

DREAMS and GHOSTS and SMOKE

**The stories of Kull,
Bran Mak Morn
and Turlogh Dubh O'Brien
by Robert E. Howard**



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The stories of Kull, Bran Mak Morn
and Turlogh Dubh O'Brien
by Robert E. Howard

First published 1929–1932
(The majority of the stories in this collection
have not been published during the author's lifetime)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert E. Howard was born in a small Texan town on January 22nd, 1906, as the only child of the traveling country physician Dr. Isaac Mordecai Howard, and his wife Hester Jane Ervin. During Howard's early years the family moved from one small Texas town to the next, relocating every year or two, until in 1919 they finally settled in the hamlet of Cross Plains, where Dr. Howard would be a well-respected general practitioner — here Howard would spend the rest of his life.

Howard started to write early — from childhood on, he had known that this was what he wanted to do — and he turned into an incredibly prolific author. Fantasy was only one of many genres in which he wrote, and even within the fantasy genre the Conan stories make up only a fraction of his immense literary output. Howard wrote to earn a living, and since the magazines that bought his stories were paying poorly, he had to make up for this by volume. He was a careful writer, usually writing outlines and several drafts of his stories before he submitted them, but he wrote fast, rarely ran out of ideas (or of older stories to re-use and improve), and above all he was an unremitting worker: *“Writing is pounding out one damn yarn after another, pounding them out whether you want to or not ... the only way I can get anything done is to keep pounding away”* (as quoted by Novalyne Price Ellis, in her biography *One Who Walked Alone*).

Howard pounded away at historical fiction, fantasy, adventure, horror, boxing, western, detective and comedy stories, and also at several hundred poems — though these, he knew, would not be published by the magazines he was writing for.

All this time, Howard's life was troubled. From early age on he suffered from depression, and then he was burdened by the chronic illness of his mother. It was she who in his childhood had installed in him the love for literature and poetry, and he felt very close to her — when she became bed-ridden, despite his father being a doctor, it was he who for many years attended to her. His unsteady commercial success as a writer did not mitigate the pain of his depression, and a longstanding on-and-off love affair with the only woman he had ever been closely acquainted with was leading nowhere. When he was told that his mother would not awake from the coma she had fallen into, on June 11th, 1936, he felt released of his duty to her, walked out to his car, took a gun he had borrowed from the glove box, and shot himself.

ABOUT THIS EDITION

This collection contains the stories about Kull, Bran Mak Morn and Turlogh Dubh O'Brien — fantasy heroes who precede Conan in Howard's oeuvre. Not included are stories that Howard has left unfinished, and of the two versions of the tale in which Turlogh Dubh O'Brien plays a rather minor role, *Spears of Clontarf* / *The Twilight of the Grey Gods*, only the latter is part of this book.

The stories are set against very different backgrounds — Kull lives in a mythical age even eons before the time of Conan, Bran in the times of the Roman Empire, and Turlogh, explicitly anchored in history, takes part in the Battle of Clontarf in the year 1014. There are connections, though: Kull appears in the Bran Mak Morn story *Kings of the Night*, and Bran Mak Morn features in the Turlogh Dubh O'Brien story *The Dark Man*. And, by the way, the story in which Conan first saw the light of literature, *The Phoenix on the Sword*, was a re-written Kull story, *By This Axe I Rule!* Still, each one of Howard's heroes is an individual character in his or her own right, and knows how to fascinate us in his or her own way.

The title of this collection, *Dreams and Ghosts and Smoke*, was taken from the last words of the last story, *The Gods of Bal-Sagoth*.

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KULL

EXILE OF ATLANTIS

The sun was setting. A last crimson glory filled the land and lay like a crown of blood on the snow-sprinkled peaks. The three men who watched the death of the day breathed deep the fragrance of the early wind which stole up out of the distant forests, and then turned to a task more material. One of the men was cooking venison over a small fire and this man, touching a finger to the smoking viand, tasted with the air of a connoisseur.

“All ready, Kull — Gor-na — let us eat.”

The speaker was young — little more than a boy. A tall, slim-waisted, broad-shouldered lad who moved with the easy grace of a leopard. Of his companions, one was an older man, a powerful, massively built hairy man, with an aggressive face. The other was a counterpart of the speaker, except for the fact that he was slightly larger — taller, a thought deeper of chest and broader of shoulder. He gave the impression, even more than the first youth, of dynamic speed concealed in long, smooth muscles.

“Good,” said he, “I am hungry.”

“When were you ever otherwise?” jeered the first speaker.

“When I am fighting,” Kull answered seriously.

The other shot a quick glance at his friend as to fathom his inmost mind; he was not always sure of his friend.

“And then you are blood hungry,” broke in the older man. “Am-ra, have done with your bantering and cut us food.”

Night began to fall; the stars blinked out. Over the shadowy hill-country swept the dusk wind. Far off a tiger roared suddenly. Gor-na

made an instinctive motion toward the flint-pointed spear which lay beside him. Kull turned his head and a queer light flickered in his cold grey eyes.

“The striped brothers hunt tonight,” said he.

“They worship the rising moon.” Am-ra indicated the east where a red radiance was becoming evident.

“Why?” asked Kull. “The moon discovers them to their prey and their enemies.”

“Once, many hundreds of years ago,” said Gor-na, “a king tiger, pursued by hunters, called on the woman in the moon and she flung him down a vine whereby he climbed to safety and abode for many years in the moon. Since then, all the striped people worship the moon.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Kull bluntly. “Why should the striped people worship the moon for aiding one of their race who died so long ago? Many a tiger has scrambled up Death Cliff and escaped the hunters, but they do not worship that cliff. How should they know what took place so long ago?”

Gor-na’s brow clouded. “It little becomes you, Kull, to jeer at your elders or to mock the legends of your adopted people. This tale must be true because it has been handed down from generation unto generation longer than men remember. What always was, must always be.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Kull. “These mountains always were but some day they will crumble and vanish. Some day the sea will flow over these hills —”

“Enough of this blasphemy!” cried Gor-na with a passion that was almost anger. “Kull, we are close friends and I bear with you because of your youth — but one thing you must learn — respect for tradition.

You mock at the customs and ways of our people — you whom that people rescued from the wilderness and gave a home and a tribe.”

“I was a hairless ape roaming in the woods,” admitted Kull frankly and without shame. “I could not speak the language of men and my only friends were the tigers and the wolves. I know not whom my people were, or what blood am I —”

“That matters not,” broke in Gor-na. “For all you have the aspect of one of that outlaw tribe who lived in Tiger Valley, and who perished in the Great Flood, it matters little. You have proven yourself a valiant warrior and a mighty hunter —”

“Where will you find a youth to equal him in throwing the spear or in wrestling?” broke in Am-ra, his eyes alight.

“Very true,” said Gor-na. “He is a credit to the Sea-mountain tribe, but for all that he must control his mouth, and learn to reverence the holy things of the past and of the present.”

“I mock not,” said Kull without malice, “but many things the priests say I know to be lies for I have run with the tigers and I know wild beasts better than the priests. Animals are neither gods nor fiends, but men in their way without the lust and greed of man —”

“More blasphemy!” cried Gor-na angrily. “Man is Valka’s mightiest creation.”

Am-ra broke in to change the subject. “I heard the coast drums beating early in the morning. There is war on the sea. Valusia fights the Lemurian pirates.”

“Evil luck to both,” grunted Gor-na.

Kull’s eyes flickered again. “Valusia! Land of Enchantment! Some day I will see the great City of Wonder.”

“Evil the day that you do,” snarled Gor-na. “You will be loaded

with chains with the doom of torture and death hanging over you. No man of our race sees the Great City save as a slave.”

“Evil luck attend her,” muttered Am-ra.

“Black luck and a red doom!” exclaimed Gor-na, shaking his fist toward the east. “For each drop of spilt Atlantean blood, for each slave toiling in their cursed galleys, may a black blight rest on Valusia and all the Seven Empires!”

Am-ra, fired, leapt lithely to his feet and repeated part of the curse; Kull cut himself another slice of cooked meat.

“I have fought the Valusians,” said he, “and they were bravely arrayed but not hard to kill. Nor were they evil-featured.”

“You fought the feeble guard of her northern coast,” grunted Gor-na, “or the crew of stranded merchant ships. Wait until you have faced the charge of the Black Squadrons, or the Great Army as have I. Hai! Then there is blood to drink! With Gandaro of the Spear, I harried the Valusian coasts when I was younger than you, Kull. Aye, we carried the torch and the sword deep into the empire. Five hundred men we were, of all the coast tribes of Atlantis. Four of us returned! Outside the village of Hawks, which we burned and sacked, the van of the Black Squadron smote us! Hai, there the spears drank and the swords were eased of thirst! We slew and they slew, but when the thunder of battle was stilled, four of us escaped from the field, and all of us sore wounded.”

“Ascalante tells me,” pursued Kull, “that the walls about the Crystal City are ten times the height of a tall man; that the gleam of gold and silver would dazzle the eyes and the women who throng the streets or lean from their windows are robed in strange, smooth robes that rustle and sheen.”

“Ascalante should know,” grimly said Gor-na, “since he was slave

among them so long that he forgot his good Atlantean name and must forsooth abide by the Valusian name they gave him.”

“He escaped,” commented Am-ra.

“Aye, but for every slave that escapes the clutches of the Seven Empires, seven are rotting in dungeons and dying each day — for it was not meant for an Atlantean to bide as a slave.”

“We have been enemies to the Seven Empires since the dawn of time,” mused Am-ra.

“And will be until the world crashes,” said Gor-na with a savage satisfaction. “For Atlantis, thank Valka, is the foe of all men.”

Am-ra rose, taking his spear and prepared to stand watch. The other two lay down on the sward and dropped to sleep. Of what did Gor-na dream? Battle perhaps, or the thunder of buffalo — or a girl of the caves. Kull —

Through the mists of his sleep echoed faintly and far away the golden melody of the trumpets. Clouds of radiant glory floated over him; then a mighty vista opened before his dream self. A great concourse of people stretched away into the distance and a thunderous roar in a strange language went up from them. There was a minor note of steel clashing and great shadowy armies reined to the right and the left; the mist faded and a face stood out boldly, a face above which hovered a regal crown — a hawk-like face, dispassionate, immobile, with eyes like the grey of the cold sea. Now the people thundered again. “Hail the king! Hail the king! *Kull the King!*”

Kull awoke with a start — the moon glimmered on the distant mountain, the wind sighed through the tall grass. Gor-na slept beside him and Am-ra stood, a naked bronze statue against the stars. Kull’s eyes wandered to his scanty garment — a leopard’s hide twisted about

his pantherish loins. A naked barbarian — Kull's cold eyes glimmered. Kull the king! Again he slept.

They arose in the morning and set out for the caves of the tribe. The sun was not yet high when the broad blue river met their gaze and the caverns of the tribe rose to view.

“Look!” Am-ra cried out sharply. “They burn someone!”

A heavy stake stood before the caves; thereon was a young girl bound. The people who stood about, hard-eyed, showed no sign of pity.

“Ala,” said Gor-na, his face setting into unbending lines. “She married a Lemurian pirate — the wanton.”

“Aye,” broke in a stony-eyed old woman, “my own daughter — thus she brought shame on Atlantis — my daughter no longer! Her mate died — she was washed ashore when their ship was broken by the craft of Atlantis.”

Kull eyed the girl compassionately. He couldn't understand — why did these people, her own kin and blood, frown on her so, merely because she chose an enemy of her race? In all the eyes that were centered on her, Kull saw only one trace of sympathy. Am-ra's strange blue eyes were sad and compassionate.

What Kull's own immobile face mirrored there is no knowing. But the eyes of the doomed girl rested on his. There was no fear in her fine eyes, but a deep and vibrant appeal. Kull's gaze wandered to the fagots at her feet.

Soon the priest, who now chanted a curse beside her, would stoop and light these with the torch which he now held in his left hand. Kull saw that she was bound to the stake with a heavy wooden chain — a peculiar thing which was typically Atlantean in its manufacture. He could not sever that chain, even if he reached her through the throng

that barred his way. Her eyes implored him. He glanced at the fagots; touched the long flint dagger at his girdle. She understood. Nodded, relief flooding her eyes.

Kull struck as suddenly and unexpectedly as a cobra. He snatched the dagger from his girdle and threw it. Fairly under the heart it struck, killing her instantly. While the people stood spell-bound, Kull wheeled, bounded away and ran up the sheer side of the cliff for twenty feet, like a cat. The people stood struck dumb, then a man whipped up bow and arrow and sighted along the smooth shaft. Kull was heaving himself over the lip of the cliff: the bowman's eyes narrowed — Am-ra, as if by accident, lurched headlong into him and the arrow sang wide and aside. Then Kull was gone.

He heard them screaming on his track; his own tribesmen, fired with the blood-lust, wild to run him down and slay him for violating their strange and bloody code of morals. But no man in Atlantis, and that means no man in the world, could foot it with Kull of the Sea-mountain tribe.

THE SHADOW KINGDOM

1.

A King Comes Riding

The blare of the trumpets grew louder, like a deep golden tide surge, like the soft booming of the evening tides against the silver beaches of Valusia. The throng shouted, women flung roses from the roofs as the rhythmic chiming of silver hoofs came clearer and the first of the mighty array swung into view in the broad white street that curved round the golden-spired Tower of Splendor.

First came the trumpeters, slim youths, clad in scarlet, riding with a flourish of long, slender golden trumpets; next the bowmen, tall men from the mountains; and behind these the heavily armed footmen, their broad shields clashing in unison, their long spears swaying in perfect rhythm to their stride. Behind them came the mightiest soldiery in all the world, the Red Slayers, horsemen, splendidly mounted, armed in red from helmet to spur. Proudly they sat their steeds, looking neither to right nor to left, but aware of the shouting for all that. Like bronze statues they were, and there was never a waver in the forest of spears that reared above them.

Behind those proud and terrible ranks came the motley files of the mercenaries, fierce, wild-looking warriors, men of Mu and of Kaa-u and of the hills of the east and the isles of the west. They bore spears and heavy swords, and a compact group that marched somewhat apart were the bowmen of Lemuria. Then came the light foot of the nation, and more trumpeters brought up the rear.

A brave sight, and a sight which aroused a fierce thrill in the soul of

Kull, king of Valusia. Not on the Topaz Throne at the front of the regal Tower of Splendor sat Kull, but in the saddle, mounted on a great stallion, a true warrior king. His mighty arm swung up in reply to the salutes as the hosts passed. His fierce eyes passed the gorgeous trumpeters with a casual glance, rested longer on the following soldiery; they blazed with a ferocious light as the Red Slayers halted in front of him with a clang of arms and a rearing of steeds, and tendered him the crown salute. They narrowed slightly as the mercenaries strode by. They saluted no one, the mercenaries. They walked with shoulders flung back, eyeing Kull boldly and straightly, albeit with a certain appreciation; fierce eyes, unblinking; savage eyes, staring from beneath shaggy manes and heavy brows.

And Kull gave back a like stare. He granted much to brave men, and there were no braver in all the world, not even among the wild tribesmen who now disowned him. But Kull was too much the savage to have any great love for these. There were too many feuds. Many were age-old enemies of Kull's nation, and though the name of Kull was now a word accursed among the mountains and valleys of his people, and though Kull had put them from his mind, yet the old hates, the ancient passions still lingered. For Kull was no Valusian but an Atlantean.

The armies swung out of sight around the gem-blazing shoulders of the Tower of Splendor and Kull reined his stallion about and started toward the palace at an easy gait, discussing the review with the commanders that rode with him, using not many words, but saying much.

"The army is like a sword," said Kull, "and must not be allowed to rust." So down the street they rode, and Kull gave no heed to any

of the whispers that reached his hearing from the throngs that still swarmed the streets.

“That is Kull, see! Valka! But what a king! And what a man! Look at his arms! His shoulders!”

And an undertone of more sinister whisperings: “Kull! Ha, accursed usurper from the pagan isles” — “Aye, shame to Valusia that a barbarian sits on the Throne of Kings.” ...

Little did Kull heed. Heavy-handed had he seized the decaying throne of ancient Valusia and with a heavier hand did he hold it, a man against a nation.

After the council chamber, the social palace where Kull replied to the formal and laudatory phrases of the lords and ladies, with carefully hidden, grim amusement at such frivolities; then the lords and ladies took their formal departure and Kull leaned back upon the ermine throne and contemplated matters of state until an attendant requested permission from the great king to speak, and announced an emissary from the Pictish embassy.

Kull brought his mind back from the dim mazes of Valusian statecraft where it had been wandering, and gazed upon the Pict with little favor. The man gave back the gaze of the king without flinching. He was a lean-hipped, massive-chested warrior of middle height, dark, like all his race, and strongly built. From strong, immobile features gazed dauntless and inscrutable eyes.

“The chief of the Councilors, Ka-nu of the tribe, right hand of the king of Pictdom, sends greetings and says: ‘There is a throne at the feast of the rising moon for Kull, king of kings, lord of lords, emperor of Valusia.’”

“Good,” answered Kull. “Say to Ka-nu the Ancient, ambassador

of the western isles, that the king of Valusia will quaff wine with him when the moon floats over the hills of Zalgara.”

Still the Pict lingered. “I have a word for the king, not” — with a contemptuous flirt of his hand — “for these slaves.”

Kull dismissed the attendants with a word, watching the Pict warily.

The man stepped nearer, and lowered his voice: “Come alone to feast tonight, lord king. Such was the word of my chief.”

The king’s eyes narrowed, gleaming like gray sword steel, coldly.

“Alone?”

“Aye.”

They eyed each other silently, their mutual tribal enmity seething beneath their cloak of formality. Their mouths spoke the cultured speech, the conventional court phrases of a highly polished race, a race not their own, but from their eyes gleamed the primal traditions of the elemental savage. Kull might be the king of Valusia and the Pict might be an emissary to her courts, but there in the throne hall of kings, two tribesmen glowered at each other, fierce and wary, while ghosts of wild wars and world-ancient feuds whispered to each.

To the king was the advantage and he enjoyed it to its fullest extent. Jaw resting on hand, he eyed the Pict, who stood like an image of bronze, head flung back, eyes unflinching.

Across Kull’s lips stole a smile that was more a sneer.

“And so I am to come — alone?” Civilization had taught him to speak by innuendo and the Pict’s dark eyes glittered, though he made no reply. “How am I to know that you come from Ka-nu?”

“I have spoken,” was the sullen response.

“And when did a Pict speak truth?” sneered Kull, fully aware that the Picts never lied, but using this means to enrage the man.

“I see your plan, king,” the Pict answered imperturbably. “You wish

to anger me. By Valka, you need go no further! I am angry enough. And I challenge you to meet me in single battle, spear, sword or dagger, mounted or afoot. Are you king or man?"

Kull's eyes glinted with the grudging admiration a warrior must needs give a bold foeman, but he did not fail to use the chance of further annoying his antagonist.

"A king does not accept the challenge of a nameless savage," he sneered, "nor does the emperor of Valusia break the Truce of Ambassadors. You have leave to go. Say to Ka-nu I will come alone."

The Pict's eyes flashed murderously. He fairly shook in the grasp of the primitive blood-lust; then, turning his back squarely upon the king of Valusia, he strode across the Hall of Society and vanished through the great door.

Again Kull leaned back upon the ermine throne and meditated.

So the chief of the Council of Picts wished him to come alone? But for what reason? Treachery? Grimly Kull touched the hilt of his great sword. But scarcely. The Picts valued too greatly the alliance with Valusia to break it for any feudal reason. Kull might be a warrior of Atlantis and hereditary enemy of all Picts, but too, he was king of Valusia, the most potent ally of the Men of the West.

Kull reflected long upon the strange state of affairs that made him ally of ancient foes and foe of ancient friends. He rose and paced restlessly across the hall, with the quick, noiseless tread of a lion. Chains of friendship, tribe and tradition had he broken to satisfy his ambition. And, by Valka, god of the sea and the land, he had realized that ambition! He was king of Valusia — a fading, degenerate Valusia, a Valusia living mostly in dreams of bygone glory, but still a mighty land and the greatest of the Seven Empires. Valusia — Land of Dreams, the tribesmen named it, and sometimes it seemed to Kull that

he moved in a dream. Strange to him were the intrigues of court and palace, army and people. All was like a masquerade, where men and women hid their real thoughts with a smooth mask. Yet the seizing of the throne had been easy — a bold snatching of opportunity, the swift whirl of swords, the slaying of a tyrant of whom men had wearied unto death, short, crafty plotting with ambitious statesmen out of favor at court — and Kull, wandering adventurer, Atlantean exile, had swept up to the dizzy heights of his dreams: he was lord of Valusia, king of kings. Yet now it seemed that the seizing was far easier than the keeping. The sight of the Pict had brought back youthful associations to his mind, the free, wild savagery of his boyhood. And now a strange feeling of dim unrest, of unreality, stole over him as of late it had been doing. Who was he, a straightforward man of the seas and the mountain, to rule a race strangely and terribly wise with the mysticisms of antiquity? An ancient race —

“I am Kull!” said he, flinging back his head as a lion flings back his mane. “I am Kull!”

His falcon gaze swept the ancient hall. His self-confidence flowed back ... And in a dim nook of the hall a tapestry moved — slightly.

2.

Thus Spake the Silent Halls of Valusia

The moon had not risen, and the garden was lighted with torches aglow in silver cressets when Kull sat down in the throne before the table of Ka-nu, ambassador of the western isles. At his right hand sat the ancient Pict, as much unlike an emissary of that fierce race as a man could be. Ancient was Ka-nu and wise in statecraft, grown old in the game. There was no elemental hatred in the eyes that looked at Kull

appraisingly; no tribal traditions hindered his judgments. Long associations with the statesmen of the civilized nations had swept away such cobwebs. Not: who and what is this man? was the question ever foremost in Ka-nu's mind, but: can I use this man, and how? Tribal prejudices he used only to further his own schemes.

And Kull watched Ka-nu, answering his conversation briefly, wondering if civilization would make of him a thing like the Pict. For Ka-nu was soft and paunchy. Many years had stridden across the sky-rim since Ka-nu had wielded a sword. True, he was old, but Kull had seen men older than he in the forefront of battle. The Picts were a long-lived race. A beautiful girl stood at Ka-nu's elbow, refilling his goblet, and she was kept busy. Meanwhile Ka-nu kept up a running fire of jests and comments, and Kull, secretly contemptuous of his garrulity, nevertheless missed none of his shrewd humor.

At the banquet were Pictish chiefs and statesmen, the latter jovial and easy in their manner, the warriors formally courteous, but plainly hampered by their tribal affinities. Yet Kull, with a tinge of envy, was cognizant of the freedom and ease of the affair as contrasted with like affairs of the Valusian court. Such freedom prevailed in the rude camps of Atlantis — Kull shrugged his shoulders.

After all, doubtless Ka-nu, who had seemed to have forgotten he was a Pict as far as time-hoary custom and prejudice went, was right and he, Kull, would better become a Valusian in mind as in name.

At last when the moon had reached her zenith, Ka-nu, having eaten and drunk as much as any three men there, leaned back upon his divan with a comfortable sigh and said, "Now, get you gone, friends, for the king and I would converse on such matters as concerns not children. Yes, you too, my pretty; yet first let me kiss those ruby lips — so; now dance away, my rose-bloom."

Ka-nu's eyes twinkled above his white beard as he surveyed Kull, who sat erect, grim and uncompromising.

"You are thinking, Kull," said the old statesman, suddenly, "that Ka-nu is a useless old reprobate, fit for nothing except to guzzle wine and kiss wenches!"

In fact, this remark was so much in line with his actual thoughts, and so plainly put, that Kull was rather startled, though he gave no sign.

Ka-nu gurgled and his paunch shook with his mirth. "Wine is red and women are soft," he remarked tolerantly. "But — ha! ha! — think not old Ka-nu allows either to interfere with business."

Again he laughed, and Kull moved restlessly. This seemed much like being made sport of, and the king's scintillant eyes began to glow with a feline light.

Ka-nu reached for the wine-pitcher, filled his beaker and glanced questioningly at Kull, who shook his head irritably.

"Aye," said Ka-nu equably, "it takes an old head to stand strong drink. I am growing old, Kull, so why should you young men begrudge me such pleasures as we oldsters must find? Ah me, I grow ancient and withered, friendless and cheerless."

But his looks and expressions failed far of bearing out his words. His rubicund countenance fairly glowed, and his eyes sparkled, so that his white beard seemed incongruous. Indeed, he looked remarkably elfin, reflected Kull, who felt vaguely resentful. The old scoundrel had lost all of the primitive virtues of his race and of Kull's race, yet he seemed more pleased in his aged days than otherwise.

"Hark ye, Kull," said Ka-nu, raising an admonitory finger, "'tis a chancy thing to laud a young man, yet I must speak my true thoughts to gain your confidence."

“If you think to gain it by flattery —”

“Tush. Who spake of flattery? I flatter only to disguard.”

There was a keen sparkle in Ka-nu’s eyes, a cold glimmer that did not match his lazy smile. He knew men, and he knew that to gain his end he must smite straight with this tigerish barbarian, who, like a wolf scenting a snare, would scent out unerringly any falseness in the skein of his word-web.

“You have power, Kull,” said he, choosing his words with more care than he did in the council rooms of the nation, “to make yourself mightiest of all kings, and restore some of the lost glories of Valusia. So. I care little for Valusia — though the women and wine be excellent — save for the fact that the stronger Valusia is, the stronger is the Pict nation. More, with an Atlantean on the throne, eventually Atlantis will become united —”

Kull laughed in harsh mockery. Ka-nu had touched an old wound.

“Atlantis made my name accursed when I went to seek fame and fortune among the cities of the world. We — they — are age-old foes of the Seven Empires, greater foes of the allies of the Empires, as you should know.”

Ka-nu tugged his beard and smiled enigmatically.

“Nay, nay. Let it pass. But I know whereof I speak. And then warfare will cease, wherein there is no gain; I see a world of peace and prosperity — man loving his fellow man — the good supreme. All this can you accomplish — *if you live!*”

“Ha!” Kull’s lean hand closed on his hilt and he half rose, with a sudden movement of such dynamic speed that Ka-nu, who fancied men as some men fancy blooded horses, felt his old blood leap with a sudden thrill. Valka, what a warrior! Nerves and sinews of steel

and fire, bound together with the perfect co-ordination, the fighting instinct, that makes the terrible warrior.

But none of Ka-nu's enthusiasm showed in his mildly sarcastic tone.

"Tush. Be seated. Look about you. The gardens are deserted, the seats empty, save for ourselves. You fear not *me*?"

Kull sank back, gazing about him warily.

"There speaks the savage," mused Ka-nu. "Think you if I planned treachery I would enact it here where suspicion would be sure to fall upon me? Tut. You young tribesmen have much to learn. There were my chiefs who were not at ease because you were born among the hills of Atlantis, and you despise me in your secret mind because I am a Pict. Tush. I see you as Kull, king of Valusia, not as Kull, the reckless Atlantean, leader of the raiders who harried the western isles. So you should see in me, not a Pict but an international man, a figure of the world. Now to that figure, hark! If you were slain tomorrow who would be king?"

"Kaanuub, baron of Blaal."

"Even so. I object to Kaanuub for many reasons, yet most of all for the fact that he is but a figurehead."

"How so? He was my greatest opponent, but I did not know that he championed any cause but his own."

"The night can hear," answered Ka-nu obliquely. "There are worlds within worlds. But you may trust me and you may trust Brule, the Spear-slayer. Look!" He drew from his robes a bracelet of gold representing a winged dragon coiled thrice, with three horns of ruby on the head.

"Examine it closely. Brule will wear it on his arm when he comes to you tomorrow night so that you may know him. Trust Brule as you

trust yourself, and do what he tells you to. And in proof of trust, look ye!”

And with the speed of a striking hawk, the ancient snatched something from his robes, something that flung a weird green light over them, and which he replaced in an instant.

“The stolen gem!” exclaimed Kull recoiling. “The green jewel from the Temple of the Serpent! Valka! You! And why do you show it to me?”

“To save your life. To prove my trust. If I betray your trust, deal with me likewise. You hold my life in your hand. Now I could not be false to you if I would, for a word from you would be my doom.”

Yet for all his words the old scoundrel beamed merrily and seemed vastly pleased with himself.

“But why do you give me this hold over you?” asked Kull, becoming more bewildered each second.

“As I told you. Now, you see that I do not intend to deal you false, and tomorrow night when Brule comes to you, you will follow his advice without fear of treachery. Enough. An escort waits outside to ride to the palace with you, lord.”

Kull rose. “But you have told me nothing.”

“Tush. How impatient are youths!” Ka-nu looked more like a mischievous elf than ever. “Go you and dream of thrones and power and kingdoms, while I dream of wine and soft women and roses. And fortune ride with you, King Kull.”

As he left the garden, Kull glanced back to see Ka-nu still reclining lazily in his seat, a merry ancient, beaming on all the world with jovial fellowship.

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A mounted warrior waited for the king just without the garden and Kull was slightly surprized to see that it was the same that had brought Ka-nu's invitation. No word was spoken as Kull swung into the saddle nor as they clattered along the empty streets.

The color and the gayety of the day had given away to the eery stillness of night. The city's antiquity was more than ever apparent beneath the bent, silver moon. The huge pillars of the mansions and palaces towered up into the stars. The broad stairways, silent and deserted, seemed to climb endlessly until they vanished in the shadowy darkness of the upper realms. Stairs to the stars, thought Kull, his imaginative mind inspired by the weird grandeur of the scene.

Clang! clang! clang! sounded the silver hoofs on the broad, moon-flooded streets, but otherwise there was no sound. The age of the city, its incredible antiquity, was almost oppressive to the king; it was as if the great silent buildings laughed at him, noiselessly, with unguessable mockery. And what secrets did they hold?

"You are young," said the palaces and the temples and the shrines, "but we are old. The world was wild with youth when we were reared. You and your tribe shall pass, but we are invincible, indestructible. We towered above a strange world, ere Atlantis and Lemuria rose from the sea; we still shall reign when the green waters sigh for many a restless fathom above the spires of Lemuria and the hills of Atlantis and when the isles of the Western Men are the mountains of a strange land.

"How many kings have we watched ride down these streets before Kull of Atlantis was even a dream in the mind of Ka, bird of Creation? Ride on, Kull of Atlantis; greater shall follow you; greater came before you. They are dust; they are forgotten; we stand; we know; we are. Ride, ride on, Kull of Atlantis; Kull the king, Kull the fool!"

And it seemed to Kull that the clashing hoofs took up the silent refrain to beat it into the night with hollow re-echoing mockery:

“Kull — the — king! Kull — the — fool!”

Glow, moon; you light a king’s way! Gleam, stars; you are torches in the train of an emperor! And clang, silver-shod hoofs; you herald that Kull rides through Valusia.

Ho! Awake, Valusia! It is Kull that rides, Kull the king!

“We have known many kings,” said the silent halls of Valusia.

And so in a brooding mood Kull came to the palace, where his bodyguard, men of the Red Slayers, came to take the rein of the great stallion and escort Kull to his rest. There the Pict, still sullenly speechless, wheeled his steed with a savage wrench of the rein and fled away in the dark like a phantom; Kull’s heightened imagination pictured him speeding through the silent streets like a goblin out of the Elder World.

There was no sleep for Kull that night, for it was nearly dawn and he spent the rest of the night hours pacing the throneroom, and pondering over what had passed. Ka-nu had told him nothing, yet he had put himself in Kull’s complete power. At what had he hinted when he had said the baron of Blaal was naught but a figurehead? And who was this Brule who was to come to him by night, wearing the mystic armlet of the dragon? And why? Above all, why had Ka-nu shown him the green gem of terror, stolen long ago from the temple of the Serpent, for which the world would rock in wars were it known to the weird and terrible keepers of that temple, and from whose vengeance not even Ka-nu’s ferocious tribesmen might be able to save him? But Ka-nu knew he was safe, reflected Kull, for the statesman was too shrewd to expose himself to risk without profit. But was it to throw the king off his guard and pave the way to treachery? Would Ka-nu dare let him live now? Kull shrugged his shoulders.

3.

They that Walk the Night

The moon had not risen when Kull, hand to hilt, stepped to a window. The windows opened upon the great inner gardens of the royal palace, and the breezes of the night, bearing the scents of spice trees, blew the filmy curtains about. The king looked out. The walks and groves were deserted; carefully trimmed trees were bulky shadows; fountains near by flung their slender sheen of silver in the starlight and distant fountains rippled steadily. No guards walked those gardens, for so closely were the outer walls guarded that it seemed impossible for any invader to gain access to them.

Vines curled up the walls of the palace, and even as Kull mused upon the ease with which they might be climbed, a segment of shadow detached itself from the darkness below the window and a bare, brown arm curved up over the sill. Kull's great sword hissed half-way from the sheath; then the king halted. Upon the muscular forearm gleamed the dragon armband shown him by Ka-nu the night before.

The possessor of the arm pulled himself up over the sill and into the room with the swift, easy motion of a climbing leopard.

"You are Brule?" asked Kull, and then stopped in surprize not unmingled with annoyance and suspicion; for the man was he whom Kull had taunted in the Hall of Society; the same who had escorted him from the Pictish embassy.

"I am Brule, the Spear-slayer," answered the Pict in a guarded voice; then swiftly, gazing closely in Kull's face, he said, barely above a whisper: "*Ka nama kaa lajerama!*"

Kull started. "Ha! What mean you?"

"Know you not?"

“Nay, the words are unfamiliar; they are of no language I ever heard — and yet, by Valka! — somewhere — I have heard —”

“Aye,” was the Pict’s only comment. His eyes swept the room, the study room of the palace. Except for a few tables, a divan or two and great shelves of books of parchment, the room was barren compared to the grandeur of the rest of the palace.

“Tell me, king, who guards the door?”

“Eighteen of the Red Slayers. But how come you, stealing through the gardens by night and scaling the walls of the palace?”

Brule sneered. “The guards of Valusia are blind buffaloes. I could steal their girls from under their noses. I stole amid them and they saw me not nor heard me. And the walls — I could scale them without the aid of vines. I have hunted tigers on the foggy beaches when the sharp east breezes blew the mist in from seaward and I have climbed the steep of the western sea-mountain. But come — nay, touch this armlet.”

He held out his arm and, as Kull complied wonderingly, gave an apparent sigh of relief.

“So. Now throw off those kingly robes; for there are ahead of you this night such deeds as no Atlantean ever dreamed of.”

Brule himself was clad only in a scanty loin-cloth through which was thrust a short, curved sword.

“And who are you to give me orders?” asked Kull, slightly resentful.

“Did not Ka-nu bid you follow me in all things?” asked the Pict irritably, his eyes flashing momentarily. “I have no love for you, lord, but for the moment I have put the thought of feuds from my mind. Do you likewise. But come.”

Walking noiselessly, he led the way across the room to the door.

A slide in the door allowed a view of the outer corridor, unseen from without, and the Pict bade Kull look.

“What see you?”

“Naught but the eighteen guardsmen.”

The Pict nodded, motioned Kull to follow him across the room. At a panel in the opposite wall Brule stopped and fumbled there a moment. Then with a light movement he stepped back, drawing his sword as he did so. Kull gave an exclamation as the panel swung silently open, revealing a dimly lighted passageway.

“A secret passage!” swore Kull softly. “And I knew nothing of it! By Valka, someone shall dance for this!”

“Silence!” hissed the Pict.

Brule was standing like a bronze statue as if straining every nerve for the slightest sound; something about his attitude made Kull’s hair prickle slightly, not from fear but from some eery anticipation. Then beckoning, Brule stepped through the secret doorway which stood open behind them. The passage was bare, but not dust-covered as should have been the case with an unused secret corridor. A vague, gray light filtered through somewhere, but the source of it was not apparent. Every few feet Kull saw doors, invisible, as he knew, from the outside, but easily apparent from within.

“The palace is a very honeycomb,” he muttered.

“Aye. Night and day you are watched, king, by many eyes.”

The king was impressed by Brule’s manner. The Pict went forward slowly, warily, half crouching, blade held low and thrust forward. When he spoke it was in a whisper and he continually flung glances from side to side.

The corridor turned sharply and Brule warily gazed past the turn.

“Look!” he whispered. “But remember! No word! No sound — on your life!”

Kull cautiously gazed past him. The corridor changed just at the bend to a flight of steps. And then Kull recoiled. At the foot of those stairs lay the eighteen Red Slayers who were that night stationed to watch the king’s study room. Brule’s grip upon his mighty arm and Brule’s fierce whisper at his shoulder alone kept Kull from leaping down those stairs.

“Silent, Kull! Silent, in Valka’s name!” hissed the Pict. “These corridors are empty now, but I risked much in showing you, that you might then believe what I had to say. Back now to the room of study.” And he retraced his steps, Kull following; his mind in a turmoil of bewilderment.

“This is treachery,” muttered the king, his steel-gray eyes a-smolder, “foul and swift! Mere minutes have passed since those men stood at guard.”

Again in the room of study Brule carefully closed the secret panel and motioned Kull to look again through the slit of the outer door. Kull gasped audibly. *For without stood the eighteen guardsmen!*

“This is sorcery!” he whispered, half-drawing his sword. “Do dead men guard the king?”

“*Aye!*” came Brule’s scarcely audible reply; there was a strange expression in the Pict’s scintillant eyes. They looked squarely into each other’s eyes for an instant, Kull’s brow wrinkled in a puzzled scowl as he strove to read the Pict’s inscrutable face. Then Brule’s lips, barely moving, formed the words:

“*The — snake — that — speaks!*”

“Silent!” whispered Kull, laying his hand over Brule’s mouth. “That is death to speak! That is a name accursed!”

The Pict's fearless eyes regarded him steadily.

"Look again, King Kull. Perchance the guard was changed."

"Nay, those are the same men. In Valka's name, this is sorcery — this is insanity! I saw with my own eyes the bodies of those men, not eight minutes ago. Yet there they stand."

Brule stepped back, away from the door, Kull mechanically following.

"Kull, what know ye of the traditions of this race ye rule?"

"Much — and yet, little. Valusia is so old —"

"Aye," Brule's eyes lighted strangely, "we are but barbarians — infants compared to the Seven Empires. Not even they themselves know how old they are. Neither the memory of man nor the annals of the historians reach back far enough to tell us when the first men came up from the sea and built cities on the shore. But Kull, *men were not always ruled by men!*"

The king started. Their eyes met.

"Aye, there is a legend of my people —"

"And mine!" broke in Brule. "That was before we of the isles were allied with Valusia. Aye, in the reign of Lion-fang, seventh war chief of the Picts, so many years ago no man remembers how many. Across the sea we came, from the isles of the sunset, skirting the shores of Atlantis, and falling upon the beaches of Valusia with fire and sword. Aye, the long white beaches resounded with the clash of spears, and the night was like day from the flame of the burning castles. And the king, the king of Valusia, who died on the red sea sands that dim day —" His voice trailed off; the two stared at each other, neither speaking; then each nodded.

"Ancient is Valusia!" whispered Kull. "The hills of Atlantis and Mu were isles of the sea when Valusia was young."

The night breeze whispered through the open window. Not the free, crisp sea air such as Brule and Kull knew and reveled in, in their land, but a breath like a whisper from the past, laden with musk, scents of forgotten things, breathing secrets that were hoary when the world was young.

The tapestries rustled, and suddenly Kull felt like a naked child before the inscrutable wisdom of the mystic past. Again the sense of unreality swept upon him. At the back of his soul stole dim, gigantic phantoms, whispering monstrous things. He sensed that Brule experienced similar thoughts. The Pict's eyes were fixed upon his face with a fierce intensity. Their glances met. Kull felt warmly a sense of comradeship with this member of an enemy tribe. Like rival leopards turning at bay against hunters, these two savages made common cause against the inhuman powers of antiquity.

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Brule again led the way back to the secret door. Silently they entered and silently they proceeded down the dim corridor, taking the opposite direction from that in which they had previously traversed it. After a while the Pict stopped and pressed close to one of the secret doors, bidding Kull look with him through the hidden slot.

“This opens upon a little-used stair which leads to a corridor running past the study room door.”

They gazed, and presently, mounting the stair silently, came a silent shape.

“Tu! Chief councilor!” exclaimed Kull. “By night and with bared dagger! How, what means this, Brule?”

“Murder! And foulest treachery!” hissed Brule. “Nay” — as Kull

would have flung the door aside and leaped forth — “we are lost if you meet him here, for more lurk at the foot of those stairs. Come!”

Half running, they darted back along the passage. Back through the secret door Brule led, shutting it carefully behind them, then across the chamber to an opening into a room seldom used. There he swept aside some tapestries in a dim corner nook and, drawing Kull with him, stepped behind them. Minutes dragged. Kull could hear the breeze in the other room blowing the window-curtains about, and it seemed to him like the murmur of ghosts. Then through the door, stealthily, came Tu, chief councilor of the king. Evidently he had come through the study room and, finding it empty, sought his victim where he was most likely to be.

He came with upraised dagger, walking silently. A moment he halted, gazing about the apparently empty room, which was lighted dimly by a single candle. Then he advanced cautiously, apparently at a loss to understand the absence of the king. He stood before the hiding place — and —

“Slay!” hissed the Pict.

Kull with a single mighty leap hurled himself into the room. Tu spun, but the blinding, tigerish speed of the attack gave him no chance for defense or counter-attack. Sword steel flashed in the dim light and grated on bone as Tu toppled backward, Kull’s sword standing out between his shoulders.

Kull leaned above him, teeth bared in the killer’s snarl, heavy brows a-squint above eyes that were like the gray ice of the cold sea. Then he released the hilt and recoiled, shaken, dizzy, the hand of death at his spine.

For as he watched, Tu’s face became strangely dim and unreal; the features mingled and merged in a seemingly impossible manner. Then,

like a fading mask of fog, the face suddenly vanished and in its stead gaped and leered *a monstrous serpent's head!*

“Valka!” gasped Kull, sweat beading his forehead, and again: “Valka!”

Brule leaned forward, face immobile. Yet his glittering eyes mirrored something of Kull's horror.

“Regain your sword, lord king,” said he. “There are yet deeds to be done.”

Hesitantly Kull set his hand to the hilt. His flesh crawled as he set his foot upon the terror which lay at their feet, and as some jerk of muscular reaction caused the frightful mouth to gape suddenly, he recoiled, weak with nausea. Then, wrathful at himself, he plucked forth his sword and gazed more closely at the nameless thing that had been known as Tu, chief councilor. Save for the reptilian head, the thing was the exact counterpart of a man.

“A man with the head of a snake!” Kull murmured. “This, then, is a priest of the serpent god?”

“Aye. Tu sleeps unknowing. These fiends can take any form they will. That is, they can, by a magic charm or the like, fling a web of sorcery about their faces, as an actor dons a mask, so that they resemble anyone they wish to.”

“Then the old legends were true,” mused the king; “the grim old tales few dare even whisper, lest they die as blasphemers, are no fantasies. By Valka, I had thought — I had guessed — but it seems beyond the bounds of reality. Ha! The guardsmen outside the door —”

“They too are snake-men. Hold! What would you do?”

“Slay them!” said Kull between his teeth.

“Strike at the skull if at all,” said Brule. “Eighteen wait without the door and perhaps a score more in the corridors. Hark ye, king,

Ka-nu learned of this plot. His spies have pierced the inmost fastnesses of the snake priests and they brought hints of a plot. Long ago he discovered the secret passageways of the palace, and at his command I studied the map thereof and came here by night to aid you, lest you die as other kings of Valusia have died. I came alone for the reason that to send more would have roused suspicion. Many could not steal into the palace as I did. Some of the foul conspiracy you have seen. Snake-men guard your door, and that one, as Tu, could pass anywhere else in the palace; in the morning, if the priests failed, the real guards would be holding their places again, nothing knowing, nothing remembering; there to take the blame if the priests succeeded. But stay you here while I dispose of this carrion.”

So saying, the Pict shouldered the frightful thing stolidly and vanished with it through another secret panel. Kull stood alone, his mind a-whirl. Neophytes of the mighty serpent, how many lurked among his cities? How might he tell the false from the true? Aye, how many of his trusted councilors, his generals, were men? He could be certain — of whom?

~

The secret panel swung inward and Brule entered.

“You were swift.”

“Aye!” The warrior stepped forward, eyeing the floor. “There is gore upon the rug. See?”

Kull bent forward; from the corner of his eye he saw a blur of movement, a glint of steel. Like a loosened bow he whipped erect, thrusting upward. The warrior sagged upon the sword, his own clattering to the floor. Even at that instant Kull reflected grimly that it was appropriate that the traitor should meet his death upon the sliding,

upward thrust used so much by his race. Then, as Brule slid from the sword to sprawl motionless on the floor, the face began to merge and fade, and as Kull caught his breath, his hair a-prickle, the human features vanished and there the jaws of a great snake gaped hideously, the terrible beady eyes venomous even in death.

“He was a snake priest all the time!” gasped the king. “Valka! what an elaborate plan to throw me off my guard! Ka-nu there, is he a man? Was it Ka-nu to whom I talked in the gardens? Almighty Valka!” as his flesh crawled with a horrid thought; “are the people of Valusia men or are they *all* serpents?”

Undecided he stood, idly seeing that the thing named Brule no longer wore the dragon armband. A sound made him wheel.

Brule was coming through the secret door.

“Hold!” Upon the arm upthrown to halt the king’s hovering sword gleamed the dragon armband. “Valka!” The Pict stopped short. Then a grim smile curled his lips.

“By the gods of the seas! These demons are crafty past reckoning. For it must be that one lurked in the corridors, and seeing me go carrying the carcass of that other, took my appearance. So. I have another to do away with.”

“Hold!” there was the menace of death in Kull’s voice; “I have seen two men turn to serpents before my eyes. How may I know if you are a true man?”

Brule laughed. “For two reasons, King Kull. No snake-man wears this” — he indicated the dragon armband — “nor can any say these words,” and again Kull heard the strange phrase: “*Ka nama kaa lajerama.*”

“*Ka nama kaa lajerama,*” Kull repeated mechanically. “Now where, in Valka’s name, have I heard that? I have not! And yet — and yet —”

“Aye, you remember, Kull,” said Brule. “Through the dim corridors of memory those words lurk; though you never heard them in this life, yet in the bygone ages they were so terribly impressed upon the soul mind that never dies, that they will always strike dim chords in your memory, though you be reincarnated for a million years to come. For that phrase has come secretly down the grim and bloody eons, since when, uncounted centuries ago, those words were watchwords for the race of men who battled with the grisly beings of the Elder Universe. For none but a real man of men may speak them, whose jaws and mouth are shaped different from any other creature. Their meaning has been forgotten but not the words themselves.”

“True,” said Kull. “I remember the legends — Valka!” He stopped short, staring, for suddenly, like the silent swinging wide of a mystic door, misty, unfathomed reaches opened in the recesses of his consciousness and for an instant he seemed to gaze back through the vastnesses that spanned life and life; seeing through the vague and ghostly fogs dim shapes reliving dead centuries — men in combat with hideous monsters, vanquishing a planet of frightful terrors. Against a gray, ever-shifting background moved strange nightmare forms, fantasies of lunacy and fear; and man, the jest of the gods, the blind, wisdomless striver from dust to dust, following the long bloody trail of his destiny, knowing not why, bestial, blundering, like a great murderous child, yet feeling somewhere a spark of divine fire ... Kull drew a hand across his brow, shaken; these sudden glimpses into the abysses of memory always startled him.

“They are gone,” said Brule, as if scanning his secret mind; “the bird-women, the harpies, the bat-men, the flying fiends, the wolf-people, the demons, the goblins — all save such as this being that lies at our feet, and a few of the wolf-men. Long and terrible was the war,

lasting through the bloody centuries, since first the first men, risen from the mire of apedom, turned upon those who then ruled the world.

“And at last mankind conquered, so long ago that naught but dim legends come to us through the ages. The snake-people were the last to go, yet at last men conquered even them and drove them forth into the waste-lands of the world, there to mate with true snakes until some day, say the sages, the horrid breed shall vanish utterly. Yet the Things returned in crafty guise as men grew soft and degenerate, forgetting ancient wars. Ah, that was a grim and secret war! Among the men of the Younger Earth stole the frightful monsters of the Elder Planet, safeguarded by their horrid wisdom and mysticisms, taking all forms and shapes, doing deeds of horror secretly. No man knew who was true man and who false. No man could trust any man. Yet by means of their own craft they formed ways by which the false might be known from the true. Men took for a sign and a standard the figure of the flying dragon, the winged dinosaur, a monster of past ages, which was the greatest foe of the serpent. And men used those words which I spoke to you as a sign and symbol, for as I said, none but a true man can repeat them. So mankind triumphed. Yet again the fiends came after the years of forgetfulness had gone by — for man is still an ape in that he forgets what is not ever before his eyes. As priests they came; and for that men in their luxury and might had by then lost faith in the old religions and worships, the snake-men, in the guise of teachers of a new and truer cult, built a monstrous religion about the worship of the serpent god. Such is their power that it is now death to repeat the old legends of the snake-people, and people bow again to the serpent god in new form; and blind fools that they are, the great hosts of men see no connection between this power and the power men

overthrew eons ago. As priests the snake-men are content to rule — and yet —” He stopped.

“Go on.” Kull felt an unaccountable stirring of the short hair at the base of his scalp.

“Kings have reigned as true men in Valusia,” the Pict whispered, “and yet, slain in battle, have died serpents — as died he who fell beneath the spear of Lion-fang on the red beaches when we of the isles harried the Seven Empires. And how can this be, Lord Kull? These kings were born of women and lived as men! This — the true kings died in secret — as you would have died tonight — and priests of the Serpent reigned in their stead, no man knowing.”

Kull cursed between his teeth. “Aye, it must be. No one has ever seen a priest of the Serpent and lived, that is known. They live in utmost secrecy.”

“The statecraft of the Seven Empires is a mazy, monstrous thing,” said Brule. “There the true men know that among them glide the spies of the serpent, and the men who are the Serpent’s allies — such as Kaanuub, baron of Blaal — yet no man dares seek to unmask a suspect lest vengeance befall him. No man trusts his fellow and the true statesmen dare not speak to each other what is in the minds of all. Could they be sure, could a snake-man or plot be unmasked before them all, then would the power of the Serpent be more than half broken; for all would then ally and make common cause, sifting out the traitors. Ka-nu alone is of sufficient shrewdness and courage to cope with them, and even Ka-nu learned only enough of their plot to tell me what would happen — what has happened up to this time. Thus far I was prepared; from now on we must trust to our luck and our craft. Here and now I think we are safe; those snake-men without the door dare not leave their post lest true men come here un-

expectedly. But tomorrow they will try something else, you may be sure. Just what they will do, none can say, not even Ka-nu; but we must stay at each other's sides, King Kull, until we conquer or both be dead. Now come with me while I take this carcass to the hiding-place where I took the other being."

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Kull followed the Pict with his grisly burden through the secret panel and down the dim corridor. Their feet, trained to the silence of the wilderness, made no noise. Like phantoms they glided through the ghostly light, Kull wondering that the corridors should be deserted; at every turn he expected to run full upon some frightful apparition. Suspicion surged back upon him; was this Pict leading him into ambush? He fell back a pace or two behind Brule, his ready sword hovering at the Pict's unheeding back. Brule should die first if he meant treachery. But if the Pict was aware of the king's suspicion, he showed no sign. Stolidly he tramped along, until they came to a room, dusty and long unused, where moldy tapestries hung heavy. Brule drew aside some of these and concealed the corpse behind them.

Then they turned to retrace their steps, when suddenly Brule halted with such abruptness that he was closer to death than he knew; for Kull's nerves were on edge.

"Something moving in the corridor," hissed the Pict. "Ka-nu said these ways would be empty, yet —"

He drew his sword and stole into the corridor, Kull following warily.

A short way down the corridor a strange, vague glow appeared that came toward them. Nerves a-leap, they waited, backs to the corridor

wall; for what they knew not, but Kull heard Brule's breath hiss through his teeth and was reassured as to Brule's loyalty.

The glow merged into a shadowy form. A shape vaguely like a man it was, but misty and illusive, like a wisp of fog, that grew more tangible as it approached, but never fully material. A face looked at them, a pair of luminous great eyes, that seemed to hold all the tortures of a million centuries. There was no menace in that face, with its dim, worn features, but only a great pity — and that face — that face —

“Almighty gods!” breathed Kull, an icy hand at his soul; “Eallal, king of Valusia, who died a thousand years ago!”

Brule shrank back as far as he could, his narrow eyes widened in a blaze of pure horror, the sword shaking in his grip, unnerved for the first time that weird night. Erect and defiant stood Kull, instinctively holding his useless sword at the ready; flesh a-crawl, hair a-prickle, yet still a king of kings, as ready to challenge the powers of the unknown dead as the powers of the living.

The phantom came straight on, giving them no heed; Kull shrank back as it passed them, feeling an icy breath like a breeze from the arctic snow. Straight on went the shape with slow, silent footsteps, as if the chains of all the ages were upon those vague feet; vanishing about a bend of the corridor.

“Valka!” muttered the Pict, wiping the cold beads from his brow; “that was no man! That was a ghost!”

“Aye!” Kull shook his head wonderingly. “Did you not recognize the face? That was Eallal, who reigned in Valusia a thousand years ago and who was found hideously murdered in his throneroom — the room now known as the Accursed Room. Have you not seen his statue in the Fame Room of Kings?”

“Yes, I remember the tale now. Gods, Kull! that is another sign of

the frightful and foul power of the snake priests — that king was slain by snake-people and thus his soul became their slave, to do their bidding throughout eternity! For the sages have ever maintained that if a man is slain by a snake-man his ghost becomes their slave.”

A shudder shook Kull’s gigantic frame. “Valka! But what a fate! Hark ye” — his fingers closed upon Brule’s sinewy arm like steel — “hark ye! If I am wounded unto death by these foul monsters, swear that ye will smite your sword through my breast lest my soul be enslaved.”

“I swear,” answered Brule, his fierce eyes lighting. “And do ye the same by me, Kull.”

Their strong right hands met in a silent sealing of their bloody bargain.

4.

Masks

Kull sat upon his throne and gazed broodingly out upon the sea of faces turned toward him. A courtier was speaking in evenly modulated tones, but the king scarcely heard him. Close by, Tu, chief councilor, stood ready at Kull’s command, and each time the king looked at him, Kull shuddered inwardly. The surface of court life was as the unrippled surface of the sea between tide and tide. To the musing king the affairs of the night before seemed as a dream, until his eyes dropped to the arm of his throne. A brown, sinewy hand rested there, upon the wrist of which gleamed a dragon armet; Brule stood beside his throne and ever the Pict’s fierce secret whisper brought him back from the realm of unreality in which he moved.

No, that was no dream, that monstrous interlude. As he sat upon

his throne in the Hall of Society and gazed upon the courtiers, the ladies, the lords, the statesmen, he seemed to see their faces as things of illusion, things unreal, existent only as shadows and mockeries of substance. Always he had seen their faces as masks, but before he had looked on them with contemptuous tolerance, thinking to see beneath the masks shallow, puny souls, avaricious, lustful, deceitful; now there was a grim undertone, a sinister meaning, a vague horror that lurked beneath the smooth masks. While he exchanged courtesies with some nobleman or councilor he seemed to see the smiling face fade like smoke and the frightful jaws of a serpent gaping there. How many of those he looked upon were horrid, inhuman monsters, plotting his death, beneath the smooth mesmeric illusion of a human face?

Valusia — land of dreams and nightmares — a kingdom of the shadows, ruled by phantoms who glided back and forth behind the painted curtains, mocking the futile king who sat upon the throne — himself a shadow.

And like a comrade shadow Brule stood by his side, dark eyes glittering from immobile face. A real man, Brule! And Kull felt his friendship for the savage become a thing of reality and sensed that Brule felt a friendship for him beyond the mere necessity of statecraft.

And what, mused Kull, were the realities of life? Ambition, power, pride? The friendship of man, the love of women — which Kull had never known — battle, plunder, what? Was it the real Kull who sat upon the throne or was it the real Kull who had scaled the hills of Atlantis, harried the far isles of the sunset, and laughed upon the green roaring tides of the Atlantean sea? How could a man be so many different men in a lifetime? For Kull knew that there were many Kulls and he wondered which was the real Kull. After all, the priests of the Serpent merely went a step further in their magic, for all men wore

masks, and many a different mask with each different man or woman; and Kull wondered if a serpent did not lurk under every mask.

So he sat and brooded in strange, mazy thought-ways, and the courtiers came and went and the minor affairs of the day were completed, until at last the king and Brule sat alone in the Hall of Society save for the drowsy attendants.

Kull felt a weariness. Neither he nor Brule had slept the night before, nor had Kull slept the night before that, when in the gardens of Ka-nu he had had his first hint of the weird things to be. Last night nothing further had occurred after they had returned to the study room from the secret corridors, but they had neither dared nor cared to sleep. Kull, with the incredible vitality of a wolf, had aforesaid gone for days upon days without sleep, in his wild savage days, but now his mind was edged from constant thinking and from the nerve-breaking eeriness of the past night. He needed sleep, but sleep was furthest from his mind.

And he would not have dared sleep if he had thought of it.

Another thing that had shaken him was the fact that though he and Brule had kept a close watch to see if, or when, the study-room guard was changed, yet it was changed without their knowledge; for the next morning those who stood on guard were able to repeat the magic words of Brule, but they remembered nothing out of the ordinary. They thought that they had stood at guard all night, as usual, and Kull said nothing to the contrary. He believed them true men, but Brule had advised absolute secrecy, and Kull also thought it best.

Now Brule leaned over the throne, lowering his voice so not even a lazy attendant could hear: "They will strike soon, I think, Kull. A while ago Ka-nu gave me a secret sign. The priests know that we know of their plot, of course, but they know not how much we know. We must

be ready for any sort of action. Ka-nu and the Pictish chiefs will remain within hailing distance now until this is settled one way or another. Ha, Kull, if it comes to a pitched battle, the streets and the castles of Valusia will run red!”

Kull smiled grimly. He would greet any sort of action with a ferocious joy. This wandering in a labyrinth of illusion and magic was extremely irksome to his nature. He longed for the leap and clang of swords, for the joyous freedom of battle.

Then into the Hall of Society came Tu again, and the rest of the councilors.

“Lord king, the hour of the council is at hand and we stand ready to escort you to the council room.”

~

Kull rose, and the councilors bent the knee as he passed through the way opened by them for his passage, rising behind him and following. Eyebrows were raised as the Pict strode defiantly behind the king, but no one dissented. Brule’s challenging gaze swept the smooth faces of the councilors with the defiance of an intruding savage.

The group passed through the halls and came at last to the council chamber. The door was closed, as usual, and the councilors arranged themselves in the order of their rank before the dais upon which stood the king. Like a bronze statue Brule took up his stand behind Kull.

Kull swept the room with a swift stare. Surely no chance of treachery here. Seventeen councilors there were, all known to him; all of them had espoused his cause when he ascended the throne.

“Men of Valusia —” he began in the conventional manner, then halted, perplexed. The councilors had risen as a man and were moving toward him. There was no hostility in their looks, but their actions

were strange for a council room. The foremost was close to him when Brule sprang forward, crouched like a leopard.

“*Ka nama kaa lajerama!*” his voice crackled through the sinister silence of the room and the foremost councilor recoiled, hand flashing to his robes; and like a spring released Brule moved and the man pitched headlong to the glint of his sword — headlong he pitched and lay still while his face faded and became the head of a mighty snake.

“Slay, Kull!” rasped the Pict’s voice. “They be all serpent men!”

The rest was a scarlet maze. Kull saw the familiar faces dim like fading fog and in their places gaped horrid reptilian visages as the whole band rushed forward. His mind was dazed but his giant body faltered not.

The singing of his sword filled the room, and the onrushing flood broke in a red wave. But they surged forward again, seemingly willing to fling their lives away in order to drag down the king. Hideous jaws gaped at him; terrible eyes blazed into his unblinkingly; a frightful fetid scent pervaded the atmosphere — the serpent scent that Kull had known in southern jungles. Swords and daggers leaped at him and he was dimly aware that they wounded him. But Kull was in his element; never before had he faced such grim foes but it mattered little; they lived, their veins held blood that could be spilt and they died when his great sword cleft their skulls or drove through their bodies. Slash, thrust, thrust and swing. Yet had Kull died there but for the man who crouched at his side, parrying and thrusting. For the king was clear berserk, fighting in the terrible Atlantean way, that seeks death to deal death; he made no effort to avoid thrusts and slashes, standing straight up and ever plunging forward, no thought in his frenzied mind but to slay. Not often did Kull forget his fighting craft in his primitive fury, but now some chain had broken in his soul, flooding his mind with a

red wave of slaughter-lust. He slew a foe at each blow, but they surged about him, and time and again Brule turned a thrust that would have slain, as he crouched beside Kull, parrying and warding with cold skill, slaying not as Kull slew with long slashes and plunges, but with short overhand blows and upward thrusts.

Kull laughed, a laugh of insanity. The frightful faces swirled about him in a scarlet blaze. He felt steel sink into his arm and dropped his sword in a flashing arc that cleft his foe to the breast-bone. Then the mists faded and the king saw that he and Brule stood alone above a sprawl of hideous crimson figures who lay still upon the floor.

“Valka! what a killing!” said Brule, shaking the blood from his eyes. “Kull, had these been warriors who knew how to use the steel, we had died here. These serpent priests know naught of swordcraft and die easier than any men I ever slew. Yet had there been a few more, I think the matter had ended otherwise.”

Kull nodded. The wild berserker blaze had passed, leaving a mazed feeling of great weariness. Blood seeped from wounds on breast, shoulder, arm and leg. Brule, himself bleeding from a score of flesh wounds, glanced at him in some concern.

“Lord Kull, let us hasten to have your wounds dressed by the women.”

Kull thrust him aside with a drunken sweep of his mighty arm.

“Nay, we’ll see this through ere we cease. Go you, though, and have your wounds seen to — I command it.”

The Pict laughed grimly. “Your wounds are more than mine, lord king —” he began, then stopped as a sudden thought struck him. “By Valka, Kull, this is not the council room!”

Kull looked about and suddenly other fogs seemed to fade. “Nay,

this is the room where Eallal died a thousand years ago — since unused and named ‘Accursed.’”

“Then by the gods, they tricked us after all!” exclaimed Brule in a fury, kicking the corpses at their feet. “They caused us to walk like fools into their ambush! By their magic they changed the appearance of all —”

“Then there is further deviltry afoot,” said Kull, “for if there be true men in the councils of Valusia they should be in the real council room now. Come swiftly.”

And leaving the room with its ghastly keepers they hastened through halls that seemed deserted until they came to the real council room. Then Kull halted with a ghastly shudder. *From the council room sounded a voice speaking, and the voice was his!*

~

With a hand that shook he parted the tapestries and gazed into the room. There sat the councilors, counterparts of the men he and Brule had just slain, and upon the dais stood Kull, king of Valusia.

He stepped back, his mind reeling.

“This is insanity!” he whispered. “Am I Kull? Do I stand here or is that Kull yonder in very truth and am I but a shadow, a figment of thought?”

Brule’s hand clutching his shoulder, shaking him fiercely, brought him to his senses.

“Valka’s name, be not a fool! Can you yet be astounded after all we have seen? See you not that those are true men bewitched by a snake-man who has taken your form, as those others took their forms? By now you should have been slain and yon monster reigning in your stead, unknown by those who bowed to you. Leap and slay swiftly or

else we are undone. The Red Slayers, true men, stand close on each hand and none but you can reach and slay him. Be swift!”

Kull shook off the onrushing dizziness, flung back his head in the old, defiant gesture. He took a long, deep breath as does a strong swimmer before diving into the sea; then, sweeping back the tapestries, made the dais in a single lionlike bound. Brule had spoken truly. There stood men of the Red Slayers, guardsmen trained to move quick as the striking leopard; any but Kull had died ere he could reach the usurper. But the sight of Kull, identical with the man upon the dais, held them in their tracks, their minds stunned for an instant, and that was long enough. He upon the dais snatched for his sword, but even as his fingers closed upon the hilt, Kull’s sword stood out behind his shoulders and the thing that men had thought the king pitched forward from the dais to lie silent upon the floor.

“Hold!” Kull’s lifted hand and kingly voice stopped the rush that had started, and while they stood astounded he pointed to the thing which lay before them — whose face was fading into that of a snake. They recoiled, and from one door came Brule and from another came Ka-nu.

These grasped the king’s bloody hand and Ka-nu spoke: “Men of Valusia, you have seen with your own eyes. This is the true Kull, the mightiest king to whom Valusia has ever bowed. The power of the Serpent is broken and ye be all true men. King Kull, have you commands?”

“Lift that carrion,” said Kull, and men of the guard took up the thing.

“Now follow me,” said the king, and he made his way to the Accursed Room. Brule, with a look of concern, offered the support of his arm but Kull shook him off.

The distance seemed endless to the bleeding king, but at last he stood at the door and laughed fiercely and grimly when he heard the horrified ejaculations of the councilors.

At his orders the guardsmen flung the corpse they carried beside the others, and motioning all from the room Kull stepped out last and closed the door.

A wave of dizziness left him shaken. The faces turned to him, pallid and wonderingly, swirled and mingled in a ghostly fog. He felt the blood from his wounds trickling down his limbs and he knew that what he was to do, he must do quickly or not at all.

His sword rasped from its sheath.

“Brule, are you there?”

“Aye!” Brule’s face looked at him through the mist, close to his shoulder, but Brule’s voice sounded leagues and eons away.

“Remember our vow, Brule. And now, bid them stand back.”

His left arm cleared a space as he flung up his sword. Then with all his waning power he drove it through the door into the jamb, driving the great sword to the hilt and sealing the room forever.

Legs braced wide, he swayed drunkenly, facing the horrified councilors. “Let this room be doubly accursed. And let those rotting skeletons lie there forever as a sign of the dying might of the serpent. Here I swear that I shall hunt the serpent-men from land to land, from sea to sea, giving no rest until all be slain, that good triumph and the power of Hell be broken. This thing I swear — I — Kull — king — of — Valusia.”

His knees buckled as the faces swayed and swirled. The councilors leaped forward, but ere they could reach him, Kull slumped to the floor, and lay still, face upward.

The councilors surged about the fallen king, chattering and shrieking. Ka-nu beat them back with his clenched fists, cursing savagely.

“Back, you fools! Would you stifle the little life that is yet in him? How, Brule, is he dead or will he live?” — to the warrior who bent above the prostrate Kull.

“Dead?” sneered Brule irritably. “Such a man as this is not so easily killed. Lack of sleep and loss of blood have weakened him — by Valka, he has a score of deep wounds, but none of them mortal. Yet have those gibbering fools bring the court women here at once.”

Brule’s eyes lighted with a fierce, proud light.

“Valka, Ka-nu, but here is such a man as I knew not existed in these degenerate days. He will be in the saddle in a few scant days and then may the serpent-men of the world beware of Kull of Valusia. Valka! but that will be a rare hunt! Ah, I see long years of prosperity for the world with such a king upon the throne of Valusia.”

THE STRIKING OF THE GONG

Somewhere in the hot red darkness there began a throbbing. A pulsating cadence, soundless but vibrant with reality, sent out long rippling tendrils that flowed through the breathless air. The man stirred, groped about with blind hands, and sat up. At first it seemed to him that he was floating on the even and regular waves of a black ocean, rising and falling with a monotonous regularity which hurt him physically somehow. He was aware of the pulsing and throbbing of the air and he reached out his hands as though to catch the elusive waves. But was the throbbing in the air about him, or in the brain inside his skull? He could not understand and a fantastic thought came to him — a feeling that he was locked inside his own skull.

The pulsing dwindled, centralized, and he held his aching head in his hands and tried to remember. Remember what?

“This is a strange thing,” he murmured. “Who or what am I? What place is this? What has happened and why am I here? Have I always been here?”

He rose to his feet and sought to look about him. Utter darkness met his glance. He strained his eyes, but no single gleam of light met them. He began to walk forward, haltingly, hands out before him, seeking light as instinctively as a growing plant seeks it.

“This is surely not everything,” he mused. “There must be something else — what is different from this? Light! I know — I remember Light, though I do not remember what Light is. Surely I have known a different world than this.”

Far away a faint grey light began to glow. He hastened toward it.

The gleam widened, until it was as if he were striding down a long and ever widening corridor. Then he came out suddenly into dim starlight and felt the wind cold in his face.

“This is light,” he murmured, “but this is not all yet.”

He felt and recognized a sensation of terrific height. High above him, even with his eyes and below him, flashed and blazed great stars in a majestic glittering cosmic ocean. He frowned abstractedly as he gazed at these stars.

Then he was aware that he was not alone. A tall vague shape loomed before him in the starlight. His hand shot instinctively to his left hip, then fell away limply. He was naked and no weapon hung at his side.

The shape moved nearer and he saw that it was a man, apparently a very ancient man, though the features were indistinct and illusive in the faint light.

“You are new come here?” said this figure in a clear deep voice which was much like the chiming of a jade gong. At the sound a sudden trickle of memory began in the brain of the man who heard the voice.

He rubbed his chin in a bewildered manner.

“Now I remember,” said he, “I am Kull, king of Valusia — but what am I doing here, without garments or weapons?”

“No man can bring anything through the Door with him,” said the other, cryptically. “Think, Kull of Valusia, know you not how you came?”

“I was standing in the doorway of the council chamber,” said Kull, dazedly, “and I remember that the watchman on the outer tower was striking the gong to denote the hour — then suddenly the crash of the gong merged into a wild and sudden flood of shattering sound. All

went dark and red sparks flashed for an instant before my eyes. Then I awoke in a cavern or a corridor of some sort, remembering nothing.”

“You passed through the Door; it always seems dark.”

“Then I am dead? By Valka, some enemy must have been lurking among the columns of the palace and struck me down as I was speaking with Brule, the Pictish warrior.”

“I have not said you were dead,” answered the dim figure. “Mayhap the Door is not utterly closed. Such things have been.”

“But what place is this? Is it paradise or Hell? This is not the world I have known since birth. And those stars — I have never seen them before. Those constellations are mightier and more fiery than I ever knew in life.”

“There are worlds beyond worlds, universes within and without universes,” said the ancient. “You are upon a different planet than that upon which you were born, you are in a different universe, doubtless in a different dimension.”

“Then I am certainly dead.”

“What is death but a traversing of eternities and a crossing of cosmic oceans? But I have not said that you are dead.”

“Then where in Valka’s name am I?” roared Kull, his short stock of patience exhausted.

“Your barbarian brain clutches at material actualities,” answered the other tranquilly. “What does it matter where you are, or whether you are dead, as you call it? You are a part of that great ocean which is Life, which washes upon all shores, and you are as much a part of it in one place as in another, and as sure to eventually flow back to the Source of it, which gave birth to all Life. As for that, you are bound to Life for all Eternity as surely as a tree, a rock, a bird or a world is bound. You call leaving your tiny planet, quitting your crude physical form — death!”

“But I still have my body.”

