you have known since you were a child. Press the last knob in the carved design, and a drawer will open. In the drawer is that which gave me power over your father. Take it as my gift."

The image faded. A little puzzled, Bardolus hesitated before doing as directed. He remembered his father only dimly; he had been a strange man, alternating between hysterical gaiety and depression so deep he would sit by the hour contemplating a knife or a dish of poison, plucking up the courage to take his own life.

Yet—*power.*

He pressed the knob and the drawer slid open, revealing a packet made of a strange yellow paper and sealed with green wax. He broke the seal convulsively, and a fine powder drifted up from it, seeming to seek his nostrils of its own accord. He tried to dodge, but it was useless; he inhaled it all, and the packet lay empty on his palm.

Another few seconds, and vast elation filled him. Why, he could do anything! He was ten feet tall, stronger than an ox, more potent than the heroes of legend and so handsome no wench could withstand him if he courted her!

He threw down the packet and raced toward the street.

From the mirror drifted mists, that coalesced into the shape of his mother, and ultimately grew strong enough to take up the empty packet in gnarled old fingers and regard it out of bleary eyes.

"You deserve no better fate than the one who got you on my body against my will," she whispered. "One hour, Bardolus—one hour of delirium! And afterwards despair. For it will be no use hunting for more of the drug, Bardolus! I never compounded more than one dose at a time, and it was by postponing for a day the next mixing that I

held power over your father. There is no one to mix it for you, Bardolus! No one at all!"

But these were not all the calamities that overtook Ys, the once-fair city. For those whom the black-clad traveler had challenged truly did not know what they were after, and for fear of letting slip a unique opportunity had demanded as much as they could conceive. Lost in this plethora of plenty—somewhere—was precisely and exactly what was needful; that much the traveler was bound to grant. But as he had warned, he had nothing to do with compulsion. Choice was what he understood.

And those who made a wrong choice did so because of what they were.

His friends had generally liked Messer Hautnoix, who was engagingly like a child with his delight in such baubles as the pretty colored bubbles he had displayed to the nobles of the city; it was characteristic of him that, compelled to spend five nights under a gallows for the privilege, he spent the entire time drunk to avoid excessive contemplation of his situation.

Yet when he repaired to his chosen ground of the execution dock and chuckled while he cut the throat of a white cock and a black hen, the one who came to him proved to be the first bearer of his line's name, professionally the municipal hangman, who had so loved his work that more than once he bought the silence of witnesses that would have saved the victims from the rope; this being discovered they had set him swinging on his own gallows at the last.

Much time having passed since he had performed his welcome task, he seized his chance with both hands, and sunset found Messer Hautnoix dangling from a noose while his forebear walked back to the city gate, rubbing his bloated hands to think of what was promised.

Dame Faussein, who had paid a drowned man so generously for the loan of his skin, made further use of her curious little drum when she came home, thinking that the tried and tested means must be superior to any not yet proved workable. It was regrettable—and she certainly regretted it—that this time the darkness to which its beating carried her was the musty interior of her ancestral vaults, where the warmth of her living body, so long as it lasted, gave strange comfort to an aunt and two uncles whose relationship even now was more complex than the ordinary ties of kinship; her eyes continued to perceive darkness when the three together had lifted off the enclosing marble lid of their mausoleum and gone to see how Ys now stood.

Messer d'Icque was indeed of peasant stock—that was no secret in Ys. His inclinations were toward country matters, and it has never been any secret anywhere that events transpire in lonely country districts at which the sophisticated of the cities invariably wonder or grow nauseated. The whole of his city residence had been stunk out for weeks by a dung-pile he had made in the central courtyard, because it was said to be in the warmth of rotting manure that homunculi came to artificial life. This heap of foulness he passed by today, however; his mind was set on the proper employment of his stock of what the French call *animelles*, a springtime by-product of farms where sheep and cattle are bred. His plan was not, moreover, to cook and serve them as a seasonal delicacy.

To him came a progenitor who had felt the frustration of an aging wife, racked with child-bearing, and had turned to the daughter of his bailiff; it being Spring. The bailiff had returned early from the task of which the *animelles* were typically a by-product, and had made use of the implement in hand to avenge the slight to his family honor. For twenty-one generations the sufferer had

sought the chance to inflict on another the operation performed on himself, and he did so without asking permission upon Messer d'Icque as the subject convenient to him. After that he set forth to multiply his valued possessions from all possible male sources.

No word of this had been brought to the beauteous Meleagra when she came home. She had never cared for Messer d'Icque, thinking him rough and ill-bred, and the news that he had been involuntarily qualified to share her overnight company would have interested her not at all.

In a boudoir hung with lace draperies, containing a round golden bed and a mirror abstracted from the Hall of State as being the largest in Ys—which she had mounted cunningly on the ceiling—she caused her maids first to draw all the curtains at the many high windows, then to light candles which gave off a fragrant, intoxicating aroma. She suffered them to remove her clothing, to prepare her a bath in which she dissolved a handful of polychrome salts, and to sing in harmony while they sponged her from head to toe. Sweetmeats were brought on a white platter and a silver filigree dish, and twenty-four new gowns were displayed before her on the body of a dumb girl who matched the dimensions of her figure.

All the while this was going on, she was musing over a crucial decision: should she, or should she not, act upon the promise the black-clad one had made?

That he had the power to which he laid claim, she never doubted. Two years before anyone else in Ys saw what needed to be done, she had closed the bargain about her virginity which she had scrupulously kept—at first purely from determination, but latterly partly from honest fear.

And what she had purchased with this bargain had enabled her to recognize the single nature of their unaccountable visitor.

A single nature! It implied that the possessor of it could neither lie nor deceive, surely . . . ? In which case she might employ her talents and be safe as she ever was. Her whole life since the age of eleven had been on the edge of a precipice, and there were creatures at the bottom of the chasm she had eluded only by extreme foresight and planning.

She had naturally said nothing of what she had learned to anyone else. It had been an uncharacteristic yielding to vanity which made her call Ub-Shebbab to the Hall of State—the purpose had been to discountenance Vengis because he was a boastful donkey. The mark had been struck. Yet Ub-Shebbab was the meekest and mildest of the beings she had called up.

Why share her hard-bought knowledge with fools and bunglers? Let disaster overtake them in due time. Meanwhile, she herself . . .

In the end, it was curiosity as much as anything that decided her. She dismissed her maids and put on a gown that had not been displayed during her bath, worked all over in gold wire with a single sentence in a forgotten language; then she opened a brass chest and took out gifts she had exacted from various suitors in the days before information about her inflexible rule was noised abroad.

There was a twig from Yorbeth, bearing a leaf transparent as glass and a brown, blotched fruit which tinkled like a bell; there was a vial of rain water caught at the foot of the rainbow overarching Barbizond, that had a trifle of Sardhin's essence in it; there was a block of pumice from the volcano where Fegrim slumbered; there was a jar of gray dust from the hill where Laprivan was shut away; there was a hair from the head of Farchgrind, an inch of candle that had revealed the secret thoughts of Wolpec but had been allowed to burn one instant longer than was safe, and a drawing of two birds and a crocodile made by a possessed child.

Also there was a book.

Following with care the instructions it contained, she danced around her boudoir keening, went twice backward across the floor with a knife between her teeth, and at last cut her forearm and let three drops of her blood fall on the carpet. When she looked again the stains had vanished.

Nothing else happened in the room. She had expected that; humming, she changed her gown for something more conventional and went down to the dining-hall where supper was to be served.

Already as she approached it she could hear the clatter of dishes, the murmur of conversation. That boded a great company. She hurried the last few steps and threw open the door.

Every place at her great table—and there were thirty-six—was taken; the servants had pressed into use benches from the kitchen, too, and the sideboards and the serving-tables were alike packed with a hungry horde. For all the scullions and maids could do, the food, brought on trolleys because there was more of it than a man could lift, disappeared within instants of being set down. The bread had gone, the meat, the wine; now it was boiled turnips and hedge-greens, broth of bones and barley, and beer too new to serve by ordinary.

Yet that was not all. Behind, between, among those who ate were others looting. The fine brocade drapes had been torn down to clothe naked bodies, leather-backed chairs stripped to afford protection to sore feet, tapestries turned to cloaks and ponchos. One wide-eyed woman, lacking anything else, had smeared herself with gravy to break up the maggot pallidity of her skin.

Meleagra stood in the doorway for a long heartbeat of time before the chief steward caught sight of her and came running to beg for help.

"Mistress, what shall we do? They are in every room

—five hundred of them at the last count! And all, all have the right to what you have, for they say they are your ancestors and this is their home!"

"That is so," whispered Meleagra. Her eyes, drawn by a magnet, went to him who had taken her seat at the head of the table, and a silence overcame the entire company.

The one at whom she gazed was a cross-eyed, ill-favored fellow in a dirty doublet, unshaven and with black around his nails. He gave her a smile that showed gapped yellow teeth, and spoke in a soft voice with a peasant's accent.

"We are in your debt, Meleagra, that you set your table for us and bid us back to enjoy what was ours and shall be again! You have worked most potent magic, child; the family is proud of you."

"Who—who are you?" she choked out.

"Damien, who built the house and founded the family's fortune in the earliest days of Ys. And at my side Cosimo, my first-born here—though I had byblows aplenty in another town! And Syriax his wife and their children Ruslan, Roland and Igraine, and their children Mark, Valetta, Corin, Ludovic, Matthaus, Letty, Seamus; theirs, Orlando, Hugo, Dianne, twins Nathaniel and Enoch—"

"Stop! Stop!" Meleagra put her hands to her temples; the room seemed to be spinning, and from every side gross faces leered at her, or thin drawn faces gazed in stony regard, or dull faces moped, or . . .

"There is no more food!" the steward shouted. "We have killed all the poultry, the pantry is bare, the wine-casks are drained, the last carp is gone from the pond, the beer-barrels are exhausted and even the *well* is dry!"

"You've done this to me, for that I gave you breath and life and this new opportunity?" Meleagra whispered to her remotest ancestor Damien.

"What do we care for you?" said Damien with contempt. "We are here and alive, your ancestors; how then can you be of importance? Here we are alive, who died before you saw light—how then can you be mistress in this house? You are a thing not thought of, less than dust for dust can be seen to dance in sunbeams. You are the flame of a candle guttering out. So—*poof!*"

He blew at the candle closest to him upon the great table, and with the death of its flame there was no such person as Meleagra—never had been—never could be.

Long hours Lord Vengis had paced in the high room above the Hall of State, pondering the day's events and screwing himself to the point where he would again begin his rituals. The day wasted; shadows lengthened; evening cold began to permeate the building and he called for fire.

He was afraid.

He had seen in the eyes of the traveler in black a warning which his pride forbade him to heed; he was ashamed because he was afraid, yet shame could not break fear's grip. He wished to do as doubtless many others were doing—what if he alone remained untalented in sorcery when blockheads like Bardolus or half-grown wenches like Vivette boasted powers unnameable?

Nonetheless, he dithered and delayed, and had not yet cast the first runes nor recited the first line of any formula when the sergeant of the guard came stiffly to report a disturbance in the town.

"Disturbance?" rapped Vengis. "Man, be precise! What do you mean?"

"Why, sir"—and the sergeant rubbed his chin dolefully—"some hours agone there were complaints of desecration in the graveyard by the cathedral, the curate saying that a vault was open and the bones removed, but seeing as how we've had call for similar extraordinary materials

that your lordship required I decided best not to say anything. Now, though, it's serious, and the side wall of the building here is cracked where they entombed alive a woman named Igraine—you've seen the plaque—accused of commerce with a familiar spirit in the guise of a cat. . . ."

From the street outside came a howl as of maddened beasts, and the sergeant flinched visibly. But he continued in his best official manner.

"Then, your lordship, at dusk reports came of strangers in the city and we called out the patrols for fear of infiltration by some jealous invader. Myself, I've stopped twenty-one persons and all spoke with the accent of the city and gave names that fit our habits, but it seems I've seen all those names on gravestones before now—some, indeed, earlier today when I answered the complaint at the cathedral. And what brings me in to you, begging your pardon, is the curious business of the man and two wives."

"What?" whispered Vengis, sweat pearling his face.

"Well, sir . . . There was this man, whom I'd challenged, walking with a girl of fifteen-odd, and comes up from nowhere a woman aged as he was—forty, maybe—and says she is his wife and what's this hussy doing with her husband? So the little girl says they were married legally and then there follows screaming of insults and hair-pulling and at the last we must clap 'em in the jail. Which is—uh—difficult. For every cell, they tell me, is full, and that's more than I can understand; this morning the records say there were one hundred and one places vacant for new prisoners."

Vengis's voice had failed him. He could not speak, but chewed his nails and stared with burning eyes at the sergeant.

"What shall I do, your lordship?" the man finally asked.

"I—I . . ." Vengis spun around and strode to the window overlooking the main square. He thrust the casement open and leaned out. By the last dim light of the dying day he could see a myriad people gathering. Some were colorful and substantial, but these were few; most were gray as the stones they trod, and they trailed curious wispy streamers behind them, like cobwebs. But all alike had the same air of bewilderment, as though they were lost in the mazes of time and eternity, and could not find the way back to the present moment.

Vengis began to babble incoherently.

There came a thundering knock at the door of the room where they were, and a cavernous groaning voice said, "Open! Open in the name of the Lord of Ys!"

Shrugging, the sergeant made to obey, but Vengis came after him, clawing madly at his arm. "Don't! Don't let them in!" he wailed.

"But, your lordship," said the sergeant firmly, "it *is* in your name that they demand entry, so it must be a matter of importance. Indeed, with your permission, I'm expecting further reports from my patrols."

Vengis searched the room with feverish eyes. In the far corner he spied a cupboard large as a man; he dashed to it, and slammed the door behind him.

The sergeant, astonished, went nonetheless to answer the knock, and fell back in dismay before the apparition which confronted him. Gaunt, tall, with a second mouth gaping redly in his throat, was the figure of legendary Lord Gazemon, who had laid the first stone of the city with his own two hands.

Now those hands held a broadsword; now he advanced with slow terrible steps upon the closet in which Vengis thought to secrete himself, and battered down the planks to the door to hail that miserable successor of his into the wan torchlight.

"You know me?" croaked the city's founder.

Gulping, moaning, Vengis contrived a nod, and the huge spectre shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. "Oh, to what a miserable stature have shrunk these weaklings of today!" he bellowed. The sergeant, cowering in the opposite corner, could not tell by which mouth Gazemon spoke—his natural one, or the second which had let out his life.

Again the door rattled to an imperious knock, and he scuttled to answer before Gazemon could address him. With trembling hands he admitted those who stood without: Lorin, who had slain Gazemon by treachery and usurped his throne; Angus, who had taken the throne back into the rightful line of descent; then Caed, then Dame Degrance who passed for a man and ruled like one until the physicians at her deathbed unmasked her sex, then Walter of Meux, then Auberon, then Lams and the first Vengis who was a stout and brave leader for the one short year he survived, and others and others to the latest who had sat the chair below before this current weakling.

With axes, maces, swords, with pens and scrolls and money-changer's scales according to the sort of power by which they had made Ys great, they gathered around the hapless victim of their contempt.

"We have been abroad in the city since we were called from rest," rumbled Gazemon, his grip still fast on Vengis' shoulder. "We have seen the stagnant puddles in the streets, the shutters dangling from one hinge on the cracked walls of the fine houses, the dirty beggars and the starving children in this which we all gave our lives to make into a city that the world should envy! You have given our golden towers to tarnish, our iron doors to rust; you have given our splendid harbor to the mud and our fat grain-fields to the weeds; you have squandered

our treasury on baubles when we bought it with blood. How say you all, you who listen here? Is it not time that we held an accounting?"

"Ay, time," they said as one, and hearing the menace in the voices Vengis rolled his eyes upward in their sockets and let go his hold on life.

"Oh, there you are!"

Perched on a rock at the top of the gray hill, Jacques turned and forwent his gazing at sunset-gilded Ys in favor of a scowl at the traveler in black who had come to join him. There were no footprints to show by which path he had arrived; still, where Laprivan wiped away the past that was no wonder.

"You've been long enough, in all conscience," he complained further. "It's cold here, and for all you promised I should witness the doom of Ys I see nothing but what I've always seen when I looked on the place. Though before you say anything I concede you were correct in describing this hill. I must have missed it somehow when I wandered around in my youth."

"No, that's not the case," the traveler sighed. Now the course of events was grinding to its inexorable conclusion, he felt downcast, despite there never having been an alternative. Also he did not like Jacques, regarding him as too self-righteously opinionated.

"So what's the form this doom will take?" Jacques pressed him.

"It is already in train," the traveler said. He raised his staff and pointed across the twilight gray of the valley. "Do you not see, there by the gate, a certain number of persons making in this direction?"

"Why—yes, I believe I do." Jacques peered hard. "But I cannot make out who they are at this great distance."

"I know who they are."

"Then tell me!"

"They are those of the people of Ys who have remembered you—Jacques the scrivener. And who are now bent on finding you and regulating an account with you. There is a great balancing going on, and you are an uncanceled factor."

"What?" Turned sidewise in the gloaming, Jacques' face was ghastly pale. "Why me? What do they want with me?"

"I will explain if you wish," the traveler agreed wearily, and shifted his grip on his staff to afford a more comfortable angle of support. "You must understand first that the would-be enchanters of Ys have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, and have called back—as they desired—those who made the city and visited their present plight on them. And they have found, as was inevitable, that their ancestors were ordinary human beings, with human faults and failings, and not infrequently with remarkable outstanding faults, because this is the way with persons who are remarkable and outstanding in other areas of their lives."

"But—but I counseled against this foolishness!" cried Jacques.

"No," corrected the one in black. "You said: you are pig-headed fools and I am absolutely, unalterably right while everyone else is wrong. And when they would not listen to such dogmatic bragging—as who would?—you washed your hands of them, and even wished them a dreadful doom."

"Did I wish them any worse than they deserved?" Jacques was trying to keep up his front of bravado, but he had to link his fingers to stop his hands from shaking.

"Discuss the matter with those who are coming to find you," suggested the traveler sardonically. "Their belief is opposite to yours; they hold that by making people disgusted with the views you subscribed to, you prevented rational thought from regaining its mastery of Ys. Where

you should have reasoned, you flung insults; where you should have argued calmly and with purpose, you castigated honest men with doubts as purblind idiots. This is what they say, and I have no business disagreeing with them. I leave it to you to convince them of the truth—but it seems likely to be a tough task, in view of what they carry."

Jacques looked again at the column of people winding out from the city, and now saw what the traveler referred to. At the head of the line was a blacksmith with a hammer on his shoulder; behind him, a ditcher came with a mattock, then a gardener with a sickle and two coopers with heavy barrel-staves. And those behind still bore each their handiest weapon, down to a red-handed goodwife wielding the stick from her butter churn.

"But—but!" Jacques leaped to his feet, glancing wildly around for a way of escape. "You must stop them! You told me to come here, and I think you knew this would happen if I did!"

"It happened because you wished to witness the doom of Ys," said the traveler. "You did not stop to ask if that doom was one you must share to witness it."

Slightly louder, for Jacques had begun to stumble downhill into the gathering night, he added, "Running away won't help for long, my friend. Those are incredibly determined people yonder; though you hid in the pit of Fegrim's volcano, they would track you down."

"Is there nothing I can do?" moaned Jacques. "How can I stop them from coming after me? Tell me! Tell me!"

"As you wish, so be it," said the traveler, and cheered up somewhat, for that put a very satisfactory end to this momentary aberration in the smooth course of the cosmos. It had happened, which was bad, but now it would cease, which was good.

He tapped three times on a nearby rock, and under his breath he said, "Laprivan! Laprivan of the Yellow Eyes!"

Jacques screamed.

Below, in the valley, the column of determinedly advancing men and women bound to wreak their vengeance on Jacques hesitated, halted, and broke in disorder that grew to panic. For out of the side of his hill Laprivan was peering, and what was behind his eyes belonged to the age when chaos was the All.

Some small power remained to him so long as he survived, and he put it to this single and unique purpose: to wipe clean the slate of yesterday.

So he looked down on Ys, and saw there what was to him an abomination: the shadows of the past given substance. He reached out one of his arms, and erased—and erased—and erased. . . .

Honorius, sowing his contagious fever on the streets, was not.

Thirty sated children, smeared with blood on faces and fingers, were not.

Bardolus' mother, chortling over the fate of her son, was not.

Knotting a noose from every rope in a cord-seller's shop, the first of the line of the Hautnoix was not.

Brandishing his bloody trophies, the adulterous d'Icque was not.

Three who had come forth from a vault were not.

Stripped of its food, its draperies, its gold and silver and precious artworks, the house of Meleagra was silent.

And those who had come to regulate accounts with the decadent lordling Vengis took their leave.

Also many who had come forth from graves and sepulchres, from hollow walls and wayside ditches, from dungeons and the beds of rivers and the bottoms of wells —were not.

"So!" said the traveler in black, when he had restored Laprivan to his captivity. "You have a reprieve, Jacques —are you glad of that?"

The tawny-bearded man beside him moaned an affirmative.

"And will you learn a lesson from it?"

"I'll try—as heaven is my witness, I will try!"

"Fairly said," the traveler declared. "Go then after those who are hiding in the valley. Approach them as a friend, not showing that you know why they set forth with cudgels and bludgeons. Say to them that the rule of chaos in Ys is ended, and so is Ys; they must return home for the last time and pack their belongings before they and all the people scatter to the ends of the Earth."

"But—is this Earth?" Jacques whimpered. "On the way to Barbizond—and now here—I've seen . . ."

"Don't worry. You'll have no more of that. It belongs to yesterday, and with other traces of yesterday Laprivan has wiped it out." The traveler allowed himself a smile. "And do not lament excessively for Ys. For cities, as for men, there comes a Time . . . Besides, there is a prophecy: a prince shall seek a name for his new capital, and he'll be told of Ys, and out of envy for its greatness he will say, 'I name my city Parys, *equal to* Ys.' "

"I have little faith in prophecies as a rule," said Jacques, staring. "But in this extraordinary place . . . Well, no matter. Sir, I take my leave of you—and I thank you. You have held up an honest mirror to me, and I cannot resent that."

"Go now," the traveler said. "Be quick."

He waited long on the brow of the hill while the last daylight dwindled away and the stars wheeled gradually to the angle marking midnight. It became more and more difficult to see Ys: the towers melted into mist, the walls

and gates were shadow-dark among shadows. For a while torches glimmered; then even they failed to be seen any longer, and when dawn came there was neither the city, nor the traveler in black, for anyone to behold.

THE PEOPLE OF THE SUMMIT

By

Björn Nyberg

Here is the first publication in any language of a previously unrecorded adventure of Conan the Cimmerian. Björn Nyberg will be remembered by Conan aficionados for his earlier contributions to the saga.

"Why do we tarry here, Conan?"

"The horses have to rest. Let us see if those Khozgari devils are still following!" He flung the long flap of cloth from before his face before he spoke and spat upon the ground. The heaving sweaty sides of his horse and its foam-flecked mouth bespoke the necessity of the halt. Conan's smoky blue eyes were set off by his sunburned face, the red turban around his spired helmet and his red tunic, black sash, originally white breeches and black boots. His flowing left sleeve was embroidered with the golden scimitar of a sergeant in the Turanian frontier cavalry.

His comrade, a tall, lean and black-eyed Turanian, was uniformed like the Cimmerian, except for the badge of rank. In addition to the curved scimitar and long lance, he carried a heavy double-curved bow and a leather quiver full of arrows.

"Damn that stupid King's Emissary," growled the Cimmerian. "I told him about the Khozgari and their treacherous hearts! But he wouldn't listen, the thick-skulled ass! His head was full of thoughts of trade treaties and a new caravan road. So now that head of his is hanging in the smoke of the chief's hut together with those of our seven fellow soldiers. Damn the lieutenant for agreeing to have the palaver in the rock village!"

"Aye, Conan, but what could he do? The emissary had full powers. Our task was to protect him, obey him, and nothing else. To object to what he wanted could have meant a broken scimitar and reduction to the ranks for the lieutenant. You know the captain's temper."

"Better to be broken to the ranks than to lose eight

heads! We were lucky to be able to break out when they rushed us. But listen—" He held up his hand, frowning. "What is that?"

He sat high on his horse, his eyes sweeping the gorges and crevices for signs of the source of the faint sound he had heard. His companion silently unslung the big bow and nocked an arrow. Conan's hand gripped the hilt of his long scimitar.

He left the saddle with a flying leap and rushed toward the nearby rock wall like a charging bull, for in a fleeting moment a two-legged being had rushed across the narrow gorge and was scaling the cliff wall with the agility of a monkey.

Conan reached the wall, found purchase for hands and feet, and climbed upward with a hillman's flowing motions. He heaved himself over the upper rim and cast himself aside just as a heavy club descended where his head had just been. He gripped the arms of his assailant before a new blow could be struck, and then stared.

It was a girl, dirty and disheveled but nevertheless a girl, and her body would have done grace to the statues of a king's sculptor. Her face was pretty even through the grime, as she was sobbing now in impotent wrath, twisting her slim arms fiercely against the rock-firm grip of her huge captor.

Conan's voice was rough with suspicion. "You are a spy! What tribe?"

Defiance burned with untamed fire in the girl's eyes as she spit back her answer.

"I am Shanya, daughter of Shaf Karaz, chief of the Khozgari and ruler of the mountains! He will spit you upon his lance and roast you over his council fire for daring to lay hands on me!"

"A likely story!" taunted the Cimmerian. "A chief's daughter without an armed following, here, alone?"

"No one dares lay violent hands on Shanya. The

Theggir and the Ghoufaga cower in their huts as Shanya, daughter of Shaf Karaz, rides abroad to hunt the mountain goat. Dog of a Turanian! Let me loose!"

She twisted angrily, but Conan held her slim body in the vise of his arms.

"Not so fast, my pretty one! You will be a fine hostage for our safe passage back to Samara. You will sit in front of me in the saddle all the way and you had better hold still, or you will make the journey bound and gagged. Choose whichever you like." He shrugged his massive shoulders in cold indifference to her hot temper.

"Dog! I do as you say for the present. But take care that you do not fall into the hands of the Khozgari in the future!"

"We were surrounded by them a couple of hours ago but their bowmen could not hit the wall of a canyon. Jamal here could outshoot a dozen of them. Enough of this chatter! We move, and move fast. Keep your pretty mouth shut from now on; it is easy enough to gag."

The girl's mouth was twisted with useless ire, as the horses began their careful course between the rocks and boulders.

"Which way do you plan to take, Conan?" Jamal's voice was anxious.

"We cannot go back. I do not trust this hostage business too much in the heat of ambush. We will ride straight south to the road of Garma and cross the region of the Misty Mountains through the Bhambar pass. That should put us within two days' journey of Samara."

The girl twisted around to face him. Her face was blanched with sudden fright.

"You fool! Are you so careless and ignorant as to try to cross the Misty Mountains? They are the haunts of the People of the Summit. No traveler has ever entered their land and returned. They emerged once out of the mists during the reign of Angharzeb of Turan and defeated his

whole army by magic and monsters, as the king tried to recover the burial grounds of the ancient Turanians. It is a land of terror and death! Do not go there!"

Conan's reply was indifferent. "There are old wives' tales everywhere of demons and monsters which no one living has seen. It is the safest and shortest route. If we make a detour, we will have to spend a week in the guard-house for dallying on the way." He urged his horse on. The hooves clattered resoundingly on the stones as they weaved their way forward among the cliffs.

"It is thick as mare's milk!"

The exclamation came from Conan's Turanian companion. The mist hung dank and impenetrable and they could see only a few yards in front. The two horses were walking slowly, side by side, now and then touching, feeling their way forward with careful steps. The thickness of the milky mist was not constant; the whiteness wavered and billowed and now and then the bleak walls of the mountain pass showed for a fleeting instant.

Conan's senses were sharp and alert; his hand held the bared scimitar, the other clutched Shanya firmly. His eyes ranged the field of vision, taking advantage of every opening to reconnoiter.

The girl's scream ran out with sudden shock, bringing them to a halt. She pointed with a trembling finger, cowering in the saddle against Conan's massive chest.

"I saw something move! Just for a second! It was not human!"

Conan swept the scene with narrowed lids. A random billowing of the mist cleared the sight in front for a moment, and he stiffened in the saddle, then relaxed. He made the horses move forward.

"Nothing to worry about, my pretty." The shape in front of them was *not* pretty. A human skeleton was

hanging on two poles, crossed slantwise. The bones were held together by some rags and bits of tendons and dried flesh. The skull was lying on the ground, grinning; the neckbones seemed to be broken as if twisted off with great violence.

A sound came through the mists. It began as a demoniac laugh that rose and fell, changing into an angry chattering and ending in an ululating wail. The girl was stiff with terror. Her lips moved dryly.

"The—the demons of the Summit! Our bones will lie stripped in their stone dwelling before evening! Oh, save me! I do not want to die here!"

Even Conan seemed to be shaken by the unknown threat and the eerie atmosphere, but he shook off his fear of the unknown with a mental and bodily shrug. "We are here, and we have to get through. Let that howler come within reach of my blade, and he will scream in another key!"

His horse moved forward again. A heavy crash and a gurgling scream sounded behind him. At the same instant he felt a heavy tug upon the girl, and before he could grasp her more firmly, she rose upwards into the mists at the end of a snaky rope. His horse reared wildly, he was flung from the saddle on to the ground, and the clatter of its hooves died away as he rose to his feet.

There lay Jamal, crushed beneath a giant boulder together with his horse. His still arm protruded from under the gray stone, holding the big war-bow and a handful of arrows. These Conan scooped up in one swift motion. He wasted no time mourning the death of his comrade. Here was deadly danger. His lips were bared in a feral snarl as he slung the bow over his shoulder, stuck the arrows in his sash and gripped his bared scimitar.

The mist was thick as before, but his lightning-like reflexes saved him as he felt the noose drop over his head. He ducked, seized it with his free hand, and gave a tug,

at the same time voicing a gurgling cry, simulating that of a strangled man. His eyes were slitted as he swung upward, hauled by apparently immensely strong hands. The feel of the mist was wet in his nostrils.

Heavy hands gripped him as he reached the edge of the escarpment. He could discern shadowy figures in the thinning mist. He shrugged free of the clutching fingers, drove in silent deadliness at the nearest shadow. Soft resistance and a shriek told him that the sharp scimitar had found a goal. Then the shadows were all around him. He put his back to the edge of the abyss and swung his blade in great devastating arcs.

Conan had never fought in surroundings as eerie. His enemies disappeared in the misty whirls, only to return again and again, like ghosts. Their blades reached out towards him, but he had soon got the measure of their clumsy swordsmanship. His confidence asserted itself in a laughing taunt at his silent attackers.

"Time you learned something of the way of the sword, you jackals of the mist! Ambushing travelers does not make for skill with the scimitar. You need lessons. The undercut—like this! The overhand slash—there! The upward rip with the point into the throat—watch!"

His exclamations were accompanied by demonstrations that left shadowy figures gurgling, shrieking or silent on the rocks. The Cimmerian fought with cold and terrible control and suddenly he carried the fight to his assailants in a swift and devastating charge. Another two figures fell to his vicious slashes and the remaining two melted away in hasty, panicky flight.

Conan smiled with satisfaction at his victory. He bent down to stare at one of the corpses and grunted in surprise.

No human being lay there with sightless, small eyes and widened, broad nostrils. The low forehead and receding jaw was that of an ape, though they did not re-

semble the giant apes from the forests on the shores of the Sea of Vilayet. This ape was hairless from head to toe. Its only accoutrement was a heavy rope twisted around the bulging swagbelly. Conan was puzzled. The great Vilayet apes never hunted in packs and did not have the intelligence to use arms or tools, except when trained for special performances before the royal court in Aghrapur.

Its sword was no crude tool either—forged of best Turanian steel, its curved blade had an edge like a razor. Conan felt a penetrating, musky odor emanating from the dead ape. His nostrils widened and took in the scent. He would smell out his escaped prey and find his way out of the mists.

"I shall have to save that fool of a girl," he muttered in an undertone to himself. "She may be the daughter of an enemy, but I will not leave a woman in the hands of hairless apes!" He moved forward on the scent, like a hunting leopard.

As the mists began to thin, he trod more warily. The spoor of the scent twisted and turned, as if panic had wrought havoc with the sense of direction of his quarry. Conan smiled grimly. Better to be the hunter than the hunted.

Now and then tall pyramids of giant, spherical stones rose in the mists beside the path. Conan knew that these were ancient places of the dead, graves of the chiefs of the early Turanian tribes. Not even the apes appeared to have attempted to demolish them. The Cimmerian made careful detours around each grave, both to avoid a possible ambush—but also out of reverence for those who lay there.

The mist was almost gone as he reached the upper heights, and then the path was a narrow walkway on the top of a mountain wall, bisecting a dizzying abyss. At the

end of the walkway, a giant cylindrical stone tower rose to an imposing height from a mountain summit. No sign of life could be seen. Conan hid behind one of the graves at the end of the path, spying out the situation. The mysterious tower loomed like an index finger of evil against the background of the bleak mountains.

Shanya awoke in odd surroundings. She lay upon a divan covered with coarse black cloth. No fetters bound her, but she had been deprived of her clothing. She twisted her supple body upon the bed to look around and then she recoiled from what she saw.

A man sat in a wooden armchair with curious carvings. He was like no man she had ever seen. The face was dead white and curiously stiff, and his eyes were completely black with no white showing around the iris. He was dressed in a kaftan of the coarse black cloth, his hands hidden in the wide sleeves. His head was bald. He spoke in a sibilant whisper.

"It is many years since a beautiful woman last came to visit the abode of Shangara. No new blood has infused the race of the People of the Summit for two hundred years. You will be a fit mate for myself and my son."

The half-wild girl flared up in sudden barbarian anger.

"Do you think that a daughter of a line of a hundred chiefs would mate with one of your abominable race? Rather will I fling myself into the nearest gorge than dwell in your house! Release me! Or these walls will soon shake to the thunder of Khozgari spears!"

A mocking smile parted the pale lips of the stiff face.

"You are a headstrong hussy! No spears reach through the Bhambar mists. No one crosses these mountains and lives. Your fate is sealed. Come to your senses. If you persist in your stubbornness, no easy end such as a leap from a cliff edge will be yours. Your soul and body will then instead serve to add to the strength of the most an-

cient inhabitant of this land, who is still bound by forgotten spells in serfdom to the People of the Summit. It was he who helped us to smite the Turanian king when he once tried to conquer our lands. Then we were strong and could also fight ourselves. Now we are few, our number has dwindled through the centuries to a bare dozen in this tower, guarded by our cliff apes. But still we do not fear any enemies. *He* still lives, ready to come forth when peril threatens. You shall gaze upon his countenance. Then choose your fate!"

He rose, shaking back the fold of the kaftan from white, claw-like hands. Two whitefaced, bald, black-eyed men entered, bowed and turned to two giant stone handles in the wall. Two door-halves began to roll back in well-balanced smoothness. The chamber inside was filled with white mist. It began to swirl into the room, to thin and show the vague outline of a giant, unmoving shape inside. The mist thinned still more, and as the girl caught a clear view of the *thing* inside, she screamed and fainted.

Conan was fretting with impatience at his long wait. Not a sign of life had appeared in or around the forbidding tower. Had he not scented the reek of the musky ape-odor, he would have believed the tower to be deserted. His hand itched as he fondled the hilt of his scimitar and the curve of the bow in turn.

A figure appeared at the top of the tower. The distance was too great to discern details, but the flapping robe and the lean contours told of the fact that this was no ape. Conan's mouth curved in a grim smile.

He drew and loosed the arrow with a smooth motion. The figure on the tower flung up its arms and toppled, limp as a rag doll, over the crenelated wall into the depths below. Conan nocked another arrow and waited.

He did not have to wait for long this time. A stone portal was flung open, and a row of apes ran out, padding splay-footed on to the walkway. Conan loosed again and again. His marksmanship was unerring. The merciless hail of his arrows flung them one after one into the gorge, but still they came on in unreasoning stupidity and rage.

Conan loosed his last arrow. He flung the bow aside and rushed, sword in hand, to meet the two apes remaining on the cliff path. He avoided the clumsy swipe of the first by ducking his head, and then his blade shore through flesh and bone with a grating shudder, as he lopped off the shoulder and arm of his foe. The remaining ape proved to be quicker. Conan had barely enough time to wrench his reddened blade from the side of the hairless body and parry the vicious swipe aimed at his head. He staggered at the impact and nearly lost his balance on the narrow walkway. The ape's dull mind took advantage of the situation by raining incessant and tireless blows upon the Cimmerian's guard. Regaining his footing, Conan feinted swiftly and lashed out in a low disembowelling thrust, too fast for the eye to follow, and his adversary sank bellowing down upon the walkway in a jerking heap.

Conan lost no time gloating over his victory—he sprang forward, surefooted as a mountain goat, and reached the open portal. Something hissed by his head as he flung himself sideways upon entering and he retaliated by a straight thrust with the sharp scimitar at a shadowy figure lurking in the gloom. A muted, choked scream was followed by the clatter of a dropped weapon. He bent down to look at the corpse. A tall, lean man with a curiously stiff, dead white face stared at him with black eyes, now lifeless. The face was covered with an odd mask of a translucent substance. The Cimmerian re-

moved it. He had never seen anything like it, nor the material of which it was made. He tucked it inside his sash and strode on.

He slunk more warily around the circular corridor that he encountered further on. The stone walls were damp and the air was chilly. The corridor went on and on, then widened into a large room. An odd assemblage confronted him.

Ten of the dead white people faced him. Two were women, with stringy white hair framing their chalky features. All looked like painted, unmoving corpses, and every one of them held a long knife with a wavy edge. Their black eyes burned with mingled fear and hatred. On a couch in the center of the room lay the naked body of a girl whom he recognized as Shanya. She lay there with her eyes closed but her full breasts moved with her even breathing, and Conan concluded that she was either drugged or in a faint. He gripped his sword more firmly as he confronted the eerie group.

The tall, bald man in the middle of the black group spoke. His voice was a whisper, yet carried to the ears of the Cimmerian with the clarity of a bell.

"What is your purpose here? You are no Turanian. Neither are you a mountain man, though you wear the garb of a Hyrkanian."

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian. This girl is my hostage. I have come to take her back to continue my journey."

"Cimmeria? This country we never heard of. Are you jesting with us?"

"Had you been to the frozen north, you would know it is no jest. We are a fighting people. Half my tribe at my elbow, and we would be rulers of Turan!"

"You lie! To the north is nothing but the edge of the world and eternal night! This girl is ours, to give our race new strength again, to breed us strong men from her

womb. You have dared to intrude upon the secret place of the People of the Summit. Your body shall feed the maw of the Ancient One!"

The Cimmerian made a threatening move but the man stamped on the floor with a resounding clap. Like a white, blossoming flower, a thick vapor spurted out of the center of the floor. Each of the black-eyed group made a quick gesture with the left hand to the face. Before the quickly thickening vapor had blotted out everything within sight, Conan saw that they had donned curious transparent masks like the one worn by his earlier assailant.

The fog was thicker than anything he had encountered among the mountains but the Cimmerian grabbed quickly for the mask in his sash and managed to don it. This was easier than he had thought—the substance of the mask appeared to hug the skin of his forehead and cheeks, leaving the eyes free. He was astounded to find that he could see clearly; it was as if the vapor had dispersed before his eyes. His antagonists had been quick and silent behind the misty shield—two of them were almost upon him. A quick move, and his blade whistled in the damp air of the large room.

It was a massacre. The remnants of this once powerful race did not stand a chance against the fury of the vengeful Cimmerian. Wavy-edged knives glanced harmlessly from the whirling streak of his gleaming scimitar. Every time his blade licked out, a robed figure sank to the floor in death. His rough code of chivalry tempted him to spare the women but as they flung themselves at him in terrible frenzy, he stood at last alone in the room with ten lifeless bodies and the captive girl.

All were not lifeless. The last sparks of life of the head man hissed out between writhing lips: "Barbarian cur! You have destroyed our race! But you will not live to

gloat over it! The Ancient One will strip the meat from your bones and suck the marrow from their innards! Give me strength, O Ancient One . . ."

As the Cimmerian watched, fascinated, the lean man exerted his last powers with an awful groan. The thin hand tugged at one of the twin stone handles in the wall. One of the two door-halves began to roll back slowly.

Conan's hair rose on the nape of his neck as he glimpsed the hulking form inside the other chamber. A many-limbed body, like a legged egg. Not a spider, with broad-snouted head and gaping jaw, the giant form exuded an almost tangible power of evil, dating back to dark eons before man ever walked the Earth. He flung himself forward to scoop up the body of Shanya in his arms as a clawed, hairless limb fumbled at the door to enlarge the opening. He heard a wheezing sound behind him as he ran through the corridor for the outer portal.

He had almost crossed the walkway, balancing precariously in his great haste, the girl in his arms, before he looked back. The giant monster was running swiftly forward on its many powerful legs and had almost reached the middle. Panting, he flung himself forward between two of the grave mounds. He dropped the girl to the ground and turned to give battle.

He met the first onrush of the monster with a savage cut at one of the grasping limbs and his arm was jarred to the shoulderbone with the shock as the blade splintered into pieces against the impenetrable skin of the creature. The blow made it lose its footing temporarily but it came on again, spitting and wheezing, in its fast, weaving gait. Desperate, Conan flung his eyes about for any kind of weapon. His eyes fastened upon the nearest mound of stones. In a fraction of a second he held one of the spherical boulders above his head and flung it with all the might of his barbarian thews at the terrible apparition that was almost upon him.

The spells chanted by the Turanian sorcerers of old over the grave of an ancient chief had been forgotten through the ages, but they had not lost their power against a monster of the kind that roamed the mountains before man was young. With a blood-curdling shriek, the creature tugged at the crushed limb beneath the heavy stone, paralyzed in part of its body. Conan grabbed another boulder, flung it, pushed yet another rolling it toward the thrashing monster, flung still another one, and then the undermined pyramid of stones collapsed in a hurtling avalanche, tearing the many-limbed terror down the slope into the abyss in a cloud of dust and shards.

Conan wiped his sweaty brow with a trembling hand, and the trembling was not all from exertion. He heard a stirring behind him and swung around. The girl's eyes were open and she gazed around in bewilderment.

"Where am I? Where is the evil man?" She shuddered. "He was going to feed me to—"

Conan's voice broke in roughly upon her.

"I cleaned up that nest of mummified robbers. Their evil thing I sent to where it crept from. Lucky for you that I came in time to save your skin."

She flared up in quick, haughty anger.

"I would have managed to outwit them! My father would have saved me!"

"He could not have found his way here. That monster would have made mincemeat out of his warriors. I was lucky to find a weapon that killed that overgrown cockroach. Now we have to move out of here, fast. I have to get to Samara and I still need you as a hostage."

The girl's eyes softened with a quick change of mood. Her lids drooped, and a taunting note came into her voice, as she shrugged her naked shoulders provocatively at the Cimmerian.

"I will keep you company to the border region. You

saved my life and you will be permitted safe conduct through Khozgari country as your reward. It will be interesting to get to learn something of the ways of a northern barbarian." Her voice held a seductive undertone, and she stretched her splendid body, seemingly unaware of her nudity.

Conan looked at her with appreciation.

"By the bones of Crom! Perhaps dallying a couple of days on the way will be worth a week in the guardhouse!"

THE FLAME BRINGERS

By

Michael Moorcock

Elric, proud Prince of ruins and last Lord of Melnibone, is the possessor of both knowledge and powers denied to ordinary men. We have met Elric, molder of madnesses and dabbler in wild delights, in THE MIGHTY BARBARIANS. Stay with him now as he sings the Song of the Dragon Masters!

I

Bloody-beaked hawks soared on the frigid wind. They soared high above a mounted horde inexorably moving across the Weeping Waste.

The horde had crossed two deserts and three mountain ranges to be there and hunger drove them onwards. They were spurred on by remembrances of stories heard from travellers who had come to their Eastern homeland, by the encouragements of their thin-lipped leader who swaggered in his saddle ahead of them, one arm wrapped around a ten-foot lance decorated with the gory trophies of his pillaging campaigns.

The riders moved slowly and wearily, unaware that they were nearing their goal.

Far behind the horde, a stocky rider left Elwher, the singing, boisterous capital of the Eastern world, and came soon to a valley.

The hard skeletons of trees had a blighted look and the horse kicked earth the color of ashes as its rider drove it fiercely through the sick wasteland that had once been gentle Eshmir, the golden garden of the East.

A plague had smitten Eshmir and the locust had stripped her of her beauty. Both plague and locust went by the same name—Terarn Gashtek, Lord of the Mounted Hordes, sunken-faced carrier of destruction; Terarn Gashtek, insane blood-drawer, the shrieking flame bringer. And that was his other name—Flame Bringer.

The rider who witnessed the evil that Terarn Gashtek had brought to gentle Eshmir was named Moonglum. Moonglum was riding, now, for Karlaak by the Weeping Waste, the last outpost of the Western civilization of

which those in the Eastlands knew little. In Karlaak, Moonglum knew he would find Elric of Melnibone who now dwelt permanently in his wife's graceful city. Moonglum was desperate to reach Karlaak quickly, to warn Elric and to solicit his help.

He was small and cocky, with a broad mouth and a shock of red hair, but now his mouth did not grin and his body was bent over the horse as he pushed it on towards Karlaak. For Eshmir, gentle Eshmir, had been Moonglum's home province and, with his ancestors, had formed him into what he was.

So, cursing, Moonglum rode for Karlaak.

But so did Terarn Gashtek. And already the Flame Bringer had reached the Weeping Waste. The horde moved slowly, for they had wagons with them which had at one time dropped far behind but now the supplies they carried were needed. As well as provisions, one of the wagons carried a bound prisoner who lay on his back cursing Terarn Gashtek and his slant-eyed battlemongers.

Drinij Bara was bound by more than strips of leather, that was why he cursed, for Drinij Bara was a sorcerer who could not normally be held in such a manner. If he had not succumbed to his weakness for wine and women just before the Flame Bringer had come down on the town in which he was staying, he would not have been trussed so, and Terarn Gashtek would not now have Drinij Bara's soul.

Drinij Bara's soul reposed in the body of a small, black cat—the cat which Terarn Gashtek had caught and carried with him always, for, as was the habit of Eastern sorcerers, Drinij Bara had hidden his soul in the body of the cat for protection. Because of this he was now slave to the Lord of the Mounted Hordes, and had to obey him lest the man slay the cat and so send his soul to Hell.

It was not a pleasant situation for the proud sorcerer, but he did not deserve less.

There was on the pale face of Elric of Melnibone some slight trace of an earlier haunting, but his mouth smiled and his crimson eyes were at peace as he looked down at the young, black-haired woman with whom he walked in the terraced gardens of Karlaak.

"Elric," said Zarozinia, "have you found your happiness?"

He nodded. "I think so. That black runesword, *Stormbringer*, now hangs amid cobwebs in your father's armory. The drugs I discovered in Troos keep me strong, my eyesight clear, and need to be taken only occasionally. I need never think of travelling or fighting again. I am content, here, to spend my time with you and study the books in Karlaak's library. What more would I require?"

"You compliment me overmuch, my lord. I would become complacent."

He laughed. "Rather that than you were doubting. Do not fear, Zarozinia, I possess no reason, now, to journey on. Moonglum, I miss, but it was natural that he should become restless of residence in a city and wish to revisit his homeland."

"I am glad you are at peace, Elric. My father was at first reluctant to let you live here, fearing the black evil that once accompanied you, but three months have proved to him that the evil has gone and left no fuming berserker behind it."

Suddenly there came a shouting from below them, in the street a man's voice was raised and he banged at the gates of the house.

"Let me in, damn you, I must speak with your master."

A servant came running: "Lord Elric—there is a man

at the gates with a message. He pretends friendship with you."

"His name?"

"An alien one—Moonglum, he says."

"Moonglum! His stay in Elwher has been short. Let him in!"

Zarozinia's eyes held a trace of fear and she held Elric's arm fiercely. "Elric—pray he does not bring news to take you hence."

"No news could do that. Fear not, Zarozinia." He hurried out of the garden and into the courtyard of the house. Moonglum rode hurriedly through the gates, dismounting as he did so.

"Moonglum, my friend! Why the haste? Naturally, I am pleased to see you after such a short time, but you have been riding hastily—why?"

The little Eastlander's face was grim beneath its coating of dust and his clothes were filthy from hard riding.

"The Flame Bringer comes with sorcery to aid him," he panted. "You must warn the city."

"The Flame Bringer? The name means nothing—you sound delirious, my friend."

"Aye, that's true, I am. Delirious with hate. He destroyed my homeland, killed my family, my friends and now plans conquests in the West. Two years ago he was little more than an ordinary desert raider but then he began to gather a great horde of barbarians around him and has been looting and slaying his way across the Eastern lands. Only Elwher has not suffered from his attacks, for the city was too great for even him to take. But he has turned two thousand miles of pleasant country into a burning waste. He plans world conquest, rides westwards with five hundred thousand warriors!"

"You mentioned sorcery—what does this barbarian know of such sophisticated arts?"