“I have not said that you are dead, as you name it. As for that, you may be still upon your little planet, as far as you know. Worlds within worlds, universes within universes. Things exist too small and too large for human comprehension. Each pebble on the beaches of Valusia contains countless universes within itself, and itself as a whole is as much a part of the great plan of all universes, as is the sun you know. Your universe, Kull of Valusia, may be a pebble on the shore of a mighty kingdom.

“You have broken the bounds of material limitations. You may be in a universe which goes to make up a gem on the robe you wore on Valusia’s throne or that universe you knew may be in the spider web which lies there on the grass near your feet. I tell you, size and space and time are relative and do not really exist.”

“Surely you are a god?” said Kull curiously.

“The mere accumulation of knowledge and the acquiring of wisdom does not make a god,” answered the other rather impatiently. “Look!” A shadowy hand pointed to the great blazing gems which were the stars.

Kull looked and saw that they were changing swiftly. A constant weaving, an incessant changing of design and pattern was taking place.

“The ‘everlasting’ stars change in their own time, as swiftly as the races of men rise and fade. Even as we watch, upon those which are planets, beings are rising from the slime of the primeval, are climbing up the long slow roads to culture and wisdom, and are being destroyed with their dying worlds. All life and a part of life. To them it seems billions of years; to us, but a moment. All life. And a part of life.”

Kull watched fascinated, as huge stars and mighty constellations

blazed and waned and faded, while others equally as radiant took their places, to be in turn supplanted.

Then suddenly the hot red darkness flowed over him again, blotting out all the stars. As through a thick fog, he heard a faint familiar clashing.

Then he was on his feet, reeling. Sunlight met his eyes, the tall marble pillars and walls of a palace, the wide curtained windows through which the sunlight flowed like molten gold. He passed a swift, dazed hand over his body feeling his garments and the sword at his side. He was bloody; a red stream trickled down his temple from a shallow cut. But most of the blood on his limbs and clothing was not his. At his feet in a horrid crimson wallow lay what had been a man. The clashing he had heard, ceased, re-echoing.

“Brule! What is this?! What happened?! Where have I been?”

“You had nearly been on a journey to old king Death’s realms,” answered the Pict with a mirthless grin as he cleansed his sword. “That spy was lying in wait behind a column and was on you like a leopard as you turned to speak to me in the doorway. Whoever plotted your death must have had great power to so send a man to his certain doom. Had not the sword turned in his hand and struck glancing instead of straight, you had gone before him with a cleft skull, instead of standing here now mulling over a mere flesh wound.”

“But surely,” said Kull, “that was hours ago.”

Brule laughed.

“You are still mazed, lord king. From the time he leaped and you fell, to the time I slashed the heart out of him, a man could not have counted the fingers of one hand. And during the time you were lying in his blood and yours on the floor, no more than twice that time

elapsed. See, Tu has not yet arrived with bandages and he scurried for them the moment you went down.”

“Aye, you are right,” answered Kull, “I cannot understand — but just before I was struck down I heard the gong sounding the hour, and it was still sounding when I came to myself.

“Brule, there is no such thing as time, nor space; for I have travelled the longest journey of my life, and have lived countless millions of years during the striking of the gong.”

THE ALTAR AND THE SCORPION

“God of the crawling darkness, grant me aid!”

A slim youth knelt in the gloom, his white body shimmering like ivory. The marble polished floor was cold to his knees but his heart was colder than the stone.

High above him, merged into the masking shadows, loomed the great lapis lazuli ceiling, upheld by marble walls. Before him glimmered a golden altar and on this altar shone a huge crystal image — a scorpion, wrought with a craft surpassing mere art.

“Great Scorpion,” the boy continued his invocation. “Aid thy worshipper! Thou knowest how in by-gone days, Gonra of the Sword, my greatest ancestor, died before thy shrine on a heap of slain barbarians who sought to defile thy holiness. Through the mouths of thy priests, thou promised aid to Gonra’s race for all the years to come!

“Great Scorpion! Never has man or woman of my blood before reminded thee of thy vow! But now in my hour of bitter need I come before thee, to abjure thee to remember that oath, by the blood drunk by Gonra’s blade, by the blood spilled from Gonra’s veins!

“Great Scorpion! Guron, high priest of the Black Shadow is my enemy! Kull, king of all Valusia, rides from his purple-spired city to smite with fire and steel the priests who have defied him and still offer human sacrifice to the dark elder gods. But before the king may arrive and save us, I and the girl I love shall lie stark on the black altar in the Temple of Everlasting Darkness. Guron has sworn! He will give our soft bodies to ancient and abhorred abominations, and at last, our souls to the god that lurks forever in the Black Shadow.

“Kull sits high on the throne of Valusia and now he rides to our aid, but Guron rules this mountain city and even now he follows me! Great Scorpion, aid us! Remember Gonra, who gave up his life for you when the Atlantean savages carried the torch and sword into Valusia!”

The boy’s slender form drooped, his head sank on his bosom despairingly. The great shimmering image on the altar gave back an icy sheen in the dim light and no sign came to its worshipper, to show that the curious god had heard that passionate invocation.

Suddenly the youth started erect. Quick steps throbbed on the long wide steps outside the temple. A girl darted into the shadowed doorway like a white flame blown before the wind.

“Guron — he comes!” she gasped as she flew into her lover’s arms. The boy’s face went white and his embrace tightened as he gazed apprehensively at the doorway. Footfalls, heavy and sinister, clashed on the marble and a shape of menace loomed in the opening.

Guron the high priest was a tall, gaunt man, a cadaverous giant. His evil eyes glimmered like fiery pools under his penthouse brows and his thin gash of a mouth gaped in a silent laugh. His only garment was a silken loin cloth, through which was thrust a cruel curved dagger, and he carried a short heavy whip in his lean and powerful hand.

His two victims clung to each other and gazed white-eyed at their foe, as birds stare at a serpent. And Guron’s slow swaying stride as he advanced was not unlike the sinuous glide of a crawling snake.

“Guron, have a care!” the youth spoke bravely but his voice faltered from the fearful terror that gripped him. “If you have no fear of the king or pity for us, beware offending the Great Scorpion, under whose protection we are!”

Guron laughed in his might and arrogance.

“The king!” he jeered. “What means the king to me, who am

mightier than any king? The Great Scorpion? Ho! Ho! A forgotten god, a deity remembered only by children and women! Would you pit your Scorpion against the Black Shadow? Fool! Valka himself, god of all gods, could not save you now! You are sworn to the god of the Black Shadow!”

He swept toward the cowering youngsters and gripped their white shoulders, sinking his talon-like nails deep into the soft flesh. They sought to resist but he laughed and with incredible strength, lifted them in the air, where he dangled them at arm’s length, as a man might dangle a baby. His grating, metallic laughter filled the room with echoes of evil mockery.

Then, holding the youth between his knees, he bound the girl hand and foot while she whimpered in his cruel clutch, then flinging her roughly to the floor, bound the youth likewise. Stepping back, he surveyed his work. The girl’s frightened sobs sounded quick and panting in the silence. At last the high priest spoke.

“Fools, to think to escape me! Always men of your blood, boy, have opposed me in council and court. Now you pay and the Black Shadow drinks. Ho! ho! I rule the city today, let he be king who may!

“My priests throng the streets, full armed, and no man dare say me nay! Were the king in the saddle this moment, he could not arrive and break my swordsmen in time to save you.”

His eyes roved about the temple and fell upon the golden altar and the silent crystal scorpion.

“Ho ho! What fools to pin your faith on a god whom men have long ceased to worship! Who has not even a priest to attend him, and who is granted a shrine only because of the memory of his former greatness, who is accorded reverence only by simple people and foolish women!

“The real gods are dark and bloody! Remember my words when soon you lie on an ebon altar behind which broods a black shadow forever! Before you die you shall know the real gods, the powerful, the terrible gods, who came from forgotten worlds and lost realms of blackness. Who had their birth on frozen stars, and black suns brooding beyond the light of any stars! You shall know the brain-shattering truth of that Unnamable One, to whose reality no earthly likeness may be given, but whose symbol is — the Black Shadow!”

The girl ceased to cry, frozen, like the youth, into dazed silence. They sensed, behind these threats, a hideous and inhuman gulf of monstrous shadows.

Guron took a stride toward them, bent and reached claw-like hands to grip and lift them to his shoulders. He laughed as they sought to writhe away from him. His fingers closed on the girl’s tender shoulder —

A scream shattered the crystal gong of the silence into a million vibrating shards as Guron bounded into the air and fell on his face, screeching and writhing. Some small creature scurried away and vanished through the door. Guron’s screams dwindled into a high thin squealing and broke short at the highest note. Silence fell like a deathly mist.

At last the boy spoke in an awed whisper:

“What was it?”

“A scorpion!” the girl’s answer came low and tremulous. “It crawled across my bare bosom without harming me, and when Guron seized me, it stung him!”

Another silence fell. Then the boy spoke again, hesitantly:

“No scorpion has been seen in this city for longer than men remember.”

“The Great One summoned this of his people to our aid!” whispered the girl. “The gods never forget, and the Great Scorpion has kept his oath! Let us give thanks to him!”

And, bound hand and foot as they were, the youthful lovers wriggled about on their faces where they lay giving praise to the great silent glistening scorpion on the altar for a long time — until a distant clash of many silver-shod hoofs and the clangor of swords bore them the coming of the king.

BY THIS AXE I RULE!

1.

“My Songs are Nails for a King’s Coffin!”

“At midnight the king must die!”

The speaker was tall, lean and dark, and a crooked scar close to his mouth lent him an unusually sinister cast of countenance. His hearers nodded, their eyes glinting. There were four of these — one was a short fat man, with a timid face, weak mouth and eyes which bulged in an air of perpetual curiosity — another a great somber giant, hairy and primitive — the third a tall, wiry man in the garb of a jester whose flaming blue eyes flared with a light not wholly sane — and last a stocky dwarf of a man, inhumanly short and abnormally broad of shoulders and long of arms.

The first speaker smiled in a wintry sort of manner. “Let us take the vow, the oath that may not be broken — the Oath of the Dagger and the Flame. I trust you — oh, yes, of course. Still, it is better that there be assurance for all of us. I note tremors among some of you.”

“That is all very well for you to say, Ascalante,” broke in the short fat man. “You are an ostracized outlaw, anyway, with a price on your head — you have all to gain and nothing to lose, whereas we —”

“Have much to lose and more to gain,” answered the outlaw imperturbably. “You called me down out of my mountain fastnesses to aid you in overthrowing a king — I have made the plans, set the snare, baited the trap and stand ready to destroy the prey — but I must be sure of your support. Will you swear?”

“Enough of this foolishness!” cried the man with the blazing eyes.

“Aye, we will swear this dawn and tonight we will dance down a king! ‘Oh, the chant of the chariots and the whirl of the wings of the vultures —’”

“Save your songs for another time, Ridondo,” laughed Ascalante. “This is a time for daggers, not rhymes.”

“My songs are nails for a king’s coffin!” cried the minstrel, whipping out a long lean dagger. “Varlets, bring hither a candle! I shall be first to swear the oath!”

A silent and sombre slave brought a long taper and Ridondo pricked his wrist, bringing blood. One by one the other four followed his example, holding their wounded wrists carefully so that the blood should not drip yet. Then gripping hands in a sort of circle, with the lighted candle in the center, they turned their wrists so that the blood-drops fell upon it. While it hissed and sizzled, they repeated:

“I, Ascalante, a landless man, swear the deed spoken and the silence covenanted, by the oath unbreakable!”

“And I, Ridondo, first minstrel of Valusia’s courts!” cried the minstrel.

“And I, Volmana, count of Karaban,” spoke the dwarf.

“And I, Gromel, commander of the Black Legion,” rumbled the giant.

“And I, Kaanuub, baron of Blaal,” quavered the short fat man, in a rather tremulous falsetto.

The candle sputtered and went out, quenched by the ruby drops which fell upon it.

“So fade the life of our enemy,” said Ascalante, releasing his comrades’ hands. He looked on them with carefully veiled contempt. The outlaw knew that oaths may be broken, even “unbreakable” ones, but he knew also that Kaanuub, of whom he was most distrustful, was

superstitious. There was no use overlooking any safe-guard, no matter how slight.

“Tomorrow,” said Ascalante abruptly, “I mean today, for it is dawn now, Brule the Spear-slayer, the king’s right-hand man, departs from Grondar along with Ka-nu the Pictish ambassador, the Pictish escort and a goodly number of the Red Slayers, the king’s bodyguard.”

“Yes,” said Volmana with some satisfaction. “That was your plan, Ascalante, but I accomplished it. I have kin high in the counsel of Grondar and it was a simple matter to indirectly persuade the king of Grondar to request the presence of Ka-nu. And of course, as Kull honors Ka-nu above all others, he must have a sufficient escort.”

The outlaw nodded.

“Good. I have at last managed, through Gromel, to corrupt an officer of the Red Guard. This man will march his men away from the royal bedroom tonight just before midnight, on a pretext of investigating some suspicious noise or the like. The various sentries will have been disposed of. We will be waiting, we five, and sixteen desperate rogues of mine who I have summoned from the hills and who now hide in various parts of the city. Twenty-one against one —”

He laughed. Gromel nodded, Volmana grinned, Kaanuub turned pale; Ridondo smote his hands together and cried out ringingly:

“By Valka, they will remember this night, who strike the golden strings! The fall of the tyrant, the death of the despot — what songs I shall make!”

His eyes burned with a wild fanatical light and the others regarded him dubiously, all save Ascalante who bent his head to hide a grin. Then the outlaw rose suddenly.

“Enough! Get back to your places and not by word, deed or look do you betray what is in your minds.” He hesitated, eyeing Kaanuub.

“Baron, your white face will betray you. If Kull comes to you and looks into your eyes with those icy grey eyes of his, you will collapse. Get you out to your country estate and wait until we send for you. Four are enough.”

Kaanuub almost collapsed then, from a reaction of joy; he left babbling incoherencies. The rest nodded to the outlaw and departed.

Ascalante stretched himself like a great cat and grinned. He called for a slave and one came, a somber evil-looking fellow whose shoulders bore the scars of the brand that marks thieves.

“Tomorrow,” quoth Ascalante, taking the cup offered him, “I come into the open and let the people of Valusia feast their eyes upon me. For months now, ever since the Rebel Four summoned me from my mountains, I have been cooped in like a rat — living in the very heart of my enemies, hiding away from the light in the daytime, skulking masked through dark alleys and darker corridors at night. Yet I have accomplished what those rebellious lords could not. Working through them and through other agents, many of whom have never seen my face, I have honeycombed the empire with discontent and corruption. I have bribed and subverted officials, spread sedition among the people — in short, I, working in the shadows, have paved the downfall of the king who at the moment sits throned in the sun. Ah, my friend, I had almost forgotten that I was a statesman before I was an outlaw, until Kaanuub and Volmana sent for me.”

“You work with strange comrades,” said the slave.

“Weak men, but strong in their ways,” lazily answered the outlaw. “Volmana — a shrewd man, bold, audacious, with kin in high places — but poverty-stricken, and his barren estates loaded with debts. Gromel — a ferocious beast, strong and brave as a lion, with considerable influence among the soldiers, but otherwise useless — lacking the

necessary brains. Kaanuub, cunning in his low way and full of petty intrigue, but otherwise a fool and a coward — avaricious but possessed of immense wealth, which has been essential in my schemes. Ridondo, a mad poet, full of hare-brained schemes — brave but flighty. A prime favorite with the people because of his songs which tear out their heart-strings. He is our best bid for popularity, once we have achieved our design. I am the power that has welded these men, useless without me.”

“Who mounts the throne, then?”

“Kaanuub, of course — or so he thinks! He has a trace of royal blood in him — the old dynasty, the blood of that king whom Kull killed with his bare hands. A bad mistake of the present king. He knows there are men who still boast descent from the old dynasty but he lets them live. So Kaanuub plots for the throne. Volmana wishes to be reinstated in favor, as he was under the old regime, so that he may lift his estate and title to their former grandeur. Gromel hates Kelka, commander of the Red Slayers, and thinks he should have that position. He wishes to be commander of all Valusia’s armies. As to Ridondo — bah! I despise the man and admire him at the same time. He is your true idealist. He sees in Kull, an outlander and a barbarian, merely a rough-footed, red-handed savage who has come out of the sea to invade a peaceful and pleasant land. He already idolizes the king Kull slew, forgetting the rogue’s vile nature. He forgets the inhumanities under which the land groaned during his reign, and he is making the people forget. Already they sing ‘The Lament for the King’ in which Ridondo lauds the saintly villain and vilifies Kull as ‘that black-hearted savage’ — Kull laughs at these songs and indulges Ridondo, but at the same time wonders why the people are turning against him.”

“But why does Ridondo hate Kull?”

“Because he is a poet, and poets always hate those in power, and turn to dead ages for relief in dreams. Ridondo is a flaming torch of idealism and he sees himself as a hero, a stainless knight, which he is, rising to overthrow the tyrant.”

“And you?”

Ascalante laughed and drained the goblet. “I have ideas of my own. Poets are dangerous things, because they believe what they sing — at the time. Well, I believe what I think. And I think Kaanuub will not hold the throne-seat overlong. A few months ago I had lost all ambitions save to waste the villages and the caravans as long as I lived. Now, well — now we shall see.”

2.

“*Then I was The Liberator — Now —*”

A room strangely barren in contrast to the rich tapestries on the walls and the deep carpets on the floor. A small writing table, behind which sat a man. This man would have stood out in a crowd of a million. It was not so much because of his unusual size, his height and great shoulders, though these features lent to the general effect. But his face, dark and immobile, held the gaze and his narrow grey eyes beat down the wills of the onlookers by their icy magnetism. Each movement he made, no matter how slight, betokened steel-spring muscles and brain knit to those muscles with perfect coordination. There was nothing deliberate or measured about his motions — either he was perfectly at rest — still as a bronze statue, or else he was in motion, with that cat-like quickness which blurred the sight that tried to follow his movements. Now this man rested his chin on his fists, his elbows on the writing table, and gloomily eyed the man who stood before him.

This man was occupied in his own affairs at the moment, for he was tightening the laces of his breast-plate. Moreover he was abstractedly whistling — a strange and unconventional performance, considering that he was in the presence of a king.

“Brule,” said the king, “this matter of statecraft wearies me as all the fighting I have done never did.”

“A part of the game, Kull,” answered Brule. “You are king — you must play the part.”

“I wish that I might ride with you to Grondar,” said Kull enviously. “It seems ages since I had a horse between my knees — but Tu says that affairs at home require my presence. Curse him!

“Months and months ago,” he continued with increasing gloom, getting no answer and speaking with freedom, “I overthrew the old dynasty and seized the throne of Valusia — of which I had dreamed ever since I was a boy in the land of my tribesmen. That was easy. Looking back now, over the long hard path I followed, all those days of toil, slaughter and tribulation seem like so many dreams. From a wild tribesman in Atlantis, I rose, passing through the galleys of Lemuria — a slave for two years at the oars — then an outlaw in the hills of Valusia — then a captive in her dungeons — a gladiator in her arenas — a soldier in her armies — a commander — a king!

“The trouble with me, Brule, I did not dream far enough. I always visualized merely the seizing of the throne — I did not look beyond. When king Borna lay dead beneath my feet, and I tore the crown from his gory head, I had reached the ultimate border of my dreams. From there, it has been a maze of illusions and mistakes. I prepared myself to seize the throne — not to hold it.

“When I overthrew Borna, *then* people hailed me wildly — *then* I was the Liberator — *now* they mutter and stare blackly behind my

back — they spit at my shadow when they think I am not looking. They have put a statue of Borna, that dead swine, in the Temple of the Serpent and people go and wail before him, hailing him as a saintly monarch who was done to death by a red-handed barbarian. When I led her armies to victory as a soldier, Valusia overlooked the fact that I was a foreigner — now she cannot forgive me.

“And now, in the Temple of the Serpent, there come to burn incense to Borna’s memory, men whom his executioners blinded and maimed, fathers whose sons died in his dungeons, husbands whose wives were dragged into his seraglio — Bah! Men are all fools.”

“Ridondo is largely responsible,” answered the Pict, drawing his sword belt up another notch. “He sings songs that make men mad. Hang him in his jester’s garb to the highest tower in the city. Let him make rhymes for the vultures.”

Kull shook his lion head. “No, Brule, he is beyond my reach. A great poet is greater than any king. He hates me, yet I would have his friendship. His songs are mightier than my sceptre, for time and again he has near torn the heart from my breast when he chose to sing for me. I will die and be forgotten, his songs will live forever.”

The Pict shrugged his shoulders. “As you like; you are still king, and the people cannot dislodge you. The Red Slayers are yours to a man, and you have all Pictland behind you. We are barbarians, together, even if we have spent most of our lives in this land. I go, now. You have naught to fear save an attempt at assassination, which is no fear at all, considering the fact that you are guarded night and day by a squad of the Red Slayers.”

Kull lifted his hand in a gesture of farewell and the Pict clanked out the room.

Now another man wished his attention, reminding Kull that a king's time was never his own.

This man was a young noble of the city, one Seno val Dor. This famous young swordsman and reprobate presented himself before the king with the plain evidence of much mental perturbation. His velvet cap was rumpled and as he dropped it to the floor when he kneeled, the plume drooped miserably. His gaudy clothing showed stains as if in his mental agony he had neglected his personal appearance for some time.

“King, lord king,” he said in tones of deep sincerity. “If the glorious record of my family means anything to your majesty, if my own fealty means anything, for Valka's sake, grant my request.”

“Name it.”

“Lord king, I love a maiden — without her I cannot live. Without me, she must die. I cannot eat, I cannot sleep for thinking of her. Her beauty haunts me day and night — the radiant vision of her divine loveliness —”

Kull moved restlessly. He had never been a lover.

“Then in Valka's name, marry her!”

“Ah,” cried the youth, “there's the rub. She is a slave, Ala by name, belonging to one Volmana, count of Karaban. It is on the black books of Valusian law that a noble cannot marry a slave. It has always been so. I have moved high heaven and get only the same reply. ‘Noble and slave can never wed.’ It is fearful. They tell me that never in the history of the empire before has a nobleman wanted to marry a slave! What is that to me? I appeal to you as a last resort!”

“Will not this Volmana sell her?”

“He would, but that would hardly alter the case. She would still be a slave and a man cannot marry his own slave. Only as a wife I want

her. Any other way would be hollow mockery. I want to show her to all the world, rigged out in the ermine and jewels of val Dor's wife! But it cannot be, unless you can help me. She was born a slave, of a hundred generations of slaves, and slave she will be as long as she lives and her children after her. And as such she cannot marry a freeman."

"Then go into slavery with her," suggested Kull, eyeing the youth narrowly.

"This I desired," answered Seno, so frankly that Kull instantly believed him. "I went to Volmana and said: 'You have a slave whom I love; I wish to wed her. Take me, then, as your slave so that I may be ever near her.' He refused with horror; he would sell me the girl, or give her to me but he would not consent to enslave me. And my father has sworn on the unbreakable oath to kill me if I should so degrade the name of val Dor as to go into slavery. No, lord king, only you can help us."

Kull summoned Tu and laid the case before him. Tu, chief councillor, shook his head. "It is written in the great iron-bound books, even as Seno has said. It has ever been the law, and it will always be the law. A noble may not mate with a slave."

"Why may I not change that law?" queried Kull.

Tu laid before him a tablet of stone whereon the law was engraved.

"For thousands of years this law has been — see, Kull, on the stone it was carved by the primal law makers, so many centuries ago a man might count all night and still not number them all. Neither you, nor any other king, may alter it."

Kull felt suddenly the sickening, weakening feeling of utter helplessness which had begun to assail him of late. Kingship was another form of slavery, it seemed to him — he had always won his way by carving a path through his enemies with his great sword — how could

he prevail against solicitous and respectful friends who bowed and flattered and were adamant against anything new, or any change — who barricaded themselves and their customs with traditions and antiquity and quietly defied him to change — anything?

“Go,” he said with a weary wave of his hand. “I am sorry. But I cannot help you.”

Seno val Dor wandered out of the room, a broken man, if hanging head and bent shoulders, dull eyes and dragging steps mean anything.

3.

“I Thought You a Human Tiger!”

A cool wind whispered through the green woodlands. A silver thread of a brook wound among great tree boles, whence hung large vines and gayly festooned creepers. A bird sang and the soft late summer sunlight was sifted through the interlocking branches to fall in gold and black velvet patterns of shade and light on the grass-covered earth. In the midst of this pastoral quietude, a little slave girl lay with her face between her soft white arms, and wept as if her little heart would break. The bird sang but she was deaf; the brook called her but she was dumb; the sun shone but she was blind — all the universe was a black void in which only pain and tears were real.

So she did not hear the light footfall nor see the tall broad-shouldered man who came out of the bushes and stood above her. She was not aware of his presence until he knelt and lifted her, wiping her eyes with hands as gentle as a woman’s.

The little slave girl looked into a dark immobile face, with cold narrow grey eyes which just now were strangely soft. She knew this man was not a Valusian from his appearance, and in these troublous times

it was not a good thing for little slave girls to be caught in the lonely woods by strangers, especially foreigners, but she was too miserable to be afraid and besides the man looked kind.

“What’s the matter, child?” he asked and because a woman in extreme grief is likely to pour her sorrows out to anyone who shows interest and sympathy she whimpered: “Oh, sir, I am a miserable girl! I love a young nobleman —”

“Seno val Dor?”

“Yes, sir.” She glanced at him in surprize. “How did you know? He wishes to marry me and today having striven in vain elsewhere for permission, he went to the king himself. But the king refused to aid him.”

A shadow crossed the stranger’s dark face. “Did Seno say the king refused?”

“No — the king summoned the chief councillor and argued with him awhile, but gave in. Oh,” she sobbed, “I knew it would be useless! The laws of Valusia are unalterable! No matter how cruel or unjust! They are greater than the king.”

The girl felt the muscles of the arms supporting her swell and harden into great iron cables. Across the stranger’s face passed a bleak and hopeless expression.

“Aye,” he muttered, half to himself, “the laws of Valusia are greater than the king.”

Telling her troubles had helped her a little and she dried her eyes. Little slave girls are used to troubles and to suffering, though this one had been unusually kindly used all her life.

“Does Seno hate the king?” asked the stranger.

She shook her head. “He realizes the king is helpless.”

“And you?”

“And I what?”

“Do you hate the king?”

Her eyes flared — shocked. “I! Oh sir, who am I, to hate the king? Why, why, I never thought of such a thing.”

“I am glad,” said the man heavily. “After all, little one, the king is only a slave like yourself, locked with heavier chains.”

“Poor man,” she said, pityingly though not exactly understanding, then she flamed into wrath. “But I do hate the cruel laws which the people follow! Why should laws not change? Time never stands still! Why should people today be shackled by laws which were made for our barbarian ancestors thousands of years ago —” she stopped suddenly and looked fearfully about.

“Don’t tell,” she whispered, laying her head in an appealing manner on her companion’s iron shoulder. “It is not fit that a woman, and a slave girl at that, should so unashamedly express herself on such public matters. I will be spanked if my mistress or my master hears of it!”

The big man smiled. “Be at ease, child. The king himself would not be offended at your sentiments; indeed I believe that he agrees with you.”

“Have you seen the king?” she asked, her childish curiosity overcoming her misery for the moment.

“Often.”

“And is he eight feet tall,” she asked eagerly, “and has he horns under his crown, as the common people say?”

“Scarcely,” he laughed. “He lacks nearly two feet of answering your description as regards height; as for size he might be my twin brother. There is not an inch difference in us.”

“Is he as kind as you?”

“At times; when he is not goaded to frenzy by a statecraft which he

cannot understand and by the vagaries of a people which can never understand him.”

“Is he in truth a barbarian?”

“In very truth; he was born and spent his early boyhood among the heathen barbarians who inhabit the land of Atlantis. He dreamed a dream and fulfilled it. Because he was a great fighter and a savage swordsman, because he was crafty in actual battle, because the barbarian mercenaries in Valusian armies loved him, he became king. Because he is a warrior and not a politician, because his swordsmanship helps him now not at all, his throne is rocking beneath him.”

“And he is very unhappy.”

“Not all the time,” smiled the big man. “Sometimes when he slips away alone and takes a few hours holiday by himself among the woods, he is almost happy. Especially when he meets a pretty girl like —”

The girl cried out in sudden terror, slipping to her knees before him: “Oh, sire, sire, have mercy! I did not know — you are the king!”

“Don’t be afraid.” Kull knelt beside her again and put an arm about her, feeling her trembling from head to foot. “You said I was kind —”

“And so you are, sire,” she whispered weakly. “I — I thought you were a human tiger, from what men said, but you are kind and tender — b-but — you are k-king and I —”

Suddenly in a very agony of confusion and embarrassment, she sprang up and fled, vanishing instantly. The overcoming realization that the king, whom she had only dreamed of seeing at a distance some day, was actually the man to whom she had told her pitiful woes, overcame her and filled her with an abasement and embarrassment which was an almost physical terror.

Kull sighed and rose. The affairs of the palace were calling him back and he must return and wrestle with problems concerning the

nature of which he had only the vaguest idea and concerning the solving of which he had no idea at all.

4.

“Who Dies First?”

Through the utter silence which shrouded the corridors and halls of the palace, twenty figures stole. Their stealthy feet, cased in soft leather shoes, made no sound either on thick carpet or bare marble tile. The torches which stood in niches along the halls gleamed redly on bared dagger, broad sword-blade and keen-edged axe.

“Easy, easy all!” hissed Ascalante, halting for a moment to glance back at his followers. “Stop that cursed loud breathing, whoever it is! The officer of the night guard has removed all the guards from these halls, either by direct order or by making them drunk, but we must be careful. Lucky it is for us that those cursed Picts — the lean wolves — are either revelling at the consulate or riding to Grondar. Hist! back — here come the guard!”

They crowded back behind a huge pillar which might have hidden a whole regiment of men, and waited. Almost immediately ten men swung by; tall brawny men, in red armor, who looked like iron statues. They were heavily armed and the faces of some showed a slight uncertainty. The officer who led them was rather pale. His face was set in hard lines and he lifted a hand to wipe sweat from his brow as the guard passed the pillar where the assassins hid. He was young and this betraying of a king came not easy to him.

They clanked by and passed on up the corridor.

“Good!” chuckled Ascalante. “He did as I bid; Kull sleeps un-

guarded! Haste, we have work to do! If they catch us killing him, we are undone, but a dead king is easy to make a mere memory. Haste!”

“Aye haste!” cried Ridondo.

They hurried down the corridor with reckless speed and stopped before a door.

“Here!” snapped Ascalante. “Gromel — break me open this door!”

The giant launched his mighty weight against the panel. Again — this time there was a rending of bolts, a crash of wood and the door staggered and burst inward.

“In!” shouted Ascalante, on fire with the spirit of murder.

“In!” roared Ridondo. “Death to the tyrant —”

They halted short — Kull faced them — not a naked Kull, roused out of deep sleep, mazed and unarmed to be butchered like a sheep, but a Kull wakeful and ferocious, partly clad in the armor of a Red Slayer, with a long sword in his hand.

Kull had risen quietly a few minutes before, unable to sleep. He had intended to ask the officer of the guard into his room to converse with him awhile, but on looking through the spy-hole of the door, had seen him leading his men off. To the suspicious brain of the barbarian king had leaped the assumption that he was being betrayed. He never thought of calling the men back, because they were supposedly in the plot too. There was no good reason for this desertion. So Kull had quietly and quickly donned the armor he kept at hand, nor had he completed this act when Gromel first hurtled against the door.

For a moment the tableau held — the four rebel noblemen at the door and the ten wild desperate outlaws crowding close behind them — held at bay by the terrible-eyed silent giant who stood in the middle of the royal bedroom, sword at the ready.

Then Ascalante shouted: "In! And slay him! He is one to twenty and he has no helmet!"

True; there had been lack of time to put on the helmet, nor was there now time to snatch the great shield from where it hung on the wall. Be that as it may, Kull was better protected than any of the assassins except Gromel and Volmana who were in full armor, with their vizors closed.

With a yell that rang to the roof, the killers flooded into the room. First of all was Gromel. He came in like a charging bull, head down, sword low for the disembowelling thrust. And Kull sprang to meet him like a tiger charging a bull, and all the king's weight and mighty strength went into the arm that swung the sword. In a whistling arc the great blade flashed through the air to crash down on the commander's helmet. Blade and helmet clashed and flew to pieces together and Gromel rolled lifeless on the floor, while Kull bounded back, gripping the bladeless hilt.

"Gromel!" he snarled as the shattered helmet disclosed the shattered head, then the rest of the pack were upon him. He felt a dagger-point rake along his ribs and flung the wielder aside with a swing of his great left arm. He smashed his broken hilt square between another's eyes and dropped him senseless and bleeding to the floor.

"Watch the door, four of you!" screamed Ascalante, dancing about the edge of that whirlpool of singing steel, for he feared Kull, with his great weight and speed, might smash through their midst and escape. Four rogues drew back and ranged themselves before the single door. And in that instant Kull leaped to the wall and tore therefrom an ancient battle axe which had hung there for possibly a hundred years.

Back to the wall he faced them for a moment, then leaped among them. No defensive fighter was Kull! He always carried the fight to

the enemy. A sweep of the axe dropped an outlaw to the floor with a severed shoulder — the terrible back-hand stroke crushed the skull of another. A sword shattered against his breast-plate — else he had died. His concern was to protect his uncovered head and the spaces between breast plate and back plate — for Valusian armor was intricate and he had had no time to fully arm himself. Already he was bleeding from wounds on the cheek and the arms and legs, but so swift and deadly he was, and so much the fighter that even with the odds so greatly on their side, the assassins hesitated to leave an opening. Moreover their own numbers hampered them.

For one moment they crowded him savagely, raining blows, then they gave back and ringed him, thrusting and parrying — a couple of corpses on the floor gave mute evidence of the unwisdom of their first plan.

“Knaves!” screamed Ridondo in a rage, flinging off his slouch cap, his wild eyes glaring. “Do ye shrink from the combat? Shall the despot live? Out on it!”

He rushed in, thrusting viciously; but Kull, recognizing him, shattered his sword with a tremendous short chop and, with a push, sent him reeling back to sprawl on the floor. The king took in his left arm the sword of Ascalante and the outlaw only saved his life by ducking Kull’s axe and bounding backward. One of the hairy bandits dived at Kull’s legs hoping to bring him down in that manner, but after wrestling for a brief instant at what seemed a solid iron tower, he glanced up just in time to see the axe falling, but not in time to avoid it. In the interim one of his comrades had lifted a sword with both hands and hewed downward with such downright sincerity that he cut through Kull’s shoulder plate on the left side, and wounded the

shoulder beneath. In an instant the king's breast plate was full of blood.

Volmana, flinging the attackers to right and left in his savage impatience, came ploughing through and hacked savagely at Kull's unprotected head. Kull ducked and the sword whistled above, shaving off a lock of hair — ducking the blows of a dwarf like Volmana is difficult for a man of Kull's height.

Kull pivoted on his heel and struck from the side, as a wolf might leap, in a wide level arc — Volmana dropped with his whole left side caved in and the lungs gushing forth.

“Volmana!” Kull spoke the word rather breathlessly. “I'd know that dwarf in Hell —”

He straightened to defend himself from the maddened rush of Ridondo who charged in wild and wide open, armed only with a dagger. Kull leaped back, axe high.

“Ridondo!” his voice rang sharply. “Back! I would not harm you —”

“Die, tyrant!” screamed the mad minstrel, hurling himself headlong on the king. Kull delayed the blow he was loath to deliver until it was too late. Only when he felt the bite of steel in his unprotected side did he strike, in a frenzy of blind desperation.

Ridondo dropped with a shattered skull and Kull reeled back against the wall, blood spurting through the fingers which gripped his wounded side.

“In, now, and get him!” yelled Ascalante, preparing to lead the attack.

Kull placed his back to the wall and lifted his axe. He made a terrible and primordial picture. Legs braced far apart, head thrust forward, one red hand clutching at the wall for support, the other

gripping the axe on high, while the ferocious features were frozen in a death-snarl of hate, and the icy eyes blazed through the mist of blood which veiled them. The men hesitated; the tiger might be dying but he was still capable of dealing death.

“Who dies first?” snarled Kull through smashed and bloody lips.

Ascalante leaped as a wolf leaps — halted almost in mid-air with the unbelievable speed which characterized him, and fell prostrate to avoid the death that was hissing toward him in the form of a red axe. He frantically whirled his feet out of the way and rolled clear just as Kull recovered from his missed blow and struck again — this time the axe sank four inches into the polished wood floor close to Ascalante’s revolving legs.

Another desperado rushed at this instant, followed half-heartedly by his fellows. The first villain had figured on reaching Kull and killing him before he could get his axe out of the floor, but he miscalculated the king’s speed, or else he started his rush a second too late. At any rate the axe lurched up and crashed down and the rush halted abruptly as a reddened caricature of a man was catapulted back against their legs.

At that moment a hurried clanking of feet sounded down the hall and the rogues in the door raised a shout: “Soldiers coming!”

Ascalante cursed and his men deserted him like rats leaving a sinking ship. They rushed out into the hall — or limped, splattering blood — and down the corridor a hue and cry was raised, and pursuit started.

Save for the dead and dying men on the floor, Kull and Ascalante stood alone in the royal bed room. Kull’s knees were buckling and he leaned heavily against the wall, watching the outlaw with the eyes of a dying wolf.

“All seems to be lost, particularly honor,” he murmured. “However the king is dying on his feet — and —” whatever other cogitation might have passed through his mind is not known for at that moment he ran lightly at Kull just as the king was employing his axe arm to wipe the blood from his half-blind eyes. A man with a sword at the ready can thrust quicker than a wounded man out of position can strike with an axe that weighs his weary arm like lead.

But even as Ascalante began his thrust, Seno val Dor appeared at the door and flung something through the air which glittered, sang and ended its flight in Ascalante’s throat. The outlaw staggered, dropped his sword and sank to the floor at Kull’s feet, flooding them with the flow of a severed jugular — mute witness that Seno’s war-skill included knife-throwing as well. Kull looked down bewilderedly at the dead outlaw and Ascalante’s dead eyes stared back in seeming mockery, as if the owner still maintained the futility of kings and outlaws, of plots and counter-plots.

Then Seno was supporting the king, the room was flooded with men-at-arms in the uniform of the great val Dor family and Kull realized that a little slave girl was holding his other arm.

“Kull, Kull, are you dead?” val Dor’s face was very white.

“Not yet,” the king spoke huskily. “Staunch this wound in my left side — if I die ’twill be from it; ’tis deep but the rest are not mortal — Ridondo wrote me a deathly song there! Cram stuff into it for the present — I have work to do.”

They obeyed wonderingly and as the flow of blood ceased, Kull though literally bled white already, felt some slight access of strength. The palace was fully aroused now. Court ladies, lords, men-at-arms, councillors, all swarmed about the place babbling. The Red Slayers were gathering, wild with rage, ready for anything, jealous of the fact

that others had aided their king. Of the young officer who had commanded the door guard, he had slipped away in the darkness and neither then nor later was he in evidence, though earnestly sought after.

Kull, still keeping stubbornly to his feet, grasping his bloody axe with one hand and Seno's shoulder with another singled out Tu, who stood wringing his hands and ordered: "Bring me the tablet whereon is engraved the law concerning slaves."

"But lord king —"

"Do as I say!" howled Kull, lifting the axe and Tu scurried to obey.

As he waited and the court women flocked about him, dressing his wounds and trying gently but vainly to pry his iron fingers from about the bloody axe handle, Kull heard Seno's breathless tale.

"— Ala heard Kaanuub and Volmana plotting — she had stolen into a little nook to cry over her — our troubles, and Kaanuub came, on his way to his country estate. He was shaking with terror for fear plans might go awry and he made Volmana go over the plot with him again before he left, so he might know there was no flaw in it.

"He did not leave until it was late, and then Ala stole away and came to me. But it is a long way from Volmana's city house to the house of val Dor, a long way for a little girl to walk, and though I gathered my men and came instantly, we almost arrived too late."

Kull gripped his shoulder.

"I will not forget."

Tu entered with the law tablet, laying it reverently on the table.

Kull shouldered aside all who stood near him and stood up alone.

"Hear, people of Valusia," he exclaimed, upheld by the wild beast vitality which was his, fired from within by a strength which was more than physical. "I stand here — the king. I am wounded almost unto death, but I have survived mass wounds.

“Hear you! I am weary of this business! I am no king but a slave! I am hemmed in by laws, laws, laws! I cannot punish malefactors nor reward my friends because of law — custom — tradition! By Valka, I will be king in fact as well as in name!

“Here stand the two who have saved my life! Henceforward they are free to marry, to do as they like!”

Seno and Ala rushed into each others’ arms with a glad cry.

“But the law!” screamed Tu.

“I am the law!” roared Kull, swinging up his axe; it flashed downward and the stone tablet flew into a hundred pieces. The people clenched their hands in horror, waiting dumbly for the sky to fall.

Kull reeled back, eyes blazing. The room whirled to his dizzy gaze.

“I am king, state and law!” he roared, and seizing the wand-like sceptre which lay near, he broke it in two and flung it from him. “This shall be my sceptre!” The red axe was brandished aloft, splashing the pallid nobles with drops of blood. Kull gripped the slender crown with his left hand and placed his back against the wall. Only that support kept him from falling but in his arms was still the strength of lions.

“I am either king or corpse!” he roared, his corded muscles bulging, his terrible eyes blazing. “If you like not my kingship — come and take this crown!”

The corded left arm held out the crown, the right gripping the menacing axe above it.

“By this axe I rule! This is my sceptre! I have struggled and sweated to be the puppet king you wished me to be — to king it your way. Now I use mine own way! If you will not fight, you shall obey! Laws that are just shall stand; laws that have outlived their times I shall shatter as I shattered that one! *I am king!*”

Slowly the pale-faced noblemen and frightened women knelt, bow-

ing in fear and reverence to the blood-stained giant who towered above them with his eyes ablaze.

“I am king!”

THE CAT AND THE SKULL

King Kull went with Tu, chief councillor of the throne, to see the talking cat of Delcardes, for though a cat may look at a king, it is not given every king to look at a cat like Delcardes'. So Kull forgot the death-threat of Thulsa Doom the necromancer and went to Delcardes.

Kull was skeptical and Tu was wary and suspicious without knowing why, but years of counter-plot and intrigue had soured him. He swore testily that a talking cat was a snare and a fraud, a swindle and a delusion and maintained that should such a thing exist, it was a direct insult to the gods, who ordained that only man should enjoy the power of speech.

But Kull knew that in the old times beasts had talked to men for he had heard the legends, handed down from his barbarian ancestors. So he was skeptical but open to conviction.

Delcardes helped the conviction. She lounged with supple ease upon her silk couch, herself like a great beautiful feline, and looked at Kull from under long drooping lashes, which lended unimaginable charm to her narrow, piquantly slanted eyes.

Her lips were full and red and usually, as at present, curved in a faint enigmatical smile and her silken garments and ornaments of gold and gems hid little of her glorious figure.

But Kull was not interested in women. He ruled Valusia but for all that he was an Atlantean and a ferocious savage in the eyes of his subjects. War and conquest held his attention, together with keeping his feet on the ever rocking throne of the ancient empire, and the task

of learning the ways, customs and thoughts of the people he ruled — and the threats of Thulsa Doom.

To Kull, Delcardes was a mysterious and queenly figure, alluring, yet surrounded by a haze of ancient wisdom and womanly magic.

To Tu, chief councillor, she was a woman and therefore the latent base of intrigue and danger.

To Ka-nu, Pictish ambassador and Kull's closest adviser, she was an eager child, parading under the effect of her show-acting; but Ka-nu was not there when Kull came to see the talking cat.

The cat lolled on a silken cushion, on a couch of her own and surveyed the king with inscrutable eyes. Her name was Saremes and she had a slave who stood behind her, ready to do her bidding, a lanky man who kept the lower part of his face half concealed by a thin veil which fell to his chest.

“King Kull,” said Delcardes, “I crave a boon of you — before Saremes begins to speak — when I must be silent.”

“You may speak,” Kull answered. The girl smiled eagerly, and clasped her hands. “Let me marry Kulra Thoom of Zarfhaana!” Tu broke in as Kull was about to speak. “My lord, this matter has been thrashed out at lengths before! I thought there was some purpose in requesting this visit! This — this girl has a strain of royal blood in her and it is against the custom of Valusia that royal women should marry foreigners of lower rank.”

“But the king can rule otherwise,” pouted Delcardes.

“My lord,” said Tu, spreading his hands as one in the last stages of nervous irritation, “if she marries thus it is like to cause war and rebellion and discord for the next hundred years.”

He was about to plunge into a dissertation on rank, genealogy and history but Kull interrupted, his short stock of patience exhausted:

“Valka and Hotath! Am I an old woman or a priest to be bedevilled with such affairs? Settle it between yourselves and vex me no more with questions of mating! By Valka, in Atlantis men and women marry whom they please and none else.”

Delcardes pouted a little, made a face at Tu who scowled back, then smiled sunnily and turned on her couch with a lissome movement. “Talk to Saremes, Kull, she will grow jealous of me.” Kull eyed the cat uncertainly. Her fur was long, silky and grey, her eyes slanting and mysterious.

“She is very young, Kull, yet she is very old,” said Delcardes. “She is a cat of the Old Race who lived to be thousands of years old. Ask her her age, Kull.”

“How many years have you seen, Saremes?” asked Kull idly.

“Valusia was young when I was old,” the cat answered in a clear though curiously timbred voice. Kull started violently.

“Valka and Hotath!” he swore. “She talks!”

Delcardes laughed softly in pure enjoyment but the expression of the cat never altered.

“I talk, I think, I know, *I am*,” she said. “I have been the ally of queens and the councillor of kings ages before even the white beaches of Atlantis knew your feet, Kull of Valusia. I saw the ancestors of the Valusians ride out of the far east to trample down the Old Race and I was here when the Old Race came up out of the oceans so many eons ago that the mind of man reels when seeking to measure them. Older am I than Thulsa Doom, whom few men have ever seen.

“I have seen empires rise and kingdoms fall and kings ride in on their steeds and out on their shields. Aye, I have been a goddess in my time and strange were the neophytes who bowed before me and terrible were the rites which were performed in my worship to pleasure

me. For of old beings exalted my kind; beings as strange as their deeds.”

“Can you read the stars and foretell events?” Kull’s barbarian mind leaped at once to material ideas.

“Aye; the books of the past and the future are open to me and I tell man what is good for him to know.”

“Then tell me,” said Kull, “where I misplaced the secret letter from Ka-nu yesterday.”

“You thrust it into the bottom of your dagger scabbard and then instantly forgot it,” the cat replied.

Kull started, snatched out his dagger and shook the sheath. A thin strip of folded parchment tumbled out.

“Valka and Hotath!” he swore. “Saremes, you are a witch of cats! Mark ye, Tu!”

But Tu’s lips were pressed in a straight disapproving line and he eyed Delcardes darkly.

She returned his stare guilelessly and he turned to Kull in irritation.

“My lord, consider! This is all mummery of some sort.”

“Tu, none saw me hide that letter for I myself had forgotten.”

“Lord king, any spy might —”

“Spy? Be not a greater fool than you were born, Tu. Shall a cat set spies to watch me hide letters?”

Tu sighed. As he grew older it was becoming increasingly difficult to refrain from showing exasperation toward kings.

“My lord, give thought to the humans who may be behind the cat!”

“Lord Tu,” said Delcardes in a tone of gentle reproach, “you put me to shame and you offend Saremes.”

Kull felt vaguely angered at Tu.

“At least, Tu,” said he, “the cat talks; that you cannot deny.”

“There is some trickery,” Tu stubbornly maintained. “Man talks; beasts may not.”

“Not so,” said Kull, himself convinced of the reality of the talking cat and anxious to prove the rightness of his belief. “A lion talked to Kambra and birds have spoken to the old men of the sea-mountain tribes, telling them where game was hidden.

“None denies that beasts talk among themselves. Many a night have I lain on the slopes of the forest-covered hills or out on the grassy savannahs and have heard the tigers roaring to one another across the star-light. Then why should some beast not learn the speech of man? There have been times when I could almost understand the roaring of the tigers. The tiger is my totem and is tambu to me save in self defense,” he added irrelevantly.

Tu squirmed. This talk of totem and tambu was good enough in a savage chief, but to hear such remarks from the king of Valusia irked him extremely.

“My lord,” said he, “a cat is not a tiger.”

“Very true,” said Kull, “and this one is wiser than all tigers.”

“That is naught but truth,” said Saremes calmly. “Lord Chancellor, would you believe then, if I told you what was at this moment transpiring at the royal treasury?”

“No!” Tu snarled. “Clever spies may learn anything as I have found.”

“No man can be convinced when he will not,” said Saremes imperturbably, quoting a very old Valusian saying. “Yet know, lord Tu, that a surplus of twenty gold tals has been discovered and a courier is even now hastening through the streets to tell you of it. Ah,” as a step sounded in the corridor without, “even now he comes.”

A slim courtier, clad in the gay garments of the royal treasury,

entered, bowing deeply, and craved permission to speak. Kull having granted it, he said:

“Mighty king and lord Tu, a surplus of twenty tals of gold has been found in the royal monies.”

Delcardes laughed and clapped her hands delightedly but Tu merely scowled.

“When was this discovered?”

“A scant half hour ago.”

“How many have been told of it?”

“None, my lord. Only I and the Royal Treasurer have known until just now when I told you, my lord.”

“Humph!” Tu waved him aside sourly. “Begone. I will see about this matter later.”

“Delcardes,” said Kull, “this cat is yours, is she not?”

“Lord king,” answered the girl, “no one owns Saremes. She only bestows on me the honor of her presence; she is a guest. As for the rest she is her own mistress and has been for a thousand years.”

“I would that I might keep her in the palace,” said Kull.

“Saremes,” said Delcardes deferentially, “the king would have you as his guest.”

“I will go with the king of Valusia,” said the cat with dignity, “and remain in the royal palace until such time as it shall please me to go elsewhere. For I am a great traveller, Kull, and it pleases me at times to go out over the world-path and walk the streets of cities where in ages gone I have roamed forests, and to tread the sands of deserts where long ago I trod imperial streets.”

So Saremes the talking cat came to the royal palace of Valusia. Her slave accompanied her and she was given a spacious chamber, lined with fine couches and silken pillows. The best viands of the royal table

were placed before her daily and all the household of the king did homage to her except Tu who grumbled to see a cat exalted, even a talking cat. Saremes treated him with amused contempt but admitted Kull into a level of dignified equality.

She quite often came into his throne chamber, borne on a silken cushion by her slave who must always accompany her, no matter where she went.

At other times Kull came into her chamber and they talked into the dim hours of dawn and many were the tales she told him and ancient the wisdom that she imparted. Kull listened with interest and attention for it was evident that this cat was wiser far than many of his councillors, and had gained more antique wisdom than all of them together. Her words were pithy and oracular and she refused to prophesy beyond minor affairs taking place in the everyday life of the palace and kingdom, save that she warned him against Thulsa Doom who had sent a threat to Kull.

“For,” said she, “I who have lived more years than you shall live minutes, know that man is better without knowledge of things to come, for what is to be will be, and man can neither avert not hasten. It is better to go in the dark when the road must pass a lion and there is no other road.”

“Yet,” said Kull, “if what must be is to be — a thing which I doubt — and a man be told what things shall come to pass and his arm weakened or strengthened thereby, then was not that too, fore-ordained?”

“If he was ordained to be told,” said Saremes, adding to Kull’s perplexity and doubt. “However, not all of life’s roads are set fast, for a man may do this or a man may do that and not even the gods know the mind of a man.”

“Then,” said Kull dubiously, “all things are not destined, if there be more than one road for a man to follow. And how can events then be prophesied truly?”

“Life has many roads, Kull,” answered Saremes. “I stand at the crossroads of the world and I know what lies down each road. Still, not even the gods know what road a man will take, whether the right hand or the left hand, when he comes to the dividing of the ways, and once started upon a road he cannot retrace his steps.”

“Then, in Valka’s name,” said Kull, “why not point out to me the perils or the advantages of each road as it comes and aid me in choosing?”

“Because there are bounds set upon the powers of such as I,” the cat replied, “lest we hinder the workings of the alchemy of the gods. We may not brush the veil entirely aside for human eyes, lest the gods take our power from us and lest we do harm to man. For though there are many roads at each crossroads, still a man must take one of those and sometimes one is no better than another. So Hope flickers her lamp along one road and man follows, though that road may be the foulest of all.”

Then she continued, seeing Kull found it difficult to understand.

“You see, lord king, that our powers must have limits, else we might grow too powerful and threaten the gods. So a mystic spell is laid upon us and while we may open the books of the past, we may but grant flying glances of the future, through the mist that veils it.”

Kull felt somehow that the argument of Saremes was rather flimsy and illogical, smacking of witch-craft and mummerly, but with Saremes’ cold, oblique eyes gazing unwinkingly at him, he was not prone to offer any objections, even had he thought of any.

“Now,” said the cat, “I will draw aside the veil for an instant to your own good — let Delcardes marry Kulra Thoom.”

Kull rose with an impatient twitch of his mighty shoulders.

“I will have naught to do with a woman’s mating. Let Tu attend to it.”

Yet Kull slept on the thought and as Saremes wove the advice craftily into her philosophizing and moralizing in days to come, Kull weakened.

A strange sight it was, indeed, to see Kull, his chin resting on his great fist, leaning forward and drinking in the distinct intonations of the cat Saremes as she lay curled on her silken cushion, or stretched languidly at full length — as she talked of mysterious and fascinating subjects, her eyes glinting strangely and her lips scarcely moving, or not at all, while the slave Kuthulos stood behind her like a statue, motionless and speechless.

Kull highly valued her opinions and he was prone to ask her advice — which she gave warily or not at all — on matters of state. Still, Kull found that what she advised usually coincided with his private wishes and he began to wonder if she were not a mind reader also.

Kuthulos irked him with his gauntness, his motionlessness and his silence but Saremes would have none other to attend her. Kull strove to pierce the veil that masked the man’s features, but though it seemed thin enough, he could tell nothing of the face beneath and out of courtesy to Saremes, never asked Kuthulos to unveil.

Kull came to the chamber of Saremes one day and she looked at him with enigmatical eyes. The masked slave stood statue-like behind her.

“Kull,” said she, “again I will tear the veil for you; Brule, the Pictish

Spear-slayer, warrior of Ka-nu and your friend, has just been haled beneath the surface of the Forbidden Lake by a grisly monster.”

Kull sprang up, cursing in rage and alarm.

“Ha, Brule? Valka’s name, what was he doing about the Forbidden Lake?”

“He was swimming there. Hasten, you may yet save him, even though he be borne to the Enchanted Land which lies below the Lake.”

Kull whirled toward the door. He was startled but not so much as he would have been had the swimmer been someone else, for he knew the reckless irreverence of the Pict, chief among Valusia’s most powerful allies.

He started to shout for guards when Saremes’ voice stayed him:

“Nay, my lord. You had best go alone. Not even your command might make men accompany you into the waters of that grim lake and by the custom of Valusia, it is death for any man to enter there save the king.”

“Aye, I will go alone,” said Kull, “and thus save Brule from the anger of the people, should he chance to escape the monsters; inform Ka-nu!”

Kull, discouraging respectful inquiries with wordless snarls, mounted his great stallion and rode out of Valusia at full speed. He rode alone and he ordered none to follow him. That which he had to do, he could do alone, and he did not wish anyone to see when he brought Brule or Brule’s corpse out of the Forbidden Lake. He cursed the reckless inconsideration of the Pict and he cursed the tambu which hung over the Lake, the violation of which might cause rebellion among the Valusians.

Twilight was stealing down from the mountains of Zalgara when

Kull halted his horse on the shores of the lake that lay amid a great lonely forest. There was certainly nothing forbidding in its appearance, for its waters spread blue and placid from beach to wide white beach and the tiny islands rising above its bosom seemed like gems of emerald and jade. A faint shimmering mist rose from it, enhancing the air of lazy unreality which lay about the regions of the lake. Kull listened intently for a moment and it seemed to him as though faint and far away music breathed up through the sapphire waters.

He cursed impatiently, wondering if he were beginning to be bewitched, and flung aside all garments and ornaments except his girdle, loin clout and sword. He waded out into the shimmery blueness until it lapped his thighs, then knowing that the depth swiftly increased, he drew a deep breath and dived.

As he swam down through the sapphire glimmer, he had time to reflect that this was probably a fool's errand. He might have taken time to find from Saremes just where Brule had been swimming when attacked and whether he was destined to rescue the warrior or not. Still, he thought that the cat might not have told him, and even if she had assured him of failure, he would have attempted what he was now doing, anyway. So there was truth in Saremes' saying that men were better untold then.

As for the location of the lake-battle, the monster might have dragged Brule anywhere. He intended to explore the lake bed until —

Even as he ruminated thus, a shadow flashed by him, a vague shimmer in the jade and sapphire shimmer of the lake. He was aware that other shadows swept by him on all sides, but he could not make out their form.

Far beneath him he began to see the glimmer of the lake bottom which seemed to glow with a strange radiance. Now the shadows were

all about him; they wove a serpentine about and in front of him, an ever-changing thousand-hued glittering web of color. The water here burned topaz and the things wavered and scintillated in its faery splendor. Like the shades and shadows of colors they were, vague and unreal, yet opaque and gleaming.

However, Kull, deciding that they had no intention of attacking him, gave them no more attention but directed his gaze on the lake floor, which his feet just then struck, lightly. He started, and could have sworn that he had landed on a living creature for he felt a rhythmic movement beneath his bare feet. The faint glow was evident there at the bottom of the lake — as far as he could see stretching away on all sides until it faded into the lambent sapphire shadows, the lake floor was one solid level of fire, that faded and glowed with unceasing regularity. Kull bent closer — the floor was covered by a sort of short moss-like substance which shone like white flame. It was as if the lake bed were covered with myriads of fire-flies which raised and lowered their wings together. And this moss throbbed beneath his feet like a living thing.

Now Kull began to swim upward again. Raised among the sea-mountains of ocean-girt Atlantis, he was like a sea-creature himself. As much at home in the water as any Lemurian, he could remain under the surface twice as long as the ordinary swimmer, but this lake was deep and he wished to conserve his strength.

He came to the top, filled his enormous chest with air and dived again. Again the shadows swept about him, almost dazzling his eyes with their ghostly gleams. He swam faster this time and having reached the bottom, he began to walk along it, as fast as the clinging substance about his limbs would allow, the while the fire-moss breathed and glowed and the color things flashed about him and monstrous, night-

mare shadows fell across his shoulder upon the burning floor, flung by unseen beings.

The moss was littered by the skulls and the bones of men who had dared the Forbidden Lake and suddenly with a silent swirl of the waters, a thing rushed upon Kull. At first the king thought it to be a huge octopus for the body was that of an octopus, with long waving tentacles, but as it charged upon him he saw it had legs like a man and a hideous semi-human face leered at him from among the writhing snaky arms of the monster.

Kull braced his feet and as he felt the cruel tentacles whip about his limbs, he thrust his sword with cool accuracy into the midst of that demoniac face and the creature lumbered down and died at his feet with grisly soundless gibbering. Blood spread like a mist about him and Kull thrust strongly against the floor with his legs and shot upward.

He burst into the fast fading light and even as he did a great form came skimming across the water toward him — a water spider, but this one was larger than a horse and its great cold eyes gleamed hellishly. Kull, keeping himself afloat with his feet and one hand, raised his sword and as the spider rushed in, he cleft it half way through the body and it sank silently.

A slight noise made him turn and another, larger than the first was almost upon him. This one flung over the king's arms and shoulders great strands of clinging web that would have meant doom for any but a giant. But Kull burst the grim shackles as if they had been strings and seizing a leg of the thing as it towered above him, he thrust the monster through again and again till it weakened in his grasp and floated away, reddening the blue waters.

“Valka!” muttered the king, “I am not like to go without employ-

ment here. Yet these things be easy to slay — how could they have overcome Brule, who in all the Seven Kingdoms is second only to me in battle-might?”

But Kull was to find that grimmer spectres than these haunted the death-ridden abysses of Forbidden Lake. Again he dived and this time only the color-shadows and the bones of forgotten men met his glance. Again he rose for air and for the fourth time he dived.

He was not far from one of the islands and as he swam downward he wondered what strange things were hidden by the dense emerald foliage which cloaked these islands. Legend said that temples and shrines reared there that were never built by human hands and that on certain nights the lake beings came out of the deeps to enact eery rites there.

The rush came just as his feet struck the moss. It came from behind and Kull, warned by some primal instinct, whirled just in time to see a great form loom over him, a form neither man nor beast but horribly compounded of both — to feel gigantic fingers close on arm and shoulder.

He struggled savagely but the thing held his sword arm helpless and its talons sank deeply into his left forearm. With a volcanic wrench he twisted about so that he could at least see his attacker. The thing was something like a monstrous shark but a long cruel horn curved like a saber jutted up from its snout and it had four arms, human in shape but inhuman in size and strength and in the crooked talons of the fingers.

With two arms the monster held Kull helpless and with the other two it bent his head back, to break his spine. But not even such a grim being as this might so easily conquer Kull of Atlantis. A wild rage surged up in him and the king of Valusia went berserk.

Bracing his feet against the yielding moss, he tore his left arm free with a heave and wrench of his great shoulders. With cat-like speed he sought to shift the sword from right hand to left, and failing in this, struck savagely at the monster with clenched fist. But the mocking sapphorean stuff about him foiled him, breaking the force of his blow. The shark-man lowered his snout but before he could strike upward Kull gripped the horn with his left hand and held fast.

Then followed a test of might and endurance. Kull, unable to move with any speed in the water, knew his only hope was to keep in close and wrestle with his foe in such manner as to counterbalance the monster's quickness. He strove desperately to tear his sword arm loose and the shark-man was forced to grasp it with all four of his hands. Kull gripped the horn and dared not let go lest he be disembowelled with its terrible upward thrust, and the shark-man dared not release with a single hand the arm that held Kull's long sword.

So they wrenched and wrestled and Kull saw that he was doomed if it went on in this manner. Already he was beginning to suffer for want of air. The gleam in the cold eyes of the shark-man told that he too recognized the fact that he had but to hold Kull below the surface until he drowned.

A desperate plight indeed, for any man. But Kull of Atlantis was no ordinary man. Trained from babyhood in a hard and bloody school, with steel muscles and dauntless brain bound together by the coordination that makes the superfighter, he added to this a courage which never faltered and a tigerish rage which on occasion swept him up to superhuman deeds.

So now, conscious of his swiftly approaching doom and goaded to frenzy by his helplessness, he decided upon action as desperate as his need. He released the monster's horn, at the same time bending his

body as far back as he could and gripping the nearest arm of the thing with the free hand.

Instantly the shark-man struck, his horn ploughing along Kull's thigh and then — the luck of Atlantis! — wedging fast in Kull's heavy girdle. And as he tore it free, Kull sent his mighty strength through the fingers that held the monster's arm, and crushed clammy flesh and inhuman bone like rotten fruit between them.

The shark-man's mouth gaped silently with the torment and he struck again wildly. Kull avoided the blow and losing their balance they went down together, half-buoyed by the jade surge in which they wallowed. And as they tossed there, Kull tore his sword arm from the weakening grip and striking upward, split the monster open.

The whole battle had consumed only a very brief time but to Kull, as he swam upward, his head singing and a great weight seeming to press his ribs, it seemed like hours. He saw dimly that the lake floor shelved suddenly upward close at hand and knew that it sloped to an island, the water became alive about him and he felt himself lapped from shoulder to heel in gigantic coils which even steel muscles could not break. His consciousness was fading — he felt himself borne along at terrific speed — there was a sound as of many bells — then suddenly he was above water and his tortured lungs were drinking in great draughts of air. He was whirling along through utter darkness and he had time only to take a long breath before he was again swept under.

Again light glowed about him and he saw the fire-moss throbbing far below. He was in the grasp of a great serpent who had flung a few lengths of sinuous body about him like huge cables and was now bearing him to what destination Valka alone knew.

Kull did not struggle, reserving his strength. If the snake did not keep him so long under water that he died, there would no doubt be a

chance of battle in the creature's lair or wherever he was being taken. As it was, Kull's limbs were pinioned so close that he could no more free an arm than he could have flown.

The serpent, racing through the blue deeps so swiftly, was the largest Kull had ever seen — a good two hundred feet of jade and golden scales — vividly and wonderfully colored. Its eyes, when they turned toward Kull, were like icy fire if such a thing can be. Even then Kull's imaginative soul was struck with the bizarreness of the scene; that great green and gold form flying through the burning topaz of the lake, while the shadow-colors weaved dazzlingly about it.

The fire-gemmed floor sloped upward again — either for an island or the lake shore — and a great cavern suddenly appeared before them. The snake glided into this — the fire-moss ceased and Kull found himself partly above the surface in unlighted darkness. He was borne along in this manner for what seemed a very long time, then the monster dived again.

Again they came up into light, but such light as Kull had never before seen. A luminous glow shimmered duskiy over the face of the waters which lay dark and still. And Kull knew that he was in the Enchanted Domain under the bottom of Forbidden Lake for this was no earthly radiance; it was a black light, blacker than any darkness, yet it lit the unholy waters so that he could see the dusky glimmer of them and his own dark reflection in them. The coils suddenly loosed from his limbs and he struck out for a vast bulk that loomed in the shadows in front of him.

Swimming strongly he approached, and saw that it was a great city. On a great level of black stone, it towered up and up until its sombre spires were lost in the blackness above the unhallowed light, which, black also, was yet of a different hue. Huge square-built massive build-

ings of mighty basaltic-like blocks fronted him as he clambered out of the clammy waters and strode up the steps which were cut into the stone, like steps in a wharf, and between the buildings columns rose gigantically

No gleam of earthly light lessened the grimness of this inhuman city but from its walls and towers the black light flowed out over the waters in vast throbbing waves.

Kull was aware that in a wide space before him, where the buildings swept away on each side, a huge concourse of beings confronted him. He blinked, striving to accustom his eyes to the strange illumination. The beings came closer and a whisper ran among them like the waving of grass in the night wind. They were light and shadowy, glimmering against the blackness of their city and their eyes were eery and luminous.

Then the king saw that one of their number stood in front of the rest. This one was much like a man and his bearded face was high and noble but a frown hovered over his magnificent brows.

“You come like the herald of all your race,” said this lake-man suddenly, “bloody and bearing a red sword.” Kull laughed angrily for this smacked of injustice.

“Valka and Hotath!” said the king. “Most of this blood is mine own and was let by things of your cursed lake.”

“Death and ruin follow the course of your race,” said the lake-man sombrely. “Do we not know? Aye, we reigned in the Lake of blue waters before mankind was even a dream of the gods.”

“None molests you —” began Kull.

“They fear to. In the old days men of the earth sought to invade our dark kingdom. And we slew them and there was war between the sons of men and the people of the lakes. And we came forth and

spread terror among the earthlings for we knew that they bore only death for us and that they yielded only to slaying. And we wove spells and charms and burst their brains and shattered their souls with our magic so they begged for peace and it was so. The men of earth laid a tambu on this lake so that no man may come here save the king of Valusia. That was thousands of years ago. No man has ever come into the Enchanted Land and gone forth, save as a corpse floating up through the still waters of the upper lake. King of Valusia or whoever you be, you are doomed.”

Kull snarled in defiance. “I sought not your cursed kingdom. I seek Brule the Spear-slayer whom you dragged down.”

“You lie,” the lake-man answered. “No man has dared this lake for over a hundred years. You come seeking treasure or to ravish and slay like all your bloody-handed kind. You die!” And Kull felt the whisperings of magic charms about him; they filled the air and took physical form, floating in the shimmering light like wispy spider-webs, clutching at him with vague tentacles. But Kull swore impatiently and swept them aside and out of existence with his bare hand. For against the fierce elemental logic of the savage, the magic of decadency had no force. “You are young and strong,” said the lake-king. “The rot of civilization has not yet entered your soul and our charms may not harm you, because you do not understand them. Then we must try other things.”

And the lake-beings about him drew daggers and moved upon Kull. Then the king laughed and set his back against a column, gripping his sword hilt until the muscles stood out on his right arm in great ridges.

“This is a game I understand, ghosts,” he laughed.

They halted.

“Seek not to evade your doom,” said the king of the lake, “for we are immortal and may not be slain by mortal arms.”

“You lie, now,” answered Kull with the craft of the barbarian, “for by your own words you feared the death my kind brought among you. You may live forever but steel can slay you. Take thought among yourselves. You are soft and weak and unskilled in arms; you bear your blades unfamiliarly. I was born and bred to slaying. You will slay me for there are thousands of you and I but one, yet your charms have failed and many of you shall die before I fall. I will slaughter you by the scores and the hundreds. Take thought, men of the lake, is my slaying worth the lives it will cost you?”

For Kull knew that beings who slay may be slain by steel and he was unafraid. A figure of threat and doom, bloody and terrible he loomed above them.

“Aye, consider,” he repeated. “Is it better that you should bring Brule to me and let us go, or that my corpse shall lie amid sword-torn heaps of your dead when the battle-shout is silent? Nay, there be Picts and Lemurians among my mercenaries who will follow my trail even into the Forbidden Lake and will drench the Enchanted Land with your gore if I die here. For they have their own tambus and they reckon not of the tambus of the civilized races nor care they what may happen to Valusia but think only of me who am of barbarian blood like themselves.”

“The old world reels down the road to ruin and forgetfulness,” brooded the lake-king, “and we that were all powerful in by-gone days must brook to be bearded in our own kingdom by an arrogant savage. Swear that you will never set foot in Forbidden Lake again, and that you will never let the tambu be broken by others and you shall go free.”

“First bring the Spear-slayer to me.”

“No such man has ever come to this lake.”

“Nay? The cat Saremes told me —”

“Saremes? Aye, we knew her of old when she came swimming down through the green waters and abode for some centuries in the courts of the Enchanted Land; the wisdom of the ages is hers but I knew not that she spoke the speech of earthly men. Still, there is no such man here and I swear —”

“Swear not by gods or devils,” Kull broke in. “Give your word as a true man.”

“I give it,” said the lake-king and Kull believed for there was a majesty and a bearing about the being which made Kull feel strangely small and rude.

“And I,” said Kull, “give you my word — which has never been broken — that no man shall break the tambu or molest you in any way again.”

The lake-king replied with a stately inclination of his lordly head and a gesture of his hand.

“And I believe you, for you are different from any earthly man I ever knew. You are a real king and what is greater, a true man.”

Kull thanked him and sheathed his sword, turning toward the steps.

“Know ye how to gain the outer world, king of Valusia?”

“As to that,” answered Kull, “if I swim long enough I suppose I shall find the way. I know that the serpent brought me clear through at least one island and possibly many and that we swam in a cave for a long time.”

“You are bold,” said the lake-king, “but you might swim forever in the dark.”

He raised his hands and a behemoth swam to the foot of the steps.

“A grim steed,” said the lake-king, “but he will bear you safe to the very shore of the upper lake.”