"Little himself, but he has one of our greatest wizards

in his power—Drinij Bara. The man was captured as he lay drunk between two wenches in a tavern. He had put his soul into the body of a cat so that no rival sorcerer might steal it while he slept. But Terarn Gashtek, the Flame Bringer, knew of this trick, seized the cat and bound its legs, eyes and mouth, so imprisoning Drinij Bara's evil soul. Now the sorcerer is his slave—if he doe not obey the barbarian, the cat will be killed by an iron blade and Drinij Bara's soul will go to Hell."

"These are unfamiliar sorceries to me," said Elric. "They seem little more than superstitions."

"Who knows what they may be—but so long as Drinij Bara believes what he believes, he will do as Terarn Gashtek dictates. Several proud cities have been destroyed with the aid of his magic."

"How far away is this Flame Bringer?"

"Three days' ride at most. I was forced to come hence by a longer route, to avoid his outriders."

"Then we must prepare for a siege."

"No, Elric—you must prepare to flee!"

"To flee—should I request the citizens of Karlaak to leave their beautiful city unprotected, to leave their homes?"

"If they will not—you must, and take your bride with you. None can stand against such a foe."

"My own sorcery is no mean thing."

"But one man's sorcery is not enough to hold back half a million men also aided by sorcery."

"And Karlaak is a trading city—not a warriors' fortress. Very well, I will speak to the Council of Elders and try to convince them."

"You must convince them quickly, Elric, for if you do not Karlaak will not stand half a day before Terarn Gashtek's howling blood-letters."

"They are stubborn," said Elric as the two sat in his

private study later that night. "They refuse to realize the magnitude of the danger. They refuse to leave and I cannot leave them for they have welcomed me and made me a citizen of Karlaak."

"Then we must stay here and die?"

"Perhaps. There seems to be no choice. But I have another plan. You say that this sorcerer is a prisoner of Terarn Gashtek. What would he do if he regained his soul?"

"Why he would take vengeance upon his captor. But Terarn Gashtek would not be so foolish as to give him the chance. There is no help for us there."

"What if we managed to aid Drinij Bara?"

"How? It would be impossible."

"It seems our only chance. Does this barbarian know of me or my history?"

"Not as far as I know."

"Would he recognize you?"

"Why should he?"

"Then I suggest we join him."

"Join him—Elric, you are no more sane than when we rode as free travelers together!"

"I know what I am doing. It would be the only way to get close to him and discover a subtle way to defeat him. We will set off at dawn, there is no time to waste."

"Very well. Let's hope your old luck is good, but I doubt it now, for you've forsaken your old ways and the luck went with them."

"Let us find out."

"Will you take *Stormbringer?*"

"I had hoped never to have to make use of that hell-forged blade again. She's a treacherous sword at best."

"Aye—but I think you'll need her in this business."

"Yes, you're right. I'll take her."

Elric frowned, his hands clenched. "It will mean breaking my word to Zarozinia."

"Better break it—than give her up to the Mounted Hordes."

Elric unlocked the door to the armory, a pitch torch flaring in one hand. He felt sick as he strode down the narrow passage lined with dulled weapons which had not been used for a century.

His heart pounded heavily as he came to another door and flung off the bar to enter the little room in which lay the disused regalia of Karlaak's long-dead War Chieftains —and *Stormbringer*. The black blade began to moan, as if welcoming him as he took a deep breath of the musty air and reached for the sword. He clutched the hilt and his body was racked by an unholy sensation of awful ecstasy. His face twisted as he sheathed the blade and he almost ran from the armory towards cleaner air.

Elric and Moonglum mounted their plainly equipped horses and, garbed like common mercenaries, bade urgent farewell to the Councillors of Karlaak.

Zarozinia kissed Elric's pale hand.

"I realize the need for this," she said, her eyes full of tears, "but take care, my love."

"I shall. And pray that we are successful in whatever we decide to do."

"The White Gods be with you."

"No—pray to the Demon Gods, to Arioch and Voroon —to the Lords of the Darks, for it is their evil help I'll need in this work. And forget not my words to the messenger who is to ride to the south-west and find Dyvim Slorm."

"I'll not forget," she said, "though I worry lest you succumb again to your old black ways."

"Fear for the moment—I'll worry about my own fate later."

"Then farewell, my lord, and be lucky."

"Farewell, Zorozinia. My love for you will give me

more power even than this foul blade here." He spurred his horse through the gates and then they were riding for the Weeping Waste and a troubled future.

II

Dwarfed by the vastness of the softly turfed plateau which was the Weeping Waste, the place of eternal rains, the two horsemen drove their hard-pressed steeds through the drizzle.

A shivering desert warrior, huddled against the weather, saw them come towards him. He stared through the rain trying to make out details of the riders, then wheeled his stocky pony and rode swiftly back in the direction he had come. Within minutes he had reached a larger group of warriors attired like himself in furs and tasselled iron helmets. They carried short bone bows and quivers of long arrows fletched with hawk feathers. There were curved scimitars at their sides.

He exchanged a few words with his fellows and soon they were all lashing their horses towards the two riders.

"How much further lies the camp of Terarn Gashtek, Moonglum?" Elric's words were breathless, for both men had ridden for a day without halt.

"Not much farther, Elric. We should be—look!"

Moonglum pointed ahead. About ten riders came swiftly towards them. "Desert barbarians—the Flame Bringer's men. Prepare for a fight—they won't waste time parleying."

Stormbringer scraped from the scabbard and the heavy blade seemed to aid Elric's wrist as he raised it, so that it felt almost weightless.

Moonglum drew both his swords, holding the short one with the same hand with which he grasped his horse's reins.

The Eastern warriors spread out in a half circle as they rode down on the companions, yelling wild war-shouts.

Elric reared his mount to a savage standstill and met the first rider with *Stormbringer's* point full in the man's throat. There was a stink like brimstone as it pierced flesh and the warrior drew a ghastly choking breath as he died, his eyes staring out in full realization of his terrible fate—for *Stormbringe*r drank souls as well as blood.

Elric cut savagely at another desertman, lopping off his sword arm and splitting his crested helmet and the skull beneath. Rain and sweat ran down his white, taut features and into his glowing crimson eyes, but he blinked it aside, half-fell in his saddle as he turned to defend himself against another howling scimitar, parried the sweep, slid his own runeblade down its length, turned the blade with a movement of his wrist and disarmed the warrior. Then he plunged his sword into the man's heart and the desert warrior yelled like a wolf at the moon, a long baying shout before *Stormbringer* took his soul.

Elric's face was twisted in self-loathing as he fought intently with superhuman strength. Moonglum stayed clear of the albino's sword for he knew its liking for the lives of Elric's friends.

Soon only one opponent was left. Elric disarmed him and had to hold his own greedy sword back from the man's throat.

Reconciled to the horror of his death, the man said something in a guttural tongue which Elric half-recognized. He searched his memory and realized that it was a language close to one of the many ancient tongues which, as a sorcerer, he had been required to learn years before.

He said in the same language: "Thou art one of the warriors of Terarn Gashtek the Flame Bringer."

"That is true. And you must be the White-faced Evil One of legends. I beg you to slay me with a cleaner weapon than that which you hold."

"I do not wish to kill thee at all. We were coming hence to join Terarn Gashtek. Take us to him."

The man nodded hastily and clambered back on his horse.

"Who are you who speaks the High Tongue of our people?"

"I am called Elric of Melnibone—dost thou know the name?"

The warrior shook his head. "No, but the High Tongue has not been spoken for generations, save by shamans—yet you're no shaman but, by your dress, seem a warrior."

"We are both mercenaries. But speak no more. I will explain the rest to thy leader."

They left a jackal's feast behind them and followed the quaking Easterner in the direction he led them.

Fairly soon, the low-lying smoke of many camp-fires could be observed and at length they saw the sprawling camp of the barbarian War Lord's mighty army.

The camp encompassed over a mile of the great plateau. The barbarians had erected skin tents on rounded frames and the camp had the aspect of a large primitive town. Roughly in the centre was a much larger construction, decorated with a motley assortment of gaudy silks and brocades.

Moonglum said, in the Western tongue: "That must be Terarn Gashtek's dwelling. See, he has covered its half-cured hides with a score of Eastern battle-flags." His face grew grimmer as he noted the torn standard of Eshmir, the lion-flag of Okara and the blood-soaked pennants of sorrowing Changshai.

The captured warrior led them through the squatting ranks of barbarians who stared at them impassively and muttered to one another. Outside Terarn Gashtek's tasteless dwelling was his great war-lance decorated with

more trophies of his conquests—the skulls and bones of Eastern princes and kings.

Elric said: "Such a one as this must not be allowed to destroy the reborn civilization of the Young Kingdoms."

"Young kingdoms are resilient," remarked Moonglum, "but it is when they are old that they fall—and it is often Terarn Gashtek's kind that tear them down."

"While I live he shall not destroy Karlaak—nor reach as far as Bakshaan."

Moonglum said: "Though, in my opinion, he'd be welcome to Nadsoker, the City of Beggars deserves such visitors as the Flame Bringer. If we fail, Elric, only the sea will stop him—and perhaps not that."

"With Dyvim Slorm's aid—we shall stop him. Let us hope Karlaak's messenger finds my kinsman soon."

"If he does not we shall be hard put to fight off half a million warriors, my friend."

The barbarian shouted: "Oh, Conqueror—mighty Flame Bringer—there are men here who wish to speak with you."

A slurred voice snarled: "Bring them in."

They entered the badly smelling tent which was lighted by a fire flickering in a circle of stones. A gaunt man, carelessly dressed in bright captured clothing, lounged on a wooden bench. There were several women in the tent, one of whom poured wine into a heavy golden goblet which he held out.

Terarn Gashtek pushed the woman aside, knocking her sprawling and regarded the newcomers. His face was almost as fleshless as the skulls hanging outside his tent. His cheeks were sunken and his slanting eyes narrow beneath thick brows.

"Who are these?"

"Lord, I know not—but between them they slew ten of our men and would have slain me."

"You deserved no more than death if you let yourself

be disarmed. Get out—and find a new sword quickly or I'll let the shamans have your vitals for divination." The man slunk away.

Terarn Gashtek seated himself upon the bench once more.

"So, you slew ten of my bloodletters, did you, and came here to boast to me about it? What's the explanation?"

"We but defended ourselves against your warriors—we sought no quarrel with them." Elric now spoke the cruder tongue as best he could.

"You defended yourselves fairly well, I grant you. We reckon three soft-living house-dwellers to one of us. You are a Westerner, I can tell that, though your silent friend has the face of an Elwherite. Have you come from the East or the West?"

"The West," Elric said, "we are free travelling warriors, hiring our swords to those who'll pay or promise us good booty."

"Are all Western warriors as skilful as you?" Terarn Gashtek could not hide his sudden realization that he might have underestimated the men he hoped to conquer.

"We are a little better than most," lied Moonglum, "but not greatly."

"What of sorcery—is there much strong magic here?"

"No," said Elric, "the art has been lost to most."

The barbarian's thin mouth twisted into a grin, half of relief, half of triumph. He nodded his head, reached into his gaudy silks and produced a small bound cat. He began to stroke its back. It wriggled but could do no more than glare at its captor. "Then we need not worry," he said.

"Now, why did you come here? I could have you tortured for days for what you did, slaying ten of my best outriders."

"We recognized the chance of enriching ourselves by aiding you, Lord Flame Bringer," said Elric. "We could show you the richest towns, lead you to ill-defended cities that would take little time to fall. Will you enlist us?"

"I've need of such men as you, true enough. I'll enlist you readily—but mark this, I'll not trust you until you've proved loyal to me. Find yourselves quarters now—and come to the feast, tonight. There I'll be able to show you something of the power I hold—the power which will smash the strength of the West and lay it waste for ten thousand miles."

"Thanks," said Elric. "I'll look forward to tonight."

They left the tent and wandered through the haphazard collection of tents and cooking fires, wagons and animals. There seemed little food, but wine was in abundance and the taut, hungry stomachs of the barbarians were placated with that.

They stopped a warrior and told him of Terarn Gastek's orders to them. The warrior sullenly led them to a tent.

"Here—it was shared by three of the men you slew. It is yours by right of battle, as are the weapons and booty inside."

"We're richer already," grinned Elric with feigned delight.

In the privacy of the tent, which was less clean than Terarn Gashtek's, they debated.

"I feel uncommonly uncomfortable," said Moonglum, "surrounded by this treacherous horde. And every time I think of what they made of Eshmir, I itch to slay more of them. What now?"

"We can do nothing now—let us wait until tonight and see what develops." Elric sighed. "Our task seems impossible—I have never seen so great a horde as this."

"They are invincible as they are," said Moonglum.

"Even without Drinij Bara's sorcery to tumble down the walls of cities, no single nation could withstand them and, with the Western Nations squabbling among themselves, they could never unite in time. Civilization itself is threatened. Let us pray for inspiration—your dark gods are at least sophisticated, Elric, and we must hope that they'll resent the barbarian's intrusion as much as we do."

"They play strange games with their human pawns," Elric replied, "and who knows what they plan?"

Terarn Gashtek's smoke-wreathed tent had been further lighted by rush torches when Elric and Moonglum swaggered in, and the feast, consisting primarily of wine, was already in progress.

"Welcome, my friends," shouted the Flame Bringer, waving his goblet. "These are my captains—come, join them!"

Elric had never seen such an evil-looking group of barbarians. They were all half-drunk and, like their leader, had draped a variety of looted articles of clothing about themselves. But their swords were their own.

Room was made on one of the benches and they accepted wine which they drank sparingly.

"Bring in our slave!" yelled Terarn Gashtek. "Bring in Drinij Bara our pet sorcerer." Before him on the table lay the bound and struggling cat and beside it an iron blade.

Grinning warriors dragged a morose-faced man close to the fire and forced him to kneel before the barbarian chief. He was a lean man and he glowered at Terarn Gashtek and the little cat. Then his eyes saw the iron blade and his gaze faltered.

"What do you want with me now?" he asked sullenly.

"Is that the way to address your master, spell-maker? Still, no matter. We have guests to entertain—men who have promised to lead us to fat merchant cities. We require you to do a few minor tricks for them."

"I'm no petty conjurer. You cannot ask this of one of the greatest sorcerers in the world!"

"We do not ask—we order. Come, make the evening lively. What do you need for your màgic-making? A few slaves—the blood of virgins? We shall arrange it."

"I'm no mumbling shaman—I need no such trappings."

Suddenly the sorcerer saw Elric. The albino felt the man's powerful mind tentatively probing his own. He had been recognized as a fellow sorcerer. Would Drinij Bara betray him?

Elric was tense, waiting to be denounced. He leaned back in his chair and, as he did so, made a sign with his hand which would be recognized by Western sorcerers —would the Easterner know it?

He did. For a moment he faltered, glancing at the barbarian leader. Then he turned away and began to make new passes in the air, muttering to himself.

The beholders gasped as a cloud of golden smoke formed near the roof and began to metamorphose into the shape of a great horse bearing a rider which all recognized as Terarn Gashtek. The barbarian leader leaned forward, glaring at the image.

"What's this?"

A map showing great land areas and seas seemed to unroll beneath the horse's hooves. "The Western lands," cried Drinij Bara. "I make a prophecy."

"What is it?"

The ghostly horse began to trample the map. It split and flew into a thousand smoky pieces. Then the image of the horseman faded, also, into fragments.

"Thus will the mighty Flame Bringer rend the bountiful nations of the West," shouted Drinij Bara.

The barbarians cheered exultantly, but Elric smiled thinly. The Eastern wizard was mocking Terarn Gashtek and his men.

The smoke formed into a golden globe which seemed to blaze and vanish.

Terarn Gashtek laughed. "A good trick, magic-maker —and a true prophecy. You have done your work well. Take him back to his kennel!"

As Drinij Bara was dragged away, he glanced questioningly at Elric but said nothing.

Later that night, as the barbarians drank themselves into a stupor, Elric and Moonglum slipped out of the tent and made their way to the place where Drinij Bara was imprisoned.

They reached the small hut and saw that a warrior stood guard at the entrance. Moonglum produced a skin of wine and, pretending drunkenness, staggered towards the man. Elric stayed where he was.

"What do you want, Outlander?" growled the guard.

"Nothing, my friend, we are trying to get back to our own tent, that's all. Do you know where it is?"

"How should I know?"

"True—how should you? Have some wine—it's good —from Terarn Gashtek's own supply."

The man extended a hand. "Let's have it."

Moonglum took a swig of the wine. "No, I've changed my mind. It's too good to waste on common warriors."

"Is that so?" The warrior took several paces towards Moonglum. "We'll find out, won't we? And maybe we'll mix some of your blood with it to give it flavor, my little friend."

Moonglum backed away. The warrior followed.

Elric ran softly towards the tent and ducked into it to find Drinij Bara, wrists bound, lying on a pile of uncured hides. The sorcerer looked up.

"You—what do you want?"

"We've come to aid you, Drinij Bara."

"Aid me? But why? You're no friend of mine. What would you gain? You risk too much."

"As a fellow sorcerer, I thought I'd help you," Elric said.

"I thought you were that. But, in my land, sorcerers are not so friendly to one another—the opposite, in fact."

"I'll tell you the truth—we need your aid to halt the barbarian's bloody progress. We have a common enemy. If we can help you regain your soul, will you help?"

"Help—of course. All I do is plan the way I'll avenge myself. But for my sake be careful—if he suspects that you're here to aid me, he'll slay the cat and slay us, too."

"We'll try to bring the cat to you. Will that be what you need?"

"Yes. We must exchange blood, the cat and I, and my soul will then pass back into my own body."

"Very well, I'll try to—" Elric turned, hearing voices outside. "What's that?"

The sorcerer replied fearfully, "It must be Terarn Gashtek—he comes every night to taunt me."

"Where's the guard?" The barbarian's harsh voice came closer as he entered the little tent. "What's . . . ?" He saw Elric standing above the sorcerer.

His eyes were puzzled and wary. "What are you doing here, Westerner—and what have you done with the guard?"

"Guard?" said Elric, "I saw no guard. I was looking for my own tent and heard this cur cry out, so I entered. I was curious, anyway, to see such a great sorcerer clad in filthy rags and bound so."

Terarn Gashtek scowled. "Any more of such unwary curiosity my friend, and you'll be discovering what your own heart looks like. Now, get hence—we ride on in the morning."

Elric pretended to flinch and stumbled hurriedly from the tent.

A lone man in the livery of an Official Messenger of Karlaak goaded his horse southwards. The mount galloped over the crest of a hill and the messenger saw a village ahead. Hurriedly he rode into it, shouting at the first man he saw.

"Quickly, tell me—know you aught of Dyvim Slorm and his Imrryrian mercenaries? Have they passed this way?"

"Aye—a week ago. They went towards Rignariom by Jadmar's border, to offer their services to the Vilmirian Pretender."

"Were they mounted or on foot?"

"Both."

"Thanks, friend," cried the messenger behind him and galloped out of the village in the direction of Rignariom.

The messenger from Karlaak rode through the night—rode along a recently made trail. A large force had passed that way. He prayed that it had been Dyvim Slorm and his Imrryrian warriors.

In the sweet-smelling garden city of Karlaak, the atmosphere was tense as the citizens waited for news they knew they could not expect for some time. They were relying on both Elric and on the messenger. If only one were successful, there would be no hope for them. Both had to be successful. Both.

III

The tumbling sound of moving men cut through the weeping morning and the hungry voice of Terarn Gashtek lashed at them to hurry.

Slaves packed up his tent and threw it into a wagon. He rode forward and wrenched his tall war-lance from the soft earth, wheeled his horse and rode westwards, his captains, Elric and Moonglum among them, behind him.

Speaking the Western tongue, Elric and Moonglum debated their problem. The barbarian was expecting

them to lead him to his prey, his outriders were covering wide distances so that it would be impossible to lead him past a settlement. They were in a quandary for it would be disgraceful to sacrifice another township to give Karlaak a few days' grace, yet . . .

A little later two whooping outriders came galloping up to Terarn Gashtek.

"A town, lord! A small one and easy to take!"

"At last—this will do to test our blades and see how easy Western flesh is to pierce. Then we'll aim at a bigger target." He turned to Elric: "Do you know this town?"

"Where does it lie?" asked Elric thickly.

"A dozen miles to the south-west," replied the outrider.

In spite of the fact that the town was doomed, Elric felt almost relieved. They spoke of the town of Gorjhan.

"I know it," he said.

Cavim the Saddler, riding to deliver a new set of horse furniture to an outlying farm, saw the distant riders, their bright helmets caught by a sudden beam of sunlight. That the riders came from off the Weeping Waste was undoubtable—and he recognized menace in their massed progress.

He turned his mount about and rode with the speed of fear, back the way he had come to the town of Gorjhan.

The flat, hard mud of the street trembled beneath the thudding hooves of Cavim's horse and his high, excited shout knifed through shuttered windows.

"*Raiders come! 'Ware the raiders!*"

Within a quarter of an hour, the head-men of the town had met in hasty conference and debated whether to run or to fight. The older men advised their neighbors to flee the raiders, other younger men preferred to stay ready, armed to meet a possible attack. Some argued that their town was too poor to attract any raider.

The townspeople of Gorjhan debated and quarrelled, and the first wave of raiders came screaming to their walls.

With the realization that there was no time for further argument came the realization of their doom, and they ran to the ramparts with their pitiful weapons.

Terarn Gashtek roared through the milling barbarians who churned the mud around Gorjhan: "Let's waste no time in siege. Fetch the sorcerer!"

They dragged Drinij Bara forward. From his garments, Terarn Gashtek produced the small black cat and held an iron blade at its throat.

"Work your spell, sorcerer, and tumble the walls quickly."

The sorcerer scowled, his eyes seeking Elric, but the albino averted his own eyes and turned his horse away.

The sorcerer produced a handful of powder from his belt pouch and hurled it into the air where it became first a gas, then a flickering ball of flame and finally a face, a dreadful unhuman face, formed in the flame.

"Dag-Gadden the Destroyer," intoned Drinkij Bara, "you are sworn to our ancient pact—will you obey me?"

"I must, therefore I will. What do you command?"

"That you obliterate the walls of this town and so leave the men inside naked, like crabs without their shells."

"My pleasure is to destroy and destroy I shall." The flaming face faded, altered, shrieked a searing course upward and became a blossoming scarlet canopy which hid the sky.

Then it swept down over the town and, in the instant of its passing, the walls of Gorjhan groaned, crumbled and vanished.

Elric shuddered—if Dag-Gadden came to Karlaak, such would be their fate.

Triumphant, the barbarian battlemongers swept into the defenseless town.

Careful to take no part in the massacre, Elric and Moonglum were also helpless to aid the slaughtered townspeople. The sight of the senseless, savage bloodshed around them enervated them. They ducked into a small house which seemed so far untouched by the pillaging barbarians. Inside they found three cowering children huddled around an older girl who clutched an old scythe in her soft hands. Shaking with fear, she prepared to stand them off.

"Do not waste our time, girl," Elric said, "or you'll be wasting your lives. Does this house have a loft?"

She nodded.

"Then get to it quickly. We'll make sure you're unharmed."

They stayed in the house, hating to observe the slaughter-madness which had come upon the howling barbarians. They heard the dreadful sounds of carnage and smelled the stench of dead flesh and running blood.

A barbarian, covered in blood which was not his own, dragged a woman into the house by her hair. She made no attempt to resist, her face stunned by the horror she had witnessed.

Elric growled: "Find another nest, hawk—we've made this our own."

The man said: "There's room enough here for what I want."

Then, at last, Elric's clenched muscles reacted almost in spite of him. His right hand swung over to his left hip and the long fingers locked around *Stormbringer's* black hilt. The blade leapt from the scabbard as Elric stepped forward and, his crimson eyes blazing his sickened hatred, he smashed his sword down through the man's body. Unnecessarily, he clove again, hacking the barbar-

ian in two. The woman remained where she lay, conscious but unmoving.

Elric picked up her inert body and passed it gently to Moonglum. "Take her upstairs with the others," he said brusquely.

The barbarians had begun to fire part of the town, their slaying all but done. Now they looted. Elric stepped out of the doorway.

There was precious little for them to loot but, still hungry for violence, they spent their energy on smashing inanimate things and setting fire to the broken, pillaged dwellings.

Stormbringer dangled loosely in Elric's hand as he looked at the blazing town. His face was a mask of shadow and frisking light as the fire threw up still longer tongues of flame to the misty sky.

Around him, barbarians squabbled over the pitiful booty; and occasionally a woman's scream cut above the other sounds, intermingled with rough shouts and the clash of metal.

Then he heard voices which were pitched differently to those in the immediate vicinity. The accents of the reavers mingled with a new tone—a whining, pleading tone. A group led by Terarn Gashtek came into view through the smoke.

Terarn Gashtek held something bloody in his hand—a human hand, severed at the wrist—and behind him swaggered several of his captains holding a naked old man between them. Blood ran over his body and gushed from his ruined arm, spurting sluggishly.