“A moment,” said Kull. “Am I at present beneath an island or the mainland, or is this land in truth beneath the lake floor?”

“You are at the center of the universe as you are always. Time, place and space are illusions, having no existence save in the mind of man which must set limits and bounds in order to understand. There is only the underlying reality, of which all appearances are but outward manifestations, just as the upper lake is fed by the waters of this real one. Go now, king, for you are a true man even though you be the first wave of the rising tide of savagery which shall overwhelm the world ere it recedes.”

Kull listened respectfully, understanding little but realizing that this was high magic. He struck hands with the lake-king, shuddering a little at the feel of that which was flesh but not human flesh; then he looked once more at the great black buildings rearing silently and the murmuring moth-like forms among them, and he looked out over the shiny jet surface of the waters with the waves of black light crawling like spiders across it. And he turned and went down the stair to the water’s edge and sprang on the back of the behemoth.

Eons followed, of dark caves and rushing waters and the whisper of gigantic unseen monsters; sometimes above and sometimes below the surface, the behemoth bore the king and finally the fire-moss leaped up and they swept up through the blue of the burning water and Kull waded to land.

Kull’s stallion stood patiently where the king had left him and the moon was just rising over the lake, whereat Kull swore amazedly.

“A scant hour ago, by Valka, I dismounted here! I had thought that many hours and possibly days had passed since then.”

He mounted and rode toward the city of Valusia, reflecting that there might have been some meaning in the lake-king's remarks about the illusion of time.

Kull was weary, angry and bewildered. The journey through the lake had cleansed him of the blood, but the motion of riding started the gash in his thigh to bleeding again, moreover the leg was stiff and irked him somewhat. Still, the main question that presented itself was that Saremes had lied to him and either through ignorance or through malicious forethought had come near to sending him to his death. For what reason?

Kull cursed, reflecting what Tu would say and the chancellor's triumph. Still, even a talking cat might be innocently wrong but hereafter Kull determined to lay no weight to the words of such.

Kull rode into the silent silvery streets of the ancient city and the guard at the gate gaped at his appearance but wisely refrained from questioning.

He found the palace in an uproar. Swearing he stalked to his council chamber and thence to the chamber of the cat Saremes. The cat was there, curled imperturbably on her cushion, and grouped about the chamber, each striving to talk down the others, were Tu and the chief councillors. The slave Kuthulos was nowhere to be seen.

Kull was greeted by a wild acclamation of shouts and questions but he strode straight to Saremes' cushion and glared at her.

"Saremes," said the king, "you lied to me!"

The cat stared at him coldly, yawned and made no reply. Kull stood, nonplused and Tu seized his arm.

"Kull, where in Valka's name have you been? Whence this blood?"

Kull jerked loose irritably.

“Leave be,” he snarled. “This cat sent me on a fool’s errand — where is Brule?”

“Kull!”

The king whirled and saw Brule stride through the door, his scanty garments stained by the dust of hard riding. The bronze features of the Pict were immobile but his dark eyes gleamed with relief.

“Name of seven devils!” said the warrior testily, to hide this emotion. “My riders have combed the hills and the forest for you — where have you been?”

“Searching the waters of Forbidden Lake for your worthless carcase,” answered Kull with grim enjoyment of the Pict’s perturbation.

“Forbidden Lake!” Brule exclaimed with the freedom of the savage. “Are you in your dotage? What would I be doing there? I accompanied Ka-nu yesterday to the Zarfhaanan border and returned to hear Tu ordering out all the army to search for you. My men have since then ridden in every direction except the Forbidden Lake where we never thought of going.”

“Saremes lied to me —” Kull began.

But he was drowned out by a chatter of scolding voices, the main theme being that a king should never ride off so unceremoniously, leaving the kingdom to take care of itself.

“Silence!” roared Kull, lifting his arms, his eyes blazing dangerously. “Valka and Hotath! Am I an urchin to be rated for truancy? Tu, tell me what has occurred.”

In the sudden silence which followed this royal outburst, Tu began:

“My lord, we have been duped from the beginning. This cat is, as I have maintained, a delusion and a dangerous fraud.”

“Yet —”

“My lord, have you never heard of men who could hurl their voice

to a distance, making it appear that another spoke, or that invisible voices sounded?"

Kull flushed. "Aye, by Valka! Fool that I should have forgotten! An old wizard of Lemuria had that gift. Yet who spoke —"

"Kuthulos!" exclaimed Tu. "Fool am I not to have remembered Kuthulos, a slave, aye, but the greatest scholar and the wisest man in all the Seven Empires. Slave of that she-fiend Delcardes who even now writhes on the rack!"

Kull gave a sharp exclamation.

"Aye!" said Tu grimly. "When I entered and found that you had ridden away, none knew where, I suspected treachery and I sat me down and thought hard. And I remembered Kuthulos and his art of voice-throwing and of how the false cat had told you small things but never great prophecies, giving false arguments for reason of refraining.

"So I knew that Delcardes had sent you this cat and Kuthulos to befool you and gain your confidence and finally send you to your doom. So I sent for Delcardes and ordered her put to the torture so that she might confess all. She planned cunningly. Aye, Saremes must have her slave Kuthulos with her all the time — while he talked through her mouth and put strange ideas in your mind."

"Then where is Kuthulos?" asked Kull.

"He had disappeared when I came to Saremes' chamber, and —"

"Ho, Kull!" a cheery voice boomed from the door and a bearded elfish figure strode in, accompanied by a slim, frightened girlish shape.

"Ka-nu! Delcardes — so they did not torture you, after all!"

"Oh, my lord!" she ran to him and fell on her knees before him, clasping his feet. "Oh, Kull," she wailed, "they accuse me of terrible

things! I am guilty of deceiving you, my lord, but I meant no harm! I only wished to marry Kulra Thoom!”

Kull raised her to her feet, perplexed but pitying her evident terror and remorse.

“Kull,” said Ka-nu, “it is a good thing I returned when I did, else you and Tu had tossed the kingdom into the sea!”

Tu snarled wordlessly, always jealous of the Pictish ambassador, who was also Kull’s adviser.

“I returned to find the whole palace in an uproar, men rushing hither and yon and falling over one another in doing nothing. I sent Brule and his riders to look for you, and going to the torture chamber — naturally I went first to the torture chamber, since Tu was in charge —”

The chancellor winced.

“Going to the torture chamber —” Ka-nu continued placidly, “I found them about to torture little Delcardes who wept and told all she had to tell but they did not believe her — she is only an inquisitive child, Kull, in spite of her beauty and all. So I brought her here.

“Now, Kull, Delcardes spoke truth when she said Saremes was her guest and that the cat was very ancient. True; she is a cat of the Old Race and wiser than other cats, going and coming as she pleases, but still a cat. Delcardes had spies in the palace to report to her such small things as the secret letter which you hid in your dagger sheath and the surplus in the treasury — the courtier who reported that was one of her spies and had discovered the surplus and told her before the royal treasurer knew. Her spies were your most loyal retainers and the things they told her harmed you not and aided her, whom they all love, for they knew she meant no harm.

“Her idea was to have Kuthulos, speaking through the mouth of

Saremes, gain your confidence through small prophecies and facts which anyone might know, such as warning you against Thulsa Doom. Then, by constant urging you to let Kulra Thoom marry Delcardes, to accomplish what was Delcardes' only desire."

"Then Kuthulos turned traitor," said Tu.

And at that moment there was a noise at the chamber door and guards entered haling between them a tall, gaunt form, his face masked by a veil, his arms bound.

"Kuthulos!"

"Aye, Kuthulos," said Ka-nu, but he seemed not at ease and his eyes roved restlessly, "Kuthulos, no doubt, with his veil over his face to hide the workings of his mouth and neck muscles as he talked through Saremes."

Kull eyed the silent figure which stood there like a statue. A silence fell over the group, as if a cold wind had passed over them. There was a tenseness in the atmosphere. Delcardes looked at the silent figure and her eyes widened as the guards told in terse sentences how the slave had been captured while trying to escape from the palace down a little used corridor.

Then silence fell again and more tensely as Kull stepped forward and reached forth a hand to tear the veil from the hidden face. Through the thin fabric Kull felt two eyes burn into his consciousness. None noticed Ka-nu clench his hands and tense himself as if for a terrific struggle.

Then as Kull's hand almost touched the veil, a sudden sound broke the breathless silence — such a sound as a man might make by striking the floor with his forehead or elbow. The noise seemed to come from a wall and Kull, crossing the room with a stride, smote against a panel, from behind which the rapping sounded. A hidden door swung

inward, revealing a dusty corridor, upon which lay the bound and gagged form of a man.

They dragged him forth and standing him upright, unbound him.

“Kuthulos!” shrieked Delcardes.

Kull stared. The man’s face, now revealed, was thin, and kindly like a teacher of philosophy and morals.

“Yes, my lords and lady,” he said, “that man who wears my veil stole upon me through the secret door, struck me down and bound me. I lay there, hearing him send the king to what he thought was Kull’s death, but could do nothing.”

“Then who is he?” All eyes turned toward the veiled figure and stepped forward.

“Lord king, beware!” exclaimed the real Kuthulos. “He —”

Kull tore the veil away with one motion and recoiled with a gasp. Delcardes screamed and her knees gave way; the councillors pressed backward, faces white and the guard released their grasp and shrank horror-struck away.

The face of the man was a bare white skull, in whose eye sockets flamed livid fire!

“Thulsa Doom!”

“Aye, I guessed as much!” exclaimed Ka-nu.

“Aye, Thulsa Doom, fools!” the voice echoed cavernously and hollowly. “The greatest of all wizards and your eternal foe, Kull of Atlantis. You have won this tilt but, beware, there shall be others.”

He burst the bonds on his arms with a single contemptuous gesture and stalked toward the door, the throng giving back before him.

“You are a fool of no discernment, Kull,” said he, “else you had never mistaken that other fool, Kuthulos, for me, even with the veil and his garments.”

Kull saw that it was so, for though the twain were alike in height and general shape, the flesh of the skull-faced wizard was like that of a man long dead.

The king stood, not fearful like the others, but so amazed at the turn events had taken that he was speechless. Then even as he sprang forward, like a man waking from a dream, Brule charged with the silent ferocity of a tiger, his curved sword gleaming. And like a gleam of light it flashed into the ribs of Thulsa Doom, piercing him through and through so that the point stood out between his shoulders.

Brule regained his blade with a quick wrench as he leaped back, then, crouching to strike again were it necessary, he halted. Not a drop of blood oozed from the wound which in a living man had been mortal. The skull-faced one laughed.

“Ages ago I died as men die!” he taunted. “Nay, I shall pass to some other sphere when my time comes, not before. I bleed not for my veins are empty and I feel only a slight coldness which shall pass when the wound closes, as it is even now closing. Stand back, fool, your master goes but he shall come again to you and you shall scream and shrivel and die in that coming! Kull, I salute you!”

And while Brule hesitated, unnerved, and Kull halted in undecided amazement Thulsa Doom stepped through the door and vanished before their very eyes.

“At least, Kull,” said Ka-nu later, “you have won your first tilt with the skull-faced one, as he admitted. Next time we must be more wary, for he is a fiend incarnate — an owner of magic black and unholy. He hates you for he is a satellite of the great serpent whose power you broke; he has the gift of illusion and of invisibility, which only he possesses. He is grim and terrible.”

“I fear him not,” said Kull. “The next time I will be prepared and

my answer shall be a sword thrust, even though he be unslayable, which thing I doubt. Brule did not find his vitals, which even a living dead man must have, that is all.”

Then turning to Tu, “Lord Tu, it would seem that the civilized races also have their tambus, since the blue lake is forbidden to all save myself.”

Tu answered testily, angry because Kull had given the happy Delcardes permission to marry whom she desired:

“My lord, that is no heathen tambu such as your tribe bows to; it is a matter of state-craft, to preserve peace between Valusia and the lake-beings who are magicians.”

“And we keep tambus so as not to offend unseen spirits of tigers and eagles,” said Kull. “And therein I see no difference.”

“At any rate,” said Tu, “you must beware of Thulsa Doom; for he vanished into another dimension and as long as he is there he is invisible and harmless to us, but he will come again.”

“Ah, Kull,” sighed the old rascal, Ka-nu, “mine is a hard life compared to yours; Brule and I were drunk in Zarfhaana and I fell down a flight of stairs, most damnably bruising my shins. And all the while you lounged in sinful ease on the silk of the kingship, Kull.”

Kull glared at him wordlessly and turned his back, giving his attention to the drowsing Saremes.

“She is not a wizard-beast, Kull,” said the Spear-slayer. “She is wise but she merely looks her wisdom and does not speak. Yet her eyes fascinate me with their antiquity. A mere cat, just the same.”

“Still, Brule,” said Kull, admiringly, stroking her silky fur, “still, she is a very ancient cat, very.”

THE SCREAMING SKULL OF SILENCE

*— And a dozen death-blots blotched him
On jowl and shank and buckle.
And he knocked on his skull with his knuckle
And laughed — if you'd call it laughter —
At the billion facets of dying
In his outstart eye-balls shining —*

Men still name it The Day of the King's Fear. For Kull, king of Valusia, was only a man after all. There was never a bolder man, but all things have their limits, even courage. Of course Kull had known apprehension and cold whispers of dread, sudden starts of horror and even the shadow of unknown terror. But these had been but starts and leapings in the shadows of the mind, caused mainly by surprize or some loathsome mystery or unnatural thing — more repugnance than real fear. So real fear in him was so rare a thing that men mark the day.

Yet there was a time that Kull knew Fear, stark, terrible and unreasoning, and his marrow weakened and his blood ran cold. So men speak of the time of Kull's Fear and they do not speak in scorn nor does Kull feel any shame. No, for as it came about the thing rebounded to his undying glory.

Thus it came to be. Kull sat at ease on the throne of society, listening idly to the conversation of Tu, chief councillor, Ka-nu, ambassador from Pictdom, Brule, Ka-nu's right-hand man, and Kuthulos the slave, who was yet the greatest scholar in the Seven Empires.

"All is illusion," Kuthulos was saying, "all outward manifestations of the underlying Reality, which is beyond human comprehension,

since there are no relative things by which the finite mind may measure the infinite. The One may underlie all, or each natural illusion may possess a basic entity. All these things were known to Raama, the greatest mind of all the ages, who eons ago freed humanity from the grasp of unknown demons and raised the race to its heights.”

“He was a mighty necromancer,” said Ka-nu.

“He was no wizard,” said Kuthulos, “no chanting, mumbling conjurer, divining from snakes’ livers. There was naught of mummery about Raama. He had grasped the First Principles, he knew the Elements and he understood natural forces, acted upon by natural causes, producing natural results. He accomplished his apparent miracles by the exercise of his powers in natural ways, which were as simple in their manners to him, as lighting a fire is to us, and as much beyond our ken as our fire would have been to our ape-ancestors.”

“Then why did he not give all his secrets to the race?” asked Tu.

“He knew it is not good for man to know too much. Some villain would subjugate the whole race, nay the whole universe, if he knew as much as Raama knew. Man must learn by himself and expand in soul as he learns.”

“Yet, you say all is illusion,” persisted Ka-nu, shrewd in state-craft but ignorant in philosophy and science, and respecting Kuthulos for his knowledge. “How is that? Do we not hear and see and feel?”

“What is sight and sound?” countered the slave. “Is not sound absence of silence, and silence absence of sound? The absence of a thing is not material substance. It is — nothing. And how can nothing exist?”

“Then why are things?” asked Ka-nu like a puzzled child.

“They are appearances of reality. Like silence; somewhere exists the essence of silence, the soul of silence. Nothing that is something;

an absence so absolute that it takes material form. How many of you ever heard complete silence? None of us! Always there are some noises — the whisper of the wind, the flutter of an insect, even the growing of the grass, or on the desert the murmur of the sands. But at the center of silence, there is no sound.”

“Raama,” said Ka-nu, “long ago shut a spectre of silence into a great castle and sealed him there for all time.”

“Aye,” said Brule, “I have seen the castle — a great black thing on a lone hill, in a wild region of Valusia. Since time immemorial it has been known as the Skull of Silence.”

“Ha!” Kull was interested now. “My friends, I would like to look upon this thing!”

“Lord king,” said Kuthulos, “it is not good to tamper with what Raama made fast. For he was wiser than any man. I have heard the legend that by his arts he imprisoned a demon — not by his arts, say I, but by his knowledge of the natural forces, and not a demon but some element which threatened the existence of the race.

“The might of that element is evinced by the fact that not even Raama was able to destroy it — he only imprisoned it.”

“Enough.” Kull gestured impatiently. “Raama has been dead so many thousand years that it wearies me to think on it. I ride to find the Skull of Silence; who rides with me?”

All of those who listened to him, and a hundred of the Red Slayers, Valusia’s mightiest war force, rode with Kull when he swept out of the royal city in the early dawn. They rode up among the mountains of Zalgara and after many days’ search, they came upon a lone hill rising sombrely from the surrounding plateaus and on its summit a great stark castle, black as doom.

“This is the place,” said Brule. “No people live within a hundred

miles of this castle, nor have they in the memory of man. It is shunned like a region accursed.”

Kull reined his great stallion to a halt and gazed. No one spoke and Kull was aware of the strange, almost intolerable stillness. When he spoke again every one started. To the king it seemed that waves of deadening quiet emanated from that brooding castle on the hill. No birds sang in the surrounding land and no wind moved the branches of the stunted trees. As Kull’s horsemen rode up the slope, their footfalls on the rocks seemed to tinkle drearily and far away, dying without echo.

They halted before the castle that crouched there like a dark monster and Kuthulos again essayed to argue with the king.

“Kull, consider! If you burst that seal, you may loose upon the world a monster whose might and frenzy no man can stay!”

Kull, impatient of restraint, waved him aside. He was in the grip of a wayward perverseness, a common fault of kings, and though usually reasonable he had now made up his mind and was not to be swerved from his course.

“There are ancient writings on the seal, Kuthulos,” he said. “Read them to me.”

Kuthulos unwillingly dismounted and the rest followed suit, all save the common soldiers who sat their horses like bronze images in the pale sunlight. The castle leered at them like a sightless skull, for there were no windows whatever and only one great door, that of iron and bolted and sealed. Apparently the building was all in one chamber.

Kull gave a few orders as to the disposition of the troops and was irritated when he found he was forced to raise his voice unseemingly in order for the commanders to understand him. Their answers came dimly and indistinctly.

He approached the door, followed by his four comrades. There on a frame beside the door hung a curious appearing gong, apparently of jade — a sort of green in shade. But Kull could not be sure of the color for to his amazed stare it changed and shifted, and sometimes his gaze seemed to be drawn into great depths and sometimes to glance extreme shallowness. Beside the gong hung a mallet of the same strange material. He struck it lightly and then gasped, nearly stunned by the crash of sound which followed — it was like all earth noises concentrated.

“Read the writings, Kuthulos,” he commanded, again, and the slave bent forward in considerable awe, for no doubt these words had been carved by the great Raama himself.

“That which was may be again,” he intoned, “then beware, all sons of men!”

He straightened, a look of fright on his face.

“A warning! A warning straight from Raama! Mark ye, Kull, mark ye!”

Kull snorted and drawing his sword, rent the seal from its hold and cut through the great metal bolt. He struck again and again, being aware of the comparative silence with which the blows fell. The bars fell, the door swung open.

Kuthulos screamed. Kull reeled, stared — the chamber was empty? *No!* He saw nothing, there was nothing to see, yet he felt the air throb about him as *something* came billowing from that foul chamber in great unseen waves. Kuthulos leaned to his shoulder and shrieked — and his words came faintly as from over cosmic distance:

“The silence! This is the soul of all Silence!”

Sound ceased. Horses plunged and their riders fell face first into

the dust and lay clutching at their heads with their hands, screaming without sound.

Kull alone stood erect, his futile sword thrust in front of him. Silence! Utter and absolute! Throbbing, billowing waves of still horror! Men opened their mouths and shrieked but there was no sound!

The Silence entered Kull's soul; it clawed at his heart; it sent tentacles of steel into his brain. He clutched at his forehead in torment; his skull was bursting, shattering. In the wave of horror which engulfed him Kull saw red and colossal visions — the Silence spreading out over the earth, over the Universe! Men died in gibbering stillness; the roar of rivers, the crash of seas, the noise of winds faltered and ceased to be. All Sound was drowned by the Silence. Silence, soul-destroying, brain-shattering — blotting out all life on earth and reaching monstrously up into the skies, crushing the very singing of the stars!

And then Kull knew fear, horror, terror — overwhelming, grisly, soul-killing. Faced by the ghastliness of his vision, he swayed and staggered drunkenly, gone wild with fear. Oh gods, for a sound, the very slightest, faintest noise! Kull opened his mouth like the grovelling maniacs behind him and his heart nearly burst from his breast in his effort to shriek. The throbbing stillness mocked him. He smote against the metal sill with his sword. And still the billowing waves flowed from the chamber, clawing at him, tearing at him, taunting him like a being sensate with terrible Life.

Ka-nu and Kuthulos lay motionless. Tu writhed on his belly, his head in his hands, and squalled soundlessly like a dying jackal. Brule wallowed in the dust like a wounded wolf, clawing blindly at his scabbard.

Kull could almost see the form of the Silence now, the frightful Silence that was coming out of its Skull at last, to burst the skulls

of men. It twisted, it writhed in unholy wisps and shadows, it laughed at him! It lived! Kull staggered and toppled, and as he did his outflung arm struck the gong. Kull heard no sound but he felt a distinct throb and jerk of the waves about him — a slight withdrawal, involuntary, just as a man's hand jerks back from the flame.

Ah, old Raama left a safe-guard for the race, even in death! Kull's dizzy brain suddenly read the riddle. The sea! The gong was like the sea, changing green shades, never still, now deep and now shallow — *never silent.*

The sea! Vibrating, pulsing, booming day and night — the greatest enemy of the Silence. Reeling, dizzy, nauseated he caught up the jade mallet. His knees gave way but he clung with one hand to the frame, clutching the mallet with the other, in a desperate death grip. The Silence surged wrathfully about him.

Mortal, who are you to oppose me, who am older than the gods? Before Life was I was, and shall be when Life dies. Before the invader sound was born, the Universe was silent and shall be again. For I shall spread out through all the cosmos and kill Sound — kill Sound — kill Sound — kill Sound!

The roar of Silence reverberated through the caverns of Kull's crumbling brain in abysmal chanting monotonous as he struck on the gong — again — and again — and again!

And at each blow the Silence gave back — inch by inch — inch by inch. Back, back, back. Kull renewed the force of his mallet blows. Now he could faintly hear the far-away tinkle of the gong, over unthinkable voids of stillness — as if someone on the other side of the Universe were striking a silver coin with a horse-shoe nail. At each tiny vibration of noise, the wavering Silence started and shuddered. The tentacles shortened, the waves contracted. The Silence shrank.

Back and back and back — and back. Now the wisps hovered in the doorway and behind Kull men whimpered and wallowed to their knees, chins sagging and eyes vacant. Kull tore the gong from its frame and reeled toward the door. He was a finish fighter — no compromise for him. There would be no bolting the great door upon the horror again. The whole Universe should have halted to watch a man justifying the existence of mankind, scaling sublime heights of glory in his supreme atonement.

He stood in the doorway and leaned against the waves that hung there, hammering ceaselessly. All Hell flowed out to meet him, from the fright thing whose very last stronghold he was invading. All of the Silence was now in the chamber again, forced back by the unconquerable crashings of Sound — Sound concentrated from all the sounds and noises of earth and imprisoned by the master hand that long ago conquered both Sound and Silence.

And here Silence gathered all its forces for one last attack. Hells of soundless cold and noiseless flame whirled about Kull. Here was a thing, elemental and real. Silence the absence of sound, Kuthulos had said — Kuthulos who now grovelled and yammered empty nothingnesses.

Here was more than an absence — an absence whose utter absence became a presence — an abstract illusion that was a material reality. Kull reeled, blind, stunned, numb, almost insensible from the onslaught of cosmic forces upon him; soul, body and mind. Cloaked by the whirling tentacles, the noise of the gong died out again. But Kull never ceased. His tortured brain rocked but he thrust his feet against the sill and shoved powerfully forward. He encountered material resistance, like a wall of solid fire, hotter than flame and colder than ice. Still he plunged forward and felt it give — give.

Step by step, foot by foot he fought his way into the chamber of death, driving the Silence before him. Every step was screaming, demonic torture; every foot was ravaging Hell. Shoulders hunched, head down, arms raising and falling in jerky rhythm, Kull forced his way, and great drops of blood gathered on his brow and dropped unceasingly.

Behind him men were beginning to stagger up, weak and dizzy from the Silence that had invaded their brains. They gaped at the door, where the king fought his deathly battle for the universe. Brule crawled blindly forward, trailing his sword, still dazed, and only following his stunned instinct which bade him follow the king though the trail led to Hell.

Kull forced the Silence back, step by step, feeling it growing weaker and weaker, feeling it dwindling. Now the sound of the gong pealed out and grew and grew. It filled the room, the earth, the sky. The Silence cringed before it, and as the Silence dwindled and was forced into itself, it took hideous form that Kull saw yet did not see. His arm seemed dead but with a mighty effort he increased his blows. Now the Silence writhed in a dark corner and shrunk and shrunk. Again, a last blow! All the sound in the Universe rushed together in one roaring, yelling, shattering, engulfing burst of sound! The gong blew into a million vibrating fragments! And Silence screamed!

THE MIRRORS OF TUZUN THUNE

*A wild, weird clime that lieth sublime
Out of Space, out of Time.*

— Poe

There comes, even to kings, the time of great weariness. Then the gold of the throne is brass, the silk of the palace becomes drab. The gems in the diadem and upon the fingers of the women sparkle drearily like the ice of the white seas; the speech of men is as the empty rattle of a jester's bell and the feel comes of things unreal; even the sun is copper in the sky and the breath of the green ocean is no longer fresh.

Kull sat upon the throne of Valusia and the hour of weariness was upon him. They moved before him in an endless, meaningless panorama, men, women, priests, events and shadows of events; things seen and things to be attained. But like shadows they came and went, leaving no trace upon his consciousness, save that of a great mental fatigue. Yet Kull was not tired. There was a longing in him for things beyond himself and beyond the Valusian court. An unrest stirred in him and strange, luminous dreams roamed his soul. At his bidding there came to him Brule the Spear-slayer, warrior of Pictland, from the islands beyond the West.

“Lord king, you are tired of the life of the court. Come with me upon my galley and let us roam the tides for a space.”

“Nay.” Kull rested his chin moodily upon his mighty hand. “I am weary beyond all these things. The cities hold no lure for me — and the borders are quiet. I hear no more the sea-songs I heard when I lay as a boy on the booming crags of Atlantis, and the night was alive with

blazing stars. No more do the green woodlands beckon me as of old. There is a strangeness upon me and a longing beyond life's longings. Go!"

Brule went forth in a doubtful mood, leaving the king brooding upon his throne. Then to Kull stole a girl of the court and whispered:

"Great king, seek Tuzun Thune, the wizard. The secrets of life and death are his, and the stars in the sky and the lands beneath the seas."

Kull looked at the girl. Fine gold was her hair and her violet eyes were slanted strangely; she was beautiful, but her beauty meant little to Kull.

"Tuzun Thune," he repeated. "Who is he?"

"A wizard of the Elder Race. He lives here, in Valusia, by the Lake of Visions in the House of a Thousand Mirrors. All things are known to him, lord king; he speaks with the dead and holds converse with the demons of the Lost Lands."

Kull arose.

"I will seek out this mummer; but no word of my going, do you hear?"

"I am your slave, my lord." And she sank to her knees meekly, but the smile of her scarlet mouth was cunning behind Kull's back and the gleam of her narrow eyes was crafty.

~

Kull came to the house of Tuzun Thune, beside the Lake of Visions. Wide and blue stretched the waters of the lake and many a fine palace rose upon its banks; many swan-winged pleasure boats drifted lazily upon its hazy surface and evermore there came the sound of soft music.

Tall and spacious, but unpretentious, rose the House of a Thou-

sand Mirrors. The great doors stood open and Kull ascended the broad stair and entered, unannounced. There in a great chamber, whose walls were of mirrors, he came upon Tuzun Thune, the wizard. The man was ancient as the hills of Zalgara; like wrinkled leather was his skin, but his cold gray eyes were like sparks of sword steel.

“Kull of Valusia, my house is yours,” said he, bowing with old-time courtliness and motioning Kull to a throne-like chair.

“You are a wizard, I have heard,” said Kull bluntly, resting his chin upon his hand and fixing his somber eyes upon the man’s face. “Can you do wonders?”

The wizard stretched forth his hand; his fingers opened and closed like a bird’s claws.

“Is that not a wonder — that this blind flesh obeys the thoughts of my mind? I walk, I breathe, I speak — are they all not wonders?”

Kull meditated awhile, then spoke. “Can you summon up demons?”

“Aye. I can summon up a demon more savage than any in ghostland — by smiting you in the face.”

Kull started, then nodded. “But the dead, can you talk to the dead?”

“I talk with the dead always — as I am talking now. Death begins with birth and each man begins to die when he is born; even now you are dead, King Kull, because you were born.”

“But you, you are older than men become; do wizards never die?”

“Men die when their time comes. No later, no sooner. Mine has not come.”

Kull turned these answers over in his mind.

“Then it would seem that the greatest wizard of Valusia is no more than an ordinary man, and I have been duped in coming here.”

Tuzun Thune shook his head. "Men are but men, and the greatest men are they who soonest learn the simpler things. Nay, look into my mirrors, Kull."

The ceiling was a great many mirrors, and the walls were mirrors, perfectly jointed, yet many mirrors of many sizes and shapes.

"Mirrors are the world, Kull," droned the wizard. "Gaze into my mirrors and be wise."

Kull chose one at random and looked into it intently. The mirrors upon the opposite wall were reflected there, reflecting others, so that he seemed to be gazing down a long, luminous corridor, formed by mirror behind mirror; and far down this corridor moved a tiny figure. Kull looked long ere he saw that the figure was the reflection of himself. He gazed and a queer feeling of pettiness came over him; it seemed that that tiny figure was the true Kull, representing the real proportions of himself. So he moved away and stood before another.

"Look closely, Kull. That is the mirror of the past," he heard the wizard say.

Gray fogs obscured the vision, great billows of mist, ever heaving and changing like the ghost of a great river; through these fogs Kull caught swift fleeting visions of horror and strangeness; beasts and men moved there and shapes neither men nor beasts; great exotic blossoms glowed through the grayness; tall tropic trees towered high over reeking swamps, where reptilian monsters wallowed and bellowed; the sky was ghastly with flying dragons and the restless seas rocked and roared and beat endlessly along the muddy beaches. Man was not, yet man was the dream of the gods and strange were the nightmare forms that glided through the noisome jungles. Battle and onslaught were there, and frightful love. Death was there, for Life and Death go hand in hand. Across the slimy beaches of the world sounded the bellowing

of the monsters, and incredible shapes loomed through the steaming curtain of the incessant rain.

“This is of the future.”

Kull looked in silence.

“See you — what?”

“A strange world,” said Kull heavily. “The Seven Empires are crumbled to dust and are forgotten. The restless green waves roar for many a fathom above the eternal hills of Atlantis; the mountains of Lemuria of the West are the islands of an unknown sea. Strange savages roam the elder lands and new lands flung strangely from the deeps, defiling the elder shrines. Valusia is vanished and all the nations of today; they of tomorrow are strangers. They know us not.”

“Time strides onward,” said Tuzun Thune calmly. “We live today; what care we for tomorrow — or yesterday? The Wheel turns and nations rise and fall; the world changes, and times return to savagery to rise again through the long ages. Ere Atlantis was, Valusia was, and ere Valusia was, the Elder Nations were. Aye, we, too, trampled the shoulders of lost tribes in our advance. You, who have come from the green sea hills of Atlantis to seize the ancient crown of Valusia, you think my tribe is old, we who held these lands ere the Valusians came out of the East, in the days before there were men in the sea lands. But men were here when the Elder Tribes rode out of the waste lands, and men before men, tribe before tribe. The nations pass and are forgotten, for that is the destiny of man.”

“Yes,” said Kull. “Yet is it not a pity that the beauty and glory of men should fade like smoke on a summer sea?”

“For what reason, since that is their destiny? I brood not over the lost glories of my race, nor do I labor for races to come. Live now, Kull, live now. The dead are dead; the unborn are not. What matters men’s

forgetfulness of you when you have forgotten yourself in the silent worlds of death? Gaze in my mirrors and be wise.”

Kull chose another mirror and gazed into it.

“That is the mirror of the deepest magic; what see ye, Kull?”

“Naught but myself.”

“Look closely, Kull; is it in truth you?”

Kull stared into the great mirror, and the image that was his reflection returned his gaze.

“I come before this mirror,” mused Kull, chin on fist, “and I bring this man to life. This is beyond my understanding, since first I saw him in the still waters of the lakes of Atlantis, till I saw him again in the gold-rimmed mirrors of Valusia. He is I, a shadow of myself, part of myself — I can bring him into being or slay him at my will; yet” — he halted, strange thoughts whispering through the vast dim recesses of his mind like shadowy bats flying through a great cavern — “yet where is he when I stand not in front of a mirror? May it be in man’s power thus lightly to form and destroy a shadow of life and existence? How do I know that when I step back from the mirror he vanishes into the void of Naught?”

“Nay, by Valka, am I the man or is he? Which of us is the ghost of the other? Mayhap these mirrors are but windows through which we look into another world. Does he think the same of me? Am I no more than a shadow, a reflection of himself — to him, as he to me? And if I am the ghost, what sort of a world lives upon the other side of this mirror? What armies ride there and what kings rule? This world is all I know. Knowing naught of any other, how can I judge? Surely there are green hills there and booming seas and wide plains where men ride to battle. Tell me, wizard who are wiser than most men, tell me, are there worlds beyond our worlds?”

“A man has eyes, let him see,” answered the wizard. “Who would see must first believe.”

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The hours drifted by and Kull still sat before the mirrors of Tuzun Thune, gazing into that which depicted himself. Sometimes it seemed that he gazed upon hard shallowness; at other times gigantic depths seemed to loom before him. Like the surface of the sea was the mirror of Tuzun Thune; hard as the sea in the sun’s slanting beams, in the darkness of the stars, when no eye can pierce her deeps; vast and mystic as the sea when the sun smites her in such way that the watcher’s breath is caught at the glimpse of tremendous abysses. So was the mirror in which Kull gazed.

At last the king rose with a sigh and took his departure still wondering. And Kull came again to the House of a Thousand Mirrors; day after day he came and sat for hours before the mirror. The eyes looked out at him, identical with his, yet Kull seemed to sense a difference — a reality that was not of him. Hour upon hour he would stare with strange intensity into the mirror; hour after hour the image gave back his gaze.

The business of the palace and of the council went neglected. The people murmured; Kull’s stallion stamped restlessly in his stable and Kull’s warriors dived and argued aimlessly with one another. Kull heeded not. At times he seemed on the point of discovering some vast, unthinkable secret. He no longer thought of the image in the mirror as a shadow of himself; the thing, to him, was an entity, similar in outer appearance, yet basically as far from Kull himself as the poles are far apart. The image, it seemed to Kull, had an individuality apart from Kull’s; he was no more dependent on Kull than Kull was dependent

on him. And day by day Kull doubted in which world he really lived; was he the shadow, summoned at will by the other? Did he instead of the other live in a world of delusion, the shadow of the real world?

Kull began to wish that he might enter the personality beyond the mirror for a space, to see what might be seen; yet should he manage to go beyond that door could he ever return? Would he find a world identical with the one in which he moved? A world, of which his was but a ghostly reflection? Which was reality and which illusion?

At times Kull halted to wonder how such thoughts and dreams had come to enter his mind and at times he wondered if they came of his own volition or — here his thoughts would become mazed. His meditations were his own; no man ruled his thoughts and he would summon them at his pleasure; yet could he? Were they not as bats, coming and going, not at his pleasure but at the bidding or ruling of — of whom? The gods? The Women who wove the webs of Fate? Kull could come to no conclusion, for at each mental step he became more and more bewildered in a hazy gray fog of illusory assertions and refutations. This much he knew: that strange visions entered his mind, like bats flying unbidden from the whispering void of non-existence; never had he thought these thoughts, but now they ruled his mind, sleeping and waking, so that he seemed to walk in a daze at times; and his sleep was fraught with strange, monstrous dreams.

“Tell me, wizard,” he said, sitting before the mirror, eyes fixed intently upon his image, “how can I pass yon door? For of a truth, I am not sure that that is the real world and this the shadow; at least, that which I see must exist in some form.”

“See and believe,” droned the wizard. “Man must believe to accomplish. Form is shadow, substance is illusion, materiality is dream; man is because he believes he is; what is man but a dream of the gods?”

Yet man can be that which he wishes to be; form and substance, they are but shadows. The mind, the ego, the essence of the god-dream — that is real, that is immortal. See and believe, if you would accomplish, Kull.”

The king did not fully understand; he never fully understood the enigmatical utterances of the wizard, yet they struck somewhere in his being a dim responsive chord. So day after day he sat before the mirrors of Tuzun Thune. Ever the wizard lurked behind him like a shadow.

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Then came a day when Kull seemed to catch glimpses of strange lands; there flitted across his consciousness dim thoughts and recognitions. Day by day he had seemed to lose touch with the world; all things had seemed each succeeding day more ghostly and unreal; only the man in the mirror seemed like reality. Now Kull seemed to be close to the doors of some mightier worlds; giant vistas gleamed fleetingly; the fogs of unreality thinned, “form is shadow, substance is illusion; they are but shadows” sounded as if from some far country of his consciousness. He remembered the wizard’s words and it seemed to him that now he almost understood — form and substance, could not he change himself at will, if he knew the master key that opened this door? What worlds within what worlds awaited the bold explorer?

The man in the mirror seemed smiling at him — closer, closer — a fog enwrapped all and the reflection dimmed suddenly — Kull knew a sensation of fading, of change, of merging —

“*Kull!*” The yell split the silence into a million vibratory fragments!

Mountains crashed and worlds tottered as Kull, hurled back by that frantic shout, made a superhuman effort, how or why he did not know.

A crash, and Kull stood in the room of Tuzun Thune before a shattered mirror, mazed and half blind with bewilderment. There before him lay the body of Tuzun Thune, whose time had come at last, and above him stood Brule the Spear-slayer, sword dripping red and eyes wide with a kind of horror.

“Valka!” swore the warrior. “Kull, it was time I came!”

“Aye, yet what happened?” The king groped for words.

“Ask this traitress,” answered the Spear-slayer, indicating a girl who crouched in terror before the king; Kull saw that it was she who first sent him to Tuzun Thune. “As I came in I saw you fading into yon mirror as smoke fades into the sky, by Valka! Had I not seen I would not have believed — you had almost vanished when my shout brought you back.”

“Aye,” muttered Kull, “I had almost gone beyond the door that time.”

“This fiend wrought most craftily,” said Brule. “Kull, do you not now see how he spun and flung over you a web of magic? Kaanuub of Blaal plotted with this wizard to do away with you, and this wench, a girl of Elder Race, put the thought in your mind so that you would come here. Kananu of the council learned of the plot today; I know not what you saw in that mirror, but with it Tuzun Thune enthralled your soul and almost by his witchery he changed your body to mist —”

“Aye.” Kull was still mazed. “But being a wizard, having knowledge of all the ages and despising gold, glory and position, what could Kaanuub offer Tuzun Thune that would make of him a foul traitor?”

“Gold, power and position,” grunted Brule. “The sooner you learn that men are men whether wizard, king or thrall, the better you will rule, Kull. Now what of her?”

“Naught, Brule,” as the girl whimpered and groveled at Kull’s feet.

“She was but a tool. Rise, child, and go your ways; none shall harm you.”

Alone with Brule, Kull looked for the last time on the mirrors of Tuzun Thune.

“Mayhap he plotted and conjured, Brule; nay, I doubt you not, yet — was it his witchery that was changing me to thin mist, or had I stumbled on a secret? Had you not brought me back, had I faded in dissolution or had I found worlds beyond this?”

Brule stole a glance at the mirrors, and twitched his shoulders as if he shuddered. “Aye. Tuzun Thune stored the wisdom of all the hells here. Let us begone, Kull, ere they bewitch me, too.”

“Let us go, then,” answered Kull, and side by side they went forth from the House of a Thousand Mirrors — where, mayhap, are prisoned the souls of men.

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None look now in the mirrors of Tuzun Thune. The pleasure boats shun the shore where stands the wizard’s house and no one goes in the house or to the room where Tuzun Thune’s dried and withered carcass lies before the mirrors of illusion. The place is shunned as a place accursed, and though it stands for a thousand years to come, no footsteps shall echo there. Yet Kull upon his throne meditates often upon the strange wisdom and untold secrets hidden there and wonders ...

For there are worlds beyond worlds, as Kull knows, and whether the wizard bewitched him by words or by mesmerism, vistas did open to the king’s gaze beyond that strange door, and Kull is less sure of reality since he gazed into the mirrors of Tuzun Thune.

SWORDS OF THE PURPLE KINGDOM

1.

Valusia Plots Behind Closed Doors

A sinister quiet lay like a shroud over the ancient city of Valusia. The heat waves danced from roof to shining roof and shimmered against the smooth marble walls. The purple towers and golden spires were softened in the faint haze. No ringing hoofs on the wide paved streets broke the drowsy silence and the few pedestrians who appeared walking, did what they had to do hastily and vanished indoors again. The city seemed like a realm of ghosts.

Kull, king of Valusia, drew aside the filmy curtains and gazed over the golden window sill, out over the court with its sparkling fountains and trim hedges and pruned trees, over the high wall and at the blank windows of houses which met his glance.

“All Valusia plots behind closed doors, Brule,” he grunted.

His companion, a dark-faced, powerful warrior of medium height grinned hardly: “You are too suspicious, Kull. The heat drives most of them indoors.”

“But they plot,” reiterated Kull. He was a tall broad-shouldered barbarian, the true fighting build — wide shoulders, mighty chest and lean flanks. Under heavy black brows his cold grey eyes brooded. His features betrayed his birth for Kull the usurper was an Atlantean.

“True, they plot. When did the people ever fail to plot, no matter who held the throne? And they might be excused now, Kull.”

“Aye,” the giant’s brow clouded, “I am an alien. The first barbarian to press the Valusian throne since the beginning of time. When I was

a commander of her forces they overlooked the accident of my birth. Now — they hurl it into my teeth — by looks and thoughts, at least.”

“What do you care? I am an alien also. Aliens rule Valusia now, since the people have grown too weak and degenerate to rule themselves. An Atlantean sits on her throne, backed by all the Picts, the empire’s most ancient and powerful allies; her court is filled with foreigners, her armies with barbarian mercenaries — and the Red Slayers — well, they are at least Valusians, but they are men of the mountains who look upon themselves almost as a different race.”

Kull shrugged his shoulders restlessly.

“I know what the people think, and with what aversion and anger the powerful old Valusian families must look on the state of affairs. But what would you have? The empire was worse under Boma, a native Valusian and a direct heir of the old dynasty, than it has been under me. This is the price a nation must pay for decaying — the strong young people come in and take possession, one way or another. I have at least rebuilt the armies, organized the mercenaries and restored Valusia to a measure of her former international greatness. Surely it is better to have one barbarian on the throne, holding the crumbling bands together, than to have a hundred thousand riding red-handed through the city streets. Which is what would have happened by now, had it been left to king Boma. The kingdom was splitting under his feet; invasions threatening on all sides, the heathen Grondarians were ready to launch a raid of appalling magnitude —

“Well, I killed Boma with my bare hands that wild night when we rode at the head of the rebels. That bit of ruthlessness won me some enemies, but within six months I had put down anarchy and all counter rebellions, had welded the nation back into one piece, had broken the back of the Triple Federation and crushed the power of

the Grondarians — well, now Valusia dozes in peace and quiet, and between naps, plots my overthrow. There has been no famine since my reign, the store houses are bulging with grain, the trading ships ride heavy with cargo, the merchants' purses are full, the people are fat-bellied — but still they murmur and curse and spit on my shadow. What do they want?"

The Pict grinned savagely and with bitter mirth. "Another Boma! A red-handed tyrant! Forget their ingratitude. You did not seize the kingdom for their sakes, nor do you hold it for their benefit. Well, you have accomplished a life long ambition and you are firmly seated on the throne. Let them murmur and plot. You are king!"

Kull nodded grimly. "I am king of this purple kingdom! And until my breath stops and my ghost goes down the long Shadow road, I will be king! What now?"

A slave bowed deeply: "Delcartes, daughter of the great house of bora Ballin, desires audience, most high majesty!"

A shadow crossed the king's brow. "More supplication in regard to her damnable love affair!" he sighed to Brule. "Mayhap you'd better go." To the slave, "Let her enter the presence."

Kull sat in a chair padded with velvet and gazed at Delcartes. She was only some nineteen years of age, and clad in the costly but scanty fashion of Valusian noble ladies, she presented a ravishing picture, the beauty of which even the barbarian king could appreciate. Her skin was a marvelous white, due partly to many baths in milk and wine, but mainly a part of her heritage of loveliness. Her cheeks were tinted naturally with a delicate pink and her lips were full and red. Under delicate black brows brooded a pair of deep soft eyes, dark as mystery, and the whole picture was set off by a mass of curly black silky hair which was partly confined by a slim golden band.

Delcartes knelt at the feet of the king and clasping his sword-hardened fingers in her soft slim hands, she looked up into his eyes, her own eyes luminous and pensive with appeal. Of all the people in the kingdom, Kull preferred not to look in the eyes of Delcartes. He saw there at times a depth of allure and mystery, of which he knew not even herself was aware. She knew something of her powers, this spoiled and pampered child of aristocracy, but her full powers she little guessed, because of her extreme youth. But Kull who was wise in the ways of men and of women, realized with some uneasiness that with maturity, Delcartes was bound to become a terrific power in the court and the land, either for good or bad.

“But your majesty,” she was wailing now, like a child begging for a toy. “Please let me marry Dalgar of Farsun! He has become a Valusian citizen, he is high in favor at court, as you say yourself, then why —”

“I have told you,” said the king with patience. “It is nothing to me whether you marry Dalgar, Brule or the devil! But your father does not wish you to marry this Farsunian adventurer and —”

“But you can make him let me!” she cried.

“The house of bora Ballin I number among my staunchest supporters,” answered the Atlantean, “and Goron bora Ballin, your father, among my closest friends. When I was a friendless gladiator he befriended me. He lent me money when I was a common soldier, and he espoused my cause when I struck for the throne. Not to save this right hand of mine would I force him into an action to which he is so violently opposed, or interfere in his family affairs.”

Delcartes had not yet learned that some men cannot be moved by feminine wiles. She pleaded, coaxed and pouted. She kissed Kull’s hands, wept on his mighty breast, perched on his knee and argued, all much to his embarrassment — but without avail. Kull was sincerely

sympathetic but adamant. To all her appeals and blandishments he had one answer: that it was none of his business, that her father knew better what she needed and that he, Kull, was not going to interfere.

At last Delcartes gave it up as a bad job and left the presence with bowed head and dragging steps. As she emerged from the royal chamber, she met her father coming in. Goron bora Ballin, guessing his daughter's purpose in visiting the king, said nothing to her, but the look he gave her spoke eloquently of spankings to come. The girl climbed miserably into her sedan chair, feeling as if her load was too heavy for any one girl to bear. Then her deeper nature asserted itself. Her dark eyes smoldered with rebellion and she spoke a few quick words to the slaves who carried her chair.

Count Goron stood before his king meanwhile, and his features were frozen into a mask of formal deference. Kull noted that expression and it hurt him. Formality existed between himself and all his subjects and allies except the Pict, Brule, and the ambassador Kananu, but this studied formality was a new thing in Count Goron of the bora Ballin and Kull guessed at the reason.

“Your daughter was here, Count,” said he abruptly.

“Yes, your majesty.” The tone was impassive and respectful.

“You probably know why. She wants to marry Dalgar of Farsun.”

The Count made a stately inclination of his head. “If your majesty so wishes, he has but to say the word.” His features froze into harder lines.

Kull, stung, rose and strode across the chamber to the window, where once again he gazed out at the drowsing city. Without turning he said: “Not for half my kingdom would I interfere with your family affairs, nor force you into a course unpleasant to you.”

The Count was at his side in an instant, his formality vanished, his

fine eyes eloquent: “Your majesty, I have wronged you in my thoughts — I should have known —” He made as if to kneel but Kull restrained him.

The king grinned. “Be at ease, Count. Your private affairs are your own. I cannot help you, but you can help me. There is conspiracy in the air; I smell danger as in my early youth I sensed the nearness of a tiger in the jungle or a serpent in the high grass.”

“My spies have been combing the city, your majesty,” said the Count, his eyes kindling at the prospect of action. “The people murmur as they will murmur under any ruler — but — I have recently come from Kananu at the consulate and he told me to warn you that outside influence and foreign money were at work. He said he knew nothing definite, but his Picts wormed some information from a drunken servant of the Verulian ambassador — vague hints at some coup of treachery that government is planning.”

Kull grunted. “Verulian trickery is a by-word. But Gen Dala the Verulian ambassador is the soul of honor.”

“So much better a figure head; if he knows nothing of what his nation plans, so much the better will he serve as a mask for their doings.”

“But what would Verulia gain?” asked Kull.

“Gomlah, a distant cousin of king Borna, took refuge there when you overthrew the old dynasty. With you slain, Valusia would fall to pieces. Her armies would become disorganized, all her allies except the Picts would desert her, the mercenaries whom only you can control would turn against her, and she would be an easy prey for the first powerful nation who might move against her. Then, with Gomlah as an excuse for invasion, as a puppet on Valusia’s throne —”

“I see,” grunted Kull. “I am better at battle than in council but I see. So — the first step must be my removal, eh?”

“Yes, your majesty.”

Kull smiled and flexed his mighty arms. “After all, this kinging it grows dull at times.” His fingers caressed the hilt of the great sword which he wore at all times.

“Tu, chief councillor to the king, and Dondal, his nephew,” sang out a slave, and two men entered the presence.

Tu, chief councillor, was a portly man of medium height and late middle life, who looked more like a merchant than a councillor. His hair was thin and sparse, his face lined and on his brow rested a look of perpetual suspicion. Tu’s years and honors rested heavily on him. Originally of plebian birth, he had won his way by sheer power of craft and intrigue. He had seen three kings come and go before Kull, and the strain told on him.

His nephew Dondal was a slim, foppish youth with keen dark eyes and a pleasant smile. His chief virtue lay in the fact that he kept a discreet tongue in his head and never repeated what he heard at court. For this reason he was admitted into places not even warranted by his close kinship to Tu.

“Just a small matter of state, your majesty,” said Tu. “This permit for a new harbor on the Western coast. Will your majesty sign?”

Kull sighed his name, Tu drew from inside his bosom a signet ring attached to a small chain which he wore around his neck, and affixed the seal. This ring was the royal signature, in effect. No other ring in the world was exactly like it, and Tu wore it about his neck, waking or sleeping. Outside those in the royal chamber at the moment, not four men in the world knew where the ring was kept.

2.

Mystery

The quiet of the day had merged almost imperceptibly into the quiet of night. The moon had not yet risen and the small silver star points gave little light, as if their radiance was strangled by the heat which still rose from the earth.

Along a deserted street a single horse's hoofs clanged hollowly. If eyes watched from the blank windows, they gave no sign that betrayed that anyone knew Dalgar of Farsun was riding through the night and the silence.

The young Farsunian was fully armed, his lithe athletic body completely encased in light armor, and a morion on his head. He looked capable of handling the long, slim, jewel-hilted sword at his side and the scarf which crossed his steel-clad breast with its red rose detracted nothing from the picture of manhood which he presented.

Now as he rode he glanced at a crumpled note in his hand, which half unfolded disclosed the following message in the characters of Valusia: "At midnight, my beloved, in the Accursed Gardens beyond the walls. We will fly together."

A dramatic note, dramatically worded; even Dalgar's handsome lips curved slightly as he read. Well, a little melodrama was pardonable in a young girl, and the youth enjoyed a touch himself. A thrill of ecstasy shook him at the thought of that rendezvous — by dawn he would be far across the Verulian border with his bride to be — then let Count Goron bora Ballin rave — let the whole Valusian army follow their track. With that much start he and Delcartes would be in safety. He felt high and romantic; his young brave heart swelled with the foolish heroics of youth. It was hours until midnight but — he nudged his

horse with an armored heel and turned aside to take a short cut through some dark narrow streets.

“Oh silver moon and a silver breast —” he hummed under his breath the flaming love songs of the mad, dead poet Ridondo — then his horse snorted and shied. In the shadow of a squalid doorway, a dark bulk moved and groaned.

Drawing his sword, Dalgar slipped from the saddle and bent over he who groaned.

Bending very close he made out the form of a man. He dragged the body into a comparatively lighter area, noting that he was still breathing. Something wet and warm and sticky adhered to his hand.

The man was portly and apparently old, since his hair was thin and sparse, and his beard was shot with white. He was clad in the rags of a beggar but even in the darkness Dalgar could tell that his hands were soft and white under their grime. A nasty gash on the side of his head seeped blood, and his eyes were closed. He groaned from time to time.

Dalgar tore a piece from his sash to staunch the wound and in doing so, a ring on his finger became entangled in the unkempt beard. He jerked impatiently — the beard came away entirely, disclosing the smooth shaven, deeply lined face of a man in late middle life. Dalgar cried out and recoiled. He bounded to his feet, shaken to the roots of his foundation — bewildered and shocked. A moment he stood, staring down at the groaning man, then the quick rattle of hoofs on a parallel street recalled him to life.

He ran down a side alley and accosted the rider. This man pulled up with a quick motion, reaching for his sword as he did so. The steel shod hoofs of his steed struck fire from the flagstones as the horse set back on his haunches.

“What now? Oh, it’s you Dalgar?”

“Brule!” cried the young Farsunian. “Quick! Tu, the chief councillor lies in yonder street, senseless — mayhap murdered!”

The Pict was off his horse in an instant, sword flashing into his hand. He flung the reins over his mount’s head and left the steed standing there like a statue while he followed Dalgar on a run.

Together they bent over the stricken councillor while Brule ran an experienced hand over him.

“No fracture, apparently,” grunted the Pict. “Can’t tell for sure, of course. Was his beard off when you found him?”

“No, I pulled it off accidentally -”

“Then likely this is the work of some thug who knew him not. I’d rather think that. If the man who struck him down knew he was Tu, there’s black treachery brewing in Valusia. I told him he’d come to grief, prowling around the city disguised this way — but you cannot tell a councillor anything. He insisted that in this manner he learned all that was going on — kept his finger on the empire’s pulse, as he said.”

“But if it were a cutthroat,” said Dalgar. “Why did they not rob him? Here is his purse with a few copper coins in it — and who would seek to rob a beggar?”

The Sword-slayer swore. “Right. But who in Valka’s name could know he was Tu? He never wore the same disguise twice and only Dondal and a slave helped him with it — and what did they want, whoever struck him down? Oh, well, Valka — he’ll die while we stand jabbering. Help me get him on my horse.”

With the chief councillor lolling drunkenly in the saddle, upheld by Brule’s steel-sinewed arms, they clattered through the streets to the palace. They were admitted by a wondering guard, and the senseless

man was carried to an inner chamber and laid on a couch, where he was showing signs of recovering consciousness, under the ministrations of the slaves and court women.

At last he sat up and gripped his head groaning. Kananu, Pictish ambassador and the craftiest man in the kingdom, bent over him.

“Tu! Who smote you?”

“I don’t know,” the councillor was still dazed. “I remember nothing.”

“Had you any documents of importance about you?”

“No.”

“Did they take anything from you?”

Tu began fumbling at his garments uncertainly; his clouded eyes began to clear, then flared in sudden apprehension: “The ring! The royal signet ring! It is gone!”

Kananu smote his fist into his palm and cursed soulfully.

“This comes of carrying the thing with you! I warned you! Quick, Brule, Kelka — Dalgar — foul treason is afoot! Haste to the king’s chamber!”

In front of the royal bed chamber ten of the Red Slayers, men of the king’s favorite regiment, stood at guard. To Kananu’s staccato questions, they answered that the king had retired an hour or so ago, that no one had sought entrance, that they had heard no sound.

Kananu knocked on the door. There was no response. In a panic he pushed against the door. It was locked from within.

“Break that door down!” he screamed, his face white, his voice unnatural with unaccustomed strain.

Two of the Red Slayers, giants in size, hurled their full weight against the door, but of heavy oak, braced by bronze bands, it held. Brule pushed them away and attacked the massive portal with his

sword. Under the heavy blows of the keen edge, wood and metal gave way and in a few moments Brule shouldered through the shreds and splinters and rushed into the room. He halted short with a stifled cry and glaring over his shoulder Kananu clutched wildly at his beard. The royal bed was mussed as if it had been slept in, but of the king there was no sign. The room was empty and only the open window gave hint of any clue.

“Sweep the streets!” roared Kananu. “Comb the city! Guard all the gates! Kelka, rouse out the full force of the Red Slayers! Brule, gather your horsemen and ride them all to death if necessary! Haste! Dalgar —”

But the Farsunian was gone. He had suddenly remembered that the hour of midnight approached and of far more importance to him than the whereabouts of any king, was the fact that Delcartes bora Ballin was awaiting him in the Accursed Gardens two miles beyond the city wall.

3.

The Sign of the Seal

That night Kull had retired early. As was his custom, he halted outside the door of the royal bedchamber for a few minutes to chat with the guard, his old regimental mates, and exchange a reminiscence or so of the old days when he had ridden in the ranks of the Red Slayers. Then, dismissing all his attendants, he entered the chamber, flung back the covers of his bed and prepared to retire. Strange proceedings for a king, no doubt, but Kull had been long used to the rough life of a soldier and before that he had been a savage tribesman. He had never

gotten used to having things done for him and in the privacy of his bed chamber, he would at least attend to himself.

But just as he turned to extinguish the great candle which illuminated his room, he heard a slight tapping at the window sill. Hand on sword, he crossed the room with the easy silent tread of a great panther and looked out. The window opened on the inner grounds of the palace, and the hedges and trees loomed vaguely in the semi darkness of the starlight. Fountains glimmered vaguely and he could not make out the forms of any of the sentries who paced those confines.

But here at his elbow was Mystery. Clinging to the vines which covered the wall, was a small wizened fellow who looked much like the professional beggars which swarmed the more sordid of the city's streets. He seemed harmless, with his thin limbs and monkey face, but Kull regarded him with a scowl.

“I see I shall have to plant sentries at the very foot of my window, or tear these vines down,” said the king. “How did you get through the lines?”

The wizened one put his skinny finger across puckered lips for silence, then with a simian like dexterity, slid a hand over the sill through the bars into the room. There he silently handed Kull a piece of parchment. The king unrolled it and read: “King Kull: if you value your life, or the welfare of the kingdom, follow this guide to the place where he shall lead you. Tell no one. Let yourself be not seen by the guards. The regiments are honeycombed with treason and if you are to live and hold the throne, you must do exactly as I say. Trust the bearer of this note implicitly.” It was signed “Tu, Chief Councillor of Valusia” and was sealed with the royal signet ring.

Kull knit his black brows. The thing had an unsavory look — but this was Tu's handwriting — he noted the peculiar, almost impercep-

tible quirk in the last letter of Tu's name, which was the councillor's trade mark, so to speak. And then the sign of the seal, the seal which could not be duplicated — Kull sighed.

“Very well,” he said. “Wait until I arm myself.”

Dressed and clad in light chain mail armor, Kull turned again to the window. He gripped the bars, one in each hand, and cautiously exerting his superhuman strength, felt them give until even his broad shoulders could slip between them. Clambering out he caught the vines and swung down them with as much ease as was displayed by the small beggar who preceded them.

At the foot of the wall, Kull caught his companion's arm.

“How did you elude the guard?” he whispered.

“To such as accosted me, I showed the sign of the royal seal.”

“That will scarcely answer now,” grunted the king. “Follow me; I know their routine.”

Some twenty minutes followed, of lying in wait behind a hedge or tree until a sentry passed, of dodging quickly into the shadows and making short stealthy dashes — at last they came to the outer wall. Kull took his guide by the ankles and lifted him until his fingers clutched the top of the wall. Once astride, the beggar reached down a hand to aid the king, but Kull, with a contemptuous gesture, backed off a few paces, took a short run and bounding high in the air, caught the parapet with one upflung hand, swinging his great form up across the wall top with an almost incredible display of strength and agility.

The next instant the two strangely incongruous figures had dropped down on the opposite side and faded into the gloom.

4.

“Here I stand at bay!”

Delcartes, daughter of the house of bora Ballin, was nervous and frightened. Upheld by her high hopes and her sincere love, she did not regret her rash actions of the last few hours, but she earnestly wished for the coming of midnight and her lover.

Up to the present, her escapade had been easy. It was not easy for any one to leave the city after nightfall, but she had ridden away from her father’s house just before sundown, telling her mother that she was going to spend the night with a girl friend of hers — well for her that women were allowed unusual freedom in the city of Valusia, and were not kept hemmed in in seraglios and veritable prison houses as they were in the Eastern empires; a habit which survived the Flood.

Delcartes had ridden boldly through the Eastern gate, and then made directly for the Accursed Gardens, two miles east of the city. These Gardens had once been the pleasure resort and country estate of a great nobleman, but tales of grim debauches and ghastly rites of devil worship began to get abroad, and finally the people, maddened by the regular disappearance of their children, had descended on the Gardens in a frenzied mob, and had hanged the bad prince to his own portals. Combing the Gardens, the people had found strange foul things, and in a flood of repulsion and horror, had partially destroyed the mansion and the summer houses, the arbors, the grottoes and the walls. But built of imperishable marble, many of the buildings had resisted both the sledges of the mob and the corrosion of time. Now, deserted for a hundred years, a miniature jungle had sprung up within the crumbling walls and the rank vegetation overran the ruins.

Delcartes concealed her steed in a ruined summer house and

seating herself on the cracked marble floor, settled herself to wait. At first it was not bad. The gentle summer sunset flooded the land, softening all scenes with its mellow gold. The green sea about her, shot with white gleams which were marble walls and crumbling roofs, intrigued her. But as night fell and the shadows merged, Delcartes grew nervous. The night wind whispered grisly things through the branches and the broad palm leaves and the tall grasses and the stars seemed cold and far away. Legends and tales came back to her, and she fancied that above the throb of her pounding heart, she could hear the rustle of unseen black wings, and the mutter of fiendish voices.

She prayed for midnight and Dalgar. Had Kull seen her then, he would not have thought of her strange deep nature, nor the signs of her great future; he would have seen only a frightened little girl who passionately desired to be taken up and cuddled.

But the thought of leaving never entered her mind.

Time seemed as if it would never pass, but pass it did somehow. At last a faint glow betrayed the rising of the moon, and she knew the hour was close to midnight.

Then suddenly there came a sound which brought her to her feet, her heart flying into her throat. Somewhere in the supposedly deserted Gardens there crashed into the silence a shout and a clang of steel. A short hideous scream chilled the blood in her veins, then silence fell in a suffocating shroud.

Dalgar — Dalgar! The thought beat like a hammer in her dazed brain. Her lover had come and had fallen foul of some one — or something — men *or* — ?

She stole from her hiding place, one hand over her heart which seemed about to burst through her ribs. She stole along a broken pave, and the whispering palm leaves brushed against her like ghostly fin-

gers. About her lay a pulsating gulf of shadows, vibrant and alive with nameless evil. There was no sound.

Ahead of her loomed the ruined mansion; then without a sound two men stepped into her path. She screamed once, then her tongue froze with terror. She tried to flee but her legs would not work and before she could move, one of the men had caught her up and tucked her under his arm as if she were a tiny child.

“A woman,” he growled in a language which Delcartes barely understood, and recognized as Verulian. “Lend me your dagger and I’ll —”

“We haven’t time now,” interposed the other, speaking in the Valusian tongue. “Toss her in there with him, and we’ll finish them both together. We must get Gonda here, before we kill him — he wants to question him a little.”

“Small use,” rumbled the Verulian giant, striding after his companion. “He won’t talk — I can tell you that — he’s opened his mouth only to curse us, since we captured him.”

Delcartes, tucked ignominiously under her captor’s arm, was frozen with fear, but her mind was working. Who was this “him” they were going to question and then kill? The thought that it must be Dalgar drove her own fear from her mind, and flooded her soul with a wild and desperate rage. She began to kick and struggle violently and was punished with a resounding smack which brought tears to her eyes and a cry of pain to her lips. She lapsed into a humiliated submission and was presently tossed unceremoniously through a shadowed doorway, to sprawl in a disheveled heap on the floor.

“Hadn’t we better tie her?” queried the giant.

“What use? She can’t escape. And she can’t untie *him*. Hurry up; we’ve got work to do.”

Delcartes sat up and looked timidly about. She was in a small chamber the corners of which were screened with spider webs. Dust was deep on the floor, and fragments of marble from the crumbling walls littered it. Part of the roof or ceiling was gone, and the slowly rising moon poured light through the aperture. By its light she saw a form on the floor, close to the wall. She shrank back, her teeth sinking into her lip with horrified anticipation, then she saw with a delirious sensation of relief that the man was too large to be Dalgar. She crawled over to him and looked into his face. He was bound hand and foot and gagged; above the gag, two cold grey eyes looked up into hers. Eyes in which cold flame danced, like a volcano gleaming under fathoms of grey ice.

“King Kull!” Delcartes pressed both hands against her temples while the room reeled to her shocked and astounded gaze. The next instant her slim strong fingers were at work on the gag. A few minutes of agonized effort and it came free. Kull stretched his powerful jaws and swore in his own language, considerate, even in that moment, of the girl’s tender ears.

“Oh my lord, how came you here?” the girl was wringing her hands.

“Either my most trusted councillor is a traitor or I am a madman!” growled the giant. “One came to me with a letter in Tu’s handwriting, bearing even the royal seal. I followed him, as instructed, through the city and to a gate the existence of which I had never known. This gate was unguarded and apparently unknown to any but they who plotted against me. Outside the gate one awaited us with horses and we came full speed to these damnable Gardens. At the outer edge we left the horses, and I was led, like a blind dumb fool for sacrifice, into this ruined mansion.

“As I came through the door, a great man-net fell on me, entangling my sword arm, and binding my limbs, and a dozen great rogues sprang on me. Well, mayhap my taking was not so easy as they had thought. Two of them were swinging on my already encumbered right arm so I could not use my sword, but I kicked one in the side and felt his ribs give way, and bursting some of the net’s strands with my left hand, I gored another with my dagger. He had his death thereby and screamed like a lost soul as he gave up the ghost.

“But by Valka, there were too many of them. At last they had me stripped of my armor” — Delcartes saw the king wore only a sort of loin cloth — “and bound as you see me. The devil himself could not break these strands — no, scant use to try to untie the knots. One of the men was a seaman and I know of old the sort of knots they tie! I was a galley slave once, you know.”

“But what can I do?” wailed the girl, wringing her hands.

“Take a heavy piece of marble and flake off a sharp sliver,” said Kull swiftly. “You must cut these ropes —”

She did as she was bid and was rewarded with a long thin piece of stone, the concave edge of which was as keen as a razor with a jagged edge.

“I fear I will cut your skin, sire,” she apologized as she began work.

“Cut skin, flesh and bone, but get me free!” snarled Kull, his ferocious eyes blazing. “Trapped like a blind fool! Oh, imbecile that I am! Valka, Honan and Hotath! But let me get my hands on the rogues — how came you here?”

“Let us talk of that later,” said Delcartes rather breathlessly. “Just now there is time for haste.”

Silence fell as the girl sawed at the stubborn strands giving no heed to her own tender hands which were soon lacerated and bleeding.

Slowly, strand by strand the cords gave way; but there was still enough to hold the ordinary man helpless, when a heavy step sounded outside the door.

Delcartes froze. A voice spoke: "He is within, Gonda, bound and gagged and helpless. With him some Valusian wench that we caught wandering about the Garden."

"Then be on watch for some gallant," spoke another voice, a harsh, grating one, as the tone of a man accustomed to being obeyed. "Likely she was to meet some fop here. You —"

"No names, no names, good Gonda," broke in a silky Valusian voice. "Remember our agreement — until Gomlah mounts the throne, I am simply — the Masked One."

"Very good," grunted the Verulian. "You have done a good night's work, Masked One. None but you could have done it, for of us all only you knew how to obtain the royal signet. Only you could so closely counterfeit Tu's writing — by the way, did you kill the old fellow?"

"What matter? Tonight, or the day Gomlah mounts the throne — he dies. The matter is that the king lies helpless in our power."

Kull was racking his brain to remember — whose voice was that of the traitor? The voice was familiar but he could not place it. And Gonda — his face grew grim. A deep conspiracy indeed, if Verulia must send the commander of her royal armies to do her foul work. The king knew Gonda well, and had aforetime entertained him in the palace.

"Go in and bring him out," said Gonda. "We will take him to the old torture chamber. I have questions to ask of him."

The door opened admitting one man; the giant who had captured Delcartes. The door closed behind him and he crossed the room, giving scarcely a glance to the girl who cowered in a corner. He bent over

the bound king, took him by leg and shoulder to lift him bodily — there came a sudden loud snap, as Kull, throwing all his iron strength into one convulsive wrench, broke the remaining strands which bound him.

He had not been tied long enough for all circulation to be cut off and his strength affected. As a python strikes his hands shot to the giant's throat — shot, and gripped like a steel vise.

The giant went to his knees. One hand flew to the iron fingers at his throat, the other to his dagger. His fingers sank like steel into Kull's wrist, the dagger flashed from its sheath — then his eyes bulged, his tongue sagged out. The fingers fell away from the king's wrist, and the dagger slipped from a nerveless grip. The Verulian went limp, his throat literally crushed in that terrible grip. Kull, with one terrific wrench, broke his neck and releasing him, tore the sword from its sheath. Delcartes had picked up the dagger.

The whole combat had taken only a few flashing seconds and had caused no more noise than might have resulted from a man lifting and shouldering a great weight.

“Hasten!” called Gonda's voice impatiently from the door, and Kull, crouching tiger-like just inside, thought quickly. He knew that there were at least a score of conspirators in the Gardens. He knew also, from the sound of the voices, that there were only two or three outside the door at the moment. This room was not a good place to defend. In a moment they would be coming in to see what was the delay. He reached a decision and acted promptly.

He beckoned the girl. “As soon as I have gone through the door, run out likewise and run up the stairs which lead away to the left.” She nodded trembling and he patted her slim shoulders reassuringly. Then he whirled and flung open the door.

To the men outside, expecting the Verulian giant with the helpless king on his shoulders, appeared an apparition which was dumfounding in its unexpectedness. Kull stood in the door; Kull, half naked, crouched like a great human tiger, his teeth bared in the moonlight in a snarl of battle fury, his terrible eyes blazing — the long blade whirling like a wheel of silver in the moon.