Terarn Gashtek frowned when he saw Elric. Then he shouted: "Now Westerner, you shall see how we placate our Gods with better gifts than meal and sour milk as this swine once did. He'll soon be dancing a pretty measure, I'll warrant—won't you, Lord Priest?"

The whining note went out of the old man's voice then and he stared with fever-bright eyes at Elric. His voice rose to a frenzied and high-pitched shriek which was curiously repellent.

"You dogs can howl over me!" he spat, "but Mirath and T'aargano will be revenged for the ruin of their priest and their temple—you have brought flame here and you shall die by flame." He pointed the bleeding stump of his arm at Elric—"And you—you are a traitor and have been one in many causes, I can see it written in you. Though now . . . You are—" the priest drew breath.

Elric licked his lips.

"I am what I am," he said. "And you are nothing but an old man soon to die. Your gods cannot harm us, for we do not pay them any respect. I'll listen no more to your senile meanderings!"

There was in the old priest's face all the knowledge of his past torment and the torment which was to come. He seemed to consider this and then was silent.

"Save your breath for screaming," said Terarn Gashtek to the uncomprehending priest.

And then Elric said: "It's bad luck to kill a priest, Flame Bringer!"

"You seem weak of stomach, my friend. His sacrifice to our own gods will bring us good luck, fear not."

Elric turned away. As he entered the house again, a wild shriek of agony seared out of the night and the laugher which followed was not pleasant.

Later, as the still burning houses lit the night, Elric and Moonglum, carrying heavy sacks on their shoulders, clasping a woman each, moved with a simulation of drunkenness to the edge of the camp. Moonglum left the sacks and the women with Elric and went back, returning soon with three horses.

They opened the sacks to allow the children to climb

out and watched the silent women mount the horses, aiding the children to clamber up.

Then they galloped away.

"Now," said Elric savagely, "we must work our plan tonight, whether the messenger reached Dyvim Slorm or not. I could not bear to witness another such sword-quenching."

Terarn Gashtek had drunk himself insensible. He lay sprawled in an upper room of one of the unburned houses.

Elric and Moonglum crept towards him. While Elric watched to see that he was undisturbed, Moonglum knelt beside the barbarian leader and, light-fingered, cautiously reached inside the man's garments. He smiled in self approval as he lifted out the squirming cat and replaced it with a stuffed rabbit-skin he had earlier prepared for the purpose. Holding the animal tight, he arose and nodded to Elric. Together, warily, they left the house and made their way through the chaos of the camp.

"I ascertained that Drinij Bara lies in the large wagon," Eric told his friend. "Quickly, now, the main danger's over."

Moonglum said: "When the cat and Drinij Bara have exchanged blood and the sorcerer's soul is back in his body—what then, Eric?"

"Together, our powers may serve at least to hold the barbarians back, but—" he broke off as a large group of warriors came weaving towards them.

"It's the Westerner and his little friend," laughed one. "Where are you off to, comrades?"

Elric sensed their mood. The slaughter of the day had not completely satiated their blood-lust. They were looking for trouble.

"Nowhere in particular," he replied. The barbarians lurched around them, encircling them.

"We've heard much of your straight blade, stranger," grinned their spokesman, "and I'd a mind to test it against a real weapon." He grabbed his own scimitar out of his belt. "What do you say?"

"I'd spare you that," said Elric coolly.

"You are generous—but Id rather you accepted my invitation."

"Let us pass," said Moonglum.

The barbarians' faces hardened. "Speak you so to the conquerors of the world?" said the leader.

Moonglum took a step back and drew his sword, the cat squirming in his left hand.

"We'd best get this done," said Elric to his friend. He tugged his runeblade from its scabbard. The sword sang a soft and mocking tune and the barbarians heard it. They were disconcerted.

"Well?" said Elric, holding the half-sentient blade out.

The barbarian who had challenged him looked uncertain of what to do. Then he forced himself to shout: "Clean iron can withstand any sorcery," and launched himself forward.

Elric, grateful for the chance to take further vengeance, blocked his swing, forced the scimitar back and aimed a blow which sliced the man's torso just above the hip. The barbarian screamed and died. Moonglum, dealing with a couple more, killed one but another came in swiftly and his sweeping sword sliced the little Eastlander's left shoulder. He howled—and dropped the cat. Elric stepped in, slew Moonglum's opponent, *Stormbringer* wailing a triumphant dirge. The rest of the barbarians turned and ran off.

"How bad is your wound?" gasped Elric, but Moonglum was on his knees staring through the gloom.

"Quick, Elric—can you see the cat? I dropped it in the struggle. If we lose it—we too are lost."

Frantically, they began to hunt through the camp.

But they were unsuccessful, for the cat, with the dexterity of its kind, had hidden itself.

A few moments later they heard the sounds of uproar coming from the house which Terarn Gashtek had commandeered.

"He's discovered that the cat's been stolen!" exclaimed Moonglum. "What do we do now?"

"I don't know—keep searching and hope he does not suspect us."

They continued to hunt, but with no result. While they searched, several barbarians came up to them. One of them said:

"Our leader wishes to speak with you."

"Why?"

"He'll inform you of that. Come on."

Reluctantly, they went with the barbarians to be confronted by a raging Terarn Gashtek. He clutched the stuffed rabbit skin in one claw-like hand and his face was warped with fury.

"My hold over the sorcerer has been stolen from me," he roared. "What do you know of it?"

"I don't understand," said Elric.

"The cat is missing—I found this rag in its place. You were caught talking to Drinij Bara recently, I think you were responsible."

"We know nothing of this," said Moonglum.

Terarn Gashtek growled: "The camp's in disorder, it will take a day to re-organize my men—once loosed like this they will obey no one. But when I've restored order, I shall question the whole camp. If you tell the truth, then you will be released, but meanwhile you will be given all the time you need to speak with the sorcerer." He jerked his head. "Take them away, disarm them, bind them and throw them in Drinij Bara's kennel."

As they were led away, Elric muttered: "We must escape and find that cat, but meanwhile we need not waste this opportunity to confer with Drinij Bara."

Drinij Bara said in the darkness: "No, Brother Sorcerer, I will not aid you. I will risk nothing until the cat and I are united."

"But Terarn Gashtek cannot threaten you any more."

"What if he recaptures the cat—what then?"

Elric was silent. He shifted his bound body uncomfortably on the hard boards of the wagon. He as about to continue his attempts at persuasion when the awning was thrown aside and he saw another trussed figure thrown towards them. Through the blackness he said in the Eastern tongue: "Who are you?"

The man replied in the language of the West: "I do not understand you."

"Are you, then, a Westerner?" asked Elric in the common speech.

"Yes—I am an Official Messenger from Karlaak. I was captured by these ordorous jackals as I returned to the city."

"What? Are you the man we sent to Dyvim Slorm, my kinsman? I am Elric of Melnibone."

"My lord, are we all, then prisoners? Oh, gods—Karlaak is truly lost."

"Did you get to Dyvim Slorm?"

"Aye—I caught up with him and his band. Luckily they were nearer to Karlaak than we suspected."

"And what was his answer to my request?"

"He said that a few young ones might be ready, but even with sorcery to aid him it would take some time to get to the Dragon Isle. There is a chance."

"A chance is all we need—but it will be no good unless we accomplish the rest of our plan. Somehow Drinij Bara's soul must be regained so that Terarn Gashtek can-

not force him to defend the barbarians. There is one idea I have—a memory of an ancient kinship that we of Melnibone had for a being called Meerclar. Thank the gods that I discovered those drugs in Troos and I still have my strength. Now, I must call my sword to me."

He closed his eyes and allowed his mind and body first to relax completely then concentrate on one single thing —the sword *Stormbringer.*

For years the evil symbiosis had existed between man and sword and the old attachments lingered.

He cried: "*Stormbringer!* Sister *Stormbringer*, unite with your brother! Come, sweet runeblade, come hell-forged kinslayer, your master needs thee . . ."

Outside, it seemed that a wailing wind had suddenly sprung up. Elric heard shouts of fear and a whistling sound. Then the covering of the wagon was sliced apart to let in the starlight and the moaning blade quivered in the air over his head. He struggled upwards, already feeling nauseated at what he was about to do, but he was reconciled that he was not, this time, guided by self-interest but by the necessity to save the world from the barbarian menace.

"Give me thy strength, sister my sword," he groaned as his bound hands grasped the hilt. "Give me thy strength and let us hope it is for the last time."

The blade writhed in his hands and he felt an awful sensation as its power, the power stolen vampire-like, from a hundred brave men, flowed into his shuddering body.

He became possessed of a peculiar strength which was not by any means wholly physical. His white face twisted as he concentrated on controlling the new power and the blade, both of which threatened to possess him entirely. He snapppd his bonds and stood up.

Barbarians were even now running towards the wagon.

Swiftly he cut the leather ropes binding the others and, unconscious of the nearing warriors, called a different name.

He spoke a new tongue, an alien tongue which normally he could not remember. It was a language taught to the Sorcerer Kings of Melnibone, Elric's ancestors, even before the building of Imrryr, the Dreaming City, over ten thousand years previously.

Meerclar of the Cats, it is I, your kinsman, Elric of Melnibone, last of the line that made vows of friendship with you and your people. Do you hear me, Lord of the Cats?"

Far beyond the Earth, dwelling within a world set apart from the physical laws of space and time which governed the planet, glowing in a deep warmth of blue and amber, a manlike creature stretched itself and yawned, displaying tiny, pointed teeth. It pressed its head languidly against its furry shoulder—and listened.

The voice it heard was not that of one of its people, the kind he loved and protected. But he recognized the language.

He smiled to himself as remembrance came and he felt the pleasant sensation of fellowship. He remembered a race which, unlike other humans (whom he disdained) had shared his qualities—a race which, like him, loved pleasure, cruelty and sophistication for its own sake. The race of Melniboneans.

Meerclar, Lord of the Cats, Protector of the Feline Kind, projected himself gracefully towards the source of the voice.

"*How may I aid thee?*" he purred.

"We seek one of your folk, Meerclar, who is somewhere close to here."

"*Yes, I sense him. What do you want of him?*"

"Nothing which is his—but he has two souls, one of them not his own."

"*That is so—his name is Fiarshern of the great family of Trrechoww. I will call him. He will come to me.*"

Outside, the barbarians were striving to conquer their fear of the supernatural events taking place in the wagon. Terarn Gashtek cursed them: "There are five hundred thousand of us and a few of them. Take them now!"

His warriors began to move cautiously forward.

Fiarshern, the cat, heard a voice which it knew instinctively to be that of one which it would be foolish to disobey. It ran swiftly towards the source of that voice.

"Look—the cat—here it is. Seize it quickly."

Two of Terarn Gashtek's men jumped forward to do his bidding, but the little cat eluded them and leaped lightly into the wagon.

"*Give the human back its soul, Fiarshern,*" said Meerclar softly. The cat moved towards its human master and dug its delicate teeth into the sorcerer's veins.

A moment later Drinij Bara laughed wildly. "My soul is mine again. Thank you, great Cat Lord. Let me repay you!"

"*There is no need,*" smiled Meerclar mockingly, "*and, anyway, I perceive that your soul is already bartered. Goodbye, Elric of Melnibone. I was pleased to answer your call, though I see that you no longer follow the ancient pursuits of your fathers. Still, for the sake of old loyalties I do not begrudge you this service. Farewell, I go back to a warmer place than this inhospitable one.*"

The Lord of the Cats faded and returned to the world of blue and amber warmth where he once more resumed his interrupted sleep.

"Come, Brother Sorcerer," cried Drinij Bara exultantly. "Let us take the vengeance which is ours."

He and Elric sprang from the wagon, but the two others were not quite so quick to respond.

Terarn Gashtek and his men confronted them. Many had bows and long arrows fitted to them.

"Shoot them down swiftly," yelled the Flame Bringer. "Shoot them now before they have time to summon further demons!"

A shower of arrows whistled towards them. Drinij Bara smiled, spoke a few words as he moved his hands almost carelessly. The arrows stopped in midflight, turned back and each uncannily found the throat of the man who had shot it. Terarn Gashtek gasped and wheeled back, pushing past his men and, as he retreated, shouted for them to attack the four.

Driven by the knowledge that if they fled they would be doomed, the great mass of barbarians closed in.

Dawn was bringing light to the cloud-ripped sky as Moonglum looked upwards. "Look, Elric," he shouted pointing.

"Only five," said the albino. "Only five—but perhaps enough."

He parried several lashing blades on his own sword and, although he was possessed of superhuman strength, all the power seemed to have left the sword so that it was only as useful as an ordinary blade. Still fighting, he relaxed his body and felt the power leave him, flowing back into *Stormbringer.*

Again the runeblade began to whine and thirstily sought the throats and hearts of the savage barbarians.

Drinij Bara had no sword, but he did not need one, he was using subtler means to defend himself. All around him were the gruesome results, boneless masses of flesh and sinew.

The two sorcerers and Moonglum and the messenger forced their way through the half-insane barbarians who were desperately attempting to overcome them. In the confusion it was impossible to work out a coherent plan of action. Moonglum and the messenger grabbed scimi-

tars from the corpses of the barbarians and joined in the battle.

Eventually, they had reached the outer limits of the camp. A whole mass of barbarians had fled, spurring their mounts westwards. Then Elric saw Terarn Gashtek, holding a bow. He saw the Flame Bringer's intention and shouted a warning to his fellow sorcerer who had his back to the barbarian. Drinij Bara, yelling some disturbing incantation, half-turned, broke off, attempted to begin another spell, but the arrow pierced his eye.

He screamed: "*No!*"

Then he died.

Seeing his ally slain, Elric paused and stared at the sky and the great wheeling beasts which he recognized.

Dyvim Slorm, son of Elric's cousin Dyvim Tvar the Dragon Master, had brought the legendary dragons of Imrryr to aid his kinsman. But most of the huge beasts slept, and would sleep for another century—only five dragons had been aroused. As yet, Dyvim Slorm could do nothing for fear of harming Elric and his comrades.

Terarn Gashtek, too, had seen the magnificent beasts. His grandiose plans of conquest were already fading and, thwarted, he ran towards Elric.

"You white-faced filth," he howled, "you have been responsible for all this—and you will pay the Flame Bringer's price!"

Elric laughed as he brought up *Stormbringer* to protect himself from the incensed barbarian. He pointed to the sky: "These, too, can be called Flame Bringers, Terarn Gashtek—and are better named than thou!"

Then he plunged the evil blade full into Terarn Gashtek's body and the barbarian gave a choking moan as his soul was drawn from him.

"Destroyer, I may be, Elric of Melibone," he gasped, "but my way was cleaner than yours. May you and all you hold dear be cursed for eternity!"

Elric laughed, but his voice shook slightly as he stared at the barbarian's corpse. "I've rid myself of such curses once before, my friend. Yours will have little effect, I think." He paused. "By Arioch, I hope I'm right. I'd thought my fate cleansed of doom and curses, but perhaps I was wrong . . ."

The huge horde of barbarians were nearly all mounted now and fleeing westwards. They had to be stopped for, at the pace they were travelling, they would soon reach Karlaak and only the Gods knew what they would do when they got to the unprotected city.

Above him, he heard the flapping of thirty-foot wings and scented the familiar smell of the great flying reptiles which had pursued him years before when he had led a reaver fleet on the attack of his home-city. Then he heard the curious notes of the Dragon Horn and saw that Dyvim Slorm was seated on the back of the leading beast, a long spearlike goad in his gauntleted right hand.

The dragon spiralled downward and its great bulk came to rest on the ground thirty feet away, its leathery wings folding back along its length. The Dragon Master waved to Elric.

"Greetings, King Elric, we barely managed to arrive in time I see."

"Time enough, kinsman," smiled Elric. "It is good to see the son of Dyvim Tvar again. I was afraid you might not answer my plea."

"Old scores were forgotten at the Battle of Bakshaan when my father Dyvim Tvar died aiding you in the siege of Nikorn's fortress. I regret only the younger beasts were ready to be awakened. You'll remember the others were used but a few years past."

"I remember," said Elric. "But may I beg another favor, Dyvim Slorm?"

"What is that?"

"Let me ride the chief dragon. I am trained in the arts

of the Dragon Master and have good reason for riding against the barbarians—we were forced to witness insensate carnage a while ago and may, perhaps, pay them back in their own coinage."

Dyvin Slorm nodded and swung off his mount. The beast stirred restlessly and drew back the lips of its tapering snout to reveal teeth as thick as a man's arm, as long as a sword. Its forked tongue flickered and it turned its huge, cold eyes to regard Elric.

Elric sang to it in the old Melnibonean speech, took the goad and the Dragon Horn from Dyvim Slorm and carefully climbed into the high saddle at the base of the dragon's neck. He placed his booted feet into the great silver stirrups.

"Now fly, dragon brother," he sang, "up, up and have your venom ready."

He heard the snap of displaced air as the wings began to beat and then the great beast was clear of the ground and soaring upwards into the grey and brooding sky.

The other four dragons followed the first and, as he gained height, sounding specific notes on the horn to give them directions, he drew his word from its scabbard.

Centuries before, Elric's ancestors armed with *Stormbringer* and its lost sister-sword *Mournblade* had ridden their dagon steeds to conquer the whole of the Western World. There had been many more dragons in the Dragon Caves in those days. Now only a handful remained, and of those only the youngest had slept sufficiently long enough to be awakened.

High in the wintry sky climbed the huge reptiles and Elric's long white hair and stained black cloak flew behind him as he sang the exultant *Song of the Dragon Masters* and urged his charges westwards.

Wild wind-horses soar the cloud-trails,
Unholy born doth sound its blast,
You and we were first to conquer,
You and we shall be the last!

Thoughts of love, of peace, of vengeance even were lost in that reckless sweeping across the glowering skies which hung over that ancient Age of the Young Kingdoms. Elric, archetypal, proud and disdainful in his knowledge that even his deficient blood was the blood of the Sorcerer Kings of Melnibone, became detached.

He had no loyalties then, no friends and, if evil possessed him, then it was a pure, brilliant evil, untainted by human drivings.

High soared the dragons until below them was the heaving black mass, marring the landscape, the fear-driven horde of barbarians who, in their ignorance, had sought to conquer the lands beloved of Elric of Melnibone.

"Ho, dragon brothers—loose your venom—burn—burn! And in your burning cleanse the world!"

Stormbringer joined in the wild shout and, diving, the dragons swept across the sky, down upon the crazed barbarians, shooting streams of combustible venom which water could not extinguish, and the stink of charred flesh drifted upwards through the smoke and flame so that the scene became a scene of Hell—and proud Elric was Black Sathanus reaping awful vengeance.

He did not gloat, for he had done only what was needed, that was all. He shouted no more but turned his dragon mount back and upward, sounding his horn and summoning the other reptiles to him. And as he climbed, the exultation left him and was replaced by cold horror.

"I am still a Melnibonean," he thought, "and cannot rid myself of that whatever else I do. And, in my strength I am still weak, ready to use this cursed blade in any small

emergency." With a shout of loathing, he flung the sword away, flung it into space. It screamed like a woman and went plummeting downwards towards the distant earth.

"There," he said, "it is done at last." Then, in calmer mood, he turned to where he had left his friends and guided his reptilian mount to the ground.

Dyvim Slorm said: "Where is the sword of your forefathers, King Elric?" But the albino did not answer, just thanked his kinsman for the loan of the dragon leader. Then they all remounted the dragons and flew back towards Karlaak to tell them the news.

Zarozinia saw her lord riding the first dragon and knew that Karlaak and the Western World were saved, the Eastern World avenged. His stance was proud but his face was grave as he went to meet her outside the city. She saw in him a return of an earlier sorrow which he had thought forgotten. She ran to him and he caught her in his arms, holding her close but saying nothing.

He bade farewell to Dyvim Slorm and his fellow Imrryians and, with Moonglum and the messenger following at a distance, went into the city and thence to his house, impatient of the congratulations which the citizens showered upon him.

"What is it, my lord?" Zarozinia said as, with a sigh, he sprawled wearily upon the great bed. "Can speaking help?"

"I'm tired of swords and sorcery, Zarozinia, that is all. But at last I have rid myself once and for all of that hell-blade which I had thought my destiny to carry always."

"*Stormbringer*, you mean?" she gasped.

"Of course, what else?"

She said nothing. She did not tell him of the sword which, apparently of its own volition, had come screaming into Karlaak and passed into the armory to hang, in its old place, in darkness there.

He closed his eyes and drew a long, sighing breath.

"Sleep well, my lord," she said softly and, with tearful eyes and a sad mouth, lay herself down beside him.

She did not welcome the morning.

BEYOND THE BLACK RIVER

By

Robert E. Howard

Conan can be said to be the personification of the times—strikingly similar to those we know as the Dark Ages—in which he lived. It was a time when Man was beginning the long climb back towards the world the fathers of the race had known—a period when the sword ruled, counseled at times by men allied to that which ruled the shadows.

The stillness of the forest trail was so primeval that the tread of a soft-booted foot was a startling disturbance. At least it seemed so to the ears of the wayfarer, though he was moving along the path with the caution that must be practised by any man who ventures beyond Thunder River. He was a young man of medium height, with an open countenance and a mop of tousled tawny hair unconfined by cap or helmet. His garb was common enough for that country—a coarse tunic, belted at the waist, short leather breeches beneath, and soft buckskin boots that came short of the knee. A knife-hilt jutted from one boot-top. The broad leather belt supported a short, heavy sword and a buckskin pouch. There was no perturbation in the wide eyes that scanned the green walls which fringed the trail. Though not tall, he was well built, and the arms that the short wide sleeves of the tunic left bare were thick with corded muscle.

He tramped imperturbably along, although the last settler's cabin lay miles behind him, and each step was carrying him nearer the grim peril that hung like a brooding shadow over the ancient forest.

He was not making as much noise as it seemed to him, though he well knew that the faint tread of his booted feet would be like a tocsin of alarm to the fierce ears that might be lurking in the treacherous green fastness. His careless attitude was not genuine; his eyes and ears were keenly alert, especially his ears, for no gaze could penetrate the leafy tangle for more than a few feet in either direction.

But it was instinct more than any warning by the external senses which brought him up suddenly, his hand

on his hilt. He stood stock-still in the middle of the trail, unconsciously holding his breath, wondering what he had heard, and wondering if indeed he had heard anything. The silence seemed absolute. Not a squirrel chattered or bird chirped. Then his gaze fixed itself on a mass of bushes beside the trail a few yards ahead of him. There was no breeze, yet he had seen a branch quiver. The short hairs on his scalp prickled, and he stood for an instant undecided, certain that a move in either direction would bring death streaking at him from the bushes.

A heavy chopping crunch sounded behind the leaves. The bushes were shaken violently, and simultaneously with the sound, an arrow arched erratically from among them and vanished among the trees along the trail. The wayfarer glimpsed its flight as he sprang frantically to cover.

Crouching behind a thick stem, his sword quivering in his fingers, he saw the bushes part, and a tall figure stepped leisurely into the trail. The traveller stared in surprise. The stranger was clad like himself in regard to boots and breeks, though the latter were of silk instead of leather. But he wore a sleeveless hauberk of dark mesh-mail in place of a tunic, and a helmet perched on his black mane. That helmet held the other's gaze; it was without a crest, but adorned by short bull's horns. No civilized hand ever forged that head-piece. Nor was the face below it that of a civilized man: dark, scarred, with smoldering blue eyes, it was a face as untamed as the primordial forest which formed its background. The man held a broad sword in his right hand, and the edge was smeared with crimson.

"Come on out," he called, in an accent unfamiliar to the wayfarer. "All's safe now. There was only one of the dogs. Come on out."

The other emerged dubiously and stared at the stranger. He felt curiously helpless and futile as he gazed on

the proportions of the forest man—the massive iron-clad breast, and the arm that bore the reddened sword, burned dark by the sun and ridged and corded with muscles. He moved with the dangerous ease of a panther; he was too fiercely supple to be a product of civilization, even of that fringe of civilization which composed the outer frontiers.

Turning, he stepped back to the bushes and pulled them apart. Still not certain just what had happened, the wayfarer from the east advanced and stared down into the bushes. A man lay there, a short, dark, thickly-muscled man, naked except for a loin-cloth, a necklace of human teeth and a brass armlet. A short sword was thrust into the girdle of the loin-cloth, and one hand still gripped a heavy black bow. The man had long black hair; that was about all the wayfarer could tell about his head, for his features were a mask of blood and brains. His skull had been split to the teeth.

"A Pict, by the gods!" exclaimed the wayfarer.

The burning blue eyes turned upon him.

"Are you surprised?"

"Why, they told me at Velitrium, and again at the settlers' cabins along the road, that these devils sometimes sneaked across the border, but I didn't expect to meet one this far in the interior."

"You're only four miles east of Black River," the stranger informed him. "They've been shot within a mile of Velitrium. No settler between Thunder River and Fort Tuscelan is really safe. I picked up this dog's trail three miles south of the fort this morning, and I've been following him ever since. I came up behind him just as he was drawing an arrow on you. Another instant and there'd have been a stranger in Hell. But I spoiled his aim for him."

The wayfarer was staring wide-eyed at the larger man, dumbfounded by the realization that the man had actu-

ally tracked down one of the forest-devils and slain him unsuspected. That implied woodsmanship of a quality undreamed, even for Conajohara.

"You are one of the fort's garrison?" he asked.

"I'm no soldier. I draw the pay and rations of an officer of the line, but I do my work in the woods. Valannus knows I'm of more use ranging along the river than cooped up in the fort."

Casually the slayer shoved the body deeper into the thickets with his foot, pulled the bushes together and turned away down the trail. The other followed him.

"My name is Balthus," he offered. "I was at Velitrium last night. I haven't decided whether I'll take up a hide of land, or enter fort-service."

"The best land near Thunder River is already taken," grunted the slayer. "Plenty of good land between Scalp Creek—you crossed it a few miles back—and the fort, but that's getting too devilish close to the river. The Picts steal over to burn and murder—as that one did. They don't always come singly. Some day they'll try to sweep the settlers out of Conajohara. And they may succeed—probably will succeed. This colonization business is mad, anyway. There's plenty of good land east of the Bossonian marches. If the Aquilonians would cut up some of the big estates of their barons, and plant wheat where now only deer are hunted, they wouldn't have to cross the border and take the land of the Picts away from them."

"That's queer talk from a man in the service of the Governor of Conajohara," objected Balthus.

"It's nothing to me," the other retorted. "I'm a mercenary. I sell my sword to the highest bidder. I never planted wheat and never will, so long as there are other harvests to be reaped with the sword. But you Hyborians have expanded as far as you'll be allowed to expand. You've crossed the marches, burned a few villages, exter-

minated a few clans and pushed back the frontier to Black River; but I doubt if you'll even be able to hold what you've conquered, and you'll never push the frontier any further westward. Your idiotic king doesn't understand conditions here. He won't send you enough reinforcements, and there are not enough settlers to withstand the shock of a concerted attack from across the river."

"But the Picts are divided into small clans," persisted Balthus. "They'll never unite. We can whip any single clan."

"Or any three or four clans," admitted the slayer. "But some day a man will rise and unite thirty or forty clans, just as was done among the Cimmerians, when the Gundermen tried to push the border northward, years ago. They tried to colonize the southern marches of Cimmeria: destroyed a few small clans, built a fort-town, Venarium—you've heard the tale."

"So I have indeed," replied Balthus, wincing. The memory of that red disaster was a black blot in the chronicles of a proud and warlike people. "My uncle was at Venarium when the Cimmerians swarmed over the walls. He was one of the few who escaped that slaughter. I've heard him tell the tale, many a time. The barbarians swept out of the hills in a ravening horde, without warning, and stormed Venarium with such fury none could stand before them. Men, women and children were butchered. Venarium was reduced to a mass of charred ruins, as it is to this day. The Aquilonians were driven back across the marches, and have never since tried to colonize the Cimmerian country. But you speak of Venarium familiarly. Perhaps you were there?"

"I was," grunted the other. "I was one of the horde that swarmed over the walls. I hadn't yet seen fifteen snows, but already my name was repeated about the council fires."

Balthus involuntarily recoiled, staring. It seemed incredible that the man walking tranquilly at his side should have been one of those screeching, blood-mad devils that had poured over the walls of Venarium on that long-gone day to make her streets run crimson.

"Then you, too, are a barbarian!" he exclaimed involuntarily.

The other nodded, without taking offense.

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian."

"I've heard of you." Fresh interest quickened Balthus' gaze. No wonder the Pict had fallen victim to his own sort of subtlety. The Cimmerians were barbarians as ferocious as the Picts, and much more intelligent. Evidently Conan had spent much time among civilized men, though that contact had obviously not softened him, nor weakened any of his primitive instincts. Balthus' apprehension turned to admiration as he marked the easy catlike stride, the effortless silence with which the Cimmerian moved along the trail. The oiled links of his armor did not clink, and Balthus knew Conan could glide through the deepest thicket or most tangled copse as noiselessly as any naked Pict that ever lived.

"You're not a Gunderman?" It was more assertion than question.

Balthus shook his head. "I'm from the Tauran."

"I've seen good woodsmen from the Tauran. But the Bossonians have sheltered you Aquilonians from the outer wilderness for too many centuries. You need hardening."

That was true; the Bossonian marches, with their fortified villages filled with determined bowmen, had long served Aquilonia as a buffer against the outlying barbarians. Now among the settlers beyond Thunder River there was growing up a breed of forest-men capable of meeting the barbarians at their own game, but their numbers

were still scanty. Most of the frontiersmen were like Balthus—more of the settler than the woodsman type.

The sun had not set, but it was no longer insight, hidden as it was behind the dense forest wall. The shadows were lengthening, deepening back in the woods as the companions strode on down the trail.

"It will be dark before we reach the fort," commented Conan casually; then: "Listen!"

He stopped short, half crouching, sword ready, transformed into a savage figure of suspicion and menace, poised to spring and rend. Balthus had heard it too—a wild scream that broke at its highest note. It was the cry of a man in dire fear or agony.

Conan was off in an instant, racing down the trail, each stride widening the distance between him and his straining companion. Balthus puffed a curse. Among the settlements of the Tauran he was accounted a good runner, but Conan was leaving him behind with maddening ease. Then Balthus forgot his exasperation as his ears were outraged by the most frightful cry he had ever heard. It was not human, this one; it was a demoniacal caterwauling of hideous triumph that seemed to exult over fallen humanity and find echo in black gulfs beyond human ken.

Balthus faltered in his stride, and clammy sweat beaded his flesh. But Conan did not hesitate; he darted around a bend in the trail and disappeared, and Balthus, panicky at finding himself alone with that awful scream still shuddering through the forest in grisly echoes, put on an extra burst of speed and plunged after him.

The Aquilonian slid to a stumbling halt, almost colliding with the Cimmerian who stood in the trail over a crumpled body. But Conan was not looking at the corpse which lay there in the crimson-soaked dust. He was glaring into the deep woods on either side of the trail.

Balthus muttered a horrified oath. It was the body of a

man which lay there in the trail, a short, fat man, clad in the gilt-worked boots and (despite the heat) the ermine-trimmed tunic of a wealthy merchant. His fat, pale face was set in a stare of frozen horror; his thick throat had been slashed from ear to ear as if by a razor-sharp blade. The short sword still in its scabbard seemed to indicate that he had been struck down without a chance to fight for his life.

"A Pict?" Balthus whispered, as he turned to peer into the deepening shadows of the forest.

Conan shook his head and straightened to scowl down at the dead man.

"A forest devil. This is the fifth, by Crom!"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever hear of a Pictish wizard called Zogar Sag?"

"He dwells in Gwawela, the nearest village across the river. Three months ago he hid beside this road and stole a string of pack-mules from a pack-train bound for the fort—drugged their drivers, somehow. The mules belonged to this man"—Conan casually indicated the corpse with his foot—"Tiberias, a merchant of Velitrium. They were loaded with ale-kegs, and old Zogar stopped to guzzle before he got across the river. A woodsman named Soractus trailed him, and led Valannus and three soldiers to where he lay dead drunk in a thicket. At the importunities of Tiberias, Valannus threw Zogar Sag into a cell, which is the worst insult you can give a Pict. He managed to kill his guard and escape, and sent back word that he meant to kill Tiberias and the five men who captured him in a way that would make Aquilonians shudder for centuries to come.

"Well, Soractus and the soldiers are dead. Soractus was killed on the river, the soldiers in the very shadow of the fort. And now Tiberias is dead. No Pict killed any of

them. Each victim—except Tiberias, as you see—lacked his head—which no doubt is now ornamenting the altar of Zogar Sag's particular god."

"How do you know they weren't killed by the Picts?" demanded Balthus.

Conan pointed to the corpse of the merchant.

"You think that was done with a knife or a sword? Look closer and you'll see that only a talon could have made a gash like that. The flesh is ripped, not cut."

"Perhaps a panther—" began Balthus, without conviction.

Conan shook his head impatiently.

"A man from the Tauran couldn't mistake the mark of a panther's claws. No. It's a forest devil summoned by Zogar Sag to carry out his revenge. Tiberias was a fool to start for Velitrium alone, and so close to dusk. But each one of the victims seemed to be smitten with madness just before doom overtook him. Look here; the signs are plain enough. Tiberias came riding along the trail on his mule, maybe with a bundle of choice otter pelts behind his saddle to sell in Velitrium, and the *thing* sprang on him from behind that bush. See where the branches are crushed down.

"Tiberias gave one scream, and then his throat was torn open and he was selling his otter skins in Hell. The mule ran away into the woods. Listen! Even now you can hear him thrashing about under the trees. The demon didn't have time to take Tiberias' head; it took fright as we came up."

"As *you* came up," amended Balthus. "It must not be a very terrible creature if it flees from one armed man. But how do you know it was not a Pict with some kind of a hook that rips instead of slicing? Did you see it?"

"Tiberias was an armed man," grunted Conan. "If Zogar Sag can bring demons to aid him, he can tell them which men to kill and which to let alone. No, I didn't see

it. I only saw the bushes shake as it left the trail. But if you want further proof, look here!"

The slayer had stepped into the pool of blood in which the dead man sprawled. Under the bushes at the edge of the path there was a footprint, made in blood on the hard loam.

"Did a man make that?" demanded Conan.

Balthus felt his scalp prickle. Neither man nor any beast that he had ever seen could have left that strange, monstrous three-toed print, that was curiously combined of the bird and the reptile, yet a true type of neither. He spread his fingers above the print, careful not to touch it, and grunted explosively. He could not span the mark.

"What is it?" he whispered. "I never saw a beast that left a spoor like that."

"Nor any other sane man," answered Conan grimly. "It's a swamp demon—they're thick as bats in the swamps beyond Black River. You can hear them howling like damned souls when the wind blows strong from the south on hot nights."

"What shall we do?" asked the Aquilonian, peering uneasily into the deep blue shadows. The frozen fear on the dead countenance haunted him. He wondered what hideous head the wretch had seen thrust grinning from among the leaves to chill his blood with terror.

"No use to try to follow a demon," grunted Conan, drawing a short woodman's ax from his girdle. "I tried tracking him after he killed Soractus. I lost his trail within a dozen steps. He might have grown himself wings and flown away, or sunk down through the earth to Hell. I don't know. I'm not going after the mule, either. It'll either wander back to the fort, or to some settler's cabin."

As he spoke Conan was busy at the edge of the trail with his ax. With a few strokes he cut a pair of saplings nine or ten feet long, and denuded them of their

branches. Then he cut a length from a serpent-like vine that crawled among the bushes near by, and making one end fast to one of the poles, a couple of feet from the end, whipped the vine over the other sapling and interlaced it back and forth. In a few moments he had a crude but strong litter.

"The demon isn't going to get Tiberias' head if I can help it," he growled. "We'll carry the body into the fort. It isn't more than three miles. I never liked the fat fool, but we can't have Pictish devils making so cursed free with white men's heads."

The Picts were a white race, though swarthy, but the border men never spoke of them as such.

Balthus took the rear end of the litter, onto which Conan unceremoniously dumped the unfortunate merchant, and they moved on down the trail as swiftly as possible. Conan made no more noise laden with their grim burden than he had made when unencumbered. He had made a loop with the merchant's belt at the end of the poles, and was carrying his share of the load with one hand, while the other gripped his naked broadsword, and his restless gaze roved the sinister walls about them. The shadows were thickening. A darkening blue mist blurred the outlines of the foliage. The forest deepened in the twilight, became a blue haunt of mystery sheltering unguessed things.

They had covered more than a mile, and the muscles in Balthus' sturdy arms were beginning to ache a little, when a cry rang shuddering from the woods whose blue shadows were deepening into purple.

Conan started convulsively, and Balthus almost let go the poles.

"A woman!" cried the younger man. "Great Mitra, a woman cried out then!"

"A settler's wife straying in the woods," snarled

Conan, setting down his end of the litter. "Looking for a cow, probably, and—stay here!"

He dived like a hunting wolf into the leafy wall. Balthus' hair bristled.

"Stay here alone with this corpse and a devil hiding in the woods?" he yelped. "I'm coming with you!"

And suiting action to words, he plunged after the Cimmerian. Conan glanced back at him, but made no objection, though he did not moderate his pace to accommodate the shorter legs of his companion. Balthus wasted his wind in swearing as the Cimmerian drew away from him again, like a phantom between the trees, and then Conan burst into a dim glade and halted crouching, lips snarling, sword lifted.

"What are we stopping for?" panted Balthus, dashing the sweat out of his eyes and gripping his short sword.

"That scream came from this glade, or near by," answered Conan. "I don't mistake the location of sounds, even in the woods. But where—"

Abruptly the sound rang out again—*behind them;* in the direction of the trail they had just quitted. It rose piercingly and pitifully, the cry of a woman in frantic terror—and then, shockingly, it changed to a yell of mocking laughter that might have burst from the lips of a fiend of lower Hell.

"What in Mitra's name—" Balthus' face was a pale blur in the gloom.

With a scorching oath Conan wheeled and dashed back the way he had come, and the Aquilonian stumbled bewilderedly after him. He blundered into the Cimmerian as the latter stopped dead, and rebounded from his brawny shoulders as though from an iron statue. Gasping from the impact, he heard Conan's breath hiss through his teeth. The Cimmerian seemed frozen in his tracks.

Looking over his shoulder, Balthus felt his hair stand

up stiffly. Something was moving through the deep bushes that fringed the trail—something that neither walked nor flew, but seemed to glide like a serpent. But it was not a serpent. Its outlines were indistinct, but it was taller than a man, and not very bulky. It gave off a glimmer of weird light, like a faint blue flame. Indeed, the eery fire was the only tangible thing about it. It might have been an embodied flame moving with reason and purpose through the blackening woods.

Conan snarled a savage curse and hurled his ax with ferocious will. But the thing glided on without altering its course. Indeed it was only a few instants' fleeting glimpse they had of it—a tall, shadowy thing of misty flame floating through the thickets. Then it was gone, and the forest crouched in breathless stillness.

With a snarl Conan plunged through the intervening foliage and into the trail. His profanity, as Balthus floundered after him, was lurid and impassioned. The Cimmerian was standing over the litter on which lay the body of Tiberias. And that body no longer possessed a head.

"Tricked us with its damnable caterwauling!" raved Conan, swinging his great sword about his head in his wrath. "I might have known! I might have guessed a trick! Now there'll be five heads to decorate Zogar's altar."

"But what thing is it that can cry like a woman and laugh like a devil, and shines like witch-fire as it glides through the trees?" gasped Balthus, mopping the sweat from his pale face.

"A swamp devil," responded Conan morosely. "Grab those poles. We'll take in the body, anyway. At least our load's a bit lighter."

With which grim philosophy he gripped the leathery loop and stalked down the trail.

The Wizard of Gwawela

Fort Tuscelan stood on the eastern bank of Black River, the tides of which washed the foot of the stockade. The latter was of logs, as were all the buildings within, including the donjon (to dignify it by that appellation), in which were the governor's quarters, overlooking the stockade and the sullen river. Beyond that river lay a huge forest, which approached jungle-like density along the spongy shores. Men paced the runways along the log parapet day and night, watching that dense green wall. Seldom a menacing figure appeared, but the sentries knew that they too were watched, fiercely, hungrily, with the mercilessness of ancient hate. The forest beyond the river might seem desolate and vacant of life to the ignorant eye, but life teemed there, not alone of bird and beast and reptile, but also of men, the fiercest of all the hunting beasts.

There, at the fort, civilization ended. Fort Tuscelan was the last outpost of a civilized world; it represented the westernmost thrust of the dominant Hyborian races. Beyond the river the primitive still reigned in shadowy forests, brush-thatched huts where hung the grinning skulls of men, and mud-walled enclosures where fires flickered and drums rumbled, and spears were whetted in the hands of dark, silent men with tangled black hair and the eyes of serpents. Those eyes often glared through the bushes at the fort across the river. Once dark-skinned men had built their huts where that fort stood; yes, and their huts had risen where now stood the fields and log cabins of fair-haired settlers, back beyond Velitrium, that raw, turbulent frontier town on the banks of Thunder River, to the shores of that other river that bounds the Bossonian marches. Traders had come, and priests of

Mitra who walked with bare feet and empty hands, and died horribly, most of them; but soldiers had followed, and men with axes in their hands and women and children in ox-drawn wains. Back to Thunder River, and still back, beyond Black River, the aborigines had been pushed, with slaughter and massacre. But the dark-skinned people did not forget that once Conajohara had been theirs.

The guard inside the eastern gate bawled a challenge. Through a barred aperture torchlight flickered, glinting on a steel headpiece and suspicious eyes beneath it.

"Open the gate," snorted Conan. "You see it's I, don't you?"

Military discipline put his teeth on edge.

The gate swung inward and Conan and his companion passed through. Balthus noted that the gate was flanked by a tower on each side, the summits of which rose above the stockade. He saw loopholes for arrows.

The guardsmen grunted as they saw the burden borne between the men. Their pikes jangled against each other as they thrust shut the gate, chin on shoulder, and Conan asked testily: "Have you never seen a headless body before?"

The faces of the soldiers were pallid in the torchlight.

"That's Tiberias," blurted one. "I recognize that fur-trimmed tunic. Valerius here owes me five lunas. I told him Tiberias had heard the loon call when he rode through the gate on his mule, with his glassy stare. I wagered he'd come back without his head."

Conan grunted enigmatically, motioned Balthus to ease the litter to the ground, and then strode off toward the governor's quarters, with the Aquilonian at his heels. The tousle-headed youth stared about him eagerly and curiously, noting the rows of barracks along the walls, the stables, the tiny merchants' stalls, the towering block-

house, and the other buildings, with the open square in the middle where the soldiers drilled, and where, now, fires danced and men off duty lounged. These were now hurrying to join the morbid crowd gathered about the litter at the gate. The rangy figures of Aquilonian pikemen and forest runners mingled with the shorter, stockier forms of Bossonian archers.

He was not greatly surprised that the governor received them himself. Autocratic society with its rigid caste laws lay east of the marches. Valannus was still a young man, well knit, with a finely chiseled countenance already carved into sober cast by toil and responsibility.

"You left the fort before daybreak, I was told," he said to Conan. "I had begun to fear that the Picts had caught you at last."

"When they smoke my head the whole river will know it," grunted Conan. "They'll hear Pictish women wailing their dead as far as Velitrium—I was on a lone scout. I couldn't sleep. I kept hearing drums talking across the river."

"They talk each night," reminded the governor, his fine eyes shadowed, as he stared closely at Conan. He had learned the unwisdom of discounting wild men's instincts.

"There was a difference last night," growled Conan. "There has been ever since Zogar Sag got back across the river."

"We should either have given him presents and sent him home, or else hanged him," sighed the governor. "You advised that, but—"

"But it's hard for you Hyborians to learn the ways of the outlands," said Conan. "Well, it can't be helped now, but there'll be no peace on the border so long as Zogar lives and remembers the cell he sweated in. I was following a warrior who slipped over to put a few white

notches on his bow. After I split his head I fell in with this lad whose name is Balthus and who's come from the Tauran to help hold the frontier."

Valannus approvingly eyed the young man's frank countenance and strongly-knit frame.

"I am glad to welcome you, young sir. I wish more of your people would come. We need men used to forest life. Many of our soldiers and some of our settlers are from the eastern provinces and know nothing of woodcraft, or even of agricultural life."

"Not many of that breed this side of Velitrium," grunted Conan. "That town's full of them, though. But listen, Valannus, we found Tiberias dead on the trail." And in a few words he related the grisly affair.

Valannus paled. "I did not know he had left the fort. He must have been mad!"

"He was," answered Conan. "Like the other four; each one, when his time came, went mad and rushed into the woods to meet his death like a hare running down the throat of a python. *Something* called to them from the deeps of the forest, something the men call a loon, for lack of a better name, but only the doomed ones could hear it. Zogar Sag has made a magic that Aquilonian civilization can't overcome."

To this thrust Valannus made no reply; he wiped his brow with a shaky hand.

"Do the soldiers know of this?"

"We left the body by the eastern gate."

"You should have concealed the fact, hidden the corpse somewhere in the woods. The soldiers are nervous enough already."

"They'd have found it out some way. If I'd hidden the body, it would have been returned to the fort as the corpse of Soractus was—tied up outside the gate for the men to find in the morning."

Valannus shuddered. Turning, he walked to a case-

ment and stared silently out over the river, black and shiny under the glint of the stars. Beyond the river the jungle rose like an ebony wall. The distant screech of a panther broke the stillness. The night pressed in, blurring the sounds of the soldiers outside the blockhouse, dimming the fires. A wind whispered through the black branches, rippling the dusky water. On its wings came a low, rhythmic pulsing, sinister as the pad of a leopard's foot.

"After all," said Valannus, as if speaking his thoughts aloud, "what do we know—what does anyone know—of the things that jungle may hide? We have dim rumors of great swamps and rivers, and a forest that stretches on and on over everlasting plains and hills to end at last on the shores of the western ocean. But what things lie between this river and that ocean we dare not even guess. No white man has ever plunged deep into that fastness and returned alive to tell us what he found. We are wise in our civilized knowledge, but our knowledge extends just so far—to the western bank of that ancient river! Who knows what shapes earthly and unearthly may lurk beyond the dim circle of light our knowledge has cast?

"Who knows what gods are worshipped under the shadows of that heathen forest, or what devils crawl out of the black ooze of the swamps? Who can be sure that all the inhabitants of that black country are natural? Zogar Sag—a sage of the eastern cities would sneer at his primitive magic-making as the mummery of a fakir; yet he has driven mad and killed five men in a manner no man can explain. I wonder if he himself is wholly human."

"If I can get within ax-throwing distance of him I'll settle that question," growled Conan, helping himself to the governor's wine and pushing a glass toward Balthus, who took it hesitatingly, and with an uncertain glance toward Valannus.

The governor turned toward Conan and stared at him thoughtfully.

"The soldiers, who do not believe in ghosts or devils," he said, "are almost in a panic of fear. You, who believe in ghosts, ghouls, goblins, and all manner of uncanny things, do not seem to fear any of the things in which you believe."

"There's nothing in the universe cold steel won't cut," answered Conan. "I threw my ax at the demon, and he took no hurt, but I might have missed, in the dusk, or a branch deflected its flight. I'm not going out of my way looking for devils; but I wouldn't step out of my path to let one go by."

Valannus lifted his head and met Conan's gaze squarely.

"Conan, more depends on you than you realize. You know the weakness of this province—a slender wedge thrust into the untamed wilderness. You know that the lives of all the people west of the marches depend on this fort. Were it to fall, red axes would be splintering the gates of Velitrium before a horseman could cross the marches. His majesty, or his majesty's advisers, have ignored my plea that more troops be sent to hold the frontier. They know nothing of border conditions, and are averse to expending any more money in this direction. The fate of the frontier depends upon the men who now hold it.

"You know that most of the army which conquered Conajohara has been withdrawn. You know the force left me is inadequate, especially since that devil Zogar Sag managed to poison our water supply, and forty men died in one day. Many of the others are sick, or have been bitten by serpents or mauled by wild beasts which seem to swarm in increasing numbers in the vicinity of the fort. The soldiers believe Zogar's boast that he could summon the forest beasts to slay his enemies.

"I have three hundred pikemen, four hundred Bossonian archers, and perhaps fifty men who, like yourself, are skilled in woodcraft. They are worth ten times their number of soldiers, but there are so few of them. Frankly, Conan, my situation is becoming precarious. The soldiers whisper of desertion; they are low-spirited, believing Zogar Sag has loosed devils on us. They fear the black plague with which he threatened us—the terrible black death of the swamplands. When I see a sick soldier I sweat with fear of seeing him turn black and shrivel and die before my eyes.

"Conan, if the plague is loosed upon us, the soldiers will desert in a body! The border will be left unguarded and nothing will check the sweep of the dark-skinned hordes to the very gates of Velitrium—maybe beyond! If we can not hold the fort, how can they hold the town?

"Conan, Zogar Sag must die, if we are to hold Conajohara. You have penetrated the unknown deeper than any other man in the fort; you know where Gwawela stands, and something of the forest trails across the river. Will you take a band of men tonight and endeavor to kill or capture him? Oh, I know it's mad. There isn't more than one chance in a thousand that any of you will come back alive. But if we don't get him, it's death for us all. You can take as many men as you wish."