Kull saw Gonda, two Verulian soldiers, a slim figure in a black mask — a flashing instant and then he was among them and the dance of death was on. The Verulian commander went down in the king's first lunge, his head cleft to the teeth, in spite of his helmet. The Masked One drew and thrust, his point raking Kull's cheek; one of the soldiers drove at the king with a spear, was parried and the next instant lay dead across his master. The other soldier broke and ran, hallooing lustily for his comrades. The Masked One retreated swiftly before the headlong attack of the king, parrying and guarding with an almost uncanny skill. He had no time to launch an attack of his own; before the whirlwind ferocity of Kull's charge he had only time for defense. Kull beat against his blade like a blacksmith on an anvil, and again and again it seemed as though the long Verulian steel must inevitably cleave that masked and hooded head, but always the long slim Valusian sword was in the way, turning the blow by an inch or stopping it within a hair's breadth of the skin, but always just enough.

Then Kull saw the Verulian soldiers running through the foliage and heard the clang of their weapons and their fierce shouts. Caught here in the open, they would get behind him and spit him like a rat. He slashed once more, viciously, at the retreating Valusian, and then backing away, turned and ran fleetly up the stairs, at the top of which Delcartes already stood.

There he turned at bay. He and the girl stood on a sort of artificial

promontory. A stair led up and a stair had once led down the other way, but now the back stair had long since crumbled to decay. Kull saw that they were in a cul-de-sac. There was no escape, for on each side was a sheer wall some fifty feet in height. These walls were cut deep with ornate carvings but — “Well,” thought Kull, “here we die. But here many others die, too.”

The Verulians were gathering at the foot of the stair, under the leadership of the mysterious masked Valusian. The bell rang then. Kull took a fresh grip on his sword hilt and flung back his head — an unconscious reversion to days when he had worn a lion-like mane of hair. A wild freedom swept over him and he laughed with such ringing joy that the soldiers at the foot of the stairs stared up at him, gaping.

Kull had never feared death; he did not fear it now; except for one consideration, he would have welcomed the clamor and madness of battle as an old friend, without regrets — this consideration was the girl who stood beside him. As he looked at her trembling form and white face, he reached a sudden decision. For a moment he struggled with himself. And to those to whom it seems a slight thing, the sacrifice he planned, let them reflect that Kull was an Atlantean; that all his life he had expected to die gloriously in battle. That his race looked on any other death as the ultimate disgrace. Yet now this man, who was king of Valusia and more than king, raised his hand and shouted: “Ho, men of Verulia! Here I stand at bay. Many shall fall before I die. But promise me to release the girl, unharmed, and I will not lift a hand. You may kill me then like a sheep.”

Delcartes cried out in protest and the Masked One laughed: “We make no bargains with one already doomed. The girl also must die and I make no promises to break. Up, warriors, and take him!”

They flooded the stair like a black wave of death, swords sparkling

frosty silver in the moonlight. One was far in advance of his fellows, a huge warrior who bore on high a great battle axe. Moving quicker than Kull had anticipated, this man was on the landing in an instant it seemed. Kull rushed in and the axe descended. Kull caught the heavy shaft with his left hand and checked the rush of the weapon in mid-air — a feat few men could have done — and at the same time struck in from the side with his right, a sweeping hammer-like blow which sent the long sword crunching through armor, muscle and bone, and left the broken blade wedged in the spinal column.

At the same instant then, he released the useless hilt and tore the axe from the nerveless grasp of the dying warrior who pitched back down the stairs. And Kull laughed shortly and grimly.

The Verulians hesitated on the stair and below the Masked One savagely urged them on. They were inclined to be rebellious.

“Gonda is dead,” shouted one. “Shall we take orders from this Valusian? This is a devil and not a man, who faces us! Let us save ourselves!”

“Fools!” the Masked One’s voice rose in a ferine shriek. “Don’t you see that your only safety lies in slaying the king? If you fail tonight your own government will repudiate you and will aid the Valusians in hunting you down! Up fools, you will die, some of you, but better for a few to die under the king’s axe, than for all to die on the gibbet! Let one man retreat down these stairs — that man will I kill!” And the long slender sword menaced them.

Desperate, afraid of their leader and recognizing the truth of his words, the score or more warriors turned their breasts to Kull’s steel. As they massed for what must necessarily be the last charge, Delcartes’ attention was attracted by a movement at the base of the wall. A shadow detached itself from the shadows and moved up the sheer face

of the wall, climbing like an ape and using the deep carvings for foot and hand holds. This side of the wall was in shadow and she could not make out the features of the man, more especially as he wore a heavy morion which shaded his face.

Saying nothing to Kull who stood at the landing, his axe poised, she stole over to the edge of the wall, half concealing herself behind a ruin of what had once been a parapet. Now she could see that the man was in full armor but still she could not make out his features. Her breath came fast and she raised the dagger, fighting fiercely to overcome a tendency of nausea.

Now a steel-clad arm looked up over the edge — now she sprang quick and silent as a tigress and struck full at the unprotected face upturned suddenly in the moonlight. And even as the dagger fell and she was unable to check the blow, she screamed, wild and agonized. For in that fleeting second she recognized the face of her lover, Dalgar of Farsun.

5.

The Battle of the Stairs

Dalgar, after unceremoniously leaving the distracted presence of Kananu, got him to horse and rode hard to the Eastern gate. He had heard Kananu give orders to close the gates and let no one out, and he rode like a madman to beat that order. It was a hard matter to get out at night anyhow, and Dalgar having learned that the gates were not guarded tonight by the incorruptible Red Slayers, had planned to bribe his way out. Now he depended on the audacity of his scheme.

All in a lather of sweat, he halted at the Eastern gate and shouted: “Unbolt the gate! I must ride to the Verulian border tonight! Quick!

The king has vanished! Let me through and then guard the gate! Let no one follow me! In the name of the king!”

Then as the soldier hesitated: “Haste, fools! The king may be in mortal danger! Hark!”

Far out across the city, chilling hearts with sudden nameless dread, sounded the deep tones of the great bronze Bell of the King which booms only when the king is in peril. The guards were electrified.

They knew Dalgar was high in favor as a visiting noble. They believed what he said. Under the impetuous blast of his will, they swung the great iron gates wide and he shot through like a thunderbolt, to vanish instantly in the outer darkness.

As Dalgar rode, he hoped no great harm had come to Kull, for he liked the bluff barbarian far more than he had ever liked any of the polished, sophisticated and bloodless kings of the Seven Empires. Had it been possible, he would have aided in the search. But Delcartes was waiting for him and already he was late.

As the young nobleman entered the Garden, he had a peculiar feeling, that here in the heart of desolation and loneliness, there were many men. An instant later he heard a clash of steel, the sound of many footsteps running, and a fierce shouting in a foreign tongue. Slipping off his horse and drawing his sword, he crept through the underbrush until he came in sight of the ruined mansion. There a strange sight burst upon his astounded vision. At the top of the crumbling staircase stood a half naked, blood-stained giant whom he recognized as the king of Valusia. By his side stood a girl — a cry burst from Dalgar’s lips, half stifled! Delcartes! His nails bit into the palms of his clenching hand. Who were those men in dark clothing who swarmed up the stairs? No matter. They meant death to the girl and to Kull. He heard the king challenge them and offer his life for Delcartes’

and a flood of gratitude swelled into his throat, nearly strangling him. Then he noted the deep carvings on the wall nearest him. The next instant he was climbing — to die by the side of the king, protecting the girl he loved.

He had lost sight of Delcartes and now as he climbed he dared not take the time to look up for her. This was a slippery and treacherous task. He did not see her until he caught hold of the edge to pull himself up — till he heard her scream and saw her hand falling toward his face gripping a gleam of silver. He ducked and took the blow on his morion; the dagger snapped at the hilt and Delcartes collapsed in his arms the next moment.

Kull had whirled, axe high, at her scream — now he paused. He recognized the Farsunian and even in that instant he read between the lines, knew why the couple was here, and grinned with real enjoyment.

A second the charge had halted, as the Verulians had noted the second man on the landing; now they came on again, bounding up the steps in the moonlight, blades aflame, eyes wild with desperation. Kull met the first with an overhand smash that crushed helmet and skull, then Dalgar was at his side and his blade licked out and into a Verulian throat. Then began the battle of the stair, since immortalized by singers and poets.

Kull was there to die and to slay before he died. He gave scant thought to defense. His axe played a wheel of death about him and with each blow there came a crunch of steel and bone, a spurt of blood, a gurgling cry of agony. Bodies choked the wide stair, but still the survivors came, clambering over the gory forms of their comrades.

Dalgar had little opportunity to thrust or cut. He had seen in an instant that his best task lay in protecting Kull, who was a born

slaughter machine, but who, in his armorless condition was likely to fall any instant.

So Dalgar wove a web of steel about the king, bringing into play all the sword skill that was his. Again and again his flashing blade turned a point from Kull's heart; again and again his mail-clad forearm intercepted a blow that else had killed. Twice he took on his own helmet slashes meant for the king's bare head.

It is not easy to guard another man and yourself at the same time. Kull was bleeding from cuts on the face and breast, from a gash above the temple, a stab in the thigh, and a deep wound in the left shoulder; a thrusting pike had rent Dalgar's cuirass and wounded him in the side, and he felt his strength ebbing. A last mad effort of their foes and the Farsunian was overthrown. He fell at Kull's feet and a dozen points prodded for his life. With a lion-like roar Kull cleared a space with one mighty sweep of that red axe and stood astride the fallen youth. They closed in —

There burst on Kull's ears a crash of horses' hoofs and the Accursed Gardens were flooded with wild riders, yelling like wolves in the moonlight. A storm of arrows swept the stairs and men howled, pitching headlong to lie still, or to tear gibbering at the cruel, deeply imbedded shafts. The few whom Kull's axe and the arrows had left fled down the stairs to be met at the bottom by the whistling curved swords of Brule's Picts. And there they died, fighting to the last, those bold Verulian warriors — catspaws for their false king, sent out on a dangerous and foul mission, disowned by the men who sent them out, and branded forever with infamy. But they died like men.

But one did not die there at the foot of the stairs. The Masked One had fled at the first sound of hoofs, and now he shot across the Gardens riding a superb horse. He had almost reached the outer wall

when Brule, the Spear-slayer, chief of the Picts, dashed across his path. There on the promontory, leaning on his bloody axe, Kull saw them fight beneath the moon.

The Masked One had abandoned his defensive tactics. He charged the Pict with reckless courage and the Spear-slayer met him, horse to horse, man to man, blade to blade. Both were magnificent horsemen. Their steeds, obeying the touch of the bridle, the nudge of the knee, whirled, reared and spun. But through all their motions, the whistling blades never lost touch of each other. Brule, differently from his tribesmen, used the slim straight sword of Valusia. In reach and speed there was little to choose between them, and Kull watching again and again caught his breath and bit his lip as it seemed Brule would fall before an unusually vicious thrust.

No crude hacking and slashing for these seasoned warriors. They thrust and countered, parried and thrust again. Then suddenly Brule seemed to lose touch with his opponent's blade — he parried wildly and wide, leaving himself wide open — the Masked One struck heels into his horse's sides as he lunged, so that the sword and the horse shot forward as one. Brule leaned aside, let the blade glance from the side of his cuirass — his own blade shot straight out, elbow, wrist, hilt and point making a straight line from his shoulder; the horses crashed together and together they rolled headlong on the sward. But from that tangle of lashing hoofs Brule rose unharmed and there in the high grass lay the Masked One, Brule's sword still transfixing him.

Kull awoke as from a trance; the Picts were howling about him like wolves, but he raised his hand for silence. "Enough! You are all heroes! But attend to Dalgar — he is sorely wounded. And when you have finished, you might see to my own wounds. Brule, how came you to find me?"

Brule beckoned Kull to where he stood above the dead Masked One.

“A beggar crone saw you climb the palace wall, and out of curiosity watched where you went. She followed you and saw you go through the forgotten gate. I was riding the plain between the wall and these Gardens when I heard the clash of steel. But look — who can this be?”

“Raise the mask,” said Kull. “Whoever it is, it is he who copied Tu’s handwriting, who took the signet ring from Tu — and —”

Brule tore the mask away.

“Dondal!” Kull ejaculated. “Tu’s nephew! Brule, Tu must never know this. Let him think that Dondal rode with you and died fighting for his king!”

Brule seemed stunned: “Dondal! A traitor! Why, many a time I’ve drunk wine with him and slept it off in one of his beds.”

Kull nodded. “I liked Dondal.”

Brule cleansed his blade and drove it home in the scabbard with a vicious clank. “Want will make a rogue of any man,” he said moodily. “He was deep in debt — Tu was penurious with him. Always maintained that giving young men money was bad for them. Dondal was forced to keep up appearances for his pride’s sake and so fell into the hands of the usurers. Thus Tu is the greater traitor for he drove the boy into treachery by his parsimony — and I could wish Tu’s heart had stopped my point instead of his.”

So saying, with a vicious snap of his teeth, the Pict turned on his heel and strode somberly away.

Kull turned back to Dalgar who lay half senseless while the Pictish warriors dressed his wounds with experienced fingers. Others attended to the king, and while they staunched, cleansed and bandaged,

Delcartes came up to Kull with the mystery of the moon in her dark eyes.

“Sire,” she held out her small hands, now torn and stained with dried blood. “Will you now not have mercy on us — grant my plea if —” her throat caught on a sob — “if Dalgar lives?”

Kull caught her slim shoulders and shook her in his agony of spirit.

“Girl, girl, girl! Ask me anything except something I cannot grant. Ask half my kingdom, or my right hand and it is yours. I will ask Goron to let you marry Dalgar — I will beg him — but I cannot force him.”

Tall horsemen were gathering through the Gardens whose resplendent armor shone among the half naked wolfish Picts. A tall man hurried up, throwing back the vizer of his helmet.

“Father!”

Goron bora Ballin crushed his daughter to his breast with a sob of thanksgiving, and then turned to his king.

“Sire, you are sorely wounded!”

Kull shook his head. “Not sorely — not at least for me, though other men might feel stiff and sore. But yonder lies he who took the death thrusts meant for me; who was my shield and my helmet, and but for whom Valusia had howled for a new king.”

Goron whirled toward the prostrate youth.

“Dalgar! Is he dead?”

“Nigh unto it,” growled a wiry Pict who was still working above him. “But he is steel and whalebone; with any care he should live.”

“He came here to meet your daughter and elope with her,” said Kull while Delcartes hung her head. “He crept through the brush and saw me fighting for my life and hers, atop yonder stair. He might have escaped. Nothing barred him. But he climbed the sheer wall to certain

death, as it seemed then, and fought by my side as gayly as he ever rode to a feast — he not even a subject of mine by birth.”

Goron’s hands clenched and unclenched. His eyes kindled and softened as they bent on his daughter.

“Delcartes,” he said softly, drawing the girl into the shelter of his steel clad arm. “Do you still wish to marry this wild reckless youth?”

Her eyes spoke eloquently enough.

Kull was speaking: “Take him up carefully; bear him to the palace; he shall have the best —”

Goron interposed: “Sire, if I may ask — let him be taken to my castle. There the finest physicians shall attend him and on his recovery — well, if it be your royal pleasure, might we not celebrate the event with a wedding?”

Delcartes screamed with joy, clapped her hands, kissed her father and Kull and was off to Dalgar’s side like a whirlwind.

Goron smiled softly, his aristocratic face lighted.

“Out of a night of blood and terror, joy and happiness are born.”

The barbarian king grinned and shouldered his stained and notched axe.

“Life is that way, Count; one man’s bane is another’s bliss.”

THE CURSE OF THE GOLDEN SKULL

Rotath of Lemuria was dying. Blood had ceased to flow from the deep sword-gash under his heart, but the pulse in his temple hammered like kettle drums.

Rotath lay on a marble floor. Granite columns rose about him and a silver idol stared with ruby eyes at the man who lay at its feet. The bases of the columns were carved with curious monsters; above the shrine sounded a vague whispering. The trees which hemmed in and hid that mysterious fane spread long waving branches above it, and these branches were vibrant with curious leaves which rustled in the wind. From time to time great black roses scattered their dusky petals down.

Rotath lay dying and he used his fading breath in calling down curses on his slayers — on the faithless king who had betrayed him, and on that barbarian chief, Kull of Atlantis, who dealt him the death blow.

Acolyte of the nameless gods, and dying in an unknown shrine on the leafy summit of Lemuria's highest mountain — Rotath's weird inhuman eyes smoldered with a terrible cold fire. A pageant of glory and splendor passed before his mind's eye. The acclaim of worshippers, the roar of silver trumpets, the whispering shadows of mighty and mystic temples where great wings swept unseen — then the intrigues, the onslaught of the invaders — death!

Rotath cursed the king of Lemuria — the king to whom he had taught fearful and ancient mysteries and forgotten abominations. Fool

that he had been to reveal his powers to a weakling who, having learned to fear him, had turned to foreign kings for aid.

How strange it seemed, that he, Rotath of the Moonstone and the Asphodel, sorcerer and magician, should be gasping out his breath on the marble floor, a victim to that most material of all threats — a keen pointed sword in a sinewy hand.

Rotath cursed the limitations of the flesh. He felt his brain crumbling and he cursed all the men of all the worlds. He cursed them by Hotath and Helgor, by Ra and Ka and Valka.

He cursed all men living and dead, and all the generations unborn for a million centuries to come, naming Vramma and Jaggta-noga and Kamma and Kulthas. He cursed humanity by the fane of the Black Gods, the tracks of the Serpent Ones, the talons of the Ape Lords and the iron-bound books of Shuma Gorath.

He cursed goodness and virtue and light, speaking the names of gods forgotten even by the priests of Lemuria. He invoked the dark monstrous shadows of the older worlds, and of those black suns which lurk forever behind the stars.

He felt the shades gather about him. He was going fast. And closing about him in an ever nearing ring, he sensed the tiger-taloned devils who awaited his coming. He saw their bodies of solid jet and the great red caverns of their eyes. Behind hovered the white shadows of they who had died upon his altars, in horrid torment. Like mist in the moonlight they floated, great luminous eyes fixed on him in sad accusation, a never-ending host.

Rotath feared, and fearing, his curses rose louder, his blasphemies grew more terrible. With one last wild passion of fury, he placed a curse on his own bones that they might bring death and horror to the sons of men. But even as he spoke he knew that years and ages would

pass and his bones turn to dust in that forgotten shrine before any man's foot disturbed its silence. So he mustered his fast-waning powers for one last invocation to the dread beings he had served, one last feat of magic. He uttered a blood-freezing formula, naming a terrible name.

And soon he felt mighty elemental powers set in motion. He felt his bones growing hard and brittle. A coldness transcending earthly coldness passed over him and he lay still. The leaves whispered and the silver god laughed with cold gemmed eyes.

Emerald Interlude

Years stretched into centuries, centuries became ages. The green oceans rose and wrote an epic poem in emerald and the rhythm thereof was terrible. Thrones toppled and the silver trumpets fell silent forever. The races of men passed as smoke drifts from the breast of a summer. The roaring jade-green seas engulfed the lands and all mountains sank, even the highest mountain of Lemuria.

Orchids of Death

A man thrust aside the trailing vines and stared. A heavy beard masked his face and mire slimed his boots. Above and about him hung the thick tropic jungle in breathless and exotic brooding. Orchids flamed and breathed about him.

Wonder was in his wide eyes. He gazed between shattered granite columns upon a crumbling marble floor. Vines twined thickly, like green serpents, among these columns and trailed their sinuous length across the floor. A curious idol, long fallen from a broken pedestal, lay upon the floor and stared up with red, unblinking eyes. The man noted

the character of this corroded thing and a strong shudder shook him. He glanced unbelievably again at the other thing which lay on the marble floor, and shrugged his shoulders.

He entered the shrine. He gazed at the carvings on the bases of the sullen columns, wondering at their unholy and indescribable appearance. Over all the scent of the orchids hung like a heavy fog.

This small, rankly grown, swampy island was once the pinnacle of a great mountain, mused the man, and he wondered what strange people had reared up this fane — and left that monstrous thing lying before the fallen idol. He thought of the fame which his discoveries should bring him — of the acclaim of mighty universities and powerful scientific societies.

He bent above the skeleton on the floor, noting the inhumanly long finger bones, the curious formation of the feet; the deep cavern-like eye-sockets, the jutting frontal bone, the general appearance of the great domed skull, which differed so horribly from mankind as he knew it.

What long dead artizan had shaped the thing with such incredible skill? He bent closer, noting the rounded ball-and-socket of the joints, the slight depressions on flat surfaces where muscles had been attached. And he started as the stupendous truth was borne on him.

This was no work of human art — that skeleton had once been clothed in flesh and had walked and spoken and lived. And this was impossible, his reeling brain told him, for the bones were of solid gold.

The orchids nodded in the shadows of the trees. The shrine lay in purple and black shade. The man brooded above the bones and wondered. How could he know of an elder world sorcery great enough to serve undying hate, by lending that hate a concrete substance, impervious to Time's destructions?

The man laid his hand on the golden skull. A sudden deathly shriek broke the silence. The man in the shrine reeled up, screaming, took a single staggering step and then fell headlong, to lie with writhing limbs on the vine-crossed marble floor.

The orchids showered down on him in a sensuous rain and his blind, clutching hands tore them into exotic fragments as he died. Silence fell and an adder crawled sluggishly from within the golden skull.

THE KING AND THE OAK

Before the shadows slew the sun the kites were soaring free,
And Kull rode down the forest road, his red sword at his knee;
And winds were whispering round the world: “King Kull
rides to the sea.”

The sun died crimson in the sea, the long grey shadows fell;
The moon rose like a silver skull that wrought a demon’s spell,
For in its light great trees stood up like specters out of Hell.

In spectral light the trees stood up, inhuman monsters dim;
Kull thought each trunk a living shape, each branch a knotted limb,
And strange unmortal evil eyes flamed horribly at him.

The branches writhed like knotted snakes, they beat against the night,
And one great oak with swayings stiff, horrific in his sight,
Tore up its roots and blocked his way, grim in the ghostly light.

They grappled in the forest way, the king and grisly oak;
Its great limbs bent him in their grip, but never a word was spoke;
And futile in his iron hand, the stabbing dagger broke.

And through the tossing, monstrous trees there sang a dim refrain
Fraught deep with twice a million years of evil, hate and pain:
“We were the lords ere man had come, and shall be lords again.”

Kull sensed an empire strange and old that bowed to man’s advance
As kingdoms of the grassblades bow before the marching ants,
And horror gripped him in the dawn like someone in a trance.

He strove with bloody hands against a still and silent tree;
As from a nightmare dream he woke; a wind blew down the lea
And Kull of high Atlantis rode silent to the sea.

BRAN MAK MORN

MEN OF THE SHADOWS

*From the dim red dawn of Creation
From the fogs of timeless Time
Came we, the first great nation.
First on the upward climb.*

*Savage, untaught, unknowing,
Groping through primitive night,
Yet faintly catching the glowing,
The hint of the coming Light.*

*Ranging o'er lands untraveled,
Sailing o'er seas unknown
Mazed by world-puzzles unraveled,
Building our land-marks of stone.*

*Vaguely grasping at glory,
Gazing beyond our ken
Mutely the ages' story
Rearing on plain and fen.*

*See, how the Lost Fire smolders,
We are one with the eons' must.
Nations have trod our shoulders,
Trampling us into the dust.*

*We, the first of the races,
Linking the Old and New —
Look, where the sea-cloud spaces
Mingle with ocean-blue.*

*So we have mingled with ages,
And the world-wind our ashes stirs,
Vanished are we from Time's pages,
Our memory? Wind in the firs.*

*Stonehenge of long-gone glory
Sombre and lone in the night,
Murmur the age-old story
How we kindled the first of the Light
Speak night-winds, of man's creation,
Whisper o'er crag and fen,
The tale of the first great nation,
The last of the Stone Age men.*

~

Sword met sword with clash and slither.

“Ailla! A-a-ailla!” rising on a steep pitch of sound from a hundred savage throats.

On all sides they swarmed upon us, a hundred to thirty. Back to back we stood, shields lapped, blades at guard. Those blades were red, but corselets and helmets, too, were red. One advantage we possessed, we were armored and our foes were not. Yet they flung themselves naked to the fray with as fierce a valor as if they were clad in steel.

Then for a moment they drew off and stood at a distance, gasping curses, blood from sword-thrusts making strange patterns on their woad-painted skins.

Thirty men! Thirty, the remnant of the troop of five hundred that had marched so arrogantly from Hadrian's Wall. Zeus, what a plan! Five hundred men, sent forth to hew a way through a land that

swarmed with barbarians of another age. Marching over heather hills by day, hacking a crimson trail through blood-frenzied hordes, close camp at night, with snarling, gibbering beings that stole past the sentries to slay with silent dagger. Battle, bloodshed, carnage.

And word would go to the emperor in his fine palace, among his nobles and his women, that another expedition had disappeared among the hazy mountains of the mystic North.

I glanced at the men who were my comrades. There were Romans from Latinia and native-born Romans. There were Britons, Germans, and a flame-haired Hibernian. I looked at the wolves in human guise that ringed us round. Dwarfish, hairy men they were, bowed and gnarled of limb, long and mighty of arm, with great mops of coarse hair topping foreheads that slanted like apes'. Small unblinking black eyes glinted malevolent spite, like a snake's eyes. Scarce any clothing they wore, and they bore small round shields, long spears and short swords with oval-shaped blades. While scarce one of them topped five feet in height, their incredibly broad shoulders denoted massive strength. And they were as quick as cats.

They came with a rush. Short savage sword clashed on short Roman sword. It was fighting at very close quarters, for the savages were better adapted to such battling and the Romans trained their soldiers in the use of the short blade. There the Roman shield was at disadvantage, for it was too heavy to be shifted swiftly and the savages crouched, thrusting upward.

Back to back we stood, and as a man fell, we closed the ranks again. On, on they pushed, until their snarling faces were close to ours, and their rank, beast-like breath was in our nostrils. Like men of steel we held the formation. The heather, the hills, time itself, faded. A man ceased to be a man and became a mere fighting automaton. The haze

of battle erased mind and soul. Swing, thrust. A blade shattering on shield; a bestial face snarling through the battle-fog. Smite! The face vanishing, for another face equally bestial.

Years of Roman culture slipped away like sea-fog before the sun. I was again a savage; a primal man of the forest and seas. A primal man, facing a tribe of another age, fierce in tribal hate, fierce with the slaughter-lust. How I cursed the shortness of the Roman sword I wielded. A spear crashed against my breast-plate; a sword shattered on my helmet crest, beating me to the ground. Up I reeled, slaying the smiter with a fierce up-slashing thrust. Then I stopped short, sword raised. Over all the heather was silence. No more foes stood before me. In a silent, gory band they lay, still grasping their swords, hacked and hewn faces still set in snarls of hate. And of the thirty that had faced them, there remained five. Two Romans, a Briton, the Irishman, and I. The Roman sword and the Roman armor had triumphed and incredible as it seemed, we had slain nearly four times our own number.

And there was but one thing we might do. Hew our way back over the trail we had come, seek to gain through countless leagues of ferocious land. On every hand great mountains reared. Snow crowned their summits and the land was not warm. How far north we were, we had no idea. The march was but a hazy memory into whose crimson fogs days and nights faded in a red panorama. All we knew was some days ago the remnants of the Roman army had been scattered among the peaks by a terrific tempest, on whose mighty wings the savages had assailed us by hordes. And the war horns had droned through the vales and crags for days, and the half-hundred of us who had held together had battled every step of the way, beset by yelling foemen who seemed to swarm from thin air. Now silence reigned and

there was no sign of the tribesmen. South we headed, going like hunted things.

But before we set out, I found upon the battle-field that which thrilled me with a fierce joy. Grasped in the hand of a tribesman was a long, two-handed sword. A Norse sword, by the hand of Thor! How the savages came by it, I know not. Possibly some yellow-haired viking had gone down among them, battle-song on bearded lips, sword swinging. But at least the sword was there.

So fiercely had the savage clinched the hilt that I was forced to chop off his hand to gain the sword.

With it in my grasp, I felt bolder. Short swords and shields might suffice for men of middle height; but they were feeble arms for a warrior who towered more than five inches above six feet.

Over the mountains we went, clinging to narrow cliff edges, scaling steep crags. Like so many insects we crawled along the face of a sky-towering precipice, of such gigantic proportions that it seemed to dwarf men into mere nothingness. Up over its brow we climbed, nearly beaten down by the high mountain wind that roared with the voice of giants. And there we found they who waited for us. The Briton went down with a spear through him, reeled up, clutched him that wielded it, and over the cliff they tumbled together, to fall for a thousand feet. A wild, short flurry of fury, a whirl of swords and the battle was over. Four tribesmen lay still at our feet, and one of the Romans crouched, seeking to stem the blood that leaped from the stump of a severed arm.

Over the cliff we shoved those we had slain and we did up the Roman's arm with leather strips, binding them tight, so that the arm ceased to bleed. Then once more we took up our way

On, on; crags reeled above us; gorse slopes tilted crazily. The sun towered above the swaying peaks and sloped westward. Then as we

crouched upon a crag, hidden by great boulders, a band of tribesmen passed beneath, walking upon a narrow trail that skirted precipices and wound around mountain shoulders. And as they passed beneath us, the Irishman gave a shout of wild joy, and bounding from the cliff, fell among them. With yells like wolves they rushed upon him, and his red hair gleamed above their black. The first to reach him went down with a cleft head, and the second screeched as his arm left his shoulder. With a wild battle-yell, he drove his sword through a hairy breast, plucked it forth and smote off a head. Then they swarmed over him like wolves over a lion, and an instant later his head went up on a spear. The face still seemed to wear the battle-joy.

They passed on, never suspecting our presence, and again we pressed on. Night fell and the moon rose, making the peaks rear up like vague ghosts, throwing strange shadows among the valleys. As we went we found signs of the march, and of the retreat. There a Roman lying at the foot of a precipice, a smashed heap, perhaps a long spear through him; there a headless body, there a bodyless head. Shattered helmets, broken swords told the mute tale of fiercely contested battles.

On through the night we staggered, halting only at dawn, when we hid ourselves among the boulders and ventured forth again only when night had fallen. Groups of tribesmen passed close but we remained undiscovered, though at times we could have touched them as they went.

Dawn was breaking when we came upon a different land, a land that was merely a great plateau. Mountains towered on every hand, except to the south where the level land seemed to run for a long way. So I believed that we had left the mountains and had come upon the foothills that stretched away to finally merge upon the fertile plains of the south.

So we came upon a lake and halted there. There was no sign of a foe, no smoke in the sky. But as we stood there, the Roman who had but one arm pitched forward on his face without a sound and there was a throwing spear through him.

We scanned the lake. No boats rippled its surface. No foe showed among the scant reeds near its bank. We turned, gazing across the heather. And without a sound the Roman crumpled and fell forward, a short spear standing between his shoulders.

Sword bared, and mazed, I searched the silent slopes for sign of a foe. The heath stretched bare from mountain to mountains and nowhere was the heather tall enough to hide a man, not even a Caledonian. No ripple stirred the lake — what caused that reed to sway when the others were motionless? I bent forward, peering into the water. Beside the reed a bubble rose to the surface. I bent nearer, wondering — a bestial face leered up at me, just below the surface of the lake! An instant's astoundment— then my frantic-swung sword split that hairy face, checking just in time the spear that leaped for my breast. The waters of the lake boiled in turmoil and presently there floated to the surface the form of the savage, the sheaf of throwing spears still in his belt, his ape-like hand still grasping the hollow reed through which he had breathed. Then I knew why so many Romans had been strangely slain by the shores of the lakes.

I flung away my shield, discarded all accoutrements except my sword, dagger and armor. A certain ferocious exultation thrilled me. I was one man, amid a savage land, amid a savage people who thirsted for my blood. By Thor and Woden, I would teach them how a Norseman passed! With each passing moment I became less of the cultured Roman. All dross of education and civilization slipped from me,

leaving only the primitive man, only the primordial soul, red-taloned, ferocious.

And a slow, deep rage began to rise in me, coupled with a vast Nordic contempt for my foes. I was in good mood to go berserk. Thor knows I had had fighting in plenty along the march and along the retreat, but the fighting soul of the Norse was a-stir in me, that has mystic depths deeper than the North Sea. I was no Roman. I was a Norseman, a hairy-chested, yellow-bearded barbarian. And I strode the heath as arrogantly as if I trod the deck of my own galley. Picts, what were they? Stunted dwarfs whose day had passed. It was strange what a terrific hate began to consume me. And yet not so strange, for the further I receded in savagery, the more primitive my impulses became, and the fiercer flamed the intolerant hatred of the stranger, that first impulse of the primal tribesman. But there was a deeper, more sinister reason at the back of my mind, though I knew it not. For the Picts were men of another age, in very truth, the last of the Stone Age peoples, whom the Celts and Nordics had driven before them when they came down from the North. And somewhere in my mind lurked a nebulous memory of fierce, merciless warfare, waged in a darker age.

And there was a certain awe, too, not for their fighting qualities, but for the sorcery which all peoples firmly believed the Picts to possess. I had seen their cromlechs all over Britain, and I had seen the great rampart they had built not far from Corinium. I knew that the Celtic Druids hated them with a hate that was surprizing, even in priests. Not even the Druids could, or would tell just how the Stone Age men reared those immense barriers of stone, or for what reason, and the mind of the ordinary man fell back upon that explanation which has served for ages — witch-craft. More, the Picts themselves

believed firmly that they were warlocks and perhaps that had something to do with it.

And I fell to wondering just why we five hundred men had been ordered out on that wild raid. Some had said to seize a certain Pictish priest, some that we sought word of the Pictish chief, one Bran Mak Morn. But none knew except the officer in command and his head rode a Pictish spear somewhere out in that sea of mountain and heather. I wished that I could meet that same Bran Mak Morn. 'Twas said that he was unmatched in warfare, either with army or singly. But never had we seen a warrior who seemed so much in command as to justify the idea that he was the chief. For the savages fought like wolves, though with a certain rude discipline.

Perhaps I might meet him and if he were as valiant as they said, he would surely face me.

I scorned concealment. Nay, more, I chanted a fierce song as I strode, beating time with my sword. Let the Picts come when they would. I was ready to die like a warrior.

I had covered many miles when I rounded a low hill and came full upon some hundred of them, fully armed. If they expected me to turn and flee, they were far in error. I strode to meet them, never altering my gait, never altering my song. One of them charged to meet me, head down, point on and I met him with a down-smiting blow that cleft him from left shoulder to right hip. Another sprang in from the side, thrusting at my head, but I ducked so that the spear swished over my shoulder, and ripped out his guts as I straightened. Then they were surging all about me, and I cleared a space with one great two-handed swing and set my back close to the steep hill side, close enough to prevent them from running behind me, but not too close for me to swing my blade. If I wasted motion and strength in the up and down

movement, I more than made up by the smashing power of my sword-blows. No need to strike twice, on any foe. A swart bearded savage sprang in under my sword, crouching, stabbing upward. The sword-blade turned on my corselet and I stretched him senseless with a downward smash of the hilt. They ringed me like wolves, striving to reach me with their shorter swords, and two went down with cleft heads as they tried to close with me. Then one, reaching over the shoulders of the others, drove a spear through my thigh and with a roar of fury I thrust savagely, spitting him like a rat. Before I could regain my balance, a sword gashed my right arm and another shattered upon my helmet. I staggered, swung wildly to clear a space and a spear tore through my right shoulder. I swayed, went to the ground and reeled up again. With a terrific swing of my shoulders I hurled my clawing, stabbing foes clear, and then, feeling my strength oozing from me with my blood, gave one lion-like roar and leaped among them, clean berserk. Into the press I hurled myself, smiting left and right, depending only on my armor to guard me from the leaping blades. That battle is a crimson memory. I was down, up, down again, up, right arm hanging, sword flailing in left hand. A man's head spun from his shoulders, an arm vanished at the elbow, and then I crumpled to the ground striving vainly to lift the sword that hung in my loose grasp.

A dozen spears were at my breast in an instant, when someone threw the warriors back, and a voice spoke, as of a chief:

“Stay! This man must be spared.”

Vaguely as through a fog, I saw a lean, dark face as I reeled up to face the man who spoke.

Vaguely I saw a slim, dark-haired man, whose head would come scarcely to my shoulder, but who seemed as lithe and strong as a leopard. He was scantily clad in plain close-fitting garments, his only

arm a long straight sword. He resembled in form and features the Picts no more than did I, and yet there was about him a certain apparent kinship to them.

All those things I noted vaguely, scarce able to keep my feet.

“I have seen you,” I said, speaking as one mazed. “Often and often in the forefront of battle I have seen you. Always you led the Picts to the charge while your chiefs slunk far from the field. Who are you?”

Then the warriors and the world and the sky faded and I crumpled to the heath.

Vaguely I heard the strange warrior say, “Stanch his wounds and give him food and drink.” I had learned their language from Picts who came to trade at the Wall.

I was aware that they did as the warrior bid them and presently I came to my senses, having drunk much of the wine that the Picts brew from heather. Then, spent, I lay upon the heather and slept nor recked of all the savages in the world.

When I awoke the moon was high in the sky. My arms were gone and my helmet, and several armed Picts stood guard over me. When they saw I was awake they motioned me to follow them, and set out across the heath. Presently we came to a high, bare hill and a fire gleamed upon its top. On a boulder beside the fire sat the strange, dark chief and about him, like spirits of the Dark World, sat Pictish warriors, in a silent ring.

They led me before the chief, if such he was, and I stood there, gazing at him without defiance or fear. And I sensed that here was a man different from any I had ever seen. I was aware of a certain Force, a certain unseen Power radiating from the man, that seemed to set him apart from common men. It was as though from the heights of self-conquest he looked down upon men, brooding, inscrutable, fraught

with the ages' knowledge, sombre with the ages' wisdom. Chin in hand he sat, dark unfathomed eyes fixed upon me.

“Who are you?”

“A Roman citizen.”

“A Roman soldier. One of the wolves who have torn the world for far too many centuries.”

Among the warriors passed a murmur, fleeting as the whisper of the night wind, sinister as the flash of a wolf's fang.

“There be those whom my people hate more than they do the Romans,” said he. “But you are a Roman, to be sure. And yet, methinks they must grow taller Romans than I had thought. And your beard, what turned it yellow?”

At the sardonic tone, I threw back my head, and though my skin crawled at the thought of the swords at my back, I answered proudly.

“By birth I am a Norseman.”

A savage, blood-lusting yell went up from the crouching horde and in an instant they surged forward. A single motion of the chief's hand sent them slinking back, eyes blazing. His own eyes had never left my face.

“My tribe are fools,” said he. “For they hate the Norse even more than they do the Romans. For the Norse harry our shores incessantly; but it is Rome that they should hate.”

“But you are no Pict!”

“I am a Mediterranean.”

“Of Caledonia?”

“Of the world.”

“Who are you?”

“Bran Mak Morn.”

“What!” I had expected a monstrosity, a hideous deformed giant, a ferocious dwarf built in keeping with the rest of his race.

“You are not as these.”

“I am as the race was,” he replied. “The line of chiefs has kept its blood pure through the ages, scouring the world for women of the Old Race.”

“Why does your race hate all men?” I asked curiously “Your ferocity is a by-word among the nations.”

“Why should we not hate?” His dark eyes lit with a sudden fierce glitter. “Trampled upon by every wandering tribe, driven from our fertile lands, forced into the waste places of the world, deformed in body and in mind. Look upon me. I am what the race once was. Look about you. A race of ape-men, we that were the highest type of men the world could boast.”

I shuddered in spite of myself at the hate that vibrated in his deep, resonant voice.

Between the lines of warriors came a girl, who sought the chief’s side and nestled close to him. A slim, shy little beauty, not much more than a child. Mak Morn’s face softened somewhat as he put his arm about her slender body. Then the brooding look returned to his dark eyes.

“My sister, Norseman,” he said. “I am told that a rich merchant of Corinium has offered a thousand pieces of gold to any who brings her to him.”

My hair prickled for I seemed to sense a sinister minor note in the Caledonian’s even voice. The moon sank below the western horizon, touching the heather with a red tinge, so that the heath looked like a sea of gore in the eery light.

The chief's voice broke the stillness. "The merchant sent a spy past the Wall. I sent him his head."

I started. A man stood before me. I had not seen him come. A very old man he was, clad only in a loin cloth. A long white beard fell to his waist and he was tattooed from crown to heel. His leathery face was creased with a million wrinkles, his hide was scaly as a snake's. From beneath sparse white brows his great strange eyes blazed, as though seeing weird visions. The warriors stirred restlessly. The girl shrank back into Mak Morn's arms as if frightened.

"The god of War rides the night wind," spoke the wizard suddenly, in a high eery voice. "The kites scent blood. Strange feet tramp the roads of Alba. Strange oars beat the Northern Sea."

"Lend us your craft, wizard," commanded Mak Morn imperiously.

"You have displeased the old gods, chief," the other answered. "The temples of the Serpent are deserted. The white god of the moon feasts no more on man flesh. The lords of the air look down from their ramparts and are not pleased. Hai, hai! They say a chief has turned from the path."

"Enough." Mak Morn's voice was harsh. "The power of the Serpent is broken. The neophytes offer up no more humans to their dark divinities. If I lift the Pictish nation out of the darkness of the valley of abysmal savagery, I brook no opposition by prince or priest. Mark my words, wizard."

The old man raised great eyes, weirdly alit, and stared into my face.

"I see a yellow-haired savage," came his flesh-crawling whisper. "I see a strong body and a strong mind, such as a chief might feast upon."

An impatient ejaculation from Mak Morn.

The girl put her arms about him timidly and whispered in his ear.

"Some characteristics of humanity and kindness remain still with

the Picts,” said he, and I sensed the fierce self-mockery in his tone. “The child asks me that you go free.”

Though he spoke in the Celtic language, the warriors understood, and muttered discontentedly.

“No!” exclaimed the wizard violently.

The opposition steeled the chief’s resolution. He rose to his feet.

“I say the Norseman goes free at dawn.”

A disapproving silence answered him.

“Dare any of ye to step upon the heath and match steel with me?” he challenged.

The wizard spoke, “Hark ye, chief. I have outlived a hundred years. I have seen chiefs and conquerors come and go. In midnight forests have I battled the magic of the Druids. Long have ye mocked my power, man of the Old Race, and here I defy ye. I bid ye unto the combat.”

No word was spoken. The two men advanced into the fire-light which threw its fitful gleam into the shadows.

“If I conquer, the Serpent coils again, the Wild-cat screeches again, and thou art my slave forever. If thou dost conquer, my arts are thine and I will serve thee.”

Wizard and chief faced each other. The lurid flame-flares lit their faces. Their eyes met, clashed. Yes, the combat between the eyes and the souls behind them was as clearly evident as though they had been battling with swords. The wizard’s eyes widened, the chief’s narrowed. Terrific forces seemed to emanate from each; unseen powers in combat swirled about them. And I was vaguely aware that it was but another phase of the eon-old warfare. The battle between Old and New. Behind the wizard lurked thousands of years of dark secrets, sinister mysteries, frightful nebulous shapes, monsters half hidden in the fogs

of antiquity. Behind the chief, the clear strong light of the coming Day, the first kindling of civilization, the clean strength of a new man with a new and mighty mission. The wizard was the Stone Age typified; the chief, the coming civilization. The destiny of the Pictish race, perhaps, hinged on that struggle.

Both men seemed in the grasp of terrific effort. The veins stood out upon the chief's forehead. The eyes of both blazed and glittered. Then a gasp broke from the wizard. With a shriek he caught at his eyes, and slumped to the heather like an empty sack.

"Enough!" he gasped. "You conquer, chief." He rose, shaken, submissive.

The tense, crouching lines relaxed, sat in their places, eyes fixed on the chief. Mak Morn shook his head as if to clear it. He stepped to the boulder and sat him down, and the girl threw her arms about him, murmuring to him in a gentle, joyous voice.

"The Sword of the Picts is swift," mumbled the wizard. "The Arm of the Pict is Strong. Hai! They say a mighty one has risen among the Western Men.

"Gaze ye upon the ancient Fire of the Lost Race, Wolf of the Heather! Aai, hai! They say a chief has risen to lead the race onward."

The wizard stooped above the coals of the fire which had gone out, muttering to himself.

Stirring the coals, mumbling in his white beard, he half droned, half sang a weird chant, of little meaning or rhyme, but with a kind of wild rhythm, remarkably strange and eerie.

*"O'er lakes agleam the old gods dream;
Ghosts stride the heather dim.*

*The night winds croon; the eery moon
Slips o'er the ocean's rim.
From peak to peak the witches shriek.
The gray wolf seeks the height.
Like gold sword sheath, far o'er the heath
Glimmers the wandering light."*

The ancient stirred the coals, pausing now and then to toss on them some weird object, keeping time with his motions with his chant.

*"Gods of heather, gods of lake,
Bestial fiends of swamp and brake;
White god riding on the moon,
Jackal-jawed, with voice of loon;
Serpentgod whose scaly coils
Grasp the Universe in toils;
See, the Unseen Sages sit;
See the council fires alit.
See I stir the glowing coals,
Toss on manes of seven foals.
Seven foals all golden shod
From the herds of Alba's god.
Now in numbers one and six,
Shape and place the magic sticks.
Scented wood brought from afar,
From the land of Morning Star.
Hewn from limbs of sandal-trees,
Brought far o'er the Eastern Seas.
Sea-snakes' fangs, see now, I fling,
Pinions of a sea-gull's wing.*

*Now the magic dust I toss,
Men are shadows, life is dross.
Now the flames crawl, ere they blaze,
Now the smokes rise in a haze.
Fanned by far off ocean-blast
Leaps the tale of distant past.”*

In and out among the coals licked the thin red flames, now leaping in swift upward spurts, now vanishing, now catching the tinder thrown upon it, with a dry crackle that sounded through the stillness. Wisps of smoke began to curl upward in a mingling, hazy cloud.

*“Dimly, dimly glimmers the starlight,
Over the heather-hill, over the vale.
Gods of the Old Land brood o’er the far night,
Things of the Darkness ride on the gale.
Now while the fire smoulders, while smokes enfold it,
Now ere it leap into clear, mystic flame,
Harken once more (else the dark gods withhold it),
Hark to the tale of the race without name.”*

The smoke floated upward, swirling about the wizard; as through a dense fog his fierce yellow eyes peered. As if across far spaces his voice came floating, with a strange impression of disembodiment. With a weird intonation as though the voice were, not the voice of the ancient, but a something detached, a something apart; as if disembodied ages, and not the wizard’s mind, spake through him.

A wilder setting I have seldom seen. Overhead all darkness, scarce a star a-glitter, the waving tentacles of the Northern Lights reaching lurid banners across the sullen sky; sombre slopes stretching away to mingle

with vagueness, a dim sea of silent, waving heather; and on that bare, lone hill, the half-human horde crouching like sombre specters of another world, their bestial faces now merging in the shadows, now touched with blood as the firelight veered and flickered. And Bran Mak Morn sitting like a statue of bronze, his face thrown into bold relief by the light of the leaping flames. And that weird face, limned by the eery light, with its great, blazing yellow eyes, and its long, snow-white beard.

“A mighty race, the men of the Mediterranean.”

Savage faces alit, they leaned forward. And I found myself thinking that the wizard was right. No man might civilize those primeval savages. They were untamable, unconquerable. The spirit of the wild, of the Stone Age was theirs.

“Older than the snow-crowned peaks of Caledon.”

The warriors leaned forward, evincing eagerness and anticipation. I sensed that the tale ever intrigued them, though doubtless they had heard it a hundred times from a hundred chiefs and ancients.

“Norseman,” suddenly, breaking the train of his discourse. “What lies beyond the Western Channel?”

“Why, the isle of Hibernia.”

“And beyond?”

“The isles that the Celts call Aran.”

“And beyond?”

“Why, in sooth I know not. Human knowledge pauses there. No ship has sailed those seas. The learned men call it Thule. The Unknown, the realm of illusion, the edge of the world.”

“Ha ha! That mighty western ocean washes the shores of continents unknown, islands unguessed.

“Far, far across the great, wave-tossed vastness of the Atlantic lie two great continents, so vast that the smaller would dwarf all Europe.

Twin lands of immense antiquity; lands of ancient, crumbling civilization. Lands in which roamed tribes of men wise in all craftsmanship, while this land ye call Europe was yet a vast, reptile-haunted swamp, a dank forest known but to apes.

“So mighty are these continents that they span the world, from the snows of the north to the snows of the south. And beyond them lies a great ocean, the Sea of Silent Waters. Many islands are upon that sea, and those islands were once the mountain peaks of a great land — the lost land of Lemuria.

“And the continents are twin continents, joined by a narrow neck of land. The western coast of that northern continent is fierce and rugged. Huge mountains rear skyward. But those peaks were islands upon a time, and to those islands came the Nameless Tribe, wandering down from the north, so many thousand years ago that a man would grow a-weary numbering them. A thousand miles to the north and west had the tribe come into being, there upon the broad and fertile plains close by the northern channels, which divide the continent of the north from Asia.”

“Asia!” I exclaimed, bewildered.

The ancient jerked up his head angrily, eyeing me savagely. Then he continued.

“There, in the dim haze of unnamed past, had the tribe won up from crawling sea-thing to ape and from ape to ape-man and from ape-man to savage.

“Savages they were still when they came down the coast, fierce and war-like.

“Skilled in the chase they were, for they had lived by the hunt for untold centuries. Strong-built men they were, not tall nor huge, but

lean and muscular like leopards, swift and mighty. No nation might stand before them. And they were the first Men.

“Still they clad themselves in the hides of beasts and their stone implements were crudely chipped. Upon the western islands they took their abode, the islands that lay laughing in a sunny sea. And there they had their habitation for thousands and thousands of years. For centuries upon the western coast. The isles of the west were wondrous isles, lapped in sun-lit seas, rich and fertile. There the tribe laid aside the arms of war and taught themselves the arts of peace. There they learned to polish their implements of stone. There they learned to raise grain and fruits, to cultivate the soil; and they were content and the harvest gods laughed. And they learned to spin and to weave and to build them huts. And they became skilled in the working of pelts, and in the making of pottery.

“Far to the west, across the roaming waves, lay the vast, dim land of Lemuria. And anon came fleets of canoes bearing strange raiders, the half-human Men of the Sea. Perhaps from some strange sea-monster had those sprung, for they were scaly like unto a shark and they could swim for hours under the water. Ever the tribe beat them back but often they came, for renegades of the tribe fled to Lemuria. To the east and the south great forest stretched away to the horizons, peopled by ferocious beasts and ferocious ape-men.

“So the centuries glided by on the wings of Time. Stronger and stronger grew the Nameless Tribe, more skillful in craftsmanship; less skilled in war and the chase. And slowly the Lemurians fared on the upward climb.

“Then, upon a day, a mighty earth-quake rocked the world. Sky mingled with sea and the land reeled between. With the thunder of gods at war, the islands of the west plunged upward and lifted from

the sea. And lo, they were mountains upon the new-formed western coast of the northern continent. And lo, the land of Lemuria sank beneath the waves, leaving only a great mountainous island, surrounded by many isles which had been her highest peaks.

“And upon the western coast, mighty volcanos roared and bellowed and their flaming spate rushed down the coast and swept away all traces of the civilization that was being conceived. From a fertile vineyard the land became a desert.

“Eastward fled the tribe, driving the ape-men before them, until they came upon broad and rich plains far to the east. There they abode for centuries. Then the great ice-fields came down from the Arctics and the tribe fled before them. Then followed a thousand years of wandering.

“Down into the southern continent they fled, ever driving the beast-men before them. And finally, in a great war, they drove them forth entirely. Those fled far to the south and by means of the marshy islands that then spanned the sea, crossed into Africa, thence wandering up into Europe, where there were then no men, except ape-men.

“Then the Lemurians, the Second Race, came into the northern land. Far up the scale of life had they made their way and they were a swart, strange race; short, broad men were they, with strange eyes like unto unknown seas. Little they knew of cultivation or of craft, but they possessed strange knowledge of curious architecture and from the Nameless Tribe had they learned to make implements of polished obsidian and jade and argillite.

“And ever the great ice fields pushed south and ever the Nameless Tribe wandered before them. No ice came into the southern continent nor even near it, but it was a dank, swampy land, serpent-haunted. So they made them boats and sailed to the sea-girt land of Atlantis.

Now the Atlanteans were the Third Race. They were physical giants, finely made men, who inhabited caves and lived by the chase. They had no skill in artizanship, but were artists. When they were not hunting or warring among themselves, they spent their time in painting and drawing pictures of men and beasts upon the walls of their caverns. But they could not match the Nameless Tribe in craft, and they were driven forth. They, too, made their way to Europe, and there waged savage warfare with the beast-men who had gone before them.

“Then there was war among the tribes and the conquerors drove forth the conquered. And among those was a very wise, very ancient wizard and he put a curse upon the land of Atlantis, that it should be unknown to the tribes of men. No boat from Atlantis should ever gain another shore, no foreign sail should ever sight the broad beaches of Atlantis. Girt by unsailed seas should the land lie unknown until ships with the heads of serpents should come down from the northern seas and four hosts should battle on the Isle of Sea-fogs and a great chief should rise among the people of the Nameless Tribe.

“So those crossed to Africa, oaring from island to island, and went up the coast until they came to the Middle Sea which lay enjeweled amid sunny shores.

“There did the tribe abide for centuries, and grew strong and mighty, and from thence did they spread all over the world. From the Afric deserts to the Baltic forests, from the Nile to the peaks of Alba they ranged, growing their grain, grazing their cattle, weaving their cloth. They built their crannogs in the Alpen lakes; they reared their temples of stone upon the plains of Britain. They drove the Atlanteans before them, and they smote the red-haired reindeer men.

“Then from the North came the Celts, bearing swords and spears of bronze. From the dim lands of Mighty Snows they came, from the

shores of the far North Sea. And they were the Fourth Race. The Picts fled before them. For they were mighty men, tall and strong, lean built and gray-eyed, with tawny hair. All over the world Celt and Pict battled, and ever the Celt conquered. For in the long ages of peace, the tribes had forgotten the arts of war. To the waste places of the world they fled.

“And so fled the Picts of Alba; to the west and to the north and there they mingled with the red-haired giants which they had driven from the plains in ages gone by. Such is not the way of the Pict but shall tradition serve a nation whose back is at the wall?”

“And so as the ages passed, the race changed. The slim, small black-haired people, mingling with the huge, coarse-featured, red-haired savages, formed a strange, distorted race; twisted in soul as in body. And they grew fierce and cunning in warfare; but forgotten the old arts. Forgotten the loom and the kiln and the mill. But the line of chiefs remained untainted. And such art thou, Bran Mak Morn, Wolf of the Heather.”

For a moment there was silence; the silent ring still harkening dreamily, as if to the echo of the wizard’s voice. The night wind whispered by. The fire caught the tinder and burst suddenly into vivid flame, flinging lean red arms to catch the shadows.

The wizard’s voice took up its drone.

“The glory of the Nameless Tribe is vanished; like the snow that falls on the sea; like the smoke that rises in the air. Mingling with past eternities. Vanished the glory of Atlantis; fading the dark empire of the Lemurians. The people of the Stone Age are melting like hoar-frost before the sun. Out of the night we came; into the night we go. All are shadows. A shadow race are we. Our day is past. Wolves roam the temples of the Moon-God. Water serpents coil amid our sunken cities.

Silence broods over Lemuria; a curse haunts Atlantis. Red-skinned savages roam the western lands, wandering o'er the valley of the Western River, befouling the entempled ramparts which the men of Lemuria reared in worship of the God of the Sea. And to the south, the empire of the Toltecs of Lemuria is crumbling. So the First Races are passing. And the Men of the New Dawn grow mighty."

The ancient took a flaming brand from the fire and with a motion incredibly swift, inscribed the circle and triangle in the air. And strangely, the mystic symbol seemed to hover in the air, for a moment, a ring of fire.

"The circle without beginning," droned the wizard. "The circle unending. The Snake with its tail in its mouth, that encompasses the Universe. And the Mystic Three. Beginning, passivity, ending. Creation, preservation, destruction. Destruction, preservation, creation. The Frog, the Egg, and the Serpent. The Serpent, the Egg, and the Frog. And the Elements: Fire, Air and Water. And the phallic symbol. The Fire-god laughs."

I was aware of the fierce, almost ferocious intensity with which the Picts stared into the fire. The flames leaped and blazed. Smoke billowed up and vanished and a strange yellow haze took its place, that was neither fire, smoke nor fog, and yet seemed a blending of all three. World and sky seemed to merge with the flames. I became, not a man, but a pair of disembodied Eyes.

Then somewhere in the yellow fog vague pictures began to show, looming and vanishing. I sensed that the past was gliding by in a dim panorama. There was a battle-field and on one side were many men such as Bran Mak Morn, but unlike him in that they seemed unused to fray. On the other side was a horde of tall gaunt men, armed with sword and spears of bronze. The Gaels!

Then on another field another battle was in progress and I sensed that hundreds of years had passed. Again the Gaels charged to battle with their arms of bronze, but this time it was they who reeled back in defeat, before a host of huge, yellow-haired warriors, armed also with bronze. The battle marked the coming of the Brythons who gave their name to the isle of Britain.

Then a serried line of vague and fleeting scenes, which passed too rapidly to be distinguished. They gave the impression of great deeds, mighty happenings, but only dim shadows showed. For an instant a dim face loomed. A strong face, with steel-gray eyes, and yellow mustaches drooping over thin lips. I sensed that it was that other Bran, the Celtic Brennus whose Gallic hordes had sacked Rome.

Then in its place another face stood out with startling boldness. The face of a young man, haughty, arrogant, with a magnificent brow, but with lines of sensual cruelty about his mouth. The face of both a demi-god and a degenerate.

Caesar!

A shadowy beach. A dim forest; the crash of battle. The legions shattering the hordes of Caractacus.

Then vaguely, swiftly, passed shadows of the pomp and glory of Rome. There were her legions returning in triumph, driving before them hundreds of chained captives. There were shown the corpulent senators and nobles at their luxurious baths and their banquets and their debauches. There were shown the effeminate, slothful merchants and nobles lolling in lustful ease in Ostia, in Massilia, in Aqua Sulae. Then in abrupt contrast, the gathering hordes of the outer world. The fierce-eyed, yellow-bearded Norsemen; the huge-bodied Germanic tribes; the wild, flame-haired savages of Wales and Damnonia, and

their allies, the Pictish Silures. The past had faded; present and future took its place!

Then, a vague holocaust, in which nations moved and armies and men faded and shifted.

“Rome falls!” suddenly the wizard’s fiercely exultant voice broke the silence. “The Vandal’s foot spurns the Forum. A savage horde marches along the Via Appia. Yellow-haired raiders violate the Vestal Virgins. And Rome falls!”

A ferocious yell of triumph went winging up into the night.

“I see Britain beneath the heel of the Norse invaders. I see the Picts trooping down from the mountains. There is rapine, fire and warfare.”

In the fire-fog leaped the face of Bran Mak Morn.

“Hale the up-lifter! I see the Pictish nation striding upward toward the new light!

*Wolf on the height
Mocking the night;
Slow comes the light
Of a nation’s new dawn.
Shadow hordes massed
Out of the past.
Fame that shall last
Strides on and on.
Over the vale
Thunders the gale
Bearing the tale
Of a nation up-lifted.
Flee, wolf and kite!
Fame that is bright”*

From the east came stealing a dim gray radiance. In the ghostly light Bran Mak Morn's face showed bronze once more, expressionless, immobile; dark eyes gazing unwaveringly into the fire, seeing there his mighty ambitions, his dreams of empire fading into smoke.

“For what we could not keep by battle, we have held by cunning for years and centuries unnumbered. But the New Races rise like a great tidal wave and the Old gives place. In the dim mountains of Galloway shall the nation make its last fierce stand. And as Bran Mak Morn falls, so vanishes the Lost Fire — forever. From the centuries, from the eons.”

And as he spoke, the fire gathered itself into one great flame that leaped high in the air, and in mid-air vanished.

And over the far eastern mountains floated the dim dawn.

KINGS OF THE NIGHT

1.

*The Caesar lolled on his ivory throne —
His iron legions came
To break a king in a land unknown,
And a race without a name.*

— The Song of Bran

The dagger flashed downward. A sharp cry broke in a gasp. The form on the rough altar twitched convulsively and lay still. The jagged flint edge sawed at the crimsoned breast, and thin bony fingers, ghastly dyed, tore out the still twitching heart. Under matted white brows, sharp eyes gleamed with a ferocious intensity.

Besides the slayer, four men stood about the crude pile of stones that formed the altar of the God of Shadows. One was of medium height, lithely built, scantily clad, whose black hair was confined by a narrow iron band in the center of which gleamed a single red jewel. Of the others, two were dark like the first. But where he was lithe, they were stocky and misshapen, with knotted limbs, and tangled hair falling over sloping brows. His face denoted intelligence and implacable will; theirs merely a beast-like ferocity. The fourth man had little in common with the rest. Nearly a head taller, though his hair was black as theirs, his skin was comparatively light and he was gray-eyed. He eyed the proceedings with little favor.

And, in truth, Cormac of Connacht was little at ease. The Druids of his own isle of Erin had strange dark rites of worship, but nothing

like this. Dark trees shut in this grim scene, lit by a single torch. Through the branches moaned an eery night-wind. Cormac was alone among men of a strange race and he had just seen the heart of a man ripped from his still pulsing body. Now the ancient priest, who looked scarcely human, was glaring at the throbbing thing. Cormac shuddered, glancing at him who wore the jewel. Did Bran Mak Morn, king of the Picts, believe that this white-bearded old butcher could foretell events by scanning a bleeding human heart? The dark eyes of the king were inscrutable. There were strange depths to the man that Cormac could not fathom, nor any other man.

“The portents are good!” exclaimed the priest wildly, speaking more to the two chieftains than to Bran. “Here from the pulsing heart of a captive Roman I read — defeat for the arms of Rome! Triumph for the sons of the heather!”

The two savages murmured beneath their breath, their fierce eyes smoldering.

“Go and prepare your clans for battle,” said the king, and they lumbered away with the ape-like gait assumed by such stunted giants. Paying no more heed to the priest who was examining the ghastly ruin on the altar, Bran beckoned to Cormac. The Gael followed him with alacrity. Once out of that grim grove, under the starlight, he breathed more freely. They stood on an eminence, looking out over long swelling undulations of gently waving heather. Near at hand a few fires twinkled, their fewness giving scant evidence of the hordes of tribesmen who lay close by. Beyond these were more fires and beyond these still more, which last marked the camp of Cormac’s own men, hard-riding, hard-fighting Gaels, who were of that band which was just beginning to get a foothold on the western coast of Caledonia — the

nucleus of what was later to become the kingdom of Dalriadia. To the left of these, other fires gleamed.

And far away to the south were more fires — mere pinpoints of light. But even at that distance the Pictish king and his Celtic ally could see that these fires were laid out in regular order.

“The fires of the legions,” muttered Bran. “The fires that have lit a path around the world. The men who light those fires have trampled the races under their iron heels. And now — we of the heather have our backs at the wall. What will fall on the morrow?”

“Victory for us, says the priest,” answered Cormac.

Bran made an impatient gesture. “Moonlight on the ocean. Wind in the fir tops. Do you think that I put faith in such mummery? Or that I enjoyed the butchery of a captive legionary? I must hearten my people; it was for Gron and Bocah that I let old Gonar read the portents. The warriors will fight better.”

“And Gonar?”

Bran laughed. “Gonar is too old to believe — anything. He was high priest of the Shadows a score of years before I was born. He claims direct descent from that Gonar who was a wizard in the days of Brule, the Spear-slayer who was the first of my line. No man knows how old he is — sometimes I think he is the original Gonar himself!”

“At least,” said a mocking voice, and Cormac started as a dim shape appeared at his side, “at least I have learned that in order to keep the faith and trust of the people, a wise man must appear to be a fool. I know secrets that would blast even your brain, Bran, should I speak them. But in order that the people may believe in me, I must descend to such things as they think proper magic — and prance and yell and rattle snakeskins, and dabble about in human blood and chicken livers.”

Cormac looked at the ancient with new interest. The semi-madness of his appearance had vanished. He was no longer the charlatan, the spell-mumbling shaman. The starlight lent him a dignity which seemed to increase his very height, so that he stood like a white-bearded patriarch.

“Bran, your doubt lies there.” The lean arm pointed to the fourth ring of fires.

“Aye,” the king nodded gloomily. “Cormac — you know as well as I. Tomorrow’s battle hinges upon that circle of fires. With the chariots of the Britons and your own Western horsemen, our success would be certain, but — surely the devil himself is in the heart of every Northman! You know how I trapped that band — how they swore to fight for me against Rome! And now that their chief, Rognar, is dead, they swear that they will be led only by a king of their own race! Else they will break their vow and go over to the Romans. Without them we are doomed, for we can not change our former plan.”

“Take heart, Bran,” said Gonar. “Touch the jewel in your iron crown. Mayhap it will bring you aid.”

Bran laughed bitterly. “Now you talk as the people think. I am no fool to twist with empty words. What of the gem? It is a strange one, truth, and has brought me luck ere now. But I need now, no jewels, but the allegiance of three hundred fickle Northmen who are the only warriors among us who may stand the charge of the legions on foot.”

“But the jewel, Bran, the jewel!” persisted Gonar.

“Well, the jewel!” cried Bran impatiently. “It is older than this world. It was old when Atlantis and Lemuria sank into the sea. It was given to Brule, the Spear-slayer, first of my line, by the Atlantean Kull, king of Valusia, in the days when the world was young. But shall that profit us now?”

“Who knows?” asked the wizard obliquely “Time and space exist not. There was no past, and there shall be no future. *Now* is all. All things that ever were, are, or ever will be, transpire *now*. Man is forever at the center of what we call time and space. I have gone into yesterday and tomorrow and both were as real as today — which is like the dreams of ghosts! But let me sleep and talk with Gonar. Mayhap he shall aid us.”

“What means he?” asked Cormac, with a slight twitching of his shoulders, as the priest strode away in the shadows.

“He has ever said that the first Gonar comes to him in his dreams and talks with him,” answered Bran. “I have seen him perform deeds that seemed beyond human ken. I know not. I am but an unknown king with an iron crown, trying to lift a race of savages out of the slime into which they have sunk. Let us look to the camps.”

As they walked Cormac wondered. By what strange freak of fate had such a man risen among this race of savages, survivors of a darker, grimmer age? Surely he was an atavism, an original type of the days when the Picts ruled all Europe, before their primitive empire fell before the bronze swords of the Gauls. Cormac knew how Bran, rising by his own efforts from the negligent position of the son of a Wolf clan chief, had to an extent united the tribes of the heather and now claimed kingship over all Caledon. But his rule was loose and much remained before the Pictish clans would forget their feuds and present a solid front to foreign foes. On the battle of the morrow, the first pitched battle between the Picts under their king and the Romans, hinged the future of the rising Pictish kingdom.

Bran and his ally walked through the Pictish camp where the swart warriors lay sprawled about their small fires, sleeping or gnawing half-cooked food. Cormac was impressed by their silence. A thousand

men camped here, yet the only sounds were occasional low guttural intonations. The silence of the Stone Age rested in the souls of these men.

They were all short — most of them crooked of limb. Giant dwarfs; Bran Mak Morn was a tall man among them. Only the older men were bearded and they scantily, but their black hair fell about their eyes so that they peered fiercely from under the tangle. They were barefoot and clad scantily in wolfskins. Their arms consisted in short barbed swords of iron, heavy black bows, arrows tipped with flint, iron and copper, and stone-headed mallets. Defensive armor they had none, save for a crude shield of hide-covered wood; many had worked bits of metal into their tangled manes as a slight protection against sword-cuts. Some few, sons of long lines of chiefs, were smooth-limbed and lithe like Bran, but in the eyes of all gleamed the unquenchable savagery of the primeval.

These men are fully savages, thought Cormac, worse than the Gauls, Britons and Germans. Can the old legends be true — that they reigned in a day when strange cities rose where now the sea rolls? And that they survived the flood that washed those gleaming empires under, sinking again into that savagery from which they once had risen?

Close to the encampment of the tribesmen were the fires of a group of Britons — members of fierce tribes who lived south of the Roman Wall but who dwelt in the hills and forests to the west and defied the power of Rome. Powerfully built men they were, with blazing blue eyes and shocks of tousled yellow hair, such men as had thronged the Ceanntish beaches when Caesar brought the Eagles into the Isles. These men, like the Picts, wore no armor, and were clad scantily in coarse-worked cloth and deerskin sandals. They bore small round bucklers of hard wood, braced with bronze, to be worn on the left arm,

and long heavy bronze swords with blunt points. Some had bows, though the Britons were indifferent archers. Their bows were shorter than the Picts' and effective only at close range. But ranged close by their fires were the weapons that had made the name Briton a word of terror to Pict, Roman and Norse raider alike. Within the circle of firelight stood fifty bronze chariots with long cruel blades curving out from the sides. One of these blades could dismember half a dozen men at once. Tethered close by under the vigilant eyes of their guards grazed the chariot horses — big, rangy steeds, swift and powerful.

“Would that we had more of them!” mused Bran. “With a thousand chariots and my bowmen I could drive the legions into the sea.”

“The free British tribes must eventually fall before Rome,” said Cormac. “It would seem they would rush to join you in your war.”

Bran made a helpless gesture. “The fickleness of the Celt. They can not forget old feuds. Our ancient men have told us how they would not even unite against Caesar when the Romans first came. They will not make head against a common foe together. These men came to me because of some dispute with their chief, but I can not depend on them when they are not actually fighting.”

Cormac nodded. “I know; Caesar conquered Gaul by playing one tribe against another. My own people shift and change with the waxing and waning of the tides. But of all Celts, the Cymry are the most changeable, the least stable. Not many centuries ago my own Gaelic ancestors wrested Erin from the Cymric Danaans, because though they outnumbered us, they opposed us as separate tribes, rather than as a nation.”

“And so these Cymric Britons face Rome,” said Bran. “These will aid us on the morrow. Further I can not say. But how shall I expect loyalty from alien tribes, who am not sure of my own people? Thou-

sands lurk in the hills, holding aloof. I am king in name only. Let me win tomorrow and they will flock to my standard; if I lose, they will scatter like birds before a cold wind.”

A chorus of rough welcome greeted the two leaders as they entered the camp of Cormac’s Gaels. Five hundred in number they were, tall rangy men, black-haired and gray-eyed mainly, with the bearing of men who lived by war alone. While there was nothing like close discipline among them, there was an air of more system and practical order than existed in the lines of the Picts and Britons. These men were of the last Celtic race to invade the Isles and their barbaric civilization was of much higher order than that of their Cymric kin. The ancestors of the Gaels had learned the arts of war on the vast plains of Scythia and at the courts of the Pharaohs where they had fought as mercenaries of Egypt, and much of what they learned they brought into Ireland with them. Excelling in metal work, they were armed, not with clumsy bronze swords, but with high-grade weapons of iron.