"A dozen men are better for a job like that than a regiment," answered Conan. "Five hundred men couldn't fight their way to Gwawela and back, but a dozen might slip in and out again. Let me pick my men. I don't want any soldiers."

"Let me go!" eagerly exclaimed Balthus. "I've hunted deer all my life on the Tauran."

"All right, Valannus, we'll eat at the stall where the foresters gather, and I'll pick my men. We'll start within an hour, drop down the river in a boat to a point below

the village and then steal upon it through the woods. If we live we should be back by daybreak."

The Crawlers in the Dark

The river was a vague trace between walls of ebony. The paddles that propelled the long boat creeping along in the dense shadow of the western bank dipped softly into the water, making no more noise than the beak of a heron. The broad shoulders of the man in front of Balthus were a blur in the dense gloom. He knew that not even the keen eyes of the man who knelt in the prow would discern anything more than a few feet ahead of them. Conan was feeling his way by instinct and an intensive familiarity with the river.

No one spoke. Balthus had had a good look at his companions in the fort before they slipped out of the stockade and down the bank into the waiting canoe. They were of a new breed growing up in the world on the raw edge of the frontier—men whom grim necessity had taught woodcraft. Aquilonians of the western provinces to a man, they had many points in common. They dressed alike—in buckskin boots, leathern breeks and deerskin shirts, with broad girdles that held axes and short swords; and they were all gaunt and scarred and hard-eyed; sinewy and taciturn.

They were wild men, of a sort, yet there was still a wide gulf between them and the Cimmerian. They were sons of civilization, reverted to a semi-barbarism. He was a barbarian of a thousand generations of barbarians. They had acquired stealth and craft, but he had been born to these things. He excelled them even in lithe economy of motion. They were wolves, but he was a tiger.

Balthus admired them and their leader and felt a pulse of pride that he was admitted into their company. He was proud that his paddle made no more noise than did

theirs. In that respect at least he was their equal, though woodcraft learned in hunts on the Tauran could never equal that ground into the souls of men on the savage border.

Below the fort the river made a wide bend. The lights of the outpost were quickly lost, but the canoe held on its way for nearly a mile, avoiding snags and floating logs with almost uncanny precision.

Then a low grunt from their leader, and they swung its head about and glided toward the opposite shore. Emerging from the black shadows of the brush that fringed the bank and coming into the open of the mid-stream created a peculiar illusion of rash exposure. But the stars gave little light, and Balthus knew that unless one were watching for it, it would be all but impossible for the keenest eye to make out the shadowy shape of the canoe crossing the river.

They swung in under the overhanging bushes of the western shore and Balthus groped for and found a projecting root which he grasped. No word was spoken. All instructions had been given before the scouting-party left the fort. As silently as a great panther Conan slid over the side and vanished in the bushes. Equally noiseless, nine men followed him. To Balthus, grasping the root with his paddle across his knee, it seemed incredible that ten men should thus fade into the tangled forest without a sound.

He settled himself to wait. No word passed between him and the other man who had been left with him. Somewhere, a mile or so to the northwest, Zogar Sag's village stood girdled with thick woods. Balthus understood his orders; he and his companion were to wait for the return of the raiding-party. If Conan and his men had not returned by the first tinge of dawn, they were to race back up the river to the fort and report that the forest had again taken its immemorial toll of the invading

race. The silence was oppressive. No sound came from the black woods, invisible beyond the ebony masses that were the overhanging bushes. Balthus no longer heard the drums. They had been silent for hours. He kept blinking, unconsciously trying to see through the deep gloom. The dank night-smells of the river and the damp forest oppressed him. Somewhere, near by, there was a sound as if a big fish had flopped and splashed the water. Balthus thought it must have leaped so close to the canoe that it had struck the side, for a slight quiver vibrated the craft. The boat's stern began to swing, slightly away from the shore. The man behind him must have let go of the projection he was gripping. Balthus twisted his head to hiss a warning, and could just make out the figure of his companion, a slightly blacker bulk in the blackness.

The man did not reply. Wondering if he had fallen asleep, Balthus reached out and grasped his shoulder. To his amazement, the man crumpled under his touch and slumped down in the canoe. Twisting his body half about, Balthus groped for him, his heart shooting into his throat. His fumbling fingers slid over the man's throat—only the youth's convulsive clenching of his jaws choked back the cry that rose to his lips. His fingers encountered a gaping, oozing wound—his companion's throat had been cut from ear to ear.

In that instant of horror and panic Balthus started up—and then a muscular arm out of the darkness locked fiercely about his throat, strangling his yell. The canoe rocked wildly. Balthus' knife was in his hand, though he did not remember jerking it out of his boot, and he stabbed fiercely and blindly. He felt the blade sink deep, and a fiendish yell rang in his ear, a yell that was horribly answered. The darkness seemed to come to life about him. A bestial clamor rose on all sides, and other arms grappled him. Borne under a mass of hurtling bodies the canoe rolled sidewise, but before he went under with it,

something cracked against Balthus' head and the night was briefly illuminated by a blinding burst of fire before it gave way to a blackness where not even stars shone.

The Beasts of Zogar Sag

Fires dazzled Balthus again as he slowly recovered his senses. He blinked, shook his head. Their glare hurt his eyes. A confused medley of sound rose about him, growing more distinct as his senses cleared. He lifted his head and stared stupidly about him. Black figures hemmed him in, etched against crimson tongues of flame.

Memory and understanding came in a rush. He was bound upright to a post in an open space, ringed by fierce and terrible figures. Beyond that ring fires burned, tended by naked, dark-skinned women. Beyond the fires he saw huts of mud and wattle, thatched with brush. Beyond the huts there was a stockade with a broad gate. But he saw these things only incidentally. Even the cryptic dark women with their curious coiffures were noted by him only absently. His full attention was fixed in awful fascination on the men who stood glaring at him.

Short men, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, lean-hipped, they were naked except for scanty loin-clouts. The firelight brought out the play of their swelling muscles in bold relief. Their dark faces were immobile, but their narrow eyes glittered with the fire that burns in the eyes of a stalking tiger. Their tangled manes were bound back with bands of copper. Swords and axes were in their hands. Crude bandages banded the limbs of some, and smears of blood were dried on their dark skins. There had been fighting, recent and deadly.

His eyes wavered away from the steady glare of his captors, and he repressed a cry of horror. A few feet away there rose a low, hideous pyramid: it was built of gory human heads. Dead eyes glared glassily up at the

black sky. Numbly he recognized the countenances which were turned toward him. They were the heads of the men who had followed Conan into the forest. He could not tell if the Cimmerian's head were among them. Only a few faces were visible to him. It looked to him as if there must be ten or eleven heads at least. A deadly sickness assailed him. He fought a desire to retch. Beyond the heads lay the bodies of half a dozen Picts, and he was aware of a fierce exultation at the sight. The forest runners had taken toll, at least.

Twisting his head away from the ghastly spectacle, he became aware that another post stood near him—a stake painted black as was the one to which he was bound. A man sagged in his bonds there, naked except for his leathern breeks, whom Balthus recognized as one of Conan's woodsmen. Blood trickled from his mouth, oozed sluggishly from a gash in his side. Lifting his head as he licked his livid lips, he muttered, making himself heard with difficulty above the fiendish clamor of the Picts: "So they got you, too!"

"Sneaked up in the water and cut the other fellow's throat," groaned Balthus. "We never heard them till they were on us. Mitra, how can anything move so silently?"

"They're devils," mumbled the frontiersman. "They must have been watching us from the time we left midstream. We walked into a trap. Arrows from all sides were ripping into us before we knew it. Most of us dropped at the first fire. Three or four broke through the bushes and came to hand-grips. But there were too many. Conan might have gotten away. I haven't seen his head. Been better for you and me if they'd killed us outright. I can't blame Conan. Ordinarily we'd have gotten to the village without being discovered. They don't keep spies on the river bank as far down as we landed. We must have stumbled into a big party coming up the river from the south. Some devilment is up. Too many Picts here.

These aren't all Gwaweli; men from the western tribes here and from up and down the river."

Balthus stared at the ferocious shapes. Little as he knew of Pictish ways, he was aware that the number of men clustered about them was out of proportion to the size of the village. There were not enough huts to have accommodated them all. Then he noticed that there was a difference in the barbaric tribal designs painted on their faces and breasts.

"Some kind of devilment," muttered the forest runner. "They might have gathered here to watch Zogar's magic-making. He'll make some rare magic with our carcasses. Well, a border-man doesn't expect to die in bed. But I wish we'd gone out along with the rest."

The wolfish howling of the Picts rose in volume and exultation, and from a movement in their ranks, an eager surging and crowding, Balthus deduced that someone of importance was coming. Twisting his head about, he saw that the stakes were set before a long building, larger than the other huts, decorated by human skulls dangling from the eaves. Through the door of that structure now danced a fantastic figure.

"Zogar!" muttered the woodsman, his bloody countenance set in wolfish lines as he unconsciously strained at his cords. Balthus saw a lean figure of middle height, almost hidden in ostrich plumes set on a harness of leather and copper. From amidst the plumes peered a hideous and malevolent face. The plumes puzzled Balthus. He knew their source lay half the width of a world to the south. They fluttered and rustled evilly as the shaman leaped and cavorted.

With fantastic bounds and prancings he entered the ring and whirled before his bound and silent captives. With another man it would have seemed ridiculous—a foolish savage prancing meaninglessly in a whirl of feathers. But that ferocious face glaring out from the

billowing mass gave the scene a grim significance. No man with a face like that could seem ridiculous or like anything except the devil he was.

Suddenly he froze to statuesque stillness; the plumes rippled once and sank about him. The howling warriors fell silent. Zogar Sag stood erect and motionless, and he seemed to increase in height—to grow and expand. Balthus experienced the illusion that the Pict was towering above him, staring contemptuously down from a great height, though he knew the shaman was not as tall as himself. He shook off the illusion with difficulty.

The shaman was talking now, a harsh, guttural intonation that yet carried the hiss of a cobra. He thrust his head on his long neck toward the wounded man on the stake; his eyes shone red as blood in the firelight. The frontiersman spat full in his face.

With a fiendish howl Zogar bounded convulsively into the air, and the warriors gave tongue to a yell that shuddered up to the stars. They rushed toward the man on the stake, but the shaman beat them back. A snarled command sent men running to the gate. They hurled it open, turned and raced back to the circle. The ring of men split, divided with desperate haste to right and left. Balthus saw the women and naked children scurrying to the huts. They peeked out of doors and windows. A broad lane was left to the open gate, beyond which loomed the black forest, crowding sullenly in upon the clearing, unlighted by the fires.

A tense silence reigned as Zogar Sag turned toward the forest, raised on his tiptoes and sent a weird inhuman call shuddering out into the night. Somewhere, far out in the black forest, a deeper cry answered him. Balthus shuddered. From the timbre of that cry he knew it never came from a human throat. He remembered what Valannus had said—that Zogar boasted that he could summon wild beasts to do his bidding. The woodsman was livid

beneath his mask of blood. He licked his lips spasmodically.

The village held its breath. Zogar Sag stood still as a statue, his plumes trembling faintly about him. But suddenly the gate was no longer empty.

A shuddering gasp swept over the village and men crowded hastily back, jamming one another between the huts. Balthus felt the short hair stir on his scalp. The creature that stood in the gate was like the embodiment of nightmare legend. Its color was of a curious pale quality which made it seem ghostly and unreal in the dim light. But there was nothing unreal about the low-hung savage head, and the great curved fangs that glistened in the firelight. On noiseless padded feet it approached like a phantom out of the past. It was a survival of an older, grimmer age, the ogre of many an ancient legend—a saber-tooth tiger. No Hyborian hunter had looked upon one of those primordial brutes for centuries. Immemorial myths lent the creatures a supernatural quality, induced by their ghostly color and their fiendish ferocity.

The beast that glided toward the men on the stakes was longer and heavier than a common, striped tiger, almost as bulky as a bear. Its shoulders and forelegs were so massive and mightily muscled as to give it a curiously top-heavy look, though its hindquarters were more powerful than that of a lion. Its jaws were massive, but its head was brutishly shaped. Its brain capacity was small. It had room for no instincts except those of destruction. It was a freak of carnivorous development, evolution run amuck in a horror of fangs and talons.

This was the monstrosity Zogar Sag had summoned out of the forest. Balthus no longer doubted the actuality of the shaman's magic. Only the black arts could establish a domination over that tiny-brained, mighty-thewed monster. Like a whisper at the back of his consciousness rose the vague memory of the name of an ancient god of

darkness and primordial fear, to whom once both men and beasts bowed and whose children—men whispered—still lurked in dark corners of the world. New horror tinged the glare he fixed on Zogar Sag.

The monster moved past the heap of bodies and the pile of gory heads without appearing to notice them. He was no scavenger. He hunted only the living, in a life dedicated solely to slaughter. An awful hunger burned greenly in the wide, unwinking eyes; the hunger not alone of belly-emptiness, but the lust of death-dealing. His gaping jaws slavered. The shaman stepped back; his hand waved toward the woodsman.

The great cat sank into a crouch, and Balthus numbly remembered tales of its appalling ferocity: of how it would spring upon an elephant and drive its sword-like fangs so deeply into the titan's skull that they could never be withdrawn, but would keep it nailed to its victim, to die by starvation. The shaman cried out shrilly, and with an ear-shattering roar the monster sprang.

Balthus had never dreamed of such a spring, such a hurtling of incarnated destruction embodied in that giant bulk of iron thews and ripping talons. Full on the woodsman's breast it struck, and the stake splintered and snapped at the base, crashing to the earth under the impact. Then the saber-tooth was gliding toward the gate, half dragging, half carrying a hideous crimson hulk that only faintly resembled a man. Balthus glared almost paralyzed, his brain refusing to credit what his eyes had seen.

In that leap the great beast had not only broken off the stake, it had ripped the mangled body of its victim from the post to which it was bound. The huge talons in that instant of contact had disemboweled and partially dismembered the man, and the giant fangs had torn away the whole top of his head, shearing through the skull as easily as through flesh. Stout rawhide thongs had given way like paper; where the thongs had held, flesh and

bones had not. Balthus retched suddenly. He had hunted bears and panthers, but he had never dreamed the beast lived which could make such a red ruin of a human frame in the flicker of an instant.

The saber-tooth vanished through the gate, and a few moments later a deep roar sounded through the forest, receding in the distance. But the Picts still shrank back against the huts, and the shaman still stood facing the gate that was like a black opening to let in the night.

Cold sweat burst suddenly out on Balthus' skin. What new horror would come through that gate to make carrion-meat of *his* body? Sick panic assailed him and he strained futilely at his thongs. The night pressed in very black and horrible outside the firelight. The fires themselves glowed lurid as the fires of hell. He felt the eyes of the Picts upon him—hundreds of hungry, cruel eyes that reflected the lust of souls utterly without humanity as he knew it. They no longer seemed men; they were devils of this black jungle, as inhuman as the creatures to which the fiend in the nodding plumes screamed through the darkness.

Zogar sent another call shuddering through the night, and it was utterly unlike the first cry. There was a hideous sibilance in it—Balthus turned cold at the implication. If a serpent could hiss that loud, it would make just such a sound.

This time there was no answer—only a period of breathless silence in which the pound of Balthus' heart strangled him; and then there sounded a swishing outside the gate, a dry rustling that sent chills down Balthus' spine. Again the firelit gate held a hideous occupant.

Again Balthus recognized the monster from ancient legends. He saw and knew the ancient and evil serpent which swayed there, its wedge-shaped head, huge as that of a horse, as high as a tall man's head, and its palely gleaming barrel rippling out behind it. A forked tongue

darted in and out, and the firelight glittered on bared fangs.

Balthus became incapable of emotion. The horror of his fate paralyzed him. That was the reptile that the ancients called Ghost Snake, the pale, abominable terror that of old glided into huts by night to devour whole families. Like the python it crushed its victim, but unlike other constrictors its fangs bore venom that carried madness and death. It too had long been considered extinct. But Valannus had spoken truly. No white man knew what shapes haunted the great forests beyond Black River.

It came on silently, rippling over the ground, its hideous head on the same level, its neck curving back slightly for the stroke. Balthus gazed with glazed, hypnotized stare into that loathsome gullet down which he would soon be engulfed, and he was aware of no sensation except a vague nausea.

And then something that glinted in the firelight streaked from the shadows of the huts, and the great reptile whipped about and went into instant convulsions. As in a dream Balthus saw a short throwing-spear transfixing the mighty neck, just below the gaping jaws; the shaft protruded from one side, the steel head from the other.

Knotting and looping hideously, the maddened reptile rolled into the circle of men who strove back from him. The spear had not severed its spine, but merely transfixed its great neck muscles. Its furiously lashing tail mowed down a dozen men and its jaws snapped convulsively, splashing others with venom that burned like liquid fire. Howling, cursing, screaming, frantic, they scattered before it, knocking each other down in their flight, trampling the fallen, bursting through the huts. The giant snake rolled into a fire, scattering sparks and brands, and the pain lashed it to more frenzied efforts. A hut wall

buckled under the ram-like impact of its flailing tail, disgorging howling people.

Men stampeded through the fires, knocking the logs right and left. The flames sprang up, then sank. A reddish dim glow was all that lighted that nightmare scene where the giant reptile whipped and rolled, and men clawed and shrieked in frantic flight.

Balthus felt something jerk at his wrists, and then, miraculously, he was free, and a strong hand dragged him behind the post. Dazedly he saw Conan, felt the forest man's iron grip on his arm.

There was blood on the Cimmerian's mail, dried blood on the sword in his right hand; he loomed dim and gigantic in the shadowy light.

"Come on! Before they get over their panic!"

Balthus felt the haft of an ax shoved into his hand. Zogar Sag had disappeared. Conan dragged Balthus after him until the youth's numb brain awoke, and his legs began to move of their own accord. Then Conan released him and ran into the building where the skulls hung. Balthus followed him. He got a glimpse of a grim stone altar, faintly lighted by the glow outside; five human heads grinned on that altar, and there was a grisly familiarity about the features of the freshest; it was the head of the merchant Tiberias. Behind the altar was an idol, dim, indistinct, bestial, yet vaguely man-like in outline. Then fresh horror choked Balthus as the shape heaved up suddenly with a rattle of chains, lifting long misshapen arms in the gloom.

Conan's sword flailed down, crunching through flesh and bone, and then the Cimmerian was dragging Balthus around the altar, past a huddled shaggy bulk on the floor, to a door at the back of the long hut. Through this they burst, out into the enclosure again. But a few yards beyond them loomed the stockade.

It was dark behind the altar-hut. The mad stampede of the Picts had not carried them in that direction. At the wall Conan halted, gripped Balthus and heaved him at arm's length into the air as he might have lifted a child. Balthus grasped the points of the upright logs set in the sun-dried mud and scrambled up on them, ignoring the havoc done his skin. He lowered a hand to the Cimmerian, when around a corner of the altar-hut sprang a fleeing Pict. He halted short, glimpsing the man on the wall in the faint glow of the fires. Conan hurled his ax with deadly aim, but the warrior's mouth was already open for a yell of warning, and it rang loud above the din, cut short as he dropped with a shattered skull.

Blinding terror had not submerged all ingrained instincts. As that wild yell rose above the clamor, there was an instant's lull, and then a hundred throats bayed ferocious answer and warriors came leaping to repel the attack presaged by the warning.

Conan leaped high, caught, not Balthus' hand but his arm near the shoulder, and swung himself up. Balthus set his teeth against the strain, and then the Cimmerian was on the wall beside him, and the fugitives dropped down on the other side.

The Children of Jhebbal Sag

"Which way is the river?" Balthus was confused.

"We don't dare try for the river now," grunted Conan. "The woods between the village and the river are swarming with warriors. Come on! We'll head in the last direction they'll expect us to go—west!"

Looking back as they entered the thick growth, Balthus beheld the wall dotted with black heads as the savages peered over. The Picts were bewildered. They had not gained the wall in time to see the fugitives take cover. They had rushed to the wall expecting to repel an

attack in force. They had seen the body of the dead warrior. But no enemy was in sight.

Balthus realized that they did not yet know their prisoner had escaped. From other sounds he believed that the warriors, directed by the shrill voice of Zogar Sag, were destroying the wounded serpent with arrows. The monster was out of the shaman's control. A moment later the quality of the yells was altered. Screeches of rage rose in the night.

Conan laughed grimly. He was leading Balthus along a narrow trail that ran west under the black branches, stepping as swiftly and surely as if he trod a well-lighted thoroughfare. Balthus stumbled after him, guiding himself by feeling the dense wall on either hand.

"They'll be after us now. Zogar's discovered you're gone, and he knows my head wasn't in the pile before the altar-hut. The dog! If I'd had another spear I'd have thrown it through him before I struck the snake. Keep to the trail. They can't track us by torchlight, and there are a score of paths leading from the village. They'll follow those leading to the river first—throw a cordon of warriors for miles along the bank, expecting us to try to break through. We won't take to the woods until we have to. We can make better time on this trail. Now buckle down to it and run as you never ran before."

"They got over their panic cursed quick!" panted Balthus, complying with a fresh burst of speed.

"They're not afraid of anything, very long," grunted Conan.

For a space nothing was said between them. The fugitives devoted all their attention to covering distance. They were plunging deeper and deeper into the wilderness and getting farther away from civilization at every step, but Balthus did not question Conan's wisdom. The Cimmerian presently took time to grunt: "When we're far enough away from the village we'll swing back to the

river in a big circle. No other village within miles of Gwawela. All the Picts are gathered in that vicinity. We'll circle wide around them. They can't track us until daylight. They'll pick up our path then, but before dawn we'll leave the trail and take to the woods."

They plunged on. The yells died out behind them. Balthus' breath was whistling through his teeth. He felt a pain in his side, and running became torture. He blundered against the bushes on each side of the trail. Conan pulled up suddenly, turned and stared back down the dim path.

Somewhere the moon was rising, a dim white glow amidst a tangle of branches.

"Shall we take to the woods?" panted Balthus.

"Give me your ax," murmured Conan softly. "Something is close behind us."

"Then we'd better leave the trail!" exclaimed Balthus.

Conan shook his head and drew his companion into a dense thicket. The moon rose higher, making a dim light in the path.

"We can't fight the whole tribe!" whispered Balthus.

"No human being could have found our trail so quickly, or followed us so swiftly," muttered Conan. "Keep silent."

There followed a tense silence in which Balthus felt that his heart could be heard pounding for miles away. Then abruptly, without a sound to announce its coming, a savage head appeared in the dim path. Balthus' heart jumped into his throat; at first glance he feared to look upon the awful head of the saber-tooth. But this head was smaller, more narrow; it was a leopard which stood there, snarling silently and glaring down the trail. What wind there was was blowing toward the hiding men, concealing their scent. The beast lowered his head and snuffed the trail, then moved forward uncertainly. A chill played

down Balthus' spine. The brute was undoubtedly trailing them.

And it was suspicious. It lifted its head, its eyes glowing like balls of fire, and growled low in its throat. And at that instant Conan hurled the ax.

All the weight of arm and shoulder was behind the throw, and the ax was a streak of silver in the dim moon. Almost before he realized what had happened, Balthus saw the leopard rolling on the ground in its death-throes, the handle of the ax standing up from its head. The head of the weapon had split its narrow skull.

Conan bounded from the bushes, wrenched his ax free and dragged the limp body in among the trees, concealing it from the casual glance.

"Now let's go, and go fast!" he grunted, leading the way southward, away from the trail. "There'll be warriors coming after that cat. As soon as he got his wits back Zogar sent him after us. The Picts would follow him, but he'd leave them far behind. He'd circle the village until he hit our trail and then come after us like a streak. They couldn't keep up with him, but they'll have an idea as to our general direction: They'd follow, listening for his cry. Well, they won't hear that, but they'll find the blood on the trail, and look around and find the body in the brush. They'll pick up our spoor there, if they can. Walk with care."

He avoided clinging briars and low-hanging branches effortlessly, gliding between trees without touching the stems and always planting his feet in the places calculated to show least evidence of his passing; but with Balthus it was slower, more laborious work.

No sound came from behind them. They had covered more than a mile when Balthus said: "Does Zogar Sag catch leopard-cubs and train them for bloodhounds?"

Conan shook his head. "That was a leopard he called out of the woods."

"But," Balthus persisted, "if he can order the beasts to do his bidding, why doesn't he rouse them all and have them after us? The forest is full of leopards; why send only one after us?"

Conan did not reply for a space, and when he did it was with a curious reticence.

"He can't command all the animals. Only such as remember Jhebbal Sag."

"Jhebbal Sag?" Balthus repeated the ancient name hesitantly. He had never heard it spoken more than three or four times in his whole life.

"Once all living things worshipped him. That was long ago, when beasts and men spoke one language. Men have forgotten him; even the beasts forget. Only a few remember. The men who remember Jhebbal Sag and the beasts who remember are brothers and speak the same tongue."