They were clad in well-woven kilts and leathern sandals. Each wore a light shirt of chain mail and a vizorless helmet, but this was all of their defensive armor. Celts, Gaelic or Brythonic, were prone to judge a man’s valor by the amount of armor he wore. The Britons who faced Caesar deemed the Romans cowards because they cased themselves in metal, and many centuries later the Irish clans thought the same of the mail-clad Norman knights of Strongbow.

Cormac’s warriors were horsemen. They neither knew nor esteemed the use of the bow. They bore the inevitable round, metal-braced buckler, dirks, long straight swords and light single-handed axes. Their tethered horses grazed not far away — big-boned animals, not so ponderous as those raised by the Britons, but swifter.

Bran’s eyes lighted as the two strode through the camp. “These

men are keen-beaked birds of war! See how they whet their axes and jest of the morrow! Would that the raiders in yon camp were as staunch as your men, Cormac! Then would I greet the legions with a laugh when they come up from the south tomorrow.”

They were entering the circle of the Northmen fires. Three hundred men sat about gambling, whetting their weapons and drinking deep of the heather ale furnished them by their Pictish allies. These gazed upon Bran and Cormac with no great friendliness. It was striking to note the difference between them and the Picts and Celts — the difference in their cold eyes, their strong moody faces, their very bearing. Here was ferocity, and savagery, but not of the wild, up-bursting fury of the Celt. Here was fierceness backed by grim determination and stolid stubbornness. The charge of the British clans was terrible, overwhelming. But they had no patience; let them be balked of immediate victory and they were likely to lose heart and scatter or fall to bickering among themselves. There was the patience of the cold blue North in these seafarers — a lasting determination that would keep them steadfast to the bitter end, once their face was set toward a definite goal.

As to personal stature, they were giants; massive yet rangy. That they did not share the ideas of the Celts regarding armor was shown by the fact that they were clad in heavy scale mail shirts that reached below mid-thigh, heavy horned helmets and hardened hide leggings, reinforced, as were their shoes, with plates of iron. Their shields were huge oval affairs of hard wood, hide and brass. As to weapons, they had long iron-headed spears, heavy iron axes, and daggers. Some had long wide-bladed swords.

Cormac scarcely felt at ease with the cold magnetic eyes of these flaxen-haired men fixed upon him. He and they were hereditary foes,

even though they did chance to be fighting on the same side at present — but were they?

A man came forward, a tall gaunt warrior on whose scarred, wolfish face the flickering firelight reflected deep shadows. With his wolfskin mantle flung carelessly about his wide shoulders, and the great horns on his helmet adding to his height, he stood there in the swaying shadows, like some half-human thing, a brooding shape of the dark barbarism that was soon to engulf the world.

“Well, Wulfhere,” said the Pictish king, “you have drunk the mead of council and have spoken about the fires — what is your decision?”

The Northman’s eyes flashed in the gloom. “Give us a king of our own race to follow if you wish us to fight for you.”

Bran flung out his hands. “Ask me to drag down the stars to gem your helmets! Will not your comrades follow you?”

“Not against the legions,” answered Wulfhere sullenly. “A king led us on the viking path — a king must lead us against the Romans. And Rognar is dead.”

“I am a king,” said Bran. “Will you fight for me if I stand at the tip of your fight wedge?”

“A king of our own race,” said Wulfhere doggedly. “We are all picked men of the North. We fight for none but a king, and a king must lead us — against the legions.”

Cormac sensed a subtle threat in this repeated phrase.

“Here is a prince of Erin,” said Bran. “Will you fight for the West-erner?”

“We fight under no Celt, West or East,” growled the viking, and a low rumble of approval rose from the onlookers. “It is enough to fight by their side.”

The hot Gaelic blood rose in Cormac's brain and he pushed past Bran, his hand on his sword. "How mean you that, pirate?"

Before Wulphere could reply Bran interposed: "Have done! Will you fools throw away the battle before it is fought, by your madness? What of your oath, Wulphere?"

"We swore it under Rognar; when he died from a Roman arrow we were absolved of it. We will follow only a king — against the legions."

"But your comrades will follow you — against the heather people!" snapped Bran.

"Aye," the Northman's eyes met his brazenly. "Send us a king or we join the Romans tomorrow."

Bran snarled. In his rage he dominated the scene, dwarfing the huge men who towered over him.

"Traitors! Liars! I hold your lives in my hand! Aye, draw your swords if you will — Cormac, keep your blade in its sheath. These wolves will not bite a king! Wulphere — I spared your lives when I could have taken them.

"You came to raid the countries of the South, sweeping down from the northern sea in your galleys. You ravaged the coasts and the smoke of burning villages hung like a cloud over the shores of Caledon. I trapped you all when you were pillaging and burning — with the blood of my people on your hands. I burned your long ships and ambushed you when you followed. With thrice your number of bowmen who burned for your lives hidden in the heathered hills about you, I spared you when we could have shot you down like trapped wolves. Because I spared you, you swore to come and fight for me."

"And shall we die because the Picts fight Rome?" rumbled a bearded raider.

"Your lives are forfeit to me; you came to ravage the South. I did

not promise to send you all back to your homes in the North unharmed and loaded with loot. Your vow was to fight one battle against Rome under my standard. Then I will aid your survivors to build ships and you may go where you will, with a goodly share of the plunder we take from the legions. Rognar had kept his oath. But Rognar died in a skirmish with Roman scouts and now you, Wulfhere the Dissension-breeder, you stir up your comrades to dishonor themselves by that which a Northman hates — the breaking of the sworn word.”

“We break no oath,” snarled the viking, and the king sensed the basic Germanic stubbornness, far harder to combat than the fickleness of the fiery Celts. “Give us a king, neither Pict, Gael nor Briton, and we will die for you. If not — then we will fight tomorrow for the greatest of all kings — the emperor of Rome!”

For a moment Cormac thought that the Pictish king, in his black rage, would draw and strike the Northman dead. The concentrated fury that blazed in Bran’s dark eyes caused Wulfhere to recoil and drop a hand to his belt.

“Fool!” said Mak Morn in a low voice that vibrated with passion. “I could sweep you from the earth before the Romans are near enough to hear your death howls. Choose — fight for me on the morrow — or die tonight under a black cloud of arrows, a red storm of swords, a dark wave of chariots!”

At the mention of the chariots, the only arm of war that had ever broken the Norse shield-wall, Wulfhere changed expression, but he held his ground.

“War be it,” he said doggedly. “Or a king to lead us!”

The Northmen responded with a short deep roar and a clash of swords on shields. Bran, eyes blazing, was about to speak again when a white shape glided silently into the ring of firelight.

“Soft words, soft words,” said old Gonar tranquilly. “King, say no more. Wulfhre, you and your fellows will fight for us if you have a king to lead you?”

“We have sworn.”

“Then be at ease,” quoth the wizard; “for ere battle joins on the morrow I will send you such a king as no man on earth has followed for a hundred thousand years! A king neither Pict, Gael nor Briton, but one to whom the emperor of Rome is as but a village headman!”

While they stood undecided, Gonar took the arms of Cormac and Bran. “Come. And you, Northmen, remember your vow, and my promise which I have never broken. Sleep now, nor think to steal away in the darkness to the Roman camp, for if you escaped our shafts you would not escape either my curse or the suspicions of the legionaries.”

So the three walked away and Cormac, looking back, saw Wulfhre standing by the fire, fingering his golden beard, with a look of puzzled anger on his lean evil face.

The three walked silently through the waving heather under the far-away stars while the weird night wind whispered ghostly secrets about them.

“Ages ago,” said the wizard suddenly, “in the days when the world was young, great lands rose where now the ocean roars. On these lands thronged mighty nations and kingdoms. Greatest of all these was Valusia — Land of Enchantment. Rome is as a village compared to the splendor of the cities of Valusia. And the greatest king was Kull, who came from the land of Atlantis to wrest the crown of Valusia from a degenerate dynasty. The Picts who dwelt in the isles which now form the mountain peaks of a strange land upon the Western Ocean, were allies of Valusia, and the greatest of all the Pictish war-chiefs was Brule the Spear-slayer, first of the line men call Mak Morn.

“Kull gave to Brule the jewel which you now wear in your iron crown, oh king, after a strange battle in a dim land, and down the long ages it has come to us, ever a sign of the Mak Morn, a symbol of former greatness. When at last the sea rose and swallowed Valusia, Atlantis and Lemuria, only the Picts survived and they were scattered and few. Yet they began again the slow climb upward, and though many of the arts of civilization were lost in the great flood, yet they progressed. The art of metal-working was lost, so they excelled in the working of flint. And they ruled all the new lands flung up by the sea and now called Europe, until down from the north came younger tribes who had scarce risen from the ape when Valusia reigned in her glory, and who, dwelling in the icy lands about the Pole, knew naught of the lost splendor of the Seven Empires and little of the flood that had swept away half a world.

“And still they have come — Aryans, Celts, Germans, swarming down from the great cradle of their race which lies near the Pole. So again was the growth of the Pictish nation checked and the race hurled into savagery. Erased from the earth, on the fringe of the world with our backs to the wall we fight. Here in Caledon is the last stand of a once mighty race. And we change. Our people have mixed with the savages of an elder age which we drove into the North when we came into the Isles, and now, save for their chieftains, such as thou, Bran, a Pict is strange and abhorrent to look upon.”

“True, true,” said the king impatiently, “but what has that to do —”

“Kull, king of Valusia,” said the wizard imperturbably, “was a barbarian in his age as thou art in thine, though he ruled a mighty empire by the weight of his sword. Gonar, friend of Brule, your first ancestor, has been dead a hundred thousand years as we reckon time. Yet I talked with him a scant hour ago.”

“You talked with his ghost —”

“Or he with mine? Did I go back a hundred thousand years, or did he come forward? If he came to me out of the past, it is not I who talked with a dead man, but he who talked with a man unborn. Past, present and future are one to a wise man. I talked to Gonar while he was alive; likewise was I alive. In a timeless, spaceless land we met and he told me many things.”

The land was growing light with the birth of dawn. The heather waved and bent in long rows before the dawn wind as bowing in worship of the rising sun.

“The jewel in your crown is a magnet that draws down the eons,” said Gonar. “The sun is rising — and who comes out of the sunrise?”

Cormac and the king started. The sun was just lifting a red orb above the eastern hills. And full in the glow, etched boldly against the golden rim, a man suddenly appeared. They had not seen him come. Against the golden birth of day he loomed colossal; a gigantic god from the dawn of creation. Now as he strode toward them the waking hosts saw him and sent up a sudden shout of wonder.

“Who — or what is it?” exclaimed Bran.

“Let us go to meet him, Bran,” answered the wizard. “He is the king Gonar has sent to save the people of Brule.”

2.

*I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule;
From a wild weird clime that lieth sublime
Out of Space — out of Time.*

— Poe

The army fell silent as Bran, Cormac and Gonar went toward the stranger who approached in long swinging strides. As they neared him the illusion of monstrous size vanished, but they saw he was a man of great stature. At first Cormac thought him to be a Northman but a second glance told him that nowhere before had he seen such a man. He was built much like the vikings, at once massive and lithe — tigerish. But his features were not as theirs, and his square-cut, lion-like mane of hair was as black as Bran's own. Under heavy brows glittered eyes gray as steel and cold as ice. His bronzed face, strong and inscrutable, was clean-shaven, and the broad forehead betokened a high intelligence, just as the firm jaw and thin lips showed will-power and courage. But more than all, the bearing of him, the unconscious lion-like stateliness, marked him as a natural king, a ruler of men.

Sandals of curious make were on his feet and he wore a pliant coat of strangely meshed mail which came almost to his knees. A broad belt with a great golden buckle encircled his waist, supporting a long straight sword in a heavy leather scabbard. His hair was confined by a wide, heavy golden band about his head.

Such was the man who paused before the silent group. He seemed slightly puzzled, slightly amused. Recognition flickered in his eyes. He

spoke in a strange archaic Pictish which Cormac scarcely understood. His voice was deep and resonant.

“Ha, Brule, Gonar did not tell me I would dream of you!”

For the first time in his life Cormac saw the Pictish king completely thrown off his balance. He gaped, speechless. The stranger continued:

“And wearing the gem I gave you, in a circlet on your head! Last night you wore it in a ring on your finger.”

“Last night?” gasped Bran.

“Last night or a hundred thousand years ago — all one!” murmured Gonar in evident enjoyment of the situation.

“I am not Brule,” said Bran. “Are you mad to thus speak of a man dead a hundred thousand years? He was first of my line.”

The stranger laughed unexpectedly. “Well, now I know I am dreaming! This will be a tale to tell Brule when I waken on the morrow! That I went into the future and saw men claiming descent from the Spear-slayer who is, as yet, not even married. No, you are not Brule, I see now, though you have his eyes and his bearing. But he is taller and broader in the shoulders. Yet you have his jewel — oh, well — anything can happen in a dream, so I will not quarrel with you. For a time I thought I had been transported to some other land in my sleep, and was in reality awake in a strange country, for this is the clearest dream I ever dreamed. Who are you?”

“I am Bran Mak Morn, king of the Caledonian Picts. And this ancient is Gonar, a wizard, of the line of Gonar. And this warrior is Cormac na Connacht, a prince of the isle of Erin.”

The stranger slowly shook his lion-like head. “These words sound strangely to me, save Gonar — and that one is not Gonar, though he too is old. What land is this?”

“Caledon, or Alba, as the Gaels call it.”

“And who are those squat ape-like warriors who watch us yonder, all agape?”

“They are the Picts who own my rule.”

“How strangely distorted folk are in dreams!” muttered the stranger. “And who are those shock-headed men about the chariots?”

“They are Britons — Cymry from south of the Wall.”

“What Wall?”

“The Wall built by Rome to keep the people of the heather out of Britain.”

“Britain?” the tone was curious. “I never heard of that land — and what is Rome?”

“What!” cried Bran. “You never heard of Rome, the empire that rules the world?”

“No empire rules the world,” answered the other haughtily. “The mightiest kingdom on earth is that wherein I reign.”

“And who are you?”

“Kull of Atlantis, king of Valusia!”

Cormac felt a coldness trickle down his spine. The cold gray eyes were unswerving — but this was incredible — monstrous — unnatural.

“Valusia!” cried Bran. “Why, man, the sea waves have rolled above the spires of Valusia for untold centuries!”

Kull laughed outright. “What a mad nightmare this is! When Gonar put on me the spell of deep sleep last night — or this night! — in the secret room of the inner palace, he told me I would dream strange things, but this is more fantastic than I reckoned. And the strangest thing is, I know I am dreaming!”

Gonar interposed as Bran would have spoken. “Question not the acts of the gods,” muttered the wizard. “You are king because in the

past you have seen and seized opportunities. The gods or the first Gonar have sent you this man. Let me deal with him.”

Bran nodded, and while the silent army gaped in speechless wonder, just within ear-shot, Gonar spoke: “Oh great king, you dream, but is not all life a dream? How reckon you but that your former life is but a dream from which you have just awakened? Now we dream-folk have our wars and our peace, and just now a great host comes up from the south to destroy the people of Brule. Will you aid us?”

Kull grinned with pure zest. “Aye! I have fought battles in dreams ere now, have slain and been slain and was amazed when I woke from my visions. And at times, as now, dreaming I have known I dreamed. See, I pinch myself and feel it, but I know I dream for I have felt the pain of fierce wounds, in dreams. Yes, people of my dream, I will fight for you against the other dream-folk. Where are they?”

“And that you enjoy the dream more,” said the wizard subtly, “forget that it is a dream and pretend that by the magic of the first Gonar, and the quality of the jewel you gave Brule, that now gleams on the crown of the Morni, you have in truth been transported forward into another, wilder age where the people of Brule fight for their life against a stronger foe.”

For a moment the man who called himself king of Valusia seemed startled; a strange look of doubt, almost of fear, clouded his eyes. Then he laughed.

“Good! Lead on, wizard.”

But now Bran took charge. He had recovered himself and was at ease. Whether he thought, like Cormac, that this was all a gigantic hoax arranged by Gonar, he showed no sign.

“King Kull, see you those men yonder who lean on their long-shafted axes as they gaze upon you?”

“The tall men with the golden hair and beards?”

“Aye — our success in the coming battle hinges on them. They swear to go over to the enemy if we give them not a king to lead them — their own having been slain. Will you lead them to battle?”

Kull’s eyes glowed with appreciation. “They are men such as my own Red Slayers, my picked regiment. I will lead them.”

“Come then.”

The small group made their way down the slope, through throngs of warriors who pushed forward eagerly to get a better view of the stranger, then pressed back as he approached. An undercurrent of tense whispering ran through the horde.

The Northmen stood apart in a compact group. Their cold eyes took in Kull and he gave back their stares, taking in every detail of their appearance.

“Wulphere,” said Bran, “we have brought you a king. I hold you to your oath.”

“Let him speak to us,” said the viking harshly.

“He can not speak your tongue,” answered Bran, knowing that the Northmen knew nothing of the legends of his race. “He is a great king of the South —”

“He comes out of the past,” broke in the wizard calmly. “He was the greatest of all kings, long ago.”

“A dead man!” The vikings moved uneasily and the rest of the horde pressed forward, drinking in every word. But Wulphere scowled: “Shall a ghost lead living men? You bring us a man you say is dead. We will not follow a corpse.”

“Wulphere,” said Bran in still passion, “you are a liar and a traitor. You set us this task, thinking it impossible. You yearn to fight under

the Eagles of Rome. We have brought you a king neither Pict, Gael nor Briton and you deny your vow!"

"Let him fight me, then!" howled Wulphere in uncontrollable wrath, swinging his ax about his head in a glittering arc. "If your dead man overcomes me — then my people will follow you. If I overcome him, you shall let us depart in peace to the camp of the legions!"

"Good!" said the wizard. "Do you agree, wolves of the North?"

A fierce yell and a brandishing of swords was the answer. Bran turned to Kull, who had stood silent, understanding nothing of what was said. But the Atlantean's eyes gleamed. Cormac felt that those cold eyes had looked on too many such scenes not to understand something of what had passed.

"This warrior says you must fight him for the leadership," said Bran, and Kull, eyes glittering with growing battle-joy, nodded: "I guessed as much. Give us space."

"A shield and a helmet!" shouted Bran, but Kull shook his head.

"I need none," he growled. "Back and give us room to swing our steel!"

Men pressed back on each side, forming a solid ring about the two men, who now approached each other warily. Kull had drawn his sword and the great blade shimmered like a live thing in his hand. Wulphere, scarred by a hundred savage fights, flung aside his wolfskin mantle and came in cautiously, fierce eyes peering over the top of his out-thrust shield, ax half lifted in his right hand.

Suddenly when the warriors were still many feet apart Kull sprang. His attack brought a gasp from men used to deeds of prowess; for like a leaping tiger he shot through the air and his sword crashed on the quickly lifted shield. Sparks flew and Wulphere's ax hacked in, but Kull was under its sweep and as it swished viciously above his head he

thrust upward and sprang out again, cat-like. His motions had been too quick for the eye to follow. The upper edge of Wulfhere's shield showed a deep cut, and there was a long rent in his mail shirt where Kull's sword had barely missed the flesh beneath.

Cormac, trembling with the terrible thrill of the fight, wondered at this sword that could thus slice through scale-mail. And the blow that gashed the shield should have shattered the blade. Yet not a notch showed in the Valusian steel! Surely this blade was forged by another people in another age!

Now the two giants leaped again to the attack and like double strokes of lightning their weapons crashed. Wulfhere's shield fell from his arm in two pieces as the Atlantean's sword sheared clear through it, and Kull staggered as the Northman's ax, driven with all the force of his great body, descended on the golden circlet about his head. That blow should have sheared through the gold like butter to split the skull beneath, but the ax rebounded, showing a great notch in the edge. The next instant the Northman was overwhelmed by a whirlwind of steel — a storm of strokes delivered with such swiftness and power that he was borne back as on the crest of a wave, unable to launch an attack of his own. With all his tried skill he sought to parry the singing steel with his ax. But he could only avert his doom for a few seconds; could only for an instant turn the whistling blade that hewed off bits of his mail, so close fell the blows. One of the horns flew from his helmet; then the ax-head itself fell away, and the same blow that severed the handle, bit through the viking's helmet into the scalp beneath. Wulfhere was dashed to his knees, a trickle of blood starting down his face.

Kull checked his second stroke, and tossing his sword to Cormac, faced the dazed Northman weaponless. The Atlantean's eyes were blaz-

ing with ferocious joy and he roared something in a strange tongue. Wulphere gathered his legs under him and bounded up, snarling like a wolf, a dagger flashing into his hand. The watching horde gave tongue in a yell that ripped the skies as the two bodies clashed. Kull's clutching hand missed the Northman's wrist but the desperately lunging dagger snapped on the Atlantean's mail, and dropping the useless hilt, Wulphere locked his arms about his foe in a bear-like grip that would have crushed the ribs of a lesser man. Kull grinned tigerishly and returned the grapple, and for a moment the two swayed on their feet. Slowly the black-haired warrior bent his foe backward until it seemed his spine would snap. With a howl that had nothing of the human in it, Wulphere clawed frantically at Kull's face, trying to tear out his eyes, then turned his head and snapped his fang-like teeth into the Atlantean's arm. A yell went up as a trickle of blood started: "He bleeds! He bleeds! He is no ghost, after all, but a mortal man!"

Angered, Kull shifted his grip, shoving the frothing Wulphere away from him, and smote him terrifically under the ear with his right hand. The viking landed on his back a dozen feet away. Then, howling like a wild man, he leaped up with a stone in his hand and flung it. Only Kull's incredible quickness saved his face; as it was, the rough edge of the missile tore his cheek and inflamed him to madness. With a lion-like roar he bounded upon his foe, enveloped him in an irresistible blast of sheer fury, whirled him high above his head as if he were a child and cast him a dozen feet away. Wulphere pitched on his head and lay still — broken and dead.

Dazed silence reigned for an instant; then from the Gaels went up a thundering roar, and the Britons and Picts took it up, howling like wolves, until the echoes of the shouts and the clangor of sword on shield reached the ears of the marching legionaries, miles to the south.

“Men of the gray North,” shouted Bran, “will you hold by your oath *now*?”

The fierce souls of the Northmen were in their eyes as their spokesman answered. Primitive, superstitious, steeped in tribal lore of fighting gods and mythical heroes, they did not doubt that the black-haired fighting man was some supernatural being sent by the fierce gods of battle.

“Aye! Such a man as this we have never seen! Dead man, ghost or devil, we will follow him, whether the trail lead to Rome or Valhalla!”

Kull understood the meaning, if not the words. Taking his sword from Cormac with a word of thanks, he turned to the waiting Northmen and silently held the blade toward them high above his head, in both hands, before he returned it to its scabbard. Without understanding, they appreciated the action. Blood-stained and disheveled, he was an impressive picture of stately, magnificent barbarism.

“Come,” said Bran, touching the Atlantean’s arm; “a host is marching on us and we have much to do. There is scant time to arrange our forces before they will be upon us. Come to the top of yonder slope.”

There the Pict pointed. They were looking down into a valley which ran north and south, widening from a narrow gorge in the north until it debouched upon a plain to the south. The whole valley was less than a mile in length.

“Up this valley will our foes come,” said the Pict, “because they have wagons loaded with supplies and on all sides of this vale the ground is too rough for such travel. Here we plan an ambush.”

“I would have thought you would have had your men lying in wait long before now,” said Kull. “What of the scouts the enemy is sure to send out?”

“The savages I lead would never have waited in ambush so long,”

said Bran with a touch of bitterness. “I could not post them until I was sure of the Northmen. Even so I had not dared to post them ere now — even yet they may take panic from the drifting of a cloud or the blowing of a leaf, and scatter like birds before a cold wind. King Kull — the fate of the Pictish nation is at stake. I am called king of the Picts, but my rule as yet is but a hollow mockery. The hills are full of wild clans who refuse to fight for me. Of the thousand bowmen now at my command, more than half are of my own clan.

“Some eighteen hundred Romans are marching against us. It is not a real invasion, but much hinges upon it. It is the beginning of an attempt to extend their boundaries. They plan to build a fortress a day’s march to the north of this valley. If they do, they will build other forts, drawing bands of steel about the heart of the free people. If I win this battle and wipe out this army, I will win a double victory. Then the tribes will flock to me and the next invasion will meet a solid wall of resistance. If I lose, the clans will scatter, fleeing into the north until they can no longer flee, fighting as separate clans rather than as one strong nation.

“I have a thousand archers, five hundred horsemen, fifty chariots with their drivers and swordsmen — one hundred fifty men in all — and, thanks to you, three hundred heavily armed Northern pirates. How would you arrange your battle lines?”

“Well,” said Kull, “I would have barricaded the north end of the valley — no! That would suggest a trap. But I would block it with a band of desperate men, like those you have given me to lead. Three hundred could hold the gorge for a time against any number. Then, when the enemy was engaged with these men to the narrow part of the valley, I would have my archers shoot down into them until their ranks are broken, from both sides of the vale. Then, having my horsemen

concealed behind one ridge and my chariots behind the other, I would charge with both simultaneously and sweep the foe into a red ruin.”

Bran’s eyes glowed. “Exactly, king of Valusia. Such was my exact plan —”

“But what of the scouts?”

“My warriors are like panthers; they hide under the noses of the Romans. Those who ride into the valley will see only what we wish them to see. Those who ride over the ridge will not come back to report. An arrow is swift and silent.

“You see that the pivot of the whole thing depends on the men that hold the gorge. They must be men who can fight on foot and resist the charges of the heavy legionaries long enough for the trap to close. Outside these Northmen I had no such force of men. My naked warriors with their short swords could never stand such a charge for an instant. Nor is the armor of the Celts made for such work; moreover, they are not foot-fighters, and I need them elsewhere.

“So you see why I had such desperate need of the Northmen. Now will you stand in the gorge with them and hold back the Romans until I can spring the trap? Remember, most of you will die.”

Kull smiled. “I have taken chances all my life, though Tu, chief councillor, would say my life belongs to Valusia and I have no right to so risk it —” His voice trailed off and a strange look flitted across his face. “By Valka,” said he, laughing uncertainly, “sometimes I forget this is a dream! All seems so real. But it is — of course it is! Well, then, if I die I will but awaken as I have done in times past. Lead on, king of Caledon!”

Cormac, going to his warriors, wondered. Surely it was all a hoax; yet — he heard the arguments of the warriors all about him as they armed themselves and prepared to take their posts. The black-haired

king was Neid himself, the Celtic war-god; he was an antediluvian king brought out of the past by Gonar; he was a mythical fighting man out of Valhalla. He was no man at all but a ghost! No, he was mortal, for he had bled. But the gods themselves bled, though they did not die. So the controversies raged. At least, thought Cormac, if it was all a hoax to inspire the warriors with the feeling of supernatural aid, it had succeeded. The belief that Kull was more than a mortal man had fired Celt, Pict and viking alike into a sort of inspired madness. And Cormac asked himself — what did he himself believe? This man was surely one from some far land — yet in his every look and action there was a vague hint of a greater difference than mere distance of space — a hint of alien Time, of misty abysses and gigantic gulfs of eons lying between the black-haired stranger and the men with whom he walked and talked. Clouds of bewilderment mazed Cormac's brain and he laughed in whimsical self-mockery.

3.

*And the two wild peoples of the north
Stood fronting in the gloam,
And heard and knew each in his mind
A third great sound upon the wind,
The living walls that hedge mankind,
The walking walls of Rome.*

– Chesterton

The sun slanted westward. Silence lay like an invisible mist over the valley. Cormac gathered the reins in his hand and glanced up at the ridges on both sides. The waving heather which grew rank on those

steep slopes gave no evidence of the hundreds of savage warriors who lurked there. Here in the narrow gorge which widened gradually southward was the only sign of life. Between the steep walls three hundred Northmen were massed solidly in their wedge-shaped shield-wall, blocking the pass. At the tip, like the point of a spear, stood the man who called himself Kull, king of Valusia. He wore no helmet, only the great, strangely worked head-band of hard gold, but he bore on his left arm the great shield borne by the dead Rognar; and in his right hand he held the heavy iron mace wielded by the sea-king. The vikings eyed him in wonder and savage admiration. They could not understand his language, or he theirs. But no further orders were necessary. At Bran's directions they had bunched themselves in the gorge, and their only order was — hold the pass!

Bran Mak Morn stood just in front of Kull. So they faced each other, he whose kingdom was yet unborn, and he whose kingdom had been lost in the mists of Time for unguessed ages. Kings of darkness, thought Cormac, nameless kings of the night, whose realms are gulfs and shadows.

The hand of the Pictish king went out. "King Kull, you are more than king — you are a man. Both of us may fall within the next hour — but if we both live, ask what you will of me."

Kull smiled, returning the firm grip. "You too are a man after my own heart, king of the shadows. Surely you are more than a figment of my sleeping imagination. Mayhap we will meet in waking life some day."

Bran shook his head in puzzlement, swung into the saddle and rode away, climbing the eastern slope and vanishing over the ridge. Cormac hesitated: "Strange man, are you in truth of flesh and blood, or are you a ghost?"

“When we dream, we are all flesh and blood — so long as we are dreaming,” Kull answered. “This is the strangest nightmare I have ever known — but you, who will soon fade into sheer nothingness as I awaken, seem as real to me *now*, as Brule, or Kananu, or Tu, or Kelkor.”

Cormac shook his head as Bran had done, and with a last salute, which Kull returned with barbaric stateliness, he turned and trotted away. At the top of the western ridge he paused. Away to the south a light cloud of dust rose and the head of the marching column was in sight. Already he believed he could feel the earth vibrate slightly to the measured tread of a thousand mailed feet beating in perfect unison. He dismounted, and one of his chieftains, Domnail, took his steed and led it down the slope away from the valley, where trees grew thickly. Only an occasional vague movement among them gave evidence of the five hundred men who stood there, each at his horse’s head with a ready hand to check a chance nicker.

Oh, thought Cormac, the gods themselves made this valley for Bran’s ambush! The floor of the valley was treeless and the inner slopes were bare save for the waist-high heather. But at the foot of each ridge on the side facing away from the vale, where the soil long washed from the rocky slopes had accumulated, there grew enough trees to hide five hundred horsemen or fifty chariots.

At the northern end of the valley stood Kull and his three hundred vikings, in open view, flanked on each side by fifty Pictish bowmen. Hidden on the western side of the western ridge were the Gaels. Along the top of the slopes, concealed in the tall heather, lay a hundred Picts with their shafts on string. The rest of the Picts were hidden on the eastern slopes beyond which lay the Britons with their chariots in full readiness. Neither they nor the Gaels to the west could see what went on in the vale, but signals had been arranged.

Now the long column was entering the wide mouth of the valley and their scouts, light-armed men on swift horses, were spreading out between the slopes. They galloped almost within bowshot of the silent host that blocked the pass, then halted. Some whirled and raced back to the main force, while the others deployed and cantered up the slopes, seeking to see what lay beyond. This was the crucial moment. If they got any hint of the ambush, all was lost. Cormac, shrinking down into the heather, marveled at the ability of the Picts to efface themselves from view so completely. He saw a horseman pass within three feet of where he knew a bowman lay, yet the Roman saw nothing.

The scouts topped the ridges, gazed about; then most of them turned and trotted back down the slopes. Cormac wondered at their desultory manner of scouting. He had never fought Romans before, knew nothing of their arrogant self-confidence, of their incredible shrewdness in some ways, their incredible stupidity in others. These men were over-confident; a feeling radiating from their officers. It had been years since a force of Caledonians had stood before the legions. And most of these men were but newly come to Britain; part of a legion which had been quartered in Egypt. They despised their foes and suspected nothing.

But stay — three riders on the opposite ridge had turned and vanished on the other side. And now one, sitting his steed at the crest of the western ridge, not a hundred yards from where Cormac lay, looked long and narrowly down into the mass of trees at the foot of the slope. Cormac saw suspicion grow on his brown, hawk-like face. He half turned as though to call to his comrades, then instead reined his steed down the slope, leaning forward in his saddle. Cormac's heart pounded. Each moment he expected to see the man wheel and gallop back to raise the alarm. He resisted a mad impulse to leap up and

charge the Roman on foot. Surely the man could feel the tenseness in the air — the hundreds of fierce eyes upon him. Now he was half-way down the slope, out of sight of the men in the valley. And now the twang of an unseen bow broke the painful stillness. With a strangled gasp the Roman flung his hands high, and as the steed reared, he pitched headlong, transfixed by a long black arrow that had flashed from the heather. A stocky dwarf sprang out of nowhere, seemingly, and seized the bridle, quieting the snorting horse, and leading it down the slope. At the fall of the Roman, short crooked men rose like a sudden flight of birds from the grass and Cormac saw the flash of a knife. Then with unreal suddenness all had subsided. Slayers and slain were unseen and only the still waving heather marked the grim deed.

The Gael looked back into the valley. The three who had ridden over the eastern ridge had not come back and Cormac knew they never would. Evidently the other scouts had borne word that only a small band of warriors was ready to dispute the passage of the legionaries. Now the head of the column was almost below him and he thrilled at the sight of these men who were doomed, swinging along with their superb arrogance. And the sight of their splendid armor, their hawk-like faces and perfect discipline awed him as much as it is possible for a Gael to be awed.

Twelve hundred men in heavy armor who marched as one so that the ground shook to their tread! Most of them were of middle height, with powerful chests and shoulders and bronzed faces — hard-bitten veterans of a hundred campaigns. Cormac noted their javelins, short keen swords and heavy shields; their gleaming armor and crested helmets, the eagles on the standards. These were the men beneath whose tread the world had shaken and empires crumbled! Not all were Latins; there were Romanized Britons among them and one century

or hundred was composed of huge yellow-haired men — Gauls and Germans, who fought for Rome as fiercely as did the native-born, and hated their wilder kinsmen more savagely.

On each side was a swarm of cavalry, outriders, and the column was flanked by archers and slingers. A number of lumbering wagons carried the supplies of the army. Cormac saw the commander riding in his place — a tall man with a lean, imperious face, evident even at that distance. Marcus Sullius — the Gael knew him by repute.

A deep-throated roar rose from the legionaries as they approached their foes. Evidently they intended to slice their way through and continue without a pause, for the column moved implacably on. Whom the gods destroy they first make mad — Cormac had never heard the phrase but it came to him that the great Sullius was a fool. Roman arrogance! Marcus was used to lashing the cringing peoples of a decadent East; little he guessed of the iron in these western races.

A group of cavalry detached itself and raced into the mouth of the gorge, but it was only a gesture. With loud jeering shouts they wheeled three spears length away and cast their javelins, which rattled harmlessly on the overlapping shields of the silent Northmen. But their leader dared too much; swinging in, he leaned from his saddle and thrust at Kull's face. The great shield turned the lance and Kull struck back as a snake strikes; the ponderous mace crushed helmet and head like an eggshell, and the very steed went to its knees from the shock of that terrible blow. From the Northmen went up a short fierce roar, and the Picts beside them howled exultantly and loosed their arrows among the retreating horsemen. First blood for the people of the heather! The oncoming Romans shouted vengefully and quickened their pace as the frightened horse raced by, a ghastly travesty of a man, foot caught in the stirrup, trailing beneath the pounding hoofs.

Now the first line of the legionaries, compressed because of the narrowness of the gorge, crashed against the solid wall of shields — crashed and recoiled upon itself. The shield-wall had not shaken an inch. This was the first time the Roman legions had met with that unbreakable formation — that oldest of all Aryan battle-lines — the ancestor of the Spartan regiment — the Theban phalanx — the Macedonian formation — the English square.

Shield crashed on shield and the short Roman sword sought for an opening in that iron wall. Viking spears bristling in solid ranks above, thrust and reddened; heavy axes chopped down, shearing through iron, flesh and bone. Cormac saw Kull, looming above the stocky Romans in the forefront of the fray, dealing blows like thunderbolts. A burly centurion rushed in, shield held high, stabbing upward. The iron mace crashed terribly, shivering the sword, rending the shield apart, shattering the helmet, crushing the skull down between the shoulders — in a single blow.

The front line of the Romans bent like a steel bar about the wedge, as the legionaries sought to struggle through the gorge on each side and surround their opposers. But the pass was too narrow; crouching close against the steep walls the Picts drove their black arrows in a hail of death. At this range the heavy shafts tore through shield and corselet, transfixing the armored men. The front line of battle rolled back, red and broken, and the Northmen trod their few dead under foot to close the gaps their fall had made. Stretched the full width of their front lay a thin line of shattered forms — the red spray of the tide which had broken upon them in vain.

Cormac had leaped to his feet, waving his arms. Domnail and his men broke cover at the signal and came galloping up the slope, lining the ridge. Cormac mounted the horse brought him and glanced im-

patiently across the narrow vale. No sign of life appeared on the eastern ridge. Where was Bran — and the Britons?

Down in the valley, the legions, angered at the unexpected opposition of the paltry force in front of them, but not suspicious, were forming in more compact body. The wagons which had halted were lumbering on again and the whole column was once more in motion as if it intended to crash through by sheer weight. With the Gaulish century in the forefront, the legionaries were advancing again in the attack. This time, with the full force of twelve hundred men behind, the charge would batter down the resistance of Kull's warriors like a heavy ram; would stamp them down, sweep over their red ruins. Cormac's men trembled in impatience. Suddenly Marcus Sullius turned and gazed westward, where the line of horsemen was etched against the sky. Even at that distance Cormac saw his face pale. The Roman at last realized the metal of the men he faced, and that he had walked into a trap. Surely in that moment there flashed a chaotic picture through his brain — defeat — disgrace — red ruin!

It was too late to retreat — too late to form into a defensive square with the wagons for barricade. There was but one possible way out, and Marcus, crafty general in spite of his recent blunder, took it. Cormac heard his voice cut like a clarion through the din, and though he did not understand the words, he knew that the Roman was shouting for his men to smite that knot of Northmen like a blast — to hack their way through and out of the trap before it could close!

Now the legionaries, aware of their desperate plight, flung themselves headlong and terribly on their foes. The shield-wall rocked, but it gave not an inch. The wild faces of the Gauls and the hard brown Italian faces glared over locked shields into the blazing eyes of the North. Shields touching, they smote and slew and died in a red storm

of slaughter, where crimsoned axes rose and fell and dripping spears broke on notched swords.

Where in God's name was Bran with his chariots? A few minutes more would spell the doom of every man who held that pass. Already they were falling fast, though they locked their ranks closer and held like iron. Those wild men of the North were dying in their tracks; and looming among their golden heads the black lion-mane of Kull shone like a symbol of slaughter, and his reddened mace showered a ghastly rain as it splashed brains and blood like water.

Something snapped in Cormac's brain.

"These men will die while we wait for Bran's signal!" he shouted. "On! Follow me into Hell, sons of Gael!"

A wild roar answered him, and loosing rein he shot down the slope with five hundred yelling riders plunging headlong after him. And even at that moment a storm of arrows swept the valley from either side like a dark cloud and the terrible clamor of the Picts split the skies. And over the eastern ridge, like a sudden burst of rolling thunder on Judgment Day, rushed the war-chariots. Headlong down the slope they roared, foam flying from the horses' distended nostrils, frantic feet scarcely seeming to touch the ground, making naught of the tall heather. In the foremost chariot, with his dark eyes blazing, crouched Bran Mak Morn, and in all of them the naked Britons were screaming and lashing as if possessed by demons. Behind the flying chariots came the Picts, howling like wolves and loosing their arrows as they ran. The heather belched them forth from all sides in a dark wave.

So much Cormac saw in chaotic glimpses during that wild ride down the slopes. A wave of cavalry swept between him and the main line of the column. Three long leaps ahead of his men, the Gaelic prince met the spears of the Roman riders. The first lance turned on

his buckler, and rising in his stirrups he smote downward, cleaving his man from shoulder to breastbone. The next Roman flung a javelin that killed Domnail, but at that instant Cormac's steed crashed into his, breast to breast, and the lighter horse rolled headlong under the shock, flinging his rider beneath the pounding hoofs.

Then the whole blast of the Gaelic charge smote the Roman cavalry, shattering it, crashing and rolling it down and under. Over its red ruins Cormac's yelling demons struck the heavy Roman infantry, and the whole line reeled at the shock. Swords and axes flashed up and down and the force of their rush carried them deep into the massed ranks. Here, checked, they swayed and strove. Javelins thrust, swords flashed upward, bringing down horse and rider, and greatly outnumbered, leaguered on every side, the Gaels had perished among their foes, but at that instant, from the other side the crashing chariots smote the Roman ranks. In one long line they struck almost simultaneously, and at the moment of impact the charioteers wheeled their horses side-long and raced parallel down the ranks, shearing men down like the mowing of wheat. Hundreds died on those curving blades in that moment, and leaping from the chariots, screaming like blood-mad wildcats, the British swordsmen flung themselves upon the spears of the legionaries, hacking madly with their two-handed swords. Crouching, the Picts drove their arrows pointblank and then sprang in to slash and thrust. Maddened with the sight of victory, these wild peoples were like wounded tigers, feeling no wounds, and dying on their feet with their last gasp a snarl of fury.

But the battle was not over yet. Dazed, shattered, their formation broken and nearly half their number down already, the Romans fought back with desperate fury. Hemmed in on all sides they slashed and smote singly, or in small clumps, fought back to back, archers, slingers,

horsemen and heavy legionaries mingled into a chaotic mass. The confusion was complete, but not the victory. Those bottled in the gorge still hurled themselves upon the red axes that barred their way, while the massed and serried battle thundered behind them. From one side Cormac's Gaels raged and slashed; from the other chariots swept back and forth, retiring and returning like iron whirlwinds. There was no retreat, for the Picts had flung a cordon across the way they had come, and having cut the throats of the camp-followers and possessed themselves of the wagons, they sent their shafts in a storm of death into the rear of the shattered column. Those long black arrows pierced armor and bone, nailing men together. Yet the slaughter was not all on one side. Picts died beneath the lightning thrust of javelin and shortsword, Gaels pinned beneath their falling horses were hewed to pieces, and chariots, cut loose from their horses, were deluged with the blood of the charioteers.

And at the narrow head of the valley still the battle surged and eddied. Great gods — thought Cormac, glancing between lightning-like blows — do these men still hold the gorge? Aye! They held it! A tenth of their original number, dying on their feet, they still held back the frantic charges of the dwindling legionaries.

Over all the field went up the roar and the clash of arms, and birds of prey, swift-flying out of the sunset, circled above. Cormac, striving to reach Marcus Sullius through the press, saw the Roman's horse sink under him, and the rider rise alone in a waste of foes. He saw the Roman sword flash thrice, dealing a death at each blow; then from the thickest of the fray bounded a terrible figure. It was Bran Mak Morn, stained from head to foot. He cast away his broken sword as he ran, drawing a dirk. The Roman struck, but the Pictish king was under the

thrust, and gripping the sword-wrist, he drove the dirk again and again through the gleaming armor.

A mighty roar went up as Marcus died, and Cormac, with a shout, rallied the remnants of his force about him and, striking in the spurs, burst through the shattered lines and rode full speed for the other end of the valley.

But as he approached he saw that he was too late. As they had lived, so had they died, those fierce sea-wolves, with their faces to the foe and their broken weapons red in their hands. In a grim and silent band they lay, even in death preserving some of the shield-wall formation. Among them, in front of them and all about them lay high-heaped the bodies of those who had sought to break them, in vain. *They had not given back a foot!* To the last man, they had died in their tracks. Nor were there any left to stride over their torn shapes; those Romans who had escaped the viking axes had been struck down by the shafts of the Picts and swords of the Gaels from behind.

Yet this part of the battle was not over. High up on the steep western slope Cormac saw the ending of that drama. A group of Gauls in the armor of Rome pressed upon a single man — a black-haired giant on whose head gleamed a golden crown. There was iron in these men, as well as in the man who had held them to their fate. They were doomed — their comrades were being slaughtered behind them — but before their turn came they would at least have the life of the black-haired chief who had led the golden-haired men of the North.

Pressing upon him from three sides they had forced him slowly back up the steep gorge wall, and the crumpled bodies that stretched along his retreat showed how fiercely every foot of the way had been contested. Here on this steep it was task enough to keep one's footing alone; yet these men at once climbed and fought. Kull's shield and the

huge mace were gone, and the great sword in his right hand was dyed crimson. His mail, wrought with a forgotten art, now hung in shreds, and blood streamed from a hundred wounds on limbs, head and body. But his eyes still blazed with the battle-joy and his wearied arm still drove the mighty blade in strokes of death.

But Cormac saw that the end would come before they could reach him. Now at the very crest of the steep, a hedge of points menaced the strange king's life, and even his iron strength was ebbing. Now he split the skull of a huge warrior and the back-stroke shore through the neck-cords of another; reeling under a very rain of swords he struck again and his victim dropped at his feet, cleft to the breast-bone. Then, even as a dozen swords rose above the staggering Atlantean for the death stroke, a strange thing happened. The sun was sinking into the western sea; all the heather swam red like an ocean of blood. Etched in the dying sun, as he had first appeared, Kull stood, and then, like a mist lifting, a mighty vista opened behind the reeling king. Cormac's astounded eyes caught a fleeting gigantic glimpse of other climes and spheres — as if mirrored in summer clouds he saw, instead of the heather hills stretching away to the sea, a dim and mighty land of blue mountains and gleaming quiet lakes — the golden, purple and sapphorean spires and towering walls of a mighty city such as the earth has not known for many a drifting age.

Then like the fading of a mirage it was gone, but the Gauls on the high slope had dropped their weapons and stared like men dazed — *For the man called Kull had vanished and there was no trace of his going!*

As in a daze Cormac turned his steed and rode back across the trampled field. His horse's hoofs splashed in lakes of blood and clanged against the helmets of dead men. Across the valley the shout of victory was thundering. Yet all seemed shadowy and strange.

A shape was striding across the torn corpses and Cormac was dully aware that it was Bran. The Gael swung from his horse and fronted the king. Bran was weaponless and gory; blood trickled from gashes on brow, breast and limb; what armor he had worn was clean hacked away and a cut had shorn half-way through his iron crown. But the red jewel still gleamed unblemished like a star of slaughter.

“It is in my mind to slay you,” said the Gael heavily and like a man speaking in a daze, “for the blood of brave men is on your head. Had you given the signal to charge sooner, some would have lived.”

Bran folded his arms; his eyes were haunted. “Strike if you will; I am sick of slaughter. It is a cold mead, this kinging it. A king must gamble with men’s lives and naked swords. The lives of all my people were at stake; I sacrificed the Northmen — yes; and my heart is sore within me, for they were men! But had I given the order when you would have desired, all might have gone awry. The Romans were not yet massed in the narrow mouth of the gorge, and might have had time and space to form their ranks again and beat us off. I waited until the last moment — and the rovers died. A king belongs to his people, and can not let either his own feelings or the lives of men influence him. Now my people are saved; but my heart is cold in my breast.”

Cormac wearily dropped his sword-point to the ground.

“You are a born king of men, Bran,” said the Gaelic prince.

Bran’s eyes roved the field. A mist of blood hovered over all, where the victorious barbarians were looting the dead, while those Romans who had escaped slaughter by throwing down their swords and now stood under guard, looked on with hot smoldering eyes.

“My kingdom — my people — are saved,” said Bran wearily. “They will come from the heather by the thousands and when Rome moves

against us again, she will meet a solid nation. But I am weary. What of Kull?"

"My eyes and brain were mazed with battle," answered Cormac. "I thought to see him vanish like a ghost into the sunset. I will seek his body."

"Seek not for him," said Bran. "Out of the sunrise he came — into the sunset he has gone. Out of the mists of the ages he came to us, and back into the mists of the eons has he returned — to his own kingdom."

Cormac turned away; night was gathering. Gonar stood like a white specter before him.

"To his own kingdom," echoed the wizard. "Time and Space are naught. Kull has returned to his own kingdom — his own crown — his own age."

"Then he was a ghost?"

"Did you not feel the grip of his solid hand? Did you not hear his voice — see him eat and drink, laugh and slay and bleed?"

Still Cormac stood like one in a trance.

"Then if it be possible for a man to pass from one age into one yet unborn, or come forth from a century dead and forgotten, whichever you will, with his flesh-and-blood body and his arms — then he is as mortal as he was in his own day. Is Kull dead, then?"

"He died a hundred thousand years ago, as men reckon time," answered the wizard, "but in his own age. He died not from the swords of the Gauls of this age. Have we not heard in legends how the king of Valusia traveled into a strange, timeless land of the misty future ages, and there fought in a great battle? Why, so he did! A hundred thousand years ago, or today!

"And a hundred thousand years ago — or a moment ago! — Kull,

king of Valusia, roused himself on the silken couch in his secret chamber and laughing, spoke to the first Gonar, saying: ‘Ha, wizard, I have in truth dreamed strangely, for I went into a far clime and a far time in my visions, and fought for the king of a strange shadow-people!’ And the great sorcerer smiled and pointed silently at the red, notched sword, and the torn mail and the many wounds that the king carried. And Kull, fully woken from his ‘vision’ and feeling the sting and the weakness of these yet bleeding wounds, fell silent and mazed, and all life and time and space seemed like a dream of ghosts to him, and he wondered thereat all the rest of his life. For the wisdom of the Eternities is denied even unto princes and Kull could no more understand what Gonar told him than you can understand my words.”

“And then Kull lived despite his many wounds,” said Cormac, “and has returned to the mists of silence and the centuries. Well — he thought us a dream; we thought him a ghost. And sure, life is but a web spun of ghosts and dreams and illusion, and it is in my mind that the kingdom which has this day been born of swords and slaughter in this howling valley is a thing no more solid than the foam of the bright sea.”

A SONG OF THE RACE

High on his throne sat Bran Mak Morn
When the sun-god sank and the west was red;
He beckoned a girl with his drinking horn,
And, "Sing me a song of the race," he said.

Her eyes were as dark as the seas of night,
Her lips were as red as the setting sun,
As, a dusky rose in the fading light,
She let her fingers dreamily run

Over the golden-whispered strings,
Seeking the soul of her ancient lyre;
Bran sate still on the throne of kings,
Bronze face limned in the sunset's fire.

"First of the race of men," she sang,
"Far from an unknown land we came,
From the rim of the world where mountains hang
And the seas burn red with the sunset flame.

"First and the last of the race are we,
Gone is the old world's guilt and pride,
Mu is a myth of the western sea,
Through halls of Atlantis the white sharks glide."

An image of bronze, the king sate still,
Javelins of crimson shot the west,
She brushed the strings and a murmured thrill
Swept up the chords to the highest crest.

“Hear ye the tale that the ancients tell,
Promised of yore by the god of the moon,
Hurl'd on the shore a deep sea shell,
Carved on the surface a mystic rune:

“‘As ye were first in the mystic past
Out of the fogs of the dim of Time,
So shall the men of your race be last
When the world shall crumble,’ so ran the rhyme.

“‘A man of your race, on peaks that clash,
Shall gaze on the reeling world below;
To billowing smoke shall he see it crash,
A floating fog of the winds that blow.

“‘Star-dust falling for aye through space.
Whirling about in the winds that spin;
Ye that were first, be the last-most race,
For one of your men shall be the last of men.’”

Into the silence her voice trailed off,
Yet still it echoed across the dusk,
Over the heather the night-wind soft
Bore the scent of the forest’s musk.

Red lips lifted, and dark eyes dreamed,
Bats came wheeling on stealthy wings;
But the moon rose gold and the far stars gleamed,
And the king still sate on the throne of kings.

WORMS OF THE EARTH

1.

“Strike in the nails, soldiers, and let our guest see the reality of our good Roman justice!”

The speaker wrapped his purple cloak closer about his powerful frame and settled back into his official chair, much as he might have settled back in his seat at the Circus Maximus to enjoy the clash of gladiatorial swords. Realization of power colored his every move.

Whetted pride was necessary to Roman satisfaction, and Titus Sulla was justly proud; for he was military governor of Eboracum and answerable only to the emperor of Rome. He was a strongly built man of medium height, with the hawk-like features of the pure-bred Roman. Now a mocking smile curved his full lips, increasing the arrogance of his haughty aspect. Distinctly military in appearance, he wore the golden-scaled corselet and chased breastplate of his rank, with the short stabbing sword at his belt, and he held on his knee the silvered helmet with its plumed crest. Behind him stood a clump of impassive soldiers with shield and spear — blond titans from the Rhineland.

Before him was taking place the scene which apparently gave him so much real gratification — a scene common enough wherever stretched the far-flung boundaries of Rome. A rude cross lay flat upon the barren earth and on it was bound a man — half naked, wild of aspect with his corded limbs, glaring eyes and shock of tangled hair. His executioners were Roman soldiers, and with heavy hammers they

prepared to pin the victim's hands and feet to the wood with iron spikes.

Only a small group of men watched this ghastly scene, in the dread place of execution beyond the city walls: the governor and his watchful guards; a few young Roman officers; the man to whom Sulla had referred as "guest" and who stood like a bronze image, unspeaking. Beside the gleaming splendor of the Roman, the quiet garb of this man seemed drab, almost somber.

He was dark, but he did not resemble the Latins around him. There was about him none of the warm, almost Oriental sensuality of the Mediterranean which colored their features. The blond barbarians behind Sulla's chair were less unlike the man in facial outline than were the Romans. Not his were the full curving red lips, nor the rich waving locks suggestive of the Greek. Nor was his dark complexion the rich olive of the south; rather it was the bleak darkness of the north. The whole aspect of the man vaguely suggested the shadowed mists, the gloom, the cold and the icy winds of the naked northern lands. Even his black eyes were savagely cold, like black fires burning through fathoms of ice.

His height was only medium but there was something about him which transcended mere physical bulk — a certain fierce innate vitality, comparable only to that of a wolf or a panther. In every line of his supple, compact body, as well as in his coarse straight hair and thin lips, this was evident — in the hawk-like set of the head on the corded neck, in the broad square shoulders, in the deep chest, the lean loins, the narrow feet. Built with the savage economy of a panther, he was an image of dynamic potentialities, pent in with iron self-control.

At his feet crouched one like him in complexion — but there the resemblance ended. This other was a stunted giant, with gnarly limbs,

thick body, a low sloping brow and an expression of dull ferocity, now clearly mixed with fear. If the man on the cross resembled, in a tribal way, the man Titus Sulla called guest, he far more resembled the stunted crouching giant.

“Well, Partha Mac Othna,” said the governor with studied effrontery, “when you return to your tribe, you will have a tale to tell of the justice of Rome, who rules the south.”

“I will have a tale,” answered the other in a voice which betrayed no emotion, just as his dark face, schooled to immobility, showed no evidence of the maelstrom in his soul.

“Justice to all under the rule of Rome,” said Sulla. “Pax Romana! Reward for virtue, punishment for wrong!” He laughed inwardly at his own black hypocrisy, then continued: “You see, emissary of Pictland, how swiftly Rome punishes the transgressor.”

“I see,” answered the Pict in a voice which strongly-curbed anger made deep with menace, “that the subject of a foreign king is dealt with as though he were a Roman slave.”

“He has been tried and condemned in an unbiased court,” retorted Sulla.

“Aye! and the accuser was a Roman, the witnesses Roman, the judge Roman! He committed murder? In a moment of fury he struck down a Roman merchant who cheated, tricked and robbed him, and to injury added insult — aye, and a blow! Is his king but a dog, that Rome crucifies his subjects at will, condemned by Roman courts? Is his king too weak or foolish to do justice, were he informed and formal charges brought against the offender?”

“Well,” said Sulla cynically, “you may inform Bran Mak Morn yourself. Rome, my friend, makes no account of her actions to barbarian

kings. When savages come among us, let them act with discretion or suffer the consequences.”

The Pict shut his iron jaws with a snap that told Sulla further badgering would elicit no reply. The Roman made a gesture to the executioners. One of them seized a spike and placing it against the thick wrist of the victim, smote heavily. The iron point sank deep through the flesh, crunching against the bones. The lips of the man on the cross writhed, though no moan escaped him. As a trapped wolf fights against his cage, the bound victim instinctively wrenched and struggled. The veins swelled in his temples, sweat beaded his low forehead, the muscles in arms and legs writhed and knotted. The hammers fell in inexorable strokes, driving the cruel points deeper and deeper, through wrists and ankles; blood flowed in a black river over the hands that held the spikes, staining the wood of the cross, and the splintering of bones was distinctly heard. Yet the sufferer made no outcry, though his blackened lips writhed back until the gums were visible, and his shaggy head jerked involuntarily from side to side.

The man called Partha Mac Othna stood like an iron image, eyes burning from an inscrutable face, his whole body hard as iron from the tension of his control. At his feet crouched his misshapen servant, hiding his face from the grim sight, his arms locked about his master's knees. Those arms gripped like steel and under his breath the fellow mumbled ceaselessly as if in invocation.

The last stroke fell; the cords were cut from arm and leg, so that the man would hang supported by the nails alone. He had ceased his struggling that only twisted the spikes in his agonizing wounds. His bright black eyes, unglazed, had not left the face of the man called Partha Mac Othna; in them lingered a desperate shadow of hope. Now the soldiers lifted the cross and set the end of it in the hole prepared,

stamped the dirt about it to hold it erect. The Pict hung in midair, suspended by the nails in his flesh, but still no sound escaped his lips. His eyes still hung on the somber face of the emissary, but the shadow of hope was fading.

“He’ll live for days!” said Sulla cheerfully. “These Picts are harder than cats to kill! I’ll keep a guard of ten soldiers watching night and day to see that no one takes him down before he dies. Ho, there, Valerius, in honor of our esteemed neighbor, King Bran Mak Morn, give him a cup of wine!”

With a laugh the young officer came forward, holding a brimming wine-cup, and rising on his toes, lifted it to the parched lips of the sufferer. In the black eyes flared a red wave of unquenchable hatred; writhing his head aside to avoid even touching the cup, he spat full into the young Roman’s eyes. With a curse Valerius dashed the cup to the ground, and before any could halt him, wrenched out his sword and sheathed it in the man’s body.

Sulla rose with an imperious exclamation of anger; the man called Partha Mac Othna had started violently, but he bit his lip and said nothing. Valerius seemed somewhat surprized at himself, as he sullenly cleansed his sword. The act had been instinctive, following the insult to Roman pride, the one thing unbearable.

“Give up your sword, young sir!” exclaimed Sulla. “Centurion Publius, place him under arrest. A few days in a cell with stale bread and water will teach you to curb your patrician pride, in matters dealing with the will of the empire. What, you young fool, do you not realize that you could not have made the dog a more kindly gift? Who would not rather desire a quick death on the sword than the slow agony on the cross? Take him away. And you, centurion, see that guards remain at the cross so that the body is not cut down until the

ravens pick bare the bones. Partha Mac Othna, I go to a banquet at the house of Demetrius — will you not accompany me?”

The emissary shook his head, his eyes fixed on the limp form which sagged on the black-stained cross. He made no reply. Sulla smiled sardonically, then rose and strode away, followed by his secretary who bore the gilded chair ceremoniously, and by the stolid soldiers, with whom walked Valerius, head sunken.

The man called Partha Mac Othna flung a wide fold of his cloak about his shoulder, halted a moment to gaze at the grim cross with its burden, darkly etched against the crimson sky, where the clouds of night were gathering. Then he stalked away, followed by his silent servant.

2.

In an inner chamber of Eboracum, the man called Partha Mac Othna paced tigerishly to and fro. His sandalled feet made no sound on the marble tiles.

“Grom!” he turned to the gnarled servant, “well I know why you held my knees so tightly — why you muttered aid of the Moon-Woman — you feared I would lose my self-control and make a mad attempt to succor that poor wretch. By the gods, I believe that was what the dog Roman wished — his iron-cased watch-dogs watched me narrowly, I know, and his baiting was harder to bear than ordinarily.

“Gods black and white, dark and light!” he shook his clenched fists above his head in the black gust of his passion. “That I should stand by and see a man of mine butchered on a Roman cross — without justice and with no more trial than that farce! Black gods of R’lyeh, even you would I invoke to the ruin and destruction of those butchers!”

I swear by the Nameless Ones, men shall die howling for that deed, and Rome shall cry out as a woman in the dark who treads upon an adder!"

"He knew you, master," said Grom.

The other dropped his head and covered his eyes with a gesture of savage pain.

"His eyes will haunt me when I lie dying. Aye, he knew me, and almost until the last, I read in his eyes the hope that I might aid him. Gods and devils, is Rome to butcher my people beneath my very eyes? Then I am not king but dog!"

"Not so loud, in the name of all the gods!" exclaimed Grom in affright. "Did these Romans suspect you were Bran Mak Morn, they would nail you on a cross beside that other."

"They will know it ere long," grimly answered the king. "Too long I have lingered here in the guise of an emissary, spying upon mine enemies. They have thought to play with me, these Romans, masking their contempt and scorn only under polished satire. Rome is courteous to barbarian ambassadors, they give us fine houses to live in, offer us slaves, pander to our lusts with women and gold and wine and games, but all the while they laugh at us; their very courtesy is an insult, and sometimes — as today — their contempt discards all veneration. Bah! I've seen through their baitings — have remained imperturbably serene and swallowed their studied insults. But this — by the fiends of Hell, this is beyond human endurance! My people look to me; if I fail them — if I fail even one — even the lowest of my people, who will aid them? To whom shall they turn? By the gods, I'll answer the gibes of these Roman dogs with black shaft and trenchant steel!"

"And the chief with the plumes?" Grom meant the governor and

his gutturals thrummed with the blood-lust. “He dies?” He flicked out a length of steel.

Bran scowled. “Easier said than done. He dies — but how may I reach him? By day his German guards keep at his back; by night they stand at door and window. He has many enemies, Romans as well as barbarians. Many a Briton would gladly slit his throat.”

Grom seized Bran’s garment, stammering as fierce eagerness broke the bonds of his inarticulate nature.

“Let me go, master! My life is worth nothing. I will cut him down in the midst of his warriors!”

Bran smiled fiercely and clapped his hand on the stunted giant’s shoulder with a force that would have felled a lesser man.

“Nay, old war-dog, I have too much need of thee! You shall not throw your life away uselessly. Sulla would read the intent in your eyes, besides, and the javelins of his Teutons would be through you ere you could reach him. Not by the dagger in the dark will we strike this Roman, not by the venom in the cup nor the shaft from the ambush.”

The king turned and paced the floor a moment, his head bent in thought. Slowly his eyes grew murky with a thought so fearful he did not speak it aloud to the waiting warrior.

“I have become somewhat familiar with the maze of Roman politics during my stay in this accursed waste of mud and marble,” said he. “During a war on the Wall, Titus Sulla, as governor of this province, is supposed to hasten thither with his centuries. But this Sulla does not do; he is no coward, but the bravest avoid certain things — to each man, however bold, his own particular fear. So he sends in his place Caius Camillus, who in times of peace patrols the fens of the west, lest the Britons break over the border. And Sulla takes his place in the Tower of Trajan. Ha!”

He whirled and gripped Grom with steely fingers.

“Grom, take the red stallion and ride north! Let no grass grow under the stallion’s hoofs! Ride to Cormac na Connacht and tell him to sweep the frontier with sword and torch! Let his wild Gaels feast their fill of slaughter. After a time I will be with him. But for a time I have affairs in the west.”

Grom’s black eyes gleamed and he made a passionate gesture with his crooked hand — an instinctive move of savagery.

Bran drew a heavy bronze seal from beneath his tunic.

“This is my safe-conduct as an emissary to Roman courts,” he said grimly. “It will open all gates between this house and Baal-dor. If any official questions you too closely — here!”

Lifting the lid of an iron-bound chest, Bran took out a small, heavy leather bag which he gave into the hands of the warrior.

“When all keys fail at a gate,” said he, “try a golden key. Go now!”

There were no ceremonious farewells between the barbarian king and his barbarian vassal. Grom flung up his arm in a gesture of salute; then turning, he hurried out.

Bran stepped to a barred window and gazed out into the moonlit streets.

“Wait until the moon sets,” he muttered grimly. “Then I’ll take the road to — Hell! But before I go I have a debt to pay.”

The stealthy clink of a hoof on the flags reached him.

“With the safe-conduct and gold, not even Rome can hold a Pictish reaver,” muttered the king. “Now I’ll sleep until the moon sets.”

With a snarl at the marble frieze-work and fluted columns, as symbols of Rome, he flung himself down on a couch, from which he had long since impatiently torn the cushions and silk stuffs, as too soft for his hard body. Hate and the black passion of vengeance seethed in

him, yet he went instantly to sleep. The first lesson he had learned in his bitter hard life was to snatch sleep any time he could, like a wolf that snatches sleep on the hunting trail. Generally his slumber was as light and dreamless as a panther's, but tonight it was otherwise.

He sank into fleecy gray fathoms of slumber and in a timeless, misty realm of shadows he met the tall, lean, white-bearded figure of old Gonar, the priest of the Moon, high counsellor to the king. And Bran stood aghast, for Gonar's face was white as driven snow and he shook as with ague. Well might Bran stand appalled, for in all the years of his life he had never before seen Gonar the Wise show any sign of fear.

"What now, old one?" asked the king. "Goes all well in Baal-dor?"

"All is well in Baal-dor where my body lies sleeping," answered old Gonar. "Across the void I have come to battle with you for your soul. King, are you mad, this thought you have thought in your brain?"

"Gonar," answered Bran somberly, "this day I stood still and watched a man of mine die on the cross of Rome. What his name or his rank, I do not know. I do not care. He might have been a faithful unknown warrior of mine, he might have been an outlaw. I only know that he was mine; the first scents he knew were the scents of the heather; the first light he saw was the sunrise on the Pictish hills. He belonged to me, not to Rome. If punishment was just, then none but me should have dealt it. If he were to be tried, none but me should have been his judge. The same blood flowed in our veins; the same fire maddened our brains; in infancy we listened to the same old tales, and in youth we sang the same old songs. He was bound to my heart-strings, as every man and every woman and every child of Pictland is bound. It was mine to protect him; now it is mine to avenge him."

"But in the name of the gods, Bran," expostulated the wizard, "take your vengeance in another way! Return to the heather — mass your

warriors — join with Cormac and his Gaels, and spread a sea of blood and flame the length of the great Wall!”

“All that I will do,” grimly answered Bran. “But now — *now* — I will have a vengeance such as no Roman ever dreamed of! Ha, what do they know of the mysteries of this ancient isle, which sheltered strange life long before Rome rose from the marshes of the Tiber?”

“Bran, there are weapons too foul to use, even against Rome!”

Bran barked short and sharp as a jackal.

“Ha! There are no weapons I would not use against Rome! My back is at the wall. By the blood of the fiends, has Rome fought me fair? Bah! I am a barbarian king with a wolfskin mantle and an iron crown, fighting with my handful of bows and broken pikes against the queen of the world. What have I? The heather hills, the wattle huts, the spears of my shock-headed tribesmen! And I fight Rome — with her armored legions, her broad fertile plains and rich seas — her mountains and her rivers and her gleaming cities — her wealth, her steel, her gold, her mastery and her wrath. By steel and fire I will fight her — and by subtlety and treachery — by the thorn in the foot, the adder in the path, the venom in the cup, the dagger in the dark; aye,” his voice sank somberly, “and by the worms of the earth!”

“But it is madness!” cried Gonar. “You will perish in the attempt you plan — you will go down to Hell and you will not return! What of your people then?”

“If I can not serve them I had better die,” growled the king.

“But you can not even reach the beings you seek,” cried Gonar. “For untold centuries they have dwelt *apart*. There is no door by which you can come to them. Long ago they severed the bonds that bound them to the world we know.”

“Long ago,” answered Bran somberly, “you told me that nothing in

the universe was separated from the stream of Life — a saying the truth of which I have often seen evident. No race, no form of life but is close-knit somehow, by some manner, to the rest of Life and the world. Somewhere there is a thin link connecting *those* I seek to the world I know. Somewhere there is a Door. And somewhere among the bleak fens of the west I will find it.”

Stark horror flooded Gonar’s eyes and he gave back crying, “Wo! Wo! Wo! to Pictdom! Wo to the unborn kingdom! Wo, black wo to the sons of men! Wo, wo, wo, wo!”

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Bran awoke to a shadowed room and the starlight on the window-bars. The moon had sunk from sight though its glow was still faint above the house tops. Memory of his dream shook him and he swore beneath his breath.

Rising, he flung off cloak and mantle, donning a light shirt of black mesh-mail, and girding on sword and dirk. Going again to the iron-bound chest he lifted several compact bags and emptied the clinking contents into the leathern pouch at his girdle. Then wrapping his wide cloak about him, he silently left the house. No servants there were to spy on him — he had impatiently refused the offer of slaves which it was Rome’s policy to furnish her barbarian emissaries. Gnarled Grom had attended to all Bran’s simple needs.

The stables fronted on the courtyard. A moment’s groping in the dark and he placed his hand over a great stallion’s nose, checking the nicker of recognition. Working without a light he swiftly bridled and saddled the great brute, and went through the courtyard into a shadowy side-street, leading him. The moon was setting, the border

of floating shadows widening along the western wall. Silence lay on the marble palaces and mud hovels of Eboracum under the cold stars.

Bran touched the pouch at his girdle, which was heavy with minted gold that bore the stamp of Rome. He had come to Eboracum posing as an emissary of Pictdom, to act the spy. But being a barbarian, he had not been able to play his part in aloof formality and sedate dignity. He retained a crowded memory of wild feasts where wine flowed in fountains; of white-bosomed Roman women, who, sated with civilized lovers, looked with something more than favor on a virile barbarian; of gladiatorial games; and of other games where dice clicked and spun and tall stacks of gold changed hands. He had drunk deeply and gambled recklessly, after the manner of barbarians, and he had had a remarkable run of luck, due possibly to the indifference with which he won or lost. Gold to the Pict was so much dust, flowing through his fingers. In his land there was no need of it. But he had learned its power in the boundaries of civilization.

Almost under the shadow of the northwestern wall he saw ahead of him loom the great watch-tower which was connected with and reared above the outer wall. One corner of the castle-like fortress, farthest from the wall, served as a dungeon. Bran left his horse standing in a dark alley, with the reins hanging on the ground, and stole like a prowling wolf into the shadows of the fortress.

The young officer Valerius was awakened from a light, unquiet sleep by a stealthy sound at the barred window. He sat up, cursing softly under his breath as the faint starlight which etched the window-bars fell across the bare stone floor and reminded him of his disgrace. Well, in a few days, he ruminated, he'd be well out of it; Sulla would not be too harsh on a man with such high connections; then let any man or woman gibe at him! Damn that insolent Pict! But wait, he

thought suddenly, remembering: what of the sound which had roused him?

“Hsssst!” it was a voice from the window.

Why so much secrecy? It could hardly be a foe — yet, why should it be a friend? Valerius rose and crossed his cell, coming close to the window. Outside all was dim in the starlight and he made out but a shadowy form close to the window.

“Who are you?” he leaned close against the bars, straining his eyes into the gloom.

His answer was a snarl of wolfish laughter, a long flicker of steel in the starlight. Valerius reeled away from the window and crashed to the floor, clutching his throat, gurgling horribly as he tried to scream. Blood gushed through his fingers, forming about his twitching body a pool that reflected the dim starlight dully and redly.

Outside Bran glided away like a shadow, without pausing to peer into the cell. In another minute the guards would round the corner on their regular routine. Even now he heard the measured tramp of their iron-clad feet. Before they came in sight he had vanished and they clumped stolidly by the cell-windows with no intimation of the corpse that lay on the floor within.

Bran rode to the small gate in the western wall, unchallenged by the sleepy watch. What fear of foreign invasion in Eboracum? — and certain well organized thieves and women-stealers made it profitable for the watchmen not to be too vigilant. But the single guardsman at the western gate — his fellows lay drunk in a near-by brothel — lifted his spear and bawled for Bran to halt and give an account of himself. Silently the Pict reined closer. Masked in the dark cloak, he seemed dim and indistinct to the Roman, who was only aware of the glitter of his cold eyes in the gloom. But Bran held up his hand against the

starlight and the soldier caught the gleam of gold; in the other hand he saw a long sheen of steel. The soldier understood, and he did not hesitate between the choice of a golden bribe or a battle to the death with this unknown rider who was apparently a barbarian of some sort. With a grunt he lowered his spear and swung the gate open. Bran rode through, casting a handful of coins to the Roman. They fell about his feet in a golden shower, clinking against the flags. He bent in greedy haste to retrieve them and Bran Mak Morn rode westward like a flying ghost in the night.

3.

Into the dim fens of the west came Bran Mak Morn. A cold wind breathed across the gloomy waste and against the gray sky a few herons flapped heavily. The long reeds and marsh-grass waved in broken undulations and out across the desolation of the wastes a few still meres reflected the dull light. Here and there rose curiously regular hillocks above the general levels, and gaunt against the somber sky Bran saw a marching line of upright monoliths — menhirs, reared by what nameless hands?

As a faint blue line to the west lay the foothills that beyond the horizon grew to the wild mountains of Wales where dwelt still wild Celtic tribes — fierce blue-eyed men that knew not the yoke of Rome. A row of well-garrisoned watch-towers held them in check. Even now, far away across the moors, Bran glimpsed the unassailable keep men called the Tower of Trajan.

These barren wastes seemed the dreary accomplishment of desolation, yet human life was not utterly lacking. Bran met the silent men of the fen, reticent, dark of eye and hair, speaking a strange mixed

tongue whose long-blended elements had forgotten their pristine separate sources. Bran recognized a certain kinship in these people to himself, but he looked on them with the scorn of a pure-blooded patrician for men of mixed strains.

Not that the common people of Caledonia were altogether pure-blooded; they got their stocky bodies and massive limbs from a primitive Teutonic race which had found its way into the northern tip of the isle even before the Celtic conquest of Britain was completed, and had been absorbed by the Picts. But the chiefs of Bran's folk had kept their blood from foreign taint since the beginnings of time, and he himself was a pure-bred Pict of the Old Race. But these fenmen, overrun repeatedly by British, Gaelic and Roman conquerors, had assimilated blood of each, and in the process almost forgotten their original language and lineage.

For Bran came of a race that was very old, which had spread over western Europe in one vast Dark Empire, before the coming of the Aryans, when the ancestors of the Celts, the Hellenes and the Germans were one primal people, before the days of tribal splitting-off and westward drift.

Only in Caledonia, Bran brooded, had his people resisted the flood of Aryan conquest. He had heard of a Pictish people called Basques, who in the crags of the Pyrenees called themselves an unconquered race; but he knew that they had paid tribute for centuries to the ancestors of the Gaels, before these Celtic conquerors abandoned their mountain-realm and set sail for Ireland. Only the Picts of Caledonia had remained free, and they had been scattered into small feuding tribes — he was the first acknowledged king in five hundred years — the beginning of a new dynasty — no, a revival of an ancient dynasty

under a new name. In the very teeth of Rome he dreamed his dreams of empire.

He wandered through the fens, seeking a Door. Of his quest he said nothing to the dark-eyed fenmen. They told him news that drifted from mouth to mouth — a tale of war in the north, the skirl of war-pipes along the winding Wall, of gathering-fires in the heather, of flame and smoke and rapine and the glutting of Gaelic swords in the crimson sea of slaughter. The eagles of the legions were moving northward and the ancient road resounded to the measured tramp of the iron-clad feet. And Bran, in the fens of the west, laughed, well pleased.

In Eboracum Titus Sulla gave secret word to seek out the Pictish emissary with the Gaelic name who had been under suspicion, and who had vanished the night young Valerius was found dead in his cell with his throat ripped out. Sulla felt that this sudden bursting flame of war on the Wall was connected closely with his execution of a condemned Pictish criminal, and he set his spy system to work, though he felt sure that Partha Mac Othna was by this time far beyond his reach. He prepared to march from Eboracum, but he did not accompany the considerable force of legionaries which he sent north. Sulla was a brave man, but each man has his own dread, and Sulla's was Cormac na Connacht, the black-haired prince of the Gaels, who had sworn to cut out the governor's heart and eat it raw. So Sulla rode with his ever-present bodyguard, westward, where lay the Tower of Trajan with its war-like commander, Caius Camillus, who enjoyed nothing more than taking his superior's place when the red waves of war washed at the foot of the Wall. Devious politics, but the legate of Rome seldom visited this far isle, and what of his wealth and intrigues, Titus Sulla was the highest power in Britain.

And Bran, knowing all this, patiently waited his coming, in the deserted hut in which he had taken up his abode.

One gray evening he strode on foot across the moors, a stark figure, blackly etched against the dim crimson fire of the sunset. He felt the incredible antiquity of the slumbering land, as he walked like the last man on the day after the end of the world. Yet at last he saw a token of human life — a drab hut of wattle and mud, set in the reedy breast of the fen.

A woman greeted him from the open door and Bran's somber eyes narrowed with a dark suspicion. The woman was not old, yet the evil wisdom of ages was in her eyes; her garments were ragged and scanty, her black locks tangled and unkempt, lending her an aspect of wildness well in keeping with her grim surroundings. Her red lips laughed but there was no mirth in her laughter, only a hint of mockery, and under the lips her teeth showed sharp and pointed like fangs.

“Enter, master,” said she, “if you do not fear to share the roof of the witch-woman of Dagon-moor!”

Bran entered silently and sat him down on a broken bench while the woman busied herself with the scanty meal cooking over an open fire on the squalid hearth. He studied her lithe, almost serpentine motions, the ears which were almost pointed, the yellow eyes which slanted curiously.

“What do you seek in the fens, my lord?” she asked, turning toward him with a supple twist of her whole body.

“I seek a Door,” he answered, chin resting on his fist. “I have a song to sing to the worms of the earth!”

She started upright, a jar falling from her hands to shatter on the hearth.

“This is an ill saying, even spoken in chance,” she stammered.

“I speak not by chance but by intent,” he answered.

She shook her head. “I know not what you mean.”

“Well you know,” he returned. “Aye, you know well! My race is very old — they reigned in Britain before the nations of the Celts and the Hellenes were born out of the womb of peoples. But my people were not first in Britain. By the mottles on your skin, by the slanting of your eyes, by the taint in your veins, I speak with full knowledge and meaning.”

Awhile she stood silent, her lips smiling but her face inscrutable.

“Man, are you mad?” she asked, “that in your madness you come seeking that from which strong men fled screaming in old times?”

“I seek a vengeance,” he answered, “that can be accomplished only by Them I seek.”

She shook her head.

“You have listened to a bird singing; you have dreamed empty dreams.”

“I have heard a viper hiss,” he growled, “and I do not dream. Enough of this weaving of words. I came seeking a link between two worlds; I have found it.”

“I need lie to you no more, man of the North,” answered the woman. “They you seek still dwell beneath the sleeping hills. They have drawn *apart*, farther and farther from the world you know.”

“But they still steal forth in the night to grip women straying on the moors,” said he, his gaze on her slanted eyes. She laughed wickedly.

“What would you of me?”

“That you bring me to Them.”

She flung back her head with a scornful laugh. His left hand locked like iron in the breast of her scanty garment and his right closed on his hilt. She laughed in his face.

“Strike and be damned, my northern wolf! Do you think that such life as mine is so sweet that I would cling to it as a babe to the breast?”

His hand fell away.

“You are right. Threats are foolish. I will buy your aid.”

“How?” the laughing voice hummed with mockery.

Bran opened his pouch and poured into his cupped palm a stream of gold.

“More wealth than the men of the fen ever dreamed of.”

Again she laughed. “What is this rusty metal to me? Save it for some white-breasted Roman woman who will play the traitor for you!”

“Name me a price!” he urged. “The head of an enemy —”

“By the blood in my veins, with its heritage of ancient hate, who is mine enemy but thee?” she laughed and springing, struck cat-like. But her dagger splintered on the mail beneath his cloak and he flung her off with a loathing flirt of his wrist which tossed her sprawling across her grass-strewn bunk. Lying there she laughed up at him.

“I will name you a price, then, my wolf, and it may be in days to come you will curse the armor that broke Ada’s dagger!” She rose and came close to him, her disquietingly long hands fastened fiercely into his cloak. “I will tell you, Black Bran, king of Caledon! Oh, I knew you when you came into my hut with your black hair and your cold eyes! I will lead you to the doors of Hell if you wish — and the price shall be the kisses of a king!

“What of my blasted and bitter life, I, whom mortal men loathe and fear? I have not known the love of men, the clasp of a strong arm, the sting of human kisses, I, Atla, the were-woman of the moors! What have I known but the lone winds of the fens, the dreary fire of cold sunsets, the whispering of the marsh grasses? — the faces that blink up at me in the waters of the meres, the foot-pad of night-things

in the gloom, the glimmer of red eyes, the grisly murmur of nameless beings in the night!

“I am half-human, at least! Have I not known sorrow and yearning and crying wistfulness, and the drear ache of loneliness? Give to me, king — give me your fierce kisses and your hurtful barbarian’s embrace. Then in the long drear years to come I shall not utterly eat out my heart in vain envy of the white-bosomed women of men; for I shall have a memory few of them can boast — the kisses of a king! One night of love, oh king, and I will guide you to the gates of Hell!”

Bran eyed her somberly; he reached forth and gripped her arm in his iron fingers. An involuntary shudder shook him at the feel of her sleek skin. He nodded slowly and drawing her close to him, forced his head down to meet her lifted lips.

4.

The cold gray mists of dawn wrapped King Bran like a clammy cloak. He turned to the woman whose slanted eyes gleamed in the gray gloom.

“Make good your part of the contract,” he said roughly. “I sought a link between worlds, and in you I found it. I seek the one thing sacred to Them. It shall be the Key opening the Door that lies unseen between me and Them. Tell me how I can reach it.”

“I will,” the red lips smiled terribly. “Go to the mound men call Dagon’s Barrow. Draw aside the stone that blocks the entrance and go under the dome of the mound. The floor of the chamber is made of seven great stones, six grouped about the seventh. Lift out the center stone — and you will see!”

“Will I find the Black Stone?” he asked.

“Dagon’s Barrow is the Door to the Black Stone,” she answered, “if you dare follow the Road.”

“Will the symbol be well guarded?” He unconsciously loosened his blade in its sheath. The red lips curled mockingly.

“If you meet any on the Road you will die as no mortal man has died for long centuries. The Stone is not guarded, as men guard their treasures. Why should They guard what man has never sought? Perhaps They will be near, perhaps not. It is a chance you must take, if you wish the Stone. Beware, king of Pictdom! Remember it was your folk who, so long ago, cut the thread that bound Them to human life. They were almost human then — they overspread the land and knew the sunlight. Now they have drawn *apart*. They know not the sunlight and they shun the light of the moon. Even the starlight they hate. Far, far apart have they drawn, who might have been men in time, but for the spears of your ancestors.”

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The sky was overcast with misty gray, through which the sun shone coldly yellow when Bran came to Dagon’s Barrow, a round hillock overgrown with rank grass of a curious fungoid appearance. On the eastern side of the mound showed the entrance of a crudely built stone tunnel which evidently penetrated the barrow. One great stone blocked the entrance to the tomb. Bran laid hold of the sharp edges and exerted all his strength. It held fast. He drew his sword and worked the blade between the blocking stone and the sill. Using the sword as a lever, he worked carefully, and managed to loosen the great stone and wrench it out. A foul charnel-house scent flowed out of the aperture and the dim sunlight seemed less to illuminate the cavern-like opening than to be fouled by the rank darkness which clung there.

Sword in hand, ready for he knew not what, Bran groped his way into the tunnel, which was long and narrow, built up of heavy joined stones, and was too low for him to stand erect. Either his eyes became somewhat accustomed to the gloom, or the darkness was, after all, somewhat lightened by the sunlight filtering in through the entrance. At any rate he came into a round low chamber and was able to make out its general dome-like outline. Here, no doubt, in old times, had reposed the bones of him for whom the stones of the tomb had been joined and the earth heaped high above them; but now of those bones no vestige remained on the stone floor. And bending close and straining his eyes, Bran made out the strange, startlingly regular pattern of that floor: six well-cut slabs clustered about a seventh, six-sided stone.

He drove his sword-point into a crack and pried carefully. The edge of the central stone tilted slightly upward. A little work and he lifted it out and leaned it against the curving wall. Straining his eyes downward he saw only the gaping blackness of a dark well, with small, worn steps that led downward and out of sight. He did not hesitate. Though the skin between his shoulders crawled curiously, he swung himself into the abyss and felt the clinging blackness swallow him.

Groping downward, he felt his feet slip and stumble on steps too small for human feet. With one hand pressed hard against the side of the well he steadied himself, fearing a fall into unknown and unlighted depths. The steps were cut into solid rock, yet they were greatly worn away. The farther he progressed, the less like steps they became, mere bumps of worn stone. Then the direction of the shaft changed sharply. It still led down, but at a shallow slant down which he could walk, elbows braced against the hollowed sides, head bent low beneath the curved roof. The steps had ceased altogether and the stone felt slimy

to the touch, like a serpent's lair. What beings, Bran wondered, had slithered up and down this slanting shaft, for how many centuries?

The tunnel narrowed until Bran found it rather difficult to shove through. He lay on his back and pushed himself along with his hands, feet first. Still he knew he was sinking deeper and deeper into the very guts of the earth; how far below the surface he was, he dared not contemplate. Then ahead a faint witch-fire gleam tinged the abysmal blackness. He grinned savagely and without mirth. If They he sought came suddenly upon him, how could he fight in that narrow shaft? But he had put the thought of personal fear behind him when he began this hellish quest. He crawled on, thoughtless of all else but his goal.

And he came at last into a vast space where he could stand upright. He could not see the roof of the place, but he got an impression of dizzying vastness. The blackness pressed in on all sides and behind him he could see the entrance to the shaft from which he had just emerged — a black well in the darkness. But in front of him a strange grisly radiance glowed about a grim altar built of human skulls. The source of that light he could not determine, but on the altar lay a sullen night-black object — the Black Stone!

Bran wasted no time in giving thanks that the guardians of the grim relic were nowhere near. He caught up the Stone, and gripping it under his left arm, crawled into the shaft. When a man turns his back on peril its clammy menace looms more grisly than when he advances upon it. So Bran, crawling back up the nighted shaft with his grisly prize, felt the darkness turn on him and slink behind him, grinning with dripping fangs. Clammy sweat beaded his flesh and he hastened to the best of his ability, ears strained for some stealthy sound to betray that fell shapes were at his heels. Strong shudders shook him, despite

himself, and the short hair on his neck prickled as if a cold wind blew at his back.

When he reached the first of the tiny steps he felt as if he had attained to the outer boundaries of the mortal world. Up them he went, stumbling and slipping, and with a deep gasp of relief, came out into the tomb, whose spectral grayness seemed like the blaze of noon in comparison to the stygian depths he had just traversed. He replaced the central stone and strode into the light of the outer day, and never was the cold yellow light of the sun more grateful, as it dispelled the shadows of black-winged nightmares of fear and madness that seemed to have ridden him up out of the black deeps. He shoved the great blocking stone back into place, and picking up the cloak he had left at the mouth of the tomb, he wrapped it about the Black Stone and hurried away, a strong revulsion and loathing shaking his soul and lending wings to his strides.

A gray silence brooded over the land. It was desolate as the blind side of the moon, yet Bran felt the potentialities of life — under his feet, in the brown earth — sleeping, but how soon to waken, and in what horrific fashion?

He came through the tall masking reeds to the still deep men called Dagon's Mere. No slightest ripple ruffled the cold blue water to give evidence of the grisly monster legend said dwelt beneath. Bran closely scanned the breathless landscape. He saw no hint of life, human or unhuman. He sought the instincts of his savage soul to know if any unseen eyes fixed their lethal gaze upon him, and found no response. He was alone as if he were the last man alive on earth.

Swiftly he unwrapped the Black Stone, and as it lay in his hands like a solid sullen block of darkness, he did not seek to learn the secret of its material nor scan the cryptic characters carved thereon. Weighing

it in his hands and calculating the distance, he flung it far out, so that it fell almost exactly in the middle of the lake. A sullen splash and the waters closed over it. There was a moment of shimmering flashes on the bosom of the lake; then the blue surface stretched placid and unrippled again.

5.

The were-woman turned swiftly as Bran approached her door. Her slant eyes widened.

“You! And alive! And sane!”

“I have been into Hell and I have returned,” he growled. “What is more, I have that which I sought.”

“The Black Stone?” she cried. “You really dared steal it? Where is it?”

“No matter; but last night my stallion screamed in his stall and I heard something crunch beneath his thundering hoofs which was not the wall of the stable — and there was blood on his hoofs when I came to see, and blood on the floor of the stall. And I have heard stealthy sounds in the night, and noises beneath my dirt floor, as if worms burrowed deep in the earth. They know I have stolen their Stone. Have you betrayed me?”

She shook her head.

“I keep your secret; they do not need my word to know you. The farther they have retreated from the world of men, the greater have grown their powers in other uncanny ways. Some dawn your hut will stand empty and if men dare investigate they will find nothing — except crumbling bits of earth on the dirt floor.”

Bran smiled terribly.

“I have not planned and toiled thus far to fall prey to the talons of vermin. If They strike me down in the night, They will never know what became of their idol — or whatever it be to Them. I would speak with Them.”

“Dare you come with me and meet them in the night?” she asked.

“Thunder of all gods!” he snarled. “Who are you to ask me if I dare? Lead me to Them and let me bargain for a vengeance this night. The hour of retribution draws nigh. This day I saw silvered helmets and bright shields gleam across the fens — the new commander has arrived at the Tower of Trajan and Caius Camillus has marched to the Wall.”

~

That night the king went across the dark desolation of the moors with the silent were-woman. The night was thick and still as if the land lay in ancient slumber. The stars blinked vaguely, mere points of red struggling through the unbreathing gloom. Their gleam was dimmer than the glitter in the eyes of the woman who glided beside the king. Strange thoughts shook Bran, vague, titanic, primeval. Tonight ancestral linkings with these slumbering fens stirred in his soul and troubled him with the fantasmal, eon-veiled shapes of monstrous dreams. The vast age of his race was borne upon him; where now he walked an outlaw and an alien, dark-eyed kings in whose mold he was cast had reigned in old times. The Celtic and Roman invaders were as strangers to this ancient isle beside his people. Yet his race likewise had been invaders, and there was an older race than his — a race whose beginnings lay lost and hidden back beyond the dark oblivion of antiquity.

Ahead of them loomed a low range of hills, which formed the

easternmost extremity of those straying chains which far away climbed at last to the mountains of Wales. The woman led the way up what might have been a sheep-path, and halted before a wide black gaping cave.

“A door to those you seek, oh king!” her laughter rang hateful in the gloom. “Dare ye enter?”

His fingers closed in her tangled locks and he shook her viciously.

“Ask me but once more if I dare,” he grated, “and your head and shoulders part company! Lead on.”

Her laughter was like sweet deadly venom. They passed into the cave and Bran struck flint and steel. The flicker of the tinder showed him a wide dusty cavern, on the roof of which hung clusters of bats. Lighting a torch, he lifted it and scanned the shadowy recesses, seeing nothing but dust and emptiness.

“Where are They?” he growled.

She beckoned him to the back of the cave and leaned against the rough wall, as if casually. But the king’s keen eyes caught the motion of her hand pressing hard against a projecting ledge. He recoiled as a round black well gaped suddenly at his feet. Again her laughter slashed him like a keen silver knife. He held the torch to the opening and again saw small worn steps leading down.

“They do not need those steps,” said Atla. “Once they did, before your people drove them into the darkness. But you will need them.”

She thrust the torch into a niche above the well; it shed a faint red light into the darkness below. She gestured into the well and Bran loosened his sword and stepped into the shaft. As he went down into the mystery of the darkness, the light was blotted out above him, and he thought for an instant Atla had covered the opening again. Then he realized that she was descending after him.

The descent was not a long one. Abruptly Bran felt his feet on a solid floor. Atla swung down beside him and stood in the dim circle of light that drifted down the shaft. Bran could not see the limits of the place into which he had come.

“Many caves in these hills,” said Atla, her voice sounding small and strangely brittle in the vastness, “are but doors to greater caves which lie beneath, even as a man’s words and deeds are but small indications of the dark caverns of murky thought lying behind and beneath.”

And now Bran was aware of movement in the gloom. The darkness was filled with stealthy noises not like those made by any human foot. Abruptly sparks began to flash and float in the blackness, like flickering fireflies. Closer they came until they girdled him in a wide half-moon. And beyond the ring gleamed other sparks, a solid sea of them, fading away in the gloom until the farthest were mere tiny pin-points of light. And Bran knew they were the slanted eyes of the beings who had come upon him in such numbers that his brain reeled at the contemplation — and at the vastness of the cavern.

Now that he faced his ancient foes, Bran knew no fear. He felt the waves of terrible menace emanating from them, the grisly hate, the inhuman threat to body, mind and soul. More than a member of a less ancient race, he realized the horror of his position, but he did not fear, though he confronted the ultimate Horror of the dreams and legends of his race. His blood raced fiercely but it was with the hot excitement of the hazard, not the drive of terror.

“They know you have the Stone, oh king,” said Atla, and though he knew she feared, though he felt her physical efforts to control her trembling limbs, there was no quiver of fright in her voice. “You are in deadly peril; they know your breed of old — oh, they remember the days when their ancestors were men! I can not save you; both of us will

die as no human has died for ten centuries. Speak to them, if you will; they can understand your speech, though you may not understand theirs. But it will avail not — you are human — and a Pict.”

Bran laughed and the closing ring of fire shrank back at the savagery in his laughter. Drawing his sword with a soul-chilling rasp of steel, he set his back against what he hoped was a solid stone wall. Facing the glittering eyes with his sword gripped in his right hand and his dirk in his left, he laughed as a blood-hungry wolf snarls.

“Aye,” he growled, “I am a Pict, a son of those warriors who drove your brutish ancestors before them like chaff before the storm! — who flooded the land with your blood and heaped high your skulls for a sacrifice to the Moon-Woman! You who fled of old before my race, dare ye now snarl at your master? Roll on me like a flood, now, if ye dare! Before your viper fangs drink my life I will reap your multitudes like ripened barley — of your severed heads will I build a tower and of your mangled corpses will I rear up a wall! Dogs of the dark, vermin of Hell, worms of the earth, rush in and try my steel! When Death finds me in this dark cavern, your living will howl for the scores of your dead and your Black Stone will be lost to you for ever — for only I know where it is hidden and not all the tortures of all the Hells can wring the secret from my lips!”

Then followed a tense silence; Bran faced the fire-lit darkness, tensed like a wolf at bay, waiting the charge; at his side the woman cowered, her eyes ablaze. Then from the silent ring that hovered beyond the dim torchlight rose a vague abhorrent murmur. Bran, prepared as he was for anything, started. Gods, was *that* the speech of creatures which had once been called men?

Atla straightened, listening intently. From her lips came the same hideous soft sibilances, and Bran, though he had already known the

grisly secret of her being, knew that never again could he touch her save with soul-shaken loathing.

She turned to him, a strange smile curving her red lips dimly in the ghostly light.

“They fear you, oh king! By the black secrets of R’lyeh, who are you that Hell itself quails before you? Not your steel, but the stark ferocity of your soul has driven unused fear into their strange minds. They will buy back the Black Stone at any price.”

“Good,” Bran sheathed his weapons. “They shall promise not to molest you because of your aid of me. And,” his voice hummed like the purr of a hunting tiger, “They shall deliver into my hands Titus Sulla, governor of Eboracum, now commanding the Tower of Trajan. This They can do — how, I know not. But I know that in the old days, when my people warred with these Children of the Night, babes disappeared from guarded huts and none saw the stealers come or go. Do They understand?”

Again rose the low frightful sounds and Bran, who feared not their wrath, shuddered at their voices.

“They understand,” said Atla. “Bring the Black Stone to Dagon’s Ring tomorrow night when the earth is veiled with the blackness that foreruns the dawn. Lay the Stone on the altar. There They will bring Titus Sulla to you. Trust Them; They have not interfered in human affairs for many centuries, but They will keep their word.”

Bran nodded and turning, climbed up the stair with Atla close behind him. At the top he turned and looked down once more. As far as he could see floated a glittering ocean of slanted yellow eyes upturned. But the owners of those eyes kept carefully beyond the dim circle of torchlight and of their bodies he could see nothing. Their low hissing speech floated up to him and he shuddered as his imagination

visualized, not a throng of biped creatures, but a swarming, swaying myriad of serpents, gazing up at him with their glittering unwinking eyes.

He swung into the upper cave and Atla thrust the blocking stone back in place. It fitted into the entrance of the well with uncanny precision; Bran was unable to discern any crack in the apparently solid floor of the cavern. Atla made a motion to extinguish the torch, but the king stayed her.

“Keep it so until we are out of the cave,” he grunted. “We might tread on an adder in the dark.”

Atla’s sweetly hateful laughter rose maddeningly in the flickering gloom.

6.

It was not long before sunset when Bran came again to the reed-grown marge of Dagon’s Mere. Casting cloak and sword-belt on the ground, he stripped himself of his short leathern breeches. Then gripping his naked dirk in his teeth, he went into the water with the smooth ease of a diving seal. Swimming strongly, he gained the center of the small lake, and turning, drove himself downward.

The mere was deeper than he had thought. It seemed he would never reach the bottom, and when he did, his groping hands failed to find what he sought. A roaring in his ears warned him and he swam to the surface.

Gulping deep of the refreshing air, he dived again, and again his quest was fruitless. A third time he sought the depth, and this time his groping hands met a familiar object in the silt of the bottom. Grasping it, he swam up to the surface.

The Stone was not particularly bulky, but it was heavy. He swam leisurely, and suddenly was aware of a curious stir in the waters about him which was not caused by his own exertions. Thrusting his face below the surface, he tried to pierce the blue depths with his eyes and thought to see a dim gigantic shadow hovering there.

He swam faster, not frightened, but wary. His feet struck the shallows and he waded up on the shelving shore. Looking back he saw the waters swirl and subside. He shook his head, swearing. He had discounted the ancient legend which made Dagon's Mere the lair of a nameless water-monster, but now he had a feeling as if his escape had been narrow. The time-worn myths of the ancient land were taking form and coming to life before his eyes. What primeval shape lurked below the surface of that treacherous mere, Bran could not guess, but he felt that the fenmen had good reason for shunning the spot, after all.

Bran donned his garments, mounted the black stallion and rode across the fens in the desolate crimson of the sunset's afterglow, with the Black Stone wrapped in his cloak. He rode, not to his hut, but to the west, in the direction of the Tower of Trajan and the Ring of Dagon. As he covered the miles that lay between, the red stars winked out. Midnight passed him in the moonless night and still Bran rode on. His heart was hot for his meeting with Titus Sulla. Atla had gloated over the anticipation of watching the Roman writhe under torture, but no such thought was in the Pict's mind. The governor should have his chance with weapons — with Bran's own sword he should face the Pictish king's dirk, and live or die according to his prowess. And though Sulla was famed throughout the provinces as a swordsman, Bran felt no doubt as to the outcome.

Dagon's Ring lay some distance from the Tower — a sullen circle of tall gaunt stones planted upright, with a rough-hewn stone altar in

the center. The Romans looked on these menhirs with aversion; they thought the Druids had reared them; but the Celts supposed Bran's people, the Picts, had planted them — and Bran well knew what hands reared those grim monoliths in lost ages, though for what reasons, he but dimly guessed.

The king did not ride straight to the Ring. He was consumed with curiosity as to how his grim allies intended carrying out their promise. That They could snatch Titus Sulla from the very midst of his men, he felt sure, and he believed he knew how They would do it. He felt the gnawings of a strange misgiving, as if he had tampered with powers of unknown breadth and depth, and had loosed forces which he could not control. Each time he remembered that reptilian murmur, those slanted eyes of the night before, a cold breath passed over him. They had been abhorrent enough when his people drove Them into the caverns under the hills, ages ago; what had long centuries of retrogression made of them? In their nighted, subterranean life, had They retained any of the attributes of humanity at all?

Some instinct prompted him to ride toward the Tower. He knew he was near; but for the thick darkness he could have plainly seen its stark outline tussing the horizon. Even now he should be able to make it out dimly. An obscure, shuddersome premonition shook him and he spurred the stallion into swift canter.

And suddenly Bran staggered in his saddle as from a physical impact, so stunning was the surprize of what met his gaze. The impregnable Tower of Trajan was no more! Bran's astounded gaze rested on a gigantic pile of ruins — of shattered stone and crumbled granite, from which jutted the jagged and splintered ends of broken beams. At one corner of the tumbled heap one tower rose out of the waste

of crumpled masonry, and it leaned drunkenly as if its foundations had been half cut away.

Bran dismounted and walked forward, dazed by bewilderment. The moat was filled in places by fallen stones and broken pieces of mortared wall. He crossed over and came among the ruins. Where, he knew, only a few hours before the flags had resounded to the martial tramp of iron-clad feet, and the walls had echoed to the clang of shields and the blast of the loud-throated trumpets, a horrific silence reigned.

Almost under Bran's feet, a broken shape writhed and groaned. The king bent down to the legionary who lay in a sticky red pool of his own blood. A single glance showed the Pict that the man, horribly crushed and shattered, was dying.

Lifting the bloody head, Bran placed his flask to the pulped lips and the Roman instinctively drank deep, gulping through splintered teeth. In the dim starlight Bran saw his glazed eyes roll.

"The walls fell," muttered the dying man. "They crashed down like the skies falling on the day of doom. Ah Jove, the skies rained shards of granite and hailstones of marble!"

"I have felt no earthquake shock," Bran scowled, puzzled.

"It was no earthquake," muttered the Roman. "Before last dawn it began, the faint dim scratching and clawing far below the earth. We of the guard heard it — like rats burrowing, or like worms hollowing out the earth. Titus laughed at us, but all day long we heard it. Then at midnight the Tower quivered and seemed to settle — as if the foundations were being dug away —"

A shudder shook Bran Mak Morn. The worms of the earth! Thousands of vermin digging like moles far below the castle, burrowing away the foundations — gods, the land must be honeycombed with

tunnels and caverns — these creatures were even less human than he had thought — what ghastly shapes of darkness had he invoked to his aid?

“What of Titus Sulla?” he asked, again holding the flask to the legionary’s lips; in that moment the dying Roman seemed to him almost like a brother.

“Even as the Tower shuddered we heard a fearful scream from the governor’s chamber,” muttered the soldier. “We rushed there — as we broke down the door we heard his shrieks — they seemed to recede — *into the bowels of the earth!* We rushed in; the chamber was empty. His blood-stained sword lay on the floor; in the stone flags of the floor a black hole gaped. Then — the — towers — reeled — the — roof — broke; — through — a — storm — of — crashing — walls — I — crawled —”

A strong convulsion shook the broken figure.

“Lay me down, friend,” whispered the Roman. “I die.”

He had ceased to breathe before Bran could comply. The Pict rose, mechanically cleansing his hands. He hastened from the spot, and as he galloped over the darkened fens, the weight of the accursed Black Stone under his cloak was as the weight of a foul nightmare on a mortal breast.

As he approached the Ring, he saw an eery glow within, so that the gaunt stones stood etched like the ribs of a skeleton in which a witch-fire burns. The stallion snorted and reared as Bran tied him to one of the menhirs. Carrying the Stone he strode into the grisly circle and saw Atla standing beside the altar, one hand on her hip, her sinuous body swaying in a serpentine manner. The altar glowed all over with ghastly light and Bran knew some one, probably Atla, had rubbed it with phosphorus from some dank swamp or quagmire.

He strode forward and whipping his cloak from about the Stone, flung the accursed thing on to the altar.

“I have fulfilled my part of the contract,” he growled.

“And They, theirs,” she retorted. “Look! — they come!”

He wheeled, his hand instinctively dropping to his sword. Outside the Ring the great stallion screamed savagely and reared against his tether. The night wind moaned through the waving grass and an abhorrent soft hissing mingled with it. Between the menhirs flowed a dark tide of shadows, unstable and chaotic. The Ring filled with glittering eyes which hovered beyond the dim illusive circle of illumination cast by the phosphorescent altar. Somewhere in the darkness a human voice tittered and gibbered idiotically. Bran stiffened, the shadows of a horror clawing at his soul.

He strained his eyes, trying to make out the shapes of those who ringed him. But he glimpsed only billowing masses of shadow which heaved and writhed and squirmed with almost fluid consistency.

“Let them make good their bargain!” he exclaimed angrily.

“Then see, oh king!” cried Atla in a voice of piercing mockery.

There was a stir, a seething in the writhing shadows, and from the darkness crept, like a four-legged animal, a human shape that fell down and groveled at Bran’s feet and writhed and mowed, and lifting a death’s-head, howled like a dying dog. In the ghastly light, Bran, soul-shaken, saw the blank glassy eyes, the bloodless features, the loose, writhing, froth-covered lips of sheer lunacy — gods, was this Titus Sulla, the proud lord of life and death in Eboracum’s proud city?

Bran bared his sword.

“I had thought to give this stroke in vengeance,” he said somberly.

“I give it in mercy — *Vale Caesar!*”

The steel flashed in the eery light and Sulla's head rolled to the foot of the glowing altar, where it lay staring up at the shadowed sky.

"They harmed him not!" Atla's hateful laugh slashed the sick silence. "It was what he saw and came to know that broke his brain! Like all his heavy-footed race, he knew nothing of the secrets of this ancient land. This night he has been dragged through the deepest pits of Hell, where even you might have blenched!"

"Well for the Romans that they know not the secrets of this accursed land!" Bran roared, maddened, "with its monster-haunted meres, its foul witch-women, and its lost caverns and subterranean realms where spawn in the darkness shapes of Hell!"

"Are they more foul than a mortal who seeks their aid?" cried Atla with a shriek of fearful mirth. "Give them their Black Stone!"

A cataclysmic loathing shook Bran's soul with red fury.

"Aye, take your cursed Stone!" he roared, snatching it from the altar and dashing it among the shadows with such savagery that bones snapped under its impact. A hurried babel of grisly tongues rose and the shadows heaved in turmoil. One segment of the mass detached itself for an instant and Bran cried out in fierce revulsion, though he caught only a fleeting glimpse of the thing, had only a brief impression of a broad strangely flattened head, pendulous writhing lips that bared curved pointed fangs, and a hideously misshapen, dwarfish body that seemed *mottled* — all set off by those unwinking reptilian eyes. Gods! — the myths had prepared him for horror in human aspect, horror induced by bestial visage and stunted deformity — but this was the horror of nightmare and the night.

"Go back to Hell and take your idol with you!" he yelled, brandishing his clenched fists to the skies, as the thick shadows receded, flowing back and away from him like the foul waters of some black

flood. “Your ancestors were men, though strange and monstrous — but gods, ye have become in ghastly fact what my people called ye in scorn! Worms of the earth, back into your holes and burrows! Ye foul the air and leave on the clean earth the slime of the serpents ye have become! Gonar was right — there are shapes too foul to use even against Rome!”

He sprang from the Ring as a man flees the touch of a coiling snake, and tore the stallion free. At his elbow Atla was shrieking with fearful laughter, all human attributes dropped from her like a cloak in the night.

“King of Pictland!” she cried, “King of fools! Do you blench at so small a thing? Stay and let me show you real fruits of the pits! Ha! ha! ha! Run, fool, run! But you are stained with the taint — you have called them forth and they will remember! And in their own time they will come to you again!”

He yelled a wordless curse and struck her savagely in the mouth with his open hand. She staggered, blood starting from her lips, but her fiendish laughter only rose higher.

Bran leaped into the saddle, wild for the clean heather and the cold blue hills of the north where he could plunge his sword into clean slaughter and his sickened soul into the red maelstrom of battle, and forget the horror which lurked below the fens of the west. He gave the frantic stallion the rein, and rode through the night like a hunted ghost, until the hellish laughter of the howling were-woman died out in the darkness behind.

TURLOGH DUBH O'BRIEN

THE TWILIGHT OF THE GREY GODS

1.

A voice echoed among the bleak reaches of the mountains that reared up gauntly on either hand. At the mouth of the defile that opened on a colossal crag, Conn the thrall wheeled, snarling like a wolf at bay. He was tall and massively, yet angrily, built, the fierceness of the wild dominant in his broad, sloping shoulders, his huge hairy chest and long, heavily muscled arms. His features were in keeping with his bodily aspect — a strong, stubborn jaw, low slanting forehead topped by a shock of tousled tawny hair which added to the wildness of his appearance no more than did his cold blue eyes. His only garment was a scanty loin-cloth. His own wolfish ruggedness was protection enough against the elements — for he was a slave in an age when even the masters lived lives as hard as the iron environments which bred them.

Now Conn half crouched, sword ready, a bestial snarl of menace humming in his bull-throat, and from the defile there came a tall man, wrapped in a cloak beneath which the thrall glimpsed a sheen of mail. The stranger wore a slouch hat pulled so low that from his shadowed features only one eye gleamed, cold and grim as the grey sea.

“Well, Conn, thrall of Wolfgar Snorri’s son,” said the stranger in a deep, powerful voice, “whither do you flee, with your master’s blood on your hands?”

“I know you not,” growled Conn, “nor how you know me. If you would take me, whistle up your dogs and make an end. Some of them will taste steel ere I die.”

“Fool!” There was deep scorn in the reverberant tone. “I am no

hunter of runaway serfs. There are wilder matters abroad. What do you smell in the seawind?"

Conn turned toward the sea, lapping greyly at the cliffs far below. He expanded his mighty chest, his nostrils flaring as he breathed deeply.

"I smell the tang of salt-spume," he answered.

The stranger's voice was like the rasp of swords. "The scent of blood is on the wind — the musk of slaughter and the shouts of the slaying."

Conn shook his head, bewildered. "It is only the wind among the crags."

"There is war in your homeland," said the stranger somberly. "The spears of the South have risen against the swords of the North and the death-fires are lighting the land like the mid-day sun."

"How can you know this?" asked the thrall uneasily. "No ship has put in to Torka for weeks. Who are you? Whence come you? How know you these things?"

"Can you not hear the skirl of the pipes, the clashing of the axes?" replied the tall stranger. "Can you not smell the war-reek the wind brings?"

"Not I," answered Conn. "It is many a long league from Torka to Erin, and I hear only the wind among the crags and the gulls screeching over the headlands. Yet if there is war, I should be among the weapon-men of my clan, though my life is forfeit to Melaglin because I slew a man of his in a quarrel."

The stranger gave no heed, standing like a statue as he gazed far out across the reaches of hazy barren mountains and misty waves.

"It is the death-grip," he said, like one who speaks to himself. "Now comes the reaping of kings, the garnering of chiefs like a har-

vest. Gigantic shadows stalk red-handed across the world, and night is falling on Asgaard. I hear the cries of long-dead heroes whistling in the void, and the shouts of forgotten gods. To each being there is an appointed time, and even the gods must die ...”

He stiffened suddenly with a great shout, flinging his arms seaward. Tall, rolling clouds, sailing gigantically before the gale, veiled the sea. Out of the mist came a great wind and out of the wind a whirling mass of clouds. And Conn cried out. From out the flying clouds, shadowy and horrific, swept twelve shapes. He saw, as in a nightmare, the twelve winged horses and their riders, women in flaming silver mail and winged helmets, whose golden hair floated out on the wind behind them, and whose cold eyes were fixed on some awesome goal beyond his ken.

“The Choosers of the Slain!” thundered the stranger, flinging his arms wide in a terrible gesture. “They ride in the twilight of the North! The winged hooves spurn the rolling clouds, the web of Fate is spun, the Loom and Spindle broken! Doom roars upon the gods and night falls on Asgaard! Night and the trumpets of Ragnarok!”

The cloak was blown wide in the wind, revealing the mighty, mail-clad figure; the slouch hat fell aside; the wild elf-locks blew free. And Conn shrank before the blaze of the stranger’s eye. And he saw that where the other eye should have been, was but an empty socket. Thereat panic seized him, so that he turned and ran down the defile as a man flees demons. And a fearsome backward glance showed him the stranger etched against the cloud-torn sky, cloak blowing in the wind, arms flung high, and it seemed to the thrall that the man had grown monstrously in stature, that he loomed colossal among the clouds, dwarfing the mountains and the sea, and that he was suddenly grey, as with vast age.

2.

*Oh Masters of the North, we come with tally of remembered dead,
Of broken hearth and blazing home, and rafters crashing overhead.
A single cast of dice we throw to balance, by the leaden sea,
A hundred years of wrong and woe with one red hour of butchery.*

The spring gale had blown itself out. The sky smiled blue overhead and the sea lay placid as a pool, with only a few scattered bits of driftwood along the beaches to give mute evidence of her treachery. Along the strand rode a lone horseman, his saffron cloak whipping about behind him, his yellow hair blowing about his face in the breeze.

Suddenly he reined up so short that his spirited steed reared and snorted. From among the sand dunes had risen a man, tall and powerful, of wild, shock-headed aspect, and naked but for a loincloth.

“Who are you,” demanded the horseman, “who bear the sword of a chief, yet have the appearance of a masterless man, and wear the collar of a serf withal?”

“I am Conn, young master,” answered the wanderer, “once an outlaw, once a thrall — always a man of King Brian’s, whether he will or no. And I know you. You are Dunlang O’Hartigan, friend of Murrough, son of Brian, prince of Dal Cais. Tell me, good sir, is there war in the land?”

“Sooth to say,” answered the young chief, “even now King Brian and King Malchi lie encamped at Kilmainham, before Dublin. I have but ridden from the camp this morning. From all the lands of the Vikings King Sitric of Dublin has summoned the slayers, and Gaels and Danes are ready to join battle — and such a battle as Erin has never seen before.”

Conn’s eyes clouded. “By Crom!” he muttered, half to himself,

“It is even as the Grey Man said — yet how could he have known? Surely it was all a dream.”

“How come you here?” asked Dunlang.

“From Torka in the Orkneys in an open boat, flung down as a chip is thrown upon the tide. Of yore I slew a man of Meath, kern of Melaghlin, and King Brian’s heart was hot against me because of the broken truce; so I fled. Well, the life of an outlaw is hard. Thorwald Raven, Jarl of the Hebrides, took me when I was weak from hunger and wounds, and put this collar on my neck.” The kern touched the heavy copper ring encircling his bull-neck. “Then he sold me to Wolfgar Snorri’s son on Torka. He was a hard master. I did the work of three men, and stood at his back and mowed down carles like wheat when he brawled with his neighbors. In return he gave me crusts from his board, a bare earth floor to sleep on, and deep scars on my back. Finally I could bear it no more, and I leaped upon him in his own skalli and crushed his skull with a log of firewood. Then I took his sword and fled to the mountains, preferring to freeze or starve there rather than die under the lash.

“There in the mountains,” — again Conn’s eyes clouded with doubt — “I think I dreamed,” he said, “I saw a tall grey man who spoke of war in Erin, and in my dream I saw Valkyries riding southward on the clouds ...

“Better to die at sea on a good venture than to starve in the Orkney mountains,” he continued with more assurance, his feet on firm ground. “By chance I found a fisherman’s boat, with a store of food and water, and I put to sea. By Crom! I wonder to find myself still alive! The gale took me in her fangs last night, and I know only that I fought the sea in the boat until the boat sank under my feet, and then fought her in her naked waves until my senses went from me. None

could have been more surprised than I when I came to myself this dawn lying like a piece of driftwood on the beach. I have lain in the sun since, trying to warm the cold tang of the sea out of my bones.”

“By the saints, Conn,” said Dunlang, “I like your spirit.”

“I hope King Brian likes it as well,” grunted the kern.

“Attach yourself to my train,” answered Dunlang. “I’ll speak for you. King Brian has weightier matters on his mind than a single blood-feud. This very day the opposing hosts lie drawn up for the death-grip.”

“Will the spear-shattering fall on the morrow?” asked Conn.

“Not by King Brian’s will,” answered Dunlang. “He is loath to shed blood on Good Friday. But who knows when the heathen will come down upon us?”

Conn laid a hand on Dunlang’s stirrup-leather and strode beside him as the steed moved leisurely along.

“There is a notable gathering of weapon-men?”

“More than twenty thousand warriors on each side; the bay of Dublin is dark with the dragon-ships. From the Orkneys comes Jarl Sigurd with his raven banner. From Man comes the Viking Brodir with twenty longships. From the Danelagh in England comes Prince Amlaff, son of the King of Norway, with two thousand men. From all lands the hosts have gathered — from the Orkneys, the Shetlands, the Hebrides — from Scotland, England, Germany, and the lands of Scandinavia.

“Our spies say Sigurd and Brodir have a thousand men armed in steel mail from crown to heel, who fight in a solid wedge. The Dalcassians may be hard put to break that iron wall. Yet, God willing, we shall prevail. Then among the other chiefs and warriors there are Anrad the Berserk, Hrafn the Red, Platt of Danemark, Thorstein and his

comrade-in-arms Asmund, Thorleif Hordi, the Strong, Athelstane the Saxon, and Thorwald Raven, Jarl of the Hebrides.”

At that name Conn grinned savagely and fingered his copper collar. “It is a great gathering if both Sigurd and Brodir come.”

“That was the doing of Gormlaith,” responded Dunlang.

“Word had come to the Orkneys that Brian had divorced Kormlada,” said Conn, unconsciously giving the queen her Norse name.

“Aye — and her heart is black with hate against him. Strange it is that a woman so fair of form and countenance should have the soul of a demon.”

“God’s truth, my lord. And what of her brother, Prince Mailmora?”

“Who but he is the instigator of the whole war?” cried Dunlang angrily. “The hate between him and Murrogh, so long smoldering, has at last burst into flame, firing both kingdoms. Both were in the wrong — Murrogh perhaps more than Mailmora. Gormlaith goaded her brother on. I did not believe King Brian acted wisely when he gave honors to those against whom he had warred. It was not well he married Gormlaith and gave his daughter to Gormlaith’s son, Sitric of Dublin. With Gormlaith he took the seeds of strife and hatred into his palace. She is a wanton; once she was the wife of Amlaff Cauran, the Dane; then she was wife to King Malachi of Meath, and he put her aside because of her wickedness.”

“What of Melaghlin?” asked Conn.

“He seems to have forgotten the struggle in which Brian wrested Erin’s crown from him. Together the two kings move against the Danes and Mailmora.”

As they conversed, they passed along the bare shore until they came into a rough broken stretch of cliffs and boulders; and there they halted suddenly. On a boulder sat a girl, clad in a shimmering green

garment whose pattern was so much like scales that for a bewildered instant Conn thought himself gazing on a mermaid come out of the deeps.

“Eevin!” Dunlang swung down from his horse, tossing the reins to Conn, and advanced to take her slender hands in his. “You sent for me and I have come — you’ve been weeping!”

Conn, holding the steed, felt an impulse to retire, prompted by superstitious qualms. Eevin, with her slender form, her wealth of shimmering golden hair, and her deep mysterious eyes, was not like any other girl he had ever seen. Her entire aspect was different from the women of the Norse-folk and of the Gaels alike, and Conn knew her to be a member of that fading mystic race which had occupied the land before the coming of his ancestors, some of whom still dwelt in caverns along the sea and deep in unfrequented forests — the De Danaans, sorcerers, the Irish said, and kin to the faeries.

“Dunlang!” The girl caught her lover in a convulsive embrace. “You must not go into battle — the weird of far-sight is on me, and I know if you go to the war, you will die! Come away with me — I’ll hide you — I’ll show you dim purple caverns like the castles of deep-sea kings, and shadowy forests where none save my people has set foot. Come with me and forget wars and hates and prides and ambitions, which are but shadows without reality or substance. Come and learn the dreamy splendors of far places, where fear and hate are naught, and the years seem as hours, drifting forever.”

“Eevin, my love!” cried Dunlang, troubled, “You ask that which is beyond my power. When my clan moves into battle, I must be at Murrogh’s side, though sure death be my portion. I love you beyond all life, but by the honor of my clan, this is an impossible thing.”

“I feared as much,” she answered, resigned. “You of the Tall Folk

are but children — foolish, cruel, violent — slaying one another in childish quarrels. This is punishment visited on me who, done of all my people, have loved a man of the Tall Folk. Your rough hands have bruised my soft flesh unwittingly, and your rough spirit as unwittingly bruises my heart.”

“I would not hurt you, Eevin,” began Dunlang, pained.

“I know,” she replied, “the hands of men are not made to handle the delicate body and heart of a woman of the Dark People. It is my fate. I love and I have lost. My sight is a far-sight which sees through the veil and the mists of life, behind the past and beyond the future. You will go into battle and the harps will keen for you; and Eevin of Craglea will weep until she melts in tears and the salt tears mingle with the cold salt sea.”

Dunlang bowed his head, unspeaking, for her young voice vibrated with the ancient sorrow of womankind; and even the rough kern shuffled his feet uneasily.

“I have brought a gift against the time of battle,” she went on, bending lithely to lift something which caught the sun’s sheen. “It may not save you, the ghosts in my soul whisper — but I hope without hope in my heart.”

Dunlang stared uncertainly at what she spread before him. Conn, edging closer and craning his neck, saw a hauberk of strange workmanship and a helmet such as he had never seen before — a heavy affair made to slip over the entire head and rest on the neckpieces of the hauberk. There was no movable vizor, merely a slit cut in the front through which to see, and the workmanship was of an earlier, more civilized age, which no man living could duplicate.

Dunlang looked at it askance, with the characteristic Celtic antipathy toward armor. The Britons who faced Caesar’s legionnaires

fought naked, judging a man cowardly who cased himself in metal, and in later ages the Irish clans entertained the same conviction regarding Strongbow's mail-clad knights.

"Eevin," said Dunlang, "my brothers will laugh at me if I enclose myself in iron, like a Dane. How can a man have full freedom of limb, weighted by such a garment? Of all the Gaels, only Turlogh Dubh wears full mail."

"And is any man of the Gael less brave than he?" she cried passionately. "Oh, you of the Tall Folk are foolish! For ages the iron-clad Danes have trampled you, when you might have swept them out of the land long ago, but for your foolish pride."

"Not altogether pride, Eevin," argued Dunlang. "Of what avail is mail of plated armor against the Dalcassian ax which cuts through iron like cloth?"

"Mail would turn the swords of the Danes," she answered, "and not even an ax of the O'Briens would rend this armor. Long it has lain in the deep-sea caverns of my people, carefully protected from rust. He who wore it was a warrior of Rome in the long ago, before the legions were withdrawn from Britain. In an ancient war on the border of Wales, it fell into the hands of my people, and because its wearer was a great prince, my people treasured it. Now I beg you to wear it, if you love me."

Dunlang took it hesitantly, nor could he know that it was the armor worn by a gladiator in the days of the later Roman empire, nor wonder by what chance it had been worn by an officer in the British legion. Little of that knew Dunlang who, like most of his brother chiefs, could neither read nor write; knowledge and education were for monks and priests; a fighting man was kept too busy to cultivate the arts and

sciences. He took the armor, and because he loved the strange girl, agreed to wear it — “if it will fit me.”

“It will fit,” she answered. “But I will see you no more alive.”

She held out her white arms and he gathered her hungrily to him, while Conn looked away. Then Dunlang gently unlocked her clinging arms from about his neck, kissed her, and tore himself free.

Without a backward glance he mounted his steed and rode away, with Conn trotting easily alongside. Looking back in the gathering dusk, the kern saw Eevin standing there still, a poignant picture of despair.

3.

The campfires sent up showers of sparks and illumined the land like day. In the distance loomed the grim walls of Dublin, dark and ominously silent; before the walls flickered other fires where the warriors of Leinster, under King Mailmora, whetted their axes for the coming battle. Out in the bay, the starlight glinted on myriad sails, shield-rails and arching serpent-prows. Between the city and the fires of the Irish host stretched the plain of Clontarf, bordered by Tomar’s Wood, dark and rustling in the night, and the Liffey’s dark, star-flecked waters.

Before his tent, the firelight playing on his white beard and glinting from his undimmed eagle eyes, sat the great King Brian Boru, among his chiefs. The king was old — seventy-three winters had passed over his lion-like head — long years crammed with fierce wars and bloody intrigues. Yet his back was straight, his arm unwithered, his voice deep and resonant. His chiefs stood about him, tall warriors with war-hardened hands and eyes whetted by the sun and the winds and the

high places; tigerish princes in their rich tunics, green girdles, leathern sandals and saffron mantles caught with great golden brooches.

They were an array of war-eagles — Murrogh, Brian's eldest son, the pride of all Erin, tall and mighty, with wide blue eyes that were never placid, but danced with mirth, dulled with sadness, or blazed with fury; Murrogh's young son, Turloagh, a supple lad of fifteen with golden locks and an eager face — tense with anticipation of trying his hand for the first time in the great game of war. And there was that other Turloagh, his cousin — Turloagh Dubh, who was only a few years older but who already had full stature and was famed throughout all Erin for his berserk rages and the cunning of his deadly ax-play. And there were Meathla O'Faellan, prince of Desmond or South Munster, and his kin — the Great Stewards of Scotland — Lennox, and Donald of Mar, who had crossed the Irish Channel with their wild Highlanders — tall men, sombre and gaunt and silent. And there were Dunlang O'Hartigan and O'Hyne, and prince of Hy Many was in the tent of his uncle, King Malachi O'Neill, which was pitched in the camp of the Meathmen, apart from the Dalcassians, and King Brian was brooding on the matter. For since the setting of the sun, O'Kelly had been closeted with the King of Meath, and no man knew what passed between them.

Nor was Donagh, son of Brian, among the chiefs before the royal pavilion, for he was afield with a band ravaging the holdings of Mailmora of Leinster.

Now Dunlang approached the king, leading with him Conn, the kern.

“My lord,” quoth Dunlang, “here is a man who was outlawed aforetime, who has spent vile durance among the Gall, and who risked his life by storm and sea to return and fight under your banner.

From the Orkneys in an open boat he came, naked and alone, and the sea cast him all but lifeless on the sand.”

Brian stiffened; even in small things his memory was sharp as a whetted stone. “Thou!” he cried. “Aye, I remember him. Well, Conn, you have come back — and with your red hands!”

“Aye, King Brian,” answered Conn stolidly, “my hands are red, it is true, and so I took to washing off the stain in Danish blood.”

“You dare stand before me, to whom your life is forfeit!”

“This alone I know, King Brian,” said Conn boldly, “my father was with you at Sulcoit and the sack of Limerick, and before that followed you in your days of wandering and was one of the fifteen warriors who remained to you when King Mahon, your brother, came seeking you in the forest. And my grandsire followed Murkertagh of the Leather Cloaks, and my people have fought the Danes since the days of Thorgils. You need men who can strike strong blows, and it is my right to die in battle against my ancient enemies, rather than shamefully at the end of a rope.”

King Brian nodded. “Well spoken. Take your life. Your days of outlawry are at an end. King Malachi would perhaps think otherwise, since it was a man of his you slew, but —” He paused; an old doubt ate at his soul at the thought of the King of Meath. “Let it be,” he went on, “let it rest until after the battle — mayhap that will be world’s end for us all.”

Dunlang stepped toward Conn and laid hand on the copper collar. “Let us cut this away; you are a free man now.”

But Conn shook his head. “Not until I have slain Thorwald Raven who put it there. I’ll wear it into battle as a sign of no quarter.”

“That is a noble sword you wear, kern,” said Murrogh suddenly.

“Aye, my lord. Murkertagh of the Leather Cloaks wielded this

blade until Blacair the Dane slew him at Ardee, and it remained in the possession of the Gall until I took it from the body of Wolfgar Snorri's son."

"It is not fitting that a tern should wear the sword of a king," said Murrogh brusquely. "Let one of the chiefs take it and give him an ax instead."

Conn's fingers locked about the hilt. "He would take the sword from me had best give me the ax first," he said grimly, "and that suddenly."

Murrogh's hot temper blazed. With an oath, he strode toward Conn, who met him eye to eye and gave back not a step.

"Be at ease, my son," ordered King Brian. "Let the kern keep the blade."

Murrogh struggled. His mood changed. "Aye, keep it and follow me into battle. We shall see if a king's sword in a kern's hand can hew as wide a path as a prince's blade."

"My lords," said Conn, "it may be God's will that I fall in the first onset — but the scars of slavery burn deep in my back this night, and I will not be backward when the spears are splintering."

4.

Therefore your doom is on you,

Is on you and your kings . . .

— Chesterton

While King Brian communed with his chiefs on the plains above Clontarf, a grisly ritual was being enacted within the gloomy castle that was at once the fortress and palace of Dublin's king. With good reason did

Christians fear and hate those grim walls; Dublin was a pagan city, ruled by savage heathen kings, and dark were the deeds committed therein.

In an inner chamber in the castle stood the Viking Brodir, sombrely watching a ghastly sacrifice on a grim black altar. On that monstrous stone writhed a naked, frothing thing that had been a comely youth; brutally bound and gagged, he could only twist convulsively beneath the dripping, inexorable dagger in the hands of the white-bearded wild-eyed priest of Odin.

The blade hacked through flesh and thw and bone; blood gushed, to be caught in a broad, copper bowl, which the priest, with his red-dappled beard, held high, invoking Odin in a frenzied chant. His thin, bony fingers tore the yet pulsing heart from the butchered breast, and his wild half-man eyes scanned it with avid intensity.

“What of your divinations?” demanded Brodir impatiently.

Shadows flickered in the priest’s cold eyes, and his flesh crawled with a mysterious horror. “Fifty years I have served Odin,” he said, “fifty years divined by the bleeding heart, but never such portents as these. Hark, Brodir! If ye fight not on Good Friday, as the Christians call it, your host will be utterly routed and all your chiefs slain; if ye fight on Good Friday, King Brian will die — but he will win the day.”

Brodir cursed with cold venom.

The priest shook his ancient head. “I cannot fathom the portent — and I am the last of the priests of the Flaming Circle, who learned mysteries at the feet of Thorgils. I see battle and slaughter — and yet more — shapes gigantic and terrible that stalk monstrously through the mists ...”

“Enough of such mummery,” snarled Brodir. “If I fall I would take

Brian to Helheim with me. We go against the Gaels on the morrow, fall fair, fall foul!” He turned and strode from the room.

Brodur traversed a winding corridor and entered another, more spacious chamber, adorned, like all the Dublin king’s palace, with the loot of all the world — gold-chased weapons, rare tapestries, rich rugs, divans from Byzantium and the East — plunder taken from all peoples by the roving Norsemen; for Dublin was the center of the Vikings’ wide-flung world, the headquarters whence they fared forth to loot the kings of the earth.

A queenly form rose to greet him. Kormlada, whom the Gaels called Gormlaith, was indeed fair, but there was cruelty in her face and in her hard, scintillant eyes. She was of mixed Irish and Danish blood, and looked the part of a barbaric queen, with her pendant earrings, her golden armlets and anklets, and her silver breastplates set with jewels. But for these breastplates, her only garments were a short silken skirt which came half way to her knees and was held in place by a wide girdle about her lithe waist, and sandals of soft red leather. Her hair was red-gold, her eyes light grey and glittering. Queen she had been, of Dublin, of Meath, and of Thomond. And queen she was still, for she held her son Sitric and her brother Mailmora in the palm of her slim white hand. Carried off in a raid in her childhood by Amlaff Cauran, King of Dublin, she had early discovered her power over men. As the child-wife of the rough Dane, she had swayed his kingdom at will, and her ambitions increased with her power.

Now she faced Brodir with her alluring, mysterious smile, but secret uneasiness ate at her. In all the world there was but one woman she feared, and but one man. And the man was Brodir. With him she was never entirely certain of her course; she duped him as she duped all men, but it was with many misgivings, for she sensed in him an

elemental savagery which, once loosed, she might not be able to control.

“What of the priest’s words, Brodir?” she asked. “If we avoid battle on the morrow we lose,” the Viking answered moodily. “If we fight, Brian wins, but falls. We fight, the more because my spies tell me Donagh is away from camp with a strong band, ravaging Mailmora’s lands. We have sent spies to Malachi, who has an old grudge against Brian, urging him to desert the king — or at least to stand aside and aid neither of us. We have offered him rich rewards and Brian’s lands to rule. Ha! Let him step into our trap! Not gold, but a bloody sword we will give him. With Brian crushed we will turn on Malachi and tread him into the dust! But first — Brian.”

She clenched her white hands in savage exultation. “Bring me his head! I’ll hang it above our bridal bed.”

“I have heard strange tales,” said Brodir soberly. “Sigurd has boasted in his cups.”

Kormlada started and scanned the inscrutable countenance. Again she felt a quiver of fear as she gazed at the sombre Viking with his tall, strong stature, his dark, menacing face, and his heavy black locks which he wore braided and caught in his sword-belt.

“What has Sigurd said?” she asked, striving to make her voice casual.

“When Sitric came to me in my skalli on the Isle of Man,” said Brodir, red glints beginning to smoulder in his dark eyes, “it was his oath that if I came to his aid, I should sit on the throne of Ireland with you as my queen. Now that fool of an Orkneyman, Sigurd, boasts in his ale that he was promised the same reward.”

She forced a laugh. “He was drunk.”

Brodir burst into wild cursing as the violence of the untamed

Viking surged up in him. “You lie, you wanton!” he shouted, seizing her white wrist in an iron grip. “You were born to lure men to their doom! But you will not play fast and loose with Brodir of Man!”

“You are mad!” she cried, twisting vainly in his grasp. “Release me, or I’ll call my guards!”

“Call them!” he snarled, “and I’ll slash the heads from their bodies. Cross me now and blood will run ankle-deep in Dublin’s streets. By Thor! there will be no city left for Brian to burn! Mailmora, Sitric, Sigurd, Amlaff — I’ll cut all their throats and drag you naked to my ship by your yellow hair. Dare to call out!”

She dared not. He forced her to her knees, twisting her white arm so brutally that she bit her lip to keep from screaming.

“You promised Sigurd the same thing you promised me,” he went on in ill-controlled fury, “knowing neither of us would throw away his life for less!”

“No! No!” she shrieked. “I swear by the ring of Thor!” Then, as the agony grew unbearable, she dropped pretense. “Yes — yes, I promised him — oh, let me go!”

“So!” The Viking tossed her contemptuously on to a pile of silken cushions, where she lay whimpering and disheveled. “You promised me and you promised Sigurd,” he said, looming menacingly above her, “but your promise to me you’ll keep — else you had better never been born. The throne of Ireland is a small thing beside my desire for you — if I cannot have you, no one shall.”

“But what of Sigurd?”

“He’ll fall in battle — or afterward,” he answered grimly.

“Good enough!” Dire indeed was the extremity in which Kormlada had not her wits about her. “It’s you I love, Brodir; I promised him only because he would not aid us otherwise.”

“Love!” The Viking laughed savagely. “You love Kormlada — none other. But you’ll keep your vow to me or you’ll rue it.” And, turning on his heel, he left her chamber.

Kormlada rose, rubbing her arm where the blue marks of his fingers marred her skin. “May he fall in the first charge!” she ground between her teeth. “If either survive, may it be that tall fool, Sigurd — methinks he would be a husband easier to manage than that black-haired savage. I will perforce marry him if he survives the battle, but by Thor! he shall not long press the throne of Ireland — I’ll send him to join Brian.”

“You speak as though King Brian were already dead.” A tranquil voice behind Kormlada brought her about to face the other person in the world she feared besides Brodir. Her eyes widened as they fell upon a slender girl clad in shimmering green, a girl whose golden hair glimmered with unearthly light in the glow of the candles. The queen recoiled, hands outstretched as if to fend her away.

“Eevin! Stand back, witch! Cast no spell on me! How came you into my palace?”

“How came the breeze through the trees?” answered the Danaan girl. “What was Brodir saying to you before I entered?”

“If you are a sorceress, you know,” suddenly answered the queen.

Eevin nodded. “Aye, I know. In your own mind I read it. He had consulted the oracle of the sea-people — the blood and the torn heart” — her dainty lips curled with disgust — “and he told you he would attack tomorrow.”

The queen blanched and made no reply, fearing to meet Eevin’s magnetic eyes. She felt naked before the mysterious girl who could uncannily sift the contents of her mind and empty it of its secrets.

Eevin stood with bent head for a moment, then raised her head

suddenly. Kormlada started, for something akin to fear shone in the were-girl's eyes.

“Who is in this castle?” she cried.

“You know as well as I,” muttered Kormlada. “Sitric, Sigurd, Brodir.”

“There is another!” exclaimed Eevin, paling and shuddering. “Ah, I know him of old — I feel him — he bears the cold of the North with him, the shivering tang of icy seas ...”

She turned and slipped swiftly through the velvet hangings that masked a hidden doorway Kormlada had thought known only to herself and her women, leaving the queen bewildered and uneasy.

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In the sacrificial chamber, the ancient priest still mumbled over the gory altar upon which lay the mutilated victim of his rite. “Fifty years I have served Odin,” he maundered. “And never such portents have I read. Odin laid his mark upon me long ago in a night of horror. The years fall like withered leaves, and my age draws to a close. One by one I have seen the altars of Odin crumble. If the Christians win this battle, Odin's day is done. It comes upon me that I have offered up my last sacrifice ...”

A deep, powerful voice spoke behind him. “And what more fitting than that you should accompany the soul of that last sacrifice to the realm of him you served?”

The priest wheeled, the sacrificial dagger falling from his hand. Before him stood a tall man, wrapped in a cloak beneath which shone the gleam of armor. A slouch hat was pulled low over his forehead, and when he pushed it back, a single eye, glittering and grim as the grey sea, met his horrified gaze.

Warriors who rushed into the chamber at the strangled scream that burst hideously forth, found the old priest dead beside his corpseladen altar, unwounded, but with face and body shrivelled as by some intolerable exposure, and a soul-shaking horror in his glassy eyes. Yet, save for the corpses, the chamber was empty, and none had been seen to enter it since Brodir had gone forth.

~

Alone in his tent with the heavily-armed gallagachs ranged outside, King Brian was dreaming a strange dream. In his dream a tall grey giant loomed terribly above him, and cried in a voice that was like thunder among the clouds, "Beware, champion of the white Christ! Though you smite my children with the sword and drive me into the dark voids of Jotunheim, yet shall I work you rue! As you smite my children with the sword, so shall I smite the son of your body, and as I go into the dark, so shall you go likewise, when the Choosers of the Slain ride the clouds above the battlefield!"

The thunder of the giant's voice and the awesome glitter of his single eye froze the blood of the king who had never known fear, and with a strangled cry, he woke, starting up. The thick torches which burned outside illumined the interior of his tent sufficiently well for him to make out a slender form.

"Eevin!" he cried. "By my soul! it is well for kings that your people take no part in the intrigues of mortals, when you can steal under the very noses of the guards into our tents. Do you seek Dunlang?"

The girl shook her head sadly. "I see him no more alive, great king. Were I to go to him now, my own black sorrow might unman him. I will come to him among the dead tomorrow."

King Brian shivered.

“But it is not of my woes that I came to speak, my lord,” she continued wearily. “It is not the way of the Dark People to take part in the quarrels of the Tall Folk — but I love one of them. This night I talked with Gormlaith.”

Brian winced at the name of his divorced queen. “And your news?” he asked.

“Brodir strikes on the morrow.”

The king shook his head heavily. “It vexes my soul to spill blood on the Holy Day. But if God wills it, we will not await their onslaught — we will march at dawn to meet them. I will send a swift runner to bring back Donagh . . .”

Eevin shook her head once more. “Nay, great king. Let Donagh live. After the battle the Dalcassians will need strong arms to brace the sceptre.”

Brian gazed fixedly at her. “I read my doom in those words. Have you cast my fate?”

Eevin spread her hands helplessly. “My lord, not even the Dark People can rend the Veil at will. Not by the casting of fates, or the sorcery of divination, not in smoke or in blood have I read it, but a weird is upon me and I see through flame and the dim clash of battle.”

“And I shall fall?”

She bowed her face in her hands.

“Well, let it fall as God wills,” said King Brian tranquilly. “I have lived long and deeply. Weep not — through the darkest mists of gloom and night, dawn yet rises on the world. My clan will revere you in the long days to come. Now go, for the night wanes toward morn, and I would make my peace with God.”

And Eevin of Craglea went like a shadow from the king’s tent.

5.

*The war was like a dream; I cannot tell
How many heathens souls I sent to Hell.
I only know, above the fallen ones
I heard dark Odin shouting to his sons,
And felt amid the battle's roar and shock
The strive of gods that crashed in Ragnarok.*

— Conn's Saga

Through the mist of the whitening dawn men moved like ghosts and weapons clanked eerily. Conn stretched his muscular arms, yawned cavernously, and loosened his great blade in its sheath. "This is the day the ravens drink blood, my lord," he said, and Dunlang O'Hartigan nodded absently.

"Come hither and aid me to don this cursed cage," said the young chief. "For Eevin's sake I'll wear it; but by the saints! I had rather battle stark naked!"

The Gaels were on the move, marching from Kilmainham in the same formation in which they intended to enter battle. First came the Dalcassians, big rangy men in their saffron tunics, with a round buckler of steel-braced yew wood on the left arm, and the right hand gripping the dreaded Dalcassian ax. This ax differed greatly from the heavy weapon of the Danes; the Irish wielded it with one hand, the thumb stretched along the haft to guide the blow, and they had attained a skill at ax-fighting never before or since equalled. Hauberks they had none, neither the gallaglach's nor the kern's, though some of their chiefs, like Murrogh, wore light steel caps. But the tunics of warriors and chiefs alike had been woven with such skill and steeped in vinegar until

their remarkable toughness afforded some protection against sword and arrow.

At the head of the Dalcassians strode Prince Murrogh, his fierce eyes alight, smiling as though he went to a feast instead of a slaughtering. On one side went Dunlang in his Roman corselet, closely followed by Conn, bearing the helmet, and on the other the two Turloghs — the son of Murrogh, and Turlogh Dubh, who alone of all the Dalcassians always went into battle fully armored. He looked grim enough, despite his youth, with his dark face and smoldering blue eyes, clad as he was in a full shirt of black mail, mail leggings and a steel helmet with a mail drop, and bearing a spiked buckler. Unlike the rest of the chiefs, who preferred their swords in battle, Black Turlogh fought with an ax of his own forging, and his skill with the weapon was almost uncanny.

Close behind the Dalcassians were the two companies of the Scottish, with their chiefs, the Great Stewards of Scotland, who, veterans of long wars with the Saxons, wore helmets with horsehair crests and coats of mail. With them came the men of South Munster commanded by Prince Meathla O'Faellan.