Balthus did not reply; he had strained at a Pictish stake and seen the nighted jungle give up its fanged horrors at a shaman's call.

"Civilized men laugh," said Conan. "But not one can tell me how Zogar Sag can call pythons and tigers and leopards out of the wilderness and make them do his bidding. They would say it is a lie, if they dared. That's the way with civilized men. When they can't explain something by their half-baked science, they refuse to believe it."

The people on the Tauran were closer to the primitive than most Aquilonians; superstitions persisted, whose sources were lost in antiquity. And Balthus had seen that which still prickled his flesh. He could not refute the monstrous thing which Conan's words implied.

"I've heard that there's an ancient grove sacred to Jhebbal Sag somewhere in this forest," said Conan. "I don't know. I've never seen it. But more beasts *remember* in this country than any I've ever seen."

"Then others will be on our trail?"

"They are now," was Conan's disquieting answer. "Zogar would never leave our tracking to one beast alone."

"What are we to do, then?" asked Balthus uneasily, grasping his ax as he stared at the gloomy arches above him. His flesh crawled with the momentary expectation of ripping talons and fangs leaping from the shadows.

"Wait!"

Conan turned, squatted and with his knife began scratching a curious symbol in the mold. Stooping to look at it over his shoulder, Balthus felt a crawling of the flesh along his spine, he knew not why. He felt no wind against his face, but there was a rustling of leaves above them and a weird moaning swept ghostily through the branches. Conan glanced up inscrutably, then rose and stood staring somberly down at the symbol he had drawn.

"What is it?" whispered Balthus. It looked archaic and meaningless to him. He supposed that it was his ignorance of artistry which prevented his identifying it as one of the conventional designs of some prevailing culture. But had he been the most erudite artist in the world, he would have been no nearer the solution.

"I saw it carved in the rock of a cave no human had visited for a million years," muttered Conan, "in the uninhabited mountains beyond the Sea of Vilayet, half a world away from this spot. Later I saw a black witch-finder of Kush scratch it in the sand of a nameless river. He told me part of its meaning—it's sacred to Jhebbal Sag and the creatures which worship him. Watch!"

They drew back among the dense foliage some yards away and waited in tense silence. To the east drums muttered and somewhere to north and west other drums answered. Balthus shivered, though he knew long miles of black forest separated him from the grim beaters of those

drums whose dull pulsing was a sinister overture that set the dark stage for bloody drama.

Balthus found himself holding his breath. Then with a slight shaking of the leaves, the bushes parted and a magnificent panther came into view. The moonlight dappling through the leaves shone on its glossy coat rippling with the play of the great muscles beneath it.

With its head low it glided toward them. It was smelling out their trail. Then it halted as if frozen, its muzzle almost touching the symbol cut in the mold. For a long space it crouched motionless; it flattened its long body and laid its head on the ground before the mark. And Balthus felt the short hairs stir on his scalp. For the attitude of the great carnivore was one of awe and adoration.

Then the panther rose and backed away carefully, belly almost to the ground. With his hind-quarters among the bushes he wheeled as if in sudden panic and was gone like a flash of dappled light.

Balthus mopped his brow with a trembling hand and glanced at Conan.

The barbarian's eyes were smoldering with fires that never lit the eyes of men bred to the ideas of civilization. In that instant he was all wild, and had forgotten the man at his side. In his burning gaze Balthus glimpsed and vaguely recognized pristine images and half-embodied memories, shadows from Life's dawn, forgotten and repudiated by sophisticated races—ancient, primeval fantasms unnamed and nameless.

Then the deeper fires were masked and Conan was silently leading the way deeper into the forest.

"We've no more to fear from the beasts," he said after a while, "but we've left a sign for men to read. They won't follow our trail very easily, and until they find that symbol they won't know for sure we've turned south. Even then it won't be easy to smell us out without the

beasts to aid them. But the woods south of the trail will be full of warriors looking for us. If we keep moving after daylight, we'll be sure to run into some of them. As soon as we find a good place we'll hide and wait until another night to swing back and make the river. We've got to warn Valannus, but it won't help him any if we get ourselves killed."

"Warn Valannus?"

"Hell, the woods along the river are swarming with Picts! That's why they got us. Zogar's brewing war-magic; no mere raid this time. He's done something no Pict has done in my memory—united as many as fifteen or sixteen clans. His magic did it; they'll follow a wizard farther than they will a war-chief. You saw the mob in the village; and there were hundreds hiding along the river bank that you didn't see. More coming, from the farther villages. He'll have at least three thousand fighting-men. I lay in the bushes and heard their talk as they went past. They mean to attack the fort; when, I don't know, but Zogar doesn't dare delay long. He's gathered them and whipped them into a frenzy. If he doesn't lead them into battle quickly, they'll fall to quarreling with one another. They're like blood-mad tigers.

"I don't know whether they can take the fort or not. Anyway, we've got to get back across the river and give the warning. The settlers on the Velitrium road must either get into the fort or back to Velitrium. While the Picts are besieging the fort, war-parties will range the road far to the east—might even cross Thunder River and raid the thickly settled country behind Velitrium."

As he talked he was leading the way deeper and deeper into the ancient wilderness. Presently he grunted with satisfaction. They had reached a spot where the underbrush was more scattered, and an outcropping of

stone was visible, wandering off southward. Balthus felt more secure as they followed it. Not even a Pict could trail them over naked rock.

"How did you get away?" he asked presently.

Conan tapped his mail-shirt and helmet.

"If more borderers would wear harness there'd be fewer skulls hanging on the altar-huts. But most men make noise if they wear armor. They were waiting on each side of the path, without moving. And when a Pict stands motionless, the very beasts of the forest pass him without seeing him. They'd seen us crossing the river and got in their places. If they'd gone into ambush after we left the bank, I'd have had some hint of it. But they were waiting, and not even a leaf trembled. The devil himself couldn't have suspected anything. The first suspicion I had was when I heard a shaft rasp against a bow as it was pulled back. I dropped and yelled for the men behind me to drop, but they were too slow, taken by surprise like that.

"Most of them fell at the first volley that raked us from both sides. Some of the arrows crossed the trail and struck Picts on the other side. I heard them howl." He grinned with vicious satisfaction. "Such of us as were left plunged into the woods and closed with them. When I saw the others were all down or taken, I broke through and outfooted the painted devils through the darkness. They were all around me. I ran and crawled and sneaked, and sometimes I lay on my belly under the bushes while they passed me on all sides.

"I tried for the shore and found it lined with them, waiting for just such a move. But I'd have cut my way through and taken a chance on swimming, only I heard the drums pounding in the village and knew they'd taken somebody alive.

"They were all so engrossed in Zogar's magic that I was able to climb the wall behind the altar-hut. There

was a warrior supposed to be watching at that point, but he was squatting behind the hut and peering around the corner at the ceremony. I came up behind him and broke his neck with my hands before he knew what was happening. It was his spear I threw into the snake, and that's his ax you're carrying."

"But what was that—that thing you killed in the altar-hut?" asked Balthus, with a shiver at the memory of the dim-seen horror.

"One of Zogar's gods. One of Jhebbal's children that didn't remember and had to be kept chained to the altar. A bull ape. The Picts think they're sacred to the Hairy One who lives on the moon—the gorilla-god of Gullah.

"It's getting light. Here's a good place to hide until we see how close they're on our trail. Probably have to wait until night to break back to the river."

A low hill pitched upward, girdled and covered with thick trees and bushes. Near the crest Conan slid into a tangle of jutting rocks, crowned by dense bushes. Lying among them they could see the jungle below without being seen. It was a good place to hide or defend. Balthus did not believe that even a Pict could have trailed them over the rocky ground for the past four or five miles, but he was afraid of the beasts that obeyed Zogar Sag. His faith in the curious symbol wavered a little now. But Conan had dismissed the possibility of beasts tracking them.

A ghostly whiteness spread through the dense branches; the patches of sky visible altered in hue, grew from pink to blue. Balthus felt the gnawing of hunger, though he had slaked his thirst at a stream they had skirted. There was complete silence, except for an occasional chirp of a bird. The drums were no longer to be heard. Balthus' thoughts reverted to the grim scene before the altar-hut.

"Those were ostrich plumes Zogar Sag wore," he said.

"I've seen them on the helmets of knights who rode from the East to visit the barons of the marches. There are no ostriches in this forest, are there?"

"They came from Kush," answered Conan. "West of here, many marches, lies the seashore. Ships from Zingara occasionally come and trade weapons and ornaments and wine to the coastal tribes for skins and copper ore and gold dust. Sometimes they trade ostrich plumes they got from the Stygians, who in turn got them from the black tribes of Kush, which lies south of Stygia. The Pictish shamans place great store by them. But there's much risk in such trade. The Picts are too likely to try to seize the ship. And the coast is dangerous to ships. I've sailed along it when I was with the pirates of the Barachan Isles, which lie southwest of Zingara."

Balthus looked at his companion with admiration.

"I knew you hadn't spent your life on this frontier. You've mentioned several far places. You've traveled widely?"

"I've roamed far; farther than any other man of my race ever wandered. I've seen all the great cities of the Hyborians, the Shemites, the Stygians and the Hyrkanians. I've roamed in the unknown countries south of the black kingdoms of Kush, and east of the Sea of Vilayet. I've been a mercenary captain, a corsair, a *kozak*, a penniless vagabond, a general—hell, I've been everything except a king, and I may be that, before I die." The fancy pleased him, and he grinned hardly. Then he shrugged his shoulders and stretched his mighty figure on the rocks. "This is as good life as any. I don't know how long I'll stay on the frontier; a week, a month, a year. I have a roving foot. But it's as well on the border as anywhere."

Balthus set himself to watch the forest below them. Momentarily he expected to see fierce painted faces thrust through the leaves. But as the hours passed no stealthy footfall disturbed the brooding quiet. Balthus

believed the Picts had missed their trail and given up the chase. Conan grew restless.

"We should have sighted parties scouring the woods for us. If they've quit the chase, it's because they're after bigger game. They may be gathering to cross the river and storm the fort."

"Would they come this far south if they lost the trail?"

"They've lost the trail, all right; otherwise they'd have been on our necks before now. Under ordinary circumstances they'd scour the woods for miles in every direction. Some of them should have passed within sight of this hill. They must be preparing to cross the river. We've got to take a chance and make for the river."

Creeping down the rocks Balthus felt his flesh crawl between his shoulders as he momentarily expected a withering blast of arrows from the green masses above them. He feared that the Picts had discovered them and were lying about in ambush. But Conan was convinced no enemies were near, and the Cimmerian was right.

"We're miles to the south of the village," grunted Conan. "We'll hit straight through for the river. I don't know how far down the river they've spread. We'll hope to hit it below them."

With haste that seemed reckless to Balthus they hurried eastward. The woods seemed empty of life. Conan believed that all the Picts were gathered in the vicinity of Gwawela, if, indeed, they had not already crossed the river. He did not believe they would cross in the daytime, however.

"Some woodsman would be sure to see them and give the alarm. They'll cross above and below the fort, out of sight of the sentries. Then others will get in canoes and make straight across for the river wall. As soon as they attack, those hidden in the woods on the east shore will assail the fort from the other sides. They've tried that before, and got the guts shot and hacked out of them. But

this time they've got enough men to make a real onslaught of it."

They pushed on without pausing, though Balthus gazed longingly at the squirrels flitting among the branches, which he could have brought down with a cast of his ax. With a sigh he drew up his broad belt. The everlasting silence and gloom of the primitive forest was beginning to depress him. He found himself thinking of the open groves and sun-dappled meadows of the Tauran, of the bluff cheer of his father's steep-thatched, diamond-paned house, of the fat cows browsing through the deep, lush grass, and the hearty fellowship of the brawny, bare-armed plowmen and herdsmen.

He felt lonely, in spite of his companion. Conan was as much a part of this wilderness as Balthus was alien to it. The Cimmerian might have spent years among the great cities of the world; he might have walked with the rulers of civilization; he might even achieve his wild whim some day and rule as king of a civilized nation; stranger things had happened. But he was no less a barbarian. He was concerned only with the naked fundamentals of life. The warm intimacies of small, kindly things, the sentiments and delicious trivialities that make up so much of civilized men's lives were meaningless to him. A wolf was no less a wolf because a whim of chance caused him to run with the watch-dogs. Bloodshed and violence and savagery were the natural elements of the life Conan knew; he could not, and would never, understand the little things that are so dear to civilized men and women.

The shadows were lengthening when they reached the river and peered through the masking bushes. They could see up and down the river for about a mile each way. The sullen stream lay bare and empty. Conan scowled across at the other shore.

"We've got to take another chance here. We've got to swim the river. We don't know whether they've crossed

or not. The woods over there may be alive with them. We've got to risk it. We're about six miles south of Gwawela."

He wheeled and ducked as a bowstring twanged. Something like a white flash of light streaked through the bushes. Balthus knew it was an arrow. Then with a tigerish bound Conan was through the bushes. Balthus caught the gleam of steel as he whirled his sword, and heard a death scream. The next instant he had broken through the bushes after the Cimmerian.

A Pict with a shattered skull lay face-down on the ground, his fingers spasmodically clawing at the grass. Half a dozen others were swarming about Conan, swords and axes lifted. They had cast away their bows, useless at such deadly close quarters. Their lower jaws were painted white, contrasting vividly with their dark faces, and the designs on their muscular breasts differed from any Balthus had ever seen.

One of them hurled his ax at Balthus and rushed after it with lifted knife. Balthus ducked and then caught the wrist that drove the knife licking at his throat. They went to the ground together, rolling over and over. The Pict was like a wild beast, his muscles hard as steel strings.

Balthus was striving to maintain his hold on the wild man's wrist and bring his own ax into play, but so fast and furious was the struggle that each attempt to strike was blocked. The Pict was wrenching furiously to free his knife hand, was clutching at Balthus' ax, and driving his knees at the youth's groin. Suddenly he attempted to shift his knife to his free hand, and in that instant Balthus, struggling up on one knee, split the painted head with a desperate blow of his ax.

He sprang up and glared wildly about for his companion, expecting to see him overwhelmed by numbers. Then he realized the full strength and ferocity of the Cimmerian. Conan bestrode two of his attackers, shorn

half asunder by that terrible broad sword. As Balthus looked he saw the Cimmerian beat down a thrusting shortsword, avoid the stroke of an ax with a cat-like sidewise spring which brought him within arm's length of a squat savage stooping for a bow. Before the Pict could straighten, the red sword flailed down and clove him from shoulder to mid-breastbone, where the blade stuck. The remaining warriors rushed in, one from either side. Balthus hurled his ax with an accuracy that reduced the attackers to one, and Conan, abandoning his efforts to free his sword, wheeled and met the remaining Pict with his bare hands. The stocky warrior, a head shorter than his tall enemy, leaped in, striking with his ax, at the same time stabbing murderously with his knife. The knife broke on the Cimmerian's mail, and the ax checked in midair as Conan's fingers locked like iron on the descending arm. A bone snapped loudly, and Balthus saw the Pict wince and falter. The next instant he was swept off his feet, lifted high above the Cimmerian's head—he writhed in midair for an instant, kicking and thrashing, and then was dashed headlong to the earth with such force that he rebounded, and then lay still, his limp posture telling of splintered limbs and a broken spine.

"Come on!" Conan wrenched his sword free and snatched up an ax. "Grab a bow and a handful of arrows, and hurry! We've got to trust to our heels again. That yell was heard. They'll be here in no time. If we tried to swim now, they'd feather us with arrows before we reached midstream!"

Red Axes of the Border

Conan did not plunge deeply into the forest. A few hundred yards from the river, he altered his slanting course and ran parallel with it. Balthus recognized a grim determination not to be hunted away from the river

which they must cross if they were to warn the men in the fort. Behind them rose more loudly the yells of the forest men. Balthus believed the Picts had reached the glade where the bodies of the slain men lay. Then further yells seemed to indicate that the savages were streaming into the woods in pursuit. They had left a trail any Pict could follow.

Conan increased his speed, and Balthus grimly set his teeth and kept on his heels, though he felt he might collapse any time. It seemed centuries since he had eaten last. He kept going more by an effort of will than anything else. His blood was pounding so furiously in his ear-drums that he was not aware when the yells died out behind them.

Conan halted suddenly. Balthus leaned against a tree and panted.

"They've quit!" grunted the Cimmerian, scowling.

"Sneaking—up—on—us!" gasped Balthus.

Conan shook his head.

"A short chase like this they'd yell every step of the way. No. They've gone back. I thought I heard somebody yelling behind them a few seconds before the noise began to get dimmer. They've been recalled. And that's good for us, but damned bad for the men in the fort. It means the warriors are being summoned out of the woods for the attack. Those men we ran into were warriors from a tribe down the river. They were undoubtedly headed for Gwawela to join in the assault on the fort. Damn it, we're farther away than ever, now. We've got to get across the river."

Turning east he hurried through the thickets with no attempt at concealment. Balthus followed him, for the first time feeling the sting of lacerations on his breast and shoulder where the Pict's savage teeth had scored him. He was pushing through the thick bushes that fringed the bank when Conan pulled him back. Then he heard a

rhythmic splashing, and peering through the leaves, saw a dugout canoe coming up the river, its single occupant paddling hard against the current. He was a strongly built Pict with a white heron feather thrust in a copper band that confined his square-cut mane.

"That's a Gwawela man," muttered Conan. "Emissary from Zogar. White plume shows that. He's carried a peace talk to the tribes down the river and now he's trying to get back and take a hand in the slaughter."

The lone ambassador was now almost even with their hiding-place, and suddenly Balthus almost jumped out of his skin. At his very ear had sounded the harsh gutturals of a Pict. Then he realized that Conan had called to the paddler in his own tongue. The man started, scanned the bushes and called back something, then cast a startled glance across the river, bent low and sent the canoe shooting in toward the western bank. Not understanding, Balthus saw Conan take from his hand the bow he had picked up in the glade, and notch an arrow.

The Pict had run his canoe in close to the shore, and staring up into the bushes, called out something. His answer came in the twang of the bow-string, the streaking flight of the arrow that sank to the feathers in his broad breast. With a choking gasp he slumped sidewise and rolled into the shallow water. In an instant Conan was down the bank and wading into the water to grasp the drifting canoe. Balthus stumbled after him and somewhat dazedly crawled into the canoe. Conan scrambled in, seized the paddle and sent the craft shooting toward the eastern shore. Balthus noted with envious admiration the play of the great muscles beneath the sun-burnt skin. The Cimmerian seemed an iron man, who never knew fatigue.

"What did you say to the Pict?" asked Balthus.

"Told him to pull into shore; said there was a white

forest runner on the bank who was trying to get a shot at him."

"That doesn't seem fair," Balthus objected. "He thought a friend was speaking to him. You mimicked a Pict perfectly—"

"We needed his boat," grunted Conan, not pausing in his exertions. "Only way to lure him to the bank. Which is worse—to betray a Pict who'd enjoy skinning us both alive, or betray the men across the river whose lives depend on our getting over?"

Balthus mulled over this delicate ethical question for a moment, then shrugged his shoulder and asked: "How far are we from the fort?"

Conan pointed to a creek which flowed into Black River from the east, a few hundred yards below them.

"That's South Creek; it's ten miles from its mouth to the fort. It's the southern boundary of Conajohara. Marshes miles wide south of it. No danger of a raid from across them. Nine miles above the fort North Creek forms the other boundary. Marshes beyond that, too. That's why an attack must come from the west, across Black River. Conajohara's just like a spear, with a point nineteen miles wide, thrust into the Pictish wilderness."

"Why don't we keep to the canoe and make the trip by water?"

"Because, considering the current we've got to brace, and the bends in the river, we can go faster afoot. Besides, remember Gwawela is south of the fort; if the Picts are crossing the river we'd run right into them."

Dusk was gathering as they stepped upon the eastern bank. Without pause Conan pushed on northward, at a pace that made Balthus' sturdy legs ache.

"Valannus wanted a fort built at the mouths of North and South Creeks," grunted the Cimmerian. "Then the river could be patrolled constantly. But the Government wouldn't do it.

"Soft-bellied fools sitting on velvet cushions with naked girls offering them iced wine on their knees—I know the breed. They can't see any farther than their palace wall. Diplomacy—hell! They'd fight Picts with theories of territorial expansion. Valannus and men like him have to obey the orders of a set of damned fools. They'll never grab any more Pictish land, any more than they'll ever rebuild Venarium. The time may come when they'll see the barbarians swarming over the walls of the Eastern cities!"

A week before, Balthus would have laughed at any such preposterous suggestion. Now he made no reply. He had seen the unconquerable ferocity of the men who dwelt beyond the frontiers.

He shivered, casting glances at the sullen river, just visible through the bushes, at the arches of the trees which crowded close to its banks. He kept remembering that the Picts might have crossed the river and be lying in ambush between them and the fort. It was fast growing dark.

A slight sound ahead of them jumped his heart into his throat, and Conan's sword gleamed in the air. He lowered it when a dog, a great, gaunt, scarred beast, slunk out of the bushes and stood staring at them.

"That dog belonged to a settler who tried to build his cabin on the bank of the river a few miles south of the fort," grunted Conan. "The Picts slipped over and killed him, of course, and burned his cabin. We found him dead among the embers, and the dog lying senseless among three Picts he'd killed. He was almost cut to pieces. We took him to the fort and dressed his wounds, but after he recovered he took to the woods and turned wild.—What now, Slasher, are you hunting the men who killed your master?"

The massive head swung from side to side and the eyes

glowed greenly. He did not growl or bark. Silently as a phantom he slid in behind them.

"Let him come," muttered Conan. "He can smell the devils before we can see them."

Balthus smiled and laid his hand caressingly on the dog's head. The lips involuntarily writhed back to display the gleaming fangs; then the great beast bent his head sheepishly, and his tail moved with jerky uncertainty, as if the owner had almost forgotten the emotions of friendliness. Balthus mentally compared the great gaunt hard body with the fat sleek hounds tumbling vociferously over one another in his father's kennel yard. He sighed. The frontier was no less hard for beasts than for men. This dog had almost forgotten the meaning of kindness and friendliness.

Slasher glided ahead, and Conan let him take the lead. The last tinge of dusk faded into stark darkness. The miles fell away under their steady feet. Slasher seemed voiceless. Suddenly he halted, tense, ears lifted. An instant later the men heard it—a demoniac yelling up the river ahead of them, faint as a whisper.

Conan swore like a madman.

"They've attacked the fort! We're too late! Come on!"

He increased his pace, trusting to the dog to smell out ambushes ahead. In a flood of tense excitement Balthus forgot his hunger and weariness. The yells grew louder as they advanced, and above the devilish screaming they could hear the deep shouts of the soldiers. Just as Balthus began to fear they would run into the savages who seemed to be howling just ahead of them, Conan swung away from the river in a wide semicircle that carried them to a low rise from which they could look over the forest. They saw the fort, lighted with torches thrust over the parapets on long poles. These cast a flickering, uncertain light over the clearing, and in that light they

saw throngs of naked, painted figures along the fringe of the clearing. The river swarmed with canoes. The Picts had the fort completely surrounded.

An incessant hail of arrows rained against the stockade from the woods and the river. The deep twanging of the bowstrings rose above the howling. Yelling like wolves, several hundred naked warriors with axes in their hands ran from under the trees and raced toward the eastern gate. They were within a hundred and fifty yards of their objective when a withering blast of arrows from the wall littered the ground with corpses and sent the survivors fleeing back to the trees. The men in the canoes rushed their boats toward the river-wall, and were met by another shower of clothyard shafts and a volley from the small ballistae mounted on towers on that side of the stockade. Stones and logs whirled through the air and splintered and sank half a dozen canoes, killing their occupants, and the other boats drew back out of range. A deep roar of triumph rose from the walls of the fort, answered by bestial howling from all quarters.

"Shall we try to break through?" asked Balthus, trembling with eagerness.

Conan shook his head. He stood with his arms folded, his head slightly bent, a somber and brooding figure.

"The fort's doomed. The Picts are blood-mad, and won't stop until they're all killed. And there are too many of them for the men in the fort to kill. We couldn't break through, and if we did, we could do nothing but die with Valannus."

"There's nothing we can do but save our own hides, then?"

"Yes. We've got to warn the settlers. Do you know why the Picts are not trying to burn the fort with fire-arrows? Because they don't want a flame that might warn the people to the east. They plan to stamp out the fort, and then sweep east before anyone knows of its fall.

They may cross Thunder River and take Velitrium before the people know what's happened. At least they'll destroy every living thing between the fort and Thunder River.

"We've failed to warn the fort, and I see now it would have done no good if we had succeeded. The fort's too poorly manned. A few more charges and the Picts will be over the walls and breaking down the gates. But we can start the settlers toward Velitrium. Come on! We're outside the circle the Picts have thrown around the fort. We'll keep clear of it."