The third division consisted of the warriors of Connacht, wild men of the west, shock-headed and naked but for their wolf-skins, with their chiefs O'Kelly and O'Hyne. O'Kelly marched as a man whose soul is heavy, for the shadow of his meeting with Malachi the night before fell gauntly across him.

Somewhat apart from the three main divisions marched the tall gallaghlachs and kerns of Meath, their king riding slowly before them.

And before all the host rode King Brian Boru on a white steed, his white locks blown about his ancient face and his eyes strange and fey, so that the wild kerns gazed on him with superstitious awe.

So the Gaels came before Dublin, where they saw the hosts of

Leinster and Lochlann drawn up in battle array, stretching in a wide crescent from Dubhgall's Bridge to a narrow river Tolka which cuts the plain of Clontarf. Three main divisions there were — the foreign Northmen, the Vikings, with Sigurd and the grim Brodir; flanking them on the one side, the fierce Danes of Dublin, under their chief, a sombre wanderer whose name no man knew, but who was called Dubhgall, the Dark Stranger; and on the other flank the Irish of Leinster, with their king, Mailmora. The Danish fortress on the hill beyond the Liffey River bristled with armed men where King Sitric guarded the city.

There was but one way into the city from the north, the direction from which the Gaels were advancing, for in those days Dublin lay wholly south of the Liffey; that was the bridge called Dubhgall's Bridge. The Danes stood with one horn of their line guarding this entrance, their ranks curving out toward Tolka, their backs to the sea. The Gaels advanced along the level plain which stretched between Tomar's Wood and the shore.

With little more than a bow-shot separating the hosts, the Gaels halted, and King Brian rode in front of them, holding aloft a crucifix. "Sons of Goidhel!" his voice rang like a trumpet call. "It is not given me to lead you into the fray, as I led you in days of old. But I have pitched my tent behind your lines, where you must trample me if you flee. You will not flee! Remember a hundred years of outrage and infamy! Remember your burned homes, your slaughtered kin, your ravaged women, your babes enslaved! Before you stand your oppressors! On this day our good Lord died for you! There stand the heathen hordes which revile His Name and slay His people! I have but one command to give you — conquer or die!"

The wild hordes yelled like wolves and a forest of axes brandished on high. King Brian bowed his head and his face was grey.

“Let them lead me back to my tent,” he whispered to Murrogh. “Age has withered me from the play of the axes and my doom is hard upon me. Go forth, and may God stiffen your arms to the slaying!”

Now as the king rode slowly back to his tent among his guardsmen, there was a taking up of girdles, a drawing of blades, a dressing of shields. Conn placed the Roman helmet on Dunlang’s head and grinned at the result, for the young chief looked like some mythical iron monster out of Norse legendry. The hosts moved inexorably toward each other.

The Vikings had assumed their favorite wedge-shaped formation with Sigurd and Brodir at the tip. The Northmen offered a strong contrast to the loose lines of the half-naked Gaels. They moved in compact ranks, armored with homed helmets, heavy scale-mail coats reaching to their knees, and leggings of seasoned wolf-hide braced with iron plates; and they bore great kite-shaped shields of linden wood with iron rims, and long spears. The thousand warriors in the forefront wore long leggings and gauntlets of mail as well, so that from crown to heel they were steel-clad. These marched in a solid shield-wall, bucklers overlapping, and over their iron ranks floated the grim raven banner which had always brought victory to Jarl Sigurd — even if it brought death to the bearer. Now it was borne by old Rane Asgrimm’s son, who felt that the hour of his death was at hand.

At the tip of the wedge, like the point of a spear, were the champions of Lochlann — Brodir in his dully glittering blue mail, which no blade had even dented; Jarl Sigurd, tall, blond-bearded, gleaming in his golden-scaled hauberk; Hrafn the Red, in whose soul lurked a mocking devil that moved him to gargantuan laughter even

in the madness of battle; the tall comrades, Thorstein and Asmund; Prince Amlaff, roving son of the King of Norway; Platt of Danemark; Athelstane the Saxon; Jarl Thorwald Raven of the Hebrides; Anrad the Berserk.

Toward this formidable array the Irish advanced at quick pace in more or less open formation and with scant attempt at any orderly ranks. But Malachi and his warriors wheeled suddenly and drew off to the extreme left, taking up their position on the high ground by Cabra. And when Murrough saw this, he cursed under his breath, and Black Turlogh growled, "Who said an O'Neill forgets an old grudge? By Crom! Murrough, we may have to guard our backs as well as our breasts before this fight be won!"

Now suddenly from the Viking ranks strode Platt of Danemark, his red hair like a crimson veil about his bare head, his silver mail gleaming. The hosts watched eagerly, for in those days few battles began without preliminary single combats.

"Donald!" shouted Platt, flinging up his naked sword so that the rising sun caught it in a sheen of silver. "Where is Donald of Mar? Are you there, Donald, as you were at Rhu Stoir, or do you skulk from the fray?"

"I am here, Rogue!" answered the Scottish chief as he strode, tall and gaunt, from among his men, flinging away his scabbard.

Highlander and Dane met in the middle space between the hosts, Donald cautious as a hunting wolf, Platt leaping in reckless and headlong, eyes alight and dancing with a laughing madness. Yet it was the wary Steward's foot which slipped suddenly on a rolling pebble, and before he could regain his balance, Platt's sword lunged into him so fiercely that the keen point tore through his corselet-scales and sank deep beneath his heart. Platt's mad yell of exultation broke in a gasp.

Even as he crumpled, Donald of Mar lashed out a dying stroke that split the Dane's head, and the two fell together.

Thereat a deep-toned roar went up to the heavens, and the two great hosts rolled together like a tidal wave. Then were struck the first blows of the battle. There were no maneuvers of strategy, no cavalry charges, no flights of arrows. Forty thousand men fought on foot, hand to hand, man to man, slaying and dying in red chaos. The battle broke in howling waves about the spears and axes of the warriors. The first to shock were the Dalcassians and the Vikings, and as they met, both lines rocked at the impact. The deep roar of the Norsemen mingled with the yells of the Gaels and the Northern spears splintered among the Western axes. Foremost in the fray, Murrogh's great body heaved and strained as he roared and smote right and left with a heavy sword in either hand, mowing down men like corn. Neither shield nor helmet stood beneath his terrible blows, and behind him came his warriors slashing and howling like devils. Against the compact lines of the Dublin Danes thundered the wild tribesmen of Connacht, and the men of South Munster and their Scottish allies fell vengefully upon the Irish of Leinster.

The iron lines writhed and interwove across the plain. Conn, following Dunlang, grinned savagely as he smote home with dripping blade, and his fierce eyes sought for Thorwald Raven among the spears. But in that mad sea of battle where wild faces came and went like waves, it was difficult to pick out any one man.

At first both lines held without giving an inch; feet braced, straining breast to breast, they snarled and hacked, shield jammed hard against shield. All up and down the line of battle blades shimmered and flashed like sea-spray in the sun, and the roar of battle shook the ravens that wheeled like Valkyries overhead. Then, when human flesh

and blood could stand no more, the serried lines began to roll forward or back. The Leinstermen flinched before the fierce onslaught of the Munster clans and their Scottish allies, giving way slowly, foot by foot, cursed by their king, who fought on foot with a sword in the forefront of the fray.

But on the other flanks, the Danes of Dublin under the redoubtable Dubhgall had held against the first blasting charge of the Western tribes, though their ranks reeled at the shock, and now the wild men in their wolf-skins were falling like garnered grain before the Danish axes.

In the center, the battle raged most fiercely; the wedged-shaped shield-wall of the Vikings held, and against its iron ranks the Dalcasians hurled their half-naked bodies in vain. A ghastly heap ringed that rim wall as Brodir and Sigurd began a slow, steady advance, the inexorable outstride of the Vikings, hacking deeper and deeper into the loose formation of the Gaels.

On the walls of Dublin Castle, King Sitric, watching the fight with Kormlada and his wife, exclaimed, "Well do the sea-kings reap the field!"

Kormlada's beautiful eyes blazed with wild exultation. "Fall, Brian!" she cried fiercely. "Fall, Murrogh! And fall too, Brodir! Let the keen ravens feed!" Her voice faltered as her eyes fell upon a tall cloaked figure standing on the battlements, apart from the people — a sombre grey giant, brooding over the battle. A cold fear stole over her and froze the words on her lips. She plucked at Sitric's cloak. "Who is he?" she whispered, pointing.

Sitric looked and shuddered. "I know not. Pay him no heed. Go not near him. When I but approached him, he spoke not or looked at me, but a cold wind blew over me and my heart shrivelled. Let us rather watch the battle. The Gaels give way."

But at the foremost point of the Gaelic advance, the line held. There, like the convex center of a curving ax-blade, fought Murrogh and his chiefs. The great prince was already streaming blood from gashes on his limbs, but his heavy swords flamed in double strokes that dealt death like a harvest, and the chiefs at his side mowed down the corn of battle. Fiercely Murrogh sought to reach Sigurd through the press. He saw the tall Jarl looming across the waves of spears and heads, striking blows like thunder-strokes, and the sight drove the Gaelic prince to madness. But he could not reach the Viking.

“The warriors are forced back,” gasped Dunlang, seeking to shake the sweat from his eyes. The young chief was untouched; spears and axes alike splintered on the Roman helmet or glanced from the ancient cuirass, but, unused to armor, he felt like a chained wolf.

Murrogh spared a single swift glance; on either side of the clump of chiefs, the gallaghlachs were falling back, slowly, savagely, selling each foot of ground with blood, unable to halt the irresistible advance of the mailed Northmen. These were falling, too, all along the battle-line, but they closed ranks and forced their way forward, legs braced hard, bodies strained, spears driving without cease or pause; they plowed on through a red surf of dead and dying.

“Turlogh!” gasped Murrogh, dashing the blood from his eyes. “Haste from the fray for Malachi! Bid him charge, in God’s name!”

But the frenzy of slaughter was on Black Turlogh; froth flecked his lips and his eyes were those of a madman. “The Devil take Malachi!” he shouted, splitting a Dane’s skull with a stroke like the slash of a tiger’s paw.

“Conn!” called Murrogh, and as he spoke he gripped the big kern’s shoulder and dragged him back. “Haste to Malachi — we need his support.” Conn drew reluctantly away from the melee, dealing his path

with thunderous strokes. Across the reeling sea of blades and rocking helmets he saw the towering form of Jarl Sigurd and his lords — the billowing folds of the raven banner floated above them as their whistling swords hewed down men like wheat before the reaper.

Free of the press, the kern ran swiftly along the battle-line until he came to the higher ground of Cabra where the Meathmen thronged, tense and trembling like hunting hounds as they gripped their weapons and looked eagerly at their king. Malachi stood apart, watching the fray with moody eyes, his lion's head bowed, his fingers twined in his golden beard.

“King Melaghlin,” said Conn bluntly, “Prince Murrogh urges you to charge home, for the press is great and the men of the Gael are hard beset.”

The great O'Neill lifted his head and stared absently at the kern. Conn little guessed the chaotic struggle which was taking place in Malachi's soul — the red visions which thronged his brain — riches, power, the rule of all Erin, balanced against the black shame of treachery. He gazed out across the field where the banner of his nephew O'Kelly heaved among the spears. And Malachi shuddered, but shook his head.

“Nay,” he said, “it is not time. I will charge — when the time comes.”

For an instant king and kern looked into each others' eyes. Malachi's eyes dropped. Conn turned without a word and sped down the slope. As he went, he saw that the advance of Lennox and the men of Desmond had been checked. Mailmora, raging like a wild man, had cut down Prince Meathla O'Faelan with his own hand, a chance spear-thrust had wounded the Great Steward, and now the Leinstermen held fast against the onset of the Munster and Scottish clans.

But where the Dalcassians fought, the battle was locked; the Prince of Thomond broke the onrush of the Norsemen like a jutting cliff that breaks the sea.

Conn reached Murrogh in the upheaval of slaughter. "Melaghlin says he will charge when the time comes."

"Hell to his soul!" cried Black Turlogh. "We are betrayed!"

Murrogh's blue eyes flamed. "Then in the name of God!" he roared, "Let us charge and die!"

The struggling men were stirred at his shout. The blind passion of the Gael surged up, bred of desperation; the lines stiffened, and a great shout shook the field that made King Sitric on his castle wall whiten and grip the parapet. He had heard such shouting before.

Now, as Murrogh leaped forward, the Gaels awoke to red fury as in men who have no hope. The nearness of doom woke frenzy in them, and, like inspired madmen, they hurled their last charge and smote the wall of shields, which reeled at the blow. No human power could stay the onslaught. Murrogh and his chiefs no longer hoped to win, or even to live, but only to glut their fury as they died, and in their despair they fought like wounded tigers — severing limbs, splitting skulls, cleaving breasts and shoulder-bones. Close at Murrogh's heels flamed the ax of Black Turlogh and the swords of Dunlang and the chiefs; under that torrent of steel the iron line crumpled and gave, and through the breach the frenzied Gaels poured. The shield formation melted away.

At the same moment the wild men of Connacht again hurled a desperate charge against the Dublin Danes. O'Hyne and Dubhgall fell together and the Dublin men were battered backward, disputing every foot. The whole field melted into a mingled mass of slashing battlers without rank or formation. Among a heap of torn Dalcassian dead,

Murrogh came at last upon Jarl Sigurd. Behind the Jarl stood grim old Rane Asgrimm's son, holding the raven banner. Murrogh slew him with a single stroke. Sigurd turned, and his sword rent Murrogh's tunic and gashed his chest, but the Irish prince smote so fiercely on the Norseman's shield that Jarl Sigurd reeled backward.

Thorleif Hordi had picked up the banner, but scarce had he lifted it when Black Turlogh, his eyes glaring, broke through and split his skull to the teeth. Sigurd, seeing his banner fallen once more, struck Murrogh with such desperate fury that his sword bit through the prince's morion and gashed his scalp. Blood jetted down Murrogh's face, and he reeled, but before Sigurd could strike again, Black Turlogh's ax licked out like a flicker of lightning. The Jarl's warding shield fell shattered from his arm, and Sigurd gave back for an instant, daunted by the play of that deathly ax. Then a rush of warriors swept the ranging chiefs apart.

"Thorstein!" shouted Sigurd. "Take up the banner!"

"Touch it not!" cried Asmund. "Who bears it, dies!" Even as he spoke, Dunlang's sword crushed his skull.

"Hrafn!" called Sigurd desperately. "Bear the banner!"

"Bear your own curse!" answered Hrafn. "This is the end of us all."

"Cowards!" roared the Jarl, snatching up the banner himself and striving to gather it under his cloak as Murrogh, face bloodied and eyes blazing, broke through to him. Sigurd flung up his sword — too late. The weapon in Murrogh's right hand splintered on his helmet, bursting the straps that held it and ripping it from his head, and Murrogh's left-hand sword, whistling in behind the first blow, shattered the Jarl's skull and felled him dead in the bloody folds of the great banner that wrapped about him as he went down.

Now a great roar went up, and the Gaels redoubled their strokes.

With the formation of shields tom apart, the mail of the Vikings could not save them; for the Dalcassian axes, flashing in the sun, hewed through chainmesh and iron plates alike, rending linden shield and homed helmet. Yet the Danes did not break.

On the high ramparts, King Sitric had turned pale, his hands trembling where he gripped the parapet. He knew that these wild men could not be beaten now, for they spilled their lives like water, hurling their naked bodies again and again into the fangs of spear and ax. Kormlada was silent, but Sitric's wife, King Brian's daughter, cried out in joy, for her heart was with her own people.

Murrogh was striving now to reach Brodir, but the black Viking had seen Sigurd die. Brodir's world was crumbling; even his vaunted mail was failing him, for though it had thus far saved his skin, it was tattered now. Never before had the Manx Viking faced the dreaded Dalcassian ax. He drew back from Murrogh's onset. In the crush, an ax shattered on Murrogh's helmet, knocking him to his knees and blinding him momentarily with its impact. Dunlang's sword wove a wheel of death above the fallen prince, and Murrogh reeled up.

The press slackened as Black Turlogh, Conn and young Turlogh drove in, hacking and stabbing, and Dunlang, frenzied by the heat of battle, tore off his helmet and flung it aside, ripping off his cuirass.

"The Devil eat such cages!" he shouted, catching at the reeling prince to support him, and even at that instant Thorstein the Dane ran in and drove his spear into Dunlang's side. The young Dalcassian staggered and fell at Murrogh's feet, and Conn leaped forward to strike Thorstein's head from his shoulders so that it whirled grinning still through the air in a shower of crimson.

Murrogh shook the darkness from his eyes. "Dunlang!" he cried

in a fearful voice, falling to his knees at his friend's side and raising his head.

But Dunlang's eyes were already glazing. "Murrogh! Eevin!" Then blood gushed from his lips and he went limp in Murrogh's arms.

Murrogh leaped up with a shout of demoniac fury. He rushed into the thick of the Vikings, and his men swept in behind him.

On the hill of Cabra, Malachi cried out, flinging doubts and plots to the wind. As Brodir had plotted, so had he. He had but to stand aside until both hosts were cut to pieces, then seize Erin, tricking the Danes as they had planned to betray him. But his blood cried out against him and would not be stilled. He gripped the golden collar of Tomar about his neck, the collar he had taken so many years before from the Danish king his sword had broken, and the old fire leaped up.

"Charge and die!" he shouted, drawing his sword, and at his back the men of Meath gave tongue like a hunting back and swarmed down into the field.

Under the shock of the Meathmen's assault, the weakened Danes staggered and broke. They tore away singly and in desperate slashing groups, seeking to gain the bay where their ships were anchored. But the Meathmen had cut off their retreat, and the ships lay far out, for the tide was at flood. All day that terrific battle had ranged, yet to Conn, snatching a startled glance at the setting sun, it seemed that scarce an hour had passed since the first lines had crashed together.

The fleeing Northmen made for the river, and the Gaels plunged in after them to drag them down. Among the fugitives and the groups of Norsemen who here and there made determined stands, the Irish chiefs were divided. The boy Turlogh was separated from Murrogh's side and vanished in the Tolka, struggling with a Dane. The clans of Leinster did not break until Black Turlogh rushed like a maddened

beast into the thick of them and struck Mailmora dead in the midst of his warriors.

Murrogh, still blood-mad, but staggering from fatigue and weakened by loss of blood, came upon a band of Vikings who, back to back, resisted the conquerors. Their leader was Anrad the Berserk, who, when he saw Murrogh, rushed furiously upon him. Murrogh, too weary to parry the Dane's stroke, dropped his own sword and closed with Anrad, bearing him to the ground. The sword was wrenched from the Dane's hand as they fell. Both snatched at it, but Murrogh caught the hilt and Anrad the blade. The Gaelic prince tore it away, dragging the keen edge through the Viking's hand, severing nerve and mew; and, setting a knee on Anrad's chest, Murrogh drove the sword thrice through his body. Anrad, dying, drew a dagger, but his strength ebbed so swiftly that his arm sank. And then a mighty hand gripped his wrist and drove home the stroke he had sought to strike, so that the keen blade sank beneath Murrogh's heart.

Murrogh fell back dying, and his last glance showed him a tall grey giant looming above, his cloak billowing in the wind, his one glittering eye cold and terrible. But the mazed eyes of the surrounding warriors saw only death and the dealing of death.

The Danes were all in flight now, and on the high wall King Sitric sat watching his high ambitions fade away, while Kormlada gazed wild-eyed into ruin, defeat and shame.

Conn ran among the dying and fleeing, seeking Thorwald Raven. The kern's buckler was gone, shattered among the axes. His broad breast was gashed in half a dozen places; a sword-edge had bitten into his scalp when only his shock of tangled hair had saved him. A spear had girded into his thigh. Yet now in this heat and fury he scarcely felt those wounds.

A weakening hand caught at Conn's knee as he stumbled among dead men in wolf-skins and mailed corpses. He bent and saw O'Kelly, Malachi's nephew, and chief of the Hy Many. The chief's eyes were glazing in death. Conn lifted his head, and a smile curled the blue lips.

"I hear the war-ciy of the O'Neill," he whispered. "Malachi could not betray us. He could not stand from the fray. The Red Hand-to-Victory!"

Conn rose as O'Kelly died, and caught sight of a familiar figure. Thorwald Raven had broken from the press and now fled alone and swiftly, not toward the sea or the river, where his comrades died beneath the Gaelic axes, but toward Tomar's Wood. Conn followed, spurred by his hate.

Thorwald saw him, and turned, snarling. So the thrall met his former master. As Conn rushed into close quarters, the Norseman gripped his spear-shaft with both hands and lunged fiercely, but the point glanced from the great copper collar about the kern's neck. Conn, bending low, lunged upward with all his power, so that the great blade ripped through Jarl Thorwald's tattered mail and spilled his entrails on the ground.

Turning, Conn saw that the chase had brought him almost to the king's tent, pitched behind the battle-lines. He saw King Brian Boru standing in front of the tent, his white locks flowing in the wind, and but one man attending him. Conn ran forward.

"Kern, what are your tidings?" asked the king.

"The foreigners flee," answered Conn. "But Murrogh has fallen."

"You bring evil tidings," said Brian. "Erin shall never again look on a champion like him." And age like a cold cloud closed upon him.

"Where are your guards, my lord?" asked Conn.

"They have joined in the pursuit."

“Let me then take you to a safer place,” said Conn. “The Gall fly all about us here.”

King Brian shook his head. “Nay, I know I leave not this place alive, for Eevin of Craglea told me last night I should fall this day. And what avails me to survive Murrogh and the champions of the Gael? Let me lie at Armagh, in the peace of God.”

Now the attendant cried out, “My king, we are undone! Men blue and naked are upon us.”

“The armored Danes,” cried Conn, wheeling.

King Brian drew his heavy sword.

A group of blood-stained Vikings were approaching, led by Brodir and Prince Amlaff. Their vaunted mail hung in shreds; their swords were notched and dripping. Brodir had marked the king’s tent from afar, and was bent on murder, for his soul raged with shame and fury and he was beset by visions in which Brian, Sigurd, and Kormlada spun in a hellish dance. He had lost the battle, Ireland, Kormlada — now he was ready to give up his life in a dying stroke of vengeance.

Brodir rushed upon the king, Prince Amlaff at his heels. Conn sprang to bar their way. But Brodir swerved aside and left the kern to Amlaff, as he fell upon the king. Conn took Amlaff’s blade in his left arm and smote a single terrible blow that rent the prince’s hauberk like paper and shattered his spine. Then the kern sprang back to guard King Brian.

Then even as he turned, Conn saw Brodir parry Brian’s stroke and drive his sword through the ancient king’s breast. Brian went down, but even as he fell he caught himself on one knee and thrust his keen blade through flesh and bone, cutting both Brodir’s legs from under him. The Viking’s scream of triumph broke in a ghastly groan as he

toppled in a widening pool of crimson. There he struggled convulsively and lay still.

Conn stood looking dazedly around him. Brodir's company of men had fled, and the Gaels were converging on Brian's tent. The sound of the keening for the heroes already rose to mingle with the screams and shouts that still came from the struggling hordes along the river. They were bringing Murrogh's body to the king's tent, walking slowly — weary, bloody, men with bowed heads. Behind the litter that bore the prince's body came others — laden with the bodies of Turlogh, Murrogh's son; of Donald, Steward of Mar; of O'Kelly and O'Hyne, the western chiefs; of Prince Meatha O'Faellan; of Dunlang O'Hartigan, beside whose litter walked Eevin of Craglea, her golden head sunk on her breast.

The warriors set down the litters and gathered silently and wearily about the corpse of King Brian Boru. They gazed unspeaking, their minds dulled from the agony of strife. Eevin lay motionless beside the body of her lover, as if she herself were dead; no tears stood in her eyes, no cry or moan escaped her pallid lips.

The clamor of battle was dying as the setting sun bathed the trampled field in its roseate light. The fugitives, tattered and slashed, were limping into the gates of Dublin, and the warriors of King Sitric were preparing to stand siege. But the Irish were in no condition to besiege the city. Four thousand warriors and chieftains had fallen, and nearly all the champions of the Gael were dead. But more than seven thousand Danes and Leinstermen lay stretched on the blood-soaked earth, and the power of the Vikings was broken. On Clontarf their iron reign was ended.

Conn walked toward the river, feeling now the ache of his stiffening wounds. He met Turlogh Dubh. The madness of battle was gone from

Black Turlogh, and his dark face was inscrutable. From head to foot he was splattered with crimson.

“My lord,” said Conn, fingering the great copper ring about his neck, “I have slain the man who put this thrall-mark on me. I would be free of it.”

Black Turlogh took his red-stained ax-head in his hands and, pressing it against the ring, drove the keen edge through the softer metal. The ax gashed Conn’s shoulder, but neither heeded.

“Now I am truly free,” said Conn, flexing his mighty arms. “My heart is heavy for the chiefs who have fallen, but my mind is mazed with wonder and glory. When will ever such a battle be fought again? Truly, it was a feast of the ravens, a sea of slaughter ...”

His voice trailed off, and he stood like a statue, head flung back, eyes staring into the clouded heavens. The sun was sinking in a dark ocean of scarlet. Great clouds rolled and tumbled, piled mountainously against the smoldering red of the sunset. A wind blew out of them, biting, cold, and, borne on the wind, etched shadowy against the clouds, a vague, gigantic form went flying, beard and wild locks streaming in the gale, cloak billowing out like great wings — speeding into the mysterious blue mists that pulsed and shimmered in the brooding North.

“Look up there — in the sky!” cried Conn. “The Grey Man! It is he! The Grey Man with the single terrible eye. I saw him in the mountains of Torca. I glimpsed him brooding on the walls of Dublin while the battle raged. I saw him looming above Prince Murrough as he died. Look! He rides the wind and races among the tall clouds. He swindles. He fades into the void! He vanishes!”

“It is Odin, god of the sea-people,” said Turlogh sombrely. “His children are broken, his altars crumble, and his worshippers fallen

before the swords of the South. He flees the new gods and their children, and returns to the blue gulfs of the North which gave him birth. No more will helpless victims howl beneath the daggers of his priests — no more will he stalk the black clouds.” He shook his head darkly. “The Grey God passes, and we too are passing, though we have conquered. The days of the twilight come on amain, and a strange feeling is upon me as of a waning age. What are we all, too, but ghosts waning into the night?”

And he went on into the dusk, leaving Conn to his freedom — from thralldom and cruelty, as both he and all the Gaels were now free of the shadow of the Grey God and his ruthless worshippers.

THE DARK MAN

*For this is the night of the drawing of swords,
And the painted tower of the heathen hordes
Leans to our hammers, fires and cords,
Leans a little and falls.*

— Chesterton

A biting wind drifted the snow as it fell. The surf snarled along the rugged shore and farther out the long leaden combers moaned ceaselessly. Through the gray dawn that was stealing over the coast of Connacht a fisherman came trudging, a man rugged as the land that bore him. His feet were wrapped in rough cured leather; a single garment of deerskin scantily sheltered his body. He wore no other clothing. As he strode stolidly along the shore, as heedless of the bitter cold as if he were the shaggy beast he appeared at first glance, he halted. Another man loomed up out of the veil of falling snow and drifting sea-mist. Turlogh Dubh stood before him.

This man was nearly a head taller than the stocky fisherman, and he had the bearing of a fighting man. No single glance would suffice, but any man or woman whose eyes fell on Turlogh Dubh would look long. Six feet and one inch he stood, and the first impression of slimness faded on closer inspection. He was big but trimly molded; a magnificent sweep of shoulder and depth of chest. Rangy he was, but compact, combining the strength of a bull with the lithe quickness of a panther. The slightest movement he made showed that steel trap coordination that makes the super-fighter. Turlogh Dubh — Black Turlogh, once of the Clan na O'Brien. And black he was as to hair,

and dark of complexion. From under heavy black brows gleamed eyes of a hot volcanic blue. And in his clean-shaven face there was something of the somberness of dark mountains, of the ocean at midnight. Like the fisherman, he was a part of this fierce western land.

On his head he wore a plain vizorless helmet without crest or symbol. From neck to mid-thigh he was protected by a close-fitting shirt of black chain mail. The kilt he wore below his armor and which reached to his knees was of plain drab material. His legs were wrapped with hard leather that might turn a sword edge, and the shoes on his feet were worn with much traveling.

A broad belt encircled his lean waist, holding a long dirk in a leather sheath. On his left arm he carried a small round shield of hide-covered wood, hard as iron, braced and reinforced with steel, and having a short, heavy spike in the center. An ax hung from his right wrist, and it was to this feature that the fisherman's eyes wandered. The weapon with its three-foot handle and graceful lines looked slim and light when the fisherman mentally compared it to the great axes carried by the Norsemen. Yet scarcely three years had passed, as the fisherman knew, since such axes as these had shattered the northern hosts into red defeat and broken the pagan power forever.

There was individuality about the ax as about its owner. It was not like any other the fisherman had ever seen. Single-edged it was, with a short three-edged spike on the back and another on the top of the head. Like the wielder, it was heavier than it looked. With its slightly curved shaft and the graceful artistry of the blade, it looked the weapon of an expert — swift, lethal, deadly, cobra-like. The head was of finest Irish workmanship, which meant, at that day, the finest in the world. The handle, cut from the heart of a century-old oak, specially fire-hardened and braced with steel, was as unbreakable as an iron bar.

“Who are you?” asked the fisherman with the bluntness of the west.

“Who are you to ask?” answered the other.

The fisherman’s eyes roved to the single ornament the warrior wore — a heavy golden armlet on his left arm.

“Clean-shaven and close-cropped in the Norman fashion,” he muttered. “And dark — you’d be Black Turlogh, the outlaw of Clan na O’Brien. You range far; I heard of you last in the Wicklow hills preying off the O’Reillys and the Oastmen alike.”

“A man must eat, outcast or not,” growled the Dalcassian.

The fisherman shrugged his shoulders. A masterless man — it was a hard road. In those days of clans, when a man’s own kin cast him out he became a son of Ishmael with a vengeance. All men’s hands were against him. The fisherman had heard of Turlogh Dubh — a strange, bitter man, a terrible warrior and a crafty strategist, but one whom sudden bursts of strange madness made a marked man even in that land and age of madmen.

“It’s a bitter day,” said the fisherman apropos of nothing.

Turlogh stared somberly at his tangled beard and wild matted hair. “Have you a boat?”

The other nodded toward a small sheltered cove where lay snugly anchored a trim craft built with the skill of a hundred generations of men who had torn their livelihood from the stubborn sea.

“It scarce looks seaworthy,” said Turlogh.

“Seaworthy? You who were born and bred on the western coast should know better. I’ve sailed her alone to Drumcliff Bay and back, and all the devils in the wind ripping at her.”

“You can’t take fish in such a sea.”

“Do ye think it’s only you chiefs that take sport in risking their

hides? By the saints, I've sailed to Ballinskellings in a storm — and back too — just for the fun of the thing.”

“Good enough,” said Turlogh. “I'll take your boat.”

“Ye'll take the devil! What kind of talk is this? If you want to leave Erin, go to Dublin and take ship with your Dane friends.”

A black scowl made Turlogh's face a mask of menace. “Men have died for less than that.”

“Did you not intrigue with the Danes? — and is that not why your clan drove you out to starve in the heather?”

“The jealousy of a cousin and the spite of a woman,” growled Turlogh. “Lies — all lies. But enough. Have you seen a long serpent beating up from the south in the last few days?”

“Aye — three days ago we sighted a dragon-beaked galley before the scud. But she didn't put in — faith, the pirates get naught from the western fishers but hard blows.”

“That would be Thorfel the Fair,” muttered Turlogh, swaying his ax by its wrist-strap. “I knew it.”

“There has been a ship-harrying in the south?”

“A band of reavers fell by night on the castle on Kilbaha. There was a sword-quenching — and the pirates took Moira, daughter of Murtagh, a chief of the Dalcassians.”

“I've heard of her,” muttered the fisherman. “There'll be a whetting of swords in the south — a red sea-plowing, eh, my black jewel?”

“Her brother Dermot lies helpless from a sword-cut in the foot. The lands of her clan are harried by the MacMurroughs in the east and the O'Connors from the north. Not many men can be spared from the defense of the tribe, even to seek for Moira — the clan is fighting for its life. All Erin is rocking under the Dalcassian throne since great Brian fell. Even so, Cormac O'Brien has taken ship to hunt down her

ravishers — but he follows the trail of a wild goose, for it is thought the raiders were Danes from Coningbeg. Well — we outcasts have ways of knowledge — it was Thorfel the Fair who holds the isle of Slyne, that the Norse call Helni, in the Hebrides. There he has taken her — there I follow him. Lend me your boat.”

“You are mad!” cried the fisherman sharply. “What are you saying? From Connacht to the Hebrides in an open boat? In this weather? I say you are mad.”

“I will essay it,” answered Turlogh absently. “Will you lend me your boat?”

“No.”

“I might slay you and take it,” said Turlogh.

“You might,” returned the fisherman stolidly.

“You crawling swine,” snarled the outlaw in swift passion, “a princess of Erin languishes in the grip of a red-bearded reaver of the north and you haggle like a Saxon.”

“Man, I must live!” cried the fisherman as passionately. “Take my boat and I shall starve! Where can I get another like it? It is the cream of its kind!”

Turlogh reached for the armband on his left arm. “I will pay you. Here is a torc that Brian Boru put on my arm with his own hand before Clontarf. Take it; it would buy a hundred boats. I have starved with it on my arm, but now the need is desperate.”

But the fisherman shook his head, the strange illogic of the Gael burning in his eyes. “No! My hut is no place for a torc that King Brian’s hands have touched. Keep it — and take the boat, in the name of the saints, if it means that much to you.”

“You shall have it back when I return,” promised Turlogh, “and

mayhap a golden chain that now decks the bull neck of some northern rover.”

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The day was sad and leaden. The wind moaned and the everlasting monotone of the sea was like the sorrow that is born in the heart of man. The fisherman stood on the rocks and watched the frail craft glide and twist serpent-like among the rocks until the blast of the open sea smote it and tossed it like a feather. The wind caught the sail and the slim boat leaped and staggered, then righted herself and raced before the gale, dwindling until it was but a dancing speck in the eyes of the watcher. And then a flurry of snow hid it from his sight.

Turlogh realized something of the madness of his pilgrimage. But he was bred to hardships and peril. Cold and ice and driving sleet that would have frozen a weaker man, only spurred him to greater efforts. He was as hard and supple as a wolf. Among a race of men whose hardiness astounded even the toughest Norseman, Turlogh Dubh stood out alone. At birth he had been tossed into a snow-drift to test his right to survive. His childhood and boyhood had been spent on the mountains, coast and moors of the west. Until manhood he had never worn woven cloth upon his body; a wolf-skin had formed the apparel of this son of a Dalcassian chief. Before his outlawry he could out-tire a horse, running all day long beside it. He had never wearied at swimming. Now, since the intrigues of jealous clansmen had driven him into the wastelands and the life of the wolf, his ruggedness was such as can not be conceived by a civilized man.

The snow ceased, the weather cleared, the wind held. Turlogh necessarily hugged the coast line, avoiding the reefs against which it seemed again and again that his craft would be dashed. With tiller,

sail and oar he worked tirelessly. Not one man out of a thousand of seafarers could have accomplished it, but Turlogh did. He needed no sleep; as he steered he ate from the rude provisions the fisherman had provided him. By the time he sighted Malin Head the weather had calmed wonderfully. There was still a heavy sea, but the gale had slackened to a sharp breeze that sent the little boat skipping along. Days and nights merged into each other; Turlogh drove eastward. Once he put into shore for fresh water and to snatch a few hours' sleep.

As he steered he thought of the fisherman's last words: "Why should you risk your life for a clan that's put a price on your head?"

Turlogh shrugged his shoulders. Blood was thicker than water. The mere fact that his people had booted him out to die like a hunted wolf on the moors did not alter the fact that they *were* his people. Little Moira, daughter of Murtagh na Kilbaha, had nothing to do with it. He remembered her — he had played with her when he was a boy and she a babe — he remembered the deep grayness of her eyes and the burnished sheen of her black hair, the fairness of her skin. Even as a child she had been remarkably beautiful — why, she was only a child now, for he, Turlogh, was young and he was many years her senior. Now she was speeding north to become the unwilling bride of a Norse reaver. Thorfel the Fair — the Handsome — Turlogh swore by gods that knew not the Cross. A red mist waved across his eyes so that the rolling sea swam crimson all about him. An Irish girl a captive in the skalli of a Norse pirate — with a vicious wrench Turlogh turned his bows straight for the open sea. There was a tinge of madness in his eyes.

It is a long slant from Malin Head to Helni straight out across the foaming billows, as Turlogh took it. He was aiming for a small island that lay, with many other small islands, between Mull and the Hebrides.

A modern seaman with charts and compass might have difficulty in finding it. Turlogh had neither. He sailed by instinct and through knowledge. He knew these seas as a man knows his house. He had sailed them as a raider and an avenger, and once he had sailed them as a captive lashed to the deck of a Danish dragon ship. And he followed a red trail. Smoke drifting from headlands, floating pieces of wreckage, charred timbers showed that Thorfel was ravaging as he went. Turlogh growled in savage satisfaction; he was close behind the viking, in spite of the long lead. For Thorfel was burning and pillaging the shores as he went, and Turlogh's course was like an arrow's.

He was still a long way from Helni when he sighted a small island slightly off his course. He knew it of old as one uninhabited, but there he could get fresh water. So he steered for it. The Isle of Swords it was called, no man knew why. And as he neared the beach he saw a sight which he rightly interpreted. Two boats were drawn up on the shelving shore. One was a crude affair, something like the one Turlogh had, but considerably larger. The other was a long low craft — undeniably viking. Both were deserted. Turlogh listened for the clash of arms, the cry of battle, but silence reigned. Fishers, he thought, from the Scotch isles; they had been sighted by some band of rovers on ship or on some other island, and had been pursued in the long rowboat. But it had been a longer chase than they had anticipated, he was sure; else they would not have started out in an open boat. But inflamed with the murder lust, the reavers would have followed their prey across a hundred miles of rough water, in an open boat, if necessary.

Turlogh drew inshore, tossed over the stone that served for anchor and leaped upon the beach, ax ready. Then up the shore a short distance he saw a strange red huddle of forms. A few swift strides brought him face to face with mystery. Fifteen red-bearded Danes lay in

their own gore in a rough circle. Not one breathed. Within this circle, mingling with the bodies of their slayers, lay other men, such as Turlogh had never seen. Short of stature they were, and very dark; their staring dead eyes were the blackest Turlogh had ever seen. They were scantily armored, and their stiff hands still gripped broken swords and daggers. Here and there lay arrows that had shattered on the corselets of the Danes, and Turlogh observed with surprize that many of them were tipped with flint.

“This was a grim fight,” he muttered. “Aye, this was a rare sword-
quenching. Who are these people? In all the isles I have never seen
their like before. Seven — is that all? Where are their comrades who
helped them slay these Danes?”

No tracks led away from the bloody spot. Turlogh’s brow darkened.

“These were all — seven against fifteen — yet the slayers died with
the slain. What manner of men are these who slay twice their number
of vikings? They are small men — their armor is mean. Yet —”

Another thought struck him. Why did not the strangers scatter and
flee, hide themselves in the woods? He believed he knew the answer.
There, at the very center of the silent circle, lay a strange thing. A
statue it was of some dark substance and it was in the form of a man.
Some five feet long — or high — it was, carved in a semblance of life
that made Turlogh start. Half over it lay the corpse of an ancient man,
hacked almost beyond human semblance. One lean arm was locked
about the figure; the other was outstretched, the hand gripping a flint
dagger which was sheathed to the hilt in the breast of a Dane. Turlogh
noted the fearful wounds that disfigured all the dark men. They had
been hard to kill — they had fought until literally hacked to pieces, and
dying, they had dealt death to their slayers. So much Turlogh’s eyes
showed him. In the dead faces of the dark strangers was a terrible

desperation. He noted how their dead hands were still locked in the beards of their foes. One lay beneath the body of a huge Dane, and on this Dane Turlogh could see no wound; until he looked closer and saw the dark man's teeth were sunk, beast-like, into the bull throat of the other.

He bent and dragged the figure from among the bodies. The ancient's arm was locked about it, and he was forced to tear it away with all his strength. It was as if, even in death, the old one clung to his treasure; for Turlogh felt that it was for this image that the small dark men had died. They might have scattered and eluded their foes, but that would have meant giving up their image. They chose to die beside it. Turlogh shook his head; his hatred of the Norse, a heritage of wrongs and outrages, was a burning, living thing, almost an obsession, that at times drove him to the point of insanity. There was, in his fierce heart, no room for mercy; the sight of these Danes, lying dead at his feet, filled him with savage satisfaction. Yet he sensed here, in these silent dead men, a passion stronger than his. Here was some driving impulse deeper than his hate. Aye — and older. These little men seemed very ancient to him, not old as individuals are old, but old as a race is old. Even their corpses exuded an intangible aura of the primeval. And the image —

The Gael bent and grasped it, to lift it. He expected to encounter great weight and was astonished. It was no heavier than if it had been made of light wood. He tapped it, and the sound was solid. At first he thought it was of iron; then he decided it was of stone, but such stone as he had never seen; and he felt that no such stone was to be found in the British Isles or anywhere in the world he knew. For like the little dead men it looked *old*. It was as smooth and free from corrosion as if carved yesterday, but for all that, it was a symbol of antiquity, Turlogh

knew. It was the figure of a man who much resembled the small dark men who lay about it. But it differed subtly. Turlogh felt somehow that this was the image of a man who had lived long ago, for surely the unknown sculptor had had a living model. And he had contrived to breathe a touch of life into his work. There was the sweep of the shoulders, the depth of the chest, the powerfully molded arms; the strength of the features was evident. The firm jaw, the regular nose, the high forehead, all indicated a powerful intellect, a high courage, an inflexible will. Surely, thought Turlogh, this man was a king — or a god. Yet he wore no crown; his only garment was a sort of loin-cloth, wrought so cunningly that every wrinkle and fold was carved as in reality.

“This was their god,” mused Turlogh, looking about him. “They fled before the Danes — but died for their god at last. Who are these people? Whence come they? Whither were they bound?”

He stood, leaning on his ax, and a strange tide rose in his soul. A sense of mighty abysses of time and space opened before; of the strange, endless tides of mankind that drift for ever; of the waves of humanity that wax and wane with the waxing and waning of the sea-tides. Life was a door opening upon two black, unknown worlds — and how many races of men with their hopes and fears, their loves and their hates, had passed through that door — on their pilgrimage from the dark to the dark? Turlogh sighed. Deep in his soul stirred the mystic sadness of the Gael.

“You were a king, once, Dark Man,” he said to the silent image. “Mayhap you were a god and reigned over all the world. Your people passed — as mine are passing. Surely you were a king of the Flint People, the race whom my Celtic ancestors destroyed. Well — we have had our day and we, too, are passing. These Danes who lie at your feet

— they are the conquerors now. They must have their day — but they too will pass. But you shall go with me, Dark Man, king, god or devil though you be. Aye, for it is in my mind that you will bring me luck, and luck is what I shall need when I sight Helni, Dark Man.”

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Turlogh bound the image securely in the bows. Again he set out for his sea-plowing. Now the skies grew gray and the snow fell in driving lances that stung and cut. The waves were gray-grained with ice and the winds bellowed and beat on the open boat. But Turlogh feared not. And his boat rode as it had never ridden before. Through the roaring gale and the driving snow it sped, and to the mind of the Dalcassian it seemed that the Dark Man lent him aid. Surely he had been lost a hundred times without supernatural assistance. With all his skill at boat-handling he wrought, and it seemed to him that there was an unseen hand on the tiller, and at the oar; that more than human skill aided him when he trimmed his sail.

And when all the world was a driving white veil in which even the Gael's sense of direction was lost, it seemed to him that he was steering in compliance with a silent voice that spoke in the dim reaches of his consciousness. Nor was he surprized when at last, when the snow had ceased and the clouds had rolled away beneath a cold silvery moon, he saw land loom up ahead and recognized it as the isle of Helni. More, he knew that just around a point of land was the bay where Thorfel's dragon ship was moored when not ranging the seas, and a hundred yards back from the bay lay Thorfel's skalli. He grinned fiercely. All the skill in the world could not have brought him to this exact spot — it was pure luck — no, it was more than luck. Here was the best place possible for him to make an approach — within half a mile of his foe's

hold, yet hidden from sight of any watchers by this jutting promontory. He glanced at the Dark Man in the bows — brooding, inscrutable as the sphinx. A strange feeling stole over the Gael — that all this was his work; that he, Turlogh, was only a pawn in the game. What was this fetish? What grim secret did those carven eyes hold? Why did the dark little men fight so terribly for him?

Turlogh ran his boat inshore, into a small creek. A few yards up this he anchored and stepped out on shore. A last glance at the brooding Dark Man in the bows, and he turned and went hurriedly up the slope of the promontory, keeping to cover as much as possible. At the top of the slope he gazed down on the other side. Less than half a mile away Thorfel's dragon ship lay at anchor. And there lay Thorfel's skalli, also the long low building of rough-hewn log emitting the gleams that betokened the roaring fires within. Shouts of wassail came clearly to the listener through the sharp still air. He ground his teeth. Wassail! Aye, they were celebrating the ruin and destruction they had committed — the homes left in smoking embers — the slain men — the ravished girls. They were lords of the world, these vikings — all the southland lay helpless beneath their swords. The southland folk lived only to furnish them sport — and slaves — Turlogh shuddered violently and shook as if in a chill. The blood-sickness was on him like a physical pain, but he fought back the mists of passion that clouded his brain. He was here, not to fight but to steal away the girl they had stolen.

He took careful note of the ground, like a general going over the plan of his campaign. He noted that the trees grew thick close behind the skalli; that the smaller houses, the storehouses and servants' huts were between the main building and the bay. A huge fire was blazing down by the shore and a few carles were roaring and drinking about it,

but the fierce cold had driven most of them into the drinking-hall of the main building.

Turlogh crept down the thickly wooded slope, entering the forest which swept about in a wide curve away from the shore. He kept to the fringe of its shadows, approaching the skalli in a rather indirect route, but afraid to strike out boldly in the open lest he be seen by the watchers that Thorfel surely had out. Gods, if he only had the warriors of Clare at his back as he had of old! Then there would be no skulking like a wolf among the trees! His hand locked like iron on his ax-haft as he visualized the scene — the charge, the shouting, the blood-letting, the play of the Dalcassian axes — he sighed. He was a lone outcast; never again would he lead the swordsmen of his clan to battle.

He dropped suddenly in the snow behind a low shrub and lay still. Men were approaching from the same direction in which he had come — men who grumbled loudly and walked heavily. They came into sight — two of them, huge Norse warriors, their silver-scaled armor flashing in the moonlight. They were carrying something between them with difficulty and to Turlogh's amazement he saw it was the Dark Man. His consternation at the realization that they had found his boat was gulfed in a greater astonishment. These men were giants; their arms bulged with iron muscles. Yet they were staggering under what seemed a stupendous weight. In their hands the Dark Man seemed to weigh hundreds of pounds; yet Turlogh had lifted it lightly as a feather! He almost swore in his amazement. Surely these men were drunk. One of them spoke, and Turlogh's short neck hairs bristled at the sound of the guttural accents, as a dog will bristle at the sight of a foe.

“Let it down; Thor's death, the thing weighs a ton. Let's rest.”

The other grunted a reply and they began to ease the image to the

earth. Then one of them lost his hold on it; his hand slipped and the Dark Man crashed heavily into the snow. The first speaker howled.

“You clumsy fool, you dropped it on my foot! Curse you, my ankle’s broken!”

“It twisted out of my hand!” cried the other. “The thing’s alive, I tell you!”

“Then I’ll slay it,” snarled the lamed viking, and drawing his sword, he struck savagely at the prostrate figure. Fire flashed as the blade shivered into a hundred pieces, and the other Norseman howled as a flying sliver of steel gashed his cheek.

“The devil’s in it!” shouted the other, throwing his hilt away. “I’ve not even scratched it! Here, take hold — let’s get it into the ale-hall and let Thorfel deal with it.”

“Let it lie,” growled the second man, wiping the blood from his face. “I’m bleeding like a butchered hog. Let’s go back and tell Thorfel that there’s no ship stealing on the island. That’s what he sent us to the point to see.”

“What of the boat where we found this?” snapped the other. “Some Scotch fisher driven out of his course by the storm and hiding like a rat in the woods now, I guess. Here, bear a hand; idol or devil, we’ll carry this to Thorfel.”

Grunting with the effort, they lifted the image once more and went on slowly, one groaning and cursing as he limped along, the other shaking his head from time to time as the blood got into his eyes.

Turlogh rose stealthily and watched them. A touch of chilliness traveled up and down his spine. Either of these men was as strong as he, yet it was taxing their powers to the utmost to carry what he had handled easily. He shook his head and took up his way again.

At last he reached a point in the woods nearest the skalli. Now

was the crucial test. Somehow he must reach that building and hide himself, unperceived. Clouds were gathering. He waited until one obscured the moon, and in the gloom that followed, ran swiftly and silently across the snow, crouching. A shadow out of the shadows he seemed. The shouts and songs from within the long building were deafening. Now he was close to its side, flattening himself against the rough-hewn logs. Vigilance was most certainly relaxed now — yet what foe should Thorfel expect, when he was friends with all northern reavers, and none else could be expected to fare forth on a night such as this had been?

A shadow among the shadows, Turlogh stole about the house. He noted a side door and slid cautiously to it. Then he drew back close against the wall. Someone within was fumbling at the latch. Then the door was flung open and a big warrior lurched out, slamming the door to behind him. Then he saw Turlogh. His bearded lips parted, but in that instant the Gael's hands shot to his throat and locked there like a wolf-trap. The threatened yell died in a gasp. One hand flew to Turlogh's wrist, the other drew a dagger and stabbed upward. But already the man was senseless; the dagger rattled feebly against the outlaw's corselet and dropped into the snow. The Norseman sagged in his slayer's grasp, his throat literally crushed by that iron grip. Turlogh flung him contemptuously into the snow and spat in his dead face before he turned again to the door.

The latch had not fastened within. The door sagged a trifle. Turlogh peered in and saw an empty room, piled with ale barrels. He entered noiselessly, shutting the door but not latching it. He thought of hiding his victim's body, but he did not know how he could do it. He must trust to luck that no one saw it in the deep snow where it lay. He crossed the room and found it led into another parallel with the

outer wall. This was also a storeroom, and was empty. From this a doorway, without a door but furnished with a curtain of skins, let into the main hall, as Turlogh could tell from the sounds on the other side. He peered out cautiously.

He was looking into the drinking-hall — the great hall which served as banquet, council and living-hall of the master of the skalli. This hall, with its smoke-blackened rafters, great roaring fireplaces, and heavily laden boards, was a scene of terrific revelry tonight. Huge warriors with golden beards and savage eyes sat or lounged on the rude benches, strode about the hall or sprawled full length on the floor. They drank mightily from foaming horns and leathern jacks, and gorged themselves on great pieces of rye bread, and huge chunks of meat they cut with their daggers from whole roasted joints. It was a scene of strange incongruity, for in contrast with these barbaric men and their rough songs and shouts, the walls were hung with rare spoils that betokened civilized workmanship. Fine tapestries that Norman women had worked; richly chased weapons that princes of France and Spain had wielded; armor and silken garments from Byzantium and the Orient — for the dragon ships ranged far. With these were placed the spoils of the hunt, to show the viking's mastery of beasts as well as men.

The modern man can scarcely conceive of Turlogh O'Brien's feeling toward these men. To him they were devils — ogres who dwelt in the north only to descend on the peaceful people of the south. All the world was their prey to pick and choose, to take and spare as it pleased their barbaric whims. His brain throbbed and burned as he gazed. As only the Gael can hate, he hated them — their magnificent arrogance, their pride and their power, their contempt for all other races, their stern, forbidding eyes — above all else he hated the eyes

that looked scorn and menace on the world. The Gaels were cruel but they had strange moments of sentiment and kindness. There was no sentiment in the Norse make-up.

The sight of this revelry was like a slap in Black Turlogh's face, and only one thing was needed to make his madness complete. This was furnished. At the head of the board sat Thorfel the Fair, young, handsome, arrogant, flushed with wine and pride. He *was* handsome, was young Thorfel. In build he much resembled Turlogh himself, except that he was larger in every way, but there the resemblance ceased. As Turlogh was exceptionally dark among a dark people, Thorfel was exceptionally blond among a people essentially fair. His hair and mustache were like fine-spun gold and his light gray eyes flashed scintillant lights. By his side — Turlogh's nails bit into his palms, Moira of the O'Briens seemed greatly out of place among these huge blond men and strapping yellow-haired women. She was small, almost frail, and her hair was black with glossy bronze tints. But her skin was fair as theirs, with a delicate rose tint their most beautiful women could not boast. Her full lips were white now with fear and she shrank from the clamor and uproar. Turlogh saw her tremble as Thorfel insolently put his arm about her. The hall waved redly before Turlogh's eyes and he fought doggedly for control.

“Thorfel's brother, Osric, to his right,” he muttered to himself; “on the other side Tostig, the Dane, who can cleave an ox in half with that great sword of his — they say. And there is Halfgar, and Sweyn, and Oswick, and Athelstane, the Saxon — the one *man* of a pack of sea-wolves. And name of the devil — what is this? A priest?”

A priest it was, sitting white and still in the rout, silently counting his beads, while his eyes wandered pityingly toward the slender Irish girl at the head of the board. Then Turlogh saw something else. On a

smaller table to one side, a table of mahogany whose rich scrollwork showed that it was loot from the southland, stood the Dark Man. The two crippled Norsemen had brought it to the hall, after all. The sight of it brought a strange shock to Turlogh and cooled his seething brain. Only five feet tall? It seemed much larger now, somehow. It loomed above the revelry, as a god that broods on deep dark matters beyond the ken of the human insects who howl at his feet. As always when looking at the Dark Man, Turlogh felt as if a door had suddenly opened on outer space and the wind that blows among the stars. Waiting — waiting — for whom? Perhaps the carven eyes of the Dark Man looked through the skalli walls, across the snowy waste, and over the promontory. Perhaps those sightless eyes saw the five boats that even now slid silently with muffled oars, through the calm dark waters. But of this Turlogh Dubh knew nothing; nothing of the boats or their silent rowers; small, dark men with inscrutable eyes.

Thorfel's voice cut through the din: "Ho, friends!" They fell silent and turned as the young sea-king rose to his feet. "Tonight," he thundered, "I am taking a bride!"

A thunder of applause shook the smoky rafters. Turlogh cursed with sick fury.

Thorfel caught up the girl with rough gentleness and set her on the board.

"Is she not a fit bride for a viking?" he shouted. "True, she's a bit shy, but that's only natural."

"All Irish are cowards!" shouted Oswick.

"As proved by Clontarf and the scar on your jaw!" rumbled Athelstane, which gentle thrust made Oswick wince and brought a roar of rough mirth from the throng.

“Ware her temper, Thorfel,” called a bold-eyed young Juno who sat with the warriors; “Irish girls have claws like cats.”

Thorfel laughed with the confidence of a man used to mastery. “I’ll teach her her lessons with a stout birch switch. But enough. It grows late. Priest, marry us.”

“Daughter,” said the priest, unsteadily, rising, “these pagan men have brought me here by violence to perform Christian nuptials in an ungodly house. Do you marry this man willingly?”

“No! No! Oh God, no!” Moira screamed with a wild despair that brought the sweat to Turlogh’s forehead. “Oh most holy master, save me from this fate! They tore me from my home — struck down the brother that would have saved me! This man bore me off as if I were a chattel — a soulless beast!”

“Be silent!” thundered Thorfel, slapping her across the mouth, lightly but with enough force to bring a trickle of blood from her delicate lips. “By Thor, you grow independent. I am determined to have a wife, and all the squeals of a puling little wench will not stop me. Why, you graceless hussy, am I not wedding you in the Christian manner, simply because of your foolish superstitions? Take care that I do not dispense with the nuptials, and take you as slave, not wife!”

“Daughter,” quavered the priest, afraid, not for himself, but for her, “bethink you! This man offers you more than many a man would offer. It is at least an honorable married state.”

“Aye,” rumbled Athelstane, “marry him like a good wench and make the best of it. There’s more than one southland woman on the cross benches of the north.”

What can I do? The question tore through Turlogh’s brain. There was but one thing to do — wait until the ceremony was over and Thorfel had retired with his bride. Then steal her away as best he

could. After that — but he dared not look ahead. He had done and would do his best. What he did, he of necessity did alone; a masterless man had no friends, even among masterless men. There was no way to reach Moira to tell her of his presence. She must go through with the wedding without even the slim hope of deliverance that knowledge of his presence might have lent. Instinctively his eyes flashed to the Dark Man standing somber and aloof from the rout. At his feet the old quarreled with the new — the pagan with the Christian — and Turlogh even in that moment felt that the old and new were alike young to the Dark Man.

Did the carven ears of the Dark Man hear strange prowls grating on the beach, the stroke of a stealthy knife in the night, the gurgle that marks the severed throat? Those in the skalli heard only their own noise and those who revelled by the fires outside sang on, unaware of the silent coils of death closing about them.

“Enough!” shouted Thorfel. “Count your beads and mutter your mummery, priest! Come here, wench, and marry!” He jerked the girl off the board and plumped her down on her feet before him. She tore loose from him with flaming eyes. All the hot Gaelic blood was roused in her.

“You yellow-haired swine!” she cried. “Do you think that a princess of Clare, with Brian Boru’s blood in her veins, would sit at the cross bench of a barbarian and bear the tow-headed cubs of a northern thief? No — I’ll never marry you!”

“Then I’ll take you as a slave!” he roared, snatching at her wrist.

“Nor that way, either, swine!” she exclaimed, her fear forgotten in fierce triumph. With the speed of light she snatched a dagger from his girdle, and before he could seize her she drove the keen blade under

her heart. The priest cried out as though he had received the wound, and springing forward, caught her in his arms as she fell.

“The curse of Almighty God on you, Thorfel!” he cried, with a voice that rang like a clarion, as he bore her to a couch near by.

Thorfel stood nonplussed. Silence reigned for an instant, and in that instant Turlogh O’Brien went mad.

“*Lamh Laidir Abu!*” the war-cry of the O’Briens ripped through the stillness like the scream of a wounded panther, and as men whirled toward the shriek, the frenzied Gael came through the doorway like the blast of a wind from hell. He was in the grip of the Celtic black fury beside which the berserk rage of the viking pales. Eyes glaring and a tinge of froth on his writhing lips, he crashed among the men who sprawled, off guard, in his path. Those terrible eyes were fixed on Thorfel at the other end of the hall, but as Turlogh rushed he smote to the right and left. His charge was the rush of a whirlwind that left a litter of dead and dying men in his wake.

Benches crashed to the floor, men yelled, ale flooded from upset casks. Swift as was the Celt’s attack, two men blocked his way with drawn swords before he could reach Thorfel — Halfgar and Oswick. The scarred-faced viking went down with a cleft skull before he could lift his weapon, and Turlogh, catching Halfgar’s blade on his shield, struck again like lightning and the keen ax sheared through hauberk, ribs and spine.

The hall was in a terrific uproar. Men were seizing weapons and pressing forward from all sides, and in the midst the lone Gael raged silently and terribly. Like a wounded tiger was Turlogh Dubh in his madness. His eery movement was a blur of speed, an explosion of dynamic force. Scarce had Halfgar fallen before the Gael leaped across his crumpling form at Thorfel, who had drawn his sword and stood

as if bewildered. But a rush of carles swept between them. Swords rose and fell and the Dalcassian ax flashed among them like the play of summer lightning. On either hand and from before and behind a warrior drove at him. From one side Osric rushed, swinging a two-handed sword; from the other a house-carle drove in with a spear. Turlogh stooped beneath the swing of the sword and struck a double blow, forehand and back. Thorfel's brother dropped, hewed through the knee, and the carle died on his feet as the back-lash return drove the ax's back-spike through his skull. Turlogh straightened, dashing his shield into the face of the swordsman who rushed him from the front. The spike in the center of the shield made a ghastly ruin of his features; then even as the Gael wheeled cat-like to guard his rear, he felt the shadow of Death loom over him. From the corner of his eye he saw the Dane Tostig swinging his great two-handed sword, and jammed against the table, off balance, he knew that even his superhuman quickness could not save him. Then the whistling sword struck the Dark Man on the table and with a clash like thunder, shattered to a thousand blue sparks. Tostig staggered, dazedly, still holding the useless hilt, and Turlogh thrust as with a sword; the upper spike of his ax struck the Dane over the eye and crashed through to the brain.

And even at that instant, the air was filled with a strange singing and men howled. A huge carle, ax still lifted, pitched forward clumsily against the Gael, who split his skull before he saw that a flint-pointed arrow transfixed his throat. The hall seemed full of glancing beams of light that hummed like bees and carried quick death in their humming. Turlogh risked his life for a glance toward the great doorway at the other end of the hall. Through it was pouring a strange horde. Small, dark men they were, with beady black eyes and immobile faces. They were scantily armored, but they bore swords, spears and bows. Now

at close range they drove their long black arrows point-blank and the carles went down in windrows.

Now a red wave of combat swept the skalli hall, a storm of strife that shattered tables, smashed the benches, tore the hangings and the trophies from the walls, and stained the floors with a red lake. There had been less of the dark strangers than vikings, but in the surprize of the attack, the first flight of arrows had evened the odds, and now at hand-grips the strange warriors showed themselves in no way inferior to their huge foes. Dazed by surprize and the ale they had drunk, with no time to arm themselves fully, the Norsemen yet fought back with all the reckless ferocity of their race. But the primitive fury of their attackers matched their own valor, and at the head of the hall, where a white-faced priest shielded a dying girl, Black Turlogh tore and ripped with a frenzy that made valor and fury alike futile.

And over all towered the Dark Man. To Turlogh's shifting glances, caught between the flash of sword and ax, it seemed that the image had grown — expanded — heightened; that it loomed giant-like over the battle; that its head rose into the smoke-filled rafters of the great hall; that it brooded like a dark cloud of death over these insects who cut each other's throats at its feet. Turlogh sensed in the lightning sword-play and the slaughter that this was the proper element of the Dark Man. Violence and fury were exuded by him. The raw scent of fresh-spilled blood was good to his nostrils and these yellow-haired corpses that rattled at his feet were as sacrifices to him.

The storm of battle rocked the mighty hall. The skalli became a shambles where men slipped in pools of blood, and slipping, died. Heads spun grinning from slumping shoulders. Barbed spears tore the heart, still beating, from the gory breast. Brains splashed and clotted the madly driving axes. Daggers lunged upward, ripping bellies and

spilling entrails upon the floor. The clash and clangor of steel rose deafeningly. No quarter was asked or given. A wounded Norseman had dragged down one of the dark men, and doggedly strangled him regardless of the dagger his victim plunged again and again into his body.

One of the dark men seized a child who ran howling from an inner room, and dashed its brains out against the wall. Another gripped a Norse woman by her golden hair and hurling her to her knees, cut her throat, while she spat in his face. One listening for cries of fear or pleas for mercy would have heard none; men, women or children, they died slashing and clawing, their last gasp a sob of fury, or a snarl of quenchless hatred.

And about the table where stood the Dark Man, immovable as a mountain, washed the red waves of slaughter. Norseman and tribesman died at his feet. How many red infernos of slaughter and madness have your strange carved eyes gazed upon, Dark Man?

Shoulder to shoulder Sweyn and Thorfel fought. The Saxon Athelstane, his golden beard a-bristle with the battle-joy, had placed his back against the wall and a man fell at each sweep of his two-handed ax. Now Turlogh came in like a wave, avoiding, with a lithe twist of his upper body, the first ponderous stroke. Now the superiority of the light Irish ax was proved, for before the Saxon could shift his heavy weapon, the Dalcassian ax licked out like a striking cobra and Athelstane reeled as the edge bit through the corselet into the ribs beneath. Another stroke and he crumpled, blood gushing from his temple.

Now none barred Turlogh's way to Thorfel except Sweyn, and even as the Gael leaped like a panther toward the slashing pair, one was ahead of him. The chief of the dark men glided like a shadow under

the slash of Sweyn's sword, and his own short blade thrust upward under the shirt of mail. Thorfel faced Turlogh alone. Thorfel was no coward; he even laughed with pure battle-joy as he thrust, but there was no mirth in Black Turlogh's face, only a frantic rage that writhed his lips and made his eyes coals of blue fire.

In the first whirl of steel Thorfel's sword broke. The young seaking leaped like a tiger at his foe, thrusting with the shards of the blade. Turlogh laughed fiercely as the jagged remnant gashed his cheek, and at the same instant he cut Thorfel's left foot from under him. The Norseman fell with a heavy crash, then struggled to his knees, clawing for his dagger. His eyes were clouded.

"Make an end, curse you!" he snarled.

Turlogh laughed. "Where is your power and your glory, now?" he taunted. "You who would have for unwilling wife an Irish princess — you —"

Suddenly his hate strangled him, and with a howl like a maddened panther he swung his ax in a whistling arc that cleft the Norseman from shoulder to breast-bone. Another stroke severed the head, and with the grisly trophy in his hand he approached the couch where lay Moira O'Brien. The priest had lifted her head and held a goblet of wine to her pale lips. Her cloudy gray eyes rested with slight recognition on Turlogh — but it seemed at last she knew him and she tried to smile.

"Moira, blood of my heart," said the outlaw heavily, "you die in a strange land. But the birds in the Cullane hills will weep for you, and the heather will sigh in vain for the tread of your little feet. But you shall not be forgotten; axes shall drip for you and for you shall galleys crash and walled cities go up in flames. And that your ghost go not unassuaged into the realms of Tir-na-n-Oge, behold this token of vengeance!"

And he held forth the dripping head of Thorfel.

“In God’s name, my son,” said the priest, his voice husky with horror, “have done — have done. Will you do your ghastly deeds in the very presence of — see, she is dead. May God in His infinite justice have mercy on her soul, for though she took her own life, yet she died as she lived, in innocence and purity.”

Turlogh dropped his ax-head to the floor and his head was bowed. All the fire of his madness had left him and there remained only a dark sadness, a deep sense of futility and weariness. Over all the hall there was no sound. No groans of the wounded were raised, for the knives of the little dark men had been at work, and save their own, there were no wounded. Turlogh sensed that the survivors had gathered about the statue on the table and now stood looking at him with inscrutable eyes. The priest mumbled over the corpse of the girl, telling his beads. Flame ate at the farther wall of the building, but none heeded it. Then from among the dead on the floor a huge form heaved up unsteadily. Athelstane the Saxon, overlooked by the killers, leaned against the wall and stared about dazedly. Blood flowed from a wound in his ribs and another in his scalp where Turlogh’s ax had struck glancingly.

The Gael walked over to him. “I have no hatred for you, Saxon,” said he, heavily, “but blood calls for blood and you must die.”

Athelstane looked at him without an answer. His large gray eyes were serious but without fear. He too was a barbarian — more pagan than Christian; he too realized the rights of the blood-feud. But as Turlogh raised his ax, the priest sprang between, his thin hands outstretched, his eyes haggard.

“Have done! In God’s name I command you! Almighty Powers, has not enough blood been shed this fearful night? In the name of the Most High, I claim this man.”

Turlogh dropped his ax. “He is yours; not for your oath or your curse, not for your creed but for that you too are a man and did your best for Moira.”

A touch on his arm made Turlogh turn. The chief of the strangers stood regarding him with inscrutable eyes.

“Who are you?” asked the Gael idly. He did not care; he felt only weariness.

“I am Brogar, chief of the Picts, Friend of the Dark Man.”

“Why do you call me that?” asked Turlogh.

“He rode in the bows of your boat and guided you to Helni through wind and snow. He saved your life when he broke the great sword of the Dane.”

Turlogh glanced at the brooding Dark One. It seemed there must be a human or superhuman intelligence behind those strange stone eyes. Was it chance alone that caused Tostig’s sword to strike the image as he swung it in a death blow?

“What is this thing?” asked the Gael.

“It is the only god we have left,” answered the other somberly. “It is the image of our greatest king, Bran Mak Morn, he who gathered the broken lines of the Pictish tribes into a single mighty nation, he who drove forth the Norseman and Briton and shattered the legions of Rome, centuries ago. A wizard made this statue while the great Morni yet lived and reigned, and when he died in the last great battle, his spirit entered into it. It is our god.

“Ages ago we ruled. Before the Dane, before the Gael, before the Briton, before the Roman, we reigned in the western isles. Our stone circles rose to the sun. We worked in flint and hides and were happy. Then came the Celts and drove us into the wildernesses. They held the southland. But we throve in the north and were strong. Rome broke

the Britons and came against us. But there rose among us Bran Mak Morn, of the blood of Brule the Spear-slayer, the friend of King Kull of Valusia who reigned thousands of years ago before Atlantis sank. Bran became king of all Caledon. He broke the iron ranks of Rome and sent the legions cowering south behind their Wall.

“Bran Mak Morn fell in battle; the nation fell apart. Civil wars rocked it. The Gaels came and reared the kingdom of Dalriadia above the ruins of the Cruithni. When the Scot Kenneth MacAlpine broke the kingdom of Galloway, the last remnant of the Pictish empire faded like snow on the mountains. Like wolves we live now among the scattered islands, among the crags of the highlands and the dim hills of Galloway. We are a fading people. We pass. But the Dark Man remains — the Dark One, the great king, Bran Mak Morn, whose ghost dwells forever in the stone likeness of his living self.”

As in a dream Turlogh saw an ancient Pict who looked much like the one in whose dead arms he had found the Dark Man, lift the image from the table. The old man’s arms were thin as withered branches and his skin clung to his skull like a mummy’s, but he handled with ease the image that two strong vikings had had trouble in carrying.

As if reading his thoughts Brogar spoke softly: “Only a friend may with safety touch the Dark One. We knew you to be a friend, for he rode in your boat and did you no harm.”

“How know you this?”

“The Old One,” pointing to the white-bearded ancient, “Gonar, high priest of the Dark One — the ghost of Bran comes to him in dreams. It was Grok, the lesser priest and his people who stole the image and took to sea in a long boat. In dreams Gonar followed; aye, as he slept he sent his spirit with the ghost of the Morni, and he saw the pursuit by the Danes, the battle and slaughter on the Isle of

Swords. He saw you come and find the Dark One, and he saw that the ghost of the great king was pleased with you. Wo to the foes of the Mak Morn! But good luck shall fare the friends of him.”

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Turlogh came to himself as from a trance. The heat of the burning hall was in his face and the flickering flames lit and shadowed the carved face of the Dark Man as his worshippers bore him from the building, lending it a strange life. Was it, in truth, that the spirit of a long-dead king lived in that cold stone? Bran Mak Morn loved his people with a savage love; he hated their foes with a terrible hate. Was it possible to breathe into inanimate blind stone a pulsating love and hate that should outlast the centuries?

Turlogh lifted the still, slight form of the dead girl and bore her out of the flaming hall. Five long open boats lay at anchor, and scattered about the embers of the fires the carles had lit, lay the reddened corpses of the revelers who had died silently.

“How stole ye upon these undiscovered?” asked Turlogh. “And whence came you in those open boats?”

“The stealth of the panther is theirs who live by stealth,” answered the Pict. “And these were drunken. We followed the path of the Dark One and we came hither from the Isle of the Altar, near the Scottish mainland, from whence Grok stole the Dark Man.”

Turlogh knew no island of that name but he did realize the courage of these men in daring the seas in boats such as these. He thought of his own boat and requested Brogar to send some of his men for it. The Pict did so. While he waited for them to bring it around the point, he watched the priest bandaging the wounds of the survivors. Silent, immobile, they spoke no word either of complaint or thanks.

The fisherman's boat came scudding around the point just as the first hint of sunrise reddened the waters. The Picts were getting into their boats, lifting in the dead and wounded. Turlogh stepped into his boat and gently eased his pitiful burden down.

"She shall sleep in her own land," he said somberly. "She shall not lie in this cold foreign isle. Brogar, whither go you?"

"We take the Dark One back to his isle and his altar," said the Pict. "Through the mouth of his people he thanks you. The tie of blood is between us, Gael, and mayhap we shall come to you again in your need, as Bran Mak Morn, great king of Pictdom, shall come again to his people some day in the days to come."

"And you, good Jerome? You will come with me?"

The priest shook his head and pointed to Athelstane. The wounded Saxon reposed on a rude couch made of skins piled in the snow

"I stay here to attend to this man. He is sorely wounded."

Turlogh looked about. The walls of the skalli had crashed into a mass of glowing embers. Brogar's men had set fire to the storehouses and the long galley, and the smoke and flame vied luridly with the growing morning light.

"You will freeze or starve. Come with me."

"I will find sustenance for us both. Persuade me not, my son."

"He is a pagan and a reaver."

"No matter. He is a human — a living creature. I will not leave him to die."

"So be it."

Turlogh prepared to cast off. The boats of the Picts were already rounding the point. The rhythmic clack of their oar-locks came clearly to him. They looked not back, bending stolidly to their work.

He glanced at the stiff corpses about the beach, at the charred embers of the skulli and the glowing timbers of the galley. In the glare the priest seemed unearthly in his thinness and whiteness, like a saint from some old illuminated manuscript. In his worn pallid face was a more than human sadness, a greater than human weariness.

“Look!” he cried suddenly, pointing seaward. “The ocean is of blood! See how it swims red in the rising sun! Oh, my people, my people, the blood you have spilt in anger turns the very seas to scarlet! How can you win through?”

“I came in the snow and sleet,” said Turlogh, not understanding at first. “I go as I came.”

The priest shook his head. “It is more than a mortal sea. Your hands are red with blood and you follow a red sea-path, yet the fault is not wholly with you. Almighty God, when will the reign of blood cease?”

Turlogh shook his head. “Not so long as the race lasts.” The morning wind caught and filled his sail. Into the west he raced like a shadow fleeing the dawn. And so passed Turlogh Dubh O’Brien from the sight of the priest Jerome, who stood watching, shading his weary brow with his thin hand, until the boat was but a tiny speck far out on the tossing wastes of the blue ocean.

THE GODS OF BAL-SAGOTH

1.

Steel in the Storm

The play was quick and desperate; in the momentary illumination a ferocious bearded face shone before Turlogh, and his swift ax licked out, splitting it to the chin. In the brief, utter blackness that followed the flash, an unseen stroke swept Turlogh's helmet from his head and he struck back blindly, feeling his ax sink into flesh, and hearing a man howl. Again the fires of the raging skies sprang, showing the Gael the ring of savage faces, the hedge of gleaming steel that hemmed him in.

Back against the mainmast Turlogh parried and smote; then through the madness of the fray a great voice thundered, and in a flashing instant the Gael caught a glimpse of a giant form — a strangely familiar face. Then the world crashed into fire-shot blackness.

Consciousness returned slowly. Turlogh was first aware of a swaying, rocking motion of his whole body which he could not check. Then a dull throbbing in his head racked him and he sought to raise his hands to it. Then it was he realized he was bound hand and foot — not an altogether new experience. Clearing sight showed him that he was tied to the mast of the dragon ship whose warriors had struck him down. Why they had spared him, he could not understand, because if they knew him at all, they knew him to be an outlaw — an outcast from his clan, who would pay no ransom to save him from the very pits of Hell.

The wind had fallen greatly but a heavy sea was flowing, which tossed the long ship like a chip from gulf-like trough to foaming crest.

A round silver moon, peering through broken clouds, lighted the tossing billows. The Gael, raised on the wild west coast of Ireland, knew that the serpent ship was crippled. He could tell it by the way she labored, plowing deep into the spume, heeling to the lift of the surge. Well, the tempest which had been raging on these southern waters had been enough to damage even such staunch craft as these Vikings built.

The same gale had caught the French vessel on which Turlogh had been a passenger, driving her off her course and far southward. Days and nights had been a blind, howling chaos in which the ship had been hurled, flying like a wounded bird before the storm. And in the very rack of the tempest a beaked prow had loomed in the scud above the lower, broader craft, and the grappling irons had sunk in. Surely these Norsemen were wolves and the blood-lust that burned in their hearts was not human. In the terror and roar of the storm they leaped howling to the onslaught, and while the raging heavens hurled their full wrath upon them, and each shock of the frenzied waves threatened to engulf both vessels, these sea-wolves glutted their fury to the utmost — true sons of the sea, whose wildest rages found echo in their own bosoms. It had been a slaughter rather than a fight — the Celt had been the only fighting man aboard the doomed ship — and now he remembered the strange familiarity of the face he had glimpsed just before he was struck down. Who —?

“Good hail, my bold Dalcassian, it’s long since we met!”

Turlogh stared at the man who stood before him, feet braced to the lifting of the deck. He was of huge stature, a good half head taller than Turlogh who stood well above six feet. His legs were like columns, his arms like oak and iron. His beard was of crisp gold, matching the massive armlets he wore. A shirt of scale-mail added to his war-like

appearance as the horned helmet seemed to increase his height. But there was no wrath in the calm gray eyes which gazed tranquilly into the smoldering blue eyes of the Gael.

“Athelstane, the Saxon!”

“Aye — it’s been a long day since you gave me this,” the giant indicated a thin white scar on his temple. “We seem fated to meet on nights of fury — we first crossed steel the night you burned Thorfel’s skalli. Then I fell before your ax and you saved me from Brogar’s Picts — alone of all the folk who followed Thorfel. Tonight it was I who struck you down.” He touched the great two-handed sword strapped to his shoulders and Turlogh cursed.

“Nay, revile me not,” said Athelstane with a pained expression. “I could have slain you in the press — I struck with the flat, but knowing you Irish have cursed hard skulls, I struck with both hands. You have been senseless for hours. Lodbrog would have slain you with the rest of the merchant ship’s crew but I claimed your life. But the Vikings would only agree to spare you on condition that you be bound to the mast. They know you of old.”

“Where are we?”

“Ask me not. The storm blew us far out of our course. We were sailing to harry the coasts of Spain. When chance threw us in with your vessel, of course we seized the opportunity, but there was scant spoil. Now we are racing with the sea-flow, unknowing. The steer sweep is crippled and the whole ship lamed. We may be riding the very rim of the world for aught I know. Swear to join us and I will loose you.”

“Swear to join the hosts of Hell!” snarled Turlogh. “Rather will I go down with the ship and sleep forever under the green waters, bound

to this mast. My only regret is that I can not send more sea-wolves to join the hundred-odd I have already sent to purgatory!”

“Well, well,” said Athelstane tolerantly, “a man must eat — here — I will loose your hands at least — now, set your teeth into this joint of meat.”

Turlogh bent his head to the great joint and tore at it ravenously. The Saxon watched him a moment, then turned away. A strange man, reflected Turlogh, this renegade Saxon who hunted with the wolf-pack of the North — a savage warrior in battle, but with fibers of kindness in his makeup which set him apart from the men with whom he consorted.

The ship reeled on blindly in the night, and Athelstane, returning with a great horn of foaming ale, remarked on the fact that the clouds were gathering again, obscuring the seething face of the sea. He left the Gael’s hands unbound but Turlogh was held fast to the mast by cords about legs and body. The rovers paid no heed to their prisoner; they were too much occupied in keeping their crippled ship from going down under their feet.

At last Turlogh believed he could catch at times a deep roaring above the wash of the waves. This grew in volume, and even as the duller-eared Norsemen heard it, the ship leaped like a spurred horse, straining in every timber. As by magic the clouds, lightening for dawn, rolled away on each side, showing a wild waste of tossing gray waters, and a long line of breakers dead ahead. Beyond the frothing madness of the reefs loomed land, apparently an island. The roaring increased to deafening proportions, as the long ship, caught in the tide rip, raced headlong to her doom. Turlogh saw Lodbrog rushing about, his long beard flowing in the wind as he brandished his fists and bellowed futile commands. Athelstane came running across the deck.

“Little chance for any of us,” he growled as he cut the Gael’s bonds, “but you shall have as much as the rest —”

Turlogh sprang free. “Where is my ax?”

“There in that weapon-rack. But Thor’s blood, man,” marveled the big Saxon, “you won’t burden yourself now —”

Turlogh had snatched the ax and confidence flowed like wine through his veins at the familiar feel of the slim, graceful shaft. His ax was as much a part of him as his right hand; if he must die he wished to die with it in his grip. He hastily slung it to his girdle. All armor had been stripped from him when he had been captured.

“There are sharks in these waters,” said Athelstane, preparing to doff his scale-mail. “If we have to swim —”

The ship struck with a crash that snapped her masts and shivered her prow like glass. Her dragon beak shot high in the air and men tumbled like tenpins from her slanted deck. A moment she poised, shuddering like a live thing, then slid from the hidden reef and went down in a blinding smother of spray.

Turlogh had left the deck in a long dive that carried him clear. Now he rose in the turmoil, fought the waves for a mad moment, then caught a piece of wreckage that the breakers flung up. As he clambered across this, a shape bumped against him and went down again. Turlogh plunged his arm deep, caught a sword-belt and heaved the man up and on his makeshift raft. For in that instant he had recognized the Saxon, Athelstane, still burdened with the armor he had not had time to remove. The man seemed dazed. He lay limp, limbs trailing.

Turlogh remembered that ride through the breaker as a chaotic nightmare. The tide tore them through, plunging their frail craft into the depths, then flinging them into the skies. There was naught to do but hold on and trust to luck. And Turlogh held on, gripping the

Saxon with one hand and their raft with the other, while it seemed his fingers would crack with the strain. Again and again they were almost swamped; then by some miracle they were through, riding in water comparatively calm and Turlogh saw a lean fin cutting the surface a yard away. It swirled in and Turlogh unslung his ax and struck. Red dyed the waters instantly and a rush of sinuous shapes made the craft rock. While the sharks tore their brother, Turlogh, paddling with his hands, urged the rude raft ashore until he could feel the bottom. He waded to the beach, half-carrying the Saxon; then, iron though he was, Turlogh O'Brien sank down, exhausted and soon slept soundly.

2.

Gods from the Abyss

Turlogh did not sleep long. When he awoke the sun was just risen above the sea-rim. The Gael rose, feeling as refreshed as if he had slept the whole night through, and looked about him. The broad white beach sloped gently from the water to a waving expanse of gigantic trees. There seemed no underbrush, but so close together were the huge boles, his sight could not pierce into the jungle. Athelstane was standing some distance away on a spit of sand that ran out into the sea. The huge Saxon leaned on his great sword and gazed out toward the reefs.

Here and there on the beach lay the stiff figures that had been washed ashore. A sudden snarl of satisfaction broke from Turlogh's lips. Here at his very feet was a gift from the gods; a dead Viking lay there, fully armed in the helmet and mail shirt he had not had time to doff when the ship foundered, and Turlogh saw they were his own. Even the round light buckler strapped to the Norseman's back was his.

Turlogh did pause to wonder how all his accouterments had come into the possession of one man, but stripped the dead and donned the plain round helmet and the shirt of black chain mail. Thus armed he went up the beach toward Athelstane, his eyes gleaming unpleasantly.

The Saxon turned as he approached. "Hail to you Gael," he greeted. "We be all of Lodbrog's ship-people left alive. The hungry green sea drank them all. By Thor, I owe my life to you! What with the weight of mail, and the crack my skull got on the rail, I had most certainly been food for the shark but for you. It all seems like a dream now."

"You saved my life," snarled Turlogh. "I saved yours. Now the debt is paid, the accounts are squared, so up with your sword and let us make an end."

Athelstane stared. "You wish to fight me? Why — what —?"

"I hate your breed as I hate Satan!" roared the Gael, a tinge of madness in his blazing eyes. "Your wolves have ravaged my people for five hundred years! The smoking ruins of the Southland, the seas of spilled blood call for vengeance! The screams of a thousand ravished girls are ringing in my ears, night and day! Would that the North had but a single breast for my ax to cleave!"

"But I am no Norseman," rumbled the giant in worryment.

"The more shame to you, renegade," raved the maddened Gael. "Defend yourself lest I cut you down in cold blood!"

"This is not to my liking," protested Athelstane, lifting his mighty blade, his gray eyes serious but unafraid. "Men speak truly who say there is madness in you."

Words ceased as the men prepared to go into deadly action. The Gael approached his foe, crouching panther-like, eyes ablaze. The Saxon waited the onslaught, feet braced wide apart, sword held high

in both hands. It was Turlogh's ax and shield against Athelstane's two-handed sword; in a contest one stroke might end either way. Like two great jungle beasts they played their deadly, wary game then —

Even as Turlogh's muscles tensed for the death-leap, a fearful sound split the silence! Both men started and recoiled. From the depths of the forest behind them rose a ghastly and inhuman scream. Shrill, yet of great volume, it rose higher and higher until it ceased at the highest pitch, like the triumph of a demon, like the cry of some grisly ogre gloating over its human prey.

"Thor's blood!" gasped the Saxon, letting his sword-point fall. "What was that?"

Turlogh shook his head. Even his iron nerve was slightly shaken. "Some fiend of the forest. This is a strange land in a strange sea. Mayhap Satan himself reigns here and it is the gate to Hell."

Athelstane looked uncertain. He was more pagan than Christian and his devils were heathen devils. But they were none the less grim for that.

"Well," said he, "let us drop our quarrel until we see what it may be. Two blades are better than one, whether for man or devil —"

A wild shriek cut him short. This time it was a human voice, blood-chilling in its horror and despair. Simultaneously came the swift patter of feet and the lumbering rush of some heavy body among the trees. The warriors wheeled toward the sound, and out of the deep shadows a half-naked woman came flying like a white leaf blown on the wind. Her loose hair streamed like a flame of gold behind her, her white limbs flashed in the morning sun, her eyes blazed with frenzied terror. And behind her —

Even Turlogh's hair stood up. The thing that pursued the fleeing girl was neither man nor beast. In form it was like a bird, but such a

bird as the rest of the world had not seen for many an age. Some twelve feet high it towered, and its evil head with the wicked red eyes and cruel curved beak was as big as a horse's head. The long arched neck was thicker than a man's thigh and the huge taloned feet could have gripped the fleeing woman as an eagle grips a sparrow.

This much Turlogh saw in one glance as he sprang between the monster and its prey who sank down with a cry on the beach. It loomed above him like a mountain of death and the evil beak darted down, denting the shield he raised and staggering him with the impact. At the same instant he struck, but the keen ax sank harmlessly into a cushioning mass of spiky feathers. Again the beak flashed at him and his sidelong leap saved his life by a hair's breadth. And then Athelstane ran in, and bracing his feet wide, swung his great sword with both hands and all his strength. The mighty blade sheared through one of the tree-like legs below the knee, and with an abhorrent screech, the monster sank on its side, flapping its short heavy wings wildly. Turlogh drove the back-spike of his ax between the glaring red eyes and the gigantic bird kicked convulsively and lay still.

"Thor's blood!" Athelstane's gray eyes were blazing with battle lust. "Truly we've come to the rim of the world —"

"Watch the forest lest another come forth," snapped Turlogh, turning to the woman who had scrambled to her feet and stood panting, eyes wide with wonder. She was a splendid young animal, tall, clean-limbed, slim and shapely. Her only garment was a sheer bit of silk hung carelessly about her hips. But though the scantiness of her dress suggested the savage, her skin was snowy white, her loose hair of purest gold and her eyes gray. Now she spoke hastily, stammeringly, in the tongue of the Norse, as if she had not so spoken in years.

“You — who are you men? When come you? What do you on the Isle of the Gods?”

“Thor’s blood!” rumbled the Saxon; “she’s of our own kind!”

“Not mine!” snapped Turlogh, unable even in that moment to forget his hate for the people of the North.

The girl looked curiously at the two. “The world must have changed greatly since I left it,” she said, evidently in full control of herself once more, “else how is it that wolf and wild bull hunt together? By your black hair, you are a Gael, and you, big man, have a slur in your speech that can be naught but Saxon.”

“We are two outcasts,” answered Turlogh. “You see these dead men lining the strand? They were the crew of the dragon ship which bore us here, storm-driven. This man, Athelstane, once of Wessex, was a swordsman on that ship and I was a captive. I am Turlogh Dubh, once a chief of Clan na O’Brien. Who are you and what land is this?”

“This is the oldest land in the world,” answered the girl. “Rome, Egypt, Cathay are as but infants beside it. I am Brunhild, daughter of Rane Thorfin’s son, of the Orkneys, and until a few days ago, queen of this ancient kingdom.”

Turlogh looked uncertainly at Athelstane. This sounded like sorcery.

“After what we have just seen,” rumbled the giant, “I am ready to believe anything. But are you in truth Rane Thorfin’s son’s stolen child?”

“Aye!” cried the girl, “I am that one! I was stolen when Tostig the Mad raided the Orkneys and burned Rane’s steading in the absence of its master —”

“And then Tostig vanished from the face of the earth — or the sea!”

interrupted Athelstane. “He was in truth a madman. I sailed with him for a ship-harrying many years ago when I was but a youth.”

“And his madness cast me on this island,” answered Brunhild; “for after he had harried the shores of England, the fire in his brain drove him out into unknown seas — south and south and ever south until even the fierce wolves he led murmured. Then a storm drove us on yonder reef, though at another part, rending the dragon ship even as yours was rended last night. Tostig and all his strong men perished in the waves, but I clung to pieces of wreckage and a whim of the gods cast me ashore, half-dead. I was fifteen years old. That was ten years ago.

“I found a strange terrible people dwelling here, a brown-skinned folk who knew many dark secrets of magic. They found me lying senseless on the beach and because I was the first white human they had ever seen, their priests divined that I was a goddess given them by the sea, whom they worship. So they put me in the temple with the rest of their curious gods and did reverence to me. And their high-priest, old Gothan — cursed be his name! — taught me many strange and fearful things. Soon I learned their language and much of their priests’ inner mysteries. And as I grew into womanhood the desire for power stirred in me; for the people of the North are made to rule the folk of the world, and it is not for the daughter of a sea-king to sit meekly in a temple and accept the offerings of fruit and flowers and human sacrifices!”

She stopped for a moment, eyes blazing. Truly, she looked a worthy daughter of the fierce race she claimed.

“Well,” she continued, “there was one who loved me — Kotar, a young chief. With him I plotted and at last I rose and flung off the yoke of old Gothan. That was a wild season of plot and counter-plot,

intrigue, rebellion and red carnage! Men and women died like flies and the streets of Bal-Sagoth ran red — but in the end we triumphed, Kotar and I! The dynasty of Angar came to an end on a night of blood and fury and I reigned supreme on the Isle of the Gods, queen and goddess!”

She had drawn herself up to her full height, her beautiful face alight with fierce pride, her bosom heaving. Turlogh was at once fascinated and repelled. He had seen rulers rise and fall, and between the lines of her brief narrative he read the bloodshed and carnage, the cruelty and the treachery — sensing the basic ruthlessness of this girl-woman.

“But if you were queen,” he asked, “how is it that we find you hunted through the forests of your domain by this monster, like a runaway serving wench?”

Brunhild bit her lip and an angry flush mounted to her cheeks. “What is it that brings down every woman, whatever her station? I trusted a man — Kotar, my lover, with whom I shared my rule. He betrayed me; after I had raised him to the highest power in the kingdom, next to my own, I found he secretly made love to another girl. I killed them both!”

Turlogh smiled coldly: “You are a true Brunhild! And then what?”

“Kotar was loved by the people. Old Gothan stirred them up. I made my greatest mistake when I let that old one live. Yet I dared not slay him. Well, Gothan rose against me, as I had risen against him, and the warriors rebelled, slaying those who stood faithful to me. Me they took captive but dared not kill; for after all, I was a goddess, they believed. So before dawn, fearing the people would change their minds again and restore me to power, Gothan had me taken to the lagoon which separates this part of the island from the other. The

priests rowed me across the lagoon and left me, naked and helpless, to my fate.”

“And that fate was — this?” Athelstane touched the huge carcass with his foot.

Brunhild shuddered. “Many ages ago there were many of these monsters on the isle, the legends say. They warred on the people of Bal-Sagoth and devoured them by hundreds. But at last all were exterminated on the main part of the isle and on this side of the lagoon all died but this one, who had abided here for centuries. In the old times hosts of men came against him, but he was greatest of all the devil-birds and he slew all who fought him. So the priests made a god of him and left this part of the island to him. None comes here except those brought as sacrifices — as I was. He could not cross to the main island, because the lagoon swarms with great sharks which would rend even him to pieces.

“For a while I eluded him, stealing among the trees, but at last he spied me out — and you know the rest. I owe my life to you. Now what will you do with me?”

Athelstane looked at Turlogh and Turlogh shrugged. “What can we do, save starve in this forest?”

“I will tell you!” the girl cried in a ringing voice, her eyes blazing anew to the swift working of her keen brain. “There is an old legend among this people — that men of iron will come out of the sea and the city of Bal-Sagoth will fall! You, with your mail and helmets, will seem as iron men to these folk who know nothing of armor! You have slain Groth-golka the bird-god — you have come out of the sea as did I — the people will look on you as gods. Come with me and aid me to win back my kingdom! You shall be my right-hand men and I will

heap honors on you! Fine garments, gorgeous palaces, fairest girls shall be yours!”

Her promises slid from Turlogh’s mind without leaving an imprint, but the mad splendor of the proposal intrigued him. Strongly he desired to look on this strange city of which Brunhild spoke, and the thought of two warriors and one girl pitted against a whole nation for a crown stirred the utmost depths of his knight-errant Celtic soul.

“It is well,” said he. “And what of you, Athelstane?”

“My belly is empty,” growled the giant. “Lead me to where there is food and I’ll hew my way to it, through a horde of priests and warriors.”

“Lead us to this city!” said Turlogh to Brunhild.

“Hail!” she cried flinging her white arms high in wild exultation. “Now let Gothan and Ska and Gelka tremble! With ye at my side I’ll win back the crown they tore from me, and this time I’ll not spare my enemy! I’ll hurl old Gothan from the highest battlement, though the bellowing of his demons shake the very bowels of the earth! And we shall see if the god Gol-goroth shall stand against the sword that cut Groth-golka’s leg from under him. Now hew the head from this carcass that the people may know you have overcome the bird-god. Now follow me, for the sun mounts the sky and I would sleep in my own palace tonight!”

The three passed into the shadows of the mighty forest. The interlocking branches, hundreds of feet above their heads, made dim and strange such sunlight as filtered through. No life was seen except for an occasional gayly hued bird or a huge ape. These beasts, Brunhild said, were survivors of another age, harmless except when attacked. Presently the growth changed somewhat, the trees thinned and became smaller and fruit of many kinds was seen among the

branches. Brunhild told the warriors which to pluck and eat as they walked along. Turlogh was quite satisfied with the fruit, but Athelstane, though he ate enormously, did so with scant relish. Fruit was light sustenance to a man used to such solid stuff as formed his regular diet. Even among the gluttonous Danes the Saxon's capacity for beef and ale was admired.

“Look!” cried Brunhild sharply, halting and pointing. “The spires of Bal-Sagoth!”

Through the trees the warriors caught a glimmer: white and shimmery, and apparently far away. There was an illusory impression of towering battlements, high in the air, with fleecy clouds hovering about them. The sight woke strange dreams in the mystic deeps of the Gael's soul, and even Athelstane was silent as if he too were struck by the pagan beauty and mystery of the scene.

So they progressed through the forest, now losing sight of the distant city as treetops obstructed the view, now seeing it again. And at last they came out on the low shelving banks of a broad blue lagoon and the full beauty of the landscape burst upon their eyes. From the opposite shores the country sloped upward in long gentle undulations which broke like great slow waves at the foot of a range of blue hills a few miles away. These wide swells were covered with deep grass and many groves of trees, while miles away on either hand there was seen curving away into the distance the strip of thick forest which Brunhild said belted the whole island. And among those blue dreaming hills brooded the age-old city of Bal-Sagoth, its white walls and sapphire towers clean-cut against the morning sky. The suggestion of great distance had been an illusion.

“Is that not a kingdom worth fighting for?” cried Brunhild, her voice vibrant. “Swift now — let us bind this dry wood together for

a raft. We could not live an instant swimming in that shark-haunted water.”

At that instant a figure leaped up from the tall grass on the other shore — a naked, brown-skinned man who stared for a moment, agape. Then as Athelstane shouted and held up the grim head of Groth-golka, the fellow gave a startled cry and raced away like an antelope.

“A slave Gothan left to see if I tried to swim the lagoon,” said Brunhild with angry satisfaction. “Let him run to the city and tell them — but let us make haste and cross the lagoon before Gothan can arrive and dispute our passage.”

Turlogh and Athelstane were already busy. A number of dead trees lay about and these they stripped of their branches and bound together with long vines. In a short time they had built a raft, crude and clumsy, but capable of bearing them across the lagoon. Brunhild gave a frank sigh of relief when they stepped on the other shore.

“Let us go straight to the city,” said she. “The slave has reached it ere now and they will be watching us from the walls. A bold course is our only one. Thor’s hammer, but I’d like to see Gothan’s face when the slave tells him Brunhild is returning with two strange warriors and the head of him to whom she was given as sacrifice!”

“Why did you not kill Gothan when you had the power?” asked Athelstane.

She shook her head, her eyes clouding with something akin to fear: “Easier said than done. Half the people hate Gothan, half love him, and all fear him. The most ancient men of the city say that he was old when they were babes. The people believe him to be more god than priest, and I myself have seen him do terrible and mysterious things, beyond the power of a common man.

“Nay, when I was but a puppet in his hands, I came only to the

outer fringe of his mysteries, yet I have looked on sights that froze my blood. I have seen strange shadows flit along the midnight walls, and groping along black subterranean corridors in the dead of night I have heard unhallowed sounds and have felt the presence of hideous beings. And once I heard the grisly slaving bellowings of the nameless Thing Gothan has chained deep in the bowels of the hills on which rests the city of Bal-Sagoth.”

Brunhild shuddered.

“There are many gods in Bal-Sagoth, but the greatest of all is Gol-goroth, the god of darkness who sits forever in the Temple of Shadows. When I overthrew the power of Gothan, I forbade men to worship Gol-goroth, and made the priest hail, as the one true deity, A-ala, the daughter of the sea — myself. I had strong men take heavy hammers and smite the image of Gol-goroth, but their blows only shattered the hammers and gave strange hurts to the men who wielded them. Gol-goroth was indestructible and showed no mar. So I desisted and shut the door of the Temple of Shadows which were opened only when I was overthrown and Gothan, who had been skulking in the secret places of the city, came again into his own. Then Gol-goroth reigned again in his full terror and the idols of A-ala were overthrown in the Temple of the Sea, and the priests of A-ala died howling on the red-stained altar before the black god. But now we shall see!”

“Surely you are a very Valkyrie,” muttered Athelstane. “But three against a nation is great odds — especially such a people as this, who must assuredly be all witches and sorcerers.”

“Bah!” cried Brunhild contemptuously. “There are many sorcerers, it is true, but though the people are strange to us, they are mere fools in their own way, as are all nations. When Gothan led me captive down the streets they spat on me. Now watch them turn on Ska, the new king

Gothan has given them, when it seems my star rises again! But now we approach the city gates — be bold but wary!”

They had ascended the long swelling slopes and were not far from the walls which rose immensely upward. Surely, thought Turlogh, heathen gods built this city. The walls seemed of marble and with their fretted battlements and slim watch-towers, dwarfed the memory of such cities as Rome, Damascus, and Byzantium. A broad white winding road led up from the lower levels to the plateau before the gates and as they came up this road, the three adventurers felt hundreds of hidden eyes fixed on them with fierce intensity. The walls seemed deserted; it might have been a dead city. But the impact of those staring eyes was felt.

Now they stood before the massive gates, which to the amazed eyes of the warriors seemed to be of chased silver.

“Here is an emperor’s ransom!” muttered Athelstane, eyes ablaze. “Thor’s blood, if we had but a stout band of reavers and a ship to carry away the plunder!”

“Smite on the gate and then step back, lest something fall upon you,” said Brunhild, and the thunder of Turlogh’s ax on the portals woke the echoes in the sleeping hills.

The three then fell back a few paces and suddenly the mighty gates swung inward and a strange concourse of people stood revealed. The two white warriors looked on a pageant of barbaric grandeur. A throng of tall, slim, brown-skinned men stood in the gates. Their only garments were loincloths of silk, the fine work of which contrasted strangely with the near-nudity of the wearers. Tall waving plumes of many colors decked their heads, and armlets and leglets of gold and silver, crusted with gleaming gems, completed their ornamentation. Armor they wore none, but each carried a light shield on his left arm,

made of hard wood, highly polished, and braced with silver. Their weapons were slim-bladed spears, light hatchets and slender daggers, all bladed with fine steel. Evidently these warriors depended more on speed and skill than on brute force.

At the front of this band stood three men who instantly commanded attention. One was a lean hawk-faced warrior, almost as tall as Athelstane, who wore about his neck a great golden chain from which was suspended a curious symbol in jade. One of the other men was young, evil-eyed; an impressive riot of colors in the mantle of parrot-feathers which swung from his shoulders. The third man had nothing to set him apart from the rest save his own strange personality. He wore no mantle, bore no weapons. His only garment was a plain loincloth. He was very old; he alone of all the throng was bearded, and his beard was as white as the long hair which fell about his shoulders. He was very tall and very lean, and his great dark eyes blazed as from a hidden fire. Turlogh knew without being told that this man was Gothan, priest of the Black God. The ancient exuded a very aura of age and mystery. His great eyes were like windows of some forgotten temple, behind which passed like ghosts his dark and terrible thoughts. Turlogh sensed that Gothan had delved too deep in forbidden secrets to remain altogether human. He had passed through doors that had cut him off from the dreams, desires and emotions of ordinary mortals. Looking into those unwinking orbs Turlogh felt his skin crawl, as if he had looked into the eyes of a great serpent.

Now a glance upward showed that the walls were thronged with silent dark-eyed folk. The stage was set; all was in readiness for the swift, red drama. Turlogh felt his pulse quicken with fierce exhilaration and Athelstane's eyes began to glow with ferocious light.

Brunhild stepped forward boldly, head high, her splendid figure

vibrant. The white warriors naturally could not understand what passed between her and the others, except as they read from gestures and expressions, but later Brunhild narrated the conversation almost word for word.

“Well, people of Bal-Sagoth,” said she, spacing her words slowly, “what words have you for your goddess whom you mocked and reviled?”

“What will you have, false one?” exclaimed the tall man, Ska, the king set up by Gothan. “You who mocked at the customs of our ancestors, defied the laws of Bal-Sagoth, which are older than the world, murdered your lover and defiled the shrine of Gol-goroth? You were doomed by law, king and god and placed in the grim forest beyond the lagoon —”

“And I, who am likewise a goddess and greater than any god,” answered Brunhild mockingly, “am returned from the realm of horror with the head of Groth-golka!”

At a word from her, Athelstane held up the great beaked head, and a low whispering ran about the battlements, tense with fear and bewilderment.

“Who are these men?” Ska bent a worried frown on the two warriors.

“*They are iron men who have come out of the sea!*” answered Brunhild in a clear voice that carried far; “the beings who have come in response to the old prophesy, to overthrow the city of Bal-Sagoth, whose people are traitors and whose priests are false!”

At these words the fearful murmur broke out afresh all up and down the line of the walls, till Gothan lifted his vulture-head and the people fell silent and shrank before the icy stare of his terrible eyes.

Ska glared bewilderedly, his ambition struggling with his superstitious fears.

Turlogh, looking closely at Gothan, believed that he read beneath the inscrutable mask of the old priest's face. For all his inhuman wisdom, Gothan had his limitations. This sudden return of one he thought well disposed of, and the appearance of the white-skinned giants accompanying her, had caught Gothan off his guard, Turlogh believed, rightly. There had been no time to properly prepare for their reception. The people had already begun to murmur in the streets against the severity of Ska's brief rule. They had always believed in Brunhild's divinity; now that she returned with two tall men of her own hue, bearing the grim trophy that marked the conquest of another of their gods, the people were wavering. Any small thing might turn the tide either way.

"People of Bal-Sagoth!" shouted Brunhild suddenly, springing back and flinging her arms high, gazing full into the faces that looked down at her. "I bid you avert your doom before it is too late! You cast me out and spat on me; you turned to darker gods than I! Yet all this will I forgive if you return and do obeisance to me! Once you reviled me — you called me bloody and cruel! True, I was a hard mistress — but has Ska been an easy master? You said I lashed the people with whips of rawhide — has Ska stroked you with parrot feathers?"

"A virgin died on my altar at the full tide of each moon — but youths and maidens die at the waxing and the waning, the rising and the setting of each moon, before Gol-goroth, on whose altar a fresh human heart forever throbs! Ska is but a shadow! Your real lord is Gothan, who sits above the city like a vulture! Once you were a mighty people; your galleys filled the seas. Now you are a remnant and that is dwindling fast! Fools! You will all die on the altar of Gol-goroth

ere Gothan is done and he will stalk alone among the silent ruins of Bal-Sagoth!

“Look at him!” her voice rose to a scream as she lashed herself to an inspired frenzy, and even Turlogh, to whom the words were meaningless, shivered. “Look at him where he stands there like an evil spirit out of the past! He is not even human! I tell you, he is a foul ghost, whose beard is dabbled with the blood of a million butcheries — an incarnate fiend out of the mist of the ages come to destroy the people of Bal-Sagoth!

“Choose now! Rise up against the ancient devil and his blasphemous gods, receive your rightful queen and deity again and you shall regain some of your former greatness. Refuse, and the ancient prophesy shall be fulfilled and the sun will set on the silent and crumbled ruins of Bal-Sagoth!”

Fired by her dynamic words, a young warrior with the insignia of a chief sprang to the parapet and shouted: “Hail to A-ala! Down with the bloody gods!”

Among the multitude many took up the shout and steel clashed as a score of fights started. The crowd on the battlements and in the streets surged and eddied, while Ska glared, bewildered. Brunhild, forcing back her companions who quivered with eagerness for action of some kind, shouted: “Hold! Let no man strike a blow yet! People of Bal-Sagoth, it has been a tradition since the beginning of time that a king must fight for his crown! Let Ska cross steel with one of these warriors! If Ska wins, I will kneel before him and let him strike off my head! If Ska loses, then you shall accept me as your rightful queen and goddess!”

A great roar of approval went up from the walls as the people

ceased their brawls, glad enough to shift the responsibility to their rulers.

“Will you fight, Ska?” asked Brunhild, turning to the king mockingly. “Or will you give me your head without further argument?”

“Slut!” howled Ska, driven to madness. “I will take the skulls of these fools for drinking cups, and then I will rend you between two bent trees!”

Gothan laid a hand on his arm and whispered in his ear, but Ska had reached the point where he was deaf to all but his fury. His achieved ambition, he had found, had faded to the mere part of a puppet dancing on Gothan’s string; now even the hollow bauble of his kingship was slipping from him and this wench mocked him to his face before his people. Ska went, to all practical effects, stark mad.

Brunhild turned to her two allies. “One of you must fight Ska.”

“Let me be the one!” urged Turlogh, eyes dancing with eager battle-lust. “He has the look of a man quick as a wildcat, and Athelstane, while a very bull for strength, is a thought slow for such work —”

“Slow!” broke in Athelstane reproachfully. “Why, Turlogh, for a man my weight —”

“Enough,” Brunhild interrupted. “He must choose for himself.”

She spoke to Ska, who glared red-eyed for an instant, then indicated Athelstane, who grinned joyfully, cast aside the bird’s head and unslung his sword. Turlogh swore and stepped back. The king had decided that he would have a better chance against this huge buffalo of a man who looked slow, than against the black-haired tigerish warrior, whose cat-like quickness was evident.

“This Ska is without armor,” rumbled the Saxon. “Let me likewise doff my mail and helmet so that we fight on equal terms —”

“No!” cried Brunhild. “Your armor is your only chance! I tell you,

this false king fights like the play of summer lightning! You will be hard put to hold your own as it is. Keep on your armor, I say!”

“Well, well,” grumbled Athelstane, “I will — I will. Though I say it is scarcely fair. But let him come on and make an end of it.”

The huge Saxon strode ponderously toward his foe, who warily crouched and circled away. Athelstane held his great sword in both hands before him, pointed upward, the hilt somewhat below the level of his chin, in position to strike a blow to right or left, or to parry a sudden attack.

Ska had flung away his light shield, his fighting-sense telling him that it would be useless before the stroke of that heavy blade. In his right hand he held his slim spear as a man holds a throwing-dart, in his left a light, keen-edged hatchet. He meant to make a fast, shifty fight of it, and his tactics were good. But Ska, having never encountered armor before, made his fatal mistake in supposing it to be apparel or ornament through which his weapons would pierce.

Now he sprang in, thrusting at Athelstane’s face with his spear. The Saxon parried with ease and instantly cut tremendously at Ska’s legs. The king bounded high, clearing the whistling blade, and in midair he hacked down at Athelstane’s bent head. The light hatchet shivered to bits on the Viking’s helmet and Ska sprang back out of reach with a blood-lusting howl.

And now it was Athelstane who rushed with unexpected quickness, like a charging bull, and before that terrible onslaught Ska, bewildered by the breaking of his hatchet, was caught off his guard — flat-footed. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the giant looming over him like an overwhelming wave and he sprang in, instead of out, stabbing ferociously. That mistake was his last. The thrusting spear glanced harmlessly from the Saxon’s mail, and in that instant the great sword

sang down in a stroke the king could not evade. The force of that stroke tossed him as a man is tossed by a plunging bull. A dozen feet away fell Ska, king of Bal-Sagoth, to lie shattered and dead in a ghastly welter of blood and entrails. The throng gaped, struck silent by the prowess of that deed.

“Hew off his head!” cried Brunhild, her eyes flaming as she clenched her hands so that the nails bit into her palms. “Impale that carrion’s head on your sword-point so that we may carry it through the city gates with us as token of victory!”

But Athelstane shook his head, cleansing his blade: “Nay, he was a brave man and I will not mutilate his corpse. It is no great feat I have done, for he was naked and I full-armed. Else it is in my mind, the brawl had gone differently.”

Turlogh glanced at the people on the walls. They had recovered from their astonishment and now a vast roar went up: “A-ala! Hail to the true goddess!” And the warriors in the gateway dropped to their knees and bowed their foreheads in the dust before Brunhild, who stood proudly erect, bosom heaving with fierce triumph. Truly, thought Turlogh, she is more than a queen — she is a shield woman, a Valkyrie, as Athelstane said.

Now she stepped aside and tearing the golden chain with its jade symbol from the dead neck of Ska, held it on high and shouted: “People of Bal-Sagoth, you have seen how your false king died before this golden-bearded giant, who being of iron, shows no single cut! Choose now — do you receive me of your own free will?”

“Aye, we do!” the multitude answered in a great shout. “Return to your people, oh mighty and all-powerful queen!”

Brunhild smiled sardonically. “Come,” said she to the warriors; “they are lashing themselves into a very frenzy of love and loyalty,

having already forgotten their treachery. The memory of the mob is short!”

Aye, thought Turlogh, as at Brunhild’s side he and the Saxon passed through the mighty gates between files of prostrate chieftains; aye, the memory of the mob is very short. But a few days have passed since they were yelling as wildly for Ska the liberator — scant hours had passed since Ska sat enthroned, master of life and death, and the people bowed before his feet. Now — Turlogh glanced at the mangled corpse which lay deserted and forgotten before the silver gates. The shadow of a circling vulture fell across it. The clamor of the multitude filled Turlogh’s ears and he smiled a bitter smile.

The great gates closed behind the three adventurers and Turlogh saw a broad white street stretching away in front of him. Other lesser streets radiated from this one. The two warriors caught a jumbled and chaotic impression of great white stone buildings shouldering each other; of sky-lifting towers and broad stair-fronted palaces. Turlogh knew there must be an ordered system by which the city was laid out, but to him all seemed a waste of stone and metal and polished wood, without rhyme or reason. His baffled eyes sought the street again.

Far up the street extended a mass of humanity, from which rose a rhythmic thunder of sound. Thousands of naked, gayly plumed men and women knelt there, bending forward to touch the marble flags with their foreheads, then swaying back with an upward flinging of their arms, all moving in perfect unison like the bending and rising of tall grass before the wind. And in time to their bowing they lifted a monotoned chant that sank and swelled in a frenzy of ecstasy. So her wayward people welcomed back the goddess A-ala.

Just within the gates Brunhild stopped and there came to her the young chief who had first raised the shout of revolt upon the walls.

He knelt and kissed her bare feet, saying: "Oh great queen and goddess, thou knowest Zomar was ever faithful to thee! Thou knowest how I fought for thee and barely escaped the altar of Gol-goroth for thy sake!"

"Thou hast indeed been faithful, Zomar," answered Brunhild in the stilted language required for such occasions. "Nor shall thy fidelity go unrewarded. Henceforth thou art commander of my own bodyguard." Then in a lower voice she added: "Gather a band from your own retainers and from those who have espoused my cause all along, and bring them to the palace. I do not trust the people any more than I have to!"

Suddenly Athelstane, not understanding the conversation, broke in: "Where is the old one with the beard?"

Turlogh started and glanced around. He had almost forgotten the wizard. He had not seen him go — yet he was gone! Brunhild laughed ruefully.

"He's stolen away to breed more trouble in the shadows. He and Gelka vanished when Ska fell. He has secret ways of coming and going and none may stay him. Forget him for the time being; heed ye well — we shall have plenty of him anon!"

Now the chiefs brought a finely carved and highly ornamented palanquin carried by two strong slaves and Brunhild stepped into this, saying to her companions: "They are fearful of touching you, but ask if you would be carried. I think it better that you walk, one on each side of me."

"Thor's blood!" rumbled Athelstane, shouldering the huge sword he had never sheathed. "I'm no infant! I'll split the skull of the man who seeks to carry me!"

And so up the long white street went Brunhild, daughter of Rane

Thorfin's son in the Orkneys, goddess of the sea, queen of age-old Bal-Sagoth. Borne by two great slaves she went, with a white giant striding on each side with bared steel, and a concourse of chiefs following, while the multitude gave way to right and left, leaving a wide lane down which she passed. Golden trumpets sounded a fanfare of triumph, drums thundered, chants of worship echoed to the ringing skies. Surely in this riot of glory, this barbaric pageant of splendor, the proud soul of the North-born girl drank deep and grew drunken with imperial pride.

Athelstane's eyes glowed with simple delight at this flame of pagan magnificence, but to the black-haired fighting-man of the West, it seemed that even in the loudest clamor of triumph, the trumpet, the drum and shouting faded away into the forgotten dust and silence of eternity. Kingdoms and empires pass away like mist from the sea, thought Turlogh; the people shout and triumph and even in the revelry of Belshazzar's feast, the Medes break the gates of Babylon. Even now the shadow of doom is over this city and the slow tides of oblivion lap the feet of this unheeding race. So in a strange mood Turlogh O'Brien strode beside the palanquin, and it seemed to him that he and Athelstane walked in a dead city, through throngs of dim ghosts, cheering a ghost queen.

3.

The Fall of the Gods

Night had fallen on the ancient city of Bal-Sagoth. Turlogh, Athelstane and Brunhild sat alone in a room of the inner palace. The queen half-reclined on a silken couch, while the men sat on mahogany chairs, engaged in the viands that slave-girls had served on golden dishes. The

walls of this room, as of all the palace, were of marble, with golden scrollwork. The ceiling was of lapis-lazuli and the floor of silver-inlaid marble tiles. Heavy velvet hangings decorated the walls and silken cushions, richly-made divans and mahogany chairs and tables littered the room in careless profusion.

“I would give much for a horn of ale, but this wine is not sour to the palate,” said Athelstane, emptying a golden flagon with relish. “Brunhild, you have deceived us. You let us understand it would take hard fighting to win back your crown — yet I have struck but one blow and my sword is thirsty as Turlogh’s ax which has not drunk at all. We hammered on the gates and the people fell down and worshipped with no more ado. And until a while ago, we but stood by your throne in the great palace room, while you spoke to the throngs that came and knocked their heads on the floor before you — by Thor, never have I heard such clattering and jabbering! My ears ring till now — what were they saying? And where is that old conjurer Gothan?”

“Your steel will drink deep yet, Saxon,” answered the girl grimly, resting her chin on her hands and eyeing the warriors with deep moody eyes. “Had you gambled with cities and crowns as I have done, you would know that seizing a throne may be easier than keeping it. Our sudden appearance with the bird-god’s head, your killing of Ska, swept the people off their feet. As for the rest — I held audience in the palace as you saw, even if you did not understand and the people who came in bowing droves were assuring me of their unswerving loyalty — ha! I graciously pardoned them all, but I am no fool. When they have time to think, they will begin to grumble again. Gothan is lurking in the shadows somewhere, plotting evil to us all, you may be sure. This city is honeycombed with secret corridors and subterranean passages of which only the priests know. Even I, who have traversed

some of them when I was Gothan's puppet, know not where to look for the secret doors, since Gothan always led me through them blind-folded.

"Just now, I think I hold the upper hand. The people look on you with more awe than they regard me. They think your armor and helmets are part of your bodies and that you are invulnerable. Did you not note them timidly touching your mail as we passed through the crowd, and the amazement on their faces as they felt the iron of it?"

"For a people so wise in some ways they are very foolish in others," said Turlogh. "Who are they and whence came they?"

"They are so old," answered Brunhild, "that their most ancient legends give no hint of their origin. Ages ago they were a part of a great empire which spread out over the many isles of this sea. But some of the islands sank and vanished with their cities and people. Then the red-skinned savages assailed them and isle after isle fell before them. At last only this island was left unconquered, and the people have become weaker and forgotten many ancient arts. For lack of ports to sail to, the galleys rotted by the wharves which themselves crumbled into decay. Not in the memory of man has any son of Bal-Sagoth sailed the seas. At irregular intervals the red people descend upon the Isle of the Gods, traversing the seas in their long war-canoes which bear grinning skulls on the prows. Not far away as a Viking would reckon a sea-voyage, but out of sight over the sea rim lie the islands inhabited by those red men who centuries ago slaughtered the folk who dwelt there. We have always beaten them off; they can not scale the walls, but still they come and the fear of their raid is always hovering over the isle.

"But it is not them I fear; it is Gothan, who is at this moment either slipping like a loathly serpent through his black tunnels or else brewing

abominations in one of his hidden chambers. In the caves deep in the hills to which his tunnels lead, he works fearful and unholy magic. His subjects are beasts — serpents, spiders, and great apes; and men — red captives and wretches of his own race. Deep in his grisly caverns he makes beasts of men and half-men of beasts, mingling bestial with human in ghastly creation. No man dares guess at the horrors that have spawned in the darkness, or what shapes of terror and blasphemy have come into being during the ages Gotham has wrought his abominations; for he is not as other men, and has discovered the secret of life everlasting. He has at least brought into foul life one creature that even he fears, the gibbering, mowing, nameless Thing he keeps chained in the farthest cavern that no human foot save his has trod. He would loose it against me if he dared ...

“But it grows late and I would sleep. I will sleep in the room next to this, which has no other opening than this door. Not even a slave-girl will I keep with me, for I trust none of these people fully. You shall keep this room, and though the outer door is bolted, one had better watch while the other sleeps. Zomar and his guardsmen patrol the corridors outside, but I shall feel safer with two men of my own blood between me and the rest of the city.”

She rose, and with a strangely lingering glance at Turlogh, entered her chamber and closed the door behind her.

Athelstane stretched and yawned. “Well, Turlogh,” said he lazily, “men’s fortunes are unstable as the sea. Last night I was the picked swordsman of a band of reavers and you a captive. This dawn we were lost outcasts springing at each other’s throats. Now we are sword brothers and right-hand men to a queen. And you, I think, are destined to become a king.”

“How so?”

“Why, have you not noticed the Orkney girl’s eyes on you? Faith there’s more than friendship in her glances that rest on those black locks and that brown face of yours. I tell you —”

“Enough,” Turlogh’s voice was harsh as an old wound stung him. “Women in power are white-fanged wolves. It was the spite of a woman that —” He stopped.

“Well, well,” returned Athelstane tolerantly, “there are more good women than bad ones. I know — it was the intrigues of a woman that made you an outcast. Well, we should be good comrades. I am an outlaw, too. If I should show my face in Wessex I would soon be looking down on the countryside from a stout oak limb.”

“What drove you out on the Viking path? So far have the Saxons forgotten the ocean-ways that King Alfred was obliged to hire Frisian rovers to build and man his fleet when he fought the Danes.”

Athelstane shrugged his mighty shoulders and began whetting his dirk.

“So England — was — again — barred — to — me. I — took — the — Viking — path — again —”

Athelstane’s words trailed off. His hands slid limply from his lap and the whetstone and dirk dropped to the floor. His head fell forward on his broad chest and his eyes closed.

“Too much wine,” muttered Turlogh. “But let him slumber; I’ll keep watch.”

Yet even as he spoke, the Gael was aware of a strange lassitude stealing over him. He lay back in the broad chair. His eyes felt heavy and sleep veiled his brain despite himself. And as he lay there, a strange nightmare vision came to him. One of the heavy hangings on the wall opposite the door swayed violently and from behind it slunk a fearful shape that crept slavering across the room. Turlogh watched it apa-

thetically, aware that he was dreaming and at the same time wondering at the strangeness of the dream. The thing was grotesquely like a crooked gnarled man in shape, but its face was bestial. It bared yellow fangs as it lurched silently toward him, and from under penthouse brows small reddened eyes gleamed demoniacally. Yet there was something of the human in its countenance; it was neither ape nor man, but an unnatural creature horribly compounded of both.

Now the foul apparition halted before him, and as the gnarled fingers clutched his throat, Turlogh was suddenly and fearfully aware that this was no dream but a fiendish reality. With a burst of desperate effort he broke the unseen chains that held him and hurled himself from the chair. The grasping fingers missed his throat, but quick as he was, he could not elude the swift lunge of those hairy arms, and the next moment he was tumbling about the floor in a death grip with the monster, whose sinews felt like pliant steel.

That fearful battle was fought in silence save for the hissing of hard-drawn breath. Turlogh's left forearm was thrust under the apish chin, holding back the grisly fangs from his throat, about which the monster's fingers had locked. Athelstane still slept in his chair, head fallen forward. Turlogh tried to call to him, but those throttling hands had shut off his voice — were fast choking out his life. The room swam in a red haze before his distended eyes. His right hand, clenched into an iron mallet, battered desperately at the fearful face bent toward his; the beast-like teeth shattered under his blows and blood splattered, but still the red eyes gloated and the taloned fingers sank deeper and deeper until a ringing in Turlogh's ears knelled his soul's departure.

Even as he sank into semi-unconsciousness, his falling hand struck something his numbed fighting-brain recognized as the dirk Athelstane had dropped on the floor. Blindly, with a dying gesture, Turlogh struck

and felt the fingers loosen suddenly. Feeling the return of life and power, he heaved up and over, with his assailant beneath him. Through red mists that slowly lightened, Turlogh Dubh saw the ape-man, now encrimsoned, writhing beneath him, and he drove the dirk home until the dumb horror lay still with wide staring eyes.

The Gael staggered to his feet, dizzy and panting, trembling in every limb. He drew in great gulps of air and his giddiness slowly cleared. Blood trickled plentifully from the wounds in his throat. He noted with amazement that the Saxon still slumbered. And suddenly he began to feel again the tides of unnatural weariness and lassitude that had rendered him helpless before. Picking up his ax, he shook off the feeling with difficulty and stepped toward the curtain from behind which the ape-man had come. Like an invisible wave a subtle power emanating from those hangings struck him, and with weighted limbs he forced his way across the room. Now he stood before the curtain and felt the power of a terrific evil will beating upon his own, menacing his very soul, threatening to enslave him, brain and body. Twice he raised his hand and twice it dropped limply to his side. Now for the third time he made a mighty effort and tore the hangings bodily from the wall. For a flashing instant he caught a glimpse of a bizarre, half-naked figure in a mantle of parrot-feathers and a head-gear of waving plumes. Then as he felt the full hypnotic blast of those blazing eyes, he closed his own eyes and struck blind. He felt his ax sink deep; then he opened his eyes and gazed at the silent figure which lay at his feet, cleft head in a widening crimson pool.

And now Athelstane suddenly heaved erect, eyes flaring bewilderedly, sword out. "What —?" he stammered, glaring wildly. "Turlogh, what in Thor's name's happened? Thor's blood! That is a priest there, but what is this dead thing?"

“One of the devils of this foul city,” answered Turlogh, wrenching his ax free. “I think Gothan has failed again. This one stood behind the hangings and bewitched us unawares. He put the spell of sleep on us —”

“Aye, I slept,” the Saxon nodded dazedly. “But how came they here —”

“There must be a secret door behind those hangings, though I can not find it —”

“Hark!” From the room where the queen slept there came a vague scuffling sound, that in its very faintness seemed fraught with grisly potentialities.

“Brunhild!” Turlogh shouted. A strange gurgle answered him. He thrust against the door. It was locked. As he heaved up his ax to hew it open, Athelstane brushed him aside and hurled his full weight against it. The panels crashed and through their ruins Athelstane plunged into the room. A roar burst from his lips. Over the Saxon’s shoulder Turlogh saw a vision of delirium. Brunhild, queen of Bal-Sagoth, writhed helpless in midair, gripped by the black shadow of a nightmare. Then as the great black shape turned cold flaming eyes on them Turlogh saw it was a living creature. It stood, man-like, upon two tree-like legs, but its outline and face were not of a man, beast or devil. This, Turlogh felt, was the horror that even Gothan had hesitated to loose upon his foes; the arch-fiend that the demoniac priest had brought into life in his hidden caves of horror. What ghastly knowledge had been necessary, what hideous blending of human and bestial things with nameless shapes from outer voids of darkness?

Held like a babe in arms Brunhild writhed, eyes flaring with horror, and as the Thing took a misshapen hand from her white throat to defend itself, a scream of heart-shaking fright burst from her pale lips.

Athelstane, first in the room, was ahead of the Gael. The black shape loomed over the giant Saxon, dwarfing and overshadowing him, but Athelstane, gripping the hilt with both hands, lunged upward. The great sword sank over half its length into the black body and came out crimson as the monster reeled back. A hellish pandemonium of sound burst forth, and the echoes of that hideous yell thundered through the palace and deafened the hearers. Turlogh was springing in, ax high, when the fiend dropped the girl and fled reeling across the room, vanishing in a dark opening that now gaped in the wall. Athelstane, clean berserk, plunged after it.

Turlogh made to follow, but Brunhild, reeling up, threw her white arms around him in a grip even he could hardly break. “No!” she screamed, eyes ablaze with terror. “Do not follow them into that fearful corridor! It must lead to Hell itself! The Saxon will never return! Let you not share his fate!”

“Loose me, woman!” roared Turlogh in a frenzy, striving to disengage himself without hurting her. “My comrade may be fighting for his life!”

“Wait till I summon the guard!” she cried, but Turlogh flung her from him, and as he sprang through the secret doorway, Brunhild smote on the jade gong until the palace re-echoed. A loud pounding began in the corridor and Zomar’s voice shouted: “Oh, queen, are you in peril? Shall we burst the door?”

“Hasten!” she screamed, as she rushed to the outer door and flung it open.

Turlogh, leaping recklessly into the corridor, raced along in darkness for a few moments, hearing ahead of him the agonized bellowing of the wounded monster and the deep fierce shouts of the Viking. Then these noises faded away in the distance as he came into the

narrow passageway faintly lighted with torches stuck into niches. Face down on the floor lay a brown man, clad in gray feathers, his skull crushed like an eggshell.

How long Turlogh O'Brien followed the dizzy windings of the shadowy corridor he never knew. Other smaller passages led off to each side but he kept to the main corridor. At last he passed under an arched doorway and came out into a strange vasty room.

Somber massive columns upheld a shadowy ceiling so high it seemed like a brooding cloud arched against a midnight sky. Turlogh saw that he was in a temple. Behind a black red-stained stone altar loomed a mighty form, sinister and abhorrent. The god Gol-goroth! Surely it must be he. But Turlogh spared only a single glance for the colossal figure that brooded there in the shadows. Before him was a strange tableau. Athelstane leaned on his great sword and gazed at the two shapes which sprawled in a red welter at his feet. Whatever foul magic had brought the Black Thing into life, it had taken but a thrust of English steel to hurl it back into a limbo from whence it came. The monster lay half-across its last victim — a gaunt white-bearded man whose eyes were starkly evil, even in death.

“Gothan!” ejaculated the startled Gael.

“Aye, the priest — I was close behind this troll or whatever it is, all the way along the corridor, but for all its size it fled like a deer. Once one in a feather mantle tried to halt it, and it smashed his skull and paused not an instant. At last we burst into this temple, I closed upon the monster's heels with my sword raised for the death-cut. But Thor's blood! When it saw the old one standing by that altar, it gave one fearful howl and tore him to pieces and died itself, all in an instant, before I could reach it and strike.”

Turlogh gazed at the huge formless thing. Looking directly at it, he

could form no estimate of its nature. He got only a chaotic impression of great size and inhuman evil. Now it lay like a vast shadow blotched out on the marble floor. Surely black wings beating from moonless gulfs had hovered over its birth, and the grisly souls of nameless demons had gone into its being.

And now Brunhild rushed from the dark corridor with Zomar and the guardsmen. And from outer doors and secret nooks came others silently — warriors, and priests in feathered mantles, until a great throng stood in the Temple of Darkness.

A fierce cry broke from the queen as she saw what had happened. Her eyes blazed terribly and she was gripped by a strange madness.

“At last!” she screamed, spurning the corpse of her arch-foe with her heel. “At last I am true mistress of Bal-Sagoth! The secrets of the hidden ways are mine now, and old Gothan’s beard is dabbled in his own blood!”

She flung her arms high in fearful triumph, and ran toward the grim idol, screaming exultant insults like a mad-woman. And at that instant the temple rocked! The colossal image swayed outward, and then pitched suddenly forward as a tall tower falls. Turlogh shouted and leaped forward, but even as he did, with a thunder like the bursting of a world, the god Gol-goroth crashed down upon the doomed woman, who stood frozen. The mighty image splintered into a thousand great fragments, blotting from the sight of men forever Brunhild, daughter of Rane Thorfin’s son, queen of Bal-Sagoth. From under the ruins there oozed a wide crimson stream.

Warriors and priests stood frozen, deafened by the crash of that fall, stunned by the weird catastrophe. An icy hand touched Turlogh’s spine. Had that vast bulk been thrust over by the hand of a dead man? As it had rushed downward it had seemed to the Gael that the

inhuman features had for an instant taken on the likeness of the dead Gotham!

Now as all stood speechless, the acolyte Gelka saw and seized his opportunity.

“Gol-goroth has spoken!” he screamed. “He has crushed the false goddess! She was but a wicked mortal! And these strangers, too, are mortal! See — he bleeds!”

The priest’s finger stabbed at the dried blood on Turlogh’s throat and a wild roar went up from the throng. Dazed and bewildered by the swiftness and magnitude of the late events, they were like crazed wolves, ready to wipe out doubts and fear in a burst of bloodshed. Gelka bounded at Turlogh, hatchet flashing, and a knife in the hand of a satellite licked into Zomar’s back. Turlogh had not understood the shout, but he realized the air was tense with danger for Athelstane and himself. He met the leaping Gelka with a stroke that sheared through the waving plumes and the skull beneath, then half a dozen lances broke on his buckler and a rush of bodies swept him back against a great pillar. Then Athelstane, slow of thought, who had stood gaping for the flashing second it had taken this to transpire, awoke in a blast of awesome fury. With a deafening roar he swung his heavy sword in a mighty arc. The whistling blade whipped off a head, sheared through a torso and sank deep into a spinal column. The three corpses fell across each other and even in the madness of the strife, men cried out at the marvel of that single stroke.

But like a brown, blind tide of fury the maddened people of Bal-Sagoth rolled on their foes. The guardsmen of the dead queen, trapped in the press, died to a man without a chance to strike a blow. But the overthrow of the two white warriors was no such easy task. Back to back they smashed and smote; Athelstane’s sword was a thunderbolt

of death; Turlogh's ax was lightning. Hedged close by a sea of snarling brown faces and flashing steel they hacked their way slowly toward a doorway. The very mass of the attackers hindered the warriors of Bal-Sagoth, for they had no space to guide their strokes, while the weapons of the seafarers kept a bloody ring clear in front of them.

Heaping a ghastly row of corpses as they went, the comrades slowly cut their way through the snarling press. The Temple of Shadows, witness of many a bloody deed, was flooded with gore spilled like a red sacrifice to her broken gods. The heavy weapons of the white fighters wrought fearful havoc among their naked, lighter-limbed foes, while their armor guarded their own lives. But their arms, legs and faces were cut and gashed by the frantically flying steel and it seemed the sheer number of their foes would overwhelm them ere they could reach the door.

Then they had reached it, and made desperate play until the brown warriors, no longer able to come upon them from all sides, drew back for a breathing-space, leaving a torn red heap before the threshold. And in that instant the two sprang back into the corridor and seizing the great brazen door, slammed it in the very faces of the warriors who leaped howling to prevent it. Athelstane, bracing his mighty legs, held it against their combined efforts until Turlogh had time to find and slip the bolt.

"Thor!" gasped the Saxon, shaking the blood in a red shower from his face. "This is close play! What now, Turlogh?"

"Down the corridor, quick!" snapped the Gael, "before they come on us from this way and trap us like rats against this door. By Satan, the whole city must be roused! Hark to that roaring!"

In truth, as they raced down the shadowed corridor, it seemed to them that all Bal-Sagoth had burst into rebellion and civil war. From

all sides came the clashing of steel, the shouts of men, and the screams of women, overshadowed by a hideous howling. A lurid glow became apparent down the corridor and then even as Turlogh, in the lead, rounded a corner and came out into an open courtyard, a vague figure leaped at him and a heavy weapon fell with unexpected force on his shield, almost felling him. But even as he staggered he struck back and the upper-spike on his ax sank under the heart of his attacker, who fell at his feet. In the glare that illumined all, Turlogh saw his victim differed from the brown warriors he had been fighting. This man was naked, powerfully muscled and of a copperish red rather than brown. The heavy animal-like jaw, the slanting low forehead showed none of the intelligence and refinement of the brown people, but only a brute ferocity. A heavy war-club, rudely carved, lay beside him.

“By Thor!” exclaimed Athelstane. “The city burns!”

Turlogh looked up. They were standing on a sort of raised courtyard from which broad steps led down into the streets and from this vantage point they had a plain view of the terrific end of Bal-Sagoth. Flames leaped madly higher and higher, paling the moon, and in the red glare pigmy figures ran to and fro, falling and dying like puppets dancing to the tune of the Black Gods. Through the roar of the flames and the crashing of falling walls cut screams of death and shrieks of ghastly triumph. The city was swarming with naked, copper-skinned devils who burned and ravished and butchered in one red carnival of madness.

The red men of the isles! By the thousands they had descended on the Isle of the Gods in the night, and whether stealth or treachery let them through the walls, the comrades never knew, but now they ravened through the corpse-strewn streets, glutting their blood-lust in holocaust and massacre wholesale. Not all the gashed forms that lay

in the crimson-running streets were brown; the people of the doomed city fought with desperate courage, but outnumbered and caught off guard, their courage was futile. The red men were like blood-hungry tigers.

“What ho, Turlogh!” shouted Athelstane, beard a-bristle, eyes ablaze as the madness of the scene fired a like passion in his own fierce soul. “The world ends! Let us into the thick of it and glut our steel before we die! Who shall we strike for — the red or the brown?”

“Steady!” snapped the Gael. “Either people would cut our throats. We must hack our way through to the gates, and the Devil take them all. We have no friends here. This way — down these stairs. Across the roofs in yonder direction I see the arch of a gate.”

The comrades sprang down the stairs, gained the narrow street below and ran swiftly in the way Turlogh indicated. About them washed a red inundation of slaughter. A thick smoke veiled all now, and in the murk chaotic groups merged, writhed and scattered, littering the shattered flags with gory shapes. It was like a nightmare in which demoniac figures leaped and capered, looming suddenly in the fire-shot mist, vanishing as suddenly. The flames from each side of the streets shouldered each other, singeing the hair of the warriors as they ran. Roofs fell in with an awesome thunder and walls crashing into ruin filled the air with flying death. Men struck blindly from the smoke and the seafarers cut them down and never knew whether their skins were brown or red.

Now a new note rose in the cataclysmic horror. Blinded by the smoke, confused by the winding streets, the red men were trapped in the snare of their own making. Fire is impartial; it can burn the lighter as well as the intended victim; and a falling wall is blind. The red men abandoned their prey and ran howling to and fro like beasts, seeking

escape; many, finding this futile, turned back in a last unreasoning storm of madness as a blinded tiger turns, and made their last moments of life a crimson burst of slaughter.

Turlogh, with the unerring sense of direction that comes to men who live the life of the wolf, ran toward the point where he knew an outer gate to be; yet in the windings of the streets and the screen of smoke, doubt assailed him. From the flame-shot murk in front of him a fearful scream rang out. A naked girl reeled blindly into view and fell at Turlogh's feet, blood gushing from her mutilated breast. A howling, red-stained devil, close on her heels, jerked back her head and cut her throat, a fraction of a second before Turlogh's ax ripped the head from its shoulders and spun it grinning into the street. And at that second a sudden wind shifted the writhing smoke and the comrades saw the open gateway ahead of them, a-swarm with red warriors. A fierce shout, a blasting rush, a mad instant of volcanic ferocity that littered the gateway with corpses, and they were through and racing down the slopes toward the distant forest and the beach beyond. Before them the sky was reddening for dawn; behind them rose the soul-shaking tumult of the doomed city.

Like hunted things they fled, seeking brief shelter among the many groves from time to time, to avoid groups of savages who ran toward the city. The whole island seemed to be swarming with them; the chiefs must have drawn on all the isles within hundreds of miles for a raid of such magnitude. And at last the comrades reached the strip of forest, and breathed deeply as they came to the beach and found it abandoned save for a number of long skull-decorated war canoes.

Athelstane sat down and gasped for breath. "Thor's blood! What now? What may we do but hide in these woods until those red devils hunt us out?"

“Help me launch this boat,” snapped Turlogh. “We’ll take our chance on the open main —”

“Ho!” Athelstane leaped erect, pointing. “Thor’s blood, a ship!”

The sun was just up, gleaming like a great golden coin on the sea-rim. And limned in the sun swam a tall, high-pooped craft. The comrades leaped into the nearest canoe, shoved off and rowed like mad, shouting and waving their oars to attract the attention of the crew. Powerful muscles drove the long slim craft along at an incredible clip, and it was not long before the ship stood about and allowed them to come alongside. Dark-faced men, clad in mail, looked over the rail.

“Spaniards,” muttered Athelstane. “If they recognize me, I had better stayed on the island!”

But he clambered up the chain without hesitation, and the two wanderers fronted the lean somber-faced man whose armor was that of a knight of Asturias. He spoke to them in Spanish and Turlogh answered him, for the Gael, like many of his race, was a natural linguist and had wandered far and spoken many tongues. In a few words the Dalcassian told their story and explained the great pillar of smoke which now rolled upward in the morning air from the isle.

“Tell him there is a king’s ransom for the taking,” put in Athelstane. “Tell of the silver gates, Turlogh.”

But when the Gael spoke of the vast loot in the doomed city, the commander shook his head.

“Good sir, we have not time to secure it, nor men to waste in the taking. Those red fiends you describe would hardly give up anything — though useless to them — without a fierce battle and neither my time nor my force is mine. I am Don Roderigo del Cortez of Castile and this ship, the Gray Friar, is one of a fleet that sailed to harry the Moorish Corsairs. Some days ago we were separated from the rest of

the fleet in a sea skirmish and the tempest blew us far off our course. We are even now beating back to rejoin the fleet if we can find it; if not, to harry the infidel as well as we may. We serve God and the king and we can not halt for mere dross as you suggest. But you are welcome aboard this ship and we have need of such fighting men as you appear to be. You will not regret it, should you wish to join us and strike a blow for Christendom against the Moslems.”

In the narrow-bridged nose and deep dark eyes, in the lean ascetic face, Turlogh read the fanatic, the stainless cavalier, the knight errant. He spoke to Athelstane: “This man is mad, but there are good blows to be struck and strange lands to see; anyway, we have no other choice.”

“One place is as good as another to masterless men and wanderers,” quoth the huge Saxon. “Tell him we will follow him to Hell and singe the tail of the Devil if there be any chance of loot.”

4.

Empire

Turlogh and Athelstane leaned on the rail, gazing back at the swiftly receding Island of the Gods, from which rose a pillar of smoke, laden with the ghosts of a thousand centuries and the shadows and mysteries of forgotten empire, and Athelstane cursed as only a Saxon can.

“A king’s ransom — and after all that blood-letting — no loot!”

Turlogh shook his head. “We have seen an ancient kingdom fall — we have seen the last remnant of the world’s oldest empire sink into flames and the abyss of oblivion, and barbarism rear its brute head above the ruins. So pass the glory and the splendor and the imperial purple — in red flames and yellow smoke.”

“But not one bit of plunder —” persisted the Viking.

Again Turlogh shook his head. “I brought away with me the rarest gem upon the island — something for which men and women have died and the gutters run with blood.”

He drew from his girdle a small object — a curiously carved symbol of jade.

“The emblem of kingship!” exclaimed Athelstane.

“Aye — as Brunhild struggled with me to keep me from following you into the corridor, this thing caught in my mail and was torn from the golden chain that held it.”

“He who bears it is king of Bal-Sagoth,” ruminated the mighty Saxon. “As I predicted, Turlogh, you are a king!”

Turlogh laughed with bitter mirth and pointed to the great billowing column of smoke which floated in the sky away on the sea-rim.

“Aye — a kingdom of the dead — an empire of ghosts and smoke. I am Ard-Righ of a phantom city — I am King Turlogh of Bal-Sagoth and my kingdom is fading in the morning sky. And therein it is like all other empires in the world — dreams and ghosts and smoke.”