They swung out in a wide arc, hearing the rising and falling of the volume of the yells, marking each charge and repulse. The men in the fort were holding their own; but the shrieks of the Picts did not diminish in savagery. They vibrated with a timbre that held assurance of ultimate victory.

Before Balthus realized they were close to it, they broke into the road leading east.

"Now run!" grunted Conan. Balthus set his teeth. It was nineteen miles to Velitrium, a good five to Scalp Creek beyond which began the settlements. It seemed to the Aquilonian that they had been fighting and running for centuries. But the nervous excitement that rioted through his blood stimulated him to herculean efforts.

Slasher ran ahead of them, his head to the ground, snarling low, the first sound they had heard from him.

"Picts ahead of us!" snarled Conan, dropping to one knee and scanning the ground in the starlight. He shook his head, baffled. "I can't tell how many. Probably only a small party. Some that couldn't wait to take the fort. They've gone ahead to butcher the settlers in their beds! Come on!"

Ahead of them presently they saw a small blaze through the trees, and heard a wild and ferocious chanting. The trail bent there, and leaving it, they cut across

the bend, through the thickets. A few moments later they were looking on a hideous sight. An ox-wain stood in the road piled with meager household furnishings; it was burning; the oxen lay near with their throats cut. A man and a woman lay in the road, stripped and mutilated. Five Picts were dancing about them with fantastic leaps and bounds, waving bloody axes; one of them brandished the woman's red-smeared gown.

At the sight a red haze swam before Balthus. Lifting his bow he lined the prancing figure, black against the fire, and loosed. The slayer leaped convulsively and fell dead with the arrow through his heart. Then the two white men and the dog were upon the startled survivors. Conan was animated merely by his fighting spirit and an old, old racial hate, but Balthus was afire with wrath.

He met the first Pict to oppose him with a ferocious swipe that split the painted skull, and sprang over his falling body to grapple with the others. But Conan had already killed one of the two he had chosen, and the leap of the Aquilonian was a second late. The warrior was down with the long sword through him even as Balthus' ax was lifted. Turning toward the remaining Pict, Balthus saw Slasher rise from his victim, his great jaws dripping blood.

Balthus said nothing as he looked down at the pitiful forms in the road beside the burning wain. Both were young, the woman little more than a girl. By some whim of chance the Picts had left her face unmarred, and even in the agonies of an awful death it was beautiful. But her soft young body had been hideously slashed with many knives—a mist clouded Balthus' eyes and he swallowed chokingly. The tragedy momentarily overcame him. He felt like falling upon the ground and weeping and biting the earth.

"Some young couple just hitting out on their own," Conan was saying as he wiped his sword unemotionally.

"On their way to the fort when the Picts met them. Maybe the boy was going to enter the service; maybe take up land on the river. Well, that's what will happen to every man, woman and child this side of Thunder River if we don't get them into Velitrium in a hurry."

Balthus' knees trembled as he followed Conan. But there was no hint of weakness in the long easy stride of the Cimmerian. There was a kinship between him and the great gaunt brute that glided beside him. Slasher no longer growled with his head to the trail. The way was clear before them. The yelling on the river came faintly to them, but Balthus believed the fort was still holding. Conan halted suddenly, with an oath.

He showed Balthus a trail that led north from the road. It was an old trail, partly grown with new young growth, and this growth had recently been broken down. Balthus realized this fact more by feel than sight, though Conan seemed to see like a cat in the dark. The Cimmerian showed him where broad wagon tracks turned off the main trail, deeply indented in the forest mold.

"Settlers going to the licks after salt," he grunted. "They're at the edges of the marsh, about nine miles from here. Blast it! They'll be cut off and butchered to a man! Listen! One man can warn the people on the road. Go ahead and wake them up and herd them into Velitrium. I'll go and get the men gathering the salt. They'll be camped by the licks. We won't come back to the road. We'll head straight through the woods."

With no further comment Conan turned off the trail and hurried down the dim path, and Balthus, after staring after him for a few moments, set out along the road. The dog had remained with him, and glided softly at his heels. When Balthus had gone a few rods he heard the animal growl. Whirling, he glared back the way he had come, and was startled to see a vague ghostly glow vanishing into the forest in the direction Conan had taken.

Slasher rumbled deep in his throat, his hackles stiff and his eyes balls of green fire. Balthus remembered the grim apparition that had taken the head of the merchant Tiberias not far from that spot, and he hesitated. The thing must be following Conan. But the giant Cimmerian had repeatedly demonstrated his ability to take care of himself, and Balthus felt his duty lay toward the helpless settlers who slumbered in the path of the red hurricane. The horror of the fiery phantom was overshadowed by the horror of those limp, violated bodies beside the burning ox-wain.

He hurried down the road, crossed Scalp Creek and came in sight of the first settler's cabin—a long, low structure of ax-hewn logs. In an instant he was pounding on the door. A sleepy voice inquired his pleasure.

"Get up! The Picts are over the river!"

That brought instant response. A low cry echoed his words and then the door was thrown open by a woman in a scanty shift. Her hair hung over her bare shoulders in disorder; she held a candle in one hand and an ax in the other. Her face was colorless, her eyes wide with terror.

"Come in!" she begged. "We'll hold the cabin."

"No. We must make for Velitrium. The fort can't hold them back. It may have fallen already. Don't stop to dress. Get your children and come on."

"But my man's gone with the others after salt!" she wailed, wringing her hands. Behind her peered three tousled youngsters, blinking and bewildered.

"Conan's gone after them. He'll fetch them through safe. We must hurry up the road to warn the other cabins."

Relief flooded her countenance.

"Mitra be thanked!" she cried. "If the Cimmerian's gone after them, they're safe if mortal man can save them!"

In a whirlwind of activity she snatched up the smallest child and herded the others through the door ahead of her. Balthus took the candle and ground it out under his heel. He listened an instant. No sound came up the dark road.

"Have you got a horse?"

"In the stable," she groaned. "Oh, hurry!"

He pushed her aside as she fumbled with shaking hands at the bars. He led the horse out and lifted the children on its back, telling them to hold to its mane and to one another. They stared at him seriously, making no outcry. The woman took the horse's halter and set out up the road. She still gripped her ax and Balthus knew that if cornered she would fight with the desperate courage of a she-panther.

He held behind, listening. He was oppressed by the belief that the fort had been stormed and taken; that the dark-skinned hordes were already streaming up the road toward Velitrium, drunken on slaughter and mad for blood. They would come with the speed of starving wolves.

Presently they saw another cabin looming ahead. The woman started to shriek a warning, but Balthus stopped her. He hurried to the door and knocked. A woman's voice answered him. He repeated his warning, and soon the cabin disgorged its occupants—an old woman, two young women and four children. Like the other woman's husband, their men had gone to the salt licks the day before, unsuspecting of any danger. One of the young women seemed dazed, the other prone to hysteria. But the old woman, a stern old veteran of the frontier, quieted them harshly; she helped Balthus get out the two horses that were stabled in a pen behind the cabin and put the children on them. Balthus urged that she herself mount with them, but she shook her head and made one of the younger women ride.

"She's with child," grunted the old woman. "I can walk—and fight, too, if it comes to that."

As they set out, one of the young women said: "A young couple passed along the road about dusk; we advised them to spend the night at our cabin, but they were anxious to make the fort tonight. Did—did—"

"They met the Picts," answered Balthus briefly, and the woman sobbed in horror.

They were scarcely out of sight of the cabin when some distance behind them quavered a long high-pitched yell.

"A wolf!" exclaimed one of the women.

"A painted wolf with an ax in his hand," muttered Balthus. "Go! Rouse the other settlers along the road and take them with you. I'll scout along behind."

Without a word the old woman herded her charges ahead of her. As they faded into the darkness, Balthus could see the pale ovals that were the faces of the children twisted back over their shoulders to stare toward him. He remembered his own people on the Tauran and a moment's giddy sickness swam over him. With momentary weakness he groaned and sank down in the road; his muscular arm fell over Slasher's massive neck and he felt the dog's warm moist tongue touch his face.

He lifted his head and grinned with a painful effort.

"Come on, boy," he mumbled, rising. "We've got work to do."

A red glow suddenly became evident through the trees. The Picts had fired the last hut. He grinned. How Zogar Sag would froth if he knew his warriors had let their destructive natures get the better of them. The fire would warn the people farther up the road. They would be awake and alert when the fugitives reached them. But his face grew grim. The women were traveling slowly, on foot and on the overloaded horses. The swift-footed Picts would run them down within a mile, unless—he

took his position behind a tangle of fallen logs beside the trail. The road west of him was lighted by the burning cabin, and when the Picts came he saw them first—black furtive figures etched against the distant glare.

Drawing a shaft to the head, he loosed and one of the figures crumpled. The rest melted into the woods on either side of the road. Slasher whimpered with the killing lust beside him. Suddenly a figure appeared on the fringe of the trail, under the trees, and began gliding toward the fallen timbers. Balthus' bow-string twanged and the Pict yelped, staggered and fell into the shadows with the arrow through his thigh. Slasher cleared the timbers with a bound and leaped into the bushes. They were violently shaken and then the dog slunk back to Balthus' side, his jaws crimson.

No more appeared in the trail; Balthus began to fear they were stealing past his position through the woods, and when he heard a faint sound to his left he loosed blindly. He cursed as he heard the shaft splinter against a tree, but Slasher glided away as silently as a phantom, and presently Balthus heard a thrashing and a gurgling; then Slasher came like a ghost through the bushes, snuggling his great, crimson-stained head against Balthus' arm. Blood oozed from a gash in his shoulder, but the sounds in the wood had ceased for ever.

The men lurking on the edges of the road evidently sensed the fate of their companion, and decided that an open charge was preferable to being dragged down in the dark by a devil-beast they could neither see nor hear. Perhaps they realized that only one man lay behind the logs. They came with a sudden rush, breaking cover from both sides of the trail. Three dropped with arrows through them—and the remaining pair hesitated. One turned and ran back down the road, but the other lunged over the breastwork, his eyes and teeth gleaming in the dim light, his ax lifted. Balthus' foot slipped as he sprang

up, but the slip saved his life. The descending ax shaved a lock of hair from his head, and the Pict rolled down the logs from the force of his wasted blow. Before he could regain his feet Slasher tore his throat out.

Then followed a tense period of waiting, in which time Balthus wondered if the man who had fled had been the only survivor of the party. Obviously it had been a small band that had either left the fighting at the fort, or was scouting ahead of the main body. Each moment that passed increased the chances for safety of the women and children hurrying toward Velitrium.

Then without warning a shower of arrows whistled over his retreat. A wild howling rose from the woods along the trail. Either the survivor had gone after aid, or another party had joined the first. The burning cabin still smoldered, lending a little light. Then they were after him, gliding through the trees beside the trail. He shot three arrows and threw the bow away. As if sensing his plight, they came on, not yelling now, but in deadly silence except for a swift pad of many feet.

He fiercely hugged the head of the great dog growling at his side, muttered: "All right, boy, give 'em hell!" and sprang to his feet, drawing his ax. Then the dark figures flooded over the breastworks and closed in a storm of flailing axes, stabbing knives and ripping fangs.

The Devil in the Fire

When Conan turned from the Velitrium road he expected a run of some nine miles and set himself to the task. But he had not gone four when he heard the sounds of a party of men ahead of him. From the noise they were making in their progress he knew they were not Picts. He hailed them.

"Who's there?" challenged a harsh voice. "Stand where

you are until we know you, or you'll get an arrow through you."

"You couldn't hit an elephant in this darkness," answered Conan impatiently. "Come on, fool; it's I—Conan. The Picts are over the river."

"We suspected as much," answered the leader of the men, as they strode forward—tall, rangy men, stern-faced, with bows in their hands. "One of our party wounded an antelope and tracked it nearly to Black River. He heard them yelling down the river and ran back to our camp. We left the salt and the wagons, turned the oxen loose and came as swiftly as we could. If the Picts are besieging the fort, war-parties will be ranging up the road toward our cabins."

"Your families are safe," grunted Conan. "My companion went ahead to take them to Velitrium. If we go back to the main road we may run into the whole horde. We'll strike southeast, through the timber. Go ahead. I'll scout behind."

A few moments later the whole band was hurrying southeastward. Conan followed more slowly, keeping just within ear-shot. He cursed the noise they were making; that many Picts or Cimmerians would have moved through the woods with no more noise than the wind makes as it blows through the black branches.

He had just crossed a small glade when he wheeled, answering the conviction of his primitive instincts that he was being followed. Standing motionless among the bushes he heard the sounds of the retreating settlers fade away. Then a voice called faintly back along the way he had come: "Conan! Conan! Wait for me, Conan!"

"Balthus!" he swore bewilderedly. Cautiously he called: "Here I am!"

"Wait for me, Conan!" the voice came more distinctly.

Conan moved out of the shadows, scowling. "What the devil are you doing here?—*Crom!*"

He half crouched, the flesh prickling along his spine. It was not Balthus who was emerging from the other side of the glade. A weird glow burned through the trees. It moved toward him, shimmering weirdly—a green witch-fire that moved with purpose and intent.

It halted some feet away and Conan glared at it, trying to distinguish its fire-misted outlines. The quivering flame had a solid core; the flame was but a green garment that masked some animate and evil entity; but the Cimmerian was unable to make out its shape or likeness. Then, shockingly, a voice spoke to him from amidst the fiery column.

"Why do you stand like a sheep waiting for the butcher, Conan?"

The voice was human but carried strange vibrations that were not human.

"Sheep?" Conan's wrath got the best of his momentary awe. "Do you think I'm afraid of a damned Pictish swamp devil? A friend called me."

"I called in his voice," answered the other. "The men you follow belong to my brother; I would not rob his knife of their blood. But you are mine. Oh, fool, you have come from the far gray hills of Cimmeria to meet your doom in the forests of Conajohara."

"You've had your chance at me before now," snorted Conan. "Why didn't you kill me then, if you could?"

"My brother had not painted a skull black for you and hurled it into the fire that burns for ever on Gullah's black altar. He had not whispered your name to the black ghosts that haunt the uplands of the Dark Land. But a bat has flown over the Mountains of the Dead and drawn your image in blood on the white tiger's hide that hangs before the long hut where sleep the Four Brothers of the Night. The great serpents coil about their feet and the stars burn like fireflies in their hair."

"Why have the gods of darkness doomed me to death?" growled Conan.

Something—a hand, foot or talon, he could not tell which, thrust out from the fire and marked swiftly on the mold. A symbol blazed there, marked with fire, and faded, but not before he recognized it.

"You dared make the sign which only a priest of Jhebbal Sag dare make. Thunder rumbled through the black Mountain of the Dead and the altar-hut of Gullah was thrown down by a wind from the Gulf of Ghosts. The loon which is messenger to the Four Brothers of the Night flew swiftly and whispered your name in my ear. Your race is run. You are a dead man already. Your head will hang in the altar-hut of my brother. Your body will be eaten by the black-winged, sharp-beaked Children of Jhil."

"Who the devil is your brother?" demanded Conan. His sword was naked in his hand, and he was subtly loosening the ax in his belt.

"Zogar Sag; a child of Jhebbal Sag who still visits his sacred groves at times. A woman of Gwawela slept in a grove holy to Jhebbal Sag. Her babe was Zogar Sag. I too am a son of Jhebbal Sag, out of a fire-being from a far realm. Zogar Sag summoned me out of the Misty Lands. With incantations and sorcery and his own blood he materialized me in the flesh of his own planet. We are one, tied together by invisible threads. His thoughts are my thoughts; if he is struck, I am bruised. If I am cut, he bleeds. But I have talked enough. Soon your ghost will talk with the ghosts of the Dark Land, and they will tell you of the old gods which are not dead, but sleep in the outer abysses, and from time to time awake."

"I'd like to see what you look like," muttered Conan, working his ax free, "you who leave a track like a bird, who burn like a flame and yet speak with a human voice."

"You shall see," answered the voice from the flame, "see, and carry the knowledge with you into the Dark Land."

The flames leaped and sank, dwindling and dimming. A face began to take shadowy form. At first Conan thought it was Zogar Sag himself who stood wrapped in green fire. But the face was higher than his own, and there was a demoniac aspect about it—Conan had noted various abnormalities about Zogar Sag's features—an obliqueness of the eyes, a sharpness of the ears, a wolfish thinness of the lips: these peculiarities were exaggerated in the apparition which swayed before him. The eyes were red as coals of living fire.

More details came into view: a slender torso, covered with snaky scales, which was yet man-like in shape, with man-like arms, from the waist upward; below, long crane-like legs ended in splay, three-toed feet like those of some huge bird. Along the monstrous limbs the blue fire fluttered and ran. He saw it as through a glistening mist.

Then suddenly it was towering over him, though he had not seen it move toward him. A long arm, which for the first time he noticed was armed with curving, sickle-like talons, swung high and swept down at his neck. With a fierce cry he broke the spell and bounded aside, hurling his ax. The demon avoided the cast with an unbelievably quick movement of its narrow head and was on him again with a hissing rush of leaping flames.

But fear had fought for it when it slew its other victims, and Conan was not afraid. He knew that any being clothed in material flesh can be slain by material weapons, however grisly its form may be.

One flailing talon-armed limb knocked his helmet from his head. A little lower and it would have decapitated him. But fierce joy surged through him as his savagely

driven sword sank deep in the monster's groin. He bounded backward from a flailing stroke, tearing his sword free as he leaped. The talons raked his breast, ripping through mail-links as if they had been cloth. But his return spring was like that of a starving wolf. He was inside the lashing arms and driving his sword deep in the monster's belly—felt the arms lock about him and the talons ripping the mail from his back as they sought his vitals—he was lapped and dazzled by blue flame that was chill as ice—then he had torn fiercely away from the weakening arms and his sword cut the air in a tremendous swipe.

The demon staggered and fell sprawling sidewise, its head hanging only by a shred of flesh. The fires that veiled it leaped fiercely upward, now red as gushing blood, hiding the figure from view. A scent of burning flesh filled Conan's nostrils. Shaking the blood and sweat from his eyes, he wheeled and ran staggering through the woods. Blood trickled down his limbs. Somewhere, miles to the south, he saw the faint glow of flames that might mark a burning cabin. Behind him, toward the road, rose a distant howling that spurred him to greater efforts.

Conajohara No More

There had been fighting on Thunder River; fierce fighting before the walls of Velitrium; ax and torch had been plied up and down the bank, and many a settler's cabin lay in ashes before the painted horde was rolled back.

A strange quiet followed the storm, in which people gathered and talked in hushed voices, and men with red-stained bandages drank their ale silently in the taverns along the river bank.

There, to Conan the Cimmerian, moodily quaffing

from a great wine-glass, came a gaunt forester with a bandage about his head and his arm in a sling. He was the one survivor of Fort Tuscelan.

"You went with the soldiers to the ruins of the fort?"

Conan nodded.

"I wasn't able," murmured the other. "There was no fighting?"

"The Picts had fallen back across Black River. Something must have broken their nerve, though only the devil who made them knows what."

The woodsman glanced at his bandaged arm and sighed.

"They say there were no bodies worth disposing of."

Conan shook his head. "Ashes. The Picts had piled them in the fort and set fire to the fort before they crossed the river. Their own dead and the men of Valannus."

"Valannus was killed among the last—in the hand-to-hand fighting when they broke the barriers. They tried to take him alive, but he made them kill him. They took ten of the rest of us prisoners when we were so weak from fighting we could fight no more. They butchered nine of us then and there. It was when Zogar Sag died that I got my chance to break free and run for it."

"Zogar Sag's dead?" ejaculated Conan.

"Aye. I saw him die. That's why the Picts didn't press the fight against Velitrium as fiercely as they did against the fort. It was strange. He took no wounds in battle. He was dancing among the slain, waving an ax with which he'd just brained the last of my comrades. He came at me, howling like a wolf—and then he staggered and dropped the ax, and began to reel in a circle screaming as I never heard a man or beast scream before. He fell between me and the fire they'd built to roast me, gagging and frothing at the mouth, and all at once he went rigid and the Picts shouted that he was dead. It was during the

confusion that I slipped my cords and ran for the woods.

"I saw him lying in the firelight. No weapon had touched him. Yet there were red marks like the wounds of a sword in the groin, belly and neck—the last as if his head had been almost severed from his body. What do you make of that?"

Conan made no reply, and the forester, aware of the reticence of barbarians on certain matters, continued: "He lived by magic, and somehow, he died by magic. It was the mystery of his death that took the heart out of the Picts. Not a man who saw it was in the fighting before Velitrium. They hurried back across Black River. Those that struck Thunder River were warriors who had come on before Zogar Sag died. They were not enough to take the city by themselves.

"I came along the road, behind their main force, and I know none followed me from the fort. I sneaked through their lines and got into the town. You brought the settlers through all right, but their women and children got into Velitrium just ahead of those painted devils. If the youth Balthus and old Slasher hadn't held them up awhile, they'd have butchered every woman and child in Conajohara. I passed the place where Balthus and the dog made their last stand. They were lying amid a heap of dead Picts—I counted seven, brained by his ax, or disemboweled by the dog's fangs, and there were others in the road with arrows sticking in them. Gods, what a fight that must have been!"

"He was a man," said Conan. "I drink to his shade, and to the shade of the dog, who knew no fear." He quaffed part of the wine, then emptied the rest upon the floor, with a curious heathen gesture, and smashed the goblet. "The heads of ten Picts shall pay for his, and seven heads for the dog, who was a better warrior than many a man."

And the forester, staring into the moody, smoldering blue eyes, knew the barbaric oath would be kept.

"They'll not rebuild the fort?"

"No; Conajohara is lost to Aquilonia. The frontier has been pushed back. Thunder River will be the new border."

The woodsman sighed and stared at his calloused hand, worn from contact with ax-haft and sword-hilt. Conan reached his long arm for the wine-jug. The forester stared at him, comparing him with the men about them, the men who had died along the lost river, comparing him with those other wild men over that river. Conan did not seem aware of his gaze.

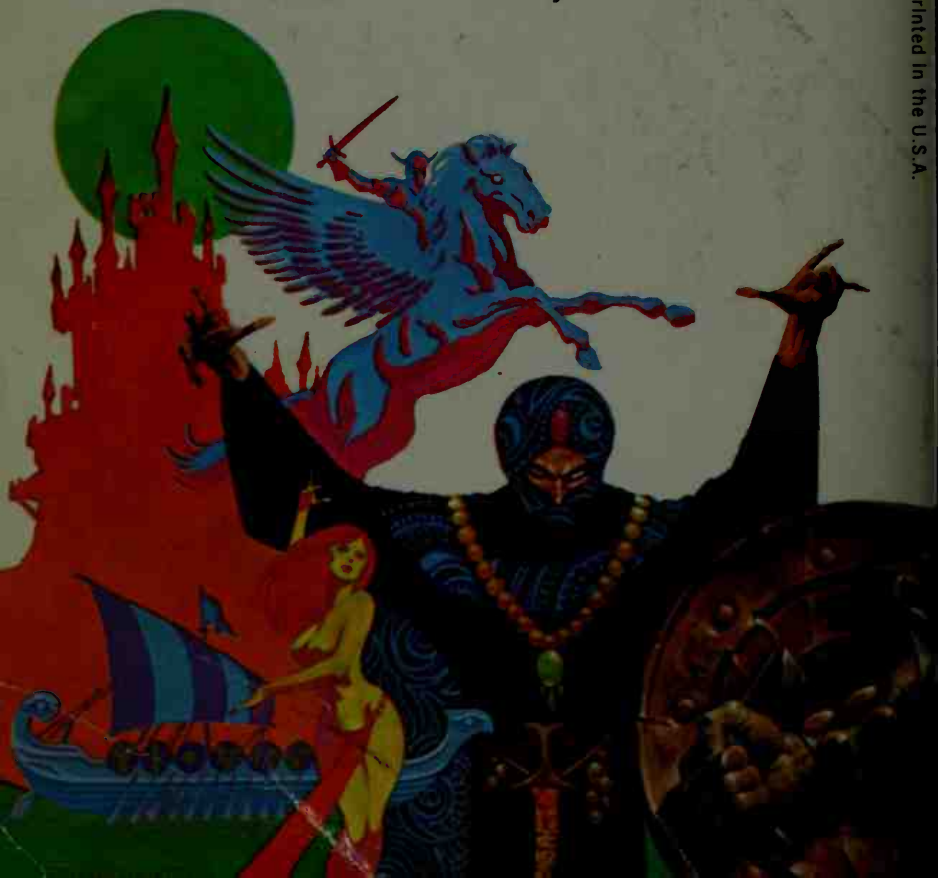
"Barbarism is the natural state of mankind," the borderer said, still staring somberly at the Cimmerian. "Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph."

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